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Political motherhood and the everyday experience of mothering: a comparison of the child care strategies of French and British working mothers

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the majority of research on the relationship between women and the state which bases its findings on nationally aggregated data and concentrates its analysis on the forces which shape national policy concerning gender, this article adopts a micro-social approach to this question. Based on the findings from an in-depth qualitative cross-national study of the child care strategies of 112 mothers working in secretarial or clerical occupations in two countries with very different configurations of 'political motherhood', namely, France and Britain, the article assesses the impact of these varying policy environments on the construction of mothering in the everyday lives of employed women. It finds that different configurations of political motherhood have a significant impact on the practical aspects of these women's child care strategies but less impact on their fundamental conceptions of the duties and responsibilities of mothering. It concludes by considering the significance of these findings for current debates concerning the role of the state in perpetuating or combating unequal gender relations.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been much discussion within social policy of the influence of the state on gender relations (Borchorst, 1990; Dominelli, 1991; Eisenstein, 1983; Langan and Ostner, 1991; Leira, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Siim, 1990; Ungerson, 1990; Willemsen *et al.*, 1995; Windebank, 1996). One of the central issues within these discussions has been that of motherhood, and more specifically, the impact of the state in structuring women's experience of mothering, particularly *vis-à-vis* their

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ability to participate in employment and thus gain financial independence and citizenship rights. Borchorst (1990, p. 160) has conceptualised the package of measures deployed by the state to mould mothering as expressions of 'political motherhood'. Within this discussion, child care policy¹ has been seen to be of critical importance in two ways. The first is practical in that such policy is said to influence 'the responsibility that mothers have for small children very directly' (Borchorst, 1990, p. 160). The second is ideological in the sense that the degree of child care provision by the state is deemed to send out implicit and explicit messages about the duties of motherhood (Brannen and Moss, 1991; Fagnani, 1992).

Although cross-national research has identified both the relationship between women and caring for children and women's unequal position in the labour market as universal phenomena across all European countries, it has also revealed considerable national variations in mothers' employment patterns (Dex *et al.*, 1993; Hantrais, 1990; Lane, 1993). Moreover, research which has focused on these cross-national differences has suggested that state policy towards women, work and child care is one of the main explanatory variables for them. This has resulted in a certain amount of debate concerning the nature of the relationship between the state and women played out as between two theoretical models: namely, the 'patriarchal state' model and the 'partnership' model (Leira, 1992).

One of the principal exponents of the 'patriarchal state' theory is Eisenstein (1983, p. 44) who argues that patriarchy exists to provide the mothers of society and that the primary function of all states is to ensure that women continue to fulfil this function. All state policies and actions, she asserts, must be interpreted in this light. National differences are therefore of form only and not of substance. Indeed, ascribing importance to these differences is said to mask the universality of gender inequality and lead to an erroneous view that specific policy measures have lessened women's subjugation.

Those subscribing to the 'partnership model', however, interpret these variations somewhat differently, arguing that the state can and does facilitate more progressive gender relations by enabling women to combine motherhood and employment. Some stress that in Scandinavian countries, for example, the state has given women financial independence from men, and thereby empowered women (Hernes, 1987; Kolberg, 1991). For them, such states cannot in any sense be termed 'patriarchal'. Others, however, although agreeing that certain states do relatively more to assist women, stress that no state has taken ultimate responsibility for

children away from mothers, which is the final test of gender equality (Borchorst, 1990; Pateman, 1988; Siim, 1990).

These two models provide a useful framework for analysing the question of the extent to which state policy reinforces or mitigates gender inequality. The problem, however, is that the vast majority of comparative work which addresses this question has been carried out at the macro-social level, comparing nationally aggregated statistics from different countries concerning women's employment patterns, birth rates, divorce rates and the like, against state provisions for maternity and parental leave, child care and equal opportunities (Jenson, 1986; Lane, 1993; Lewis, 1992, Willemsen *et al.*, 1995). Far less comparative work has addressed this question from a micro-social perspective of how state policy concerning women, work and child care, or political motherhood, impacts on the ways in which mothering is constructed in the everyday experiences of individuals.

However, researchers have recently begun to question this over-reliance on nationally aggregated data and macro-social analysis. For example, it is suggested that such an approach may well lead to an over-reliance on factors relating to the state as the principal explanation of women's unequal social and economic position (Windebank, 1992). Furthermore, Crompton (1996) suggests that macro-level data alone may overlook continuities amongst the experiences of individual women in different countries. Conversely, for Monk and Garcia-Ramon (1996) cross-national analysis can mask differences within countries, such as those of social class, ethnic group or regional specificity. They argue that only by combining large-scale transnational and cross-national research with in-depth case studies 'will we gain a better sense of the processes that are operating to shape women's work and daily lives in specific contexts, to portray the diversity of women's experiences and to identify levels at which action for change needs to be taken' (Monk and Garcia-Ramon, 1996, p. 10).

Consequently, this article aims to investigate the effects of political motherhood on the ways in which mothering is constructed in the everyday lives of women, by adopting a micro-social approach focusing on the experiences of employed mothers as they attempt to navigate a path between employment and child rearing in two countries with very different configurations of political motherhood, namely, France and Britain. In order to do this, the article draws on evidence from a qualitative cross-national comparative study of the child care strategies of two groups of women working in secretarial or clerical occupations, living with a partner and with at least one child under 12. This research investigates the

nature and extent not only of the differences, but also, following Crompton (1996), the similarities between the experiences of these two sets of individuals, both in terms of the practicalities of their everyday arrangements for child care and in terms of their justifications for and objectives in making these arrangements, in other words, in terms of the 'ideologies of mothering' which inform their practices. First, therefore, this article outlines the differences in political motherhood in the two countries. Second, the findings of the study of the French and British women's child care strategies will be analysed and finally, these findings will be discussed in the context of assessing the relative importance of state policy in shaping women's experience of employment and motherhood.

CONFIGURATIONS OF POLITICAL MOTHERHOOD AND CHILD CARE POLICY IN FRANCE AND BRITAIN

France and Britain are two countries with very diverse approaches to political motherhood and, consequently, policies towards child care. Although framed within a concern for demographic decline rather than gender equality, French policy has had the aim of helping women to be mothers and full-time workers whereas British policy has viewed mothers' employment as an individual choice whose costs must be borne by the individual (Hantrais, 1990). Indeed, these policy differences are very well documented (e.g., Crompton, 1996; Dex *et al.*, 1993; Hantrais, 1990; Jenson, 1986; Lane, 1993; Lewis, 1992; Windebank, 1996). It is not my intention here, therefore, to reiterate in detail this very thorough work. Rather, this section will sketch out the differences in political motherhood between France and Britain only in sufficient depth as to enable a comparison of what one might expect to find, given the political and institutional frameworks in place, with how mothers actually experience the weaving together of their everyday child care and employment commitments.

We will first consider the case of France. This is a country which is often seen as a 'halfway house' between the 'woman friendly' states of Scandinavia and the liberal *laissez-faire* Anglo-Saxon nations. Indeed, Lewis (1992, p. 160) has termed France a 'modified male breadwinner' state in that

'the nature of women's labour market participation has ... been predominantly full-time and women have benefited ... indirectly ... from a social security system that has prioritised horizontal redistribution ... between families with and without children, rather than from extensive and explicit policies to assist women to combine motherhood and employment.'

Parents in France benefit from few statutory rights to adapt their employment to child care needs. Nor does the labour market provide extensive opportunities for short-hours part-time work to fit with child care responsibilities. Parents in France have a right to parental leave of up to three years, but a replacement benefit only exists for those with two children or more (the *Allocation parentale d'éducation*). In the public sector, full-time employees have the opportunity to opt for part-time work, but this is decided not only on the basis of child care responsibilities, but also operational requirements. Furthermore, leave to look after sick children is a feature of public sector employment agreements, but less so in the private sector. It is not a statutory right. Indeed, the choice for mothers in France between working on a full-time and fairly rigid basis and not working at all is quite stark.

The corollary of this rigidity in the organisation of employment for mothers is the subsidy and support given by the French state for non-home-based child care for pre-school age children. The state provides free nursery education for all 3–6-year-olds. For the under three's, provision is more patchy. On average, 10 per cent of 2-year-olds are in state nursery schools, a figure which rises to 20 per cent in certain large cities (Leprince, 1991). Furthermore, there are a limited number of crèche facilities. However, the state provides financial assistance to parents using a registered childminder via a cash subsidy and the payment of the employers' social security contributions. Tax allowances are also available for child care expenses up to a ceiling. For school age children, schools often provide before and after school care (at no or very low cost) and both municipalities and employers may provide subsidised school holiday schemes. Again, however, such provisions vary geographically, as there is no requirement for local authorities to provide child care facilities, with large metropolitan cities being best served.

Britain, on the other hand, has been described by Lewis (1992) as a 'strong male breadwinner' state in which a clear dividing line is drawn between public and private responsibility. If women enter the labour market, then no special provision is made for their responsibilities as mothers and only minimal provision is made for child care, maternity leave and pay, and the right to reinstatement. There are no statutory entitlements for parents to parental leave, to vary their work hours to suit child care arrangements or to take time off to care for sick children. Equally, the state only provides or subsidises child care for the neediest families. Tax deductions are available on workplace nurseries for employers only and not employees. Therefore, the child care which does exist is located mainly in the private market sector in which parents must pay full

market price for the care of their children, or within the community or extended family on an unpaid or informally paid basis.

It is clear, therefore, that France and Britain vary considerably in terms of the different policy environments which they create for employed mothers. Given these differences, one would expect to find in any micro-social study that the French participants would more often work full time, or for longer hours part time, and on a more continuous basis than their British counterparts; that the French women would on the whole use formal paid child care and the British women informal and unpaid child care; that in all instances, the French women would find it easier than the British women to overcome their child care problems (for example, for emergency or irregular care); and that in view of the ideological environment in which they live and their greater involvement in the labour market, the French participants would express sharply different attitudes towards child care and child rearing than their British colleagues. Furthermore, one might expect given the more equal participation in employment by men and women in French households that changes in the gendering of parenting may be more far-reaching in France than in Britain, although that is not to say that one would expect to find symmetry in the child care responsibilities of mothers and fathers in either country. Therefore, the following section, based on the results of an in-depth study of the child care arrangements of two matched groups of French and British employed mothers, will assess the extent to which such expectations are borne out by their everyday experiences.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERING IN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF EMPLOYED WOMEN: CHILD CARE STRATEGIES OF FRENCH AND BRITISH WORKING MOTHERS

Here, the results are presented of an in-depth study of the child care strategies of 112 employed mothers, 56 from a medium-sized industrial city in France and 56 from a large industrial city in Britain. Taking into account the work of Duncan (1995) concerning how histories of women's employment may differ regionally within a nation-state, it is important to recognise the specificity of the two cities studied and not to take them as 'representative' of France and Britain. The French city developed its industrial base as a result of the decentralisation process from Paris after the Second World War and is embedded in a rural hinterland with close links geographically and historically to an agricultural way of life, in which women were traditionally active alongside men. The British city has a long history of industrial activity with women working, particularly in the cutlery industry, on a full-time basis. It therefore has more of a tradition of women's employment than the British 'norm'.

In order to assess the importance of different configurations of political motherhood on these child care strategies, over and above other factors, and noting the point made by Monk and Garcia-Ramon (1996) that sub-national differences must be taken into account in cross-national comparisons, the two groups were matched on a number of indicators. First, all the women interviewed were working full or part time in secretarial or clerical occupations. Clerical and secretarial occupations were chosen first because they are heavily feminised. The second reason was that those who work in these occupations represent a 'middle mass' of women employees. These women have the skills and qualifications to work on a full-time and regular basis, an option which is perhaps not open to those with fewer skills and qualifications in either country, but, in contrast to women working in some professional occupations, do not have unlimited choice as far as child care arrangements are concerned. This is a group of women who are perhaps most likely to be affected by state provisions, therefore, in their child care strategies. Furthermore, all the women interviewed worked for large public or private sector employers of white-collar staff, lived with the father of their children and had at least one child under twelve.

Three major employers of clerical staff were approached in Britain and four in France to ask their women employees in these categories if they would be prepared to participate in the research. Those responding positively and fitting the criteria outlined were included in the research. Furthermore, the two groups proved to have similar profiles on a range of supplementary indicators. First, all of the participants were white and French/British nationals with the exception of two Afro-Caribbean British women. Second, the respondents were primarily in the 30–39 age group. Third, the total number of children in the families studied ranged from one to four, with the average family size in both countries being two children. Fourth, there is the question of the social class of the participants which is an interesting one. If the research had been on men, then there would have been no hesitation in categorising all the participants as belonging to the same social class because of the similarity of their occupations. However, as they are women, one is obliged to consider the occupations of their partners. In this regard, the French and British groups had similar profiles. Within both groups were to be found partners from the whole class spectrum, from managerial and professional to unskilled manual workers. However, the majority (72 per cent of the British and 63 per cent of the French) were to be found in the middle of this spectrum, that is, in skilled manual, clerical/administrative or intermediate professions.

Despite these similarities, there were, however, two particular differences between the two groups which reflect general differences between France and Britain. First, the French women were on the whole better qualified than the British, the average qualification level of the British group being 'O' level and of the French being 'A' level equivalent. This difference is a reflection of the comparative 'qualification inflation' in France; the fact that staying at school until 18 has been much more common in France than in Britain; and that secretarial and administrative qualifications are likely to be gained within the framework of the mainstream academic qualification, the *baccalaureat*, in France. Second, the average household income of the French group was higher, at £31,000 per annum than for the British group at £27,000 per annum, largely because of the higher number of hours worked by the French women than by the British, which is a national trend.

It should be reiterated and stressed, therefore, that this research deals with two very specific groups of women and that other groups, in terms of region, ethnicity or social class/profession, may have radically different conceptions of the relationship between motherhood and paid employment. Therefore, the differences and similarities identified here between the French and British groups would not necessarily be replicated if similar Franco-British comparisons were undertaken on other categories of women. This research should be viewed, therefore, as a single piece in a jigsaw puzzle which attempts to compare women's lives cross-nationally in a more detailed manner.

The child care strategies of these two groups of women were investigated using in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour undertaken between November 1994 and July 1995. The term 'strategy' is used to express the notion that the ways in which employed women provide care for their children is not a result solely of the practical opportunities and constraints which impinge on them, nor of their attitudes and ideologies concerning mothering, but a complex mixture of the two (Commaile, 1993). The interviews aimed first, therefore, to elicit detailed information on the households' practices concerning child care. Questions were asked concerning: the respondents' and their partners' work patterns and histories and how these fit in with child care requirements; their daily routine for child care; their arrangements for emergency or irregular care; and their domestic division of child care responsibilities. Subsequently, and in a bid to understand better the ideologies of mothering which underlie these practices, the respondents were invited to discuss in an unstructured manner the problems and opportunities presented to them *vis-à-vis* child care; how they felt about their child care

arrangements; and what would be their ideals of child care and child rearing. This interest in the interaction between practice and ideology meant that mothers were not asked directly and explicitly about how they felt about motherhood. It is true that if they had been so questioned, different conceptions of child rearing may have emerged.

Here, therefore, we will examine: first, the extent to which the women in the two countries mould their employment patterns to suit child care needs; second, their daily child care arrangements; and finally, their arrangements for child care to cover emergency or irregular child care needs.

Employment patterns and child care

One possibility for mothers in their strategies to combine employment and parenthood is to reduce their employment commitments at certain points in their lives, in order to liberate time for the care of their children. This can be achieved through taking career breaks and/or working part time. Given the differing structures of political motherhood in the two countries, it could be expected that the British women in this study would work and have worked much less than the French and that this lesser commitment of time to the labour market on the part of the British women would be the result of the inadequacy of the child care infrastructure on offer to them. Furthermore, it could be assumed that the greater involvement of mothers in the French labour force would entail a weakening of the idea that a mother's place is with her children.

Looking first at career breaks, approximately one-third of the British mothers had ceased working for a time after the birth of their children whilst this was the case for only a handful of the French participants (see Table 1).² None of the women's partners had taken career breaks. This fits entirely with what one would expect, given the greater availability and lower cost of child care for very young children in France in comparison with Britain. However, it should not be thought that the women in this study necessarily conceptualised their decision to continue or not with their employment through their children's early years in terms of access to child care.

On the one hand, the British mothers who had taken career breaks did not express the fact of their stopping work after the birth of their children as a 'decision' at all, if we define this as a deliberate choice between a number of options. So 'natural' was it to them that a very young child needs its mother with him/her on a full-time basis that, on the whole, they simply stated that they had given up work for a time as a fact which needed no further justification. Conversely, the British mothers who had

TABLE 1. *Career breaks and part-time work*

	Britain		France	
	n=56	%	n=56	%
Career breaks for childrearing				
Taken	19	34	4	7
Not taken	37	66	52	93
Working-time pattern				
Full time	20	36	26	46
Part time	36	64	30	54

Source: author's survey.

worked continuously often felt the need to explain their decision in terms of financial necessity or personal desire and detailed the difficulties they had had in arranging suitable child care. On the other hand, the French women appeared to view continuing to work and putting their young children into child care as something which is normal and does not require justification. However, a significant minority of the French mothers appear to have continued to work despite their own wishes to remain with their children. Ten of the French mothers, none of whom had taken career breaks, declared that given the choice, they would have preferred to stay at home and bring up their young children themselves, not so much for their child's benefit (in other words, because the child is harmed by the mother not being there) but because the woman herself 'misses out' by not seeing her children grow up. For example, Fabienne, a 43-year-old French mother of two daughters aged 17 and 10, working on a 90 per cent contract and never having interrupted her employment, declared:

If you're really talking about an ideal, it would be to bring up your children yourself, absolutely, that's obvious, because, obviously, from the moment you have to call on a childminder, you yourself don't benefit from your children, you can't do things with them yourself because you're not around, because it's the childminder who takes over looking after them. The ideal is really to bring up your own children.

In sum, in Britain, the 'naturalness' of mothers of very young children staying at home means the British participants had to have definite reasons to return to work immediately after maternity leave, whereas in France, the degree to which it is seen as normal for a mother to return to work soon after childbirth means that some of the French participants remained in the labour force despite their deep-rooted feelings that they wanted to be with their children.

As far as part-time work is concerned, in line with the national picture

and what one might expect given the differing child care policies of the two countries, more of the British participants work part time than the French, with those part-time British workers putting in far shorter hours than their French counterparts. For example, of all the participants working 'part time', only 3 (5 per cent) of the French worked for fewer than 30 hours per week, but none of the British part-timers worked for more than 29 hours per week.³ It should be noted that only one father in this study worked part time. However, when we examine more closely the reasons given by the French and British respondents for working full- or part time, there are striking similarities in the ideologies of mothering which underlie them.

The majority of the French and the British part-time workers justified their decision to work part time in the following terms. First, they expressed the personal wish to have time with their own children. Second, they discussed their need to take the pressure off the family as a whole by being available to perform domestic chores. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they stressed the need to be available to meet the social, psychological, emotional and educational needs of their children, whether this be by supervising homework, listening to children's troubles or taking them to various social, sporting or educational activities. All these justifications are reflected in the testimony of Karen, a 35-year-old British clerical assistant with one 6-year-old daughter working a 2.5 day per week job share:

I need to spend time with her [my daughter] and I would find it very difficult if I worked full time because the only time I'd spend with her is in the evenings and I'd feel pressurised at the same time to clean the house, cook a meal and do things like that, so I'd rather spend the time that she's at school, like now, doing the housework, and when she's home, I can spend time with her.

These views were echoed by Christine, a French clerical assistant aged 35 with one daughter aged 6 working on a 30 hour per week part-time contract:

In fact, my daughter was with a childminder from two months onwards, but as for me, I wasn't making the most of her. She was growing up a lot, and then she started [nursery] school, and I decided to take the Wednesday, as a way of being with her a little bit, so I could see what she was doing at school because before, the kid came home in the evening, and me, I had to cook, get things ready for the morning.... if you have children and just put them into day care all the time, it's not really worth it.

Indeed, for many of the French mothers of nursery and primary school children, the impossibility of finding *appropriate* and *high quality* child care for Wednesday was paramount in their decision to go part time. This

is the day when there is no school and during which children are expected to engage in a range of sporting, social and artistic activities which are often missing from the school curriculum (Haicault, 1995). For example, Laure, a 35-year-old French part-time clerical officer with three children aged 3 to 11, explained that: 'I went part-time because on Wednesday, with three children ... now that they do activities, they go swimming, they do music, they've got to be taken everywhere. A child-minder is not always available to do that sort of thing.'

Moreover, many of those working full time in both France and Britain suggested that they were only happy to do so because they had found a child care solution that was as good as, or in some cases better than, what they themselves might provide. This suggests that it is not the availability of child care *per se* which is of importance in women's employment decisions, but the availability of what they consider to be high-quality child care which is appropriate to their children's needs. Indeed, the vast majority of both the French and the British mothers working full time explained their decision to work full time rather than part time not in terms of their personal preferences or commitment to employment, but rather in terms of the financial or practical impossibility of working either part time or not at all. In the British case, this was usually because of the very low incomes or severe job instability of the women's partners, whereas in France on the whole, full-time work was deemed necessary to uphold a particular standard of living for the family, for example, to finance the purchase or rent of a larger house. Laurence, a 24-year-old French insurance clerk with two children, one 6 years old and one 16 months, explained:

I'd love to work part time but that implies a reduction in salary and you can't do everything. Here, we have the option not to work on a Wednesday, but at the moment, I can't afford to do that, but it would be great, particularly with a child at school.

Regular child care arrangements

Given the differing configurations of political motherhood in France and Britain, it might be expected that amongst this group of research participants, one would find that the French women use more formal and paid child care and enjoy the benefit of a more straightforward daily organisation of their child care requirements than their British counterparts. Furthermore, one might expect that given the greater role played in employment by the French women, there would be a more, although not totally, equal division of child care tasks and responsibilities between the mothers and their partners in France. We will now see the extent to which the findings bear out these expectations.

The majority of mothers in this study, whether working full or part time, find it necessary to rely regularly on at least one other individual or organisation to care for their children during their work hours.⁴ However, the types of regular child care used by the French and the British women differ significantly, these differences corresponding to what one would expect given the contrasting child care policies in the two countries (see Table 2).

For pre-school children, informal arrangements, often with family, are the primary source of child care for more than one-third of the British participants, reflecting the lack of nursery provision within the state education system, the lack of subsidy for private sector child care and the restricted financial resources of the women interviewed. This lack of state provision often leads the British women into rather complicated child care arrangements. For example, 17 (57 per cent) of the 30 British mothers with pre-school children use more than one source of external child care usually in order to balance the cost of child care (by reducing the number of days spent in private sector care) against the imposition on unpaid carers, normally grandparents. Equally, many of the British mothers whose main child care provider is an unpaid friend or relative

TABLE 2. *Regular forms of care for pre-school and school-age children*

Type of child care used	Britain		France	
	n=30	%	n=31	%
Pre-school children				
Father	1	3	0	0
Grandparents	10	33	0	0
Other family/friends	0	0	0	0
Childminder	8	27	18	58
Nanny	2	7	0	0
Nursery school/crèche	9	30	13	42
	n=33	%	n=41	%
School-age children⁷				
Mother alone	9	27	1	2
Father	3	10	4	10
Grandparents	4	12	4	10
Other family/friends	8	24	2	5
Older siblings	0	0	2	5
Child stays alone	0	0	4	10
Childminder	8	24	12	29
Collective facility	1	3	12	29

Source: author's survey.

feel that their children need some modicum of socialising with other children before school and therefore attempt to mix some private nursery education with informal and familial care. For example, Janet, a 31-year-old secretary with a 16-month-old son, working 4 days per week, has a multifaceted arrangement reflecting all of the above considerations: one-and-a-half days a week her parents-in-law look after her son and one day a week he goes to his maternal grandmother so that neither set of grandparents is too inconvenienced. In addition, one-and-a-half days a week he goes to a private nursery because his parents feel that it is important for him to socialise but do not have the means to pay for any more nursery provision.

In contrast, all the French women with pre-school age children rely on formal sources of care for their primary child care arrangement, that is, childminders, crèches or nursery schools, which are either subsidised or totally funded by the state. Almost as many French as British mothers of pre-school children (51 per cent) need to call on more than one source of child care to cover their working hours, although for different reasons. On the whole, this applies to mothers with children at nursery school who require some kind of child care before or after school and/or on Wednesday. Those called upon are usually childminders (often the same person who looked after the child before they went to nursery school) or a grandparent. Therefore, although the provisions made by the French state offer more stable and straightforward modes of child care to these French mothers of pre-school children, they are not without their problems and complications. Indeed, as seen above, the difficulty in finding appropriate 'Wednesday' child care in France leads many women to take up the opportunity of working part time when their children start nursery school if it is on offer to them.

Indeed, the problems faced by French mothers of nursery-school age children are the same as those faced by all mothers of school-aged children: how to care for them in the period between school and work/commuting time? In both countries, the range of solutions found for before and after school care is much wider than for the care of pre-school age children. Some differences exist between the French and the British mothers, but these are not as marked as for pre-school child care. The most significant difference is that more of the British than the French women manage to fit their work hours completely around school times by working short part-time hours which are not available on the whole to French clerical and administrative employees (cf. O'Reilly's [1994] work on the banking sector).

The second difference concerns the relatively high use of extended

family and friends amongst the British participants and of collective facilities amongst the French as sources of before and after school care. This reflects the lack of before and after school clubs in Britain and the greater pool of non-working women to whom working mothers can turn for assistance in the face of lack of state support. The exact opposite is true in France where a large proportion of schools have facilities to take children early in the morning and to keep them in the evening at minimal cost and the pool of friends and relatives to 'help out' in these circumstances is more limited. Indeed, at first sight, it is surprising that only 12 of the 41 French mothers with school age children use collective school-based care given that it is available to all of them. However, this is explained by the fact that many of the mothers believe that this is an inferior form of child care – too noisy, with insufficient activities on offer and inadequately supervised. Indeed, many of those who use this option explained that it was a last resort and that they would change if they had the opportunity. For example, Agnès, a 35-year-old French clerical officer with one daughter aged 6, working part time and using a *garderie* at the end of the school day for her child because of the lack of alternative forms of care, expressed her dissatisfaction with this type of collective care:

Ideally, in the evening, I would like to pick her up early. That would allow her to get out of the school environment where she is all day already, and then, they arrive home, do their homework and that's it, we don't see them. And anyway, there are too many of them [children in the *garderie*], too much noise. The kids, at the end of the day are wound up. They get on each others' nerves.

This ideal of mothers being able to both take their children to and collect them directly from school was expressed not only by Agnès, but indeed by almost all the French and British mothers. This appears to be an act which is invested with a certain amount of emotional symbolism in the sense that the sight of the mother at the school gates can be reassuring for children. Equally, in France, where the school day is long and homework deemed essential from a very young age, home is seen as the best place for children immediately after school. For the British, 'after school' is the time when children socialise and undertake activities. Similar to the French mothers' concerns over Wednesday, the British mothers want to make sure that their children make the most of this time. This ideological, if not practical, imperative to 'be there' for their child leads equal proportions of mothers of school-age children in both France (51 per cent) and Britain (48 per cent) to make some effort to fit work times with school times either at the beginning or end of the day and to defend their right to work regular hours with little overtime.

The final point to note is the similarity between the two groups of

mothers concerning the absence of their partners in their regular child care strategies. Since the overwhelming majority of partners are employed full time and only dual-earner families were included in the study, it is not surprising perhaps that none of the fathers are involved as regular carers for pre-school children. However, and perhaps more surprisingly, neither are they involved to any extent in providing before and after school care (see Table 2), whether they be French or British. For example, only two of the British (6 per cent) and four (10 per cent) of the French mothers indicated that their partners deliberately chose their work hours to fit in with child care necessities. Indeed, whatever the arrangements made for pre-school or school aged children, the vast majority of both the French and the British mothers perceive themselves, rather than their partners, to be ultimately responsible for managing child care in the sense of gathering information on child care alternatives, making child care arrangements and subsequently monitoring them (see Table 3). A typical example of this phenomenon is Jessica, a British woman with three children aged 9 to 3, working half time as a bank clerk who reported:

When I was on maternity leave and we had to get somebody to look after Robert, he just waved his hand and told me to get on with it. And now, when he ever goes and picks the kids up, I ask him 'Was everything all right'? And he says 'How should I know?'

Furthermore, the respondents in the two countries justified the fact that it is they rather than their husbands who take responsibility for child care arrangements in remarkably similar ways. The first is that fathers, rather than mothers, have to make their jobs their priority, whatever these may be. Marie-Claude, a 39-year-old French mother of a 16 and an 11-year-old working half time as a clerical assistant explained:

It's always Mum who takes responsibility for the children. My husband has got to keep up with his work – it's the way things are. I always ask my husband what his arrangements are to see if he can help out, but it's never possible, for example, for him to take time off work, regardless of what my commitments are. His have to take priority, so looking after the children comes back down to me.

The second justification is that mothers have more of a natural instinct to worry about their children and cannot therefore leave responsibility to their partners who are more lax about the whole business. As Joanne, a 36-year-old British mother of one 5-year-old daughter working as a clerical supervisor on a job-share arrangement explained:

What really annoys me is that his idea of being in charge is to go to sleep, or read the paper and to put a video on for her to watch which is a source of great tension between

TABLE 3. *Responsibility for making and managing external child care*

	Britain		France	
	n=46*	%	n=53*	%
Regular care				
Who assumed responsibility for gathering information on child care possibilities				
Mother	38	83	42	79
Father	0	0	0	0
Joint	8	17	11	21
Who made the initial arrangements				
Mother	38	83	45	85
Father	0	0	1	2
Joint	8	17	7	13
Who monitors the quality of the care received				
Mother	30	65	37	70
Father	0	0	0	0
Joint	16	35	16	30
	n=53**	%	n=55**	%
Emergency care				
Mother	47	89	45	82
Father	0	0	0	0
Joint	6	11	10	18

Source: author's survey.

* This is not the full sample because some women have never used any external child care whilst others had the experience of family or friends offering to care for children and thus did not have to make external arrangements which they would feel they had to 'manage' or 'monitor'.

** This refers to the last incident where 'emergency' care (because of illness, etc) had to be arranged for a child rather than what 'usually' happens.

us. His argument is that if he's in charge of her, he will do it his way and his way is "Let her be independent".

This echoes previous research into the question of responsibility for domestic work and child care, carried out mainly in the United States (Darling-Fisher and Tiedje, 1990; Hill, 1987; Leslie *et al.*, 1989; Pleck, 1985).

Irregular child care arrangements

Similar patterns of continuities and differences between these two groups of mothers emerge if we examine irregular child care arrangements which constitute an important, although sometimes overlooked facet of mothers' child care strategies. The two particular questions to be investigated here concern arrangements for care during school holidays and arrangements made in the case of illness.

As far as sources of care used during school holidays for compulsory school age or French nursery school children are concerned,⁵ there are certain differences between the strategies of the French and the British mothers which are concomitant with the differing configurations of political motherhood in the two countries (see Table 4). First, a smaller percentage of the French than the British mothers reported that no-one other than they or their husband is needed to look after their children during the holiday period, reflecting the lesser employment commitments of the British mothers. Second, the British mothers once again are more likely to rely on grandparents, extended family and friends and less on paid childminders than their French counterparts, for holiday care, evidence once again of the differing financial burdens of child care and availability of non-employed kin and friends in the two countries. However, it is interesting to note that the use of collective facilities is roughly equal in the two groups.

None the less, and reinforcing previous findings, there are a number of continuities between the French and British women regarding their worries and concerns over holiday care. Holidays are seen by the majority to be times when children need to be able to unwind and relax, to be in their own homes and to have some freedom. However, they are also times when boredom can quite easily set in and which offer opportunities for a wider range of activities than is normally possible. The problem for the mothers interviewed was not so much to find someone to simply mind their children during the holidays, but to find child care solutions which would allow the children to make the most of their vacation in all these respects. Many mothers applauded collective care which provides activities for children – solving the boredom side of the equation. For example,

TABLE 4. *Primary source of care used during primary school and French nursery school holidays*

Types of child care used for school holidays	Britain		France	
	n=33	%	n=49	%
No-one other than mother and father	4	12	3	6
Grandparents	14	42	13	27
Friend/neighbour/other family member	4	12	3	6
Older siblings	0	0	5	10
Child stays alone	0	0	1	2
Childminder	5	15	14	29
Collective facility	6	19	9	18
Other	0	0	1	2

Source: author's survey.

Claire, a British mother with two boys aged 7 and 8, working a job-share as a bank clerk, commented that she had had to use more paid, collective child care as her children got older because they became bored at their grandparents, whilst the ageing grandparents found it increasingly difficult to amuse them:

Certainly, when they were younger, I was very lucky having my parents and my mother-in-law to look after them. They used to take them places. I think it's nice for them to be with somebody like that when they're younger, but now, as they're getting older, they're wanting more. They're quite sporty, so they'd prefer to do swimming courses or football courses. They're getting to an age when they want more than just grandparents. If they're happy doing things, then it's easier for me to go to work.

However, too much of this type of care is seen as institutionalising the holiday experience too much. One French mother whose son spends most of his holidays in a collective facility (a play centre) because he no longer has a childminder and no family is at hand to step into the breach, reported:

It's a shame because, well, even if they do activities which they wouldn't do otherwise, they still have to get up in the morning like when they are at school. They can't have a lie-in ... but I have noticed that there are mothers who don't work who take their children to the centre, so that makes me feel a little less guilty.

Turning now to the question of who looks after children who are too ill for their normal child care arrangements, the main difference between the two groups of women is that the French mothers take more time off themselves to look after their own children and call less upon family and friends than do British mothers (see Table 5). That said, however, overall

TABLE 5. *Arrangements for looking after sick children (last incident of illness occurring)*

What arrangement was made to look after child in most recent bout of illness	Britain		France	
	n=49	%	n=43	%
Mother took all necessary time off work	18	37	21	48
Father took all necessary time off work	3	6	3	7
Mother and father shared time off work	3	6	3	7
Mother took limited time off, then replaced by unpaid/paid carer	9	18	12	28
Unpaid carer came to house	9	18	2	5
Child sent to unpaid carer	3	6	2	5
Paid carer came to house	2	5	0	0
Child sent to paid carer	1	2	0	0
Child stayed alone	1	2	0	0

Source: author's survey.

the differences between the French and British mothers are less marked on this than on other issues with the main source of care for sick children in both groups being the mother herself with fathers playing only a minor role in providing this type of care.

It could be suggested that the lesser differences between the French and British women on this question reflect the strong ideological influences which come into play in this emotive issue of looking after children when they are at their lowest ebb. It is perceived generally amongst the research participants that in such periods of difficulty for children, it is their mother, rather than their father or a third party, that children need and that in these instances, maternal feelings demand that the woman puts her child before her employment. For example, Marie-Anne, aged 28 with one daughter aged 11 months, working full-time as an insurance clerk explained that: 'She was ill and I took some of the days that I am entitled to. It wasn't that the childminder wouldn't have taken her, but me, I didn't want to leave her ... I had to take 4 days.' Equally, Mary, a full-time British bank employee with one daughter aged 10, clarified the position by explaining also that mothers and fathers are not interchangeable in these incidences: 'Recently, I had two days off to look after her. When a child's poorly, it doesn't matter what age they are, they want their Mum. Even Dads don't come into it, so if she's ill, the first port of call for school is to phone me.'

Moreover, whatever the arrangements made it was overwhelming the mothers in both groups who perceived that it was their responsibility to make them (see Table 3 above). In no cases did the French or the British women feel that their partners took sole responsibility for such arrangements, although a small minority in each country felt that responsibility was shared. Such findings are echoed in the single-nation study of France by de Singly (1993).

In sum, therefore, this micro-social study has revealed fundamental similarities between these two groups of French and the British women. The first is that the prime concern of both groups of women is to ensure the well-being of their children when deploying a child care strategy, rather than doing what is most convenient or cheapest for themselves. The arrangements made for child care must ensure not only that someone is there to 'mind' the children, but that the care provided is of a sufficient quality to meet their social, psychological, educational and emotional needs. Child care strategies are thus not determined purely by what is available and what is most convenient for the mother, but what is best for the child within the means of the family. 'Quality' in both countries is seen in very much the same way: not as a particular type of care but as

an adequate balance between types of care which cater to the child's developing needs. In other words, these mothers are seeking sources of care which balance a warm and loving one-to-one relationship with an adult, the opportunity to socialise with other children, the opportunity to partake in developmental activities and supervision of their educational development. Too long days in collective care, particularly cheap and overcrowded care, is too tiring. Too much time with childminders or even grandparents can be seen as too stultifying for children, particularly as they grow older. These considerations are as important as practical possibilities and constraints in bringing these women to choose the degree to which they will delegate their child care responsibilities and to whom they delegate. The second continuity between these French and British mothers is their overwhelming perception that it is they, rather than their partners, who are responsible for their children. In other words, the greater involvement of the French women in the labour market appears to have had little impact on the perceptions of responsibility for their children held by these women, nor on what it means to them to be a mother as opposed to a father when compared with the British case.

It could be suggested, therefore, that these preoccupations taken together constitute a core ideology concerning the nature of the responsibilities of motherhood which is shared by these two groups of women. Whilst perhaps not advocating the need for mothers to spend twenty-four hours a day with their children, and differing between the two groups as concerns the extent to which it is acceptable for a third party to undertake care of children and the amount of time that mothers need to liberate for their children, this ideology suggests none the less that a mother should be above all devoted to the well-being of her children rather than to her employment, and that she herself should strive to derive as much benefit as possible from having children by spending maximum time with them (the definition of maximum being different in the two countries). It could thus be proposed that the greater 'commitment' to employment of the French mothers in this study in terms of hours of work, and the more extensive support which they receive from the state to facilitate this commitment, has not lessened the normative burdens of motherhood for them in comparison with their British counterparts. Indeed, de Singly and Maunaye (1995) argue that although in France women are no longer expected to spend all their time with their children in order to be a 'good mother', this does not mean that their mothering burden has become lighter in comparison with the past since parents, or more properly, mothers, are expected to provide their children with more in terms of material and psychological well-being and educational assistance. This is partly

due, in de Singly's and Maunaye's view, to the increased competition in society for educational and material success and the increased expectations to provide children with the necessary skills with which to survive in this competitive world. This concurs with Gardiner's (1997) economic view in the British context that the principal domestic burden on women is now the formation of the 'human capital' of their children.

However, it is clear that these similar perceptions of the fundamental duties of motherhood do not preclude there being a number of differences in the everyday experiences of the French and British employed mothers examined in this study, particularly at a practical level. First, there is a significant variation in the extent to which the mothers in the two countries take, or have taken time out of employment to care for their children themselves, both in a lifecourse and a weekly perspective. Second, there is a clear distinction in the ways in which the French and the British mothers have their children minded whilst they are at work, particularly when we are considering regular child care. It can be seen, therefore, that the different configurations of political motherhood to be found in the two countries have an impact on the degree to which it is possible and acceptable for the two groups of women studied here to delegate specified areas of their mothering duties to a third party – usually another woman – but much less on the extent of these duties, or indeed on the degree to which they are shared between the two parents.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What do the differences and continuities in child care strategies between these French and British women mean, therefore, for the assessment of the impact of different configurations of political motherhood on the construction of mothering in the everyday lives of employed women? Do these findings lend credence to the patriarchal state or partnership model? Before attempting to answer these questions, it should be stressed once again that one micro-social study of a particular group of women, in two countries only, cannot produce hard and fast answers as it needs to be complemented by further micro-level studies of particular groups of women in different welfare regimes. Such a recognition of the limitations of a particular study should not, however, undermine its individual contribution to this on-going debate. The findings of this micro-social study give support to what one might term the 'pessimistic' version of the partnership model of the effect of state policy on gender relations. This is because although the French state, both in its practical support for employed mothers and the ideological climate of acceptability of mothers' employment which this brings about, has allowed the French women in

this study to enjoy a relationship with the labour market which is closer to that of men than do their British counterparts, it has not taken 'ultimate responsibility for children away from mothers which is the final test of gender equality' (see p. 2). It remains the mothers', not the state's, and not the father's job to maintain the complex and sometimes fragile balance of child care arrangements which ensure the well-being in every respect of the child amongst both sets of women.

The question which remains to be answered is whether or not the changes in women's access to the job market, which have been assisted by certain welfare regimes such as in France, will eventually alter the private and qualitative aspects of mothering and the participation of fathers in child care strategies. An optimistic answer, based on the concept of 'lagged adaptation' (Gershuny *et al.*, 1994) is that the greater participation of mothers in employment will eventually lead to changes in the household, particularly in terms of the role played by fathers in the bringing up of their children and taking responsibility for them. Within this perspective, it is argued that such a change has not yet taken place, even in more progressive welfare regimes, because the adjustment of work roles occurs not through a short-term redistribution of responsibilities, but through an extended process of household negotiation (and perhaps reconstitution) extending over a period of many years, and indeed, across generations.

A more pessimistic interpretation could be that patriarchy has an enduring nature which adapts to change, rather than capitulates to it. The fact that the need of capitalism for women in the workforce has not undermined patriarchal relations in the home can be seen as evidence of this state of affairs (Delphy and Leonard, 1992). Similarly, but perhaps a little more optimistically, other feminist analysts, such as Walby (1990), argue that patriarchy is composed of different structures, for example: marriage and the household relationship; paid employment; and the patriarchal state. Consequently, the undermining of any one patriarchal structure does not lead automatically to progress in the others. Indeed, Calasanti and Bailey (1994, p. 39) insist that 'changes in the society at large do not necessarily presage changes in the household: family relations have their own dynamic and relative autonomy'. In this case, we could say that state support for mothers in employment in France, when compared to a less 'woman-friendly' welfare state such as Britain, has not led directly to improvements in all aspects of gender relations for these groups of women. Many vestiges of a traditional ideology of mothering remain despite the changes at the practical everyday level of employment and child care.

NOTES

1. Child care policy is defined here in terms of both the financial support for and material provision of child care provided by the state as well as the extent to which the state gives parents the right to spend time caring for their own children whilst protecting their employment and/or income rights.
2. Although no comparable data is available for mothers as such, a Eurobarometer survey in 1990 of all women employees in Europe found that 63 per cent of French women had never interrupted their employment whereas this was the case for only 40.3 per cent of British women (INSEE, 1995, p. 167).
3. As far as part-time work is concerned, the results here compare with national trends in that more British women than French work part time. However, the number of French participants in the study working part time was above the national average: in 1991, 60 per cent of all employed mothers with children of 10 or under were working full time and 40 per cent part time in France (Artinian and Boccara, 1992, p. 66). This reflects the contractual possibilities theoretically open to all the women interviewed to transfer to part-time work from full-time posts and suggests that more French women working in other sectors might take up such a possibility if it were open to them. For the British participants, their rates of full- and part-time work reflect on the whole the national average: in 1989, 34 per cent of employed mothers with children under 11 were working full time and 66 per cent part time (Harrop and Moss, 1995).
4. Only ten women (nine British and one French) in the study managed to fit their work hours exactly into school hours. Even so, the majority of these had to arrange 'irregular' care for school holidays, emergencies, etc.
5. These figures include parents with children at nursery school in France for whom the problem of holidays is exactly the same as for compulsory school. Private nurseries in Britain are not structured around terms and holidays on the whole. Therefore, British mothers with children under 5 are excluded here.
6. It should be noted that one of the British employers provided a subsidised workplace nursery which explains this perhaps higher than average figure. However, demand for places far outstripped supply, with places being allocated on the whole to full-time workers.
7. This category refers to compulsory school age children. Compulsory school age is 5 in Britain and 6 in France.

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