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The Social Patterning of Values and Rationalities: Mothers' Choices in Combining Caring and Employment

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The assumption of individualised rationality runs through the two dominant theorisations of family behaviour – new household economics and individualisation. We demonstrate the inaccuracy of this assumption, using the results of two CAVA projects into mothers' perceptions and choices in combining mothering with paid work, in allocating tasks with partners, and in choosing childcare. Rather, mothers make such decisions within socially negotiated accounts of what is morally adequate, and we go on to show how these decisions and the values informing them are socially patterned by class and ethnicity. Finally, we consider how both theory and policy can make a 'rationality mistake' in neglecting the importance of social ties and moral responsibilities in family life.

Introduction

Currently, there are two dominant understandings of family behaviour. First, 'new household economics' (Becker, 1996; Ermisch, 2003) extends rational choice explanations of neo-classical economics to families. An economically rational trading between men and women creates an optimal family division of labour, with women specialising in domestic work and childcare and men in labour market work. A second influential view diagnoses an individualisation of gender relations in late modernity with the development of 'self' as a prime concern. People are forced to rethink and choose biographies and lifestyles, rather than following predetermined roles. Couples are no longer tied together in complementary domestic and market specialisation and couple relationships are increasingly governed by, and contingent upon, ideas of mutually satisfying intimacy. Late modern life has to be individually negotiated (Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Despite their different disciplinary origins, in some ways these two understandings are remarkably alike – they both entail an assumption of individualised and standardised rationality (e.g. Irwin and Bottero, 2000). Partly because of this, they share some of the same problems.

First, both understandings posit universalistic, top-down frameworks which are abstracted from empirical research. The disjuncture between grand theory and close empirical work leaves the field open for unproductive polemical debate (e.g. the 'breakdown of the family'). Similarly, policy formulation is left without much purchase on the

processes of family life. Policy comes to depend on simplistic assertions about the value of one family form (e.g. marriage) over another, combined with a focus on family failure rather than on what families actually do.

The second, linked, problem is that the assumption of a standard individualised rationality runs against recent empirical research. This shows the importance of social ties and socially negotiated moral responsibilities in family life. Families make decisions about labour market participation, the allocation of unpaid caring and domestic work, and their family trajectories more generally, within socially negotiated accounts of what is morally adequate. These moral decisions are often ambiguous – there can be more than one 'right answer' depending on particular circumstances. They are also socially variant and socially patterned. Cost-benefit type economic questions are not separable from these social and moral decisions. Similarly, individual goals are seen through the lens of family responsibilities and negotiated within wider social normatives. Again, the disjuncture between this empirical work and grand theory has left policy unguided in facing contemporary family behaviour, and has led to what we call the 'rationality mistake' where government policies tend to assume an individualistic and economic rationality.

In this paper we will demonstrate this thesis using the results of two empirical projects, carried out as part of CAVA, into mothers' perceptions and choices in combining mothering with paid work, in allocating tasks with partners, and in choosing childcare. These are the 'Mothers, Care and Employment' (MCE) project, based on in-depth interviews with over 100 mothers (and some fathers) from different social groups in four different towns, and the 'Life as a Parent' (LP) project, based on a questionnaire survey of 102 parents, mostly mothers, of primary school aged children, residing in socially contrasting areas of Leeds (see Duncan, 2003; Duncan et al., 2003, 2004; Irwin, 2003).

Values, rationalities and behaviour

In the LP research, a baseline for most mothers was the priority given to having time to care for children and family. Asked what was most important to them, 52 of 96 interviewees replied 'to have the amount of time I want for spending with my child/children', with many of the remainder prioritising 'to have enough money to bring up my child/children in the way I want (17) and 'having time with my family' (6). Only four cited 'time for myself' and three 'job enjoyment'. There is not much evidence of individualisation here, unless this means personal fulfilment by caring for others.[1]

This preference is not readily accommodated in individualistic and economistic frameworks, but depends rather on moral reasoning about the best way of allocating time and resources in relation to other people's needs. We can use the example of mothers' choice of childcare, taken from the MCE project, to show both the importance and social diversity of these essentially moral judgements. The expansion of childcare under New Labour since 1997, which is in welcome contrast to previous governments, is dominated by the concepts of 'affordability' and 'availability', and is driven by an economic agenda that sees childcare as a means to overcome 'barriers' to employment. There is little consideration in this policy discourse of the wider social, moral and emotional components of parenting or childcare.

We found that partnered mothers' reasoning about the suitability of different sorts of childcare, as inducted from the interview data, was expressed along two main dimensions.

These were (1) how they understood their children's needs and (2) how they understood their own needs. First, children's needs were expressed around *emotional*, *development* or *group* issues. Emotional issues centred on the need for a child to have a secure emotional tie with a carer, while development issues included both formal education and child development as well as more general socialisation. For most mothers, it was these issues that were most important – although the exact balance between a child's emotional security and his/her social development varied with social group. Child-centred group issues, which focussed mostly on avoiding racial discrimination towards children, were also important for black mothers.

Those mothers who overtly identified their child's emotional security as particularly important also saw themselves as best placed to provide this, and there was a strong sense of the necessity to 'be there' at home for the children. Other child carers were seen more as substitute mothers who should have responsibility for, and care about, the children's emotional well-being, as well as providing practical care. Fathers and relatives were often a preferred option, while childminders were distrusted and nurseries were seen as too formal and communal. Indeed, the distaste for nurseries that these mothers expressed was sometimes quite startling. Carmen put this vividly:

> I mean it's my own preference but when you see rows and rows of cots it looks like you know some – orphanage ye know and I like to think that my baby would be in someone's home receiving personal attention rather than you know some young girl.

In contrast, some groups of middle-class mothers presented their choices about childcare provision in terms of educational and social development. Consequently, these mothers tended to prefer formal nurseries and were often dismissive of friends, neighbours and relatives for regular childcare. Gill commented that:

> I know some children who have spent all their time with their mothers . . . and they are spoilt, cannot socialise with other children. I think it's very dangerous, they shouldn't be at home with their mothers. Some mothers are crap at doing playdough or painting and things, so they need somewhere to learn to be separate and to be an individual.

In talking about their own needs, mothers valued childcare in terms of *practical*, *emotional* or *group* issues. Practical issues were those of cost, timetabling and accessibility, while emotional issues included the need for trust, for peace of mind, to avoid obligations and reciprocity, and/or to preclude any 'competing mother' for the child's affections. Group issues included the need to fulfil obligations to others (like family) or to gain social acceptance in terms of ethnicity, class or sexuality. Most mothers were located along an emotional–practical continuum, again with varying group emphases. Only a group of 'peripheral working-class' mothers (those with unskilled occupations and – if they were employed at all – in low-paid and often short-time or casual jobs) were mostly concerned with practical issues about the cost and convenience of childcare. One high-income group of mothers in North Leeds particularly stressed what we have called emotional issues. Group issues were most important to lesbian mothers, who sought to avoid discrimination because of their sexuality.

Mothers evaluate the suitability of childcare options with regard to far more than affordability and availability. Indeed, only one of the eight diverse social groups of mothers

gave these issues much prominence. Rather, our results show that childcare choices result from complex moral and emotional processes in assessing both children's needs, and the mother's own, and the balance between the two. Even the mother's needs are partly understood in relation to their children's needs. Childcare evaluations are one part of mothers' value systems, and in turn these emerge in specific social and geographical contexts. It is not just a question of the quantity of childcare needed to establish a successful policy, but also of its quality and nature.

The social patterning of values and rationalities

Decisions about combining mothering with employment, and about childcare, are fundamentally moral and social questions. These sorts of questions are particularly affected by the context in which they take place. In turn, this means that they will be socially patterned. The evidence here reveals the importance of class and ethnicity in such patterning.

Ethnicity provided a major fault line in the MCE research. The views of white mothers were mostly strung out along a 'primarily mother'–'primarily worker' continuum, with an emphasis on the former. Drawing on Duncan and Edwards (1999) a 'primarily mother' identification refers to women who give primacy to the importance of caring for their children themselves as much as possible, whereas 'primarily worker' refers to self identification by women as workers as well as mothers. Typically there is a felt tension between these identifications. In contrast, African-Caribbean mothers usually held positions along a 'primarily worker'–'mother/worker integral' axis, where the latter identification sees substantial hours in employment as a built–in component of good mothering. It was also common that African-Caribbean mothers took it for granted that they should take overall responsibility for family life, including childcare and domestic work as well as paid work; male partners held a more subsidiary position. White mothers often took a negotiating stance with male partners, where the allocation of tasks and labour was subject to outside constraints and opportunities, like the couple's respective employment hours. However, there was rarely any 'pure' trading on the household economics model, and allocation was usually subject to gendered expectations of what was psychologically or socially most suitable for men and women. Commonly, for example, men were seen to need the 'buzz' of paid work, while women were assumed to possess more suitable parenting (mothering) capabilities. Quite often this 'trading' shaded off into pre-given gendered assumptions about family divisions of labour. In this case 'negotiation' might never occur, and in some cases fathers simply refused to cooperate if they felt that the 'pre-given' homemaker–provider gender division was being overstepped.

Distinctive class patterns were also apparent from the interview data. These did not, however, simply relate to middle–working-class differences, but instead to more nuanced differences reflecting social identity within these broad positions. For working-class white mothers there was a clear split between the 'peripheral' and central/intermediate groups. The former held generally low-skilled and marginalised positions in the labour market, in contrast to the latter's more advantaged, secure and higher-skilled occupational positions. The former expressed primarily mother understandings, the latter tended towards the primarily worker position. Within the LP research a relatively small group of the total sample revealed a consistently 'pro-care' or 'primarily mother' set of attitudes, consistently prioritising women's caring over their work roles. However, those who did

so were positioned very similarly. They were white, working class, typically with an employed partner. They were relatively constrained in respect of their own employment opportunities, had children at a young age and were not highly qualified. However, although far from advantaged, they could typically afford not to work, or not to work extensively. Similarly, in the MCE research there was continuity between women's social position or circumstance and their judgements about the best thing to do. For example, Christina, who was employed part-time as a cleaner in Barnsley, expressed a common motif, she:

> couldn't see t' point of having a child and then leaving him with somebody else.

In contrast Jessica, who worked full-time as a social work assistant in Barnsley:

> 'I wanted to go back to work . . . I think it were – it were important for me to get back to being that person, not just being me little boy's mum'.

This division within the working-class respondents was associated with the idea of 'career'. Almost all those who saw their employment as career, rather than simply a job, tended toward the 'primarily worker' position, and vice versa for the 'primarily mother' group. The career group was also largely made up of the skilled working-class and intermediate-class categories. As Li *et al*. (2000) note, this career/job division in the working class is not simply related to relative power and security in the labour market, but also to a set of aspirational factors about job progress, job skills and satisfaction, and involves forward planning to achieve these goals. Certainly the interviewed mothers in this working-class 'career' group often expressed themselves in this way. It is not so surprising, therefore, that the peripheral group were more likely to take 'pre-given' gendered roles when it came to dividing tasks with partners, and the central/intermediate group were more likely to negotiate – although generally subject to gendered 'preferences'.

There were also significant differences, although still strung out along the 'primarily mother'–'primarily worker' continuum, between middle-class white mothers. One distinctive group of interviewees lived in a high status inner suburb of Leeds, and overwhelmingly showed a strong 'primarily mother' identity. Their understandings were almost identical to those of the peripheral working-class group, despite huge class differences in incomes, status, education, employment, and housing. Divisions of labour, although taking a form of negotiation, were in many respects pre-given in the sense that these values about proper mothering were already taken for granted. In contrast another group of middle-class interviewees who lived in Hebden Bridge – a location increasingly known for 'alternative' life-styles – tended more towards the 'primarily worker' position with (unusually for white mothers) some 'mother–worker integral' understandings. They were also the most likely to take 'purer' negotiating positions with male partners over household divisions of labour and were likely to favour formal childcare as a means to securing social and developmental gains for their children.

It is the nature of the relationship with male partners that seems to explain the differences between these two middle-class groups. Both groups were overwhelmingly composed of graduates, often with extensive postgraduate training and experience of working in high status professional and managerial jobs. None were local, but had moved

to Leeds or Hebden Bridge respectively for the opportunities these areas provided. But the definition of these opportunities differed. For the 'primarily mother' group in Leeds, the move was part and parcel of conventional, that is strongly gendered, family building. Most respondents in this group had met their husbands (all were married) in London, where, as young professionals, they lived together and some had their first child. Leeds was somewhere where they could buy a bigger, better house with a garden, more suitable for children, premised on a good job offer for the husband, and build a family. The women would concentrate on mothering, combined with employment as appropriate – or as compelled as in the case of some who worked longer hours than they thought best in order to 'pay the mortgage'. In contrast many of the Hebden Bridge group seemed to have moved there partly because it was a site where they could more easily combine the less gendered roles of independent worker and partnered mother.

Understandings of 'good mothering' and evaluations of the appropriate meshing or exclusiveness of paid work and care commitments clearly have an important, if under-researched, life course dimension. A consideration of this dimension within our research helps further illuminate class-related difference, and the ways in which orientations cohere with diverse social positions. In line with nationally representative surveys (e.g. Bryson 1999) over 70 per cent of women in the LP sample thought that mothers of school aged children should work part time, as opposed to working full time or being a full-time homemaker (the next most common response being one of 'undecided', which perhaps reflects a refusal to generalise). Amongst a range of questions on perceptions and attitudes respondents were asked to offer their preferred 'solution' to a dilemma presented within a vignette. The vignette scenario described a woman (with a partner working full time), trying to decide whether or not to work full time and let a childminder look after their child, just starting at primary school, until 6pm, or remain employed part time and collect her child from school herself. Around two thirds of respondents favoured the continued part-time option, about one third the full-time option. It was the highest qualified who were more likely to favour the full-time option, although even amongst those with degree level qualifications little more than half did so. This is not surprising – it fits with an expected diversity within 'class' groups about the right thing to do, and it fits with the evidence described earlier that some well-qualified middle-class women are pro-care ('primarily mother') in their judgements about meshing care and paid work. In this regard they are quite closely aligned with relatively disadvantaged women. However, respondents were also invited to state if their 'solution' to the vignette dilemma would alter should the hypothetical child, rather than just starting primary school in reception year, be a few years older. Almost uniformly the respondents who had degree level qualifications stated that they would alter their recommendation as the child grows older. A typical description of why this altered things was exemplified by one graduate level respondent:

> [The] child would already be settled at school, and secure. The child would be older physically and emotionally to cope with the long day.

This is in contrast to the women who were both 'pro-care' in their general attitudes as described earlier, and relatively constrained in their employment opportunities. These women also recommended that the vignette character should give priority to time with her child, but in contrast to the previous respondents they see this as the right thing

to do *throughout* the child's primary school years. Their recommendation would *not* change if the child had been at school for a few years. A typical response was that the vignette character should give priority to time with her child, even when the child is older:

> [You] don't have kids to give to somebody else. It's a long time for a child to be with a childminder.

It seems likely that the high-qualified women who saw paid work as compatible with mothering when a child is 'established' in her/his primary school career themselves possess opportunities for strategic employment decisions, and hold aspirations for themselves as workers, and careerists, independent of their commitments to their children. Amongst the less advantaged women there is a relatively limited scope for strategic employment decisions. The latter positioning is consistent with holding moral commitments which lie for much longer with the exclusive care of children.

Perceptions of the best thing to do are not independent of social location therefore. Equally, however, these cannot simply be read off from social location but relate to an intermingling of social norms, mothers' self-identities, and available opportunities. Diverse perceptions are not views from nowhere, or something 'freely chosen'. Rather they are shaped in relation to diverse contexts.

Conclusion: from the rationality mistake to middle range theory and progressive policy

As we have seen, mothers take decisions about how parenting might be combined with paid work, how children should be cared for, and how tasks should be divided with partners, with reference to moral and socially negotiated norms about what behaviour is right and proper. In particular, people do not view care simply as a constraint on paid work. Rather they feel morally obliged to care and often wish to do so. How this responsibility is undertaken, however, will vary between particular social groups and geographical areas.

The dominant approaches to family decision making seem to be at odds with this conclusion. The new household economics model is restricted. Cost–benefit analyses of childcare and labour market possibilities may be important but they are not separable from moral and normative assessments. Processes of socially negotiated moral understandings and relational commitments are crucial to understanding family decision making. While our critique will not be surprising to social researchers, traditionally contemptuous of 'homo economicus', it is important to remember both the robust confidence of neo-classical economics (articulated here through new household economics) and its influence in policy development. Partly, this is because it offers apparently simple operational solutions to complex social issues. Our empirical results also show that the individualisaton thesis is limited. Choosing childcare is a good example. At most, individualisation is a highly context-dependent process and, like new household economics, inadequately captures the processes of socially negotiated moral understandings and relational commitments. Both theories appear to commit a 'rationality mistake'. They ascribe a particular economic and individualistic rationality to family decision making which is not supported by empirical evidence about how

people actually make decisions. Not only are these decisions moral decisions, they are also socially negotiated in particular contexts. This means that decision-making will be socially and geographically variable, as opposed to the uniformity presumed in both the theories.

This conclusion has important policy implications. Although often implicit, these models are recognisable in much government policy in Britain. A good example is the official assumption of an 'adult worker family model', where both fathers and mothers are seen as primarily workers in the labour market, who pool their earned income in supporting themselves and their children (DTI, 2000; HM Treasury/DTI, 2003). This position is supported by reference to the increasing involvement of mothers in the labour market and to a greater social acceptance of gender equality. Together with an assumed growing individualisation of society, women are seen as taking on the identity of independent paid workers rather than 'dependent' carers. They will exercise 'rational choice' in taking individualistic decisions about how to maximise their personal gain and fulfilment. Paid work is assumed to be the optimum means of doing this. As we have described, this policy assumption does not tally with how mothers actually make choices about employment, labour allocation and childcare – which apart from anything else is highly variable. In this way policy also falls into the 'rationality mistake'. This is one reason why the government's expansion of childcare is 'not having the transforming impact that we thought it would have and that it should have' as Patricia Hewitt, as Trade and Industry Secretary, put it (*The Guardian*, 19 December 2002). We would argue that provision of childcare is crucial but that policies in the domains of care, work and childrearing must be more fully informed by an adequate understanding of the diverse choices and evaluations made by parents, and of their context specific nature.

We have sought to describe the disjuncture between close empirical work and grand theory. There is a missing 'middle element' between the social ethics of family practices and theories of general social processes. What are the middle range processes and mechanisms that shape, enable and constrain family practices? This middle element can most usefully be conceptualised as norms, values and belief systems which have continuity with diverse social contexts. An adequate middle range theory therefore needs a general level of applicability which also recognises the importance of context, and which is accessible to both empirical research and policy formulation. The concept of 'moral rationality' does just that. This enables us to make general statements about the behaviour of particular social groups in given contexts, based on grounded research into actual family practices rather than on assuming universal patterns. It should also allow general, but context driven, statements about family policy.

Acknowledgements

Note

1 Respondents were invited to state their first and second priorities in life from a fixed choice list, and were then asked to add their own 'choices' and say where these would be placed on the list of priorities. The distribution described here reflects the final pattern of priority.

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