

Advice to Mothers Workshop, Friday 20 June 2008

Report by Charlotte Faircloth, PhD candidate University of Cambridge

This workshop, organised by Dr Angela Davis and held in the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, brought together researchers from a range of disciplines – including history, sociology, anthropology and midwifery – to discuss different perspectives on ‘Advice to Mothers’.

The focus of the workshop was to look at the advice given to women and girls as mothers (and potential mothers) through the media and popular culture, education, politics, psychologists, health care professionals and within the family. The workshop aimed to examine the advice women and girls received on all aspects of motherhood, the relationship of women to the advice, the intentions of those giving the advice, the figures from women sought for advice and whether these sources were changing over time. Posing a number of questions, the day explored whether advisors were seeking to encourage or coerce mothers to fulfil particular social roles, and how this was determined by the ethnicity, class, age and locality of both the advisors and the women they advised.

Rima Apple, Vilas Life Cycle Professor in the School of Human Ecology and the Women’s Studies programme at the University of Wisconsin-Madison opened with the keynote speech. Apple is known for her work on American motherhood during the 20th century and particularly for her focus on what she coined ‘scientific motherhood’ (1995) – an ideology that designates ‘good’ mothers as those who are guided by scientific information, subjugating their own perspectives to authoritative experts (Hausman 2003: 3).

Before beginning, Apple noted that looking at advice to mothers was not, in itself, a reflection of actual practices amongst women in their own homes. Instead, such advice serves as a *gauge* for academics as to what was considered beneficial for raising healthy children. The place of science in such advice formed the focus of her talk, with a specific interest in how such advice was disseminated.

She opened by citing an American 1889 publication *Babyhood* which said ‘There is a science to bringing up children and this magazine is the voice of science’, to stress how ‘scientific parenting’ dissolved maternal authority in conjunction with the promotion of ‘modern’ parenting methods. This message was echoed throughout the following century, in books, pamphlets, by public health nurses and in educational trailers. Though not with malicious intent (indeed, ‘scientific’ methods of infant care such as separate sleeping and formula feeding were introduced to reduce infant mortality) the widespread hospitalisation of birth during the 1940s and 50s had the effect of alienating a mother from her baby, and encouraging her to seek expert guidance. This was not, of course, a simple case of oppression, but a development many mothers welcomed – not only because these methods promised to ease the stresses of dealing with infant care, but because women felt they were ensuring the best for their children. Yet there was always a coercive edge: as Apple put it, ‘What mother would want to risk the health of her baby by not doing ‘The Best’?’

When asked about the contemporary situation, Apple agreed that the rash of neuroscientifically inspired books currently on offer to new mothers was yet another permutation of scientific motherhood. Interestingly, these books (such as Sure Gerhardt's *Why love matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain*) appear to reject 'modern' parenting and return to more 'traditional' (supposedly primitive) styles of care. What is interesting is that these approaches – whether correct or otherwise – continue to rely on the discourse of science to legitimate their positions, which is ironic as they originally came out of a critique of paternalistic medicalisation.

Angela Davis' presentation had a more specific historical focus on the experiences of women in Oxfordshire during the 1960s based on interviews with a large sample of 96 women. She concentrated on how women negotiated the advice on contraception they were given by nurses according to their familial circumstances, class backgrounds and age. Some women, for example, refused to use the diaphragm because their partners disliked the sensation, despite wishing not to become pregnant.

A session on mid-century advice focussed particularly on media messages about motherhood in the 1950s and 1960s through an analysis of magazine articles and agony aunt columns. The presenters stressed how important it was to avoid stereotyping the '1950s housewife' as one who was oppressed and resentful. Ali Haggett's paper challenged the Betty Friedan version of full-time motherhood set out in *The Feminine Mystique* in her retrospective interviews with women who had been mothers during the 1950s and 1960s. This evidence showed how many relished the opportunity to have freedom and flexibility away from the public sphere – again calling attention to the complex layers of subjectivity endemic to any discussion of prevailing cultures of parenting.

The final session, on more contemporary advice looked more specifically on how childbirth was portrayed in the popular press. Holly Powell Kennedy currently visiting King's College London noted that this was often a question of polarities: the body as beautiful and capable vs. something ugly and incompetent; labour as something normal vs. something risky and pathological; birth as something transformative and a route to motherhood vs. something endured for the sake of a baby. Harriet Gross, a psychologist from Lincoln noted that in this climate, women were understandably confused. Tracing the 'social life of advice', she noted that women were themselves providing a meta-narrative on the advice they receive in the form of comments on internet sites. She quoted a conversation between numerous mothers as to the merits of the controlled crying method of infant sleep training, noting that the ferocity of some of the comments betray an anxiety amongst mothers as to the 'right' way to bring up their children. Given the historical scope of the workshop, it was made clear that this anxiety is certainly nothing new, though most participants agreed that the plethora of information stretched modern mothers ever more between the poles of 'advice' and 'support'. A final session presented by researchers from Coventry examined young mothers' experiences of this tension.

For more information and for an online image gallery of an exhibition accompanying the exhibition visit: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/images/mothers/>