

Modern Motherhood Conference, London, Wednesday 2 July 2008

Organised by the Family and Parenting Institute and the Open University

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From the start it was clear that this event was going to be a more coherent and engaging day than most purely academic conferences. Presenting the findings of two important studies of modern motherhood, but with a strong policy and political focus, the programme included discussants from academia, the media and the policy world of political parties and think-tanks. Taking place in the context of the exhaustion of the New Labour project, which made parenting a central focus of policy, and the widespread expectation that the Conservatives' time has come around again, the day had an openness that contrasted with the uncritical acceptance of parenting policy from 1997.

In her opening speech, Mary MacLeod, Chief Executive of the Family and Parenting Institute (www.familyandparenting.org), established some of the recurring themes of the day: Is there a need for a new 'politics of motherhood'?; Are there 'public remedies to private matters' that do no risk 'persecuting parents' with the often 'blunt instrument' of policy interventions? MacLeod also professed a discomfort with the proliferation of 'outcome research' which often dominates policy and public discussion of child-rearing.

Professor Heather Joshi, Director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education provided some fascinating data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. As she acknowledged, many of the findings were not surprising to those with an interest in study of family life, however they did provide useful clarification and confirmation of significant trends shaping contemporary motherhood. Longitudinal graphs illustrated the relationship between education levels and age at of the mother at first birth and historic changes in women's relationship to the labour market. One particularly interesting theme which was picked up on throughout the day was the differences between women in particular age-groups at the age of first motherhood. Joshi concluded that the findings showed that motherhood and paid work are no longer incompatible, that diversity rather than uniformity characterise modern parenthood, in particular with regard to age, education and employment, and that childrearing is no longer a mother's monopoly. This latter shift is the product in part of the expansion of professionalised childcare but it is worth noting that there is still a very high reliance on informal childcare, confirming another theme of the day, which was the embeddedness of mothering in relationships beyond the parental couple, in particular, within intergenerational relationships.

Sally Gimson, Campaigns Manager of the Family and Parenting Institute, made it clear that the conference was not concerned with 'problem families' so much as 'problems for families', in particular problems experienced by mothers. Gimson highlighted the tensions wrought within the family by the labour of childcare and household tasks, but also by the broader anxiety surrounding parenting. She also raised problems with spending cuts affecting the levels of professional support available to all parents/mothers

in the early years, not just those judged to be 'at-risk', such as young mothers. The FPI is campaigning for increases in the resources available for health visiting services, based on poll results suggesting that health visitors are the most trusted source of support and advice for new parents.

Dr Mary Jane Kehily, one of the researchers on the 'Making of Modern Motherhood: Memories, identities and practices' project (www.identities.org), described their study which entailed interviewing 62 full-time mothers and the most significant people around them. 12 of them were then followed up longitudinally. An additional element of the project was an analysis of media and cultural representations of contemporary motherhood, which elicited some consistent themes, notably the greater visibility of pregnant women and mothers, the prevalence of romanticised notions of the child and childhood and the tendency for pregnancy to become increasingly commodified and scrutinised.

Professor Rachel Thomson, who led the 'Making of Modern Motherhood' project presented the results from qualitative interviewing of the new mothers and their 'significant others'. Like Joshi, Thomson emphasised the significance of the mother's age in shaping the experience of contemporary motherhood, identifying three categories of first-time mother: 'young mums', 'older mums', and in between these two, just 'mums'. Some of the distinctions between these groups were:

- For the young mums there were noticeable tensions between their desire to be an adult and their desire to remain a child.
- For the 'just mums', motherhood tended to represent a 'project of self', with strong identification with cultural reference points such as celebrity parents or high-profile parenting experts. The research identified a common culture of motherhood amongst the 26-35 year old mothers. These women had the strongest identification with various 'positions' or identities of motherhood that were identified in the cultural analysis of parenting culture. For example, as 'Baby Whisperers' or 'Contented Little Baby' mothers, as users of re-usable or disposable nappies.
- Older mothers were characterised as often having experienced fertility problems which contributed to them seeing motherhood as a lucky event, which was almost miraculous in character rather than a lifestyle choice.

Themes described as occurring across all age-groups included:

- A rejection of the past by those who were upwardly mobile, sometimes with a couple view-point of 'us against the world'.
- Other women had a strong identification with their own mothers and a positive connection to the past which became more meaningful through the experience of motherhood.

- Among some of the women, the researchers identified what they term 'intergenerational recuperation', whereby they contrasted their own experience to their mother's life and saw themselves as 'making amends' for their mother's experience.

- Grandmothers interviewed tended to be conscious of an intensification in the experience of mothering both in terms of the time pressures on mothers but also in terms of the level of anxiety about meeting the baby's needs. There was a sense of distinction between younger and older generation in that grandmothers felt that they had 'just got on' with motherhood, without being so reflexive about baby-care decisions and questions of identity, or so subject to expertise or so 'busy' with baby-centred activities outside the home.

- Some women embraced the maternal identity as an escape from the domination of work.

- Others rejected the 'total' maternal identity for fear of losing out by retreating from the public world and the self.

- When interviewed one year on, many of the mothers found it difficult to articulate what had changed in the shift in identity through the experience of motherhood.

The policy implications of the research were discussed as follows:

- That modern motherhood has a paradoxical character as both a source of division and source of solidarity within families and between mothers.

- Although there is a common culture of motherhood, women were positioned differentially in relation to this: some were marginalised from it and perhaps by it. The common culture was described as being constituted of public services, the advice industry, commercial influences and local mothering cultures.

- Despite a common culture of mothering that was a reference point and internalised by many of the mothers, there was considerable diversity in the nature of the motherhood experience which means that experience is interpreted as private rather than public.

- In response to questions, it was raised that there seemed to be greater continuity of experience across the generations in working class families.

The second research project to be presented at the conference, 'Becoming a Mother for the First Time in Tower Hamlets', (www.identities.org) was led by Professor Ann Phoenix of London's Institute of Education, and involved interviewing 19 women from London's Tower Hamlets area who gave birth in the same period, at the same hospital. The women were from varied ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the area from which the sample was drawn. The study included interviews with the women and their families as well as

observations of mothers and babies by child psychotherapists from London's Tavistock Clinic.

The cultural context to contemporary mothering was identified as being characterised as being characterised as anxious about mothers and conscious of divisions between mothers (for example, the US 'Mommy Wars'). Being a good mother and being seen to be a good mother were common themes. Responsibility for the child was shared and negotiated with partners and family. Family was experienced as a source of support but also as a locus of conflict, for example over questions of the appropriate age for weaning.

Professor Wendy Hollway's presentation of findings from the same project raised the issue of the 'ordinary conflicts' arising in family relationships in the early years, for example around employment, competing needs, fathers and the timing of the return to work. There was considerable variation amongst the mothers but all the mothers desired to be special to the baby. It was suggested that in the early period post-partum the construction of mothering is that the mother's needs and the baby's needs coincide. However as time went on, there was an increasingly oppositional construction to these. The issue of the woman returning to work was understood by the interviewees in terms of the 'readiness' of both mother and child for this transition. Young mothers were found to often experience motherhood as a spur to work or career, whereas older middle-class mothers were more likely to be aware of the penalties to their career arising from becoming a mother.

Again, the theme of diversity emerged, with the researchers raising the problem of assumptions and generalisations about modern motherhood overriding 'psycho-social diversity' and the individual meanings attached to babies, employment and family.

Key findings so far, as this is an ongoing project, were:

- Mothers choices are context driven
- Motherhood is different to other roles
- The transition to motherhood is experienced as a psychological upheaval for all mothers, not just 'at-risk' mothers.

A very lively panel discussion rounded off the day, with panellists Brid Featherstone, Professor of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Bradford, Sue Gerhardt, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and author of *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*, Maria Miller MP (Con) and shadow minister for the family, Carey Oppenheim, co-director of the think-tank IPPR and Yvonne Roberts of the Young Foundation and journalist. The session was chaired by Fiona Millar, Chair of the Family and Parenting Institute.

Sue Gerhardt raised concerns about societal developments which she thought meant people were increasingly conceptualised only as workers, this included a drive to speed up the individualisation and emotional self-sufficiency of babies, for example through the

target-led Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. She felt that there is an economic imperative (cutting state expenditure) to the drives for increased breastfeeding and the advocacy of particular parenting styles. She raised concerns with the work pressures which lead to very young babies being put into professionalised childcare. She stressed the importance of babies having a good experience of dependence early on in life, which, in her view, tends to require mothering. There was some hostility in the audience to this upholding of what seemed to be a naturalistic construction of the maternal role.

Brid Featherstone questioned the 'mother' and 'father' terminology, especially in the light of the variety of ways in which parenthood can now come about and be carried out, for example through IVF and the experience of gay/lesbian parents. She also problematised the prevalence of a one-sided emphasis on parents' responsibilities as opposed to parents' rights and what she described as an historically unprecedented intensification of the degree of monitoring of family life.

Yvonne Roberts recounted being told by a midwife that as a mother, she had two choices, to become a 'good example or an awful warning' to her child. She acknowledged ambivalence as the only eternal and natural thing about motherhood and stressed that contrary to the pronouncements of some experts and policy-makers, there can be no justified claim to a uniform path of good motherhood and fatherhood. She called for a manifesto which could give a public voice to 'assertive parenting', able to make demands, for example for flexible working or childcare.

Maria Miller re-asserted the Conservative commitment to Surestart and stated that mothers working are now a fact of life but that support for mothers has been withdrawn by the Labour administration. She reinforced the need for a preventative health agenda with early interventions by health professionals.

Noteworthy developments of the day included:

- A consensus that motherhood has become extremely conspicuous and scrutinised.
- A widespread discomfort with the term 'parenting' both because it elides gender-distinct experiences of mothering and fathering and because it has become associated with an outcome-led policy approach.
- An emphasis on the diverse experiences of motherhood, meaning at times a polarisation of circumstance and experience, most clearly expressed in age differences, but it was claimed that 'age masks class' and the further diversity arising from ethnic, cultural and individual variations.