

State Welfare Regimes, Mothers' Agencies and Gendered Moral Rationalities

Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards

University of Bradford and London South Bank University, UK

Correspondence address:

S.S. Duncan, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, UK

Email: s.s.duncan@bradford.ac.uk

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Simon Duncan is Professor in Comparative Social Policy at the University of Bradford, and is a member of the ESRC Research Group on *Care, Values and the Future of Welfare*. He has particular interests in the comparative analysis of gender inequality in welfare states, and in parenting, partnering and the work-life balance; and has published widely in these areas. Recent publications include *Lone Mothers, Paid Work and Gendered Moral Rationalities* (Macmillan, 1999, with R. Edwards), *Gender, Economy and Culture in the EU* (edited with B. Pfau-Effinger, 2002, Routledge), and *Analysing Families: Morality and Rationality in Policy and Practice* (edited with A Carling and R Edwards, 2002, Routledge).

Rosalind Edwards is Professor in Social Policy and Director of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group at London South Bank University, UK. She has considerable research and publishing experience in a wide variety of family issues and policies. Her most recent major publications include: *Children, Home and School: Regulation, Autonomy or Resistance* (ed., 2002, Routledge/Falmer), *Analysing Families: Morality and Rationality in Policy and Practice* (ed. with A. Carling and S. Duncan, 2002, Routledge), and *Making Families: Moral Tales of Parenting and Step-parenting* (with J. Ribbens McCarthy and V. Gillies, 2003, sociology press). In addition, she edits (with J. Brannen) *The International Journal of Social Research Methodology: Theory and Practice*.

1. Introduction

In this contribution to the festschrift for Ulla Björnberg, we are concerned with a topic that has formed the focus of Ulla's work over the years – mothers, paid work and child care. Like her, we identify the importance of understanding the relationship between welfare state regimes and the lived experiences and practices of men and women.

Much research has identified the importance of different 'state welfare regimes' in supporting various concepts of the relationship between states, markets and families. As these concepts are highly gendered, men and women are also positioned differently and, in this work, this is taken to explain the gendered variations between countries in the uptake of paid and unpaid work, especially for mothers. Social policy becomes the determining factor and the national state is conceived as the primary actor.

In apparent contradiction, however, sociological research at the level of individuals and families shows instead the importance of moral ideas about what is the right and proper thing to do - how, for example, a 'good' mother should combine paid work and unpaid care. These understandings are negotiated in the context of variable social networks, groups and settings, so that different people have distinct understandings of the proper course of action within the same state welfare regime. From this perspective social policy is just another part of the secondary context through which individuals navigate.

In order to reconcile these apparently conflicting explanations, set within different theoretical and disciplinary frameworks, we need to focus on the missing 'middle element' of norms, values and beliefs. The notion of 'gendered moral rationalities' is an attempt to provide this link between structure and agency. In this contribution, we explore this link. We begin, in section 2,

by addressing the assumptions underpinning the dominant comparative social policy focus on welfare state regimes as the primary explanation for the employment behaviour of individual mothers, as welfare subjects who act in as rational economic men. We argue that this model of behaviour ignores mothers' variable agency. Such agency forms the focus of section 3. We provide case studies of four lone mothers, elaborating the rationalities underpinning their quite different approaches to the relationship between motherhood and paid work, within the one national context of the British welfare state regime. These rationalities are variable, gendered and moral, rather than unitary and economic. Thus, in section 4, we conclude with a discussion of the way that the notion of 'gendered moral rationalities' provides an explanatory link between structure and agency in understanding mothers' uptake of paid work.

2. Structures: state welfare regimes and rational economic man

The notion of 'state welfare regimes' is now familiar in comparative social science. These are discrete sets or types of national social policy, based on different concepts of state, market and family, and the relationship between them. Rather than social policy convergence, therefore, towards some predetermined, evolved position (for example, Fabian ideas of perfect social democracy or neo-liberal globalisation), different state welfare regimes diverge even as they adapt to external global change (Taylor-Gooby 2001). Any particular policy, and comparisons between countries, is thereby related to an explanatory account of the structures of welfare states.

In Gøsta Esping-Andersen's (1990) original classification *Liberal Welfare Regimes* use social policy to uphold the market and traditional work-ethic norms, with modest and means tested benefits aimed at a residualised and stigmatised group of welfare recipients. While no one country presents a pure case of any regime, and countries may straddle or move between them, the USA is a type case - with Britain rapidly moving in this direction. In *Conservative Welfare*

Regimes the preservation of status differences is central to social policy; the obsession with free markets is lacking and states intervene in a highly regulatory, albeit conservative, way. Germany is the type case. In *Social Democratic Welfare Regimes* social policy reforms based on decommodification are extended to all classes, with equality at the highest standards rather than minimal needs. The market is de-emphasised but the high taxation necessary to finance universal welfare means that the emphasis is on avoiding problems in the first place, where every adult should be able to participate in the labour market. Sweden is archetypical. Other scholars, and Esping-Andersen himself, have modified and adapted this basic classification, and it has also been extended to cover southern Europe, eastern Europe, East Asia and probably elsewhere (for example Deacon et al. 1992, Goodman et al. 1997, Esping-Andersen 1999).

These various state welfare regimes have different implications for how women and men are differentially positioned in labour markets and welfare states, and a charting of correspondence between regime types and gendered inequalities is ubiquitous. For instance, in social democratic welfare regimes public provision of childcare is widely available. Mothers can more easily both care for children and pursue a career. In liberal regimes, minimal public provision is targeted at stigmatised groups of mothers; most mothers will choose short part-time employment to fit in with school hours, and will mostly stay at home with pre-school children, although some will be able to use market provision to allow full-time employment. In conservative regimes the emphasis is on using part-time childcare to support full-time housewives, perhaps with some part-time work (see Duncan 1996).

Almost as familiar, however, is feminist critique of this body of work. As Jane Lewis (1992) put it, women disappear from the analysis as soon as they disappear from the labour market. This means that the relative, and gendered, importance of unpaid domestic and caring work is missed,

and the various ways in which familial position shapes individual positioning vis-à-vis markets and states is underplayed. The fact that women, especially mothers, as 'gendered commodities', are a priori positioned differently from men in relation to markets and welfare states is outside of the framework. Taking gender into account inverts Esping-Andersen's conceptual underpinning - those countries that are most 'decommodified' in his typology (in the Social-Democratic regime type) are in fact only so for men. For mothers, such countries are the most commodified (see Nyberg 2002 on the gendering of social policy concepts). This also means that some countries seem misclassified. For example France and Germany are both included by Esping-Andersen in the Conservative regime type, but the nature of female labour market participation and public child care provision is quite different in each. Similarly, Arnlaug Leira (2002) finds no overall Social Democratic / Scandinavian model when looking at working mothers, where Norway retains stronger conceptions of women as homemakers.

One response to this critique is to add the socio-economic position of women into Esping-Andersen type welfare state regime models (for example, Orloff 1993; Sainsbury 1994). More fundamentally, feminist critics have proposed alternatives that place gender divisions in a more central theoretical position. For example, Jane Lewis (1992) proposes a categorisation of *strong, modified and weak 'breadwinner' states* - Ireland, France and Sweden are type cases of each category. (See also Duncan and Williams, 2002, discussion of Nancy Fraser's, 1997, three alternative ideal regime types which might follow the demise of male breadwinner regimes: *the Universal Breadwinner Model, the Caregiver Parity Model* and the *Universal Caregiver Model*).

For all the various models of welfare regimes, lone mothers can be seen - as Barbara Hobson (1994) puts it - as a 'litmus test'. The social and economic position of what is conventionally seen as an economically vulnerable group indicates the relative position of women as whole

within the state welfare regime. Figure 1, which presents employment and poverty rates for lone mothers, shows this well. Thus in Sweden, the archetypical social democratic welfare state with a supported dual role model for mothers (Björnberg 2002), 70% of lone mothers were employed in the early 90s and only 2% of these had incomes below 50% of the national average. Even for the 30% minority of unemployed lone mothers, less than 10% were in poverty. In the USA, the archetypical liberal welfare state, and where employment for low-income mothers is enforced rather than supported (Orloff 2002), 60% of lone mothers were employed, but up to 30% of these were in poverty. For the 40% without employment a massive 83% were in poverty. Similar differences can be seen for other positions on the 'genderfare' spectrum.

Figure 1 around here – AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

This graph, Esping-Andersen's original model and much of the feminist social policy critique, are essentially the same in one important respect, however - they implicitly conceptualise people's behaviour in cost-benefit terms. Individual women, as welfare subjects, simply respond to different welfare state regimes (expressed as sets of national policies) acting uniformly as 'rational economic men'. That is, as in neo-classical economic models, welfare subjects make individual utility calculations, in their own self interest, about the costs and benefits of taking up paid work or remaining unpaid caregivers. It supposes that mothers consider the likely wage expected from paid work, based on an assessment of their human capital and local job opportunities, versus the income to be gained from benefits and /or via economic dependency on an employed man. This cost-benefit analysis would be subject to various constraints, such as the cost and availability of child care. Comparative social policy analysis clearly does recognise social and spatial differences in this calculus, in the form of different welfare state regimes or breadwinner states. Indeed, this approach can be useful in

theoretical and policy debates, because it shows that alternative welfare systems can exist in practice, and also that national ‘taken for granted’ (for example, the expectation that mothers are carers at home) are particular social and historical creations. But it has the explanatory drawback that welfare subjects are merely considered as provided with different sets of rational economic choices by different welfare state regimes, breadwinner states and so on. It is policy-makers and agenda setters (like Lawrence Mead, Charles Murray or the Myrdals) who actively create these alternatives¹; welfare subjects simply respond uniformly as essentially rational economic men through taking up, or not taking up, paid work or unpaid caring at different rates in different countries.

The dominant comparative social policy approach thus argues from form (outcome) to process (agency), reifying the role of the state in setting or changing opportunities and constraints (see Duncan and Edwards 1999). If this behavioural assumption is incorrect, however, if welfare subjects do not behave according to this form of economic rationality, then both theories and policies assuming that they do will be misplaced. We have described this explanatory problem elsewhere as the ‘rationality mistake’ (Barlow and Duncan 2000; Duncan and Edwards 1999). Policies based on assumptions of economically relational responses from welfare subjects may well be inefficient, irrelevant or even oppressive. Explanations of social change and behaviour will remain inadequate and tangential, or in more precise terms ‘chaotic concepts’ because their assumed model or abstract world will provide only a weak match with the social world of what people actually do (cf Sayer 1992). We now turn to this world of lived experience.

¹ Hence the logic of the complimentary social policy approach of analysing how this restricted number of agents reach their policy ideas and decisions.

3. Agencies - mothers' values and social difference

Having laid out the assumptions underpinning the dominant comparative social policy approach, and having noted the relative uptake of paid work and poverty rates for lone mothers in different welfare state regimes, we immediately want to contrast the rational economic man model with case studies of four lone mothers - Sylvia, Kim, Jessie and Fiona.² These case studies allow us to examine agency - people's own understandings and behaviour, as opposed to assumptions about how they will behave in response to policy structures. All were living in Britain, in the context of demonisation of lone mothers in public debate (Edwards et al. 1999), in part sparked off by sections of the Conservative party which then lost power in 1997. The New Labour government softened the moral tone, but apparently continued Conservative policy by withdrawing top-up benefits for lone mothers, and by more explicitly encouraging (some would say pressurising) lone mothers to take up substantial hours paid work (see Duncan and Edwards 1999). In this, New Labour took a classic 'rational economic man' policy stance. First, policies were to 'make work pay' by using benefit payments to subsidise wages, by introducing a minimum wage, and by allowing lone mothers on 'in-work' benefits to keep more maintenance money than those on 'out-of-work' benefits. Second, constraints to employment were to be lowered, in particular access to childcare was to be increased. Thirdly, active case management was introduced, to help lone mothers find employment, and/or enhance their human capital through training and education. In other words the cost-benefit structure was to be changed to make paid work the rational option and, if lone mothers were unable to work this out, professional case workers would help them do so. But, as we shall see, the four lone mothers - who came from different social groups and lived in distinctively different social areas - had already made quite different choices about the relationship between motherhood and paid work. These choices were not predicated on individual cost-benefit analyses of likely wage levels

versus benefits and constraints. On the contrary, they were based on moral views, developed within their local social networks, about what sort of behaviour was right and proper for mothers with dependent children. This alternative moral rationality resulted in decisions about employment that were quite different to decisions that would be predicted by a calculus based on simple economic rationality.

Sylvia - low human capital and caring at home:

Sylvia, a White working class lone mother, was 24 years old and had two children aged 2 and 3 at the time of the interview. Sylvia left school with no qualifications, and before she had her children worked as a waitress. Unemployed, she was living in a stigmatised public housing estate on the periphery of Brighton on England's south coast. Based on one of her sister's experiences, she thought she would be better off if she returned to paid work:

‘I'd love to go out to work, I'd love to go back full-time ... I think I'd be better off financially if I was working than I am now because I only get £68 a week on benefit. My sister gets £185 a week working in a nursing home and I think I could live off that’

Despite a low level of human capital, and hence an expected low wage level, Sylvia's cost-benefit calculation was that it would be better for her to return to paid work - she could more than double her income. But her views about what was morally right as a mother, and socially possible in negotiation with others, were quite different.

First Sylvia's social networks were strongly family based, and her own mother was a particularly important source of support. Every day, Sylvia and her children went to visit her mother who, with one of Sylvia's sisters, lived on an adjoining (and less stigmatised) public housing estate.

² These case studies are drawn from interviews conducted in 1994 for our research on lone mothers and the uptake of paid work (Duncan and Edwards 1999). We are grateful to the ESRC for funding this research under grant no. R00023496001.

Her mother was a significant influence on how Sylvia thought about her responsibilities to her children and the relationship between motherhood and paid work:

‘My mum is a one parent and she thinks, like most old people, that if you have children you should be with them. You don't have children to bugger off and leave them with someone else is how she sees it. She didn't do it. Sometimes I agree with her. That's the idea, isn't it, of parenting, being with them, isn't it? Well I think it is. Like, you know, I would go to work and not see the kids all day and just see them in the evenings. But even when I ask her to babysit she says she wasn't able to go out when she was in my position. I have to go by what my mum says otherwise there'd be an argument. She's good with the children but I'd have to argue with her to get her to agree to look after the kids while I worked.’

So arranging childcare to allow employment was not just a matter of financial or access constraints, but primarily a moral view about mothering maintained in social networks. According to Sylvia, her mother and her sisters, it is a child's mother - or failing that family - who should care for children, not ‘strangers’. Public childcare or low-cost childminders, which were options, were not considered. This even extended to the free ‘respite care’ by a childminder that the local social services had offered Sylvia for one night every month. This was in order to give her a break from her children and a chance to go out and socialise independently. Sylvia had initially taken up the offer but stopped after a few months, for:

‘My mum and the family didn't want me to do it. They said they'd rather help me out, which they have done. My mum said they [children] go to complete strangers and come back little shits who play me up.’

Thus, even though Sylvia would respond to a questionnaire by saying that she wanted paid work (as most British lone mothers do), if she actually pursued this course of action it would have caused tremendous problems in her relationship with her mother, who was so important in her everyday life. In effect, her mother saw the prospect of Sylvia taking up paid work as morally wrong. Sylvia herself, in balancing this view with her own desire for paid work, not only had to concur in order to avoid conflict with the most important adult in her daily life, but essentially agreed with her mother's moral view. For Sylvia, being a ‘good’ mother and being a worker were

in conflict - getting a paid job would be morally wrong and socially difficult. This was despite the fact that becoming a worker would have placed her in a better financial position.

Kim - low human capital and full-time employment:

Kim, an African-Caribbean working class lone mother, was 26 years old and had two children, aged 9 and just under one year, at the time of the interview. She had lived in a large public housing estate in inner London for just over three years, having been rehoused by the local council from temporary homeless accommodation. Like Sylvia, her educational qualifications were poor - she too had left school at 16 shortly before her first child was born, although she did have a few GCSEs (the basic school leaving qualification). Also like Sylvia, Kim believed paid work was better for her financially. As she put it:

‘I work cos I couldn't live off benefits and I didn't just want to stay inside the house. I keep trying to push myself and better myself ... I can save more, I can buy more things, essential things for my house and children. It gets me by more than living on benefits’

But Kim had quite different ideas to Sylvia about what was morally right as a mother, about the value of formal childcare, and about what others would support her in doing. First, Kim firmly linked employment to good mothering:

‘... I feel that, me personally, you go out and work if you want to better yourself and better your children and show them, you know what I mean, that it's not just to live off the government, you can go out and do something for yourself. And also that will show them why education is important ... I've got great dreams for myself and my children. By me working and trying to keep the household as stable as I can, I think my children may see a better life for themselves than I saw when I was growing up. I can't predict the future, but I hope it turns out okay.’

Indeed, prior to her second pregnancy, Kim was employed full-time in clerical and administrative work. Even after her youngest child was born Kim took an hourly paid temporary job when the baby was just three months. On average, she worked about 20 hours a week, but this could go up or down depending on her workload and childcare availability, but she was already looking for a job with stable long part time hours at the time of the interview.

Second, this assessment of the benefits of her taking up paid work for her children was supported by Kim's view of formal childcare. In being cared for by professional workers, Kim thought her children would gain both emotional stability and socialisation:

‘I use the play centre for my oldest child, about three days a week and my niece after she's finished school, and sometimes my sister if she's not working will help out. I prefer the centre cos she needs stability in her life and to mix with other children outside the home ... I would prefer something for the youngest like a playgroup or nursery...’

However, the weekly variation in the hours of her hourly paid job - and hence in the pay she received each week (even when supplemented by benefits) meant that she could not book a regular slot of hours in a nursery for her child or pay for a full-time place that she would not always use. But, thirdly, Kim's social network supported her in taking up paid work - both emotionally and in the form of childcare. The father of her second child (who was unemployed) provided Kim with the bulk of the extra child care she needed in order to work. Kim's family also helped. A married sister provided child care outside her own part-time hours of work, and this sister's eldest daughter looked after Kim's children after she finished school and during school holidays. Kim's other sister, also a lone mother, worked full-time and so could not help her out much with childcare, but fully supported the idea that good mothers are employed. Her wider friendship networks held the same view. For Kim, being a 'good' mother encompassed being a worker; it was not only of benefit financially, it was morally and socially the right thing to do.

Jessie - high human capital and caring at home:

Jessie was a White middle class lone mother, with a daughter aged 1 at the time of the interview. She lived in a rather conventional, high status suburb of Brighton which was geographically near, but socially distant, from Sylvia's public housing estate. Unlike Kim and Sylvia, Jessie possessed high human capital with a university education and professional, full-time working

experience. Potentially, she could earn a high wage and afford childcare. All this meant that she saw herself as quite different from working class lone mothers like Kim and Sylvia:

'I think probably I'm different ... One tends to think of lone parents, you know, being stuck in a grotty flat or bedsit ... If you're only getting £60 a week plus your rent being paid, I mean how else can anyone live, you know, if they don't have family to support them financially or whatever.'

Nonetheless, Jessie was unemployed at the time of the interview as well as drawing benefit received substantial financial support from her widowed mother. This was because her belief that good mothers stayed at home to look after their children exerted a stronger pull than economic considerations, and overcame her identity as a worker:

'Well, I mean I'm a career woman, or I was a career woman ... I wouldn't even consider [a job] now because I want to bring her up myself ... There's no question that, you know, mum can do a better job than anybody else, however loving and caring someone is. And I just wouldn't want it any other way ... Although I don't work, in my head I still see myself as someone who works. I still see myself as a person with a career.'

Jessie's evaluation of proper childcare supported this view of good mothering: children need one to one care by a mother figure, so formal daycare by childminders and nurseries was out. The only possible solution was a 'substitute mother' in the form of a private nanny under Jessie's control - although even this would be inferior to her own care:

'If I could have it as I wanted it, without thinking about my daughter, I'd have a live out nanny, like my friend Dee. I wouldn't have any peace if she went to a childminder, I want one to one care. If I could employ a nanny I wouldn't have to compromise ... I don't trust babysitters and you can't tell friends to do things exactly how you want them!'

This view was reinforced in Jessie's wider neighbourhood network, which mostly consisted of married women financially supported by their husbands. While some had part-time jobs arranged around school hours, or enabled through employing a nanny, most took on the primary role of caring for their children at home. Just like Sylvia, for Jessie being a 'good' mother and being a worker were in conflict - getting a paid job would be morally wrong and socially

difficult. Again, this was despite the fact that becoming a worker would have placed her in a better financial position.

Fiona - high human capital and full-time employment:

Fiona was a White middle class mother, 34 years old and with one child aged 6. She lived in a gentrifying part of Inner London, partly because of its 'sense of community' and her involvement in an 'alternative' social network of professional women. She had a university degree and experience of full-time, professional employment, like Jessie. But unlike Jessie, Fiona prioritised her identity as worker, indeed she had never thought about not working for pay:

'It was the natural order of things, it was what one does during the day. I've always thought people should work'.

In contrast to Kim, however, Fiona's commitment to paid work was organised less around views of good mothering and her child's needs, and more around her own need for independence. All that was necessary was to arrange good child care:

'I feel I'm much better off than living on benefits. Work gives me a structure to the day and I get a feeling of achievement from it. Yes, I enjoy the autonomy of working ... If I had the choice to work part-time? Not really. I mean I make sure that I take time off so that I can collect [my daughter] from school occasionally, and I always go to the school appointments and the school shows and all the rest of it. She never misses out...I've a great deal of pride in the fact that I'm coping, surviving and holding down a responsible job... '

As with Kim, Fiona's commitment to paid work was supported - emotionally and materially - through her social networks. Involvement in a local voluntary organisation for parents and children provided the network of friends who formed the main source of her emotional and practical support. It was through word of mouth amongst this network of friends that Fiona found the childminders she had always used to enable her to take employment:

'I know I'm about to need a new childminder, I talk about it and - I don't think I've ever advertised for anybody yet, they've all been told to me. Somehow they've just come.'

Fiona's current childminder, for example, was a friend of a friend's nanny. In this way, Fiona felt that she was able to find the right 'sort of person, the way they express their priorities'. In addition a female friend was living with her as a lodger, which Fiona also found 'very helpful and supportive'. She was, though, currently considering using an after school club, which the voluntary organisation she was involved in was trying to set up and run.

Fiona's uptake of paid work was 'quite normal' in the context of her friendship network. Moreover, this network provided her with day care, not in a direct practical sense but in terms of information and introductions. For Fiona, being a 'good' mother was distinct from being a worker, and it was this separation of the two that allowed her to feel that it was morally right and 'natural' to take up paid work, rather than the moral wrong it was for Sylvia and Jessie.

In all four cases it was the moral and social reasons for taking up, or not taking up, paid work that were dominant. Jessie had potential access to a high wage, but rejected this following her views that a good mother should stay at home with her child. Sylvia also thought she would be better off working, even though her wage would have been far less, but again good mothers did not leave their children with other people. Despite the vast class distance between these two mothers, and the gross difference between in their levels of human capital, their rationalities about combining motherhood and paid work were similar. Kim, like Sylvia, could only expect a low wage - but thought it essential for her children that she was in employment. Finally Fiona saw paid work simply as what one did, as central to her identity, whether or not one was a mother.

Our various case studies show that cost-benefit calculations about personal income are secondary to the moral and social question about what mothers should do about employment and in

choosing child care. We have consistently found similar results in all our interviews with nearly 200 lone and partnered mothers over a number of years (and including division of labour with partners for the latter), and this is supported by statistical analyses of labour market participation and by attitude surveys (see Duncan and Edwards 1999, Duncan 2003, Duncan et al. 2003, 2004). Importantly, while the response to the cost-benefit calculation can be assumed to be uniform (either you get more money or you do not, and hence you either take up paid work or not), the answer to the moral and social question is variable. Different mothers, from different social groups and in different social contexts, have different answers to this question, and hence different responses. For example, most Black mothers we interviewed, both lone and partnered in various inner-city locations, thought - like Kim - that good mothers should have full-time work, and that group nursery care was best for their children. Most of the White working class mothers living on peripheral estates, and also the conventional White middle class mothers living in suburban areas -like Sylvia and Jessie - thought that good mothers stayed at home with their children and that one-to-one childcare by relatives or nannies was best. Other groups - like Fiona - had yet different ideas (ibid). The key decisions about taking up paid work, using childcare and division of work and care with partners are taken in the framework of a mother's moral and social culture; social policy incentives and disincentives may be variously enabling or constraining, but remain secondary.

4. Linking structure and agency - norms, values and beliefs

Sections 2 and 3 of this paper seem to point us in two very different explanatory directions. The former shows the importance of the social policy structure - lone mothers' employment participation and poverty rates vary by welfare state regime. The latter, however, shows that lone mothers' uptake of paid work is not determined by social policy, but depends on mothers' agency as part of moral and social culture.

If we regard individual agency as dominant, then this would suggest that the graph in Figure 1 merely aggregates individual decisions. In this case, theorists may have subsequently added on a misconceived structural explanation, mistaking correlation of patterns for explanation of process. But if this is so, why does the uptake of paid work vary according to welfare state regime? Alternatively, if we take social structure as dominant, then welfare subjects reflect what the welfare state regime allows them in their personal decisions. In this case theorists might have obscured a structural explanation with an agency-focused perspective, based on voluntarism and narrative rather than explanation of process. But if this is so, how can it be that different mothers take completely different decisions even though they live in the same national policy context?

Rather than posing structure and agency as exclusive explanatory opposites, however, the issue can be approached in a different way: how can both explanations be linked? The key here can be conceptualised as those norms, values and belief systems that have social continuity within given social contexts. Birgit Pfau-Effinger (1998, 2002) has argued that the social practices of mothers are heavily influenced by deep-rooted cultural traditions concerning the 'right' gendered division of labour and form of generational relations within families (i.e. the construction of childhood, motherhood and fatherhood, and the main social sphere for the upbringing of children). Although there is often a set of these knowledges, values and ideals nationally that is institutionalised in social policy and majority practices as the dominant 'gender order', other everyday alternative and competing 'gender cultures' can exist at local levels and amongst particular social groups. It is the mutual interplay between these everyday different, dominant and marginalized, gender cultures and the gender order of institutional structures (comprising an overall 'gender arrangement' that is subject to flux) that shape mothers' social practices in relation to employment decisions. This points us towards the importance of a 'middle range'

explanatory concept that has both a general level of applicability and at the same time recognises the importance of context.

The concept of 'gendered moral rationalities' acts as just such a middle-range explanation. Our work on both lone mothers (Duncan and Edwards 1999) and on partnered mothers (Duncan et al. 2003, 2004), in both British and other national contexts, has identified three different gendered moral rationalities that mothers can hold. The 'primarily mother' gendered moral rationality gives moral primacy to the benefits of mothers physically caring for their children themselves; the 'primarily worker' gendered moral rationality gives moral primacy to the benefits of paid work as separate to mothers' identity as mothers; and a 'mother/worker integral' gendered moral rationality gives moral primacy to financial and role model provision through employment as part of mothers' moral responsibilities towards their children. (In this last rationality, mothers escape the tension of conflicting moralities of caring for children versus autonomy via employment, which was often keenly felt by those holding the other gendered moral rationalities.) These understandings are gendered because they fundamentally deal with notions of mothering, they are moral in that they provide answers on the right and proper thing to do, and they are rationalities in providing a framework for taking decisions about participation in the labour market. These are, however, quite a different sort of rationality to that assumed by conventional economic and social policy models. Further, while different gendered moral rationalities are socially negotiated, they nonetheless can be prescriptive amongst different social groups living in different areas. Each gendered moral rationality is also associated with different propensities to take up paid work, and this is why different social groups of lone mothers show quite different rates of paid work even within one national policy regime.

As a 'second order construct' (Schutz 1979), gendered moral rationalities construct an abstract model of the key variations and features of the social relationships between motherhood and paid work, without displaying all the particularities of individual cases. At the same time, the concept provides a means of making general statements about mothers' behaviour that still recognises differences between particular social groups of mothers in given social and geographical contexts, rather than simply assuming behavioural uniformity as in the economic rationality model of behaviour. In other words, structure and agency are linked by establishing how norms, values and beliefs guide specific behaviour in particular contexts. Social policy, and the welfare state regime, constitute one normative, which can be particularly constraining and enabling because it is backed up by the state's control and allocation of material resources and legal sanction. But mothers' social relationships and networks also provide their own normative and material resources and sanctions.

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