

ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare

Working Paper



Mothers, Care & Employment: Values & Theories

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**May 2003
Working Paper No. 1**

Acknowledgments: Thanks to the ESRC Research Programme (CAVA) M5664281001 for financial support. In addition, the London based part of the study was funded by South Bank University, and the Hebden Bridge interviews were funded through a Hallsworth Fellowship held at Manchester University. Thanks also to Rosalind Edwards, Tracey Reynolds, Pam Alldred and Lise Saugeres for their contribution to earlier work. Sarah Baker, Ruth Booth, Sophie Helm also made contributions to the research project.



PROJECT 3A MOTHERS, CARE AND EMPLOYMENT

October 2000 – May 2003

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

1. The project was one of four constituent projects in Strand 3 'Care, diversity and family life'. It examines how particular social groups of partnered mothers, defined in terms of class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality, combine mothering with paid work, allocate time and labour with partners, and choose appropriate childcare.

2. The aim was not to produce a statistically representative sample, but to purposively sample amongst different sets of partnered mothers who might well see partnering, parenting and employment in different ways. To this end 106 semi-structured interviews were conducted during 1998-2001 with eight groups of mothers who were in an exclusive couple relationship, and who had dependent children. Some focus groups and interviews with partners were also carried out. Different sample locations further distinguished these groups where the geography of partnering and parenting is highly variable. Using a grounded analysis, interviewees' accounts were conceptualised as particular instances of *gendered moral rationalities*. These are social understandings that provide answers to, or guidance on, the right and responsible thing to do as a mother in relation to employment, dividing labour and responsibilities with partners, and choosing childcare.

This is an 'intensive' research design, which aims to find out how processes happen by focussing on agency. In contrast, 'extensive' research, as with a population survey, aims to describe overall patterns and distinguishing features. Each design has its particular strengths and weaknesses, and can best be seen as complimentary. Thus in the research the interview results are integrated with information from nationally representative samples.

3. The value systems of partnered mothers seem to show both diversity and uniformity. They appear uniform in that mothers' gendered moral rationalities still involve their primary responsibility for their children. How mothers substantively exercise this responsibility varies, however. Alternative gendered moral rationalities can be distinguished in both decisions about how to combine mothering and employment, and in choosing appropriate childcare. These decisions mean interaction with partners, and here too there is variability in what values inform the divisions of labour and the rationalities that are used to do so.

4. Ethnicity and a 'conventional- alternative' dimension were associated with major differences in mothers' gendered moral rationalities concerning employment, partnering and childcare. For example, Black mothers were most likely to see full-time work as part of being a good mother, while alternative White mothers were particularly likely to value child development in childcare. Class differences, although less important, were also found. These were not, however, simply coincident with major working- middle class cleavages. Rather, class differences related more to nuanced patterns of social identity. Thus a high status group of 'suburban wives' showed similar gendered moral rationalities to those held by the poorest peripheral working class group, and those held by a career oriented skilled working /intermediate class group were sometimes similar to those held by a more alternative 'gentrifying partners' group.

These findings show how mothers navigate their way through potent and immediate normatives of 'good mothering'. They also show that different social groups navigate differently through alternative 'normatives'. Taking employment, allocating tasks with partners and choosing childcare are part of mothers' value systems, and in turn these emerge in specific social and geographical contexts.

5. In the light of these empirical results, we examined three leading theoretical approaches to understanding change and decision making in families – new household economics (Becker), individualisation in late modernity (Beck, Giddens), and 'post-modern moral negotiation' (Finch, Mason, Neale, Smart). Both new household economics and individualisation theorisations are limited in terms of the range of empirical situations that they cover and in terms of the processes they posit as central; the emphasis on individualised rationality neglects the importance of social ties and socially negotiated gendered moral responsibilities. The 'moral negotiation in post-modernity' model gives both greater range and more convincing process specification. In this case, however, there are problems where the notion of negotiation can get stretched to the point where pre-given roles and gendered discourses can be conceptualised as negotiated, rather than as a non-negotiable pre-given.

6. Government policies in Britain assume the individualisation model (describing the preferences and values of individual adults) with new household economics (describing how people operationalise these values). The empirical research results reported here suggest that policy often makes a 'rationality mistake' in making these assumptions. Rather, people take decisions about how parenting might be combined with paid work, about who does what sort of paid and unpaid work, and about what childcare is most appropriate, with reference to moral and socially negotiated views about what behaviour is right and proper. Furthermore, this decision varies between particular social groups and neighbourhoods. Policy needs to be supportive and flexible rather than prescriptive and uniform.

1. INTRODUCTION

The official assumption of an adult worker family has largely replaced the male breadwinner model, which dominated both policy and social assumptions in the postwar welfare state. The British government now regards both fathers and mothers as workers in the labour market, who pool their earned income in supporting themselves and their children (Cm. 3805, 13; see Lewis 2002). This position is supported by reference to the increasing involvement of women, especially mothers, in the labour market and to the increasing social acceptance of gender equality. The National Child Care Strategy launched in 1998, aimed at increasing both the amount and the educational effects of child care, is one part of this strategy [1].

This new adult worker model may have more to offer women than the old male breadwinner model (Lewis 2002). But it presents at least three sets of problems. First, the adult worker model refers more to the 'new ought to be', and much less to the 'new is' (ibid, 52). Gender divisions of labour remain deeply unequal in practice both in paid work and in households and fathers are still seen by themselves and other family members as primarily economic providers. Second, even if the new 'ought' became the 'is', the adult worker model would only be a partial replacement for the male breadwinner model, because unpaid caring would remain undervalued and reduced to a constraint to paid work (Fraser 1997). It would deliver best to those women who most resembled the male half of the old breadwinner ideal family - those without children or other caring responsibilities. Finally, and this is the focus of this article, the 'adult worker model' implicitly assumes that people act as 'rational economic man' in taking individualistic, cost-benefit type decisions about how to

maximise their own personal gain. Paid work is assumed to be the optimum means of doing this.

This is what I have called the 'rationality mistake' (Duncan and Edwards 1999, Barlow and Duncan 2000). For evidence about how people make decisions about their moral economies - including how parenting might be combined with paid work, and who does what sort of paid and unpaid work, show that people do not act in this way. Rather, they take such decisions with reference to moral and socially negotiated (not individual) views about what behaviour is right and proper, and this varies between particular social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare states (ibid, see also Himmelwiet, 2002, Glover 2002, Neale and Smart 2002). In particular, people do not view care simply as a constraint on paid work. Rather they feel morally obligated to care, and often wish to do so. Furthermore, when it comes to dependent children, there can be non-negotiable, and deeply gendered, moral requirements to take responsibility for children's needs and to place these first (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2000, Weeks et al. 2001). Calculations about individual utility maximisation, especially the perceived economic costs and benefits of taking employment or not, may be important once these social and moral understandings are established, but remain essentially. Decisions are still made rationally, but with a different sort of rationality to that assumed by the adult worker model.

In this article I explore this rationality mistake further. I analyse the beliefs of partnered mothers about how mothering should be combined with paid work, about the division of labour with partners, and about appropriate child care. I do this for different social groups of mothers defined in terms of class, conventionality, ethnicity

and sexuality. This extends earlier work on the employment decisions made by different social groups of lone mothers (Duncan and Edwards 1999). I then go on, in section 4, to assess the implications of this research for three leading approaches to understanding decision making in families – new household economics, individualisation in late modernity, and ‘post-modern moral negotiation’. Section 2, which follows, begins with an account of the research methodology.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 SAMPLING STRATEGY

For this study, 106 semi-structured interviews were conducted during 1998-2001 with mothers who were in an exclusive couple relationship, and who had dependent children. Our concern was not to produce a statistically representative sample, but to purposively sample amongst different sets of partnered mothers which - on pre-existing theoretical and empirical grounds – appeared to delineate substantive social groups who might well see partnering, parenting and employment in different ways. Interviews aimed to discover the mother’s values and understandings as their factual circumstances and practices. One of the chief means of gaining information about meanings and understandings is the in-depth, conversational interview (see Mason, 1996), and we used semi-structured interviews of around 1 hour to accomplish this. Some focus groups and a few interviews with male partners were also carried out. Interviewees were accessed using already established informal and formal contacts as starting points, and then snowballed within the contacted mothers’ social networks [2].

This is an ‘intensive’ research design, which aims to find out how processes happen by focussing on agency. In contrast, ‘extensive’ research, as with a population survey, aims to describe overall patterns and distinguishing features. Each design has its particular strengths and weaknesses, and can best be seen as complimentary (Sayer 1992). Thus in the discussion I have combined the interview results with information provided by nationally representative samples.

Research on mothers and employment, especially extensive research, tends not to distinguish between social groups of mothers, nor between different sorts of partner relationship. In contrast this research focused on eight different groups of partnered mothers, varying on dimensions of class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality, who lived in six specific places [3]. All lived with a male partner except for the African-Caribbean mothers with a ‘visiting’ partner and the partnered lesbian mothers, as indicated below. These groups were:

- 17 unskilled / peripheral working class White mothers, living in Barnsley in South Yorkshire, Burnley in east Lancashire, and Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire.
- 13 central working class / intermediate class White mothers, living in Barnsley and Burnley.
- 8 ‘gentrifying’ professional and managerial White mothers living in Hebden Bridge.
- 10 ‘suburban’ professional /managerial White mothers, living in Headingley in the inner suburbs of Leeds.

- 21 African-Caribbean mothers living in Chapeltown in inner-city Leeds, and Southwark and Lambeth in inner south London.
- 9 African-Caribbean mothers with a male partner in a 'visiting' relationship, living in Southwark and Lambeth.
- 10 'alternative' White mothers, living with a male partner, who advocated and attempted to practice feminist and/or green / anti-capitalist lifestyles, living in Southwark and Lambeth.
- 6 lesbian White mothers living with a female partner in Southwark and Lambeth.

Theoretically, there is strong evidence that mothers from different ethnic and class groups, and with different political and sexual orientations, view issues concerning the nature of partnering and parenting in different ways, and have differential employment patterns (Beishon et al. 1998, Duncan and Edwards 1999, Duncan and Smith 2002, Dunne 1999, Gordon 1990, Goulbourne and Chamberlain 1998, Holdsworth and Dale 1997, Holloway 1998, 1999, Jordan et al. 1992, Li et al 2002, Reynolds 2001, Weeks et al. 2001). It should be noted that these groups are not all mutually exclusive. Thus some of the lesbian mothers practiced 'alternative' societal views. In contrast, others held elements of 'alternative' (mostly feminist) ideas about family life and gender roles, but remained 'conventional' in the sense that they did not advocate or attempt to practice an 'alternative' social life.

The different locations further distinguish these groups where the geography of partnering and parenting is also highly variable (Duncan and Smith 2002). Leeds is a large commercial and industrial city, which also acts as a regional centre for much of

the north of England. Now heavily restructured, it has experienced manufacturing decline and strong expansion in services, centred on the strongest growth in the financial sector in Britain outside London. This has led to contrasting areas of disadvantage, a cosmopolitan inner city, gentrifying areas of professionals and students and large areas of conventional suburban affluence. Samples of African-Caribbean mothers living in the 'inner-city', and of 'suburban' middle class mothers, were taken from two of these contrasting areas - Chapeltown and Headingley.

The samples of working class mothers were taken from the smaller towns of Burnley and Barnsley, and the erstwhile mill town of Hebden Bridge in the southern Pennines of West Yorkshire. Burnley and Barnsley, while similar in many social indices of disadvantage, have quite different histories as far as the gender division of labour is concerned. Burnley, one of the Lancashire cotton towns where the factory system first erupted onto the world, has a 200-year history of married women, including mothers, in full-time employment. This area also has a strong tradition of women's autonomy in trade unions, politics and family life. However, the economic basis for these traditions - the cotton industry - now hardly exists. Barnsley, in contrast, is a former coalmining town where women have been excluded from the basis industry for over 150 years. It has a history of women staying at home to support their husbands and sons through carrying out the heavy domestic work required to maintain them in employment, over and above 'traditional' caring tasks. This local economic base has all but disappeared, concentrated into a particularly difficult period of restructuring in the era of Thatcherism, and the area now attracts 'Objective 1' status as one of the poorest areas in the EU.

Historically, Hebden Bridge was a smaller version of Burnley. However, since the 1970s, there has been substantial gentrification (Smith and Philips 2002), and the town is now feted as a major site for alternative living and sexualities. There has also been a substantial decline in manufacturing jobs, especially for men, while local replacement jobs in services tend to be part-time and taken by women. While traditionally female public sector jobs are available more locally, many professional jobs in the expanding service sector require commuting to Leeds or Manchester. There is also a tradition of partnered women working in the (now defunct) textile mills, and there are continuing high rates of mothers in paid work. Nonetheless, day care facilities have developed more around the needs of middle-class commuters. This provided the site for a sample of 'gentrifying' middle class mothers as well as many of the peripheral working class mothers. This occupational difference was strongly articulated through differences in culture and origin. The working-class mothers had been brought up in Hebden Bridge and their life centred around it, although they saw little opportunity for good employment in the area. None had qualifications beyond GCSE. [5] The middle-class mothers were all incomers - 'offcumdens' - who had positively chosen to move to Hebden Bridge. All had been to university. Both groups, who also spoke with different accents, were well aware of one another and of their differences.

Samples of 'alternative' feminist / green and lesbian mothers, and further samples of African-Caribbean mothers, were taken from Lambeth and Southwark. These inner London boroughs are similar to Hebden Bridge in some ways (a point sometimes made by Hebden Bridge 'incumdens' who indeed have often moved from inner London!). Men's jobs in manufacturing have substantially declined, only partially replaced by service sector jobs often aimed at part-time female employment. At the

same time, particular areas are the sites for affluent middle-class ‘gentrification’, while others have attracted ‘alternative’ residents. Unlike Hebden Bridge, however, Lambeth and Southwark have a mixed population ethnically, with large areas of social housing and substantial private renting, and high levels of social disadvantage and unemployment. Just over half of mothers of dependent children are partnered, and around two-fifths have paid work, mostly part time. Among Black mothers there is a culture of working full-time and having careers (Duncan and Edwards 1999, Reynolds 2001). Day care provision varies with a relatively high level of public provision combined with substantial market provision in some areas.

2.2 ANALYTIC STRATEGIES

A ‘grounded’ approach was used for analysing the interview material. First, all statements were identified in the interviewees’ accounts (including seemingly contradictory statements within one account) about 1 motherhood and paid work, 2 the allocation of tasks and time between partners and 3 childcare practices and evaluations. Similar statements were grouped together and, from this grouping, the main ways of accounting for these three issues were inducted.

These accounts as related by the interviewees can be seen as particular instances of *gendered moral rationalities*. This concept has its basis in the varying understandings found in earlier work concerning lone mothers’ identities and responsibilities towards their children (Duncan and Edwards 1999). These understandings provided answers to, or guidance on, the right and responsible thing to do as a mother, bringing up children on your own, in relation to employment. They were gendered because they

fundamentally dealt with notions of mothering, they were moral in providing answers about the right thing to do, and they were rationalities in providing a framework for taking decisions and carrying out actions, in this case taking up paid work. They were also negotiated and maintained within social networks in particular socio-spatial contexts. Within an unquestioned responsibility for doing the best for their children, the lone mothers could hold gendered rationalities towards paid work that gave primacy to the benefits of physically caring for their children themselves (a '*primarily mother*' gendered moral rationality), or to paid work for themselves as separate to their identity as mothers ('*primarily worker*'), or to full-time employment as part of 'good' mothering ('*mother/worker integral*'). In this paper we extend the concept to include mothers' accounts of how best to divide labour and responsibilities with partners, and about choosing childcare [4].

Identification of these rationales then allowed the construction of indicative figures in which the results of the interview analysis were plotted in diagrammatic form. These figures model the relationship between the various understandings and practices held and adopted by the interviewees in relation to our three foci. Thus for motherhood and paid work, the position of each interviewee with respect to these main accounts was plotted as a triangular model and then further generalised into the shaded areas in Figure 1. The size of the different shaded areas thereby indicates the range and number of interviewees' statements. Similar diagrammatic summaries were constructed for child care issues (Figures 4-5), although these summarise a larger number of accounts represented by the tree diagram in Figure 3. For the allocation of tasks and time, a similar procedure was followed to produce the tree diagram in

Figure 2. These diagrammatic summaries then allowed us to structure our analytical account, illustrated by type-case quotations.

3. THE VALUE SYSTEMS OF PARTNERED MOTHERS

3.1 GENDERED MORAL RATIONALITIES ABOUT COMBINING EMPLOYMENT & MOTHERING

Figure 1 summarises the understandings about combining motherhood and employment, in terms of gendered moral rationalities, for the eight groups of partnered mothers in this study.

An overall finding is that the presence or absence of partners makes little difference to gendered moral rationalities about how motherhood and paid work should be combined. The views of partnered mothers in this study are very similar to those held by lone mothers in earlier research, and for the African-Caribbean mothers in this study it made little difference whether their partner was living in or ‘visiting’. Similarly, in both studies there are parallel distinctions between the views of different social groups as defined by class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality (compare with Duncan and Edwards 1999).

Ethnicity provided a major fault line in mothers’ understandings about combining motherhood and paid work (compare Figures 1a, 1b and 1c). The views of White mothers were mostly strung out along a primarily mother – primarily worker continuum, with an emphasis on the former. Identification as a worker implied a

contradiction with what was normally understood as good mothering, while mothering at home meant a rejection of an increasingly prescribed worker status. In contrast, African-Caribbean mothers held positions along a ‘primarily worker’ – ‘mother/worker integral’ axis, with a greater possibility of seeing substantial hours in employment as a built-in component of good mothering. As Cathy, who works long part-time as a nursery officer in Leeds, put it, “I feel a great self worth when I'm working, I feel like ye know it's like, I'm trying to be a really good role model for my children”.

At the same time, the African-Caribbean mothers showed the secondary influence of social class within these ethnic divisions. Those African-Caribbean mothers employed in lower income, lower status service jobs usually held a more ‘mother/worker integral’ position (see Figure 1a), while those who held a more ‘primarily worker’ position were either self-employed entrepreneurs and professionals, private sector managers, or high status public sector professionals. This group had higher incomes than the first group. It should be emphasised, however, that for the self-employed, a primary motivation in setting up their own businesses was often to reconcile their desire for paid work with other aspects of their mothering responsibilities. Class differences within the African-Caribbean group thus related to the overall salience of the mother-worker integral position.

As Figure 1 shows, there were also some class differences in how the samples of White ‘conventional’ or ‘mainstream’ heterosexual mothers (ie those that did not practice alternative ideas about society) were located along the mother – worker continuum. These did not, however, simply relate to middle – working class

differences, but instead to more nuanced differences which had more to do with social identity within these broad positions. For the working class White mothers (Figure 1a), there was a clear split between the peripheral and central / intermediate groups – the former expressed primarily mother understandings, the latter tended more towards the primarily worker position. So Christina, who was employed part-time as a cleaner in Barnsley “couldn't see t' point of having a child and then leaving him with somebody else” (although in the past she felt she was forced to work longer hours for financial reasons). As for mothers who chose to work full time, “I can't see why they've had their kids”.

Similarly Alex, in Hebden Bridge, who worked for pay as a swimming bath attendant only when her children were at school, described the trauma of an earlier stage of trying for higher income through full-time employment:

“I just couldn't do it, the guilt took over the enjoyment of going to work. I nearly made myself ill in the end”.

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. However, 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 mothers in this group often expressed themselves in this way. For Gabrielle, a nurse in Burnley, her career gave her:

“more of a purpose really, it's like ye know I'm not just a mum or just a wife, I'm a nurse as well and I'm me ye know. It gives you another dimension”.

For Valetina, who worked part-time as a health development worker, also in Burnley, “the next step, after this position, is something more - more managerial on a small scale”.

Li et al note the ‘interesting hypothesis’ that this career / job division within the working class might relate to ‘some socio-cultural aspect’ of individual’s lives (ibid, 629). Our data seem to show that understandings of how motherhood and employment are combined may be one such aspect.

There are also significant differences, although still strung out along the primarily mother – primarily worker continuum, between the two middle class groups (see Figure 1c). The group I have called ‘suburban wives’, who lived in the high status inner suburb of Headingley, in Leeds, 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. As Betty, who worked as a university lecturer put it:

“I do wonder why women have babies and then work long hours full time, I just wonder about it, I wonder what's the point of having the babies”.

Similarly Jackie, a fine art consultant, did not:

“really understand the point in having children if you're going to, if your ambition is work rather than your children, I think it's actually quite selfish to have children”.

The single major anomaly in this group, Rita, was herself socially anomalous - she was brought up in an extended, Arabic speaking family in rural Iraq. Favourably comparing her family life as a child and teenager in Iraq with the normal pattern of mothering among her social and residential peers in Leeds, she commented:

“So there's you know one woman on her own with two small children - it isn't natural...It's not normal”.

In this way Rita was the ‘exception that proved the rule’ for this group.

In contrast the group of middle class mothers I have called ‘gentrifying partners’, who lived in Hebden Bridge, tended more towards the primarily worker position with – unusually for White mothers – some mother-worker integral understandings (although as Figure 1b shows, many remained ambivalent). Again, there is an exception that ‘proves the rule’. Mandy, who held a more primarily mother understanding, was married to a working class local who supported more traditional gender roles.

It is indeed the nature of the relationship with their male partners that seems to explain the differences between these two middle class groups. In terms of human capital,

both groups were overwhelmingly composed of graduates, often with extensive postgraduate training and recent and current experience of working in high status professional and managerial jobs. None were local to where they lived, but had moved to Headingley or Hebden Bridge respectively for the opportunities these areas provided. But the definition of these opportunities differed. For the primarily mother group in Headingley, 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 properly become a family. Wives would concentrate on mothering, combined with employment as appropriate - or as compelled where some worked longer hours than they thought best for financial reasons - to ‘pay the mortgage’. As Betty said:

“It was like there were two choices, either I get a job and pursue my career or I get married and decide to have a family and put my energies into that”.

Hence the group appellation ‘suburban wives’, despite the feminist ideas strongly held by some in the past and still influencing their political views. As Saugeres (2002) has detailed, this group seems to hold an ideology of ‘intensive mothering’ which vetoes other understandings. So according to Carrie, a full-time FE teacher:

“I’m a feminist I suppose but I still I can’t shake off the idea that, you know, the good mother should always be there . . . ‘cos it’s so ingrained isn’t it in the cultural thinking I suppose. So I do think – a good mother is one who can be there for them”.

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 role of independent worker with partnered mother. Hebden Bridge was seen as a site where this was more possible. Hence the group appellation of ‘gentrifying partners’. Nonetheless, without the resolution provided by a ‘mother/worker integral’ view, it was hard for many in this group to simultaneously meet two apparently opposing moral duties to be both a good mother and a committed worker in the labour market. For example Gill, who had been in employment since her son was an infant, and travelled daily to Manchester for a full-time university lecturing job, said that:

“People in the area rarely see me as Martin’s mother, which makes me feel terribly guilty – but I can’t leave work early to get to the school gates by half-past three. I relish it when I can ... but if you leave early, well a man said to me in the lift the other day ‘Hey part-timers - you are allowed to come and go as you please’”.

In earlier research on lone mothers we also found little class difference in gendered moral rationalities about mothering and paid work for ‘suburban’ and ‘peripheral’ White mothers– despite considerable contrasts in income and lifestyle (Duncan and Edwards 1999). Conventional understandings of good mothering seem to transcend class differences. Modifications to the male breadwinner model, through mothers’ employment and notions of gender equality, do not necessarily lead to changes in gendered identities about caring (cf Lewis 2000). Similarly, while there might be a local tradition of working-class mothers in employment in Hebden Bridge, this does

not seem to be currently reflected in the way turn of the century mothers combine mothering with employment.

The results shown in Figure 1b, for White partnered mothers in inner London holding 'alternative' views about the nature of family life, are striking in that there is little difference between heterosexual and lesbian interviewees. Differences in sexuality in themselves do not appear to be associated with gendered moral rationalities about mothering and paid work; rather it is the association with alternative, non-conventional views about family life that seems influential. There also appear to be substantial variations between different alternative accounts. Thus some of the mothers, both heterosexual and lesbian, held a strong 'primarily mother' position. This was not, however, a conventional partnered 'primarily mother' position, predicated upon a male breadwinner/female carer distinction. Rather these mothers valued mothering children at home as part of an alternative to the mores of modern capitalist society, including a rejection of paid work as a moral duty. Jane gives a good example:

"I often think, you know, back home when I left university that the sort of life - almost you could make two decisions in life. You could go and get a full time job and get married and have a mortgage, or you could sort of do what I did, which was live in communal houses and work in bits and pieces and do lots of community unpaid stuff. And it's two completely different lifestyles...I would rather work in the community garden, do work on the farm, I'd rather write, I'd rather do things in the garden and at home".

Often these alternative values were expressed in terms of 'green' politics, as well as a more radical feminism. Characteristically, these mothers had high educational qualifications but tended to work for pay (if they were not full-time mothering) occasionally or short part-time. Indeed, most of the 'primarily mother' group worked in activities like gardening, cleaning and 'lecturing and clowning'. Another group, again both heterosexual and lesbian, gave greater value to paid work but saw this more in terms of the 'mother/worker integral' position with an emphasis on the former. These were also more likely to be working longer hours in education or social care. Both groups are in some contrast to the bulk of the 'alternative' White lone mothers I interviewed in the previous study, who took a 'primarily worker' position (Duncan and Edwards 1999). It appears that their 'alternativeness' was based more on a feminism that emphasised women's economic independence through paid work and career, rather than through rejecting paid work or subordinating it to motherhood. Clearly, there are different sorts of 'alternative' mothering.

National Survey Evidence and the Interview Data

How do these results compare with the 1998 survey on women's attitudes to combining paid work and family life, carried out by Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) (Bryson et al. 1999) [6]? As part of a nationally representative sample, the SCPR respondents would be overwhelmingly White and 'conventional', and the survey results support our own for this group. Attitudinal questions reveal that roughly 40% of mothers stressed the benefits of caring at home over employment, and about 25% took a strong 'primarily mother' standpoint, in that they thought women should not combine mothering and employment and stressed the centrality of motherhood in their lives [7] (difficulties in finding child care and suitable jobs were

more reinforcing factors). As with our results, more qualified middle-class mothers were more likely to value paid work and to be in employment. The roughly 60% of SCPR respondents who saw benefits in employment were by no means taking a 'primarily worker' position, however. Employment usually meant part-time work around school hours for mothers with children under 16 (indeed over half of respondents thought that mothers with pre-school children should not have jobs at all). This attitudinal information is replicated by actual employment behaviour, where the 1991 Census shows that while almost 60% of White partnered mothers with dependent children were in employment, the majority worked part-time (Duncan and Edwards 1999).

Interpreting this quantitative data from the vantage point of our intensive study, it seems that around a fifth to a quarter of White mothers hold a firm 'primarily mother' gendered moral rationality, not allowing for significant paid work, with around another fifth also stressing a 'primarily mother' position. Most of the remaining 60% or so will tend towards this position, with only a few adhering to 'primarily worker' or 'mother/worker integral' gendered moral rationalities. But whatever their position on the relationship between mothering and paid work, nearly 90% of the SCPR survey thought that both caring for children and working for pay would cause guilty feelings. This also accords with our qualitative results in this study, where the conventional White mothers usually commented on the tensions of their position on the primarily mother – primarily worker continuum.

The SCPR survey found no significant attitudinal associations with 'ethnicity'. If, as seems likely, both Asian and Black respondents were aggregated into a 'non-White'

group, this would also aggregate above and below average employment rates, and a range of employment attitudes. Certainly the 1991 Census shows significant ethnic differences in employment behaviour (Duncan and Edwards 1999, Holdsworth and Dale 1997). Black partnered mothers are more likely to be in employment and, significantly, are more likely to be in full-time work. This would accord with the predominantly 'primarily worker' and 'mother/worker integral' gendered moral rationalities we found in our interviews with this group. Neither quantitative source, however, records information by sexuality or 'alternativeness'.

Gendered moral rationalities about combining mothering with paid work are similar for both partnered and lone mothers, therefore. Most White mothers are positioned on the 'primarily mother – 'primarily worker' tension, with a large minority taking a strong 'primarily mother' view and a rather small proportion - more likely to be from the less conventional middle-class or from the 'career' oriented working class groups - taking a 'primarily worker' position. This helps explain why full-time employment rates for both White partnered mothers and White lone mothers are similarly low. African-Caribbean mothers, who may also show secondary class differences, range along a 'primarily worker' – 'mother/worker integral' position, and both partnered and lone mothers in this group show higher full-time employment rates. Indicatively, partnered White mothers show higher *part-time* rates than their lone mother counterparts, presumably reflecting a greater access to child care afforded by paternal labour and income within the normal gendered moral prescription that full-time work is not right for mothers. In contrast partnered African–Caribbean mothers show higher full-time rates than their lone mother counterparts, again presumably reflecting their greater access to child care but this time with a different prescription about the right

thing to do in taking employment. Mothers with 'alternative' politics and sexualities show a variety of positions, including 'primarily mother', where what is 'alternative' can vary significantly.

3.2. GENDERED MORAL RATIONALITIES ABOUT DIVISION OF LABOUR WITH PARTNERS

Partnered mothers also maintain a relationship with their partner: this will involve care, but will also deal with an allocation of responsibilities about child care, other caring work, domestic work and paid employment. How do mothers understand and account for these arrangements, and does this also vary by social group? Figure 2 presents an inductive model of gendered moral rationalities about division of labour with partners. It represents the available 'routes' for mothers, from value system, through process rationality, to allocation practice.

The model presented in Figure 2 is made up of three layers. First is the overall value system informing mothers' understandings of the division of labour with their partner. With 'pre-given roles' there was little if any negotiation over the allocation of tasks because these values already determined how allocation would proceed. Other mothers negotiated with partners, using a variety of rationalities to do so, while a third value system depended on the partnership status. In this case allocation was also 'pre-given' but in the contingent sense of what form the partnership took. It could therefore change as the partnership did, rather than being pre-given in the sense of determination by normative rules.

The value systems held by the mothers underpinned the second layer in Figure 2: the moral rationality mothers used to account for their negotiations - or lack of them. These rationalities are the discursive expressions of the underlying value systems in the mothers' accounts, and were voiced and endorsed within particular social contexts. Pre-given rationalities included essentialist biological and psychological understandings of gender roles, as well as various cultural, religious and political views about gender. The negotiation value system was often articulated through rationalities about trading time and tasks. These linked with views of psychological gender preferences and suitability for caring or employment, at times approaching a 'pre-given' role, although political views about the moral need to share were also found. Finally, all these rationalities could be used with the partnership status value system where this emphasised togetherness. But where this emphasised separateness, there was little negotiation as, consequently, the mother took on almost all tasks and decisions herself.

Finally, the third layer in Figure 2 records the practices, or outcomes, resulting from such values and the rationalities expressing them. These mainly consisted of either shared, or divided, allocation of tasks and time. Divided allocations were normally unequal, although this was not necessarily so, and sharing does not necessarily imply absolute equity. In particular, where labour time and tasks might be broadly shared, the mother usually still took responsibility for organisation of household tasks and childcare.

I now use this model to present the findings for the eight social groups of mothers. An overall result, in contrast with the gendered moral rationalities about combining

motherhood and paid work, is that partnership status can make a difference. This is not surprising for allocation of tasks and time between partners. Where this status was articulated through separateness - common for the African-Caribbean mothers in visiting relationships - the mother took on most tasks and decisions herself (although she often informed her partner about the decisions she had made). See Figure 3a. As Debbie said:

“Because he’s not living here all of the time, he’s has very little say when it comes to the big decisions. Like last year I decided to move my daughter from the school she was going too because I wasn’t happy with the standards there. I told him what I decided to do as a matter of courtesy. He didn’t agree with me moving her to a new school because he thought she was already settled where she was. I talked about things but it’s really my decision, I had the final say and that was that”.

This was not an inevitable practice for visiting relationships, however. Some emphasised togetherness and operated more like the African-Caribbean mothers with a ‘full-time’ partner. For these, the majority took pre-given positions emphasising cultural beliefs that African-Caribbean mothers take overall responsibility for family life including paid work as well as domestic and child care tasks (this was sometimes expressed in political or religious terms). Alex reported that:

“It was taken for granted by [my partner] that I’d go back to full time work after the maternity leave ended because Black mothers have always worked and it was expected that I would be no different because there’s this cultural expectation for Black mothers that I work”.

A few, starting from a partnership status position, traded time and tasks. Whatever the moral rationality, however, the usual practice was a divided allocation with the mother taking on the bulk of tasks.

For White mothers with male partners the allocation of tasks and time roughly paralleled their position with respect to motherhood and paid work. For the career oriented working class group, and the ‘gentrifying improvers’ in Hebden Bridge, negotiation was the modal value position (Figures 3b and 3c). This was sometimes expressed via a trading rationality that was subject to the contingency of outside constraints and opportunities, for example a father’s hours of work could preclude him from being available to carry out some domestic tasks, but this would then be ‘traded’ for other tasks when he was available. For example, Gabrielle, a nurse in Burnley, reported that:

“If I’m working at weekends he’ll make sure all the washing’s been done, all the ironing’s done, the uniform’s are hung up ready for school, all my uniforms are washed and pressed, all his work stuff’s done, he does all the washing, all the ironing, if I’m not there. If I’m there, I’ll do it, if we’re both there then whoever feels like doing it will do it”.

Corinne, a middle class mother in Hebden Bridge, shared both employment time and tasks with her partner:

“I alternate it, both of us work two days one week and three the next...I constantly talk about it, it’s a negotiated thing between us, to find what I can cope with or who’s going to do more if somebody does less. I sort of fight it out between us – who’s doing the least important thing to stay at home”.

This well-worked allocation model was sometimes exhausting to maintain, but she claimed considerable benefits:

“It’s the best arrangement in terms of the children and in terms of me feeling comfortable that they’re being looked after well, and in terms of role models it’s good for them to see both of us doing both things”.

Corinne took an overtly ‘political’ position in articulating the equal shares model, but it was in the ‘career’ working class group that mothers reported the empowering effects of their own, independent income. This was especially marked for those who lived in Barnsley. Their partners had mostly been miners, or had expected to follow their fathers and grandfathers in mining, and also expected the traditional divisions of labour supporting this. But now their wives often had the more secure and skilled and better paid employment, and were thrust into the breadwinner role that many Black women have traditionally held. This led to a similar, if more contentious, political tinge to negotiation. So for Jessica:

“But having money of me own, I got me own self worth and I can tell him where to get off and I can make him equal. He won't let me be equal, I have got to fight for that...there's certain things that some men do and take advantage of...and he'll say 'I wouldn't dare do that'. I says 'no because you would be picking your teeth up”.

Other mothers in this group reported how they had withdrawn household services, like cooking and washing clothes, just to get this message across although heated arguments were not uncommon. This was less the case in Burley, where the dual

worker model seemed more accepted by men – even sought in some cases – and where respondents’ own parents had sometimes provided a model for this.

Trading often resulted in divided practices however, where the mother took on more tasks and usually kept the ‘household manager’ role. Yannick, a clerical officer in Barnsley, even reported that:

“it gets really frustrating because to me it feels as if I’ve got another child you know - telling him what to do but I just have to accept that”.

This could easily slip into preference-based trading, sometimes supported by psychological explanations about what sort of activity best suited which partner. As Tracey, from the lesbian group, put it:

“[My partner] would go mad if she was at home with the kids all day, she really likes working and she needs that sort of - she likes the buzz ... she likes the job and she likes the challenge, it makes her feel worthy. Whereas me I’ve never really been that ambitious, quite happy with my lot, and I’m good at it, I am good at being at home and I’ve got the patience”.

Needless to say, these preference and psychological rationalities were heavily gendered in heterosexual partnerships, so that the ‘trading’ between mothers and male partners became rather unequal. But as Tracey’s quote above shows, ‘non-gendered’ lesbian partnerships could also take on similar patterns. It was only when negotiation proceeded through a more overt political position, stressing gender equality, that a shared allocation practice was likely.

The 'peripheral' White working-class group and the 'suburban wives' were much more likely to show divided allocations and pre-given gender roles (figures 3b and 3c). Negotiation value systems, when they occurred, were often skewed by psychologically justified gender preferences – as Emily a working class mother in Hebden Bridge put it:

“He’s happier going to work and he couldn’t really do it, you know, the maternal thing, there is a difference....I could earn a lot more than him... but I’m showing the children that I’m happy to sit here baking, sewing, I love being here when they come in whatever time it is”.

In addition 'negotiation' was sometimes rather one-sided – several mothers reported that their partner simply wanted to agree with what they had worked out for themselves within the given role of homemaker and carer. If these roles were overstepped male partners might then refuse to cooperate, or claim they were unable to do so because of employment demands. The existing gendered nature of employment and caring was a common articulation of the pre-given value position Joan, a working class mother in Hebden bridge, knew that “deep down he’d rather have me at home because it would be hard work for him [at home] and he likes to come in and he likes his tea”. In any case, when she did not have employment, it was her “duty to cook and clean and iron and keep the house clean and fetch the kids because that’s my job and he does his job”.

For some mothers this 'cultural' explanation of pre-given roles was supported by essentialist biological or gender terms. Carmen, for instance, thought that “there's a danger of trying to make somebody do things that they're not naturally, it's not a

natural thing for them to sort of do the shopping”. Mandy, an ‘incumden’ middle class mother in Hebden Bridge who was actually married somewhat uncomfortably - to working class local, put this most starkly. Men were simply “different genetically and in their mind...I don’t think it is conditioning...a lot of it is biological”.

In contrast, the White lesbian mothers (figure 3d) all emphasised their alternative partnership status as a starting point, expressed in terms of togetherness (sometimes in the face of straight society). For Tracey the imperative was:

“Just to work together, that you’re both going for the same goal. I don’t always pull that off, but I do quite often. I’ve had times when I sit and talk about what I both think about something, what’s going on”.

Some of the White ‘alternative’ mothers in inner London (figure 3d), who were cohabiting with their male partners, held similar values about togetherness in the face of conventional society. Nonetheless, for both groups allocation often proceeded through ‘conventional’ rationalities, emphasising trading or even pre-given biological roles, and these usually led to divided task practices. As Jean, a lesbian mother, expressed it:

“[My partner] loves my son, but it’s different to my love for him ‘cos she’s a step-parent. She’s able to opt out of the full monty ‘cos it’s not a biological relationship. A biological mother’s programmed differently...In child care terms of course we’re completely equal, although it nearly always falls to me”.

It appears that ‘alternative’ partnerships can mirror traditional divisions of labour just as much as they may challenge them.

National Survey Evidence and the Interview Data

Recent time-use and attitude surveys provide representative quantitative data about the domestic division of labour among couples in Britain (see Pilcher 2000; Sullivan 2000). For most heterosexual couples, paid work, household work and child care continue to be unequally divided. Time-use surveys also show, however, that since the 1970s men have increased their participation in some of the normatively associated female tasks like child care, cooking, and cleaning. Differences between working-class and middle-class men have also evened out, with the former taking on proportionately more domestic work, and there has been a significant increase in 'more egalitarian' couples (ibid Sullivan). Research also shows that time spent on a task does not necessarily equate with responsibility for it. While many men may spend significant time on child care, it is women who usually plan it and take responsibility for it. Even with domestic work, men often simply 'help', while women retain an overall responsibility as homemaker (Pilcher 2000).

Extensive survey information "cannot tell us about ... *how* or *why* these changes are occurring" (Sullivan 2000, 453, original emphasis) or why change is 'slow a-coming' (Pilcher 2000, 771). Survey data will be dominated by 'conventional' White households, and results for the four conventional White samples do seem to reflect the slowly changing allocation patterns found in the national data. Even among what seem to be the rather traditional peripheral working-class and suburban middle class groups, around a quarter reported shared practices and even more referred to negotiated task allocation - albeit often with a gendered psychological slant. Interestingly, the suburban group was the more traditional in this respect. For the

middle-class ‘gentrifying improvers’ and the ‘career’ oriented working class group, most spoke of both negotiating and sharing tasks – albeit sometimes with considerable resistance by some male partners in the latter. Crucially, what the intensive results for all the groups also show is the complexity and variability of the processes leading to these practices. Thus the value systems of some partnered heterosexual mothers predetermine allocation (as with the ‘pre-given’ cultural rationality of African-Caribbeans) but this still leads to divided practices; the togetherness of some ‘alternative’ and lesbian couples can also result in divided allocation; and supposedly neutral trading often has the same result. Shared practices seem to need a political rationale about gender relations (cf Deutsch 1999).

3.3 GENDERED MORAL RATIONALITIES ABOUT CHILD CARE

Partnered mothers’ reasoning about the suitability of different sorts of childcare, as inducted from the interview data, was expressed along three main dimensions. These were (1) how they understood their own needs in arranging different types of childcare; (2) how they understood their children’s needs; and (3) the link or balance they saw between their own and their children’s needs. Figure 4 illustrates the overall model of possibilities as expressed by respondents. We consider these dimensions in turn below.

Childcare and Mothers’ Own Needs

In terms of their own needs, mothers could stress *practical*, *emotional* or *group* issues. As Figure 5 illustrates, 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.

As Figures 5a and 5b show, most mothers were located along an emotional – practical continuum, where ‘trust’ and ‘piece of mind’ were particularly important in the latter. There were varying group emphases within this continuum, however. The peripheral White working-class group were mostly concerned with practical issues about the cost and convenience of childcare. This was perhaps because their options were already shaped by their belief that it was best for mothers to stay at home with their children, coupled with traditional household divisions of labour, just as much as cost issues. As Liz put it:

“Children up to school age should have their mother at home, to be quite honest I can’t understand how these mums have babies and they’re shoved in a nursery...why have them? I can’t see the sense...I mean, I’d love to work but it’s important for kids to have their mother at home”.

Often both partners took it as given that mothers were homemakers and fathers were breadwinners. Several mothers reported that their partner simply wanted to agree with what they had worked out for themselves within the given role of homemaker and carer. If these roles were overstepped male partners might then refuse to cooperate, or claim they were unable to do so because of employment demands. In contrast the more central ‘career’ working class group, and the middle class respondents were more concerned with the emotional need for peace of mind about their children’s

security and comfort. The suburban wives group in Headingley were particularly focussed on this issue.

The African-Caribbean mothers shared these emotional 'peace of mind' concerns. A class distinction was apparent here however, with those in lower income/status employment in London more concerned with practical issues about access and costs than those with professional and entrepreneurial jobs. The higher income group still mentioned these issues, but interpreted them more in terms of childcare provision that fitted with their schedules and lifestyles. Au pairs - also Black - were a popular option for this group. Finally, most White 'alternative' heterosexual and, especially, lesbian mothers were also concerned with group relationships - about how others would accept them. Phoebe felt that:

“The younger [childcare] staff have found it quite difficult the fact that we're lesbian parents... But then, we have the main, the leader of her room, the main person of that room, is fabulous. She's great. So she's really - and has been really positive and has actually made really positive moves you know for us. So that's good. And so that makes quite a difference and it gives us a bit more confidence to go in there”.

Childcare and Children's Needs

Turning to how mothers viewed childcare in terms of their children's needs, these could stress *emotional*, *development* or *group* issues. As Figures 6a and 6b show, emotional issues centred around 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. Group issues were those of social

acceptance of the child's class or ethnic characteristics or, more positively, consolidating heritage.

There are clear group emphases in how children's needs were seen for the conventional White mothers (see Figure 5). Most of the peripheral working-class mothers, and most of the high income suburban wives, saw childcare in terms of the emotional quality of the attention their children might receive. Mothers themselves were regarded as best placed to provide this, and there was a strong sense of the necessity to 'be there' at home for your 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. Relatives were often a preferred option, while childminders were distrusted and nurseries were seen as too formal and communal. Thus Carol in Hebden Bridge would not use a nursery because "they're not getting their home environment...it's too constituted...there are things they wouldn't see if they were at home being cared for...it's about quality of care". While for Betty, from the suburban group in Leeds, "I can imagine children in a nursery feeling like it's the longest time in the whole world".

The 'career' working class group were strung out along this emotional-development continuum, although – as expressed strongly in the focus group – most were particularly hostile to nursery education. Carmen put this more 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, most of the 'gentrifying partners' in Hebden Bridge saw childcare provision in terms of educational and social development. 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".

Consequently, these mothers tended to prefer formal nurseries and were often dismissive of relatives (excluding the father) for regular childcare. As Lena put it:

"The worst [type of childcare] would be with a neighbour or friend or even a relative because if they're going to have time away it's better to have a clear relationship with a person who is a carer...a professional person in a nursery would be better".

Nonetheless, as Carol Vincent and Stephen Ball (2001) also found in a small sample of middle-class mothers using nurseries in London, these mothers still tried to push the purely market components of childcare into the background and pull love and care to the forefront.

Most of the 'alternative' White mothers in inner London, especially when they worked in education and social care, and some of the African-Caribbean lower income mothers, shared this developmental perspective. The higher income African-Caribbean mothers, however, resembled the peripheral working class and suburban middleclass White mothers in stressing their children's emotional needs, tied in with

group concerns about belonging and how others would treat their children. Thus they used Black au-pairs, childminders or family members to provide this. Two mothers even likened au-pairs to the traditional 'auntie' system in the Caribbean where a poor relative joined the household to look after the children. As Christine said:

“The thing that made me decide on my childminder was that she was a Black lady and had lots of experience. With a White childminder it's always in the back of your mind whether they really accept your children”.

This combination of emotional with group concerns in childcare choice was also important for some of the lower income African-Caribbean mothers, and for most of the White lesbian mothers. However, the sources of these group concerns were different. For the lesbian mothers the concern was over their child being accepted because of parental characteristics (ie the parents' sexuality), while for the African-Caribbean mothers this was because of the child's characteristics (ie ethnicity shared with the parent). Some of the middle class White mothers also mentioned group issues, in this case tied in a preference for childcarers of the right class, or who would at least not impart working class habits to their children.

Balancing Mothers' and Children's Needs

The eight groups' understandings about the balance between their own and their children's needs connected with their views about how motherhood should be combined with paid work. Thus African-Caribbean mothers, who saw themselves primarily as paid workers, or who thought that full-time employment was in itself a component of good mothering, usually saw their own needs as just as important as their children's when thinking about childcare provision. This assessment has to be

placed in the context that cultural values emphasise African-Caribbean women's responsibilities as provider (section 3.1, Reynolds 2001). Thus, in this formulation, there is no easy distinction between your own needs and those of your child – they are integrally linked. Again, there were class differences within this group: the higher income, entrepreneurial and professional interviewees spoke more about their own needs compared with those in lower income, lower status service jobs.

The career oriented working class group and the 'gentrifying improvers' in Hebden Bridge were more balanced between their own and their children's needs. In contrast, the peripheral working-class group and the high income 'suburban wives', who saw mothers themselves as the ideal carers, were particularly child-centred. White 'alternative' and lesbian mothers in inner London were more poised between their own and their children's needs, although they were less concerned with childcare provision than most African-Caribbean mothers; indeed some of the 'alternative' mothers were not particularly concerned with child care provision issues at all. This often followed a view that stressed caring values as an alternative to the 'capitalist work ethic', where formal employment and formal childcare were seen as part of the capitalist world. Jane provides a good example:

“When I left university, you could make two decisions in life. You could go and get a full time job and get married and have a mortgage, or you could sort of do what I did, which was live in communal houses and work in bits and pieces and do lots of community unpaid stuff ...[For childcare] I used, part time, Susie, who was an unemployed actress friend of mine who used to look after half the kids in [the communal houses] at one stage. And then when she

decided she had enough, Paul, another friend [took over]...You can't have a purely commercial relationship with people [who care for your children]".

National Survey Evidence and the Interview Data

How do these results compare with recent survey information on mother's attitudes to childcare, as carried out in 1998 by Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) (Bryson et al. 1999) and by the DfEE in 1999 (La Valle et al. 2000)? As part of nationally representative samples, respondents in both surveys would be overwhelmingly White and 'conventional', and the survey results support our own for this group. Both studies showed that informal childcare is the main source for employed mothers in Britain, irrespective of the age of the children involved, with partners and the child's grandparents most important. Less than a quarter used nurseries (mostly for immediately pre-school children, where they were joined by the children of mothers who stayed at home) and few used childminders.

This dominance of informal care was not just a matter of the relatively low levels of formal provision in Britain. When asked about 'ideal' childcare arrangements, when cost and availability were not constraints, there was little change. Nor would many mothers alter their employment times in such ideal circumstances, indeed about a fifth would work less. This valuing of informal care, usually by family members, was largely because parents needed not only to trust the carer but, over and above this, many required 'someone who would show the child affection ... [and] look after a child in the same way as parents' (quoted in Land, 2002). Overall, in the SCPR study, about two-thirds of respondents saw emotional reasons (trust, affection) as most important in choosing childcare, with around a quarter stressing practical issues and

only small minorities seeing developmental and group issues as most important (although these were more often chosen as subsidiary issues). Indeed, the 1999 DfEE survey showed that nearly a fifth of mothers would prefer to work school hours only (and not at all where they had pre-school children) so that they could look after their children themselves. Implicitly (and logically) mothers themselves were the best people to provide the maternal affection that young children required. As Jane Wheelock and Katharine Jones (2002) have shown in another survey, given these values, if child care cannot be undertaken by the mother then 'grandparents are the next best thing'. These results parallel my own for the conventional Whiter groups, although this research suggests that some middle-class mothers value child development through formal provision (cf Vincent and Ball 2001).

Partnered mothers' reasoning about the suitability of different sorts of childcare show both diversity and uniformity. They appear uniform in that mothers have a view of childcare that is relational to their children, rather than simply exercising 'rational economic choice' over costs and benefits. What this view consists of varies, however. We can therefore distinguish alternative moral rationalities in choosing appropriate childcare. These alternatives are also associated with different social groups in terms of class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality.

Reformers argue that child care preference is a circular process where, if mothers had more experience of formal provision, they would rate it more highly (eg Bryson et al. 1999). Yet the intensive data reported here suggest that child care choices result from a complex moral process in assessing both children's needs, and the mother's own, and the linkage or balance between the two. Levels of provision will probably be a

secondary factor, therefore. As Carol Vincent and Stephen Ball put it, “These [child care choice] narratives require the mothers to navigate their way through some very potent and very immediate normatives of ‘good mothering’” (2001, 649). The findings also show that different social groups navigate differently through alternative ‘normatives’. Child care evaluations are one part of mothers’ value systems, and in turn these emerge in specific social and geographical contexts.

4. THEORISING MOTHERS’ VALUE SYSTEMS

I identify three major theories or models about mothers’ value systems, and how they consequently act in relation to mothering, partnership and paid work strands - new household economics, individualisation in late modernity, and ‘post-modern moral negotiation’. I assess these three alternative models in terms of their range (how much can be explained?) and process specification (is the supposedly central process that central?) in relation to the empirical findings as discussed in section 3.

The ‘new household economics’ (Becker 1981, 1996) extends the rational choice explanations of neo-classical economics to gendered divisions of labour. Within this model, the gendered division of labour results from men and women within households specialising in the functions with which they can best capitalise their human capital: women in domestic work and child care, and men in labour market work. This division of labour is determined partly by biological proclivity and partly by gendered socialisation. Heterosexual couple partnership thus involves an instrumental and economically rational ‘trading’ in the fruits of these different and complementary specialisms. The recent increase in mothers’ labour market

participation does not negate rational economic trading between couples - they will still seek to maximise utility and efficiency in the gendered division of labour inside and outside the home, but this time factoring in mothers' employment. Choosing child care becomes one part of this modernised household economics, where the practicalities of availability and cost will be traded off against mothers' income from paid work. Although often implicit, features of this model are recognisable in much government policy, as noted in section 1.

In terms of the empirical results reported here, this model is restricted in both its range and process specification. First, the model miss-specifies the central social process by which mothers combine caring for their children with paid work; they do so in terms of gendered moral rationalities rather than comparative trading. The range of the model may be adequate, in that cost-benefit analyses of consequent labour market possibilities may be important once these fundamental decisions are made, but such considerations remain exogenous rather than endogenous as the model assumes. Second, the new household economics model appears restricted in both range and process specification in explaining division of labour with partners. Trading was only one of several process rationales used by mothers, and as such was most common for particular social groups in particular contexts. Even then, trading was often shaped by gendered discourses. In addition, process specification is again exogenous rather than endogenous - comparative trading did not form an underlying value system in allocating labour in households. Finally, similar limitations apply for the choice of child care. Cost-benefit analyses of cost and availability could be important, but again exogenously when moral and normative assessments about children's and mothers' needs, and how these were linked or balanced, had been made. Such practical

considerations were only dominant for certain groups in certain situations where these moral choices were effectively in-built.

Overall, our assessment of this model supports criticisms that it does not address central issues of gendered power within 'the family', and comes nowhere near addressing the processes of socially negotiated moral understandings and relational commitments. Indicatively, the 'suburban' and the 'peripheral' working class groups of mothers were very similar in their understandings – discourses around gender were more important than choices allowed by income. In empirical terms, however, trading with partners and cost-benefit analysis of alternatives are being used by some mothers some of the time.

The second theorisation places causal emphasis on a growing and significant individualisation of gender relations in late modernity. In part this is driven by mothers' increasing labour market participation (Beck 1992). As mothers undertake paid employment their labour becomes commodified and the male breadwinner model of family life becomes weakened, which further draws mothers into paid employment. This process of individualisation gives women in particular a greater sense of rethinking and choosing their own biographies and lifestyles, rather than following predetermined gendered roles. Women thereby see an identity as a paid worker as part of the development of their 'self' as a project. Couples are no longer tied together in a complementary domestic and market specialisation. Rather, couple relationships are increasingly governed by, and contingent upon, ideas of mutually satisfying intimacy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Giddens 1992). Traditional gender relations and 'the family' are destabilised, and the constitution of late modern

family life has to be individually negotiated. Non-heterosexual ‘families of choice’ are often the cutting edge in this process (for example, Weeks et al. 2001). For heterosexual couples, however, this has not, as yet, resulted in symmetrical gender relations either in the labour market or within families. Rather, there is a growing discrepancy between women’s expectations of equality and the still unequal gendered division of domestic labour that they experience with their male partner.

The range and process specification of this model is also limited in terms of the empirical data presented in section 2. Only a minority of mothers view themselves as ‘primarily workers’ in combining motherhood and paid work. This range limitation could perhaps be regarded as lagged adaption (Gershuny et al 1994), where this minority is showing the way forward. There are, however, two objections to this. First, all the mothers, viewed their employment decisions in relation to their responsibilities to their children. Although mothers with ‘primarily worker’ gendered moral rationalities separated their identity as a worker from their mothering, they were not ‘individualised’ in any straightforward fashion. They were still concerned with meeting their children’s needs, and these were usually understood in the dominant sense of care by mothers. This is why these mothers often felt a sense of guilt. Second, and in consequence, it is those with ‘mother/worker integral’ views who seem to lie on the cutting edge of changing gender divisions, in that they conceived providing for their children through paid work as part of mothering – but this is a connected rather than individualised identity. Choosing child care is similarly relational to the needs of children, and subject to strong moral norms (cf Holloway 1998, Vincent and Ball 2001). In our sample, African-Caribbean mothers did stress their own needs equally or more than those of their children, but as we have pointed

out this needs to be understood in terms of their morally rational integration of self and child.

Turning to the division of labour with partners, there are minority political moral rationalities that lead to shared practices for some middle-class White mothers. In terms of the individualisation model these might be seen as path breaking. It is equally striking, though, how 'alternative' mothers incorporated various underlying value systems and rationalities that led to divided practices. The group of African-Caribbean mothers with a live-in partner also provides a good example. These at first appear as the epitome of individualisation, in that their value systems position them as independent from their partner. But such individualisation has been argued to be the traditional norm rather than a late modern development for this ethnic group, and also leads to unequally divided practices. Indeed, if anything, modernity has meant becoming more 'traditional' and less 'individualised' in having to take account of a 'primarily mother' role in line with the predominantly White society (Beishon et al. 1998, Reynolds 2001).

At the least, individualisation is a highly context dependent process and, like new household economics, inadequately captures the processes of socially negotiated moral understandings and relational commitments. This is not surprising because this sociological model has much in common with the economic trading model in emphasising individualised rationality (Irwin 1999). Indeed, Catherine Hakim's (2000) 'preference theory', which is based on extensive survey data, represents this amalgam more overtly. Individualisation processes allow women more choice between three lifestyle preferences: 'home centred' (about a fifth choose this), 'work-

centred' (about a fifth), and the remaining 'adaptive' lifestyle. Having made this choice of identity (with preferences ultimately resulting from social psychological and social background factors) then women will remain rational economic actors in taking up appropriate home-employment combinations. Like individualisation theories and new home economics more generally, Hakim's focus on individualised preference neglects the importance of social ties and socially negotiated gendered moral responsibilities in shaping divisions of labour. Overall, therefore, our data leads us to agree with criticisms of the ascendance of individualisation in late modernity (Jamieson 1998).

The third theorisation, which we call 'moral negotiation in post-modernity' has recently gained currency in family studies. Here social ties and moral responsibilities are placed centre stage, with people building moral identities and reputations as a certain sort of person with particular competencies. People negotiate these identities and reputations in understanding how they should act, in relation to others. Thus when relationships are changed, for example through divorce, people may respond by renegotiating their identity (Smart and Neale 1998). This theoretical strand developed out of intensive empirical work, notably Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason's (1993) influential study of obligations to adult kin. They argued that family responsibilities and notions of 'the right thing to do' are negotiated in context rather than being defined in terms of ascribed duties. This conclusion, however, has become theoretically extended through the use of notions of individualised detraditionalisation imported from the work of Beck and Giddens as discussed above. This is because in post-modern family life 'the right thing to do' has to be negotiated in an ambiguous situation where traditional, collective, prescribed moral rules and imperatives no

longer have much purchase. In contrast to the individualisation thesis, then, this approach places more stress on social negotiation of identities and moralities. Our own earlier work (Duncan and Edwards 1999) and our research for this study also fit into this broad approach.

What 'moral negotiation' actually means determines the applicability of this model to our empirical findings. In one broad sense, everybody makes some sort of moral decision with others about their behaviour, and in this way the model has much wider applicability than either new household economics or individualisation theorisations in terms of range. But if we take a narrower definition of an active reflection on and negotiation between alternatives (cf Smart and Neale 1998), however, then the negotiation model appears more limited. Those mothers following pre-given divisions of labour for instance, whether determined by normative biological and political value systems, or by partnership status (see Figure 2), will not be covered. Similarly, in terms of process rationale, those mothers who were traders would not necessarily take a moral stance in their negotiations.

This brings us to limitations with process specification. The notion of moral negotiation can get stretched to the point where a traditional gendered division of labour can be conceptualised as actively negotiated between a couple, rather than as a non-negotiable pre-given. As our data suggests, diversity of social patterns in gendered divisions of labour may not be based on 'negotiation' of morally ambiguous actions, but on prescription in a particular social and local context (see also Duncan and Edwards 1999, Holloway 1998, Jordan et al. 1994). These data also show how structural contexts like class and ethnicity can then be important. This is not just a

matter of material resources, but also of how individuals create and experience their subjectivity (cf Skeggs 1997). Again, the correspondence between the peripheral working class and the suburban middle class mothers is indicative here, The social prescription of what it is to be moral in contemporary society, as opposed to its negotiation, seems particularly important when mothers consider the care of their dependent children (cf Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2000). To adapt Marx's famous aphorism, mothers negotiate, but not in conditions of their own choosing. Our results suggest that this third, generally superior, approach would be improved by conceptualising prescription and non-negotiation, and by giving more consideration to how alternative negotiations – and non-negotiations – link into pre-existing structural divisions of class, ethnicity and sexuality.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The value systems of partnered mothers seem to show both diversity and uniformity. They appear uniform in that mothers' gendered moral rationalities still involve their primary responsibility for their children. How mothers substantively exercise this responsibility varies, however. Alternative, ideal type, gendered moral rationalities can be distinguished in both decisions about how to combine mothering and employment, and in choosing appropriate child care. These decisions mean interaction with partners, and here too there is variability in what values inform the divisions of labour and the rationalities that are used to do so. These alternatives are also associated with different social groups in terms of class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality.

These empirical results also contain theoretical implications. Both new household economics and individualisation theorisations are limited in terms of the range of empirical situations that they cover. Some mothers will act like comparative traders, or will be developing their project of self, for some of the time - but most will not. These two models are also limited in terms of the processes they posit as central; the emphasis on individualised rationality neglects the importance of social ties and socially negotiated gendered moral responsibilities in shaping divisions of labour. The 'moral negotiation in post-modernity' model gives both greater range and more convincing process specification. In this case, however, there are problems where the notion of negotiation can get stretched to the point where a traditional gendered division of labour can be conceptualised as negotiated, rather than as a non-negotiable pre-given. This is particularly true where responsibilities to children and meeting their need are concerned.

Government policies in Britain assume that the male breadwinner model is being replaced by the adult worker model, and that policy should support and promote this change. In theoretical terms, policy amalgamates the individualisation model (describing the preferences and values of individual adults) with new household economics (describing how people operationalise these values). I suggested that this might be a 'rationality mistake' in that family life might not follow this trajectory. The empirical research results reported here, using intensive qualitative research on the basis and processes by which mothers actually do make decisions about the relationship between mothering and paid work, division of labour with partners, and choosing child care, supports this suggestion. It also concurs with recent extensive survey research. Mothers make morally and socially based decisions about what

behaviour is right and proper, and these decisions can vary between different social groups in different places.

NOTES

1. Since 1997 the New Labour government has extended maternity leave and pay, initiated paternal leave (initially unpaid but now to be paid), and entitlement to Time Off for Dependents in care emergencies (albeit unpaid). This has been accompanied by a National Childcare Strategy to boost formal provision (though not necessarily through direct public provision), and the introduction of a childcare tax credit as part of the Working Families Tax Credit.

2. Tracey Reynolds and Pam Alldred drew on their own social networks, as well as formal contacts, for the London-based interviews, as did Ruth Booth and Sophie Helm for the Hebden Bridge interviews.

3. Numbers of interviewees in each group varied according to ease of access and reallocation between groups. Three class groups were used: (1) the 'peripheral/unskilled working class' (operationally defined by current or previous employment in NS-SEC groups 6 and 7), (2) the central working class and intermediate classes (NS-SEC groups 3-5) and Professional and managerial occupations (NS-SEC groups 1 and 2).

4. As 'second order constructs' the three gendered moral rationalities are ideal types, which do not describe all the attitudes or beliefs of any individual, who may hold intermediate and conflicting positions.

5. The basic qualification at the end of compulsory school age at 16.

6. The SCPR research includes qualitative interview information, but this was mainly used to identify general themes for the quantitative survey and did not break down respondents by social group.

7. Interestingly, a significant increase since the 1994 British Social Attitudes Survey, perhaps confirming Jane Lewis' (2002) suggestion that labour market and consumption changes have reinforced, rather than weakened, traditional gender roles.

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