'I'm so much more myself now, coming back to work' – working class mothers, paid work and childcare.

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which working class mothers negotiate mothering and paid work. Drawing on interviews with 70 families with pre-school children, we examine how caring and working responsibilities are conceptualised and presented in mothers' narratives. Mothers showed a high degree of commitment to paid work and, in contrast to findings from an earlier study with middle class and professional mothers, did not feel that keeping their children at home with them was always the best option for the children. We suggest that working class mothers in the labour market remain at risk of being defined as inadequate mothers because of a middle class emphasis on intense maternal engagement with the child as a key aspect of 'good' mothering.

Introduction

This paper draws on data collected for an ESRC-funded project which explored the engagement of working class families with childcare provision. The focus of this paper is not on childcare per se, however, but rather on the mothers' negotiations and identity work around the competing tensions between their responsibilities to their children and taking up a role within the labour market. Research on mothers and employment and especially the literature on working class women, commonly emphasise their prioritising of mothering over engagement in paid work (e.g. Jordan et al. 1992; McMahon 1995; Hays 2003; Crompton 2006a). However, within the wider UK social policy context, policies such as the New Deal for Lone Parents and the introduction of Tax Credits, as well as proposed changes to Income Support eligibility criteria for mothers of school-age children (DWP 2007) clearly construct a 'good' citizen as a working citizen (see also Mink 1998). This conceptualisation, which impacts on mothers' sense of self and their role both within the family and in the broader public sphere, has also been observed in neo-liberal policy contexts in other countries (Korteweg 2002, Power 2005). Simultaneously, parenting itself has become a topical issue, emphasising parental responsibilities and stressing parents' accountability for all aspects of the behaviour of their children vis-à-vis schools and the wider community. A number of researchers have observed that in this public and policy debate, it is in particularly working class parents who are often understood to be in need of guidance, intervention and ultimately coercion with respect to the 'proper' public conduct of their children (Gewirtz 2001; Gillies 2005a; Gillies 2005b, Lister 2006). Thus mothers are faced by two imperatives: to be a 'good', self-reliant worker-citizen and a 'good' mother of well-behaved, achieving children. Whilst all

mothers are required to meet these imperatives, working class women have to do so from within a context of limited economic resources.

With this in mind, we explore in this paper how respondent mothers from working class London families negotiate their roles around mothering and paid work. In the following, we focus on mothers' perceptions of work; mothering and paid work; and childcare in relation to paid employment.

Working class mothers, work and policy

Research suggests that poor and working class mothers prefer their role as mother to that as worker. Jordan et al. (1992) in a study of working class families' employment decisions on a council estate in Exeter in the late 80s observe how the mothers they interviewed constructed themselves primarily as caregivers, even if their paid employment made a crucial financial contribution to the household's income by lifting the family out of poverty. They note the moral imperative that shaped the mothers' narratives, placing the needs of children first, above paid work and far above any other considerations of personal development or fulfilment outside of motherhood. Equally, McMahon observes how the working class mothers in her study describe their path to motherhood as one of shifting perspectives and priorities culminating in 'put[ing] others first', which she terms a 'process of moral reform' (1995, p. 168). She argues that this focus on family is in fact a coping mechanism where commitment to one's children is an attempt to make up for material shortcomings experienced by the children. The poor financial rewards of low paid jobs and the 'cost' of forfeiting state benefits, as well as a lack of affordable good

quality childcare are further identified as contributing to a preference of working class and poor mothers to stay at home and look after their own children, rather than work outside the home (Hays 2003; Power 2005, Crompton 2006a). In an analysis of 'gendered moral rationalities' Duncan and Edwards (1996) locate mother's choices vis-à-vis paid employment within a triangle of 'primarily mother', 'primarily worker' and 'mother/worker integral' identities. The working class mothers in their research clearly connect with the 'primarily mother' identity (Edwards & Duncan 1996; Duncan & Edwards 1999; Duncan et al. 2003; Duncan 2005). Different classed attitudes towards women's employment among mothers were also observed in quantitative research, e.g. Crompton using the 2002 British Social Attitudes survey finds that mothers from households which fall into manual and routine occupational categories hold more traditional views than those who were categorised as managerial and professional (2006b, pp. 668-669).

Mothers' absolute commitment to their children is of course not restricted to working class contexts, as Vincent and Ball observe, 'the need to construct a morally adequate account of oneself as mother requires women of all classes to present their prioritisation of their children's needs' (2006, p. 72). Parenting is not practiced in isolation and the models and influences of one's peer group and immediate surroundings play a part in the moral universe of mothering. As Duncan puts it, choices 'become social moralities [that are in turn] geographically and historically articulated' (2005, p. 73). Irwin notes the social context of 'choosing' and its close links to locality, observing that mothers in her study who live in almost uniformly white, working class neighbourhoods expressed more conservative or traditional views with regards to mothers' involvement with the labour market, than women with

similar background characteristics but from areas with a greater class mix (2005). Duncan and Edwards (1999; 2003) and Reynolds (2001; 2005) have emphasised the importance of paid work to the identity of African-Caribbean mothers in the UK. The former argue that this group displays a 'mother/worker integral' identity, where mothers' full-time employment provides a positive role model to their children, as well as financial benefits to the family (Duncan & Edwards 1999; 2003). In contrast to the 'primarily mother' or 'primarily worker' concepts, this constructs being a worker as a fundamental part of being a good mother. Reynolds argues that historically, black women in the UK have been cast as workers (from slavery, through colonialism and to more recent migration patterns). In addition, structural inequalities and discrimination in the labour market have pushed black women towards full-time employment to make up for the financial shortfalls of low paid work. According to Reynolds, these factors interlock, so that 'full-time paid work becomes central to black women's mothering and black mothers' work status is part of their everyday family experience' (2001, p. 1046).

Quantitative data also shows that mothers' attitudes towards the acceptability of being in employment have changed in line with the observed behaviour of other mothers with pre-school children. Using successive waves of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), Himmelweit and Sigala demonstrate that over the course of the 1990s, as the employment rate of mothers with young children rose, fewer mothers believed that pre-school children suffer if their mothers work outside the home (2004, p. 469). Their study, which also included a qualitative element, shows that behaviour and attitudes have considerable feedback effects on each other: attitudes affect the likelihood of behaviour change and vice versa. There are also dynamics of social

reinforcement, with mothers likely to move in peer group circles similar to their own: those who work full-time were more likely to have friends in full-time jobs, whilst those who are at home with their children were more likely to have friends who were not in paid work (Himmelweit & Sigala 2004, p. 470). However, the study shows that whilst initial attitudes towards motherhood and paid work are influenced by the behaviour of other mothers, eventually, it is mothers' own behaviour in relation to the labour market that most influences their attitude. For example, women in employment who find themselves in the contradictory position of believing that having a mother who works harms pre-school children were more likely to change their attitudes than their behaviour. Overall, Himmelweit and Sigala conclude that 'neither identities nor behaviours are fixed, but adapt to each other in a process of positive feedback, both at an individual level and a social level' (2004, p. 471).

The moral dimensions of parenting and mothering have also been made an object of policy discourse and intervention. From the beginning of their term in office in 1997, New Labour education and family policies have been marked by a concern with changing family 'cultures'. And whilst, as Sharon Gewirtz points out, the language of class is not used, policy strategies that, for example, re-cast parents as 'home educators' are 'very obviously aimed at working class parents' (Gewirtz 2001, p. 366), there being a tacit understanding that middle class parents are already familiar with that role. Similarly Val Gillies observes in her examination of New Labour family support policies that these are not only characterised by the assumption that 'socially excluded' families are in need of advice and support to practice effective parenting, but also that the parenting model found in policy documents 'resonates most closely with the values and ambitions of white, middle class parents, suggesting

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that working class (and/or ethnic minority) families are the real target of such interventions' (Gillies 2005b, p. 80). Congruently, being and getting into employment is promoted as the main route out of poverty for families, including for lone parent families (DWP 2007). In addition, as Power (2005) and Lister (2006) point out, participation in paid work is increasingly conceptualised as the key to full citizenship. Paid employment thus lies at the heart of both social and economic participation in society. The requirements of performing as a worker citizen may often be in tension with being the effective, responsible and involved parent invoked in the model above, not least for lone parents (Standing 1999; Horgan 2005; Power 2005). Furthermore, the gender-neutral language of 'parents' and 'parenting' in government policy discourses has been shown by researchers to obscure the gendered implications of much family and social policy (Featherstone 2006; Lister 2006). Women continue to shoulder the lion's share of responsibility for the care and education of especially young children on a daily basis, leaving Lister to conclude that 'insufficient attention [has been] given to the (gendered) relationships between financial deprivation and the ability of parents to fulfil the parenting responsibilities expected of them' (2006, p. 327).

Working class mothers thus have to negotiate their public and private lives within a plethora of different and often opposing discourses: government policies that advocate an 'adult worker' model, family policies that cast working class families as at risk of practising inadequate parenting, and a multitude of 'local' cultural, societal and familial attitudes and expectations towards mothers and work.

The study

This paper draws on interviews with 70 working class families in inner London (36 in Battersea and 34 in Stoke Newington), conducted between spring 2005 and winter 2006. National and local economies were fairly buoyant at the time of the study and both locales provide easy access to other parts of London and their respective labour markets. Interviews with parents were semi-structured, guided by an aide-memoire, with an emphasis on giving the respondents freedom to express their concerns, thoughts and practices around childcare and other aspects of their lives with children. Topics covered included decisions on children's care arrangements, relationships between carers and parents and the choice between paid work and staying at home. Initial contact with parents was made through visiting public sector nurseries, Sure Start activities and groups, as well as playgroups and toy libraries in the two localities. Interviews mostly took place in respondents' own homes or in the nursery or Sure Start setting where we first met. Families were included in the study taking into consideration a range of indicators, such as occupation, education qualifications and housing, and families that were clearly categorised as middle class on these indicators were retrospectively excluded from the study.

The families were a highly varied group, all had children under 5 years, but were otherwise very diverse on several indicators, such as number of children, family structure, occupational status, education qualifications and ethnic background. Half of the mothers in the study worked outside the home and did so in occupations ranging from routine (NS-SEC 7) to lower managerial (NS-SEC 2), with

'intermediate' occupations (usually in administrative capacities) and semi-routine occupations (in retail or personal services) as the two dominant occupational groups (see appendix table 1 for mothers' classifications of current or most recent occupations). The fathers in the study also worked in jobs across the socio-economic spectrum, with own account workers (NS-SEC 4) such as self-employed builders and carpet-fitters as the largest group (15 out of 56 fathers on which we had information). In terms of respondents' education qualifications as well, there was considerable variation. For example, whilst only a small minority of mothers (8) had no qualifications, eight had degree level qualifications (attained as mature students via part-time routes). GCSE and/or Further Education qualifications were the most common qualifications of the mothers in the sample (28). The research presented here follows an earlier study by Vincent and Ball of middle class and professional parents with young children in the same localities. Findings from this study of 59 families, which is presented in Vincent and Ball (2006) will occasionally be drawn on for comparative purposes throughout the text and referred to as the 'middle class study'. Crucially, that group of parents differed considerably from the families in this study even if they shared a socio-economic indicator. For example, a mother categorised as Class 2 in this study was working as a manager of a betting shop, whilst a Class 2 mother in the middle class study was working as a drama therapist. Equally, of the eight mothers with a degree level education in this study, none followed a straightforward path from school to university and all obtained their qualifications as mature students through part-time routes. This contrasts with the mothers in the middle class study who were nearly all qualified to at least degree level (52 out of 59 mothers) and for whom seamless progression through the education system was the norm. Most of the families in the working class study lived in public

sector housing (39), others lived with family (13) and six of the families owned their own home. The majority of families (52 out of 70) were in receipt of at least one means-tested state benefit such as Housing or Council Tax Benefit or Working Tax Credit[1]. We report elsewhere on the challenges of attempting to clarify the meaning of 'working class' in relation to the families in our study (for more details, please see Vincent et al. 2008a).

The majority of the initial interviews for this study were with mothers (61), three were with fathers and six with couples. We also conducted repeat interviews with 20 families, of which eight included both partners. The focus of this paper is on mothers' experiences and it is the interviews with women that form the basis for the analysis presented here. Interviewed mothers were aged between 16 and 40+, 41 were married or had live-in partners, whilst 29 were lone mothers. Half of the mothers (35) worked outside the home (16 full-time and 19 part-time, i.e. less than 30 hours per week), 28 were not in paid employment and seven mothers were studying or at school full-time. Families had diverse ethnic backgrounds, we classified 29 mothers as being White UK or White Other, 27 as having African/Caribbean origins and ten as coming from an Asian background (see table 2). The White UK group of interviewees included three ultra-Orthodox Jewish mothers. We interviewed a number of Muslim respondents from both Asian and African backgrounds and several of the other interviewees mentioned the importance in their lives of their Christian faith. Families used a range of different childcare with just over a third of the sample (26) having children at a daycare nursery full-time.

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[1] Working Tax Credit is a payment to top up the earnings of low paid working people (whether employed or self-employed).

As can be seen, the 70 mothers comprised a wide and varied group and this diversity has led to data which is challenging to analyse. The different combinations of class, ethnicity, religion, educational credentials, length of time in the UK, partnership status and family composition inflect in a variety of subtle and nuanced ways on individual decision-making in relation to the acceptable balance between paid work and home life.

Mother's perceptions of work

For some of the mothers we interviewed, working and earning a living played a major role in their self-perceptions:

> Once you're at work it's like for me, I couldn't just give up to do nothing.
> (Hazel, two children, black Caribbean, live-out partner, ft childcare worker)

> I can't imagine not working, getting up in the morning and doing nothing with my day. (Daisy, one child, mixed race, lone mother, pt administrator)

In the earlier study which focused on middle class parents, mothers who remained in the labour market talked about 'the liberation of working' (Vincent & Ball 2006, p. 78), meaning this socially and emotionally, as well as financially. It provided them with a publicly recognised sense of self and adult relationships separate from their identities as mothers. Middle class mothers' commitment to their paid work, where

employment can offer a space for self expression, is also emphasised by McMahon (1995) and Gatrell (2005). And Himmelweit and Sigala find that the full-time working mothers in their study take pride in coping 'against insane odds', respondents stressing their abilities to manage time and competing priorities (2004, p. 466). Viewing employment as a key part of one's identity is not a prerogative of middle class mothers, Irwin finds that 'paid work appears to be a core component of the identity of a wide spectrum of women who have young children' (2005, p. 104). The mothers in our study talked about work as providing them with an independent sense of self, Kim (two children, white UK, live-in partner, pt self-employed) states that work is important to her because *'It's mine, it's what I do!'* and Dawn (one child, Asian other, married, pt childcare worker) declaring *'I'm so much more myself now, coming back to work'*.

Thus mothers expressed considerable commitment and pride in their employment, regardless of the low status and low pay of some of the work they were doing. Of the 35 mothers who were in either full-time or part-time employment, 17 worked in the public sector, often in caring capacities such as nurses, childcare workers or teaching assistants, but also in lower level administrative posts. Those working in the private sector worked in retail and personal services such as hairdressing (nine) or again in administrative capacities (six), three of the mothers were self-employed. Some of the interviewees have worked their way up in organisations and were justifiably proud of their achievements. Moira, who left school with no qualifications said:

I was doing care work [] for about three years, and then they had a vacancy in the office [] answering the phones, and then I got promoted to care coordinator

– so I ain't done too bad! (Moira, two children, white UK, lone mother, ft care coordinator)

However, none of the mothers talked about their work in terms of a career. Quite a few of the women described frequent job changes and switching between private and public sector employment. Interviewees located themselves broadly as someone in the labour force, rather than identified with a particular skill or sector. Whilst some of the interviewees talked to us about their career aspirations, they often lacked a clear conception of how they may achieve these and/or did not have the necessary education qualifications, nor the space in their lives to study for them.

This is markedly different from the middle class study (Vincent & Ball 2006), which featured mothers who were very highly educated and had their first children in their 30s when they were often well established in professional positions of responsibility and some way down a planned and specific career path. Some of the middle class mothers expressed anxiety upon returning to work because of their perceived failure to live in two worlds, that of motherhood and that of the successful professional with concomitant demands of out-of-hours work and socialising. The working class mothers did not voice such anxieties and the social connections work afforded were highly valued, with colleagues and work relations held in particular regard:

I was looking forward to go[ing] back to work [] being back in the workforce and meeting people every day and, you know, different challenges every day. (Diana, three children, black Caribbean, lone mother, pt post office worker)

Elsewhere we have written about the lack of so-called 'weak' social ties of many of the interviewees in the study (Vincent et al. 2008b). Working class families with limited financial means and cramped housing are at a considerable disadvantage with regards to building up the kind of networks and social circles of other mothers and young children described by middle class interviewees in our earlier study. These social meetings often revolved around children's activities (e.g. lunch and tea in each others' houses, music groups, art club, etc.), activities which hardly got any mention in the accounts of the day-to-day lives of our working class respondents. Like the lone mothers in Power's (2005) Canadian study, the mothers in our study are 'flawed consumers', unable to engage with these types of social activities that often require considerable financial resources. In the absence of motherhood providing close social ties, it is not surprising that some of the working class mothers in our study talked warmly about the friendships offered to them through work:

I missed the [school] children at work and I missed my friends and socialising and, yeah, things like that. So being at home [during maternity leave] was...I sort of felt a bit left on the shelf, you know? (Jocelyn, five children, black Caribbean, lone mother, pt teaching assistant)

I like adult interaction, I like my colleagues at work, I like all of that. [] You know, you go out to lunch with your colleagues. [] Because I've got different colleagues, you know, some are Muslims, some are this, so you get invited to so many things. (Dinah, one child, black Caribbean, lone mother, ft admin officer)

Mothering and work

The government message that being part of the labour market should be a positive and defining aspect of every adult's life has thus been taken aboard by many of the mothers we interviewed. In this framing, work provides diversity and offers an independent adult identity as compared to the sameness and lack of autonomy and status experienced by many mothers, when caring for their young children. As we mentioned above, Duncan and Edwards (1999; Duncan et al. 2003) and Reynolds (2001; 2005) offer a concept which emphasises paid employment as being an integral part to 'good' mothering. Thus we examined our data to see whether and how the mothers in our sample described their paid work as benefiting their children. It is worth pointing out that the inner urban setting of our research, with its heterogeneous population and (at the time) ready availability of paid work, is likely to shape the overall picture of attitudes towards working mothers which we describe here. More traditional attitudes towards mothers' paid employment may well be found in other locations where communities lack a relatively buoyant local economy or are more homogenous.

Duncan and Edwards and Reynolds argue for a link between mothers' attitudes and practice as to the acceptable balance between paid work and home life and mothers' ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, ethnicity also emerges as an interesting variable in our study. In our, admittedly small sample of 70 families, just over half (55%) of the white mothers were in employment, the same proportion as the black mothers in the study (16 out of 29 white mothers and 15 out of 27 black mothers, see appendix table 3). However, the white group of respondents were twice as likely not to be in paid

work or studying compared to their black counterparts (41% or 12 out of 29 white mothers versus 22% or six out of 27 black mothers). Most (nine out of 10) of the Asian mothers in the study also did not work outside the home. Table 3 shows that part-time working was more common among white respondents than black mothers and, as Reynolds (2001; 2005) research suggest, mothers from black Caribbean backgrounds were more likely than mothers from other ethnic backgrounds to work full-time (39% or seven out of 18 black Caribbean mothers worked full-time as opposed to 22% or two out of 9 black African mothers and 17% or five out of 19 white mothers). The table also shows though, that being a mother of a young child and working full-time is not an experience that is confined to a particular ethnic group, white mothers also work full-time, as do those from other ethnic backgrounds. The research by Duncan and Edwards and also Reynolds does of course suggest that it is attitudes as well as practices that define a particular stance towards mothering and paid work.

The belief that being a working mother is good for children, not just in terms of family finances, but also in providing a positive role model for the child's own future and position in society, was only voiced by the black Caribbean mothers in our sample. It was a view held irrespective of whether mothers were engaged in paid work at the time of the interview or not:

> [By staying at home] you're not showing nothing to your children, are you, really? You're not showing them, you know, a way of life, or you're not showing them how to be independent by themselves. You know, you don't show them that it's not all about free money, you have to work, and when you

want something, you know, you have to work for it, you can't just sit there and expect it to fall in your hands. (Diana, three children, black Caribbean, lone mother, pt post office worker)

I just like to work and, yeah, sort of, build myself up a bit more with my children. (Natasha, two children, black Caribbean, lone mother, at home)

We have also identified a group of mothers who have come to the UK fairly recently as migrants and who consider their (full-time) participation in the labour market as crucial in building the family's new life in Britain. For the recently arrived parents, their labour is key to establishing their family unit in London as a self-sufficient and secure one. Below Peta, Agnes and Nisrine, all recent migrants to Britain talk about their decisions to go back to work after the birth of their first child:

Because I believe that I need to have some qualifications just to make my future good, and my son's future good as well. [] So I decide that even if… even it's hard like today now, I decide that I have to manage to do everything now. (Peta, one child, black African, married, ft student nurse)

We had difficult also because, you know, [my husband and I] work together [] it's my decision how long I'm working. And, of course, if I'm not working all day our income is much lower. (Agnes, one child, white other, married, ft self-employed)

Nisrine went back to work when her daughter was four months old and her mother and mother-in-law took it in turns to visit from their home country for six months at a time to look after the baby:

> Yeah, [I wanted to go back to work] because the…it's not that far from where I live, and I'm quite friendly with my boss, and she knew that I would – I said to her, 'When my mum comes as soon as I can manage to come I'll just start working'. (Nisrine, one child, other ethnic background, married, ft beautician)

These women do not explain their involvement in the labour market as modelling a positive role for their children as implied by the concept of the mother/worker integral. Nor are they describing another of Duncan and Edwards categories, 'primarily worker' which suggests a prioritising of work over mothering. They are workers for their children's future and as new arrivals to the UK, they refer not to a wider community of other mothers or families, but to the immediate and medium term future of their own, often somewhat isolated, family unit. In the context of Duncan's (2005) writing on mothers' choices around paid work as socially and culturally created, as well as historically and geographically located, they find themselves in a liminal space without being able to refer back to their own experience growing up or refer forward to examples of other families just like them. Thus they make decisions in relative isolation from the historical and geographic imperatives described by Duncan.

Two other groups of mothers in our sample stood out as particularly closely defined by their specific and long-established cultural and geographic locations. The ultra-

Orthodox Jewish women we interviewed in Stoke Newington, for example, were all working part-time (see also Blumen, 2002). Part-time work allowed for the moral obligation to prioritise the perceived needs of the children and for maintaining an identity of women as mothers and as at the centre of all family life, managing the household, and present when children return from school:

> I always said I would never go out to work if it means I can't fetch my children, if I can't be there for them, so whatever I'm doing in a day stops at 3.30pm full stop, even the housework, washing, everything stops at 3.30 until 8.30. I fetch them, give them supper, do homework, put them to bed, tidy up and then I can do what I want again. It's their hours, they deserve it. (Leah, four children, white UK, married, pt family support worker)

We also interviewed a number of Muslim women from a South Asian background (although mainly born in Britain) who were living within a small, well-defined area in one of our case study localities. The women were all married, largely young and with very young children. They were at home with their children and often lived in extended families. In the interviews, they emphasised the primacy of their role as mothers and in running a home and stressed the continuity of traditional family values:

> And the children do learn a lot from their mothers, yeah, so I think it is really important to have…to be at home with the children. (Saher, one child, Asian Indian, married, at home)

I've got used to being a housewife. I've, like, been married for five years now. I mean, I know sometimes it is – it's good because when you go out with work and everything it sort of refreshes your mind and you're kind of, sort of, fresh. But the reason is that at the moment, I just can't even think about it because it's kind of impossible for me, because I'm, like, I have to manage this whole house as well, and it's kind of hard. If I was to work then nothing would be done, the cooking and all that. (Zeenat, two children, Asian Indian, married, at home)

But as Zeenat's extract above indicates and Asma's below reinforces, employment outside the home is not ruled out and seen as attractive because of its potential to provide a parallel identity outside of motherhood:

I would like to go out, to make friends and working. You like to do something in your…your life, actually. I don't want just to do cooking and sit down in the house looking after kids. (Asma, two children, Asian Indian, married, at home)

Staying at home wasn't construed as all negative of course, being with your children, caring for them, protecting them and guiding them, as well as witnessing them grow up and develop every step of the way was emphasised as crucial by the stay-at-home mothers we interviewed, regardless of their ethnicity:

This is the time when I know that she really needs me. There is too much that I would miss to just go to work. (Naomi, one child, white UK, lone mother, at home)

I was just wondering, like, how – I don't think that there's nothing wrong with other mothers sending their kids [to childcare] but I think the mother and daughter or baby communication is very important. And you might miss, like, the first smile, the first step even if the mother's working or something. And I think … I think it's more like a closer bond. And I think you do need your mother there for the couple of – the first years. (Saher, one child, Asian Indian, married, at home)

I just thought that these years are the most important, you're not going to get them back, they're growing so rapidly, especially now that he's just turned two, things like his language, like every day, you know, another word comes out. And I just wanted – felt I wanted to be part of that as much as possible. You know, and it didn't feel – I feel a lot more relaxed now, because even though I was working part-time, the two days I was off for, there was always something to do. (Audrey, one child, black Caribbean, married, at home)

Mothering identities that revolved around staying at home with your children and caring for them full-time were found across the sample, but there were discernable patterns with regards to sub-groups. Above we mentioned two groups of mothers from South Asian and ultra-Orthodox Jewish backgrounds who saw themselves as stay-at-home mothers, but who also defined their role in a broader sense as providing

a home for all the family by running the house. Among some of the teenage mothers in the sample, like Naomi above, a primary identity as mother is also observable. Perhaps this is not surprising if we follow McMahon's (1995) argument that commitment to one's children diverts attention from challenging material conditions. Moreover, young and often lone mothers have to contend with a frequently negative portrayal of teenage motherhood in both the media and social policy contexts, which may well serve to strengthen them in their resolve to display absolute dedication to their children.

However, whilst we were able to identify certain patterns of negotiating mothering and work pertaining to particular sub-groups, there was also evidence of fluidity. Audrey, quoted above, used to work away from home but now very much embraces the identity of being a mother who is at home full-time with her child. Practical considerations and necessity influence behaviour and thus identity, as we have shown with the example of the mothers who had recently arrived in the UK. As does policy, the introduction of Tax Credits and the Childcare Element of the Tax Credit scheme for example meant that mothers who did not work when their older children were young now work outside the home, Alanis telling us: *'I stayed off work until [older child] went to school, which was when she was three, simply because childcare, you didn't get as much [financial] help as what you do now.'* (Alanis, two children, black Caribbean, live-in partner, pt learning support assistant). This underlines that, as Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) suggest, neither identity nor behaviour is fixed. Overall, the idea, if not necessarily the practice, of being a mother and working outside the home has been embraced by the women in our sample of urban working class mothers.

Childcare and work

Childcare arrangements were generally described very positively, and in particularly as offering something more for the child than the mothers alone could. Childcare meant both mother and child could get a break from each other and exposed children to different and valuable experiences:

> Everybody says, 'Oh, he's such a happy baby!' and I think that being with other children, you know, makes him happy. Not at home looking at my miserable face. (Diana, three children, black Caribbean, lone mother, pt post office worker, baby at ft nursery from six months)

Nurseries in particular were considered as both safe and developmental. Mothers found it reassuring that unlike in home-based childminder settings, more than one adult carer was present and they described the formal nature of nurseries that involved inspection reports, activity sheets, defined staff roles, etc. as giving them peace of mind. Group provision and the presence of peers were seen as encouraging children to talk and develop effective social skills from an early age:

> But I felt that my daughter being with my sister all day she's not really learning much as if she was – as she would if she was in a group, you know, with other kids. (Taysha, one child, black Caribbean, lone mother, ft administrator, child approx. 15 months when started ft nursery)

If she can go to – not just with other kids, but if she could get used to lots of

different adults that's going to be easier in the long run when she goes to

school, when it comes to babysitting, when I take her anywhere […] She's

always been interested in everything that's going on and never been frightened

of anything. [] And I think going to the nursery's got – I know she was

alright before but I think that just reinforces it. (Ruth, one child, white UK,

married, ft administrator, baby started ft nursery at five months)

This endorsement of group and nursery settings is markedly different from the views

of the middle class families of the earlier study who commonly used nurseries for

children aged three to five in the immediate pre-school period, but who generally

preferred home-based (nanny or childminder) care for their under-threes, fearing

emotional neglect in more institutional environments (Vincent & Ball 2006). By

contrast, it is fear of physical neglect or even abuse that working class mothers

worried about with regards to 'strangers' looking after their children in private homes

(Vincent et al. 2008b). The working class families preferred care arrangements that

were as straightforward and geographically close as possible and tended to stay with

these arrangements. In the middle class families, children often went to a range of

different care/activity settings in the course of a week and arrangements were

constantly reviewed and adjusted according to children's age and perceived abilities.

Several of the working class mothers we interviewed emphasised that nursery offered

their children a range of activities and access to resources that they could not provide

at home. Claudette below describes how her daughter would be at a disadvantage if

she were at home with her full-time:

I think being with me it would have just been not enough for her, I think it would have been just too boring. Even the time – even in holidays when she is with me more, like I have to kind of wrack my brains and just think of so many things to do each day, because I just do not want her to get bored; I think it's not fair on her. [] And I don't think I'm equipped enough to kind of keep that up on a long-term basis in terms of teaching her and making sure she's ahead, or on the same level, as other children that attend a nursery. (Claudette, one child, black Caribbean, lone mother, ft student, baby went to a childminder from nine months and nursery from age two)

Being at home with young children when money and space are limited can be stressful. Earlier we noted that much of the middle class mothers and their children's socialising appear to happen around commercial children's activities and reciprocal visits with other mothers, a phenomenon also observed in other research (Byrne 2006). Not having enough money to enjoy time at home with their children was felt acutely by the working class interviewees:

Because even still being an at-home mum, even just to go out on a general trip to the park, you even need to have money in your pocket. Because you'll pass the ice-cream van and like, you know, they're thirsty and they want a drink; they've come off the swing, they want a packet of crisps. Like all the way it's spending, spending, so…. Ideally, if I could be at home, and I'm financially better off, then that would be my choice. But, you know, right now I'd like to

be at work and have my child be in a nursery and, yeah, just sort of build on that really. (Natasha, two children, black Caribbean, lone mother, at home)

And being at home and…I thought, 'This is just depressing,' you know, because I suppose, you know, because not all the time I wanted to go out when I thought [child] needed fresh air, this and that. And if I did go out I'm a person I can't go out and window-shop, I have to go and buy. (Diana, three children, black Caribbean, lone mother, pt post office worker, baby at ft nursery from six months)

This enthusiasm for childcare, especially nursery care, and ambivalence towards the benefits of staying at home was a somewhat unexpected finding of the study. The positive attitude towards the 'expertise' of professional childcare workers corresponds well with policy messages around child development (e.g. Birth to Three Matters, Sure Start 2003). Yet, it also leaves working class mothers with a negative sense that they may not be able to give their children all they need.

Discussion: towards a new division in the moral universe of mothering

This paper considered the diverse practices and identities around mothering and paid work negotiated by a sample of working class mothers with young children in two different localities in inner London. We found that the policy discourse positioning employment as a social responsibility and central to a positive sense of personal fulfilment was powerful and ubiquitous across the sample. It appears that an exclusive identity as mother is increasingly contested among the urban, working class

mothers of young children we interviewed. As Kim's statement below suggests, she feels that not engaging in paid employment was no longer an option that was approved of by her immediate environment or wider society:

> And it was always sort of like that, it was always very small comments like that, "Are you going for a job?" whereas they don't seem to think, "Well, I done the same things when my kids were young, I stayed at home and looked after them," it doesn't seem to be an acceptable thing any more, that's the impression I get, to be at home and look after your kids. (Kim, two children, white UK, married, pt self-employed)

This strong work ethic displayed by the mothers in the study concurs with the direction of Labour government policies which have been designed to encourage just such a transition. Individual decision-making in relation to the acceptable balance between paid work and home life was also influenced by examples of mothering identities available close by, those of peers, family and particular cultural or ethnic groupings. A strong 'traditional' mothering philosophy that emphasised staying at home with one's children full-time was evident within smaller sub-groups, a group of Muslim mothers with a South Asian background and some of the teenage mothers, but it was not dominant across the sample. Whilst we accept, as we noted earlier, that the location of our research – the heterogeneous communities of Battersea and Stoke Newington – may well explain (at least partially) the relative absence of traditional views and practices concerning mothers staying at home with their young children, statistics concerning the growing rate of employment amongst mothers (ONS 2006) do suggest that our findings are not atypical. However, and in sharp contrast, a

number of articles have appeared in the press in recent years, especially in glossy weekend 'lifestyle' supplements, testifying to a supposed move of middle class and professional women 'back into the home' on becoming mothers (e.g. Horton 2008; De Marneffe 2006; Keating 2006; Wood 2006). Similarly Christina Hardyment (2007) in a recent review of the history of childcare advice, comments that 'a surprise new development in the last decade has been a backlash against going back to work after having a baby. It might fairly be called a Mother's Pride movement. Convinced of the importance of bringing up their children themselves, women who can afford to… are positively choosing not to work' (2007, p.301). She does not mention social class but her description, continued in the book, makes it plain that she is talking of middle class mothers. It is also true that in our earlier study of middle class families only a small minority of respondent mothers (10 out of 59) worked full-time (Vincent & Ball 2006).

The decision to stay at home and not to return to return to work may be being made by some middle class mothers because of the stress and tensions caused by trying to work in demanding jobs and to fulfil mothering responsibilities. Sharon Hays (1996) has famously described dominant discourses around mothering as 'intensive mothering'. Intensive mothering requires the mother to take on complete responsibility for all aspects of children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. It requires a centreing of children and their needs in family life, accompanied by a considerable degree of maternal self-sacrifice. Intensive mothering is conducted against a growing background of advice manuals, childrearing 'experts' and media comment. 'The methods of appropriate child rearing are construed as child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially

expensive' (Hays 1996, p.8). Hays argues that this ideology has become so dominant that mothers of all classes are aware of it (although she does note significant class differences in the way in which mothers practice 'intensive mothering', p.95). Lareau's (2002, 2003) work on childrearing cultures suggests that the poor and working class mothers in her research were largely unaware of or ignored the demands of intensive mothering. Korteweg (2002) and Minke (1998) argue that the state's heavy encouragement of welfare-reliant mothers back into the labour market allows no space for their mothering responsibilities. As Korteweg notes: 'a good mother is a working mother' (2002, p.17).

All this research is American and there is certainly a need for more UK based studies of mothering practices and discourses. One UK-based example is the work of Gillies (2007) who argues strongly for recognition of the way in which the material contexts in which families live affects mothering. With this we would certainly concur, and make an additional, but related point. If we are correct and there is a trend amongst middle class women to increase the time they spend at home by taking on part-time or no paid work, then working class mothers' increasingly intense involvement with the labour market will position them as good self-reliant adult citizens, but may adversely locate them in the moral universe of mothering versus their middle class counterparts.

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Appendix

Table 1. National Statistics Socio-Economic Classifications (NS-SEC) of mothers

NS-SEC Class	Stoke Newington (n=34)	Battersea (n=36)	All Mothers (n=70)
1 higher managerial & professional occupations	0	0	0
2 lower managerial & professional occupations	5	4	9
3 intermediate occupations	8	11	19
4 own account workers	2	1	3
5 lower supervisory & technical occupations	0	0	0
6 semi-routine occupations	6	11	17
7 routine occupations	3	1	4
8 never worked & long-term unemployed	6	5	11
Student (unclassified)	4	3	7

Table 2. Ethnic background mothers

Ethnicity	Stoke Newington (n=34)	Battersea (n=36)	All Mothers (n=70)
White UK	9	14	23
White Other	5	1	6
Black Caribbean	7	11	18
Black African	2	7	9
Asian (Indian)	8	0	8
Asian Other	1	1	2
Mixed Race	1	2	3
Other	1	0	1

Table 3. Mothers employment status by ethnic background

Ethnicity	Full-time work	Part-time work	Not in employment	Student	Total
White	5	11	12	1	29
Black Caribbean	7	6	2	3	18
Black African	2	0	4	3	9
Asian	0	1	9	0	10
Other	2	1	1	0	4
Total	16	19	28	7	70

Biographical Notes

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