

good at' their mothering, professional work and so forth, which has parallels with Duncan's analysis of 'good mothering' in Chapter 8.

Hardill and van Loon emphasize how the distribution of identity risks is structured by gender and socio-economic position. In particular, they show how the identity risks which emerge from the tensions of pursuing parenthood in conjunction with a professional vocation place particular pressures on women, for the identity of 'mother' invokes a form of presence and involvement in childrearing that is absent from current prevailing social constructions of what constitutes 'good fathering'. The identity risks for mothers are compounded by features of many professional and managerial jobs in the new economy, such as where long or unsocial working hours are the norm or where they are in precarious positions. The outcome is that many of the women in these dual-career couples had adjusted their working patterns in response to the demands of parenting – some as a conscious choice to 'being there' with their children, others due largely to the stresses and tensions of trying to manage the competing demands of professional and maternal roles. In contrast, the minority of fathers who made such an adjustment had done so as a positive response – to 'be there' with their children as a meaningful alternative to their unsatisfactory professional careers.

Together these three chapters demonstrate the persistent salience of gender and social class in understanding men and women's employment decisions and preferences. They also demonstrate how norms and obligations about what constitutes 'good' behaviour as mothers, fathers and as workers infuse the behaviour and rationalities of men and women. These norms, like behaviour, are open to change. That maternal employment is becoming more widespread in many countries where the stay-at-home mother used to be the typical pattern may contribute to this renegotiation, but norms do not simply adapt to fit with prevailing material conditions. If state policies press mothers to take employment in the absence of adequate social infrastructure, then the contradiction with mothers' normative understandings of what they should be doing as 'good mothers' produces emotional strain, stress and dilemma (McDowell et al., 2005). Clearly reconciliation measures (access to better childcare, more options for working-time adjustments and so on) help to reshape notions of how it is possible to provide 'good mothering' while employed, but the emphasis is largely upon women in most policies. Reconciliation measures which are designed to help reshape notions of 'good fathering' are less developed, yet as the Norwegian example discussed shows, they have the potential to start changing fathering practices as a basis for developing a more gender-equitable form of society premised on care work being undertaken by both sexes.

8. Mothers' work–life balance: individualized preferences or cultural construction?

Simon Duncan

INTRODUCTION: STRUCTURE, PREFERENCE AND THE WORK–LIFE BALANCE¹

For individualization theorists, structural concepts like class and gender are 'shell institutions' (Giddens, 1999) or – more colourfully – 'zombie categories', which are 'dead and still alive' (Beck, 2002: 203). The form of such structures still exists, but the content has changed where people are now the reflexive authors of their own biographies, rather than following structurally determined pathways. True enough, these reflexive individuals are still subject to inequalities and constraints of various kinds, but structures of class and gender are dead classifications from the past, given a sort of shadow life by the individualized processes through which people construct their lives. While the 'grand theorists' of this position remain infuriatingly over-abstract, Catherine Hakim (1996, 2000, 2002) has operationalized this view as 'preference theory', dealing with women's employment behaviour and based on detailed empirical work. According to Hakim, 'affluent and liberal modern societies provide opportunities for diverse lifestyle preferences to be fully realized [so that] women [have] genuine choices as to what to do with their lives' (Hakim, 2000: 273). Social structures of class and gender are at best marginal for social explanation. This response fits well with a long period in Britain during which social structure – especially class – has been unfashionable in social science both as a concept and as an empirical tool. In turn this coincided with politically dominant notions of a 'classless society' promulgated by British governments in the 1980s and 1990s, and chimes in well with the current high political profile of 'choice'. While the political emphasis on individual choice and preferences is perhaps greatest in liberal welfare state regimes such as Britain and the USA, notions of choice and preference also emerge in most European societies with other forms of welfare state

regimes in relation to the issue of maternal employment and 'work-family reconciliation'.

In this model of society with its emphasis upon liberalism, individualization and preferences it is apparent that 'work-life balance' will be seen as a matter of individual choice as constrained by the practical constraints of cost, time and accessibility. This indeed is the approach taken by the work-life balance campaign in Britain, as championed by the Department of Trade and Industry and supported by various think tanks such as the Work Foundation and some large employers like the supermarket chain Sainsbury's (Shorthose, 2004). The provision of childcare is a good example. Because this can be too costly, or does not cover work hours, or is simply not available, it is seen as a barrier to mothers' preferences in taking up employment. A solution then is to provide more childcare. That parents, particularly mothers, see themselves as having – and desiring – a social obligation to care for their children themselves, and that subsequently the nature of childcare provision is crucial to them, is not taken into account (Duncan et al., 2004). In addition, employment may not be particularly fulfilling especially for working-class mothers who do not possess sufficient human capital to establish a career. At the same time, the long-hours culture prevalent in many British workplaces is seen by some (but not apparently the government) as stopping parents (which again really means mothers) developing their careers, or even continuing in paid work at all, because then they would be unable to care properly for their children (Bunting, 2004). Again, this neglects issues about gendered identities and obligations that surround both paid work and caring, while for many a simple 'job' – without access to a 'career' – is a necessity rather than an opportunity. In other words the work-life balance campaign does not consider structures of gender and class, which can enable, or constrain, individual choice.

Melissa Benn has memorably suggested that 'being against work-life balance is like being against summer or good sex' (Benn, 2002; quoted in Shorthose, 2004). Like Shorthose, I am not against the work-life balance campaign; providing more childcare and eliminating the long-hours culture in Britain would have many beneficial effects (Bunting, 2004). Rather, the campaign is self-limiting because it takes for granted the idea of free choice within practical constraints. Work-life balance is seen simply as a balance of time and money. My contention is that while it does include these things – and these are important – it is more fundamentally a balance of everyday, practical morality. Parents, especially mothers, have to navigate within strongly held social norms about what is the proper thing to do in combining employment and mothering. And these norms, or gendered moral rationalities, will vary both socially and spatially (Duncan et al., 2003, 2004). In this way mothers do not have free choice to simply take up their individual life-style preferences as conceptualized by Hakim. Rather, they

negotiate with others about what is the proper thing to do in their particular situation.

In this chapter I follow up this contention by examining how mothers in different class groups understand the relation between mothering and paid work. The following section describes the methodology used, and the third section simply describes the class differences found. The next section then goes on to assess how Hakim's preference theory can explain these differences. Finding that this approach is limited, the fifth section returns to the interview data in order to examine how mothers socially construct their understanding of how employment and mothering should be combined. In the final section I can then draw out some more general conclusions about individualized preference versus the cultural construction of choice.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Strategy

The chapter is based on the results of 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with white mothers, with dependent children under 11, who were in an exclusive heterosexual couple relationship, and carried out during 1998–2000 in four English towns. Eleven is the age at which most parents see children as old enough to be on their own at times (Ford, 1996)². These were taken from a total sample of 108 interviews covering social variations in ethnicity, sexuality and 'alternative lifestyles' as well as class. Interviews with eight male partners, and the records of three focus groups, were also available. The concern was not to produce a statistically representative sample, but to purposively sample amongst contrasting social groups of partnered mothers.

Interviewees' social class positions were assessed using a multidimensional 'objectivist' method. This included interviewees' own occupation (current or recent) and educational or vocational qualifications, the occupations of their parents and current partner, housing tenure and neighbourhood, and current social networks. For most of the sample, all these characteristics coincided, enabling an unambiguous class allocation. Five respondents showed more transitional class positions and were not allocated to any group. Three different class groups were defined on this basis, using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) as a guide (Rose and Pevalin, 2002). These were: (1) 16 'peripheral working-class' respondents (NS-SEC groups 12–14), living in Barnsley in South Yorkshire, Burnley in east Lancashire and Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire; (2) 11 'central working class/intermediate' class respondents (NS-SEC groups 4–11), living in Barnsley and Burnley; (3) 18 professional and managerial respondents

(NS-SCE groups 1–3) mostly living in Hebden Bridge and in Headingley, Leeds.

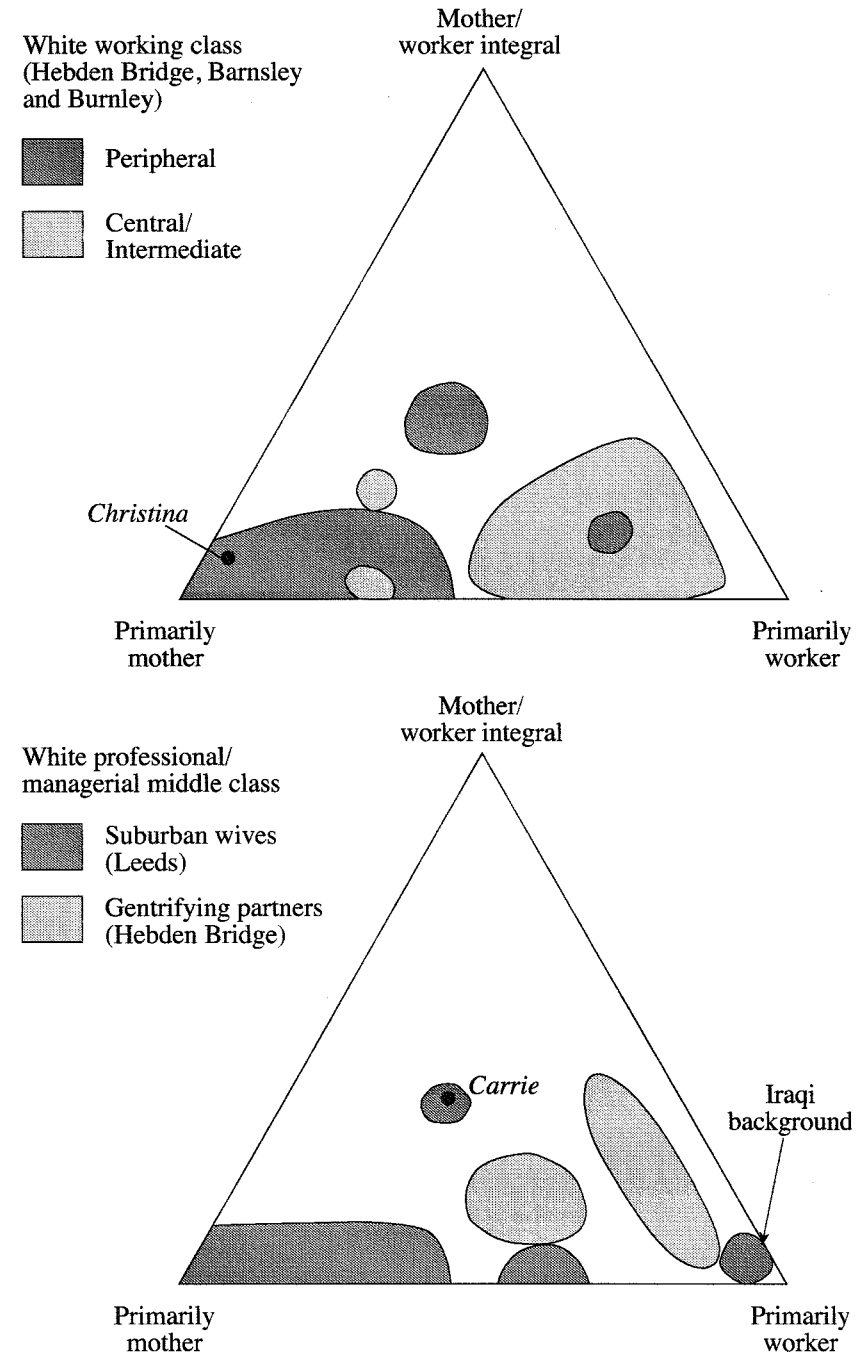
The different sample locations allowed further distinction between these groups, where the geography of partnering and parenting is variable (Duncan and Smith 2002). Barnsley typifies areas dominated by a male breadwinner/female homemaker family formation, although the economic basis for this has substantially decayed. Burnley, also a working-class industrial town, is in contrast typical of a ‘dual-worker’ area, where wives and mothers have traditionally been in employment. Hebden Bridge shares this history, but is now heavily gentrified by middle-class incomers seeking alternative lifestyles, while Headingley is a high-status inner suburb where middle-class professionals live alongside ‘post-student’ and student middle-class apprentices. It was striking that while nearly all of the working/intermediate class respondents in groups 1 and 2 and their partners had been brought up in their local areas, and most had lived there continuously, all the middle-class respondents were incomers, with many beginning their occupational and partnership careers in London.

Analytical Strategy

Analysis of the interviews used the Grounded Interview Rationality Diagram (GIRD) procedure (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Duncan et al., 2003). All statements in the interviewees’ accounts (including seemingly contradictory statements) about (1) combining employment and paid work, (2) allocating tasks with partners, and (3) choosing childcare were identified. Similar statements were grouped together, and from this grouping the main ways of accounting for these issues were inducted. These understandings were conceptualized as different ‘gendered moral rationalities’. They were gendered because they 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.

Identification of these rationales allowed the construction of summary diagrams showing the position held by individual interviewees, and the interviewee groups, in relation to the gendered moral rationalities. Thus for motherhood and paid work, the position of each interviewee with respect to three main accounts was plotted on the triangular model in Figure 8.1, and then further generalised into the shaded areas. The size of the different shaded areas thereby indicates the range and number of interviewees’ statements.

It soon became apparent from the GIRD analysis that there were considerable differences within the group of professional and managerial mothers. These were marked off by geographical location and I further distinguished a ‘gentrifying partners’ sub-group in Hebden Bridge compared



Sources: Hebden Bridge interviews 1998, Barnsley, Burnley and Leeds interviews 2001.

Figure 8.1 Combining motherhood and paid work

to a 'suburban wives' sub-group in Leeds. One of the central themes of this chapter – the relationship between preference and constraint – is already highlighted by this sub-group division where mothers with similar resources in terms of class location held different understandings about what was the best thing to do in combining employment and motherhood. Two middle-class respondents from Barnsley and Burnley could not be allocated to these geographically defined sub-groups and were excluded. This left a total of 48 respondents from the original 'class' sample of 50, with 43 allocated to the four class-based groups.

CLASS DIFFERENCES IN UNDERSTANDING MOTHERING

What, then, were the differences that GIRD found between these four groups of mothers? I focus here, for reasons of space, on their overall understandings of how motherhood should be combined with paid work (see Duncan, 2003, for detail, Duncan et al., 2003, for divisions of labour with partners, and Duncan et al., 2004, for childcare choice). Figure 8.1 indicates these differences. Within an unquestioned responsibility for doing the best for their children, the mothers could hold gendered rationalities that gave primacy to the benefits of physically caring for their children themselves ('primarily mother'), 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').

The different positions shown in Figure 8.1 do not simply relate to middle-working class division, but instead to more detailed differences within this. For the working class white mothers, there was a clear split between the peripheral and central/intermediate class groups – the former expressed primarily mother understandings, the latter tended more towards the primarily worker position (although few reached this entirely). Typically the former expressed rhetorical amazement that mothers could leave their children for long periods with others, just to go out to work, while the latter – although highly valuing time with their children – saw employment as a central part of their identity outside mothering, as well as for social and financial reasons.

There are also significant differences between the two middle-class groups. The 'suburban wives', in Headingley, mostly showed a strong primarily mother identity. Their expressed understandings were often almost identical to those of the peripheral working-class group, despite huge class differences in incomes, status, education, employment and housing. 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 (see Duncan et al., 2003 for black mothers). Typically they valued the worker role highly. In addition, for many, not only would staying at home restrict this role – it would also be bad for children to be around their parents too much.

Our results accord well other qualitative studies, and with representative surveys, which show that mothers usually see paid work in opposition to good mothering, that gender divisions of responsibility and labour in caring and providing are often taken for granted, and that most mothers prefer informal care by relatives if they are not able to provide this themselves (see for example Fenton et al., 2003; Irwin, 2003; Wheelock and Jones, 2002; Vincent and Ball, 2001). While there are changes – for example some mothers separate out and value a worker identity, gender divisions of labour are increasingly negotiated rather than prescribed, and a minority of mothers highly value formal childcare – such change is 'slow a-coming' as Jane Pilcher puts it (2000: 771). Class difference, if noted at all, is usually limited to a broad middle-working class division, or implied through the level of education. Mothers with few educational qualifications and who particularly value local networks of friends and relatives are more likely to hold 'traditional' views of motherhood (Fenton et al., 2003).

My analysis allows a restatement of the explanatory problem. First, why do different class groups of mothers show different understandings of motherhood (notably the peripheral working-class group compared with the gentrifying partner middle-class group, or the suburban wives middle-class group compared with the central working-intermediate class group)? Is this because of class differences in the ability to take up employment, or do without it? But, second, why do different class groups show similar understandings (notably the suburban wives and peripheral working-class groups)? And third, similarly, why do similar class groups show different understandings (the suburban wives compared to the gentrifying partner middle-class groups, or the two working-class groups)? Is this because women can express their individual preferences? The next section will assess the utility of two current operational frameworks in answering these questions – preference theory and rational action class theory.

EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES I: PREFERENCE VERSUS STRUCTURE

According to Catherine Hakim, 'there are no major constraints limiting choice or forcing choice in particular directions' for women's employment choice (2000: 18). In this way women's heterogeneous employment patterns are explained by heterogeneity in their lifestyle preferences, hence the appellation

'preference theory'. Although Hakim admits that the social and economic context can have some influence, lifestyle preferences are certainly 'the principal determinant' on women's employment choices (Hakim, 2003: 343). In any case, as Susan McRae (2003) points out in a critical article, any contextual constraints are in practice ignored by preference theory.

In this way preference theory neatly operationalizes the individualization view of late modern society for women's choice between employment behaviour. Indeed each uses the other for support. Thus Anthony Giddens, in his approving preface to *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century* (Hakim, 2000) sees the book's demonstration that 'modern women [have] real choices between a life centred on family work and/or on paid work' as showing that 'we can no longer learn from history', where 'individualisation has been the main driving force for change in late modern society' (Giddens, 2000: vii). Later, Hakim quotes directly from this preface to defend preference theory:

Some sociologists now accept that agency is becoming more important than the social structure as a determinant of behaviour. People do not only gain the freedom to choose their own biography, values and lifestyle, they are *forced* to make their own decisions because there are no universal certainties and norms about the good life, as in early modern industrial societies. (Hakim, 2003: 341)

In short, preference theory takes a resolutely structureless view of women's employment behaviour.

Preference theory has been heavily criticized on a number of grounds (Ginn et al., 1996; Crompton and Harris, 1998; McRae, 2003). Most of these collapse into the general charges that choice is always constrained, not least by social structures like class and gender that create a set of available choices, and that preference theory is tautological. Equally Hakim (1995, 1998, 2003) has robustly defended her position, where a general theme is that critics are 'so wedded to old theories prioritising social structural factors that they are unable to perceive the new scenario now emerging in modern societies' (2003: 343).

How far can preference theory account for the group differences described in section 2? It seems most applicable to the intra-class differences. The 'suburban wives' and 'gentrifying partners', despite similar class positions, levels of human capital, and biography before motherhood, would simply take different life-style choices. Similarly, although here there was more structural and biographical difference, the central/intermediate group preferred longer working hours, while the peripheral working-class mothers preferred shorter hours and to stay at home. Extending the logic, the conclusion would be that class in itself had little effect. Looking at the data more closely reveals some problems with this matching however. Firstly, some of the suburban wives and the peripheral working class were employed for longer hours than they thought right – to 'pay the mortgage' (suburban wives) or simply to 'get some

money' (peripheral working class). They could not properly exercise their preferences. Secondly are the inter-class differences in how these preferences were put into practice. The gentrifying improvers took professional and managerial jobs; the central/intermediate group – with a similar preference towards paid work – took lower-status jobs. Similarly, the suburban wives had far greater choice of employment than the peripheral working class. The former were able to take higher-paid, higher-status jobs with better conditions – which often included greater ability to reconcile employment with caring. They could much more have their cake and eat it. Finally, where did these alternative preferences come from, and why are they socially patterned? Hakim (2000) appeals to a mix of varying testosterone levels, feminine and masculine personalities, and biographical influences, although she remains unconvinced and unconvincing and in the end simply returns to the fact that women have various preferences available, therefore they make them in seeking 'causal pleasure' (Hakim, 2000: 189). Preference remains primary – and tautological.

Writing in reaction to Hakim's preference theory, McRae (2003) conceptualizes two kinds of constraint facing women in their balance of employment and family – the normative and structural. The former includes women's own identities – their 'inner voices' – as well as gender relations in the family. This is something considered through the concept of gendered moral rationalities and I will return to this below. McRae largely ignores this type of constraint however, and instead focuses on the structural constraints of job availability, the cost and availability of childcare, and – underlying these immediate factors – social class. It is class that explains why some women have greater choice and can more easily overcome constraints.

Hakim rejects the relevance of this class-based explanation for women's employment behaviour on the grounds that they derive from 'male centred stratification theory' (2000: 2). She claims male practice is not relevant to women's choices between a life centred on private, family work and one centred on market or public work. There seems little conceptual logic in this corraling of class to the employment sphere alone and, as section 3 shows, mothers' choices between motherhood and employment do seem to be patterned by social class. So how might class differences contribute to explaining these patterns? We would expect middle-class mothers, with their greater ability to obtain higher paid and more satisfying jobs in better conditions, to be more likely to understand mothering as a role which could be combined with substantial employment. Thus the gentrifying partner group, primarily employed in higher education and public sector management, were oriented towards the primarily worker role. In contrast the peripheral working-class group, with much lower paid employment in unskilled and routinized jobs, were clustered towards the primarily mother pole (Figure 8.1). This

overall middle-working class difference is also reflected in survey evidence of mothers' attitudes towards paid work. So far, so good for a class-based analysis emphasizing constrained possibilities.

Deviations from this explanation are equally obvious however. How do we explain the 'primarily mother' value position of the suburban wives group, and their orientation towards part-time employment – similar to the peripheral working class group – despite their high human capital and professional and managerial employment? And why does the intermediate/central group hold a value position more like the middle-class gentrifying improvers group, and take up full-time jobs, despite their relatively inferior labour market position? Are these groups of mothers acting 'irrationally'?

McRae (2003) points to the cost of childcare as an additional class constraint. Indeed the lower-paid peripheral group, and many mothers in the less well-paid intermediate/central group, were particularly concerned about questions of cost. They tended to use informal childcare if not their own care at home. The gentrifying improvers, less concerned with costs, favoured more expensive nursery options with child development as a key concern. But the same objection applies; mothers in the high-income suburban wives group still valued one-to-one care that placed the mother as the ideal. Arrangements in dividing work with partners – mentioned by McRae as another possible constraint – are similarly patterned. Suburban and peripheral groups tended to stress pre-given gender roles as opposed to the negotiation values favoured by the other two groups. The class patterning of values and choices do not always follow the class patterning of resources. Particular social groups appear to be acting 'irrationally' in terms of class and constraint.

Hakim's preference theory and a class-based constraint approach appear as mirror images of each other in explaining the mothering position of the four class groups of mothers as summarized in section 3. Each is most convincing where the other is least convincing. This seems to suggest combining the two approaches. Understandings and practices of mothering, and how they combine with employment and gender divisions of labour, are a mixture of choice (classless preference) and constraint (rational action in a class structure). But this is surely to state the obvious. We need to go further in asking how mothers develop these alternative preferences and rationalities. This is the subject of the next section.

EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES II: CULTURES OF CLASS AND MOTHERHOOD

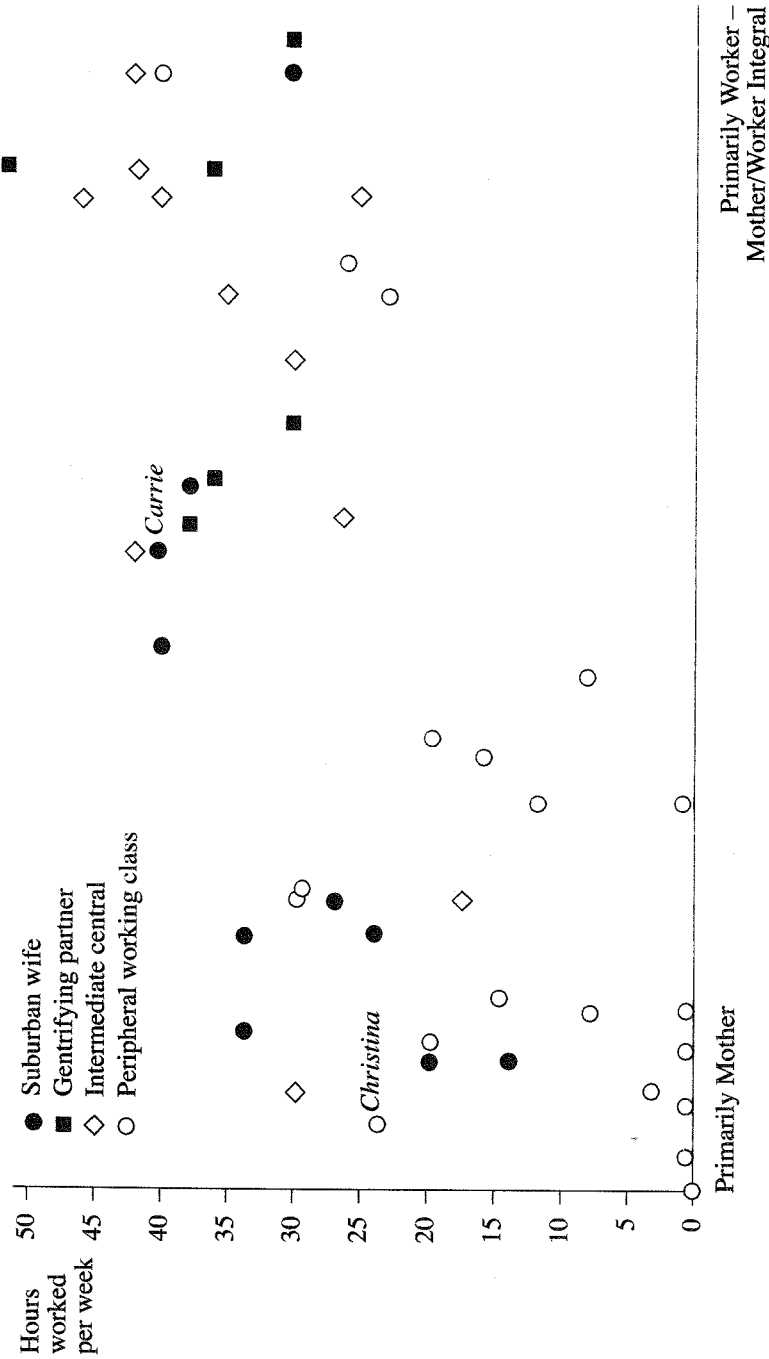
This section asks how preferences, or rational action in response to class constraints, are produced and expressed. When we ask this question, the

answer becomes more complicated than the simple 'choice versus constraint' dichotomy. And this complication turns out to be the cultural construction of choice and constraint. For example rationality in response to class constraints and opportunities is more complicated than simply maximizing individual economic returns. Thus the suburban wives group could be seen as using their superior labour market position to 'buy' more time with their children, in line with their primarily mothering values and pre-given gender roles. Some of these mothers implied that this withdrawal from the labour market was necessary not only for themselves as good mothers, but also as a means of maintaining social advantage for their children. As Betty put it:

I think that children, growing children, is really a very important thing to be doing and really – on some level, I know it's economic ...

This is 'rational' economic action in a wider sense. There is some evidence for this behaviour in Figure 8.2, which plots employment time against the mother-worker continuum. Thus we find the very shortest employment hours – or complete withdrawal from the labour market – in the peripheral working-class group while the longest hours are worked by those from the gentrifying partner and intermediate/central working class groups. Suburban wives were mostly employed for fewer hours (those exceptions who did work full-time cited financial pressure as their reason, and usually expressed a desire for shorter hours). In a striking reversal, mothers employed as an OU tutor and as a fine art consultant (in the suburban wives group) worked for fewer hours than a cleaner and a blanket packer (in the peripheral group).

In like manner half the mothers in the intermediate/central group were the main or equal breadwinner (rare in the other groups). It was presumably less possible for them to buy caring time at home, especially when their wage rates were lower than the suburban wives – who in addition all had high-earning partners. Some even expressed a desire for longer hours. Mothers in the peripheral group, where many had few or no hours of paid work, and who also expressed strong preferences for one-to-one care – ideally the mother – could be seen as simply making this purchase by default. Their likely labour market returns would not allow them to buy an adequate work-life balance, so many 'bought' this through not working long hours. This qualification to a simple economic rationality begs the question however. For the qualification is 'cultural' in that moral values about proper childcare, and concerns about their children's outcomes, qualify mothers' 'rational' labour market behaviour. Relations with partners are also crucial. Working times do not seem simply to reflect economic necessity or possibility. Rationality is at least partly constructed culturally.



Source: Interviews 1998-2000.

Figure 8.2 Gendered moral rationalities and hours worked by class group

Some mothers explained their involvement with their children in strong, emotional terms. For example Sasha, who was a part-time community project worker in the transitional class group, spoke of:

This thing comes into your life that is more precious than anything else that you own or have or want in the world and they become ... they become the first thing that you pay attention to rather than it be your career or your salary or your car or the house that you live in or whatever, they are the most important thing ye know - husband, whatever, they don't come into it really, they are the most important thing in your life and it changes your whole view on everything.

Similarly, Claudia from the suburban group described how:

The first time it was a real shock because you know I'd had this really quite high powered job ... and I had a lot of status and I had money and all of a sudden I had nothing ... but at the same time I was absolutely bowled over by Jerry [oldest son], I just thought he was the best thing since sliced bread ... and that shocked me really, I didn't expect to feel like that. Prior to having him I just thought oh well ye know, it's a baby and then since I sort of had him it was like falling in love you know oh and I felt the same with Raymond [younger son].

This, she explained, was why she took on part-time work around school hours rather than work full-time in a career. Heather, also a 'suburban wife', called herself a feminist and had even thought, 'having a baby was almost a sign of weakness'. But after the birth and its unexpectedly strong emotions she found herself putting her baby first and her career second, and this meant part-time work despite financial dependence on her husband.

This emotional experience might seem simple enough as a basis for preference-based explanations - some mothers experience intense maternal feelings and they will prefer to be mothers at home despite significant human capital in terms of education and employment experience. There are a number of problems with this conclusion however. Firstly, most mothers in the sample expressed similar feelings, if not always so strongly. (Indeed to do otherwise would constitute 'bad mothering'.) Secondly, feeling these emotions does not mean moving into mothering at home. It was rather that being a mother was a constant social and emotional position. As Rita, also from the suburban wives group, put it, 'they sort of occupy so much of your sort of psyche all the time' and while emotionally upsetting at times, this was compatible with employment for 30 hours a week as a senior IT consultant:

Yeah, it's not so much thinking, they just ... they just become part of life really you know, I wouldn't think ... oh is he happy, is he crying, is he alright sort of thing, I don't think of them in those terms like when I go to work now, I don't, I don't worry about them ye know, I know they're happy, I know they're looked after and

everything'll be fine, it's just that they're just there like a cloud, they're just part of life ...

McCarthy and Edwards (2002) summarize, this involvement is a significant social experience centred on emotion, moral identity and a particularistic relationship with children. It is much more than a simple individual preference for time allocation. It is part of life as a mother. It was also expressed by most mothers in the sample – including those with substantial hours of paid work. Experiencing motherhood as a significant social experience does not mean therefore some automatic translation into a 'primarily mother' identity. To understand how this involvement links into ideas about how best to combine mothering and paid work, and how this varies among different groups of mothers, we again need to consider how it is socially and culturally interpreted. In this sample two factors stand out – understandings of 'career' and relations with partners.

Li et al. (2002) have drawn attention to the importance of career to divisions in the working class. This division is not simply related to divisions in relative power and security in the labour market, whereby skilled workers are placed in a more advantageous position, although it is associated with it. In addition, Li et al. claim, the idea of career is linked to 'some socio-cultural aspect' of individual's lives (Li et al., 2002: 629) that gives value to job progress, job skills and satisfaction, and forward planning. This career/non-career division was replicated among our respondents – but with the important extension that this was just as marked for middle-class respondents as it was for those defined as working class.

Table 8.1 summarizes career orientation for the all four class groups. As can be seen, there are significant contrasts. Divisions within the working class resemble those found by Li et al. Mothers in the central/intermediate group were oriented towards career, sometimes highly so. They often expressed fulfilment in their employment in 'associate professional' or 'lower technical' social care occupations, and many aspired to career development and promotion. Similarly, most tended toward the primarily worker position, combining this employment with mothering. As in the research by Li et al., this association was however not a simple response to labour market opportunities, but was expressed in identity terms. Thus for Gabrielle, a full-time nurse, her career gave her:

A feeling of worth. I enjoy having friends and colleagues, I enjoy the job. It gives you 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.

This career identity was separated from just obtaining an income through

employment. Gail described how her satisfaction in career outweighed the possibility of better pay for its own sake:

This is more than earning money. Yeah I could perhaps move on to bigger things with more money but I enjoy helping people, I enjoy interacting with other people, as I say, I enjoy using me head in different ways to try and get round a problem ... I have moved up from general assistant, care assistant, assistant care manager, care manager ... I've just come back from a secondment at the hospital where there perhaps was scope to do a combined role but I chose to come back, I didn't want that, combining the role of care management plus the supervising systems, to me the supervising systems weren't working to be honest.

In contrast those mothers who merely had 'jobs' (or were unemployed) were members of the peripheral working-class group, and tended to a primarily mother position. Many of these respondents considered that career was not something for them, or even took a negative view that career was detrimental to mothering – despite the fact that their parental background and earlier biographies were little different to some of the central working-class respondents. As Lisa, who worked part-time as a bakery machine operator, said:

I don't think a career and children go together 'cos I think at the end of the day something's got to give, I think summat has to be neglected and I think at the end of the day it's children who are neglected. I don't mean neglected by being ill treated neglected, I mean like with time and time with their mother, time with their father and they're like putting these, and I think mothers try to overcompensate that by buying them these ridiculous computers.

Table 8.1 Career orientation by social group

Number of attributes	Four	Three	Two	One	None	None and negative	Total
Gentrifying improvers	5		1				6
Central working class/intermediate		4	2	5			11
Suburban wives		2	4	3	1		10
Peripheral working class		1	2	4	4	5	16

Notes: Attributes are: 1. states has a career 2. has career plans, goals, and aspirations 3. takes a long-term employment perspective 4. gains intrinsic fulfilment from the job.

Source: Interviews 1998–2001; Li et al. (2002).

Fulfilment, for these mothers, was more to be gained from being a mother at home, in contrast to just getting money with a job. For Emily, who was unemployed:

I could earn a lot more than him [husband] ... 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.

This division was not simply a working-class phenomenon; there were similar divisions among middle-class respondents. Many of the suburban wives had deliberately placed their career to one side, while the gentrifying improver group had brought their career to the fore.

This is all the more striking given the equally high human capital possessed by the both groups – aspirations and identity are in this way autonomous from access to the labour market. Typically the suburban wives looked for fulfilment in part-time employment, sometimes conceptualized as a career – albeit on hold or abandoned – but did not identify with their career and were not aspirational within it. For example Jackie, a fine art consultant, had given up a high-powered career in the arts in London in order to make a conventional family life in Leeds. Working part-time as a freelance she valued her work for its fulfilment, but still felt guilty about even this commitment to career:

I would always need something I think to keep my mind ticking over ... just for my own self-achievement, my own satisfaction, I mean that probably sounds awful ...'

Betty, a part-time university lecturer, had strategically separated these two roles in creating her biography:

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 ... What I thought was that because I was twenty-seven when we got married, I thought about pursuing a career, I'd only just graduated remember so I would have to start at the beginning ... and I thought – I can see myself not wanting to stop work to have children and ... I was just afraid that if I went for the career first, when I came to me mid-thirties and I really had to think about whether to have children or not – because of the biological clock.

Consequently, Betty had:

Difficulties ... with other women who put their careers first even when they've got children, it seems to me they value their career or their jobs more.

The gentrifying improvers group were most career oriented. The only respondent in this group expressing low career orientation was married to a traditionally minded working-class local. With this exception, members of this

group saw their careers in both fulfilment and aspirational terms. In terms of career orientation then, the traditional class hierarchy was disrupted. The central/intermediate group had a higher career orientation than the suburban wives group. This matches the class distributions in gendered moral rationalities about combining paid work with mothering as described earlier in this chapter.

It was the cultural understanding of divisions of labour with male partners that seemed to underlie these group differences in orientation to career. Respondents in the two middle-class 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. All, in the recent past, had careers. Most respondents had met their partners in London or other university cities, where as young professionals they lived together and some had their first child. 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.

The gentrifying improvers seemed to see Hebden Bridge as a site where they could more easily combine the less gendered role of independent worker with partnered (but often unmarried) mother. Hence the group appellation of 'gentrifying partners'. In contrast, for the primarily mother group in Headingley the move was part and parcel of conventional – that is, strongly gendered – family building. Marriage and motherhood was part and parcel of the move. Leeds was somewhere where they could buy a bigger, better house with a garden, more suitable for children, usually premised on a good job offer for the husband, and properly become a family. Wives would concentrate on mothering at home, combined with part-time employment as appropriate for personal fulfilment, or as compelled where some worked longer hours than they thought best for financial reasons – to 'pay the mortgage'. Hence the group appellation 'suburban wives'.

We can investigate further how preference and constraint are socially constructed by examining two cases in more detail – those of Carrie and Christina who were chosen for their (a) typicality in their social groups. See Figures 8.1 and 8.2. Carrie was atypical in the suburban wives group: she followed a full-time professional career (although she would also like less hours) and earned more than her husband. She was also exceptional among this group in holding elements of a 'mother-worker integral' understanding – mothers needed to be stimulated by life outside mothering in order to be a good mother. Christina was typical for the peripheral group – she had a part-time unskilled job and earned less than her breadwinning husband. In terms of 'constraint' versus 'preference', both Carrie and Christina appear to act rationally in using their relative levels of human capital for appropriate

employment/childcare mixes. Carrie's job as deputy school head was based on a higher degree followed by professional qualifications and experience in education, while Christina, who was a factory cleaner, had only low-level school-leaving qualifications and her employment experience was all in unskilled work. But asking why Carrie was exceptional in the suburban wives group, and Christina typical in the peripheral working-class group, can tell us much about how these preferences and constraints are socially and culturally constructed.

Firstly, Carrie was one of the few respondents showing class mobility, but while her northern working-class family had no career expectations for their daughter, she did identify with an aunt who was a primary school head. Secondly, this background had given her a horror of economic dependence on a man. Her mother, bright but working in a mill by age 14, was left after a divorce without a home of her own, earning poor wages in unskilled retail work. Not only that, but her father:

Who's had a career ... has been able to afford himself a nice house with a garden and ... so I, I just thought that's never going to happen to me, hah! And you see it happen to so many women.

This object lesson in the value of career was reinforced by the experience of her sister-in-law, who gave up a 'powerful job' to look after her child and following an acrimonious divorce was left 'with absolutely nothing' living on '£90 a week benefit'. Thirdly, this object lesson taken from her class and family background had been extended into a worked-out feminist position, which had been practised in communal living and feminist politics in London. But despite all this, Carrie held elements of a primarily mother view:

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.

So how did Carrie resolve this contradiction between her feminist views, the object lessons from her family background on the value of economic independence and career, and the need for good mothers to be there with their children? Squaring this circle largely depended on relations with her partner, Pete. He was heavily involved in both housework and childcare, so much so that:

Our children have had two mothers, if you like and they've had two fathers 'cos I work so I'm like the traditional father.

This resolution depended on Pete's shared feminist-inspired gendered politics of family life (confirmed by a separate interview with him), worked through

during the London experience of communal and political life. When they decided to move to Leeds to bring up children, they both held an agenda in which childcare, domestic work and access to career were shared.

So for Carrie bucking the group trend and taking on full-time work depended on particular biographical experiences, a contradictory class background, a feminist personal politics that had been practically developed, and above all a partner who shared and acted upon these politics. Carrie's comparative example also points to the cultural construction of the other suburban wives in the sample, with middle-class backgrounds, less developed feminism, and partners who saw themselves – and were seen by their wives – as providers more than carers.

On first sight, acting as homemaker, unpaid carer (she also looked after her aged father) and part-time unskilled worker appears to be a rational solution to Christina's class-based lack of human capital. But this rationality was also arrived at through a cultural and social journey. For Christina was not content with this 'rational choice within constraint' in combining employment and care, her employment preference lay with 'career':

I'm still deciding what to do with my life at this age ... all I've done I've had babies and done menial jobs ... 'cos I'm quite a caring person and I feel like I could do summat useful and more than being a cleaner.

What was more, she was doing something about this, and had just started a course that would qualify her to be a nursery nurse. This preference for career could then, potentially, take Christina on the same employment path as many respondents in the central/intermediate' group. How then, despite this preference, did Christina end up as 'typical' for the peripheral group?

First Christina expressed a strong identification with her own mother, who had died when she was in her twenties. Her own household divisions of labour and identity closely followed her mother's traditional breadwinner/homemaker model. In one important respect she differed from her mother however. Christina was an only child, and saw that as 'rubbish' which gave her no 'social upbringing'; she wanted to improve upon this and saw this as the explanation for her own large family of five children. Secondly, her husband Arthur strongly advocated a breadwinner/homemaker arrangement, even to the extent of undermining Christina's part-time job:

He sees hissen as breadwinner, he says you leave your job, you don't need to work, you stay at home and I'll support yer.

He even believed that his wife was shortly to give up employment, whereas in fact she was planning to leave her factory-cleaning job for a better job – with possible prospects – assisting in a nature reserve. However although Christina

wanted some financial independence and job fulfilment, she also agreed with the view that 'the mum should be with the kids' and take on the domestic work – it was striking that her sons did not 'even pick up their own clothes'. She even regretted that she had not been a full-time mother:

If I'd just been a bit more braver and I wish I'd have stayed at home with the kids.

Thirdly, these traditional views of gender roles and responsibilities were consistent with normative views among these working-class interviewees, reflecting Barnsley as a type-case 'breadwinner area' on an aggregate statistical level. Most male partners had been miners or, if younger, had expected to be so like their fathers and grandfathers. Interviewees' mothers had been carers and at most part-time workers. The economic basis for these roles had weakened or even disintegrated as mining jobs disappeared, with fathers now in low-wage unskilled or casual work and mothers thrown into a more active wage-earning role. But the social definition of proper gender roles still referred to this more settled past (it was disturbing that several male partners were said to be depressed or ill because of this disjuncture in their expected biographies). Christina and Arthur had both been brought up in the same village area and made their social lives around this ex-mining community.

This social experience of local gender culture helps explain why working-class mothers from Burnley showed greater preference for career than their Barnsley counterparts. For a similar economic decline, as the cotton industry disappeared, did not appear to be so disturbing. For in this traditionally dual worker area, interviewees already had family experience of working mothers and fathers taking on domestic work. Although demonstration of this preference for career was sometimes required (for example several respondents had gone on cleaning, washing or cooking strike) mothers seemed more comfortable with a breadwinning role and fathers with domestic work. Certainly, as the demonstrations themselves show, mothers saw a career as a way forward for them. In this way class divisions in mothering are bound up with the (re)production of regionally specific gender cultures which maintain alternative concepts of the normal and ideal family, and of what is 'the proper thing to do' as far as women and men, and in particular mothers and fathers, are concerned (Duncan and Smith, 2002; Glucksmann, 2000). We can also add however that these gender cultures are also classed cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have shown that, firstly, there appear to be class-based differences in how mothers combine employment and caring for their children.

These are not simple structural divisions between working class and middle class, but instead refer to more nuanced social identities. These class-based differences in mothering present different mixes of preference and constraint in choosing alternative courses of action. Secondly, the chapter shows that theories focusing on such preference or constraint do not go far beyond a tautological description of these alternatives. Rather – thirdly – preference and constraint are socially and culturally created through the development of career as an identity, through biographical experience, through relations with partners, and through the development of normative views in social networks. In this way preference and constraint become social moralities. In turn, the work-life balance campaign needs to pay attention to moral balance, as well as time and money. This moral balance consists of both the moral supply – as in the quality of childcare that is available – and to moral demand – as in the nature of the jobs that are on offer. Mothers need to be able to see that the needs of their children, as they define them, are indeed coming first, and that the jobs they are undertaking instead of childcare are both compatible and worthwhile. Making work pay, to quote one of New Labour's policy reform slogans, also means making work pay in moral terms.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Rosalind Edwards for comments, and to Wendy Holloway for her analysis of the interviews with 'Carrie' and 'Christina'.
2. Semi-structured interviews of around 1.5 hours were used. Interviewees were accessed using informal and formal contacts as starting points, and then snowballed within the contacted mothers' social networks.