

Mothers and Child Care: Policies, Values and Theories

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Government expansion of child care services is based on the assumption that both parents are employed (the adult worker model) and make cost-benefit calculations in choosing child care (the rational economic choice model). This paper addresses this assumption, based on research examining mothers' assessments of appropriate child care. These assessments involve complex moral and emotional decisions around their own and their children's needs, and differ between social groups. On this basis, we conclude that the assumptions underlying current child care expansion policy are inadequate, and that the mere expansion of services is not enough. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction: New Labour's vision for child care and its assumptions

New Labour's 'vision for childcare', according to the Strategy Unit's (2002) 'Delivering for children and families', sees a Britain where 'every parent can access affordable, good quality child care'. This is to be achieved by providing financial help for parents through the child care tax credit component of the Working Families Tax Credit (incorporated into the Working Tax Credit from April, 2003), by direct government investment in child care services through Sure Start and Childcare Centres in poorer areas, by supporting local authority provision and by improving the supply of carers. This vision carries forward the five year National Child Care Strategy (NCS) launched in 1998, and increasing financial support was ensured through a ministerial level Inter-Departmental Child Care Review set up in 2001 as part of the 2002 Spending Review. This increased support for child care provision accompanies extensions to maternity leave and pay, the introduction of parental and paternal leave, unpaid entitlement to time off for dependants in care emergencies, and the right for employed parents with young children to ask employers to allow them to work part-time. All this is in some contrast to previous postwar British governments, which have been reluctant to take any responsibility at all for parents' ability to combine caring for children with working for pay.

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There are at least two problems with this vision. The first is one of implementation. The Childcare Tax Credit only covers about a quarter or less of typical child care costs, largely excludes the informal care for which many parents express a preference, and applies only to families where all adults are in employment. Only 13 per cent of those eligible had taken up the credit by 2002, while investment in Childcare Centres seems to be below the level required to cover the envisaged 20 per cent of most disadvantaged areas (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2003; Papworth, 2003; Toynbee, 2003). Similarly, the right to unpaid leaves, or to reduce to part-time work, will probably mostly benefit the better off who can afford a substantial drop in income (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2003). Even Patricia Hewitt, as Trade and Industry Secretary, admitted that the programme was 'not having the transforming impact that we thought it would have and that it should have' (*The Guardian*, 19.12.02). As Hilary Land (2002) has pointed out, a fundamental problem is that child care provision, unlike school education or the NHS, is not provided as a free, universal service (see also House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2003).

The second problem concerns the aims and assumptions of the government's child care 'vision', even if more adequately implemented. There are two issues here. First, child care provision is seen largely in economic terms. A basic starting point, as the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee noted, is that affordable child care is seen as a matter of enabling parents (for which read mothers) to take up paid work (2003, para 6; see also DTI, 2000; Strategy Unit, 2002; HM Treasury/DTI, 2003). In turn, this will help reach other economic and social objectives, such as improving productivity and competitiveness, reducing child poverty, achieving greater gender equality, and reducing crime (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee). It is indicative that government activity around child care is dominated by the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry, and the Department of Work and Pensions. The role of child development is acknowledged, but this issue appears to be delegated to the Department of Education and Skills (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, para 11), which in turn seems to be less important in the formulation of child care policy.

Second, government policy assumes that parents share this predominantly economic perspective on child care. There is an official assumption of an 'adult worker family model', where both fathers and mothers are seen as primarily workers in the labour market, who pool their earned income in supporting themselves and their children (for example Cm. 3805, 1998, 13; HM Treasury/DTI, 2003; see also Lewis, 2002). This position is supported by reference to the increasing involvement of mothers in the labour market and to a greater social acceptance of gender equality. Together with an assumed growing individualisation of society, women are seen as taking on the identity of independent paid workers rather than 'dependent' carers. Choosing child care, then, will be one part of parents' cost-benefit calculations in taking up employment. They will exercise 'rational choice' in taking individualistic decisions about how to maximise their personal gain. Paid work is assumed to be the optimum means of doing this. The mere provision of child care will therefore allow parents to more successfully combine family caring and employment. There is little consideration of the wider social, moral and emotional components of parenting or child care, although there is evidence to suggest that this is one reason why many parents prefer informal child care. Relatives and friends, in many parents' eyes, better provide the emotional security and involvement that young children require (Land, 2002; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Similarly, the adult worker model usually collapses into

a 'one and a half worker model' for couples with children, where the half is normally a mother working part-time, whose paid work is temporally and emotionally organised around caring for children.

The government's vision for child care may be an example of what we have called the 'rationality mistake' (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Barlow and Duncan, 2000). For evidence about how people make family decisions—including how parenting might be combined with paid work, and how children should be cared for—shows that people do not act in this individualistic, economically rational way. Rather, they take such decisions with reference to moral and socially negotiated views about what behaviour is right and proper, and this varies between particular social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare states (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Barlow and Duncan, 2000; see also Himmelwiet, 2002; Glover, 2002; Neale and Smart, 2002). In particular, people do not view care simply as a constraint on paid work. Rather they feel morally obligated to care and often wish to do so. Furthermore, when it comes to dependent children, there can be non-negotiable, and deeply gendered, moral requirements to take responsibility for children's needs and to place these first (Ribbens and others, 2000; Weeks and others, 2001). The perceived economic costs and benefits of taking or not taking employment and paying for child care may be important once these social and moral understandings are established, but remain essentially secondary. Decisions are still made rationally, but with a different sort of rationality to that assumed by the rational choice and adult worker models. To paraphrase Patricia Hewitt, this rationality mistake may be an underlying reason why the NCS and accompanying reforms have not had the transforming impact that government thought they would, and should have. Or as the House of Commons Committee noted, 'the Government may be placing too much emphasis on a labour-market driven strategy as the basis of childcare policy'. Rather, 'an alternative vision of childcare' would be based upon the choices made by parents and families themselves' (2003, para 29).

In this article we examine further this apparent disjuncture between government suppositions and parents' views of child care. We do this by analysing the beliefs of partnered mothers about what qualities they sought in finding appropriate child care, sampling among different social groups of mothers defined in terms of class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality. (We also analysed mothers' beliefs about how mothering should be combined with paid work, and about the division of labour with partners. See Duncan and others, 2003.) In the light of this empirical research, we then examine the theoretical assumptions underpinning current government child care policy: new household economics (which underlies rational economic choice) and individualisation in late modernity (which underlies the adult worker model). We begin, however, with a brief account of our research methodology.

Methodology

For this study, we adopted an 'intensive' research design. Our concern was not to produce a statistically representative sample, but to find out how social processes actually happen through an in-depth focus on people's beliefs and actions. In contrast, 'extensive' research, as with a population survey, aims to describe overall sample patterns and distinguishing features. Each design has its particular strengths and weaknesses, and can best be seen as complimentary (Sayer, 1992). Thus in the discussion we have combined our interview results with information provided by nationally representative samples.

Research on mothers and employment, especially extensive research, tends not to distinguish between social groups of mothers, nor between different sorts of partner relationship. In contrast this research focused on six different groups of partnered mothers, varying on dimensions of class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality, who lived in two specific places. (Numbers of interviewees in each group varied according to ease of access and reallocation between groups.) Fifty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted during 1998–2000 with mothers who were in an exclusive couple relationship, and who had dependent children up to 11 years (the age at which most parents see children as old enough to be on their own at times, Ford, 1996). This sample included:

in Southwark and Lambeth, in inner London:

- Eleven African-Caribbean mothers living with a male partner;
- Nine African-Caribbean mothers with a 'visiting' relationship', where the male partner does not live within the household on a permanent basis but both maintains a relationship with his partner and children, and can contribute to the household economy;
- Ten 'alternative' White mothers, living with a male partner, who advocated and attempted to practise feminist and/or green/anti-capitalist lifestyles;
- Six White lesbian mothers living with a female partner.

In Hebden Bridge, in West Yorkshire:

- Twelve 'local' working-class White mothers, in peripheral or unskilled jobs, living with a male partner;
- Eight 'offcumden' (incomer) middle-class White mothers, with professional or managerial jobs, living with a male partner.

Theoretically, we saw these six groups as important because there is strong evidence that mothers from different ethnic and class groups, and with different political and sexual orientations, view issues concerning the nature of coupledness and parenting in different ways, and have differential employment patterns. The two locations allowed us to further distinguish these groups where the geography of partnering and parenting is also highly variable (Duncan and Smith, 2002; see Edwards and others, 2002 for details of the locations). Lambeth and Southwark were both slightly above the national average rate for day nursery places, although they were well down for childminder places. Calderdale, the local authority for Hebden Bridge, was well above the national average on both scores and also had particularly high provision in school nurseries for three year olds. While still far from universal provision, parents in both areas will have had some choice in taking up formal child care, and many will have had at least some acquaintance with other's experiences in doing so.

We accessed interviewees using already established informal and formal contacts as starting points, and then snowballed within the contacted mothers' social networks. We used semi-structured interviews to elicit the mother's feelings and understandings as well as their factual circumstances and practices. In analysing the interview material we took a 'grounded' approach, which started from interviewees' own understandings (see Duncan and others, 2003 for details).

Gendered moral rationalities about child care

We found that partnered mothers' reasoning about the suitability of different sorts of child care, as inducted from our data, were expressed along three main dimensions. These were (1) how they understood their own needs; (2) how they understood their children's needs; and (3) the link or balance they saw between their own and their children's needs in arranging different types of child care. We consider these dimensions in turn below.

Child care and mothers' own needs

In terms of their own needs, mothers could stress *practical, emotional* or *group* issues. Practical issues were those of cost, timetabling and accessibility, while emotional issues included the need for trust, for peace of mind, to avoid obligations and reciprocity, and/or to preclude any 'competing mother' for the child's affections. Group issues included the need to fulfil obligations to others (like family) or to gain social acceptance in terms of ethnicity, class or sexuality.

The 'conventional' White working-class Hebden Bridge group were mostly concerned with practical issues about the cost and convenience of child care. This was perhaps because their options were already shaped by their belief that it was best for mothers to stay at home with their children, coupled with traditional household divisions of labour (see Duncan and Otehrs, 2003). As Liz put it:

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

Often both partners took it as given that mothers were homemakers and fathers were breadwinners. Several mothers reported that their partner simply wanted to agree with what they had worked out for themselves within the given role of homemaker and carer. If these roles were overstepped male partners might then refuse to cooperate, or claim they were unable to do so because of employment demands. In contrast the White middle-class mothers in Hebden Bridge were more concerned with the emotional need for peace of mind about their children's security and comfort, and how this fitted in with their own timetables which usually included substantial paid work.

The African-Caribbean mothers in inner London shared these emotional 'peace of mind' concerns, but this included a 'group' dimension where they were concerned that their children were not marginalised or discriminated against because of their ethnicity. A class distinction was apparent here however, with those in lower income/status employment more concerned with practical issues about access and costs than those with professional and entrepreneurial jobs. The higher income group still mentioned these issues, but interpreted them more in terms of child care provision that fitted with their schedules and lifestyles. Au pairs—also Black—were a popular option for this group. Finally, most White 'alternative' heterosexual and, especially, lesbian mothers were also concerned with group relationships—about how others would accept them. Phoebe felt that:

The younger [child care] staff have found it quite difficult the fact that we're lesbian parents ... But then, we have the main, the leader of her room, the main person of that room, is

fabulous. She's great. So she's really—and has been really positive and has actually made really positive moves you know for us. So that's good. And so that makes quite a difference and it gives us a bit more confidence to go in there.

Child care and children's needs

Turning to how mothers viewed child care in terms of their children's needs, these could stress *emotional, development* or *group* issues. Emotional issues centred around the need for a child to have a secure emotional tie with a carer, while development issues included both formal education and child development as well as more general socialisation. Group issues were those of social acceptance of the child's class or ethnic characteristics or, more positively, consolidating heritage.

There are clear class emphases in how children's needs were seen for the conventional white mothers in Hebden Bridge. Most of the unskilled White working-class mothers saw child care in terms of the emotional quality of the attention their children might receive. Mothers themselves were regarded as best placed to provide this, and there was a strong sense of the necessity to 'be there' at home for your children. Other child carers were seen more as substitute mothers who should have responsibility for, and care about, the children's emotional well-being, as well as providing practical care. Relatives were often a preferred option, while childminders were distrusted and nurseries were seen as too formal and communal. Thus Carol would not use a nursery because: 'they're not getting their home environment ... it's too constituted ... there are things they wouldn't see if they were at home being cared for ... it's about quality of care'.

In contrast, most of the White middle-class mothers in Hebden Bridge saw child care provision in terms of educational and social development. Gill commented that:

I know some children who have spent all their time with their mothers ... and they are spoilt, cannot socialise with other children. I think it's very dangerous, they shouldn't be at home with their mothers. Some mothers are crap at doing playdough or painting and things, so they need somewhere to learn to be separate and to be an individual.

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

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

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

Most of the 'alternative' White mothers in inner London, especially when they worked in education and social care, and some of the African-Caribbean lower income mothers, shared this developmental perspective. The higher income African-Caribbean mothers, however, resembled the (low income) white working-class mothers in Hebden Bridge in

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

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

This combination of emotional with group concerns in child care choice was also important for some of the lower income African-Caribbean mothers, and for most of the white lesbian mothers. However, the sources of these group concerns were different. For the lesbian mothers the concern was over their child being accepted because of parental characteristics (that is the parents' sexuality), while for the African-Caribbean mothers this was because of the child's characteristics (that is ethnicity shared with the parent).

Balancing mothers' and children's needs

The six groups' understandings about the balance between their own and their children's needs connected with their views about how motherhood should be combined with paid work, as discussed in previous work (Duncan and others, 2003). Thus African-Caribbean mothers, who saw themselves primarily as paid workers, or who thought that full-time employment was in itself a component of good mothering, saw their own needs as just as important as their children's when thinking about child care provision. This assessment has to be placed in the context that cultural values emphasise African-Caribbean women's responsibilities as provider (Duncan and others, 2003; Reynolds, 2001). Thus, in this formulation, there is no easy distinction between your own needs and those of your child—they are integrally linked. Again, there were class differences within this group: the higher income, entrepreneurial and professional interviewees spoke more about their own needs compared with those in lower income, lower status service jobs.

In contrast, without the integration between meeting their own and their children's needs, the 'conventional' white mothers in Hebden Bridge mostly placed their children's needs as more important than their own. The unskilled working-class group, who saw mothers themselves as the ideal carers, were particularly child-centred. White 'alternative' and lesbian mothers in inner London were more poised between their own and their children's needs, although they were less concerned with child care provision than most African-Caribbean mothers; indeed some of the 'alternative' mothers were not particularly concerned with child care provision issues at all. This often followed a view that stressed caring values as an alternative to the 'capitalist work ethic', where formal employment and formal child care were seen as part of the capitalist world. Jane provides a good example:

When I left university, almost you could make two decisions in life. You could go and get a full time job and get married and have a mortgage, or you could sort of do what I did, which was live in communal houses and work in bits and pieces and do lots of community unpaid stuff ... [For childcare] I used, part time, Susie, who was an unemployed actress friend of mine who used to look after half the kids in [the communal houses] at one stage. And then when she decided she had enough, Paul, another friend [took over] ... You can't have a purely commercial relationship with people [who care for your children].

Survey evidence

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

This dominance of informal care was not just a matter of the relatively low levels of formal provision in Britain. When asked about 'ideal' child care arrangements, when cost and availability were not constraints, there was little change. Nor would many mothers alter their employment times in such ideal circumstances, indeed about a fifth would work less. This valuing of informal care, usually by family members, was largely because parents needed not only to trust the carer but, over and above this, many required 'someone who would show the child affection... [and] look after a child in the same way as parents' (quoted in Land, 2002). Overall, in the SCPR study, about two-thirds of respondents saw emotional reasons (trust, affection) as most important in choosing child care, with around a quarter stressing practical issues and only small minorities seeing developmental and group issues as most important (although these were more often chosen as subsidiary issues). Indeed, the 1999 DfEE survey showed that nearly a fifth of mothers would prefer to work school hours only (and not at all where they had pre-school children) so that they could look after their children themselves. Implicitly (and logically) mothers themselves were the best people to provide the maternal affection that young children required. As Jane Wheelock and Katharine Jones (2002) have shown in another survey, given these values, if child care cannot be undertaken by the mother then 'grandparents are the next best thing'. These results parallel our own for the conventional white mothers in Hebden Bridge, although our research does suggest some class emphasis with middle-class mothers more likely to value child development through formal provision (compare Vincent and Ball, 2001).

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

Theories and values

The British government's vision for child care rests on two theoretical models of parents' behaviour in choosing child care. In theoretical terms, policy amalgamates an individualisation model (describing the preferences and values of individual adults in

the adult worker model) with new household economics model (describing how people operationalise these values through rational economic choices). Our empirical results suggest that this amalgamation produces a 'rationality mistake', in that the processes by which mothers actually do make decisions about choosing child care do not follow these assumptions. This conclusion also concurs with recent extensive survey research.

'New household economics' (Becker, 1981, 1996) extends the rational choice explanations of neo-classical economics to gendered divisions of labour. Within this theory, the gendered division of labour results from men and women within households specialising in the functions with which they can best capitalise their human capital: women in domestic work and child care, and men in labour market work. Heterosexual couple partnership thus involves an instrumental and economically rational 'trading' in the fruits of these different and complementary specialisms. The recent increase in mothers' labour market participation does not negate rational economic trading between couples—they will still make cost-benefit decisions about the gendered division of labour inside and outside the home, but this time factoring in mothers' employment. Choosing child care becomes one part of this modernised household economics, where the practicalities of availability and cost will be traded off against mothers' income from paid work. Although often implicit, features of this model are recognisable in much government policy, as noted in section 1.

In terms of the empirical results reported here, this model is restricted. First, it misspecifies the central social process by which mothers combine caring for their children with paid work (including 'staying at home'); they do so in terms of moral rationalities rather than comparative trading. Cost-benefit analyses of consequent child care and labour market possibilities may be important once moral and normative assessments about children's and mothers' needs, and how these were linked or balanced, have been made. However, this exercise of 'rational choice' remained secondary, rather than a prime behavioural determinant as the model assumes. Such practical considerations were only overtly dominant for certain groups in certain situations, like the unskilled White working class mothers in Hebden Bridge, where moral choices were effectively shaped by group mores about gender roles. Generally, however, cost-benefit analysis of alternatives is used by some mothers some of the time. Overall, our assessment of this model supports criticisms that it comes nowhere near addressing the processes of socially negotiated moral understandings and relational commitments in family decision-making.

The second theoretical underpinning for government policy places causal emphasis on a growing and significant individualisation of gender relations in late modernity. In part this is driven by mothers' increasing labour market participation (Beck, 1992). This process of individualisation gives women in particular a greater sense of rethinking and choosing their own lifestyles, rather than following predetermined gendered roles. Couples are no longer tied together in a complementary domestic and market specialisation. Rather, couple relationships are increasingly governed by, and contingent upon, ideas of mutually satisfying intimacy, and the constitution of late modern family life has to be individually negotiated (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Women thereby see an identity as a paid worker as part of the development of their 'self', both parents are primarily paid workers, and child care by others will be essential to this. This theory underlies assumptions of the adult worker model.

Our empirical results show that this theory is also limited. Choosing child care was subject to strong moral norms about children's needs (compare Holloway, 1998; Vincent and Ball,

2001) and most of the mothers in our sample were more concerned about their children's needs than their own. Even their own needs were expressed in terms of their children (for example trusting carers to look after their children properly). For many, their own needs were reduced to practical issues of cost and accessibility which seemed secondary to the emotional, developmental or group needs of their children. While the African-Caribbean mothers did stress their own needs equally or more than those of their children, this needs to be understood in terms of their integration of self and child in seeing employment as part of 'good' mothering. At the least, individualisation is a highly context dependent process and, like new household economics, inadequately captures the processes of socially negotiated moral understandings and relational commitments. This is perhaps not so surprising because this sociological model has much in common with the economic trading model in emphasising individualised rationality (Irwin, 1999).

Conclusions

Our empirical results contain theoretical and policy implications. Both the new household economics and individualisation theories underpinning current government child care policy are limited in terms of the range of empirical child care situations that they cover. Some mothers will act like cost-benefit economists, or will be developing their individualised 'self', for some of the time in choosing child care—but most will not. In addition the emphasis that both theories place on individualised rationality neglects the importance of social ties and socially negotiated moral and emotional responsibilities in choosing child care.

Reformers sometimes argue that child care preference is a circular process where, if mothers had more experience of formal provision, they would rate it more highly (for example Bryson and others, 1999). There may be some truth in this, although both our interviews and the survey data suggest that the opposite—that parents would use informal child care all the more if it were subsidised through the tax system and supported institutionally—might be equally true. Rather, an important point from our results is that preference for informal care does not so much stem from lack of experience of anything better, but from a deeper assessment of the nature and quality of the care provided, however 'good' the 'quality' of formal, group-based care provision. For example some mothers, particularly in some social groups, believed that day nurseries simply could not provide the 'one to one' emotional care they wanted for their children. Conversely, many of the mothers who did prefer nursery care did so because they saw this as better for their children's socialisation and learning. Our results thus suggest that child care choices result from complex moral and emotional processes in assessing both children's needs, and the mother's own, and the balance between the two. As Carol Vincent and Stephen Ball put it, 'These [child care choice] narratives require the mothers to navigate their way through some very potent and very immediate normatives of 'good mothering'' (2001, 649). Our findings also show that different social groups navigate differently through alternative 'normatives'. Child care evaluations are one part of mothers' value systems, and in turn these emerge in specific social and geographical contexts. It is not just a question of the quantity of child care, but also of its quality and nature, and these judgements about quality and nature will vary socially and geographically. The mere provision of child care is not adequate as a policy response to the problems of combining caring for children with employment.

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