



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network

## Studies in the Maternal

---

### Article

**How to Cite:** Armstrong, J 2017 Higher Stakes: Generational Differences in Mother and Daughters' Feelings about Combining Motherhood with a Career. *Studies in the Maternal*, 9(1): 3, pp. 1–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.220>

**Published:** 01 August 2017

---

### Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

### Copyright:

© 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### Open Access:

*Studies in the Maternal* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.**

ARTICLE

## Higher Stakes: Generational Differences in Mother and Daughters' Feelings about Combining Motherhood with a Career

Jill Armstrong

University of Cambridge, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, GB  
ja605@cam.ac.uk

---

The purpose of this article is to illuminate differences in feelings and attitudes about managing motherhood and work between career women and their adult daughters. Intergenerational narrative interviews with 30 mother and daughter pairs are used to explore the relative influences of contemporary motherhood culture and the experience of being mothered by a woman who also worked full-time or close to full-time in a professional or managerial career. Almost all the daughters felt well-mothered and planned or had embarked upon a high-status career path. Despite this, a clear majority did *not* want to emulate their mothers and instead embraced a dominant idea that part-time work offers 'the best of both worlds'. The daughters are strongly influenced by the contemporary culture of motherhood with its growing emphasis on 'balance' (measured by time), individualisation and parental determinism. It appears that the stakes have been raised to make it feel too risky to one's child's well-being and progress to emulate the more pragmatic attitude to combining work and motherhood demonstrated by many of their own mothers. Much research demonstrates that part-time work presents strong barriers both to career satisfaction and progress. This reinforces the need for organisations to offer more genuinely flexible ways of working in senior roles and for policy initiatives to facilitate the greater involvement of fathers in caring for their children. For individuals, I advocate challenging the idea of measuring good mothering by 'balanced' hours spent at work and at home.

---

### **Like mother, like daughter?**

'Mothers of daughters are daughters of mothers and have remained so, in circles joined to circles, since time began' (Hammer 1975). The intertwined mother-daughter relationship has been characterised by many as a dance between oneness and separateness, change and continuity, problems and connections (Chodorow 1978; Apter 1990; Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 1994; Lawler 2000). What has not yet been written about is the contemporary question of whether the adult daughters of a generation of mothers with successful careers aspire to follow in their footsteps. The purpose of this article is to illuminate intergenerational differences in the feelings of mothers and their daughters about combining careers with motherhood. I consider the relative influences of the intergenerational transmission of attitudes and behaviour in counterpoint with cultural attitudinal differences over time. I also explore how the generations of mothers and daughters construct the meaning of work-life balance.

### **Managing a career with motherhood across generations**

Working class women have always done paid work but the persistent Victorian ideal of 'the angel in the house' (Patmore 1866, p. 114) meant that it is only since the 1970s that most middle class women have worked out of the home. It is only recently that a large generational cohort of women who have invested much time and commitment in their careers have grown old enough to have adult children; some of whom have children of their own. This presents an opportunity to address a research gap and explore to the extent to which the adult daughters want to emulate their mother's approach to managing work and motherhood. Many women starting work in the 1970s and 1980s became mothers in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1981, 24% of working women held jobs classified as Managerial, Professional and Associated Professional (Dex et al. 2006), many of whom reached senior levels in their careers (Wolf 2013). As demonstrated by McRae's (2003) longitudinal study of working mothers who had their first child in 1988, those with higher occupational classifications tended to work full-time continuously, or mostly full time. The significance of this is that the absence of the mothers from the home for long periods was visible to their daughters.

## **Intergenerational Time, Culture and Family History**

In thinking through the possible explanations for differences between mothers' and daughters' views on combining careers with motherhood I draw upon two key bodies of thought. Firstly, seeing intergenerational relationships through the interaction of both historical time, which exposes the cultural location of generations at a specific point in time, and biographical time, which focuses on the smaller stories of the interactions of generations within family chains (Kehily and Thomson 2011). This builds upon Mannheim's (1952) concept that different generations are imbued with values shaped during childhood, as well as those of contemporary culture, that combine to define the zeitgeist. By studying families we are given insight into the interaction of psychological and social factors that lie behind actions and attitudes. Intergenerational research requires consciousness of different relationships between individuals and time and the impact of that on the interpretive view of the research participants. This concept is particularly relevant to the transmission of values and behaviours concerning the combination of work with family life because they are influenced by personal experience, personal aspirations and the bigger stories of changing cultural scripts on gender roles and the way motherhood is performed.

The social and cultural context in which the different generations are mothering have changed significantly. Therefore, the second key body of thought upon which I draw builds upon Furedi's (2002) characterisation of contemporary parenting culture as shifting towards parental determinism. That is, parents, particularly mothers, being directly and principally responsible for the welfare, health and success of their children. This cultural shift is illuminated by Smith's observation that the verb 'to parent', deployed to describe the behaviour of mothers and fathers, entered into common usage in the early 1970s (2010, p. 360). Furedi argues that the rise of parental determinism is paralleled by a growing cultural consciousness of perceived risk to our children that a parent is expected to manage. These cultural shifts mean that whereas good parenting was traditionally associated with nurturing, stimulating and socialising children, 'today it is associated with monitoring their activities' (Furedi 2002, p. 5). Faircloth (2014) makes explicit the link between risk consciousness and the rise of 'intensive parenting', a term originally coined by Hays

to describe an ideology of motherhood in particular, in Euro-American settings, that involves spending 'a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children' (Hays 1998, p. x). As with all ideologies, it is not embraced by all mothers or to the same degree by all who are influenced by it. However, many scholars of motherhood have anatomised this trend. Of particular relevance to working mothers is Christopher's definition 'extensive responsibility' (2012) which describes the time and mental energy mothers spend on intervening to influence and improve the daily lives and life chances for their children even when they are outsourcing responsibility to others. Also, Thomson *et al.*'s research on first time mothers offered the term 'intensification of responsibility' (2011, p. 277) to describe 'the inflation of parental expectations and the proliferation of interventions aimed at improving children' (Thomson *et al.* 2011, p. 277). They, like Baraitser (2009), observed that this trend is an expression of the desire to help children become more competitive with one another for educational success and that it has also become an outlet for competition between women who are more home-centred and those who work longer hours out of the home. Whilst these social factors apply to most mothers, they are exacerbated by 'middle class anxiety expressing an increased perception of insecurity' (Thomson *et al.* 2011, p. 277).

The rise of parental determinism is illustrated in the increasingly directive advice given by parenting experts and mothers who publish (Lee *et al.* 2014). Baraitser (2009) conceptualised modern motherhood as being played out in public in mothers' desire to mould an individual who stands out from other children. Motherhood as a more public act also encompasses the use of social media such as Mumsnet (which claims to have 50 million monthly page views), Facebook and Instagram. Social media can also be argued to facilitate comparison and competition. In this way, social expectations about how one *should* mother seem stronger today than those experienced by mothers who had their children in the more private family environment of the 1980s and 1990s.

This article therefore goes on to scrutinise differences in the cultural context in which the mothers of adult daughters were mothering and the influence mediated through the mother-daughter relationship over historical and biographical time.

## Research Method

This article is based on a qualitative study of 30 mother and daughter pairs. The mothers were recruited to have reached senior levels in their professional and senior managerial careers in a broad range of occupational fields. They lived in different parts of England and worked mainly full-time or close to full-time hours for most of their careers. The career biographies of many mothers also align with Moen's (2005) depiction of a career over time as featuring 'time outs' (p. 191), 'second acts' (p. 133) and 'scaling back' (p. 77). The pairs were recruited by identifying the mother's occupation, average working hours and having at least one daughter who met the life-stage criteria I discuss below. The women were found through university alumni associations, women's professional networks, women met through my professional work as a qualitative researcher and by asking women in my network to e-introduce me to women who they thought may meet the requirements of my sample.

I focus on daughters rather than sons because mothers, including those in dual income households and working in high skilled roles, continue to be positioned as having responsibility for the physical and emotional well-being of their children (Gatrell 2005; Miller 2005, 2012, Lyonette and Crompton 2015). Also, it is well documented that women, including those in career roles, experience restricted career opportunities based on their *potential for*, as well as experience of, maternity (Miller 2005, 2012, Crompton 2006, Gatrell 2008). Of the daughters' generation, 10 were close to graduating from university and on the cusp of making decisions about the jobs they wanted to do, 12 were working and 9 had at least one child under five years old. The daughters all were undergraduates or graduates because the potential to enter career roles now commonly requires a degree. Representing daughters at different life stages was based on the hypothesis that views on work-life balance are likely to change in response to observing how women are affected in the workplace by becoming parents. Interviewing daughters who had also become mothers offered another level of depth to the analysis based on their experience of the effect of having children on their relationship with work. Moreover, the transition from daughter to mother to grandmother enhances women's ability and desire to understand their own relationship with their mother (Thomson *et al.* 2011).

I chose to elicit biographical, narrative accounts because of the complexity of intergenerational research in requiring women to reflect on the similarities and differences between generations and upon their own past, present and imagined futures. Participants' views are affected by how their present shapes the telling of the past and the interpretive contexts available according to their position in the generational hierarchy. Perceptions based on memory and impressions accumulated over time are subjective, and qualitative methods are best suited to drawing out subconscious themes by encouraging participants to be self-reflective (Kuhn 1995; Thomson 2008). A tool that proved especially useful was an exercise the participants completed prior to the interview. Both mother and daughter were asked the same question, in a way that invited neither positive nor negative comment: 'make some notes on any events or feelings that stand out for you in relation to being/having a working mother and indicate how old you/your daughter was at each of these times'. These timelines were used to compare and contrast the memories and emotions of mothers and daughters and uncovered just how few negative issues and anxieties were raised by the daughters in relation to their mothers' working hours, in comparison to the concerns expressed by their mothers.

My rationale for interviewing mother and daughter pairs, both separately and subsequently together, is informed by Elias's notion of 'configuration' which argues that one's sense of personal identity is closely connected to the 'we' and 'they' relationships within one's group (Elias *et al*, 1998, p. 128). Thus the transmission of values, ideas and behaviour between mother and daughter can best be understood by having more than one point of view on the same social relationship and exploring how their accounts converge and diverge. 88 interviews were conducted. It is unusual in qualitative research to have as large a sample as this. This was intended to mitigate the difficulties inherent in finding themes in the analysis of research based on an intergenerational sample with historically different points of social reference (Thomson 2014). The sample size also reflected Brannen's argument that interpreting memories inherent to conversations about experiences over a long time span means 'making generalisations may be more risky than usual' (Brannen *et al*. 2004, p. 3).

An interview is a social encounter that can contain a complex power relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Oakley 1998; Rapley 2004). I was therefore conscious of how I was positioned in relation to each participant in terms of what we had in common or what divided us; for example, age, being a mother or not, or levels of professional achievement. I was therefore careful in facilitating our conversations to focus on the participants, rather than referring to my own experience. As a liberal feminist and a full-time working mother myself (albeit of sons not daughters), the views of Skeggs struck a chord. She asserted that feminist research is political in that 'behind each contribution stands a clear desire. . . for change. . . to challenge categories of common knowledge, and to deconstruct the representations which damagingly position women'. (1995, p. 12) Consciously recognising this potential for subjective interpretation is understood as strength of feminist research and can help to inform data analysis.

My approach to the analysis drew from Thomson *et al.* who, building on the work of ethnographer Back, advanced the notion of 'an increasingly thick account' in which 'there is a growing sense of familiarity as narrative themes recur and a form of biographical triangulation sheds light on phenomena and relationships from different vantage points' (2011, p. 25). In practice, this meant using NVivo 10 to arrive at a plausible interpretation of the data in a manner described by Dey as 'abduction' (2006, p. 91). That is, combining an inductive analysis of the data to develop theories based on emergent themes, with data coded with reference to the research of others. For the sake of clarity and brevity the daughters who are also mothers are referred to as 'daughter mothers'. Their mothers are referred to as 'grandmothers'. Otherwise, the terms daughters and mothers are used.

### **How the mothers' generation felt about managing work and motherhood**

*All* the mothers identified with their careers and largely enjoyed their work. *All* the mothers also shared stories about the trade-offs and compromises involved in negotiating their way through the everyday challenges life presented and acknowledged that some periods of time threw up particular, exhausting challenges. I confine my comments to everyday challenges because events such as serious illness necessitate different responses.



The views of the mothers' generation about combining work and motherhood were varied and specific to their circumstances. A common theme, as argued by others, was that their feelings about motherhood governed the position they took towards work (Crompton and Harris 1998, Thomson *et al.* 2011). The mothers' reports conveyed two dominant attitudes to managing their feelings about motherhood and work that became clear when analysing their accounts which I describe as 'pragmatic' and 'idealistic'. I use adjectives (I behave like this) rather than nouns (I am like this) because the mothers displayed interwoven identities in relation to work and motherhood (Bailey 1999; Laney *et al.* 2014). These different attitudes were evident not in their level of identification with work but in the ways in which they thought they should mother. It therefore followed that differences in attitude were correlated with whether they felt a sense of generalised maternal guilt (Parker 1995) that made them think they should be mothering differently.

Those who were 'pragmatic' in attitude shared the feeling that they did not get everything right but their children had not suffered because of their working hours. Some, not all, felt guilt about specific incidents and, as described by Emma, a doctor, felt uncomfortable about the 'equal and opposite pulls' of their responsibilities, particularly at the end of their working day:

She was cross, quite rightly. . . if I rolled up at the bus stop even a quarter of an hour late and that was an uncomfortable demonstration of the fact that. . . genuinely you can mean you are my top priority but actually today you are not. . . something happened at work that made me late.

Others, such as Naomi, a lawyer said: 'We're all hyped up on this guilt thing but I'm not sure how many of us really feel guilty or should'. 'Pragmatic' mothers commented that they were not making a choice between their children and work and that their children were at the centre of their lives. They felt that it was not helpful to see family and work in opposition to each other because then the gain in one area would inevitably mean a loss in the other:

I think it is important that young people in the workplace know that you don't have to get it right and perfect all the time and understand it's not a set of binary choices. (Martha, CEO, public sector)

In part, the attitude of 'pragmatics' seemed to derive from their attitude to life in general and, in part, was a response to the way they felt about having compressed time:

I wouldn't feel guilty about it because I think your children will get the benefit of whatever arrangement you made. As long as they're loved and secure I don't think it matters enormously personally. . . you just have to make the time and space to make it all work, even if that time is limited. (Christina, Lawyer)

I turn now to those with 'idealistic' attitudes who tended to measure themselves against their ideal in terms of how they would like to behave as workers and mothers, and often found themselves lacking and felt guilty. Valerie, senior retail manager's description of combining work with family exemplified this 'idealistic' attitude:

Feeling I was not doing anything properly. Lurching from crisis to crisis. . . never getting it right. . . almost never getting it right

*Interviewer:* What would right have been like?

Being the perfect employee and mother. But you'd need 48 hours in a day . . . time is one constraint. A bigger constraint is energy and headspace. I have already mentioned my need to do things properly or not at all.

A dominant idea heard from those with an 'idealistic' attitude was their feeling that they were not doing either job well enough. Some used highly charged emotional language such as feeling they were 'abandoning' either their colleagues or child. A few reported making big changes, such as setting up their own companies in order to wrestle back control. These women talked more often about feeling guilt. Some said this guilt came from within themselves. Some showed that they were sensitive

to cultural judgement. For example, judgement from family members or from other mothers, not for working but for 'working a lot'. These women clearly felt that they were not adhering to the dominant cultural script about being a good worker (Williams 2000) or a good mother (Parker 1995, Miller 2012). Both good workers and good mothers are assumed to be available to meet the demands of the workplace or children respectively which causes obvious conflict.

What seemed to lie behind the feelings of 'idealistic' mothers was a sense of blaming themselves for not having made quite the right choices. This complements Gatrell's view (2008) that the setting of goals, targets and standards against which to measure achievement is a feature of late modern industrial society. It also echoes Hochschild's use of the phrase 'cultural cover up' (Hochschild and Machung 1990, p. 22) to describe the cultural oversimplification of the context in which women are making their decisions about managing motherhood and work.

There was no link between 'pragmatic' and 'idealistic' attitudes and how many children they had, the type of childcare used or the length of working hours. What was clear is that many women who expressed a 'pragmatic attitude' had partners who were involved in sharing some or, in a few cases, much of the caring responsibilities. Conversely, many of those with 'idealistic' attitudes had been single mothers for long periods or had partners who took little responsibility for childcare. Of course, there may be an element of post-hoc rationalisation given that most of these mothers were no longer in the moment when they were facing the emotional fall-out of day-to-day problems. However, this position in time was the same for all the mothers participating in this research.

Whether their attitude to motherhood was 'pragmatic' or 'idealistic' many of the mothers tried to mitigate the effects of their working on their children by altering their childcare arrangements or work schedules when there was immediate cause for concern and by putting anything they did not have to do on hold. Almost all had 'rules' they tried to stick to that included attending school events where other mothers would be present meaning that their absence would be more likely to be noticed by their daughters. In this sense, these mothers worked thoughtfully and tried to absorb most of the necessary compromises themselves.

### **Daughters, 'balance' and the 'best of both worlds'**

A key finding of my research is that almost all the daughters believed that having a mother who worked long hours out of the home in a career that she found satisfying is consistent with feeling well loved and well mothered. The daughters backed up this view by recounting the benefits of having a mother with a career, telling me what their mothers had done to mitigate any negative effects of their working hours upon them and by expressing far fewer specific incidences of problems experienced over time than did their mothers. Most daughters felt that they took it for granted that their mothers worked and believed that an absence of strong feelings was indicative of a lack of serious problems attached to having working mothers. The daughters' positive view of their mother's careers is also evidenced by the finding that almost all the daughters planned or had embarked upon high status careers themselves. Moreover, of the 28 daughters who were already in work or knew what career they wanted, ten had chosen the same field as their mothers or a job that was a close cousin (such as the daughter of a teacher becoming an educational psychologist). The majority of the daughters did not (yet) have children so their attitudes to managing motherhood and work were imagined and anticipated, by contrast with the 'daughter mothers' who were in the throes of negotiating work and motherhood. It is therefore important to clarify that almost all the 22 daughters in this study who did not have children said they wanted them. This is consistent with the view proffered by many researchers that notions of motherhood impinge upon most adult women because the association between women and motherhood applies at the level of identity (Chororow 1978; Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 1994; Crompton 2006). Philosopher, Battersby argues that 'whether or not a woman is a lesbian, infertile, post-menopausal, or childless, in modern western culture she will be assigned a subject-position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth' (1998, p. 16).

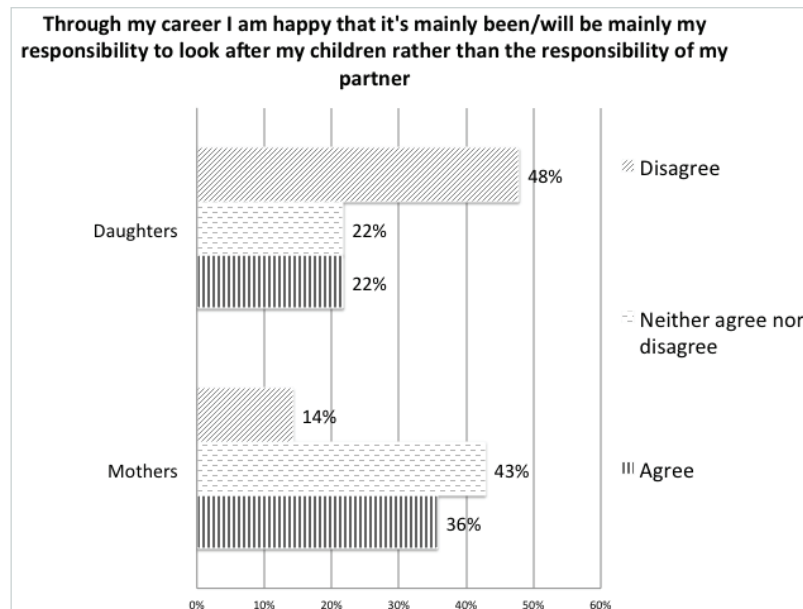
A surprising finding is that, despite embarking upon career paths and expressing a positive view of their upbringing, more than half of the daughters said that they wanted to work part-time when they had children. A few more wanted to work flexibly but most thought that their choice was between full-time or part-time

hours. Of those who expected to work full-time, several felt they had little choice due to the demands of their jobs or for economic reasons (because the lifestyle they had as children, and aspired to for themselves, was expected to necessitate two full time salaries). Others were exceptional in having been verbally encouraged by their mothers (or fathers) to be ambitious and think that it is perfectly possible to combine a good career with motherhood. The dominant idea expressed by a clear majority of the daughters was that they wanted the 'best of both worlds'. What 'best of both worlds' meant to them was splitting their *time* roughly equally between a career and time at home with their child. Therefore, they felt that part-time work would give them a 'balance' between the 'best of both worlds'. The idea of 'balance' represents a shift from the 'having it all' rhetoric of their mother's generation. Rottenberg (2014, p. 147) argues that envisioning progressive middle-class motherhood as balancing has helped create a new gender norm in which women are expected to find satisfaction by combining their responsibilities for both work and the domestic sphere. This represents progress in the sense that women are no longer being asked to choose one sphere of their life over the other. However, Rottenberg points out that 'balance' is just as hard to achieve as 'having it all' because women have still not been liberated from their primary responsibility for domestic life and are now also saddled with the idea that they should be making better choices to ensure they are living a happy life. It is well recorded that part-time work presents profound barriers to career progress (Gatrell 2008, 2013; Connolly and Gregory 2008; Durbin *et al.* 2010) and many of the daughters who were working were, at least partially, aware of this. However, almost all the daughters strongly felt that working full-time meant they would never see their children. Ursula, who worked but did not have children, expressed a representative example of this rather binary thinking as: 'I sort of feel like what's the point of having kids if you are never going to see them'. The 'best of both worlds' thought prevailed even though some were noticing the struggles experienced by women with children in their workplace and, as a result, told me that there were many drawbacks to working part-time. The daughters expressed fear of 'being left behind', 'getting career

compromise', losing out in promotions and in finding it hard to cope with the demands of the workplace when mothers were expected by most to achieve what they did before cutting their hours –but for less money. Zara, working in marketing and without children, demonstrated how these ideas are reconciled:

Working part-time gives you the best of both worlds. You get to have a career although it might not be as successful as you want it to be because of the perceptions about people who work part-time. But you still get a career, respect and human civilisation. . . and you also get to bond with your child and have a balance.

The power of the 'best of both worlds' discourse is surprising when one considers that many of these daughters with careers felt more strongly than their mothers that they did not want to be primarily responsible for their children. **Figure 1** is taken from the questionnaire all participants filled in prior to their face-to-face interviews.



**Figure 1:** Responsibility for children (n. 52).

The nine 'daughter mothers, provided an explanation of why the 'best of both worlds' discourse is hard to resist. They too equated being a good mother with cutting the hours they were prepared to commit to work and only one of the nine worked long hours. Most of their accounts were not focused on work but focused on *being with their child*. Interestingly, the repeated use of this phrase or its synonym *not leaving them* echoes the work of Baraitser (2008, p. 80) who argued that the constant disruption of mothers' lives by the immediate demands of a child may leave the mother feeling that she only dwells in the moment. This adds the nuance of maternal time to the notion of biographical time discussed above. The idea of 'being with' the child extended far beyond physical presence to being emotionally available to help and guide them. When asked to consider what lay behind these views the 'daughter mothers' reported many conversations with other women at NCT coffee groups, at ante natal groups, at yoga classes, online and in all the places women meet. Baraitser (2009) described these public spaces where mothers mass as locations in which a mother learns what is and is not acceptable behaviour for her and her child. The 'daughter mothers' reported that they felt this influence from the moment they became pregnant and that it grew stronger as they built their networks around other mothers-to-be and, subsequently, mothers. They often reported 'feeling under emotional pressure' to make choices as described by Amy:

Are you going to be a naturalistic [mother] who does baby-led weaning and real nappies or are you going to be a routine Gina Ford one? I think there is an overwhelming amount of choice, which makes it almost, (*sighs*) a lot harder. (two children, clinical network manager)

Many felt that pressure turned into judgement from women who worked fewer hours, especially about childcare. This goes to the heart of the concerns of working mothers about how their children are looked after when they are not there. Sophie, speaking dramatically to make her point, paraphrased conversations with other mothers as follows:

“Are you back at work full-time?” “Yeah she’s at nursery from 8 in the morning to 1 minute past 6 in the evening”. “There are criminals that spend less time locked up than she is, poor child”. (one child, working in marketing)

The feeling of most recent mothers was that social media was amplifying pressure to mother in a certain way. Whilst social media could be a useful source of advice and information it was also where they witnessed what Belle termed ‘humble bragging’ about the achievements and activities of other people’s children that could make them feel inadequate as mothers and shape their behaviour:

I don’t think that it’s easy and with social media (*sighs*) . . . all your choices are more painted out there in bold technicolour but also all the guilt is given to you that way as well, “you should be doing it this way”, “you should be doing it that way”, and “if you want your baby to be intelligent you should be doing x, y and z”. (Amy, two children, clinical network manager)

The evidence from the daughters’ generation accords with identification of the growing trend towards parental determinism described by Furedi (2002) and framed by Thomson *et al.* (2011, p. 277) as the ‘intensification of responsibility’ amplified by middle class anxiety and insecurity about the way they mother.

### **Mothers’ and grandmothers’ views on gains and losses over time**

What the generations of mothers and grandmothers thought to be better for new mothers now included entitlement to maternity leave, easier access to child carers of a higher standard and the sea change in the attitudes of fathers, many of whom want to be more involved in the everyday care of their children. On the other hand, there were many more references to the ways in which the grandmothers perceived working motherhood to be harder now. Many commented on the high cost of housing and childcare that took a greater proportion of their daughters’ income than it had theirs. Their concern was that the punitive costs of running a family might force their daughters into giving up on careers they have invested in and enjoyed.



The grandmothers also voiced concerns that tap into heightening parental determinism (Furedi 2002) and the culture of ‘intensification of responsibility’ (Thomson *et al.* 2011, p. 277) in two main ways. First, that the child becomes too much the focus of the mother, as described by Barbara:

I find it deeply troubling. I always managed to have a life as well as being a mother. It was important to me and I think it was good for the children. I think both my girls are excellent mothers but I think they are almost too focused on it. And I’m not convinced it’s good for the child. I think the child becomes too important. . . I don’t think it’s a comfortable place for the mothers and I’m not entirely convinced it’s a comfortable place for the children in the end.

Secondly, the grandmothers thought their daughters were under more public scrutiny than they had experienced as parents. They felt this resulted in their daughters putting themselves and their children under more and more pressure. An example of this came from Donna, a retired teacher whose observations applied both to her daughter and from her professional experience of parents:

I think you are more judged now. . . Now women have been out in the workplace and they are used to things like targets and deadlines and then . . . they turn that on their children and the next thing is, “they are at that level or this level” and they are always monitoring.

The same themes were also talked about by many of the mothers of daughters who did not have children, several of whom had picked up on the phrase ‘professionalisation of motherhood’ that has been used in the media. Tara, Media MD, said:

[Mothers] are under more pressure to do it all right. . . I wonder whether, because of social media, we are more competitive in every aspect of our lives. . . being a parent it’s like your job to get them into the right schools and everything. When I grew up you just went to the school that was near.

These mothers and grandmothers acknowledged that they had often been judged too when they had young children for the amount of hours they worked, largely by female family members or by other mothers who worked less or not at all. The distinctions drawn were that mothers of young children today face more pervasive public judgement and more extensive pressure over the many specific ways in which mothers are expected to entertain, monitor and direct their children. The generations of mother and grandmothers had the perspective of time to appreciate that social expectations about being a good mother and a good worker are set impossibly high.

### **Discussion: Raising the stakes**

A key finding of my research is that almost all the daughters believed, and backed up this belief, that having a mother who worked long hours out of the home in a career that she found satisfying is consistent with feeling well loved and well mothered. In other words, their mothers had modelled the successful combination of motherhood and comparatively long working hours. Despite this, a clear majority amongst all those daughters who did not have children and the 'daughter mothers' did *not* want to emulate their mothers and instead embraced a dominant idea that part-time work offers 'the best of both worlds'. Some of the daughters' mothers were reinforcing this view. This is suggested by the family link between 'idealistic' mothers who felt a sense of generalised guilt and the daughters seeking the 'best of both worlds'. The daughters often picked up on their mothers' feelings, whether anything was said or not.

One key difference in the biographies of the different generations of working mothers in this study is more intense pressure on the time spent working for the daughters' generation. This is attributable to the increasingly global market and the seeping of work into the home facilitated by the internet and technology which adds to the challenge of combining work with family life. On the other hand, the generations of mothers and grandmothers had far fewer opportunities to work flexibly or to cut their hours at the time their children were young (McRae 2003). It is worth pointing out that in the 1980s and 1990s many scholars wrote about the costs to

women in managerial and professional jobs in similar terms to current academic discussion (Hochschild and Machung 1990; Faludi 1992; Beatty 1996): that is, pressure on relationships; mothers experiencing work-life conflict because of their life loads; expectations that mothers have primary responsibility for their children; and mothers feeling that they are being negatively judged by other mothers, and society in general, about the time they spend at work. Moreover, childcare was not regulated by the UK government until the National Childcare Strategy was launched in 1998. Consequently, childcare was often more ad hoc, less professional, and therefore more unpredictable and stressful. In addition, many of the mothers' generation reported that their motivations to pursue satisfying careers were particularly strong because they did not want to emulate the experience of their mainly home-based mothers. A substantial 64% of the mothers' generation described themselves as feminists and the clear objective of the liberal feminism they grew up with was to achieve equality for women in the workplace (see, for example, Lorber 2010).

What does seem fundamentally different for those mothering now, or anticipating mothering, is the shift in the cultural expectations of motherhood since the late 1970s, when the first of the mothers in this study had their children. The cultural trend towards the intensification of motherhood and its responsibilities is often linked to individualisation, and is reflected in the shift in national policy in the UK towards making individual families the site of responsibility for their children's outcomes (McRobbie 2009; Lewis 2010; Rottenberg 2014). Markers of the movement of parenting from the private into the public domain include the intervention of government policy and 'experts' into parenting and childcare. The Labour government in the 1990s saw children as a social asset for the state, and this led to a plethora of policy interventions, including the championing of parenting advice and skills (Edwards *et al.* 2012). Other markers include the growing public scrutiny of how one is 'expected' to mother, which is facilitated by the media and, especially, the internet. Middle-class mothers are increasingly expected to invest time in monitoring their children to keep them safe from 'risk' and to cultivate soft and hard skills needed for them to succeed in life's competition (Furedi 2002; Baraitser 2009; Lareau 2011; Christopher 2012).

It seems that the stakes have been raised. It is much harder now for a mother to feel comfortable with adopting a 'pragmatic' attitude to combining motherhood with work because of the public, pervasive, everyday examples held up to define what a good mother does. Moreover, it feels too risky to one's child's well-being and progress. Today's individualised culture of motherhood makes it much more likely that working women with careers should now feel, even well in advance of becoming a mother, that the only way to achieve 'balance' is to work part-time. This is because 'balance' seems to be taken for granted as a common-sense aim and 'balance' is mainly defined by women as time spent at work and at home.

## Conclusions

I theorise that the popular discourse about motherhood is arguably and ironically becoming ever more draconian whilst attitudes to work become more malleable, driven by changes in gender attitudes and the trend towards and debate about the desirability of flexible working for parents.

The implications of these findings on an organisational level (backed up by policy) are to reinforce the demands of many that roles in managerial and professional positions be redesigned to offer genuine flexibility for both men and women. To be clear, I am not advocating a return to the traditional model of full-time contracted hours worked inflexibly, at the place of work. Young (2017) recently examined the troubled transitions into flexible and part-time work made by women in professional and managerial roles. Her compelling argument is that the responsibility for renegotiating one's relationship with work should not lie solely with the individual. Rather, high skill roles need to be redesigned in partnership with the organisation which has the capabilities and insights into what the business requires and can combine this with a sustainable solution for the individual.

The successful combination of work with family life has also long been argued to be made easier when the life-load is shared with partners (see, for example Crompton 2006). However, many men who want to be involved fathers continue to pay a career penalty for seeking access to shared parental leave (Gatrell *et al.* 2014). In terms of parental leave, more progressive policy solutions are suggested that mimic policies

in Sweden and Iceland which allocate a substantial period of leave to fathers as a non-transferrable right. This would assist in reframing childcare as an issue for both parents. A further recommendation is that, given that decisions to work part-time were primed well in advance of pregnancy, it seems advisable to better educate male and female employees about a range of working options early in their careers.

On an individual level, the findings of this and other research (for example, McGinn *et al.* 2015) suggests working hours are not linked to damaging outcomes for children. Almost all the adult daughters of successful career women in this study did not feel ill affected in any profound or prolonged way, and indeed saw benefits in growing up with a mother with a demanding career. Themes these daughters told me were important to them were not measured by time spent with their mothers but instead were about having a regular routine involving doing things together, being available to be focused on the child when the mother is present, being present for key events like parent's night when other mothers are expected to be there and organizing for their daughters to be cared for at home after school by a competent carer. In the context of the many mother and daughter relationships that are emotionally supportive, daughters and mothers should be encouraged to talk about and reflect on how their own pasts can inform their decision-making about combining work and motherhood when the moment arrives. In addition, were mothers and grandmothers who had successful careers to talk privately and publicly about how they managed their feelings about work and motherhood, this could help change perspectives about what good mothering can mean. The benefit of this will be to challenge feelings of generalised guilt about combining commitment to a career with motherhood and to encourage women to be skeptical about some aspects of the contemporary culture of motherhood. I advocate a return to the idea of the concept of the 'good enough mother' (Winnicott, 1953).

The voices of those arguing that being a 'good mother' means 'being there' by working substantially reduced hours seem to be louder than those expressing other points of view. It is hoped that the evidence of this research encourages mothers, and those who are anticipating motherhood, to question assumptions that part-time work inevitably 'gives you the 'best of both worlds' and assert with confidence that

being committed to a career can be consistent with being committed to your family and being thought by your children to be a good enough mother.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article forms part of my research undertaken for my doctorate, awarded at the University of Sussex in 2015. The research project has ethics approval from the Social Science Research Ethics Committee, University of Sussex. Granted in 2012 – reference 1112/02/03.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### **References**

- Apter, T E** 1990 *Altered Loves*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bailey, L** 1999 Refracted Selves? *Sociology*, 33(2): 335–352. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/S0038038599000206>
- Baraitser, L** 2008 *Maternal encounters: the ethics of interruption*. London: Routledge.
- Baraitser, L** 2009 Mothers who make things public. *Feminist Review*, 93: 8–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2009.21>
- Battersby, C** 1998 *The Phenomenal Woman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beatty, C A** 1996 The stress of managerial and professional women: is the price too high? *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 17(3): 223–51. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-1379\(199605\)17:3<233::AID-JOB746>3.0.CO;2-V](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(199605)17:3<233::AID-JOB746>3.0.CO;2-V)
- Bjerrum Nielsen, H** and **Rudberg, M** 1994 *Psychological gender and modernity*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Brannen, J, Moss, P** and **Mooney, A** 2004 *Working and caring over the twentieth century : change and continuity in four-generation families*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230005716>
- Chodorow, N** 1978 *Reproduction of mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Christopher, K** 2012 Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers' Constructions of the Good Mother. *Gender & Society*, 26(1):73–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243211427700>
- Connolly, S** and **Gregory, M** 2008 Moving Down: Women's Part-Time Work and Occupational Change in Britain 1991–2001. *The Economic Journal*, 118(526): 52–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2007.02116.x>
- Crompton, R** 2006 *Employment and the family*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511488962>
- Crompton, R** and **Harris, F** 1998 A Reply to Hakim. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49(1): 144–149. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/591268>
- Dex, S, Ward, K** and **Joshi, H** 2006 Changes in women's occupations and occupational mobility over 25 years [online]. Available from: [http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/library-media%5Cdocuments%5CWES\\_Working\\_Paper%284%29.pdf](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/library-media%5Cdocuments%5CWES_Working_Paper%284%29.pdf) (accessed 6/03/2014).
- Dey, I** 2006 Grounded Theory. In: Seale, C (Ed.) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 80–93.
- Durbin, S, Fleetwood, S, Tomlinson, J** and **Durbin, S** 2010 Female part-time managers. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 29(3): 255–270.
- Edwards, R, Gillies, V** and **Ribbons-McCarthy, J** 2012 The politics of concepts: family and its (putative) replacements. *British Journal of Sociology*, 63(4): 730–46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2012.01434.x>
- Elias, N, Mennell, S** and **Goudsblom, J** 1998 *Norbert Elias on civilization, power, and knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Faircloth, C** 2014 Intensive Parenting and the Expansion of Parenting. In: Lee, E, et al. (Eds.) *Parenting Culture Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 25–50. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137304612\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137304612_2)
- Faludi, S** 1992 *Backlash: The undeclared war against women*. London: Random House.
- Furedi, F** 2002 *Paranoid Parenting: Why ignoring the experts may be best for your child*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Gatrell, C** 2005 *Hard labour*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

- Gatrell, C** 2008 *Embodying women's work*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Gatrell, C J** 2013 Maternal body work: How women managers and professionals negotiate pregnancy and new motherhood at work. *Human Relations*, 66(5): 621–644. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726712467380>
- Gatrell, C, Burnett, S B, Cooper, C L and Sparrow, P** 2014 Parents, perceptions and belonging: exploring flexible working among UK fathers and mothers. *British Journal of Management*, 25(3): 473–87. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12050>
- Hammer, S** 1975 *Daughters and Mothers: Mothers and Daughters*. New York: Quadrangle.
- Hays, S** 1998 *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hochschild, A and Machung, A** 1990 *The second shift*. London: Piatkus.
- Kehily, M J and Thomson, R** 2011 Figuring Families: Generation, Situation and Narrative. *Sociological Research Online*, 16(4): 16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2536>
- Kuhn, A** 1995 *Family secret : acts of memory and imagination*. London: Verso.
- Laney, E K, Carruthers, L, Lewis-Hall, M E and Anderson, T** 2014 Expanding the Self: Motherhood and Identity Development in Faculty Women. *Journal of Family Issues*, 35(9): 1227–1251. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13479573>
- Lawler, S** 2000 *Mothering the self: mothers, daughters and identity*. London: Routledge.
- Lee, E** 2014 *Parenting Culture Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137304612>
- Lewis, J** 2010 *Work–family balance, gender and policy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Lorber, J** 2010 *Gender inequality: Feminist theories and politics* (4th edn). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lyonette, C and Crompton, R** 2015 Sharing the load? Partners' relative earnings and the division of domestic labour. *Work, Employment & Society*, 29(1): 23–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014523661>



- Mannheim, K** 1952 *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- McGinn, K, Ruiz, M and Lingo, E** 2015 *Mum's the Word!* Harvard Business School working paper: 15-094.
- McRae, S** 2003 Constraints and Choices in Mothers' Employment Careers. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 54(3): 317–338. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131032000111848>
- McRobbie, A** 2009 *The Aftermath of Feminism*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Miller, T** 2005 *Making sense of motherhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489501>
- Miller, T** 2012 Balancing caring and paid work in the UK: narrating 'choices' as first-time parents. *International Review of Sociology*, 22(1): 39–52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2012.657529>
- Moen, P** 2005 Beyond the Career Mystique: "Time in, Time out and Second Acts." *Sociological Forum*, 20(2): 189–208. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11206-005-4100-8>
- Oakley, A** 1998 Gender, Methodology and People's Ways of Knowing. *Sociology*, 32(4): 707–731. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038598032004005>
- Parker, R** 1995 *Torn in two: the experience of maternal ambivalence*. London: Virago Press.
- Patmore, C** 1866 *Angel in the house*. London: MacMillan.
- Rapley, T** 2004 Interviews. In: Seale, C (Ed.) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage, pp. 15–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608191.d5>
- Rottenberg, C** 2014 Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How superwoman became balanced. *Feminist Studies*, 40(1): 144–168.
- Skeggs, B** 1995 *Feminist cultural theory: process and production*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Smith, R** 2010 Total Parenting. *Educational Theory*, 60(3): 357–369. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2010.00363.x>
- Thomson, R** 2008 Thinking Intergenerationally about Motherhood. *Studies in the Maternal* [online]. Available from: <http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/>

back\_issues/issue\_one/rachel\_thomson\_abstract.html (accessed 12/02/2013).

**Thomson, R** 2014 Generational research: between historical and sociological imaginations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17(2): 147–156. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2014.892659>

**Thomson, R, Kehily, M J, Hadfield, L and Sharpe, S** 2011 *Making Modern Mothers*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

**Williams, J** 2000 *Unbending gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Winnicott, D** 1953 Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34: 89–97.

**Wolf, A** 2013 *The XX factor*. London: Profile.

**Young, Z** 2017 *Women in the middle: Mothers' experience of transition to part-time and flexible work in professional and managerial occupations*. DPhil thesis, University of Sussex.

**How to cite this article:** Armstrong, J 2017 Higher Stakes: Generational Differences in Mother and Daughters' Feelings about Combining Motherhood with a Career. *Studies in the Maternal*, 9(1): 3, pp. 1–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.220>

**Published:** 01 August 2017

**Copyright:** © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Studies in the Maternal* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access logo, which consists of a stylized 'O' with a person icon inside.