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Research in Progress: Women’s Paid Work and Family Life Decisions after Childbirth

The steady increase in Australian women’s labour market participation rate over the last three decades, particularly among women with dependents has received increased attention in paid work and family research, and has spurred new policy debates about paid work and life (Cartwright, 2004; Campbell and Charlesworth, 2004; Pocock, 2003; HREOC, 2002; Samson, 2002). In line with changes in women’s lives during this time, concerns have intensified about the disappearing boundary and intensifying conflicts between paid work and family life for women and men (Pocock, 2003). Furthermore, women today are making varied choices about participation in paid work and family life compared to women of previous generations (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004). This paper provides an overview of the research literature to date on debates around women’s paid work and family life decisions after childbirth. For this purpose, the key focus is on Australia and discussion also extends to the UK. The key objective of the paper is to situate the project I am working on in relation to these paid work/family debates. For this project, I am interviewing women who are pregnant, and women who have recently had a child to explore how women come to organise paid work/family life, and how their views of ‘choice’ may sit with or challenge theoretical debates about agency and structure (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Williams, 2000).

Introduction

There is a growing body of research literature over the last 15 years in Australia around women’s paid work and family life trends (Pocock, 2003; Gray et al., 2003; Samson, 2002; Gray, et al., 2002; Warner-Smith and Imbruglia, 2001; Evans and Kelley, 2001; Probert, 1999; Cotton, et al., 1990; Castleman, et al., 1989). The varying factors influencing and constraining women’s paid work participation and family life are well documented as involving a complex interplay of structural issues, cultural ideas about mothering and care, self-identity, and the well-being of the family. In particular, some women tailor their childbirth decisions to the schedule of their professions, some women feel they have little or no choice about returning to paid work soon after childbirth (Samson, 2002), and many women in Australia take up part-time work as a strategy to balance paid work and family life (Pocock, 2003:167-8).
The majority of investigations into women's paid work/life choices to date from in Australia (Castleman, et al., 1989; Samson, 2002; Gray, et al., 2002), and in the UK (Ginn, et al., 1996; Hakim, 2000, 2003; Houston and Marks, 2002; McRae, 2003a, 2003b) have been based on women's 'preferences' in relation to paid work/ family life using quantitative research methods, and which are related to more general theories of women's paid work orientations (Crompton and Harris, 1998; Hakim 2000, 2003). A small number of investigations have been conducted using both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004). A number of investigations have been conducted using human capital theory, preference theory, theory of planned behaviour or rational-choice theory to explain women's paid work/life orientations (Barrow, 1999; Hakim, 2000; Gray, et al., 2002; Samson, 2002; Houston and Marks, 2003; Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004). However, despite this growing body of knowledge there are some research gaps around women's 'lived-experiences' and related to their decision-making about paid work and family life after childbirth in Australia, with which this paper and project are directly concerned.

No study documenting women's 'preferences' as well as their 'lived-experiences' around decision-making about paid work and family life after childbirth, using a longitudinal and qualitative research design has been reported in the literature. Research designed to explore women's paid work and family life arrangements during pregnancy and after childbirth, and to explore women's views of 'choice' will enable a richer understanding of women's preferences and lived-experience regarding paid work/life decision-making. Moreover, findings of this nature have the potential to inform some policy as well as sharpening theoretical conceptualisations about women's choices, and may have implications for understanding the more complex issues around the 'work/care regime' in Australia (Pocock, 2003).

This paper is concerned with key debates around women's paid work and family life orientations from the research literature to date, particularly from in Australia and the UK. A key objective is to situate the Doctoral research I am working on in relation to these paid work and family life debates. The approach used in this paper will discuss changes in women's paid work and family life trends in Australia, key debates around women's paid work and family life orientations, and the current project I am working on and its significance to the literature. The paper will conclude by discussing a need for a framework that is based on qualitative research as well as quantitative. In this way, the paper seeks to offer an original contribution to the reflection upon the research literature on women's paid work and family life decisions after childbirth in Australia, and to situate a project that aims to address some gaps in the current research literature.

Changes in Women’s Paid Work and Family Life Trends in Australia

There is considerable evidence that there has been a great deal of change in Australia affecting women's paid work and family life over the past three decades. Some of these include women's changing economic and social roles throughout the life-course, such as paid workforce participation trends and gender-role expectations. The 'double day’ or ‘second shift’ phenomenon and the ‘blurring of paid
work and life’ have also been well documented by researchers during this time (Pocock, 2003; Hochschild, 1989). These changes are related to major shifts in society over the last 30 years for women in Australia. In particular, changing social mores around women’s participation in the paid workforce, increase in women’s paid workforce participation rate, rising education levels for women particularly post-school education, greater control over fertility, growth of service sector jobs and the decline of manufacturing jobs and the growing availability of part-time and casual jobs (Samson, 2002).

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) show that in the last three decades there has been a steady increase in women’s labour force participation from 30 per cent in 1970, to 56 per cent in 2003 (ABS, 1971, 2004). The increase is most obvious among women with dependents, with workforce participation rates among the proportion of all women with dependent children rising 15 per cent from 45.6 per cent in 1985 to 60.4 per cent in 2003 (ABS figures in Campbell & Charlesworth, 2004:7).

Table 1 shows the hours spent in paid employment for lone mothers (single mothers) and couple mothers (mothers in a couple relationship) in Australia. While 8% of couple mothers are employed 35 hours or more per week when their youngest child is less than one year old, this increases to almost double the rate (14%) when the youngest child is one year old. Moreover, the table shows there are more couple mothers employed 35 hours or more per week when their youngest child is less than one years and one years old compared with couple mothers employed 25 to 34 hours per week. In other words, twice the number of couple mothers are engaged in paid work of 35 hours or more per week compared with couple mothers employed 25 to 34 hours per week. Similarly, more lone mothers are engaged in paid work of 35 hours or more when their child is less than one years and one years old compared with lone mothers employed 25 to 34 hours per week. More women in Australia overall are employed part-time (less than 25 hours per week) in the first five years of their youngest child’s life.

More women now remain in the paid workforce during the peak childbearing years compared to women in previous generations (Pocock, 2003:72). For example, the labour force participation rate of women aged 25 to 34 years rose 8 per cent, from 63 per cent in 1988 to 71 per cent in 2002 (McDonald and Evans, 2002:8; ABS, 2004).

Changes around women’s paid work and family life trends suggest that more women today are making varied choices about how they organise their paid work and family life (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004). Two and three generations ago women often withdrew their participation in paid work so as to manage household work, child rearing and family responsibilities. Today, women are making various paid work/family choices - to continue in paid work, reduce their hours in paid work and others decide to cease paid work and become full-time mothers (Pocock 2003, p.72-85).

Also of significance is women’s fast return to the job they held prior to their pregnancy after giving birth when they have longer previous continuous employment experience (Glass & Riley, 1998). These changes show that more and more workers bring family caring responsibilities with them into the workplace (Pocock, 2003), and fewer workers no longer approach the workplace entrance as the
'ideal workers' associated with earlier 'male breadwinner and female homemaker' model (Campbell & Charlesworth, 2004).

While there has been much change in women’s workforce participation, nothing much has changed in households within Australia (Morehead, 2004). Many families operate in a 'gender skewed arrangement' where unpaid work in the household is unevenly shared between women and men (Morehead, 2004). Furthermore, while only 16 per cent of employees in the paid workforce are mothers, around 60 per cent of all mothers are in paid work (Morehead, 2004). The household generates family responsibilities and the ways in which unpaid work is allocated in the home and lacks laws/regulations to oversee how equally (or unequally) unpaid work is shared (Morehead, 2004). While households and families are concerned more with how many paid working hours mothers are going to take-up, how mothers are going to negotiate unpaid work, caring and paid work, however, there aren't the same discussions around how father's are going to negotiate and construct paid working hours and how this will effect the family (Morehead, 2004).

**Perspectives on Women’s Paid Work and Family Life Choices/Decisions**

In looking at what studies have said about what women and mothers want in terms of paid work and family life, British sociologist Catherine Hakim (1995, 1998, 2000, 2003) argues that in modern societies women can now make 'genuine choices' about the balance between paid work/life. Using data from a national survey, Hakim argues that lifestyle preferences predict work and fertility rates. Preference Theory (Hakim, 2000), states that women's preferences for paid work and family life are directly interconnected with the choices they make. She argues that preference theory "reinstates personal preferences as an important determinant of women's behaviour, and it states that attitudes, values and preferences are becoming increasingly important in the lifestyle choices of people in rich modern societies" (2000, p.17). Furthermore, "after the new scenario is achieved in affluent modern societies of the 21st century women's employment decisions, and eventually, those of men also, will be driven primarily by their personal preferences for one of the three qualitatively different work-lifestyles" (2000, p.189-90).

Hakim argues that women fall into three ‘types’ according to their choices, preferences and behaviours. These include ‘work-centred women’ who are more inclined towards paid work (20%), ‘home-centred women’ that are more inclined to care work within the home (20%), and ‘adaptive women’ who combine both paid work/home without giving a fixed priority to either (60%) (2000:158).

By contrast, McRae argues there is little evidence that it is women’s preferences that actually distinguish the minority from the majority (2003a, p.318). Drawing on her longitudinal survey research with just over 1,500 first time mothers surveyed in 1988, 1999 and 1993, McRae found that first-time mother's work histories were based almost entirely on observable external characteristics, not preferences (2003a, p.325). McRae argues that, "All women face constraints in making decisions about their lives. All non-trivial decisions have opportunity costs (things that must be foregone) as well as real costs... Some women have substantially better chances than others of overcoming constraints, and hence, of living as if..."
they faced no constraints” (2003a, p.328-9).

Also, in contrast to Hakim’s view of women’s paid work/life choices, Crompton and Harris describe women as constructing their paid work/family lifestyle out of both the opportunities and constraints available to them at a given time (1998a: 118).

Houston and Marks (2003) surveyed women during pregnancy and again after childbirth to examine how psychological and job-related factors in pregnancy differentiated those mothers who carried out their intention to work and those who did not. They found that ‘planning’, ‘income’ and ‘workplace support’ are the strongest predictors of working as intended, and 24 per cent of respondents were not able to return to work in a manner consistent with their preferences during pregnancy. Other arguments, however, suggest that mothers’ attitudes and choices are already structured by such economic conditions and state policies so that mother’s have ‘bounded’ information on which to choose ‘desirable’ arrangements about work/home (Fagan, 2000: 244).

More recently, Himmelweit and Sigala found that mothers identified internal and external constraints on their decisions, such as identity, economic, and institutional presence and affordability of services (2004:2).

In the Australian context, Samson argues that some mothers are more constrained than others in their decisions, for example, partnered women with pre-school aged children are more constrained than women with school-aged dependents “because they are forced to make concomitant decisions about childcare” (2002, p.4). Australian mothers with preschool children, like the majority of Australian women, have little scope for ‘real’ choice in the current economic climate due to structural barriers and gender culture constraints that limit women’s opportunities (2002, p. 4). Samson points out the varying degrees in which different groups of women are able to make ‘genuine choices’ about work/family and highlight constraints such as the gender contract, access to and affordability of child care services, economic constraints.

Australian studies of women’s childcare decisions note women’s choices are associated with external constraints such as economic concerns, as well as internal factors such as self-esteem, isolation (Warner-Smith and Imbruglia, 2001), maternal responsibility and identity as a ‘good-mother’ (Lupton, 2000).

Barbara Pocock in her latest book, ‘The Work/Life Collision’, argues that Australia needs to ‘modify the current Work/Care regime to meet the diverse needs of individuals and catch up with behavioral realities’ (2003:261). She argues that policy makers or governments ascribe too much power to individual agency and believe individual needs are a matter of ‘choice’. The choice framework, she argues, “does not encourage a focus on the constraints that shape or determine choices, and keeps the cultures and habits that construct and limit choices, out of view” (2003:261). She further argues that the presumption of choice is mistaken: “At present in most places there is simply no option to choose, for example, decently paid permanent part-time work or income support while caring for a child for a year or two”. (2003:261).

Here we see that the discourse of language and concepts around women’s decision-making and choices about paid work and family life
complicate the representation of women's paid work/family life and the ways in which they arrange paid work/life. A theoretical problem underpinning the literature is that 'women's choice' appears complex and difficult to define. On the one hand, women's 'choices' or 'decision-making' about paid work/life is simplified by Hakim who implies that that there is an abundance of choice for women regarding their paid work and family lives. Furthermore, the literature demonstrates that there is a lot of debate about how much choice women today actually have and how much choice women feel they have in organizing paid work and family life.

Agency and Structure

Underpinning women's choices about paid work and family life is theoretical discussion about 'agency' and 'structure'. The 'agency/structure' debate centers on "the role that institutional and structural influences have in shaping society and how much part the action of individuals (and groups) play in the same process" (Mahar, et al., 1990:22). 'Agency' refers to the idea that individuals can change or control the social world through their actions regardless of the circumstances of their lives (Webb, et al., 2002:ix). 'Structure' refers to the view that the social world is organized according to structures (rules, systems, forms), which make meaning possible and by which individuality are regulated (Webb, et al., 2002: xv, 36). A significant contribution to the agency/structure debate is social theorist Bourdieu (1977). In particular, his notions of 'cultural field' and 'habitus', which attempt to construct a method to account for agency/structure (Mahar, et al., 1990:10-11).

Williams (2000) describes Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' in arguing that 'mothers' choice occurs within a habitus that pulls them back toward domesticity' (2000:249). Williams explains mother's habitus as closely linked with gender politics, "the battles that women win over the politics of housework have to be refought over and over again: without constant vigilance, people tend to get sucked back into the default mode" (2000:249). Habitus refers to the way in which women view their decisions, and how much choice women feel they have. It is the unconscious taking in of rules, values and dispositions through socialization and embodied cultural history (Webb, et al., 2002:xii). In order for a particular 'habitus' to run smoothly and effectively, individuals must normally think that the possibilities from which they choose are in fact necessities, common sense, natural or inevitable. Other possibilities are ruled out precisely because they are unthinkable" (Webb, et al., 2002: 38-9).

There is a general agreement among many researchers about the interaction between 'agency' and 'structure' in women's paid work/family life choices (Himmelweit & Sigala 2004; Probert 2002; Crompton & Harris 1998a). Some hold a pro-agency position (Hakim, 2000, 2003), and some hold a pro-structural position as key factors influencing women's paid work/life. All researchers (in this literature review) have a view on both agency and structure. The focus on constraints women experience around paid work and family life has been an important development in the literature risen from early feminist arguments about the subordination of women. In particular, Hartman (1982) argued, "women have been deliberately denied access to jobs which would allow them to live independently" (Hartman in Crompton & Harris 1998a, p.121).
Situating Women’s Stories of Paid Work/Family Arrangements after Childbirth

There is a problematic discourse around women’s choices/decision-making about paid work and family life. There is an assumption within the research literature that women are making ‘choices’ or ‘decisions’ and neglects to account for ‘non-decisions’ or ‘non-planning’. Unpredictable or unplanned occurrences such as “accidental pregnancy or an offer of child care by a relative ... or a partner’s changing circumstances” as well as the first time experience of having a child may instantly change circumstances and behaviors (Richards 1977, p.11-12). We need to consider that ideas and decisions about motherhood, parenting/family life and paid work lives may not be ‘rationally’ or logically designed. For example, Barrow uses human capital theory to explain women’s decisions to return to work within one year of childbirth, focusing on the effect of child care costs, she states, “First, I assume a woman makes her labour force participation decisions by maximizing her utility, taking her husband’s labour force participation and income as given” (1999, p.3).

Another significant assumption is the ‘ideal’ worker model in Australia. Traditional models of the ‘ideal worker’, which emphasise features of gender-roles, such as the male breadwinner and female homemaker, predominantly derive from male experiences of paid work and life in industrial society. In particular, the ‘ideal worker’ describes a full-time worker without care responsibilities and who is able to work long hours and overtime. Traditional models inadequately reflect and encompass women’s, particularly mother’s lived experiences of paid work/family life, which involve concepts such as ‘multiple role conflict’, ‘juggling paid work and family responsibilities’, and the ‘second shift’ (Cartwright and Warner-Smith, 2004; Williams, 2000; Hochschild, 1989). There is increasing evidence of negative implications of traditional models, particularly for women and mothers in the workforce (Charlesworth, 2004). In particular, working mothers are seen as less committed (Charlesworth, 2004; Pocock, 2003; Hakim, 2000); many mothers don’t have access to work/family benefits; poorer conditions and benefits for mothers; gendered pay gap, and leaves the ‘ideal worker’ norm in place (Charlesworth, 2004).

While fewer workers ascribe to the gendered model of a male breadwinner and female homemaker ideal, the Howard Government still views a gendered model as the norm in Australia. For example, “It’s the job of the government to focus on the needs of mainstream Australia, and mainstream Australia is that policeman and the part-time sales assistant” (John Howard, June 6 2003). The gendered workforce model perpetuates policy and workforce problems in Australia and limits change.

This frame of thinking around issues, and meanings of women’s ‘choice’ and ‘decision-making’ about paid work and family life and my previous research into how women talk about their time-use and the implications for their health, well-being and identity has informed my desire to undertake Doctoral research exploring women’s paid work and family life arrangements after childbirth, and particularly to explore women’s views on ‘choice’. The project challenges me to unpack the conceptual language of ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ and critique them.

The central aim of the project is to address some of the gaps in the
current research literature to date around women’s lived experiences of decision-making about paid work/family life arrangements after childbirth in Victoria, Australia. The focus of the project is on the life-stage of pregnancy and motherhood, exploring women’s preferences or intentions when pregnant for how they will organize paid work and family life after childbirth, and how these play out after childbirth. My interest is in the diversity of decision-making by women from Higher Education and Retail industries in the Victorian paid workforce, using as a starting point Hakim’s (2000) propositions about women’s attachment to work. While there have been a number of investigations on paid work/family issues in regard to Higher Education (Armenti, 2003; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2003), and the Retail industry (Earle, 2002), no one study has focused on women’s decision-making from both industries in Victoria, Australia using in-depth interviewing. Data collection has commenced and will be conducted over a period of 18 months where participants will be interviewed three times.

Theoretical questions that frame project include, “how much choice do women feel they have?”, ‘how do women explain the process by which they bring about the particular paid work/family arrangements?’, ‘how do women exercise agency regarding paid work/family?’, and ‘Are women’s choices a result of or determined by structures/constraints?’. These framings are drawn from a body of theoretical literature about agency and structure (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

Women from Higher Education have been identified as a group of interest due to recent changes around enterprise bargaining and paid parental leave arrangements. Changes suggest that women employed in Higher Education have a better scope for paid work/family options/choices around childbirth, with higher rates of return to work. By contrast, the Retail industry has a high rate of casualisation and provides little scope in maternity leave options for women returning to paid-work; the baseline of 52 weeks unpaid parental leave after 12 months employment with the same employer. Retail is one of the two largest industries within Victoria employing mostly females (ABS, 2001), with among the poorest leave conditions for employees. By contrast, Higher Education has more prosperous leave entitlements for female employees. I am interested in the context of women’s stories and am trying to find out how paid work/family issues appear to these women.

Towards a New Framework

There is a need for a new framework that recognizes the dynamism of women’s decision-making around paid work and family life in Australia particularly after childbirth, and which is based on qualitative research as well as quantitative. It is important to situate and make visible women’s voices and the nature of women’s paid work/life experiences about how much ‘choice’ they feel they have regarding their paid work and family life arrangements after childbirth so as to contribute to a better understanding of women’s paid work/family life decisions, and apply this to current policy debates. There is a need for social policy to catch up to the realities of women’s paid work/family experiences and the complexities of motherhood in Australia.

There are divergent arguments within the literature on women’s choices about paid work and family, particularly around the conceptualisation of ‘women’s choice’, and the extent of constraints
regarding women’s choices (Samson 2002; Hakim 2000, 2003a; Crompton and Harris 1998a). Previous investigations separate women’s constraints and preferences from their choices and opportunities. While there is a growing body of information, at present little is still known about the complexity of women’s individual decision-making processes and lived-experiences of women’s paid work and family life decision-making in Australia.

References


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