The Shifting Paid Work and Family Life Experiences and Cultural Habitus of Motherhood: An Australian Perspective
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Abstract: There is now a burgeoning literature on the ways in which women’s paid work, care and family life orientations have changed in recent decades, particularly in countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Despite the significant attention in recent years by some researchers, politicians as well as in popular discourse, on ‘individual/personal choices’ for explaining women’s paid work and family orientations and outcomes, little of this detail figures in the experiences of the women who are the focus of this study. Rather, women’s work-family arrangements are complex with constant adjusting, accommodating and juggling between the fixed and immutable factors. In this paper, I argue that there is an absence of ‘individual/personal choice’ as represented in the dominant rhetoric about ‘free/genuine choice’, in relation to women’s paid work and care experiences and arrangements after childbirth. The main focus is on the Australian context, drawing on select case stories from a longitudinal, qualitative research project in progress with 27 women. I demonstrate that women’s paid work, care and family arrangements after childbirth are located in an internalised cultural ‘habitus’ of motherhood, which constructs women’s paid work and family realities more than notions of ‘individual/personal choice’.

Keywords: Women, Work, Care and Family Life, Choice, Motherhood, Australia, Cultural Habitus

Introduction

It does feel like a deck of cards like things are really good at the moment and I’m just very aware that anything could make things good for any number of reasons. It’s like a juggling act - you keep everything balancing up in the air and as long as you keep catching them it’s OK. It just depends what’s happening at your feet, you can’t control what’s happening under your feet (Margaret, 39 years, phase three interview).

This is the voice of Margaret – a mother of a two year old and employed full-time as a Manager in the retail industry. Margaret describes combining her paid work and caring/parenting as a ‘juggling act’ where there is lack of control due to multiple changing factors. Her account of juggling and managing paid work and family life allude to the constraints of ‘what you can’t control’. This extract is cause to reflect that something other than ‘individual choice’ is occurring. I view this as an example of the limitations in applying rhetoric of ‘individual choice’ (see Hakim 2000) to explain women’s paid work and family life arrangements and experiences. Moreover, Margaret’s account indicates the fluid or ‘shifting’ and complex nature of paid work and family life.

In recent years there has been significant attention focused on the amount of ‘choice’ women have today, when it comes to arranging paid work and family life after childbirth. However, explaining how women organise paid work and family life is highly debated and raises questions about agency and structure (see Crompton and Lyonette 2005; Himmelweit and Sigala 2002; Blair-Loy 2003; McRae 2003a, 2003b; Hakim 2000; Williams 2000). For example, on the one hand, Hakim (2000: 1) depicts women as freely choosing one of three lifestyles of ‘home-centred’, ‘work-centred’ or ‘adaptive’, based on their personal preferences. In contrast, Himmelweit and Sigala (2002: 2) argue that motherhood produces diversity in the care and employment patterns of many women today, more than any other life course event. Other researchers suggest that a range of interconnecting factors shape arrangements, which depend largely on the circumstances women find themselves in and individual perceptions of what women feel they ought to do (see Duncan and Edwards 1999; Probert and Murphy 2001; Thornwaite 2002; Himmelweit and Sigala 2002; Pocock 2003).

1 The research reported in this paper is in progress and is being conducted for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the school of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT University. Earlier versions of some material in this paper have been published in Non-Refereed Conference Proceedings, From Welfare to Social Investment: Reimagining Social Policy for the Life Course, the Centre for Public Policy, the University of Melbourne, 21-22 February 2007 (http://www.public-policy.unimelb.edu.au/conference07/cartwright.pdf); ‘Decisions, Choices and Trade-offs: Women’s Paid Work and Care Arrangements after Childbirth’, Maternal Realities, in M. Porter and J. Kelso (Eds), Cambridge Scholars Publishing (accepted for publication August 2007).
I argue that a better understanding of women’s paid work and family life arrangements and decisions need to be contextualised within a framework that takes account of the interplay of the relationship between the household, workplace, gender relations and personal factors as combined capabilities (see Nussbaum 2000; Cornelius and Skinner 2008), rather than confined to the boundaries of ‘individual choice’ or an agency/structure dichotomy. In doing so, I draw on four case stories as well as additional interview material from a longitudinal, qualitative research project in progress to argue that a focus on ‘individual choices’ and ‘preferences’ to explain women’s paid work and family experiences and arrangements, is misleading. I present case stories, which demonstrate a lack of ‘personal choice’ where preferences come at a trade-off or cost. I argue that while some women talk of actively making ‘choices’ or ‘decisions’, they do so in a set of highly constrained options. Subsequently, this involves trading-off, compromising and/or scaling back their paid work or time with family. These reflections also point to a fixed/unchanging ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1980) of motherhood, which facilitates a downward or sideways shift in paid work after childbirth.

The approach I use will first, briefly introduce key concepts underpinning the topic area of women’s paid work and family arrangements after childbirth – agency and Preference Theory (Hakim, 2000) as a popular framework for explaining women’s paid work and family orientations. Second, I draw on the work of Williams (2000) and Pocock (2003, 2005) to outline Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ applied to paid work and care. Third, I sketch the research approach to this study and I present preliminary findings. I draw on four cases to sketch how the habitus of motherhood reinforces inequality and facilitate a downward or sideways shift in women’s employment transitions after childbirth. To conclude, I highlight the need for situating women’s experiences and practices of paid work, care and family life after childbirth in a framework that takes account of the diverse, complex and fluid nature of paid work and family life, which acknowledges the constant juggling, accommodating and adjusting, as well as varied capabilities (Nussbaum 2000) for choice.

Beyond ‘Individual Choices’ and ‘Preferences’: Theorising Women’s Paid Work and Family Arrangements

How can we explain women’s paid work and care arrangements and outcomes after childbirth? In recent years, there has been significant focus on women’s paid work and family preferences, highlighting principles of ‘individual choice’. In the United Kingdom as well as Australia, Preference Theory (Hakim 2000) has gained popularity in political discourse (see Cartwright 2004: 26), arguing that women are now able to make ‘genuine choices’ about work and family and that preferences are key indicators determining women’s behaviour (Cartwright 2004: 13-16).

Based on women’s paid work and family life choices, preferences and behaviours, Hakim argues that women in modern societies form one of three ‘types’ of lifestyles. The majority of women (60 per cent) choose ‘adaptive’ lifestyles, preferring to combine both paid work and home-based work without giving a fixed priority to either (2000: 158), followed by ‘work-centered’ (20 per cent) and ‘home-centered’ (20 per cent) (Ibid).

In an attempt to move beyond ideas about agency and ‘individual choice’ there has been much critique of explanatory models, such as ‘rational choice’, ‘human capital’ (Becker 1975) and ‘preference theory’ (Hakim 2000). These models describe individuals as acting ‘self-interested and altruistic’ in decision-making about paid work and family life (see Folbre and Hartmann 1988), and do not account for the powerful gender norms entrenched in everyday life practices, experiences and attitudes.

Neoclassical economic models applied to explaining paid work and family life have been criticised for the poor fit between notions of the ‘autonomous individual acting for self-interest’ and women’s experiences of caring with respect to the collective interests of the family (see Himmelweit and Sigala 2002: 3-4). Economic rhetoric promotes an image of the ‘selfless’ woman/mother, emphasizing a female carer model in a traditional breadwinner/carer family. Furthermore, neoclassical economic arguments paint a conflicting and contradictory picture of choice and decision-making, which do not fit with women’s paid work and family life experiences, from the preliminary findings in this study.

In contrast to Hakim, Williams (2000) argues that key challenges in work-family integration lie in the practice and ideologies of domesticity and the ideal-worker model, which structures paid work and non-work life and relationships. Moreover, in contrast to ‘individual choice’, and in the Australian context, Burton (1996: 149) argues that women’s choices and preferences are shaped by broader social institutions and arrangements which further shape ‘women’s assessments of what is desirable, achievable, manageable, interesting, worthwhile and appropriate in their individual circumstances’.

Pocock (2003, 2005) argues that a cultural habitus of motherhood exists, which shape women and men’s paid work and family experiences. She makes the point that the ‘individual choice’ framework “keeps a deeper renovation of institutions, conventions and habits off the agenda” (2003: 122). Here we see that gender is at the forefront of Burton’s (1996), Po-
cock’s (2003) and Williams’ (2000) explanations of the ways in which work and care are organised and experienced.

In the following section, I take up Bourdieu’s use of the notion of habitus, which challenges sociological debates over agency versus structure. The habitus seeks to capture the ‘structured nature of human agency’, which are hidden as second nature in our taken for granted assumptions (Crossley 2005: 106, 110). While the topic of motherhood, paid work and care family life was not directly taken up in Bourdieu’s writing, I draw on work by Pocock (2003, 2005) and Williams (2000), where the cultural habitus of paid work and family life is richly situated.

The Cultural Habitus of Motherhood

Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ challenges and moves beyond sociological debates over agency versus structure and seeks to capture the “deeply internalised and largely unconscious nature of social knowledge regarding individuals” (Ortner 2006: 110). In other words, the ‘habitus’ encompasses the ‘structured nature of human agency’, which is hidden as second nature in our everyday taken for granted assumptions (Crossley 2005: 106, 110). Crossley makes the point that, “how we perceive, think and feel is shaped by our past experiences, habitual expectations and assumptions which we remain largely unaware of” (Crossley 2005: 108).

One of the key strengths of Bourdieu’s habitus concept is that it can encompass both choice and constraint and individual circumstances (Crossley 2005). While some research literature tends to establish a set of dichotomies along the lines of agency/structure, choice/constraint, freedom/determinism, habitus is an alternate approach, which reject these dichotomies.

By drawing on frameworks that apply Bourdieu’s notion of habitus to women’s paid work and family life arrangements, such as approaches by Pocock (2003, 2005) and Williams (2000) we can develop a conceptualisation about women’s paid work and family lives which opens-up the interconnections of a range of factors that play out. These factors have an impact on decisions, arrangements and patterns within households.

Blair-Loy argues that while choices and struggles over agency may appear or ‘feel like very personal battles, they are rooted in powerful assumptions of what makes life worthwhile’ (2003: 1). In other words, women’s paid work-family arrangements are deeply entrenched in powerful, shared, gendered understandings of mothering, work and care, which are internalised and taken for granted in everyday life. Habitus implies that agency is socially, politically and historically constructed and produced as individuals attempt to bring their lives into alignment with established social norms and rules, ‘expectations and institutions’ (Williams 2000: 38). These habits and conventions or expectations, as viewed by Pocock and Williams, drive women to certain ‘choices’. Or put another way by Crossley, ‘choices are underpinned by a cultural habitus’ (2005: 110).

Domesticity Ideology

Williams’ (2000) ‘Domesticity ideology’ focuses on gender as a forcefield or system shaping paid work and care arrangements. Williams uses the language of habitus in her analyses of ‘Domesticity Ideology’ (2000), which she equates to a ‘default mode’ that pulls women back into line with a primary carer and domestic role:

The ideology of domesticity held that men “naturally” belong in the market because they are competitive and aggressive; women belong in the home because of their “natural” focus on relationships, children, and an ethic of care. In its original context, domesticity’s descriptions of men and women served to justify and reproduce its breadwinner-housewife roles by establishing norms that identified successful gender performance with character traits suitable for those roles (2000: 1).

Williams points out that a habitus of domesticity is like a force field that pulls men and women in different directions – women towards care and household work and men towards the paid work sphere:

The force field imagery shows how women are disadvantaged by small incidents that might seem trivial, or not gender-related, if each was considered in isolation. It also provides a language for showing how women are disadvantaged by gender that does not deny their resistance with their agency… Mothers’ ‘choice’ occurs within a habitus that pulls them back toward domesticity. Linking the force field image with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus reminds us that gender is a system of inherited tradition – “embodied history, internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history” – built into our peculiar organisation of market work and family work (2000: 249).

Pocock (2003, 2005), like Williams (2000), argues that women in Australia are pulled back to a powerful and unchanging habitus of motherhood – as seen in Pocock’s examination of paid work and care arrange-

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2 While Bourdieu didn’t invent the term habitus, he coined it for sociology and cultural studies.
ments in Australia - a second example of the usefulness of a habitus approach in explaining women’s paid work and family orientations:

Changes in the work/care patterns of mothers occur within a powerful Australian cultural habitus of motherhood that has shown all too little renovation in the face of very significant change in what mothers now do and manage (2005: 126).

Pocock’s ‘Work/life collision’ model describes the ‘fallout’ at the centre of unchanging values and institutions on the one hand, and changing behaviour on the other. Pocock uses the language of habitus as a tool to frame the problem of gender structure:

The Australian habitus of mothering is sticky when it comes to change, like thick mud in which mothers must live and push through, despite very rapid change in the circumstance of mothering and households. While women question the idea of a ‘proper mother’, they agree that a mythology of ‘proper mothering’ runs deep in society – including in their own homes. Clearly, women mother in diverse ways and not all carry the same version of ‘proper mothering’ in their minds. However, there are entrenched and powerful expectations about ‘proper mothers’ that shape children’s expectations as well as those of the extended community and family, and encourage guilt when they cannot be achieved (2003: 75).

Both Williams (2000) and Pocock (2003, 2005) point out the unchanging and ‘unbending’ nature of the cultural habitus of motherhood, where, in line with Bourdieu’s theory, the past is reconstructed and brought into the present. The habitus approach is a useful tool for explaining women’s paid work and family arrangements, particularly the downward or sideways paid work trajectory after childbirth. It is useful for reflecting on the dominant discourse as to why women appear to personally ‘choose’ to trade-off paid work. Moreover, habitus is an alternative to economic models, which misrepresent women’s pull back to domestic/care work after childbirth as a result of an ‘individual choice’.

In the following sections, I sketch the research approach of the study and describe four case stories, to demonstrate that an unchanging/fixed habitus of motherhood.

The Research Approach

The data reported in this paper is from a research project in progress on women’s paid work and family life arrangements after childbirth, particularly their employment transitions upon returning to work. Twenty-seven participants took part in three interviews over three years. At the time of the first interview, 12 women were pregnant and 15 recently had had a child in the past 12 months to three years. For those that were pregnant, the phase one interview took place during pregnancy, followed by the phase two interview around six months after childbirth and the phase three interview around 12 to 18 months after childbirth, after participants had returned to paid work. For those that had recently had a child at phase one, the two follow-up interviews took place at similar intervals.

The interviews focused on five key themes: 1) Intentions, plans and preferences for paid work and family life after childbirth; 2) Key factors influencing paid work and family arrangements; 3) Choice and ability to carry out desired intentions and preferences for paid work and family life after childbirth; 4) Changes in paid work and family arrangements between interview phases, and 5) Reflections on the returning to paid work experience, and on the key factors influencing paid work and family arrangements and choice.

In the following sections, I discuss preliminary findings by sketching four case stories, which focus on women’s employment preferences for after childbirth and their experiences of how their intentions, plans and preferences played out after childbirth. Preliminary findings are presented under four headings; ‘Downward or sideways shift in paid work: An overview of change’; ‘Preferences, practices and problems’; ‘Creative strategies’ and ‘The habitus of motherhood’. Pseudonyms have been used to replace all the names of women referred to in the paper.

Preliminary Findings

A Downward or Sideways Shift in Women’s Paid Work after Childbirth

At the phase one interview, 12 participants were employed full-time, 12 were employed part-time and three were employed on a casual basis. By phase three interviews the number of participants employed full-time had declined by more than half of the initial count (from 12 to 5). Consequently, at phase three the number of participants employed part-time had increased by six and there were two participants not in paid work due to ‘having no job to go back to’.

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3 Williams points out: “The past is not past or dead and that domestic ideology is not in the past” (2000:36-38).
Change in employment was common among all participants, as shown on Table 1.

**Table 1: Change in Participants’ Paid Work Status Phases 1 to 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paid work status</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed/ not employed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Not active (on leave)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not active - counted in paid work status (full-time, part-time or casual)

My aim in the study is to look behind numerical data – to focus on women’s experiences and stories. In the following section, I present four case stories from the perspectives of Christine, Paula, Margaret and Anna, to reflect on individual experiences of arranging paid work and family life after childbirth. The case studies and additional interview material flesh out the experiences of change, which underpin the tabulated data above.

**Preferences, Practices and Problems**

In the Phase one interview I asked participants to discuss their employment intentions, plans and preferences with regards to after childbirth. Preliminary findings show that just over half of the sample (15 of 27) intended to work part-time after childbirth (including casual employment). Only five participants intended to return to work full-time. Some participants expressed preferences for staying at home, while some were uncertain. The preference to return to work part-time was expressed in relation to managing paid work, care and household/family life. Many participants also reported a preference for one-on-one quality childcare. However, many participants experienced difficulties arranging part-time work and noted that working part-time comes with trade-offs or at a cost. The following case stories emphasise the complexity involved in arranging paid work and family after childbirth and women’s struggles to juggle paid work and family.

**A Case Example: Christine**

At the Phase one interview in 2004, Christine was 36 years old and employed part-time as a Manager in a large retail organisation. Her husband was 35 years old and self-employed as a full-time Carpenter. Their two children were aged two, and less than twelve months old. Christine’s preference was to work part-time after the birth of her second child and for her two children to be cared for by a nanny during the time she and her husband were at work. She noted that the ‘next best scenario’ was for both children in the same childcare centre on the same day. Christine described the trade-off or cost of working part-time after returning to work from childbirth in terms of being in a ‘holding pattern’ and taking a ‘side step’ in her career:

> I recognise that right now, for the next at least year to two years I’m in a holding pattern. The job that I’m in now is a step sideways; it’s a similar role … narrower in scope. So [a] sideways step; still it’s not bad for my career, it’s not doing any damage, it’s not backwards [and] it was by choice. (Phase one)

Similar to a number of other women in the study, Christine talked about not being able to combine a career and motherhood and that putting her career on hold was her ‘choice’ and not a trade-off:

> You can’t maintain a fantastic healthy exercising lifestyle, be totally on top of your career and totally successful, study… as well as be a fabulous parent, a fabulous wife, a fabulous friend … There’s no such thing as a super-person and I don’t think it’s achievable. I think that what you can do is understand what your limits are… For example, when the kids are little you might say well I want to be the best mother I can be so therefore I’m happy to put my career on hold and do less time at work and give up my fitness regime… because you want to spend more time being a mum or a parent. I think it’d be very difficult to be good at all of them… I’m not trading that off - I’ve chosen to do that. (Phase one)

Christine’s comments echo Williams’ (2000: 14) argument that “women often use choice rhetoric to describe their decisions in favour of domesticity”. Williams notes that ‘mother’s choices to drop out or cut back on paid work’ are linked to ‘traditional domestic arrangements’. Furthermore, Christine’s talk
of downscaling her career and her acceptance of placing her career on hold, emphasises the way in which family workload interferes and effects paid work participation and workload (2000: 15).

Christine also talks of ‘constrained choice’ and describes the habitus of motherhood, paid work and family life, where choice and constraints exist at the same time:

There is choice but there [are] still unwritten constraints … there are still more men in the more senior roles at work and that would be [the case] whether women were having babies or not … That’s still the way it seems to be because I think women, when they have children, as opposed to men, feel more of that [need to nurture] and to spend time with their family, they’re just more that way… In our family I certainly earn more money than my husband and it would make sense financially for me to go back to work full-time and for [him] to be at home and spend more time with the kids but he didn’t want to [stay at home] and I didn’t want to [work full-time]. (Phase two)

Despite Christine earning more than her husband, her talk of placing her career on hold is aligned with the popular/dominant discourse of an ‘ideal or proper mother’ inherent in a cultural habitus of motherhood (see Pocock 2005). In particular, Christine talks of feeling guilty about the number of days her children were in non-parental care:

I feel a little bad, guilty that the children are in childcare more days than they are home with us. I personally feel quite tired and have been struggling to sleep well… I don’t really feel that I am doing any one aspect of my life all that well - work, mother [and] wife. (Phase three)

Christine’s story highlights the multiple factors (external and internal), which influence her paid work and family arrangements, rather than ‘free choice’. Christine’s talk of ‘feeling guilty’ is identified by Pocock as part of ‘the fallout’ (2003: 3) of changing behaviours, which collide with unchanging values and institutions.

**A Case Example: Paula**

At the phase one interview in 2004, Paula was 36 years old, on maternity leave and employed full-time as a Lecturer in higher education. Her husband was 36 years, employed part-time in higher education and studying full-time. Their child was five months old. Paula intended (as well as preferred) to take six months off paid work after childbirth and to return to work part-time, three days per week.

I’m not being very ambitious. I don’t think there’s much point in thinking you can keep going doing the same things you were doing full-time without a child… Some women seem to manage it but I don’t know how they do. I guess you have to renegotiate what you want to get out of your career because you can’t achieve the same sort of things when you’re part-time as you would full-time and you have to sort of prioritise things. (Phase one)

While part-time work was a strong preference among many research participants, the trade-offs or costs associated with part-time work (particularly among women transitioning from full-time to part-time) appeared to dominate discussion in interviews.

Paula spoke with some of her female colleagues about combining paid work and family life. Paula noted; “their comment was that you end up doing more than the time you’re allocated”, and “they thought it was also very difficult to get promotions”.

Paula described herself as ‘ambitious, up to this point in my life’, as having a successful career and as never having taken time out of work. Often, she used to take work home on the weekends. She talked about awareness of not being able to combine work and family life after the baby, particularly in comparison to her male colleagues:

I’ve always had academic ambition and for now I have to take a step back and realise that I don’t have to … it doesn’t matter if I don’t get promoted. I need to realise that these things aren’t important and that’s why I say [that] now family comes first, but it’s difficult because I work in a department full of men with families and for them family doesn’t come first. (Phase one)

Paula’s talk of taking a step back in her career after childbirth and putting her family first is aligned with the cultural construction of motherhood and an ideal mother. Paula makes the point that she is constrained with regards to paid work and family life after childbirth:

I guess you don’t have much choice really when you think about it. You’ve got a child; you’ve got to look after the child. (Phase one)

At the Phase two interview in 2005 seven months after the phase one interview, Paula was on unpaid parental leave and due to return to work in two months time. She did not return to work six months after childbirth and took twelve months maternity leave overall. Most of her leave was unpaid and was
financially difficult as she was the main income earner in her household. She felt her child was too young to be in non-parental care. She was also breastfeeding and intended to return to work part-time when her son was 12 months old and share childcare with her partner when he completed his study.

At the Phase three interview ten months after the phase two interview (when her child was one year old), Paula returned to work part-time at three days per week. She and her husband both worked part-time three days per week, with their mothers providing care on alternate days. Paula commented on the social surveillance of women organising paid work and family life. She reflects on ‘sacrificing’ in order to combine paid work and family:

I’ve just decided that despite what they say I don’t think it’s easy for women who have children to advance unless they sacrifice some of their time they spend with their children, unless they work bloody hard and I’m just not willing to do that… I like to try and keep my work at work, I don’t want to have to take work home [anymore], I don’t want to create too much stress at work for myself so I’m taking the easy option out at this stage. (Phase three)

Both Paula and Christine’s talk of arranging the return to work after childbirth emphasise the compromising, juggling, adjusting and additional work involved in planning and negotiating. Both Paula and Christine have a higher income than their partner; however they downscale their career so as to combine paid work and family life.

Another example of the sharp differences between ‘preferences’ and ‘practices’ and the challenges this involves for women after childbirth was in Margaret’s case, negotiating part-time work arrangements.

A Case Example: Margaret

At the Phase one interview, Margaret was 38 and employed as a full-time Manager in a small retail organisation. Her husband was 40 years old and a Manager. They have one child less than 12 months of age. Margaret’s preference was to work part-time over four days a week; three in the office and one from home. After discussing this with her boss, they negotiated four days at the office and one day at home. Her child was in childcare four days per week. Margaret noted the compromises she made so as to work one-day from home:

If I was to work part-time I knew that I’d have to take quite a drastic change in direction, which will probably mean I’d have to forfeit half of my salary. (Phase one)

Margaret returned to paid work nine to ten months after parental leave and compressed five days of full-time work into four days at the office and one day at home. Her child was in childcare four days per week. Margaret noted the compromises she made so as to work one-day from home:

I think [my boss has] been as supportive as he could possibly have been within the business and without sacrificing the business… I still feel that I’ve been forced into doing more work than I would ideally like to…. [I’m] still putting in a lot more hours than I would like to but [I] still consider myself very lucky. (Phase two)

The compromises and trade-offs are that the one-day I work from home I basically have to restructure my week. On that one day I take phone calls, do any trouble-shooting and then I hope that any particular job that I do from home will be jobs that I can be interrupted from and that I don’t need to be concentrating on… I’m almost resigned to the fact that I’d have to compromise either on the role that I accepted or on not being able to have a day at home with my daughter. (Phase three)

Margaret’s talk of compromises and coming second emphasises the view of a mother as self-sacrificing for the benefit of others (i.e., for the wellbeing of family).

When you have a baby… you’re life just completely changes and you get used to compromising and not sleeping… I think you just get used to not getting [and/or] having what you want. You get used to compromise, you get used to accepting less than what’s the ideal and women, work, everything falls under that, essentially. (Phase three)

The ongoing complex process of negotiating and arranging paid work and family life after childbirth, regarding women’s real life experiences, can be further understood in terms of the strategies participants developed and exercised, to transform constraints into practical options for opportunity and choice.
Creative Strategies Transforming Constraints

Participants used various strategies to create options in their work and family life, such as household and timesaving strategies (for example, outsourcing domestic work) and strategies to manage gender stereotypes (i.e., a ‘working mother’, or the view that if working more than part-time they cannot be a ‘proper mother’) in the workplace. Strategies were adaptive and accommodating in respect to the transitions of paid work and family after childbirth and were both action-orientated and reactive in nature. Below, Anna talks about the difficulty of managing paid work and family life after childbirth. Her account emphasises the way in which the habitus of motherhood is static and needs to change to catch up with the reality of women’s experiences.

A Case Example: Anna

At the Phase one interview, Anna was 36 years old employed full-time in higher education (as HEW 9) staff member and her partner was aged 42 in Information Technology (IT). Their two children were aged five years and less than six-months. Anna employed what I call a ‘creative strategy’ in regards to her organising paid work and family life after childbirth. She preferred to work full-time but said she knew she could not manage full-time paid work and family responsibilities with two children. At the phase two interview, Anna intended to resign from paid work after returning from maternity leave as she was facing the same difficulty of finding full-time childcare, half way through the year, for her second child, as she did with her first child. Anna’s preference was to work three days per week upon returning from her second maternity leave, based on ‘finding it more manageable’ and her view that ‘five days a week childcare is hard on kids’.

Between the second and third interview phases, Anna was not employed for a short time before taking up the same position at a different university. The position was the same as her previous role, with less responsibility. It was at a different higher education institution and instead of HEW 9 (her previous salary rate) it was at a salary rate of HEW 5. Anna dropped four salary levels after her second child. The position was part-time, three days per week. Anna noted she had to be strategic when arranging childcare for her second child,

In terms of sorting out crèche for [our youngest child] this year we had to have [eldest child] remain one day a week as an existing user in order to get priority to get [youngest] into full-time crèche even though [youngest] was only going three days a week and it had taken me a few weeks longer to find work. It might have meant we couldn’t afford to just keep paying childcare. (Phase one)

Anna’s strategy was to resign from paid work until she could access childcare and then look for another job, preferably part-time so that she can manage paid work and household. Anna talked about ‘strategy’ in arranging paid work and childcare and the benefit of knowing how the system works, after the first child:

Childcare and having it sorted out - would make us certainly have to think about it really 12 months in advance and work out what sort of strategy we were going to use, and also the knowledge as [son] is our second child and we know how the system works. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to work until I had childcare sorted out. (Phase one)

While Anna was strategic about childcare, due to her knowledge the second time around; the difficulty was also in trying to find ‘interesting part-time work:

They make it’s an employees market at the moment, but not if you’re looking for interesting part-time work. (Phase three)

Anna’s strategy (like Christine’s and Paula’s case-story) reveals agency and structure are tightly intertwined and the circumstances under which Anna makes choices are dependent upon options available and on the constraints upon options.

For Anna, there is little sense of real or genuine choice or agency; rather, she talked of strategies where she negotiates constraints to create a capacity to combining paid work and family arrangements within constraining circumstances. The view (by Hakim) that women can exercise choice autonomously and choice in whether or not they work in the paid workforce - is inconsistent with the four cases presented here. Furthermore, there is a theme or concept of bounded agency, the power of a cultural habitus of motherhood (of what an ideal or proper mother should do), which underpins choices.

Reflections on the Cultural Habitus of Motherhood

A significant theme emerging from preliminary findings is the internalised expectations of being a
proper mother – a highly gendered cultural habitus of motherhood. All 27 participants identified themselves as putting ‘family first’ before paid work and talked of accepting that making adjustments around the fixed (such as a male partner and his work arrangements), being flexible (‘everything changes’) and trading-off or making sacrifices and compromises in terms of putting their paid work on hold or moving it in a downward direction. In addition, some women expressed feeling uncertain about using formal childcare while child/children were young. Notions of being a proper mother came through interview data and are perhaps another reason why part-time work is such a strong preference by participants. Joan describes the ‘tug of war’ that the habitus of motherhood generates:

I think it really is problematic; I think women are fundamentally pulled in different directions and in some ways I’m not sure there’s any easy solution to it, whether it’s just the nature of life. (Phase one)

It’s hard to see where the choice is. My choice is to be with my child, my choice is to want to go overseas, my desire is to be a good mother and my desire is to be a good worker and to have interesting work and be fulfilled by that. Just fitting all those things in, I think, quite a challenge. I think it can only be a matter of compromise and that’s why I do the extra work at home in order to make sure that the job doesn’t suffer because I have less time than I used to… I would feel there were a few more choices if I had more of a family-friendly [work] environment. (Phase three)

Margaret described the ‘default mode’ or ‘force field’ of always putting herself second to her baby’s needs as well as at the workplace:

I think that you just get used to putting yourself second and then it becomes a way of life especially for a young baby that’s awake every three hours. So you start putting yourself second. So when it comes to returning to work you’re used to doing that… It wasn’t so much that it’s more to do with the day-to-day housework and things like that, I’d get home from work and I’d have to pick up [my daughter] and make dinner and be doing other things like that and so [my husband would] probably play with her for a couple of hours. If I was lucky he might empty the dishwasher or do something like that but he certainly wouldn’t see me doing something and say, “Hey! What can I do to help?” (Phase two)

Concluding Comments

The experience of arranging paid work and family life after childbirth and the downward employment trajectory raise a number of issues. Essentially what the above four case stories and additional interview data emphasise is that women are highly constrained and limited in the way in which they organise, manage and maintain the relationship between paid work, the household and in how they care for their children. Consequently, a job penalty of a downward or sideways step is a common experience of many women in the study.

While it is often assumed women’s paid work and family orientations and outcomes are a consequence of ‘free choice’; however, the four stories show that women have varied circumstances and capabilities for making ‘free choice’. Indeed, as the stories show decisions come at a price.

There is a need for these stories to be heard and located in frameworks that take account of the gendered assumptions underpinning everyday life, if the complexities of women’s realities and lived experiences after childbirth are to be understood. In particular, women make decisions in a context not made by them, but in terms of an underpinning habitus where past (norms and expectations) are brought into the present and future (see Williams 2000). While Hakim’s (2000) model is concerned with women’s choices and preferences between family and paid work, it takes a view of ‘agency’ that is inconsistent, at least discursively, with the participants’ views and practice in this study.

We need to move away from the dominant discourse of ‘free choice’ and recognise the contexts, which shape individual experiences. The implications for further research and policy lie in considering longitudinal approaches that are appreciative of the cultural context, which frame women and men’s work and family realities. I argue that this lies in applying a Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum 2000) while addressing the limitations of the habitus, which is fixed and does not account for the shifting paid work and family life experiences.

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