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**CHOICE AND THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR FOR
MOTHERS WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN:
SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY**

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CHOICE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR FOR MOTHERS WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Susan Himmelweit and Maria Sigala*

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings and policy implications of a study that used both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate mothers' decision making with respect to the interlinked issues of the care of their preschool children and their own employment. Mothers were found to have both internal and external constraints to their decisions. In the three areas of finances, childcare and working time both personal identities and external circumstances limited mothers' choices. However, neither external circumstances nor identities were fixed. Behaviour and identities therefore adjusted to each other, creating feedback effects at both the individual and the social level.

While the constraints of identity limit the direct effectiveness of some policies, positive feedback enhances the long-term effectiveness of others. In particular, the 'policy multiplier', the ratio of indirect to direct effects, is likely to be greater for enabling policies that lift existing constraints than for coercive policies that impose new constraints on mothers' behaviour. The paper examines the implications of such feedback effects for developing policy that expands the choices available to mothers in the short-term, reduces the costs of motherhood and meets the government's long-term objectives of reducing child poverty and increasing employment.

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INTRODUCTION

The UK is unique among European countries in the way its youngest children are looked after. There is practically no state provision of childcare, childcare fees are particularly high, yet the UK has one of the highest employment rates in Europe for mothers of preschool children, almost as high as those in Scandinavia (Eurostat 2002). Men work the longest hours in the European Union, so this circle is squared by mothers working part-time for short hours fitted around their children's care (Matheson and Babbs 2002; Fagan 2000). Social attitudes in the UK tend to disapprove of full-time employment for mothers of preschool children and, though many would like to work longer hours, most mothers in part-time employment do not want a full-time job (Twomey 2002; Bielenski, Bosch and Wagner 2001; Albrecht, Per-Anders and Vroman 2000). It appears that the majority of women in the UK have found a solution to the care of their children and working arrangements of which both they and the wider UK public approve.

However, this solution imposes high costs on those mothers. Those who take career breaks or work reduced hours are faced with both short- and long-term financial and career penalties. Part-time employment is concentrated in low-skilled and low-paid jobs, for which many mothers are overqualified (Jacobs 1999). Full-time hours are long, for women as well as men, so it is hard for mothers to get back into full-time employment, making the gender gap between the average number of hours worked by women and men greater than in any other European Union country (Eurostat 2002; Fagan 2000).

Even short periods of reduced labour market activity can have serious effects on a woman's future employment prospects (Joshi, Paci and Waldfogel 1999). The cost of being a mother is therefore higher in the UK than in other European countries (Harkness and Waldfogel 1999) and this cost is highest for low- and mid-skilled women, the mothers most likely to reduce their employment (Davies and Joshi 2001; Davies, Joshi, Rake and Alami 2000). Although the cost of motherhood fell for women who stay in full-time employment, it increased between 1978 and 1991 for women in the UK who let motherhood interrupt their employment in any way (Davies, Joshi and Peronaci 2000; Joshi, Paci and Waldfogel 1999).

The UK government recognises that mothers' reduced engagement in the labour market represents a serious loss of skills to the economy and is keen to encourage higher levels of employment, particularly full-time employment, for all sections of the population. It sees a particular problem in the low levels of employment among lone parents, who in the UK, unlike in many other European countries, are considerably less likely to be employed than partnered mothers. Moving lone parents into employment would also help meet another of the government's goals, that of reducing the numbers dependent on welfare, since lone parents make up

nearly 40 per cent of the non-pensioner recipients of income support (Office of National Statistics 2002).

Further, the government is committed to cutting the shockingly high levels of child poverty in the UK. It sees growing up in a 'workless household' as the main cause of child poverty and enabling lone parents to stay in the labour market as the most important step in lifting their children out of poverty (HM Treasury 1999). Because this focus on lone mothers ties in with its 'welfare to work' strategy, the government has yet to acknowledge that only if it pays similar attention to the employment of partnered mothers will it secure the future of all children living in poverty. For all sole breadwinner families are still largely poor, and many of the partnered mothers in these families will be tomorrow's lone parents (Gregg, Harkness and Machin 1999). Neither their partnership nor their partner's employment alone provide a secure future for their children. Even if the government gives insufficient weight to these longer-term implications, it recognises that improving the viability of, and rewards to, combining employment with motherhood is an important step in reducing child poverty.

However the government also claims another goal in this area: to promote 'choice'. It used that term in the titles of both its employment Green Paper *Work and parents: competitiveness and choice* (DTI 2000b), and its document laying out its new Child Tax Credits *Balancing work and family life: enhancing choice and support for parents* (HM Treasury and DTI 2003). While the former was aimed at enabling mothers to choose to stay in employment, tax credits have been promoted as enabling mothers to choose to stay at home. Thus in announcing the new tax credits, the Chancellor said, 'Our changes will mean that, from next April, mothers who wish to leave work and be with their children at home but have found it financially difficult to do so will find it easier' (HM Treasury 2002b). The previous Working Family Tax Credit was promoted as a way of giving lone parents, among others, the choice to work by increasing the net gains to employment. However, that it had the opposite effect on parents with a partner in employment was not seen as a restriction on choice. Rather, as with the new Child Tax Credit, it was presented as an opportunity to make a different choice, that of staying at home, because the net cost of doing so was correspondingly lowered. For lone parents no such extension of choice is envisaged. Instead, all lone parents on income support 'are subject to the personal adviser regime' requiring them to attend regular work-focused interviews 'to be informed about the help and support available' if they take employment (HM Treasury 2002a: ch 4). This is described as 'providing more choices for lone parents who are considering work' (HM Treasury 2000: ch 4). In other related areas, too, the government has been keen to preserve choice. For example, it gives childcare subsidies to parents rather than childcare providers to retain parental choice.

As the variety of ways in which the government construes the term demonstrates, 'choice' is not a straightforward term to apply in this area. In surveying women's attitudes to combining paid employment and family life, Bryson et al (1999) found that the majority of women in full-time employment reported financial necessity as their main reason for working. Nevertheless, most also said that if the financial need was removed they would still choose to work. Similarly, mothers who reported that the cost of childcare was a constraint to taking up employment often also said that it was important that they were at home to look after their children themselves. Both personal attitudes and financial or other circumstances play a significant role in mothers' accounts of their own decisions, leaving it a moot point whether they are best described as 'choices'.

A variety of accounts of the relationship between external circumstances and personal attitudes in mothers' decision making have been put forward. Catherine Hakim argues that modern western democracies have given women 'genuine choices' over their careers and their reproductive lives. Therefore differences in mothers' labour market behaviour reflect differences in lifestyle preferences: some women are work-oriented whilst others opt for a marriage career, in which employment takes second place. She claims that the same three characteristic types of maternal orientations, 'home-centred', 'adaptive' and 'work-centred', can be found across different countries, though the precise distribution of types varies over time and space (Hakim 2001; 2002).

Colette Fagan, however, sees cross-national differences in mothers' attitudes and behaviour as the outcome of different economic opportunities, consequent upon different policy regimes and labour market conditions (such as childcare provision, maternity and parental leave provisions, working hours and job flexibility). She contends that mothers' attitudes and choices are already structured by such economic conditions and state policies, so that mothers have partial or 'bounded' information on which to choose which 'arrangements are feasible or desirable in light of their existing domestic and workplace circumstances' (Fagan 2000: 244).

A third view on mothers' decision making comes from a study focusing on mothers' selection of care for their children rather than on their employment decisions. Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (2000) found that external constraints affected the extent to which mothers' personal attitudes influenced their childcare choices. In particular, for mothers who are not financially constrained there is a significant relationship between personal preferences and the care they choose for their children. However, such a relationship between preferences and behaviour is not significant for mothers who say that they need the income from paid work. Nevertheless, such choices also have significant feedback effects on attitudes. The authors found that over time mothers' decisions about their children's care influenced their subsequent attitudes, so that mothers who used non-parental care eventually developed attitudes more favourable to maternal employment.

This paper draws on a study designed to gain a better understanding of how mothers decide about the interlinked issues of the care of their preschool children and their own employment. In-depth two-stage interviews investigated the relationship between attitudes, circumstances and behaviour in mothers' decision making. Quantitative data on attitudes and behaviour from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) was then used to complement the qualitative data, by investigating change over a longer period.

This paper reports on some implications of the study's findings for developing policy that might meet both the government's long-term aims and mothers' own immediate objectives, without imposing such a high and persistent cost on them and their children. The following two sections describe the methods used in the interview study and its overall findings. The next three sections look in more detail at the areas of finances, childcare and working time, before examining how mothers reacted when circumstances forced them to behave in ways not in accord with their identities. The next section examines quantitative data from the BHPS that show how attitudes and behaviour change in relation to each other, providing the basis for postulating the existence of feedback effects from behaviour to attitudes at both the individual and the social level. The next section explores the implications of such feedback for the effectiveness of different types of policy to argue that the 'policy multiplier', that is the ratio of indirect to direct effects, should be greater for enabling than for coercive policies. The final section applies these more general policy implications to the task of developing policy that expands the choices available to mothers in the short-term, reduces the current costs of motherhood and meets the government's long-term objective of increasing employment and reducing child poverty.

QUALITATIVE STUDY

Methodology

Participants

Thirty-four mothers with at least one preschool child living in the wider area of Milton Keynes, an expanding new town within commuting distance of London, were selected for interview. The interviewees were recruited by a variety of means to arrive at a sample that reflected the local variety in mothers' employment decisions and childcare arrangements. Eleven of the mothers were in full-time paid employment, sixteen were in part-time paid employment and seven cared for their children full-time. Most worked, or had worked, for one of three major employers in the region: the local hospital, a bank and an educational establishment. Other employers included a law firm, two supermarkets and a childcare centre. One mother was a self-employed childminder. Nursery care, used by ten mothers, was the most frequent single type of childcare arrangement. Eight mothers had relatives and eight had childminders looking after their children, two used a workplace

creche and two received help with childcare from friends and neighbours. Three mothers used a mix of different childcare arrangements. The sample represented both lone and partnered mothers, mothers of different ages and a spread of household incomes (though no very low income partnered mothers; the only really poor mothers interviewed were lone parents). One year later, eight mothers who had experienced significant changes in the intervening period were selected for re-interview. Changes included separation from their partner, the birth of another child and changed childcare arrangements, jobs and/or working hours.

Any area chosen for a research project has some atypical characteristics. Milton Keynes has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country and, because it is still growing, an unusually large number of families who have recently moved to the area. Although mothers in Milton Keynes may therefore have less well-developed social and family networks to draw on for help with childcare, they do have relatively good formal childcare provision and better employment opportunities than mothers in many other areas. In these respects conditions in Milton Keynes may be similar to those that the government is hoping its policies will help to create throughout the UK.

Procedures

Data were collected by semi-structured interviews that were recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews began with a question on the mother's typical day, progressed to questions about their past and present decisions and circumstances regarding work, home and childcare and then to questions about other mothers' arrangements and decisions, family-friendly policies and plans for the future. Interviewing retrospectively enabled interviewees to give their own evaluations of both the outcome and the process of decision making. Interviews were designed to give participants as much chance as possible to explore ambiguities and contradictions in their decision-making process. Questions were open-ended and flexible to accommodate the particularities of each interviewee; probing was used to encourage clarification and elaboration. Second interviews one year later focused on re-evaluating previous decisions and attitudes in the light of changes in the intervening period and on explaining current behaviour.

Overall findings from the interview study

Although recognising that mothers today have more overall choice than earlier generations, few of those interviewed claimed in practice to have had much choice. Mothers presented themselves as having been constrained in conflicting ways so that one option, or possibly no option, met all constraints.

These constraints were not all external. They also reflected internal factors, aspects of mothers' identity, as much as the circumstances they were in. Many mothers expressed the constraints of identity by explaining that they were 'not the sort of

mother who could ...' behave in particular ways such as 'do nothing but look after children all day' or 'have children and leave someone else to look after them eight hours a day'. Mothers' identities thus informed how they construed the decisions they faced, so that they did not consider options that did not accord with their identities.

Statements about identity expressed mothers' attitudes to maternal responsibilities in terms that ranged from moral imperatives to personal preferences.

If I was going to have a baby then I should be looking after it, rather than having it and having someone else looking after it, because then what's the point really? (Claire; looking after children full-time)

I love her to death but couldn't be with her all the time. (Louise; in part-time employment, but uses a full-time nursery place)

In these and similar accounts, identity is used as a powerful internal mechanism that exerts control over women's decisions in a similar way to external constraints. Sixty per cent of the mothers interviewed explained their decisions by constraints that turned at least in part on personal identities. Nevertheless, mothers recognised that these constraints might change and might be different for others, and were usually unwilling to judge other mothers who had made decisions different from their own. Further, factors talked about in the language of external constraints were often recognised by mothers to include an interpretive element that depended on individual identities.

In the following sections, findings in three areas, finances, childcare and working time, where internal and external factors were closely related, will be examined in more detail.

Finances

Financial constraints were frequently talked about as determining decisions. Nevertheless it was in this area that an interpretive element blurring the distinction between internal and external constraints was most apparent. Nearly all mothers used some version of the statement 'I couldn't have afforded to do anything else' to claim that the decisions they had made had been financially determined. However, mothers recognised that such claims were also statements about the standard of living they believed their family required and about the effect that a child should be allowed to have on their parents' lifestyle.

There was a large variation in the extent to which mothers were prepared to see their standard of living fall to be able to behave consistently with other attitudes, such as the amount of time they should spend with their child. While some would accept a substantial drop in household income to care for their children full-time

themselves, others, in similar financial circumstances, considered that their household could not afford to do without their earnings.

We wouldn't be able to afford to live our lifestyle on just my husband's wages, I think. We're used to what we do. (Jane; works full-time)

In deciding what was affordable, mothers always compared the financial consequences of potential options with those of giving up employment to look after their child(ren) themselves. Even though it was recognised that most mothers of preschool children were in paid employment, and that the full-time caretaking mother was no longer the norm, she was still the yardstick against which other options were compared. Costs of childcare were therefore assessed not in relation to household income but in relation to the mother's (potential) earnings and were seen as costs of *her* employment.¹

This meant that mothers had to earn a reasonable wage to make it worth staying in employment. This particularly impinged on those who had to pay formal childcare fees, but even informal care had associated costs. Some grandparents, relatives and friends received (usually irregular) payments for their contribution to childcare and associated expenses. Transport costs were also an important consideration; for some the cost of running a car was seen as a direct consequence of the mother working.² This meant that financial calculations could work both ways. Some mothers 'could not afford' to reduce their earnings by giving up or reducing their hours of employment, while half the mothers who had left paid work had done so because the costs of remaining in employment had been 'unaffordable'.

Childcare

Mothers had strong but differing views on childcare that reflected the way they saw themselves as mothers and restricted the arrangements that they were prepared to make for their children. Consequently, views on acceptable childcare constituted one of the most effective constraints on mothers' employment.

1 Some mothers mentioned having considered the possibility of the father staying at home when he earned less than she did, but it never actually happened. This was related to mothers' identity; none of the mothers said that they would in practice have been happy with that solution, making comments along the lines of: 'If anyone is going to be with the child, I want it to be me'.

2 All the respondents in paid employment ran cars. Many claimed that, given the distances between home, childcare and their work, owning a car was a necessity, not a luxury. Only one mother mentioned attempting to use public transport, unsuccessfully, to get to work; for the rest this was not a consideration. This may be a particular feature of Milton Keynes.

Some mothers did not trust anyone who was not a family member to look after their children; others would trust only childminders who had been personally recommended; yet others would trust nurseries but not individual childminders. There were fears that a wrong selection of childcare could put the child in danger, set back the child's cognitive, social and psychological development, impair the parent-child relationship or cause problems at the mother's workplace. On the other hand good childcare could be beneficial to a child's development. Together positive and negative conditions usually pointed to a particular type of childcare:

The idea [to use a nursery] was that they would get to meet other kids and learn the kind of social sharing type skills especially from a really early age.... I would feel really a bit worried, a bit anxious about sending the children to a childminder that I just picked from a list and maybe talked to a couple of times. I would want somebody that I knew would be good and had been recommended through friends. (Fran; works part-time)

In practice, childcare choice was often dictated by external constraints. Location with respect to home and parents' workplace(s) and opening hours were important issues. The difficulty of arranging childcare places to coincide with the timing of employment was another. Most childcare providers had waiting lists; some required a deposit to secure a place. For those returning to work after maternity leave it was often difficult to make the date of restarting employment coincide with the availability of a nursery place. For those who were re-entering the labour market after a break and could not predict when they would find a job, it was nearly impossible to make secure prior childcare arrangements. These difficulties had prevented some mothers from taking available jobs and discouraged others from looking for employment.

You have to get the childcare and the job available at the same time and they always seem to miss. (Kate; lone parent, works part-time but looking for a full-time job)

Cost also constrained childcare choice. Many low-paid mothers who favoured nursery care found their fees too expensive and so could not take employment if they needed full-time childcare. Some of those with relatives living nearby solved this problem by combining nursery care with relative care, a solution that was often seen as desirable in itself as well as more affordable. However, such combinations of childcare arrangements could make employment precarious:

If my mother-in-law said that she couldn't have them one day a week anymore, that would be a big problem because it costs nearly £200 a month to have the boys in the creche one day a week. If they had to go in two days a week, then you double that figure and when you're working on a part-time wage anyway, options are

disappearing. (Susan; works part-time and uses a mixture of different types of childcare)

Shiftwork was popular among some mothers, as it allowed them to participate in all aspects of their children's lives. However, childcare posed particular problems for shiftworkers and those who worked unconventional hours. Childcare facilities were open for only limited hours and few were flexible enough to be able to take children for different sessions each week. As one mother remarked on the difficulties of finding a childcare place:

It's a combination of trying to find somewhere that you think is good enough, that's convenient to get to, that you can afford and that also has the places. (Fran; works part-time, uses nursery)

Working time

There were two aspects to mothers' requirements for time. The first was requiring enough time initially to adjust to a new baby before having to think about returning to work. The second concerned the continuing time pressures of combining employment and motherhood, in which mothers required working hours that allowed them to spend enough time with their children. Views on what was 'enough' time varied in both respects.

Many mothers reported that they had felt ready to return to work after maternity leave. However, some said that they had had to return before they were ready to do so, because their entitlement to maternity leave had run out, maternity pay was too low or the remaining leave was unpaid. Some of these continued to feel that a precious time that they could have spent with their child had been lost. Mothers who had been able to take longer time off were sympathetic to the plight of those who were given less maternity leave.

I had 11 months off, you see, so when I came back I had a lot of time with Lewis, whereas a lot of people come back they are about 3 or 4 months old. That's why I felt happier coming back full-time because I'd had a lot of time with him growing up and you know rolling over and all that sort of thing. (Kate; works full-time)

All mothers said that motherhood had changed their priorities and that their children, rather than their work, were now their 'number one priority'. There was a consensus that employment should accommodate children's needs and not the other way around, although the meaning given to that idea varied. Many of those working full-time talked about life being too stressful so that they were always rushing. Many of those working part-time perceived it as a happy medium, where they were having 'the best of both worlds'. Forty per cent of those working full-time would have preferred to be working part-time:

I am extremely tired. I think I can't keep going like this. So come next year I might review it and see what I am doing... I am full-time now so I am going to try maybe and get a job share just to give me a bit more time with her and a bit more time to do housework and everything else that you have to do. Because weekends are such a rush. I seem to be trying to do everything at weekends. (Sophie; full-time manager)

Financial considerations prevented some mothers from reducing their working hours. For others, their own and their partners' employers' flexibility, as well as their partners' willingness to contribute to childcare, determined whether they could achieve a satisfactory balance in their lives.

Employers varied considerably in how flexible they were. Although many mothers worked for employers with family-friendly policies, it was the attitude of immediate managers that seemed more significant in practice when negotiating working hours. Mothers varied in how much power they thought they had in such negotiations. Those who felt they were indispensable to their employers saw themselves in a strong position in negotiating reduced and convenient hours. However, others took it for granted that high status jobs required a continuity that would be difficult to manage on a part-time basis, and that to find other women at their level with whom to job share would be hard.

The role that I was doing as an advisor is a difficult role to do on a part-time basis. There are very few part-time advisors indeed in the country, so to try and find someone to job share would not be an option. No, I don't think I could work part-time. (Anne; works full-time)

Those lower down the hierarchy had less power in negotiating their hours, but were more interchangeable with other workers and so employers could be flexible at little cost to themselves. While some employers had special schemes such as career breaks to help mothers higher up the employment ladder, others had schemes designed to allow low-paid interchangeable workers to work the hours they wanted.

Many mothers stressed that having caring responsibilities did not mean that they were any less conscientious at work (although there was a persistent thread of mothers fearing that that was how managers and colleagues would see them). A culture of taking long working hours and uninterrupted work histories as a signal of work commitment was seen as penalising both part-timers and those on a career break, and could reflect on all mothers.

It was not only their own, but also their partners' employers' flexibility that mattered. Fathers' involvement in childcare varied a great deal. Some fathers were

not expected to contribute to the daily childcare routine due to inflexible and long working hours.

I don't [rely on him], he is not in the equation... With work he can't. If he has an afternoon off he doesn't get paid, so it was never in the equation. I do the children and that's it. (Sandra; works part-time with self-employed partner)

How involved the father was had significant effects on how constrained a mother's own time was. Those who could rely on fathers to look after children or pick them up from childcare had considerably more flexibility in their own lives.

Adjusting internal and external constraints

The interview data showed that mothers construed the decisions they faced as constrained by both internal requirements and external circumstances. They would try whenever possible to meet both internal and external constraints, but in some cases circumstances forced mothers to behave in ways not in accord with their identities. In these cases, mother might try to change those circumstances and/or some aspects of those identities might change.

In some cases, mothers reacted to a conflict between their own identity and behaviour forced on them by circumstances by trying to adjust those external circumstances. For example, mothers who were denied the possibility of working reduced hours by financial constraints might try for promotion to be able then to turn part-time. Alternatively, where the constraint was employer's inflexibility, mothers might enlist the help of sympathetic colleagues in changing the work culture. Those in more powerful positions could threaten to leave if their hours were not reduced, while those in weaker positions might quit their current jobs, usually to take employment in which their skills were not used, the pay was worse but the hours were better.

In other cases, mothers reacted to such conflicts by adjusting their identities. Those whose employers would not let them reduce their hours often reported a changed attitude to work. Some of those who had previously seen themselves as highly work-oriented talked about losing interest and resenting every hour spent away from their child, and adopted a more instrumental attitude to their work. Others decided to cope with full-time work through learning to become better time managers and being more relaxed when at home. Some changed both attitudes and behaviour, feeling let down and unappreciated by employers who did not return previous loyalty. One even threatened to impose a solution unilaterally:

I have given them the ultimatum, that come the 1st January I am working 2½ days. So whether you find me a job share or not I am going to be working 2½ days... I feel I have done what I was brought

in to do [manage a new department]. So, I am in a little bit more of a position to start demanding what I want. (Sophie; full-time manager)

Another example of attitudes adapting to behaviour was that nearly all mothers seemed happy with their current childcare arrangements, even if these were not the ones they had originally sought. Perhaps mothers found out through experience that the childcare worked well. Alternately, perhaps it was difficult for a mother to admit a lack of satisfaction with the care her child was receiving, given the responsibility mothers felt for their children's welfare and the use of maternal care as an unspoken yardstick.

In some cases it took time to resolve the conflict between behaviour and identity. For example, some mothers who felt they had returned to work too early after maternity leave for financial reasons continued to resent having to go to work as time away from their child. Some of these mothers subsequently decided that they could do with less income, and left their jobs either to stay at home with their child full-time, or to take other employment that took them away from their child for less time.

QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Individual and social feedback: findings from the BHPS data

The British Household Panel Study (BHPS) is a longitudinal study of members of households in Great Britain that has been carried out every year since 1991. In its first wave, the sample consisted of all members over 16 years of age of 5000 randomly selected households. At the time this research was conducted, data on attitudes and behaviour of 1335 mothers of preschool children over up to nine waves (1991–1999) had been collected.

The data from the BHPS was used to investigate what the interviews could not: how identities and behaviour changed over a longer period, though for a much more restricted number of variables. Identities were assessed by looking at answers to some attitudinal questions, the most pertinent of which was the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement 'a preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works'. This question was asked alternate years while employment status, the behavioural variable of interest, was recorded every year. Analysis of the BHPS showed that both attitudes and employment status adjusted when conflicts between the two arose.

Table 1 shows the percentages of mothers who, within two years, had changed their employment status or changed their attitude to mothers of preschool children working. It shows that those in the contradictory position of being in employment though believing that preschool children suffered from their mothers' working were more likely to change their attitude than their behaviour. Nearly half of them

(46%) had changed their attitude within two years, a larger percentage than for any other combination of attitudes and employment status. This was greater than the 29% who had resolved that contradiction by giving up employment, though this itself was significantly larger than the 13% who gave up employment of those whose attitudes had not been in conflict with their behaviour.³

Table 1: Percentage changing attitudes or behaviour within two years: all mothers with preschool children current year and two years previously, BHPS sample

Attitude/behaviour two years previously	Attitude change	Behavioural change	Any change
agreed that preschool children suffer if their mother works			
<i>looking after family</i>	36%	21%	44%
<i>in employment</i>	46%	29%	64%
did not agree that preschool children suffer if their mother works			
<i>looking after family</i>	20%	29%	46%
<i>in employment</i>	7%	13%	18%

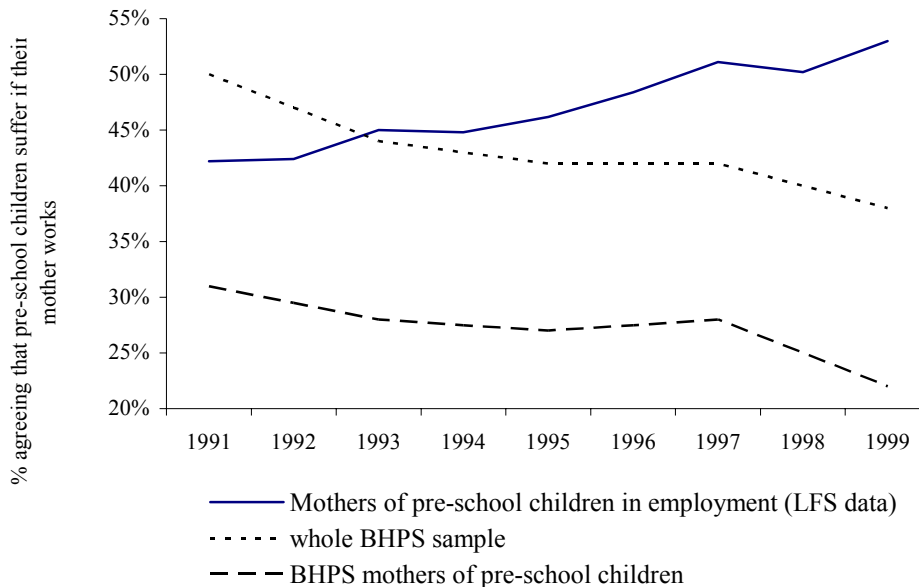
Mothers' attitudes changed not only as a result of their own experience, but also in line with the observed behaviour of other mothers. Over the 1990s, as the employment rate of mothers of preschool children rose, there was a clear trend in attitudes towards believing that preschool children were not harmed by their mother's employment. This trend in attitudes applied both to the population as a whole and, in particular, to the mothers of preschool children. This is shown in Figure 1, where the two dashed lines show the proportion agreeing with the statement that 'a preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works' of two populations, the BHPS sample as a whole (short dashes) and just those who are themselves mothers of preschool children (longer dashes). These proportions show a steady falling trend as the proportion of mothers of preschool children in employment (the solid line) rises.

However, Table 1 also shows that those in employment joined in that general shift in attitudes more readily than those who were at home looking after their family. Of those in employment who had previously believed that preschool children suffered if their mother worked, 46% no longer thought so two years later, while only 36% of those looking after their family made the same attitudinal change. Conversely, attitudes affected behaviour, with those who were critical of the effects of mothers working on children joining in the general trend towards being in employment at a slower rate than those who were less critical. Among those who

3 For tests of significance and further analysis using the BHPS data see Himmelweit (2002).

were at home with their family, 21% of those who believed that children suffered if their mothers worked had moved into employment two years later, compared with the 29% of those who did not think that maternal employment had a deleterious effect on children.

Figure 1: Employment rate of mothers of preschool children, UK, and proportion of mothers of preschool children agreeing that preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother works, BHPS sample: 1991–1999



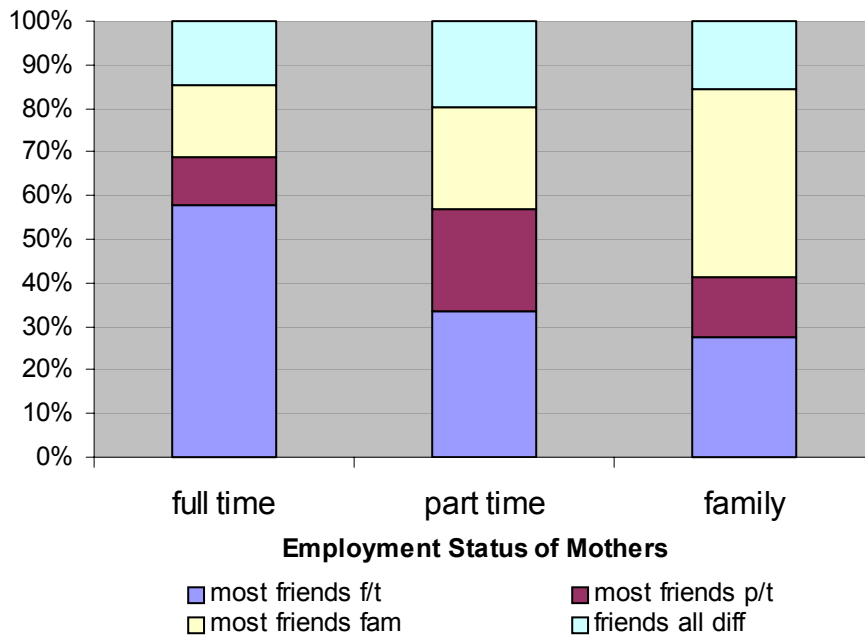
Source: Labour Force Survey and BHPS

Together these findings point to attitudes, our proxy for identities, and behaviour having significant feedback effects on each other. Attitudes affect the probability of behavioural change while behaviour affects the probability of attitudinal change. Together these two processes led to cumulative change in attitudes and behaviour, resulting in the trends shown in Figure 1.

The BHPS evidence also confirms a finding from the interviews: that mothers move in circles within which such social feedback effects are likely to be intensified. Thus mothers mainly mix with others of a similar employment status to themselves. In particular those working full-time mainly mix with others also in employment, while those at home with their children mainly meet other full-time mothers. Figure 2 shows that mothers in full-time employment are more likely to have friends who are also in full-time employment, while those at home with their family are more likely to have friends who are also out of the labour market.

Unfortunately, the BHPS does not provide information as to whether those friends are also mothers.

Figure 2: Employment status of three best friends by employment status of mothers: all mothers of preschool children



Further it appears that how and when initial attitudes are formed remains significant. It can be shown that mothers who had older children, and were therefore likely to have formed their initial maternal identities in a period in which fewer mothers of preschool children were in employment, had attitudes less favourable to mothers' employment than those who had become mothers more recently (Himmelweit 2002). This is further indirect evidence of the social influence of the behaviour of others on mothers' attitudes. The effect of older children on attitudes remains, though is smaller and less significant, when controlling for the mother's own employment status, whose effect is highly significant. This suggests that attitudes to motherhood are affected by the behaviour of other mothers, but that once a woman becomes a mother her own behaviour becomes a greater influence on her identity.

Thus neither identities nor behaviours are fixed, but adapt to each other in a process of positive feedback, both at an individual level and at a social level. Such positive feedback at a social level can explain why large cultural differences in national approaches to mothers' employment and the care of their children can

develop and persist. In each culture, mothers develop and enact identities that reflect the behaviour they observe around them; this in turn affects the development of institutions and policy in those countries, which in turn affects behaviour. Historical differences then remain even after the circumstances that gave rise to those differences diminish in importance.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Implications for a government interested in choice

So what are the implications of these findings for developing policy to meet both the government's and mothers' own objectives? All three types of constraints to mothers' employment examined in this paper (finances, childcare and working time) have both internal and external elements. Policies can directly impinge only on external constraints. The constraints of identity may limit the effectiveness of some policies, because lifting an external constraint where an internal constraint remains will have little or no effect. However, as we have seen the internal constraints of identity are not fixed. Policy that results in short-term behavioural change may have a multiplied effect in the longer term through positive feedback working through identities, at both an individual and a social level.

Any policy may therefore have both immediate and longer-term effects through feedback between identities and behaviour. Policy makers therefore need to take account of the longer-term effects of policy on identities. Policies that are enabling lift external constraints. Such policies will result in behavioural change among those for whom the constraints that are lifted are currently binding and are not overridden by internal constraints. So enabling policies will have immediate effects only on those whose current identities are favourable to the behaviour being enabled (only mothers with attitudes favourable to maternal employment will respond to childcare subsidies, for example). However, such behavioural change will produce positive feedback at an individual level by encouraging favourable identities and preventing contrary identities developing (mothers who are in employment are more (less) likely to develop attitudes favourable (contrary) to such behaviour than those who are not in employment). It will also produce a multiplier effect at the social level through the behavioural shift among some influencing the attitudes of others (with more mothers in employment social norms will shift so that others are more likely to adopt attitudes supportive of maternal employment), which should in turn affect their behaviour (so that some of these mothers will then take employment).

Although coercive policy may have greater direct effect in that it can shift behaviour despite the existence of internal constraints, its feedback effects are likely to be smaller. At an individual level this is because having an external justification for behaviour that is in conflict with attitudes reduces the responsibility for that conflict, and thus the need to change those attitudes in line

with behaviour (Pungello and Kurtz-Costes 2000; Festinger and Carlsmith 1959). At a social level, behavioural change is less likely to be interpreted as signalling a change in attitudes if it is known to be the result of coercive policies, rather than a chosen behaviour made possible by an enabling policy.

So while coercive policy may have greater immediate effects in meeting its goals, its indirect effects will, in general, be less than those of enabling policy. This means that what could be called the ‘policy multiplier’, that is the ratio of indirect to direct effects, will in general be smaller for coercive policies than for enabling policies.

This suggests that a government interested in expanding choice at the same time as pursuing other objectives should choose policies so as to:

- a) lift current external constraints on decisions that force mothers to act in ways that do not accord with their current identities; and
- b) ensure that this is done in such a way that positive feedback encourages identities to move in a direction more likely to produce behaviour in line with policy makers’ objectives.

To do this the government needs to take account of the way in which people in whose behaviour they are interested construe the decisions that they face.

Further, the extent to which positive feedback enhances a policy’s effectiveness will depend on how well-targeted the policy is on a group that is mutually influential. Policy that applies to the whole of a mutually influential group will develop stronger positive feedback than policy that applies to only a subset of that group. For example if, as seems likely from the interviews, lone and partnered mothers identify with each other and do not form distinct groups, policy designed to reach lone parents will be more effective if it applies to all mothers.

Specific policy proposals

To apply these general principles to policy on combining employment and motherhood the government should adopt an approach to the relationship between employment and the care of children more like that of mothers. Take, for example, the provision of subsidised childcare. The government sees lack of childcare as a constraint on mothers’ employment (rather as it might see the absence of adequate transport). Mothers, on the other hand, require employment compatible with their views on how their children should be cared for. Such views form internal constraints on mothers’ decisions.

A variety of types of childcare would need to be made available to meet the variety of mothers’ views. For those who favour care by relatives, there is a limit to what

policy can do directly to encourage its supply. It cannot produce grandparents for those who do not have them living nearby, though it can encourage different forms of formal and informal care and provide help with their costs. Further, the government could ensure that high quality formal childcare is available for all children, irrespective of their parents' employment status, as is the case in many other European countries. The government could also ensure that the charge to parents for whatever type of childcare they favour is such that no child is excluded by cost. Under these circumstances, attitudes to the relative merits of formal and informal childcare might change.

Whether this can be achieved through the market, for example by adjusting the current childcare tax credit to make it available to all parents (not just lone parents or couples where both partners are in employment), extending the costs that it covers and reducing its tapers is not a matter for this paper. Most probably it would require government intervention on the supply side of childcare too. Whichever way such a policy was carried out, it would be expensive. Although the benefits to children and parents would be high, the government is unlikely to adopt such a policy unless it also delivers on its own objectives.

The government recognises that child poverty has many dimensions beyond that of household income. So in this broader sense, the policy would help meet its objective of reducing child poverty. Currently the children least likely to receive the benefits of childcare are those who probably need it most, the children of the unemployed. A policy of universal childcare provision would reverse this, provided that any childcare fees were on an income-related sliding scale that then made them genuinely affordable to all.

The policy of universal childcare provision should also help achieve the government's objective of encouraging mothers into employment, since having childcare already in place would remove one major obstacle to taking employment. Indeed, it could be argued that it would be reasonable for the government to compel those taking childcare places to look for employment, in a similar way to the unemployed and the partners of the unemployed. The difference from the current approach would be that children would not then be denied childcare if their parents could not find a job, nor would their childcare be interrupted if a parent lost their job. Rather than having to look after one's own child being the cost of not finding employment, having to look for a job would be the cost, for those who favoured formal childcare, of having the care that one wants for one's child.

However, as the widespread use of formal childcare changes attitudes more generally, there will be further feedback effects on mothers' employment. In Sweden and Denmark, childcare is seen as a right of the child, and forcing a child to be withdrawn from childcare just because their parents lost their job would be considered as unfair as it would in the UK to discriminate in schooling against the

children of the unemployed. Sweden and Denmark have the highest female employment rates in the European Union (Eurostat 2002).

A second constraint on mothers' employment is that of time. Here again, the government could adopt an attitude more like that of mothers, and accept that time for employment must fit around the needs of children rather than the other way around. It has gone some way towards meeting mothers' need for more time at home with newborn babies in its recent changes to maternity and parental leave regulations. However, after maternity leave many mothers experience difficulty in negotiating working hours that conform to their idea of how much time they should spend with their children. Policy to ensure that parents can work the hours they desire would lift another constraint preventing mothers from acting in accordance with their identities.

The government has gone some way in developing policy in this area by legislating to give parents the right to request flexible working hours and a duty on employers to consider such requests seriously. Current legislation, however, does not *require* an employer to meet such a request. Whether current legislation is sufficient to satisfy the demand from parents for reduced working hours in their current employment will be shown by whether the number of parents who reduce their hours without changing jobs rises sharply. If not, stronger legislation will be needed requiring employers to accede to requests for changed working hours unless they can show that positive harm would arise from doing so. Such policy should be complemented by an extension of equal opportunities legislation to ensure that those making use of such provisions are not unfairly discriminated against.⁴ If effective, such legislation would reduce the loss of skills to the economy that mothers' part-time working currently entails. For mothers would not have to turn to unskilled work, nor pay the heavy career penalties they currently do, in order to work reduced hours during the relatively short period when their children are small.

Ensuring that all jobs can be done on a flexible basis should raise the status and pay of all part-time work. This should help break down gender segregation in employment and in parenting roles, by making it more possible for men to consider working part-time for a period. This in turn should help create more equal opportunities in employment. It should also make women more financially self-reliant, so that the security of their own and their children's future wellbeing would not depend on the survival of a partnership or on a father's employment prospects alone. So, rather than seeing part-time work as the problem, the government could achieve many of its goals, or rather the long-term goals it should have if it wants to achieve its more immediate objectives, by making part-time work part of the

4 In the United States, many cases of workers 'choosing' not to make use of their maternity and parental rights for fear it will hurt their careers have been documented (Hochschild 1997).

solution. This approach would also have the advantage of facilitating choice, for undoubtedly this is the current solution favoured by many mothers who want to combine responsibilities to their children with employment.

Again the feedback effects here should be positive in meeting the government's objectives. Both this and the government's commissioned research (DTI 2000a) show that not being able to work the hours they want keeps some mothers from returning to employment after maternity leave, and makes others resentful of their work and thus more likely to give it up subsequently. Offered the right hours, more mothers would return to employment after maternity leave, be less stressed doing so, and remain more committed to employment and so less likely to develop attitudes that might lead them to quit their jobs later. Positive feedback should enhance this effect and, as more mothers stay in employment, more of those who are not yet mothers should develop attitudes favourable to doing so. Similar effects should work on the attitudes of those who have taken time out from employment to be with their children.

As far as financial constraints go, reducing the cost of childcare would make the most significant difference. Analysis of the BHPS data shows the trend is currently working in the opposite direction. The average amount paid in childcare costs per hour of maternal employment, by those who pay for at least some of that childcare, has risen in real terms from £1.76 per hour in 1991 to £2.46 per hour in 1999 (both in 1999 prices). However, it is also important that any sliding scale of fees is not tapered so steeply as to produce a labour market disincentive through mothers again experiencing employment as 'unaffordable'. The BHPS data confirms the interview findings that mothers are largely responsible for paying for childcare: in 59% of households the mother paid for all or most childcare, in 34% costs were shared and in only 6% did the father pay all or most childcare costs. Further, mothers' earnings are highly significant determinants of household spending on childcare, while household income is much less significant, and fathers' income is insignificant. This is consistent with the interview findings that mothers' earnings are treated as the marginal income in assessing whether childcare can be afforded. Since mothers' earnings are currently low this suggests that any taper in the subsidy to childcare fees based on household income must be shallow, if it is not to provide a significant disincentive to mothers' employment.

The other side of financial constraints is improving women's jobs and pay to ensure that mothers earn enough to make employment worthwhile. Expanding training opportunities for those currently out of the labour market would help improve their employment prospects. Mothers were keen to receive training for the future, even those who were not willing to take employment yet. Enabling mothers to work flexible hours in all jobs is also likely to have significant knock-on effects by ensuring that mothers who want to work part-time do not have to accept the low

wages and poor working conditions that currently characterise part-time employment.

These two measures, providing universal childcare and ensuring that parents can work the hours they want, should also help reduce the high costs of motherhood. Currently it is the least skilled women who pay the highest costs in terms of lifetime income foregone for being mothers, because they give up employment for longer to have children and typically then return to poor quality part-time jobs (Davies, Joshi and Peronaci 2000). If childcare were no longer a constraint, fewer would give up employment, especially if they could work part-time. If part-time work were not such a ghetto, moving in and out of employment would not impose such high costs. Childcare is currently a constraint partly because of its costs, but also because of mothers' attitudes. Working hours are currently a constraint because of employers' attitudes. Both of these can be expected to change and would be all the more likely to do so if the government showed in its own policies that it took children's needs as seriously as it does employers'. This requires a change in government attitude towards recognising that both childcare and sufficient time for parents to be with children is good for both children and parents, and as such is a potential benefit rather than a cost to the economy.

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