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EVERYDAY LABOURS: RETHINKING THE  
EMPLOYMENT OF MOTHERS**

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# CONCEPTUAL ORTHODOXIES AND WOMEN'S EVERYDAY LABOURS: RETHINKING THE EMPLOYMENT OF MOTHERS

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## Abstract

Critical accounts of working mothers emphasise conflict, guilt and career disruptions. Yet the labour market participation rates of employed mothers continue to increase. We argue that there is emerging evidence that women are developing new models for combining paid work and mothering that require detailed investigation. These models focus on transferable skills and the integration of necessary labour.

## Introduction

In July, in a weekend magazine, the mother wars were presented in an article that set working and non-working mothers against each other. Entitled 'Mother knows best: the growing hostility between working and stay-at-home mothers', the article described tension between mothers in paid employment and mothers who were primary caregivers (Schmidt 2005). School tuckshop duty, fete work and child caring and rearing were inequitably distributed amongst these women, with each group outlining their disappointments with the attitude and priorities of the others. Women on both sides of this putative divide described the lives of the other group as a different world. The playground mothers and the workplace mothers shared only one thing in common, which was significant disrespect for the 'yummy mummies', women who do not work in paid employment but use child care (Schmidt 2005: 21). This formulation of disparate groups of mothers in conflict is notable for several key omissions: at the same time as all notions of class, race, ethnicity and education are absent, any attention to the shared work practices, aims and aspirations of all women with children is also absent. Here, we consider the constant reiteration of the mother wars and the adaptive capacities of this divisive trope across contemporary social issues that might unite mothers, like cuts in maternal and child services, shorter postnatal hospital stays and the provision of good education. We examine in particular the formulation of employed motherhood as a site of crisis and difficulty for our society which struggles to develop employment practices and institutions that can support women who want

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to combine mothering and paid work. We also consider the extent to which women's experiences as they operate in these two spheres are understood, represented and constrained by this discourse of crisis.

Before we begin the paper proper, we should note that, in focusing in this way, we are seeking to pick up and examine more closely some categorisations that are inherently problematic. Mother wars between types of mothers extend pre-existing wars between mothers and non-mothers, apparently two simply divisible forms of womanhood. They are a new version of a very basic 'divide and rule' formula that manages to achieve surprising social traction despite its blatancy. All such distinctions rest on an assumption that children in a woman's life can be understood to mean something specific about that woman and her aspirations, and that the lack of children is equally indicative. Children in a woman's life indicate that this woman is a 'mother' and this label draws on highly resonant evocations of maternal identity and appropriate maternal feelings that inform much of the debate about mothering and much of the conflict generated in the sphere of employed motherhood. So we want to note at the outset that we consider the interpretation of what children mean in a woman's life to be an extremely complex and uncertain process.

### **Mothers and maternal feelings**

Discourses focused on women's innate or biological desires have been with us a long time and more contemporary feminist iterations of how bodies are materialised and sexualised in culture do not seem to have significant perceptible impact on how women's experiences of reproduction and mothering are understood. The long-standing assumption that women are driven towards child bearing (or that many or most are) has been complicated by the newer assumption (post the pill in the 1960s) that fertility is entirely controlled in contexts where contraception is freely available. Common accounts of reproductive choices focus on careful planning and thoughtfulness in decision making, such as this one offered by Julianne Schultz in the *Griffith Review*.

Listen to a group of thirtysomething would-be mothers and the conversation is far removed from the old notion of 'falling pregnant'. These women don't fall anywhere, they make informed decisions: there are supplements to take, tests to be had, results to be analyzed. (Schultz 2004: 9)

Catherine Hakim (2003) has argued that women's control over fertility allows us to understand fully their preferences, as does Anne Manne in a 2001 article in *People and Place* (2005: 55; see also Manne 2001). This assumption about reproductive control is critical to how we understand the mother wars and conflicts over employed motherhood because the fact that women have children, or do not, is

understood as directly reflecting something about them: their choice, their preference or their desire. But in the Families, Fertility and the Future study on which JaneMaree was a researcher between 2002 and 2004, of the fifty-eight women with children, twenty-eight of the group identified their first pregnancy as an accident in some way or another, that is, a complete accident or an accident of timing. In that group of twenty-eight, it was only eight who said it was an accident of timing; the rest simply identified their pregnancy as accidental or unexpected. These women crossed the spectrum in terms of age, partnering status and educational attainments and employment status. Only three of these women expressed strong anti-abortion sentiments as the reason for their decisions to continue with these unexpected pregnancies. Two others had had abortions previously, but did not want to again. The rest of the women who had 'accidents', twenty three in all, indicated that the decision to continue with the pregnancy had been a process of negotiation whereby they had come around to accepting the presence of children in their lives, even when they had reservations initially. Thus Estelle was quite typical.

[It's been] a bit of a culture shock. Um, it's been far more rewarding that I ever expected it to be. It's been easier than I thought it would be.

Of the forty-two women who had no children, twenty-one indicated that in the future, or in the past, depending on age, they contemplated children.

So, in analysing the accounts of the 100 women in the study, most reproductive outcomes then could not be described or identified as directly reflecting choice or preference. Most commonly, they reflected some part of all of those elements with a significant ratio of luck, chance and happenstance. Thus, although this paper focuses on conflicts around women with children and paid work, it uses these socially constructed discursive categories while recognising that such categories cannot be understood to have any certain content. In our view, and based on what was found in the fertility study in Victoria, an explanatory frame based on preferences or choice as a way of understanding women's reproductive patterns, is not likely to offer the right explanation of the life patterns of most women, no matter what their actual fertility outcomes are. There may be as many reproductive occurrences as there are reproductive choices and this caution needs to inform any discussions. If it were taken seriously, it would certainly put an end to 'away mummy vs home mummy' or 'mummy vs non-mummy' newspaper articles, which would be a profound relief.

In this paper, we begin with a brief evocation of the relatively bleak picture for women and the workplace. We then examine contemporary accounts of employed motherhood, with a focus on the discourse of motherguilt. Finally, we focus more closely on the findings of 'Families, Fertility and the Future', a large-scale

qualitative study focusing on fertility that generated findings that significantly contest the conflict and crisis model of employed motherhood.

Attention to the ways in which cultural discourses around motherhood impact on the policy landscape is crucial if we accept Carol Bacchi's assertion that how we perceive a problem will impact on what we think can or should be done about it (1999: 1). If the problem of employed motherhood is seen primarily as one of guilt, that is an underlying unease about the combination both for women doing it and the society in which they do it, then policy designed to achieve better and more inclusive workplace outcomes may be informed by a sense that these measures are designed to make the basically unpalatable notion of separation from children manageable for women who choose to do it.

And if we return for a moment to the mother wars articles, and the shared disdain for the 'yummy mummies' in the article of July 2005, we see that the notion of leaving a child for pleasure, self-gratification or even self-enrichment is represented as the most unacceptable form of maternal practice. Not leaving your child or leaving them to pursue paid work reluctantly is more acceptable than an avowed desire to be away, for a woman with children. One of the issues it seems important to understand is the effect of limited cultural space for a woman to say 'I love my work and my children' or 'my children and my work', or 'these things that I do are deeply entwined' or even 'actually I do not perceive a conflict, or no more than any woman feels faced with the complex, continuous and often contradictory needs of children and doing anything else at all'. The 'unrenovated models of mothering' described by Barbara Pocock (2003: 1) or the 'on-going persistence of the (frustratingly enduring) myth of the "good" mother' outlined by Leslie Cannold (2005: 132) may confine both women's experiences and the broader social framework in which those experiences occur. We are not suggesting that guilt is the only motif that shapes cultural discourses of contemporary motherhood, but the notions of crisis, collision and discomfort are continuously recycled with ease. And the willingness of the Howard government to embrace the thinking of Catherine Hakim and her notions of preference, which circle around a perceived primary and innate wish of women 'to be' with children, suggests that such cultural accounts may well have enduring and material impacts on policy frameworks.

### **Current picture**

The OCED suggested in the 2002 report *Babies and bosses* that there is still 'low penetration of family-friendly work practices in Australia' (OECD 2002: 17). Recent initiatives, such as the *Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family* (Commonwealth of Australia 2005), the ACTU inquiry in 2001 into long working hours (Pocock et al 2001), and the HREOC Striking the Balance project (2005), as well as other programs like 'Parents Back to Work' at state level in Victoria indicate that governments at both state and federal

level are looking at the intersection of workplace flexibility and social issues for families with regard to care giving. The new HREOC study is specifically focused on the reorganisation of unpaid labour and the private sphere. This 'concern' however, as many have pointed out, is not driven by principles of gender equity and regard for women, but turns more on issues of labour force participation and falling fertility rates (Probert 2002).

Despite this attention, there is little evidence proffered that successful and satisfactory work-life combinations are getting easier to achieve, and there is a significant body of evidence to suggest that it is getting harder. The OECD points to three key policy areas that are central to the reconciliation of paid work and family: maternity leave, child care and part-time work (2002). Quantitative research focused in these three areas provides clear evidence that Australia is currently a difficult environment in which to be a working mother. In fact, it is probably more accurate to argue that it is a difficult environment in which to be a working woman, and it was certainly the view of most women in the Families, Fertility and the Future study that workplace issues cut across reproductive status. Australia has one of the most sex-segregated workforces amongst OECD countries and women are over-represented in part-time and casual employment (OECD 2002).

But the 2003 decision to shelve the national paid maternity leave scheme proposed by Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward, after initial support from the Howard government, serves as an iconic exemplar of ambivalence towards employed motherhood, since paid maternity leave is only available to approximately 39 per cent of Australian female employees, and some sectors have very low access (O'Neill 2004). Australia is one of only two OECD countries without a nationally funded paid maternity leave scheme and this is identified as a crucial aspect of 'family friendliness'.

The OECD report of 2002 argued that 'there is often confusion about the underlying dialectic between family policies and the labour market. Greater labour force participation itself creates the demands for more family policies to help reconcile work and family life. The fact that such policies themselves promote further labour force participation is a secondary factor in their introduction' (OECD 2002: 23). Reconciliation policies therefore could be understood as focused on alleviating the structural inequalities women face in combining their work with their family responsibilities, rather than on reshaping the labour force to achieve greater participation or balance. And in practice, as Susan Lambert has observed, most family-responsive or family-friendly policies in fact 'make it easier for workers to adjust their family life to conform to work requirements rather than altering work requirements to accommodate family responsibilities' (1993: 238). This has a particular impact on women in families. Combining work and family responsibilities is the reality of everyday life for parents and it is well established

that women are the key players in managing this combination (Baxter 2002, 2003; Baxter and Western 1998; Bittman and Pixley 1998; Craig 2002; HREOC 2005). Recently produced evidence from researchers, commentators and activists like Barbara Pocock (2003), Anne Summers (2003) and Leslie Cannold (2005) has demonstrated that the increasingly complex transitions between paid employment and caring labour, made particularly by women providing caring labour, are hard in Australia.

This brings us to motherguilt.

### **Moving onto motherguilt**

With the changing employment patterns that have seen a dramatic increase in the percentage of women with children entering the labour market, some very particular cultural discourses about women and work have been circulating. In recent years, beginning in 2003 with Barbara Pocock's *The work-life collision*, then Anne Summers' *The end of equality* (2003), Leslie Cannold's *What, no baby? Why women are losing the freedom to mother, and how they can get it back* (2005), Ita Buttrose and Penny Adams' *Motherguilt* (2005), and most lately Anne Manne's *Motherhood: how should we care for our children?* (2005), there has been a strong concentration on the difficulty women face in combining paid work and motherhood. These accounts foreground the tense intersections between paid work and child caring, which generate, in the words of Buttrose and Adams, guilt, 'not the ordinary everyday kind of guilt ... but a guilt so powerful and so uniquely related to motherhood that it has a name all of its own' (2005: 1). The intensity of this conflict and resulting guilt is quite often described in apocalyptic terms – an 'epidemic of guilt' by Pocock (2003: 90), for example – or in absolute terms like Manne's stark division between child caring and all other activities: 'Suddenly all time spent at one task was simultaneously time spent away from the other' (2005: 5). These descriptions will certainly echo with women who have children and who hold down paid employment. But we are sure they echo with women who are at home with their children and we suspect that they will equally inform the life narratives of anyone with a partner, a parent or a loved friend, for a sense that our interactions do not fully satisfy the needs of those we care about seems universal. So comprehending the issue of motherguilt is perhaps not simply recognising its existence or measuring its traction, but considering why it shapes so significantly the discussions of paid work and mothering in contemporary Australia.

The schema of British sociologist Catherine Hakim has often been quoted in discussions of women's decisions and this putative discomfort. Hakim argues there are three groups of women that can be identified in most societies: career women, usually with no children, earth mother types with lots of children and little interest in paid work, and the adaptable women in the centre, about 60 per cent, where women are primarily focused on mothering but have 'jobs', not careers. This group

is adaptable because their labour market participation will vary according to social, economic and familial pressures. Their primary focus, though, is their mothering. Hakim suggests that women's pre-existing preferences will shape their decisions more profoundly than social, cultural or economic conditions (2003: 54). This schema suggests an essential component to women's experiences of motherhood, one that diminishes the impact of social policies and cultural attitudes on women's decisions about reproduction and work. It is not surprising perhaps that our current government is attracted by these theories: Hakim's view that 50 per cent of women who have children will come back to the workforce and 50 per cent will not so paid maternity leave is not the central factor in the decision is convenient for a government that does not want to legislate in this area.

But her views seem to have been woven into a framework that undergirds the interventions of influential commentators like Anne Manne (2005), Cathy Sherry (2002a, 2002b) and Angela Shanahan (2002a, 2002b) about what constitutes mothering, and they embed the notion that women with children who do paid work have an uneasy relationship with their workplace activities. Often this is a double dose of guilt and inadequacy about failing in both spheres – and subsequent decisions to work only in one. Ongoing debates about the delivery of quality mothering in particular, the new intensive models of motherhood identified by Sharon Hays in *The cultural contradictions of motherhood* (1996), frame women's experiences and perhaps become shorthand for describing and talking about a life experience that is increasingly common.

It is crucial to recognise that the description of guilt-ridden motherhood is deeply middle class and not sensitive to variations in culture and situation. Any assumption about guilt about working suggests that the ideal situation is one in which the mother is 'present' with her children in particular ways. Yet we know that this particular form of intensive mothering has a very specific historical and social context, with many women combining paid work and mothering despite discourses about attachment and an intense focus on children (Franzway 2005). And the questions about the meaning and usage of motherguilt raised by any historical or social analyses are deepened when we consider the conundrum that, despite workplace barriers and the cultural formulation of motherhood and given the high degree of difficulty and guilt, women with children negotiate these barriers in increasing numbers.

David De Vaus' report on diversity and change in Australian families (2004) indicates that

- overall half of couple mothers with children 0–4 have some employment;
- 30 per cent of lone mothers with children 0–4 have some employment;

- women's labour force participation increases as the age of their youngest child increases: with children 5–9 the participation rate of couple and lone mothers alike is higher;
- for women with children 10–14, full time employment rates lift while part-time employment remains stable (De Vaus 2004: 302–303).

While accounts of workplace change most often reflect limited progress, women then are pushing forward into these paid–caring work balancing acts in ever increasing numbers. Young women expect to do both (Maher 2005) and De Vaus' account goes so far as to suggest that social attitudes towards women's employment and mothering combinations are actually changing with increasing approval of employed mothers being apparent (2004: 311). So, do we assume that these women who do paid work are choosing torment and trouble in their insistence on working while battling their feelings of guilt and the structural barriers? Or do we think about alternative explanatory models that move beyond narratives of having it all, having it all and hating most of it, or choosing to have none of it? And do we consider whose interests are served by a focus on motherguilt? For if mothers are guilty and think they should be at home, or feel they can not manage workplace demands and mothering demands in tandem, then work and mothering (and parenting more generally) are reinforced as separate and inherently conflicting fields of endeavour, and the combination is not seen as the responsibility of employers or governments. Women have to work out their own guilt and workplaces stay the same.

The interests we have in these intersections were sharpened by Families, Fertility and the Future, a fertility decision-making study JaneMaree was involved in across the course of 2002, 2003 and 2004 (Maher et al 2004). This study began at the high moment of HREOC's push for paid maternity leave. The team was interested in precisely what impact policy settings had on how people decided to have children and in what numbers, but a significant aspect of the women's stories was how they viewed the work–life balance challenge and how they managed, or not, to achieve combinations of paid work and mothering that worked for them.

### **Families, Fertility and the Future findings**

JaneMaree, with colleagues from Monash University Maryanne Dever, Andrew Singleton and Jennifer Curtin, interviewed one hundred women from five different areas across Victoria: City of Port Phillip, Casey, the North West (focused particularly on Brimbank and Maribyrnong), Gippsland and Bendigo. In each of these areas, the team interviewed women with no children, women with one child, women with two or more children, young women, and women raising children alone. This recruitment pattern achieved a small-scale but substantially representative account of fertility decision making. By recruiting across groups in each area, participants came from different social, economic, cultural and

geographical locations. The only group excluded was those who identified as involuntarily infertile, since this study was focused on how people made decisions about reproduction. The final sample included fifty-eight women with children and forty-two without children. The women ranged in age from 21 to 52.<sup>1</sup>

*What the team found*

- Workplace cultures and experiences were central for women with and without children.
- Social expectations about motherhood had far greater traction for women without children than they did for women with children.

*What the team did not find*

- any variation in career attachment between women with children or women without children or any women who did not support flexible options
- strong indices of motherguilt or crisis.

Motherguilt was specifically addressed through questions about images and ideas of 'good mothers', and it was largely rejected by all the women with children. They acknowledged that they felt guilty sometimes, but these admissions were as likely to come from women who were out of the paid workforce with their children as from women who did paid work. Rather than describing guilt and conflict, they talked of how they balanced their individual needs, their mothering responsibilities and their children's needs. Despite recognising the pressure to be a full-time mother, to focus a 'high level of attention ... [and to have] the capacity to give love unstintingly' (Lupton 2000: 54) to children, most women indicated that their mothering practice was not driven by this understanding. Even though Peta did not see herself as a career woman, she found combining motherhood and paid work offered a benefit to her life and sense of self-worth.

I would never have considered myself all that career-minded; however going back two days a week provided ... a nice balance. I was enjoying being at home with my baby and I was also enjoying those two days [at work].

Norah said of her paid employment:

It's not, as such, work. It's more something I really enjoy, so it's a part of my life that I find really stimulating. ... I find [that] sort of fundamental to my personality.

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<sup>1</sup> All names and identifying details have been changed. The study received ethics approval from the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans.

Grace said, 'You have to find a balance of your needs and the children's'. These were all pragmatic accounts which assigned value to each sphere of activity and sought to maximise satisfaction in each. These women with children presented a flexible and activity-based account of what they did as mothers and workers and did not identify different modes of labour or identity across their different areas of work (see Maher 2005). Unlike Manne, in the quotation we offered earlier in the paper, they did not see one type of activity as inherently in conflict with another.

This pragmatism was most evident in the women with three or more children and their labour market attachment. Twenty women in the study of 100 had between three and six children. On conventional cultural understandings, on Hakim's schema, these women were least likely to see careers as central but, in fact, this group of women were most focused on keeping their labour market options open and active and did not see themselves as 'maternal types'.

Maureen said, 'I found it quite difficult being at home as a full-time mum' and Lilian echoed this, saying, 'I'm not a person who was ever particularly fond of children, or babies or things like that ... I ... surprised myself with my own'. Louise, who now has five children, identified a big change in her life: 'When I first got married I wasn't having children. I had absolutely no intention of having children.'

This group of women was the most focused on labour market conditions and policy settings. They talked specifically about flexibility, maternity leave and their marketability as an important part of their planning and thinking around having more children. Maureen, talking about child number three, said, 'I knew there was the availability of part-time, certainly that was part of our consideration at the time ... I felt I was making a really good compromise ... I varied the amount I worked'. Maureen also noted that her husband 'was in a job that earned more money', indicating that this had impacted on how they had configured the working/caring roles. Brenda said, 'I certainly did challenge the idea that you had to choose [work] or [motherhood]'. Although Lucinda said she was not career driven, the longest she had been out of the workforce while having her four children was two years. Women who had combined work and family in this group reflected on how important maternity leave and the possibility of part-time work had been for them. This flexibility had not only been important for the economic benefits. These women suggested that work was important for other reasons, too. Rosemary said, 'I will be flat out with three children and that in itself is a full-time job, but just something for myself, that I work and I've got another identity'.

So, despite well-entrenched cultural visions about maternal preference, maternal feelings and the 'good mother', and despite the strength of discourses of discomfort around paid work and mothering, women with children did not describe conflict or

guilt but rather offered a nuanced and complex account of how the needs of their children and themselves could be met in current circumstances.

### **The effects of guilt**

There are clear impacts on all women if guilt is seen as almost synonymous with the conditions of contemporary mothering. It lessens focus on the issues that constrain women's choices and decisions about paid work, like the gender pay gap, the inflexibility of workplaces and the sense that one is making a 'mickey mouse' choice by working part-time. The issues that impacted on all the women in our study were workplace issues: quality part-time work, adequate leave provisions, support for flexibility and a career track that does not require 24/7 commitment. We suggest that these goals are not just relevant to parenting but are workplace reforms critical to all workers that slip off the agenda when motherguilt is used to describe the experiences of employed mothers. The assumption that women's workplace interests are different on this basis divides women and reduces the pressure for workplace reform.

Women in Australia with children do work for the most part: more than 50 per cent of women with young children are in the paid workforce and the entry of women with young children into the paid workforce has been one of the most sustained labour patterns in the last three decades in Australia, as is the case across the western world. While it is critical to continue to confront and articulate the very real problems caused for women by the lack of workplace advance in Australia (EOWA 2004; OECD 2002), there seems to be a need for a new conceptual framework to consider women's participation and achievements, to examine how and why women are doing it and what tactics they use. Such data could produce positive impacts on policy settings and push labour markets towards real change. The key questions for us now are: are women themselves developing new models and forging new practices as mother workers that allow for the successful combination of mothering and paid work? How can we seek to understand and emulate them?

### **Conclusion**

In interpreting what the women with children said about their experiences as mothers and their choices, we do not want to suggest there were no women who had always really wanted babies, and no women who feel guilty and struggle with conflicts between work and mothering. But the vast majority of women expressed a desire to achieve in a range of different spheres, often including motherhood, which they did not perceive as contradictory or in conflict. Simple divisions between the aspirations of 'mothers', whether in paid employment or not, and other women were not apparent, since all women sought rewarding work, fair and equitable conditions and the opportunity to live a full personal life, however that

was configured. Women expressed respect for the choices of others, not resentment, and initiatives to make work–life balance easier were seen as beneficial for all.

Susan Lambert has argued that the ‘increasing number of women in the labour force has accentuated [the] ill fit between existing work requirements and personal responsibilities’ (1993: 240) for women and men. Focusing on motherguilt only serves to reiterate that the basis of that ill-fit is something fundamental, rather than something that needs to be addressed in workplaces and policy settings. It may limit our capacity to understand the ways that women themselves may be reforming their mothering and employment in order to produce manageable and perhaps even successful outcomes. It may limit our capacity to produce policies and structures to support them.

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