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# Choice and the Relationship between Identities and Behaviour for Mothers with Pre-School Children: Some Implications for Policy from a UK Study

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on the findings and policy implications of a UK study that used both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate mothers' decision-making with respect to the interlinked issues of the care of their pre-school children and their own employment. Mothers were found to have both internal and external constraints on 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 were therefore adjusted to each other, giving rise to feedback effects at both the individual and the social level.

While the constraints of identity limit the direct effectiveness of some policies, the long-term effectiveness of others may be enhanced by positive feedback arising from attitudes changing along with behaviour. A 'policy multiplier' is defined as the ratio of such indirect to direct effects. This is likely to be greater for enabling policies that lift existing constraints and enable choices that were previously not available, than for coercive policies that impose new constraints on behaviour. The article 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.

## **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 pre-school 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 pre-school 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 *et al.*, 2001; Albrecht *et al.*, 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 *et al.*, 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 *et al.*, 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 *et al.*, 1999, 2000; Joshi *et al.*, 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. Currently, 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 tend to be poor, and many of the

partnered mothers in these families will be tomorrow's lone parents (Gregg *et al.*, 1999). Neither their partnership nor their partner's employment alone provides 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, 2000a), 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 partnered 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, 2002a). 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, 2002b: Chapter 4). This is described as 'providing more choices for lone parents who are considering work' (HM Treasury, 2000: Chapter 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 deploys 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 identities and 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 life-style preferences: some women are work-oriented whereas 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 reflecting 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, 2001: 244).

A third view on mothers' decision-making comes from two US studies focusing on mothers' selection of care for their children, rather than on their employment decisions (Pungello and Kurtz-Costes, 2000; Peyton *et al.*, 2001). These studies 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 attitudes and the care they choose for their children. However, such a relationship between attitudes and behaviour is not significant for mothers who say that they need the income from paid work. Nevertheless, Pungello and Kurtz-Costes found that such choices have significant feedback effects on attitudes. 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 article draws on a study designed to gain a better understanding of how mothers decide about the interlinked issues of the care of their pre-school children and their own employment. In-depth two-stage interviews investigated the relationship between identities, 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 article 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 subsections describe the methods used in the interview study and its overall findings. The next three subsections 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 identities at both the individual and the social level. The section that follows explores the implications of such feedback for the effectiveness of different types of policy. It defines the 'policy multiplier' as the ratio of indirect to direct effects of a policy, and argues that this should be greater for enabling policies that lift existing constraints and enable choices that were previously not available than for coercive policies that impose new constraints on behaviour. 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 objectives of increasing employment and reducing child poverty.

## **The qualitative study**

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants*

Thirty-four mothers with at least one pre-school 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 various means so as to arrive at a sample that reflected local variety in mothers' employment decisions and childcare arrangements. Eleven of the mothers were in full-time, 16 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 crèche 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 UK 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 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 views 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, 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 were expressed in terms that ranged from moral imperatives to personal requirements:

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: married with two children, aged two years and two months, looking after children full-time)

I love her to death but couldn't be with her all the time. (Louise: part-time IT manager, married with one two-year-old child, uses a full-time nursery place)

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 interpretative element that depended on individual identities.

The notion of 'identity' being used here is of 'something at the core of each individual which unifies the fragmentation of experience' (Taylor, 1998: 335), a self-defining statement that is used to make sense of a decision that has been made. Mothers used their identity statements to explain the 'choices' they had made as characteristic of themselves, to indicate how they construed the decisions they had faced so that only certain options were under consideration because of who they were. Thus identity constructed in the interview process was both used to rule out possible courses of action and confirmed by the process of ruling them out. Duncan and Edwards (1999) expressed a related idea when they used the term 'gendered moral rationalities' to account for the varying understandings they found of mothers' responsibilities towards their children, that were 'providing answers about the right thing to do' (Duncan *et al.*, 2003: 313). However, we preferred to use the notion of 'identity' to capture how views expressed were personal and self-defining, not therefore providing an answer as to what was *the* right thing to do, but instead defining what that particular mother felt right doing because of who she was.

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 interpretative 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 saw their family as requiring and about the effect that a child should be allowed to have on their parents' life-style.



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 aspects of their identity. 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: full-time administrator, married with one two-year-old child, uses a nursery)

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 pre-school children were in paid employment, and that the full-time care-taking 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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'.<sup>4</sup>

### **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.

Some mothers believed that they themselves should be their child's main carer. Some 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 on the type of childcare 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: part-time lecturer, married with two children aged two years and five months, uses a nursery)

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: part-time nursery assistant looking for a full-time job, lone parent with a two-year-old child, uses a nursery)

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 any more, that would be a big problem because it costs nearly £200 a month to have the boys in the crèche 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: part-time administrator, married with twins two years old, uses a mixture of different types of childcare)

Shift work 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 shift workers 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 of 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: part-time lecturer, married with two children aged two years and five months, uses a 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 Alex, whereas a lot of people come back when 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. (Karen: full-time administrator, married with a one-year-old child, uses a workplace nursery)

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 bank manager, married with a one-year-old child, uses a nursery)

Financial considerations prevented some mothers from reducing their working hours. For others, their own and their partner's employer's flexibility, as

well as their partner's 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 in practice more significant 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 assumed 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: full-time supervisor in a bank, married with a two-year-old child, uses a nursery).

Those lower down the hierarchy had less power in negotiating their hours, but were more interchangeable with other workers and so employers might be able to 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 partner's employer's 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's 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: part-time bank clerk, married, with two children one year and three years old; husband is self-employed; family helps with childcare)

The father's level of involvement had significant effects on how constrained a mother's own time was. Those who could rely on fathers to look after children or pick up 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, mothers might try to change those circumstances and/or some aspects of those identities might change. Such changes were investigated partly through second interviews with selected mothers for whom significant changes had taken place in their employment or domestic circumstances, their childcare arrangements or their views on how to cope as a mother. However, by the time of the first interviews, comparable changes were frequently reported as having already happened, so these data were also used as a source for studying 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 afford 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 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 view of themselves as workers. Some reacted to the time pressures of involuntary full-time work by adopting an identity based on efficient time-management and coping against the 'insane' odds. Some others who had previously seen themselves as highly work-oriented, talked about losing interest and resenting every hour spent away from their child, and took a more instrumental attitude to their work.

Some, feeling let down and unappreciated by employers who did not return previous loyalty, changed both identities and behaviour. Feeling unrewarded for past achievements became the basis of an identity that allowed Sophie to threaten to impose a solution unilaterally:

I have given them the ultimatum, that come the 1 January I am working two and a half days. So whether you find me a job share or not I am going to be working two and a half 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 bank manager, married with a one year child, uses nursery)

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 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. Second interviews also showed cases where identity changed as a result of external events. These could be empowering or disempowering. Louise, whose identity as a skilled and therefore indispensable worker was employed in her first interview to explain her success in negotiating her ideal flexible working arrangement, was much less confident by the time of her second interview. She had returned from her second maternity leave to find that her company had been taken over and her part-time job re-designed and effectively downgraded. Although, through the threat of legal action, she had been restored her previous status, she had not recovered her belief that she was empowered by her skills and entitled as a part-time worker to senior status:

So you have these meetings [with other members of the managerial team] and you just think, are they just paying lip service, did they have to give me a job legally and they don't really believe in it or do they actually think it's working out. (Louise: IT manager, married with two children aged 3 years and 7 months, uses a nursery)

However, Rebecca, who had a two-year-old child, had found that a change in circumstances had enabled her to consider an identity that had not seemed open to her before. In her first interview, she explained that she had given up a full-time job to become a childminder because she had found that she could not bear to leave her child. By the time of her second interview, her marriage had broken up and she had given up childminding for a better paid job. Although she wanted to reduce the hours she was working, she no longer felt that she had to be with her child all the time and praised the introduction of the Working Family Tax Credit for enabling her to have a part-time job and pay for childcare.

In some cases changes in identity and behaviour reinforced each other to result in rapid change between interviews. At the time of her first interview, despite enjoying the time with her child that her part-time job gave her, Kate was trying to solve her severe financial difficulties by finding a full-time job so as to be able to afford 'nice things' for herself and her child. One year later, Kate was spending less time with her child and in an even worse financial situation, having decided to leave paid work to pursue a full-time degree in nursing.

Sometimes I just think, oh why am I doing this? Because it is so hectic and there is so much work involved in it and I think, oh god, sometimes I just think I'm crazy. Well you have to be crazy when you do this course; lousy hours, lousy money and you get loads of grief. (Kate: 20-year-old full-time nursing student, lone parent with two-year-old child, uses a nursery)

She talked about herself as ‘crazy’, but had constructed an identity for herself in which job satisfaction and providing a professional service now figured rather than providing for her child financially. At the same time as denying any inconsistency by reading her current identity back into the past, she also recognised that it was the experience of doing the course that had changed her:

The money I don’t think has ever been really a kind of issue for me, I would rather have the job satisfaction and be helping people than the money. We all moan about it, but it is not really the important issue. I think if you want to do that kind of job the money is never the issue, if it was you would have no nurses . . . I think it’s definitely changed my values on things, doing the course. Especially this placement, it’s definitely made me look at things a lot differently . . . it seems that you kind of get involved in like the profession thing.

### **The 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 of 5,000 randomly selected households. At the time this research was conducted, data on attitudes and behaviour of 1,335 mothers of pre-school children over up to nine waves (1991–1999) had been released.

The data from the BHPS were used to investigate what the interviews could not: how identities and behaviour changed over a longer period, but for a much more limited number of variables, none of which really captured the complexity of people’s views about themselves. These included agreement/disagreement with a small set of ‘family values’ statements, including ‘a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works’. This attitudinal variable did not, as we would have liked, focus on what a particular mother felt right doing, the aspect of identity used earlier in this article. Nonetheless it was the most appropriate proxy variable to use and had the great advantage of being asked every other year, giving five waves of data in all. 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 pre-school children working. It shows that those in the contradictory position of being in employment though believing that pre-school children suffered from their mothers’ working were more likely to change their attitude than their behaviour. Nearly half of them (46 per cent) 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 per cent who had resolved that contradiction by giving up employment, though this itself was significantly larger than the 13 per cent who gave up employment of those whose attitudes had not been in conflict with their behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 1. Percentage changing attitudes or behaviour within two years: all mothers with pre-school children current year and two years previously.

Attitude/behaviour two years previously	Attitude change	Behavioural change	Any change
agreed that pre school 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 pre school children suffer if their mother works			
<i>looking after family</i>	20%	29%	46%
<i>in employment</i>	7%	13%	18%

Source: BHPS.

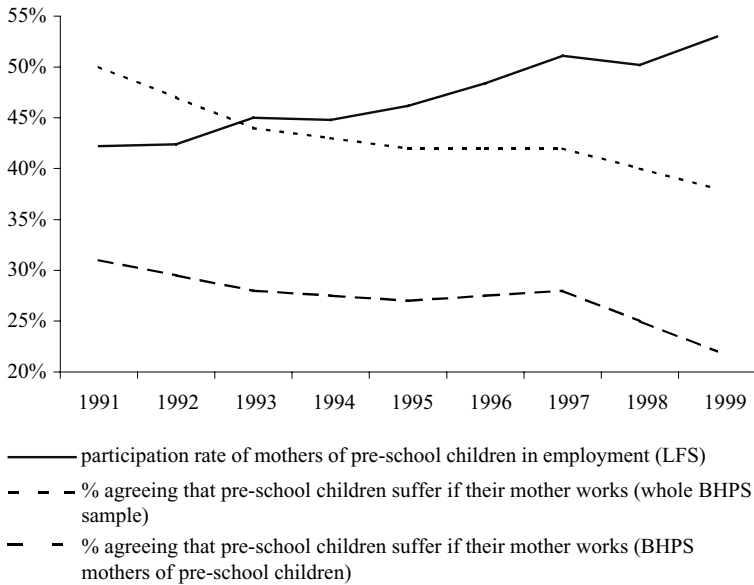


Figure 1. Participation rate of mothers of pre-school children in employment and percentages agreeing that pre-school children suffer if their mother works.

Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS) and British Household Panel Survey (BHPS)

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 pre-school children rose, there was a clear trend in attitudes towards believing that pre-school 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 pre-school children. This is shown in Figure 1, where the two dashed lines show the proportion agreeing with the statement that 'a pre-school 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





Figure 2. Employment status of majority of three best friends by employment status of mothers: all mothers with pre-school children (Source: BHPS, 1991–1999).

are themselves mothers of pre-school children (longer dashes). These proportions show a steadily falling trend as the proportion of mothers of pre-school children in employment (the solid line on Figure 1) rises.

However, Table 1 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 pre-school children suffered if their mother worked, 46 per cent no longer thought so two years later, while only 36 per cent 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 were at home with their family, 21 per cent of those who believed that children suffered if their mothers worked had moved into employment two years later, compared with 29 per cent of those who did not think that maternal employment had a deleterious effect on children.

Together these findings point to attitudes, our proxy for identity, and behaviour having significant feedback effects on each other. Attitudes affect the probability of behavioural change while behaviour affects the probability of attitudinal change. Such a process of mutually reinforcing positive feedback leads 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. 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.

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 pre-school 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 initial attitudes to motherhood are affected by the behaviour of other mothers, but that once a woman has experience of motherhood her own behaviour becomes a greater influence.

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 article (finances, childcare and working time) have both internal and external elements. Policies can impinge directly 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 level and a social level.

Any policy may therefore have not only direct effects, but also 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' are those that lift external constraints and therefore expand options. For example, childcare subsidies enable employment as an option for mothers who cannot earn enough to pay the full cost of childcare. Enabling

policies will directly result in behavioural change only if the constraints that are lifted are in fact 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). However, such behavioural change will produce positive feedback at an individual level by encouraging favourable identities and preventing contrary identities developing (mothers 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 identities of others (with more mothers in employment 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).

Coercive policy that reduces options may have greater direct effect in that it can shift behaviour despite the existence of internal constraints (workfare policies that make the receipt of welfare dependent on taking employment force all lone mothers into employment, not only those whose attitudes are favourable to it). However, the feedback effects of coercive policy 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) (mothers who take employment despite an identity at variance with that behaviour are more likely to retain that identity if they feel coerced into that dissonant position than if they feel responsible for having chosen it). 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 (mothers choosing to take employment and to use childcare who had the option to do otherwise may influence others to consider that option; that mothers on workfare are in employment is unlikely to have such influence).

So while coercive policy may have greater immediate effect 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 enabling policies to further their objectives so as to:

- lift current external constraints that force people to act in ways that do not accord with their current identities;

- do this in such a way that positive feedback is likely to shift future identities in a direction more favourable to behaviour in line with policy makers' objectives.

To do this the government needs to take account of the ways in which people 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 only to a subset of that group. For example, our interviews confirmed the findings of other researchers that lone and partnered mothers identify with each other and do not see themselves as forming distinct groups (Dean, 2001; Duncan *et al.*, 2003). If this is so, policy designed to reach lone parents will be more effective if it applies to all mothers.

### **Specific policy proposals**

To apply these general principles requires paying attention to the way mothers construe the decisions that they face about employment and the care of their children. Enabling policies will be the most effective in the long term because they will have not only an immediate effect but also a multiplied indirect effect through positive feedback. Policies that apply to all mothers will be more effective than those that require specific groups, such as lone mothers, to see themselves as different from other mothers.

Take, for example, the provision of subsidised childcare. The government treats the lack of affordable childcare as a constraint on mothers' employment (rather as it might see the absence of adequate transport). It therefore provides means-tested subsidies for low-income parents in employment through the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit, an instrument whose design makes it particularly suitable for lone parents.<sup>6</sup> Mothers, on the other hand, require employment and childcare arrangements that are compatible with their views about themselves as mothers. For some mothers, the cost and availability of childcare is the only constraint to acting in accordance with an identity that encompasses employment. For others, whose identity as a mother forms a binding internal constraint on their employment decisions, the primary issue is how they want their children to be looked after.

If the government wants to encourage employment among such mothers, or even if its concern was to influence only the lone parents holding such views, it would do better to treat childcare as a benefit to children, rather than just as a way of getting their mothers into employment. To do so convincingly, it would need to ensure that high-quality childcare was available for all children, irrespective of their parents' employment status and ensure that the cost to parents was low enough that no child was excluded by cost.<sup>7</sup> Under these circumstances, both

attitudes to the merits of non-maternal childcare and thus maternal identities that stand in the way of using childcare could be expected to change.

Universal childcare provision would also help mothers move into employment, since having childcare already in place would remove one major obstacle to taking employment. 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. As the widespread use of childcare changed attitudes more generally, there would 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 because a parent 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. Many mothers' identity requires that they take only employment which can be fitted around their requirement for time with their children. Some mothers interviewed were not in employment because they did not believe that this was possible. Policy to ensure that parents can have the leave they require and work the hours they desire would lift another constraint preventing such mothers from finding employment that allows them to act in accordance with their identities.

The government has gone some way in developing policy in this area by legislating to improve maternity leave and pay, introduce unpaid parental leave and require employers to give parents time off in emergencies.<sup>8</sup> It has also given parents of children under six years old the right to request flexible working hours and imposed a duty on employers to consider such requests seriously (though it has not extended equal opportunities legislation to ensure that those making use of such provisions are not unfairly discriminated against).<sup>9</sup> Current legislation, however, does not *require* an employer to meet requests for flexible working. In allowing employers' business needs to take priority, the government is failing to endorse the identities of many of those mothers it is trying to retain in the workforce, those who will choose employment only if it gives them enough time with their children. The government may therefore be losing an opportunity to have far-reaching long-term effects on the views of both employers and mothers as to whether good mothers can also be good employees.

If the government adopted an approach more like that of those mothers who require that employment be fitted around their childcare responsibilities, it would grant an overriding right to parents to adjust their working hours. This would mean that mothers whose identities constrain the hours they give to employment would not have to turn to unskilled work, nor pay the heavy career penalties they currently do in order to have the time they require with their children during the relatively short period when they are small. This in turn should help identities adjust as mothers do not find that being a good mother

precludes having a career, and that an identity that incorporates employment need not be interrupted by motherhood. In turn, more employers too would come to realise that workers who fit their hours of employment around their childcare needs are no less committed workers. Even though there may still be logistical problems for employers, a policy that signals that parents' needs are to have as high a priority as employers' is likely to have more effect than one that automatically sides with employers when the two come into conflict.

An effective and respected right for parents to fit working time around children should help break down gender segregation in employment and in parenting roles, by making it more possible for men to consider working reduced hours for a period. This in turn should help create more equal opportunities in employment. Enabling parents to work flexible hours in all jobs is also likely to have significant knock-on effects by ensuring that those who want to work part-time do not have to accept the low wages and poor working conditions that currently characterise part-time employment. It should also make women more financially self-reliant, so that their own security and their children's future well-being would not depend on the survival of a partnership or on a father's employment prospects alone.

Again, the feedback effects here should be positive in meeting the government's objectives. Both this and the government's commissioned research (DTI, 2000b) show that not being able to work the hours they want keeps some mothers from returning to employment after maternity leave, and makes others more likely to give up employment subsequently. Offered the right hours, more mothers would return to employment after maternity leave, be less stressed doing so, 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.

These two measures, providing universal affordable 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 life-time income forgone) for being mothers, because they give up employment for longer when they have children and typically then return to poor quality part-time jobs (Davies *et al.*, 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 some mothers' resistance to using paid childcare. 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 parents' and 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 are good for both children and parents, and as such are a potential benefit rather than a cost to the economy.

### Notes

- 1 Mothers were selected for second interview by a short questionnaire administered one year after their initial interview.
- 2 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.'
- 3 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, which has a reputation locally for poor public transport.
- 4 This was despite the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), a subsidy to low-income families in which at least one parent was in employment. Of the mothers surveyed, WFTC had helped the lone parents with only one child into employment, but those with more than one child still found the net benefit from employment negligible or non-existent. This included one mother who had returned to paid work when WFTC came in, but had given it up because it had put her in debt for the first time:

I gained extra income from Working Families Tax Credit when I did some work, but I lost it because I didn't get housing benefit, so I was just working to do that and I still had to pay a child carer. It was just too much. (Pat: lone parent, two children aged two and four years, on Income Support).

Housing benefit was mentioned only by lone mothers, but this probably reflects the lack of low-income partnered mothers in our sample. Only one partnered mother received any help from WFTC and that was just a small childcare subsidy.

- 5 For tests of significance and further analysis using the BHPS data see Himmelweit (2002).
- 6 Couples who are both in employment are also eligible for the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit (WTC). However, because WTC is means-tested on household income many low-paid partnered mothers are not eligible for the childcare element because their partners' earnings are too high. Currently the children least likely to receive the benefits of subsidised childcare are those who probably need it most, the children of the unemployed.
- 7 Whether this type of childcare provision can be achieved through the market, for example by adjusting and extending the current tax credit arrangements to all parents, is not a matter for this article. Most probably it would require government intervention on the supply side of childcare too.
- 8 It has also brought in paid paternity leave. Unpaid parental leave and time off for emergencies are available to fathers as well as mothers. Many mothers interviewed saw the conditions of employment of their partners as having important effects on their own possibilities of combining work and employment. However, few thought that their partners would take any form of unpaid leave.
- 9 In the United States, many cases have been documented of workers 'choosing' not make use of their maternity and parental rights for fear it will hurt their careers (Hochschild, 1997).

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