



## Figuring Families: Generation, Situation and Narrative in Contemporary Mothering

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### Abstract

This paper contributes to the theme of the special issue by identifying concepts that both embody relationality and have the capacity to address and articulate temporal processes. Based on an empirical study of first time motherhood, we offer a sensitising conceptual framework which privileges the temporal, scaffolding the macro socio-historical with the micro personal and subjective. The study combines longitudinal and intergenerational approaches to develop an understanding of maternal experience as it unfolds, while forging connections between individual biography, generational investments and intergenerational dynamics. Drawing on a conceptual tool kit from life history, cultural studies, social psychology and sociology, we profile two biographical case studies as an illustration of our approach. Our analysis of their contrasting experiences as 'young' and 'old' mothers demonstrates the salience of key conceptual terms including 'generation', 'situation' and 'narrative' and how this conceptual framework can both map and animate accounts of contemporary mothering.

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**Keywords:** *Motherhood; Generation; Situation, Narrative*

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### Introduction

**1.1** Our contribution to this special issue responds to the editors' challenge of identifying concepts that both embody relationality and have the capacity to address and articulate temporal processes (Gabb and Silva 2001). We do not offer a single concept or idea, but rather a sensitising conceptual framework which privileges temporal processes, scaffolding the macro socio-historical with the micro personal and subjective. It is a conceptual framework that has grown with the challenge of an empirical project investigating the making of contemporary mothering, a study that combines a prospective approach of understanding biography as it unfolds, while forging relational connections between the individual biography, generational investments and intergenerational dynamics. Our contribution fits broadly within a psycho-social approach that holds in tension the integrity of big and small histories, understanding subjectivities as both situated and productive. We draw on a conceptual tool kit from life history, cultural studies, social psychology and sociology. Although we are engaged with new directions within the field, we are also keen to understand how the rich traditions from which these emerge may offer concepts that once dusted off could be combined to do some new work.

**1.2** The paper is organised in four parts, we begin by introducing the empirical study, showing how the research design shaped our conceptual journey – drawing us to ideas of generation, intergenerational dynamics and ideas of figuration and reconfiguration. We then offer the existential 'situation' as a starting point for understanding motherhood as a singular yet diverse condition. The paper moves into two short case studies taken from a rich data set, counterposing the situations of the youngest and oldest mothers in our study. Here we illustrate the sensibility born of our conceptual framework: openness to the operations of the past within the present and the significance of social location for the making of the future. The final part of the paper revisits our conceptual framework in the light of the two case studies, reflecting on the value of our approach as well as identifying potential weaknesses and future lines of development.

**1.3** To begin, in the following two sections we provide a broad, overarching introduction to our study, outlining our research design and key influences shaping our methodological and conceptual approach.

## A comparative and dynamic approach

**2.1** The Making of Modern Motherhood study sets out to capture and relate two dimensions of social division – divisions that exist *between* generations (as captured in relationships between grandmothers, mothers and daughters) and division *within* generations (as captured by diverse women who simultaneously become mothers for the first time). Recognising the complexity of this task, we maintained a substantive but relatively narrow focus on the experience of first time motherhood and the transition into a maternal subjectivity. Located in the unique space of late pregnancy, our research encounters women as they approach birth, and then follows 12 case studies through, into the first year of motherhood. A central objective has been to capture the paradoxical way that motherhood is both one thing and many, and for this reason we generated an initial sample of 62 pregnant women that was diverse in terms of age, social class, ethnicity, nationality, fertility history, disability and sexuality (Thomson et al. 2011).

**2.2** In designing this study we were keen to capture and address two forces that hold the category of motherhood in tension (Thomson 2011). On the one hand we wanted to engage with the question of diversity within the contemporary moment and the way that motherhood both provides the potential for identifications between women as well as the ground for women to experience differences in a heightened way. We wanted to add to this brew a temporal perspective on mothering as experienced by chains of women within families and between generations more collectively, as expressed through control over resources, institutions and representations. In terms of our research design we have translated this into a desire to research of motherhood in two directions: horizontally – as relations between women who share a historical moment, and vertically as relations between intergenerational chains of women within families. It is an approach that seeks to move between an understanding of biographical time as experienced by individuals and within families, and a more collective sense of historical time as experienced by generations and the relationships between generations. Our understanding of generations draws on Karl Mannheim's classic essay (Mannheim 1952) in which he uses a musical metaphor to suggest that the 'zeitgeist' of a period is not a single sound, but can be understood as 'an accidental chord' comprised of notes expressing the distinct *units* that exist within a generation. As with melody, the combination of these notes subtly changes over time. Through a shared social location, members of a generational unit are likely to share values and attitudes, and are in a state of constant *interaction*. Following Mannheim's musical metaphor, we wanted to capture the 'zeitgeist' of contemporary motherhood, made up of the many different 'notes' that are struck by distinct yet contemporaneous generational units.

**2.3** Another of our inspirations has been a study undertaken by Nielsen and Rudberg, (1994, 2000) who traced 22 intergenerational chains of Norwegian women in order to capture historical changes in women's position within Norway in the post war period and understand how change and continuity are mediated within families. Drawing on interview material Nielsen and Rudberg suggest that at any one time there will be a lack of fit between gender identities (the kind of woman that one wants to be), subjectivity (one's sense of 'me') and the social and cultural possibilities available to realise these. The focus of their analysis was cross sectional - identifying common themes in the accounts of three generations (grandmothers born 1910-27, mothers born 1940-48 and daughters born 1971/2). This enabled them to characterise what was distinctive about the account of each generation, and to suggest how successive generations could be understood as reacting to each other. Norway is a less diverse country than the UK and we were aware that we could not assume the same level of coherence within our generations, nor could we map family generation neatly onto historical generation.

**2.4** Our approach was influenced by work in the life history field where a family is taken as the unit of analysis and as a route into the wider social and historical landscape. An important example is Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame's (1997) analysis of single French farming family over five generations, which explores interdependency of destinies and the complex interaction of psychological and social factors over time. The life history tradition is also indebted to Paul Thompson's adaptation of the family systems approaches of John Byng-Hall (1995) – that conceptualizes the family in terms of a continuous contractual relationship, where unresolved emotional dynamics can be transmitted through the 'symbolic coinage' of family stories, within which motifs, patterns and difficulties are repeated and the 'very phrases echo down the generations' (Thompson 1993: 30). Our hope was that by collecting and juxtaposing the accounts of different generations of women about the experience of their first pregnancy and birth, that we might both capture the echoes of an unconscious family 'dialog' (Rosenthal 1998) while gaining insight into how solidarity is maintained between women in the context of changing opportunities and expectations.

**2.5** The arrival of a new generation in a family is a dynamic moment, where expectations hit realities, old roles are shed and new relationships formed. In order to think about change as it happens we have drawn on Norbert Elias' (1978) conception of the configuration, adapting this idea to view participants as points of connection, rather than individuals to be analysed as a unit. The configuration is defined both by relationships, and by temporal processes (coincidences, shared history), and the individual is understood as a point from which it is possible to have a perspective – a conceptual schema also found in child and family psychotherapy (Byng Hall 1995; Stern 1998). We envisaged a longitudinal component to the case studies, designing the research around a critical moment of personal and family change (Holland and Thomson 2010). The prospective dimension of the research brings with it a new range of methodological and epistemological questions arising from how a respondent accounts change over time (Thomson and Holland 2003; McLeod and Thomson 2009). In addition to the generation of successive interview accounts researchers also recorded detailed field notes enabling them to capture a sense of setting as well as capturing unspoken emotional dynamics and allowing researchers to record and reflect on their own subjective responses and changes in these over time. In this respect our approach makes a qualitative contribution to the development of a configurational perspective on family lives, stressing the importance of time, place and timing (including the research process itself), for how we understand interdependencies and the ways they play out and are communicated between generations (Widmer et al. 2008).

## Situations and narratives

**3.1** The concept 'generation' allows us to hold in tension the relationship between historical patterns of continuity and change and the ways in which such changes are lived and expressed within families and the wider culture. The concept of 'configuration' enables us to capture the dynamic processes through which positions and resources are negotiated and realigned over time. The final part of our conceptual framework is offered by the idea of the 'situation' as drawn from the phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir which helps us understand the place of the individual biography within these collective and dynamic processes. De Beauvoir conceptualized women in terms of a bodily 'situation' (1949) that is itself situated in terms of the particularities of lived experience (subjectivity), social arrangements and the norms and discourses that constitute the 'myths of femininity' (Moi 1999:80). In thinking about first time motherhood as a bodily and biographical *situation* it is possible to think about the commonalities of women's lives without ignoring contingencies and differences. For some, reproduction is a struggle that opens the body to expert systems, technologies and collaborations in the form of infertility treatment, assisted conception, surrogacy and adoption. For others, the body is taken for granted: a source of pride and wonder or an imposition to be eliminated or accommodated. The subjective experience of pregnancy and birth are dependent on the personal and economic circumstances of expectant mothers, their positions within families and the intergenerational legacies that come into play as maternal subjectivities are formed. Bodily situations combine with personal histories to locate women differently in relation to norms and discourses of the 'mothering advice industry', maternity services that exist within local and national mothering cultures. The coincidence of these constitutes the situation of mothering, which is itself articulated in and through time. The concept of the *situation* enables us to capture the differently materialised ways in which women of the same generation encounter motherhood, an approach suited both to the diversity of women's lives and the potential of new technologies to disrupt the terms of reproduction (Young 1990; Howie 2010).

**3.2** Although we are interested in what mothers have to say, we do not take their accounts at face value. Metaphors of communication are central to the ways in which theorists such as Volosinov (1973 [1929]) have attempted to capture the process of identity formation, and the relationship between the individual and the social. In recent work on the ways in which the performance of particular gender identities relate to broader configurations of class and gender, Judith Butler (2004) explores the 'social intelligibility of an action' (p.41) that allows for 'certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable ... imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social' (p.42). Identities, practices and performances that lie outside of the norm are unrecognized, illegible and as such unliveable, yet there is always potential for recognition, and in lying outside the norm such identities maintain a (troubling) relationship with the norm. Norms may not be obvious, but are most noticeable in what Butler calls an implicit *normalizing principle*, 'difficult to read, discernable most clearly and dramatically in the effects they produce' (p.41). Echoing these themes of the storied and legible life Plummer (1995) suggests that personal narratives remain an inherently conservative form, speaking to the past rather than the future. It is hard to tell new stories, which can only emerge in the confluence of developing identities and available resources that facilitate both the story telling and its reception. The transition from private story to the generation of a public problem involves struggle and recognition of subjecthood, and the privilege to narrate oneself (rather than to be narrated by others) reflects wider dimensions of social, cultural and economic status (Kirkman et al. 2001, Adkins 2003, Skeggs 2004, Miller 2005).

**3.3** Working with the narratives of expectant and new mothers we have sought to listen for and recognise these struggles for intelligibility, remaining sensitive to the operations of cultural and symbolic capital as well as our own investments and defences as researchers (Lucey et al. 2003). By comparing narratives of mothers across generations it becomes possible to understand the psychic constraints on intelligibility which in turn coalesce with and underpin the culturally available modes of self expression and understanding (Nielsen and Rudberg 2007).

## New motherhood as a psycho-social event

**4.1** Becoming pregnant for the first time can be a well-kept secret or an immediate public announcement, but at whatever time it becomes public, it sends a ripple through all surrounding family and close relationships. The affects of pregnancy are not restricted to the female body or even the balance of the couple relationship. Partners, parents, siblings and other relatives and friends observe the expanding bump and may participate in advice and the gradual accumulation of baby clothes and baby things. With the arrival of a new generation, the whole configuration of interpersonal relationships is disrupted and forced to change to accommodate the need for new roles and additional resources. Birth is an intergenerational act, resulting in an intensive traffic of conscious and unconscious meaning within a relationship network. Mothers and daughters may re-evaluate their relationships from both sides, daughters may come more 'into focus', and mothers are rediscovered in one's own embodiment (Pines 1997). The psychotherapist Daniel Stern writes of the 'pervasive present remembering context' that new mothers experience, where 'old schemas of being-with-mother tumble out' (2008: 183). From a psycho-social perspective Hollway describes new mothers as 'generational pivots – acting as 'powerful transmitters of culture transgenerationally' (Hollway 2010:11).

**4.2** We can also think of new motherhood as inciting new forms of sociality. Couple relationships are subject to radical new demands, and relationships with siblings can be re-energized as parallel projects of parenting unfold and interact (Mauthner 2002; Mitchell 2003). Grandparents may take on a new kind of role (Wheelock and Jones 2002) and new mothers find themselves seeking out relatives and friends with babies rather than those without (Ferri and Smith 2003). The duration of the existing couple relationship also has implications for the perceived challenge represented by parenthood as illustrated by the case studies discussed below. Well-established couples might fear the loss of lifestyle or intimacy, or embrace

the new situation as a shared adventure. Some come together around a shared desire to parent, while others might part as nascent relationships are overwhelmed by its demands, confirming first time parenthood as a major stress point in couple relationships (Walker et al. 2010). In all cases, the situation of mothering is characterised by the challenge of *synchronization*. Within the social sciences a great deal of attention has been paid to the ways in which egalitarian relational practices can 'undo' tradition, facilitating new forms of intimacy between couples and generations (Giddens 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Such practices are not simply 'invented' anew, but travel across the affective connections that span the past and present, and bear the traces of the class journeys traversed.

**4.3** In the wider study that this paper is drawn from we work with interview material with over 60 expectant mothers to conceptualise patterns in our data – for example the salience of 'age' which we suggest operates as a canonical narrative (Kirkman et al. 2001) through which women locate their own autobiographies as mothers, with the youngest talking about their impending birth as marking the 'end of childhood', the oldest talking in terms of 'the last gasp of fertility' and the middle age group talking in terms of 'effective biographical planning' (Thomson et al. 2011). We argue that age operates as an organising category through which normative discourses on good mothering circulate. In a context where most women are delaying the birth of their first child, young mothers become visible as non-mobile, economically inactive subjects. New motherhood, marked by the polarisation of early and late pregnancy can be the medium through which social class is remade in the neo-liberal economy. Below we explore some of the nuances and contingencies of the production, reproduction and disruption of inequality through two case studies drawing on interviews and observations with family members over a period of time beginning in 2005 and ending in 2009. We also maintain a focus on age by counterposing the examples of Kim, who at 16 was one of the youngest mothers in our study, and Marion, who at 49 was the oldest. What is offered in these case studies is not an explication of concepts in action, but a form of writing, 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973), made possible by a theoretical framework that sensitises us to their operation within a rich body of qualitative data including interviews, observations and reflection.

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**4.4** Kim was born in the late 1980s and brought up in Zimbabwe until the age of 10. Her grandmother Nancy emigrated to Zimbabwe at the age of 16 in 1962, and her mother Gillian was born in the country. At school in Zimbabwe Kim had been academically successful and the family had been relatively affluent. Following a period of civil unrest and political turmoil, the ethnically white family returned to the UK in the late 1990s (where the grandparents lived), and her mother remarried and had another child. Once in the UK Kim planned to become a lawyer and declared to her family that she will never have children. The move from Zimbabwe to a new town in the UK is traumatic for Kim. Her identity as high achieving, can-do girl made her unpopular with peers in her new social context. She is bullied at school and leaves formal education. While on a home schooling programme, Kim's bedroom became her personal space, her classroom, and the site of her sexual initiation with her stepfather's nephew – an event that is subsequently becomes unspeakable within the family. Across several interviews, her mother, Gillian, recounts her anger, physically attacking the young man and throwing him out of the house. Kim's sister is, according to mother Gillian, 'shocked and disgusted', and said, 'I will never do that and I refuse to be called Auntie.' Friends of Kim are also shocked by her pregnancy - she 'didn't seem the type'. Kim gives up formal schooling and completes a parenting course for young mothers while pregnant.

**4.5** Putting her anger aside, Kim's mother takes charge. She describes outlining the options to Kim and supporting her decision to have the baby. As in other family matters, Gillian positions herself at the centre of the family drama. Orchestrating events, Gillian buys pregnancy magazines for Kim, has found out about benefits and allowances she will be entitled to, and has started to stockpile baby things. Gillian tells us:

'I said to her, well you've got three options, you can keep it, you can have an abortion or you can put up for adoption. Whatever decision you make, make sure it's the correct one, and I will stand by whatever your decision is.'

**4.6** The choices, however, are haunted by the lingering trace of Gillian's own experience as a pregnant young woman forced to leave the parental home by her father. Experiencing the shame of early motherhood and the struggle to recover from it, Gillian does not want the moralism of the past revisited upon her daughter. Kim becomes contradictorily positioned within the family as a child with a child. Gillian refers to her as 'still a child', and a dependent, adding, 'I brought her in to the world, she's my responsibility until the age of 21.' As the pregnancy progresses, Kim begins to imagine herself as a mother, saying that she wants to make sure the baby has everything before anything else. She doesn't express an identity shift but feels that others treat her differently. Kim tells us that she 'lost contact with a lot of my friends, I don't hear from a lot of them now that I'm pregnant.'

**4.7** The birth, like the family situation of coping with a baby daughter of a teenager daughter, is turbulent, and Kim appropriately names her daughter Tempest. Her mother and grandmother attend the birth, after which Kim passes out and cannot look after Tempest for several days. She tells us that she discharged herself from hospital

'and came home and my mum and my gran did the night shift with Tempest so that I could get some sleep... So after about the third day then my mum went back and said "you know you've got to start now, it's your baby, it's not my baby."'

**4.8** When we meet Kim again a year after the birth we discover that she was subsequently diagnosed with post natal depression. Gillian comments: 'she was very depressed and sitting crying and one minute she'd want the baby and next minute she didn't want the baby so all very emotional and so she had lots of support and people coming helping her...' Kim was happy for Nancy and Gillian to see to Tempest and they

are caught between supporting Kim and taking over. Living with contradiction appears to be woven into the fabric of the family as documented by an ethnographic field note (Thomson et al. forthcoming). In this case the researcher observed the emotional staging of family events in the encounter:

Gillian sits down next to Kim and is clearly intent on presiding over events. Her body language tells me there is no shifting her. I'm feeling chilled and resign myself to living with it. Also this seems part of the family dynamic – mum knows everything, nobody has any privacy, the living room is a public stage for family dramas and mum has the last word... Lots of contradictions emerge during the course of the interview. Mum is orchestrating events, present at birth and with help of grandmother, takes over care of the baby immediately but also says that Tempest is Kim's baby and they had to hang back to make Kim realise this. At later point says that Kim is still a child, she has a responsibility to her as a child even though she has a baby. She could never throw her out like other mums did. Mum says that Kim won't meet a nice boy on the estate where they live, it's too rough, then proceeds to name a couple of boys who Kim should have her eye on. Kim says that one of them has a girlfriend but mum says he's not happy with her and hints that Kim should consider stepping in. Lots of othering throughout the interview to establish the family as different: us/the estate; us/health care professionals; us/other young mums; us/Tempest's father; us/drug users (Field notes 4.4.07).

**4.9** Tempest's birth has a subtle but significant impact on family dynamics. After a year, Gillian is more in charge than ever, taking responsibility for Tempest as Kim still has to be reminded to feed her daughter and attend to her needs, so much so that Kim claims that her mother relates to Tempest as a daughter rather than a grand-daughter. Tempest has bonded with Gillian and Kim's stepfather. Kim and her sister still have their differences but her younger brother (a toddler) is jealous of the baby and appears to resent the attention she gets. Kim continues to rely on her mother, counts on her support on all matters involving Tempest and goes to her first when things go wrong. A year after her daughter's birth she is planning to take a course in floristry. State support enables Kim to use childcare while she is at college. She and her mother chose a childminder together, visiting locally registered women and deciding jointly what is best for Tempest. Her mother provides additional support by giving lifts to and from the childminders and looking after Tempest on other occasions. She is aware that many people feel she is overbearing and too involved with her daughter's life but she is unapologetic. Gillian and Kim appear to support one another in dealings with people outside the home.

**4.10** The overarching trajectory of Kim's family story is one of downward social mobility, declining social capital and the lack of cultural capital. In less than a decade Gillian and her family moved from occupying a position of privilege in Zimbabwe to living in rented accommodation on a council estate in a new town neighbourhood associated with disadvantage, a loss of status. The migration cycle that returns the family to Britain 40 years after their departure in search of a better life, faces them with a difficult reintegration into working class life on the borders of social exclusion. Gillian recalls leaving Zimbabwe with 'three children and four suitcases', an emblematic memory of who they were and what was left. Downward mobility for this family appears congruent with growing health problems and increasing reliance upon state support, social services and medical services. Considering the family over time highlights the unfolding of social experience across generations and how specific events have an impact upon family members as agentic beings and gendered subjects. The story of this family points to the ways in which families shape-shift through changing socio economic circumstances, and in this case adapting to a new social and material environment. Kim's unplanned pregnancy provides a focus for the trauma of displacement and a reorientation of family resources and strategy. Gillian remains the mother allowing Kim to continue to be a child.

**4.11** It is possible to see families as always bound on class journeys, intensified by moments of generational change. The Thompson's troubled re-integration into the English working class is marked by conflict, contradiction and the constant need to differentiate themselves from those around them. The downward social mobility of the family intersects with ethnicity as their former affluence rested upon their status as white Africans who had enjoyed the privileges afforded to expatriate communities. Moving between contexts where white is differently signified as a category that can be hyphenated with elite or trash complicates the class journey as a rapid and dramatic fall from grace; symbolically more of a parachute jump than a sliding down the social ladder. While Kim appears at first glance to conform to the stereotype of teenage pregnancy being predominantly a working class phenomenon, the family's recently affluent past makes their present status difficult to live with.

**4.12** The other case we engage with in this paper, Marion West's family, by contrast, show a journey in the opposite direction and can be placed on an upwardly mobile trajectory. As members of the 'labour aristocracy' in a northern English mill town, the family narrate a version of themselves as the archetypal, aspiring working-class-made-good. We meet Marion when she is eight months pregnant, living in a new town, not far from Kim.

**4.13** The West's can be seen as a post war, welfare state success story. Reaping the benefits of universal healthcare, improved schooling and grants for higher education, both daughters went to university, achieving professional careers and positions that were out of reach for their parents. A rich vein of working-class respectability runs through the family narrative, making hard work and moral integrity essential features in the quest to live a good life. In separate interviews, Marion and her sister Christine conjure up a loving family and a caring, well ordered childhood. Being a child was a rule-bound affair – there were places they were allowed to play and places that were prohibited. The boundaries changed over time as they got older, incrementally they could do more and go further. There were set routines for everything – play, homework, television, mealtimes, bedtime. Offering a glimpse into the seemingly random sediments of memory, Christine recalls that they were 'all together as a family' and that she and Marion were dressed in

the same clothes on special occasions – she remembers identical blue party dresses.

**4.14** At 49 years old Marion regarded this pregnancy as her last chance for a longed-for baby. She and her husband Richard have become more closed and isolated since the birth of their daughter. Both have been married in the past, but for each, this is their first child. Working as public sector professionals, Marion and Richard meet on a social trip organized by people at work. Spending a day together they found they had a lot in common, thought the same way about things and finished off each other's sentences. The relationship developed rapidly from this point. Marion had always wanted children, and at the age of 48, after two earlier miscarriages, she was overjoyed to be pregnant. In contrast, Richard has always felt ambivalent about fatherhood, in his words 'I didn't ever think that I would miss not having children...', although he was very happy when it happened. In contrast to Kim's situation, everyone is thrilled by Marion's pregnancy. Sadly, Marion's mother died some years before and she expresses intense regret that she is no longer there to share the joy of becoming a mother with her. Marion takes solace in the thought that her mother knew that they were continuing to try for a baby. Her father is delighted at the news, and becomes very emotional, he always felt that Marion should be a mother. Friends are also pleased, although Marion reports that many of them don't seem to have adjusted to what this may mean for them, and they may not be able to expect the same level of involvement from her in the future.

**4.15** For Marion, the sequence of couple-marriage-children is very much the appropriate order. It had worked for her family.

'I have this very clear idea that um, having a baby is something about being in a couple and being close together, it's not about you doing it individually. And in a way I could have had children a lot earlier if I'd had a different viewpoint. But to me it was absolutely essential that it was part of a loving relationship, not – not anything else...'

**4.16** Marion often refers to her 'core values', seen as legacy of the previous generation, particularly those her own mother had imbued in her: integrity, trust, and doing the right thing. For Marion, the couple is paramount, the guiding framework that takes a person through life and from which all other things emanate. The couple relationship is so important it has to be right – and that means emotionally right rather than anything else – 'an equally balanced strong relationship'. Marion's ideal bears a strong similarity to the 'pure relationship' as conceptualized by Giddens (1991), suggesting that this ideal theoretical category may have its origins in the imagination of a post-war working class childhood. Marion's preferred version of intimacy suggests that the reflexive project of self may be linked to ideas of 'coupledom' and respectability within particular class-cultural contexts and with a longer biography than late or high modernity.

**4.17** After having their daughter, Bethan, Marion and Richard decide that they don't want anyone else to look after her before she goes to school. Working freelance, Marion occasionally takes on a training job, then Richard arranges leave of absence from work to take over the childcare.

**4.18** The cases of Kim and Marion illustrate the contrasting nature of coupledom in this early period of family life. For Kim, the couple that counts is herself and her mother Gillian, who provides emotional and practical support and makes joint decisions about Tempest. For Marion, because of the closeness of the family unit and the preciousness of a longed-for baby, the couple is extended into a tight threesome that includes Bethan. The situation of motherhood is shaped profoundly by age and the existing duration of the couple relationship, as well as by class (though not in straightforward ways). While Marion is not representative of all the older mothers in our study, her case communicates the logic of her situation where motherhood involves a folding inwards, and a connection to memory and the past. There are literally fewer relatives, and those around have less capacity to help. Yet friends are not invited in and child care is considered with some suspicion, the couple appears to have the capacity to absorb the project of the child in its entirety.

**4.19** The interaction of social class with age is not straightforward, however, Marion and Kim illustrate the possibilities that motherhood opens up in relation to each. As financially stable mature parents, Marion and Richard's relationship is consolidated by the birth of Bethan and they have the resources to support their choice to be sole carers of their daughter. Young motherhood, by contrast, throws Kim into an expanding network of relationships as Tempest becomes part of the extended family of parents, grandparents and siblings, with Gillian as the co-parent. Social services and health care professionals are also involved in the care of Kim's daughter. For Kim herself, intimacy and the possibility of coupledom is mediated by the presence of her family and her daughter. Having a child has not put her off relationships but it may involve some delicate manoeuvring that family members are likely to have something to say about. The contrasting experience of Marion and Kim illustrates the very different challenge that can be posed by new motherhood, generating very different ways of 'doing' family; a personally financed retreat into the privacy of the couple and the home or a more public set of connections to extended family and local service providers.

### **Conceptualising modern motherhood: (re)configuring relationships**

'this simultaneity of the historical-cultural determination of what it means to be a mother and the unique first-timeness of the experience means that new motherhood identities should not be simply understood as pre-given and externally produced, but as developed and creatively made by mothers themselves out of the social, material and psychic resources available in their external settings, their relationships, their life histories and current experiences'. (Elliott et al. 2009: 19)

**5.1** In the first part of this paper we set out a broad conceptual framework that has helped us think through our rich and diverse data set. We have drawn on the idea of the 'situation' taken from the existential

feminism of Simone de Beauvoir, which allows us to think about the temporary state of pregnancy at the same time as holding in tension the specificity and commonality that women experience as they are positioned in and through institutional and cultural processes. Kim and Marion become mothers at the same historical moment, within a couple of miles of each other, sharing antenatal services. The situation can be simultaneously embodied, biographical and specific, yet also understood as produced and constrained by historical circumstance and social patterning. Kim's body may bounce back where Marion's will not. Our situation orients us towards distinct cultures of mothering, realised both in terms of local values, practices and resources and in the way we encounter shared cultural resources and representations.

**5.2** The concept of the situation encompasses the biographical, but also lets us move beyond it in order to think about how a coincidence of situations may constitute a generation, within which there is diversity, complexity and potential solidarities – shaped in part for example by divergent trends towards both older and younger mothering. If we think of motherhood as a situation our attention is not consumed by questions of being, but rather oriented towards questions of doing – what does this situation allow and how are we placed (Wetherell 2009: 5)? As a thread within feminist thought, this contingent approach solves many of the problems associated with thinking about women as simultaneously the same and different, and as both socially located yet active and creative (Young 1990; Moi 1999; Howie 2010). Yet the concept of 'the situation' also has weaknesses. By definition the idea of the situation draws our attention to the individual biography, and although we might engage with coincidence we are not encouraged to think about complicity, dependencies and entanglements, or how one situation may be dependent on another.

**5.3** In an attempt to respond to this we have drawn on a complementary concept for our study, this time taken from the work of Norbert Elias, that of the 'con-figuration'. For Elias individual situations constitute nodes within a configuration. For our purposes in this study, a configuration could be a family, defined at any moment in time by the relationship that exists between situations. The family looks different from the perspective of each of these positions, and as situations change, so family relationships re-configure. The arrival of a new generation within a family generally constitutes a significant moment of change and realignment, which both remakes situations, relationships and perspectives. Kim enters motherhood from the position of the daughter and is held in this place by Gillian's ongoing ability and desire to be the parent. The 'situation' of Kim's maternity does not result in a reconfiguration of the family but rather constitutes an anomaly that is a shared responsibility, mediated by family members and others. Marion on the other hand feels that her mother's death has denied her some of the pleasure of realignment in family roles, which must be imagined rather than enacted. Peers rather than parents provide a key audience for the expression of a changed situation, as the couple revise their obligations and investments.

**5.4** The third key term that we have worked with is 'narrative', encompassing both the shared 'canonical narratives' that are available within the culture and the smaller narrative claims through which selves are brought into being and remade continually. This focus is partly a consequence of the centrality of talk to our method, but also, derives from our interest in the work that stories do in making experiences intelligible and available for representation and response. Our close reading of narratives of conception and birth demonstrate the important role that story telling plays in connecting the situation of the individual to that of a couple and a wider network of family, friends and professionals. It is also possible to hear the echoes of earlier stories that continue to circulate within families as well as revealing the absence of stories about more difficult and embodied experiences. By building family case studies and returning to participants over time we also build up a picture of the iterative character of narrative, with what is apparently the same phenomena revisited in new circumstances, and the passage of time giving rise to the most radical perspective on difference in which the past is remade within a constantly changing present. For the Thompson family, narratives of crisis and drama are a recurrent motif, licensing an unapologetic family project of solidarity. For the West family, motifs of order and routine recur, connecting Marion's own childhood and that which she can offer Bethan, licensing a privatised romantic project of family that is heavily imbued with memory.

**5.5** Yet, the term narrative also has limitations, failing to capture more visual and embodied processes of meaning making, affective exchange and display (Kehily and Thomson 2011). In an increasingly visual and mediated culture different conceptual and methodological tools are needed to explore the operations of gender (Coleman 2009), the mediation of expertise (Tyler 2008, Jensen 2010) as well as encounters between mothers, others and the environment as they read each others bodies, kit and styling in knowing ways and play a part in assembling connections between things, places, people and feeling. Ideally practices are documented through observation and we have had the opportunity to explore this in further research not reported here (Thomson et al. forthcoming). Practices appear to be critical in the ways that mothers distinguish themselves from each other with particular commodities, styles of use and embodied practices (breast/bottle feeding) communicating social class and ethnic identifications. Practices are also central to the ways in which intergenerational connections are experienced, with embodied memories and physical styles of parenting evoked in practice, as well as the ways in which women learn to perform motherhood, partly through mimesis and repetition and partly through taking on ritualised intergenerational practices.

## **Concluding comment**

**6.1** In terms of a broader sociology of the family our approach sits within a phenomenological turn associated with a shift away from defining the form and functions of 'the Family', towards an interest in family practices (Morgan 1996, 2011; Gabb 2008), the claiming of family connections (Edwards and Strathern 2000; Mason and Tipper 2008) and the negotiation of obligations (Finch and Mason 1993; Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000; Irwin 2003). We are particularly interested in the ways that changing material circumstances are mediated through intimate and affective practices (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997/2003; Smart 2007; Charles et al. 2008, Widmer et al. 2008, Walkerdine 2009; Wetherell forthcoming)

and how new motherhood operates iteratively as a profound yet linking event within personal biographies, demanding creativity in the form of individual and collaborative responses (Thomson 2008; Baraitser 2008).

**6.2** In the two case studies presented here we hope to have gone beyond what people say about themselves, (or the contradictions between successive accounts of self), to capture something of the emotional projects that are embedded within families and which provide motivating resources as well as limiting constraints (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997). By exploring families over time, remaining with them as they encounter and respond to new challenges, it becomes possible to gain a social and historical perspective on their specificity. The expressive character of family journeys does not simply provide insight *into* internal family dynamics; it also turns our attention *outward* to the dynamics between the family and the wider environment. Rather than thinking of families as 'typical' of a generation, social location we can think of them as the creative medium through which the continuous yet uneven series of generation is achieved. Our ability to recognise these processes is partly enabled by a research design that employs a range of qualitative techniques within a cross generational and longitudinal design. Yet we would also argue that our focus on situations, figurations and narratives provides us with the sensitising tools that allow us to notice and connect the psycho, social and historical dimensions of family dynamics. Generally, we have drawn on and articulated existing concepts rather than inventing new. Our approach allows us to recognise and trace affective flows and the emergence of the new while holding onto the tools for describing and understanding patterns, repetitions and inertia.

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