



TIMESCAPES FINAL REPORT PROJECT 3: Dynamics of Motherhood

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The Making of Modern Motherhood study was funded by the ESRC between 2005-7, exploring the ways in which women make sense of first time motherhood, both in relation to popular constructions of the ‘good mother’ and in relation to private and more public intergenerational narratives. Twelve intergenerational case studies were constructed, drawing on two sweeps of interviews (during pregnancy and one year after the birth) with first time mothers, and, where possible, interviews with their mothers, grandmothers and a nominated ‘significant other’ (e.g. partner, father, sibling or friend). The mothers’ identity work was traced over the first year of parenthood, exploring tensions between ideals and practices.

Aims and Objectives

The Dynamics of Motherhood study *extends* and *deepens* the data set over a further two year period, drawing on 6 of the case studies for detailed investigation. In this stage of the research we more fully explore the family dynamics that follow the arrival of a new generation. The project combines a longitudinal and intergenerational design in order to explore the complex array of temporal registers that characterise family life at a time of acceleration and social change. Methods involved include repeat in-depth interviews with mothers, grandmothers and significant others; participant observation of routine family practices through a ‘day in a life’ shadowing; object based interviews and the development of an iterative interview schedule inviting reflections on earlier responses. Research questions include:

- How are interpersonal and family relationships constituted and played out over time in the context of the arrival of a new generation?
- What are the dynamic processes of identity formation for mothers in this context and how is this linked to the interplay between ‘grandmother’, ‘mother’, ‘daughter’ and ‘child’ over time?
- How do hindsight, foresight and insight interact in the research process and in what ways does researcher subjectivity become a central source of data and knowledge?

Sample

During the Dynamics of Motherhood phase of this study we have completed a further round of fieldwork with 6 of the families that we have been following longitudinally since 2005. The families are as follows:

Anastasia ARBEN Partner Richie 46 Neighbour Mother Marica Baby David	City, 26, unemployed, married, wc, Rumanian/ Russian
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Kim THOMPSON Mother Gillian 39 Grandmother 60 Baby Tempest	New town, 16, student, single, living at home, wc, white Southern African
Lorraine HALES Mother Beverley 42 Sister Danielle 20 Baby Nkosi	City, 21, chef, married (currently living in different countries), wc, African Caribbean
Monica FORTUNE Partner Jamie 41 Mother Erica 67 Baby Lucien	City, 39, civil servant, married, lmc, white British
Nadia WOOLFE Partner Kay 44 Mother Jean 65 Mother Avril 78 Baby Gabriel	City 2, 36, NHS manager, civil partnership, umc, white British
Tina WAGLAND Mother Patricia 60 Grandmother Rosie 82 Baby Saffron	New town, 36, accountant, cohabiting, lmc, white British

The new fieldwork has involved:

- **A day in a life observation** with the original mother and her child. These observations adapted the work-shadowing technique developed in organizational studies as a way of documenting ordinary mothering practices. A camera was used as an aide memoire and researchers wrote detailed field notes after the observation.
- A second **repeat interview** with significant other:
- A second repeat **interview** with grandmother, **object-based**: Grandmothers were invited to identify two objects before the interview – one representing their past and one their present/future. Women were invited to discuss these objects at the interview as part of a semi- structured interview schedule.
- A fourth repeat interview with mother, using a **recursive workbook interview** method: Workbooks were compiled for each mother, collating extracts of interview and observational material from the previous 3 encounters. These workbooks then formed the basis of 4th and final interview, with women invited to comment on change and continuity over time.

Findings

The findings from this stage of the study both enrich and deepen the broader findings of the longitudinal study, being integrated in the overall analysis (Thomson et al. 2011), as well as generating a specific set of insights and outcomes. The six families were selected to provide contrast and insight. With such a small number of cases it is not possible to make generalisations. However, considered in relation to the wider Making of Modern



Motherhoods data set as well as the broader Timescapes data set, this small and rich body of empirical work is highly generative. The children of the DoM study were all born in 2005-6 and by the end of this phase are approaching their 4th birthdays and entry into formal schooling.

Decision-making and timing

Of our 6 families, three had second children during the most recent period of fieldwork. We were able to capture how planning and decision making took place around this, and the significance of questions of care, paid employment and personal identity / well-being. Families also began to face the prospect of entry into formal education and questions of school choice were also a part of discussion. The complexity of timing and decision making at this biographical stage was clearly evident in our data, as well as the interdependency of different family members.

Shift in identifications of grandmothers – new time horizon emerging

During this phase of the research we gained insight into what appeared to be a shift in the identifications and time horizons of grandmothers, akin to the shift that we documented for the new mothers in the previous stage. There was a sense of the magnetic centre of the family moving from mother daughter, with a reconfiguration of relationships, identities and resources accordingly. A significant finding from the grandmother object-based interviews includes the ways in which generational shift stimulates an awareness of the past, including childhood memories and past relationships and emotional connections (Thomson forthcoming)

Impact of changed economic climate

This phase of fieldwork also coincided with a period of economic crisis and recession. This formed part of the backdrop to our research, but participants were also questioned directly about it. It was clear from our sample that families were differently exposed to the risks posed by the recession, with the most affluent and the least affluent reporting relative continuity. A paper based on this analysis was published as part of a special issue exploring the recession through qualitative longitudinal data in 2010 (Thomson et al. 2010).

Methodological developments

This stage of the research has offered the opportunity to experiment with methods within a broader longitudinal framework, with a view to enriching our accumulating data set and progressing methodological development within the QLR paradigm. This has included the use of a 'day in a life' shadowing with mother and child, object based interviews with grandmothers and an 'recursive' interview schedule where participants are presented with and asked to reflect on fragments of data from previous interviews. Each of these methods has been highly productive and we have developed 3 papers for publication profiling these approaches as well as developing an online digital output that animates the material.



Data Generated and Archived

The Making Modern Motherhoods data set including 62 individual interviews with expectant first time mothers, 12 case studies including interviews with Grandmothers, significant others and 2nd interviews with original respondents. Data set anonymised and deposited in archive.

The Dynamics of Motherhood: 6 longitudinal case studies including ‘day in life’ observations, object based interviews with grandmothers, repeat interviews with significant others and final workbook interviews with original respondents. Data set anonymised and deposited in archive.

Impacts

The study has had a range of impacts.

Academic: Publications from the research have been well received, generating good reviews and citations. Members of the research team have been invited to speak about the research in both academic and applied settings, and the findings are being used in range of academic fields including sociology, family studies, consumer studies, childhood studies and health studies. There is also significant international interest in the research with researchers and the project has played a key role in the establishing of maternal studies as a field of enquiry through participation in the Mamsie network and through involvement in the new online open access journal *Studies in the Maternal*. The team are also working with media professionals to create digital online outputs from the study that have potential to reach beyond academic audiences.

Popular: There is considerable popular interest in the area of motherhood, and in how maternal practices and identities have changed over generations. The research team have consistently worked with the media in order to disseminate findings and to respond to opportunities to contribute to informed public discourse in this area. Over the course of the study the research team have taken part in radio programmes, online forums, as well as working with a range of journalists. The longitudinal character of the study has provided the team with the opportunity to develop ongoing conversations with media professionals that give rise to more significant impacts. For example the team has contributed to a series of Radio 4 discussions on family related matters that are cumulatively influential. For example a 2009 contribution to a Thinking Allowed special programme on intergenerational justice involving David Willets and Frank Field led to Rachel Thomson being invited to advise on a Thinking Allowed Series on the Family as well as participating in a programme on intergenerational family living.

Policy: The original project from which the Dynamics of Motherhood study emerged was designed in partnership with a policy organisation (The Maternity Alliance) and the research team has consistently worked with policy makers and practitioners to ensure that the research generates relevant and useful findings. The Making Modern Motherhood research was launched in partnership with the Family and Parenting Institute and the team have written about the research in relevant practitioner journals as well as contributing to policy discussions in the area of family policy, maternity benefits and intergenerational justice. Some of the key ideas and narratives from the study have entered policy and popular discourse including the significance of age in shaping



mothering projects, intergenerational tensions between mothers and grandmothers and the commercialisation of mothering.

Future Plans

Contact Rachel Thomson to add?