



TIMESCAPES FINAL REPORT PROJECT 5

Work and Family Lives: The Changing Experiences of 'Young' Families

Researchers: Professor Kathryn Backett-Milburn
Dr Jeni Harden
Dr Alice Maclean
Professor Sarah Cunningham-Burley
Professor Lynn Jamieson

Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of 'Work and Family Lives: The Changing Experiences of 'Young' Families' was to investigate processes of negotiation between parents and their primary-school-aged children concerning issues raised by working parenthood.

Specific objectives were:

- To understand how such issues impact on everyday family practices;
- To examine how these change over time in response to changes in work and family circumstances, including those in children's lives;
- To explore children's perceptions and experiences of their parents' work-life reconciliation

The Study and Methods

The sample comprised 14 families recruited from a variety of employment, community and education sites. Fourteen mothers, 8 fathers, and 16 children participated, drawn from 5 lone-mother households and 9 heterosexual couple families. All parents, except two retirees due to ill health, were in paid employment. Considerable time and effort was spent trying to recruit families from a range of socio-economic circumstances, with limited success as it proved very difficult to recruit from less affluent households. The final sample comprised four families earning (before tax) less than £30,000 and the remaining ten ranging between £30,000 - £39,000 to over £60,000.

Three waves of data collection were carried out from 2007 to 2009. Fieldwork visits with these working parents and at least one of their primary-school aged children spanned 18 months to 2 years. Individual interviews were conducted with parents and children in Waves 1 and 3, with a family group interview in Wave 2. Fieldwork waves were approximately 9 months apart. Interviews were semi-structured; children's interviews also included some activities (e.g. drawing, vignettes, choosing from stickers of faces showing a range of emotions) to stimulate discussion; parents responded to some of the vignettes. Each wave had a specific focus (e.g. experiences of time during a working day; leisure time and holidays; values in relation to employment). Changes over time regarding work, family, childcare, leisure were also explored. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim; all potential identifiers were anonymised.



Analyses were conducted iteratively between interviews and waves to inform analytical reflections and enhance subsequent data collection. Analysing multiple perspectives in family groups is a complex task; our analytical approaches are discussed in Harden et al., 2010. We particularly ensured that children's and adults' accounts were given equal consideration. In regular analytical meetings team members read the same transcripts and discussed emergent themes. The challenge was to interpret the individual accounts within the family as providing both a version of events in their own right and as being part of larger family story. The analytical task was to weave together the threads of individual accounts, their similarities, gaps, contradictions and silences. To facilitate data retrieval and rigorous analysis at both the primary and secondary levels, transcripts were entered into Nvivo and systematically coded into a range of broad emergent themes.

Findings

Key findings to date on a range of topics include:

- Views and experiences of 21st century working parenthood;
- Weekday mornings: how parental employment affects the pace, timetables and rhythms of children's lives;
- The negotiation of responsibility between parents and children;
- Impacts of recession on working families;
- Children's employment futures;
- Impacts of working parenthood on constructions of childhood.

Views and experiences of 21st century working parenthood

The parents in this study all said they valued employment, giving a strong sense that being in paid work was taken for granted. As in other studies, parents also highlighted the positive aspects of being in a job, such as social interaction, stimulation and enjoyment, in addition to providing money for the family. Even the small minority who said they did not enjoy their current jobs, spoke of wishing to get other, more fulfilling, work.

Their children's views should also be understood against a backdrop that, for most of them too, working parenthood was the taken-for-granted norm. All the children's parents had paid jobs, (or were early retired from work), as, reportedly, did almost all of their friends' parents. For most, their parents had been at work throughout the majority of their childhoods. However, children's perspectives are often more easily expressed not by talking about an abstract concept, here 'feelings about parents working', but by focussing on how a particular issue, here 'parents working', impacts on themselves and their lives (Backett-Milburn and Jackson 2011). A common response was that their parents going out to work meant that they spent time away from them (particularly if they worked shifts or away from home). A few children said they disliked not being able to go straight home after school or being looked after by someone else when ill (after school half the sample were looked after not in their homes). Also, almost all children recounted how their parents' tiredness, emotions and moods impacted on themselves or their families.



They often related this either to pressures on the parent of organising home and family life, or that parents were affected by their jobs when at home.

Similarly, children seemed best able to express the good aspects of their parents working through its impact on themselves. For example, they explained that they could only have many of the possessions and experiences, such as holidays, which they particularly liked, because parents earned money to pay for these. Although these sentiments could also be seen as reflecting adult discourses, perhaps by parents justifying working to their children, they were nevertheless very common in the children's interviews.

Working parenthood therefore seemed accepted as the norm in these families and working for a living appeared valued by both parents and children. However, such a way of life has implications for everyone's lives, not least those of the children themselves and the kinds of childhoods experienced. It was evident that contradictions and tensions, between values, attitudes and everyday practices were being raised and negotiated in these families; our analysis of weekday mornings provides one illustration.

Weekday mornings: how parental employment affects the pace, timetables and rhythms of children's lives.

Changing employment patterns in recent decades, particularly the increase in working mothers, have led to many studies about the management of work and family by parents. However, we know comparatively little about the reconciliation of work and family from children's perspectives, such as whether this has an impact upon their experiences of time, space and care. In working families, mornings are a time of complex synchronisation as multiple people, of different ages with potentially varying temperaments and priorities, need to be conveyed from sleep to 'readiness' within temporal frameworks, and at a pace dictated by the social structures of work and school.

We identified two main groupings. In the first, (9 children), children's mornings were dominated by the time-space demands of parents' employment as these comprised one-parent or dual-earner households or one or both parents' jobs involved significant daily commutes. These children said they felt tired and that the tempo of the mornings was too fast, describing them as 'busy', 'hectic' and 'very rushed'. In the second, (6 children) mornings were less tightly structured by parental employment because one parent was retired, worked from home, worked evenings or had a short commute to work. Usually, one parent left for work whilst the other remained at home, got children ready and took them to school. These children also said that they felt tired most mornings and did not like getting up but, in contrast, described weekday mornings as 'quiet' and 'calm', suggesting a more leisurely tempo. Although the majority of sample children expressed little resentment of how their mornings were structured, they all placed high value on unstructured time in the mornings, for example to watch television, play games consoles or just 'potter about'. They described efforts to carve this time out for themselves, highlighting their wish to have greater control. However, the level of control they were able to assert varied according to the time-space demands of their parents' employment.



The negotiation of responsibility between parents and children

Implicit in discussions of working parenthood is the notion of parental responsibility; a discourse of responsibility is firmly embedded in a succession of governments' policies. Parents should have the right and moral obligation to take responsibility for children, while childhood is considered to be a time that should be characterised by the absence of responsibility. The 'family work project' (Millar and Ridge 2007) indicates that both parents' and children's lives are shaped by working parenthood and that responsibility is embedded in this.

Our findings highlight that responsibility is multidimensional and is contested and negotiated between different spheres, relationships and over time. Both children's and parents' lives were described as structured by the need to synchronize their times and almost all family members expressed a sense of living life at speed. The family work project in part then becomes one of routines and organization with which everyone has a responsibility to comply and adapt to when circumstances change.

There was an overarching identification of responsibility, both parental and work, as involving 'being there' and it was through this that the feelings of being torn and of juggling different parts of their lives were manifested. For parents 'being there' meant fulfilling their perceived parental obligations which could involve spending time with their children as well as being able to be around when needed, and being visible in the workplace, that is, being seen to be fulfilling their work obligations. For children, 'being there' reflected a desire to spend more time at home with parents but also it meant simply having parents around.

Both parents and children are active social actors engaged in the everyday processes that construct the family work project. The children's accounts illustrated how they participated in facilitating the smooth running of the family work project through their acceptance of working parenthood and the implications this has for their lives, their compliance with the everyday routines, and in the performance of various forms of caring. Yet at times they were also perceived by parents as challenging the project by disrupting routines, asking for more time from parents, questioning parents' commitment to them or their need to work. Responsibility was defined by both parents and children as primarily an adult concept, as something that adults possess and that children will grow into, earn or be given by adults. There were particular age expectations around when children should and could be given more responsibility, for example in domestic chores and in coming home alone. Moreover, during the course of three fieldwork visits we found that children's capacity for bringing about any change in their circumstances was limited by the extent to which the change fitted with adult perceptions of children's responsibility and the demands of working parenthood.

Impacts of recession on working families

Families' experiences of and reactions to economic change can best be understood in the wider context of their financial histories and anticipated futures. We analysed 11 families' understandings of, and reactions to, the recession during 2008 and conducted three family case studies which provided a contextualised understanding of families' experiences before and during the recession. Although all families expressed awareness of rising costs, and several



described practices to combat these, most said they were only marginally, and some not at all, affected directly by the recession. Families already on low incomes expressed greatest concern about being affected, as did those adjusting to prior changes which had already altered their financial trajectories. Although children in most groups appeared to be aware of the ‘credit crunch’, very few contributed significantly to discussions about the impact of this on their family. Children who were more aware of their family’s financial difficulties tended to attribute these to changes which had taken place before the recession.

The family case studies showed how families experience the recession not only through past and current financial experiences and practices, but also in relation to the wider events and concerns of their lives. For example, health and family concerns might take precedence over financial worries; essential financial changes because of changed circumstances might mean families felt only marginally impacted upon by the recession; or financial concerns sometimes became more salient over time as the recession took its toll on already limited budget and insecure labour market position. While financial issues loomed large for some families, they rarely described this as a direct result of the recession. Moreover, some families’ expression of financial concerns faded when compared with more personal concerns which arose concurrently with the recession.

Children’s employment futures

Discussions around the changing economic context also indicated how families’ individualised narratives were shaped by structural change. The recession was seen to create new challenges for children’s futures, with parents and children voicing concerns about the impact of the recession on children’s future employment opportunities. Most expressed a sense of greater uncertainty which might undermine the assumed futures towards which they thought they were heading. This uncertainty was most commonly expressed by the more affluent parents.

The contrast between lower and higher income families’ future narratives, also points to the influence of structural factors in shaping choices. This was most stark in the differential hopes expressed by parents: low income parents hoped for generational change to improve their children’s lives, though few specified the form of this better life. In contrast, higher income parents hoped to maintain their children’s status through generational continuity; this was often illuminated through parents’ and children’s descriptions of ‘bad’ futures, for example, veiled warnings about particular jobs (‘dustbin man’; ‘working in Macdonalds’; ‘on the checkouts’) and accommodation (‘living in a flat’; ‘on a council estate’). It seemed that a ‘bad’ future was associated with the experiences of lower socio-economic groups, reflecting hope that their children would maintain their parents’ social and economic position.

Overall, it was apparent that children’s present lives were being shaped by concerns about their employment futures. Children and parents tended to be in agreement regarding their future education and employment trajectories and all reproduced discourses around the value of education and hard work. Children’s employment futures were significant in families’ lives not simply as a far off imagined time, but one which was firmly embedded in present everyday practices, values and past experiences.



Impacts of working parenthood on constructions of childhood

The sense that being at home meant relaxation and not being organised by others was mentioned directly and indirectly by many of the children and their parents. Achieving those elements of well-being through being at home was put forward as an important element of childhood, which it was hard to replicate elsewhere. However, almost every parent spoke about how, at times, they felt guilty about their work taking them away from being at home with their children, or related some kind of reaction or protest about this from their child. Most examples tended to coalesce around children expressing wishes to be with their parent more, and, specifically, to have parents with them at home more.

Playing and interacting with friends was also seen by parents and children as an essential ingredient of childhood. This was portrayed as a social space where children could please themselves, making choices unfettered by adult organisation. However, many parents' working schedules and their knock on effect on other demands, such as getting homework done or after school activities, were often described by families as compromising children's abilities to spend as much time with their chosen friends as they would like. There was a strong sense that many of the sample children wanted to spend more time with their friends.

Children and parents distinguished between weekdays and holidays and weekends. The meanings expressed about these different calendar times indicated that childhoods were being constructed which varied according to the constraints of parental employment and school. Holidays and weekends were described as involving different tempos, emotions and personal and family practices. Almost all respondents contrasted weekends and holidays much more favourably with their weekday lives, whether at work or school. There seemed to be an unspoken assumption that the constraints on children's lives throughout the working week were being compensated for by different, and sometimes suspended, family practices during weekends and holidays. Parents expressed regret if they could not create a different kind of childhood in the holidays.

Early and Anticipated Impacts

A programme of targeted user engagement aims to build on existing uptake of research from the project, building on the Centre for Research on Families and Relationship's contacts and networks in this field. The Scottish Government are currently considering the development of a new parenting strategy and a planned meeting with key policy and analytical staff involved in this will feed in findings about responsibilities into this strategy. Targeted dissemination through CRFR's network of over 400 interested users will ensure wide publication of the findings across themes. In addition, articles in key user publications, including the Children in Scotland newsletter will be sought, along with opportunities to present at key cross-sector networks, for example the Parenting Across Scotland National Conference. The research will be presented to a local authority that was involved in the research advisory group and this session will be used to refine messages which will be sent to all of the other local authorities in Scotland. Anticipated impacts from the strategy are:



- Scottish parenting policy takes account of key findings
- Childcare partnerships and children's service plans in line with key findings
- Uptake of research messages by those working with children and families in voluntary sector and local and national government.

References

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