

Maternal Employment and the ‘Child Penalty’: Comparing Welfare Mothers and Career Academics

Maureen Baker
Professor of Sociology
University of Auckland
New Zealand

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Introduction

- Policies & discourse encourage reproduction but also expect (most) parents to earn a living
- Research (esp. quantitative) suggests that parenthood is more consequential for employment outcomes of mothers than fathers
- This paper uses qualitative interviews to examine gendered strategies to accommodate parenthood & employment, comparing participants in very different socioeconomic circumstances

Main Argument

- Child bearing tends to 'penalise' mothers (not fathers) in terms of ability to find work, gain adequate earnings & progress through ranks
- Employment 'choices' vary among mothers, shaped by household arrangements, perceptions of support, occupational requirements & ideas of 'good mothering'
- In current labour market, gendered caring & household work make it difficult for mothers to compete with male earners or non-mothers, regardless of education/earnings

Methodology

- Review of literature on gendered employment trends, welfare to work & academia (won't discuss)
- 120 qualitative interviews with NZ low-income sole mothers on state income support (DPB) who were expected to find paid work, investigating circumstances & challenges of returning to employment (2001-2)
- 30 qualitative interviews with male & female academics with permanent jobs in 2 NZ universities, investigating impact of gender & family circumstances on academic careers (2008)

Reproductive 'Choices'

- Most adults want to become parents & associate reproduction with maturity, stability & committed relationships
- Having children not always a choice & relationships do not always last
- Most of the DPB mothers were separated or divorced & 30-40 years; all had children over 6 years old
- Children were central to their lives but struggled to support & care for them on income support & earnings
- Most of male academic participants were married/partnered with children
- More academic women unpartnered, childless or sole parents

Academic women showed some ambivalence about reproducing

- *“I love kids, it’s just that circumstances have meant that I’ve not had kids, but I’m sure that those circumstances have a lot to do with my choice of career... I hear these stories about how you have to coincide your pregnancies with the summer break (laughter) ... and about the pressure if you have to make a decision to take time off to be a mum. Will you be able to pick up, will you be left behind?” (SL woman, childless)*

High rate of childlessness among academic women (choice & constraint)

- *“I’ve never felt like (having children) is something women have to do... And the fact is, I don’t think I’m that well suited to having children and it doesn’t bother me that I don’t. ... One of the nice things about the job that we have is that it actually contains a lot of freedom to follow one’s interests and direct one’s own time. And as a writer and a creative person, I think, well, that’s where my creative energies go and I think that’s fine.” (senior woman, partnered with academic)*

Both DPB & academic mothers made employment concessions for children

- Women on DPB worked part-time or homemakers, felt they could not manage full-time employment (Worried about poverty & children's wellbeing)
- All academics (except 1 woman) worked fulltime but many (sole) mothers struggled to keep up with colleagues (Concerned about not doing enough research & publishing to progress through ranks)

DPB Mothers: Difficulty finding jobs

- *“I found it quite difficult to get a job after my boy went to school. I would go for a job and was over-qualified for everything. Nobody wants someone who had 50 staff... In actual fact, I had to take all my accomplishments out of my CV to even get a job... I pared it to the bare bones and looked for part-time work... I do enjoy the [current job] but I can do it blindfolded...and I am getting paid less.” (DPB Mother, university degree)*

DPB Mothers: difficulty keeping jobs

- *“I hadn’t worked since just before [my son] was born. I wasn’t able to work afterwards because he was sick [with asthma, allergies, a heart problem and now behavioural problems]. The main reason I can’t get back into the workforce now is ... I have a child who, when he is sick, I have to stay home. During the school holidays I have to stay home, as there is nobody to look after him. He has nobody but me.” (Sole mother on DPB)*

Academic mothers also struggled to integrate university work/child care

- *“I meet all the family commitments and all the practical commitments by myself whereas other people would be able to share those commitments... My daughter’s sick, I’m the one to do it. There’s no shared responsibility there. If somebody needs to take time off that’s only me, you know – always... I couldn’t do this job and have two children and be a single parent. I’d need a wife!” (lecturer, sole mother)*

Parenthood interfered with work for both men & women academics

- “Being a mother has slowed my career down considerably... There’s just the simple fact of having much less time so .. it’s just taken me about two years to finish my book instead of, probably would have taken me about six months to finish it.” (partnered mother, lecturer)
- There’s a lot of goals I want to achieve and I know I will achieve them, but it won’t quite be necessarily on the time frame I had initially hoped... If I hadn’t had kids, I probably would be a professor now [ironic small laugh]. (partnered father, AP)

DPB Mothers' main identity: Mother

- *“When you’re a solo mum ... your children are paramount.”*
- *“My children come first. I’m not accountable to any government. I’m accountable to my children.”*
- *“To me, my number one job is a mother and I don’t care what anyone says. If I legally don’t have to work until he is 14, then I won’t ... He doesn’t have a dad or grandparents, and it’s only me and him ...”*

Academic Mothers: Identity as Mother/Worker

- *“Academia has these kinds of quite set timetables. You can’t easily just come back [from maternity leave] six months after or something like that ... So [my son] went straight into day care at 14 weeks which is earlier than I probably would have wanted to, but I sort of felt like I needed to be either away for the whole of the second semester, which we couldn’t really financially do, or back at the beginning of the second semester.”* (Partnered mother, lecturer)

Discussion

- Participants saw children as essential for 'normal' life
- Many academic women had fewer children than they wanted & several chose to remain childfree
- Academics had invested more in education & career, & therefore made reproductive decisions around career
- Academic mothers were self-supporting but pessimistic about progressing through ranks

Discussion

- Both sets of mothers shouldered housework & childcare, were 'time poor' - even academic women in couple families
- Beneficiary mothers more likely to see 'good mothering' as hands on (previous employment experiences unrewarding)
- Both categories of women complained about lack of social & institutional support for maternity/parenting

Conclusion

- Nations need children & households need women's earnings
- Yet public discourse on parenting focuses on mothering & men still viewed as main earners
- Women's strategies to integrate childcare & employment often depend on work culture, family circumstances & choices of others
- But women make more concessions than men that influence job security & earning capacity
- Esp. sole mothers struggle & experience 'child penalty'