

Lisa Baraitser

Rachel Thomson, Mary Jane Kehily, Lucy Hadfield, and Sue Sharpe, *Making Modern Mothers* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011), 318 pp., ISBN: 9781847426048, £16.99 paperback.

Making Modern Mothers is the first substantial outcome of a major longitudinal study into contemporary experiences of mothering, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK as part of their Identities and Social Action programme, and shows all the signs of becoming a classic work in motherhood studies. As the authors readily acknowledge, the aims of the longitudinal study were deceptively simple, and yet they belie the complexity, richness and ambitions of the project: to ascertain what first time motherhood means to women; to establish the significance of intergenerational and generational narratives and identifications in relation to mothering; and to explore whether and how being a mother changes women's identities. The complexity in part lies in the very real challenges of studying processes of individual and social change. Hence these apparently simple aims turn into dense questions about identity, subjectivity and temporality, with motherhood positioned as a unique 'test case' for investigating processes of social and intergenerational movement and transmission, as well as providing a snapshot of the dilemmas of negotiating identity more generally in the contemporary moment. The study and this resultant book therefore make a significant contribution to ongoing elaborations of the diverse meanings, forms, representations and experiences of motherhood, as well as understandings of how social life, which often appears remarkably resistant to change, is itself constantly remade through relational, embodied and situated practices such as mothering. *Making Modern Mothers* speaks to these challenges both in the local context of the UK, and in relation to wider debates that encompass changing patterns and forms of mothering with respect to the growth of communications and reproductive technologies; migration and transnational parenting; the privatization of care on a global scale; and concurrent discussions about motherhood under entrenched neoliberal conditions.

The most innovative and intriguing aspects of the study involve not only the transition to mothering made by the 62 participants in the diverse and varied sample, but the

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temporal and intergenerational aspects, in which these accounts are offset by the reflections of twelve of the mothers of these mothers. The transition to grand parenting allows these mothers to also look back on becoming mothers to their daughters-now-mothers, in both their own biographical and wider historical contexts. The mothers and grandmothers encompass the ‘typically’ distinct and ‘ordinarily’ unusual patterns of classed lives, stretching from the upper middle-class experience of a modern-day surgeon and her ‘socialite mother’, to the time-starved school teacher, to the mostly working-class younger mothers who all, in their turn, draw on complexly classed family histories in their responses to becoming mothers. As a result, the study beautifully captures vertical and horizontal relations to the contemporary moment, illuminating the pressure points that produce and stabilise dearly held, passionately espoused, and yet fragile maternal identities and practices, pressure points that at the same time exacerbate inequalities between women, and within familial intergenerational chains. The book therefore joins up many intersecting conversations about the histories of women’s relations to care and labour, to work and domesticity, to embodiment and the market, and to intergeneration change, social mobility and social reproduction. Central to the study is the question of whether motherhood has become the site for new social divisions between women, and indeed between women and men. The authors therefore shift throughout the book between the descriptive project of mapping diverse maternal experiences and a project that has a distinct political agenda – making visible the subtle ways that the construction and maintenance of identities occurs through the othering, marginalization and denigration of identities that at times come closest to our own, and how the norms of modern mothering, propagated through a range of media, government policy and discursive networks, prop up such social divisions.

Part of this joining up work that the authors undertake is performed at a theoretical level, in the particular conceptual apparatus that the book utilizes to hold onto commonalities and differences between women’s ‘situations’, and part is performed through the empirical practices that inform the methodology of the study. The authors draw on Simone de Beauvoir’s conceptualization of women in terms of a bodily and biographical ‘situation’ that attempts to capture the intersection between lived experience, social norms and discourses and the structuring conditions of patriarchy, as a way to think about the commonalities of women’s lives without losing hold of the differences and multiplicities of these situations. Combined with Norbert Elias’ notion of the ‘configuration’ that places ‘situations’ at key nodal points such as family, or community, and an interest in narrative as the mode in which

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such situations might be performed, the authors stitch together a conceptual framework that refuses a simple constructionist account of identity positions, or a psychologically reductive account of intergenerational transmission. At a methodological level, this stitching occurs through the layered effects of biographically orientated conversations across the generations that attempt to get at social and psychic strands of individual lives. These are prompted by cultural objects and visual materials that participants were asked to respond to, and attempt to capture stories of more sensitive issues such as body image and sexual relations, as well as modes of identification and dis-identification with other mothers on the basis of social class, age, ethnicity and disability. In a loose sense, the study could be claimed under the rubric of 'psychosocial research' in that the authors constantly work to 'bring together the reflexive relationship between the biographical and its cultural context', and juxtapose 'the ways in which women talk about their lives with reflections on how motherhood is represented in popular culture and how these representations in turn contribute to the biographical challenges faced' (p.286). The result is a book that moves from 'conception' through to 'birth', taking in the body, work, relationships, expert advice, and commodities along the way.

So, what comes through? Firstly, what is most striking in *Making Modern Mothers* is simply the array of different journeys that women make on their way to motherhood and the creativity of their responses to the many demands and challenges of this journey, despite the considerable normative pressures at work that simultaneously pull them into recognizable patterns of mothering. The transition to motherhood emerges as a time of intense plasticity for individual women and for their families. From conception (whether storied as a moment of alcohol-fuelled madness or a longed for and arduously achieved 'miracle'), through to birth itself, the transition takes in renewed relations to one's body and the bodies of others, reconfigures relationships to self, partners, friends and family, and to family histories, stories and memories. It prompts variegated interactions with the advice industry, with health and welfare services, and the multiple maternal markets that have emerged to sell everything from eggs to cashmere baby products. As a result, the mothers are bursting with active identity work, in which old ways of being and relating are reconfigured, and remade through a range of material and discursive interactions. As the authors note, with motherhood comes a range of heightened relations, especially with the meanings of 'home' (as in 'home-birth', 'home-made', 'stay-at-home mum'), and with the market itself. This sense of intensification saturates the stories of the participants. *Making Modern Mothers* is at its most poignant and affective as we eave-drop on conversations between participants and researchers, revealing the contours

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of this identity work as they discuss the kinds of mothers they want to be and are turning out to be, and from the grandmother's perspectives, the kinds of mothers they have been and the opportunities they might have liked for themselves and their daughters. Although the period of transition is intense, the stories themselves are often sober, reflective and thoughtful. Jade, a 17-year-old student narrates the dramatic story of conception with compelling clarity; Marion, a 49-year-old first-time mother speaks of her conviction that motherhood had to be part of a loving relationship, something she would only want to do in a couple, even though it has entailed a long and painful wait; Heather, a 27-year-old primary school teacher talks of coming to terms with not having enough time to fully give to her own child and the children she teaches, and how without having a child of her own she 'didn't get' the issues facing the families of children she worked with.

Secondly, what emerges from *Making Modern Mothers* is the dynamic of 'rupture and continuity', both between women, between generations, and between women's 'former selves' and their evolving 'maternal selves'. Rupture between women is made most visible through the marker of age of first-time motherhood, which has come to code for social class and employment trajectories. One of the most significant demographic trends of the post-war period is the movement towards later motherhood for the majority and early motherhood for a minority that emerges out of an increased participation by women in further and higher education and employment. Those who enter motherhood later in their lives therefore face very different issues from those coming to motherhood at the end of their teenage years, and age remains a major structuring lens for the authors as they map their way through the biographical and contextual data. However, as the authors stress, it is not age as a 'thing in itself' that they wish to illuminate, but the ways in which age organizes normative discourses of mothering, and positions certain kinds of mothering projects. What is crucially highlighted is that early and late mothering operate as ways in which classed experiences can be coded and spoken about. For women entering mothering later, for instance, motherhood appears to act as the trigger for a certain form of identity crisis, as well as a material crisis brought on by diminished earning capacity that makes motherhood the main reason for the continued disparity between women and men's pay. The authors draw on Angela McRobbie's assertion that one of the ways women have managed this shift into the labour force has been to trade the right to assert sexual difference for the right to be treated as genderless workers (McRobbie 2007). This 'post-feminist contract' however, comes under increasing strain in the event of motherhood as the real costs of being female – at both psychological and material

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levels – that have otherwise been masked, become apparent. Not only does the post-feminist contract make visible divisions between younger and older mothers, but it provides a point of rupture between women in the same life phase. As the authors find,

for many the “motherhood penalty” comes as a shock that is faced in relative isolation. Although the rights of pregnant workers could and should be a site of solidarity in the politics of motherhood, too often they are something that women negotiate when feeling vulnerable and exposed. (p.192)

Thus a significant part of maternal identity work is bound up with managing this crisis alone.

By capturing women at the same biographical moment (maternity) we also capture the fragmentation of women’s biographies along class lines and the difficulties for forging solidaristic relations between women. Unfortunately, in motherhood women are isolated from each other, even from those who are most like them. (p.194)

Women too often ‘choose’ private solutions to what are essentially public problems: ‘women are drawn into holding tensions between exploitation and solidarity and between instrumental and intrinsic forms of care’ (p.194). Thus the book provides at least a partial answer to why solidarity between women is such a troubled business, once pregnancy and childbearing are shifted into the domain of ‘private’ life.

It is the grandmothers’ stories however, that in the end carry the affective quality of the book. Their own negotiations with ‘rupture and continuity’ entail the process of looking back and looking forwards across longer time-lines than their daughters can manage, caught up, as they are, in the day-to-day immediacy of first-time mothering. The grandmothers tell us nothing so unusual – that things were of course different in their day, fewer opportunities to combine work and motherhood, less focus on ‘choice’, fewer material objects and social networks, not so many domestic appliances, more physical labour, less ‘fuss’ over crying babies. But the strength of *Making Modern Mothers* lies in ways the researchers get at stories that go beyond the obvious: buried stories of birth trauma, post-natal depression and loss, and how daughters rework unresolved issues from their mother’s generation of women through the ways they perform birth and motherhood:

These glimpses into the emotional, embodied intergenerational versions of motherhood remind us that, while we may expect or desire to hear or tell the ‘linear’, ‘happy-ending’, neat and tidy birth story, alternative images of birth, the messy, sometimes spiritual, embodied and emotional ‘stuff’ are never far from the surface. Such images get caught up in anticipatory narratives in a seemingly un-linear manner, revealing the co-existence of the present and the past, which is largely unconscious as births become entangled. (p.257)

Perhaps this notion of entangled births is a metaphor for the many entangled processes involved in becoming a mother in contemporary times. Whatever we think we are doing, we are never doing motherhood 'our way'.

References

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