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## Thinking intergenerationally about motherhood

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# **Thinking Intergenerationally about Motherhood**

**Rachel Thomson**

## **Introduction - Relationality and Temporality**

We are always, already, utterly embedded in relationships. The task of social science has traditionally been to provide us with a limited and limiting set of lenses that helps us to discipline and reduce what we look at and how we look in order to enable a story to be told about relationships and social processes (Law 2004). Depending on how we slice the empirical cake we will see different things. We can broadly distinguish between perspectives that privilege spatiality – exploring the horizontal relationships between the position of things at a single moment of time, and perspectives that privilege temporality – exploring the vertical and processual nature of phenomena, how things follow, pan out (Massey 1994). Some kinds of social science are good at the first (one off studies) and some are good at the latter (ethnographies, case studies, longitudinal studies) (McLeod and Thomson 2009). Very few studies are able to do both well or to explore the articulation of the two – what Dorreen Massey (2004) calls the challenge of a four-dimensional sociology, the exploration of co-existence, coincidence and the relationship between the life that is lived and the other ‘possible lives’ that fall away (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997, 2003).

Les Back (2007) has recently made a compelling case for ethnographic type methods, which privilege the craft of engaged listening and descriptive writing, in order to represent ‘the enigmatic and shifting nature of social existence’ (p.153): a ‘literary sociology that aims to document and understand social life, without assassinating it’ (2007, p. 164). So when we talk in theoretical terms about relationality we must remember that methodology shapes the kind of relationships that are evident, and that methods and theories are part of the context that produces what comes to be sociological ‘knowledge’ in

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particular times and places (Savage 2007). Back suggests that in order to avoid symbolic violence produced by the frozen character realist descriptions and the 'intrusive empiricism' which 'claims to know and judge the very souls of its subjects' (p.16) we are bound to 'live with doubt in the service of understanding' (p.15).

### **The Making of Modern Motherhood:**

This paper draws on *The Making of Modern Motherhoods*<sup>1</sup> study (MoMM), which explores the making of a familiar yet profound identity in historical perspective. Through an initial wave of 62 interviews with a diverse group of first time mothers we seek to capture the complexity of a 'generation'- women aged between from 15 and 48 - all going through a similar bodily and social transformation, yet in radically different social and economic contexts. From this 62 we have invited 12 women to become part of intergenerational case studies involving interviews with their own mothers and grandmothers if possible and with a nominated significant other. The mothers are re-interviewed after a year and in a new phase<sup>2</sup> we will meet them twice more at annual intervals creating a longitudinal perspective of family formation.

The conceptual landscape against which this study is elaborated takes as its central problematic the interconnections between historical, biographical and generational change. In the stories of families, and in particular, the intergenerational dynamics of mothers and daughters, we find accounts of the ways in which change is negotiated and continuity effected – two sides of a single coin always in conversation. Analytically we have posed ourselves with a real challenge, to look both ways at once – at the past and the emergent future, a future that is created collectively by families, through friendship networks and through our implications in institutions and cultural and economic exchanges (McLeod and Thomson 2009). The questions that we approach this data set with include, how are this generation of women creating motherhood, and can it even be understood as one thing? How does the arrival of a new generation impact on an individual biography and on the

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interconnected phenomena that is a family? How do the past and the present interplay in the making of the future? How can lives that are so different, so unique and contingent also be understood within broader social, cultural and historical terms. The paper begins with a review of the conceptual tools that we are using to make sense of our data, before looking in detail at one of our intergenerational case studies. It concludes with some reflections on the interplay of historical, generational and biographical temporalities.

### **Thinking Intergenerationally**

One of the primary aims of the MoMM study is to explore the ways in which women negotiate social change and continuity through intimate relationships and in their relationships to cultural forms and material practices. We are conscious of tensions between late modern theory which emphasises radical change in the gender order, and feminist theories that emphasise continuity – be that in the form of a persistence of inequalities or the re-making of inequalities in new ways. We are also very much aware of the methodological challenges in attempting to research temporal processes empirically. In our theoretical work for the project we are exploring a number of conceptual tools to assist us in this task – each of which emphasise relatedness.

Memory: In our study we are employing memory as a reflexive, analytic and generative strategy. Our approach to memory is informed by a rich tradition of memory work within feminist and cultural studies traditions (Popular Memory Group 1983, Haug et al.1987, Connerton 1989, Crawford et al.1992, Kuhn 1995) which see memory as ‘evidence’ of a complex relationship between past and present, the self and the social. Memories are always produced in the present in response to contemporary and situational demands, yet they are also a manifestation of the way in which temporal processes are experienced subjectively and relatedness ‘claimed’ (Edwards and Strathern 2000). Material objects, including photographs, baby clothes, shoes, toys etc. are important memory texts within which time, emotion and history are condensed (Miller 2008). We are finding

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women engaged in intensive 'memory work', taking many forms: the experience of pregnancy evoking memories of being mothered; grandmothers experiencing intense recollections of embodied memory of own births/ pregnancies; the exchange of objects that symbolise the past; the re-articulation and reworking of family narratives; the formation of new family narratives and representations of the family for future consumption (Finch 2007). Our interest in memory also draws us towards an exploration of unconscious processes, characterized by the absence of mutual contradiction, displacement, condensation, timelessness and a fluid relationship between external and internal reality

Generation: The transition from generation to generation is a continuous process, with the emergence of new participants in the cultural process and the 'continuous withdrawal of previous participants' (Mannheim 1952, p. 23). For Mannheim, there is no simple opposition between processes of continuity and change, rather the continuity of culture is the result of social and familial processes of flux and renewal. Mannheim has little to say about families or gender, and here we take our lead from the life history work of those such as Daniel Bertaux who explore the place of habitus in family transmission (Bertaux-Wiame 1993 and Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997), psychoanalytically informed approaches to how family dialogs (Rosenthal 1998), scripts (Byng-Hall 1995), constellations (Stern 1998) and myths (Samuel and Thompson 1990) operate to connect and separate generations. Most recently Julia Brannen and colleagues (2004) have identified the ways in which processes of social mobility create ambivalent relations between the generations, involving both identifications and disidentifications (see also Steedman 1986, Lawler 2000). A particular influence is the work of Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg, who explore the relationship between the changing socio-economic position of women and the cultural articulation of this in generational terms. A particularly distinction they draw is between *gender identity* (the gender I have - I am a woman and therefore act in this particular way), *gender subjectivity* (the gender I am - I am me, and therefore I act in this particular way, laid down in childhood and unconsciously influenced by the gendered subjectivity of their mother) and cultural and social possibilities offered by the society at any time (Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 1994, p. 92). They argue

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that at the point of adolescence there is always a lack of ‘contemporaneity’ or ‘fit’ between these dimensions. The character of this lack of contemporaneity is different for different generations, presenting distinctive biographical problems.

Co-existence: Our social world is marked by different temporal rhythms, which may not be synchronised. So, for example, the temporal rhythms of the working career may be out of synch with the social and biological rhythms of the body and intimate processes (Hareven 1978, Geisen 2004). Rapid economic and technological changes may have heightened this sense of discordance. Social change is uneven, giving rise to a diversity of biographical forms and the coexistence of tradition and innovation. Notions of co-existence are important within our project in two ways. First we are interested in the co-existence within a particular historical moment of very different gendered identities and biographical projects. Yet we are also interested in thinking about co-existence in the relationship between past and present (Pines 1997). Rather than considering what has gone before as absent (dispensed with in a narrative of progress), our interest in memory and intergenerational relationships has attuned us to the co-existence of the past, present and imagined future. The intensification of conscious and unconscious memory work that takes place with the arrival of a new generation heightens our awareness of the way that ‘then and now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightening’ that enables sociological insight (Benjamin, 1999 cited Back 2007, p. 22).

Configuration: The final dimension of our theoretical framework is the idea of the configuration, which we derive from the work of Norbert Elias (1978, 1998). For Elias the configuration rather than the individual is the basic unit of analysis. It is an approach marked by a radical ‘situatedness’, in that the configuration is defined both by relationships, and by temporal processes e.g. coincidences and history. Within a configuration the individual is understood as a point from which it is possible to have a perspective. Thus in Elias’s terms, each individual can be understood as ‘I’, ‘You’ or ‘Them’, depending on where you are standing. We feel that this approach is highly productive for thinking about the arrival of a new generation. For us, the configuration is

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the intimate network (defined differently from different points), and the arrival of a new generation forces a dynamic process of reconfiguration. Our approach is to attempt to document this process of reconfiguration from different positions within the figuration, within which each woman is differently and uniquely situated (de Beauvoir 1949, Moi 1999).

### **Co-existence and Configuration in an Intergenerational Case Study**

*Alex Calder - first interview, September 2005*

I met Alex Calder at the end of her first successful pregnancy and at the beginning of her maternity leave from a demanding job as junior surgeon. Married to another high flier, who she jokingly referred to as the 'present Mr Calder', Alex described her social and class location in terms of being 'professional people', for whom money is relatively plentiful but time is in short supply.

Throughout the interview discussions of her career dominated our interaction. I experienced her as facing the prospect of becoming a mother with some trepidation. Her considerable confidence and sense of competence were located primarily in her professional role. She described her own childhood in terms of care from nannies, boarding schools and borrowed maternal figures and expressed ambivalent feelings as to the kind of mother that she herself would be, voicing the belief that 'not everyone is naturally maternal'. From the outset she anticipated a short maternity leave and an efficient return to work, causing as little disruption as possible to her professional duties and to the progress of her training and ultimate goal of securing a position as a consultant.

This was Alex's second pregnancy, the first ending in a termination due to foetal abnormalities. Alex was still traumatised by this experience, both in terms of the quality of care that she received, and in terms of the difficulties that she experienced in managing the emotional fallout within an intolerant work context. Her strategy for survival in the highly

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competitive and intensive field of surgery has been to become 'one of the boys'. Although she had felt comfortable with this situation, her ability to make it work had been profoundly disrupted by pregnancy. She has struggled to maintain her reputation with colleagues, going out of her way to ensure that she is not seen to get special treatment just because she is pregnant, even where such dispensations are part of official workplace policy. Although she acknowledged that some areas of medicine are sympathetic and supportive to mothers, Alex fears that in her own field of emergency surgery any attempts to reform the punishing timetables of on-calls, rotations and training merely results in senior members of the profession making 'mental notes not to employ women in the future'. Yet Alex is also determined to change the norms of her chosen profession, whatever the personal costs. She questions the received wisdom that you cannot be a mother and a surgeon presenting a life plan that involves at least two children and a consultant position before the age of 35. She is adamant that if faced with the death-bed choice of being 'a happy grandmother or a professor of surgery' she would choose the former.

As a medic Alex was sensitised to the dangers involved in complicated births, yet she has gone out of her way to find non-medical spaces from which to imagine herself as a mother. Through NCT and yoga classes as well as popular pregnancy advice books, she had begun to invest in a lay maternal identity. Always careful as to what people would say/do/ think if they discovered 'who she was', Alex had begun to enjoy a very different approach to pregnancy in which natural labour and breastfeeding were assumed as desirable, and where in her words the 'biggest concern was where to get raspberry leaf tea'. Her own birth plan - to deliver as naturally as possible in a hospital based birthing centre - is presented as striking a balance between the more 'way-out' (and in Alex's view selfish) aspirations for home birth and her colleagues' approval of the pragmatism of elective caesareans.

Alex respects her mother's assertion of a lack of maternal instinct and assumes that she herself may well follow a similar path, relying heavily on others to provide care and

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nurturance to her children. Alex is adamant that she never felt unloved, and speaks warmly of a wonderful boarding school where she was able to ride horses before being sent to a school 'that was renowned apparently for producing women who were good for getting married to'. Whether or not Alex will be able to afford the nannies and 'good schools' that her mother relied on is another matter. She points out that her working patterns will mean that she will not be available to her children during the school vacations in the way that this model of care assumes.

As an adult Alex identifies more easily with her father than her mother, with whom she can have 'sensible conversations' about politics, money and career. She holds few illusions that either parent will be available for grand-parently duties, acknowledging that their health problems and personal projects mean that they are 'not actually free'. Child care is a major cause for concern for her and her husband, and they are frustrated by how difficult it is to find an option that meets their needs to work long hours. Alex is aware that her version of working motherhood stands in tension with the values of those women who prioritise the mother-child bond over career, and she avoids having conversations that expose this gulf. For Alex, the bond will be mediated by a deferred form of gratification, where the child is 'proud of what their parents *do*'. Although her parents have encouraged her to 'throw money at the situation', she struggles to find a local and affordable option that satisfies all of her requirements. Meanwhile she saves for private school fees and spends money preparing for the baby, which because of the long hours she works mostly involves internet shopping. She enjoys shopping for clothes and equipment, combining designer items with bargain finds at Asda and Tesco. Like her mother she combines an extravagance around clothes with an 'economical' approach to life.

*Barbara, a grandmother's interview*

Alex's mother Barbara is in her late 60's living with her retired husband in a house in an affluent part of the city. Alex was the youngest of her four children who are the offspring of two different marriages. The children comprise of two sets of two, born close together -

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the first at the turn of the 1960's the second on the cusp of the 1970's. Barbara was aged 32 at her final pregnancy, the same age that Alex is at her first.

Barbara grew up in a close upper middle class family. She was born before the war, and before the introduction of the National Health Service, and describes herself as cared for by nannies who 'you loved more than your mother'. Carers could disappear with little warning and Barbara tells the story of her beloved nanny leaving the house with a tummy ache which she later discovered to be a war time pregnancy. Barbara presents her childhood in glowing terms. With her father away at war, she and her siblings were taken on 'jollies' by an uncle who couldn't fight, and finally escaping the bombs for the countryside. While she recalls a great deal of fun she also explains that there was no great 'hands on love' and she and her siblings went to boarding school. As a middle class girl she describes her choices as marriage or university. Her sister did the latter, and Barbara was more than happy to follow her parents' advice to get married to a pilot. She married at 21, which may seem 'young now but it wasn't then', 'if you were not married by 23 you were considered to be 'on the shelf'

With her own husband away Barbara continued to live in the family home, where she had a 'lovely pregnancy' and was 'thoroughly spoilt' by her parents being fed good food, and provided with 'lovely maternity dresses'. Her baby was born in hospital under full anaesthetic and with 'high forceps' having been diagnosed with toxemia at 8 months. On her mother's advice she had a maternity nurse, but on her husband's return they decided to 'go it alone', taking up residence in a country cottage 'knowing nothing about babies, breastfeeding or anything like that'. She recalls the result as disastrous, she produced too little milk and the baby was constantly hungry. When her husband returned from leave Barbara gratefully returned to her parents' home. The maternity nurse was not re-engaged but she was able to take advantage of all the domestic help that her mother enjoyed. Within Barbara's account of this first pregnancy she portrays herself as innocent and trusting in others. This innocence is reframed dramatically with the benefit of hindsight when she recalls how she happily took 'little blue tablets' to control her morning sickness:

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at the beginning of the pregnancy I didn't realise I was pregnant, I went round to see friends, staying with various friends because my husband was away and I kept feeling sick, and everybody was making marmalade because it was about January, January February and I was down in Dorset staying with an artist friend and she said I think you ought to go to the doctor you know, its not right, she knew exactly ... she'd had a baby so she knew what was happening so I went toddling off to the doctor and he gave me little blue tablets to stop me feeling sick. They were marvelous. I took the whole course and I felt wonderful. After I'd had the baby my friend in Dorset who is still down there, wrote and said...cautiously is your daughter alright, I wrote back and said absolutely fine, I mean one wrote letters in those days, it was so expensive to ring up. So you didn't ring, because she said you took the full course of Thalidomide. Now the big decision - I wondered if I'd have known would I have aborted the baby? Because in those days you either went to Harley St or Sweden and er...it was amazing really. I don't know what I'd have done because it was one in three.

During her second pregnancy Barbara resisted the temptation to 'return to the loving nest of the family' and she and her husband moved to a house in the country. Her second child was born in a 'little nursing home with matron' attached to a cottage hospital.

Two years after her first husband was killed Barbara remarried, another pilot. This marriage produced a further two children, the last being Alex. Again she describes the pregnancies as 'lovely' but remembers that she also suffered with deep vein thrombosis, reflecting that she 'really shouldn't have had Alex I suppose', although she 'wasn't told categorically not to have more children'. Barbara describes herself as very self-absorbed during her pregnancies, 'you and your baby, didn't know what else was happening in the world'. She was supported by a series of 'what were called village girls', 'very cheap' and 'happy to work from 8am to 7pm', and 'someone to help in the house too.' Her births were all natural, 'although you didn't call it that' - 'just 'jolly painful and with no epidurals'. Barbara describes herself as 'having babies very easily' likening the experience to 'shitting a football'.

Although Barbara did not go to any antenatal classes, she does recall that they existed and were treated as 'a bit of a joke', with advice changing all the time. In her view 'you went into labour very ignorant', being 'told to breathe in one particular way with one child and then the next thing I knew we weren't supposed to be breathing that way'. Breast feeding was expected, but Barbara explains that you did not do it for so long, 'the maternity nurse wanted to get her hands on the baby'. They were given pills to stop their milk and

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bound their breasts which was 'jolly uncomfortable'. What advice she did get tended to be from her friends, 'all pregnant together, knitting away and doing all the right things, as opposed to a career which of course is now'.

Although early motherhood is presented as a period of pleasure and routine, Barbara presents herself as increasingly bored and frustrated as the children got older. When Alex (the youngest) was five years old Barbara went to college and completed the secretarial training that she had started before her first marriage. She then began a thirty year pattern of working part time, travelling to the city 3 days a week, and staying in their '*piéd a terre*'. Barbara explains that 'I rather liked earning, as they used to call it in those days, pin money', noting that it was 'lovely to get out and meeting people and do something for yourself'.

In contrast to the woman who loved being pregnant, a more ambivalent mother emerges at this stage in Barbara's account, and a more familiar figure from Alex's interview. Barbara describes herself as 'not really a very good mother', 'very casual', and 'saved by boarding schools' which 'let me off the leash'. Yet within this apparently disparaging account of her role there is also a pride and adherence to a particular set of values. She explains that she let her children 'bum along' yet ensured that they had 'idyllic surroundings', - noting that 'I like children to be bored sometimes, why should they be instructed during the school holidays'. She contrasts her different approach with her two sets of children, very casual with the first two 'when you're younger you are a bit selfish and you want to live your own life and your children have got to fit in'. With her second two she was 'more careful', noting that 'possibly they're more neurotic' because of this.

Barbara is now grandmother to five. Her first experience of grandmother-hood came with her eldest daughter's children (now in their early teens), with whom she was and continues to be closely involved. She describes her eldest daughter as being very like herself, and 'the children were dragged up rather like I dragged up my children', alternating between 'any old child minder', boarding school and a rambling home in the country with

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dogs and horses. In contrast she likens Alex to her own father, 'being very capable, strong mentally and physically'. Barbara admits to uncertainty as to how Alex will cope, balancing motherhood with 'a real career'. She anticipates that she will be 'a good mother, not doting, but very good' observing that she has 'a co-operative husband'.

My interview with Barbara coincided with the period during which Alex was returning to full time work and her mother recognised that 'this little hump' would be very difficult. She describes their child care arrangements as 'a big black mammy who lives around the corner', and Alex's maternity leave as 'highly sociable', with Alex taking 'masses of classes, a full time job as far as I could see'. Alex's gregarious approach during this period is contrasted to that adopted by her eldest daughter who she reflects on as having been more isolated at home in the country with a baby. Barbara is rather irreverent about the centring of the experience of the baby epitomised by the fashion for 'baby massage, caustically observing 'she's bonding – that's a new word, the bonding with the baby'.

Towards the end of the interview I asked Barbara how she felt motherhood had changed over the course of a generation - what were the gains and what were the losses. She was quick to recognise the advantages of being a younger mother, observing 'you can't do it all can you?' Having invested first in career, at 32 Alex is - for Barbara - an 'older mother' and inevitably more anxious for it. She characterises the lives of mothers now as 'more frenetic' than the leisurely past where 'you took the babies for a walk in the afternoon – a little shopping in the morning, bed at 6 and fathers home'. The increased involvement of fathers is observed as 'an enormous improvement', as are the 'increased facilities' available to the young mother. While Barbara accepts her own past as 'easier, you weren't expected to have a career', her experience of spending time in America when the children were young alerted her to how different things *could* be. I was struck by the vehemence with which she described the USA in the 1970's as 'a woman's country' with crèches, free schools, and school buses that made it possible for women to have lives of their own.

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The commercialisation of maternity is one of the markers of change for Barbara, but one that she has a range of responses to. She observes how the shift to older motherhood is associated with greater economic independence for women and she marvels at how Alex assumes that she will buy all her own gear, unlike her generation who assumed that their parents would 'cough up'. Like her own mother, Barbara enjoys the role of the grandparent in 'spoiling' the grandchildren by indulging them with pretty clothes, yet she also 'dreads to think' what Alex and her partner have spent on preparing for their baby. She is both amused at the retro appeal of terry towelling nappies, and welcomes the availability of attractive maternity wear, suggesting that she would have been proud to show off her bump under tight maternity wear if it had been available in her day.

Barbara is careful not to put pressure onto Alex, noting that she prefers to email her rather than phone, allowing her to say no easily- 'poor kid, she's tired out having her mother ringing up and checking'. Although Barbara says that she would 'love to do more', the journey to Alex's home is a long trek across town, and she is uncertain how to help – in contrast to her confident approach to her eldest daughter's children. She describes Alex as being 'better organised' and 'more sensible' than she ever was, but then reflects that in fact she was well organised, being 'alone with four children' but of course 'with help'. The continuities between them may be subtle – in Barbara's words 'you make your gravy like your mother made, there's things you don't realise'.

*Alex, second interview November 2006*

I met Alex again 16 months after our first interview. At this point she was in the 8<sup>th</sup> month of another pregnancy and the first week of her second maternity leave. I interviewed her at home, with her daughter Sian, a situation that was relatively unusual since her return to full time work after 6 months. Alex reported a birth that had gone to plan, a natural delivery, without 'too much trauma' in the hospital birth centre. She had successfully avoided having

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an epidural, opting for a local anaesthetic and ‘biting on some leather’ for the repair of tearing. Alex’s description of the birth reflects her attempts to make the experience her own (for example dousing the delivery room in lavender oil), alongside her awareness of her position from the perspective of the medics. She comments on how midwives interpret the demands of ‘first timers’, yet overall considered them to have done a brilliant job. Her return home was less successful, falling as she did between two hospitals, she found that no midwives came to visit her at home during the important first week.

Having told me the story of her birth, I was surprised by her bravado in encapsulating the entire birth experience as ‘just another day at work kind of thing, that’s done now lets get on with the next job’. Alex expressed contradictory feelings concerning her need to balance the demands of motherhood and career. On one hand she tells a story of an efficient return to work after a happy and sociable maternity leave which itself maintained the busy tempo of her working life. Although she had loved breastfeeding she weaned her daughter from breast to bottle quickly and completely, considering more gradual or partial solutions impossible due to the demands of her work. This is despite support from her Sure Start breast feeding group and an awareness of National Health Service guidance that protects her rights in this area. Her return to medical practice is presented as a bold choice, with Alex explaining that ‘I didn’t enjoy looking after Sian as much as I actually enjoyed a really good day at work’. Yet within Alex’s account a more ambivalent position was also evident. The experience of moving Sian from breast to formula had been traumatic for both, and something that in hindsight she says she regretted. Weaning is presented as a curtailment of her own desires as well as those of her daughter, and she draws parallels with the return to boarding school after a vacation, ‘painful but necessary’.

The decision to avoid ‘the mess’ of being a nursing mother is presented as the price of ‘not messing’ around her colleagues. But Alex’s resolve to erase her maternity from the workplace is further complicated by her next pregnancy, itself planned in order to fit around training timetables. She explained that in the last few months before her maternity

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leave she had been 'profoundly tired'. Concerns about the health of her unborn child and her ability to work safely had forced Alex to request her right to be exempted from on-calls. She reports the resentment expressed by colleagues who went so far as to challenge her right to full pay, while also admitting that they would not want their wives to work at all during the final stages of pregnancy. Even during her maternity leave she was preparing to travel for a job interview, despite her fear she might go into labour during the journey. In typically pragmatic style Alex explained that she would take her notes with her.

The uncertainty of Alex's position became acutely evident in this second interview. Despite years of specialist training, she was yet to secure one of the few consultant positions in her field. She explained that the surplus of National Health Service trained consultants meant that 'talented individuals' were being forced to retrain and/ or to practice in other countries. She herself was planning to take up an unpaid training position abroad later that year, which she hoped would improve her chances of securing a permanent position at home. She and her partner had accepted that they faced 'a difficult few years' during which they had to prioritise her career in order to realise the investment of her training. That this period coincided with the arrival of their children and the expense of childcare was a challenge that they had to absorb. At this stage Alex did not feel that she could afford to jeopardise her prospects, and she was struggling to compensate for the toll of the two pregnancies on her personal appearance – itself a vital professional asset.

Alex's return to full time work had been made possible by Cheryl, her child minder. Living locally with a young child of her own, Cheryl offers 7am-7pm childcare for less than £1000 a month and has been a vital support to the family. Mother and child minder communicate primarily through a written diary in which activities and requests are recorded. Alex describes Cheryl as honest and open and she is reassured by her own interest in organic and whole foods. Sian is a fussy eater, and more willing to eat at Cheryl's house in the company of other children than at home. Food has become a focus of anxiety for Alex. She describes the arduous Sunday night sessions in which she prepares and freezes five batches of 3 meals a day for Sian to take with her to the child minders –

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concluding that ‘the cooking kills me’, particularly when Sian refuses to eat it. Alex explains that the most significant change that she has experienced in becoming a mother is that her peace of mind is now dependent on Sian’s well-being, which she in turn attributes in large part to her good health and the routine she enjoys with Cheryl. She is loathe to disrupt this routine, even though her maternity leave provides her the potential to save a significant amount of money.

Money continues to be an important motif in Alex’s account. She is aware that her ability to reproduce the lifestyle of her parents, including private schools and nannies, would be impossible living in their current life. Although she has the support of a cleaner and a child-minder, Alex is not in the same financial league as her parents, despite both herself and partner having professional careers. Her hopes continue to be pinned on a job outside the city, enabling them to afford a large home and good enough ‘day schools’. Although her local friends, made during her maternity leave, are considering the local primary school, Alex feels that state education in the city is simply not an option for her and her partner who will have to pay for the input that they are unable to provide at home. In the mean time, her daughter is cared for by a working class woman in her mixed urban neighbourhood. Alex is aware of the class and racial dividing lines that structure her locality. Her child minder and cleaner are both working class and black, and she acknowledges that Sian spends most of her time in their company. She describes herself and friends ‘abusing’ the local Sure Start scheme, enjoying a breast feeding group aimed at socially deprived communities that refuse to use them. The complexity of her situation is reflected in a story that she tells about Sian’s clothes. Like many mothers, Alex takes pride in Sian’s appearance, and her own ability to mix and match designer items with bargains from supermarkets. This mixing could be seen as reflecting the form of cosmopolitan ‘taste’ that Alex seeks to maintain in her position as a modern professional woman living in a mixed urban community. Yet this balance is delicate:

I had another cleaner who was a brilliant cleaner but she was incredibly unreliable so I had to let her go, she would bring Sian presents, but the clothes that she got were also from Asda actually but horrendous and I remember once when Sian was very small when she’d go round to Cheryl’s she’d always have a second outfit, she’d often come back in having had some sort of accident or other, and I remember seeing her in this horrendous pink velour track suit type number and I put the hood up on her and just looked at her and thought you are not my child

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you know, it's amazing what a really nasty outfit can do to your child, so I do quite enjoy her being, and I like, it gives me pleasure to have her in a nice outfit even though it costs a ridiculous sum of money.

Alex spoke less about her mother in this second interview, acknowledging that they had become closer, and saw more of each other, but that her mother's health was not good enough for Alex to rely on her for childcare. Rather than offer Alex help, her mother had offered to send a former household 'help' to Alex's house to assist her with washing.

My overall impression of Alex at this second interview was of a very determined and able woman, under enormous pressure, yet refusing to compromise on what she considered to be essential matters: career, healthy food, washable nappies and looking good. She was aware that these priorities placed pressure on her key relationships, with her partner and her daughter. The current pregnancy was strangely invisible. Alex explained that she had not yet found the space to enjoy the pregnancy or to prepare herself for the impending birth. Even with her maternity leave, career matters continued to demand her attention. She had yet to speak with Sian about the impending changes. Her plans at this point were to again use the hospital birthing centre, to return after 6 months to work before leaving for a training post abroad for a year. The family would all go, with her partner taking a sabbatical and taking on the child care. That is unless a job came up in the mean time...

### **The Interplay of Historical, Generational and Biographical Time.**

The historical back drop to the three generations of women's lives is shaped clearly by social class and national culture. This is a story of upper middle class women, moving between London and the countryside. The Second World War and the introduction of the National Health Service mark these stories clearly, as do accounts of changing medical practices and norms in birthing advice and practices. Salient markers of change include the centring of the child, the commodification and increased sociability of motherhood/babyhood and the later age at which 'professional' women tend to have their babies. Continuities include the delegation of childcare giving rise to ambivalence towards the

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maternal – what Ronald Fraser characterizes as the unsettling knowledge that ‘I was her job, but her job was not me, it was a function of a predetermined future’ (1984, p. 94)

In generational terms, Barbara can be seen as ‘between generations’, shaped in large part by a pre-war culture of large houses, servants and sociability. She is not quite part of the sexual revolution perhaps because of her investments in more conventional aspects of the British establishment including the armed forces and boarding schools. Yet her story is one in which personal freedom and desire is valued. Although she and her peers ‘were all knitting together and doing the right thing’ there is a sense that hers was a relatively isolated generation, stuck in the country with animals and children while ‘father’ was working in the city. For Barbara work signalled a partial freedom, a social life and some ‘pin money’ (even though she is apparently wealthy in her own right). For Alex, work is career and at the centre of her life.

Alex is also ambiguous in generational terms. Although she is part of a cohort of middle class women who expect to have careers, she has invested in a highly male dominated specialism, where being a woman is a struggle. She is not content with the settlement of forgoing family for career which often characterises the first generation of women to break through into male dominated worlds. Rather she seeks to ‘do it all’, have career, marriage and motherhood. And although she rejects her mother’s ‘silliness’ in favour of the ‘seriousness’ of her father, she nevertheless draws on her mother’s maternal ambivalence and the view that ‘children will survive’ without being at the centre. So although Alex is typical of middle class women of her generation in having a child at the age she is, in investing in natural birth and purposeful maternal sociability, her willingness to fully delegate care marks her off from the wider middle class group that she is part of, to a smaller group of upper middle class professionals where work is sufficiently rewarding to maintain a privileged place. It is interesting that she does not opt for live-in domestic help which may be typical of the most wealthy professionals in the UK context – a solution associated with the maintenance of more traditional gendered division of labour within the household (Crompton 2006). I suspect that the main reason for this are financial and space

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constraints - she rejects the option of an eastern European au pair on the grounds of language and the fear of inexperience and thus safety. But I also think that the child care option that Alex and her husband have settled for works for them in other ways. It is local and consistent with the local maternal culture (Dyck 1996). It demands a greater degree of sharing between them. It also resonates with local versions of childcare that characterised her own childhood.

Alex is also part of a professional generation, those medics whose training spans the pre- and post-European working time directive, introduced in 2004 to reduce the working hours of doctor in training on the grounds of health and safety – initially to 58 hours a week and by 2009 to 48 hours. It has been suggested that this marks a fall from 30,000 to 8,000 training hours that it took to move from the position of senior house officer to consultant, giving rise to questions about the quality of those trained in the new regime: ‘to become a competent surgeon in one fifth of the time once needed either requires genius, intensive practice, or lower standards’ (Chikwe et al. 2004, p. 418). The post directive culture appears to be more family friendly, with shorter working hours and flexible working becoming a possibility. Yet Alex’s cautious approach to taking up maternity provisions that are official NHS policy suggest that these changes have yet to impact on the informal culture of what emergency medicine means in the UK. The difficulty that Alex and her generation of medics face in securing these rewards in the form of a permanent job is further evidence of the changing professional landscape that is emerging. Alex needs to be good at everything: she is comfortable being ‘one of the boys’ and is prepared to both hide the unwelcome aspects of her femaleness (epitomised by pregnancy and maternity) while also displaying those aspects of her femininity that are more welcome – involving dressing well. She also proves herself as competent at being ‘one of the girls’, forging a local peer group during her maternity leave, but only with mothers from a ‘similar socio-economic bracket’ (Clarke 2004, Byrne 2006). Communicating within her neighbourhood across divides of social class and ethnicity is primarily undertaken within the contractual relationships with her child minder. Alex does not seek out friendship or commonality of experience here, apart from establishing base line agreements around organic food.

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The biographical patterns of Barbara and Alex's lives are strikingly different, and reflect a transformation in the part played by work in the lives of middle class western women (Lewis 1992, Crompton 2006). Later motherhood is a result of this longer investment in education. As Barbara points out, for women of her class position there were two options, university or marriage. Alex's account of her school that produced people who were 'good for marrying' suggests that these two options are still on the table. Her desire to continue her career unabated at the point of motherhood marks her out as being relatively unusual, with many of her contemporaries taking the opportunity for career change or pause. Alex's particular heritage (boarding schools and the delegation of care) provides her with a particular set of resources for managing this situation. The incompatibility of the timetables of biology and professional training pose a serious challenge to women who want to be mothers and consultants. The generation before her only thought about children once they had secured their positions, and this was too late. She is attempting to concertina everything into a couple of years. The bottle-neck of activity and resources that Alex and her partner are facing shows how high risk their strategy is - the financial and emotional costs of the delegation of care must be met by significant economic reward, which in turn must be offset into education in order to offset the cost of the delegation of care. As she says several times, their strategy may not work, and one of them (her partner) will have to give up work.

The British ethnographer, Les Back, has argued that thick descriptions are produced through 'deep sociological listening...that theorize as they describe and describe as they theorize' (Back 2007, p. 21). This case study is both a product of engaged listening and an explicit attempt to bring temporality into a research design through intergenerational and longitudinal strategies. It is an approach that enables us to see beyond the individual towards the historically contingent configuration that is a 'family'. By counter-posing the horizontal dimensions of the generation against the vertical dimension of historical process and intergenerational change it is possible to capture a sense of how people live, creating change in order to establish continuity. Families express the coexistence of the past and the

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present, with the past constantly reworked by contemporary demands, yet these demands being shaped by what has passed. As a daughter becomes a mother, she realizes her inheritances and turns her gaze into the future. Generational succession provides a rhythm and direction for these flows and the maternal can provide an entry point for understanding how historical change is experienced and mediated.

The maternal identities explored in this paper are situated, entangled and dynamic. Birth is an intergenerational act, resulting in an intensive traffic of meaning and a moment when daughters ‘come into focus’, siblings relationships are revitalized and mothers are rediscovered in one’s own embodiment. The intergenerational claims and promises that we make are partial, moving between bodily, biographical and cultural identifications. Although we cannot generalise from such particular and situated examples, they can provide insights into the dynamic between freedom and constraint that lies at the heart of maternal experience, constituted in changing times, circumstances and social and political settings – and fuelled by the past-made-present in the form of subjectivities that include our own experiences of being mothered. The ‘fit’ between this subjectivity, who we want to be and the circumstances in which mothering is enacted means that projects are diverse and uncomfortable, and that women struggle to form maternal solidarities within and across generations.

In the preface to her book on the complex relationship between Virginia Woolf and her servants, Alison Light reflects on how her initial discomfort shifted in response to her personal experience of caring for her dying husband, observing that it ‘made the question of our dependence on others look and feel different: this suddenly had an inevitability about it, which I had seen face to face. Dependence was no longer a question of whether, so much as when. And I also came to think that the capacity to entrust one’s life to the care of others, including strangers, and for this to happen safely and in comfort, without abuse, is crucial to any decent community and to any society worth the name.’ (Light 2007, p. xxii). Talking with and thinking about Alex and Barbara has not been a comfortable experience for me and I have found myself both attracted by their appetites yet unnerved by their

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expectation that others will bear the cost of their privilege. Through this case study I have come to appreciate the way that mother and daughter are able to articulate a relationship between freedom from the obligations of mothering and a dependence on the help of others. What is troubling is the absence of the voices of those other women who are part of the configuration that constitutes the maternal for this family: Cheryl, the 'village girls' and the disappearing nanny.

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