

Abstracts

Interdisciplinary Panel 1

Pat Thane (Contemporary British History, KCL)
'Mothering and Work in Britain, Past and Present'

Throughout history working class mothers have combined paid work and childrearing, from economic necessity, while relatives, often grandparents, and friends cared for their children. Until World War 2, middle class mothers were rarely in paid employment and faced severe social disapprobation if they did so. The women's movement of the 1920s and 30s insisted that mothering and domestic work were 'work' and should be recognized and rewarded as such e.g., by family allowances. This was revived by the post-'68 movement. After 1945 it became socially acceptable for middle class women to take paid work usually with a break for childcare. The government encouraged mothers of older children to work. Public day-care was scarce, as always in the UK, apart from wartime. More working class women could afford to stay at home for childrearing. More British mothers than ever before cared for their young children. At the same time, social censure of working mothers became strong due to the growing influence of psychologists. Married, and not only (as from 1980s) single, mothers were censured. The numbers of employed mothers continued to grow, often working part-time, especially through the 1980s and 90s as housing and other costs put pressure on family incomes and women's work opportunities improved. Mothers took less time off for childcare, despite continuing scarcity of day-care. Grandparents played a vital role. Employment rights increased slowly. By the 1990s, the UK was much criticized by the EU for lagging behind in provision of parental leave. The right to 3 months unpaid parental leave, 18 weeks paid maternity leave and improved employment rights for part-time workers were introduced in 1999. Current economic and welfare policies, combined with the international crisis, are severely reducing employment opportunities for all women, while day-care becomes even scarcer and more expensive and welfare benefits are cut.

Helena Forsås-Scott (Scandinavian Studies, UCL/Edinburgh)
'Narration in Kerstin Ekman's *Skraplotter* (2003; 'Scratch Cards'): Techniques and Effects in Relation to Mothering and Employment'

This paper takes its starting-point in the debate on mothering/parenting and employment that emerged in Sweden in the 1960s, and then outlines mothering and employment in a selection of texts from the 1970s onwards, with some attention paid to research question 7: how do literary texts respond to and/or shape current debates on mothering and employment, and vice versa? But my focus is on the last volume in a trilogy by Kerstin Ekman (b. 1933), arguably the leading novelist in Sweden today, and on research question 8: how are issues relating to mothering and employment treated in literary and popular texts, i.e. what kinds of literary techniques and effects are employed to convey meaning in relation to the topic? Set in the late 1990s, *Skraplotter* ('Scratch Cards') includes as one of its main characters Ingefrid, a minister in the Lutheran Church and the mother of Anand, a boy adopted from India. The ministry was the last

of the professions to which women in Sweden gained access, in 1958, and there is no mistaking the prejudice Ingefrid encounters several decades later. Her search for a new version of the epiphany she once experienced combines with her search for the mother who gave her up to be fostered; and here, as I shall try to show, Rosi Braidotti's concept of 'the nomadic subject' provides a useful tool for the analysis of feminine subjectivation. The narrative technique of the novel is crucial, the text consisting of sections of first-person narration alternating with sections in the third person, with the latter characterised by distinctive voices and focalisations. What are the effects and implications of Ingefrid's voice as it emerges in her notes, prayers and conversations with God for her dual search, for her mothering, and for her realisation of the ambition to provide help without exercising power? And how should we read the prominent environmental implications of her eventual move from the Swedish capital to a tiny village in the far north, to a part-time post that has long been vacant, and to a different and much more extensive community where Anand's artistic talent can also unfold?

Sonia Bertolini (Sociology, Turin)
'The Care of the Baby: a Family Affair in Italy'

The paper aims to reconstruct how what's 'best for the baby' is defined by pregnant couples and addresses their main expectations regarding the gendered division of care and paid work. Our qualitative study is based on interviews with 20 Italian working (with typical/atypical contracts) couples during their transition to parenthood. The results of the first preliminary analysis show that the main 'care ideal' behind Italian working couples expecting a baby is that a newborn baby needs its mother. The 'family care model', which includes especially mothers and grandparents, if available, is considered a better solution until the baby is 12 to 18 months old. The couples seem to have been socialized to a traditional representation of motherhood and fatherhood in which the 'good mother' is the one who spends a lot of time with her baby, and the 'good father' is the one who acts as the main breadwinner. Starting from this model, some mothers argue that they feel guilty to restart work too early or continue to work soon after childbirth (i.e. after the compulsory maternity leave period). Nevertheless they are aware that their external constraints and their economic conditions have changed (e.g. lower income, labour market instability etc.) and for these reasons the majority of them, for choice or necessity, need to go back to work. At the same time, fathers' decisions not to take (or request) parental leave, although mainly justified by our interviewees (both mothers and fathers) by cost-opportunity arguments, is deeply rooted in the cultural model of fatherhood, in which the earning capabilities of the father are more important than the time he spends with children. In conclusion, the couples seem aware of the conflict between caring responsibilities and job constraints. But this awareness does not translate into a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of gender roles. If there are conflicts between family and work, the couples do not ask themselves if the institutional or organizational constraints can be modified, or if the couple roles can be negotiated. The most frequent response is to reduce mothers' commitment to their job.

Interdisciplinary Panel 2

Featured Text: 'Tempo parziale' ('Part-Time') by Carmen Covito

Monica Jansen (Modern Languages-Italian, Antwerp and Utrecht)

'Precarity and the Reinvention of Motherhood: A Reading of "Tempo parziale" ("Part-time") by Carmen Covito'

In this paper I want to start from the ambivalent nature of precarity, which threatens security but nevertheless offers a transformative potential through its collective reach. An increase in 'precarity' has been recognized as a widespread phenomenon in Italy, creating a cohort of 'precarious subjects' among which many women. I also want to start from the assumption that feminist activism and practice has distanced itself from state feminism and tends towards 'feminist reinvention' (Galletto *et al.* 2009, 199) through a fluid network of mobile networks and through the use of humour as a creative tool for activism. How does this impact on the issue of precarity and motherhood? In the story by Carmen Covito, 'Tempo parziale' (2009, 37-43), irony is used as a narrative strategy of resistance. The outcome of the story, pregnancy urging the female protagonist to quit her job, is however ambivalent and can be read as a defeat as well as a victory. Is this a case of asserting autonomy and resisting precarity, or should we nevertheless talk in terms of victimhood?

Tina Miller (Sociology, Oxford Brookes)

'The Narration of 'Choices' around Returning to Work after Becoming a Mother'

Increasingly across Europe, women who are mothers also combine caring and domestic chores with paid work. Using data from a qualitative longitudinal study on women's experiences of transition to first-time motherhood in the UK, this paper will explore how women narrate and reconcile their decisions either to return to paid work or not to, following the birth of their first child (Miller 2005). These findings reveal the ways in which deeply embedded assumptions about women's lives and maternal capacities shape how mothers feel able to talk about their practices. The gendered dimensions of work and caring 'choices' is further illuminated through a comparison with data from a companion study on men's experiences of transition to first-time fatherhood (Miller 2010). Even though recent research points to some changes in men's involvement in caring and women's increased activities in the work-place, particular aspects of these arrangements remain seemingly impervious to change.