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**GeNet Working Paper No. 34  
December 2008**

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# Family, class and gender ‘strategies’ in mothers’ employment and childcare

Rosemary Crompton and Clare Lyonette

## Introduction

### *Societal inequalities: origins and policies*

As cross-national comparisons demonstrate, Britain is a highly unequal society and indeed, class inequalities have considerably widened since the 1980s (Hills, 2004). Sociologists with very different approaches to ‘class analysis’ would be in agreement on one important point – that the major ‘transmission belt’ for the reproduction of class inequalities is the family (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993, Bourdieu 1996, Crompton 2006). However, there are important differences in emphasis. Whereas Goldthorpe (via the development of Rational Action Theory, RAT) has been emphatic that the ‘drivers’ of class reproduction via the educational system are entirely economic, Bourdieu (and others influenced by his approach such as Reay and Lucey 2003, Ball, 2003) have also emphasised the parallel impact of cultural and social capital in the creation and reproduction of class ‘habitus’- ‘things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say, in relation to a probable ‘upcoming’ future’ (Bourdieu cited in Ball, 2003: 16). In some contrast to Goldthorpe’s approach, therefore, these authors emphasise that both economic *and* cultural factors are significant in the reproduction of class inequalities.

In general, we would be in agreement with those who have emphasised the dual significance of economic and cultural factors in the reproduction of class inequalities (Crompton, 2008). However, the question of the *relative* importance of one or the other factor is an important issue in policy debates. If class inequalities are seen as a ‘problem’ to be tackled, then the question of their origins becomes crucial. In particular, as critics of ‘culturalist’ approaches have always argued, if structured social inequality is seen to be in the larger part a consequence of ‘cultural degradations’, together with the subsequent behaviours of those groupings so degraded, then cultural, rather than material, solutions to the problems of social inequality are indicated (Fraser, 2000; Frank, 2000). Goldthorpe in particular is well aware of this problem. In making his argument against the significance of the ‘inertial forces’ of ‘habitus’ in the reproduction of educational inequalities, Goldthorpe argues that on the contrary, it is the ‘...unequal distributions of opportunities and constraints that characterise a class society (that) contribute to their own perpetuation through quite rational adaptive strategies that they induce on the part of those who must act under their influence’ (2000: 178). It follows from this argument that policies to reduce inequality should be directed at the *structures* of opportunities and constraints. Here Goldthorpe cites the example of Sweden, a society in which, as a consequence of political action, state policies have contributed to the narrowing of income differentials, and class inequalities in educational attainment have been reduced.

However, current government policies relating to inequality do not primarily address these external structures of opportunities and constraints (HMSO, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Rather, they have a focus on removing prejudice and changing individual and family behaviours. If inequalities are understood as primarily an outcome of inadequate socialisation and/or damaging cultural ‘preferences’, then (even well-meaning) attempts to address the problem of social inequality can become focused on attempts to reshape individual

attitudes, and/or attack the roots of cultural disadvantage, rather than to address the broader structures of social and economic inequality in which these cultures are embedded. Increasingly, these kinds of criticisms have been directed at 'New Labour' policies concerned with inequality, many of which have been developed with the intention of overcoming childhood disadvantage. These strategies have been criticised by some authors for giving priority to 'middle class' values (Gillies, 2007; Evans, 2006).

In this paper, we will focus on decision making within the family in respect of the division of market work between men and women (in particular, the question of mothers' employment), as well as in relation to childcare. We shall argue that although there are indeed what might be described as 'cultural' differences associated with decision-making in respect of these important issues, nevertheless, the most important factors shaping behaviours are in fact the structures of constraints and opportunities within which decisions are taken and 'choices' are made.

#### *Family behaviours and class outcomes*

The relatively recent (re)entry of mothers, particularly mothers of young children, into the labour force has been class differentiated. Mothers with higher levels of qualification, who are likely to be in partnerships with similar men, are more likely to remain in employment than mothers with only low levels of qualification (Rake et al., 2000). Furthermore, women in 'routine and manual' and 'intermediate' occupations are more likely to work part-time than professional and managerial women. This pattern of couple employment behaviour will serve to deepen material inequalities. There is also evidence to suggest that working-class women are more traditional in their attitudes to the mothers' caring role than professional and managerial women (see Crompton and Lyonette 2008). Indeed, in a series of attitudinal questions, in aggregate, professional and managerial respondents emerge as less traditional in their attitudes to both gender roles and the impact of mothers' employment on family life (Crompton, 2006) - although as we shall see, this is largely because of very low levels of gender traditionalism amongst professional and managerial women in employment.

This kind of evidence adds to a sociological strand that, as we have seen above, has long emphasised the impact of different cultures of class. In the past, one feature that was said to distinguish 'working' from 'middle' class perspectives was the capacity to plan for the future – to develop a family strategy. Middle classes were argued to be characterised by deferred gratification - investing in further training and qualifications, saving for the future, etc., whilst the working classes 'lived for today': 'working-class life puts a premium on the taking of pleasures now, discourages planning for some future good' (Hoggart, cited in Goldthorpe et al., 1969: 119). Although this contrast of class perspectives might seem quaint and old-fashioned today, as noted above, Goldthorpe suggests that material class differences crucially affect the 'capacity to plan' in respect of education, and authors such as Ball and Reay have suggested that these capacities are underpinned by variations in cultural resources.

Ball and his colleagues have suggested that changes in education policy – in particular, the creation of a 'quasi-market' in education through an emphasis on parental choice, the creation of school league tables, etc., - have increased the scope

for middle class strategising, understood as a deployment of means to an end (Ball, 2003).<sup>2</sup> This argument has been extended to research on nursery care:

‘Childcare may not, at first sight, seem to be a key arena of class reproduction but we suggest that that is exactly what it is. Childcare opportunities and choices are strongly stratified and very closely tied to family assets.’ (Vincent and Ball 2006: 63)

An emphasis on ‘strategising’ is, of course, perfectly compatible with a RAT based approach. ‘Cultural’ approaches might argue, however, that ‘strategies’ are affected not only by structures of opportunities and constraint, but also by culturally embedded differences (habitus) that positively or negatively influence the choices that are made.

Debates as to the nature of the class-based origins and persistence of family strategies, however, would be seen as largely irrelevant by those who have argued that in contemporary societies, ‘class’ is no longer an appropriate concept as far as sociology is concerned (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In respect of the family, it has been argued that the replacement of the ‘standard biography’ by the ‘choice biography’ is part and parcel of the way in which the ‘traditional’ family, which was a ‘community of need’, has become, increasingly, an ‘elective relationship’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 86). These processes, it is claimed, are closely bound up with the emancipation of women. No longer bound to a life of domesticity, women have themselves become individualised and increasingly able to exercise their choices. As a consequence, family relationships are in flux and ‘...there is no given set of obligations and opportunities, no way of organising everyday work, the relationship between men and women, parents and children, which can just be copied’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 203). In respect of mothers’ employment, one of the most contentious developments of the individualisation thesis has been in the work of Hakim, who has argued that in aggregate, the patterning of mothers’ employment reflects the impact of the ‘choices’ made by different ‘types’ of women, and their individual ‘preferences’ for particular combinations of employment and family life. In common with the individualisation thesis, Hakim discounts the relevance of class and claims that the three lifestyle preference groups she identifies ‘...cut across social class, education, and ability differences’ (Hakim, 2003: 247)<sup>3</sup>.

The persisting class differences in couple employment strategies suggest, however, that the exercise of women’s individual ‘choices’ is not a sufficient explanation as far as mothers’ employment is concerned. Although critics of individualisation theses have challenged the over-emphasis on agency in explanations of family behaviours, they do not seek to replace agency with structure. Rather, they emphasise that one ‘side’ cannot be understood without reference to the other (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Crompton, 2008). This is the position that we take in this paper. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, we will first examine the question of whether family ‘strategies’ can be identified in respect of mothers’ employment. Next we will explore the childcare arrangements made by our interviewees, and the varying rationales associated with ‘choosing’ particular kinds of childcare.

## Data and methods

We draw upon two sources of quantitative data: (i) the British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys of 2002 and 2006, which included repeat questions on family and gender roles, and (ii) wave 14 (2005) of the British Household Panel Study (BHPS), which incorporates some of the questions included in the BSA surveys. Our major data source in this paper, however, is over ninety work-life interviews carried out as part of a GeNet project.<sup>4</sup> All interviewees had at least one child under fourteen. For comparative purposes,<sup>5</sup> we interviewed qualified doctors, accountants (all members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales), and employees in finance and retail. Our interview 'sample', therefore, is not representative of all parents and will be particularly biased towards professional and managerial employees, as well as employed mothers (all women interviewed were in paid work to some degree, although some of the men interviewed had non-working partners).

Our finance interviews (we interviewed in an insurance company, a retail bank and an international bank) included a number of very highly-paid and qualified managerial and professional respondents, although the majority would be classified as 'intermediate' in occupational class terms (that is, lower managerial and administrative employees).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, most of the retail respondents (we interviewed in a large department store) were on supervisory grades and therefore in the 'intermediate' occupational class category, and only four could be described as 'working class' (routine/manual) – in that they were both unqualified and unpromoted.<sup>7</sup> In occupational class terms, therefore, our interviews are not representative of the whole. In terms of income, the differences between our respondents were very wide, with individual incomes ranging from £10,000 to over £100,000 a year, and household incomes from £23,000 to over £250,000.

### *Family strategies and 'choice'*

The last three decades have seen extensive changes in the patterning of family lives and family arrangements. The increase in the paid employment of mothers of relatively young children is one of the most striking manifestations of these changes. As we have seen above, some authors (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Hakim, 2003) have linked these changes to increasing 'individualisation' (particularly amongst women) and the decline of 'class'. However, in families, 'choices' about mothers' employment will rarely be taken on an individual basis. Rather, in couple households, both parents will be involved (Moen, 2000: 19).

In order to explore the extent of family strategy, we asked all of our interviewees whether or not they had 'planned ahead' when they had children – that is, whether they had discussed childcare, sharing domestic work, and so on. A substantial minority (28) said that they simply hadn't planned ahead: 'Goodness, no...A bit of a shock, isn't it, when it arrives, oh my God.' (A15, male accountant, professional/managerial). However, the majority of those interviewed had had such discussions, and in many cases had made quite complex changes to their working lives in anticipation of parenthood. One of our interviewees (R2, male retail, intermediate), for example, had changed his job to one with more regular hours (although it paid less), and his wife had retrained as a driving instructor while pregnant. A job with regular hours enabled him to get home in time to care for the

children so that his wife could work in the evenings – a case of ‘shift parenting’ (Warren, 2003; La Valle et al., 2002).

However, although plans varied, in our interviews there was no obvious class, or occupational, pattern in whether or not couples had ‘planned ahead’. In respect of mothers’ employment, therefore, class differences in *propensity* to plan were not evident. Rather, what was apparent was that intermediate and manual interviewees felt much more materially constrained as far as their planning was concerned. In particular, intermediate and manual interviewees were more than four times as likely as professional and managerial interviewees to mention that the woman’s income was vital as far as family finances were concerned. For example:

We knew, she knew she had to go back to work because that’s what happened, that’s what you had to do, because there was no money (R5, male retail, intermediate).

I know lots of people like that, where they need to have two incomes, particularly if someone’s job is completely unstable, ...I think I was under no illusions when I had a baby that I would have to work and I’d have to have some form of income coming in (F16, female finance, intermediate).

I knew before I went on maternity leave what I wanted to come back to do. Financially it was never a case of I’m going to give up work, I knew I had to come back (R1, female retail, intermediate).

In these (and many other similar instances), the female partner’s income is crucial to family finances, as was concisely expressed by one of our interviewees in retail:

Getting the mother or that second earner back to work, I think can be key...I think that’s where families live on the breadline, where that second earner has to look after the children (R16, male retail, intermediate).

In some contrast, professional and managerial women were more likely to emphasise the importance of paid work to themselves as individuals, when taking the decision to work:

I do sometimes feel guilty myself... but I know I’d be a dreadful stay at home mum. I’d be really awful, and I’m a much better mum for not being there... And my mum didn’t work, and I think I always resented her for that whole martyr being at home, running around after the men all the time ... and I just looked at her and went “I don’t want any of that, thank you” (F12, female finance, professional/managerial).

Even though I’ve got two children, I’m not an earth mother at all, really. Like I couldn’t survive without my job and that’s why I carried on being a full-time, really. I tried the part-time for a year and didn’t like it, so I decided to just go full-time and sort of work things around it really (M20, female GP, professional/managerial).

Rather than any differences in ‘strategising’, or abilities to plan ahead, therefore, the kinds of sentiments we have summarised reflect the very different patterns of class constraints and opportunities available to our interviewees. Professional and managerial women were more likely to emphasise their own need for self-fulfilment in describing their decisions to continue in employment, intermediate and manual interviewees to stress the need for a second income. Many intermediate and manual women also found their jobs fulfilling on a day-to day basis, but none sought to explain their return to employment in these terms, however.

A similar pattern of ‘constrained choice’ by class was apparent in respect of childcare arrangements.<sup>8</sup> Apart from partners, interviewees used a large variety of childcare options, from friends and family to full-time nursery places and nannies. Professional and managerial interviewees were much more likely than intermediate and manual respondents to use the most expensive forms of childcare such as nurseries and nannies (66%). For intermediate and manual respondents, nurseries were only used by 14% and nannies by none. Over half used grandparents, and a quarter used childminders. In the case of grandparents, these were frequently regular, unpaid childcare arrangements, facilitated by their family living close by, which often allowed the female partner to work.

We’re very lucky in that we live very close to both sets of grandparents. So on the three days that she (*wife*) works, one set of grandparents has her two days and one has her for one day, and on Saturday mornings while (*wife’s*) doing nails (*a second part-time job as a manicurist*), I have her, so we’re spoilt really.... If we were paying for childcare, I don’t know that we would have a child to be honest, because I *don’t* think we could have made it work ... Childcare probably wouldn’t have made it worthwhile my wife carrying on working (R10, male retail, intermediate).

Her nan, which we’ve been very lucky with, because she’s going to be able to (be) free when (*wife’s*) going back to work, which is really a godsend because otherwise I wouldn’t know what else to do, because obviously paying for childcare, it’s just *so* expensive, and we’ve looked into that and it’s just astronomical. And we’ve worked it out that she’d most probably be better off not going to work, being honest, but her nan’s come to the rescue (R13, male retail, intermediate).

For those without this kind of regular help from grandparents (usually due to old age, the grandparent still working or not living close by), it was evident that many intermediate and manual interviewees often had difficulties with struggling to combine work and childcare:

Yes, before I came back to work at six months, and from six months really until the ...end of 2004, we relied on family, ....not to look after her, but to pick her up and drop her off....But my mother can’t do that now and my husband’s mother she’s, she doesn’t want to do, she’s getting on, so it was a case of, come the beginning of 2005 we had to decide well look, what *are* we going to do because, you know, I used to be able to drop her off to the child minder but I can’t pick her up as well just because of how I work the hours, so (*the husband changed his working hours*) (R1, female retail, intermediate).

For intermediate and manual interviewees, grandparental care was not a matter of preference, but rather, necessity. A substantial minority of professional and managerial interviewees also drew upon grandparental help, but in only two cases was this as a direct support for parental employment. In many cases, grandparents simply lived too far away:

They live in C, so whilst they do help out and they're very good and from time to time the children go and stay with them, and have a great time, but it's difficult to say, 'I'm not going to get home for half past six, can you pop round', because by the time you know that, there's no way they can do it ... (M13, male doctor, professional/managerial).

Rather, for professional and managerial interviewees the grandparent's care was seen to be of benefit to the child, and not a regular support system for the parent. Professional and managerial interviewees who lived close to grandparents tended to use them on an occasional basis for childcare:

Yes, (husband's) mother, my husband's mother lives not too far away, and my eldest loves going there, so probably once every two or three weeks she'll stay overnight on the Saturday, but it's not regular, she doesn't drive, so it's more emergencies or just a bit of space at the weekend (F12, female finance, professional/managerial).

*And do your parents-in-law help out at all? I mean you said they live just...*

Not on that basis. They did take two of them on a Wednesday morning just for, I don't know, it was just for sort of special granny time. And they also certainly help out with babysitting in the evenings and things like that if we ever go out (M1, male GP, professional/managerial).

It is not being suggested that professional and managerial interviewees had no problems with childcare. For example:

The difficulty I have with that is that my son's school is in (*London suburb*), it's just over there, my daughter's nursery is in (*other London suburb*), and both will finish at six o'clock, it will be quite difficult to get to both places, so I am thinking that I might have to resort to a nanny, which I never wanted to do ... (A18, female accountant, professional/managerial).

Rather, what we are arguing is that although the logistics of childcare might present problems, as in the example above, being unable to pay was not one of them. However, more limited choices were available as far as the intermediate and manual respondents were concerned, because of their inability to pay for certain types of care. The pattern of childcare arrangements amongst our interviewees, therefore, (and not surprisingly) reflected in large part the ability of parents to pay, and inability to pay for certain types of childcare obviously restricts the choices available to many couples.<sup>9</sup> Recent data available from the Families and Children Study (FACS) shows that in 2005, 55% of couples where both work more than 16 hours per week using some form of childcare (both formal and informal). Reflecting our discussion of the types of childcare used by couples where both partners worked, the FACS findings

show that 39% of families in the highest income quintile used formal childcare compared with only 20% of families in the lowest quintile. These figures correspond with the class differences in childcare use found amongst our interviewees. As Butt and her colleagues (2007: 54) have argued: ‘...there are two distinct childcare markets in operation. More affluent areas are mainly served by private providers...Deprived areas have been reliant on government intervention (and) particular concerns remain about the viability of provision in ...deprived areas, once the start-up funding provided by government initiatives runs out’.

In this section, we have examined the strategies used by our interviewees in respect of mothers’ employment and childcare. We argue that it is not the presence or absence of ‘strategising’, or the nature of the strategy itself, that is the major issue, but rather the kinds of material constraints that couples face in relation to the necessity for mothers’ employment and the kind of childcare that can be afforded. As we have seen, these vary systematically by class. Furthermore, we would suggest that class-related ‘cultural’ variations (for example, a greater ‘familialism’ amongst intermediate and manual interviewees) have not, in fact, played a major part in shaping couples’ strategies. As we shall see, this does not mean that issues of choice or ‘preference’, or class variations in cultural capital, were not relevant at all to the decision-making process. For example, in our interviews, one theme that emerged was that professional and managerial women seemed to have had considerably more freedom to exercise their ‘choices’ to take up employment or not. This finding lends support to an argument we have already developed in a previous analysis of the BSA data. We found that professional and managerial women who had stayed at home when their children were young were (statistically) significantly more likely to emphasise the importance of maternal care for young children than professional and managerial women who had gone out to work. In contrast, although women in intermediate and routine and manual class categories who had been in paid employment when their children were young were less likely to emphasise the importance of maternal care than stay at home mothers, the attitudinal difference between working and non-working mothers in these class groupings was much less than that amongst professional and managerial mothers (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008).

#### *Class, gender and attitudes towards maternal employment*

In a similar vein, there were systematic class differences in interviewees’ attitudes regarding the impact of non-maternal care on children. Here, however, we also found substantial gender differences. As we shall see, in aggregate, men are rather more ‘traditional’ than women in their views about maternal care for pre-school children.

The question of childcare is a very emotive issue. However, it is also a topic where changes in attitudes seem to follow changes in behaviour. Using longitudinal data from the BHPS survey, Himmelweit and Sigala (2003) have demonstrated that as the employment rate of mothers of pre-school children rose (between 1991 and 1999), so the proportion of mothers of pre-school children ‘agreeing’ that such children are likely to suffer if their mother works declined.

Data on this question were available from the 2002 and 2006 BSA surveys. However, numbers were small, given the requirement to work with a subsample reflecting the demographic characteristics of our interviewees (in a partnership, with at least one child under the age of fourteen). We therefore turned to the British Household Panel

Survey, in which we were able to locate over two and a half thousand respondents who met our broad criteria. Table 1 summarises the BHPS findings for 2005 by sex and class, using the five-category ONS-SEC classification.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1: ‘A pre-school child suffers if his or her mother goes out to work’ (men and women in a partnership with a child under the age of twelve) (Weighted percentages)

		Prof/man.	Intermediate	Small employers and own account workers	Lower supervisory and technical	Semi-routine and routine	Total
Men	Agree/strongly agree	36	39	46	33	35	37
	Neither agree nor disagree	28	24	28	27	32	28
	Disagree/strongly disagree	36	37	26	40	34	35
	Total	590 100%	102 100%	203 100%	165 100%	324 100%	1384 100%
Women	Agree/strongly agree	20	27	31	28	29	26
	Neither agree nor disagree	25	26	34	30	34	29
	Disagree/strongly disagree	55	47	35	43	37	45
	Total	455 100%	354 100%	94 100%	40 100%	458 100%	1401 100%

Source: BHPS 2005

The first point to note about Table 1 is the rather high (nearly a third) proportion of respondents who ‘neither agree nor disagree’ on this question – an ambivalence that, as we shall see, was also very evident amongst our interviewees. We know that in aggregate, professionals and managerials are less ‘traditional’ in their attitudes to family and gender roles (Crompton, 2006). We also know that opinions about the impact of the employment of mothers on young children are rather sensitive to whether the woman works or not (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003). As far as women are concerned, therefore, Table 1 demonstrates the expected variation by class – professional and managerial women (who are more likely to be in employment) are significantly more likely to ‘disagree’ that a pre-school child suffers than are women in the other occupational class categories ( $\chi^2$  37.027; d.f.=8;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Much research on childcare, and childcare choices, has, not surprisingly, tended to focus on mothers alone (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003; Vincent et al., Duncan, 2005). Although it is true that mothers – even mothers in employment - take the major responsibility for childcare (and this was also the case amongst the great majority of our interviewees), as we have argued, and as is demonstrated by many of our interviewees (see R1 above, for example), fathers often play a crucial role in holding the childcare ‘package’ together, and decisions about couples’ employment strategies will often be taken in relation to the needs of the family unit, rather than the individual. The attitudes of fathers, therefore, are of some interest.

It is well established that in aggregate, men are more gender traditional than women in their attitudes (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Crompton and Lyonette 2008). This is borne out in Table 1, in that in aggregate, 37% of fathers, as against only 26% of mothers, think that a pre-school child will suffer if the mother is in employment ( $\chi^2$  48.303; d.f.=4;  $p < 0.001$ ). Another gendered contrast within Table 1 is that whereas the class differences in women's attitudes are relatively large (and run largely in the 'expected' direction), the class differences in fathers' attitudes do not reveal any distinct pattern. Small employment and own account workers are rather more 'conservative' on this issue than other men – reflecting, perhaps, the political conservatism of the self-employed – but the difference is not statistically significant. In respect of this rather sensitive topic, therefore, gender and class cut across each other.

Given the pattern of results described in Table 1, we carried out a similar analysis of the 1991 BHPS data. Although the proportions thinking that a child suffered as a consequence of maternal employment was higher in all categories in 1991, as we would have expected, the pattern of variation in attitudes by class and gender was rather similar in 1991 as in 2005. That is, in 1991, more men (52%) than women (36%) thought that a child would suffer, and managerial and professional women (44%) were more likely to disagree than routine and manual women (36%). Professional men (57%) were more likely to agree than men in the other occupational classes, particularly men in the semi-routine and routine category (48%). The broad pattern of attitudinal variation by class and sex revealed in Table 1, therefore, has been evident for well over a decade. Looking at change over time, the two groups amongst whom attitudes have changed the most are managerial and professional women, and routine and manual men.<sup>11</sup>

In the 2005 BHPS sample, of mothers with a child under twelve, only 14% of professional and managerial women reported their current economic activity as "family care", as compared to 25% of intermediate, and 30% of routine and manual, women. Amongst employed mothers, there were significant class differences in attitudes – 61% of employed professional and managerial women 'disagreed' that a pre-school child would suffer, as compared to 45% of routine and manual women. This finding confirms our arguments, drawing on quantitative data (see Crompton and Lyonette, 2008), as well as the qualitative data already presented in this paper, that professional and managerial women are better placed to exercise their 'choices' (insofar as these choices are reflected in attitudes) in respect of employment.

Not surprisingly, women with children under twelve who were not in employment were much more likely (46%) to agree that maternal employment was damaging to a pre-school child than mothers in employment (only 18%, both 2005 figures). However, in 2005 there were no class differences at all in attitudes amongst non-employed mothers. Although, as noted above, only a small minority of professional and managerial women were stay-at-home mothers, those who had opted for full-time motherhood held virtually identical views to intermediate, and routine and manual, women in the same position.<sup>12</sup>

The evidence summarised so far suggests that occupational class is a major determinant of whether a mother is (a) in employment and (b) considers her children

will not suffer as a consequence. Middle class women are more likely to be working for 'self-fulfilment', women in the lower occupational categories are more likely to be working for extra income. Nevertheless, a small minority of professional and managerial women would seem to have a preference for motherhood over employment. The attitudinal pattern amongst men (which appears to have persisted over time) presents intriguing problems of interpretation. Everywhere, men have more traditional attitudes to gender roles than women (perhaps because they fear the loss of their 'patriarchal dividend', see Connell, 2002), but this does not explain why there would seem to be a tendency for routine and manual men to become *more* tolerant over time of mothers' employment at a greater rate than professional and managerial men – even though their partners are less likely to be in paid work. We can only speculate. It might be that, as interviewee R16 (male retail, intermediate) argued above, routine and manual men are feeling increasingly aware of the need for a second income, and are therefore in the process of changing their views on the necessity for maternal care quite rapidly.<sup>13</sup> In the case of managerial and professional men (whose partners are much more likely to be in employment, and working longer hours, than either intermediate or routine and manual women), it is possible that the family pressures to which this gives rise are keeping attitudes rather more 'traditional'.<sup>14</sup>

We also asked our interviewees whether or not they thought a pre-school child suffers if his or her mother goes out to work. Gender differences on the topic were very evident. Twenty men agreed that a lack of maternal care was harmful to young children, as against only six women, and twenty-two mothers held that non-maternal childcare was definitely *not* damaging, as compared to only seven men. Our number of interviews was simply too small to explore the interactions of gender and class revealed in the quantitative data. What the answers to this question did reveal, however, were class (cultural) differences in the rationales offered by respondents to explain their opinions.

#### *Class and attitudes towards paid childcare*

Most of the parents, from all classes, who had used paid childcare emphasised the social benefits that their children had gained in the process, particularly as far as interactions with other children were concerned:

I mean I would say he's a very confident little boy, argues like mad and he's only four, it drives me mad. And he's got his confidence I would say 50% from nursery really, from interacting with the other kids, and he's been in nursery since he was four months old (M20, female GP, professional/managerial).

I look at (daughter), she's always been around my child minder and her three kids. In our family, my brother has twins which are a year older than (daughter) ... if I look at (daughter) and I look at like my brother's kids before they went to school, they were very shy, you know, they were at home a lot whereas (daughter's) very social, you know, she's not a shy girl and she interacts very well (R1, female retail, intermediate).

However, the professional and managerial interviewees were much more likely to refer to 'scientific' evidence in explaining their views. This might be seen as an

artefact of having so many doctors amongst our interviewees, but the recourse to scientific explanation was by no means limited to our medical interviewees:

I look at all these studies that people do about, you know, one says that they're more intelligent if they go to nursery earlier and one says they're less intelligent, and I think it's horses for courses. I really do think that (A1, female accountant, professional/managerial).

It's a group of child psychologists, I think it said, who believe that children suffer if their mother goes out to work and they're put into childcare. And I don't think so, providing the childcare that they are receiving is high quality and that the parents have adequate input around the childcare... (A18, female accountant, professional/managerial).

Another theme that emerged amongst the professional and managerial interviewees (and reinforcing their arguments about a woman's own personal need for the satisfactions of employment) was that maternal care is not necessarily the best for children:

I think it's a very bad thing to be where the mother at home who's depressed or who isn't able to stimulate children or doesn't have a choice, you know I think that can be worse. I think if you got a depressed mother – I don't want to stereotype – a mother who's not equipped at the current time for whatever reason not to be a great mum, I think there some nursery support or nursery education can be very positive, because it gives them more stimulation, it gives them a different environment (F12, female finance, professional/managerial).

But I also think the child suffers if, if somebody is full time at home, it's vital that whoever's at home recognises the child's needs for social development and, and probably slightly more creative play ... I'm reassured by the fact that, that she does actually do painting at nursery. ... I think, I think, I've seen a lot of stay at home mums who I think do actually choke their child's development by not exposing them to a sufficient variety of environments (M15, male GP, professional/managerial).

In short, professional and managerial respondents, in discussing the impact of pre-school care on their children, were considerably more likely to draw on rational, 'scientific' arguments in arguing for the absence of a negative impact (and vice versa) as far as non-maternal care was concerned. This kind of reasoning reflects 'ways of thinking' that demonstrate the 'academic' approach characteristic of middle-class 'habitus' (Ball, 2003), that underpin the class differences in attitudes – particularly amongst women – revealed in Table 1.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

In this paper, we have, from a class perspective, explored in some depth the closely-related topics of the employment of mothers of young children, and the childcare 'choices' of the couples involved. Our interviews supplied concrete evidence of what may be broadly described as differences of class 'habitus' in the dialogues that

surrounded their decision-taking, particularly in relation to childcare. What was more striking about our interviews, however, was that in the main, the major factors shaping outcomes were the *structures* of opportunities and constraints faced by the parents involved. Here, therefore, we would incline to Goldthorpe's 'materialist' explanation of class inequalities. More particularly, it was the professional and managerial interviewees who had most clearly been able to exercise their personal 'choices' – whether for mothers to work out of a sense of personal fulfilment, or to 'choose' – and switch – into and out of expensive childcare.

These findings have implications for current government policy. In present day Britain, the government argues that inequalities are *not* socially desirable. As noted in our Introduction, however, contemporary policies focus more on individual and family choices and motivations, rather than the structural opportunities and constraints we have emphasised. For example, a recent review (HMSO, 2007: 14-15) argues for a 'new approach' to inequality, drawing on Sen's (1999) 'capabilities' approach, which focuses on process and worth, rather than outcomes. Prejudice against individuals, as reflected in organisational and institutional constraints, must be removed, but: 'A large part of what will unseat entrenched inequalities will lie in what communities and families do for themselves', and 'barriers to aspiration' must be removed (HMSO, 2007: 45). The sharp rise in income inequality and job polarisation in Britain in recent years is acknowledged (HMSO, 2007: 32), but it is not acknowledged that rising income inequality (and changes in the employment structure) were themselves a consequence of changes in economic policy following the turn to neoliberalism from the 1980s (Harvey, 2005).

It is certainly a positive step to introduce policies that aim to develop the practical capacities for individuals to realise their 'capabilities', but this does not mean that approaches to the problem of inequality that focus on resources and outcomes can simply be discarded. If the 'class structure', as reflected in the occupational structure, remains highly unequal, then extensive inequalities will endure. In short, it is being argued here that parallel efforts should be made to improve the overall 'quality' of *employment*, as well as the 'quality' of the people taking up employment. This would imply some narrowing of income differentials. The provision of high quality, universal childcare would also serve to narrow class inequalities. The extent of childcare provision in Britain has been much improved, but much of this is supplied by the private sector. Our evidence suggests that the capacity to pay for childcare remains crucial in facilitating mothers' employment, and is a major class factor differentiating childcare use, as Vincent and Ball (2006) have argued.

Finally, gender differences – which have not been explored much in the past as discussions of maternal employment and childcare have focused mainly on women – have emerged around this important topic. Professional and managerial men are as traditional as other men as far as their views on maternal care are concerned – although they have significantly less traditional attitudes than men in other occupational classes as far as 'general' gender roles are concerned. This may possibly be an indication of a potential gender conflict *within* the professional and managerial grouping, and is certainly an area that merits further research.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the tax and benefits system was defined as ‘outside the scope’ of their enquiry (HMSO 2007 14).

<sup>2</sup> In past debates, the sociological analysis of situations in terms of ‘strategies’ has been seen as offering the opportunity to ‘go beyond the classic structure/agency dichotomy’ (Crow 1989 1).

<sup>3</sup> Hakim has argued that: ‘...the only cleavages that will matter within the workforce in the twenty-first century will be the continuing differences between primary and secondary earners ...Sex and gender will cease to be important factors and are already being replaced by lifestyle preferences as the only important differentiating characteristic in labour supply’ (Hakim 2003a: 261).

<sup>4</sup> Project 7, ‘Class, gender employment and family’ of the ESRC Research Network ‘Gender inequalities in production and reproduction’ (GeNet), directed by Jackie Scott, University of Cambridge.

<sup>5</sup> See Crompton and Lyonette, *Gender Work and Organisation*.

<sup>6</sup> Using the ONS-SEC 3-category classification.

<sup>7</sup> Workforces are stratified by both age and stage of family formation (see Yeandle et al), and our interviewing strategy made the recruitment of routine and manual employees problematic. Doctors and Accountants are clearly professionals, and the majority of employees in finance would be classified as ‘Intermediate’. In retail, the majority of employees would be classified as ‘routine and manual’ according to the NS-SEC classification. We interviewed in a large London department store, where the majority of all employees were on lower grades. However, the vast majority of these were young. All of our interviewees had to have a child under the age of 14. Had we interviewed in say, a supermarket, the most of the shopfloor employees would have been either women with children, or young part-timers, often students (see Crompton et al).

<sup>8</sup> We had 85 usable respondents for this part of the analysis (i.e. heterosexual, coupled). Of these, 37 were men (19 prof/managerials, 17 intermediates and 1 manual) and 48 were women (31 prof/managerials, 14 intermediates and 3 manuals).

<sup>9</sup> Latest figures from The Daycare Trust (2007) show that the typical cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two is £152 a week (over £7900 per year), and that the costs in the south-east are much higher (typically £205 a week in inner London or £180 a week in the south-east, where most of our interviews were conducted). Typical costs with a childminder for a child under 2 is £141 per week. Nannies cost anything between £250 and £500 per week, with families also responsible for the nanny’s tax and NI contributions.

<sup>10</sup> Occupational class was allocated on an individual basis. Men and women in employment were allocated the class category of their current job, those not in employment (‘looking after the home’, or unemployed) were allocated the class category of their last job. We use the five category ONS-SEC classification. In the three-category ONS-SEC classification, occupational segregation has a marked impact on the ‘Intermediate’ category. Whereas women cluster in the ‘Intermediate’ grouping (lower level clerical and administrative employment), men cluster in the ‘small employers and own account workers’ and ‘lower supervisory and technical’ categories. Thus gender/class breakdowns using the three category ONS-SEC do not compare like with like in occupational terms.

<sup>11</sup> Although our numbers are small, the BSA 2002 and 2006 surveys also indicated a larger shift in attitudes, in a more liberal direction, amongst routine and manual men.

<sup>12</sup> This finding lends confirmation to the findings of Duncan’s (2005) qualitative research. That is, the group he identified as ‘suburban wives’ (non-employed professional and managerial women), identified themselves as ‘primarily mothers’ and placed a very high value on maternal care. In this respect, their views were closer to the ‘peripheral working class’ mothers (who were also not in employment) than other middle class women (‘gentrifying partners’) who were more likely to identify themselves as ‘workers’.

<sup>13</sup> Support for this interpretation may be found in the fact that, in 2005, 55% of semi-routine and routine manual men ‘Agreed’ that both the man and woman should contribute to the household income, as compared to only 34% of professional/managerial men.

<sup>14</sup> In this discussion, we concentrate on one question only. However, an analysis of other family and gender role questions in the BHPS revealed that, although professional and managerial men were *more* gender liberal on questions relating to gender roles, they (and the self-employed) tended to be similarly *less* liberal on other attitudinal questions relating to the impact on the family of mothers’ employment.