

*Contemporary Motherhood and Traditional Gendered Division
of Labour: A Study of High Income Stay-at-Home Mothers* in a
Brisbane Suburb*

Toni McCallum

PhD candidate, School of Humanities and Social Science, Sociology and
Anthropology, The University of Newcastle

Contacts Details: Mobile: 0448820370

Email: toni.mccallum@uon.edu.au

Key words: Brisbane, Ascot, stay-at-home mother, housewife, maternal
identity, post-natal depression.

Word Count: 3328 (excluding details cover page and Table 1)

* ‘Stay-at-home mother’ in this paper refers to a married woman whose main
occupation is caring for her family, and managing household affairs and housework.
The women in this study refer to themselves as ‘stay-at-home mothers’. In addition, I
use the term ‘housewife’ specifically when discussing the more traditional aspects of
their *role* as ‘stay-at-home mothers’.

Introduction

Childcare, of course, was their [the mothers'] domain. Fathers usually worked long hours outdoors or away from home. Fathers often appeared only for the evening meal, by which time children were supposed to be ready for bed. Women made the decisions on child management on a day-to-day basis, keeping paternal authority for reinforcement.

(Rieger, 1991: 50)

Rieger refers to the idea of “the typical Australian family” in the 1930s; here is Ascot stay-at-home mother Mary, who has three children under eight, describing the input of her husband to the family’s domestic arrangements in 2012:

“I do everything. Colin is just a speed bump in my life. In terms of the routine of my day he contributes very little.”

(Mary, 44, stay-at-home mother of 3 young children)

This paper examines the lives of six stay-at-home mothers in the high income Brisbane suburb of Ascot who were interviewed in 2011 and 2012. I interviewed 12 mothers in total in Ascot, six of whom worked full- and part-time. The remainder were stay-at-

home mothers and it is this latter group that is the focus of this paper.

I will argue that these stay-at-home mothers in Ascot are in largely traditional and gendered roles as housewives* and mothers within their marriages. I will also explore and demonstrate how these understandings are produced from within a framework of socio-economic privilege.

Contextualisation of the present study

These Ascot interviews form part of a larger study with the aim of understanding women's lived experience of motherhood in contemporary Australia, as told and experienced by the mothers themselves. I have asked them to describe, in their own words, what they do in their mothering work, and how they talk about and understand their mothering identity. While the overall location of the study is Brisbane, I interviewed mothers from contrasting parts of the city to ensure a diversity of cultural and

* See footnote on page 1 for explanation of terms used in this paper.

socio-economic backgrounds and voices. The opportunity to study motherhood in a variety of community and cultural settings opens up new linkages between motherhood and class, race and ethnicity. Rather than contemporary representations of motherhood as hegemonic, prescriptive and compulsory motherhood is reframed as nuanced, multiple and contextual. The iteration of motherhood presented in this paper is just part of a broader picture of contemporary Australian motherhood.

Trends in mothering and work in comparable Western countries

I will show how being a stay-at-home mother goes against international trends; for example, in 2012 more than a third of mothers in the United States and the United Kingdom were the family's main breadwinner, either because they were single, or because they made more money than their husbands (Rosin, 2013: 48). In the North American context 66% of mothers aged 30 to 44 with children 2 and under, 63% of mothers aged 30 to

44 with children 5 and under, and 74% of mothers aged 30 to 44 with children aged 6 to 11, were in paid work (United States Census Bureau, June 2010).

I found this same trend when I interviewed mothers in the low income suburb of Logan, Brisbane in 2011 (McCallum, 2013).

Despite having large families (up to 8 children) and young babies (as young as 6 months old) full- or part-time work or looking for work was the taken for granted norm. In fact “the whole question... about whether mothers should work, is moot ‘because they just do. This idealized family – he works, she stays at home – hardly exists anymore’ ” (Rosin, 2013: 49).

Married women with children who work are also the norm in Australian contexts. In 2012 the participation rate for women with dependent children in the labour force was 59% and this figure has been trending upwards for at least the last 10 years. In 2011 54% of women with children aged 0 to 4 years were working (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

The mix of family types in contemporary Australia further shows how the phenomenon of high income, stay-at-home mothers supported by a male breadwinner, as I found in Ascot, is notable.

While families comprising couples with children (of any age) remain the most prevalent type of family in Australia, the increase in the number of these families was relatively small (3%) between 1986 and 2001. In comparison, the number of one-parent families increased by 53%, and couple families without children living with them increased by 33% over the same period. Consequently, over time, couple families with children are forming a smaller proportion of all families - 47% of families in 2001, down from 54% in 1986 (*Australian Social Trends 2003*, Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Methodology: A comparative study of contemporary mothering practices

TABLE 1: Key Demographic Characteristics of the Ascot Stay-at-Home Mothers

<i>Name *</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>No of children and ages</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Renting or own home</i>	<i>Family Income</i>	<i>Work Status</i>	<i>Qualifications</i>
Paula	42	White Australian	3 (6, 5 and 2)	Married	Renting but renovating own home	**Up to \$50,000	Stay-at-home mother	University graduate
Sarah	38	White Australian	2 (6 and 4)	Married	Rent. Plan to buy	\$150,000 to \$200,000	Stay-at-home mother	Postgraduate university graduate
Mia	35	White Australian	2 (4, 18 months)	Married	Rent	\$120,000 to \$150,000	Stay-at-home mother	University graduate
Wendy	43	English - emigrated in early 2000's	2 (8 and 2)	Married	Own	\$150,000 to \$200,000	Stay-at-home mother	Postgraduate university graduate
Sally	35	White Australian	3 (6, 4 and 2)	Married	Own	\$200,000 +	Stay-at-home mother	University graduate
Mary	44	White Australian	3 (8, 7 and 4)	Married	Own	** \$80,000 to \$120,000	Stay-at-home mother	TAFE qualified

*Note all names have been changed to pseudonyms

** While some of these declared incomes do not seem that high they were self-disclosed. However, the descriptions of some of the women's lives eg, tutoring for their young school age children and the children's many out of school activities along with the fact they can be stay-at-home mothers with no pressure to bring money into the family, undermines these self-disclosed figures.

I digitally recorded the semi-structured interviews with Ascot mothers and transcribed them myself; pseudonyms were used and all transcripts were de-identified.

Each of the interviews took between one and a half to two hours, and was either conducted at the participant's home or the local park. In some instances their young children played nearby. The participants were recruited from advertisements placed in local kindergartens, daycare centres or the local free monthly parenting magazine *Brisbane Child*. I also attended the local Ascot playgroup, which was a unique glimpse of the Ascot parenting culture. Half the adult attendees were au pairs (the biological stay-at-home mothers were at home having a rest I discovered after talking to the au pairs). The playgroup was run by a paid educational 'leader' who ensured the children were engaged in developmental learning opportunities. This is a deviation from the traditional playgroup model where mothers meet in a run-down community hall and share intimate aspects of their personal, domestic lives while their children play nearby in the (usually dirty) sandpit (Everingham, 1994).

The Ascot interviews in this study complement completed interviews with 10 mothers in Logan in 2011. The study will also comprise interviews with 10 stay-at-home fathers to see whether they ‘mother’ differently to women (Ruddick, 1989).

The research is informed by a self-reflexive understanding that the interview is an active, emergent process, with a feminist epistemological stance that frames these interviews as intimate, reciprocal conversations between two participants (Oakley, 1981; Ezzy, 2010). Hence, these interview data present situated contributions to the ongoing conversations about Australian motherhood.

As Table 1 above shows most of the Ascot stay-at-home mothers were university educated. They all had professional work experience: one had been a high school teacher, one had run a large medical establishment in the United Kingdom, one had worked in environmental management and another had worked as a policy adviser in local government. Although one of the participants currently works 5 hours a week for a charity

and another helps with the books for her husband's business their central focus is their work in the home and with their children. Any work outside this domestic sphere is minimised and must fit in to their maternal responsibilities. The Ascot women I engaged with thus represent an economically and educationally privileged group.

Contemporary issues in parenting: gender equality and individual fulfillment

To theoretically situate the findings and attempt an explanation of why these more traditional roles as mother and housewife persist in contemporary Ascot I will contrast my research findings with Hochschild's widely cited work on the family in the USA (1989, 1997) and Rosin's 2013 findings on highly qualified American mothers, many of them married to similarly highly qualified men.

In the 1980s Hochschild examined the tensions arising when working mothers also do most of the childcare and housework;

the ‘second shift’ (Hochschild, 1989). In Rosin’s more recent study of privileged, well-qualified working mothers the domestic tensions identified by Hochschild, while not disappearing completely, have been absorbed into more democratic, equitable domestic arrangements. Like the Ascot women the American women in Rosin’s study still seek comfort in traditional marriage, however these “see-saw marriages” as Rosin calls them are “much more fluid about who plays what role, who earns more money, and, to some extent, who sings the lullabies” (Rosin, 2013: 7). Rosin situates this new domestic arrangement within a particular paradigm of contemporary attitudes toward work and individual fulfillment:

Couples are not chasing justice and fairness as measured by some external yardstick of gender equality. What they are after is individual self-fulfillment, and each partner can have a shot at achieving it at different points in the marriage (Rosin, 2013: 67).

Even in the Australian context Goodwin and Huppertz (2010) show how the hegemonic figure of the “white, heterosexual, economically dependent and child focused” mother is hardly a

dominant form of mothering in contemporary Australia (2010: 2). Alternative discourses of motherhood: lesbian mothers, Aboriginal mothers, mothers on welfare, and executive mothers, among others, disrupt this dominant paradigm (Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010).

This paper raises the issue of why some Australian women appear to be taking on the traditional and gendered role of stay-at-home mother. How far is this amenable to individual flexibility and fulfillment or is it a reversion to pre-second wave forms which militate against gender equality? The starting point of the paper is to ask what this type of gendered division of labour means to the women themselves?

“But I’m choosing to be a stay-at-home mum. It’s my job...”

When I spoke with the Ascot stay-at-home mothers many insisted that this was their chosen role:

“I’m a stay-at-home mum. I made a conscious decision to do this.”
(Mia, 35, stay-at-home mother, two children, 4 and 18 months)

and;

“Actually being a full-time mum is really important to me. I made a conscious choice.”

(Sarah, 38, stay-at-home mother, two children, 6 and 4)

However, for many of these Ascot mothers, the ‘choice’ to be a stay-at-home mother often occurs as a pragmatic response to having a high-earning, highly-educated husband who is largely absent from the routines of family life.

In a study of “managerial masculinities” in 2008, Connell interviewed male managers and found entrenched ideas about masculinity and that traditional ways of working are embedded in organisational life. (Many of the husbands of the Ascot stay-at-home mothers were in managerial positions.) She found that these ideas have a profound affect on the relationship between work life and the family:

Most of the men we have interviewed work about a ten-hour day, are focussed on the demands and responsibilities of their work, and rely on having a wife to look after the children and keep the household going (Connell, 2008: 243).

In the Ascot households of this study patriarchal absence during the week is even extended to the weekend as some of these high-earning male partners engage in semi-competitive sports like triathalons and cycling; one had had a racing car, another had a boat, and another played regular poker. Family responsibilities were often moulded around their male training and recreational schedules.

Me: And is your husband more hands on in the weekend?

Mary: “Well during the week he’s up at 5am. Out the door (running or cycling) and then he has a coffee. In again at 8. Comes home at night at 6pm. Watches ‘Deal or No Deal’ [sarcastic, mocking voice]. And I just keep going. Occasionally he might do the washing up. Or I’ll do it. He says ‘I’ll do it in the morning’ but I can’t stand looking at it so it’s easier if I do it.”

(Mary, 44, stay-at-home mother, three children, 8, 7 and 4)

“...so the last two years have been quite full on for him work wise. And my sense watching him is that he really just needs down time in the weekend. And um we went through a phase when my first child was 1 when I would ask him for help in the weekends and he would get sick. And when I didn’t ask for help he didn’t get sick.... So I thought I’m not going to ask you for help any more because then I have to look after you as well. It’s easier for me to look after

the kids and keep you well rather than to stretch you... So now I see the weekends as my husband's time.”

(Sarah, 38, stay-at-home mother, two children, 6 and 4)

The moral dimension: shaping model citizens and striving to be 'good mothers'

An inherent component of the Ascot stay-at-home mothers' parenting seemed to be creating clever, well-behaved citizenry (Everingham, 1994).

To Mary, motherhood was partly about:

“Shaping little lives, identities. About routine. Consistency. Direction and support.”

(Mary, stay-at-home mother of three children, 8, 7 and 4)

Many of their mothering narratives show uncompromising ideas about eating nutritious, home-made food (in one interview an 18 month old ate frozen peas and small bits of cut up organic tomato as her mother tried to ensure she didn't eat processed food), limiting television viewing to an hour a day and only ABC 2, involving children in many out of school activities in

exhausting domestic regimes, enforcing strict homework rules, engaging tutors for their young school aged children and being very particular about where they send their children to school, usually choosing private schools over state.

In this way they were similar to the privileged mothers of Hoffman's (2013) study of contemporary American mothers. They strove at all times to do their job as mother well and to be 'good mothers':

[they] felt vulnerable to the criticisms of others in their attempt to carve identities for themselves as "good mothers", struggles were not only with their children, but with the larger community, and even, one might speculate, with the larger culture and its pressures to get the job of childrearing "right" (Hoffman, 2013).

Higher incidence of postnatal depression among the Ascot stay-at-home mothers

While the Ascot stay-at-home mothers are an economically and socially privileged group of mothers and despite their narratives of how 'lucky' they are not to have to work, the experience of

post-natal depression featured largely in their accounts. The Ascot women who were in the work force did not report such experiences.

Five of the six Ascot stay-at-home mothers I spoke with had experienced post-natal depression at some time:

“...Part of being a mother is being locked in these four walls. That’s one of my challenges. Just being around the house. It drives me crazy.”

(Wendy, 43, 2 children, 2 and 8, had run a large medical establishment in the UK before having children, married to an IT specialist who regularly works away)

“After I had xxx [child’s name] I did have times when I was down, but it was more because I was tired. It was more about things like being tired, isolated and wanting connection.”

(Sarah, 38, two children under 6, has a Masters in Law, married to the managing director of a major company who works long hours)

“It’s hard work [being a mother]. It’s like those jokey emails about job descriptions for mothers – no pay, no sick leave, no sleep...If you knew what you were signing up for you wouldn’t do it... It’s a shitty job.”

(Sally, 35, 3 children under 6, has a medical specialist husband who is 'on call' and often away, has a nanny three and a half days a week and a cleaner)

High income families often don't have other family members in the state or country because they have travelled interstate to follow their husband's work:

"The whole time we've had kids we've never had family support. Having the kids around all the time is all we've ever known."

(Wendy, 43, stay-at-home mother, 2 children, 2 and 8)

"When the baby was little, everything was so tricky. When do I feed her? What do I do? How do you wean? Babies seem so little and vulnerable..... I was so anxious about everything. I remember I used chat rooms for those really specific technical questions...."

(Sarah, 38, stay-at-home mother, 2 children, 4 and 6)

This compares strongly with the experiences of low income women in Logan. Here mothering advice is shared between the generations as mothers, grandmothers and aunties share their collective mothering knowledge in a kind of 'co-mothering'; whole communities are involved in raising a child (McCallum, 2013). In Ascot mothering is an individualised, isolating experience.

Do the women themselves think they are experiencing gender inequality?

One of the participants, Mia, nicely sums up the contradictory and complex nature of the women's own perceptions of their position and status in life as unequal. In the space of 5 minutes in the interview she says:

“I feel like a dinosaur as a stay-at-home mum but I wouldn't do it [use daycare for younger children]. I'd feel like I was missing out.”
and

“I'm fortunate I don't have to work. I have a choice to be a stay-at-home mum. Having said that motherhood is relentless.”
and

“If you work it's easier. You get to go to the toilet on your own. You get to interact with adults. But there are so few small years...”
(Mia, 35, stay-at-home mother, two children, 4 and 18 months)

Conclusion

The six Ascot stay-at-home mothers whose experiences are the basis of this paper show a commitment to a traditional and gendered role as housewife and mother within their marriage.

This is contrary to international and Australian trends where the

norm is that most married women with children engage in paid work. The self-reflexive mothering narratives of the women emphasise that this is their 'chosen' role. However, the significant absence of their husbands from their domestic arrangements, a higher rate of postnatal depression experienced and lack of family support in their mothering would more accurately reframe these narratives as pragmatic survival strategies. It is not clear the extent to which these experiences represent a chosen path of flexibility and individual fulfillment or a resignation to gendered inequality. Maybe in time these women will insist on a 'see-saw' arrangement that evens up the balance. Sarah says:

“Before we had kids we were a modern progressive family. My husband is highly educated. I thought the split would be 70/30. The reality was 90/10 or sometimes 95/5. In terms of sharing the care of children. I thought 'oh shit'. But then I thought this is a small time in our lives. I need to make sure I buy back that time for myself at some point. I will walk out and say you deal with them.”

(Sarah, 38, stay-at-home mother, 2 children, 4 and 6)

Bibliography

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013.

Australian Social Trends 2003, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Connell, R. (2008) “A Thousand Miles from Kind: Men, Masculinities and Modern Institutions”, *Journal of Men’s Studies* 16, (3), 237-252.

Connell, R. & Crawford, J. (2007) “Mapping the Intellectual Labour Process”, *Journal of Sociology* 43, (2), 187-205.

Everingham, C. (1994) *Motherhood and Modernity: An investigation into the rational dimension of mothering*.

Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Ezzy, D. (2010) “Qualitative Interviewing as an Embodied Emotional Performance”, *Qualitative Inquiry* 2010, 16: 163, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Goodwin, S. & Huppertz, K. (2010) (eds.) *The Good Mother: Contemporary Motherhoods in Australia*, Sydney: Sydney University Press.

Hochschild, A. R. (1989). *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Avon.

Hochschild, A. R. (1997). *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Holt Paperbacks.

Hoffman, D. M. (2013) "Power struggles: the paradoxes of emotion and control among child-centered mothers in privileged America" in Faircloth, C, and D. M. Hoffman and L. L. Layne (eds.) *Parenting in Global Perspective: Negotiating Ideologies of Kinship, Self and Politics*. London: Routledge.

McCallum, T. (2013) "Mothering in Logan: The Need to Work", *Proceedings of the 2013 Australian Sociological Association (TASA) Conference*.

Oakley, A. (1981). "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms". In H. Roberts (ed), *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 30-61.

Rieger, K. (1991). *Family Economy*. Victoria, Australia: McPhee Gribble.

Rosin, H. (2013) *The End of Men and the Rise of Women*. New York: Penguin Books.

Ruddick, S. (1989) *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*. London: The Women's Press.

United States Census Bureau, June 2010.

