To be or not to be a mother?: Women negotiating cultural representations of mothering

Jane Maree Maher and Lise Saugeres

*Journal of Sociology* 2007; 43; 5
DOI: 10.1177/1440783307073931

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jos.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/43/1/5

Additional services and information for *Journal of Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jos.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://jos.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations (this article cites 5 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
http://jos.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/43/1/5#BIBL
To be or not to be a mother?

Women negotiating cultural representations of mothering

Jane Maree Maher
Centre for Women’s Studies & Gender Research, Monash University

Lise Saugeres
Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

Abstract
This article is based on a recently completed study of fertility decision-making in Victoria, Australia. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 100 women, it explores how dominant discourses of mothering influence women in their life decisions about children. While much research indicates that all women negotiate dominant ideals of good mothering, our findings suggest that such stereotypes need to be further broken down, since women with and without children respond to different aspects of such ideals. For women who have children, images of the ‘good mother’ are less prevalent than pragmatic concerns about how to manage mothering. Women without children, in contrast, understand mothering as all-encompassing and potentially overwhelming. These findings suggest that Australian women share ideals and assumptions about mothering with their counterparts in the United Kingdom and the United States, but they also point to an increasing gap between how mothering is viewed and how it is practised.

Keywords: childlessness, fertility, motherhood, mothering, the ‘good mother’

There have been significant social, economic and cultural changes that have impacted on practices of mothering in Western societies (Crompton and Harris, 1999; Jarvis, 1999; McRae, 1999; Scott, 1999). There has been a sharp increase in women’s paid employment, changes in marriage and partnering affecting the ways in which people view intimacy, parenthood and domesticity, a decrease in fertility rates including an increased tendency to

DOI:10.1177/1440783307073931 www.sagepublications.com
postpone having children. In political and media discourses in Australia, there has been concern over the decline in fertility rates. This study was designed to investigate women’s fertility decision-making and was conducted during a period of intense discussion about birth, fertility and choice in Australia during 2002 and 2003. Overall, in the study we found that fertility decision-making is often situational and less influenced by specific policies than by social expectations and employment conditions (Maher and Dever, 2004; Maher et al., 2004).

One of the key themes in the data concerned images and ideas of motherhood and how these impacted on women’s views about children. Despite significant changes to women’s involvement in the public sphere, cultural discourses of femininity still centre on motherhood. As Gillespie (2000: 223) argues:

Motherhood has predominantly been perceived as natural for women, the desire for it inevitable, unquestioned and central to the constructions of normal femininity.

Consequently, women who choose not to have children are viewed as abnormal or deviant (Dever and Saugeres, 2004; Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 1999; Morell, 1994). Ideals of intensive mothering, where women are seen as best suited to look after young children and required to be unconditionally available, still hold considerable power in societies like the US, the UK and Australia (Cannold, 2005; Hattery, 2001; Hays, 1996). Our findings suggested great resonance in the ‘good mother’ ideal and her key attributes of selflessness and all-encompassing commitment to motherhood. We consider that these images and representations of the ‘good mother’ need to be more carefully analysed and distinguished, since there were significant differences in how women with children and women without children engaged with this cultural representation of the ‘good mother’. Voluntarily childless women contested the discourse that mothering is essential to womanhood, but did often view motherhood as incompatible with other life goals. Women with children, by contrast, defined ‘good motherhood’ much less stringently and felt able to negotiate motherhood alongside their other life goals. Sharon Hays suggested that ‘all mothers ultimately share a recognition of the ideology of intensive mothering’ (1996: 131); our findings suggest that all women, whether mothers or not, share this recognition, but that the experience of mothering as a practice acts to demystify ideals of mothering. Our findings also suggest that idealized images of motherhood persist, despite clear changes in women’s decisions about mothering and employment.

This study demonstrates similarities with research conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States (Hattery, 2001; Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995; Vincent et al., 2004) and earlier findings from Australian research (Bittman and Pixley, 1998; Lupton, 2000). Dominant constructions of good mothering suggest that mothers need to be intensely focused on child-rearing, and this construction of mothering may be seen as engendering
guilt in women who mother and encouraging women without children to view mothering as an all-encompassing and potentially engulfing experience. These findings suggest that there is a significant need to continue research into the ‘disparate discourses around contemporary mothering’ (Vincent et al., 2004: 573). But they also suggest the need for new ways to consider and to represent women’s mothering work, to contest what Vincent et al. have identified ‘as the longevity and robustness of … traditional [care] arrangements’ (2004: 572) and the assumptions about mothering that go with them. In Australia, women’s paid work has become increasingly crucial to the national economic and social structure (HREOC, 2005), yet the disjunction between what women with children actually do (with more women with children than ever in the paid workforce; see de Vaus 2004), and how the role and work of mothering is perceived and valued persists. The increasing gap in Australia between how women with children actually do mothering work and the dominant constructions of motherhood allows for limited recognition of women’s actual work.

We focus here on women’s perceptions of mothering, showing how mothers and childless women reproduce, negotiate and contest dominant social constructions. We describe the methodology of the study. We explore how women without children contest and accept conventional ideals of ‘good mothering’. Finally, we examine how women who have children negotiate ‘good mothering’ in practice. Through a closer examination of which aspects of the ideal of the ‘good mother’ impact on different groups of women, we are able to reveal the persistence and resilience of images and ideals of ‘good mothering’, despite significant social shifts in the past several decades, which have changed both the expectations and activities of women considerably.

**Methods**

The study focused on five different areas across Victoria: City of Port Phillip, Casey, the North West, focused particularly on Brimbank and Maribyrnong, Gippsland and Greater Bendigo. Interviews were conducted between January 2002 and October 2003. Ethical approval was gained through the institutional ethics committee, prior to the commencement of the study. In each area, participants were recruited from the following groups: women with no children, women with one child, women with two or more children, young women, and women raising children alone. Recruitment was through community newspaper advertisements, posters at selected health centres and public libraries, and via community radio stories in both Gippsland and Greater Bendigo. Recruitment posters invited anyone, aged 18–43, interested in discussing their views on having children to contact the research team. This recruitment pattern ensured that we achieved a small-scale but substantially representative account of fertility decision-making.
By recruiting from these groups in our target areas, we were able to achieve social, economic and geographical diversity. All women who volunteered were interviewed. The only group excluded were those who identified as involuntarily infertile, since this study was focused on how people made decisions about reproduction. Although the advertisement was open, only 14 men responded – findings about their fertility decisions have been reported elsewhere (Maher et al., 2004). Our final sample of 100 women included 58 women with children and 42 without children, between the ages of 21 and 52. Of the women with children, numbers of children varied from one to six: the average issue was two children (including current pregnancies) and the mean age at first birth for these women was 28.43 years. Educational attainments ranged from Year 9 to higher level tertiary, with half of the women having achieved tertiary education (21 of the women with no children and 29 of the women with children). The interviews were conducted by different members of the research team and by three research assistants across the life of the project, with each interviewer interviewing women in each group.

In the open-ended questions, we focused on the social, cultural and economic factors that had influenced fertility decision-making. All women were asked the same questions, with variations only where they were necessary for sense; for example, ‘When you decided to have your first child, what employment issues were important?’ contrasted with ‘When you consider having your first child, what employment issues seem important?’ We encouraged interviewees ‘to explore the subject in their own way and in their own words’ (Cameron, 2001: 14). Each interview was taped and fully transcribed. Key words and concepts were highlighted in the transcripts and similarities with themes appearing in other interviews were examined in relation to existing literature on family formation, views of parenting, combining parenting and paid work. Pseudonyms have been used and any directly identifying details have been changed or omitted.

The project findings regarding fertility decision-making were analysed by the research team with a focus on shared themes. As we were interested in whether stereotypes, such as the career-driven non-mother and the committed maternal woman with many children, were reflected in women’s decisions and life choices, we divided the data into groups of women with and without children for initial analysis. Once findings were made for these groups, we collated and compared key findings across the entire sample. Issues of employment flexibility and social expectations were a shared concern for all women (Maher et al., 2004). In this process of analysis, the idealized vision of motherhood as all-encompassing emerged as a pressing theme for women with and without children, but this idealized vision of mothering affected these groups of women differently. For example, women without children talked of the fear of children consuming every moment of their time, while this aspect of ‘good mothering’ was not a focus for women
with children. Once these differences in regard to the ‘good mother’ were observed, the authors of this article decided to focus more closely on this theme in the data.

Initially, in the process of this further analysis, each of the authors took responsibility for the transcripts of one of the groups identified. Lise Saugeres was responsible for the first interpretation of the transcripts of the women with no children. JaneMaree Maher was responsible for the first interpretation of the transcripts of the women with children. These decisions were made on the basis of the life situation of each of the researchers, although we did not assume congruence between our own life experiences and decisions and those of the women we interviewed. Once initial thematic findings were generated by each researcher, transcripts and findings were read by the other researcher. Initially, our respective interpretations of the data for the women with and without children were different, with each researcher inclined to view their group of interviewees as resistant to ideals of good mothering, although in different ways. Lise Saugeres saw that the decision not to become a mother indicated resistance to the association of adult femininity to motherhood. JaneMaree Maher saw that women’s refusal to view their mothering as all-encompassing indicated resistance to those same ideals. Reviewing the transcripts and findings of the other forced us to develop a more nuanced account of the elements of the ‘good mother’ ideal that impacted on these different women and why it did so. While the women in these two groupings shared many ideas, and while each woman’s experience was unique, in this article we have focused on themes that were prevalent across the groups.

Denzin (2003) has argued that the analysis of qualitative data is always the outcome of interpretations given by those who produce the text and those who read and analyse it. Mauthner and Doucet (2003: 414) have noted ‘most methods [of data analysis] continue to be presented as a series of neutral, mechanical and decontextualized procedures that are applied to the data and take place in a social vacuum’. Here, we compared our initial analyses and discussed our differing interpretations. In this process, we developed the final shared analyses which appear in this article. By engaging with the data through these different lenses and rethinking and reformulating our initial interpretations together, we were able to examine more fully and critically the influences that shaped our interpretative paradigms and research process (see Mauthner and Doucet, 2003: 415).

‘I worry about just being a mother’: voluntarily childless women

Our study found that while women who had children found it very difficult to reflect on their decision about having children, women without children had to engage in a process of self-reflection and justification. This finding
suggests that Australian women are similar to their counterparts in other developed countries like the United Kingdom and the United States (see Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 1999; Veevers, 1980). Their deviation from the maternal desires assumed in all women led them to question and reject some aspects of dominant cultural constructions of femininity and mothering. But these women have also internalized and accepted the ideal of intensive mothering to the extent that, as Elizabeth’s statement in the heading of this section indicates, they can only imagine mothering as all encompassing and very limiting. This is an important finding, since these all-encompassing understandings of mothering in childless women were first identified by Veevers three decades ago (1980) and were identified in Australia by Marshall (1993) more than a decade ago. Despite the increasing numbers of women with children who do work now in Australia (de Vaus, 2004), this idealized image persists in contemporary women’s views. We first examine voluntarily childless women’s decisions not to have children, and then we show how mothering is viewed by these women as an overwhelming ideal.

**Not wanting children or postponing**

Tietjens-Meyer (2001) in her study of fertility decisions in the US has identified two main groups among the women who are voluntarily childless: the ‘early articulators’ and the ‘postponers’ (see also Campbell, 1999; Faux, 1984; Gillespie, 2000; Veevers, 1980). Even though it is not our intention to place women into neat categories, this distinction has been useful in identifying two broad tendencies among the voluntarily childless women in this study. The ‘early articulators’, a minority here, were women who knew at an early age that they would never want to have children. But here as in other research (see Faux, 1984; Tietjens-Meyer, 2001; Veevers, 1980) the ‘early articulators’ in our study did not feel that they actually made a choice; they just never imagined themselves as having children. For example, Gwen (39), who lived apart from her partner, related:

> I think I decided as a child myself really. Well, I never ever – I don’t remember ever wanting children or ever assuming that I was going to have children. ... I know by the time I met my husband when I was 16, I was saying then I wasn’t having children. It wasn’t a choice thing. That was my stance on it. I didn’t want children.

Even though these women felt that not wanting children was part of their early identity formation and not the result of a conscious choice that they made as adults, they nevertheless felt the need to understand and rationalize why they did not want children.

The other women were ‘postponers’. Eight women aged 30–34 said that they always imagined that they would have children but they had postponed so far because they had not felt that they were in stable long-lasting relationships. The other women aged 32–38 were still undecided about whether
they wanted children or not. Esther had decided not to have children but having a child still crossed her mind ‘at least once a month’. All of these women were torn between social expectations they had internalized that they should be mothers, and their reluctance to change their lifestyles and fears around motherhood. Tietjens-Meyer (2001) has argued that the ‘postponers’ were women who thought that they wanted children and these women in our study hoped for a strong urge or desire to overwhelm them and make the decision for them (see also Marshall, 1993). Melissa (38), a single bisexual woman, said that she liked children and that if she did not have any she might feel that she has ‘missed out on something’. She said:

I think it’s probably very hard to be a mother but at the same time I think it kind of almost gives you as a woman a sense of being valid.

Her dilemma was that she was unable to decide whether she really wanted a child. She expressed this:

I don’t believe that motherhood is such an amazing thing that I just have to do it you know. And I think I would – maybe it’s a battle because maybe I think part of me is torn because I think well, and I know that it’s wrong – but I think that maybe it’s something I should do. But I try to fight that as well.

Because the ‘postponers’ were undecided and felt that time was running out, they appeared to be more torn than the ‘early articulators’. Women in both groups had encountered conflicts about fertility decisions at different times in their lives. These dilemmas had emerged from the negative ways in which they viewed mothering, coexisting with their idealization of the dominant myth of motherhood.

**Motherhood: an overwhelming ideal**

Most of the ‘postponers’ held a very idealized and traditional view of motherhood, indicating that as children they had internalized the ideal of the full-time mother, always available to her children. Tess (32), whose mother had stayed at home full-time, said that until recently she had been ambivalent about having children.

... as a little girl that was what I expected or was inclined to, that I could stay at home and be there when the kids got home from school and all that.... I think in some way my interest in having children is trying to kind of live that fantasy, I'm more conscious that it's a 1950s fantasy, not a 21st-century one, but I think it is my cultural background.

Not only did these women have fantasies about the ideal mother, they also had fantasies about children and family life. Louise (32) related:

... I was walking the dog and as I went past a house the light was on, it was night time and I saw these two kids working at the table, I think they were doing their homework and I thought it would be really nice to have you know some kids that
you can help along the way and share experiences with them and it’s also, I guess almost like a romantic notion and when I go down to the farm I seem to get filled with enthusiasm…. I have such a good time with my own father down there and I sort of cherish that relationship and that sense of family …

Veevers (1980) has argued that one characteristic of voluntarily childless persons was their tendency to view motherhood as all-encompassing and impossible to reconcile with other important life goals; remaining childless seems to be the only way they can achieve their individual life goals. Despite the significant social changes in the last 30 years in Australia, most of the ‘postponers’ in our study continued to feel that mothers should stay at home with their children for a few years, although this idea terrified them. A few of the ‘early articulators’ also believed that it was best for mothers to stay at home with their children while they were infants but could not have done it themselves. The strength of this view is interesting, because demographic data indicates that at least half the mothers in Australia combine activities such as paid employment with motherhood (de Vaus, 2004) – yet this combination was not visible to the women without children in our study. Many of them talked about valuing their freedom, independence, flexibility and being able to focus on their own aspirations. Only a few women cited careers as central to their decision. Several women noted that motherhood was not valued in society and did not want to do work which was not valued. Elizabeth, who was still undecided, said:

... the way mothers are seen in a certain way traditionally and their work is undervalued in society. I worry about being into that category of just being a mother and I don’t see myself that way.

The majority were afraid that motherhood would take over their other priorities such as their own personal development, relationship with their partners, social activities and travels. They feared that motherhood would disrupt their lives and would actually mean a loss of their identities. Several of them were afraid of having to always put their children’s needs before their own. They believed that if they had children they would metamorphose into different women – ‘mothers’ who only think and talk about their children and changing nappies – and would not be able to control this process. Ruth (40), an ‘early articulator’, said:

... you are expected to change because you are a mother and that worries me.... You are expected to grow up and be more mature and responsible.... Friends who’ve had children ... the way they change, everything is baby focused and things that came naturally, their personality seemed to change with the baby arriving.... I’ve seen people lose their own personality, their own identity and I have seen a benefit to the joys that you can get, but I think the negatives always seem to stick in my mind.

The equating of motherhood with losing control of oneself seemed to be a central issue. For some women, their fears were not only about losing control
Esther, who had always imagined herself having children found the idea ‘horrifying’, ‘very frightening and overwhelming’ when she began to seriously consider it. She said:

I felt as if having a baby growing inside my body would feel – I would feel out of control and invaded and that it would be a very scary experience, that it seemed to be a lot to do with feeling out of control.... I think I also felt that having a small child around me would feel like that I – that demands were placed on me constantly, that I would have to be able to meet the demands of another person and would – I suppose again lose control in a way and would be tired and committed to that other sort of person in a way that I guess made me feel very anxious ...

The dilemmas and conflicts that these women had encountered around motherhood were also tied in with feelings of being marginal for being uncertain about motherhood.

**Femininity, motherhood and marginalization**

Even though these women had been influenced by social and cultural constructions of motherhood, which equate adult femininity with motherhood, they were very critical of these. Rita said:

Society really sees it as a rite of passage and the fact that you’re not an adult unless you’ve had a child yourself.... Well, not within me because I feel like I’m already an adult with the sorts of things that I’ve achieved, but society’s perception of people says that, you know, you have to have to have the house and ... first you get the degree and then you get the job and then you get the house and then you get the child and that’s your little rite of passage and that’s what garners your notion of success.... It’s all about perceptions and society’s perhaps skewed representations of things.

Several women felt that they were perceived as selfish, immature, and abnormal for not wanting children. Rita reflected that:

... people I’ve talked to think that I’m a bit of a freak because I don’t have that motherly instinct and people actually berate you.

Some of these women related their lack of maternal feelings to problematic relationships with their mothers or both parents. Some said that they had felt that their mothers or fathers would have been happier without children. Some also said that they were put off having children after caring for younger siblings. Other studies have also found that voluntarily childless women often rejected social constructions of motherhood because they had had childhood experiences that destroyed or discredited the motherhood mystique (Faux, 1984; Marshall, 1993; Veevers, 1980).

Being able to make sense of what made them non-maternal or hesitant about having children did not make these women feel less marginal. Several women, among both the ‘early articulators’ and ‘postponers’, had directly experienced social pressure from friends, relatives and work colleagues to have children. Gwen, who had never wanted children, said repeated comments...
from other women at work had caused her to think that maybe she might one day. To her amazement, she began to feel what she called an ‘irrational need’ to have children. When her partner agreed to it, she realized that she did not really want children.

I really was feeling social pressure and I had to justify why I was different. I was feeling for the first time a bit abnormal about it. Over the years all my friends had had children and then all these women, or my customers were in shock, you know some of them even seemed shocked at the idea that there was a choice…. I kind of buckled under a little bit, felt, oh, can they all be wrong? … And then I thought yes, they can all be wrong about me.

Because motherhood is constructed as natural and highly desirable, women who make an early decision not to have children or have difficulties in deciding whether to have children or not have often been portrayed as being abnormal or having emotional problems (Gillespie, 2000; Morell, 1994; Tietjens-Meyer, 2001). For these women, concepts of naturally occurring maternal love and the innate desire to become a mother do not fit with their experience. These women tend to have an all-encompassing view of motherhood, which does not always correspond to how most mothers manage their lives, but does correspond to social and cultural expectations around mothering. Women are still expected, and expect themselves, to be the primary carers and to structure their lives around the needs of their children, and, while much research suggests this expectation is realistic (Bittman and Pixley, 1998; Crompton and Harris, 1999; Sanger, 1999; Williams, 2002), the accounts of women with children revealed a much more complex, and mostly less overwhelming, experience of motherhood.

‘I suppose you look at things differently as a mother’: women with children

Tamara made the above comment, when she was describing her reaction to hearing other children cry in public spaces – she no longer judged the woman mothering that child in a negative way, now she was a mother. This comment characterized the more pragmatic and less idealized view of mothering expressed by the women with children. While the women with children often said that the decision to have children had been a ‘natural’ progression for them, they described mothering as part of their activity and identity, rather than the totality of it. Garey (1999: 11–12) has observed that mothering is often constructed as being, not doing, but women with children in this study talked significantly more about what they did as mothers than about social expectations of mothering. Despite recognizing the pressure to be a full-time mother, to focus a ‘high level of attention … [and to have] the capacity to give love unstintingly’ to children (Lupton, 2000: 54), most women indicated that their mothering had not been based on this understanding, as they
combined paid work and mothering and felt reasonably comfortable with those decisions and choices. We examine three main themes in the responses of women with children: choosing to have children, mothering and femininity, and the impact of cultural images of mothers on their practices and decisions.

**Choosing children**

While the women choosing not to have children described this as a central life decision, the process of decision-making appeared to have receded from the thoughts of women with children. When asked about this, women responded in uncertain and often vague terms, like Tamara.

> I suppose I decided that it was – oh well, we both did, that it was a good time for me to have one.... [I had ] long service leave and I felt I was ready to have one, that I could cope.

Peta’s narrative was also vague about the decision-making.

> I think prior to having them I thought we have been together this long, children seemed like the next natural progression. Sounds like you don’t have a choice. We did consciously choose it.... I remember turning 30 and feeling really bad about turning 30 because I hadn’t had a child yet.... I think at different points we seesawed.... He would be ready to have children and then I wasn’t and then I would swing to [being] ready but he wasn’t. So there was a bit of seesawing backwards and forwards.

Women here were not describing a clear process of decision-making, but mostly assumed they would have children, and had hesitated usually only about the time and the circumstances. These reproductive decisions were presented as part of their life experiences, rather than as moments of crucial change.

**Femininity and motherhood**

Challenges to the ‘naturalness’ of mothering, however, were present in how women described their experiences of becoming a mother. Although these women often assumed that they would have children, the natural correlation between femininity and mothering did not continue when they had children. These women did not describe a swift or easy transition into motherhood, and reported surprise about what mothering actually entailed.

Pauline expressed this in the following way:

> Expectations were like – that I would know what to do and being a mother was natural and no big deal.... There was a little bit of a surprise actually.... I saw a few of the other women who were in the same situation as I was ... and they didn’t know what to do [either].

For Norah, doing mothering work made her a mother, rather than any substantial change in identity.
You do really mundane things like feed and change and you don’t have much sleep. And so then you just become, you know, a mother, and a sort of a – in a sort of chucked on sense.

Featherstone (1997: 7) has suggested that ‘little attention [is] given to the everyday practices that mothers carry out on behalf of, and with, their children’, but these everyday practices appeared far more influential in these women’s experiences of motherhood, than did any pre-existing cultural ideals. This view of mothering was also important in how these women described their attachment to paid work, which they clearly identified as an important aspect of their lives, even though they did arrange this work to fit with childcare responsibilities.

Lucinda saw her decision to become a mother as intimately related to her working identity.

I suppose the fact that there would be a job there for me to return to – that was a factor. It encouraged us, I guess, to start a family rather than perhaps wait a few more years and [be] more financially settled. We knew I had something to return to if I needed it.

Peta combined mothering and work and explicitly rejected any notion of maternal instinct. ‘I was enjoying being at home with my baby and I was also enjoying those two days [at work].’ Her decisions about work had been affected by the difference in salaries that she and her partner could earn. ‘He had the opportunity and was getting more money than I would have if I had gone back.’

While Brenda understood that there was social conflict around women working, she was able to negotiate it effectively in her own life.

[Then] it was an either or and it was a very clear statement that they made and I’m sure that was symbolic of that generation, 20-odd years ago…. I didn’t really challenge that idea in my own head about whether or not I would have children. But I certainly did challenge the idea that you had to choose one or the other and I always felt I was going to do both.

Maureen had also managed these competing demands in her working/mothering practices.

I found it quite difficult being at home as a full-time Mum…. I never really considered going back full time as I didn’t need to financially and I was still getting the stimulation that I needed so it worked quite well in terms of my home life.

Maureen said that she ‘always felt [she] should have been home full time’, but noted her own mother had combined mothering and paid work and ‘became a lot happier when she did go out to work’. Maureen felt her path had been eased by good and flexible working conditions. ‘I knew there was the availability of part time certainly, that was part of our consideration at the time.’ She also reflected on the wage gap between her partner and herself. ‘It was never really a consideration [that he take leave] ... because basically he was in a job that earned more money. So that was the reason.’
So these women committed themselves to mothering in tandem with paid work, despite recognizing the persistence of the full-time devoted mothering myth as a pervasive one in Western societies (see Cannold, 2005; Sanger, 1999). When describing the role of employment aspirations in fertility decision-making, the women here focused on practical issues like childcare, flexible workplaces and the gender wage gap – the ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ of motherhood. The findings in this study bear out Garey’s contention that multiple ‘strategies of being’ are adopted by women to work through conflicts between paid employment and mothering activity. Recent work by Alison Morehead (2001) suggests that women combine working and mothering even when they are at work, using phone calls to keep in touch with their children. Albrecht et al. (2000: 596) have noted, in their study of seven European countries, that there is a disparity between the number of women who think women with young children should work full time and the number of women with children who do work full time. This suggests that the findings here, where maternal ideologies are present but do not determine women’s decision-making around paid employment, are consonant with the findings of studies in other Western contexts where the practicalities of motherhood – social, cultural, economic and geographical locations – ‘[produce] mothers’ (McMahon, 1995: 269). The practical and activity-based view of ‘being a mother’ is reflected in the ways women with children respond to the cultural representations of good mothering.

The ‘good mother’

While these women were aware of the idealized ‘good mother’, they did not generally feel constrained by expectations attached to the ideal. Katrina’s story reflected her negotiations of her mothering identity as her life changed. She said, ‘I became very focused on that job [after a miscarriage] and that was obviously something I needed to keep me going.’ Then she focused on breastfeeding as an important aspect, saying, ‘I didn’t want my need to go back to work to interrupt breastfeeding.’ Cultural images had not determined her decisions: it was ‘certainly stuff I have been aware of’, but she ‘[hadn’t] really allowed those things to affect my mothering’.

Caitlin was the epitome of the ideal ‘good mother’ as primary care-giver for four children. But she too held a more realistic and pragmatic view of ‘good mothering’. She said ‘you try and tell people that you have four children one day and see what response you get…. It is something like … “you are mentally deficient”’. Molly, with six children, also had to say to people ‘“I appreciate the fact that you had two children and that was all you wanted”. At the time we had five and I said “That’s what we wanted. I mean I respect you and you should respect my decision”’.

Cherry said that she did reluctantly subscribe to the view of mothering as an essential part of a woman’s identity. ‘I fight this but part of me believes that motherhood is a validation of yourself as a woman.’ But she had combined this strong sense of maternal identity with paid work since
her husband had acted in the role of primary care-giver from 10 weeks of age for each of their two children.

A number of women directly rejected stereotypical images. Ella said, ‘I don’t think I had any stereotypical images put on me. I just thought it was part and parcel of life experience.’ Grace said ‘I used to get put off by … what I used to think of as very boring, dull [images].’

Culturally sanctioned images of ‘good mothers’ were present in all the women’s narratives, but they appeared less often and were weighted less in narratives of women with children than they were in narratives of women without children. Ex and Janssens (2000: 882) have suggested that young women contemplating mothering value women’s ability to combine work and mothering, to combine interdependence with autonomy. While this is not the language used by the women with children in this study, the commitment to mothering in combination with activity in other spheres for self-fulfilment was clear.

While there were some substantive differences of perception about mothering between women who mother and women who do not, the interview material clearly indicates that all women are burdened to some extent by expectations of appropriate mothering identities. Women in both groups identified as ‘selfish’, for choosing not to have children, for leaving it to others ‘who aren’t as maybe selfish as me’ as Susan said, but also for having an only child or for only having two. Molly and Caitlin had been judged negatively for having too many children. But we have found here that the practice of mothering leads to a diminution of ideals of all-encompassing view of motherhood. Lawler in *Mothering the Self* has argued that ‘meanings are … produced and reproduced through social practice’ (2000: 1) and the social practices of these women reflected a pragmatic view of how to be a ‘good mother’, which included activities not focused on children.

**Conclusion**

In examining how social and cultural constructions of mothering impacted on the lives and decisions of women with children and women without children, this study revealed that both these groups of women responded to prevailing discourses of femininity, mothering and ‘good mothering’, but in different ways. Women without children challenged the nexus between femininity and mothering, saying women do not need to reproduce to be women, but felt that ‘good mothering’ required presence and full-time attention. For them, the combination of individual aspirations and child-rearing presented a great degree of difficulty, as mothering necessitated a fundamental change in identity. As Marshall also found, the voluntarily childless ‘do not stand outside the ideology of parenthood’ (1993: 139), and, despite the changes to the patterns of mothering that continue apace in Western countries like Australia (see de Vaus, 2004), the ideals of mothering
that stress full-time presence are resonant in the accounts of these voluntarily childless women.

Women with children appeared to have internalized the importance of having children to adult femininity, often seeing it as a ‘natural’ progression. However, they expressed a much more flexible view of mothering, where they worked to combine personal aspirations with maternal activities. Although they did recognize the pressure to ‘be there’ for their children, they focused on practical strategies to fulfil maternal duties and achieve other life goals. The women here reflected a closer adherence to the model that Lupton and Schmied (2002) described as the ‘independent mother’.

In this study, we found that ideals of ‘good mothering’ impacted on all women but had a variable influence on life decisions. We also found that images of ‘good mothers’ persist, despite the fact that most mothers in our study, in keeping with patterns of employment for Australian women, combined mothering with paid work. This clear gap in how women with children and women without children conceive of the meaning, content and activity of motherhood persists despite the visible presence of mothers in the workforce in contemporary Australia. It suggests the need to keep working towards a broader ‘consider[ation of] mothers’ activities and understandings, and experiences’ (Arendell, 2000: 1192); to address the significant gap in how mothering work in Australia is perceived and how it is actually done. Systematic examinations of how different groups of women respond to cultural and social accounts of mothering are important to assist us in developing a richer understanding of women’s activities and decisions. They are also important to continue contesting the dominant discourses of mothering, which, despite evidence of their diminishing traction in the lives of women who mother, continue to resonate and shape public debate in Australia.

Acknowledgments
The Families, Fertility and the Future research project was funded by the Faculty of Arts, Monash University.

References


**Biographical notes**

**JaneMaree Maher** holds degrees in Arts and Law from the University of Melbourne and completed her doctoral studies at La Trobe University in 1999. She is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research, Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. Her current research includes fertility choices, birth experiences, motherhood and work. Her recent publications include articles in Australian Feminist Studies, Health Sociology Review and Feminist Review. **Address**: Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, Clayton, VICIC 3800, Australia. [email: JaneMaree.Maher@arts.monash.edu.au]

**Lise Saugeres** is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology. Her research interests include cultural constructions of femininity, gender and the family, and gender and employment. **Address**: Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, Hawthorn, VICIC 3122, Australia [email: LSaugeres@groupwise.swin.edu.au]