

Mothering at Middle Age:  
Lacking in Familial Support?  
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# The Study and Context



- Currently a record 'baby boom of mothers over 40'
- What kind of family support do these older mothers expect and receive?
- Data drawn from a small qualitative study of younger (>18) and older (<38) mothers in the UK
- Age at first birth is a recognised marker of socio-economic position: in my sample young mothers working class, older mothers middle-class
- Given that older mothers are seen as privileged in terms of class positions, what difficulties do they face as new mothers?

# Receiving Family Support: Autonomy and Dependence



- All mothers I spoke with stressed the importance of a strong support network for mothering, especially in the early days
- Past research also points to the significance of support for a positive experience of motherhood (e.g. Fox and Worts, 1999; Bhopal, 1998)
- Older mothers in my sample has less access to family support as they lived far from families and therefore relied on formal support more

# Needing help but finding it difficult to receive

*Pete's parents, his mum felt a bit shut out actually, we never talked about it but I do think she did because at first we didn't let anybody come and visit us and I don't know why we did this, it was me not him but I couldn't quite get my head around having visitors so we hadn't asked for it [...] but I was just thinking, we didn't include them at all, I mean we sort of, it was more like it's ours, we'll let you in when you, which I think looking back was a bit bizarre really because actually when you've finally got this baby and she was so beautiful and you just think I want to show her off, I want people to see her but by then we'd sort of put up all the barriers 'cos I mean different people said 'you know you will need somebody to help you' and everything and I was like 'No, I want to do it just us'! (Emma)*

# Needing help but finding it difficult to receive



*I don't know, it wasn't great to say to her, I did try to get her to come but there was other stuff going on by then so it was sort of, it would have seemed like I was really saying 'please please come', which would have made it sound like I was desperate almost, and I wasn't desperate, but it was a bit of a strange time. (Emma)*

# Needing Help but finding it difficult to receive

*'Cos she often says 'Well I used to get on with it and I used to have 3 of them and we didn't have these new fangled things that you have today and I had a huge pram and I had to do all the shopping', and you just think 'shut up!' And I think well yes, but you didn't have a professional job. Her own mother basically didn't help at all with her children, she had no help, got on with it and you somehow feel that she's holding herself up as an icon, with me who can't cope and who needs lots of help and support and although she helps a lot because she didn't get help and I think secretly she remembers how hard it was.  
(Ruth)*

# The significance of autonomy for good motherhood

- ❑ Older mothers found it difficult to ask for and receive help from their families as autonomy was key to their performance of good motherhood
- ❑ For adults, relying on help from one's family can threaten one's morality (Finch and Mason, 1993)
- ❑ A contradiction in mothers' accounts: on the one hand assertion that support is crucial and on the other difficulties in accepting family support
- ❑ The moral script is that the good mother copes by herself
- ❑ Families' geographical locations also plays a significant role

# Intergenerational Relationships between Children and

## Grandparents

- There has been an increased interest in intergenerational relations in family sociology
- Women who have children later face particular dilemmas with regard to the possibility of intergenerational relationships
- Their children not knowing and spending time with their grandparents was the most significant concern for older mothers

# Intergenerational Ties

*I think it's to do with their adulthood and your extended family so that you get the ability to enjoy grandchildren whilst you're still alive, 'cos I was 39 when I had Deborah so if she does the same as me then I'm gonna be really getting on by the time she has any kids if she has any. I was thinking about it this morning and thinking about, 'cos my mother now would be in her early 70s and my dad too, and they're getting to the stage where you could leave the kids with them but not for too long and I remember as a child I knew my great grandmother, I must have been about 10 or so when she died and I think it's quite nice that sense of family and for them to be able to know the generations, in that sense having children really young is nice because you do have the link between the generations a lot more than you do when you leave it older. (Ruth)*

# Intergenerational Ties

*There's huge disadvantages in that you don't necessarily have the same support network because you're, quite often the grandparents are not alive, I mean 'cos we lost Mike's dad after Robert was born and my dad had passed away before that, so now we've got two grandmas and actually for my mum to sit on the floor and play with them she's got bad knees and bad hips, if I'd had my kids twenty years ago she would have been taking them to the park and going down the slide like I do now kinda thing, so I think they're gonna miss out on a young grandparent 'cos that is something that's quite unique really, and in some cases for older mothers they might miss out on grandparents altogether, so that's a huge disadvantage. (Helen)*

# Intergenerational Ties



- Given that in the UK it is grandparents who continue to be the main providers of childcare for working parents, having children late may constitute a significant disadvantage
- Older mothers saw the (im)possibility of intergenerational relationships as a significant issue
- To what extent do how decisions about reproductive timing take into account the availability of family support from older generations?

# Conclusions

- Problematized the assumption that older mothers, because of their class privilege, experience a problem free transition to motherhood.
- Evidence that older mothers may experience deficiency in familial support
- Autonomy is at the centre of dominant discourses of good motherhood
- But how do we shift from the binary of autonomy vs dependency in forging wider support networks for mothers?
- It has been suggested that intergenerational family relations have become increasingly important in the face of and as ways of adapting to demographic changes like marital instability, longer life-spans and smaller family size (Swartz, 2009)
- Intergenerational transfers are increasingly significant in the context of reductions in the welfare state and increased longevity (Brannen, 2006), which older parents may not have access to