

Introduction

The ‘naughty step’¹ had not been invented when my own children were small. When my brother was brought home from hospital (being the firstborn, that is where birth usually took place in the 1950s), he slept in a drawer taken from a chest of drawers for the first few weeks of his life. When my mother was a child in London, she was sent out alone on all sorts of errands by my grandmother, including delivering tea in a milk bottle to the local Park caretaker. Happily everyone has survived and lived to tell the tales. But these glimpses of childcare from my own family provide a perspective from which to think about how ideas and practises – and the paraphernalia – of caring for children have changed in recent generations. Historically, of course, changes in how ‘small adults’ and ‘little people’ have been thought about, and so how phases of childhood – and more recently the advent of the teenager – have become construed and recognised, are well documented and debated (Acocella, 2003; Aries, 1962). How adults care for their children and develop relationships and attachments of love and protection has been configured in different ways at different historical moments. It is clear, then, that ideas about caregiving are historically, culturally and, in the 21st century, increasingly politically shaped. This has been brought home to me as I have had the good fortune to live in other cultures and witness how caring for children and working are managed. In the Solomon Islands (I lived on the island of New Georgia for two years in the 1980s), the small village shared caring for and chastising the babies, young children and young adults as a collective undertaking and village responsibility. This was in stark contrast to how caring was practised back in the United Kingdom, where I returned to give birth to my eldest daughter. The maternal business of caregiving here was assumed to be instinctive and undertaken as a mostly solitary and largely invisible (at home) endeavour.

¹ www.jofrost.com/naughty-step-technique.

Some things, but not all, have changed in significant ways since then. The changes have included a reorientation of how paid work features in women's lives, including those who are mothers, and changes in ideas and practices of what men can do as fathers. But the shifts across caring and paid work – and who does what – do not equate in exact ways between mothers and fathers and vary across cultures. In the United Kingdom, the contexts in which couple and single parents manage work and family lives have also become more politicised through ideas of 'good' parenting, which too often fail to acknowledge the material and gendered circumstances in which 'choices' and practises are made and lived. Expectations of parents have grown, workplace demands have increased and everything has become intensified. This intensification forms a neoliberal backdrop to the individual stories followed in this book. These stories are explored through a focus on how a group of mothers and fathers living in the United Kingdom manage the daily activities and responsibilities of caring for their children (in couples and alone) alongside other aspects of their lives. These activities, responsibilities and relationships are now often generically referred to as 'parenting', a term that has become increasingly used in the Western world since the 1970s.

The title of this book uses the term parenthood, and it is important to emphasise that this is not intended to imply a singular way of being a parent. Lives, circumstances, caring and love are experienced in numerous and changing ways and contexts, even though ideals of parenthood are narrowly constructed in political terms. It is necessary then to think about parenting relationships as reciprocal, inter-generational, challenging, loving and fluid and to think of parenthood in the plural, as parenthoods. But the term 'parent' also glosses over deeply embedded gendered differences and histories in the responsibilities, activities and 'mental labor' (Walzer, 1996) associated with women who are mothers and men who are fathers. Even though gender equality may be an aim of how caring in families is practised, reflecting other significant changes such as those in the workplace, there is still a long way to go, even in countries such as Sweden where gender equality has been championed through policies since the 1970s. For this reason, this book focuses particularly on how gender shapes the domains of caring and paid work and the contingency of maternal and paternal possibilities, viewed over time. This book is the third in what serendipitously has become a series, through the extension of an original qualitative

study, *Transition to First-time Motherhood* (Miller, 2005), and a subsequent companion study, *Transition to First-time Fatherhood* (Miller, 2010).

This third book revisits the original participants and focuses on how lives have unfolded as the children born in the original studies, which set out to explore experiences of transition, reach 18 years of age and early adulthood in the *Motherhood* study and 5 years of age and the beginning of primary school in the *Fatherhood* study. The longitudinal aspect of the studies has enabled later experiences of caring and work to be collected and compared with earlier data, revealing how intentions, hopes and plans have unfolded in families initially interviewed just before the birth of their first baby. In the earlier books and here again, it is necessary to place caveats around what follows, or at least make clear what the book can do and what its particular focus and contribution will be. The samples in the two studies have been described in earlier work as more privileged because of their occupational status (employed) and associated social class.² These first births were happily anticipated (even if not planned, although most were) in heterosexual couple relationships. In these ways the participants conformed to normative ideals of the ‘good’ mother and the ‘good’ father, who are employed, have planned parenthood at a culturally appropriate age and stage of their working lives and intend to build stable and ‘forever’ families. Sadly, life doesn’t always turn out as planned, as these later episodes of navigating caring and work experiences reveal. However, because the samples have had ‘choices’ and (some) avenues of opportunity open to them that not all families enjoy, the focus on gender taken in this book is in relation to middle-class experiences, which will be both similar to and different from the experiences of families with less opportunities and whose parenting might be – or feel – subjected to

² Social class is a complex issue because occupational class does not necessarily match or overlap with how social class is felt or claimed as an identity or position. For example, in the *Transition to Motherhood Study*, one participant who was a qualified and practising lawyer described herself as working class. Another described herself as upper middle class, making a further distinction within a class classification. In the 2015 British Social Attitudes survey, the majority of people surveyed considered themselves to be working class (60%) compared with 40% who identified as being middle class, despite the fact that it is estimated that only a quarter of the population in Britain are in working-class occupations (www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/?_ga=1.43472613.1332573774.1467244789).

greater professional scrutiny and (negative) labelling. Even so, the earlier findings from these studies revealed just how diverse and complex early mothering and fathering experiences could be, even in apparently homogeneous groups.

Set against the shifting landscapes of modern family lives, the chapters that follow explore how caring and work unfold as families grow, jobs change, mothers work more and couple relationships (sometimes) breakdown. The rich longitudinal data enable everyday experiences and narratives of caring, working and surviving to be traced over time. The analysis of the data (comprising more than 200 hours of interviews) over the years leads to the central question that occupies this book: can a *primary* caring responsibility for children be *equally* shared? Groundbreaking scholarly feminist work, initiated several decades ago, began to question taken-for-granted assumptions about women's maternal selves, lives and destiny, challenging essentialist associations in contexts etched through with patriarchal privilege and power. But there was ambivalence too, with some arguing that mothering was a form of female empowerment. There have been significant changes since then, and continued debate, about how 'choices' and 'preferences' operate in relation to maternal and paternal orientations as caregivers and workers. Global labour demands and economic necessity have also changed the debates as the majority of families in the United Kingdom are now also working families. More precise and nuanced understandings of how gender operates across the domains of caregiving and working, have also helped to show that arrangements in these interwoven spheres can be organised in different and more gender symmetrical or equitable ways. Many fathers also want to be more emotionally involved in their children's lives, rather than replicate the remote, breadwinning father figures they associate with their own childhoods.

But the question of whether a *primary* caring responsibility for children can be *equally* shared remains, even though a burgeoning research literature, including my own, has charted men's increased involvement in hands-on caring for their children. What becomes clear through the unfolding accounts charted in the following chapters is that no amount of preparation can prepare you for the fact that a small baby occupies every space (emotionally and perhaps physically too, with all the 'necessary' paraphernalia a 'good' mother must have) and that a sense of a '24/7 thinking responsibility' descends as a baby is born. Someone

has to take on that responsibility. Regardless of intentions to change gendered practises of caring by mothers and fathers and to share caring in equal ways, typically mothers quickly become the parent who is most practised at caring and doing the mental work of thinking about the baby, then toddler, then young child and so on. Exhaustion for everyone in the early weeks and months of becoming a parent make it a difficult time to challenge and try to disrupt gendered arrangements in the workplace and corresponding possibilities in the home. Becoming practised at caregiving leads to perceived ‘maternal’ expertise, and fathers can ‘get it wrong’ if they are left ‘in charge’: everyone falls back into traditionally gendered positions. What emerges then are practises of parental caring that indicate fathers’ increased emotional engagement and possibilities of change as well as maternal and paternal ‘gatekeeping’ of particular practises. Patriarchal habits and dividends and motherhood wage penalties continue to underscore the terrain. But it is the daily, micro-processes of caring, documented over many years, which in this book shows how gendered practises become accepted, reinforced and quite quickly ‘invisible’ and where inequalities *and* gatekeeping co-exist.

This book is written with the intention and hope of reaching a wide audience, both within various academic disciplines and beyond to a general, interested public. There will be something to attract anyone with a curiosity in the ebb and flow of family lives and practices, as well as for those with more specific interests such as theorisations of gender/gendered practices and agency or those interested in how intensive parenting ideals are engaged with by mothers and fathers as children grow and responsibilities change. Across the chapters, discursive and critical attention is given to contemporary debates and theorisations of how sharing and responsibilities are navigated within households. In Chapter 1, the context of modern parenthood (as institution and ideal) is introduced alongside the intensified and ‘biologised’ neoliberal landscape of parenting and caregiving in the United Kingdom. Details of the two qualitative longitudinal research studies are also outlined in this chapter. In Chapter 2, a closer examination of the literature on care, caregiving and gender is examined to frame the subsequent empirical chapters as consideration of gendered orientations and care/work unfolds across these. Chapter 3 returns to fathers from the original Transition to Fatherhood Study (Miller, 2010) and explores their experiences of caring involvement and paid work as

their children begin primary school. In contrast (in many respects), the following chapter focuses on mothers from the original Transition to Motherhood Study (Miller, 2005) as their firstborn child reaches 18 years of age. The mothers reflect on how they have taken up and managed caring responsibilities and paid work across the years. In Chapter 5, the focus turns to consider the experiences of families in the two studies where parental relationships have broken down and co-parenting is now practiced between households. Aspects of caring orientations, maternal and paternal responsibilities and how these unfold and become managed are examined in Chapter 6. In this chapter, data from the two studies are explored and compared, together with earlier interview data from the participants, revealing how gendered patterns of caring and types of maternal and paternal gatekeeping become practised. Finally, in Chapter 7, conclusions and theorisations are drawn and reflections on narrating gendered selves and identities as individuals, parents and workers are considered, along with methodological reflections.

It is necessary to explain how, in the empirical chapters, the terms ‘caring’ and ‘work’ are used. The term ‘caring’ in this context is used to describe caring for a child or children in a family (alone or in a couple), which is further defined and illuminated through the data as activities, tasks, thinking and planning. The term ‘work’ refers to paid work (usually outside the home), which is distinct from the caring in the home, even though caring can be experienced as a form of labour. It is appreciated that this distinction implies a separation, which is not necessarily experienced, especially by mothers, but nonetheless is used in the book to distinguish between gendered (‘moral’) orientations and practices of caring and paid work and their navigation and orchestration in family lives.

The book can be read in different ways as each chapter is written as a standalone piece, which also means that some arguments are restated as the work unfolds. The book is also a single text on experiences of parenthood. But as a third book in a series based on longitudinal data, it is also possible for the reader to go back to the two earlier texts, for example to follow the featured participants before they became parents and then through their earlier parenting experiences. Of course, interpretation means that other versions of events are possible, even likely, as we make sense of our lives and those of others around us from different perspectives at different times. In the narrative tales of

mothering, fathering, caring and paid work that have unfolded and unravelled across all three books, this will certainly be the case. Nevertheless, the narratives of individual experiences, which are re-narrated and edited as lives unfold, provide unusually rich accounts of mothering and fathering and the (unforeseen) twists and turns of family lives.

So, finally, even though it must be possible (mustn't it?) for a 24/7 thinking and caring parental responsibility to be *equally* shared, why does this still seem to be so hard to achieve? Rather than focus on the division of tasks, their type and hours spent on them, in trying to promote more gender equitable choices in home and work spheres, at the heart of these matters sits the assumed *singularity* of a primary responsibility. For all the sharing, it is this singularity – so obdurately adhered to the institution of motherhood and not (so far) to fatherhood – that demands our critical attention and sets the scene for the chapters that follow. But the exploration and further consideration of this tricky terrain has only been possible because of the generosity of spirit of the participants. They have shared their time and unfolding personal experiences of transition and later practices of family caring and work, love and loss, and to them I remain indebted and grateful.