ANGELS OF THE HOME:
HOW WOMEN THINK ABOUT AND ORGANISE
THEIR PAID WORK, CARE AND HOUSEHOLDS
AFTER CHILDBIRTH

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RMIT
DECLARATION

I certify that:

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Sheree Gregory

21st December 2010
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ABSTRACT
This thesis explores the continued inequities in the gendered division of labour within family households and their impact on women’s participation in labour market work, particularly around the birth and rearing of children.

The thesis establishes a conceptual framework made up of Williams’ (2000) ‘domesticity ideology’ of the ideal worker and marginalised carer norms, a critical application of Hakim’s (2000) notion of ‘preferences’, and Bourdieu’s (1977, 2005b) notion of habitus, field and symbolic violence, to investigate and report qualitative research with twenty–seven women about their work and family arrangements. This theoretical framework suggests the value of establishing how women experience gender relations within the household to explain how unequal work–care arrangements and outcomes are created, maintained and perpetuated.

The research explored the key influences on how employed women thought about and organised their paid work and family/care arrangements before and after the birth of children and how they managed the relationship between the workplace and household, during the two years of data collection. This involved exploring the complex negotiations over, and implications of, managing work-family demands.

The research used qualitative methods to document and analyse women’s individual experiences. The research involved a process of three successive interviews with twenty–seven women employed in either the higher education sector or in the retail industry in Victoria. At the time of the first interview the women were either pregnant or had recently had a baby in the last twelve months. The sequence of interviews explored their preferences, intentions and plans; influences on decisions; views on choice; employment transitions, and lived experiences of organising their paid work and family as they thought about childbirth, the household, maternity leave and after returning to paid work.

The analysis covered four aspects of women’s paid work-family decision-making experiences around childbirth: how women think about their paid work and care; their paid work transitions across each stage of the data collection; how women experience returning to paid work after childbirth; and how women manage and negotiate work-care in the household. The
data gathered in the course of the research demonstrated that regardless of workplace policy, it was the negotiations and decision-making in the household that mattered most. Further, the idea that women today are exercising personal and unconstrained choice when they ‘scale back’, ‘opt out,’ ‘cut back’ or ‘drop back’ from their paid work in order to weave a balance between paid and unpaid work, fails to acknowledge the potency of the gendered habitus which instates child care as a task best carried out by women.
PART ONE
INTRODUCTION
At the start of the twenty-first century all Australians continue to confront the normal vicissitudes and contingencies of life which previous generations of Australians confronted. These can be framed as a series of questions: How should I shape my life? How and with whom do I live? How might I best secure my livelihood? What constitutes a good life? Framed this way, such questions might imply that we are entirely free to choose our answers and style of life. As embodied creatures bound in time and embedded in particular social contexts and ways of living, we need to remember that, as Marx (1967) once observed, while free to make our history, we do so under circumstances that are not of our choosing.

These admittedly abstracted questions are foregrounded sharply – and possibly even painfully – for many women who confront the issue of how, or even whether, they will seek to make a commitment to both being in paid work and caring for their children. How a group of women imagine as well as make sense of their circumstances and then actually make decisions about this matter is the subject of this thesis.

My own interest in the research topic sits between some deeply personal questions and a more abstract theoretical curiosity. From an early age, motherhood has been on my mind and it has been an expectation that I know others have of me. My feminist disposition has also moved me in the direction of this topic. I have come to appreciate through my reading and lived experience that combining having children with a career typically exacerbates women’s disadvantage in the public world of work as well as at home (Gaze 2001).

Women’s expectations about the negative impacts of combining family and work have been canvassed by many scholars (McDonald 2001). As Oakley (1979: 1) noted:

[I]t is the moment when she becomes a mother that a woman first confronts the full reality of what it means to be a woman in our society.

More recently researchers have noted that balancing a career and motherhood is considerably more fraught for women than for men and usually articulated in terms of career–family ‘imbalance’ (Castleman, Coulthard & Reed 2005: 17).
My interest in how women try to balance having a career and being a mother has been paralleled by a strong desire to develop an academic career. The work I have done in furthering that ambition has also inspired this research. Between 2000 and 2002 I worked at the Australian Longitudinal Study for Women’s Health. In the course of my research, I analysed focus-group data on young women aged eighteen to twenty-three years concerning their time-use and constraints on their leisure. Many young women identified time fragmentation, stress and illness. Of considerable interest to me were their narratives about maintaining a ‘balance’ among various commitments. Seeking to balance roles and responsibilities was a dominant theme, drawing attention to health-seeking behaviour, time for self and the idealised desire to control their time. The young women also emphasised their desire to make ‘personal choices’ and ‘decisions’ about their time-use, which they linked to feeling assertive and exercising control over constraints such as traditional gender roles and expectations (Cartwright & Warner-Smith 2003: 333-4). I was particularly struck by a comment one participant made about her relationship with her partner: ‘unspoken, we never ever said who was “gonna do what” and we just fell into a perfect routine of what mum and dad did – exactly’ (Cartwright & Warner-Smith 2003: 335).

I began to think about how women both make decisions about how best to combine their paid work and family/personal life arrangements as well as how they experience these decision-making processes. How do women actually think about their paid work and family/care responsibilities? What are their preferences, what shapes their preferences and how do they play out in the context of their lives? To me these questions seem fundamental to any attempt to make sense of gender relations and the way women and men experience their lives. As a sociologist and a feminist I knew from the outset that gender would be an integral part of the study, because gender plays a central role in mediating perceptions and experiences as well as shaping major life options. It seemed to me that it was quite likely that women’s decisions about their working time would have a lot to do with gendered beliefs and expectations. Sensitised by my personal and academic interests in gender and a belief in my research topic, my research questions, aims and approach began to take shape.
Research Questions

In this thesis I explore the links between the personal dimensions of women’s lives and experiences and the broader social and cultural considerations that may influence women’s work–family arrangements. As noted above, I believe that gender is central to this thesis and the research underpinning it.

My main research question is: How do women now think about and then organise their paid work and family arrangements after childbirth? How do women shape their life–work balance? To answer this key question, additional questions must be asked about the factors that influence women’s decision-making. In particular, how much choice do women think and feel they have about how to organise their paid work and family care responsibilities? How do their preferences and plans take shape and emerge in the context of their lives? How much does the household figure in their decisions? Do women understand their experiences and decisions as constrained or inequitable? What, if anything, about these experiences and household dynamics might explain the relative persistence of gender inequality in relation to work–family arrangements?

The Research Terrain

My research enters a field already well tiled by others. A good deal of recent research reveals that in many Australian households, women entertain a range of views about the benefits and costs of combining paid work with caring for their children (Hand & Hughes 2004). More interesting is the fact that those doing this research seem to be sharply divided about how much choice and capability women have to resolve the tensions inherent in achieving a balance between paid work and their work as carers (for example, see Hakim 2000; McRae 2003a, 2003b; Crompton & Harris 1998a, 1998b; Houston & Marks 2003; Himmelweit & Sigala 2004; Probert 2006).

On the one hand, some researchers argue that women have more choice than ever before about how to organise their paid work and child care obligations (Hakim 2000). Women are often represented as ‘willingly’ choosing to work full-time or a range of part-time hours, and leaving their children in the responsibility of a range of childcare providers (see Leahy &
Doughney 2006: 37). On the other hand, however, other researchers insist that the idea that women can exercise ‘choice’ does not make much sense of women’s experiences as they struggle to deal with various tensions and negotiate their way through material and structural constraints. Writers like Williams (2000) and Gaze (2001) argue that there are major problems with arguments about choice; this is evident, for example, in the ways women are unable to both perform as an ‘ideal worker’ while simultaneously assuming child care and other domestic responsibilities (Gaze 2001: 199). Williams (2000) argues that when women try to combine paid work and care they challenge the ‘ideal worker norm’ by requiring flexible hours and practices. This is to say nothing of conflicting interests and ideas found in the ‘community’ about women and employment and women’s responsibility for managing the lives of their family.

Gaze (2001: 199) argues that ‘having children, in the context of current social arrangements, is likely to exacerbate women’s disadvantage in both the public and private spheres’. Further, as Pocock (2001, 2005c) insists, while some celebrate women’s/ mothers’ choices, there are still many constraints suggesting that work–family arrangements are not radically different from previous generations, namely the gendered distribution of unpaid work in the household. As Crompton (2006: 17) reminds us: ‘Centuries of ideological renditions of “the feminine”, to say nothing of gender socialisation and normative expectations, render it extremely likely that in any given population, women will carry out more care work than men’.

Certainly the research conducted in Australia since the 1950s has consistently revealed that ‘women continue to take on the major responsibility for family tasks related to children regardless of whether the family is a dual income or single income family’ (Higgins & Morse 2000: 11). Household and time-use surveys, which investigate how gendered arrangements concerning household work are maintained (Baxter 2009; Craig 2007; West & Zimmerman 1987; Baxter 1993, 2000), explain in part why the unpaid domestic work in the household continues to be done by women, and that this pattern has not changed significantly despite women’s increased participation in paid work. In short, most ‘couples actively construct their households’ in ways that mean women/mothers ‘continue to do most of the unpaid work’ – including the care of children (Morehead 2005a: 5). Baxter notes that understanding this
construction may further ‘contribute to understanding women’s oppression more generally’ (1993: 1).

An Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report entitled Work, Life and Family Balance (2009 Cat. No. 4102.0: 5) drawing on data from the 2006 Time Use Survey confirmed that, ‘on average, mothers in couple families spend more time on child care activities than fathers’ as well as ‘much less time in paid work than fathers’. Where both parents worked in a household, ‘mothers spent on average, around nineteen hours a week caring for their children, while fathers spent around eight’ (ABS 2009 Cat. No. 4102.0: 5). Further, ‘when both parents were employed full-time’ the amount of time spent in unpaid child care was still unequally shared, with mothers spending an average of seventeen hours and fathers spending just eight hours caring (ABS 2009 Cat. No. 4102.0: 5).

Craig et al. (2008) reported on their analysis of the 1997 ABS Time Use Survey that they had conducted in order to investigate the ways in which Australians balance the competing demands of work and family. They applied measures relating to ‘objective’ time pressure of the total hours worked (paid work, unpaid work and childcare) and ‘subjective’ time pressure (like feelings of being rushed or pressed for time) (2008: iii). The study distinguished between six household types including: male-breadwinner family, one-and-a-half-earner family, standard full-time dual-career family (woman working standard full-time hours), long hours full-time dual-career family (women working more than forty-nine hours a week), family in which the man does not work full-time, and sole mother family (Craig et al. 2008: iii). Among couple households, Craig et al. found that ‘whatever their employment status and whatever the household type, women do more unpaid domestic labour than men do’ (2008: iv). They also found that ‘In all the household types women do significantly more childcare than men’, and ‘When women do take up paid work, they do not reduce their childcare time by an amount equivalent to their paid work hours’ (Craig et al. 2008: iv).

To date, much of the research in this field has focused on the ways in which partnered women’s dramatic entrance into paid work has not resulted in equally dramatic changes in the division of household work and child care (for example, Hochschild 1989; Morehead 2002; Probert 2002). As Hochschild (1989: x) has noted, while increasing numbers of married women with children have entered the paid workforce, women have not achieved the kind of
promotion or income rewards they might have expected, which she partly attributes to ‘the work system inhibiting women’. Equally, as Hochschild observes, to only look at changes in the system of paid work is to look at only ‘half the problem’: the other half is found in the home, because ‘men do not share the raising of their children and the caring of their homes’ (1989: x-xi).

Indeed, research on what has been called the ‘stalled revolution’ (Hochschild 1989) continues to be needed two decades on since Hochschild’s groundbreaking work.

The fact that married women’s participation in paid work has increased dramatically does not explain either why or how unpaid work continues to be distributed unequally between men and women in the household (see Baxter 1993; Morehead 2005a; Pocock 2005c; Williams 2000; Edwards 2003). ‘Women who have children are faced with a huge range of unsatisfactory choices concerning paid work and childcare, which are usually referred to as the “work–family problem”’ (Gaze 2001: 199). Equally, while it appears that the image and practice of the traditional ‘male breadwinner family’ model has been profoundly disrupted (Connell 2005: 372) and ‘has been overtaken by the dual income family’ (Pocock 2005c: 13), the old and highly gendered assumptions underpinning this model are still intact (Hobson, Duvander & Hallden 2006). Moreover, the prevalent model continues to impose many of the costs involved in having and caring for children on women (Crittenden 2001; Gaze 2001). Caring responsibilities, for example, disadvantage women financially because their paid work participation is restricted, which in turn affects earning capacity (Grace 2005) and financial security, particularly at retirement (HREOC 2005; Gaze 2007).

Today, many women find it ‘difficult to juggle their dual loads of paid work and family work’, which is illustrated by the ‘large numbers of women working part-time and in positions below their skill levels’ (HREOC 2007b: 3). In Australia, ‘part-time work is seen as the key strategy for attempting to reconcile work and care’ (Charlesworth & Cartwright 2007: 5). Indeed, juggling and integrating work and family is a challenge that all parents face (OECD 2007), and ‘either mothers or fathers could use a part-time workload as a means of balancing work and family’ (Olsen & Walby 2004 in Craig et al. 2008: 16). However, ‘in practice it is usually the mother who is a part-time worker within a household’ (Olsen & Walby 2004 in Craig et al. 2008: 16; see also Gaze 2001).
It is now well-recognised that women are far more likely than men to adjust their paid work hours around caring obligations and to use family-friendly workplace measures such as part-time work, ‘even when those measures are offered to both’ men and women (Craig et al. 2008: 16; Bittman, Hoffman & Thompson 2004). Indeed, ‘decisions by parents with young children about participation in paid employment are strongly tied to decisions about who will care for their children’ (ABS, Cat. No. 4102.0, 2010: 26). Part-time work allows women to give priority to their caring role, thereby meeting the social standards of ‘proper motherhood’ and retaining motherhood as their primary identity (Craig et al. 2008: 16; Pocock 2003). Further, ‘the advocacy of the one-and-a-half-earner household implies the idea that while the demands of paid work and childcare are difficult to reconcile, it is mothers rather than fathers who are ultimately responsible’ for carework (Stykos & Weller 1967, in Craig et al. 2008: 16).

Conversely, part-time management and leadership roles are often viewed as unviable or counter to business needs, illustrating both an overt and covert resistance to part-time work policy and practice, which reflects the deeply embedded and gendered organisation of work and working-time norms (Charlesworth & Cartwright 2007: 5).

The quality of part-time work is also a key issue for focus (Pocock 2003). Not only because much part-time work in Australia is insecure, lacking basic conditions essential to carers (such as sick leave, holiday leave and paid parental leave for casual staff), and is typified by short hours, limited access to promotion and career advancement, but because it leads to questions of gender equity and the ideal worker norm (Charlesworth & Cartwright 2007: 6, 18).

**Method**

In this thesis I explore the ways in which ‘cultural’ and ‘structural’ forces shape women’s decisions and experiences regarding their work–family arrangements. This is a qualitative
research process. It draws on interviews with twenty-seven women over a two-year period, from 2004 to 2006, as they thought about, planned and made decisions about combining their work and child care obligations.

The role of gender in relation to agency, power and change is important when considering the factors that shape how women arrive at their work and family arrangements. This is a key theme explored in this thesis. More specifically, this thesis explores the impact of ‘structural’ issues, such as ‘gender relations’ within the household (see Morehead 2003; Agarwal 1997), on the social practice of women-as-mothers-as-carers (see Durey 2008; McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002) employed in higher education and retail in Victoria and on their decision as to how they might combine paid work and care after childbirth. That is, my focus is on the household as a site and locale where unequal gender arrangements seem to be being created, played out and perpetuated.

This research is intended to promote and advance understanding of the organisation of care and paid work. It centres on understanding and documenting dimensions of women’s work–family experience by giving voice to their personal stories. The aims of the research are twofold: to explore how women arrive at their paid work and family arrangements and to capture their paid work transitions while combining paid work and the care of children.

This thesis and my research questions are informed by a phenomenological and reflexive approach. It employs a temporal perspective whereby participants – twenty-seven women employed in the higher education sector and retail industry in Victoria – were interviewed three times about their preferences, intentions and plans; influences on decisions; views on choice, and experiences, in order to explore past, present and future aspects. My work draws on a theoretical framework which emphasises the gendered dimensions of the household and reflects my own feminist philosophical standpoint.

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2 I use the term ‘gender relations’ throughout this thesis to refer to the complex relations of power between men and women (See Agarwal 1997: 1). By this I encompass the complex sets of material and emotional relationships always embued with power and how these social relations impinge on economic outcomes (Agarwal 1997: 1; see also Connell 2009).
I undertook this research with the aim of documenting women’s preferences, intentions and plans, and their lived experiences as they combined their paid work and care responsibilities across time. This research also aims to broadly compare the similarities and differences between the two industry groups – retail and higher education – with particular regards to whether having access to policies (in the case of those women employed in higher education sector with access to parental leave policies, compared with women in retail, who at the time of data collection, paid leave for work-family were not available) is enough.

A review of the methodology used in related empirical research on the topic indicates that no known study in Australia has explored both the preferences and lived experiences of how women arrive at their paid work and family arrangements, in particular through the method of engaging with participants employed in these two industry groups in Australia over a period of two years. The retail industry and higher education sector in Victoria were selected for the purposes of recruiting a sample of women who were employed and either pregnant at the time of recruitment and/or the first interview, or had recently had a baby in the last 12 months, and to consider the effects of the labour market industry/sector/employer upon women’s work-family-care arrangements after childbirth. The industry and sector policy context and workplace culture provides one part of the backdrop for how women in this research sought to combine their paid work and family responsibilities, in terms of access to and use of paid work and family policies around childbirth. Workplace based policies for combining work and family, while highly gendered (Charlesworth & Baird 2007), is one part of the story (Hochschild 1989) which has held primacy in work-family research in recent decades. I chose these two industry samples because at the time of the research data collection, the higher education sector provided some best practice examples for combining paid work and family, compared with retail – a major employer of women in Victoria.

There are significant differences between higher education and retail which further develops the rationale for my choice in these industries. The higher education sector is one occupational area where there have been – ‘on paper’ – recent improvements in terms of family orientated policy, like maternity leave provisions and flexible work practices. However, access to flexible working arrangement such as 48 week year scheme, part-time work or up to 36 weeks parental is highly limited based on employment type (for example,
contract, casual/sessional, full-time, length of service) arrangements. Importantly, the retail industry is one of the largest industries in Victoria employing mostly women (ABS 2001 Cat. No. 6202.2). By comparison with the higher education sector, female employees in retail, at the time of the research project, may access up to 52 weeks unpaid leave per year.

The sample includes a roughly even division of employment industry and whether the participants were pregnant or had recently had a child at the time of the first interview. Further, a relatively small sample was selected, in order to create a depth of understanding of individual cases, rather than a broad overview of the population as a whole.

At the heart of my inquiry were simple questions like: Who takes care of the children? What would it take to get real equal sharing of unpaid domestic work? What if men played a more equal part in the full range of unpaid domestic work? What would have to happen before we get a situation where a middle-class, full-time male employee announces to his employer and co-workers: ‘It’s my turn to be at home’? What if we reconfigure the way both paid and care work are organised so that it is equal for both men and women, so that caring for children is built into a ‘total work’ system rather than being organised around paid work, and so it ceases to be socially acceptable or expected that mothers will choose to either ‘drop their baby’ (Williams 2000) to return to paid work, or drop their paid work to care for children?

### The Argument

My work is situated at the point of intersection between what may be referred to as ‘agential’ accounts of social life and those more ‘structural’ accounts which talk about how social ‘structures’ or ‘forces’ shape women’s decisions about their work–family arrangements. Here I take Hakim’s (2000) focus on women’s preferences as an influential, agential account and Williams’ (2000) account of domestic ideology including her treatment of the ‘ideal worker’ and the ‘marginalised carer’ as a more structuralist account. While both Hakim and Williams acknowledge structure and agency, each tends to favour one more than the other. This has the effect of creating a binary view of how women make decisions about their work-family commitments. Williams’ approach is one that relies very much on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. It is the insights offered by Bourdieu that I use to address my research questions.
To navigate my way between these binaries I draw on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of *habitus*, ‘field’ and ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1990a, 2001, 2005b). Bourdieu’s work is especially important to my contention that we need to identify and question what are often referred to as structural constraints, particularly the dominant cultural forces, expectations and social norms that underpin and shape women’s work–family arrangements. I argue that by focusing on gendered practices and habitus in the household we can better see how women make decisions about how to combine paid and unpaid work, and how they arrive at their respective work–family arrangements. In Bourdieu’s framework habitus refers to all of those acquired characteristics which are the product of social conditions. Habitus involves an embodied, emotional and cognitive sense of one’s place and role in the world of one’s lived environment, which shapes, generates and organises specific practices (Bourdieu 2005b; Hillier & Rooksby 2005; Durey 2008). The challenge is to question and impede the inequitable gender relations in the family–household and men’s and women’s habitus.

Pregnancy and mothering are embodied experiences where a woman’s thoughts (cognitive sense) and feelings (emotions) about her place in the world, and the ways in which these are managed in accordance with social norms and expectations (Hochschild 1979) shape social practice. My aim is not to treat thoughts and feelings as separate, or to argue that one is more important than the other. I ask how women make decisions in a way that moves me away from a ‘sociology of emotions’ offered by scholars such as Hochschild (1979), and towards Bourdieu and the concept of habitus. Theoretically the notion of habitus is very helpful because it is concerned with how we develop a ‘feel for the game’ which in turn allows us to know how we, and others should behave. This, it is argued, depends on our ‘position’ which, in turn is influenced by the amount of field–relevant capital we control (Hatch & Cunliffe 2006: 125). Habitus, and more specifically ideas about interplay with field is used in this thesis. As Hatch and Cunliffe (2006: 125) point out it is

> [t]he internal logic of the field can be kept hidden, the habitus can be well protected from outsiders and may operate as tacit knowledge among insiders who thus reproduce the field and its hierarchies without consciousness of their involvement. It may well be that members of a field tap into the rules and resources that Giddens described as the tissue connecting agency and structure.
This important insight supports my argument about the value of looking to the field of the family–household if we are to understand how and why people act as they do.

I argue that the household is a key factor and site where the gendered habitus of women’s lives and men’s lives are lived out and reproduced. Arguably it is a more important site than the workplace. This is not to say that the workplace or the statutory or policy frameworks attached to the workplace are not relevant or important to women when they set about organising and arranging their paid work and care obligations. Workplaces and workplace-based policies are important because they provide additional supports to women who can access them, so as to care for their baby within the context of their household. Further, workplace supports are sorely needed because they help, at least to a varied and partial degree, counter the inequitable gender relations in the workplace and household. However, despite the best workplace policy, the gendered habitus operating within the household has a tremendous influence on women’s (and men’s) decisions about parental–work – including how they feel, think and act. These theoretical framings help create a nuanced view of the work and care that my interviewees experienced across three periods of time. It is that which provides an original contribution to the literature.

I propose that by deconstructing women’s stories about paid work–family decision-making and lived experiences so as to expose their ideological nature, along with taken-for-granted assumptions about paid work and child care, we can better understand and address the issue of gender inequity in relation to work and care arrangements. This may also provide a way of understanding how people embody a sense of time, (for example, past and future), and how identity is shaped by hidden ‘cultural logics’ (Bourdieu 1977) that inhabit the present.

Indeed, this might be controversial given how much feminist activism and public debate is focused on the ‘work’ sphere and government policy. It may be criticised for taking the debate back to the ‘private’ sphere as a matter of individual family ‘choice’. I am not, however, suggesting that the private sphere is a sphere of choice. Rather, I am identifying and drawing critical attention to the habitus operating in the ‘field’ of the home that leads women to feel that there is little choice – and that what is right and natural is that they sacrifice and juggle work and/or family – while also acknowledging the interconnectedness of the two spheres.
My theoretical framework is one key point where this thesis deviates from previous studies of women’s work–family experiences. My thesis seeks to extend previous work on women’s work–family arrangements by focusing on both the industry sector contexts and household contexts of the women involved in the research, thereby including the similarities and differences of two groups of women (from retail and higher education). Therefore, this approach is ideally suited to understanding employed women as they become mothers, and employed mothers.

The research for this thesis focuses specifically on employed women who are either pregnant or mothers at the time of the first interview. Fathers and partners feature significantly in the lived experiences (and preferences) of the participants, and in the background demographic information about the dual-earner household in which the mother (those who are partnered) lives. As such, they have been a major influence on how mothers organise their time, as supported by recent Australian studies (Morehead 2003). Moreover, while hegemonic masculinity, masculinities, and fathers’ experiences are important areas of research that has some bearing on this topic, an investigation into those domains is beyond the scope of this thesis. Pursuing such an interest will damage the focus thesis and will not assist with the task of addressing the specific research questions that are directing the thesis.

I now provide a summary of the layout of the different chapters of this thesis.

**Chapter Outline**

This thesis is organised into two parts. Part One consists of the first three chapters, which focus on the context for the research and highlight conceptual issues and debates that frame the findings from my qualitative research.

In Chapter One I discuss the social and cultural context of the research. I outline some of the key social, historical, cultural and policy developments, changes and transformations in paid work and family life that have reshaped the circumstances of mothers, particularly women’s and mothers’ attachment to paid work, and changes in family formation in Australia since before the 1970s. In doing so, I provide the background context essential for understanding the ways in which women make decisions about the combination of paid work and family,
and the growing conflict between the two. I use the social and cultural context to illustrate two major recurring ideas of this thesis: the continued gendered assumptions underpinning work and family, and that structural constraints are illustrated in the dilemma for many women who want to fulfil their expectation of having an attachment to the paid workforce across the life course, as well as being the main caregiver in the home.

In Chapter Two I establish the conceptual framework of this thesis. I describe the central debates and literature on women’s paid work–family decisions and arrangements with particular attention to these since the turn of the century. I outline the relevant conceptualisation of ‘agency’–‘structure’ as a dichotomy. I discuss the conceptual framework made up of Catherine Hakim’s (2000) model of ‘preferences’, Joan Williams’ (2000) theories on ‘domesticity’ and ‘ideal worker norm’, and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990a, 1990b, 2001, 2005a, 2005b) account of ‘habitus’, ‘field’ and ‘symbolic violence’. These are the ‘thinking tools’ (Wacquant 1989: 50 in Jenkins 2002: 67) that I use to examine my empirical data, which show the significance of structural and cultural influences on the experiences of employed women-as-mothers (and mothers-as-carers) in retail and higher education, as they seek to organise their paid work and care arrangements after childbirth and when the youngest child is a toddler (i.e., younger than School-age). This chapter is designed to illuminate some of the central debates as well as the respective writers. First, are Australian contributions by researchers Alison Morehead (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2005b) on gender dynamics in the household, Barbara Pocock (2003, 2005a, 2005c) on work–family regimes and Connell (2002, 1987) also demonstrates the significance of a gender order and gender relations. The discussion then draws on key theoretical concepts in the work of international scholars including Hakim (2000), Williams (2000) and Bourdieu (1977). I identify certain common ground that exists between these theorists as well as their limitations

The theoretical framework, and underpinning philosophy, is offered which sets the stage for establishing phenomenology or symbolic interactionism frame (Van Manen 1990; Goffman 1959; Blumer 1969). As I explain, it’s a tradition that subscribes to idea that we can understand the social world by asking how people interpret their lived experience. This paradigm, which I discuss in Chapter Three, encompasses a methodological framework best
suited to getting insiders accounts: in this case, it requires talking with women/mothers about their work and family decision making experiences.

In Chapter Three I discuss the research methodology and general approach I employed to do my research which are linked to the ontological frameworks of the conceptual argument espoused in Chapter Two. I discuss my perspective as a feminist and sociologist with personal and academic interests in the research topic. I discuss how I went about doing the research – I describe the research design and data collection method - how I recruited participants, carried out the interviews, and explain how I managed the data and analysed the findings. The idea of ‘sensemaking’ and a case story approach are also used to analyse the material (Weick 1995). I conclude with a reflection on the challenges and limitations of this approach. In particular, I point out that a ‘case-story approach’ is a narrative approach that involves three sets of interviews with each participant. This created ‘one story’ or ‘case’. The case or narrative approach of telling stories in-depth enables me to explore the habitus at work.

All the chapters in Part One seek to analyse the underlying logic and influences that inform how women think about and act in regard to paid work and family life arrangements after childbirth. Part Two consists of four chapters (Chapters Four, Five, Six, Seven) and Conclusion, which present and explore the findings of my research framed by the thesis’ theoretical and conceptual foundations. Throughout these chapters I discuss the similarities and differences in terms of the degree of choice perceived and experienced by participants in the two industry groups with regard to access to differing policies for combining paid work and family. I argue that the way gender is lived out in the household is the dominant factor.

In my ‘analysis chapters’, I look at the frames and meanings people bring to their work-family life with particular attention given to key moments or issues such as: pregnancy, maternity leave, the time after childbirth and returning to paid work. The findings are organised into four chapters: preferences and ideas about how women think about arranging work and family; lived experiences of employment transitions across the three interview stages; lived experiences of negotiating the ‘return’ to paid work after childbirth, and strategies for managing work and family-care in the field of the household which are hidden
from public view. I am interested in discovering how my interviewees think, feel and act; whether they reflect on those experiences and the extent to which all that is shaped by social norms and gender orders (Hoschschild 1979). In doing so, I rely on theories and ideas that are directly related to my research questions.

Part Two begins with Chapter Four where I focus on the participants’ preferences, intentions and plans for combining their paid work and care after childbirth. I explore the meanings that participants give to their preferences, intentions and plans. I explore the organisation of work-family life by examining what informs the preferences, intentions and plans of my interviewees. This chapter answers the questions: How do their preferences and plans take shape and emerge in the context of their lives? How much choice do women think and feel they have about how to best organise their paid work and family care responsibilities? How much does the household figure in their decisions? I draw particularly on Hakim’s (2000) ‘Preference Theory’ and Williams’ (2000) ‘domesticity’ and ‘ideal worker’ concepts to address the structured elements that lie beneath the surface of the participants’ talk of preferences.

In this way Bourdieu’s (1990a, 2005b) account of habitus as a cognitive structure with a hidden internal logic, that ‘power relations on the basis of the distribution of’ various forms of ‘capital’, (Hatch & Cunliffe 2006: 124 – 125) is embodied and represented in participants’ expectations within their preferences gives me some basic interpretative frames. Their preferences for paid work and care arrangements are linked with household structures and dominant ideas about gender, which Bourdieu’s (2001) theory of symbolic violence may be useful. I argue that gendered norms are enacted not only in everyday practice, but in thoughts, feelings and desires about ‘the right and proper thing to do’ regarding women’s and men’s roles in combining paid work and care. Here, the participants’ preferences are explored as revealing the ways in which negotiation about paid work and care are within a gendered context of relations.

In Chapter Five I focus on the participants’ paid work transitions across the three phases of interviews from 2004 to 2006. The chapter maps women’s paid work transitions by examining patterns of continuity and change according to whether participants remained in full-time or part-time (or casual) work across the interviews. This data is analysed according
to industry group, and employment type (e.g., full-time, part-time) across the three sets of interviews. The rationale for this is that I am interested in exploring transitions or change and to identify any similarities and differences that exist among the industry groups. This also enables me to highlight how those participants who experienced continuity in paid work status throughout the three interview stages, actually experienced considerable change in other aspects of their paid work that remain hidden beneath quantitative data. These important nuances and detail are revealed through their stories. This experience of change and continuity in paid work around childbirth is important, as the participants report on the compromises, negotiations and difficulties involved in juggling paid work and child care obligations, which are a part of their decision-making. By considering the change and continuity in paid work status we see how the gender habitus, made up of domestic ideology of the ideal worker and strongly reproduced in the household, is a central influence.

I draw specifically on participants’ narratives through the lens of Bourdieu’s (1990a, 2005b) habitus and ‘field’ concepts to illustrate how women’s experiences are embodied in a gender order that pulls them back to the household, thereby adjusting their paid work so as to best manage the work and care juggle. The paid work transitions illustrate an important part of the thesis’ intention to understand women’s work and care arrangements; that is, that the experience and practice of work–family imbalance falls disproportionately to women. The domestic sphere and the gendered habitus operating within the field is a key factor influencing the ways in which participants seek to shape their paid work and care commitments – women’s experiences of dropping back from paid work to spend more time at home shows that the household is an important consideration. I discuss how these ideas played out and took shape in participants’ practices and lived experiences.

In Chapter Six I examine some of the challenges faced by the participants when they returned to paid work after childbirth, and tried to combine paid work and care. I explore the participants’ views and experiences of negotiating work and care arrangements in the workplace, which continues to shine a light on the significance of gender relations in the household. I discuss narratives of inequality and the discriminatory practices that took place when some women negotiated the return to paid work after childbirth. The focus on negotiating paid work and care by drawing on these narratives helps answer my central
research question: How do women arrive at their paid work and care arrangements? It also reflects on why women may respond in such ways. This chapter also highlights the ways that women’s paid work arrangements are often at odds with their preferences, intentions and plans. From the outside it may look like some participants ‘got what they wanted/desired’ in terms of a preference for working part-time. However, some had to take what they could get, which was a position equivalent to a job three years prior. Therefore, by questioning and looking deeper within and beneath the surface of patterns of paid work status change and continuity across time we see the way women experience and make sense of their work–family arrangements and decisions.

In Chapter Seven I highlight the ways negotiation and decision-making involve strategies, rather than a situation in which women simply choose how to organise their paid work and care. Some women employed strategies to transform constraints and create practical and more manageable options for combining paid work and care, which involved the interplay of agency and gendered practice. For many participants their strategies had a negative impact on their employment.

This chapter also explores the importance of child care as a key issue impacting on returning to paid work, in particular the cost and availability of childcare centres, which highlights that the household is still a key factor shaping women’s experiences and arrangements. Women want to spend time at home caring, but it depends largely on supports within the household, as well as workplace policies that require them to return to paid work or return their maternity leave payment. Child care and household work (what happens inside the household) still appears to be the domain of the mother. I draw on Williams (2000) regarding the structure of gender relations and the organisation of paid work and family life according to ideal worker and carer norms. In terms of paid parental leave policies (some of the partners could only get a few days here and there), the workplace emphasises that the woman should be at home caring. There were dominant expectations or assumptions about who will do the care work within a household. I draw on Bourdieu’s (2001) notion of symbolic violence to examine the participants’ narratives of the strategies they created to manage work and care. It draws implications for the broader change needed – that is, in the ways in which gender arrangements are negotiated in the household.
Drawing on the qualitative interviews about thinking about and organising paid work and care after childbirth, and negotiating the return to paid work as a gendered practice, a theoretical understanding highlights the unlikelihood of ‘choosing’ arrangements within everyday practice made up of ideal worker and carer norms. It shows the ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 2001) of some participants’ experiences. This finding highlights the importance of challenging both men and women’s gendered habitus – rather than just women – if social change is to take place. Further, it draws attention to the gendered social norms that are deeply entrenched in the household, and which influence women’s arrangements.

In the conclusion I summarise the key research findings. I conclude that for the women in this study, their paid work and care arrangements, practices and employment transition patterns were strongly influenced by a range of varying interconnected and fluid social and cultural forces, particularly household factors and circumstances (financial status and household earnings; whether they are partnered or lone; the number of children and household members), and gender relations and arrangements in the household was the dominant factor. I conclude that the context of industry and workplace are important for these two industry groups, and that a focus on the household needs attention in further research. Moreover, if women with access to the best workplace policies found combining paid work and care challenging and complex, then this indeed sheds light on the difficulty for women without access to paid parental leave or supportive policies and workplace initiatives for childcare.
CHAPTER ONE

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

According to conventional wisdom, the past half-century or so has seen unprecedented change. Sociologists and social theorists have not been able to resist the temptation to endlessly celebrate and diagnose the idea that ours is a time of unrelenting radical change. Whether it was Beck (1992) on ‘risk society’, Lyotard (1984) on the post modern condition, Giddens (1992, 1991) on ‘late modernity’ and later on globalisation, Bauman (2000) on ‘liquid modernity’, Berman (1983) on ‘experience of ceaseless change’, or Castells (1996) on ‘network society’, these writers and many others expounded at length on the sense expressed in Bob Dylan’s song of 1964 that ‘The Times They Are a−Changin’.

Yet it may be objected that making sense of change is always difficult. In an earlier epoch marked by a sensation of rapid change, the French writer Chateaubriand produced the aphorism, ‘plus ca change, plus ca meme’, which can be roughly translated as ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’. And as Leon Trotsky (2008 [1932]), one of the twentieth century’s most famous revolutionaries, understood all too well, the process of change – even apparently revolutionary change – is actually characterised by what he called ‘uneven development’ as some elements of a society change while others remain inert and resistant.

These remarks are relevant to my research, which addresses the transformations in paid work and family life that have taken place in Australia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My goal is to understand something of the processes of change which have apparently helped to reshape the way Australian men and women relate to each other, especially when they set about creating families of their own.

There is certainly a widespread perception that there have been major changes marked by women’s changing economic and social roles, understood, for example, in terms of a steady increase in their paid work participation. However, as Probert (2002) argues, women have always played a significant role in the paid workforce across the twentieth century: the significant shift has taken place in the proportion of married women with children who have stayed on in the paid workforce. There have also been major changes in family forms, as we
see more single parent families, same sex unions, ‘blended families’ and older age parents, all of which have been attributed to factors such as effective contraception; reduced fertility; sexual liberation; and changing attitudes towards parenthood, divorce and sexuality, for example (Poole 2005a: 39-40).

Social historians like Reiger (2005: 60-1) argue that major changes have taken place in the relationship of family life to paid work because the ‘male breadwinner model’ has become less prominent, therefore ‘unsettling the gender relations which had been basic to the development of the modern family’. Others argue that the experiences, conditions and ideologies which attend motherhood have been reshaped (Damaske & Gerson 2008). Some writers suggest that all this change is the result of decades of significant public discussion and intellectual debate about gender roles sponsored by feminist critics. Some writers, like Hakim (2000), have gone so far as to say that women now enjoy greater ‘agency’ or freedom to shape their own lives. Indeed Hakim argues that motherhood is no longer a barrier to paid work, and that there is more choice than ever before about how women and men in developed nations can organise their lives (Hakim 2000).

Others, however, are not so sure about the extent of the changes. Plentiful research suggests that some things have not changed much at all. Subversive research based, for example, on time studies of domestic labour suggests that inside the home an older gender order persists as women continue to do the bulk of the housework and child care (ABS 2007, Cat. No. 4153.0; Baxter 1993). Others argue that the traditional gender order, which for so long structured and organised social life in terms that broadly privileged the public needs of men by guiding how men and women ought to think, feel and act, has not changed all that much (Pocock 2005a). As noted in the previous chapter, the male breadwinner model, (like ‘masculinity’), has been profoundly critiqued (Connell 2005). In spite of this, gendered assumptions about ‘the role’ women and men perform in work and family seem to remain stubbornly in tact (Hobson, Duvander & Hallden 2006).
My research was designed to elucidate some of the ways we might think in an informed way about the large question of social change as it affects the lives of men and women by focusing on the way a number of women experience organising and combining paid work and care/family life both before and after giving birth to their children, and when the children are young. This focus on the experience of women needs to recognise the context in which this experience occurs, which women seek to make sense of. As Kerreen Reiger (2005: 43-44) has observed, ‘families are shaped by society – by place, time and culture – rather than being “natural”, inevitable and unchangeable’. However, the challenge lies in spelling out precisely how this takes place in a way that does not simply convert people into puppets dangling at the end of ‘social structural’ strings. Reiger suggests this ‘involves asking about the social forces impacting on women [and] men’ (2005: 44).

Though I will offer a richer and more immediate account of the lives of the women I interviewed later, so as to highlight some of the more immediate aspects of their context, I want here to focus on the broader social and historical context of Australia over the past few decades. My questions here are relatively simple. I begin by asking what kinds of broad changes have affected the workforce attachment of women who are also mothers. What do we know about patterns of family formation in Australia in the past few decades, including the roles of men and women in care work in the home? What kinds of public processes, including policy formation and the role, for example, of neo-liberal ideas about freedom of choice, have played a part in shaping this context? I note, my discussion is deliberately limited by an interest in collecting material that allows me to answer my research questions. The requirement for a disciplined focus requires that I bracket a number of interesting and related areas (such as masculinity, fathers’ experiences) because they are not directly relevant to that task.

It may well be that if we take a closer look at the prevalence of gendered norms, beliefs and values that make up our complex ‘institutional and cultural order that comes into relation with our bodies and gives gender meaning’ (Connell 2002: 39) and inform our social practices and relations — we can see that while some things have indeed changed, many things have changed much less than commonly believed. For example, there has been a tendency in previous adult generations, as well as in the aspirations of young people today
(Pocock 2005b, 2006), to reproduce and contest aspects of the social practice and structure of relations that is gendered. In this way, gender ‘is the structure of our social relations and the sets of practices (governed by this structure)’ that bring differences into processes (Connell 2002: 10). In other words, ‘gender structures and perpetuates our social practice and relations, and our practice of gender maintains and perpetuates structure’ (Connell 2002: 10) in ways that tie together our past, present and future.

Women’s Work and Family Formation: The Trends

On the face of it, much has changed about the way Australians make and live in their families (Reiger 2005, 1985; Gilding 1991). In the 1950s, households and the women and men within them occupied and lived out quite fixed and dichotomous roles such as ‘good/proper husbands and fathers’ who focused on paid work outside the home or as ‘good/proper wives and mothers’ whose primary locus of experience was ‘homemaker’ and ‘housewife’ in the home (Barnett et al. 1993: 795; Probert 2002; Zajdow 2005). Women’s work was to ‘devote herself exclusively to the care of the family in the home’ (Swain, Warn & Grimshaw 2005: 21−22), including ‘emotional responsibility for family happiness’ (Reiger 2005: 59). Women’s work during this time in Australia, and indeed in much of the Western world, was relatively ‘hidden’ (Bryson 1995; Folbre 2001; Oakley 1995 [1974]; 2004) – as Gilding (1991: 62) notes: ‘Women’s work became more privatised and less acknowledged’. Married women within households were treated as ‘dependants’ (Bryson 1995: 25) ‘supported by [a] male breadwinner’ (Swain, Warn & Grimshaw 2005: 21), yet have always been primarily involved in home economics by – doing domestic work or, if relevant, by working in the family business or on the farm (Baxter 1998a). Women routinely sought and found employment before they were married and often ‘resigning upon marriage or the birth of their first child’ – a period characterised by a relatively short time in the labour market (Mitchell 1998: 355). However, there were very clear expectations – some of them inscribed in law, and enforced – that once a woman married she was expected to resign from her employment to assume her ‘proper’ role as wife and, hopefully, mother (Zajdow 2005; Mitchell 1998). Only briefly during the Second World War (1939–45) did married women leave the home in
large numbers to engage in paid work in the labour market – they were ‘generally unwelcome in the paid workforce unless it was for national emergencies’ (Zajdow 2005: 99).

But beginning in the 1960s this old order began to change and the participation of women in paid work in Australia (and in most developed countries) began to rise (Zajdow 2005; Probert 2002). There has been a distinct change in women’s paid workforce participation in Australia over the past four decades. In 1970, women of all statuses (i.e. unmarried and married) made up 30 per cent of the paid workforce (ABS 1971 Cat. No 622). By 2003 this had increased to 56 per cent (ABS 1971 Cat No. 622, 2004 Cat No. 1301.0).

This increase has been most striking among married women with young children, showing a continuity of women’s paid work participation after childbirth (ABS 2003 Cat No. 4102.0). National data from the ABS shows that in 2003 most women with dependent children were heavily engaged in the paid workforce (ABS 2003 Cat No. 4102.0). The proportion of all women with dependent children in the paid workforce (i.e. mothers in one-parent families, or ‘lone mothers’; and mothers in couple families, or ‘couple’ mothers) increased from 45.6 per cent in 1985 to 60.4 per cent in 2003 (Campbell & Charlesworth 2004: 7; Cartwright 2005). Similarly, ‘mothers in couples with jobs has increased significantly over the past 25 years, doubling among those whose youngest child is less than one year old’ (Pocock 2003: 73).

In the period from 1980 to 2000 the paid work participation rate of women in the peak childbearing years (twenty-five to thirty-four) ‘increased from 50 per cent to 66 per cent’ (ABS 2001, Cat. No. 4102.0: 135). This increase reflects a number of key points, including the delay in childbearing by women with higher education qualifications and an increase in the number of women with children in the workforce (ABS 2001 Cat. No. 4102.0).

Research in Australia by Pocock (2003: 72) indicates that, compared with women from previous generations, fewer women are now leaving the paid workforce during the peak childbearing years. For example, the labour force participation rate of women aged between twenty-five and thirty-four years rose from 63 per cent in 1988 to 71 per cent in 2002 (McDonald & Evans 2002: 8; ABS 2004 Cat. No. 1301.0).
This also suggests that what has changed between, say, 1960 and 2000 is that in Australia women are now making a variety of decisions about how to fit together their paid work and family arrangements (Himmelweit & Sigala 2004, 2002). It has also been noted that women who work during their pregnancy return faster to their same job after giving birth when they have longer previous continuous employment experience (Baxter 2008; Glass & Riley 1998). As Pocock (2003), and Campbell and Charlesworth (2004: i) put it, these changes suggest that more and more workers bring caring responsibilities with them into the workplace and ‘no longer approach the workplace entrance as the “ideal workers” associated with the earlier “male breadwinner/female homemaker” model’. In the Australian context many women work part-time in order to combine motherhood and paid work – in 2002, Australia had the second highest participation of part-time employed women, after the Netherlands, out of 28 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2002a: 48, 2002b: 69).

While some women continue in paid work, some reduce their hours and others cease paid work and become full-time mothers (Pocock 2003: 72-85), the ways in which women make decisions about organising paid work and family life, the influential factors upon their decision-making, and how much of decision-making reflects agency or structure are increasingly significant questions today (Cartwright 2005). These questions are related to major shifts in society over the past thirty to forty years, in particular changing social mores around women’s participation in the paid workforce, and a steady increase in women’s paid workforce participation rate (Pocock 2003: 72-85). For example, the proportion of all women in the paid workforce with dependent children increased from 45.6 per cent in 1985 to 60.4 per cent in 2003 (Chalmers, Campbell & Charlesworth 2005: 45).

Another significant change is that many Australian women work part-time in order to combine motherhood and paid work (Charlesworth & Cartwright 2007; Pocock 2003). However, despite these significant changes in women’s paid work participation rates, national data from the most recent time-use survey (ABS 2007, Cat. no. 4153.0) indicates that women who are employed and also caring for young children spend more time on unpaid domestic and care work than men.
Both on the face of it and evidenced in the broad brush data I have surveyed, there is substantial evidence that there has been a great deal of change in Australia in regard to the way women in general, and married women with children in particular, engage their paid work and family work. Many writers have pointed to a variety of factors, including the impact of changing economic trends and pressures as well as changing social mores (Samson 2002; Fagan 2001). These factors seem to have shaped the pattern of women’s participation in the paid workforce. Writers point variously to ‘rising education levels’ for women particularly post-school education, greater ‘control over fertility’, the ‘growth in service sector jobs’ (and the decline of manufacturing jobs), and the ‘increasing availability of part-time and casual jobs’ as key changes affecting women’s paid work and family life (Samson 2002: 24).

However, as I now want to argue, the evidence also suggests that there is a good deal of complexity and difficulty in the way people, and especially women, now shape their lives around the imperatives to engage in paid employment and have families. The ‘blurring of paid work and life’ and ‘double day’ or ‘second shift’ phenomenon and negative impacts such as growing feelings of time-pressure are now well documented (Brown, Cerin & Warner-Smith 2008; Hochschild 1997). The additional unpaid work that women perform, which has implications for health and wellbeing, identity and relationships, has also been well documented (Morehead 2003; Hochschild 1997). In the following section, drawing on this discussion of change (and lack of change) in work and family life, I identify key gaps, contradictions and problems that this evidence points.

**Breadwinners, Homemakers and Gender Role Stereotyping: The Cultural Context**

The connections between work and gender identities are central to the framing of this thesis. For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, paid work for men was understood as ‘breadwinning’ and was essential to the wellbeing of ‘the family’ (Singleton 2005; Probert 2002; Murphy 2002). Historians now talk about the male breadwinner family model, particularly during the post-war years in Australia (Murphy 2002) based on a ‘gender order’ where ‘gender relations between men and women were fundamentally constructed in terms of
male power and female dependency’ and reflected strict ‘gendered divisions of labour in the household and labour market’ (Broomhill & Sharp 2004: 3). The predominance of the male breadwinner model and of male paid workers were largely protected by post–war government policy developments in Australia, most evident for example in the wage-earner welfare state (Cass 1998; Murphy 2002; Broomhill & Sharp). Modern historical accounts argue that the 1907 principle of ‘family wage’ – a decision given by Justice H.B. Higgins in the Harvester Wage Case reinforced the ideal of a male breadwinner. In particular, it ‘served to consolidate the domestic division of labour, to legitimize the financial obligations of men as breadwinners’ (Cass 1988: 62 in Mitchell 1998: 357) and therefore ‘entrench’ rigid segregation of domestic roles and the gender order (Zajdow 2005: 98–99). This was achieved, for example, by establishing the male ‘family wage’ as based on a male breadwinner supporting a dependant family (Murphy 2002; Broomhill & Sharp 2004). On the one hand it was seen to be ‘protecting married women from having to seek paid work in the open market’. However ‘in practice it played a critical role in blocking women’s options in paid employment’ (Broomhill & Sharp 2004: 4).

Further, Swain, Warn and Grimshaw note, ‘The model of man as worker, with woman as mother and consumer, was increasingly entrenched’ (2005: 25). In this model, ‘breadwinning’ and ‘homemaking’ were considered the ‘norm’ (Zajdow 2005; Probert 2002) and ‘central to understanding men’s and women’s gendered identities’ and ‘the way in which work in the household is defined’ (Baxter 1993: 7). The homemaker role was subjected to endless cultural validation as the role women were expected not only to maintain but to enjoy carrying out (Gilding 1991).

While the male breadwinner model has been central to much research on work and family, gender identity, and policy in Australia, it is not unchanging or static (Murphy 2002). Murphy (2002: 61) notes while the male breadwinner model connects to masculinity as a fluid construct (see Connell 2002), there are variations of the male breadwinner model found in cross-national studies. In his interviews with 38 men who all worked full-time during the 1950s, Murphy (2002: 64) observed that ‘being a provider was clearly essential to masculine identity, regardless of class’. However, below the surface of the apparent uniformity, Murphy drew out the different meanings that those men gave to breadwinner. He argues that
‘variations can be discerned between those vigorously committed to being the breadwinner and those who simply accepted it as their lot’ (Murphy 2002: 71). Buchanan and Thornwaite (2001: 30) also report that the majority of Australians ‘support a sharing of the breadwinner role’ yet in practice ‘men are the primary breadwinners in the vast majority of households’. This is partly due largely to women’s work-care arrangements and decisions taken after childbirth. As Buchanan and Thornwaite explain, they are decisions that relate to factors like ‘the existence of accessible, affordable child care and options for employment’ (2001: 30).

The changing shape of the Australian work–family arrangements, and particularly women’s increases in paid work participation, have been informed by male breadwinner norms. As such they provide an important cultural and historical context for this study (Broomhill & Sharp 2004). While women’s paid work participation increased during the Second World War, this was primarily necessary because the men were away fighting and women took on the roles and responsibilities that had been the domain of men (Zajdow 2005). During this time, women’s increased paid work participation was supported by government funded childcare (Reiger 1985). In 1945, however, as the war drew to a close, women’s paid work participation decreased as they returned to the home front/‘domesticity’, so that men could resume their ‘rightful place’ as breadwinner (Swain, Warn & Grimshaw 2005; Singleton 2005). However, there was now an increased demand for labour supply, due to the extended economic growth in post war Australia (Broomhill & Sharp 2004). Further, historians have noted that there has ‘been less discussion of the women who defied [this] dominant trend’ of returning to the home (Swain, Warn & Grimshaw 2005: 27), which reinforces traditional gender role stereotyping of women primarily as homemakers, and the embedding of the male breadwinner model in Australian cultural and social norms (Broomhill & Sharp 2004).

The male breadwinner/female homemaker-caregiver in Australia remained dominant through to the 1970s. Amongst other things this meant that women’s participation in the labour market and gendered division of labour in the home was not on equal terms with men’s (Broomhill & Sharp 2004). Having said that, it is important to note that gender was not the only influence on identity and experience. Indeed in the context of a culture strongly influenced by the notion of ‘blokey mateship’ and the ‘white Australia policy’, ethnicity as well as class mattered (Reiger 2005; Gilding 1991).
A full historical account of the various ways gender shaped expectations, family relations within the home is beyond the aims and general scope of this thesis. Having said that, it is important to recognise that this ‘development’ was not homogenous matter: family and household relations in the late nineteenth century differed across class and ethnicity. The nuclear family ‘model’ for example did not characterise the experiences of upper-class and working-class Australians (Gilding 1991: 31-5). Rather, family life during this time and in the earlier colonial period of Australian history were more like pre-industrial Britain (Reiger 2005: 53). The intensity of emotion surrounding ‘family issues’ and ideas about what constitutes a “good” and “bad” family’ point to the influence of place, time and culture on gender dynamics and how they in turn influence the lives of men, women and children over many generations (Reiger 2005: 43 – 59).

By the 1970s the male breadwinner model was in retreat as two income families became increasingly normal (Singleton 2005). Yet the more things change the more they stay the same: women continue to take primary responsibility for household work and child care (Baxter 1998b; Baxter & Western 1997; Baxter 1993; Bittman 1990). While the Australian women’s movement of the 1970s played a critical role in changing attitudes and government policies towards women’s participation in paid work, so women as mothers became more visible in the paid workforce, they continue to carry the major responsibility for unpaid domestic work (Morehead 2003; Baxter 1993; Bittman 1990). The ‘dominant gender culture ensured that women, while working, also remained primarily responsible for social reproduction in the home and the society’ (Broomhill & Sharp 2004: 2-3). As Broomhill & Sharp observe: The ‘dominant gender culture ensured that women, while working, also remained primarily responsible for social reproduction in the home and the society’ (2004: 2-3). Further, Broomhill and Sharp (2004) also note that the decline in the traditional breadwinner family model is likely to continue in future decades, yet paradoxically many of the ideas and values that underpin the more traditional family arrangements remain deeply embedded in the Australian gender-culture psyche.

Indeed it seems the older cultural norms attached to ‘motherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’ are still in place and that in the new century some of the messages are still the same. In a recent cover story, for example, in The Sunday Age’s magazine Sunday Life, Sex Discrimination
Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick noted that part of the return to work after childbirth dilemma for women – whether to work full-time, part-time or not at all – is that ‘most Australians have a deeply held cultural belief that a good mother is someone who is always with her children’. Broderick further noted: ‘When you bring that belief into the workplace, it’s no wonder we are where we are’ (Tynan 20 June 2010: 14).

The power of culture is greatest when it is working at the tacit and implied levels of what Hofstadter (1986) calls ‘default assumptions’, namely those things we take-for-granted. The contradictory nature of the contemporary frameworks people use to think about matters like gender roles and who does what in the home is suggested by the work of Chris Argyris (for example, 1976, 1982, 1985, 1993) and his colleague Donald Schon (1974). Their work was developed specifically in the context of wanting to think about organisations and how to generate changes in workplace culture; however, it is highly relevant to any consideration of social and cultural change more generally.

Argyris and Schon (1974) drew attention to the inertial tendencies that inhibit change even, or especially, in places ostensibly committed to change, to ‘good causes’ and to the production of knowledge and learning. A brief ‘theoretical’ excursus into this body of work opens up the question of how what we know connects, or does not connect, to what we do. For significant change to take place, particularly in any organisation, we need to acknowledge that inertia and the transience of ‘the way things are’ are among the great obstacles to change.

Argyris’ work draws attention to the tensions at work between what people know or believe and what they actually do. One tension is the difference between what Argyris and Schon (1974) call ‘espoused theory’ and ‘theory in use’ (6-7). The distinction goes to the way people, when asked to say why they do what they do, offer what might be called the ‘politically correct’ answer. That is, they use discursive frameworks which they understand to be the ones preferred by those who have power or status (particularly in their organisational culture). This we can call the ‘espoused theory’, which describes the favoured vocabulary and stories used to convey what we do and/or what we would like others to think we do. When someone is asked, for example, what she does or why she does something, the answer given is the espoused theory of action. ‘Espoused theory’ is different from what Argyris and Schon (1974: 6-7) called ‘theories-in-use’. These are the words and stories that more directly reflect
and/or inform actual behaviour. These stories tend to be tacit. Their relation to actual practice ‘is like the relation of grammar-in-use to speech; they contain assumptions about self, others and environment – these assumptions constitute a microcosm of science in everyday life’ (Argyris & Schon 1974: 30).

By extrapolation we can say that over the past few decades in Australia, gender equity and ideas about the rights of women to shape their own lives freely and without too many hindrances has become the ‘espoused theory’. As I suggest in the next section, this espoused theory has informed a good deal of legal and policy change. Equally we can say that another set of ideas, which we can call the ‘theory in use’, has remained the actual framework people use to negotiate their daily lives; this is a body of ideas that remains wedded to the older gender order, suggesting that things may not be as clear as the social change data suggests.

For example, we can tell a story about how women’s access to paid work has also been facilitated by other legislative changes including equal opportunity for women, equal pay, parental leave and anti-discrimination policies. But the very plethora of legal and policy interventions also points to some of the tensions between competing ideas and expectations.

**Work–family Interventions: The Policy Context**

While the idea of paid maternity leave does not address all of the issues at stake for women as they consider the relations between paid employment and child care (Grace 2003), it does catch some of the key issues. Historically, access to paid parental leave in Australia has been modest at best and largely limited and determined by occupational status (Baird & Whitehouse 2007). At the time of writing, Australia and the United States are the only OECD countries without a national paid parental leave scheme.

These issues have been the subject both of policy reviews and related academic research. The subject of managing and combining work and family life has, for example, been a key issue on the agenda of the Sex Discrimination Unit of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). The work–family dilemma has been treated by the HREOC essentially as an issue about inequality and discrimination. A 2002 debate about the need for a reform in policy, to address work and family demands and support work and family
balance, was raised at the federal level by the HREOC report *A Time to Value: Proposal for a national paid maternity leave scheme*. A key issue highlighted in this and other research reports has been the acknowledgment by a succession of Commonwealth governments of the unique challenges that women face when trying to combine paid work and family obligations after childbirth. The report identified a number of key issues. It focused particularly on the idea that ‘paid maternity leave would make it easier for women to combine paid work and family responsibilities’ (HREOC 2005: 2). It was also made clear that ‘maternity leave is not itself enough to deliver balanced paid work and family responsibilities to families’ and that a government-mandated scheme should be accompanied by other supportive measures – for example, access to flexible work practices and high quality child care (HREOC 2005: 2). HREOC (2002) proposed that the Commonwealth government implement a national paid maternity leave scheme.

At the time when the HREOC (2002) first proposed that a national paid maternity leave scheme be implemented, the Howard government was at least prepared to recognise that the work–family balance was a major concern and that the government needed to ‘facilitate choice’ for parents on the issues of work and family (Howard 2003). Nothing, however, was forthcoming by way of legislative change.

In 2005 and 2007 the HREOC released two reports specifically addressing the issue of balancing work and family life so as to address negative implications for both men and women. These reports acknowledged that many women were feeling time pressure and experiencing serious impacts on their health and wellbeing. The two reports, *Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family* (2005) and *It’s About Time: Women, men, work and family* (2007a), drew on a considerable body of research from employer and industry groups, employee organisations, government, academics, community organisations and representatives, group and individual consultations and submissions from around Australia. Findings and recommendations from both reports proposed a series of changes to legislation and workplace policy and programs, and contained proposals to fund education and awareness initiatives to help change community attitudes to unpaid caring work.

The 2005 HREOC report identified gender equity and fairness, choice constraints, cultural change at the workplace level and attitudinal change as key components of work and family
balance dilemma issues affecting people in the household, in their workplace or in the community (125-30). In the 2007 report HREOC made the case for a new framework to support a better balance between paid work and family responsibilities by recognising the changing needs and responsibilities of both men and women by adopting a ‘shared work-valued care’ approach.

Recent decades have also seen employers, organisations and unions addressing the issue of work and family balance. Employers have recognised the need to support employees’ work and family balance by, for example, offering their workers paid parental leave (Baird 2009; Rapoport et al. 2002). For employers, the new focus on employees’ work and family needs may best be seen as recognition of the need to attract and retain a diverse pool of employees within a framework contextualised by a prior concern with achieving productivity and flexibility in a competitive global market (Rapoport et al. 2002). However, workers arguably see the priorities differently: for them the major imperative is to get support from their employers to combine work and family responsibilities in ways that reflect their needs (Charlesworth & Baird 2007).

A lot of research indicates that parental leave provisions matter in women’s employment transitions after childbirth. Data from the *Parental Leave in Australia Survey* from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC 2006, 2007) which was ‘initiated and funded by the Australian Government’, for example, shows that patterns of leave-taking among parents differed markedly between women and men (Whitehouse et al. 2006). Only 15 per cent of women surveyed took paid leave from work around childbirth, and only 4 per cent of women took paid maternity leave (Whitehouse et al. 2006). Another 11 per cent took a combination of other forms of leave with paid maternity leave, while 26 per cent of mothers took no leave at all (Whitehouse et al. 2006: 10-12). Fathers took far fewer periods of leave but had better access to leave than women (Whitehouse et al. 2006: 12). One reason men did not take longer periods of leave was that their partner was at home engaged in full-time child care (Whitehouse et al. 2006: 12). It can be argued that access to and use of leave policies for combining work and family is a key to how paid work and care are organised. However, it seems on the basis of this kind of evidence that there are clear limitations to the effectiveness of parental leave policy as a vehicle for change if men’s and women’s decisions about child
care are based on different norms from those underpinning experiments in parental leave policy (Productivity Commission 2008, 2009). This impression is confirmed when the large body of research on this matter is examined.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, as married women’s workforce participation rates began to increase, researchers from various disciplines, including sociology, economics and industrial relations, have been studying the specifics of parental leave policy provisions as well as the broader framework that makes up the politics of work and family arrangements (for example, Rapoport & Rapoport 1965, 1971). Oakley (1995 [1974]), for example, undertook the first critical examination of the everyday taken-for-granted experiences of household life, which has transformed the way we think about housework and the division of household labour, motherhood, gender and social research methods.

There is now substantial research which suggests that having children has a much bigger impact on women and their employment rates, transitions and status than it does on men (for example, Morehead 2005a; Baxter et al. 2007; Gaze 2007). This research also says that it is more likely that women-as-mothers will face barriers when trying to combine paid work and care, and that this situation is unlikely to disappear in the immediate future (Hochschild 1989; Burton 1997; Glezer & Wolcott 2000; Williams 2000; Gaze 2001; Pocock 2003; Maher & Lindsay 2005a; Smyth, Rawsthorn & Siminski 2005).

It is clear, for example, that combining paid work and unpaid care work has two main effects, one economic and the other to do with the quality of the caring work that women do. Firstly, as Craig (2008) and others (Grace 2001, 2004; Pocock 2003; HREOC 2005) have noted, those with domestic caring responsibilities, who are primarily women and mothers, spend less time in paid work across their life-time. Put another way, childbearing leads to discontinuous employment, which reduces women’s income over the life course. For example, in Australia, survey data from the ABS shows that women’s paid work participation hours decrease at the birth of a child (i.e., women withdraw from paid work when they become mothers) and increase again with the age of the youngest child in the household (Craig 2008; Grace 2004). Depending on an individual’s economic situation, paid work opportunities and the legal framework of work, women face varying barriers if they want to return to paid work after a period of childcare/family leave (Craig 2008; Baxter 2005b).
Women’s paid work participation is also fluid throughout the life course, particularly from around the time of childbirth (Smyth, Rawsthorne & Siminski 2005). Childbirth, in short, has immediate and far-reaching consequences for income, overall lifetime earnings and the ability to build up superannuation contributions or make retirement savings (Grace 2005, 2004, 2001). To use the words of Craig: ‘the costs of motherhood include being at risk of poverty in old age’ (Ginn et al. 2001; Olsberg 2004 in Craig et al. 2008).

Becoming a mother and undertaking unpaid care commitments raises a major challenge for any woman who has to take time out of the paid workforce to care for a child. The economic costs, also known as a ‘care penalty’, fall disproportionately upon women (Craig 2008; Folbre 2001). Subsequently, this raises additional key problems and demonstrates the clear connections between inequality and motherhood. These economic impacts are felt by mothers more than by fathers and/or childless women or men (Craig 2008; Grace 2004; Folbre 2001).

Secondly, paid work participation time has a negative impact on the caring work women do because paid work time cuts into caring time. The guilt associated with ‘dropping the baby’ (Williams 2000) is now well documented (Pocock 2005a). The social impact is also complex. As the HREOC (2005: 125) and as many scholars (Maushart 2000; Pocock, 2003; Crittenden, 2001; Williams, 2000) have noted, the community and media may treat the choices women make to seek paid employment as evidence of a decline in women’s commitment to mothering. This may feed into the way women encounter negative messages from peers, colleagues and family when they return to paid work after childbirth. For example, 22 per cent of respondents to the Pregnancy and Employment Transitions survey in 2005 experienced problems at work, including receiving ‘inappropriate or negative comments’ and ‘missing out on training or development opportunities’ (ABS 2005, Cat. No. 4913.0). The Productivity Commission (2008: 6.3) noted that these negative experiences included ‘employer hostility, pressure to return to work earlier than planned, resistance to extending maternity leave and difficulty negotiating part-time work and more flexible arrangements’ (The Productivity Commission 2008: 6.3). These contextual contradictions and difficulties may indicate why the politics of parental leave have been so difficult in Australia (Grace 2003).
This contention was implied by the Productivity Commission when it released an inquiry report in February 2009 entitled *Paid Parental Leave: Support for parents with newborn children*. This report recommended the introduction of a government-funded Paid Parental Leave Scheme. The report specifically referred to ‘the increasing role of women as simultaneously carers, workers and sources of family income, and [to] changes, albeit limited, to male roles in caring for, and rearing, children’ (2009: xv).

In its report, the Commission identified three broad grounds for introducing a paid parental leave scheme that aimed to address issues arising from combining work and care roles (constructed as competing demands) and the difficulty in maintaining these, particularly for women. The first rationale offered was that it would help to improve the wellbeing of families, and particularly child and maternal health, associated with an extended period of absence from work around childbirth. The Commission highlighted the likely positive impacts of the scheme such as increased health and wellbeing of the child, mother and father while increasing lifetime workforce participation of women – over the long run and prior to the birth of the child (2009: xxiii). Secondly, it argued that such a scheme would acknowledge the variety of factors like financial constraints, which made it difficult for parents to take sufficient time off work. The report also allowed that there were incentives ‘against’ work provided by the social welfare and tax system, and that such a scheme would also encourage women of reproductive ages to maintain their attachment to the workforce. Finally, the report acknowledged the force of new community norms, including ideas that having a child and taking time out for family reasons were now part of the usual expectations held by many male and female workers (2009: xviii).

In mid-2010 the then Rudd Labor government, caught up in a hectic pre-election bidding war with the Federal Opposition, announced somewhat dramatically that it would be introducing a new national 18-week Paid Parental Leave scheme to commence from January 2011. The proposed paid parental leave government scheme is means tested and designed for ‘the primary carer’ who earns less than $150,000; the inference was made that it could be shared between a mother and father (Baird 2009). It will provide economic support and flexibility so that parents can take time out of the workforce to focus on caring after childbirth for a limited period of time.
Despite the scheme being based on minimum wage standards, this is a major policy change after thirty years of campaigning by union and women’s groups (Baird 2009). Also related to (‘but not part of’) the scheme are ‘stay in touch programs’ and ‘return to work part of the policy’, which ‘are built around an assumption of female participation in the paid workforce’ (Baird 2009).

**Women’s Work–family Decisions**

My discussion has so far emphasised something of the profound social changes in Australia signified by changes both in the way married women participate in paid work and by the shift from a ‘male breadwinner’ family model to a ‘dual breadwinner’ model where men and women collaborate in earning their family’s income (Craig 2008; Lewis & Giullari 2005). However, as the research and debates centering on paid parental leave imply, the kinds of changes in Australia’s ‘gender culture’ that some commentators have worried about may simply not have taken place.

This likelihood has been suggested by studies of the gendered dimensions of time-use and the division of household labour. The research (for example, Pocock 2005a), shows that the distribution of responsibility for domestic labour in the Australian household remains relatively unchanged. Or to put this another way, the decision-making about domestic labour seems to be running at odds with the changes to women’s participation in paid work (Williams 2000; Craig 2008).

The literature on women’s paid work and family decisions and experiences is extensive, disparate and continues, if nothing else, to highlight the complexity of the issue. Some of this research, for example, shows that when a woman becomes a mother she is most likely to engage a variety of strategies that are neither linear nor determined as she struggles to rebalance paid work and child care responsibilities (Maher & Lindsay 2005a, 2005b). It is also clear that there are conflicting descriptions and explanations about whether women are really able to choose to be variously in part-time or full-time work or to be full-time mothers (see Hakim 1995, 2000; Manne 2001) a discussion in which all sorts of ideas about the ‘ideal mother’, and the constraints of ‘downward’ moving employment transitions are mixed up.
What is missing in the literature, particularly the dearth of Australian studies, is a focus on women’s lived-experiences as they struggle to organise their paid work and family responsibilities both before the birth of a child, during maternity leave, and after. My qualitative research about how women think about, and what shapes their decisions and preferences traces their lived experiences across time. Like some other researchers (for example, Smyth, Rawsthorn & Siminski 2005; Morehead, 2005a), I think that qualitative research will give us a descriptively richer and nuanced account of the complexity of the decision-making processes, transitions, negotiations and arrangements that women experience in the context of their domestic and workplace-based relationships.

The existing research has drawn on a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives, done by people working within a variety of academic disciplines including sociology, organisational and management studies, economics and psychology. While different explanations have been offered to account for the pattern of women’s paid work and family arrangements, a lot of the research has both reflected and emphasised often quite polarised notions of ‘agency’ versus ‘structure’. Some explanations, for example, emphasise women’s ‘agency’ and argue that women are exercising ‘genuine choice’ over their paid work and family arrangements and outcomes (Hakim, 2000). Others emphasise the role of ‘structural’ determinants. Leaving aside briefly the question what might be meant by referring to either ‘agency’ or ‘structure’, it can be suggested that adopting a theoretical-cum-methodological framework which emphasise, agency at the expense of structure or that emphasises structure at the expense of agency is always going to be unwise and misleading.

Two and three generations ago women often withdrew from paid work so as to manage the expectations that they had to do the household work, and take charge of child rearing and family responsibilities. Today, women’s paid work and family arrangements are far more diverse and arguably more contradictory (Pocock 2003: 72-85).

The question of how to integrate paid employment along with the care of young children is relatively new. For example, Himmelweit and Sigala (2002) make the point that most mothers today now face the question of how to care for their children. However ‘their grandmothers, whose class would have largely determined how their own children were looked after, would not have had to face such a question’ (2002: 2). They point to the
extraordinary diversity contemporary women face when they observe the variety of ways in which small children are cared for:

Becoming a mother now marks a transition point in which women’s lives diverge. Some stay in full-time employment, some reduce the hours they spend in paid work, or find new jobs that make this possible, while others become full-time mothers (2002: 2).

As Himmelweit and Sigala go on to note it was not always motherhood that marked such a turning point in women’s lives:

[F]or the first half of the twentieth century, the defining moment for women of many classes was marriage. Now it is definitely motherhood. There was never any corresponding point for men (2002: 2).

Conclusion

The visibility of mothers in paid work has certainly increased dramatically over the past four decades in Australia (Morehead 2003; Zajdow 2005). There have also been significant changes to the ways Australian families look and work (McDonald 2001; Gilding 1991); for example, there are now more dual-earner households (Campbell & Charlesworth 2004; Pocock 2003). The traditional ‘male breadwinner’ family model and the practices associated with it have been profoundly challenged (Connell 2005).

However, while there have been significant changes in work and family life in recent decades, including the ways in which women make decisions about the best combination of paid work and domestic labour, there is also evidence that the so-called ‘life–work balance’ has been both a precarious accomplishment and one achieved at some cost especially to women (Williams 2000). Structural constraints are illustrated in the dilemma for many women who want to fulfil their expectation of an attachment to the paid workforce across the life-course, which is noted by McDonald (2001: 19) as ‘a predominant expectation of young women in Australia’, as well as fulfilling their role as main caregiver in the home. Moreover, an ideal worker model (Williams 2000) and ‘long-hours work culture’ creates a context which is ‘increasingly at odds with the caring work that many women do’ (Pocock et al. 2001: 26). However, Hakim (2000), Himmelweit and Sigala (2004, 2002) and others suggest
that more women today are making varied choices about how they organise their paid work and family life compared with previous generations of women.

So how much choice reflects their own interests, and how much capacity to realise those ‘choices’ do women have? In the following chapters I focus on the household as one of the key sites in which Australian women now set about making decisions on how best to balance or reconcile the demands placed on them to be both workers and mothers. It is to this issue that I now turn.
CHAPTER TWO

“DECIDING WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE”: THE CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As is well acknowledged, Australian family life has been defined by a long-standing ‘traditional’ gendered division of labour, characterised by the dominant ‘male wage earner headed household’ (O’Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999). Until the 1970s this meant that the majority of married women carried out unpaid domestic work and cared for children in the home while their male partners earned a wage income, typically on a full-time basis. Since the 1970s that pattern has changed as increasing numbers of married women remain active participants in the labour market after marriage, and as women with children seek to balance the demands of paid work and child care.

In framing my research questions, I have been influenced by my encounters with a number of theorists and empirical researchers. In this chapter I describe the character of these influences. I do this to indicate the range of theoretical perspectives and explanations available, as well as to identify and isolate certain key conceptual and analytic problems which a critical reading of this literature suggests and which my research attempts to address.

There can be little doubt that the question of work in relation to gender has received a good deal of attention since the beginning of this century (for example, Hakim 2000, 2003; Williams 2000; Murphy 2002; Buchanan & Thornwaite 2001; Gilding 2001; Himmelweit & Sigala 2004, 2002; Pascal & Lewis 2004; Folbre 2006, 2004, 2001; Houston & Marks 2003; Blair-Loy 2003; Crompton 2006; Edgar 2005; Gerson 2004; Pocock 2003, 2005a, 2005c; Morehead 2001; 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Durey 2008; Craig et al. 2008; Acker 2009, 2006; Manne 2010). However, it would be misleading to assume that it is a new area of concern. It is clear that various aspects of this topic have been researched actively for several decades (for example, Rapoport & Rapoport 1965, 1971; Oakley 1995 [1974], 1979; Edgar 1974; Grimshaw 1979; Grimshaw & Willett 1981; Curthoys 1981; Waring 1988; Ironmonger 1989; Fraser 1989; Walby 1990; Delphy & Leonard 1992; Fraser 1994; Folbre 1994; Gilding 1997, 1991; Acker 1998; Grace 1998; Kittay 1999; McMahon 1999). In view of this extensive and rapidly growing literature, I focus primarily on material from 2000 and after, with particular attention given to the Australian context of empirical literature which
highlight some key developments that are directly relevant to answering my research questions.

In this chapter I draw on two exemplary writers – Williams (2000) and Hakim (2000) – to understand and unpack the conceptual debates and issues relevant to my research questions. Williams (2000) and Hakim (2000) ‘represent’ in an ‘ideal-typical’ way the kinds of positions, assumptions, methods and evidence selected and promoted by those who work out variously from a ‘structure’ or ‘agency’ position. Williams (2000) explains women’s work–family conflict and the perpetuation of unequal gender relations in both agency and structural terms, yet favours structure. She treats these issues as a consequence of the organising principles of ‘domesticity’ and of what she calls the ‘ideal worker norm’. Williams makes much of the way that gender relations and ideologies work to pull mothers back into the household, using the interplay of structure and agency in ‘force field’. On the other hand, Hakim (2000), in what proved to be a controversial scholarly intervention, argues that we should celebrate the active agency that women now exercise in their ‘preferences’ and choices about their work and family lifestyle in the twenty-first century. One of Hakim’s major points is that a large majority of women prefer to dedicate time to family by, for example, combining work and family responsibilities (see also Hakim 2003). In reading of Hakim’s work in this chapter I discuss what a ‘preference’ or agentic approach looks like and drawing on a relevant literature I discuss its limitations. I do this to set the stage for arguing that a more critical framework is needed. In particular, I argue that a dynamic concept of preferences is a critical consideration for understanding women’s paid work and the decisions and arrangements made around the birth and ‘rearing’ of a child/children.

Following a focused exegesis of the influential work of Williams and Hakim, I turn to a reading of Bourdieu to recall the problems any social science faces when an emphasis is given either to structure or to agency. Bourdieu argued for decades against constructing or relying on the structure-agency binary. He argued both for a more ‘reflexive sociology’ and a focus on social relations of practice inside particular ‘fields’. I will argue that a direct reading of Bourdieu’s notions of symbolic violence, habitus and field (rather than through Williams’ notion of force field, and Pocock) provide an important conceptual framework within which to build a more fully-realised relational account of how women in households
arrive at their paid work and family arrangements after childbirth, and how their respective
arrangements and outcomes are shaped. More than this, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus
highlights the importance of the embodiment of social conditions — the embodied, emotional
and cognitive sense of one’s place in the world which shapes dynamics that generate and
perpetuate specific (albeit unequal) practices (see Bourdieu 2005b; Hillier & Rooksby 2005).
It is this nuanced approach combined with notions of ‘preferences’ and ‘domesticity’ that will
be used (in my analysis and made explicit in Part Two of this thesis). This, I argue, makes a
novel contribution of this research. Further, while ‘thoughts’ and ‘feelings’ may be captured
using the work of Hochschild (1979), particularly the ‘sociology of emotions’, I argue that it
is Bourdieu’s interplay of field and habitus, and concept of symbolic violence that is most
appropriate for answering my research questions, and can be linked to preferences and
domesticity ideology.

Taking a relational perspective reveals how unequal gender/power relations and practices,
particularly the gendered division of labour in the household, are created and maintained. I
treat the household as a significant ‘field’ in which a gendered habitus (as noted above: ‘the
embodied, emotional and cognitive sense of one’s place and role that shapes one’s
practices’), and culture are. I contend that it is within the gendered habitus (which is strongly
perpetuated in the field of the household) that women’s ‘preferences’ for work-family are
shaped/constrained and identified/negotiated. It is also this habitus that will need to be better
understood and addressed (for example, by innovative and supportive workplace
policies involving child care or parental leave) if any significant changes are to take place as
a result of purposive policy interventions, or challenges be directed to the ‘deeply seated
gendered cultural models of work and family’ (Blair-Loy 2003: 197), particularly that come
into play after childbirth. Bourdieu’s relational concepts, ‘symbolic violence’, ‘habitus’ and
‘field’ (Bourdieu 1977, 1990a, 2001, 2005b) assist in bringing together conceptual tools like
‘preferences’ (Hakim 2000), ‘domesticity’ and ‘ideal worker norm’ (Williams 2000).

Treating preferences as ‘free choices’ invites a misreading of the lives of women: it is vitally
necessary to look at what lies behind the surface of the language of preferences and
incorporate a more critical approach to the notion of preferences by starting to ask how
preferences take shape in the lived experience and practice of women/mothers when they
think about how they organise their paid work and family arrangements after childbirth; as well as what informs their decisions, how they came to those decisions, and how they feel about the ‘choice’ they had. As I argue, this involves getting ‘insiders’ accounts’, in this case reaching into women’s heads and hearts to understand better how they both experience and make sense (Weick 1995, 1993, 1985) of those aspects of their lives that influence their decisions about what paid work and household work arrangements they will want after the birth of a baby. To that extent, my research questions are best answered by drawing on a ‘phenomenological’ approach to lived experience (Moran 2005), which involves directly talking to women and asking them about their thoughts, feelings, actions, and experiences.

I conclude by arguing that a focus on the moral dimensions (i.e., ideas about the right and proper thing to do) (see Kittay 1999: 53 on ‘moral obligations and ethics of care’) of women’s paid work and family narratives may bring us closer to understanding not only how inequitable gender relations and practices regarding work and family are maintained, but how people tie the past, present and future together, reflecting the relationship between what have too often been treated as the incommensurable categories of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’.

**Mapping the Theoretical and Empirical Literature: Structuralism and the Gender Order**

There have been a number of researchers who have pointed to persistent structures shaping dominant gender roles, where, for example, men are ‘ideal workers’ and women are ‘marginalised carers’ (Williams 2000; Gaze 2001; Pocock 2005a). For example, writing about part-time work as a way of ‘practicing’ the paid work and family juggle in Australia, Gaze (2001: 203) highlights that ‘women’s decision whether or not to have children’ and further, how to combine their paid work and child care responsibilities ‘carries a great deal of baggage which constrains choices’. By ‘baggage’, she means the cultural baggage of gendered norms, discourses, rules, conventions and institutions, which can shape our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours about how to arrange work and care.

The significance of the social construction of gender, and gender relations in paid work and care arrangements have also been well documented by other empirical researchers in
Australia (for example, Morehead 2005a; Pocock 2003, 2005a, 2005c; Probert 1999, 1989). The recent work of two prominent scholars on women’s/mothers’ paid work and care arrangements in Australia by Morehead (2001, 2002, 2003, 2005a), and Pocock (2003, 2005a, 2005c) both emphasise the importance of gender relations in paid work and family arrangements within the context of late modernity where expectations of equality and what that might mean are drawn together. In particular, their work locates gender relations and ideologies at the fore of social arrangements, which continue to dominate women’s (and men’s) participation in paid work and care.

**Morehead: Empirical Research on ‘Gender Dynamics’ in the Home**

Writing as an empirical researcher with policy reform interests, Alison Morehead (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2005b) has researched how mothers allocate time for, and maintain the relationship between, the household and workplace. She suggests that there is a complex interaction between opportunities, practices and the ‘gender contract’. Drawing on qualitative data from one workplace (a hospital) in which she interviewed male and female managers and employees, as well as nineteen households, Morehead developed a typology of work arrangements for households where the mother is employed and dependent children are present (Morehead 2003). She argued that there were three patterns of work including a gender-skewed work arrangement (where the distribution of paid and/or unpaid work is unevenly divided between parents); gender-balanced work arrangement (a more or less even distribution of paid and unpaid work between parents); and sole parent work arrangement (where the employed mother is the sole parent in the household) (Morehead 2003: ii). The dynamics involved in the development of different patterns of work include social supports, pressures and additional labour. This view highlights the power of social structure over and in connection to the social practice of gender.

Morehead argues that the allocation of time for work and family, and the different labour market experiences of mothers and fathers, are shaped by what she calls the ‘gender dynamics’ within the household. For example, she found that the gender/parenting ideologies of mothers and fathers are one component of a range of supports and pressures affecting their work arrangements. Morehead also shows us how women’s paid work cannot be isolated
from their unpaid work in the home. She argues that the gender divisions in the household determine women’s availability for paid work (see Morehead 2001, 2003). I consider this point to be one of the most important raised in Morehead’s work.

Morehead’s research directly relates to my interest in the significance of gender norms and relations in the women’s households. A major claim throughout her work is the importance of gender practice and dynamics played out in the household through the ‘mechanism of “additional labour” carried out by the mother’ (Morehead 2003: 189). Morehead does not apply the framework of a ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1977). It is also relevant for illuminating how decisions about the division of labour within the home and orientation to paid work, particularly after the arrival of a child, get to be made. In this respect it is important to note that my research does not specifically ask both men and women about the gender dynamics at work in the relationships between the women and men in couple households: my interest was in how women experienced decision-making about work and care arrangements.

**Pocock: Gender as Structuring Paid Work and Care**

Barbara Pocock’s (2003, 2005a, 2005c) research and her model of ‘work/care’ regimes has been used to explain various work–care outcomes, which have had significant impact on work–family debates in contemporary Australia. Pocock (2003: 34; see also 2005a: 122) treats women’s/mothers’ work and family arrangements and outcomes as connected to the current work–care order in Australia. The work–care order is embodied in an underpinning regime which, if better understood, can provide a more nuanced understanding of the context of motherhood and women’s paid work–family lives (2005a: 122). Pocock argues that ‘mothers live within such work/care regimes, and the elements of their care and work are shaped by them’ (2005c: 14). In other words, ‘the practice of individual mothers and households in any work/care regime is both a product of the dominant values and institutions of work/care, and changes over time’ (2005a: 122).

A key aspect of Pocock’s reading of the work–care regime in Australia is that it is a highly gendered dynamic which takes place within what Connell calls a ‘gender order’ (1987), as well as being affected by other social forces such as ‘the state’ and ‘the balance of forces between employers and employees’ (2005a: 122; 2003: 13, 34). Pocock draws on the writing

Connell notes that ‘gender orders are historically constructed patterns of power relations’ which are “always imperfect and under construction” and yet “an orderliness” of gender relations exists at any point in time’ (Connell 1987: 116, in Pocock 2003: 34). The ‘gender order’, ‘gender regime’ and ‘gender relations’ can be explained as existing in relation to ‘the structure of power’, to use Connell’s term (1987: 117). For example, there is ‘a high degree of systemacity’ that reflects ‘the dominance of a group whose interests are served by a particular gender order’ (Connell 1987: 117). Gender relations refer to the complex power relations between men and women (see Agarwal 1997: 1) that are an important structure in any institution.

The interaction between gender relations, structure, power, social practice and behaviour can be seen in the institution of the family. To illustrate the power and structure of gender relations and gender practice, Connell (1987: 122) refers to, ‘studies of the sexual division of labour’ like that of ‘Michael Gilding’s research on the family in Sydney up to 1940’, which show the ‘redistribution of housework among women rather than from women to men’. Therein, ‘the sexual division of labour reflects ideas about “a woman’s place” ... the way families work is partly a consequence of the husband’s power to define their wives’ situation’ (Connell 1987: 122). Indeed, this pattern where ‘women are subordinated to men’ is consistent in research into ‘family power-structure’ where power is ‘an influence in decision-making’ (Connell 1987: 122-123).

Building upon Connell’s approach, Pocock (2003, 2005a) argues that the larger ‘work-care order’ in Australia ‘is shaped by the balance of forces between employers and employees, the role and nature of the state, and the gender order’ (2003: 34–35). Therefore, it provides the larger social context of institutions, culture (i.e., established values) and individual behaviour (Pocock 2003: 35).

Pocock defines ‘work-care regimes’ as historically specific, reflecting dominant institutional and cultural realities, current behaviours and preferences, which are constantly under
construction (Pocock 2003: 35). The three forces that shape work–care regimes include values, institutions and preferences, which are not independent of one another (Pocock 2003: 35). Pocock argues that ‘at any time or place, work/care outcomes or arrangements are the consequences of the established work/care order and its specific embodiment in a work/care regime’ (Pocock 2003: 35). For example, the work-care regime is ‘made up of the interplay of three forces: a given set of institutions, established beliefs or culture, and a set of behaviours and preferences that are in play’ (2005c: 14, emphasis in original). She treats preferences as one factor which is ‘in many cases subservient to these other forces, rather than being explanatory’ (2003: 37).

There are tensions where there is a poor fit between the current work–care regime and women’s place within it (Pocock 2005c). In other words, ‘motherhood’ includes both those cultural ideas and practices made up of historically constructed ideologies such as ‘the proper mother’, ‘selfless mothering’, ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays 1996, in Pocock 2005a: 126), as well as the reality of ‘what mothers now do and manage’ (Pocock 2005a: 126).

Pocock describes women’s/mothers’ changing work and care arrangements and patterns as located in a habitus of motherhood (2003, 2005a, 2005c). She draws on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as a kind of second nature involving both habits of body and mind when she describes the habitus of motherhood as ‘the cultural mud’ (2003: 249). According to Pocock (2005a: 127), it is this ‘Australian cultural habitus of motherhood’ that impedes change – it ‘has shown all too little renovation in the face of very significant change in what mothers now do and manage’ (2005c: 19). ‘The fairer distribution of housework and care’, according to Pocock, ‘is one of the most obvious ways in which the current arrangements need to change’ (2003: 249). However, ‘this redistribution is among the hardest to make’ (Pocock 2005c: 19). This is because men’s and women’s habitus shape work and care arrangements by aligning what they actually do with certain expectations and ideas about what ‘real’ men and women do. The production and reproduction of gender norms also describes how individuals go about the ethical task of creating and organising themselves, and their practices. Pocock says this has particularly negative implications for women, as a range of fixed gender norms within a context of changing work patterns lead to a good deal of conflict, tension and contradiction (2005c; see also Probert 2002).
That said, we see here a small version of a much larger problem that has always attended structuralist accounts of the social world, namely how they account for change. For example, how are we to make sense of the fact that some women may wish to remain at home and be the full-time carer for their child(ren) (Hakim 2000), while others do not, and that motherhood is associated with a variety of paid work transitions (Maher & Lindsay 2005a)?

On the face of it, a structuralist account cannot in principle, acknowledge, let alone explain, change except as a consequence of certain structural contradictions or else by treating people who promote change as deviants who have somehow escaped the pull of a given structure. Or to put this another way in this instance, how much are women merely passive ‘social agents’ who represent certain structured embodiments of culturally prescribed gender ideals and norms, and how much are they able to actively negotiate their understanding of how work and family decisions take place in a context where ‘cultures, institutions and new patterns of households and work’ clash (Pocock 2005b: 91), and appear to be changing? Pocock’s model of work/care has provided invaluable insight into how paid work and care can collide. Her attention to conflict, tension and contradiction helps explain how things do change. Both Pocock’s and Morehead’s research on work and family life played a critical role in providing a background for this thesis.

In the literature I have reviewed in this chapter so far, plus the literature on time-use and the historical material (presented in the previous two chapters), there is examination of the key issues and debates that existed in the late 1990s and early 2000s which are directly relevant to my research questions.

Those key issues and debates include feminist debates that focus on the changes and continuity of the male breadwinner model (Folbre 2001; Crompton 1999). These pointed to the fact that while male breadwinner has changed since more women entered the paid workforce, wherein households now reflect a one-and-a half model of dual earners (full and part-time workers), traditional gendered relations continue and have not been aligned with that change. In this way women have become doubly burdened (Hochschild 1989; Cartwright & Warner-Smith 2003). The care and household work has not been supported by an equivalent change in child care facilities, and most workplace arrangements (Morehead 2003). Overwhelmingly care work continues to be the ‘task’ of women. Researchers (Folbre, 2001;
Pocock, 2005; Grace, 2004; Bacchi 2003; Morehead, 2003) draw attention to the way caring is undervalued. While women are now having fewer babies on the whole, there is penalty attached to care work, which is taken-for-granted as 'private' and women's domain. (Penalties include lower retirement savings due to breaks in employment, status in households, pay equity and paid work opportunities, such as promotion). Yet even with these ‘issues’ in mind, some scholars argue that women now have it much better than ever before (Hakim 2000).

**Analytical Tensions: Hakim’s Preference Theory**

The notion that women today ‘choose’ to either remain at home as the full-time carers, or that the majority of women ‘choose’ to work part-time and combine work and care has been explored by Hakim as she developed a version of ‘preference theory’.

In her book *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory* (2000), British sociologist Catherine Hakim argued that theorists have underestimated the significance of personal preference and choice by women in how they organise work and family. Hakim used a three-part typology to describe the preferences and arrangements of women: ‘work-centred’ women (comprising 20 per cent of her cross-sectional distribution), who prioritise paid work over family; ‘home-centred’ (20 per cent), who prefer to focus on the household; and ‘adaptive’, who choose to combine paid work and family (the largest group – 60 per cent of women).

Hakim’s reading of women’s ‘choice’ to stay home, participate in work, or combine work and family has tended to treat them as active agents where their relatively disadvantaged position in the formal labour market is not a consequence of the institutional and structural milieu. Rather, women’s position (albeit marginalised and disadvantaged) reflects the outcome of their preferences and varying choices (see Crompton & Harris 1998a: 118).

In the development of ‘preference theory’ – ‘an empirically-based statement of the choices women and men actually make in late modernity’ (2000: 13) – Hakim draws on Giddens’ theories of reflexive modernity and the reflexive project of the self, which she notes are consonant with her perspective. In doing so, she makes the point that ‘agency becomes more important than the social structure as a determinant of behaviour’ (2000: 12). This point of
view is emphasised elsewhere in her writing: ‘Today, genuine choices are open to women in
the sense that the vast majority of women have choices, not only particular subgroups in the
population’ (2003: 4).

Hakim’s conceptual argument is on the ‘hard’, ‘individual agent’ and ‘action’ side of the
agency-structure debate, where agency and power are seen to reside within the individual and
their actions. This approach extends individualistic perspectives and contrasts and breaks
with mainstream feminist and gender accounts of patriarchy, gender order, and cultural
frameworks that construct everyday social life and women’s options and choices. In this way,
it has sparked much debate about explaining women’s paid work and family life patterns,
particularly in relation to gender inequality and marginalisation in the division of labour.
Hakim’s theory gives much credence to the notion of preferences, which she describes as
independent of their social environment and as fixed (see Pocock 2005a: 121). She argues
that attitudes, values and preferences are increasingly important in the lifestyle choices of
women in rich modern societies (2000: 17) as opposed to economic and social structures.

The agency or choice approach emphasises individual characteristics in the making of
decisions rather than how our lives and what we do also reflect various constraints that relate
to our socio-political context as well as our material conditions. Hakim exemplifies this
school of thought:

Preference theory was developed explicitly to explain women’s employment choices today
and tomorrow … it suggests that a change of emphasis is needed in sociological research,
away from the structural factors that have been its focus in the 20th century, towards the
values and preferences that will shape behaviour in the new scenario in modern society in the

There is little consideration given to the contextual or structural constraints and influences
that help shape our choices. Indeed, women’s agency, it is argued, can transform their
situations and remove these constraints if they desire:

In the new scenario women have genuine choices in how to shape their lives. The full-time
homemaker role is no longer forced on women as the ‘natural’ choice for all … The full-time
work role is also not forced on women as a social obligation … The majority of women fall
between the two extremes and want the ‘best of both worlds’, in the sense of some combination of paid work and family role. In practice, this choice often means lesser achievements in one or both spheres, compared to women and men who decide on one priority ... [S]ocial structural and cultural influences are no more than that: influences, not coercive powers (2000: 169–170).

Many feminist and gender theorists have criticised Hakim’s conceptualisation, arguing that women’s paid work and care decisions are more complex than references to individual choice and can address (McRae 2003a, 2003b; Ginn et al. 2001; Crompton & Harris 1998a, 1998b; Crompton 1999; Crompton & Lyonette 2007; Pocock 2003, 2005a; Leahy & Doughney 2006). Critics point to several challenges that Hakim’s work presents (Cartwright 2004, 2005). Leahy and Doughney (2006: 37), for example, argue that ‘Hakim does not fully articulate her concept of preferences’. While Hakim ‘clearly links preferences to dispositions and values and considers preferences to be consistent over the lifespan’, she does not completely explain how preferences change and can be adaptive (Leahy & Doughney 2006: 37, 44). Leahy and Doughney (2006: 44) make the point that women’s preferences about how they would like to organise their paid work and care may sometimes be ‘formed in response to circumstances’ - a criticism that has also been made by Nussbaum (2000: 136, in Leahy & Doughney 2006: 45) and Sen (2000: 62–3, in Leahy and Doughney 2006: 45), for example, where: ‘individuals adjust their desires in accordance with the way of life they know’. This conceptualisation highlights the ‘doubleness’ of preferences (Nussbaum 2000; Pocock 2003). For example, women may express ‘what they want’ or ‘who they want to be/become’ as well as ‘what they have’ or ‘who they are’ (Nussbaum 2000; Leahy & Doughney 2006).

Hakim does not fully explain the complexity of preference formation, or account for the doubleness or ‘plurality’ of it (Nussbaum 2000 in Leahy & Doughney 2006: 46). She does not explain the relationship between preferences and gender norms and inequality – for example, the social forces shaping preferences, such as the social and moral nature of care and household work – which I believe is central to any concept of preferences involving work and family.

Leahy and Doughney (2006) contend that, an additional problem with Hakim’s conceptualisation is revealed when we consider preference formation in response to
predominant circumstances. They argue that the phenomenon of ‘adaptive preferences’ suggests that individuals’ thinking, desires, decision-making and preferences adapt to given circumstances by ‘making the best out of a bad lot’ (2006: 45). This understanding points to the relevance of the past – and in relation to our present and future – in preference formation:

If prevailing circumstances embody a history of discrimination and or disadvantage, adaptive preferences can reinforce and reproduce the history of discrimination and or disadvantage (2006: 44).

Other critics argue that Hakim’s preference theory tells us little about what increases or contributes to a woman’s agency. Using Pocock’s words, Hakim’s theory does not say ‘where preferences come from or how they are affected by their social and institutional environment’ (2005a: 121). Hakim does not explain what situations or contexts are important for women’s agency. While she notes that historical changes and conditions brought about by the second wave of feminism provide the background and context for the importance and development of personal preferences today (see Hakim 2000: 2–3, 7), this perspective is countered by a number of assumptions about the accomplishment of historical contexts.

Hakim treats the shift to active agent as a consequence of the impact of social and labour market changes in the late twentieth century (Hakim 2000: 2-7). These include second-wave feminism, the contraception revolution, the equal opportunity revolution, the expansion of white-collar jobs (as being more attractive to women), the creation of jobs for secondary earners, and the increasing importance of attitudes, values and personal preferences in lifestyle choices (Hakim 2000: 5). However, in my critical analysis of Hakim’s thesis, I think gender equity and ‘real choice’ in the first decade of this century are further away than they ever have been. Indeed, alongside this apparent choice, agency and power to commit to a preferred lifestyle, the prevalence of inequality, disadvantage and marginalisation continues to be of key concern for many women in combining paid work and child care responsibilities (this is emphasised by Gaze 2001; Probert 2002; Williams 2000; Pocock 2003, 2005a).

It appears as though the social forces that second-wave feminism rebelled against have not dissipated, and may even have gained strength. For example, both Williams (2000: 6, 46, 64) and Pocock (2003: 7–8) have argued that second-wave feminist goals about equality, agency
and women’s advancement in work and family life did not fully succeed due to the social forces located in the family and home that remain ‘unchanged’ and ‘undisrupted’. By ‘social forces’ they mean the cultural norms and stereotypes within a (gendered) habitus of motherhood, which are internalised and embodied by individuals. Rather, while equity battles were significantly advanced in the public sphere of paid work, where increasing numbers of women are now represented, second-wave feminism did little to change the unequal gender relations in the household (Williams 2000; Pocock 2003), where change lags. Instead of gaining more equal sharing of work in the domestic sphere, women acquired a ‘second shift’ (Hochschild 1989; Williams 2000).

Further, Hakim’s critics refer to the relatively small scale and slow shift in the domestic division of labour as evidenced by time-use studies (see Bittman 1995, 1990; Baxter 1998b). Indeed, some researchers refer to a ‘stalled revolution’ (Hochschild 1989; Probert 2002) and claim we need more feminist action (Williams 2000; Hochschild 1989). However, for Hakim, this delayed development is best treated as the outcome of women’s choices to focus on the home rather than on paid work. To argue that women today have more power, equality and choice about their work and family life after childbirth, and that new paradigms of choice are open to women, misreads the interdependent relationship between structure and agency.

I think Hakim is too optimistic about women’s agency, advantages and chances for change. Her arguments about women’s agency would be more justified if there was a deeper critical analysis of preferences in the context of formation regarding power and gender relations. These aspects of her argument overlook those narratives and experiences of women, where the line between choice and constraint is increasingly blurred or ‘muddied’ (Probert 2002; Pocock 2003). Other considerations like the limits or constraints on our preferences or agency point to ‘Constrained choices’ and ‘Forced Decisions’. These concepts point to the complexity and nuanced nature of women’s experiences.

It may also be misleading to ignore those factors constraining women’s preferences. As Williams points out:

> When mothers quit market work for lack of suitable child care, the paucity of good alternatives gets encoded as mothers ‘preferences’ to care for children at home … [T]he
material conditions of motherhood in a society that delivers child services primarily through mothers becomes evidence of mothers’ choice to stay home. This in turns gets encoded in negative market imagery of day care ... and is not counterbalanced by alternative imagery of day care as a place where children receive professional services and develop social skills in ways they cannot in an isolated home setting (2000: 50).

While Hakim reads women’s work and care patterns as a freely made choice and preference, in contrast, Williams reads these patterns and choices as underpinned and shaped by larger social forces and cultural elements, which are highly gendered.

In this regard it is important to establish how mothers-to-be and mothers think about organising their paid work and care after childbirth. How do women identify their preferences, or explain what shapes them?

**Williams’ ‘Domesticity’ and the ‘Ideal Worker’ Norm**

The American feminist legal scholar Joan Williams offers a conceptual framework that allows us to consider the gendered dimensions of organising and combining domestic, paid work and the care of children as an everyday embodied experience cohered by domesticity. Williams’ (2000) notion of ‘domesticity’ concerns the ‘ideal-worker’ norm and ‘marginalised-carer’ norm as the organising structures of the social practice of women-as-mothers.

Borrowing from the work of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1990a), Williams explains the way women make decisions about work and care and how these decisions are embedded or embodied ‘in the context of the gender system that has been shaping the lives of mothers for the last two centuries’ (Williams 2000: 19). The gender system she refers to is ‘domesticity’. Williams employs Bourdieu’s idea of habitus in her metaphor of the ‘force field’ to describe the ways in which women’s/mothers’ decisions and ‘the scope of agency they exercise’ about paid work and care are made within social constraints (2000: 38).

My analysis of *A Mother’s Work* is meant to highlight “the active presence of the whole past” in structuring our sense of what is desirable and feasible in the present … A subjective sense of authenticity and repose about one’s “choices” may reflect no more than a decision to bring
one’s life into alignment with the expectations and institutions of domesticity … Many women find that ceding to the demands of domesticity is the only way to have their lives make sense (Williams 2000: 38).

It is the habits and conventions or expectations and practices that produce ‘the ideal worker’ and ‘marginalised carer’, which inform women’s decisions. Here the notion of ‘an embodied history internalised so as to become second nature’ shapes how women arrive at their decisions about work and care arrangements (Williams 2000: 38).

Williams’ argument is that the current structuring of work and family life that describes gender arrangements rests on old norms that have ‘mutated’ through the language of ‘choice’; that is, women choose these norms and thereby the ideology and assumptions underpinning the norms. Those who resist or are unable to conform are consequently disadvantaged.

Williams’ central thesis is that domesticity is a gender system that organises work and family life and remains entrenched in society by its reproduction in social, legal, economic and political institutions. In this way, gendered norms play a key role in everyday social life, but do so in a way that is entrenched and taken for granted as the norm. Williams contends that the key to reconciling work and family conflict is to transform the conditions that produce it, particularly the way we organise work and family – in other words, deconstructing and eliminating the two defining characteristics of the social/gender order.

Williams argues that our understanding of work is defined by two models of what the ideal worker looks like. First, there is the idealised paid worker. The ‘ideal worker’ norm describes an employee who can work full-time, who can work long hours, including overtime if necessary, who is unencumbered by family responsibilities, and who almost always has the support of a full-time partner in the household to take care of family and domestic obligations. Then there is the ‘ideal carer’, which entails that those with care-giving responsibilities are marginalised because they cannot perform like an ‘ideal worker’. Consequently, the marginalisation of carers (almost always describing women/mothers) rests on their exclusion from the particular ideal worker model because they do not and cannot fit the ideal worker gender norms.

[The] ideal-worker norm does not define all jobs today, it defines the good ones: full-time
blue-collar jobs in the working-class context, and high-level executive and professional jobs for middle class and above. [In this system], when work is structured in this way, caregivers … cannot perform as ideal workers. Their inability to do so gives rise to domesticity’s second defining characteristic: its system of providing for caregiving by marginalizing the caregivers, thereby cutting them off from most of the social roles that offer responsibility and authority (Williams 2000: 1).

Both the ideal worker and marginalised carer norms are rigid ‘mutually reinforced’ ideas about work and family as separate spheres (Baker 2000). For example, the ideal worker is expected to be ‘flexible’ in terms of hours devoted to paid work, while the marginalised carer is ‘inflexible’ in their paid work, but always ‘flexible’ in their availability for care work (Gaze 2001: 206; Baker 2000). Both notions of inflexibility/flexibility reinforce the characteristics of Williams’ conception and highlight the concept of domesticity as a gender structure operating in reference to the household and family, as the centre that holds everything together. Williams makes the point that:

Domesticity organizes our everyday tasks, our emotions, our politics. My goal is … to deconstruct domesticity and encourage the development of new ways of organizing work as well as family, emotional and political life. The guiding principles are that society needs not only market work but also family work, and that adults who do family work should not be marginalized (2000: 4).

The ideal worker concept is viewed as a ‘norm’ and ‘expectation’, and ‘is gendered in two ways’ (See Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005: 48; Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2004). First, while there are an increasing number of women today who perform as ideal workers, they may be viewed as deviant if their commitment to family and the household is perceived as secondary to their commitment to paid work (Drago et al. 2006; Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005; Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2004) or if they completely reject responsibilities regarding family and the household. At the same time, an ideal worker cannot be both committed to paid work and care-giving for children. An expression of a commitment to family, by a woman or a man, may be viewed as a ‘signal’ to an ‘employer and co-workers’ that the employee does not intend to perform as an ideal worker (Drago et al. 2006: 1224; Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005: 48). The expectation that women will perform as ideal carers (Folbre 2001), and the assumption that this is their preference and choice, limits women’s ability to operate as ideal
workers in the workplace. This friction between the expectations of working and caring is a key aspect of the work–family dilemma (Gaze 2001: 199, see also Probert 2002; Pocock 2005c).

Second, ‘men are expected to perform as ideal workers’ and it is assumed that this is their preference and choice (Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005: 48). Men may be ‘viewed as deviant’ if, for example, they become a stay-at-home caregiver, take parental leave, ‘take part-time employment’, and/or share care-giving and domestic work, rather than opt for full-time or long hours employment (Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005: 48). This assumption limits men’s ability to operate as ideal carers and reinforces their advantage in the workplace. Conceptions of ideal workers and carers create a pressure for men to conform to the conventions of the gender order operating in domesticity. ‘The tendency to reward only the ideal worker in the workplace’ (Gaze 2001: 206) reinforces this norm and the importance of it as a social practice and arrangement. The ideal worker may also be embedded in the sentiment ‘that employers are entitled to workers with limited caring responsibilities’ (Williams 2000: 20).

These social forces shape individuals’ ideas and experiences, thereby reproducing and reinforcing these norms (Duncan & Edwards 2003; Durey 2008). This is also an example of how gender relations impact and disadvantage some men/fathers who seek to change their paid work arrangements (for example, by seeking to work less than full-time), but are hindered by a dominant ‘gender culture’ within the workplace and organisations (Charlesworth & Cartwright 2007).

The ideal worker norm may invoke subtle or not so subtle pressure on people to orient towards a breadwinner/homemaker model or division of labour (Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005). For example, when a child is unwell ‘the mother’ may be ‘more likely than the father to be called at the workplace’ (Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005: 48) and to take time off paid work. When a baby is born, ‘the father may be expected to continue serving as an ideal worker, whereas the mother may be expected to resign’ or take leave (Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005: 48). Therefore, these norms may make it easier for individuals to conform to these stereotypes rather than resist.
Williams also points out that ‘mothers often do not take jobs that require them to perform as ideal workers’ (2000: 15). Both the ideal worker and marginalised caregiver can be seen as mutually reinforcing each other in the frame of ‘the right and proper thing to do’ (see also Williams, 2004; Duncan & Edwards 2003; Duncan et al. 2003). In other words, these gendered arrangements in households have moral underpinnings about what constitutes correct behaviour, qualities that reinforce their practice and dominance.

Further, the ideal carer and worker are constructed as operating both as interdependent and separate ideals. Gaze (2001: 206) notes that: ‘one [is] the full-time worker with no external limits on their commitment, the other the fully flexible parent who ensures the running of the family, the socialisation of children, and the domestic resourcing of both children and the ideal worker’. She further notes this interdependency which operates to reinforce these ‘ideal’ types:

No one who wants to have children can carry out both these functions. The ideal worker must rely on someone else to caretake for him, and the domestic caretaker does not have time or flexibility to compete in the workplace, so she must rely on someone else for financial support. This normative structure clearly has no place for the working parent who has limited flexibility and no “wife” (domestic support worker at home) (2001: 206).

The deconstruction that challenges these norms is echoed by Pocock. There is also a weight of evidence of the presence and the implications of these norms in the everyday, for example, in women’s reluctance to use maternity leave (HREOC 1999: 178), and the use of various ‘accommodative strategies’ to manage gender in the workplace (Burton 1996) to avoid being labelled as uncommitted. Further, time-use data suggests that men’s work hours increase with paternity (Campbell & Charlesworth 2004; Grace 2004).

Sentiments that reinforce gendered norms and assumptions can also be found at work in public and workplace policy and in practices such as maternity leave, which enables a female employee to claim a more extended period of leave than men seeking paternity leave. Williams (2000: 138-140) argues that custody and child support rulings can penalise mothers for working long hours (i.e., performing as an ideal worker), whereas part-time work and parental leave may marginalise individuals.
There are disadvantages when individuals challenge, resist or move outside of the ideal worker/marginalised carer frame (Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005). For example, ‘women may choose not to perform as ideal workers, but they do not choose the marginalization that currently accompanies that decision’ (Williams 2000: 6). Individuals with caregiving obligations and those with ideal worker responsibilities would take risks if they take up the opposing norms. Here we see gender equality is hard to obtain in the domesticity system, or could be viewed as unrealistic (Durey 2008; Drago, Tseng & Wooden 2005). In order to achieve gender equity, the powerfully held norms that underpin these social arrangements must be deconstructed because the ‘current social arrangements make mothering more demanding, lonelier and stressful than it needs to be’ (Bacchi 2003: 11). Change also needs to be considered in terms of rethinking the balance between paid work and caring responsibilities (Bacchi 2003: 11).

In answer to two questions posed by this research – How can we explain the persistence of gender inequality in relation to paid work and care arrangements and by what means might they change over time? How do women now think about and then organise their paid work and family arrangements after childbirth? – I argue that Williams’ conceptualisation of domesticity and the ideal worker, and critique of these concepts in shaping women’s experiences, can explain how preferences and practices come to be shaped, and identify directions for social change.

Williams’ conceptualisation of domesticity and the ideal worker norm will be used to guide this research to help explain how women arrive at their paid work and family arrangements and employment transitions after childbirth. It offers ideas and concepts that I can use to investigate how a group of women come to their paid work and care decisions, including their decisions to drop out of and cut back their paid work. In this research I will be looking for key themes and patterns that resonate with the domesticity and ideal worker concepts, in particular the ideal worker norm in the participants’ preferences and practices.

Critiques of Williams’ thesis include the claim that her conceptualisation of domesticity as a gender system that structures and organises work and family ‘resists power rhetoric’ or ‘takes the power out of feminist rhetoric’ (Baker 2000). Baker argues that Williams does not spend very much time addressing the subordination of domestic work. This may be because she
recognises that it is hard to address the subordination of domestic work without addressing
the power dynamic implicit in the gendered division of labour. She argues that the force field
metaphor will resonate better than power rhetoric because, as she accurately observes, many
women do not feel the pull toward care work as wholly negative.

Williams’s call to take power out of feminist rhetoric may make sense; but as an analytic
matter it is dangerous. Taking power out of the analysis leaves one wondering what is wrong
with the force field. What is wrong with the force field is that it requires women, not men, to
accept responsibility for the unpaid, low-status work that benefits both men and women. It
also allows men to seek self-fulfilment solely in work that brings them status. Williams
ignores or denies that the status, which men ‘need’, is likely about power. She seems to
believe that domesticity is a gender system without thinking it is a power system (Baker
2000).

Baker argues that Williams has skated over the problem of inequity on the premise that low-
paid women’s jobs and unpaid housework equals more status, money and free time for men.
Connell (1987, 2002, 2005, 2009), however, reminds us that gender and power are
interconnected in ways that leave women as ‘subordinate’ to men in gender relations (1987:
108). This is done in ‘specific ways which produce their own limits’:

As with labour, the structure of power is an object of practice as well as a condition. Many
accounts of patriarchy give the impression of a simple, orderly structure ... Behind the facade
is likely to be a mass of disorder and anomaly. Imposing order requires a mobilization of
resources and expenditure of energy (Connell 1987: 108).

Williams seems to want to spell out some of the ways this ‘mass of disorder and anomaly’
works. In effect, if she allows that women can exercise choice, that choice is very limited
(Williams 2000: 34–40). For example, women may base their decision about how much paid
work they do on their recognition that their ‘economic power’ is not as great as the man’s
(Williams 2000: 37–40). In this respect both men and women are caught in a
‘dominant’/'subordinate’ binary.
It is time to admit that women as a group do not perform the same as men as a group when jobs are designed around an ideal worker with men’s physique and/or men’s access to a flow of family work most women do not enjoy. Once we invent a language that defines this situation as the result of discrimination against women, rather than mothers’ choice, we can face the facts and make new demands to restructure work (Williams 2000: 272).

Equally, Baker’s critique that Williams fails to theorise ‘power’ is an important point. While I disagree with Baker that Williams’ conceptualisation of ‘force field’ is dismissive of power, there is a basis for concern that Williams has not probed what lies beneath the gender system, and the habitus of gender in terms of the experiences women have as they struggle to plan and live out the decisions they have made.

How do ‘structural’ factors like the fact that men’s incomes are typically far larger than women’s relate to the arrangements, and decisions women make? Williams’ account of what women go through as they strive for success in the paid workforce (i.e., perform like an ideal worker) while also juggling caring responsibilities is very much a core problem:

Take elite jobs, in law firms or executive positions. To succeed in either context, workers typically not only must be able to do good work but also must be able to do it for fifty or seventy hours a week. Few mothers can do this because few women have spouses willing to raise their children while the women are at work. Another common job requirement in academics and management is the ability to relocate when opportunities arise, to advance the profession or even get a job. Few mothers can do this. As a consequence, women who are academics are more likely to drop out or to find themselves in adjunct or other non-tenure-track positions and are less likely to end up in a tenure-track positions or in elite institutions. ‘Success’ requires ideal-worker status. Few women have it (Williams 2000: 5).

It is in this respect that Bourdieu’s work is particularly helpful when considering the views of Hakim (i.e., human agency, subjectivity and the power of individualisation) which contrast with Williams’ views (structure). Bourdieu addresses the structure/agency problem and I draw on these ideas for their explanatory power in relation to women’s paid work and family/care decisions, arrangements and the reconstitution of inequitable gender relations and outcomes, and the associated tensions.
Pierre Bourdieu on ‘Habitus’, ‘Field’ and ‘Symbolic Violence’

Pierre Bourdieu has been a key protagonist in the effort to overcome the long-standing theoretical dichotomy between ‘agency’/‘structure’ and ‘objectivism’/‘subjectivism’. Throughout his extensive work, Bourdieu (1977, 1990a, 1990b, 2001, 2005b) regards this binary as ‘not very useful in understanding, for instance, both the persistence of gender inequality and the capacity for change’ (see Powell 2008: 168; Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990: 15). Rather, he suggests that structure and agency are interwoven in terms of a ‘dialectical relationship’ instantiated in the matter of ‘practice’ and operationalised through habitus and field (Bourdieu 1977: 3, 89). Mahar, Harker and Wilkes (1990: 15) note that it is primarily through ‘the study of particular practices that a field’ and habitus can be understood.

Bourdieu (1977, 1990a, 1990b) shows us (more explicitly than Williams’ account of ‘force field’) how ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ are interconnected and situated within a context of shared understandings about past experiences, social norms and habits, which individuals internalise and embody as second nature (or habitus) in the present tense. These are often internalised as the ‘unwritten rules that allow members of a culture [and particular field] to know what is expected of them in a wide variety of situations including how to coordinate their behaviour with that of others’ (Hatch & Cunliffe 2006: 187).

According to Bourdieu (1977: 78 –79), social phenomena like human ‘practice’ are simultaneously objective and subjective, constituted both by the distribution of material resources, and by the mental structures that function as symbolic templates for practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Gorton 2000). Bourdieu insists that the social world leads a ‘double life’ (Bourdieu 1977: 22). This ‘dialectical relationship’ (Bourdieu 1977: 83, 89), or the dynamic interaction of the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’, governs social reproduction and is a key starting point of Bourdieu’s reading of the social world (Gorton 2000: 280).

Granted that the concept of habitus ‘sparked the interest of some feminist sociologists’ (Pocock 2008: 168) in exploring gender relations and inequality, and in explaining women’s work and family life arrangements (see for example, Williams 2000; Pocock 2003, 2005a), I begin with that idea.
Habitus

While Bourdieu did not invent the term habitus, he argued repeatedly for its application to and use in sociology. Bourdieu was influenced by various strands of structuralism, and described his work as ‘constructivist structuralism’ (Powell 2008: 171). By this he meant ‘that social constructions are subject to structural constraints, while at the same time social structures are themselves socially constructed as they originate in the social (Bourdieu 1990a: 130–1, in Powell 2008: 171).

In Bourdieu’s words (1979: vii) habitus is ‘a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices’. Dispositions (like values) are embodied in individuals and created and reformulated through objective structures and internalised history (Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990). Social agents are thus understood to be structurally and culturally reproduced, which is exemplified by anthropologist Sherry Ortner:

[T]he subject internalizes the structures of the external world, both culturally defined and objectively real. These internalized structures form a habitus, a system of dispositions that incline actors to act, think and feel in ways consistent with the limits of the structure … [T]he main emphasis of Bourdieu’s arguments about habitus is on the ways in which it establishes a range of options and limits for the social actor (2006: 109).

Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus to point to the active dispositions that people unconsciously employ in the course of social life. It captures the deeply internalised nature of social knowledge, such as the unconscious taking on of rules, values and dispositions through socialisation and embodied cultural history (Ortner 2006: 110; Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: xii). In other words, the ‘structured nature of human agency’ is hidden as second nature in our everyday taken-for-granted assumptions (Crossley 2005: 106, 110).

The idea of ‘the unthinkable’ crystallises Ortner’s view of habitus. For example, in order for a particular habitus to run smoothly and effectively, individuals must normally think that the possibilities from which they choose are ‘necessities’, ‘common sense’, ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 38–9, 67). Other alternatives or ‘possibilities are ruled out because they are unthinkable’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 39). Further,
The rules and structures of perception that pertain to a particular habitus are inscribed on, and in, individuals as if they were ‘human nature’ or ‘civilised behaviour’, and things outside those rules and structures are usually understood, when forced upon us, as amounting to the horrific and barbaric, or the absurd and comic (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 39).

This is also known as *amor fati* or ‘love of one’s fate’, whereby ‘social agents make a virtue out of a necessity; refusing something that is already denied to them or choosing the inevitable’ (Powell 2008: 173).

A key element in understanding the habitus is that it is a largely unconscious process of internalising structures (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002: 15). While habitus primarily rests on the unconscious, women’s decisions about how to organise and manage paid work, care and family life after childbirth always involve some level of conscious recognition of factors that need to be taken into account. Ortner (2006: 110) notes that ‘Bourdieu’s insistence on the deeply internalized and largely unconscious nature of social knowledge’ in actors, contrasts with Giddens’ emphasis that individuals ‘are always at least partially “knowing”’ – they have some degree of reflexivity about themselves and their desires. However, as Powell (2008: 172) notes: ‘his various works … suggest that individuals or social agents do indeed possess a “margin of freedom” … which allows for a more complex understanding of the interplay of social structures and individual agency’.

The habitus includes an individual’s knowledge and view of the world, which is different from the reality of the world (Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990). This is because the habitus is ‘not just manifest in [individual] behaviour’ – the dispositions ‘acquired in social positions’ are an integral part of it (Gorton 2000: 282).

Bourdieu’s (2001) notion of a ‘gendered habitus’ means the taking in of gendered ideals and norms through mental structures and bodily practice; that is, ‘the ways we feel, think, and respond to others’ (Powell 2008: 172). He notes that individuals do think and act in strategic ways (with regard to agency), but are strongly influenced by the values and expectations of the (gendered) habitus. This is exemplified by Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002: 58):

> [T]hough they may be conscious of making moves and acting strategically, they are unaware that their motives, goals and aspirations are not spontaneous or natural, but are given to them
through the habitus.

In this way, women/mothers may think they are making choices, but are choosing expectations already situated in their habitus, as per the ‘rules of the game’ enacted as rules that govern decision making (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002: 66; Hatch & Cunliffe 2006: 187). This seems to be a plausible reading of what Williams (2000) was pointing to. Equally it seems that Bourdieu’s notion of habitus can also help me to understand the ways in which women view their paid work and family preferences, and make decisions about arrangements based on how much choice they feel they have. In particular, I am interested in exploring whether the habitus and ideas, for example, about domesticity embedded in the cultural habitus are revealed in the participants’ preferences. I will also be looking to establish if there are traces of the ‘ideal worker’ model in the stories women tell as they describe their paid work and family preferences, and experiences. My interest in the ‘imagined’ – that is, in how women think and talk about their ‘preferences’ for organising their paid work and family life in the future– is likely to touch on the boundaries between the unconscious habitus and a more reflexive awareness.

**Field**

An important aspect of Bourdieu’s work has involved ‘understanding and explaining the relationship between a person’s ‘practice’ and the contexts in which those practices occur’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 21). Bourdieu’s interest in the ‘interactions’ between ‘discourses, institutions, values, rules and regulations which produce and transform attitudes and practices’ constitute what he means by ‘cultural fields’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 21–22; Bourdieu 1990b). Put simply, a cultural field is a setting wherein social action takes place (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). More than this, ‘a field is a structure with an internal logic that establishes hierarchical relationships on the basis of the distribution of capital [in various forms] ... [those] resources used by the powerful and influential to distinguish themselves from those without [as much] power or influence’ (Hatch & Cunliffe 2006: 124-125).

Power and ‘power relations’ are key aspects of a given field (Jenkins 2002: 85). Rather than physically located, a field is a social space that is comprised of an objective hierarchy of
social positions where there is always a struggle for power and authority by individuals. For example, ‘The amount of power a person has within a field depends on that person’s position within the field’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 23). One example of a field relevant to this research is the household unit or domestic/family unit. Jenkins (2002: 85) explains Bourdieu’s field as:

[A] structured system of social positions – occupied either by individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants. It is also a system of forces which exist between these positions; a field is structured internally in terms of power relations.

The ways in which social practice, field and habitus are linked is essential to understanding Bourdieu’s theory, according to Jenkins (2002: 66 – 102), and I would add to exploring the practice of women-as-mothers (and men-as-fathers) in the field of the household. ‘Social practice’ is a term that refers to visible social action, behaviour or ‘what people do’ in everyday life, which is located in time and space and is ‘not wholly consciously organised and orchestrated’ (Jenkins 2002: 69–70). This involves individual action within a social/cultural environment, made up of individuals (social agents) and social structures. Practice, is typically habitual and repetitive, and always takes place in a field (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 49).

Bourdieu refers to the analogy of ‘social games’ to show the processes and relations between the concepts field, practice and habitus (Bourdieu 2001). For example, ‘People play different games, which are autonomous, but at the same time, there are homologies between different games and … there are general principles of the functioning of these games’ (Bourdieu 1985 sited in Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990: 7). The ‘logic of the game’ follows that ‘entering’ a game ‘implies a conscious or unconscious acceptance of the explicit and/or implicit rules of the game on the part of the players’ (Bourdieu 1985 cited in Mahar, Harker & Wilkes 1990: 7). This is also explained by Hatch & Cunliffe (2006: 125):

Permeating any given field, the habitus gives individuals a feel for the game that allows them to know how they and others should behave depending upon their hierarchical position, which, in turn, is determined by the amount of field-relevant capital they control. Because the internal logic of the field can be kept hidden, the habitus can be well protected from outsiders and may operate as tacit knowledge among insiders who thus reproduce the field and its
hierarchies without consciousness of their involvement.

‘A cultural field’ or context is ‘defined by a series of institutions, rules and conventions’ which ‘produce certain discourses and activities’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 21-22). The rules ‘produce and transform attitudes and practices as cultural fields’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 21). The habitus is both transposable and durable and it remains with individuals across cultural contexts or fields, and includes the ways in which an individual/social agent knows and understands the world and comes to be taken for granted as ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and ‘common sense’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002). It involves the internalisation or unconscious taking in of the structures or rules of the social world or a given field (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002).

The essential value of the idea of habitus and field is to stress the sticky or inertial qualities of social experience. This is what Pocock (2003: 75) is getting at when, writing about a number of important demographic and policy shifts in Australia, she observes:

> While we might expect these changes to have unpicked some of the traditional stereotypes of ‘mother’, instead we find much continuity, giving rise to guilt and over-compensating behaviours. The Australian habitus of mothering is sticky when it comes to change, like thick mud in which mothers must love and push through, despite very rapid change in the circumstances of mothering and households. While women question the idea of ‘proper mother’, they agree that a mythology of ‘proper mothering’ runs deep in society – including in their own homes [emphasis in original].

This explains, in part, how unequal gender relations and norms are maintained and recreated in social life – because the habitus is made up of or constituted by dispositions such as gendered ideologies, norms, beliefs and relations that are ‘unchanging’ (see also Williams 2000). The respective gendered habitus of men and women informs a woman’s and man’s mothering/fathering style, knowledge and preferences. These practices are also further constrained by societal taboos and other practical factors including living arrangements (Singleton 2005: 141). This supports Probert’s (2002) findings that beliefs about gender roles prevalent in the 1950s were still prevalent in the 1990s. This is also seen in the ways in which ‘attitudes about what mothers “should do” in terms of work and family life arrangements and
decisions, run behind what they actually “do” (Pocock 2003: 73), which is at the centre of ‘the fallout’ or collision between work and care.

When the habitus encounters new social interactions or crises for which there is little or no past experience, there is ‘potential for new, creative, practical dispositions to emerge … ‘the possibility for alternative action is never fully closed’ (Bourdieu 2001 in Powell 2008: 172). This feature represents the ‘generative capacity’ of the habitus that demonstrates how new experiences and ‘social change may be realised’ (Powell 2008: 172). Bourdieu’s habitus and field may allow for the emergence of new social practices by individuals/social agents, particularly where there is a lack of fit between one’s gendered habitus and the field under negotiation.

Equally there is also the possibility that the promise of change can elicit forms of what Bourdieu (1992) calls ‘symbolic violence’.

**Symbolic Violence**

Symbolic violence refers to ‘the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’ (Bourdieu 1992 in Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 25). Individuals are ‘subjected to forms of violence’ in an internalised or symbolic way, rather than physical – such as, for example, ‘treated as inferior … limited in their social mobility and aspirations’ (Bourdieu 1992 in Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 25). In other words, it is the ‘taking in’ of particular symbols and meanings of power and domination that are internalised by the members of a group. This internalisation is helped by the process of ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu 1992 in Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: 24 –25), where individuals do not view themselves as victims or perpetrators of symbolical violence. Rather, power relations, and, for example, unequal gender relations, are hidden in the taken-for-granted, and what is perceived to be ‘the way things are’ – ‘Not for what they objectively are, but in the form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: xiii). Individuals, for example, may be treated as inferior or subordinate to others by being defined, for example, as ‘the marginalised carer, being limited in terms of realistic aspirations, or being denied resources’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002: xvi).
Agarwal (1997: 15), writing on ‘bargaining’ and gender relations both inside and beyond the household in India, noted that ‘at any given time, for a given society, some decisions would fall into the realm of … “Doxa”’. ‘Doxa’ includes all those norms and practices which are ‘accepted as natural and self-evident part of the social order’ (Agarwal 1997: 15). It ‘goes without saying’ and ‘is not open to contestation or questioning’ (Agarwal 1997: 15), describing ‘an uncontested acceptance of the daily lifeworld’ (Bourdieu 2002: 73). Doxa is key to realising symbolic violence in social practice (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002). For example, women as a social group accept their subordinate position without realising they are being oppressed and without seeking to change the situation by challenging the conventional wisdom (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002). Women can accept, legitimate and reproduce the prevailing gender practices of men’s dominance because they misrecognise the symbolic violence being perpetrated (Bourdieu in Bourdieu & Wacquant 2002: 172). Rather, symbolic violence is experienced as a natural and normal existing social order (Bourdieu in Bourdieu & Wacquant 2002: 172).

Seeing ‘domesticity’ as symbolic violence (and its manifestations in daily life) would put power back into Williams’ (2000) analysis in which Baker (2000) suggested this element was missing. For the purpose of my research, the doxa experience of social relations, norms and practices and symbolic violence are important to understanding how individuals view gender relations (Durey 2008). In particular, how they are maintained in women’s work and family arrangements after the birth of a child, and everyday practices in the field of the household. In relation to paid work and care decisions and arrangements, symbolic violence may be exemplified by women’s willingness to conform to gendered norms such as the ‘marginalised carer’, ‘super mum’, ‘proper mother’ or ‘working mother’ (Durey 2008). Women’s paid work and family preferences (ideas, desires), decisions and arrangements may be shaped by their perceptions of the consequences should they resist conforming to the gender relations (Agarwal 1997; Durey 2008). In other words, they may feel and/or think that it would be inappropriate to resist conforming to gendered expectations and norms on moral grounds (about what is the right or proper thing to do) (Williams 2004).

Probert (2002) has explored some of these aspects of Australia’s gender culture, pointing out how they are contradictory and put women in a no-win situation. For example, the current
social expectation of women is that mothers should return to the workforce after childbirth, and this is broadly accepted by women and the broader community. At the same time they are also expected to act altruistically in the family, by caring for children and taking responsibility for domestic labour (Probert 2002; Pocock 2003: 250).

In this research, I will be looking for expressions of symbolic violence in the participants’ narratives. I am interested in what generates the symbolic violence and in how the role of symbolic violence shapes the participants’ experiences and arrangements of work and care before and after childbirth. I believe that the concept of symbolic violence would significantly develop Williams’ (2000) conceptualisation and operationalisation of domesticity and the ideal worker norm in practice, and further contribute to the deconstruction of the emphasis ‘choice’ and ‘active agency’, rhetoric that attempts to explain women’s work and family arrangements and outcomes. This research may contribute to providing a more nuanced account of structural inequality by bringing the importance of symbolic violence to the forefront, and in further understanding gender and power relations as an instance of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001).

Moreover, how the participants ‘make sense of’ their thoughts and feelings about how they want to organise their paid work and care arrangements, may reveal contradictions when looking at what they actually do. In this way, ‘Sensemaking’ theory and enactment (Weick 1995) is relevant to these concepts (as noted in analysis of the narratives, see Part Two). In short, ‘sensemaking’ is ‘not based on discovering the truth … but on ordering our experiences so that our lives make sense’ (Hatch & Cunliffe 2006: 44).

**Gender Relations in the Family-Household**

In this thesis I argue that the gendered system or order of ‘domesticity’ (Williams 2000) acts as a factor that affects the ‘social practice of women-as-mothers’ (Durey 2008; McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002) as they think about how they will organise their paid work and care arrangements around the time of childbirth, and as an influence on how respective work arrangements and (unequal division of work) outcomes are arrived at. It effects the ‘rules of the game’ (Hatch & Cunliffe 2006) such as how they think and feel and manage these. Unbalanced gender arrangements and relations in the home are maintained through gender
Habitus in the field of the household by doxa where symbolic violence and inequality are ‘misrecognised’ (and can also be recognised but unable to change) (Durey 2008: 80). Symbolic violence is critical to the operation of traditional gender power and relations, and the current patterns of work–family arrangements have preserved the unequal and unjust structures identified by Williams (2000) as the ‘ideal worker’ and ‘marginalised carer’ norms (Durey 2008). These structural and social forces entrench power imbalance - they disproportionately benefit a more dominant/privileged group (Bourgois 2002). The symbolic violence mediates practice and ‘experience on a phenomenological level’ and ‘shape the understanding of social processes’ held by individuals (Bourgois 2002: 223).

The gender ideologies of domesticity and ideal worker norm (that regulate and reproduce cultural stereotypes about what is the right or proper thing to do) are embedded in the habitus (Williams 2000; Pocock 2003, 2005a). I contend that, regardless of workplace policy, these ideals are exemplified in the domestic sphere/household, especially around the birth of a child. Drawing on data from interviews conducted with twenty-seven participants (in two industries with differing policy contexts) over two years as they combine paid work and care, I will examine how this occurs.

Oakley (1995: 156–157 [1974]) and other scholars (Hays 1996; Probert 2002) remind us that stereotypes about a ‘good/proper/typical wife or mother’ remain firmly entrenched and linked with moral ideas describing a ‘real man and wife’ (Oakley 1995: 156 [1974]). For example, she is ‘subservient’ (i.e., subordinate) and ‘dedicated to the satisfaction of her husband’s needs – these stereotypes are very influential’ (Oakley 1995: 157 [1974]). Further, this notion extends to her children and places familial wellbeing above her own needs.

Williams argues that women and men are reproducing hegemonic (and masculine) patterns of gender relations in domestic and labour market contexts. However, ‘Hakim reports evidence that one-third of women themselves believe that home and childcare are their main focus in life and that they should not combine a career with a family’ (Hakim 1995, 2003 in Durey 2008: 80). In effect, Hakim and Williams point to one same conclusion about the moral ideas and identity around caring and family (and households) that women are linked to.
Specifically, they both conclude that women are drawn to domestic and family work; however, their sense of how this operationalises is contrasting.

Blurred with these moral ideas are socially constructed roles of ideal worker and carer. These are historically grounded (Williams (2000: 98) notes ‘the past is not dead, it mutated’); they are also grounded in contemporary society and culture and in the future aspirations of younger generations (see Pocock 2005b, 2006). Indeed, it is our moral ideas about our roles and belongingness in paid work and care that tie our past, present and future together. I contend that this is why unequal gender norms and ideal stereotypes prevail. They are morally tied to our sense of self – imposed on us from within and reinforced from without. This is what is meant by how we create our social world and are, in turn, created by it. Further, gendered stereotypes and relations are perpetuated in the everyday by us not challenging, changing or deconstructing our taken-for-granted perceptions.

Mary Blair-Loy has referred to the role played by culturally produced ‘schema’ or ‘dispositions’ (2003: 1–2). ‘Schema’ are powerful ‘cultural models’ which organise and define individual and collective behaviour and attitudes, but do not determine them. In other words, while choices and struggles over agency may appear or ‘feel like very personal battles, they are rooted in powerful [moral] assumptions of what makes life worthwhile’ (Blair-Loy 2003: 1).

Durey (2008: 80), in her study of the work and family experiences of medical practitioners and their spouses with older children residing in rural Australia, makes the point that in terms of practical change, mothers and ‘female spouses can also act as agents for change’. They may resist structural constraints in the context of paid work and household practices ‘by expressing and acting on their own sense of entitlement’ to combine paid work and their child care responsibilities (Durey 2008: 80). This may be realised in three ways: a mother being able to be an ideal worker at work; a father being an ideal carer at home; and both men and women equally sharing and combining paid work and family responsibilities (Durey 2008). Breaking down these ideal stereotypes and imagining new reality is what Bourdieu indicates as being a resistance strategy to the habitus. When we can begin to imagine what life is like outside of the current structures of the habitus we can transform it and create change
(Crossley 2001). This directly links with Williams’ reconstruction based on re-imagining new ways of organising paid work and care.

It is largely the moral aspects bound up with gender expectations and norms that impact on the gender division of labour in the household and on what women decide they can achieve in the workplace after childbirth. This is the answer to the research questions and conceptual questions I have posed in this chapter. Seeking a clearer and deeper understanding of women’s complicity warrants further research, so as to unpack women’s preferences, plans, decisions and experiences across time. A deeper analysis in chapters four, five, six and seven will reveal further complexity and nuance in the context of women’s lives today and make an original contribution to the literature.

I contend that it is the habitus in the field of the home and family unit that needs to be challenged (by legislation and policy, for example) so as to realise social change. This is because the household is a key locale where the cultural habitus of motherhood and gendered relations regarding work and care arrangements are so strongly maintained. The ways in which work and family are organised in the household and family unit was not disrupted as a focus of critique during the second wave of feminism (Williams 2000; Pocock 2003). This is further realised by the ways in which many work and family policies such as maternity leave and child care do not seem to impact on gendered roles and the unequal division of unpaid domestic labour in the household (Edwards 2003).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have drawn on a number of different theories to provide an overarching framework for thinking about and understanding my research. This research is a contribution to that project of thinking through aspects of these relationships and conceptual debates. My key claim is that recent theoretical work explaining women’s work and family arrangements, specifically by Hakim (2000) and Williams (2000), offers only a partial account, because it uses an agency or structure favoured understanding. The theoretical framework is made up of conceptual tools: preferences, which I understand as individual ideas, imaginings and desires in relation to experience and practice. I am influenced by a critical examination of Hakim’s ‘preference theory’, with particular attention to generating a deeper understanding of the
concept of preferences. I also draw on Williams’ ideas about ‘domesticity’ and ‘ideal worker’ norm as tools for understanding structural factors and how they interweave with individual experience.

It also matters that we escape the temptation to opt for either a structural or an agential account of what is going on. Bourdieu’s approach to social theory is useful in this regard. He offers a set of ‘thinking tools’ (Wacquant 1989: 50 in Jenkins 2002: 67) (rather than abstract paradigms) that guide empirical research. Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ is taken as an individual phenomenon while being also created and shaped by the interplay of both individual agency and structural factors. Another tool borrowed from the work of Bourdieu is the concept of the cultural or social ‘field’, which refers to a social rather than a physical space. In this research the overarching field is the ‘family-household’, which may also encompass relations to and thinking about the space of the ‘workplace’. Indeed, the reliance of workplaces on unpaid care and family-household work is an important component of the reproduction of gender inequality and protection of traditional power relations (see Edwards 2003). Lastly, the ‘symbolic violence’ concept (Bourdieu 2001) offers useful insights for my research with women on the intractable experience of gender inequality. This concept focuses on cultural or ideological domination and subordination of groups, involving the use of language and discourses.

A major claim in this thesis is that the very act of combining and organising paid work and care is deeply grounded in a gendered habitus within the field of the household/family unit, wherein gendered ideas and practices of domesticity and ideal workers are firmly entrenched. It is my contention that the social forces which operate in women’s and men’s habitus within the field of the household reproduce gendered norms and outdated stereotypes of unequal work and care arrangements. This is how we can explain the persistence of gender inequality in the allocation of paid work and family care over time. According to this framing of the problem, women may choose to conform according to moral beliefs and values about the right and proper thing to do as a mother, which are also historically grounded and constantly reconfigured in the changing habitus.

I argue that feminists need to challenge the social construction of gender roles and stereotypes in relation to work and family life, so as to work out a new direction which allows
for workers who have families. The ‘idea of gender as a historical and moral matrix, rather than a static structure’ (McNay 2000: 13), which subsequently builds on Williams’ use of Bourdieu’s insights on embodied identity and relations through concepts of social practice, may have the potential to offer a more substantive account of women’s work and family decisions.

The key theoretical concepts I draw on – including ‘domesticity ideology’ and the ‘ideal worker and marginalised carer’ (Williams 2000), a critical application of ‘preferences’ (Hakim 2000) to incorporate constrained choices and forced decisions, Bourdieu’s habitus, field, and symbolic violence, and sensemaking (Weick 1995) – to contextualise and to better understand women’s experiences are grounded in my data and are therefore linked to a grounded theory approach as a ‘broadly applied’ methodological perspective, which has guided the conduct and analysis of the research. Indeed, ‘sensemaking’ (Weick 1995) is linked to Bourdieu’s habitus through the unconscious ways we make sense of, or use ‘common sense’ our experiences and place in the world. I will now turn to the methodological framing of this research, which builds upon a social constructivist epistemology and feminist standpoint. This discussion of methodology will describe my approach to the research and to engaging women in work and family research.
CHAPTER THREE

ON METHOD

It is plain that there are a number of ways of understanding how women think about and then organise their paid work and family arrangements. It is also clear that there are any number of theoretical and ethical assumptions which inform the way researchers understand the various problems and then carry out their research. Finally, it is now generally agreed that no research is ‘value-free’ (Oakley 2000).

Accordingly, Bryman (2004b: 500) argues that:

   Social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate’; ‘reflexivity entails a sensitivity to the researcher’s cultural, political and social context. As such, “knowledge” from a reflexive position is always a reflection of a researcher’s location in time and social space.

Proponents of feminist research and reflexivity, for example, make an obvious point when they observe that how we think about and do our research is connected to the life experience of the researcher. In the spirit of a reflexive researcher (Crotty 1998), a reflexive approach acknowledges and allows for the values and standpoint of researchers and how this might shape their work.

However, and perhaps most importantly, how I do the research ought to reflect what I am trying to find out. My research questions are oriented to understanding how women both identify and then try to shape the best kind of life–work balance for them. This involves asking some basic questions like: How much choice do women think and feel they have about how to best organise their paid work and family care responsibilities? How do their preferences and plans emerge in the context of their lives? How much does the household figure in their decisions? Do they understand their experiences and decisions as constrained or inequitable? What, if anything, about these experiences and household dynamics might explain the relative persistence of gender inequality in relation to work–care arrangements?
Let me start by situating this research in my own experience and explaining why I wanted to do this research. I will then discuss how I went about doing the research, and I conclude with some reflections on the challenges and limitations of my research.

**Why I Wanted to Do this Research**

A number of researchers (Oakley 2000; Crotty 1998; Denzin & Lincoln 1998) highlight the importance of locating the life experience of the researcher in design and implementation of their research. I can see quite clearly now that while my research began as an academic thesis on the key factors that influence women’s decisions about how to balance paid work and family life, it moved quickly towards studying how a particular group of women arranged their paid work and family obligations while negotiating the influence of particular beliefs and ideas which sustained and even reproduced certain inequitable gender relations.

Like most researchers, my reasons for doing this research grew out of certain personal experiences, along with a concern to engage with a major contemporary public policy issue, and intellectual interest in ideas about gender, equality and power.

My initial interest was completely personal. While I do not currently have children I have long had a keen personal interest in the questions of how I would deal with organising my paid work and care work, and particularly how I would negotiate decisions about parenting with my partner. Thinking about how to combine motherhood and career, while anticipating the pressure to do well at both, has never been far from my mind on a day-to-day basis.

To some extent, my research questions also reflect my experience of growing up as the youngest child in a traditional family. My father was the sole breadwinner and my mother stayed home to look after the children and take care of household tasks until I began to go to school. My father regularly carried out many long hours in addition to full-time employment and can be described in academic literature as ‘the ideal worker’ (Williams 2000). At various times during my adolescence I became aware of my mother’s frustration with combining paid and unpaid (care and household) work that accompanied her re-entry into the workforce – known in the academic literature as the ‘double shift’ (Hochschild 1998). I also became
aware of the disadvantage of being a ‘marginalised carer’ (Williams 2000). This was the dominant pattern in Australian families into the 1980s (Gilding 1991).

Thirdly, my professional and academic interests coalesced to inform my motivation to do this research. Following a journal article that I co-authored on the topic of young women’s identity and time-use when combining other activities (such as paid work, study, household work, relationships, child care), I began reviewing the research literature on the effects of motherhood upon a woman’s paid work, and decisions about the work–family interface. As I discussed in the Introduction, my professional work since 2000 in qualitative research in the fields of gender, time-use and public health helped to shape the design of this research.

Critical feminist theory provides an additional and important component of my approach to research. As a feminist I acknowledge the importance of the relationships between gender, class, power, organisational and domestic cultures, agency and structure, and policy. I have wanted to question and seek to change cultures of entrenched misogyny and gendered norms, and to push for better parental leave, access to childcare, and equal pay. These political interests led me to question the gendered norms and ideas related to women’s (and men’s) roles which help to constitute our paid work and family life expectations in contemporary Australia. Further, I am concerned about the problems created by combining work and care, especially for women, who continue to be the main caregivers. I am interested in the ways in which traditional assumptions about the relationship between femininity and caring remain intact despite transformations in motherhood and family life, and women’s participation in paid work.

Phenomenology, Sensemaking and the Lived Experience

While the research began with my personal and professional interests, as it developed it took on a more phenomenological orientation (Van Manen 1990; Goffman 1959; Blumer 1969). Phenomenology requires social researchers to ‘engage with phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately’ (Crotty 1998: 79). Phenomenology and Symbolic Interactionism come from the same theoretical hermeneutic-interpretive tradition or way of viewing the world (Crotty 1998: 66-80), that ‘emerged in [opposition] to positivism in attempts to understand and explain human and social reality’ (Crotty 1998: 66 – 67). This
framing is often identified with Max Weber, who saw that social or human sciences as concerned primarily with ‘understanding’ (Crotty 1998: 67). For researchers working from this perspective social reality and ‘meaning is not discovered but constructed’ (Crotty 1998: 42).

Phenomenological and hermeneutical study is interested in human existence or the lived experience. As Van Manen notes, it is ‘…phenomenology because it is the descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning; hermeneutics because it is the interpretive study of the expressions … of lived experience’ (1990: 38). Van Manen highlights the reflexive practice that also characterises in the phenomenology approach (1990: 36):

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience.

My methodological approach focuses on ‘sense-making’ (Weick 1985) and ‘phenomenology’ (Goffman 1959) and helps me explore how my interviewees experience gender, being a woman, a mother and worker in ‘the field’ of the household. These concepts and theories help me to ‘get at’ the layers of meaning associated with particular practice. As Crotty (1998: 42) observes:

It is the view that all knowledge, and therefore meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.

Research Methodology: Qualitative

I knew early on that I wanted to explore women’s accounts of their experiences and to find out what informs preferences and decision-making. I wanted to gain an understanding of women’s paid work and family arrangements and how they interpreted and ‘made sense of’ their experiences and decisions (Weick 1995, 1993, 1985).
Given my interest in understanding how women experience and make sense of their life and how they make decisions to remain in, alter or leave their paid and unpaid work meant that I needed to engage with women and to get an ‘insider’s’ perspective. This perspective would enable me to understand the participants’ perspectives and experiences. I needed in particular to be able to access what meaning they give to their social experience and practices, how they imagine, and what their fears and dreams are (Hammersley 1992: 45).

These intentions on my part indicate why I have used a qualitative research approach, associated with an interpretive and social constructivist epistemological view (Crotty 1998). I approached my central research questions in the same way Minichiello et al. (1995: 9) write about when they say they want ‘to capture people’s meanings, definitions and descriptions of events’. The value of qualitative research, according to Bryman (2004a: 277–83), is that it enables the researcher to see through the eyes of the people being studied, obtain descriptive detail based on an emphasis on explaining context, and explore the phenomena under question. It also involves exploring social life as process with flexibility and limited structure and concepts and theory grounded in data. Thus, a qualitative research approach enabled me to answer my research questions, and to get at the voices, stories, language and meanings that women construct and interpret in describing their experiences.

**Time and Experience in the Study**

One important perspective inherent in all phenomenological research is the centrality accorded to time. Heidegger’s (1927–91) work on ‘being’ and ‘time’ made the point that ‘being there’ is always an experience in a particular space and is lived out in time. My research has made this a central theme. I wanted to explore the participants’ patterns of continuity and change in their paid work over time, and in their preferences and ideas about combining work and caring responsibilities. ‘Experiential’ time involves the ability to look forward (for example, to future preferences, plans and intentions) as well as reflect back. These were vital components for capturing a snapshot of women’s experiences of organising paid work and family life. This perspective further emphasises the ‘relational’ interplay between time (as measured by clocks and calendars), and the social experience of time within
the contexts of particular social spaces or fields, such as the workplace and household (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 914).

Drawing on the work of McKie, Gregory & Bowlby (2002: 914), exploring the ‘historicity of experience’ is useful for the analysis of combining paid work and caring, for several key reasons. A temporal gaze ‘highlights the consideration of time as a [relational] component of the study of social life’ and the ‘importance of context in the multidimensionality of time’ (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 908). This perspective emphasises the social experiences and social organisation of reproduction and goes beyond the limitations of ‘clock and calendar’ time (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 906–8; Adam 2000). It adds more nuance to understanding women’s experiences by incorporating a notion of time involved in the decision-making about paid work and caring, in particular planning, anticipating, shifting patterns of work, prioritising, and the process of taking maternity or parental leave (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 915).

For example, embedded in women’s decision-making were different temporalities over time, as they thought about paid work and the work of caring. The work of caring is not static (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 905), but shifts in experience from participant to participant, and across each of the participants’ three interviews. To an extent, the complexities of scheduling and organising paid work and care, and the conflicting interactions between the two, have been the focus of some public policy debates in recent years (see HREOC 2007a, 2005).

The notion of work–care time as both a lived experience and a negotiated practice provides an additional way of imagining and understanding the participants’ realities, assumptions and expectations of men and women in the household and workplace. Recognising the flows of time is vital if we are to better understand the ways that the household and workplace are separate spheres (fields or social spaces) in Williams’ (2000) conceptualisation of domesticity and the ‘ideal worker norm’. McKie, Gregory & Bowlby (2002) employ a ‘temporal gaze’ in their conceptualisation of ‘caringscapes’ in which women have to negotiate the allocation of their time between the work/public and home/private spheres. They note that changes in domestic arrangements have not led to a clear division between the time-space of the private and public (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 914). Rather, there is a complex interaction in
everyday practices between both, which is relational and continues to emphasise gendered expectations across the life course, as evidenced by ‘the feminisation of poverty’ (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 914). ‘To address the causes of this would require a fundamental reappraisal of gendered roles and the implications of ‘doing gender’ and ‘doing family’’ (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 914), which further links to my conceptual framework of Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, field and symbolic violence.

In short, a temporal perspective enables the accommodation of the complex nature of decision-making and some changes that occur in women’s lives as they navigate different experiences before and after they have children. It enabled me to understand how I could track or follow pregnant women’s and mothers’ work and family realities and experiences over two years. This research design enabled me to impart greater depth to the data collection, because as Minichello et al. put it:

> It allows the recognition and examination of patterns … Thus, the researcher is able to analyse the continuity or otherwise of the informants’ meaning structures from one episode in their everyday living to another (1995: 170–1).

I thought that a three-phase or stage design was especially useful for answering one of the key research questions: How do women’s preferences take shape in lived experience across time? I wanted to talk to employed pregnant women at three specific points in time: when they were organising their maternity leave and planning and deciding about how they intend to organise their paid work and child care, including whether to return to paid work; during maternity leave; and upon returning to paid work. I wanted to follow the participants over a period of eighteen months to two years to understand how their decisions played out and arrangements were manifested. Table One describes the focus of each phase of the research design. The focus in the interviews (see ‘Interview Focus’ column) was the same as it was for interviewees who were pregnant and those who just had a child. This introduces an element of temporal complexity in regards to past, present and future accounts of participants’ experiences which has been taken into account and clarified in the discussion of findings.
Table 1: Research Design of the Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Phase</th>
<th>Pregnancy / Motherhood Stage</th>
<th>Interview Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>During pregnancy (for those participants who were pregnant at the initial interview)</td>
<td>Intentions, preferences, influences, choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>6 months after birth</td>
<td>Changes since phase 1 interview, experiences, intentions, preferences, choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>12–18 months after birth and upon return to paid work/6 months after phase 2 interview</td>
<td>Changes since phase 2, reflection on experiences, return to paid work, choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 months after phase 2 interview (for those not pregnant at phase 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table One suggests, the focus of my interviews was on the women’s intentions, plans and preferences. I was also keen to establish the key factors influencing paid work and family arrangements; how much choice women feel they have; the returning to paid work experience; and change and continuity.

Interviewing the participants on three separate occasions several months apart contributed to the research in various ways. Firstly, given the focus on the shift from pregnancy through to ‘after the baby’ (particularly on maternity leave and the return to paid work), and the focus on motherhood while the youngest child was a toddler (under School-age), this sequence of interviews enabled me to understand the changes in circumstances and the transformations in the participants. It also provided a space for both me, as the researcher, and the participants to return to themes and issues raised that required further reflection or clarification. In addition, this design enabled me to follow-up with respondents, something that aided the strengthening and development of my rapport with the participants. For example, I got to know their families – in some cases I met with and spoke to partners and often interacted with babies/children who were present at interviews. Some participants opened up more when discussing issues with me in the follow-up sessions. One participant commented at the end of
the first interview, after I had thanked her for her time, that she likes to have her voice heard. She noted: ‘How else am I going to get my opinion heard?’ She seemed to enjoy the interaction and talked of volunteering for a number of research projects related to giving mothers a voice.

Other researchers have also noted the advantages of interviewing participants more than once (Oakley 1981). In particular, Oakley (1981: 44 – 46), in her discussion of her research focusing on women making the transition to motherhood, comments that the interaction between herself as researcher and the participants developed in richness during the second and third interviews. Further, it is important to highlight that the vast scholarship on Feminist Research Methods in sociology and anthropology (see Reinharz 1992; Oakley 2004, 1981) has been critical for my research.

**Methods of Data Collection: How I Gathered the Information**

In designing and carrying out my research, I applied some aspects of grounded theory (in lower case) when managing my data. I did not adhere to a classic or strict version of ‘grounded theory’ which Glaser and Strauss (1967) discussed, but followed the guiding principle of ‘grounded theory’ namely the idea that the research process evolves as more data is gathered. ‘Grounded theory’ is a general strategy for data analysis, which involves developing and refining an iterative practice of data collection, coding and analysis (Bryman 2004a: 399–400). In my research, for example, I was able to re-structure and re-define my interview schedules over the course of three interview phases, as each engagement with the participants affected my sense of the themes that mattered.

I used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to collect the majority of the data needed to address the central and additional research questions. This included all of the phase one interviews. There were some telephone interviews and email follow-ups (for pragmatic reasons in the follow-up phases), which were less in-depth than the phase one face-to-face interviews. In some instances a face-to-face meeting in the follow-up occasions was not possible due to participants’ paid work schedules. All interviews were undertaken after the RMIT University Ethics Sub-Committee had approved the research.
Before each interview began I introduced myself and restated information from the consent form and plain language statement that ensured each participant had a clear understanding that they were providing information that would be used for research only. I checked the participants’ level of comfort, asked permission to record the interview and encouraged them to ask questions or raise any concerns.

I carried out one pilot interview prior to the three phases of interviews, to test and develop the questions. The pilot interview was a collaborative and interactive process between the pilot participant and me as researcher. I encouraged feedback on the questions during and at the end of the interview. The participant was later recruited into the research sample and remained an active participant throughout the three phases of data collection. ‘Testing’ or ‘trialing’ the interview schedule is noted by Morse and Richards (2002) as a good way of ensuring rigorous data collection. With these protocols in place, twenty-eight participants were interviewed, and twenty-seven of the twenty-eight continued their participation in the research across the three interview phases. I conducted eighty-two interviews in total (eighty-one will be used in the later chapters).

Semi-structured interviewing as a research technique enabled me to build my rapport with the women and get closer to understanding their real life experiences. It enabled me to base my conclusions on their views, attitudes and perspectives as well as, and most importantly, to get feedback on their views on my interpretation of their material. This was due to the use of ‘open-ended’ questions that enabled me to tease out assumptions. One practical limitation of this type of interviewing was that it was very time-consuming. Interviews took one to more than two hours to complete. Transcribing long interviews was likewise very time-consuming.

I refined the follow-up interview schedules after my preliminary analysis of the first round interviews. For example, after reflecting on the preliminary findings that came from the first round of interviews, I decided I wanted to tease-out the often subtle beliefs or assumptions that seemed to be embedded in the women’s responses about paid work, care/motherhood, the household division of labour, and choices. I also developed questions to probe certain ‘silences’ in the data.
I was then able to carry out my phase two and three interviews. In the follow-up periods I asked the participants about their views on the ‘mother wars’ debate in the media – teasing out the silences about child care arrangements and why women prefer to care for their children themselves rather than use and/or seek an alternate or formal childcare centre. My hunch was that there was a silence when women talked about the reasons behind not wanting to use formal child care. I was interested to see whether they were uncomfortable about openly stating that they just want to stay home and care for their child at this time, and whether there was a silent or hidden conspiracy underpinning why women (not men) would trade-off paid work for caring after childbirth. I asked whether they would want to engage in paid work in the same way they did before childbirth, as well as be able to devote enough time to their children as they would like.

The three interview schedules were based on open-ended questions and prompts (see Appendix Four), which were covered in all interviews. Some open-ended questions, I decided, were out of order in the previous interview because of the participants’ emphasis on a particular theme or issue, and some required more discussion time and focus than others. In this way I varied the interview structure and time from participant to participant. In order to preserve the informal flow of the interview I encouraged participants to discuss the issues that were most relevant to them, ensuring I covered all other questions at a later stage. This meant that the participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences and responses in their own words, and to guide the interview.

I carried out the face-to-face interviews variously in participants’ homes, workplaces, local coffee shops and on one occasion at a playground and at RMIT. Some interviews had to be conducted in two separate sittings, and on some occasions I had to clarify or complete the interview by phone. Interviews were scheduled during daytime business hours, sometimes during participants’ paid work lunch breaks. Some participants also kept in contact between interview phases by email. Some interviews were rescheduled due to health problems being experienced by the child or by the mother. At one stage, I conducted a telephone interview with a participant in phase two who had been unwell; her child had been unwell for around four months.
All interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of participants. Some field notes were written or recorded on the tape recorder at the end of each interview. Between the phase two and three interviews I sent a feedback information sheet on phase one and two preliminary findings (see Appendix Five) prior to the third follow-up interview. I supplied a reply-paid envelope for participants to respond with feedback on my perceptions and understanding of key themes and issues. This summary assisted with getting feedback and clarifying inconsistencies as an additional way of ensuring thorough interpretation and analysis of the data.

**Recruiting Participants**

Because I wanted to understand women’s experiences of thinking about and combining paid work and care responsibilities, I focused on recruiting women who were currently employed and pregnant or had recently had a child. This became the starting point for recruiting participants.

My focus on recruiting women only for the research was also motivated by the relatively unchanging patterns of domestic and care work in Australian households ‘that remain largely the work of women’ (Pocock 2003: 1). International research shows that ‘most mothers organise and often pay for’ formal ‘childcare’ so as to ‘enhance ease of access in and out of paid work’ (Stephens 1999 in McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 899) and that the ‘gendered division of domestic labour persists despite increasing participation by fathers in caring and housework’ (McKie, Gregory & Bowlby 2002: 899).

My recruitment criteria strategy uses a mixture of ‘convenience’, ‘snowball’ and ‘theoretical’ elements (and a bit of ‘pot luck’). Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to the value of thinking about the kinds of people who could be useful to help the researcher address the research topic and questions. The key focal points I wanted to understand more about were ‘paid work’, ‘child caring’ and ‘motherhood’.

My recruitment was also informed by a regard for how policy affects the decision-making process. I became interested in broadly comparing how access to work–care balance policies (and a lack thereof) impact on the paid work and care decisions, arrangements, preferences
and views of women who encounter them. While one researcher alone cannot cover all the possible industries, occupations and policy environments/contexts in which women work, I opted to focus on two very different industry areas. I decided to recruit participants firstly from the higher education sector, because universities have developed policies for combining paid work and care, and secondly from the retail industry, where women are heavily represented particularly as part-time and casual workers, and because of the general contrast (on paper) in paid work and family provisions between the two.

A national paid parental leave scheme will be implemented in Australia in January 2011 (as established under the Rudd government). However, the emphasis has long been on employer-based policy and workplace practice (Baird & Whitehouse 2007). Given this emphasis, various policy provisions with limited availability exist in industry and sector contexts for providing support to employed individuals to combine paid work and family (see, for example, discussion by Broer & Sanders 2006; Burgess, Henderson & Strachan 2006).

As with so much qualitative research, I decided that I wanted to get lots of ‘deep data’ from a small number of participants, rather than try to develop a more general assessment based on a large sample survey. Initially I recruited twenty-eight women: fifteen employed in the higher education sector and thirteen from the retail industry. Twenty-seven women were involved from phase one to three (the twenty-eighth participant from the retail industry was unable to undertake the second and third follow-up interviews; her data has been omitted from this thesis).

Bryman (2004a) notes that ‘convenience’ is often the basis for sampling. My recruiting process involved a mixture of deliberate choice and practical convenience. A guided snowball technique was used to recruit participants around the theoretical sampling criteria of ‘paid work’, ‘child caring’ and ‘motherhood’. Therefore, my participants were involved in recruiting other participants from their social or employment networks. Getting access to participants and negotiating and renegotiating their involvement with each phase was an ongoing process that was dependant on my capacity to develop a good relationship with the women. As such, I devised various recruitment strategies. Initially, I contacted the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to assist in calling for research participants. Some participants employed in the sector responded to a call for participants advertised in the
NTEU Victorian member magazine, some through snowball technique and only a few responded to various newspaper notices. I recruited a total of fifteen participants from various institutions, academic and professional positions, employment status and occupations in the higher education sector.

It was difficult to source a similar number of participants from the retail industry. In addition to posting media releases in newspapers and the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Union (SDA) magazine for Victorian members, I extended the recruitment period to June 2005. The SDA Victorian branch also added their letterhead and a statement of support to a flyer calling for participants, which was given to all union delegates to recruit at workplaces. All female SDA members (and those enquiring to join SDA) telephoning the SDA for maternity leave advice were also informed about my research and how to take part. I also contacted personnel/human resource departments by telephone and postal letter, which included large fashion retail, grocery retail, and hair and beauty retail. This method of recruitment was also very slow. At first many human resource personnel I spoke with were not interested in the research. I sought advice from an industrial relations analyst who had previously conducted work and family research with women in the retail industry in Victoria. She told me to emphasise to organisations that I was not researching the organisations, but was wanting to recruit participants through them. Articulating this simple distinction resulted in my being able to successfully recruit more participants. At the conclusion of each interview I confirmed the participant’s interest in being contacted about being interviewed in the next six months. All participants agreed to be interviewed on two additional occasions.

Who They Were: Participants in the Study

Initially, I had wanted to interview a minimum of twenty and a maximum of thirty pregnant women who were in the third trimester of their pregnancy and who were roughly due to give birth around the same time. I wanted to interview an equal number of women from each industry, and I did think about further breaking down the sample to include a cross-section of

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3 One participant (as noted previously there were twenty-eight interviews conducted as phase one) withdrew from the research upon the time of attempting to arrange the follow-up interview, due to not being able to arrange a follow-up time.
full-time, part-time and casual employees and a range of occupations within higher education and retail. I also wanted to include the broad criteria of women who were partnered or single, in heterosexual or same-sex relationships, first time mothers, and women with more than one child. However, some quick reflection indicated that if I wanted to cover this cross-section of employment types, occupations and demographic criteria such as sexuality I would need to recruit far more than thirty participants. I concluded that I should not limit the sample criteria by imposing the above criteria, instead I decided to include women who, at the time of recruitment and/or the first interview, were either currently employed in higher education or currently employed in retail, and currently pregnant or had recently had a child in the last twelve months to three years. To include pregnant women and mothers enabled me to understand the experiences and patterns of arrangements – not just shortly after childbirth, but for some women up to three years or more after childbirth (when their youngest was a toddler).

I did manage to find an approximate equal number of females from both industries (fifteen from higher education, twelve from retail) who were pregnant or had recently had a child (twelve were pregnant, fifteen had recently had a child). Overall, there were twelve full-time employees, twelve part-time and three casual workers across the two industries. Of the twelve participants employed in the retail industry, five were employed in management roles at the time of phase one interview. Three of the five managers worked full-time and two part-time. Of the fifteen participants employed in the higher education sector, just over half (eight of the fifteen) were academics (or ‘education professionals’) and just under half (seven of the fifteen) were non-educational professional (non-academic) staff members in either specialist manager, associate professional, or intermediate clerical and sales workers roles.

I gathered relevant demographic and background information on each participant, including age, marital status, level of education, country of birth, birth due date, demographic information about household members, and occupational/workplace details (for example, position, length of leave from paid work, partner’s occupation details). A participant details form (see Appendix Three) was designed as short survey-form for the purpose of gathering select demographic data prior to the interview. This also assisted with the interviewing
process and in tracking participants involved in the study over the three periods of interviewing.

All research participants prior to the phase one interview completed the details form at the time of recruitment, and the data was stored in an Access database to manage and track the research sample throughout the project. Once I got an expression of interest from participants I sent them an information pack, which consisted of a plain language statement and consent form with information about participating in interviews at the time of completing and returning the participant detail form.

The participants were aged twenty-seven to forty-three years at the time of the first interview. The median age of the participants recruited in 2004 and 2005 was thirty-five. The majority (twenty) were, as might be expected, in their childbearing years. A small number of participants (three) were aged forty years and over, followed by women aged twenty-six to twenty-nine years (four). Twenty-two of the twenty-seven participants had completed a tertiary degree, and less than half (a total ten) of this group had completed a postgraduate qualification. In particular, twenty-six of the twenty-seven participants identified as being in female–male couple household; one participant was at the time living as a lone mother and was not in a relationship, and during interviews she identified as heterosexual. The participants all identified as having Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. If I had included women in lesbian partnerships or people from non-Anglo backgrounds the experience I report on here may well have been quite different.

The following table displays the participants and some of their demographic characteristics such as age at phase one interview, number of children and age of children, highest level of education attainment, relationship status (partnered/single), and occupation and industry characteristics.
Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Sample at Phase 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME (PSEUDONYM)</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>NO. CHILDREN &amp; AGE</th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th>RELATIONSHIP</th>
<th>EMPLOYMENT STATUS &amp; INDUSTRY/SECTOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Anna</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2 children – 4, &lt;1</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Patricia</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4 children – 9, 7, 5, 2 Pregnant</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Part-time/sessional, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mary</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Janice</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Christine</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2 children – &lt;2, &lt;1</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Part-time, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Carolyn</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1 child – &lt;1</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Part-time, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Paula</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1 child – &lt;1</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Linda</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1 child – 3 Pregnant</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Part-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Naomi</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1 child – 2 Pregnant</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Part-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Cheryl</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4 children – 9, 6, 4, 1</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Part-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Miriam</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2 children – 4, 1</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Diana</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Margaret</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1 child – &lt;2</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Erika</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>Cert/Dip</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Part-time, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Sandra</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1 child – 2 Pregnant</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Full-time, higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Highest Education</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1 child – 1</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1 child – &lt;1 Pregnant</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1 child – 1</td>
<td>Cert/Dip</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1 child – 1  Pregnant</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1 child – 2</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1 child – &lt;2</td>
<td>Cert/Dip</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1 child – 2</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1 child – 1</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4 children – 4, 9, 7, &lt;1</td>
<td>Yr 12</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Detailed tables describing the change and continuity in the participants’ employment status across the three interviews will be explored in Chapter Five.
Employed Women in Higher Education and Retail, Victoria

I focused on recruiting women employed in Higher Education and Retail. In particular, women working at different levels in the organisation (full-time/ part-time/ casual employment). Women employed in higher education were identified as a group of interest. My interest here related to the recent innovative changes and enterprise bargaining that had been taking place around paid parental leave arrangements (including up to 36 weeks full pay, paid maternity leave; return to paid work bonus – it is important to note that these conditions are limited in access). I was interested in discovering what impact workplace policy provision might have in the context on women’s maternity stories and decisions. I purposely chose the two subsets of the population as the retail industry is one of the two largest industries within Victoria employing mostly females (ABS 2001, Cat. No. 6202.2), and they have no paid policy conditions for work and family, as at the time of the conduct of this research.

The relationship between the workplace policy context (particularly access to paid and unpaid maternity leave entitlements), the household context – was an area that I wanted to explore. My interest was in finding out how women think and make decisions about their work and care arrangements after childbirth.4

Research into the workplace and related issues like their access to paid paternity leave of my interviewees’ partners was carried out in two ways. First, information on the participant’s partners’ employment was gathered in the demographics sheet. Second, the partners’ access to paid policies for work and family was explored during the three interviews.

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4 My initial research proposal set out to explore the following questions: How do women from two different industries in the Victorian paid workforce arrange their paid work and family life after childbirth? How do women from different industries in the Victorian paid workforce approach the decision to cease, continue or reduce their paid employment around childbirth? How do women’s preferences before childbirth differ from their lived-experiences of deciding about work/family after childbirth? How do women explain these differences? How can we understand and explain the processes by which women decide about combining paid work and family? Do employment conditions within an industry impact on women’s decisions? If so, how? Are there similarities and differences about paid work/family decisions around childbirth with women in the two different industry groups?
**Analysing the Data**

I tape-recorded each interview with the permission of the participant. After concluding each interview I then made brief field notes (either hand written or recorded) and set about transcribing the interview. As the length of each interview varied, and the time-consuming nature of transcribing each interview meant that it soon became exceedingly difficult to keep up to date with the number of interview tapes, I then sent the tapes to a professional transcribing service for verbatim transcribing. I read the transcripts and I then immersed myself in them to develop a report of preliminary themes and findings.

I used NVivo2 computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package to assist in the coding process and in organising my codes, to facilitate data analysis. I imported each transcript as a Word document into NVivo2 and read the transcript as I coded responses into key themes.

Granted that my research project was exploratory I concluded that I was not setting out to test a hypothesis when I designed the research project. Instead I adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in which I tried to let the data lead me to important insights. This meant that I was able to develop and test hunches throughout the data collection process. Second, I used what Morse and Richards (2002) call ‘pattern analysis’. This involves looking for and describing patterns within the data. I ‘coded-up’ – that is, I did not develop pre-determined codes prior to reading the transcript so as to explain what I would find. This practice fits with ‘open-coding’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in grounded theory; I let the data guide me and the themes emerged. I started with broad codes and themes (free nodes), which became more specific (tree nodes) as I became more familiar with the data.

At the end of each interview phase I re-read and re-visited my coded transcripts and developed a summary report that consisted of key themes and my preliminary interpretation of the findings. I also used an Access database to store the participant demographic information, and to track and schedule the follow-up interviews over the two-year data-collection period; and a thematic, case-story approach, which developed late in my analysis as a way to explore each participant’s experiences and biography.
In terms of my coding process, I gave each code a title, which consisted of either a quote or a statement that was occurring frequently, or a broad code name, or a key discussion question (or topic) from the interview schedules. For example, my phase one preliminary themes consisted of: ‘intentions’; ‘it is a bit up in the air at the moment’; ‘wait and see how things turn out’; ‘women’s ideas about motherhood’; ‘key influences’; ‘choice’; and ‘flexibility’. These codes I used to produce some initial general themes.

As I made sense of the coded data and identified general themes, I began to ask new questions such as: ‘What does it all mean?’ ‘What do I do with the identified themes?’ Moving from coding to analysis involved going back to the transcripts, refining and defining codes (i.e., placing limits around codes – what they are and are not), and explaining and describing the relationship between codes.

What I particularly wanted to know was how decisions and arrangements were made, and how women experienced these. For example, according to the interview phase (see Table Two) and question, a participant’s response was coded under the umbrella of ‘preferences’, ‘intentions and plans’ and ‘choice’. ‘It depends on my partner’s work’ was coded under the heading of partner. I also looked for similarities and differences (i.e., between the experiences and responses of women from higher education and retail sectors). I found there were multiple sets of overlapping factors that enabled and constrained how women organised and experienced their paid work and family life. These factors could be loosely grouped into supports, constraints and cultural ideas. For example, some of the key factors included: partner, household economics, workplace, ideas about motherhood, previous birth experiences, the baby, and the mother (with numerous codes branching off these).

**Challenges and Limitations: ‘NVivo2.0’ and the Case–Story Approach**

There were three key factors that limited the design of the research and the ultimate conclusions that were able to be drawn. First, there were the usual difficulties associated with getting absolute clarity about the research questions and what I thought I was trying to

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5 NVivo2.0 is a qualitative software product that was developed by Tom Richards, QSR International (qsrinternational.com).
discover. In my initial attempt at defining my research question, I thought that I was trying to establish what key factors influenced women’s decision making about paid work and family life after childbirth. However, over time I came to see that on the one hand that I was making a number of structuralist, objectivist or ‘positivist’ assumptions which treated the women I was interviewing as if they were simply objects responding to external factors or forces. Equally my use of the word ‘choice’ implied that I was assuming that the women I was interviewing had free choice. After some hard thinking I revised the research questions. The rewording of the central research question reflects a significant development in my thinking and understanding of the topic as the research progressed.

A second challenge had much to do with the difficulties involved in identifying and recruiting a balanced sample of participants employed in the higher education sector and retail industry, as well as a balanced number of participants who were pregnant and had recently had a baby at the time of the phase one interview. These recruitment challenges required additional time to access participants, as well as strategic compromises in the research (as discussed above) including broadening the recruitment criteria. While I believe this did not unduly affect the research in any negative way, it needs to be acknowledged that such changes did represent a divergence from the initial design.

Third, I found using NVivo2 was limiting and challenging for managing and organising a large amount of qualitative data. On reflection, I would now say that it was useful for managing the data on a technical level. But it was not the most useful way to develop a ‘deep’ sense of the picture of participants’ experiences. After I had finished coding the transcripts of the second and third interviews – and subsequent refining of codes, and collapsing and recoding of some data – there were a total of 177 final nodes. These nodes provided me with useful starting point for understanding the key influences on women’s paid work and family arrangements, but not in answering all of my research questions. While NVivo2 worked well as a data management tool, it was problematic as I tried to move to writing and analyse the patterns of continuity and change in paid work arrangements across three interview phases from a code book. The large number of final nodes, while overwhelming, presented challenges in developing the ‘depth’ I was seeking in each individual participant experience. Another challenge was that at the conclusion of coding I felt that I was limited by my coding
decisions in how I ‘cut’ the qualitative data in terms of specific nodes and cases. There was also a significant amount of doubling of responses, with responses being split or cut into a number of codes.

For example, after I initially broke interview transcripts up into key themes, I then sorted them by question, supported by quotes and the frequency in which these themes were raised. Using NVivo2 I coded large clumps of data into ‘free nodes’ and quickly moved them into ‘tree nodes’ as I found that the code I had given an interview response could be coded in many different and multiple ways (i.e., ‘splitting’). Tree nodes enabled me to divide codes accordingly, from the main codes (also known as ‘parents’) into a number of related sub-codes (‘children’). At the time of moving preliminary codes or ‘free nodes’ into more structured and organised ‘tree nodes’, I began going back to transcripts again to produce a more logical sequence of codes in order of discussion questions.

I constructed additional data management tools to remedy my analysis challenges and limitations. I went back to the hardcopy interview transcripts and began grouping them by industry to develop, label and note patterns and questions. I then placed the interviews of each participant into a folder with the pseudonym clearly labelled. I also did this electronically; I summarised each of the twenty-seven participants’ overall experience, and developed a participant case story master document. This document enabled me to further explore patterns in the data and to broadly compare transitions – by industry, partner and participant – over two years. In sum, this involved reorganising the transcript material into ‘case stories’ and developing a master document of ‘participant profile stories, phase one to three’. I then proceeded to describe and tabulate the patterns within the stories by hand coding. I developed twenty-seven case-stories – one per each participant.

The case-story approach was a strategy for interrogating the qualitative data and involved treating each participant as a case and collapsing three interviews into one story per participant (Anna’s story, Michelle’s story). This approach was broadly applied to allow me to gain an in-depth view of each participant that was difficult to attain by using NVivo2. This approach was not part of my initial research methodology or strategy. Rather, it came about in a practical sense so as to best deal with the large amount of rich qualitative material.
After re-reading the transcripts and developing a case-story master document, I then had a firm idea of the data and could see the story I wanted to get at to tell the story. From the patterns it became evident that the story of the participants’ preferences, intentions and plans needed to be told as an important aspect of their arrangements and decision-making, to be prioritised and considered before their experiences and narratives of returning to paid work. From the case-stories, rather than pulling out codes, I used ‘sub-headings’ to separate chunks of the participants’ stories. The larger story of pre-birth intentions and preferences – the ‘downward’ change in employment patterns after childbirth, and the work in organising the return to work and employing strategies to manage work and care – began to emerge by taking a broader view as well as breaking the data into smaller chunks of nodes.

In sum, my data analysis involved a number of techniques, in particular returning to the transcripts; hand coding with highlighters and taking notes in order to tabulate patterns of change and continuity, and remarking on other demographic characteristics; and counting and tabulating qualitative responses to questions about preferences for part-time or full-time work and child care. This practice enabled me to explain and highlight dominant themes and responses, and adhered to the technique of pattern analysis (Morse & Richards 2002). Now armed with a report of patterns and tabulated data, I was able to move between the empirical and theoretical literature, my master document containing twenty-seven case-stories (a summary of each participant’s experience across the three interviews), and the analysis reports. In some instances I returned to the hardcopy transcripts when needed. I moved back and forth from data to literature, checked for negative cases, and developed reflections on the theoretical and methodological issues. This process was ongoing and provided the overall picture of discussion in my data chapters, as well as the overall picture of the participants’ experiences.

**Conclusion**

To date, research documenting Victorian women’s preferences, lived experiences and decisions about paid work and family arrangements after childbirth, using a temporal gaze, has not been reported. While there have been a number of investigations on paid work–family issues in regard to higher education (Ward & Wolf-Wendel 2003), and the retail industry
(Earle 2002) in Australia, no one study has focused on women’s arrangements and decision-making from two industries in Victoria using a qualitative multiple-interview approach. My research will enable a richer understanding of women’s preferences and lived experience during pregnancy and after childbirth. Findings from this research have the potential to inform some policy as well as sharpening theoretical conceptualisations about women’s choices, and may have implications for understanding the more complex issues around the paid work–care regime in Australia.

The framework of method at work in this research project involved a social constructivist approach, which values an ongoing critical awareness of the researcher’s own subjectivities and the co-construction of meaning within the participant–researcher interaction. The research approach was designed as a qualitative interview-based inquiry with twenty-seven participants over a period of two years. The analysis was aided by multiple techniques of managing a large amount of qualitative data, and the interpretations are presented by using ‘thick description’ and verbatim quotes. The basis for these methodological choices was motivated by a number of aspects, including my desire to best answer the research questions, to appropriately record and reflect the lived experiences of the participants, and to contribute to a sociological understanding of women’s real lives combining paid work and care.

Women employed in higher education and the retail industry were recruited for this research because of the potential for a broad contrast. The higher education sector is one occupational area where there have been recent improvements in good employment practices for women, particularly in terms of family orientated policy like maternity leave provisions. According to Probert (2006), ‘the higher education sector generally is one example in the labour market where women do have choices’. By comparison, women employed in the retail industry may appear to (generally, on paper) have less availability of good maternity leave provisions, and options surrounding work and family, by comparison with the higher education sector. Importantly, the retail industry is one of the largest industries in Victoria employing mostly women (ABS 2001 Cat. No. 6202.2).

In the next chapter I draw on the interview data to show how the gendered conception of the ‘ideal worker’ and ‘marginalised carer’ (Williams 2000) are embedded and embodied in the participants’ preferences, intentions and plans for combining paid work and care after
childbirth. I show how employed mothers-to-be and mothers imagine their paid work and care practices, how they will take shape and, importantly, what shapes their preferences. I argue that rather than describing personal free choice, preferences were limited, constrained (watered down) and not ‘ideal’, but were described by the participants as highly gendered or ‘gender coded’ (Folbre 1994). I conclude that in order to properly understand how employed women organise, decide about and imagine how to combine their paid work and care arrangements, and why they express these preferences, the gendered habitus and ideology dynamics that occur within their household must be taken into account.
PART TWO
Summary

The twenty-seven women – 15 employed in higher education and 12 in the retail industry were interviewed on three different occasions between August 2004 and August 2006. The central research questions asked were: How do women now think about and then organise their paid work and family arrangements after childbirth? How do women shape their work-life balance? In other words – How, and, what are the key factors which shape or influence their arrangements? The findings reveal the significance of what happens in the field of the family-household as the key influence on women’s work-family arrangements after childbirth. Gender relations in the field of the home, is at the forefront of participants thoughts and experiences.

The findings reveal the existence of a range of problems experienced in returning to paid work. These were also experienced during and after the maternity leave. A wide range of factors shaped the interviewees’ work and family experiences, decision making, and the meanings they attributed to the language of ‘preference’, ‘intention and plan’.

The perseverance of the ‘ideal worker model’ was apparent. This was particularly so in negotiations with managers at work, with the capacity of women to access ‘family friendly’ policy provision, to accommodate workplace changes, negotiate working hours, workplace location and so forth. The task of juggling of child care and paid work arrangements, their partners’ interests and preferences, household finances, the needs of the child and extended family fell predominantly on the women. All this along with the practical ‘chore’ of household work, and expectations shaped by gender habitus found expression in their ideas and emotions about mother-baby relationship and ‘motherhood’ characterised the lives of my interviewees.

Decision making and ‘choice’ was highly constrained, constantly fluid, and of conflict ridden. There were always a ‘trade-off’ and compromises made in the context of relationships and the need to juggle various competing demands. Preferences were seen as different to intentions and plans, but were also constrained. The lived experiences in the follow-up interviews revealed that while some women exercised choice and took action to ‘cutting back’ on their work, others had ‘no job to return to’. Most interviewees spoke of being marginalised when they returned to work.
CHAPTER FOUR

‘JUST BE TOTALLY FLEXIBLE’: HOW WOMEN THINK ABOUT PAID WORK AND CHILD CARE

Who doesn’t have hopes, dreams and plans for their lives? As Amartya Sen (2009), writing in a liberal society that ostensibly values both freedom and ‘well-being’, has argued, people having plans and being able to realise them is a vital constitutive characteristic of such a society.

[W]e have reason to be interested not only in the kind of lives we manage to lead, but also in the freedom that we actually have to choose between different styles and ways of living. Indeed the freedom to determine the nature of our lives is one of the valued aspects of living that we have reason to treasure (2009: 233).

My research was designed to explore the ways women imagine their lives and in particular think about, arrive at, and make decisions about ‘the balance’ between their family care work and their paid work. In this chapter I explore the ways some of the women I interviewed thought about and tried to shape their care work and their paid work. I asked them some simple questions: How did they think about the relationship between paid and unpaid work? What ideas, aspirations, preferences, expectations, and plans did they have about organising their family lives and their paid work? How were their preferences, arrangements and decisions shaped? How did their ideas about their arrangements take shape and emerge in their daily lives? How much did the household context figure in work and family decisions?

In what follows I tell a story based on what these women told me about their lives and their attempts to organise their child care and paid work arrangements. To do this I draw primarily on the biographies of Anna, Miriam and Paula, three women who work in the higher education sector; and of Michelle and Margaret who work in the retail sector; as well as interview data from other participants. The story of ‘domesticity ideology’ in the context of the household emerged as a dominant theme from the interviews with participants about how they think about their paid work and care arrangements. The material in this chapter is from phase one interviews, except where otherwise stated.

I chose to focus on these five biographies firstly because they represent cases of women who are employed in workplaces with policies ostensibly designed to encourage and
enable women to combine family care and paid work. Secondly, each woman also had the support of a partner living in the household to share the domestic work and child-care responsibilities. While it would seem that these workplace policy and household factors gave them a sense of choice, the biographies, as I begin to show here, tell another story.

In this chapter I focus on three key elements of women’s ideas about their paid work and family arrangements. Firstly, I consider the meanings these women gave to their preferences in an ‘ideal scenario’. This is followed by a discussion of their intentions and plans for how they approached the decisions they made. Then I focus on certain unexpected silences. In my discussion I argue that Hakim’s (2000) notion of preferences and Williams’ (2000) ideas about domesticity, gender and the ‘ideal worker’ norm are helpful for analysing the interview material, but only if we treat these interpretative frames as partial yet complementary ways of getting at the truth of the matter. I also draw on Bourdieu’s (1990b, 2005b) theoretical work to argue that women’s perceptions and meanings are largely contextualised by a gendered habitus.

As I show here, most of the women I spoke with expected to continue to be employed, and explicitly and implicitly noted that they would be returning to paid work after childbirth and maternity leave. All the participants described their futures in which being employed and managing their paid work-family responsibilities was a central element. This is reflective of a lot of research that suggests the dual-earner household model is the key family arrangement in Australia and other Western countries (see, for example, Campbell & Charlesworth 2004; Crompton 2006; Craig, 2008). Equally, as research by Castleman, Courthard & Rosslyn (2005), and McDonald (2001) suggests, many women now anticipate both that they will combine paid work and family and that there will be significant conflict associated with negotiating the tensions involved in doing this.

**Ideal Preferences: The Meaning of Preferences**

Many women with children who are also working, do so on a part-time basis. Current employment data in Australia suggests that increased participation in the paid workforce by women who are also mothers largely involves part-time work (Charlesworth & Cartwright 2007).
Of the women I spoke with who were working full-time, all expressed a preference to be working part-time after their maternity leave. When I asked Michelle, then a thirty-year-old retail manager pregnant with her first child, what her preferences were, she picked up and used the ‘ideal-world’ phrase:

I’d prefer to, if it was an ideal world, I would like to return to work four days a week and work one of those days at home or maybe more if it suited me, and it suited the business to work more. [I’d prefer to] have the child in childcare maybe a couple of days of that week and then a couple of days have it with my mother-in-law. That’s what I think at the moment.

Maria, an academic at university in her early thirties, who was pregnant with her second child, also shared this view:

I still would prefer to work a little bit … I’ve been full-time now for six months and been pregnant and having a young child – and it’s been exhausting. So my preference in an ideal world would be to be part-time.

When I interviewed her the first time, Anna was on maternity leave for the birth of her second child. Her preference was to return to work part-time for three days per week and return to a role that had less responsibility, which she said allowed her to better manage family and household responsibilities. As Anna put it:

[My preference] would probably be to return to work three days a week. Not only because I think I personally would find that manageable, but also because crèche is hard on kids … it’s a long day, five days a week. … So in an ideal world [I would prefer to work] three days a week.

This was also the case for Margaret, then in her late thirties and a full-time retail manager with one child:

My boss had been incredibly supportive – he’s got a couple of little girls himself. He was very, very supportive and stressed that you, basically, [He] said to start with, ‘You tell me what you’d like and then we’ll try and work towards that’. So I said, ‘What I’d like to do would be ideally to be to work four days a week, three in the office and one from home’. And I sort of thought that was a bit idealistic, but he asked me what I wanted so I said – that seems reasonable. I had the full expectation for him to come back and say no, and he came back and said, ‘Look I think let’s leave it at that, that’s our intention, let’s talk about it afterwards – see how it works out’. 
The importance of getting part-time work after having a child reveals how women were thinking about going back to paid work, and how they envisaged managing the balance between family care work and unpaid and paid work.

Some of the other women I spoke with, including two women who worked in universities and five retail workers, expressed a strong preference for staying at home full-time with their baby rather than returning to paid work, especially while their child was young. These women talked about the possibility of using child care provided by a family member, with a preference for a small amount of formal care by a nanny, a childcare centre or family-child care centre, allied to a decision taken by their partner to work part-time and/or share the child care responsibilities. In their case ‘staying at home with the baby’ was considered an ‘ideal’, but it was not practical because it was not possible given the state of the household finances. As Diana, then in her late twenties and a retail worker, saw it:

In an absolutely ideal world I would probably have taken six months off where I was doing nothing, just spending time with the baby. [My partner] and I have talked about it and that would be his preference too, but we’re both too realistic in that we don’t have the option to be on one wage not with a mortgage, if we didn’t have the mortgage maybe but basically what we do is we put all of my salary into the mortgage and we live off his and then if we have to put his salary into the mortgage there’s just not enough left over for very bits and pieces.

An employee from the retail industry in her mid-thirties, Joanne, was at the time of the interview a mother of three children under 10 years, working part-time and studying part-time, and also said something quite similar:

What I would have preferred would be to not have had the financial pressure, for it not to have been a financial decision and at the end of the day when you take into consideration the cost of child care and you know things like disposable nappies (because it’s easier) and those sorts of added costs, you don’t really make a lot of money, certainly in retail you don’t. Yeah, there’s really not a lot left over at the end of the day so I might have been working three days a week for an extra hundred dollars or something, you know when you break it down per hour it’s a pittance, but you needed that extra hundred dollars … so I feel like I have no choice.

[I] just think it was sad that I felt under so much pressure to contribute financially. And then with the last one [baby] there really was no choice in it, it was just a matter ‘of
course’ – you know, this is what we’ve continued to do – just go back to work. The idea of not working was never considered. It’s still something I have to do, and I’d love to be able to consider not working. I didn’t work the first year of this course [of study] which was fabulous probably because of finances.

Finally Debra, who was in her late twenties and worked in a university, said:

Given the choice I would love to be home with [my son], given the choice I would have quite happily said goodbye to [the university] and stayed home with him and I still hope to do that one day, probably not until after the second baby, but I would love to be a stay-at-home mum and then when they go to school do part-time during the day, but still be home in the afternoons.

While working part-time was a stated preference, it was also fraught in terms of financial concerns. Two key points emerged in relation to the way all of these women discussed their preferences. When talking about their preferences, they did so by depicting them as practical or pragmatic goals understood in terms of ‘what I can do’, and which incorporated their ideas about ‘what is possible’ and ‘what I am able to do’, all very much defined in the context of ‘what is on offer or available to me’.

The participants spoke of ‘constrained choices’, particularly regarding the various forms of paid or unpaid maternity leave and childcare services. What women could get or access through workplace policies as well as household finances were key elements shaping their preferences, plans and intentions. Maria, for example, who was pregnant with her second child at age thirty-three at the first interview, talked about her plans as well as her lack of choices because of the home mortgage. Both the workplace and household structured Maria’s plans for arranging and combining work and care, and her discussion of plans was orientated around practical elements:

I’m planning a schedule which is fourteen weeks leave and then you get a return to work bonus, but the return to work bonus is enough to enable me to return part-time for at least twenty-four weeks, so because I’ve just bought a house I don’t have much choice. I need the money so I’ll be off fourteen weeks and I’m saving up my leave to take before the birth as well.

Sandra (like Maria), was also pregnant with her second child at our first interview, and worked in higher education. Sandra reflected on her intentions and plans for her
work–family arrangements with her first child, and used this as the basis for what was achievable and practical with her current plans:

Just from the difference with having the previous baby I actually thought that I’d be able to get back to work in three months time – that’s when I’d be at home. But as soon as I had the baby I knew that I couldn’t do that, I didn’t want to do that and I also actually breastfed for about ten to eleven months and it wasn’t practical for me to go back to work before I was ready to give that up. So [now] I’m working with that kind of hindsight. I’ve actually tried for twelve months leave [from work] … So I think this time, I’d like to assume that I’m going to be away for twelve months but I’ve got the flexibility of coming back a bit sooner and if I do that I’ll come back for three days a week and have both of the babies in child care probably a couple of days.

Paula, then a mid-thirties’ full-time academic, also talked about the practical availability of maternity leave and return-to-work practices:

The plan is to go back first semester next year, which is actually starting the last week in February, and to go back part-time at point six. But I may (I mean when you come back again), I might have changed my mind.

The second point that emerged in these interviews was the difference between the language of ‘preferences’ and that of ‘intentions and plans’. The language of ‘preferences’ also had an element of ‘what I would like to do’ and yet also seemed to belong to a realm of unconstrained choice, however later in this chapter I will also explore how preferences were constrained. Reference to ‘intentions and plans’ pointed to a way of talking about ‘what I can do’, defined by how much time off was allowed by maternity leave provisions. Christine, a mother of two and a part-time worker in the retail industry, caught this distinction nicely when she said:

I thought I would probably go back [to work] in six months. That was my plan when I was pregnant and that’s pretty much how it happened after he was born. …I had every intention of going back … It was a new role and I wanted to further cement some of the things we were doing … In an ideal world I would have definitely preferred to have a nanny at home.

The distinctive use of ‘preferences’, ‘intentions’ and ‘plans’ points to certain differences that matter. The notion of ‘preferences’ pointed to ‘ideas and imaginings’ about how work
and care might play out in some unconstrained space of free choice. ‘Intentions and plans’, however, were based on constraints such as workplace policy and practice.

So how do women come to their arrangements, and how do they make the decisions they end up making?

**Forced Decisions and Constrained Choices**

I draw on the stories told by Anna, Michelle and Miranda as evidence in support of my general thesis that what happens in the household is the key factor in the arrangements, and decisions that the participants in this study, make today. This is the case, I argue, even though many of these women worked in organisations that had ‘family-friendly’ policies.

**Anna**

At the time of her first interview in 2004, Anna was already a mother of two children (one aged five, and the other five months) and living with her partner. Anna was employed full-time in higher education and on maternity leave after the birth of her second child. Anna was one of the participants able to access paid maternity leave. Her ideal preference had been, return to work part-time (three days per week) and return to a role that had less responsibility, which she said better allowed her to manage family and household responsibilities. It was noteworthy that in her first interview Anna did not refer to her partner when talking about her preferences.

Anna’s preference for work part-time seemed to be associated with the way she saw both her professional role as a manager and herself as a mother. This entailed a deep concern about the well-being of her children (i.e., not having a long day in formal childcare) along with managing her household work.

For Anna, working part-time made it possible to combine paid work and home life while her children were young because she did not want her children to be in formal childcare for extended periods of time. Anna made it very clear that childcare and ‘the household’ were her responsibility and her domain. Her preference was expressed in a hypothetical ‘ideal-world’ scenario, which she says did connect to the real world, was for part-time work. As she explained:
I think I will probably look for some project work or something like that because I think having the kind of job that I was doing three days a week, where I’m sort of more focused on a single task or project – I know that I would find that a lot easier in terms of stress and that kind of thing. Because coming home and basically managing a household and children and that kind of thing is also fairly demanding.

Later in her third interview she said simply:

I think you just simply need a job that is manageable, because in the job I had previously there was an expectation that it was a senior enough role that you work over-and-above the normal work hours and have a significant level of responsibility. And when you’ve got a lot going on at home with managing kids and the household you want something interesting, but you don’t want something that is going to stop you from what you need to be doing in the household as well.

The references to ‘managing’ and to ‘responsibility’ were recurring themes in Anna’s story and talk of how to arrange work and family. They also reveal something of the constraints when thinking about, and surrounding women’s preferences. Prompting Anna to respond further and expand on her preferences revealed something of the way her preferences were constrained, and became choices. What seemed to be driving Anna’s preferences and ideas about how she might organise paid work and care was the problem of managing it all. Anna’s language and constant use of phrases like ‘managing the household’ highlights that what she hoped for had little to do with being a free and unconstrained agent. Concern, if not anxiety, about how to keep both the household running smoothly while engaging in paid work was a key factor in Anna’s decision-making. This would be true also for Margaret, Maria and Michelle. These women’s preferences were constrained by the ‘realities’ of their daily lives.

What lay beneath Anna’s talk of ‘preferences’ and ‘choices’? One thing which influenced Anna’s preference was her partner’s clear preference to work full-time and not take time-off paid work for caring. Later, Anna said that because her husband worked full-time and would be paid more than her even if she were working full-time, meant that his taking time-off from his paid work to take on a child care role was simply not an option. As Anna put it in her second interview:

He doesn’t really want to reduce his hours. …He actually gets a market bonus … and his salary is worth more to us as a family in value than mine, even before I considered part-
time work. He also prefers to work [full-time, rather than look after kids].

Anna’s discussion points to a rationale and a strategy regarding household income. Understanding the importance of this family’s financial consideration indicates a certain balance of power at work in Anna’s decision-making; as mother/woman Anna has less financial bargaining power than her partner. Anna’s comment about earnings also suggests how the existing pattern of gender relations makes it hard for men to not be the breadwinner. The ‘one and a half wage earner’ model is the Australian way of balancing or juggling paid work and family care work which tacitly acknowledges the reality that women tend to be paid lower wages. In an ideal world finances and household income would not be an issue for women/mothers if their preferences were truly ‘free’ as Hakim (2000) represents them to be.

In order to illuminate further some of the dynamics at work in the power relations that both underpin and inform women’s ideas about work and family, I set about trying to better understand how the way the women I spoke with understood their preferences and choices.

For example, I asked Anna about the idea of not changing her paid work arrangements. Anna insisted that it was an ‘impossible dream’ to continue to participate in paid work after the birth of her child in the same way as she had done before she had children. The notion of what was ‘impossible’ and ‘possible’ in terms of organising the balance between her paid work and her family responsibilities rapidly became apparent in the course of the interview. When I asked Anna during the third interview about her preferences in relation to paid work before and after children she described it as ‘impossible’ to work in the same way:

Interviewer: Wouldn’t you rather continue in your career as before you had children, earning the same salary/wage rate and with opportunities for career development [or advancement], while being able to give your child(ren) the time you felt they needed?

Anna: That sounds like the impossible dream. At the end of the day the actual work you’re doing matters less than whether or not the hours are right and whether you can manage to pick up the children and drop them off when you need to, and not having too far to travel, and whether you’ll get a massive guilt trip over whether one of the kids are sick and maybe you can’t come into work because you’ve got to stay at home and look after them. I think it becomes far more important than the actual work you are doing. Because if you
can’t get the family logistics working then the whole thing goes pear−shaped.

Anna’s response suggests how women expect to change the quantum of their paid work while also expecting that the amount of paid work done by their partners will not change. Anna’s story is very much about her identity and role as carer. Her story about her partner is told in terms of him as an ideal worker – working full-time and taking little time off for caring.

In sum, Anna’s story demonstrates that her decisions, and preferences have a lot to do with what is practical, logical and reasonable in the circumstances in which she finds herself. It highlights the way part-time work is understood by women like Anna as a realistic and desirable preference after the birth of a child. However, it is also understood and talked about in a way that can be characterised as a ‘norm’. Anna, for example, understands that it is a ‘good’ thing to be able to return to part-time work after the arrival of a child and to be able to work part-time while the children are young so as to address the tricky balance of managing the household care and engaging in paid work. In this way the ‘ideal world’ and ‘real world’ are merged and become the same. In other words, Anna has expressed her preference for an ideal by making a choice that takes into account what is variously possible and appropriate.

Anna’s story reminds us that the key elements of a gendered habitus always play their part even if unconsciously. One problem with Hakim’s insistence that modern women have ‘real choice’ is that her assumption that both the practice and experience of decision-making by women is undertaken by women acting as free agents. Hakim needs to assume that women are not encumbered by habits of mind and beliefs or that their identity as a woman is thickly sedimented. Hakim is not acknowledging or giving due weight to the way both men and women negotiate their preferences beginning with a strong sense of who they are and how their ‘nature’ constrains what they can or ought to do.

Anna is one of the eleven women who had access to ‘best practice’ workplace provisions dealing with maternity. Her story suggests that both the experience of having both certain preferences and then making decisions is not something being done by an abstracted, freely choosing agent. Rather these ‘choices’ are the consequence variously of understanding and recognising her partner’s preferences, understanding the value of his higher income, and identifying her own motivations such as ‘wanting’ to place her family first and care for her children. The fact that there are maternity leave provisions available
in her workplace is an additional structural factor that enables her to combine paid work and family life. Anna understands ‘the way the system works’ with regard to how best to combine and use different types of leave (I will discuss this further in Chapter Seven).

In contrast, Hakim treats the idea of choice and preference as a kind of elixir that is able to magically confer agency on women, enabling them to transform their situations almost in any fashion they desire:

In the new scenario women have genuine choices in how to shape their lives. The full-time homemaker role is no longer forced on women as the ‘natural’ choice for all … The full-time work role is also not forced on women as a social obligation … The majority of women fall between the two extremes and want the ‘best of both worlds’, in the sense of some combination of paid work and family role. In practice, this choice often means lesser achievements in one or both spheres, compared to women and men who decide on one priority (2000: 169).

Anna’s account reveals that she does not understand her circumstances or her options in the way Hakim suggests she should. Hakim’s (2000) preference theory fails to illuminate the way preferences are experienced or shaped, let alone the complexities of how these preferences are then negotiated inside families. Hakim does not pay enough attention to the interplay of the relationships in the household (like the woman’s relations with significant others – like her partner (and her partners’ preferences and with her children), for example, or of the relationship between the world of the household and the wider field of social action including the workplace and its culture, and the relevant policy settings.

Anna’s story points to the central role played by the idea of management and responsibility, and also shows it was a financial strategy related to household earnings and income. This discussion of finances allows me to interrogate the concept and definition of ‘preferences’ more deeply. Finance is a key factor that looms large in participants’ talk of preferences, and intentions and plans, however, would not feature if preferences were based on ‘ideal’ world situations and lifestyles in which women were free to ‘choose’ as Hakim (2000) argues. Therefore, Anna’s preference is more modest than Hakim (2000) allows. However, the household context is of key importance. It is important to note that it is not just for financial reasons that Anna prefers to work part-time after maternity from her second child; Anna’s partner prefers to work full-time. It is also because her husband works full-time and is paid more and he prefers to work full-time - that her working full-
time is not an option. Further, Anna’s perceptions and experiences revolve around accommodating her husband’s preferences. This is also linked to Crompton’s (1999) work showing how intentions and actions change according to life circumstances and that “the attitudes and behaviour of women towards employment is shaped by a wide range of structural factors, rather than the exercise of “free choice” alone” (Crompton, 2006: 163).

In terms of sharing childcare, Michelle’s story is an example where gender relations in the household, and the ideal worker and carer norms are present and contribute to the maintenance of unequal gender relations.

**Michelle**

At her first interview in 2005, Michelle was thirty years old. She was expecting her first child, and worked full-time as a human resources manager in a large retail organisation. Her husband was thirty-four years old and employed full-time as an IT manager. Michelle was not eligible for paid maternity leave and was able to access only twelve months unpaid maternity leave. She stated that she preferred to work part-time after childbirth and described feeling uncertain:

> In terms of what my role would look like, I’d like a role like what I’m doing now ... it would be a luxury living close to where you work. It will depend on the type of roles that are available at the time that I’m ready to come back … I think it also depends on how I go with motherhood – how I cope and whether it’s something that I find really enjoyable or feel like I would need more of a balance. I think my partner [is an influence] in how we go with that balancing act and how we go with managing the household and the day-to-day life of having a child, which we’re not doing at the moment. If anything happens with my husband’s job – he’s currently not very happy with his job – so if he finds another job, how that impacts on him. How my family care arrangements go with finding a childcare placement, which from what I’ve heard, is quite difficult.

Michelle’s preferences depended upon the workplace accommodating her return to work, the household (income and her partner) and personal feelings about managing and coping with motherhood. Like Anna, Michelle noted practical aspects such as returning to a job with less travel time. Michelle noted her change in focus from her career to motherhood as a subtle (but obvious) pressure not acknowledged in Hakim’s (2000) preference theory:

> I’ve always been fairly career focused and I have always been thinking when I’m in a role:
what’s the next step? Since becoming pregnant – and that’s something that I’ve wanted for a little while – it’s changed my focus … once I have a child I’ll be able to know; I will then know what suits me. I can’t make that decision now.

The notion of moving from a career focus to a child or having to choose between the two was also noted by Paula, another participant:

I think once you have children you focus on your children, and getting that promotion is not important but promotion is important – in the sense that you earn more money and if you’ve only got one person in the partnership earning money it helps enormously. So I guess I’m saying this is something, a lifestyle or a life change, which is very huge for me being someone who’s very academic and is always focused on the academic issues.

Michelle commented that her husband could access some parental leave, and she talked about encouraging him to take three months off paid work when the baby was eight or nine months old so as to experience caring and being at home full-time. However, the unarticulated expectations and pressures from gender/parental roles and gender coded perceptions of a breadwinner constrain him and make for him it unlikely to take time off paid work to care:

He gets, I think, one week’s paid leave and he can take parental leave as well. He’s not too keen on taking a big chunk of parental leave at the time when the baby’s born. But what I’m trying to make him think about is whether, what I think he is thinking about - probably not seriously at the moment, but maybe when the baby comes – is maybe when I return to work, [him] taking a couple of months off at the time and being the main care giver. He can be very traditional so when it comes down to it I don’t know whether he’ll want to do that. I think he feels like he’s the main breadwinner so he should be out there working as opposed to looking after the baby … I think that it would be really good for him and for the child as well.

Michelle noted that her husband was ‘open-minded’ about how she arranged her paid work and family life after childbirth. However, his preference echoed her preference for taking on a full-time caring role at home and also revealed the gendered cost of child care:

My husband is pretty open-minded in terms of how many days I want to return [to paid work]. I think his preference would be that I stayed [at home], that I focus on home more, and his income is pretty good so from that perspective there’s not a huge pressure on me to return to work full-time. It’s really up to me and what suits me, and also what I can find when I’m ready to come back to some extent. And I think pretty much it will be [that] I
want to come back three days a week – [it depends on] what is there out there. It might not be exactly what I want to do, but it’ll keep me in the business and in my area of expertise and I think that’s important … That’s how I see it at the moment. I’m just playing it by ear if you like I’m not committing to too much.

Underpinning Michelle’s discussion about her preferences were gendered assumptions, particularly her husband’s preferences about work and care roles as based in the household context and field. The comments ‘no pressure on me to return to work full-time’, ‘it’s about what suits me’, ‘it might not be exactly what I want to do’ and ‘that’s how I see it’ – were ones I would continue to hear from women (whose partners wanted them to stay home). The trouble with such discussion is that not only do they reflect Williams’ domestic ideology of ideal worker/breadwinner and carer norms, but also the power relations and balance of power in decision-making attached to these norms.

Michelle identified constraints or barriers to her preferred paid work and family arrangements, and also influences. These barriers included access to paid maternity leave and finances, access to appropriate childcare, being able to negotiate her return to work role with her employer, her partner’s preferences, and her own beliefs and ideas about paid work and care. As I heard Michelle talking I could hear the language of a gendered habitus in which ideas about the naturalness of motherhood played a central part. Her own reference to a ‘cultural mould’ captures this point well:

I think one of the constraints for me, one of the barriers, is not having paid maternity leave and I feel more pressured … to try and minimise the time that I’m going to take off work … [R]etail is far behind a lot of other sectors like higher education and banking in terms of paid maternity leave … From a childcare perspective, not being able to say, ‘Yeah I want to put my child into this childcare centre and I want to have these particular days’ and feeling confident to a high degree that I’d get that. At the moment it’s contingent on getting a childcare place and the days of work that I can agree to with the company, with my employer, and there is a lot of unknown there … The constraint of your partner’s perception of about their role in childcare… If it was more equal in terms of an expectation of who was the main caregiver. My husband always says that you’re going to be able to breastfeed so you’re the one who should be looking [after the baby] and have the closest bond. It’s just a little bit hard to get through [to him] sometimes … it’s just sort of getting people out of that mould – the cultural mould that the mother is the main person. I feel like I’ve got a bit of a weight on my shoulders in terms of that expectation, which might be fine if that’s absolutely all I do and I want to be the main care giver … I
would like my husband to contribute … I just don’t know until I’m actually experiencing it.

Here we see the habitus at work. Michelle wants to be the main caregiver, she has an embodied sense and a strong emotional attachment to caring for her baby and spending time bonding. Michelle’s sense at this time was that negotiations in the workplace would play a large role in shaping any decisions she made, but her story also points to ideas her partner has about her role as a woman-as-mother as well as her own sense that she is caught in something of a ‘cultural mould’. Michelle clearly recognised some of the insistent elements that play in the gendered relations in which she finds herself.

Michelle’s story can be explained in terms of Williams’ (2000) domestic ideology. That ideology and its account of an ideal-worker norm has all too real consequences in that it is still very much part of the way paid work and care in the household are both understood and to which people’s conduct is expected to conform (see also Pocock, 2003: 1). Michelle, like Anna, identified herself as ‘putting family first’ before paid work and talked about accepting that making adjustments around her male partner and his work arrangements. The domestic carer norm is based on a fully flexible, sacrificing parent. Michelle also noted that this made her feel pressured, that it is a cultural mould rather than two people sharing equally in the child care and domestic labour. These are key elements of the domestic ideology.

We can see how obdurate that domestic ideology actually is when we hear Michelle discussing the gendered norms which specify what men and women should do and/or actually choose to do in terms of work and family responsibilities. This is evident, for example, in Michelle’s account of her partner not wanting to do any of the caring work, and her hope that this will change at some point in the future:

I often say to him – what about both of us being part-time? But at this stage, he’s not open to the idea.

Interviewer: Why is that? Is that to do with more a salary cut or more to do with how he feels about working part-time or he’d prefer to be working full-time?

Michelle: I just don’t think he would. For a female thinking about having children – I thought about how can I fit this into my life. But [for] my husband, it’s always been the assumption that he’ll work full-time for the rest of his life and [taking time off work for care-work] hasn’t really entered his mind. My hope is that once we do have children we
start to enjoy that time … [I]t’s just about him questioning some of those assumptions that you make about your life and about parenting.

Here we see Michelle’s frustration with the expectations and assumptions associated with her partner’s view of his role as a breadwinner or ideal-worker, which is getting in the way of an equal division of labour in the household. This brings me to a key point underpinning my thesis – that we need to be concerned about the unchanging gender relations regarding child care that occur in the *household* in terms of childbearing and rearing, domesticity (Williams, 2000) – not only workplace culture.

It is also clear that Michelle was aware, and reflexively so, of the gendered norms that informed her relationship with her partner. That this should be so conforms with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as well as with Williams’ (2000) insistence that what are called women’s ‘choices’ in respect to motherhood, paid work and caring are rarely free choices but are always constrained choices being shaped and affected by the gravitational pull of the broader framework of gender arrangements.

Miriam’s biography highlights her preference for working part-time to combine both paid work and child care and also shows how she was constrained by the ideal worker norm which made it difficult to spend time caring for her children – a key feature of William’s (2000) domesticity ideology.

**Miriam**

In the first interview in 2004, Miriam was thirty-two years old, employed full-time in an academic position in higher education. Her husband, aged thirty-nine, was not employed and was a full-time ‘stay at home’ dad. They had two children aged four years and twelve months old. Miriam was the main earner in her household. When pregnant with her second child she worked part-time in a different role at the university:

[T]hat suited me very much because I had an older child and I was able to go home at the end of the day and completely forget about work and there was no doubt in my mind that my principal role was parenting …

When I was pregnant … I had a part-time job, which was wonderful – [it] worked around having a child. However, when I was eight months pregnant I got a phone call from somebody here saying, ‘Would you like to come in for an interview for this job’, and I said, ‘I can’t possibly think about it now because I’m pregnant’. They said, ‘Oh well we
can probably work around that’ … [S]o I negotiated the job when they offered it to me and agreed to start when [my youngest child] was five months old and that was not something I had anticipated doing at all. I firmly felt that my primary role was parenting and I know that an academic life is very demanding and you’re expected to be committed to it outside [of work] hours. I knew that I was going to struggle with that contradiction and I have struggled with it ... Things changed remarkably after I had [my youngest child] and I … came back to work much earlier than I expected to … and working full-time in a very demanding job, which I didn’t expect to be doing.

A full-time academic position was offered to Miriam when she was eight months pregnant with her second child; she agreed to take this position on when her youngest child was five months. At the time Miriam took the position, she said her family was feeling financially constrained and that her husband had ‘always expressed a desire to stay home with the children’. However, taking a full-time job conflicted with her preference to work part-time so that she could combine paid work and child care/time with her children, a preference she consistently expressed throughout the three interviews:

I would prefer to be working part–time and then I’d be happier. I don’t think I’d want to not work at all because I am concerned about what happens when the kids get to a particular age and you invest so much in them and your role as a parent – then where’s your identity come from? I see it in so many older women – I know that I don’t want to do that. I do want to keep working, but I feel that I don’t get to spend enough time with the children at the moment.

Miriam was concerned with the expectations of working full-time while also returning to paid work earlier than anticipated, and of a future where she did not spend as much time with her children as she was wanting to do. On the other hand, Miriam was also concerned about the repercussions of not engaging in paid work. In this way, Miriam can be seen as resisting the practice of full-time caring of previous generations of women. Not only does Miriam’s interview describe Williams’ (2000: 4 – 5) ideal-worker norm that is structured around a full-time worker who is free from caring responsibilities and flexible to the workplace, but it also reflects the fear of taking time off paid work for birth and child rearing, which I saw as playing into the hands of the domesticity ideology in the fields of the corporate world and household.

Miriam described the unbalanced nature of the division of labour between women and men:
I do think it’s unusual, although probably becoming more common, I don’t know that many families where the man is able to and is happy to stay home with the children and where the woman is essentially the breadwinner … that old thing about women having to do twice as much to prove as they’re half as good as men … but I think that women of my generation have been doing twice as much and have felt the need to do twice as much and so do appear to be more successful and more ambitious … and therefore find themselves being the breadwinner when they didn’t necessarily expect [it].

She also commented on the demands of being a breadwinner and carer when she arrives home from paid work, and described her day-to-day life as juggling two jobs:

With my husband staying home you don’t really have the same option of having that kind of traditional [arrangement]. I go out to work and my husband is essentially a wife. When I come home the kids are incredibly demanding – they want a mother and the mothering role and they see that in me. So you are working two jobs really; it’s very demanding. There’s no stopping.

Further, in Miriam’s words, ‘the dominant way’ referred to women taking on both paid work and care arrangements. As she put it in her third interview:

[I] felt quite a bit of pressure from my friends, particularly women friends, to take on demanding jobs like this. I felt more pressure that it wasn’t acceptable to stay home with the children than I did pressure to stay home with my children. I feel that’s the dominant way and friends say it all time, say things like, you know, ‘Oh I can’t bear being home all day, I’m going mad’ - and for me it’s actually a delight to be at home a bit more and I think that’s probably in a way because I haven’t had the opportunity. Maybe if I had the opportunity I would be going a bit stir crazy, but I found it quite, it’s an issue that I struggle with a bit.

This is an example of how circumstances may change, but the ideas and feelings that go with being an ideal carer remains the same. Miriam became disenchanted with the model of combining paid work and family life, which traditionally was designed for a male ideal worker (Williams, 2000). It disenchants individuals because they have to continue to conform to this way of experiencing and practicing paid work and family life (see also Blair-Loy 2003; Pocock 2005). Further, gender relations play a key part in Miriam’s work and carer status and ability to be an ideal worker. The lived experience of going against the habitus is evident when Miriam discussed ‘feeling guilty’ as she negotiated the
contradictory impulses to pursue full-time paid work and engage in home/unpaid care work. As she explained in her first interview, she found this to be a difficult process:

I find it really hard, I feel guilty both places. If I’m at home when I should be at work I feel guilty about it. While I’m here [at work] and I’m not working effectively I think, well I could be at home not working effectively, why am I here? I find it not too hard to make the transition to work once I get here … but when I go home it takes me a good hour or so to say, OK you’re [home]. Like here [at work] nobody gets in my way, I go around doing things and nobody stops me and I have to turn off that expectation and say, OK I’m just going to play; I’m not going to try and fold the clothes or do the cooking.

Silences

At various points in the course of my interviews I encountered unexpected silences, in terms of asking about preferences. The theme of unexpected silences highlights the ways in which women think about dealing with paid and unpaid work and care. These silences occurred as women talked about needing to be flexible, accommodating and adjusting around others in the household (particularly their partners), as well as waiting to see how their choice worked out before making any more definitive decisions about their paid work and child care arrangements.

For example, in her first interview Paula talked about not having ‘too many plans’ and described ‘accommodating’ and ‘adjusting’ around her husband. I now turn to describe how Paula talked about and perceived preferences.

Paula

At the first interview in 2004, Paula was thirty-six years old. She was on paid maternity leave and worked full-time as an academic in higher education. Her husband was thirty-six years, and was employed part-time in higher education while studying full-time. Their child was five months old. Paula was eligible for three months paid maternity leave, which she took ten days before the birth of her son and arranged to take annual leave to give her five and a half months paid leave in total. Paula had the option to take the remaining six and a half months (of twelve in total) of unpaid maternity leave. However, Paula, like Miriam, was the main earner in her household. Paula intended to take six
months off paid work after childbirth and return to paid work part-time, three days per
week. Her main concern was financial:

The option is to take a year off but the problem is, with us, my husband is actually
studying so I’m the breadwinner in the family, so it depends on whether we feel we can
survive without a salary next year. We probably could survive. But it helps to pay off the
mortgage.

Paula talked about not having high expectations about being able to keep up with the same
workload as before having a child.

I’m not being very ambitious. I don’t think there’s much point in thinking you can keep
going doing the same things you were doing full-time without a child … Some women
seem to manage it, but I don’t know how they do. I guess you have to renegotiate what
you want to get out of your career because you can’t achieve the same sort of things when
you’re part-time as you would full-time and you have to sort of prioritise things.

Paula’s expectation of not being able to work in the same way as she had as before
childbirth resembles Anna’s talk of the ‘impossible’ nature of her preferences.

Unfolding in Paula’s ideas about combining paid work and care was evidence that she
was feeling the weight of expectations and a sense that she would not be able to do both
well, possibly even having to sacrifice her paid work:

I was worried about the transition. Well, it’s not even the transition; I’m worried about the
change … Children are a big responsibility and as far as I’m concerned family comes first.

Of the advice she received from her female colleagues, Paula noted, ‘Their comment was
that you end up doing more than the time you’re allocated’ … ‘they thought it was also
very difficult to get promotions’. Paula gave an example of how one female colleague had
managed to get promoted up to senior lecturer, but that this was difficult:

[I]t had been very difficult and she felt the main reason she’d been promoted was she that
her PhD supervisor cum boss was very supportive of her, so she had someone more senior
than her supporting her.

So far we see that embedded in Paula’s ideas about combining motherhood and paid work
are expectations that it is difficult to have a career as an academic on a part-time basis or
to be promoted and that any expectations she might have had about career advancement
needed to be adjusted when you have a baby. Paula described herself as ‘ambitious, up to
this point in my life’, having a successful career, never taking time out of work and often
taking work home on the weekends. She also talked about being aware of not being able
to combine work and family life after the baby, particularly in comparison to her male
colleagues:

I’ve always had sort of academic ambition and for now I have to take a step back and
realise that … it doesn’t matter if I don’t get promoted. I need to realise that these things
aren’t important and that’s why I say now family comes first, but it’s difficult because I
work in a department full of men with families and for them family doesn’t come first.

Paula and her husband were intending to share the child care and also call on their parents
to help out. Paula’s partner, in particular, was strongly opposed to using formal childcare
while their son was young.

Paula talked about the flexibility of academia in terms of she took leave in the following
year while her partner continued to study, noting, ‘I feel very lucky to be working in the
university environment’ … ‘the university is really flexible’. She described friends who
worked in corporate organisations - they didn’t have ‘that sort of flexibility’ in regards to
changing the days she may work after returning to work. It was common in interviews for
participants to view their work arrangements as lucky, and express that they were happy
with these work and domestic situations. Paula described being an academic as ‘quite
flexible’, even though she talked about having to adjust and work around her partner:

I guess you’ve got to look at what you’ve got and try and work out the best situation based
on what your partner is doing. I may decide just to take off the whole year but I have a
feeling, being someone who has always worked or studied, that I won’t want to take off
the whole year, but I may change my mind … I guess we’ve limited ourselves by saying
no childcare and that also affects our finances as well. A lot of people put their kids in
childcare because it means they can earn more money and it’s cheaper in the long run. I
guess I work around the baby, I guess I have really, but it’s what I wanted to do as well.
It’s not like I’ve made any sort of compromise.

When asked about choice, Paula again talked about adjusting and making decisions
around her partner:

It depends on what your partner is doing. I mean if your husband is earning … [T]he
woman across the road is having a baby and her [partner] … obviously earns lots of
money and she’s given up work, she’s not planning on going back to work. So if your
husband is happy to keep working, and doesn’t want to be involved in the child care and he can earn enough money, that is a good option.

Paula also talked about the lack of choice after the arrival of the baby. She considered herself lucky that her husband was keen to be involved in the child care, which gave her more choice:

I guess you don’t have much choice really do you when you think about it. You know you’ve got a child; you’ve got to look after the child. I’m lucky because my husband is happy to help with the child care ... I think he has this notion that he’s going to write novels ... I don’t think he realises that he won’t have much time but he’s a happy homebody and he likes to be at home, and he likes playing with the baby and changing nappies. I guess that’s given me more choice, in a sense, than a lot of women whose husbands don’t want to take time out. That’s probably because my husband is not that ambitious.

Flexibility and creating choice or options were important to Paula when she thought about her return-to-work arrangements. Paula also noted that she doesn’t like to have fixed plans, but wanted to remain flexible and to ‘play it by ear’:

I guess I don’t like to have too many concrete plans because you’ve got to play it by ear to some extent because it depends on what my husband is doing and whether I like working part-time. I’ve said to my head of department, look I can’t promise anything you know, I’d like to be given the option of coming back part-time or taking off the whole year or going part-time indefinitely. He’s fine with that as long as I give him plenty of warning, you know, so he can replace me for lectures and things if I decide not to come back. So I guess I feel like I have quite a bit of flexibility and choice, relative to other friends who wouldn’t, who work for corporate organisations – if they don’t go back after their maternity leave they lose their job.

Paula also described how she and her husband approached the option of childcare. She spoke of childcare making it difficult and it limited their options in terms of thinking about how to organise paid work and care after childbirth:

Initially my husband was dead set against putting him in anywhere until he was in kindergarten or something but I’ve managed to persuade him that maybe when he’s two or three we could put him in somewhere ... It’s hard because we tend to put work first and I guess you feel that if you put your kids first your work will suffer... I’d like to think the choice wasn’t only financial and it isn’t in a sense, that I’m willing to take off the rest of
the year if need be. Part of me thinks, oh gee it would be nice to take the whole year off.

Adjusting to the needs and preferences of others and ‘accommodating’ the household was a key theme in other women’s thinking about their futures.

**Margaret**

At her first interview in 2005, Margaret was thirty-eight and employed as a full-time manager in a small retail organisation; her husband was forty years old and a manager in another industry. At the time of this first interview, the couple had one child less than 12 months. Margaret had returned to paid work between nine and ten months after maternity leave and had compressed five days of full-time work into four days at the office and one day working from home. Her child was at a childcare centre four days a week.

Prior to maternity leave Margaret had discussed her return to work preferences with her employer – for four days in the office and one day from home. Margaret thought this was reasonable from her point of view.

Margaret noted she and her husband needed to decide in the next couple of years if they were going to have another child and, if so how they would arrange their paid work and family life.

I’ll have to find something else because I don’t want to be working full-time with two children – I don’t think it’s fair. I don’t think I’d be able to work from home one day a week with two children, and the reason that I work that day at home was to have it with [my child], so putting her into care and working from home doesn’t achieve what I want to do.

We see that Margaret’s preference with her employer was negotiated in a way where she would be returning at a rate higher than she wanted. We also see that the ongoing work of arranging work and care is an important consideration, particularly due to Margaret preferring not to work full-time with young children.

**Making Sense of It All**

There has been a lively debate in the literature about women’s preferences regarding paid work and care. Hakim (2000: 278) developed her ‘preference theory’ in a bid to explain women’s employment arrangements and decisions. She argued that women have choice
and that what they say they prefer reflects that choice. In Australia, Pocock (2003) says that preferences represent ‘what we want’, and explain why we behave in a particular way. ‘What we do’, our values and norms are reflected in ‘what we think’. Leahy & Doughney (2006) and other researchers from Australia (Smyth, Rawsthorne & Siminski 2005; Samson, 2002) argue that when we talk of women’s preferences we touch on circumstantial constraints, entrenched attitudes and beliefs relating to identity. When we talk about preferences they say we talk about how contributions in personal, family and community domains are defined and perceived (Glezer & Wolcot 1997: 4).

Given my reading of the literature, I expected a rich conversation with my participants about their preferences. Yet as I noted, what surprised me once I began the interviews was that not all participants could either identify or articulate their preferences. Clearly some of the women I interviewed had preferences, but that many didn’t and of those that said they had preferences some were sometimes quite vague about what they were. In short, one early key ‘discovery’ was that not all the women in my study could name or describe their preferences or say what they wanted. Many participants reported not having preferences and feeling unsure in regards to their ideas, plans, preferences and decisions, which was due to a variety of reasons centred around demands, structures, and circumstances in flux.

Two key themes seemed to underpin women’s discussion of their preferences. Firstly, many women who spoke of preferences limited their discussion to what they saw as possible or practical. They typically began by identifying ‘what they would like to do’ in an ideal situation or in an ideal world and then quickly retreated to what was more pragmatic. For example, while my participants expressed a desire to have a good life and to be a good parent they did not articulate what that might mean. Instead they quickly turned to talking about access to part-time work, affordable, quality childcare and managing the relationship between work and home. Those ‘preferences’ focused on what I assumed could be obtained. I saw their preferences as constrained to what was already on offer, what they could already get – not what they might choose if they considered the various options that might be open to them.

Bourdieu calls this wanting the inevitable or ‘the rejection of the inaccessible’ (1988: 114). Drawing on this view, the participants’ preferences for what I saw as practical, pragmatic and modest can bear the marks of a strong cultural tendency. Using Bourdieu’s
work, it can be argued that the participants were limited in what they wanted by what they saw as being available and attainable. What I call into question is the traditional ideas about gender which remain strong in the minds of the participants. I suggest this is what needs to be identified and challenged if we are serious about facilitating and realising possibilities for social change that can enhance real choice for women.

A second element that entered the conversation about preferences was the incorporation not only of personal or individual preferences, but also those of their partner. My reading of this is that it’s the partners’ impact that has been missing – it is not strongly foregrounded in Hakim’s (2000) work. This is a surprising omission, given the social nature of decision-making within the household and the social nature of relationship into which children are typically born. In short, talking about preferences without such a social dimension points to a serious limitation in Hakim’s work.

The language women used to talk about preferences revealed how they were constrained by their habitus. When they spoke about the family and work they imagined and described very traditional social norms and expectations. For example, of the few women who told me about their preference for equal sharing of child care with their partner did so dispiritedly and with a resigned acceptance that such an expectation was very unlikely. The old gender norms described by Williams (2000) as the ‘domestic ideology’, which refers to familiar domestic arrangements where women make accommodation or sacrifice their paid work opportunities, rather than their male partners, was prevalent in these interviews. In all the cases where participants were either currently or previously in a dual-earner household, a key factor in their talk about decision-making, was that what they wanted or preferred, needed to be organised around their partners’ preferences. The bottom line was that a woman’s work life is flexible and that she ought to be accommodating. It is to this issue that I now turn.

The interviews point to the relational, social and gendered qualities of women’s preferences and the evaluations underpinning their thinking about what would be the ideal relationship between their paid work and child care arrangements. Participant responses and stories did reflect economic decisions based on household consumption, as Hakim (2000) describes. However, underpinning these economic considerations were assumptions, for example, about who paid for child care.
Indeed, when asked for the reasons that lay behind their ideas about their arrangements and decisions, most participants gave the explanation they thought might make them appear most reasonable, sensible and practical. Rarely did those answers reflect the real story that was in effect submerged beneath these more publicly acceptable explanations. As will become clearer in later chapters, this story points towards a recognition of the way unbalanced or inequitable arrangements that privileged their male partners were working to undermine any ‘real’ choice they might have. This story about the unequal division of labour, which reflects ideal worker/carer stereotypes, was sitting there quietly and firmly in women’s ideas - under the surface of their talk of their anticipated and desired arrangements.

Hakim’s (2000) preference theory is valuable in its recognition of the importance of preferences. However, it does not seem all that well able to explain the experiences of the women I was interviewing. Preference theory (Hakim, 2000) does not discuss ideas, expectations and practices of accommodating, adjusting, domestic ideology, gender norms, feeling ‘up in the air’ or not able to define a preference, the ‘impossible’ (in Anna’s case story), and inequitable gender relations that I have identified as shaping and underpinning women’s talk of preferences. It does not depict women as having preferences that are un-named and unidentified and changing.

Much of the research on preferences advises caution when interpreting preference data (Smyth, Rawsthorne & Siminski 2005). In particular, while some women can act on their preferences, some can not (Rose 2001). For example, Rose (2001: 38) argues that while some women can make choices based on their values and attitudes ‘more often, action is the product of a structure of opportunities and constraints’.

The norms about work and care that are central to the domestic ideology are both highly gendered and embedded in the habitus of family processes and relationships. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus emphasises the complex overlay of cognitive, emotional and ethical dimensions in what becomes quite simply a sense of the utter rightness and timelessness of a whole way of life, internalised and built into our organisation of family work and making sense of what women, men and children are entitled to.

It is this habitual quality of women’s ideas and sense of what they want or prefer to do, and their sense of the husband’s/father’s preference for paid work and family
arrangements, that renders any attempt to insist on a split between the ‘personal’ and the ‘structural’ meaningless.

The differences between responses from participants employed in higher education and retail were less obvious than expected. Overall, there were more similarities than differences among responses between the two industry groups. Participants from higher education such as Anna, Paula and Miriam had better access to (on paper) workplace provisions for balancing paid work and family, compared with Michelle and other participants employed in the retail industry. Putting industrial policy and workplace practices aside, all participants expressed similar influences underpinning their preferences, intentions and plans. Many participants commented on the constraints of what they could not access, and discussed ‘flexibility’ and ‘support’ with regards to their partner, managing or juggling the general logistics of workload and time, and household earnings or finances were significant themes underpinning preferences, intentions and plans across the two industry cohorts. The most significant themes were gender and domesticity ideology.

At the same time, and as I noted in the previous chapter, care should be taken when drawing any conclusions from my research project and applying them to the broader population of Australian women. All that should be said is that the views of these participants at least represent a challenge to Hakim’s view of preferences, which situate women as having more agency and less to do with gender.

The evidence that I have presented in this chapter supports the key points/messages that gendered perceptions about work–family practices operate in the household, and that the household is a significant component.

My research suggests that it is this site rather than the workplace that plays a part in shaping decisions that are made. In the case of the women in my study, it was what happens within the home, more than the strength of family friendly policy, that influence what their preferences were, what they wanted and what they did. In this way what I am arguing is significant in respect to prevailing debates because it counters the dominant view that if we can get the workplace and policy right then women will have greater choice and opportunity to engage in both paid and domestic work. This context is important and makes significant distinctions – as the meanings of ‘personal preference’
and the relevance to women’s everyday lives are highly debated in the research literature (see Crompton 2006; Himmelweit & Sigala 2004; McRae 2003a, 2003b; Thornwaite 2002; Samson 2002; Probert 2002; Hakim 2000; Crompton & Harris 1998a, 1998b; Glezer & Wolcott 1997; Baxter 2008; Castleman, Coulthard & Reed 2005; Houston & Marks 2003).

While my aim was to map the decision-making process from pregnancy through to after returning to paid work after maternity and as the youngest child grew older – the picture of decision-making revealed here was not straightforward. The evidence suggests that women’s preferences, intentions and plans were at best messy and fluid. Ideas about arrangements show the complex and fluid nature of paid work–family life. Despite there being a decline in the single-earner breadwinner, the assumptions that underlie it remain strong and dominant. Gender norms and cultural ideas of women being primary carers were running through the participants’ stories.

I certainly had not anticipated how complex the ongoing business of combining and organising paid work and family responsibilities would be.

Preferences, intentions and plans are important aspects related to paid work and family arrangements because they reveal women’s/mothers’ ideas about organising and combining paid work and family. Their ideas were made up of an interaction between ideas, material constraints, gender and domesticity ideology. However, preferences, intentions and plans do not represent final arrangements (as will be shown in the following chapters). Rather, they reveal the non-linear complexity and fluidity of arrangements and outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Prior to the beginning of my research, I had expected that all mothers-to-be would have a clear set of preferences and plans for how they wanted to arrange their paid work and child care. I was therefore a little surprised to learn in the course of my interviews that this was not the case. Amy, a thirty-six year old mother of one and a part-time retail worker, was typical in that like some of the other women in the study she struggled to identify her intentions or to say what her preferences were. As she put it:

> It’s difficult to know what you do want in terms of work and family because you’re so
used to just adjusting or fitting in to get things done.

As other women I interviewed indicated, in spite of the ‘supportive workplace’ and their domestic situation circumstances, they understood themselves variously as ‘women’, ‘mothers’, ‘female workers’ and ‘partners’ and they carried with them a series of ideas and beliefs about what they should be doing, that informed or underpinned the decisions they made in respect to their family and work.

In particular, they relied on what can be identified as older, perhaps more ‘traditional’ gendered views of themselves as women whose primary responsibility was to care for their children and for their male partners, who, they understood as the primary breadwinners or providers. As part of that world view their accounts of the work-family preferences, and about arrangements and decision-making that took place in the home about child care and paid work also seemed to be less than equal or fair. The traditional ways in which they identified themselves worked to sustain unequal gender relations between the men and women in these households and the idea that they – as women – ought to take primary responsibility for domestic work and especially child care. Men on the other hand had priority when it came to paid work. The women did not expect their partners to make any significant sacrifices, like working more flexible hours or putting their employment security at risk so as to contribute more to child care work thus creating the circumstances in which the woman would be able to increase her paid work time.

The ways these caring responsibilities were talked about had clear implications for how women would make sense of their preferences for working part-time or full-time and therefore for how the actual distribution of time for paid work and domestic work would be distributed. Women’s ideas about paid and unpaid work connected their hopes and aspirations to some strikingly gendered propositions about responsibility for child care and the ideal worker. These preferences are consistent with Williams’ (2000) discussion of parental norms in her account of ‘domestic ideology’. Emphasising the way this domestic ideology as foregrounded in the gender habitus in the field of the household, seems to shape women’s preferences and ideas about paid and unpaid work including care work, seems to work better than Hakim’s (2000) notion of personal preferences. The image of the ‘ideal worker’ for so long assumed to refer to a male, full-time employee, who does not work part-time or combine paid work and unpaid care work, has often been positioned against the ‘marginalised carer’ presumptively understood to be a woman who
is positioned as a secondary earner and who takes primary responsibility for care work. This binary has played a major part in shaping the way women’s work is thought about by both men and women and so has sculpted the complex dynamics, practices and relations at work in the ways families make decisions.
CHAPTER FIVE

‘THERE’S ALWAYS CONFLICT AND COMPROMISE’: HOW WOMEN DEAL WITH PAID WORK AND CHILD CARE

The great nineteenth-century Danish existentialist Soren Kierkegaard once observed that ‘life can only be understood backwards, but ... it must be lived forward’. The truth of that proposition seems exemplified in the way most of the women I interviewed made decisions about the best balance of paid work and domestic work for them and their family. As I argued in the previous chapter, old gender stereotypes continue to influence the arrangements of, and the decisions many women make. As demonstrated in my interviews with women before the birth of the child, and with mothers, underpinning their efforts to think ahead about their preferences for work–family arrangements were certain older and more traditional ideas about who is responsible for caring for children. These ideas continue to hold sway. But do things change after the birth of a child?

In this chapter I explore the consequences for women once they have had a child on how they think about the balance of paid work and child care. Here I focus on the decisions made by the women I spoke with. I try to establish the role played by what they valued and what they believed and how their values and beliefs influenced them as they went about making their decisions. Also central here – as I will show, are the gendered practice and relations, which further reveals the habitus at work to shape women’s arrangements. I also inquire as to how they described and interpreted their experiences. Do women change their minds about the desirable amount of paid work they ought to be doing after the child has been born? How is it that some women are able to continue in their employment once children have arrived? Are there any similarities in the ways different women organise their paid and family work? Do career options change for those who combine paid work with child care? Does a partner’s employment status change after childbirth? The aim in asking such questions is to capture how my participants made decisions and then acted to accommodate both employment and child care.

By documenting the transformations and accommodations the women I interviewed experienced across the three interviews (at the return to work and after), I demonstrate how their lived experiences contrast with the contemporary idea that women are now ‘free’ to choose their family–work arrangements.
My research reveals a more complex and challenging picture. It highlights how having a child typically comes at a cost to pursuing a career. Mothers are likely to step out of the labour market for a period of time after the birth of their child, and usually it is difficult for them to do the same quantum of paid work as they had done prior to having children (Williams 2000; Grace 2004). Given this, along with writers like Hochschild (1989) and Williams (2000), I argue that feminism has not been the cause of work–family conflict. Likewise, as my interview material reveals, we are a long way from achieving equality for women. Indeed, it is because gender based oppression remains entrenched within our culture that the need for more feminist social action continues. As Williams (2000) suggests, rather than arguing that men and women are equal now, a more accurate description is that:

[O]ur system has shifted from one where (middle-class) men were breadwinners and (middle-class) women were housewives to one where men are ideal workers and their wives (or ex-wives) are workers marginalized by caregiving (2000: 124).

The transition that many of my participants made back to paid work highlighted the influence of an enabling or supportive context. However, the gendered habitus, characterised by domestic ideology and reproduced within the household, remained a central influence. Many women’s experiences are shaped by a gender order that draws them to the household and encourages them to reduce their paid work commitments. It is a frame of mind and the emotional embodied practices and feelings of mothering that reinforces the traditional gendered power relations characterised, amongst other things, by an unequal sharing of paid and unpaid work. This is an account of the habitus at work.

‘Cutting back’ paid work when the children arrive

There were experiences common to a number of my participants. It is clear that part-time employment was the dominant arrangement. This is especially evident when we look at the set of third interviews – see Table 3 – when all participants were mothers.

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<tr>
<th>Participants’ paid work status</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most women moved from full-time to part-time work at the time when they gave birth to a child; alternately, they continued working part-time but reduced their hours. Some also left paid work completely after the birth of their child because they had ‘no job to go back to’ and had decided not to seek alternative employment.

In the first round of interviews twelve of the participants were employed full-time, twelve worked part-time and three were casual workers (four participants were on leave; this included combinations of paid and unpaid maternity leave, and annual leave).

By the time I conducted the second set of interviews, the number of full-time workers had decreased by three; that is, from twelve to nine. By the final round of interviews the number had dropped by more than half – from twelve at the first interview, to five by the third. Overall, participants employed part-time increased by six; the majority were working part-time at the third interview (eighteen of twenty-seven).

These constantly shifting arrangements have been acknowledged by other researchers as a common pattern (see for example, McRae 1993, 2003a, 2003b; Houston & Marks 2003; Maher & Lindsay 2005a; Smyth, Rawsthorne & Siminski 2005). Maher and Lindsay observe the highly changeable nature of these arrangements:

> Women’s definitions of their work and the patterns of movement between were not linear or determined. Women moved across the domains of full-time, part-time and caring work, volunteer and community sector work … They consistently re-ordered their lives to manage shifts in each of these domains (2005a: 7).

In this chapter I build on the discussion in the previous chapter of women’s stories of having to constantly keep 'adjusting', 'accommodating' and 'being flexible' as they moved between child care and employment and back again. It is also worth noting that a capacity of a mother to have meaningful choice about engaging in employment was influenced by the age of the youngest child (Pocock 2003; Grace 2004). The emotional attachment to their children was a key part of the women’s gender habitus. However, as I will show, motherhood comes at a cost in terms of paid work (Crittenden (2001)).
Table 4 (below) shows changes to my participants’ employment status across time and the three sets of interviews. While twelve of twenty-seven of my participants experienced change, fifteen remained in continuous paid employment. While there were slightly more participants who had not changed their employment status, there were significant shifts in terms of their employer, the workplace and the number of hours worked.

Table 4: Changes to employment status across interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Leave</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>H. Education</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT (on leave)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We need to look at paid work patterns in a discriminating way. For example, while change in paid work status from interview one to three was common for just under half of the women, continuity in paid work status was actually the dominant pattern, as represented in Table 5 and Table 6 below. However, it is equally important to point out that even those participants who reported the same paid work status across all three interviews had also experienced considerable change in other ways.

**Table 5: Change and continuity in paid work status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paid work status interview 1 to 3</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
<th>Retail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change in paid work status</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous paid work status</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6: Paid work status continuity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part-time interview 1 to 3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual interview 1 to 3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time interview 1 to 3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To put this another way: continuity in employment status did not mean continuity of work experiences. Indeed, there was significant change not only in the hours worked, but also in the work roles and responsibilities. Five of the fifteen participants (Barbara, Naomi, Joan, Margaret and Joanne) who had continuous or unchanged employment across the three interviews changed their place of work. Naomi had found that her first workplace was not family-friendly and she wanted a work culture that had greater flexibility and which took the idea of work–life balance seriously:

At the end of last year I had a chat to one of my bosses, well my PhD supervisor actually, who had been a mentor to me as well and said, ‘Look I’m really not happy with the way things are’. And I felt the work-life balance was a bit out. He said, ‘Well just quit and then work out what you want to do’. So at the end of last year I sort of resigned, or told my boss that I was going to resign ... So I was thinking about what I was going to do, and that this isn’t really what I want to do. So at that stage I started looking around for a few other positions and applied for a few jobs and in the meantime my supervisor actually wrote to me and said, ‘I’ve got something here that might suit you’, which was a three-day a week role and it could be, if I wanted, nine-to-five-ish. That’s what I wanted … So it’s actually
working out really well. It’s a team position too, which I think is helping me a lot, so it’s not just me. There are a lot of other people involved. So on the days that I’m not there they’re doing other stuff for the project.

To discover the kind of discussions that took place with her partner following the birth of their second child, I asked Naomi whether he had expectations about her returning to work and whether they talked about how those decisions might be made. She responded with a firm ‘no’. It appears that the decision and the responsibility for ‘working it out’ had been hers. It was in conversations like this that the uneven nature of the task of working out the child care and new employment arrangements became obvious:

The only thing (which is probably not much to do with him) is that in the end I had the choice of the two jobs – the job that was full-time and that they could work me in part-time, and the job that my supervisor had offered me. And the difference in those jobs – they were both three days a week, they were both fairly flexible, they were both reasonably interesting. One was something that I knew, so I knew mostly everyone – I’d be fairly happy there. The other one, I would be a little bit more uncertain [of] because I hadn’t worked with any of these people, I didn’t know any of them. The job that I turned down was much higher paying compared with the job with supervisor. The only thing [my partner] wouldn’t understand is why I would take a lesser paying job than the stability of going into a job where I was less certain of how it would all work. Whereas I don’t have anything to worry about now I know I’ll be fine. With an ill child you can’t get in a nanny when you have to work, you can’t send them to day-care and the only option would be to ask [my partner’s] parents and they might get ill and the stress isn’t fair to them, and they’re a little bit older ... So we just have to drop everything.

Naomi chose a job that paid less, but was more flexible and supportive, and enabled her to carry out what she saw as her primary care role. Her partner did not alter his paid work arrangements. Naomi saw child care obligations as her domain and her responsibility; of crucial importance to Naomi was having a job that was accommodating and supportive of her role as mother.

The need for flexibility in the workplace and a personal capacity to continually make adjustments was described by Margaret, who said: ‘You just get used to constantly adjusting’. In Margaret’s story we see the ‘default mode’ in operation that is the practice of always putting herself second:

I think that you just get used to putting yourself second and then it becomes a way of life,
especially with a young baby that’s awake every three hours – so you start putting yourself second. When it comes to returning to work you’re so used to doing that it actually takes quite a conscious effort to go, ‘Hang on a minute’. So I think it actually comes down to whether it be generally running around or organising things, you just try to do it because it’s almost what you are trained to do. I think too, that in the last six months [my partner’s] been a lot more open to making himself available to finish early if [my daughter’s] not well or if she needs to be taken somewhere or picked up. I just stayed at home and he preferred to work and before it seemed to be that it was always me more than he, he wasn’t prioritising [our daughter] and he worked more and she was at crèche … I was wanting to go to a specialist … and it would be nice if he was there and I would be able to take her whereas she’s a little bit older and he perhaps just got used to it and he’s now a lot more supportive than he was to start with so that’s certainly a good thing.

I think there’s still the perception that the woman’s the mother so she’s the primary caregiver. I think that’s still very much a reality. I don’t know what’s changed with my partner so I mentioned it to him, but I don’t want to make a big deal about it … [I don’t know] whether it’s about change or whether it’s just that he realises that I can’t do it all on my own – it could be either of those two things or perhaps both of them … It wasn’t so much that it’s more to do with the day-to-day housework and things like that and so I’d get home from work and I’d have to pick up [my daughter] and make dinner, and be doing other things, and so probably he’d play with her for a couple of hours. If I was lucky he might empty the dishwasher or do something like that but he certainly wouldn’t see me doing something and then say to me, ‘Hey! What can I do to help?’ (Interview two)

Three participants, Nicole, Cheryl and Emma, took on more paid work hours than they seem to have wanted. That increase was to accommodate the change brought about by and to compensate for the effect of changes made by their partners’ employment arrangements, which had produced a drop in the household income. This, however, did not mean they reduced their child care and domestic work. What it meant was that the women did those jobs after they had finished their paid work.

In what follows I delve further into the experiences and the events, conversations and views that influenced the decisions these women made about what they did in regard to their paid work. I argue that arrangements in the household, their partners’ employment status and the habitus within the household were key factors that shaped their preferences, decisions and what they actually ended up doing.
While my participants did not use the term ‘ideal worker’ to describe themselves, it was clear that once they had child-care responsibilities they could no longer operate as one (Williams 2000; Gaze 2001). Part-time work meant they could manage some work and still maintain their family obligations (Craig et al. 2008; Pocock 2003).

While some participants ‘traded-off’ paid work or took a ‘side step’ in their career until the children were older, others ‘chose’ to engage in full-time child care. The habitus and embodied aspects of being a mother also permit this side step. I argue that Bourdieu’s notion of doxa experiences/practices has some explanatory value in relation to how the decision to be full-time carers was taken. Doxa is the classical Greek word for a ‘common belief’ or ‘popular opinion’ (it was usually set against the Greek word logos referring to ‘certain knowledge’). In Bourdieu’s (2001) hands, doxa refers to the opinions held by people about the social world, and matters like the relations between men and women, as self-evident, as the way things are naturally and how they ought to be. Doxa plays an important and typically unconscious influence in habitus and informs symbolic violence (Durey 2008).

The Cover-up of ‘Choice’ and the Problem of the Ideal Worker

Lisa, who was employed in retail, decided to do less paid work and more child care because her partner’s income had increased. This is one example of how changes within the household can affect the woman’s decisions about paid work. While Lisa explicitly described herself as having made choices, I argue that her decisions were strongly influenced by gendered habitus. In this case the domesticity ideology that characterised her traditional dispositions and sensibilities reinforced and strengthened inequitable gender relations – and distribution of work. In this way it can be seen that while progressive policy and laws and certain narratives that speak of gender equity have become a part of the contemporary social world, traditional feminine identities and practices appear not to be changing all that much.

Lisa

Lisa loved being a mother. She talked of motherhood as fulfilling and joyful, and she particularly enjoyed the emotional attachment and bond to her baby. When Lisa was twenty-nine I first spoke with her in 2005. She was a full-time manager in a small retail
organisation, married and the mother of a seventeen month old baby. When she was pregnant with her first child she said that she had imagined working up until two weeks prior to the birth. Her working day was approximately five hours long and she never missed a day of work until she was thirty-six weeks pregnant. She was not, however, eligible for paid maternity leave.

Lisa intended to return to paid work within a few weeks of the birth; she used annual leave to take two weeks off with the idea of returning soon after childbirth. Lisa took her baby to work while she was breastfeeding; she also worked from home prior to returning to work. She returned to work on a full-time basis and divided her work between the shop floor and working from home, and described retail as one of the most flexible industries because they accommodated her preference.

Lisa’s husband had worked for fifteen years with one employer and had access to paid paternity leave as well as to annual and long service leave. In her first interview, Lisa had described her partner in terms that Williams (2000) used to describe the ‘ideal worker’ – he took no parental leave, was very loyal to his workplace and worked long hours. Although Lisa’s partner could access paid paternity leave he had instead taken annual leave and so had taken two weeks of his annual leave at the time of their child’s birth. Lisa described his workplace as supportive of men using annual leave for this purpose.

Lisa also described him as a ‘typical male’:

He had paternity leave that he was able to draw on, but he chose not to because [he] had worked with them for fifteen years – so he had fifteen years of long service owing to him [too], which he’d never drawn on, and being a typical male, [he] had something like a half of one year’s sick pay and annual leave owing to him. So, again, he didn’t draw on it because he took two weeks off at the time [our child] was born and he used annual leave for that, and then he just had another month off work … At different times he’s just used his annual leave, you know, for appointments or anything like that that he wanted to be involved in – but they’ve been great with him because he’s worked there for so long.

Even so, her partner seemed willing to play some part in child care but usually only after she had asked him to ‘help out’:

Again, [his workplace is] really great – sometimes I’d ring up and say can you come home early today I’ve not got the energy to survive the afternoon because he works such hours, you know, he’s gone at seven o’clock in the morning and never really home before seven-
thirty at night. So sometimes I’d ring up and say, ‘I am just not going to make it through the afternoon, I’m way too tired, come home’, and he would, and it’s great. [He] really has a lot of flexibility … [At] other times, he’s gone in [to work] late … Yeah they’ve been really great with his work, fantastic.

Something of the same pattern was also evident in the case of Martha, a part-time academic. When talking about her partner, Martha said:

I don’t know if he has parental leave – we’ve had this conversation many times and I don’t think he’s ever actually asked anyone. We were fortunate enough that he had accumulated a lot of annual leave and long service leave as well – he never takes it off. So he had something like twelve weeks of annual leave accumulated so we decided, well I made it very clear, that he was going to take six weeks off at least when she was born. So he never actually looked into that whole parental leave thing … Several months before [the baby] was born [my partner’s] mother had passed away and he’d taken quite a lot of compassionate leave with that cause she was quite sick. He was sort of pretty much ready to go: I’ll just use my annual leave. You know how some people feel a bit funny about negotiating things; I think he was a bit like that. So I don’t know whether he has parental leave or not.

Baird, an Australian work–family researcher, comments that the practice of men not taking parental leave when it was available to them was in fact common:

Since 1990, Australian men have been entitled to twelve months unpaid paternity leave but fewer than one in ten use any of it. Instead eighty per cent of working men take two weeks’ paid annual leave when their child is born … [M]ost men who do have access to paternity leave choose not to use it … [W]orkplace expectations and societal pressures are the main reasons for this (Baird, in Egan & Sheridan 2009, The Age)

Recent Australian research also shows that gendered notions of the ‘ideal worker’ remain embedded in many workplace cultures, which explain in part why some men are reluctant to work part-time and apply for paternity leave. The fear seems to be that part-time employment and paternity leave are not ‘manly’.

“People are too scared to ask about part-time work”. There was … a broad assumption that part-time work was ‘just’ for women, despite the identification of several men who had been allowed to work reduced hours, with one production line focus group participant commenting that the view in his work area was that “real men don’t work part-time” (Charlesworth & Cartwright 2007: 11).
What we see here is evidence that workplace-based policies, like the provision of unpaid paternity leave, continue to fail many women because they do little to disrupt traditional domestic habitus. Legislation and policies alone are not enough. Baird makes my point when she says she doubts that it:

… will be enough to encourage men to swap suit and tie for stroller and nappy bag, because they’re not prepared to risk the career repercussions women have endured for years (Baird, in Egan & Sheridan 2009, *The Age*).

The notion of the ‘ideal worker’ has become so much a part of men and women’s gender identity that substantial change is unlikely until we see more serious challenges to traditional gender identities and the notion of the ideal worker. Whitehouse agrees:

[W]e have to legitimise father’s use of leave to look after children …several Scandinavian countries have adopted use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave to encourage fathers to play a greater role in raising their children (Whitehouse, in Egan & Sheridan 2009, *The Age*).

This is not an argument in favour of giving up on the use of policies to help bring about positive changes in the workplace, by way of offering more support to women and men who have caring responsibilities. It is more an argument about the need to pay attention to other matters, like the politics of language and the way language is used to in ways that invite us to see things in particular ways. For example, Lisa was emphatic about the fact she that she chose to be the primary carer.

Hakim (2003) drew on research gathered by the British Cabinet Office’s Women’s unit in 1998 and 1999 to advance the argument that ‘some mothers were … clear that women now have choices and opportunities’. However, if we look closely at the talk of ‘choice’ as Williams (2000: 14–15) suggest we ought to, and if choice is to be understood as the ability to select freely from a range of viable options, it becomes apparent that this kind of choice rarely exists. As Williams points out:

Women often use choice rhetoric to describe their decisions in favour of domesticity. So does everyone else. Economists have an entire … literature that attributes women’s disadvantaged workforce position to the fact that they “self-select” into jobs that require less education and levels of skill … mothers’ load of family work often does affect their workforce participation … mothers often do not take jobs that require them to perform as ideal workers (2000: 14 - 15).
I suggest that when arguments are made about choice we need to be cautious about accepting such claims at face value. I say this because too often the reality is that women have few viable options other than to take on the main caring role, and then try to fit in as many hours of paid work as she can manage. In this way, talk about choice may give the impression that women exercise their human agency and freely elect to do A or B, but they do so in the context of certain constraints. Thus when the language of choice is used it can actually disguise the subtle but nonetheless powerful influences at play while helping compound and reproduce the traditional domestic arrangements that characterise their habitus (Williams 2000).

When I asked Lisa about her choices and whether she felt she had choices, she began discussing economics, parenting norms, the ideal worker and the ideal carer:

I think economics has a lot to do with it. The people that I know that have had to return to work and [they’ve then returned to work] put their children in childcare [have] begrudged it and hated it, but have had to do that – have had to go back after six months … they had no maternity leave or whatever – truly for financial reasons. I don’t know anybody in my circle of friends that has gone back to work because they really love their job but they’ve had to leave their child behind. I know for me, if I had to leave [my child] at home, and if I had to go back, if I hadn’t been able to take [my child] with me, I wouldn’t have gone back to work. That’s something that [my partner] and I were quite definite on. I would certainly have been an at-home mum and happy about that.

The emotional attachment and value placed on caring for her baby, is important for Lisa as a mother. The emotional embodiment of mother-carer is part of the gender habitus; thus we see the habitus at work. Lisa explains:

[M]y best friend is an at-home mum and is happy about that … It’s not an issue for her financially to need to go back to work. But then I look at my sister-in-law who has had so much pressure, and her husband was unemployed while she was pregnant … People nowadays have huge mortgages, two cars that are always on loan. People are up to their eyeballs in debt and they think it’s their right to have all this stuff … [They] keep loading up their credit cards but they don’t understand the consequences of it and it often hits them, like, [when] they have a child and they drop down one income and they just realise they can’t afford to live off one income. Well they would have known that before you got pregnant you should have worked something out about it then. Sell your cars and buy, you know, perhaps second hand cars that are within your means.
Lisa then spoke in detail about her ‘choices’:

I feel very fortunate that I have the flexibility to make choices and that I have a lot of choices to make. I feel very lucky that if something happened tomorrow and I had to go and work full-time I would without a thought … If I need to work full-time and earn money I always could …. I feel like I’ve got … [a] good work history behind me and I’ve got very good contacts and … I feel confident. The situation I’m in now is … [that] I am primarily being a mother. If that was taken away from me, if that was removed, I doubt that I would really struggle. I would have to be a full-time worker and a mum.

Work will still be here tomorrow and your family is more important. And your family comes first and you just can’t put a price on that.

Here we see Lisa affirming the priority of traditional value which as she puts it is the proposition that, ‘Your family comes first’. It is also apparent in her accounts of choice understood as the freedom to pursue child care. For Williams, the language of ‘choice’ actually works to favour decision-making which reinforces the ideal work-care norm played out primarily in the home. As Williams (2000: 15) says, the choice of being able to ‘drop out or cut back on work’ with relative ease and flexibility overlooks too many realities, including the fact that many workplaces do not in practice offer their female employees any capacity to accommodate the needs of women with small children in their care. It also overlooks both the overt and the more subtle forces at play that influence the choices women make about employment and child care.

One participant, Sandra, drew a distinction between the ideas of ‘choice’ and ‘decision making’ to highlight her awareness of the fact she was not making choices, but rather making decisions between constrained options. As Sandra observed, each time she took a decision to select one of a few constrained options, the choice she made was not what she would have chosen freely, but rather what she opted for in the context of significant constraints that limited her opportunity to do what she really wanted to:

It does feel more natural for me to say ‘to make a decision’ rather than ‘to make a choice’ because I think there’s too many constraints to really feel that you’re making a choice. I think you’re given a number of options and you have to decide which you’re going to make – there’s always conflict and compromise … It’s more about trying to make compromises and weighing up what’s the best result with both you and your partner, and such a significant part of that is the financial aspect of it. I know that it’d be a far healthier option for me to be working part-time, but I might be compelled to go back full-time.
because we might be under too much financial strain ... So that wouldn’t necessarily be a choice.

In her interview, Martha also drew a similar distinction between making a ‘choice’ and making a ‘decision’:

I think it is very appropriate to call it ‘decisions’ rather than ‘choices’. In calling it choices it portrays what I think is a bit of a falsehood, in that women have freedom to choose from a broad range of options, thus assigning responsibility for the choices to the women themselves rather than making visible the wider influences on their choice – quite convenient for policy makers. They can say ‘women have chosen to do it this way or that way’ and therefore they are telling us what they want! … For me, it’s about accommodating individual circumstances.

It’s really quite complex. I think it’s wrong to say that women have so much choice – and that’s just a reflection of growing up through that era after when we were being told constantly ‘you can do and have anything’. When I left school it was like you can just walk in anywhere and get a job. It was like very much through my whole high school and I guess primary school – [the idea] you can have [it all], you can have a job and stuff and then of course [you] come out to the real world and realise that no, it doesn’t actually work like that. The whole debate, heated discussion I guess at times, between feminists: … ‘You said that we could have everything’; and then the old feminists replied, saying ‘We said that you could have everything but we didn’t mean that you could have it all at once’. I think that really rings true to me, having gone through that feeling as if I was told we could do anything. I can now see what they were actually saying that you can have a lot of stuff but you can’t have it all at once. So I think at the first level women are constrained in choice by their biology and if they decide to have children – that has a huge impact, doesn’t matter what else is in place, does not matter! … the extent of the impact that has is obviously either softened or hardened by … The society that you’re in and the supports that are in place … Your choices are constrained; [they] become constrained.

While some of the women I interviewed opted to use the language of ‘choice’, it was not the only way participants talked about their experiences. Some spoke about managing their time allocation by juggling time – where anything could happen or change at any time – and used metaphors like ‘a dance’ or ‘tug of war’.

I note here Martha’s reference to the ‘biology’ of being a woman and mother, which she regards as a constraint or something influences her choices. Her ‘biology’ means that she
is the one who gets pregnant, gives birth, breastfeeds, is part of ‘reproduction ideology’ and part of the habitus.

Some people even explained the pattern of work and care arrangements which were actually in place in terms of the baby’s character or disposition. ‘Good babies’ were seen to enable the mother to ‘juggle’ her time better, while – presumably – ‘bad babies’ did not. Lisa had an arrangement that involved taking her baby to work. She had looked at the prospect of using childcare centres prior to the arrival of her child, but decided against using it – at least until her child was older. She explained that she had this option open to her because she was ‘fortunate’ or ‘lucky’. Not only did she have a mother who would help out, but she also had a ‘good baby’. It was because the baby was good – that is, it slept a lot, did not cry and was not too demanding and so forth – that she was able to make the work–care arrangements she had organised.

Lisa continued by reflecting on her own mother and what she had done to manage the ratio of child care to employment. Recalling the experiences of previous generations was something a number of my participants also did. As Lisa told me:

I think when you’re a parent you always reflect back in your own past, and my mum worked right through … I’m doing the same thing that my mum did back then. People think it’s really weird that I’ve been able to do but that’s what my mum did … There are women out there working and having babies and doing it all just the same and my mum ended up getting paid ten cents less so that she could not be getting the same as a man. Isn’t that funny? My mum did that with all of us.

The image of a ‘good mother’ appeared to play a strong role in the minds of many participants, and is central to the gender habitus. Thus we see here the habitus at work. The ‘good woman’ as ‘good mother’ is a traditionally gendered character, one who is able to manage a number of competing interests while always putting family before herself. Indeed, if the option of taking the baby to work didn’t work then the ‘choice’ was simple – resign from paid work to care for the child.

As Lisa explained, she chose to work because her baby permitted it. Her role, identity and visible ‘performance’ as a motherhood was important to her, as was her emotional attachment and capacity to care for her baby. She described this in the interviews as one of the most valuable aspects of her life. Moreover, she could, if she wished, not work
because her partner had an income that was big enough to support the family. All of these aspects her life: family relations, feelings about the need to care for her baby and to be a good mother, income, her partners interests and her relationship with him made up the habitus.

I think that’s perhaps what John Howard is getting at – stay at home, stop living the high life, gear down a little bit and be happy within yourself – because I think that’s what a lot of people are missing out on. They’re just missing out on happiness. They’re chasing something, they get on this merry-go-around, keeping up with the Jones’s or whatever, and they are just chasing themselves around in circles.

I’ve found parenting and working to be really positive. I’ve found that it’s worked really well and it’s been great for [my partner] – a really fantastic thing. If I’d had the type of child that didn’t enjoy being at work [with me] I would have resigned without a doubt. You know, I had that option available to me, that financially we could manage on one income. It’s just been a bonus and I think it’s actually added to our life. I think a lot of people find work can take you away from your life.

For women who did not have a partner with a high income, the ‘choice’ of not working was not a realistic option. Likewise ‘gearing down’ from the ‘high life’ and living a more modest lifestyle assumes one has a ‘high life’ to begin with. For many women, and their families, making ends meet can be quite difficult and can require two incomes. This is to say nothing of single mothers who do not have a partner with an income, or the material and practical supports a partner can offer. For those women the ‘choice’ is minimal.

Seven months after the first interview with Lisa, her child was placed in childcare for two days per week and was also cared for by Lisa’s mother one afternoon per week. Taking her child to work ended up becoming too difficult, so reduced her paid work hours from full-time to twenty hours per week. Nine months later, at the time of our third interview Lisa had reduced her hours even further back to ten hours per week. She explained that the reduction in her working hours was primarily due to the way things were working out in the household. This, she said, allowed her to make the choice to become the ideal carer/’good mother’ – which was her clear preference.

Lisa explained that it was her partner’s high income that was the key factor in her decision to reduce her paid working hours. She also said that it was her intention to reduce her hours even further, and eventually stop working:
I only work at the most ten hours per week. The last time I spoke to you I was probably working double that. I started [my child in] two days a week in childcare and two days a week, with me. Soon I’ll be decreasing as my husband’s had a change in his work situation and he left the company he’s been with for sixteen years. He was poached away from them and they made it very worth his while to leave and financially we don’t really need to have me working. That’s been a bit of a driving force in the reduction of me working, but also I feel at this age that [my son’s] just blossomed into this beautiful child and he gets so much excitement out of the things that we go and do, whether it’s going to the zoo or to a park etc, and I really enjoy doing that with him and I think that’s what childhood should be about. So just prior to my husband changing work … I had a little time off … and I really enjoyed being a mum and not having work in my life. We could see he was getting a lot of pleasure out of doing different activities.

If we apply Williams’ concept of ‘domestic ideology’ to Lisa’s case we see ‘the dominant domestic ecology’ at work. Labour is turned into ‘love’ which enhances ‘men’s market potential while eroding that of the woman. ‘The family work of a full or part-time homemaker allows her husband to concentrate his efforts on market work’ (Williams 2000: 125). The heuristic value of this concept is also evident in Lisa’s observations in the third interview when she reflects on her capacity to choose:

I’m realising that you can’t put a price on the pleasure of parenting and that fortunately we are in a financial situation where I can choose that. I always thought that I would remain in that career about twenty to twenty-five hours a week but I find that [when my son] was younger and not so actively participating in the world, [then] me working was more viable, whereas now it’s not so rewarding as being involved in his life. So that’s something that’s a surprise to me, to be honest, because I thought that as he got older I was going to step back a little bit more from him, and I’d be happy for him to go into day care and [us] be more independent of one another, but I’m finding it to be me and I’m wanting to be more involved with my child. So work sort of comes down the list in priorities.

Here we see that what happens in the household has a critical influence on the decisions women make about child care and paid work.

**Increasing Paid Work**

Against the general trend to reduce paid working hours, a small number of participants increased their quantum of paid work. In her third interview, Emma referred to the need to
be flexible to accommodate changes to her partner’s paid work commitments. This, she explained, put immediate pressure on her in respect to her paid work and family care arrangements.

I think I’ve had four different contracts since I started at work. Each time [my partner] had a change in work I approached my work and said, ‘There’s been a change – what can I do?’ Fortunately for me they’re very adaptable to my needs.

The financial situation in the household created the circumstances where it made sense for Lisa to decrease her paid work hours, but for Emma it meant increasing her paid work hours, and fitting in with her partners’ work arrangements.

By the third interview, Diana and Christine had also increased their hours, moving from part-time paid work to full-time. In the case of both women, the increase was understood in terms of financial pressure. They said it was not their preference – they did not want to work or develop their careers (See Blair-Loy 2003; Hakim 2000). As Christine who was employed in the retail industry explained it:

The reason why I am working the hours is to try to move ahead financially … we are continuing to get further into debt.

Diana, who was employed full-time in the retail industry at the first interview, returned part-time after childbirth, but earlier than anticipated. By the third interview she had returned to full-time work – an example of a fluid pattern. She had had no access to paid maternity leave. Like Christine, underpinning Diana’s paid work transitions was the problem that the household income was not matching the expenses. Both Diana and her partner believed they could not afford to reduce their incomes after the birth of their child. Diana returned to work earlier than she preferred and ended up taking on more hours due to financial needs connected to her partner’s paid work and their mortgage payments.

Christine’s biography shows similar features to Diana.

**Christine**

Christine was thirty-six when I first met her, she worked part-time as a human resource manager in retail and her partner was a self-employed tradesman. They had two children – one aged two, and the other under twelve months. Christine’s preference had been to work
part-time after the birth of her second child and for her two children to be cared for by a nanny during the time she and her husband were at work. The ‘next best scenario’ was the same childcare centre. Christine’s childcare, paid work and return to work preferences were heavily influenced by financial considerations:

In an ideal world I would have definitely preferred to have a nanny at home, from the convenience point of view and also [for] the care the kids get because it’s more one-on-one. The whole making the meals, doing the bottles, basic cleaning and so forth the nanny would have [and it] would make it so much easier. So in an ideal world if we could afford that … The next best scenario would be both at the same childcare centre on the same day. And I’ve tossed up in my mind whether I would have liked to have more time off. Financially, I went back after six months because we really needed that. We could have survived if I had another six months off but I have a feeling that I probably would have gone insane quicker by not being stimulated and I also think another six months off is another six months out of the workplace – you just lose touch that [much] more; it is much more isolating … and difficult to go back or even want to go back … I would have made a different decision if financially we [were] in a stronger position.

At the second interview her preferences were still constrained by household finances:

I probably would prefer to work three days a week but financially that’s not a choice for us at the moment. So that would be my ideal – just three days in the office and not work from home at all. I go through phases with my employer as to whether I actually like the job that I’m doing. The job is still fairly intellectually challenging; it’s still the same level that I was at [previously].

Christine described the cost of working part-time after childbirth as a ‘holding pattern’ which entailed her taking a ‘side step’ in her career:

I recognise that right now, for the next at least year to two years, I’m in a holding pattern. The job that I’m in now is a step sideways; it’s a similar role … narrower in scope. So [it’s a] sideways step; still it’s not bad for my career, it’s not doing any damage, it’s not backwards [and] it was by choice.

Like Lisa, Christine talked about putting her career on hold as her ‘choice’ and not as a trade-off, yet the ideal of a 'good mother' crept into her story:

You can’t maintain a fantastic healthy exercising lifestyle, be totally on top of your career and totally successful, study … as well as be a fabulous parent, a fabulous wife, a fabulous
friend … There’s no such thing as a super-person and I don’t think it’s achievable. I think that what you can do is understand what your limits are … For example, when the kids are little you might say, well I want to be, the best mother I can be so therefore I’m happy to put my career on hold and do less time at work and give up my fitness regime … because you want to spend more time being a mum or a parent. I think it’d be very difficult to be good at all of them … I’m not trading that off – I’ve chosen to do that.

Christine’s comments echo Williams’ (2000: 14) observations about the use of the language of choice. Williams, for example, notes that ‘mother’s choices to drop out or cut back on paid work’ are linked to ‘traditional domestic arrangements’.

Listening to Christine it became clear that the notion of ‘the proper and right thing to do’ mattered a lot (Williams 2004). Drawing on Williams (2004), insight into the notion of ‘the right thing to do’ it is clear that women’s preferences and paid work arrangements were heavily ‘value laden’. This becomes particularly evident when listening while also being sensitive to women’s particular social context. The degree of support, the opportunities that were available, the constraints in the workplace and household, plus their cultural beliefs all shaped what the proper or right thing to do was. Understood in this way, it can be seen how women’s preferences ‘morally informed responses’ (Williams 2004) that are grounded in the various commitments women have to others. What became apparent is that the extent to which women ‘had to’ accommodate the needs and interests of others to sustain an ethic of care, worked to disadvantage some of my participants. This was described using the language of ‘trade-offs’ that involved ‘choosing’ part-time work:

If I go part-time that doesn’t bother me in the least … However, I would maybe lose some of the more interesting aspects [of my job]. But if I can manage to negotiate part-time work it has some advantages. (Mary, higher education)

I guess my career has come second behind family, but that was my choice and it’s still going to be because there is no way I’ll ever go full-time unless something dramatically changes at home and I need to for some reason. I’ve sort of sacrificed my career to an extent … I’ll always give priority to the kids rather than the extra work unless there’s some way that it can be juggled in to fit my requirements. So while I’m earning money and developing experiences in a teaching area, that’s all that I’m doing for myself, it’s not really progressing me anywhere in terms of my career. (Patricia, higher education)
Partners’ Paid Work and Child Care: The Ideal Worker Norm

Of the twenty-six male partners, the paid work arrangements of seventeen did not alter across the three sets of interviews (See Table 7 and 8). Fifteen of these men remained in full-time work and two remained in part-time employment. Of the two partners who remained in part-time work, only one of these men’s paid working hours fluctuated. To this extent the paid work arrangements of these men were largely uninterrupted following the birth of the child. This was not a surprise – it confirms key findings in the literature which highlight the unequal impact having children has on women and men (Franzway 2003). The female carer norm is firmly entrenched and remains unchanged, as we might say, both in ‘theory’ and in practice.

Table 7: Partners unchanged paid work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unchanged paid work interview 1 – 3</th>
<th>Partner Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Both of these tables were constructed from demographic questionnaires given to the participants prior to interview and from the qualitative interview material with participants in phase two and three – where I asked about changes in the participants paid work and care arrangements (again I note that I did not interview any of the male partners).

Table 8: Change in participants’ partners’ paid work status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paid work status</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One unexpected finding was the extent to which the pattern of paid work changed for a small number of the male partners. Over the course of the interviews five of the men who had been working full-time at the time of the first interview had dropped back to part-time work at the time of the third. It is plainly not possible to draw any large conclusions about such a movement in such a small group of people; however, this change in employment status across the three interviews may reflect the recent decline in the ‘male breadwinner
type’ in Australian households. One other small change involved a man who was not employed at the time of the first interview but who was working part–time at the time of the second and third. This man, Miriam’s partner, was the main carer for their two children while Miriam was at work during the day (not employed at the first interview; commenced part-time work at the second and remained part-time at the third).

Their partner’s work status was clearly a major factor in how the women I interviewed thought about their own preferences. Patricia, for example, who had changed her paid work from casual to permanent part-time between the second and third interviews, talked about the impact of her partner’s status as a self-employed businessman on her paid work arrangements. In the first interview, she noted that if her husband decided to give up running his own business then this would have a financial impact on the household, and on her child care arrangements.

If he can hold on a bit longer that would make it a lot easier on me … at the same time though I’ll feel like I’ll be letting mum down because this has been her sort of little job and [it’s] helping her financially.

Patricia’s arrangements hinged on her partner’s status. She talked a lot about uncertainty and what would be ideal. Here we see capital and the gender habitus influencing in Patricia’s work and family arrangements that are negotiated and managed in the field of the household.

If he had a job that did earn a lot of money, and that had fixed hours and that he couldn’t leave work early, then I would work less hours and concentrate them on the middle of the day so that I’d get the kids to school. Mum could come around and mind the two youngest and then I’d be home a few hours later to relieve her again, knowing that he’ll be home later that night … If he was still self employed [and] his business [was] booming that would be fantastic because it would mean that he could earn all his money in the morning and then come home – that would be the ideal situation. But where he’s working it’s just dropping off, so it’s a lot of uncertainty.

Equally when a partner's capacity to work becomes insecure (because they are unemployed or unwell), this can generate new work-family tensions. Far from resolving the work–care balance, it can create new tensions.

Nicole’s partner, for example, was unwell between the second and third interviews and had to take leave from paid work. As a result Nicole increased her hours of employment.
Cheryl’s partner had also become unwell at the time of the third interview, which she explained was due to long hours and overwork. Cheryl’s response was to work additional paid hours and do more of the domestic work. Similarly, Emma’s partner was made redundant at the second interview and she increased her paid work hours to accommodate.

One clear finding was that any changes to the paid work arrangements of the male partner had a direct and immediate influence on what happened in the household. It is plain that the dynamics at work in the household directly influence women’s paid work and care arrangements. Some of the relevant circumstances (like illness, changes in the workplace or the closure of their own business) were beyond the control of the men and women in these relationships. Equally, circumstances like these can render the preferences, intentions and plans of the women suddenly redundant or irrelevant. Those women I interviewed who experienced these sudden changes reported that their domestic workload and their hours of paid work increased as a result. In Nicole’s case she worked an extra shift or two to supplement the household income.

In other cases the changes were driven by factors affecting the women more directly. Cheryl, who was a casual worker in higher education and also employed part-time as a nurse, was on leave from her permanent part-time role. She was trying to employ a nanny because her former nanny had resigned. The changes she made to her employment were not directly related to the birth of her last child, but to the need to care for her four children. Here we see once more the primary responsibility for what happened in the household, and particularly child care, was deemed to be the primary responsibility of the woman, which had an immediate and significant impact on their paid work arrangements. In particular, it had a major influence on the time they could spend in employment as well as the degree of responsibility they could assume. As Cheryl explained: ‘I have choice as long as I have care’.

Likewise, Debra’s partner was working from home full-time, but could not care for their son while he was working. He asked Debra to reduce her hours of employment at the university after she had returned from maternity leave, as he wanted her to help him with his office work. This support, he argued, would mean he could do more and thereby increase the household income. Debra was unsure and undecided about the proposal. Here we see an example of expectations about ‘wifely support’ to secure the ideal worker
identity of the husband. It was an expectation that entailed Debra relinquishing or reducing her own career oriented employment so she could help her husband develop his business, while she was also looking after two young children. This was mirrored in domesticity as the ideal worker having the support of a wife (Gaze 2001).

A similar situation developed for Joanne. Before separating from her husband and the subsequent break up of her marriage, her work included both part-time paid work and unpaid office work for her husband’s business as well as caring for three children.

**Conclusion**

Most of the women I interviewed had worked full-time prior to the birth of their child but subsequently returned to part-time employment after the birth of their child. This shift highlights an important part of the story I wish to tell in this thesis. The domestic sphere and the gendered habitus of my participants had a major influence on how they endeavoured to balance their paid work and care commitments. In effect, most participants were primarily engaged in unpaid household work. Indeed, rather than abandoning the ‘home and hearth to go to work’ which is the account given in the various ‘cover stories’ (Crittenden 2001: 13; see also Pocock 2003: 6–7), the participants in my study tried to combine paid work and care responsibilities while effectively working on a full-time basis in the home. The primary focus and concern of these women was always the home and their family.

The everyday lives of women who are also mothers is more far more complicated than is presented in the ‘cover stories’. Powerful cultural expectations influence work practices as women move in and out of paid work while also doing unpaid caring work in the household.

The women's devotion to family/caring significantly affected their ability to engage in paid work. While there were different ways of managing, there were also a number of similarities. I refer, for example, to the ‘flexibility’ that was required in relation to their part-time work, as well as the unequal distribution of labour involved in just managing child care, domestic work and employment arrangements. Not only did the employment status of many of my participants change, but so to did their roles and responsibilities. For
some participants it also meant a change in their workplace, whereas their partner’s paid work status was not as fluid by comparison.

The women I interviewed experienced the process of making their decisions about the balance between paid work and child care work in a variety of ways. What emerged over the journey from the first to the third interview was a picture combining elements of change, loss and accommodation. I never saw these women exercising genuine freedom to make choices. I saw too that having a baby has a significant impact on women’s lives. The powerful attachment women have to their babies and their evolving appreciation of what being a parent meant clearly helped change their preferences and initial ideas about how they can resume employment as they did before becoming mothers.

Women’s experiences of ‘cutting back’ or ‘dropping out’ of paid work so they could spend more time at home revealed that what was happening in the household was an important consideration. Some participants’ preferences also changed across the interviews, which was not surprising given their experiences of what they were able to do changed. Some resisted using the language of ‘choice’ and talked rather about the constraints that informed their decision-making. Others felt they were ‘not’ actively making choices, but were making arrangements because they believed that they had to act as the person with primary responsibility for the care of their children.

In this respect we can best understand their experiences by paying attention to the ways that gender relations and notions of the ideal worker/carer norms were played out in each relationship (Hochschild 1989; Williams 2000). The dominant work arrangement involved an unequal allocation of work in the household – where women typically ‘made their lives work’ by maintaining the connection to their employment once their children arrived. They did this by cutting back their hours and dropping back their responsibilities. In some cases it involved taking on more paid work than they preferred.

In the following chapters I explore what took place in the workplace – or what I also call being ‘on-stage’. This includes how women negotiated arrangements with their employers and the decline in their employment-professional status – as well as what happened ‘behind the scenes’ in the household. Attention will be given to how identities and responsibilities were transformed, how relationships in the home altered, and what strategies were used so women could return to paid work while combining child care.
CHAPTER SIX

‘THE TAP IS STUCK’: WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE OF RETURNING TO PAID EMPLOYMENT

The gap between human intention and what humans actually end up doing is often very large. As one well-known aphorism has it, ‘There’s many a slip ‘twixt cup and lip’. Adopting a more elevated theoretical posture, Alfred Schutz (1972) made the same point in the course of developing a critique of Max Weber’s rational action model. Schutz argued that Weber’s view – that human action involves a straight line of connection between intention, action and the post-facto rational explanation of that action – failed to take account of many problems. Those problems begin with Weber’s dismissal of ‘non-rational’ motivations like ethical values, emotions and religious inclinations. These observations help to frame my discussion here about how women make up and change their minds about their plans and preferences for organising work and family as they attempt to return to paid work following childbirth.

In previous chapters I have explored women’s ideas, plans and preferences for organising work and family (Chapter Four). I have also described how they went about making their plans as they tried to balance their paid work and care (Chapter Five), and their employment transitions. Now I want to focus on the experience of returning to work after the baby has arrived – for those participants who were pregnant at the first interview.

The importance of accessing flexible work options, including the ability to reduce to a part-time workload, to accommodate women’s family responsibilities has been supported by many employer organisations as well as by the union movement (Rapoport et al. 2002). It has also been extensively researched by social scientists and advocacy organisations (HREOC 2007a; Faustenau 2006; Mitchell 2004; Hewlett & Luce 2005; Bittman, Hoffman & Thompson 2004; Crittenden 2001; Rimmer & Rimmer 1994). One view of the ‘logic’ of this exercise has been offered by the Australian chairman of a global executive recruitment firm when he suggested that returning to work part-time is a key strategy for 'successfully managing career through pregnancy, birth and motherhood':

You might well be better taking a lesser or part-time position … so it's easier to turn the tap back on when you are ready (Mumm, in Mitchell 2004:11–12).
The use of the tap metaphor implies that the mechanisms returning to work after the birth of a child are both relatively simple and are also essentially within the volitional control of the woman. How well does this view square with the experience of the women I spoke with? In this chapter I ask a number of questions: What were the participants’ experiences of returning to paid work after the birth of their child? How did they negotiate their return to paid work arrangements and how did things work out? How did they structure their return to paid work? Were there any important similarities or differences in experiences of women in the two industry groups – retail and higher education? My focus here is on the role played by the way particular managers and what can more diffusely be called ‘the workplace culture’ dealt with women’s preferences for more flexible paid work arrangements.

As in earlier chapters, I draw on women’s stories about returning to paid work after childbirth. What happened was often surprising to me; as I will also suggest, it was certainly far from what the women I spoke with thought was ideal or what they actually wanted.

These narratives are not so much evidence of choice or preferences, so much as of the ways decisions are made within a context of an already unequal organisation of paid work and domestic labour. These narratives also highlight how women bear many of the negative consequences of the work–family imbalance. The women’s experience of employment disadvantage, marginalisation, being treated unfairly, having to take what they could get with little or no choice, and then feeling unhappy and dissatisfied with their arrangements and negotiations all highlight key problems with the contemporary culture and structure of work and family (Edwards 2003; Fastenau 2007, 2006; Rimmer & Rimmer 1994).

What these stories also suggest is that some commonly held assumptions about work–family arrangements and what factors determine the outcomes for men and women, like the idea that women have choices just like men, lack evidence and need to be rethought. It seems that how women negotiate their return to paid work, both with their partners and their employers, points to the problem – namely the lack of choice (see also Fastenau 2006). These experiences raise hard questions such as: Why do the dominant ideologies prevail? Why are they both hard to name and hard to resist and what can we do about it?
To develop my argument I begin with Michelle's story about returning to the retail organisation she had worked in before the birth of her child. On her return to the workplace she faced a choice: she could take a backwards step in her career, or elect for redundancy.

Like Nicole and Erika, who also work in retail, and Joan, Janice, Mary and Maria, who work in higher education, Michelle’s story (as well as these participants) highlights the point that work culture and employers’ attitudes to caring responsibilities favour the ‘ideal worker’ norm and need to be challenged. I then turn to Miriam's story to illustrate the negative impact of the ‘ideal worker’ norm. Miriam's biography fleshes out Williams' (2000) notion of 'dropping the baby' to perform as an 'ideal worker'. The data in this chapter is from phase two and three.

The Return to Paid Work Experience

Michelle

Michelle's story exemplifies some of the penalties or costs of returning to paid work after childbirth and the complexity of the negotiations required to effect the return to work. Michelle worked as a full-time human resource manager in the retail industry. She also had access to twelve months unpaid maternity leave. While flexible workplace arrangements may enable women to ‘turn the tap back on’, in the case of Michelle’s career trajectory the metaphor ‘the tap is stuck’ may be more appropriate.

At the time of our second interview Michelle was on maternity leave and her husband was working full-time. She described returning to work as a ‘daunting’ prospect. However, Michelle intended to return to work when her child was ten and a half months, although she did not know what role she would be returning to.

The role that I was doing [prior to maternity leave] was really operational and you could be working long hours … My preference is to work in a project oriented role, which is not as demanding. It is demanding, but more planned. It can be [more] well planned than an operational-type role is, so you know my preference would be to look at those options … Going back to an operational role where you’re running up and down all the time at everyone’s beck and call … would be much more stressful for me and a lot of people to fit in with looking after a young baby.
In relation to reducing her hours when re-entering the paid workforce, Michelle also talked about the risk of being out of the workforce for too long a time.

In terms of maintaining, keeping your foot in the door if you like … if I choose to have three or four years off work to bring up my child until it went to school I think it would be incredibly difficult for me to find a job at the level that I’m at now; I think that it would be impossible.

However, things had changed a bit by the time of our third interview. Michelle had indeed returned to work part-time, though in a role she was unhappy with in terms of her career trajectory. Her husband, who took four weeks off work around the time of the birth, was still working full-time and their child was being cared for by Michelle’s mother-in-law while Michelle was at work. Michelle was unhappy with her return-to-work arrangements because an equivalent position had been offered at another location. The equivalent position, however, was not really an option because the manager she would be reporting to was known to be difficult to work for. One option was to take a part-time position somewhat below her previous position, which she took. This option was revealed when I asked Michelle if there had been any changes in her work and family arrangements since previous interviews. As her response suggests, Michelle had had a negative experience:

I spoke to my manager and they basically didn't keep me in the loop [when on leave] and I ended up having to call them etc, etc. My return to work happened around the same time [the company] was being sold. So I ended up going back part-time. In my case, the issue was not the number of days. I said I was happy to go back two or three days a week and I was happy to go back full-time when [my child] was two [years old]. The issue was more the type of job they wanted me to do. It was initially what I considered going backwards in terms of the responsibility that I had. It actually ended up [that] I am in that job; I’m doing that three days a week and it's something I was doing three years ago in terms of my career.

Michelle let her employer know that she wasn’t happy taking a backward step, but she felt she had had no choice. She revealed that she had also been offered a redundancy:

So when they initially offered me this job in [a particular role], what I thought was ‘a backward step’ I said to them, ‘Look this is a backward step - find me some other options’. And they said one option we could look at is redundancy. I said, ‘I’m not interested in redundancy, I want my job’. So I suppose if I wanted to, I could have taken a redundancy but I thought it was a bit of a short-term plan if I wanted to go down that path.

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The other thing is – and I don’t know whether any of the other ladies have said anything about this – I didn’t feel really confident about presenting for another job. Let’s say I was looking for another part-time job, I just don’t feel I would have the confidence to do that.

Her ‘choice’ involved taking a backward step and her return-to-work arrangement was the outcome of a compromise based on accommodating the pressing demands of the need to ensure that her child care arrangements worked successfully:

There probably was an opportunity to go and work in another area, but the person that I’d be reporting to would make that very difficult. So I was sort of given a choice, but not really.

I ended up choosing to stay in [a department] which was a backward step for me because I thought – I don’t want to be stressed about going to work every single day – and feeling that I had to report to someone that I didn’t respect, and that I wouldn’t enjoy working with, and maybe it’s a time to really just relax and not worry too much about work – considering [my child] is still very young and still quite demanding – and so that’s how it ended up.

As we now see Michelle’s experience was far from unique.

**Janice**

Janice, who worked in higher education as a manager, had had a similar experience to Michelle. Nine months after our first interview, Janice felt strongly that she did not want to return to work full-time. She was ‘quite anxious’ about the possibility of finding another position as her current role would not be available part-time. Her husband wanted to work also part-time and they preferred their child to be in childcare only two days per week. Janice wanted a 48 week over 52 weeks per year work arrangement, but was not confident her employer would consider this. She described some distinct disadvantages of working part-time, including an expectation of having to settle for a ‘down-graded’ position (in order to access part-time):

I’ll learn more in January if I’m going to have more choice, but I suspect that they probably won’t have to give me my job at the same level. I’ll be going part-time and I’ll be downgraded or do something that is less challenging. I might be wrong – I hope I am – but I just know that they’re not [going to] allow people at my level … to work part-time. I don’t know anyone at my level who job-shares and that would be something that would
interest me … My job could easily be shared and it could actually work really well, but it’s just finding the reason … It makes me angry, really because I think that women … in the [department] that I’m in are so much under-rated … yet, if I were a man I wouldn’t be talking about part-time. I just think that it’s probable that I’m going to [have to] settle for something less than what I really want. I don’t want to settle … I’d like to have more choice and I don’t feel that I do have more choice.

Like Michelle, Janice felt that she had no choice but to take a step down the organisational hierarchy (this view or strategy was also shared by several other women, including Miriam, Anna, Joan, Sandra and Paula).

Janice was actually offered a redundancy package while she was on maternity leave. During the third interview, she told me that she had had to remind her employer of their legal obligations to hold her position until her maternity leave had finished.

I extended maternity leave so it was twelve months plus about another six weeks … I knew that I was going to be made redundant because they contacted me about in July or August the year before and called me in for a meeting. I said that I wasn’t prepared to make a decision until I returned from maternity leave and I reminded them of their legal obligation to keep my job open for me. I spoke to the union and got some advice and then I decided to [take a] redundancy … I didn’t actually go back to work.

The choices given to Janice as part of her return-to-work options were between accepting a redundancy package or going into an employment pool as the university set about ‘trying to find her a job’, as part of larger workplace changes. She was reluctant to accept the latter choice believing that it was unlikely that she would be able to find a part-time job at her HEW nine level: ‘If I had been maybe a HEW five I probably would have had a good chance of getting another job’.

**Linda**

Linda, who also worked in higher education, returned to work for a couple of months but was made redundant around the time she found out she was pregnant. To be clear, the redundancy she and many of her colleagues had been offered had nothing to do with her pregnancy and everything to do with government funding cutbacks. She applied for part-time jobs, but felt disadvantaged by her pregnancy. She recalled being reluctant to
mention her pregnancy during the job interviews and was not confident she would find work to suit her needs. She talked of an ‘unspoken prejudice around pregnancy’:

[I’m feeling] reasonably limited in terms of work. I’m feeling, even if it’s unspoken, a certain prejudice around pregnancy. A couple of jobs I applied for, I did really well, I wasn’t showing and they actually created a position for me and it was good but that was the one where the hours were just going to be too full-on. Then I applied for another one and was really upfront about being pregnant and I feel that I did really well in the interview up until the point where I said I was pregnant.

**Erika and Nicole**

Erika and Nicole, who both worked in the retail sector, reported that they had had difficulties negotiating their return to work. Erika, for example, told me that:

It was about three weeks before I went back to work she finally got it [my return to work paperwork] and when she rang and said, ‘This is what I can give you’. I said, ‘Well that’s not what I want, you obviously haven’t seen my availability’. And she said ‘Yeah [I have], but that’s what we can give you’. I said, ‘I’m sorry, it’s not good enough – I can’t do that’. So basically in a nutshell I almost had to bring my union in to help settle it ... They were offering me fewer hours on different days [than my arrangement prior to maternity leave].

Erika’s manager commented that her request for hours would impact on other employees in terms of taking their hours:

She said, ‘Look come in and speak to [me] and the boss’. And we sat down and it just went around in circles and basically whatever I said he reckoned [it] wasn’t relevant to the conversation … I said, ‘Right, if this is not sorted out, I’m ringing the union, which will turn into a grievance procedure’ … When she rang … she said I can give you [the] days you want, but it worked out to eighteen hours. And, I said, ‘Well that’s even less’. I said, ‘I’m not even going to consider that, I’m sorry’. So they managed to get to twenty hours ...

Technically they’re actually supposed to hold your job open and technically on paper they held my job open, but they’ve obviously given away my hours … And we could have taken them to Commission if that wasn’t sorted, so she rang back a few minutes later and said, ‘I’ve managed to get [other] people to change their contract by a short amount’, so I’ve got the days and the hours I wanted.
Nicole also reported that her manager had told her that legally he only had to offer her what she was doing prior to her maternity leave unless that is she wanted a work transfer. Nicole was concerned the manager was trying to force her out of work by deliberately making it difficult for her return to work, resisting her preferences and limiting the shifts offered to her. As she said to me, ‘The manager is renowned for cutting staff’.

I rang him up [the manager] a couple of weeks before I was due back and I said to him, ‘Look, I’m coming back’! … When I spoke to him I said, ‘For obvious reasons I have to come back on day shift’, because I was working night shift when I went [on maternity leave] and he said, ‘Well there are no shifts available throughout the day and legally I only have to offer you what you were doing before you went on maternity leave, which was nightshift’.

Nicole, like Janice, Amy, Michelle, Joan and Erika, had to negotiate with her boss; she also contacted the union for advice. Nicole also felt that her manager would prefer she did not return to paid work.

His intention was to basically force me out of the company ... [My husband] says, ‘He wants to force you out’. So when I said to him I’ll do the Saturday and Sunday night he was like, ‘Oh you’re going to do the Saturday and Sunday night because the money that they are paying you to do two nights [is better]’, (basically three days for the same wage) and I said, ‘Yeah’. The look on his face! I rang up the Union then and told them and they were – ‘Yeah, good’.

At the centre of these stories we see something of the impact of the ‘ideal worker norm’ (Williams, 2000). This ideal worker norm is both embedded in the workplace culture and is also protected by an array of industrial policies and legislation ostensibly designed to facilitate and protect women’s employment. The stories told by Michelle and the other women also suggest that the reality of returning to paid work is more difficult than is commonly understood and hints at the symbolic violence at work in the gender habitus (Bourdieu 1990a, 2001). That point is made in the stories told by the women I spoke with. I now turn to show the gender habitus at work.

**The ‘Flexible’ Worker in an Ideal-Worker Culture**

Michelle felt that it would be both more convenient for her manager and that she would have enhanced job options if she returned to work full-time rather than part-time:
They are flexible, and my particular boss at the moment is supportive, but it’s ‘managing my manager’ ... [Some departments] are rapt if you’re full-time and you come back and say I want to be part-time … it suits them better. But in my area it’s basically, it’s not as convenient for them.

If I wanted to go back full-time I think the options would be much better. Also, if I could travel, which I’m not prepared to do at the moment, the options would be much better. But I didn’t even entertain that discussion because I wasn’t at that time wanting to go back full-time. So we didn’t have that discussion. If I said to them today – I want to come back full-time now and I want to do this job, I think they’d be quite open to it in terms of a better job.

The workplace culture described by Michelle indicates a preference for an ‘ideal-worker’ – that is, someone who could work full-time, unencumbered by other diversions – like caring for children. She noted that part-time work in her organisation had never been encouraged or supported:

I have to say in the work that I’ve been doing and the attitudes of some people around, that fact that I’m part-time is just appalling [to them]. It’s really hard not to get your back up and get upset about it.

This was said even as Michelle acknowledged that she had access to the best available policies apparently designed to balance work and family responsibilities. She was not impressed by that fact. As she saw it, the problem was the workplace culture; it was this, and not the policies, that did most to shape her return to work experience:

A lot of the managers are male and they’ve got no idea, and … it all comes back to the quality of your manager and their ability to handle these sorts of things and their experience with these sorts of things – it’s always going to influence how good your experience is going to be.

… Really we should move to a cultural shift … in which case people start thinking differently and start to say – well I’m going to have to do this; I have to think differently and accommodate this person back into my workplace. … It’s a cultural thing [and] it’s so hard to change; it’s not something you can easily change. [It’s] about the way we see people’s roles.

Michelle also made the point that her experience was not unique. She reported that her friends had also had ‘trouble’ getting back to work:
Everyone else I know has had trouble getting back to work and getting into the job that they’re doing and finding it very difficult to balance work and life, and tensions at work with – either they feel that with their other colleagues, [or they] feel that they’re not pulling their weight because of it being part-time.

There is a case to be made that work-family and flexible work policies are not easing the day-to-day tensions associated with ‘juggling the two domains of “women’s work”’ (Hochschild 1989). The stories told by the women I spoke with indicate something other than the ‘they now have the choice’ story. To get work, many participants had to ‘take what they could get’. This involved taking up so-called equivalent positions that involved either a step backwards in their career or even a move out of paid work altogether. They were choosing part-time work in a work–family regime that favoured and rewarded an ideal worker, which is a full-time worker, not a flexible or part-time worker. Even in workplaces where effective and innovative policies were in place, women had real difficulties balancing work–family life on a day-to-day basis. It seemed that there was little or no consideration or recognition of the impact of policies and practices on women.

One of the difficulties is that while policies and provisions are couched in a gender-neutral language, there is a highly gendered take-up; that is, gendered practices reinforce invisible or unconscious gendered norms in workplaces which are applied to women’s paid employment and care responsibilities. This is in stark contrast with men’s time-unfettered availability for and capacity to commit to full-time paid work (Charlesworth et al., 2006).

Michelle’s observation that ‘Everyone else I know has had trouble getting back to work and getting into the job that they’re doing and finding it very difficult to balance work and life’ suggests that some women are still willing to see the problem as pointing to some personal deficit. Pocock (2005: 113) has suggested that women she interviewed were ‘well aware of society’s ready judgment of mothers’ and pointed to the effects of ‘… a sizeable burden of guilt and complex quandaries about care, responsibility, welfare of dependants, and the making of a healthy family’.

Women indeed seem caught in a crossfire. On the one hand, as Williams has argued, the gendered habitus of the household constantly ‘pulls women back toward domesticity’ (2000: 249). Equally, in the workplace the ideal worker norm presupposes that the good worker is a full-time worker without care responsibilities who is able to work long hours.
and pick up overtime. One implication of the ideal worker norm is that women who are mothers and who are in paid employment are seen as ‘less committed’ (Charlesworth 2004; Pocock 2003).

Women like Janice, Joan, Maria and Mary, who worked in different departments and roles in higher education, all saw the way this norm worked.

**Mary**

Mary, in her mid-thirties at the first interview was employed full-time in higher education, had at the time commenced paid maternity leave. Her husband also worked full-time. While Mary was intending to return to part-time work and wanted to do so, she was aware she might lose some of ‘the more interesting aspects’ of her current job:

> I realised that if I go part-time that doesn’t bother me in the least – less control and the various parts of the my role that are involved in some worksite development; otherwise if I worked part-time I would maybe lose some of the more interesting aspects. But if I can manage to negotiate part-time work it has some advantages.

Mary’s employer had ‘a stated dislike of part-time workers and [was]n’t particularly supportive’. In her work department, all the women worked full-time except for one who worked two days per week for child care reasons.

> I’m not sure if she was ever full-time but she only works two days a week; now she job-shares with someone. So she’s the only example of what has happened when a woman has had a child.

> [I’ve got] the most choices probably any Australian woman would have because I’m getting paid leave; I’ve got an option to take a year, and because of my particular arrangements – my partner and my family – I’ve got quite a lot of support. I suppose the only thing that I feel is impeding my choice is my particular work situation in that part-time work isn’t being promoted.

Mary had given her supervisor the usual amount of notice that she was taking maternity leave. However, she also felt bad and that she was becoming an inconvenience when the time actually came to take maternity leave:

> In terms of what immediately happened after I left, it was very messy and I felt a bit bad about that, even [though] obviously it’s not my fault because I know I’ve taken all the
steps. For two weeks after I left there were makeshift arrangements until somebody could actually take over my acting position, and then [there was] all that time to back-fill. It was partly because … people were leaving and changing … I did feel bad, but almost upset like I had been an inconvenience in a sense. I was thinking, ‘Well it’s my life and I shouldn’t be, I’ve told everyone about it, people had notice, and that these arrangements were under control’, but I still felt bad.

At the time of her second interview, Mary talked about the tensions with her boss about returning to work part-time. She still wanted to work part-time and to work from home for one day but was now thinking that her boss would not agree. ‘I want to work two days a week but the position that looks likely that I’ll fill is three days a week. So it’s starting with a compromise from my point of view’. She talked about the disadvantages – ‘I won’t have as much control’ – and had even considered resigning:

I feel it’s almost that the divide is just so much clearer now than before I had a baby. On the one hand, I think if my boss won’t sort out the situation I’ll just leave and deal with the financial ramifications of that … So I’m more torn. Before my identity as working person was so much stronger and I expected to consider going back and visit my friends at work a lot more often than I have. I feel … that I’ve changed in what I think, not necessarily what I think is important, but instead of going back to visit work I’m thinking, well I’m interrupting work … feeling less connected to my workplace than I expected.

While Mary would be described by Hakim (2000) as an ‘adaptive’ type, this is not how Mary would identity herself. Indeed, these narratives are not really touched on in Hakim’s research.

Maria, an academic in higher education, felt as if she were asking the workplace for a favour when she set about trying to get flexible work arrangements. In terms of negotiating her paid work hours, Maria noted:

I returned to work on 0.6 after maternity leave and I assumed it was negotiable for me to decide whether I went back full-time or fractional for the next year. So it just came up with my annual review.

However, she had to go to the Equal Opportunity Officer at her university to ask what a reasonable workload was for someone on her fraction and with a family:

I felt that I had to turn to those [equal opportunity] documents as a backup, and said that the university is meant to be family friendly, cause they were going to push me to still do
the full-time, and [I] gave them the reasons as I wanted to spend more time with my kids.

When it came time to negotiate reduced working hours, Maria felt she was asking her manager a favour in order to have her request honoured:

I found them a bit weird because [my manager] went over all the work and family documents that she had [and] never really spelled out [I was] … entitled to a slightly less load than other people, but they said that the department should be flexible. I actually preferred to tread slowly on that point so just yesterday night I spoke to my head of department and said that I had looked at the equal opportunity documents and at the stats and this would also be a request. I felt that I had to turn to those documents as a backup and said that the university’s meant to be family friendly, because they were going to push me to still do the full-time. [I gave] them the reasons: I wanted more time with my kids … I felt like I had to ask a favour in order to get it honored. There were departmental policies, like [having] the management sit down with you and talk about how you are re-adjusting to work, and that certainly never happened so I had to bring it up and initiate it … I think that they would see that this is the favour that has allowed me to get out of one subject this year, especially when I thought it was reasonable given my fraction was reduced. Now I feel like I owe them a favour. They wanted a decision from me just in the last week – what fraction am I next year – because they are planning subjects, but I prefer to make the decision at the end of the year and see how I’m feeling then. There’s also the pressure that I can feel other people in my field are establishing more and more research projects and feel that I’m only able to commit to one at the moment, probably because of the time as well. That means going [overseas] and it means a bit of an issue with leaving the family. I don’t think there’s any support for taking the family with you.

Joan

Like some of the other women in higher education and in retail, Joan, employed in the higher education sector, found that her requests for a flexible working life were not getting much of a sympathetic hearing – so much so that she had considered applying for other jobs outside her unit while on maternity leave, due to the lack of support from her manager. Maternity leave and part-time work were not supported:

There’s certainly issues in my workplace about maternity leave and about part-time work when I return to work, even though on maternity leave I wrote reports, I put in funding applications [for] the project work that I do and it was generally seen [that] the [area] maintained itself and was a success. I was told that it had been terribly difficult for my
boss – and been really hard for her – and that the department had suffered … my
maternity leave was blamed and I really resented that.

At the second interview, Joan said she was happy to be away from her workplace. Some
of her colleagues felt ‘they were putting up with things’ that newer colleagues did not feel
was acceptable. Joan eventually took twelve months maternity leave (a portion of which
was unpaid). I interviewed her during her maternity leave; while it was not due to
conclude for another seven months, she was still considering not returning to work:

[My boss] seems to imply whether it would be better if I didn’t come back to work …
When a colleague] announced that she was pregnant towards the end of the year, my boss
started saying things to her like she’s ruined everything and the business plan is all messed
up.

By the time the third interview came around, Joan had resigned from her job. As she told
me:

I decided in the end I just didn’t want to go back into that toxic culture. I think that was
the right decision and it was very, very difficult.

As for the much discussed idea that women now have choice, as Crittenden (2001: 237)
pointed out, ‘talk of choice not only overlooks power but also ignores the pain embedded
in mothers’ tough trade-offs.’ The stories the women told, exemplified in Michelle's and
Joan's narratives, suggest that part-time work is viewed as a woman's 'choice'. Equally,
the career penalties that women experience if they step out of full-time work and back to
part-time work are a by-product of a deeply gendered culture and practice that undermines
the point of policies ostensibly introduced to give women more choice.

Crittenden echoes Williams’ (2000) reference to a ‘force-field’ and Bourdieu’s notion of
habitus. Michelle certainly understood her experiences and decisions as both highly
constrained and inequitable. If anything, her experience highlighted the absence of choice:

I feel like it’s much more difficult, much narrower in the choices that I’ve had. All of
these little things, the reality of it becomes much more difficult than what you think. The
fact that this lady that I don’t want to work with is in an area that I really wanted to work
in, the fact that I didn’t feel really confident about applying for other jobs – I’m thinking
now maybe I should have taken the redundancy. Although you have choices, the situation
that you’re in makes it really hard to feel like you’re making the best decision. I have
found it extremely difficult to make decisions because I have found that I’ve never really
known what may be the right thing. I don’t know … I find it really hard to know what the right thing is and I’m not really confident with my decisions.

No wonder many mothers talk about ‘surrendering’ to motherhood, as if it were a gigantic defeat that is better to accept than to fight (Crittenden 2001: 236, 237).

Michelle thought there was ‘a bigger burden on women than men’ in terms of making a choice:

Choice tends to be a bigger burden on the woman than what it is on the man. I think the man in a way has more choice. You can have a better lifestyle because you both work as opposed to our parents where one tended to work but it’s the woman who will be expected to pick up the child from childcare and expected to organise the school side of things … so the woman ends up working pretty much twenty something hours.

Hakim’s (2000) research may have painted an upbeat picture – women apparently enjoy unprecedented choice, but for women like Michelle, ‘choice’ seems to be all about no options, bad options or difficult decisions. Michelle haltingly articulated what this choice looks like on a daily basis when she noted:

We’re giving women choice and it’s a very costly choice and the reason for that is because we don’t have the … the culture is not there to back up the choice, the male support. The male comes through in the workplace not necessarily in the home where … in order to get that equality in the home and the workplace … it’s exhausting. It is literally like pushing shit uphill, it’s so hard. It’s really like pulling teeth … it’s very hard and I think women just give up and think – OK, it’s too hard, I’m going to try and do it myself, and we try and do everything.

‘Dropping the Baby’ to Return to Paid Work

In a guide for employed women called Careers and Motherhood, Challenges and Choices: How to successfully manage your career through pregnancy, birth and motherhood, Mitchell (2004) makes the point that the ‘culture of an organisation is by far the most important factor in how well women will be able to balance motherhood and career’ (2004: 3). While allowing that formal policies are important – they make up what she calls the ‘building blocks for family-friendly workplaces’ – Mitchell argues that even more crucial are the ways in which some employers will or will not ‘try to understand and honour the intent of a policy – that is, to minimise disruption so that individuals can do
their job more effectively’ (Mitchell 2004: 3). She addresses women specifically when she writes:

   [T]he way these policies are applied will make the real difference to your ability to maintain your career after childbirth. Those responsible for applying policies can interpret them to enhance or limit opportunities … Where policy enforcers have different agendas, such as budgetary concerns or deeply seated views about working mothers, they can apply policies less generously (2004: 3).

Mitchell’s guide highlights some of the issues that affect the capacity of mothers to return to work. However, Mitchell’s work typically obscures the all too real problems which women like those I interviewed experienced. Edwards (2003), drawing on data gathered in 2000–2002 for gender equity research in public institutions in Australia, offers a more realistic assessment of the problems many women face. As she puts it, there is one fact than should never be forgotten:

   Flexible workplace policies have been enacted in a context where women still perform the bulk of the domestic labour and where other vestiges of gender inequality also prevail … [W]omen, taking advantage of flexible workplace policies tend to pay a career penalty for doing so (2003: 2).

Edwards accepts that many women are trapped in the crossfire of a domestic ideology about women-as-mothers and the ideal worker norm in the workplace. She is right to at least ask whether greater equality in the household between men and women is necessary if greater equality in the public sphere of the labour market is ever to become a reality (2003: 3). She also points to the way the existing division of labour in the household is exacerbated by the privileging of full-time work in the workplace:

   Despite their frequent portrayal in gender neutral language … nothing is inherent in flexible workplace policies that challenges any division of labour – be it in the public or the private realm. Although the gender-neutral-language of such policies allows for use by both men and women, in practice it is mainly women who use them. This works against the discourse of an equitable sharing of labour in the private sphere (Edwards 2003: 6).

In this way the unequal division of labour and gender relations is masked – along with the career sacrifices that many women pay (Edwards 2003: 6) – all apparently in the name of choice.
The way this works out is well caught in the second part of Miriam’s story.

**Miriam**

Employed as an academic in higher education, Miriam was the main income earner in her household. At the time of her second interview, Miriam’s paid work arrangements had not changed – she was still working full-time in the same job. However, her husband was working part-time for three days per week. Their two children were in childcare and/or after-school-care two days per week. Taking advantage of the relative degree of flexibility university teachers enjoy, Miriam had informally compressed her full-time workload into four days in her university office so she could spend one day working from home with her children. She had applied for another job but had been unsuccessful, and she was still looking for a job with greater flexibility.

Ten months later, at the third interview, Miriam and her husband were still in the positions they had held at the time of the second interview. However, Miriam had found she was unable to do her job on a part-time basis and was now planning to take one year of unpaid leave so as to spend more time with her children. She was very unhappy working full-time and was trying to work out how to be part-time in her position: no one in her department worked part-time and there was some resistance to authorising such arrangements. She had applied for part-time positions elsewhere.

She felt that unpaid leave or a part-time position were her best options because her immediate work culture did not support her preference (to take up a part-time position):

> I don’t feel that I can negotiate part-time here. I think it’s easier to get into a job and then negotiate part-time without trying to negotiate a full-time job down to part-time … I’m at Level B now and I’d actually consider going down [a level] in order to take a part-time job if there was one that I thought was truly a part-time job or job-share.

Lack of access to a ‘real’ part-time position was a key problem for Miriam. She was willing to drop a level in order to achieve this. In Miriam’s case the ideal worker norm was producing some negative consequences. For all of the modern talk about promoting women’s ‘choices’, Miriam’s story suggests that if the preference to work part-time is not actively supported in the workplace then it is an irrelevant preference.
Like some of the other women interviewed, Miriam was discovering that notwithstanding the availability of various policies to support women’s choices, these mattered far less than the culture of the workplace. This was also the case for a number of other women who discovered that returning to work part-time after having a child was not supported in their workplace. While discrimination based on pregnancy and women’s care work is well documented, I was still shocked to hear firsthand stories of discriminatory and inequitable treatment arising as a direct consequence of women having children. It was also a surprise that some participants seemed to unquestionably accept their experiences of disadvantage and indirect discrimination as part of their experience of returning to work.

Michelle’s experience of being offered an ‘equivalent position’ upon returning to paid work – that is, one equivalent to a position she undertook three years prior to taking maternity leave – was paralleled by Janice having to remind her employers of their legal obligation to hold her job until she had finished her maternity leave. Lack of support by managers for part-time and flexible work arrangements meant that women like Michelle and others had to down-scaled their jobs, while Miriam intended to look for a lower level job just to access a part-time schedule.

**Conclusion**

The burden of my research project has been to establish what factors shape the kinds of decisions women make as they struggle to accommodate their interest both in earning an income and in being good mothers. My research has shown that deeply gendered ideas continue to shape the basic decisions taken about who should care for children and who should take time off from paid work and/or work part-time. The domestic ideology in the household remains important, particularly as the work performed in the household and the gender division of labour continues to sustain and maintain the public sphere (Edwards 2003; Gaze 2001; Williams 2000; Pocock 2003). Accordingly, it would seem that it is the domestic ideology embedded in women’s and men’s habitus, within the field of the household that needs to be questioned, challenged and disrupted so that new kinds of social practices might emerge.

Over recent years many researchers have addressed the issue of how women who have become mothers manage to combine recent motherhood with the return to paid work (Fastenau 2006; Mitchell 2004; Taylor 1996; Rimmer & Rimmer 1994; Schmidt 2010).
One way of framing the problem has been to focus on 'helping' women to balance paid work and child care (Edwards 2003: 4–5). For example, a recent newspaper article titled ‘Keeping Mum’ (Schmidt, The Sunday Age Magazine, August 15, 2010) asked ‘how expectant mothers cope in the workplace’ and ‘whether having a baby means losing a career’. The HREOC reports (2005, 2007a) however recognised that as long as work–family/work–life issues are seen as a woman’s concern only, then ‘women will continue to face discrimination in the workplace’ (HREOC 2005: ix). This points to the underlying social forces that shape how women arrive at their paid work and family arrangements. These gendered work and family practices and problems are often talked about as if it were simply a matter of women exercising their free choice.

Hakim (2000), for example, has argued that the women, like the ones I spoke with, had chosen in accordance their preferences to reduce their hours and to drop back their paid work status so as to combine paid work and motherhood. Pocock, on the other hand, has argued that ‘women’s larger responsibility for the domestic sphere shapes their paid labour market status’ (2003: 148). Pocock (2005, 2003) draws on Williams (2000) to argue that the way we organise market and family work marginalises mothers, particularly the gender arrangements where child rearing is viewed as mothers’ work and the ways in which economic marginalisation are viewed as choice (2000: 1-5).

As my discussion both in previous chapters and in this chapter indicates, a lot is being obscured by this talk of choice. It is plain from my participants’ stories that the key decisions taken about child care and paid employment reflected the state of play in the relationship between the woman and her partner in the household. The dominant concerns and factors which shaped the arrangements, and the decisions women made about returning to paid work reflected their concerns about their role in the family, their responsibility for childcare, and their identity as wives and mothers. That said, it is also apparent that women’s experiences of returning to work also reflect attitudes and norms which operate in the workplace. Again what we can call the ‘ideal worker norm’ tends to disadvantage women who are looking for more flexible paid work arrangements. From the outside it looked like some participants ‘got what they wanted or desired’ in terms of a preference for working part-time; however, some had to take what they could get, even if it was a position equivalent to a job three years prior. This evidence supports my overall
thesis in naming and identifying the habitus in the field of the household, which needs to be disrupted so that further opportunities for social change can be realised.

While few of the women I interviewed viewed their final arrangements or outcomes as what they had expected, the majority reported experiences that differed considerably from their initial preferences, intentions and plans they had for organising and combining paid work and family life. Their preferences became redundant because they could not ‘conform to the male model of the ideal worker - who is available for work with no limits and no domestic responsibilities’ (Gaze 2001: 199).

It seems that the actual practices of a given workplace culture affected the women’s experience of returning to work after childbirth, far more than the formal policies then in place. Policies providing for paid and unpaid maternity leave, access to part-time work and flexible hours meant that many participants remained attached to the paid workforce after childbirth – returning to the same job or joining another organisation. However, some were excluded and had no job to return to. For women like Michelle, Nicole, Janice, Maria, Joan, Mary and Erika, who could access the best available maternity leave for their industry standards, as well as taking up flexible work provisions upon return (with the exception of Janice who took a redundancy), we see that their experience can best be described in terms of marginalisation, disadvantage and adverse consequences.

Many women voiced concerns about the negative attitudes of managers and co-workers upon returning to paid work. For example, Maria said she felt like she was asking a favour to get part-time hours. Joan felt she was ‘disrupting the workplace’ by taking maternity leave, and was undermined when negotiating her return to work arrangements, so decided to resign. Mary felt that part-time work was not supported and took on additional hours.

As Hochschild (1989), Blair-Loy (2002) Williams (2000), Probert (2004), Edwards (2003) and Fastenau (2007) have argued, workplace policies and initiatives since the second wave feminist movement have opened up access for women to the world of paid work. Equally, the division of unpaid work in the household has remained relatively unchanged. Family-friendly policies and practices free up women’s time to attend to unpaid family work, thereby reinforcing a gendered division of labour in the field of the household. While workplaces have adopted family-friendly policies, their implementation
is problematic (Fastenau 2007: 46). As Anna noted in the first interview, the impact of policy upon her work and family arrangements was ‘like a drop in the ocean’.

It is now well-documented that ‘a major factor identified as hampering women’s career and paid work opportunities is the heavier burden women carry for day-to-day family responsibilities, including child care and domestic tasks’ (Fastenau 2007: 45). The tendency for women to put their career on hold or to reduce their working hours or stop paid work altogether after childbirth has been well documented (Baxter 2005; Pocock 2003; Houston & Marks 2003; Gaze 2007, 2001; Williams 2000; Wajcman 1998; Hochschild 1997; McRae 1993). Edwards (2003: 5) put it bluntly when she said flexible work provisions ‘do nothing to challenge the division of labour in the private sphere’.

Morehead (2003) and Probert (2004) note that while much of the contemporary work−family literature suggests the concept of an individual mother revealing her preferences for various amounts of paid and unpaid work, women’s ability to devote time to paid work is the consequence of a highly gendered and complex set of negotiations and compromises and practices within the household.

While demands for flexible workplaces (including normal family-friendly entitlements, practices and a supportive culture) are a direct response to women's increased paid work participation, and to manage the caring that goes on in the household, they have been unable to address the unequal outcomes for men and women in terms of work−family conflict and involvement in domestic work (Edwards 2003; Probert 2004). They continue to assist women to combine paid work and care responsibilities – but have they increased men's participation in all facets of domestic work (Edwards 2003)?

I agree with researchers like Pocock (2003, 2005), Edwards (2003) and Morehead (2003) that a ‘culture change’ needs to take place at the workplace and household levels. With Edwards (2003), Morehead (2003) and Probert (2004), I argue that that we need to focus on what happens in the household and ‘accept it as a critical sphere in which mothers’ ability to develop their careers is negotiated is not to reject that significance of workplace initiatives and policy’ (Probert 2004: 25).

What goes on in the household in order for women to be able to return to work, and the ways in which the household structures women’s return to work, is the subject of the following chapter.
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ART OF JUGGLING TIME: LOOKING BACKSTAGE TO WOMEN MANAGING THE HOUSEHOLD

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen many Australian women combine both paid work and domestic work in quite distinctive ways. OECD data shows, for example, that in countries like Sweden and Denmark, 70 per cent of women with children are also in paid work and the majority do so on a full-time basis. Conversely, only 45 per cent of Australian women with children under six do so, and of these women two-thirds work part-time (OECD 2008). Yet it is not surprising that debates about the merits of paid work versus child care have attracted passionate partisans in most modern societies. Linda Hirschmann (2006) has argued that women need to engage in paid work. She says young, well-educated women who choose to give up high-paying, high-powered, and prestigious jobs in order to stay home and take care of their children can only lead to a lesser life for these women:

These women are choosing lives in which they do not use their capacity for very complicated work, they’re choosing lives in which they do not use their capacity to deal with very powerful other adults in the world, which takes a lot of skill. I think there are better lives and worse lives (2006: xii).

Anne Manne (2008) has argued no less strongly that women ought to be able to be valued for the child care work they do, and that policies enabling more women to stay at home are needed urgently. Indeed, the women in my study talked of the importance and value of the emotional bond and attachment they felt caring for their child/children.

On each side of this ongoing debate, assumptions continue to be made about the degrees of choice women have or do not have. As I show here, the binary ‘free choice’ versus ‘no choice’ does not capture the complexity of working women’s lives. In this chapter I look at what happens ‘backstage’ in the household, which reveals the ‘constrained choice’ and ‘forced decisions’ at play. The questions which I address are those I put to a small number of women at three different points in their lives as they juggled the imperatives of paid work and the demands of child care: How do you manage your paid work and care obligations? What strategies do you use? How are issues about who does what in the home resolved? How do you and your partner decide who does paid work, the housework and the child care?
Rather than representing women as strategic negotiators who calculate the advantages and disadvantages of paid work and family responsibilities, weighing up their personal preferences along with matters that are beyond their control, I draw on the women’s stories to show how they made sense of their lives, which shows the habitus operating. In particular, the emotional and cognitive aspects of mothering, and the gender relations in the household which shape women’s work and family arrangements. I highlight the complex and continuous nature of the processes that these women engaged in as they tried to manage their lives and make arrangements – often having to re-negotiate these arrangements – as they tried to balance the demands of their paid work and their work (the emotional labour, care work, household work) at home. This highlights the obvious but often overlooked fact that women do not simply choose what they want, or organise it and then go and do it. On the contrary, what women want as their first preference is rarely what they get; or when arrangements are made they will have to accommodate other demands such as financial issues, looking after sick children or being expected to prioritise their partner’s career. For many participants these strategies had a negative impact on their own paid employment.

As I indicate below, my interviews suggest that the women in this study encountered many difficulties as they made decisions about paid work while also trying to look after the household after childbirth and emotional carework. The support and activity that occurs ‘off-stage’ in household’s forms a backdrop that has to be factored in, thought about and recognised. The backstage story, while being hidden from view of policy makers and employers and co-workers, holds symbolical and emotional meanings and represents the outcome of the ideal worker norms (Williams 2000). I draw on these interviews to suggest how these women, including those working full-time, dealt with four sets of issues including the cost of child care, the demands of their partners’ work, the need to juggle often wickedly complex demands on their time by being ‘flexible’, and how they managed the household (see also Morehead 2003; Probert 2004). The women’s decisions were heavily influenced by what they described as their concerns for other family members and which might be called an ‘ethic of care’. It became apparent that over the period I interviewed them and as they either became mothers for the first time or added to their family, the women took a larger share of the caring role than their partner, which included being the organiser or manager of the household. As I showed in previous chapters, this included giving preference to their partner’s employment and career in
priority to their own. As I emphasise here, it was the women who also took primary responsibility for organising everyone and everything in the home.

As to the reason why this happened Debra put this simply and clearly:

> It was almost ingrained, almost taken for granted or assumed that I’m just, I’m just deciding how I’m going to organise my work and family and my partner’s and things like that …

Let me start with the problem many of the women who wanted to work faced – the costs of childcare.

**Managing the Cost of Childcare**

Being in paid employment and being a mother typically involves reliance on some form of formal (day care, family) childcare. This was exemplified by Cheryl, who noted: ‘I have choice as long as I have childcare’. Yet this option carries with it significant financial costs. This becomes one aspect of the broader array of considerations which women take into account as they think about managing being a mother and an employee after a baby is born.

The financial cost and the management of childcare were on the minds of most of the women I spoke with when they talked about their initial preferences, expectations and ideas before the birth of the child (Chapter Four). After the birth of their child it soon became apparent that some of their initial preferences were not possible. By the time I did my second interview with Naomi for example, returning to work was no longer a viable option. As she explained, the costs of childcare made it impractical, because it would cost her more to go to work and put the children in care than she earned:

> [F]inancially it’s not worth me going back to work … which is good and bad because it allows me more flexibility because I don’t have to go back to work, but I can if I want … I don’t really care if it put me ahead; I mean it would be silly for me to do it if it was going to put me way behind. I’d like more than anything – it would be nice if it put me ahead but I’m not expecting that to happen. I think really one of the main things is that I’d be happy in what I’m doing so I’m not going to go back to where I was if I’m going to be on a rubbish project that I’m not going to enjoy doing – working hard and getting me nowhere really.
As Anna also noted:

I wonder if the number of kids has a bearing on the decision a woman makes. After all, if your childcare costs are in the order of $850 for two kids in childcare full-time per week, how many women will be earning enough to afford to return to work? Two or more kids also generate a lot more housework (washing, cleaning etc.) than one child alone. So, managing the burgeoning responsibilities at home is another disincentive to add work to the mix. I also think that if you have had a poor experience the first time you had a child and returned to work, then you are much less likely to repeat it a second time. Recently, I returned to work part-time but the circumstances surrounding this choice were very different to those that were in play when I returned to work after the birth of my first child.

By the time I had my second interview with Anna, she had resigned having discovered that the cost of childcare was negating the value of any income she earned from her job:

[B]y the time I paid childcare for two kids it was actually costing me to go to work. I wasn’t going to be earning any money.

It was significant that the women often spoke about how the cost of childcare was subtracted from their income rather than from what could have been referred to as the ‘household income’ or the ‘joint income’. Implicit in weighing up the costs and benefits of childcare was the fact that in most cases both people understood the man to be the breadwinner and to enjoy the superior income. Interviews, for example, done with Anna and Naomi revealed how their partners were ‘the breadwinners’ and enjoyed a higher income then they did. For that reason, decisions about their work favoured the men. The reasoning seemed to have been that because ‘it didn’t make financial sense to use childcare’ and then there was no real benefit to be had from the woman returning to work. Other benefits associated with returning to employment, like the longer term advantage of career development, seemed not to have been a major factor in the decision.

We see here that domesticity ideology contributed to these participants’ dependency and subordinate position, in a subtle combination with the reproduction of traditional gender roles, norms and arrangements after childbirth. This happened in ways that were less recognisable to the individual women, yet were accepted in the caregiving role and internalised as a norm without overt coercion. This practice evokes both the notion of Bourdieu’s ‘doxa’ principle and symbolic violence embedded in the inequitable balance
of power in the gender relations in the household, which was further reinforced by none of
the women questioning the calculation of childcare costs (see also Wolf 2002). The
‘symbolic violence’ is constituted by the ways in which power relations are hidden from
view, yet constrain women’s sense of choice at the level of social practice (Durey 2008).

The financial costs and management of formal childcare were not the only stresses
associated with this.

**Being Flexible with Time**

The need to manage childcare was another key factor as women weighed up the pros and
cons of returning to paid work and how they would organise their paid work time. The
women spoke of the constant need to be flexible and to accommodate change by making
adjustments. As Michelle, who by then was on maternity leave, explained, she gave a lot
of consideration to her ‘return to work plans’ because to do this successfully would
require both flexibility and managing her absence from the household:

> It is on my mind a lot. Yeah, I know it shouldn’t be because it’s still a few months away
> [before I return to work], but you know, I think about it. Thinking about what will we do.
> Who’s going to look after [our child]? … Now I’m thinking crèche is going to be too hard
> and I’ve been to visit a couple around here and I’m not all that enthused. I know the
> transition to crèche is quite difficult, so my mother-in-law is quite happy to come here and
> look after [my child] – so that’s really good because it means the transition for [the baby]
> will be much easier instead of having to cart him off at seven o’clock in the morning and
> just drop him off and get used to all new people.

> I think the main thing in my life is his care and to make sure that he is [cared for] …My
> mother-in-law absolutely adores him and she will look after him the best that she can, but
> things have changed so much since [she] looked after babies and I’m just, that sort of
> makes me feel a bit uncomfortable and also [that I’m] losing that control over some of the
> choice. So it’s losing a bit of that, you know – [capability to] do stuff my way all the time.

Here we see the emotional embodiment and practice of motherhood – the role of carer and
practice of caring for her baby is *the* main ‘thing’ in her life. Most of the women
understood that of they were to successfully manage all the ‘juggling’ and ‘organising’
they had to do before they could leave home to go to work, they would need to be
flexible. This theme figured strongly in Margaret’s story.
When I first interviewed Margaret, she was thirty-eight and worked full-time as a manager in retail. Her husband, forty years old, was also a manager and they had one child less than twelve months. Margaret returned to work ten months after childbirth and compressed five days of full-time work into four at the office and one day working from home. Her child was in childcare on the four days she worked at the office. Prior to taking parental leave, Margaret discussed her return to work preferences with her employer:

What I’d like to do would be ideally to work four days a week, three in the office and one from home. They negotiated four days at the office and one day working from home … I think [my boss has] been as supportive as he could possibly have been within the business and without sacrificing the business. He’s been incredibly supportive and I still sort of feel that I’ve been forced into doing more work that I would ideally like to ... [I’m] still putting in a lot more hours than I would like to but [I] still consider myself very lucky.

Three weeks before the second interview, Margaret’s workplace was restructured and she started another job in a more senior role. Her new job was not so hands on and involved supervising staff. She continued to work four days at the office and one day from home. Six weeks before the third interview she began outsourcing housework. She hired two cleaners for two hours per fortnight, for which she paid $60:

[T]wo hours a fortnight. That’s something that you wrack yourself with guilt over – that you should be able to do everything yourself. You just put your hands up and say, ‘Well, I can’t do everything’ and that’s money well spent.

Interviewer: Is it expensive?

Margaret: God no, compared to childcare it’s a breeze (laughs). I pay $60 for two hours and two people come in for two hours – vacuum and clean and they bring all the cleaning stuff. It’s great for my level of happiness at home because at the end of the working day you are pretty stuffed by the time you get to bed and so it’s really nice to not have that hanging over your head.

Margaret described outsourcing housework as ‘compromising’ so she could accommodate her work and family commitments. Here we see the gendered habitus (of motherhood) at play:

When you have a baby full stop your life just completely changes and you get used to compromising and to not sleeping. So you’re pretty much a broken woman for a while you start to question who you are and what you are and it takes a little while to come out of
that – and you don’t stand up for yourself like you did before. Your beliefs and your wants now are one accord so you forget to put yourself first until you get to the point where you have a nervous breakdown and you’re forced [to] and other people make you put yourself first. I think you just get used to not getting, having what you want. You get used to compromise; you get used to accepting less than what’s the ideal and [for] women, work – everything - falls under that. Essentially.

Outsourcing housework was one way of saving time and energy. Yet managing paid work and family life remained a ‘juggle’:

I’ve got my Wednesdays. A special time with [my child] – we try to keep our weekends as free as possible; jointly we go out less socially than we used to … there’s so much going on that I think it’s hard catching up … As far as routines go we try not to schedule too much on weekends then we can feel like we have time to do whatever we feel like doing on that particular day and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t work … What’s changed is the time that you had available to spend on yourself and your relationship, and on hobbies. I’m not doing any exercise at the moment and in summertime I can go for a run in the evenings. At the moment I pick up [my child], get her home and fed and [then] it’s dark, and exercise is pretty much gone by the wayside for me. You don’t really have much time to do anything for yourself unless you make a special time for yourself and that’s probably what happens on your schedule for one night a week, but I haven’t got that quite organised yet.

Sandra, a manager in higher education, also spoke of tight time schedules, and always having to ‘juggle’:

[My partner] picks up the girls, cooks dinner, gives them a bath and goes and gets me from the station and when I come home I put the girls to bed and he goes back to sleep. So on Friday, Saturday, Sunday I am doing all the cooking, cleaning, housework and looking after the girls from when they wake up till they go to bed. I’ve just gone through a bad patch – I never had teething problems with the older one but the younger one it seems to bother. I know that she’s got eye teeth coming through so she wakes every night about four times. It might just be that she will have to change back into this three-day crèche because I have to wake them up very early in the morning and then they’re rushed around a lot – little children get tired of rushing around and they need to go at their own pace. That’s what’s stressful to little children.

Margaret spoke of the burden associated with having to constantly juggle things – the constant ‘work’ involved in having to make all kinds of arrangements so she could go to
her paid work and the way in which those arrangements always changed. Her inability to plan with any sense of certainty that her plans would actually eventuate:

[I]t does feel like a deck of cards – like things are really good at the moment, and I’m just very aware that anything could make things good for any number of reasons. It’s like a juggling act – you keep everything balancing up in the air and as long as you keep catching them it’s OK. It just depends what’s happening at your feet; you can’t control what’s happening under your feet.

At my third interview with Margaret, she spoke about how she had to constantly make concessions and ‘trade-offs’ so she could go to work:

The compromises and trade-offs are that the one day I work from home I basically have to restructure my week. On that one day I take phone calls, do any trouble-shooting and then I hope that any particular job that I do from home will be [one] that I can be interrupted from and that I don’t need to be concentrating on. It’s really just a matter of restructuring my week so that on those days that I’m working from home they’re particularly jobs that I do that normally would be done on other times of the week. So it’s really just organisational … I’m almost resigned to the fact that I’d have to compromise either on the role that I accepted or on not being able to have a day at home with [my child].

As Margaret explained above the compromises she was making related to her paid work, what was really going on was a compromise and negotiation in both work and at home. Margaret’s life involved incessant negotiation in the household so she can do her paid job becomes a major and ongoing chore:

I try and negotiate housework. [My partner] goes through stops and starts and through times in which he’ll be really good for a couple of days – and it’s not because I had to go in and it looks like I’ve slept at the office. [At these times] he’ll go, ‘It looks like I need to be doing something here’. So he’ll clean and tidy and do the dishwasher and it’ll be 50/50 – and then he will just slide along … I prompt him as much as I can without nagging. It’s about being the person you want to be – I try not to let it worry me I guess. I tend to just do it myself and I prefer the house to look a certain way and it does more or less, without me being to anal about it. It doesn’t worry [my partner] too much if it’s untidy or if there is crap everywhere. So I just jolly him along and he takes it on board cause he knows we have different standards, and every now and then it gets to a point that it really annoys me.

It is important to acknowledge that of all my participants Margaret had one of the best workplace circumstances. She had a ‘very supportive boss’ and a sometimes ‘helpful
husband’, but she still had to run the household. The division of labour in the home was unequal – Margaret assumed responsibility for the household work while the demands of her paid work increased.

For Margaret, as for so many other women, the new work–life balance was a constant challenge.

**Managing the Household**

Morehead (2003: 13) argues that a key influence affecting a woman’s decision about returning to paid work is the ‘power of absence’; that is, how her absence from the home is managed. She also argues that the mother’s time schedule is more critical than for her partner’s for the smooth running of the household. In a way that merits the use of the phrase ‘negative capability’, Morehead reminds us that ‘fathers have an impact on mothers’ choices, and on households and what goes on in them’ (cited in Probert 2004: 25).

For Nicole, who worked in retail, the question of how to manage the home while she was at work was a major issue:

… I was thinking – how am I going to do this? … Not so much going back to work but the ‘nitty gritty’.

The ‘nitty gritty’ Nicole referred to was the work involved in managing all the detailed arrangements of her household so that ‘things flowed smoothly’ and ‘there weren’t any disasters’. In particular, she meant the need for flexibility to accommodate formal childcare. Michelle also felt anxious about leaving her child when she returned to paid work and spent time worrying how, and indeed whether, the new arrangements would work out:

I don’t want to leave. I think the thing of leaving a baby at the childcare centre [is that] they tend to be, I think, if you say something they are obligated to do it, like in terms of what food they have and the way they’re put to sleep … My mother-in-law might do her own thing, which might make things a bit more difficult for me when I’m looking after him. Plus I’m just not sure because he’s very little. He’s never really drunk out of a bottle so in the past when we’ve tried to give him a bottle he’s not really interested; so giving him milk when I’m not here – I’m just a bit anxious about that as well.
Michelle had arranged for her mother-in-law to care for her child on the days she worked. She talked about the difficulties of returning to work because her child was not sleeping well and was still being breastfed:

The difficulty with expressing [milk] is really making me less comfortable about the whole going back to work thing because I’m worrying about how [my child is] going to be with my mother-in-law or any carers … [He] cries and won’t go to sleep … I think once that’s sorted out I’ll feel better about going back to work.

Michelle also described the difficulty of adjusting to motherhood and then having to go back to her old job. She described how her idea of being a ‘good mother’ seemed to influence her experience of returning to paid work negatively:

It’s a bit like trying to think – what sort of mother am I going to be? Am I happy not to see [my child] for most of the week? How do I feel about it? I find things difficult in terms of preparing our meals and focusing at work. I don’t know, I can’t tell you whether it’s the job or what it is. I think I’ve lost my interest in work at the moment. I think that I’m very disappointed with what’s happened – I don’t like the team that I’m working in and I find it really hard to focus that into work. It’s been really hard. It hasn’t been enjoyable. I was, prior to going on maternity, a very motivated person with respect to work, and enjoyed work and really looked forward to going. And now that I’ve come back I don’t like my team and I don’t like the work that I’m doing. It’s not very good.

Mary also highlighted the need to be super-organised so she could to be away from her child and participate in paid work. She also spoke of her colleagues’ judgemental attitudes in the workplace towards her return-to-paid work:

I heard them talking and I said, ‘I’ve got a little one eighteen months’ and he said, ‘My sister’s just had a child and I’m trying to persuade her not to go back to work for at least two years’. I don’t want to talk about your situation, but for me I think going back to work is the right decision for me. He was really saying, ‘Oh! But you know this, this and this – and how can you be sure that she’s being looked after?’ I got caned down by saying, ‘I think I’m a better mother not being with her the whole time’ … Sometimes I complain that I don’t want to go to work as I want to be with my child but the reality is that sometimes I need to have time away from her … the flipside of that is that I have to prepare for her not to be with me. I have to make sure that … everything’s organised.
Preparing to be away from the baby involved a lot of work organising food, childcare arrangements and domestic work/responsibilities. Michelle described some of her strategies to manage her time better, which included cooking meals ahead of time:

I don’t have any time at all to myself. ‘Me time’ is absolute zero. If it’s like ten minutes after [my child] goes to sleep, I read a magazine or read a book but he’s still waking up in the middle of the night so I try to get to bed early. I just don’t have any time to myself … I cook [in advance many of our weekly meals] on a Sunday, Monday and Tuesday so we don’t have to worry about cooking on those [other] few nights. I try to get my chores out of the way when I’m at home so I don’t have to worry about them on the weekend. Even now I still find there’s still not a lot of time to myself.

My feeling is it starts in the home. My feeling is that things have changed so much in my generation and I think that they will again in the next generation … I don’t know. I hope that women in the next generation will be less accepting of less equality. I think we’re a bit more accommodating of men doing less. I mean, I’m talking of myself because I do more in the house than what my husband does.

Maria also talked about the vexed issue of managing her time and work in the home:

[My partner’s] job doesn’t really allow him to really take that much time, there’s no replacement for him so he’s taken one day off every two weeks … It is something that happens when you become a mother, that kind of gender roles become more defined. I have to say [to him that] these are your jobs too. [There’s] so much extra you’re doing – bins, you’ve got to empty the nappies and because you’re bottle feeding – sterilise the bottles all day – and the amount of washing of clothes! So there’s a lot more extra work but then the trade-off is when you get home, he’s the one getting home later. I want him to have time with the children, I don’t just say, ‘you get to work’, you know.

Interviewer: So how do you negotiate that, how do you work it out so that you’re not doing all the work?

Maria: Well it comes down to who thinks about what first. I think that women think a bit more in terms of the domestic things – what’s to be done … Occasionally I remind him that things need doing. The dishwasher … but pretty much I certainly do all the food preparation for the children as well – you know, mashed veggies. There’s a lot of extra work and if the woman used to do most of the work she’s probably doing more work now but that’s the trade-off, how much time do they spend with the children too? Like [my daughter] really wants to see her daddy when he’s home, so he might be the one to put her to bed and he stays with her until she’s asleep, which is an hour of extra time at night.
The importance of the household and managing things so she could spend time away was also present in Mary’s experience of returning to paid work:

I’m away from her and I’m able to have a little bit of distant perspective on my role as a mother, but when I come home she is too thrilled to see me and enjoys me so much more … because she hasn’t been with me and doesn’t take me for granted so much. So that’s really nice, but also the flipside of that is that I have to prepare for her not to be with me. I have to make sure that whether she’s at childcare or with her dad or my mother-in-law or with someone else that everything’s organised for her to do that. She’s got her food, her clothes and everything all organised and set out – and at first I thought it was heaven because I wanted everything to be perfect. I was a bit obsessive about that compared to now, but even so I am still ready to spring into action and organise everything at work and get someone else to do my training and go and pick her up and all that sort of thing. It’s 24/7 in terms of the responsibility, but if you can have some physical time like that that’s really good.

I’m very lucky, compared to all the young mothers I know, in that [my partner] is both willing and able around the house. He always looks after the cooking now and he does probably more cleaning than he did [before]. The recognition is now that … there’s an amazing amount of washing being done leaving mothers to do the ongoing cleaning across the week.

Mary talked about all the work that goes into organising her child for childcare: all the food and clothing had to be ready in advance, which added to her domestic workload. While she identified the increased housework, she considered herself ‘lucky’ because her partner was ‘willing and able around the house’. Mary also observed how her partner did more cleaning than he did before the baby was born. She also described herself as ‘family-first’ – that is, family life being the key priority; we see the embodied aspects of the gender habitus at work. As Mary says being a loving parent is critical:

The most important thing is your child. You can have the best career in the world but the most important thing is your family and the people in your life and you do whatever you need to do to be happy … and be a good, supportive and loving parent. That’s more important than any job, even the most important career, I think.

I’ve had to be a bit more organised as I’m not a particularly organised person but I’ve had to be to make sure that [my daughter is] OK, that she’s got food and clothes and all the rest. Also in terms of making sure that [my partner] and I have some time together because we don’t get as much time together as we’d like. We have to apply much more
forethought. He likes to sleep cause he was on night shift and when she’s tired he’s had [go to bed earlier and schedule his sleeping times] … so he could get up at this time, so he can cook, so we could get her to bed, so we could then have a little bit of time together before I go to work. I’ve had to do the planning for that and think, ‘OK! I actually have some time achieving things and planning these things and being more flexible’. As she’s gotten older she doesn’t sleep as much but also she needs routine … and we are living proof that you do need to create a routine for her sake.

One of my participants described the tensions and constant family and work demands as a ‘tug of war’:

The problem is that you have twenty-four hours in the day and you effectively have twelve hours that you can spend with a child and they’re basically the same twelve hours that you can spend in a workplace under normal circumstances. If you find a workplace that’s happy to have flexi hours for that kind of thing that’s great – cause then you can spend eight hours with your child, eight hours at work and then you’ve still got eight hours left to do the rest. It’s just that your daylight hours are your daylight hours at the moment – that time is allocated to your child and it’s also the time of day that the work demands are.

In effect, and as Williams (2000) has argued, it was not simply the ‘time’ factor that women struggled with so much as the constant need to be ‘flexible’ and on ‘stand-by’, ever ready to make accommodations and ‘fit in’ and fix up problems that took a toll. For Martha, it was that unrelenting pressure to both manage and accommodate the tensions between paid work and family that got to her:

The bottom line with that is when we think about [the fact that] I have more the potential to earn more money than what [my partner] does so why don’t I go back to work full-time and [my partner] stay at home? That’s when it really hits the crux when you think – I don’t want to work full-time; I want to spend some time with my child. Which then brings up the interesting issues about how blokes feel about the fact that it’s just expected that they’ll be the ones working full-time – the whole stuff about the structure in place … why isn’t easy for people who share? This has been one of my aims in going back to work … to be able to get into a field where I could work part-time and feel that I earned enough money for what I was doing, so that [my partner] could be part-time as well. So that’s sort of always been one of the big aims, regardless of whether we ended up having a child or children or not. That was always the big aim.

I think the majority of men [think], that’s obviously been his role, he doesn’t necessarily
see it as being his role but he’s been socialised to expect that’s what life is like as a bloke – I don’t know what you’ll make of this – do you know what I mean? Rather I think women are brought up to expect that they will be in and out of the workforce or may have the option to stay at home at some stage … whereas I think that men are brought up with [the attitude:] well you know ‘I have a work life’. So I think that’s probably underpinned everything, but [my partner] would love to not have to work and I don’t think that’s necessarily linked to having a child; I think he would just like not to have to work. But he’s got an incredible sense of responsibility and realises that you do have to work basically to live. … Anyway, he’s loved being at home with [the baby] one day a week and I think he would love to be able to continue that. But then, on the other hand, he’s not going out of his way to put things in motion for that to happen – but then again his work is in a situation where in the past couple of years it’s been a little bit up in the air like are they going to contract it out, is he still going to have a position, that kind of thing. He’s not in a position where he feels he wants to sort of push the boundaries too much.

Anna, who worked in higher education, spoke about having to organise everyone, which involved taking responsibility for the day-to-day running of the household, looking after the childcare arrangements and going to work on top of that. To ‘cope’ she decided to ‘take a step down’ in her job and not to seek promotion. For Anna it was the all incessant organising that she had to do to go to work that was both time consuming and challenging:

Look, I think I still probably do the majority in terms of how the household will be organised. I think I still do the majority of all that. [My partner] does the crèche drop-off and he’s been the one that crèche calls if [our youngest child] is unwell, but on the other hand there’s not nearly as much of what he does in terms of housework or sitting there thinking if he doesn’t do the washing we’ll run out of clothes – that kind of thing. On the other hand, we’ve also got a cleaner that comes in and I think that probably saves a lot of arguments.

I asked Anna if her partner felt as though he had ever had to make compromises:

I think he does in terms of me returning to work. He said to me that ‘I’m a bit behind [be]cause I don’t have enough time now’ … By the time he drops [our youngest child] off and picks him up he probably loses the best part of an hour’s working time, … and that’s something I foresaw, but I don’t think he did … I think he didn’t really foresee the fact that if [our youngest child] was unwell at crèche he would have to be picked up and taken home. I don’t think [my partner] realised that it would be falling on his shoulders. I
foresaw that. When [my partner] complained about it I said at the end of the day your employer has been pretty lucky to have had you for the last eighteen months or so with a stay-at-home wife, which meant that you could work longer hours.

To help ‘manage things’, Anna outsourced some of the household work. She also resigned from paid work after her paid maternity leave finished until she found suitable childcare. She then took up a part-time job in another university, dropping four salary levels in doing so. Anna spoke the difficulties in trying to find childcare which was a key factor in her decision to change jobs:

Trying to get adequate childcare for two children, not just one – you know it’s like finding a needle in a haystack. You are not just going to find that.

It is also worth noting that while Anna dropped her incremental level, she did end up working part-time which had been her original preference.

Twelve months after this second interview, when Anna was employed part-time, she spoke of the unequal division of labour and how most of the work in the home fell to her shoulders. ‘I still probably do the majority in terms of how the household will be organised.’ She also explained that she had decided to spend $40 a week to pay for a cleaner. This had been done not just to relieve her workload but also to stop the arguments. For Anna, all the juggling involved in combining paid work and organising and paying for child care for her two children was weighing her down.

However, by the third interview Anna reported that ‘things’ were better. She spoke of having the ‘logistics working’ and the convenience of having her workplace close to her home:

Three days in childcare and [our eldest child] goes to after-school-care. In terms of the logistics, that’s all working very well. [My youngest child] really enjoys going to crèche and that all works very well and that leaves [the eldest child] for me to drop and pick up after school. Logistically it works very well and a significant factor is that [the] university is about ten minutes drive from here. The fact that I’m not commuting an hour and a half each day makes a big difference as well.

Reflecting on her decisions, Anna said she felt as if she had some choice, albeit constrained choice, and one that came at a cost to her career development. What happened
in the home was critical to her decision, and being able to organise childcare was particularly important. Once that was done, she knew she could work.

I think we see here how decisions made in the course of negotiation were being silently informed by a gendered ‘ideology of domesticity’. These negotiations in the context of the family dynamics, rather than any practice of individual ‘rational choice’, offer a better way of understanding how such decisions get made. What happens in the home matters enormously. The availability of quality and affordable childcare, the division of labour in the home, the privileging of male partner’s employment, whether there is room for flexibility to accommodate sick children, pick-ups and drop-offs, and the myriad of other unforeseen family crises all highlight the significance of the household.

Anna’s experience confirms Morehead’s argument that the household trumps the workplace when it comes to determining the balance of paid work and child care (2003). As Anna explains:

I have to say that in terms of my choosing to go back to work it has been able to happen because I’ve been able to choose. The choices have been made around family first and foremost and then getting the logistics to work – then work was going to be possible. I’ve got to say that in terms of sorting out crèche for [our youngest child] this year we had to have [our eldest child] remain one day a week as an existing user in order to get priority to get [the youngest] the care that we needed. So all of last year I was thinking in advance to get childcare for [the youngest] – she would remain at least one day per week – which meant that when they did the allocation in November last year we knew in advance that we’d have care starting around February, so that all worked quite well … [But] that meant I couldn’t start looking for a job until I actually had childcare. I was pretty lucky to land this job six weeks later, and because I didn’t know my hours we had to book him into full-time crèche even though he was only going three days a week and it had taken a few weeks longer for me to find work. It might have meant we couldn’t afford to just keep paying childcare. [My emphasis added]

Childcare, and the availability of it, was the key factor in determining whether Anna could go back to work. As she said to me, ‘I knew that I wouldn’t be able to work until I had childcare sorted out this February.’
Making Sense of It All

Are women surprised by what they experience? How did they interpret the choices they thought they had had, the constraints they saw and any inequities they observed? Williams argues that ‘gender is unbending not only because of its infinite availability as a metaphor, but also because of the way it intertwines gender roles with attractive ideals’ (2000: 246). She continues: ‘The single most powerful weapon at domesticity’s disposal is the way it links women’s marginalisation with their dreams for children’ (Williams 2000: 246). With this in mind, Chloe’s story is revealing.

In my interviews with Chloe she gave voice to the way important cultural expectations that had the effect of diminishing ‘choice’ which affected her experience of choice. This meant that she was aware of a cultural imperative to return to work. She spoke with the clear expectation that she would – and indeed ‘had to’ – return to work regardless of what she wanted. For that reason the quality of childcare available mattered deeply to Chloe. As she saw it childcare was the major issue: ‘childcare drives everything.’ You could not be a good mother if you put your child in care that you believed to be unsatisfactory.

Access to quality and affordable childcare freed women to engage in paid work. Chloe revealed that even with access to childcare, managing it in conjunction with paid work commitments could be difficult:

… Whether or not you can get it, what day you can get it, [there are factors like] the place we’ve got you can either have Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, Friday or full-time … When they rang me up they said, ‘We can offer you a place but it has to be Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday’. I had this great panic – will I take it? And I decided yes I would. Then they said you can put your name down to swap, so that’s fine to a point, but they are already writing these timetables for next year so if I kept my days of Thursday, Friday but taken Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and then swapped it would have been OK but if I’d changed my days and then taken the childcare then I couldn’t do it. It was completely inflexible and I was just lucky … Also, if you stop and have another baby and you take your child out of childcare you lose your place entirely. If you want to keep the place you have to pay the full-time fees and you go back to the bottom of the waiting list. Most of my friends have kept their children in childcare when on maternity leave, which is so strange. It’s very strange; here is this wonderful opportunity in which you spend a year off to have a 100 per cent of the time with your children and the older children keep going
to childcare.

Chloe emphasised how important childcare was to her:

…It’s an eighteen month wait basically to get a spot, so your maternity leave will be up in twelve months, and the other thing is if you’d gone part-time after your first child you only get part-time maternity leave payments for your next. This would probably mean that unless you were very financially secure you might have to go back up to six months this time instead of twelve months. Childcare seems to drive all these things. Some people who don’t get a place will get a place in a childcare centre they don’t want and are unhappy with. I don’t think I’d do that. I think I would cobble [childcare] together with relatives although it’s apparently so terrible to do that. Evidently the family can be very unreliable.

Chloe also pointed to the difficulty of organising maternity leave, projecting her return to work ahead of time, accessing a childcare place that was flexible for additional days required to attend conferences and do research, and also keeping up with work while she is on leave:

… When I put in for maternity leave, my head of department said, ‘We won’t even discuss when you’re coming back because you won’t know yet’ (although the subtext was that I’d come back after a year) and in fact [my child] was only four weeks old when they rang me up to finalise my teaching for when I returned. I had to make my decision now for what I wanted to teach and that was only a couple timetables … I feel really competitive about getting a childcare place. I really felt like that’s one of my tasks for this year and I’ve achieved it; but it’s almost like that’s a driving force – if you get a place then I can go back to writing – and I feel like the scary thing is the extra [paid work] duties like conference papers, book writing and that sort of thing. In fact there hasn’t been any choice about whether I write that this year.

Equally, in Chloe’s case her preferences changed once she had her child so that going back to work became less attractive. For Chloe, being a mother was fulfilling, and the emotional attachment she felt was described in her account of reluctance to return to paid work. One more we see the gender habitus at work – expectations of women’s participation in paid work and child rearing:

[T]he cultural expectation that you’ll go back to work is true … I think the only people who would take more than a year off … would be people who have some problem with their child … One of my dear colleagues who supported my move into the tenured
position said, ‘If you don’t come back from maternity leave, I’m going to turn up with a
car and physically take you’. They put themselves on the line to give me a job when I was
pregnant, but I do think that women have a lot of choice now and that amount of choice
actually gives them little choice. Everyone’s saying that. I guess the only choice is that
you could come back part-time – and not everyone can do that – so I’m very grateful that
I can. If I had to face going back full-time I think I’d find that much harder.

Chloe also spoke about what she described as the ‘morality’ of ‘the issue’:

It’s a really very moral issue … what working mothers should do, which is part of the
tension … it’s not really looking at how can you be productive and reproductive and stay
sane.

Is this evidence for Williams’ (2000: 246) argument that women’s dreams or plans to
have a family marginalise them? Or do women end up doing what they think are ‘their’
preferences? Under what circumstances might women’s ‘dreams for their children’ be
compatible with them returning to work? (Williams 2000: 246).

Chloe did not want to return to paid work because she ‘fell in love with her baby’. Her
paid maternity leave arrangements, however, prevented her from doing what she wanted
to do because returning to work was part of the agreement she had entered into when she
first took leave. In this regard, this kind of policy can work to undermine the choices open
to women. While Chloe wanted to reduce her paid work so that she could be more of a
‘stay at home mum’, she was constrained by the maternity leave policy:

[It’s] amazing when you have a baby that you suddenly think – ‘Gee it would be nice to
stay home with this child’. I’ve always loved children and I’ve never been a person who
stayed at home but I’ve always had the expectation that I wouldn’t be a stay-at-home
mum. It is so lovely and you have so much fun and it’s so un-stressful, but it is very
tempting to think I would love to not go back. On the other hand, because my husband
supported me I feel that I need to support his aims to do some study as well, so I don’t
think that [I’ll stay home], but it does leap around in the back of my mind.

By the third interview Chloe had returned to work part-time two days per week. Her
husband was studying and working part-time. Their child was at a childcare centre two
days per week and with Chloe’s mother one day per week.

Interviewer: Did you expect those types of feelings – about you not wanting to return?

Chloe: Not really – all my friends, just through circumstance, had to be the main
breadwinner in their household (they're all my female friends) … I am surprised by how much I’d love to be a housewife with six kids.

I asked Chloe if she would prefer to be at home next year and then return part-time. She replied that that would be the ideal situation. When I asked her a more reflective question about her feelings about being a stay-at-home-mum, she gave an interesting and lengthy response:

Did I feel that I wouldn’t want to be a stay-at-home mum? We have got this fantastic mothers’ group and we were photographed [for a newspaper] while we were having coffee one day and that created controversy because [someone] has written in complaining that it stereotyped women in a mothering role and men in a work role, i.e. the ambulance service and locksmiths and fire service. There have been letters in the paper about it and the funny thing about it is that our mothers’ group must be the most professional group you have ever heard of. These are all highly professional women, i.e. doctors and lawyers and academics, and there is not one single person planning to be a stay-at-home mum. Most of them are already returning to work anyway, so they’re juggling mothers’ group plus work. They have just written in to the paper saying that they thought it was offensive to typecast women in that way and there is nothing wrong with being a stay-at-home mother anyway, as that is an important social function, and that these are women who are juggling being at home. You can’t tell from that picture that we are not a bunch of lawyers having a coffee on a Saturday afternoon.

We see here evidence of the way a broader set of norms, imaginaries and images become a habitual way of understanding what we ought to be doing. What Williams calls an ‘ideology of domesticity’ refers to those deeply embedded ideas and feelings about what is the natural and the right things to do. To that extent it informs all sorts of ‘practical’ decisions understood as all those decisions in which some idea of a good is at stake. For Chloe, what could be described as an ‘objective’ ideology of domesticity was simply for her an intuitively correct and desirable way of feeling and acting. As Williams argues:

All these forces added up to a great sucking sound that pulled her home. This suggests the image of a force field exerting a steady pull in the direction of conventional behaviour, enforced by sanctions less brutal than a beating but equally effective in securing conventional gender performance. “They can’t do much to you … but then they don’t have to” (2000: 246)
Chloe’s experience raise the question: Can a woman ever get it right? The outcome of the ideal worker norm is that caring interferes with workplace efficiency and that workplace polices and practices tend to reinforce the premise that the household and the workplace are radically different spaces with clear boundaries separating them. Chloe and her boss, for example, never raise the possibility of her bringing her child to work.

It is harder than you think to leave your child in childcare … I’m just profoundly glad I’m only doing two and a half days a week and therefore I can be with her most of the time.

The other trade-off is [that] I think it’s going to be quite hard to go to conferences and it’s already been extremely hard to go to the … library because it’s hard enough to arrange childcare for the days you’re teaching and it just seems greedy to keep saying – and could you also take her – I wouldn’t mind popping in to the library for a whole day tomorrow.

In the third interview Chloe had returned to paid work, but the household – specifically the childcare and day-to-day work-life juggle, continued to be difficult:

[C]hildcare … really directs what you do in your work cause I’m already locked in now for [next year] as to what days in childcare I can get – and that was the same as last year and emotionally handing your child over to childcare is harder than I had imagined and also my daughter was diagnosed with … allergies. She looks a healthy happy little girl but what she eats during the day is a serious issue so that made it harder too, although the childcare people have been fantastic about it and very knowledgeable. My other problem was that [the university] timetabled me on the Tuesdays when I didn’t have any childcare arranged, so I was just lucky that my mum could pick that up for me … In terms of fitting back into work and making those sorts of changes, I think that my biggest surprise was that I expected to have a lot more time in the evening to get my preparation done. I expected I would have a little child that would sleep for twelve hours when I sat up and did my reading but it doesn’t necessarily work that way.

Chloe thought that a housecleaning strategy might help resolve things:

I was hoping that we might be able to afford to get someone in to clean the house while I was back at work but that hasn’t happened. Luckily my husband is a very helpful house cleaner so we both do that. I am probably doing quite a bit more of the child care but I’m only working two and a half days a week so I feel that’s partly my duty. We really did think we would be able to divvy out the evenings better than we have so I’ve been doing most of the evening child care as well. That was a surprise to us. I do most of the shopping, most of the washing of the clothes and [my husband] does regular other things
in the house too, i.e. he does most of the dinner cooking and washing up etc.

I am constantly trying to find any way possible to spend as much time on family time as possible. It’s definitely getting better … It’s the morning routine that I feel most responsible for and I guess what we’re cutting out is we resent being asked out without [our child] because we already feel we give up time without her so we are much more likely to go to things that children can come to, and that’s a big change. Also I guess I try to do as much work as I can at home other than going in on the weekends or going back late in the evening or anything like that – I never do that anymore.

The field of the household remains a site where a deeply gendered habitus continues to define what ‘normal’ men and women ought to do and how they should feel. As Martha put it:

When you’re trying to manage a house and work and a relationship and everything you almost by default, well in my situation by default, you go to what’s easiest and a lot of the time what’s easiest is just to go, ‘Well look I’ll just bloody do it cause I know it’ll get done’ … and I’m sure that’s what it is for a lot of women. So I feel like I spend a lot of my time trying to keep things running smoothly.

It is in this sense that we can say that these women felt that what was happening was in some sense ‘fair’ or ‘right’. Any unequal treatment they were experiencing they dealt with by (re)defining it as ‘fair’.

Underlying Martha's comment about ‘what it is like for a lot of women’ when managing a house, paid work and her relationship, are ideas about the ideal worker and the ideal carer which define and shape arrangements in taken-for-granted and deeply legitimated ways (Blair-Loy 2009, 2003). Again we see, as with so many of the stories these women told me, how morally defined obligations constrain the array of options from which to choose. The good mother is the person who keeps the household and everything running smoothly regardless of the cost to her career (Blair-Loy 2009). It is this ‘default’ position that is embedded in culture that assumes the practice of an ideal worker norm and structures an ideal carer norm (Williams 2000), which becomes the behavioural template, as Martha puts it, 'for a lot of women'. Martha's response to this is resignation and frustration – something conveyed in the tone of her voice. Martha well understands that it is her ‘lot’ as a woman ‘to bloody do it cause I know it’ll get done’. The practical decisions women and men make about paid work, child care domestic labour and who is responsible in ways barely captured by Hakim's (2000) theory of preferences.
In this respect, the idea of individual preferences or choices does not quite grasp why the women I interviewed acted in the ways they did. In large part this is because the traditional liberal idea of the individual – as a person who acts in a rational way entirely based on the calculation of costs and benefits and who is isolated from or lacking any kind of social context – has little connection with the rich empirical reality of most people’s lives. This is especially true of the women I interviewed. They were not isolated. On the contrary, they were deeply connected to others, to their children and their partners, as well as to their larger family and community. What they wanted and what they ended up getting depended on their context within the home and the family. It depended very much on their relations with others and on how they saw themselves within the habitus of the home, which was primarily responsible for the household and the care of their children (Blair-Loy & Wharton 2002).

Being responsible for child care is a perfect example of this. The dominant assumption was that responsibility for day-to-day care of children rested with the women which has implications for any analysis for this area of research or policy that relies on the idea of ‘individual preferences’.

As Marshall (1993: 147) has observed, what women prefer as ‘individuals’ is constrained by what actually happens within the household:

> Where it seems that men are taking up some of the work done in the home is indeed that of looking after children. But overall, the bulk of domestic work is still done by women, just as, overall, most workplaces do not sufficiently recognize that fact that most workers have domestic responsibilities towards children, partners, aged parents or all three.

For one thing the ‘choice’ to ‘scale-back’ their paid work may not be a choice at all if child care is not affordable or available, if there is no stable breadwinner, and if taking up the use of officially available family-friendly organisational policies to manage paid work and family means being stigmatised. The individual embrace of the ideal worker and carer norms, as described by Williams (2000), may reduce the sense of paid work–family imbalance and conflict. However, it reinforces not only the ideological framing of domesticity, but the frustration of the structural inequality and unfairness, particularly for women, as Martha notes.
While the women I interviewed were clearly aware of the ‘juggling act’, and while they also clearly grasped the unequal gendered nature of their relationships, this insight did little, if anything, to change their situation. A ‘tug of war’ was a metaphor used by Margaret and Martha to describe the circumstances of combining the household and paid work. All their effort and energy was being put into managing things, to keep things going smoothly without a disaster happening which made the prospect of trying to change beyond what they could manage. There was no talk of rebellion or ‘change’. The only participant who came close to having a strong reaction and who named the inequalities was Martha:

> It’s all been structured so that you’re given the incentives to one person in the relationship to stay at home to be with the child – although they wouldn’t say it that way. I guess they’d say you’re given support so that if you have to stay at home to be with the child. The way it’s structured, you have to be out of the workforce for a year; I mean it shouldn’t be like that – it should be you’re supported while out of the workforce and encouraged to be able to go back in again through things such as adequate access to childcare and adequate places for childcare. It’s just swayed on keeping one person out back in the home and because of the nature of the bigger picture, which is women generally get paid less or do more part-time work or that kind of stuff. It tends to fall on the shoulders of women, and the fact that the physical side of it is shouldered by women [women] may mean staying out of the workforce for a period of time to recover from birth or whatever. So it’s at their disadvantage there I guess.

Here we see Martha described referred to her experience as having been ‘structured’ in ways that support the notion of the ideal worker who has the support of ‘his’ ideal-carer.

**Conclusion**

In the chapter I have argued that what takes place in the space of the home has a major influence on how women experience their return to paid work after childbirth. Most of the women I interviewed reported that juggling and balancing paid work and family was difficult. They pointed to ill-health effects, and time spent organising and managing household and caring before and after work. After returning to work, they also felt more constrained in terms of choices, than they had expected. It is true many talked about how supportive their partners were, but only to reveal later that things had not always been either easy or balanced. Participants reported that childcare was a significant problem: all
were concerned about accessing affordable, quality childcare. This mattered because childcare determined the participant’s paid work arrangements/decisions in a way that their partners seem not to have noticed. For many women, the costs of childcare weighed heavily enough for them to wonder whether it was worth returning to paid work.

Participants reported their partners expected them to they look after the bulk, if not all of the housework and caring, which was emphasised after childbirth when the baby came home. Some reported a household based on equality and support, while some described expectations of doing the lion’s share of housework. Some felt like there was a default mode that they were being pulled into in terms of doing the majority of housework/caring work: ‘I take on tedious boring stuff like housework … it just naturally falls into roles’. It was revealed that the social forces underlying conscious actions and decisions need to be disrupted.

The weight of child care and domestic responsibility, combined with the management of women’s absence from the household on a day-to-day basis, continued to weigh most heavily on women and to remain the key factors structuring women’s paid work arrangements. I argue that the household and what goes on in it is the key factor shaping women’s work–family arrangements.

Bourdieu’s work on the gendered nature of the habitus ‘captures the inequitable relations between men and women and the stories told by women about how they managed being away from the household, and how they organised domestic work so they could return to paid work (2002). I asked the participants about their experiences of ’scheduling’ and ’time’. These two aspects – ’organising others’ and ’scheduling and time’ – did not challenge traditional gendered norms that underlay paid work and family/child care arrangements.

Though we can use the language of ‘strategy’ to describe the women’s efforts to organise their return to paid work after the birth of their child, this process does not seem to have involved entirely conscious choices. The view that individuals consciously strategise, negotiate, cope with and make rational trade-offs regarding their paid work and child care obligations is valid, but negates certain moral and ideological components of this experience. What the women reported was relying on deeply ingrained aspects of an ‘old’ gender order.
The significance of ‘strategies’ which enabled some participants to return to paid work and best organise how to manage the relationship between their paid work and family/child care responsibilities was highlighted, but also was how these strategies proved occasionally to be a double-edged sword.

Balancing paid work and child care in a way that is equal and sharing appeared largely unachievable, even with the help of the best workplace polices and supportive partners. This suggests that key elements for change may require that more attention be paid to the gendered norms and practices summed up by Williams’ (2000) discussion of the ideology of domesticity.

Furthermore, despite transformations in family formation and the distribution of work over the past forty years or more, the pace and depth of change has been modest. While many paid work–family scholars call for policy changes so as to render the workplace culture more ‘family-friendly’ new policies – while worthwhile – may only result in what Blair-Loy (2003: 196) identifies as ‘largely cosmetic change absent theoretical understanding of the devotional schemas’, that is – the deeply seated, gendered cultural models of work and family. I agree strongly with Blair-Loy (2003: 197) who claims:

Simply introducing new work-family corporate policies is largely futile. Any serious effort to reduce work and family conflict among professional workers must be based on recognition that this is a so-called structural dilemma founded on powerful, taken-for-granted cultural models of how women and men should spend their waking hours.

Anna resigned from her paid work until she accessed childcare; she also noted that trying to find childcare for two children was expensive – 'Like trying to find a needle in a haystack'. Emma simply noted that it would be useful if only she could access it. Sandra, Margaret, Anna and Chloe employed housecleaners, purchased dishwashers, cut back on personal time, prepared meals ahead of time and involved family members in the childcare juggle. These aspects were hidden until revealed in the final interview when I had established some rapport with participants. Even then, the participants did not fully examine the inequality of their experiences that disadvantaged them to the extent that nothing changed (in a changing world). Their capacity to reflect on gendered norms and practices did not extend to an explicit refusal. Indeed, this may represent an aspect of symbolic violence in their gendered habitus of paid work and care arrangements operating in the field of the household.
In short, and in spite of all the progressive legislation and feminist critiques of the past decades, the notion of the ideal worker and its disadvantageous effects remain resilient. The strength of this traditional idea becomes apparent when women talk about their lives within the home and how, for example, they privilege the work of their male partners. Thus, even when women are employed in organisations that have the best family-friendly policies, what is decisive in terms of what they end up doing is what goes on ‘backstage’ in the household. Paying close attention to the home reveals powerful cultural assumptions associated with the family and unpaid work that multiplies after the birth of a child (Regier, Garvan & Temel 2009), which workplace policies do not address.

In understanding the experiences of women who attempt to return to paid work after childbirth, it is critical to appreciate the relationship between the workplace and household. We can have progressive legislation and policies that provide for maternity leave, but on their own they are not enough. In short, if we are serious about supporting women to return to paid work then it is critical not to see them as separate spheres. If family-friendly policies in the workplace are to be effective, then attention needs to be given to what goes on in the household.
CONCLUSION

Just over two decades have passed since Arlie Hochschild (1989: x-xi) argued that the feminist revolution initiated by the women’s movement in the late 1960s had stalled. In explaining this, Hochschild called attention to ‘the way married women had secured access to the world of paid work without relinquishing their other role as the chief source of domestic labour’, a move she referred to as ‘the second shift’.

One of the factors that seem to be playing a considerable part in constraining change is the powerful inertial tendency of our ideas about care. This explains why Williams (2000), Reiger, Garvan and Temel (2009) and Blair-Loy (2003) have argued that the question of care is central to any analysis of contemporary social life. Folbre (2001) has described how certain ideas about obligation both inform our inclination to care for others and constitute a fundamental social value. The seemingly ‘natural’ relationship of women and motherhood has arguably long been the most potent expression of this obligation. As Folbre (2001: 11-12) notes:

The notion that women should be more altruistic than men has a long history … By devoting themselves to their husbands and children, women could hold civilization together. In both Britain and the United States, a burgeoning literature of domesticity explained how women could become angels of the home [my emphasis].

Those of a more sceptical cast of mind may well decide that these norms of care work speak more to the economic value of care and household work: norms which are certainly central to modern work–family policy debates and the politics of social life in the early part of the twenty-first century in many western societies. Some feminists would go further and observe that these norms are especially costly to women who pay a very substantial ‘care penalty’ when they shoulder a disproportionate share of the burdens of care (Crittenden 2001; Wolf 2002; Maushart 2000). That costs coexists alongside a major cultural double standard in which women’s care-giving is actually consistently devalued.

Reiger, Garvan and Temel, while acknowledging the complexity of modern domestic relationships, are keen to highlight the persistently unequal nature of the modern family unit. In their analysis (Reiger, Garvan & Temel 2009) they begin by asking - how could it be that the achievement of their lifelong plan to have children seems to
have brought forth unexpected and often difficult consequences? The authors (2009: 20) go on to observe that:

Even now when gender-equity is largely expected, when a woman becomes a first-time mother, she is confronted with the most entrenched aspect of our patriarchal history – the relegation of responsibility for human dependency to the privatized, and gender-inequitable, family unit.

These observations of Reiger, Garvan and Temel’s nicely encapsulate some of the reasons I decided to undertake this research project. My research set out to explore how women arrived at their paid work and family arrangements. This is not a new problem. Indeed it has been at the centre of research and policy debates for some decades. I focused on the problem of gender inequality in women’s work and family life, particularly the decision-making about domestic labour and who does what.

Reiger, Garvan and Temel’s account also points to one long-standing idea associated with several decades of feminist research, namely that there are certain structural features of modern society that work to reproduce the unequal status of women. This example is the import of her reference to patriarchy. This emphasis on ‘structure’ was strikingly controverted in 2000 by Catherine Hakim (2000), who argued that women both had and actually exercised plenty of ‘choice’ about how they might best combine their paid work and childbearing and childrearing work. Yet do we not see here an all too familiar replay of an old debate between those who advocate for structure and those who advocate for human agency? And, worse, are we not being invited to choose between two binaries at the cost of overlooking the extent to which, for example, the structuralist position typically overemphasises the persistence of certain social practices, while those who advocated for agency overlook the often real constraints people face as they struggle to choose the best course of action.

My interest in trying to make sense of what was going on, without falling into one or other of the two reductionist binaries which sociologists have conventionally relied on – led me to draw on the theoretical framework developed by Bourdieu that replaced this binary with a relational or reflexive sociology. In this particular instance this has meant paying a lot of attention to discourses about the ‘ideal worker’ and ‘marginalised-carer’ which Williams (2000) has called the ‘ideology of domesticity’.
The key research question I asked was this: How do women think about and then organise their paid work and family arrangements after childbirth? To address this question I needed to ask some additional questions: How do women imagine fitting their paid work and care together? How much choice do women feel they have in the organisation of their paid work and family care responsibilities? How do their preferences take shape and emerge in the context of their lives? Do women understand their experiences and decisions as constrained or inequitable? What, if anything, about their experiences and dynamics in the household might explain the relative persistence of gender inequality in relation to paid work-care arrangements?

My research was designed to allow a group of employed women to talk about their preferences, plans, anxieties, beliefs, thoughts and feelings, practices and lived experiences as they worked out how to try to combine being a mother and a paid worker. This involved me carrying out a series of interviews with twenty-seven women, employed in the higher education sector and retail industry in Victoria, who were pregnant or had recently had a baby at the first interview. Employing a phenomenological approach I interviewed the participants three times. I adopted this approach to interviewing so as to find out how women approached their paid work and family arrangements both before and after the birth of their child, and to capture change and continuity in work-care across time.

My purpose throughout this research project was designed to capture a complex non-linear process of thinking about, deciding about and arranging paid work and child care after childbirth.

In this thesis I show that some women have preferences. Among their preferences were desires to share child care, sometimes to have their partner do most of the care. Others were less clear about what they wanted. Most of the women knew that their preferences were not always obtainable, so their intentions and plans were frequently more modest than their preferences. Anna’s view, for example, that full-time career focus was ‘an impossible dream’ was a common theme.

Both preferences and intentions are shaped by the ideology of domesticity and by what goes on at home. The traditional expectations of mothers shape the way they think about what is right. This view is succinctly captured in Lisa’s insistence that
‘Your family comes first and you can’t put a price on it’. Preferences and intentions shape and are shaped by experience, which was for most, but not all of the women interviewed was a return to work part-time. For some it is return to work on a lower level as well as for fewer hours. Workplace policies and practices play a part here but household arrangements, especially partners, were important shapers of experience. Factors like the costs of child care, and the endless ‘juggle’ of family life were also important.

Contra Hakim, women’s actions cannot be seen as a straightforward reflection of their preferences. Rather, the gendered habitus, the way the ideology of domesticity plays out in the life of a family, continues to make it harder for women to pursue a career full-time or to stop feeling that they are the person most responsible for the family and for child care. Seeing the matter as about the individual woman’s choice or as simply about the need for more effective workplace policies is misrecognition, or what Bourdieu would call symbolic violence.

This thesis tells a story about the significance of the household and what happens in it. This place is still a key factor shaping women’s paid work and care arrangements. But more than this, women's narratives of gender relations in the field of the household, particularly about the way the domesticity ideology of worker/carer norms is reinforced in workplace policy and initiatives may go some of the way to explaining the relative persistence of gender inequality.

There is plenty of evidence to show that while women are confronted with expectations and decisions about continuity of paid work, deferral, loss of earnings and loss of retirement savings, childcare arrangements, career advancement, work schedules and family wellbeing, male workers do not face these dilemmas to the same degree. The labour market is structured to support a full-time male breadwinner model of worker (Williams 2000; Pocock et al. 2001). The high concentration of working mothers in part-time and casual employment is evidence that the labour market remains largely unresponsive to accommodate the needs of workers with families and more so female workers who are mothers already ‘with an identity strongly rooted in paid work’ (Pocock 2003: 72).
There is no less plentiful evidence to show that employed women's paid work outcomes and conditions are poorer when compared with employed men. Evidence of poorer outcomes and conditions can be seen in the high concentration of female workers in poorly paid occupations and underrepresented in senior administrative and executive positions, disparity in weekly earnings of men and women, and the lack of acknowledgement by policy makers of the unpaid work women commit to as well as paid work (Castleman, Mulvany & Wulf 1989). With this comes a growing proportion of families in Australia who face new challenges of combining paid work and family responsibilities (Pocock 2003).

By focusing on women's perspectives, I have shown how their ideas and experiences are both gendered, and rely on something far more obdurate than the ideal of unconstrained choice and lifestyle preferences which some people in the twenty-first century seem to believe is available to them. This hidden factor in women's lives – their central responsibility for child rearing and family management – has an important impact on workforce patterns for women in that it has added an extra shift to their daily schedules (Castleman, Mulvany & Wulf 1989; see also Hochschild 1989; Morehead 2003). It is also widely known that the 'second shift' or 'double burden' of domestic work and paid work in the labour market presents employment disadvantages as well as other negative impacts such as greater ill-health for these women (Hochschild 1989; Bittman & Pixley 1997).

The ideal work/care regime, described by Williams (2000) as the gender system of domesticity, was a central theme. The participants described the ideology of domesticity as being significant in their arrangements and as central to the relationship between the workplace and household, but more so in organising the relationship between men and women in the field of the household. This is a key component that makes the pursuit of gender equality essentially problematic. The idea that women today are exercising personal and unconstrained choice when they 'scale back', 'opt out', 'cut back' or 'drop back' from their paid work in order to manage a balance between paid and unpaid work fails to acknowledge the potency of the gendered habitus which makes care an essentially feminine task.

Domesticity contributed to the participants’ dependency and the reproduction of traditional gender roles and arrangements after childbirth that they were trying to
resist. This happened in ways that were often less recognisable to the individual, such as Bourdieu’s doxa principle and symbolic violence where such gender structures appear hidden yet permeate the everyday life. The participants genuinely grappled with attempts to achieve gender equality or egalitarian arrangements in the household, while also experiencing significant change and adjustments with the presence of a new baby, yet felt compelled to take on additional household work, drop back in their paid work, sacrifice their economic independence, assume the responsibility of the wellbeing and best interests of their child(ren) and other household members – which made going against domesticity or sharing paid work and care challenging, difficult and an unthinkable choice, and therefore not pragmatic. New ways of arranging work–care and associated meanings proved difficult to access. Instead, the participants drew largely upon traditional representations of a paid worker/carer norm, which were incorporated into their arrangements. These are a hardly clear-cut or a rational process of preference and choice.

The notion of ‘an impossible dream’ (conveyed by Anna; see Chapter Four) in terms of preferences, also captured some gendered expectations of making a sacrifice and down-scaling paid work after maternity leave. It was evident from the participants' meaning construction and their experiences that underpinning the notions of preference and choice were a highly complex set of gendered interaction involving the relations of power in the household, past traditional arrangements and a dialectical relationship between structural factors and social practice, that frames the disadvantage faced by employed women seeking to combine their paid work and child care responsibilities.

On a final note, the research findings in this thesis reveal there are a number of outstanding policy issues that require immediate remedial attention. The findings also reveal a need for future theoretical and empirical researchers to pay greater attention to the domestic space of the home as well as the persistence of embedded discriminatory gendered relations that inform workplace culture and policy. If women are to enjoy more genuine choice about the options available to them and if they are to be supported to achieve those choices then it is critical that more attention is to what the goes on in the household.
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Appendix 1 – Plain Language Statement

University Faculty of the Constructed Environment

Department/School: School of Social Science and Planning

Invitation to take part in a research project entitled What are the key factors that influence women’s decision-making about paid work and family after childbirth?

I am a PhD student from RMIT University. I invite you to participate in a study about how women go about arranging their paid work and family lives after having a child. The key research question in the project is: What are the key factors that influence women’s decision-making about paid work and family after childbirth?

The following information tells you about the project. If, after reading this information, you are willing to take part, please complete the attached consent form.

What is the Research Project about?
Today more than in previous generations, women are making a variety of choices about paid work and family life after having a child. For example, some continue in employment, some reduce hours, some become full-time mothers. This study explores how women who work in Higher Education or Retail in Victoria decide about paid work and family arrangements, and how these choices play out after childbirth.

Who will be involved in the research?
Women working in Higher Education and Retail industries who are pregnant or have recently had a child.

How will the information be collected?
The information will be collected in three stages of informal interviews. For pregnant participants, the first interview will be held during pregnancy, the second around six months after the birth, and the third around one year after the birth. For women who have recently had a child, interviews will be at six-month intervals.

What will you have to do?
Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. If you volunteer, you will be interviewed three times, at times and places that suit you. With your permission, the interviews will be tape-recorded. Interviews will then be fully transcribed. If you are pregnant, you will be asked to discuss how you think you may go about arranging your paid work and family life after having a child. Around six months after having a child and again after a year, you will be asked to talk about your actual paid work and family arrangements. If you have recently had a child, you will be asked to discuss paid work and family life arrangements from during pregnancy to after childbirth. Interviews will remain private and confidential. They will take approximately one hour to complete. You may ask for clarification at any time of any aspect of the research.

How will the information be used?
The findings of the study will be presented at academic conferences and may be published as academic journal articles and books. If you wish, at the completion of the study, a summary of findings will be mailed to you.
What will be done to make sure the information is confidential?
If you decide to take part, the researcher will ensure that your privacy is completely protected within the limits of the law. All information will be treated with the strictest confidence. You will be given a pseudonym, which will be used in all the transcripts and all information arising from this research. Any other names mentioned in interviews will also be changed in the transcripts. Your personal details will be stored and locked in a cabinet and kept separate from the data. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, any unprocessed data may also be withdrawn.

Any queries or complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne 3001. The telephone number is 9925 1745.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information statement.

If you wish to participate in this study, or have any questions about the research, please contact me on the following: (withheld)
Appendix 2 – Consent form

University Faculty of the Constructed Environment

Department/School: School of Social Science and Planning

Consent form for persons providing confidential information

Name of participant:

Project Title: “What are the Key Factors that Influence Women’s Decision-making about paid Work and Family After Childbirth?”

Name of investigator(s) Tel: (bus) Tel: (home)

1. Student / Sheree

1. I consent to participate in the above research project. This research project has been explained to me and I have read and kept a plain language description of the research.

2. I have agreed to participate in an interview.

3. I acknowledge that:
   
   • I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data.
   • The project is for the purpose of research and/or teaching and may not directly benefit me.
   • My anonymity and the confidentiality of information provided is assured.
   • The security of the data obtained is assured following completion of the study.
   • The research outcomes may be published and a report will be provided to me.

Signature: Date:

(Participant)

Signature: Date:

(Investigator)

Any queries or complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is 9925 1745.
Appendix 3 – Demographics sheet

“What are the key factors that influence the ways in which women make decisions about paid work and family life after childbirth?”

RMIT University

DETAILS SHEET

PLEASE FILL OUT AS COMPLETELY AS POSSIBLE.

Demographic information

1. What is your full name?
   ………………………………………………………………………………………………………

2. What is your country of birth?
   ………………………………………………………………………………………………………

3. What is your occupation?
   ………………………………………………………………………………………………………

4. What is the HIGHEST qualification you have completed?
   o No formal qualifications
   o Year 10 or equivalent
   o Year 12 or equivalent (eg VCE)
   o Trade/apprenticeship (eg hairdresser, chef)
   o Certificate/ diploma
   o University degree
   o Higher university degree (eg Grad Dip, Masters, PhD)
   o Other (please specify)
      ………………………………………………………………………………………………………

5. What is your relationship to the members of your household (including children)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member of household (name)</th>
<th>Relationship to you</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eg You</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eg Tom</td>
<td>Son</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. If you are currently pregnant, in what month is your baby due?………………

Relationship Status

7. What is your FORMAL registered marital status?
   o Never married
   o Married
   o Separated
   o Divorced
   o Widowed

8. If in a partnered relationship, what is your partner’s/husband’s age?………………
Paid Work/ Employment

9. What is the name of the institution/company with which you are employed?
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................

What is the name of the department you are employed?
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................

What position do you currently hold at your place of employment?
(eg. manager, retail/shop assistant, lecturer, etc)
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................

Are you employed
○ Full-time
○ Part-time
○ Casual
○ Other (please specify)
.................................................................................................................................

10. How many years have you been employed in Higher Education/ Retail?
.................................................................................................................................

12. Are you currently on leave from work?
○ Yes
○ No

If yes, please explain the type of leave and expected length of leave
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................
.................................................................................................................................
13. If in a partnered relationship, is your partner/husband employed?
   o Yes
   o No

14. If yes, is this employment:
   o Full-time
   o Part-time
   o Casual
   o Other (please specify)

                                
                                
What is your partner’s/husband’s occupation?
                                
                                
What position does your partner/husband currently hold at work?
                                
                                
   **Thank you.**
   *Don’t forget to email or post it back to me as soon as possible!*
## Appendix 4 – Interview Questions and Prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVIEW PHASE</th>
<th>PROMPTS &amp; QUESTIONS: ‘PREGNANT AT PHASE 1 INTERVIEW’</th>
<th>PROMPTS &amp; QUESTIONS: ‘RECENTLY HAD CHILD AT PHASE 1 INTERVIEW’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **PHASE 1**    | *Discussion topics:* Can you tell me about what you are planning/ would like to do after your baby is born with regard to your paid work and family life arrangements? / How are you going to go about organising your employment and family life after childbirth?  
What are some of the things that have influenced your plans?  
Recently, there has been a lot of debate around how much choice women have when arranging their paid work and family life after having a child, whether women have choice or don’t have choices about their paid work and family life arrangements. What do you think?  
*Prompts:* Impact of your employer/ workplace; role of partner (the decisions regarding leave); Impact of maternity leave policy. | *Discussion topics:* Looking back how did you expect or think you were going to go about organising your paid work and family life after childbirth? / How did you come to your paid work/ family decisions for after childbirth?  
How do your intentions for arranging paid work and family life during pregnancy, compare with your actual experiences now?  
Recently, there has been a lot of debate around how much choice women have when arranging their paid work and family life after having a child, whether women have choice or don’t have choices about their paid work and family life arrangements. What do you think?  
*Prompts:* Views on the workplace/employer role; partner in household (the decisions regarding leave); Impact of maternity leave policy. |
| **PHASE 2**    | *Discussion topics:* Tell me about your experiences regarding your paid work/family life arrangements in the last 6 mths/ since having a baby.  
*Prompts:* | *Discussion topics:* Can you tell me about your experiences regarding your paid work/family life arrangements in the last six months?  
*Prompts:* PAID WORK - Have you changed your paid working hours from |
**Discussion Topic: Return to Employment**

Tell me about your paid work and family arrangements now?

*Prompts:*
- Current employment arrangements (position, hours, set days, changes - different/ same job as before maternity leave; if not at same job, describe how did the change of employment come the first interview to now? Have you worked mainly full-time, part-time or a mix of both?
- How has that been for you? Do you see that as being sustainable?
- How do you see things in the near future?
- Attitude of partner regarding decisions about paid work/family in six months?
- Can you tell me about your preferences for arranging your paid work/family life now? / How are you going to go about organising your paid work/ family life in the next year or so?
- What would you prefer and what do you intend to do?
- What are some of the things that have influenced your experiences of paid work/ family life arrangements in the last six months? What has influenced the ultimate outcome?
- Has your view of how much choice women have in deciding about paid work/family life changed in the last six months? How much choice do you see you have now? How do you see women’s choices in general?

**Discussion Topic: Changes/ Continuity**

Tell me about your paid work and family arrangements now?

*Prompts:*
- Current employment arrangements (position, hours, set days, changes - different/ same job as before maternity leave; if not at same job, describe how did the change of employment come the first interview to now? Have you worked mainly full-time, part-time or a mix of both?
- How has that been for you? Do you see that as being sustainable?
- How do you see things in the near future?
- Attitude of partner regarding decisions about paid work/family in six months?
- Can you tell me about your preferences for arranging your paid work/family life now? / How are you going to go about organising your paid work/ family life in the next year or so?
- What would you prefer and what do you intend to do?
- What are some of the things that have influenced your experiences of paid work/ family life arrangements in the last six months? What has influenced the ultimate outcome?
- Has your view of how much choice women have in deciding about paid work/family life changed in the last six months? How much choice do you see you have now? How do you see women’s choices in general?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Topic: SCHEDULING/ ARRANGING/ ORGANISING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about the ‘organising’, ‘arranging’ and ‘scheduling’ element of your paid work/caring now at 12 months after childbirth?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Discussion Topic: IDENTITY</th>
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<tr>
<td>How do you see/define yourself? Has this changed since being back at work/not at work?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Discussion Topic: DECISIONS &amp; CHOICES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel you have a lot of choice/ not much choice regarding paid work and family life after childbirth?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Discussion Topic: IMPACT OF POLICY ON WORK/FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which policies and services are of use are of most use to you in terms of paid work and family?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Discussion Topic: TRANSITION/ ADJUSTMENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Could you tell me about the transition/ adjustment to paid work?</td>
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Discussion topic: Missing data/ silences around formal child care.
Appendix 5 – Preliminary Data Feedback Sheet (collected between Phase 2 – 3 interviews)

‘Women’s Paid Work/Family Decisions after Childbirth’ PhD Research Project: Participant Feedback Phase 1 and 2

1. Introduction
The research project is being undertaken by Sheree Cartwright, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT University. In-depth interviews are being conducted from September 2004 until mid 2006. The key research question is: “What are the key factors that influence the ways in which women make decisions about paid work and family after childbirth?” The project aims to:
- Explore how women from two different industries in the Victorian paid workforce arrange their paid work and family life after childbirth
- Explore what are the influences upon women’s decisions about their paid work and family arrangements after childbirth
- Identify similarities and differences about paid work/family decisions after childbirth, between the two industry groups of female workers
- Investigate how decisions change over a period of 18 months (i.e., three interview phases)
- Explore if employment conditions and policy provisions within an industry impact on women’s decisions

2. Research Design and Participants
Participants are interviewed three times over a period of eighteen months to explore women’s paid work and family/caring experiences and decisions over time:

- Phase 1 interview (during third trimester pregnancy)
- Phase 2 (approximately six-months after childbirth)
- Phase 3 (approximately twelve months or more after childbirth)
- For women who weren’t pregnant at the first interview (and had recently had a child in the last three-years at the time of recruitment), they have been interviewed at similar six-month intervals.

28 participants have volunteered in the project. At the time of recruitment, 15 participants were working in various areas of Higher Education, 13 were working within various areas of the Retail industry.

3. Initial Analysis Phase 1:
My initial analysis is based on the first Phase of interviews conducted in 2004 to mid 2005.
Summary of Key Themes:

(Theme 1) Intentions for arranging paid work and family life/caring after childbirth:

- Many participants reported during pregnancy they did not have detailed plans and had not decided about how they were going to arrange paid work and family life after childbirth.
• All participants reported they were planning to return to paid work after childbirth but were leaving their options open until after childbirth. Decisions depended upon a number of factors such as: child care, how they felt after childbirth, negotiating return with workplace, support from partner, finances.

• A number of participants reported they had a plan or strategy about how long they were going to take off paid work, and whether they may return to paid work on a part-time or full-time basis after maternity leave.

• Comments: ‘It’s a bit up in the air at the moment’, ‘I haven’t thought about it much’, ‘I want to be open-minded’.

**THIS IS WHAT I THINK IT MEANS:**

• Participants felt ambivalent or uncertain about how they were going to arrange paid work and family life after childbirth as a result of tensions, conflict and contradictions regarding expectations, adjustment, transitioning out of the workplace and then back to paid work, household arrangements (i.e., partner’s support, partner’s expectations, how they were both going to accommodate a new baby in the home), the process of becoming a mother (or having a new baby), availability, cost and access to good child care.

• I see this as a form of ‘non decision-making’ or ‘letting things evolve over time’ and of the ways in which women adjust their life around a range of factors after childbirth (including around a fixed male role, workplace).

(Theme 2) Women’s preferences for part-time work:

• Participants expressed a preference in a hypothetical ideal-world situation, for part-time work arrangements after childbirth, and noted the importance of part-time work for balancing paid work and caring.

• Participants talked about the advantages and disadvantages of part-time work arrangements after childbirth.

• Some discussed the trade-off’s – some part-time work arrangements considered a hassle/not well supported in their workplace, taking a pay/salary cut from a full-time job to part-time, being viewed as ‘partly-committed’ or ‘partly valued’ or a ‘working mum’ if they were working part-time, concern that part-time work may be less stimulating or fulfilling, less career-development/ advancement opportunities, working a full-time workload in part-time hours, put career on hold or reduce career goals/ambitions.

• Some described part-time work as a way to earn an income and keep social contact with adults while being a mother with caring responsibilities.

**THIS IS WHAT I THINK IT MEANS:**

• Part-time work arrangements are not fully supported in the workplace, and women are well aware of the compromises and trade-offs they make to accommodate paid work/family balance.

(Theme 3) Gender arrangements in the household:

• A continuum of joint decision-making in terms of accommodating a new baby where there’s a process of adjustment of a mother around ‘fixed or taken for granted’ role of father, for example working around partner’s work schedule.

• Participants who had recently had a child (and weren’t pregnant at Phase 1) discussed doing the majority of caring and household work because it just seemed to work out that way; it suited their personality, and sees their role as ‘keeping things running smoothly’.
Comment: “You’ve got to try and work out the best situation based on what your partner is doing”.

**THIS IS WHAT I THINK IT MEANS:**

- These are taken-for granted or unquestioned assumptions about the gendered division of roles in the household. Participants talk of making adjustments and fitting around a fixed male role, in terms of paid work and family arrangements indicate that partner’s had a great deal of influence on paid work decisions and arrangements.

(Theme 4) Key factors Influencing women’s decisions about paid work/family after childbirth:

- Ideas about motherhood (beliefs and values about what a ‘good’ mother is and how she would organise paid work and family compared to a ‘bad’ or ‘not as good’ mother)
- Workplace and workplace policies (whether participants had access to paid maternity leave or not)
- Partner’s support, expectations and flexibility (if their partner expected or preferred women to be stay at home mum, partner’s views on working part-time to share caring work)
- Family practices (participants talked about their mother’s paid work/family arrangements when they were a small child)
- Gender arrangements (if they ‘naturally’ took on more caring than their partner, being the organiser or ‘control’ person in household was just a part of their personality)

(Theme 5) The importance of language: ‘decisions’ or ‘choice’

- Some participants preferred to talk about making ‘decisions’, not choices.

**THIS IS WHAT I THINK IT MEANS:**

- The notion of ‘choice’ does not accurately represent women’s lived experiences in terms of their paid work and family life arrangements. The notion of ‘choice’ is linked with free choice and the ability to do as one desires and some participants are limited and constrained in their choices. Participants saw themselves as ‘making decisions’ in a context of trade-offs, conflict and constraints.

**Initial Analysis of Phase 2 (follow-up interviews conducted mid 2005 – Feb 2006)**

(Theme 1) Uncertain/Unsure of Return to Paid Work Decisions:

- All participants on maternity leave at Phase 2 interview intended to return to paid work after maternity leave, except one who had tended resignation.
- Participants were unsure or uncertain how many hours/days they would return to paid work, if they would return to the same workplace or another job, nervous about negotiating with boss/ workplace, unsure if work would accommodate their flexibility, nervous because their confidence was down from being at home, nervous how child would adjust to child care, and how to adjust to paid work and mothering and breastfeeding.
- Some participants were weighing up if it was worth returning to paid work after the cost of childcare.
- Comments: “I’m still tossing up what to do…”; “ambivalence about the whole sort of return to work thing. But every time I check out a new child care centre or I talk about going back to work I sort of think how could I leave my gorgeous [baby]”;

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**THIS IS WHAT I THINK IT MEANS:**

- Participant’s plans for arranging paid work and family life after childbirth were still evolving, particularly due to the strain of juggling demands of child, household, paid work and time constraints.

(Theme 2) The Importance of Child Care Arrangements:

- Participants reported childcare as a significant issue in paid work/family arrangements and decisions and were concerned about getting access to affordable, good quality child care.
- Participants preferred ‘one-on-one care’ for their child when they were very young, such as a nanny or care by a family member, or a mix of childcare (family member combined with occasional, family day care or crèche).
- Those that were using full-time childcare were happy with the stimulation their child was receiving.
- Child care determined paid work arrangements/decisions, for example, how many days of child care participants were able to access determined which days and number of days in paid work, the cost of child care determined number of days needed to work to cover cost of child care, or whether it was worth returning to paid work.
- Comments: “It depends on how much if any sort of subsidy I get, is worth going back”.

**THIS IS WHAT I THINK IT MEANS:**

- Participants feel a lack of control over their paid work and family/caring arrangements/decisions and are ambivalent about returning to work, and juggling/balancing a range of demands. Participants are ambivalent about placing child in the care of others, negotiating/bargaining with workplace, managing conflicting demands of paid work and family schedules.

(Theme 3) Partner’s Involvement, Negotiating Paid Work and Caring in the Household

- Participants reported their partner’s expected they look after everything in terms of the housework and caring, which was emphasised after childbirth when the baby came home.
- Some reported a household based on equality and support, while some described expectations of doing the lion’s share of housework.
- Participants reported partner having to adjust to parenthood and household changes.
- Some felt like there was a default mode that they were being pulled into in terms of doing the majority of housework/caring work.
- Comments: “I take on tedious boring stuff like housework… it just naturally falls into roles”.

(Theme 4) Barriers/Tensions/Difficulties/Constraints in Combining Paid Work and Family at Phase 2:

- Participants reported juggling and balancing paid work/family is difficult, noting ill-health effects, time spent organising and managing household and caring before and after work.
- Participants felt more constrained in terms of choices, compared to Phase 1 interviews.
- Partner’s expectations was a cause of tension.
• Workplace expectations to return full-time (part-time work not supported) was a cause of tension
• Difficulty organising appointments during after hours (when participant works full-time)

(Theme 5) You’re invisible at workplace when you’re on maternity leave:
• Participants were frustrated their office/desk space had been allocated to a full-time employee while they were on maternity leave and possibly after the return.
• Participants felt distanced from work colleagues while being away from work.
• Participants were active in checking emails, keeping up to date with work related activities while on maternity leave so as to show continued interest in belonging to the workplace.

WHAT I THINK IT MEANS:
• The workplace is not as supportive or inclusive regarding paid work and family.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? HAVE I GOT IT RIGHT? HAVE I MISSED ANYTHING?
PLEASE CONTACT ME WITH FEEDBACK.

THANK YOU!