

## *Chapter 8*

# GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND CONTINUITY AMONG BRITISH MOTHERS

THE SHARING OF BELIEFS, KNOWLEDGE AND  
PRACTICES C. 1940–1990

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According to Nancy Chodorow, 'Biological mothering – pregnancy, childbirth, the felt reproductive drive – is filtered and created through the prism of the intrapsychic and intersubjective reproduction of mothering' (1999: xiv). Using Chodorow's thesis of the reproduction of mothering, this chapter explores how women's relationships with their own mothers influenced their attitudes towards motherhood in post-war Britain. Focusing on the themes of women's learning to be mothers, emulation of their own mothers, and rejection of their own mothers' examples, the chapter considers the transfers of knowledge that took place. This is examined not only at a conscious level, for example in the practical help and support mothers offered their daughters in respect to maternity, infant care and child-rearing, but also at an unconscious level, through the models of motherhood they presented. By analysing the accounts of mothers and daughters the chapter demonstrates the continued importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the intergenerational transmission of attitudes and practices.

In a 1974 article entitled 'Family Structure and Feminine Personality' Chodorow explained that she was attempting to 'rectify certain gaps in the social-scientific literature' and contribute to a 'reformulation of psychological anthropology'. She continued:

Most traditional accounts of family and socialization tend to emphasize only role training, and not unconscious features of personality. Those few that rely on Freudian theory have abstracted a behaviorist methodology from this theory, concentrating on isolated 'significant' behaviors like weaning and toilet training. The paper advocates instead a focus on the ongoing interpersonal relationships in which these various behaviors are given meaning. (44)

Developing her ideas in the seminal work *The Reproduction of Mothering*, first published in 1978, Chodorow offered an explanation of women's mothering based on object-relations psychoanalysis (Rye 2009: 24–25). Drawing on the work of Margaret Mahler, she proposed that because mothers treat their daughters and sons differently, they in turn develop differently (Mahler et al. 1975: 3). Daughters, who share a 'core female identity' with their mothers, are encouraged to imitate them, while sons are expected to be separate and autonomous (Chodorow 1978: 151). During the oedipal conflict the daughter remains in an 'attached' relationship, which ideally suits her for adopting the caring and nurturing responsibilities in the domestic sphere. The son, on the other hand, turns away from his mother and towards his father who he sees as more worthy. He adopts competitive traits that are suited to the powerful public sphere (Chodorow 1978: 8–10, 39). While Chodorow acknowledges the importance of the outside world in shaping their experiences of motherhood (her earlier works paid more attention to the sociology of gender (Lorber 1981: 482)) she ultimately concludes that, 'Women come to be mothers because they have been mothered by women' (211).

Chodorow's analysis was taken up by the women's movement as the most competently theorized new writing on mothering (Segal 1994: 136). But it was also deeply controversial (van Mens-Verhulst 1995: 526–539). Although her text is a frequent reference point, it has been widely criticized for its reliance on the model of the white, heterosexual, middle-class, nuclear family (Rye 2009: 24–25). When she was writing the book, however, the model of heterosexual family described by Chodorow (1999: xi–xii) was statistically prevalent. In the United States 74 per cent of households were headed by a married couple in 1965 and it was similarly 74 per cent

of households in Britain in 1961 (Hughes 2010: 15; Wetzel 1990: 5). Reflecting back on the 1970s in the 1999 preface to the book's second edition she explained that she could not, at that time, 'foretell that a culture that advocated full-time mothering and an economy that permitted it for many women would be replaced by workplace practices and economic transformations that erode recognition of the mother-child relationship' (Chodorow 1999: xvi). Born in 1944, Chodorow is of the same generation as many of the women oral history respondents discussed in this chapter. Like Chodorow they grew up in a social and cultural context where the model of the male breadwinner and female homemaker was dominant. And similarly to Chodorow, in the course of their narratives they tried to make sense of the continuities, as well as the changes, that existed between their own and their mothers' lives. Chodorow's theory of how women become mothers is therefore particularly pertinent to the testimonies analysed in this chapter and offers an explanation for why mothers remained important figures in their accounts of their own motherhood.

Using Chodorow's thesis of the reproduction of mothering, while also remaining sensitive to its limitations, this chapter examines how women's relationships with their mothers influenced their attitudes towards motherhood. In doing so, it explores the processes by which girls are socialized into becoming adult women within the family, while also paying attention to how they reflect upon their psychological development as mothers.

## **Methodology**

The chapter is based on seventy oral history interviews carried out in 2008–2009 with women about their experiences of motherhood in late twentieth-century Britain. The interviews were conducted as part of a wider project on post-war motherhood (Davis 2012). Interviewees were found through local newsletters, websites and radio, community groups and social clubs, and by women recommending other women to me. The sample was self-selecting as all the women volunteered to be interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and based around the life cycle to encourage the women to position their own experiences within a longer process of generational change and to examine how their understandings of motherhood were passed down the generations. Memories are transmitted through the stories family members tell. Discussing oral history and

family memory, Paul Thompson reflects how, 'Telling one's own life story requires not only recounting directly remembered experience, but also drawing on information and stories transmitted across the generations' (1993: 13). The changing lives and expectations of family members, particularly women in the family, was a central theme for the interviewees. Personal autobiographical memory is also functionally and structurally related to cultural myths and social narratives (Nelson 2003: 125). Issues such as class and gender therefore intersected within their accounts and informed the stories they chose to tell. To explore these narrative processes, the women were selected from a range of class and educational backgrounds: from those who had left education at fourteen with the end of compulsory schooling to those who held postgraduate qualifications.

Different types of localities and communities also affect women's experiences. A case study was chosen rather than a national survey to enable an in-depth analysis of women from rural, urban and suburban locations in the neighbouring counties of Berkshire and Oxfordshire. These were the villages of Benson (referred to in this chapter as BE) and Ewelme (EW) in south Oxfordshire, the Wychwood villages (WY) in west Oxfordshire, the twenty-four square miles near Banbury in north Oxfordshire covered by the Country Planning (1944) survey (BA), and two villages in Berkshire – Crowthorne (CR) and Sandhurst (SA). Interviews were carried out with women from the market town of Thame (TH), which lies in the east of the county, Oxford city centre (OX), and the contrasting suburbs of industrial, working-class Cowley and Florence Park in east Oxford (CO), professional, middle-class Summertown in north Oxford (NO), and graduates of Somerville College, Oxford (SO). The interviews were typically ninety minutes in duration, although some were shorter and others considerably longer. They usually took place in the interviewee's home at a time of their choosing. I had met many of the interviewees before the interview, and had spoken to almost all by telephone to arrange the meeting. To enable informed consent I explained the aims of the research to potential respondents in advance of the interview. Interviewees were also given the chance to specify any restrictions they wished to make on their contributions. To preserve their anonymity pseudonyms have been used. Recordings and transcripts are held by the author.

Women construct their narratives in the context of the cultural representations that are specific to their generation and in relation to the experiences of others, such as their children and grandchildren (Wright and McLeod 2012: 15). The interviewees considered

here ranged in age from those born in the late 1930s to the early 1960s, so that the women's narratives demonstrate change over time. Women's age, and their position in the life cycle, influenced how they reflected upon generational change (Nelson 2003: 125; Pascoe 2009: 231). The issue of nostalgia is also important. Barbara Shircliffe defines this as, 'a yearning for something past that is no longer recoverable' (2001: 62). The interviewees had grown up with a strong ideal that marriage and the nuclear family was the best and perhaps only form that families could take. Popular conceptions of motherhood in the decades after the Second World War, with the associated ideals of happy nuclear families founded upon the companionate relationship between breadwinner husbands and homemaker wives, were deeply influential. Such ideas were also present in contemporary social surveys and community studies, as I have discussed elsewhere (Davis 2009, 2012: 15–55). The women's accounts of motherhood employed the discourses of marriage and family that dominated the post-war social and cultural milieu and they often found it difficult to relate to the other arrangements with which they had been confronted, often through the experiences of their own children, in later life (Davis 2012: 177–202).

Oral history therefore raises a number of interpretive challenges, such as the tension between self and public representation, the dynamics between interviewee and interviewer, the function of memory, and the playing out of the past-present relationship in interview narratives (Wright and McLeod 2012: 16–17). The women were looking back on past experiences from their current circumstances and this encouraged selective recollection. Their present selves determined what the important events from their past lives were. In many cases this was influenced by them having recently relived their own experiences of motherhood through the birth of grandchildren. Linked to this, my own status as a younger woman, often of a similar age to their daughters, was also significant in shaping the interview. Jay Mechling (1987: 580–581) has demonstrated how oral history informants modify their testimonies in accordance with their reading of the audience's understanding, so that the background and generation of the interviewer determines the topics they raise for discussion (Wright and McLeod 2012: 2). Interviewees were also aware of a wider public outside of the interview. They addressed this external audience in their interviews, asking questions about what other interviewees had said and how their own stories fitted into a larger account. These intricacies make oral history a particularly appropriate methodology for this study, however. Oral

history reveals the complex ways in which women compose their narratives in order to reconcile ideals of motherhood with the reality of their own lives, but also the changes in this relationship over time (Davies 1992: 55).

### **Learning to Be a 'Mother'**

Girls learnt how to be a mother in the home. Intergenerational transmission occurs through a number of processes. It could take place through habituation. The women interviewees in this study recalled how girls, rather than boys, were expected to help with housework and emulate their own mothers' domestic roles. Margaret was born in 1944 in Romford in Essex, and her younger brother was born five years later. Discussing whether they helped in the home when they were growing up, she said:

Well, I used to help with the Hoovering, help with the washing, I always went shopping with my mother. She used to ask me to work with her I think when we were doing housework. I mean I don't mean to say I was Cinderella or anything but I just felt that because I was the girl I was expected to do the domestic stuff and my brother never was. (EW15: 2)

Girls' experiences of learning from their mothers varied significantly according to class, however. Interviewees from middle-class backgrounds said they learnt far less from their mothers than their working-class counterparts. The mothers of middle-class girls, particularly those born before the Second World War, had domestic servants who their daughters said were responsible for the more practical elements of their upbringing (SO5: 3; NO7: 1; NO14: 3; OX15: 1–2).

It was not only through watching or helping with household chores that girls learnt what was expected of adult women. Women growing up in the decades after the Second World War also learnt what was considered to be the appropriate behaviour of adult women from their mothers (Alexander 1994: 220). Tara was born in India in 1954, where her parents were part of the Anglo-Indian community, before moving to London when she was eighteen months old. She was the second youngest of four children and the only girl. Recalling the birth of her younger brother in 1957 she said: 'my first significant memory is his birth ... And I remember helping my mother bathe him, and push him around in the pram

and all that' (SO15: 1). Tara not only witnessed what it meant to be a mother, but was encouraged to participate in the mothering of her brother. It was at home that she learnt about division of labour in the family, with breadwinner husbands and homemaker wives, so dominant in post-war British culture. She continued by explaining that: 'I think my earliest impression of what it was to be a woman was to be a mother. That's what I remember, you know. Mum has the baby and it's literally holding the baby and dad's out there somewhere doing something called work' (SO15: 2). Discussing growing up, Tara explained that it was in the family that she learned what her expected future was to be. She told me: 'there was a large, great deal of pressure for the female role – expectation that you would get married quite likely and that was the substantial part of your future' (SO15: 4–5). However, it was not just from her mother that these ideas were disseminated, and she told an anecdote about a conversation with her father to illustrate this point:

I remember being with my father when I was a little girl and talking about the future and he said, 'Oh, one day I'll have to give you away.' And I was very alarmed. I thought, 'What do you mean?' You know, be given to a jumble sale or something? Then he said, 'Oh, no, that's what happens when you get married.' So it was definitely there. You know, that the daughter was expected to get married. (SO15: 4–5)

Tara's account of her childhood was not unusual and other women had similar stories to tell. Pippa was born in Paisley in Scotland in 1955. Her father was in the navy and her mother was a housewife. During Pippa's childhood the family had moved around the country following her father's postings. She explained: 'my mother ... was very clear about her role within the house. There was much more differentiation between my parents' (CO13: 3). Indicating the influence of her mother's actions upon her own, Pippa said that despite ostensibly trying to live her life in a different way from her mother she felt that in many ways she replicated it: 'I think that there is still this element of being respectable and conforming to the model of motherhood that my mother had to present to me' (CO13: 20–21). Pippa felt she was constantly defined by her mother's conduct, not only in terms of her relationship with her children, but also her husband. She said:

She's always been concerned about [my husband] being away all the time and always been absolutely horrified about the way I treat, supposedly treat him ... There was a lot of ... nurturing of my father to

which I [rebelled], you know, a lot of the arguments we had when I was a teenager was [because] my Dad had the best of everything and had the best chair and was served first and so I would rail against this. (CO13: 20–21)

Despite these tensions, however, Pippa also explained that she had tried to please her parents. She spoke of how she felt she had been encouraged by her parents, at both a conscious and unconscious level, to marry early at the age of twenty-three rather than living with her partner. She said: ‘it’s interesting that I wasn’t prepared to upset them really’ (CO13: 20–21). Pippa’s use of the idea of conscious and unconscious mind may have resulted from her work in early years’ services which meant she was familiar with the language of psychoanalysis. However, while other women may not have used these terms, she was not alone in describing the implicit and explicit influence that parents had exerted over life choices in terms of education, employment and choice of partner. This was described as occurring through parents’ efforts to overtly enforce their will on their children or because the bond between parent and child meant the younger women did not want to disappoint them. The different ways in which parents could influence their children was also something they reflected on as parents themselves. Pippa explained how she had tried to behave with her own children, indicating how these ideas about the distinct roles for men and women had been passed down the family, even if not intentionally:

I don’t think I made any distinction, not consciously, between them over household chores. But I think there is a gender difference. I think when they’re home, there is a more of a feeling of a student flat about the place when the boys are here than when my daughter’s here ... Whereas the boys [say] ‘Oh, I’ll do it later’ you know, if I ask her to do something, she will do it. (CO13: 20–21)

As both Tara and Pippa’s accounts indicate, women could find it difficult to reconcile the model of motherhood they had inherited from their mothers with their own hopes and desires. After the Second World War, the 1944 Education Act and the expansion of universities meant that young women, and particularly, although not exclusively, middle-class young women, had educational opportunities that had not been open to their mothers and in consequence held different aspirations for their future lives. They did not want or expect that being a wife and mother would also entail being a full-time homemaker dependent on a male breadwinner.



Kim was born in 1948 and grew up in Nottinghamshire to a middle-class family. She had one brother who was five years older. Kim said she had struggled to combine the image of motherhood that her mother had shown with her own aspirations for an education. Kim's mother had left university after a year and had not worked after having her children. In consequence, Kim explained that she had 'no idea how on earth the two things squared up, going to university and having a career, and turning into my mother and being a good housewife with children. It was a gap in my understanding that I couldn't easily put together' (OX15: 4). Kim had always wanted to go to university, but was unsure what would happen next. She said she thought she would 'have a career of some kind, very unspecified, no idea what it would be, hopefully not teaching because I hated school so much, and that I would then somehow miraculously meet somebody, stop that bit of life and would start this other strand of life which was me as a mother' (OX15: 4). Her mother had passed down a model of motherhood that she did not want to replicate, but neither did Kim know how else to be a mother: 'I didn't really like the model that my mother had given me because ... the more I got into my teens, the more I was flabbergasted really by how passive my mother was ... she hadn't had a career, she'd left that all behind years before' (OX15: 4).

This difficulty of knowing how to be a mother was a subject of importance to Kim, and one she discussed throughout her interview. Indeed she expressed doubts over whether she herself had managed to find a way of being a mother which enabled her to meet her different and sometimes contradictory needs. Furthermore, Kim continually used her own mother as a point of reference. For example, when asked at the end of the interview whether there was anything else we had not yet talked about that was important to her experiences, she returned to the subject of how she wanted to behave as a mother. She said, 'going back to this idea of the dichotomy of the career or the mother, and knowing what I had about my mother being rather depressed and not wanting [to be] that kind of mother, I found myself [as] that kind of mother and it was very difficult for me' (OX15: 4). For women such as Tara, Pippa and Kim, who had been educated to expect to lead a different life from their mothers but then found their lives were similar, the reproduction of mothering seemed to be an unavoidable process. They had come to emulate their own mothers, even when they had been trying to carve out a new way of being a woman and mother. It was hard for them to break free from the example of motherhood that their own

mothers had presented them with, and, as was indicated by Pippa's account of her relationship with her daughter, they could also pass on this model of motherhood on to their own daughters.

Family dynamics were diverse. Some women felt a closer bond to their father than their mother, and fathers could be particularly important when it came to educational and career decisions. For middle-class women, nannies or mother's helps were often primary caregivers, and grandmothers could be important figures for women of all classes. However the fact that being a mother was a shared female role across the generations meant that women related to their mothers and the influence of their mothers upon their own behaviour in a different way from other relationships they described. They were echoing Chodorow's argument, here, that it was because of their shared gender. Chodorow surmised that:

Mothers ... experience daughters as, in a certain sense, like them, and sons as, in a certain sense, unlike. Reciprocally, girls and boys themselves appropriate and transform these unconscious maternal communications through their own intrapsychic capacities for fantasy, their own defensive reactions to anxiety and guilt, and their own desires, passions, and impulses. (1999: viii)

For Chodorow, 'mothering' is not simply parenting undertaken by women, but an especially intense form of childcare overwhelmingly performed by women (1978: 3, 11).

### **Following in Their Mothers' Footsteps**

As well as their mothers acting as role models for how to be a mother, mothering practices were also passed down the generations. Using language informed by psychoanalytical thought, whether or not they were conscious they were doing so, interviewees explained how they thought the desire to care came naturally to mothers because they were reliving their own childhood experiences. Sharon was born in Prestatyn in 1944 after her mother had been evacuated from Liverpool, where the family returned to after the war. Her father worked in a dispensary and her mother was a housewife. She had one younger sister. Recalling the births of her own two children in 1972 and 1974, she said, 'Mum was very supportive' (EW9: 10–11). She explained that her mother offered practical support and advice that Sharon said she followed, but her mother was also emotionally supportive in that she respected Sharon's choices in how to

look after her children. Sharon contrasted her mother's approach with the mothers of other women she knew:

Mothers are very important because if they are, if they have completely opposite views to what you want to do it's terribly difficult. And I breastfed. I wanted to breastfeed, and Mum was completely supportive of that. But you know, you used to keep meeting all these women who wanted to breastfeed, and their mothers would say, 'Oh, why are you doing that, give them a bottle'. (EW9: 10–11)

Sharon felt she was influenced by her mother at an unconscious level as well: 'I think that when you look after your children, you probably are recalling how your mother looked after you. So if you haven't had a good mothering experience, I think it must be very difficult to know how to mother other children' (EW9: 14).

It is noteworthy, though, that Sharon did not live close to her mother. Sharon had moved to Ewelme, a small village in south Oxfordshire, when she had her children, while her mother remained in Liverpool. Despite this geographical distance, Sharon recalled that she would turn to her mother for advice on how to care for her children. She explained how, 'Until the last couple of years before she died she was the person I could talk to about the children' (EW9: 14). Women and their families often made efforts to remain in contact despite the distances between them. The widespread adoption of technologies such as the telephone, once the preserve of the middle classes, meant that disparate families could remain emotionally close and continue to pass on their mothering practices and beliefs across the generations. As Sharon's account indicates, talking over the phone offered a new way to share knowledge, although it meant women now learnt through listening to what their mothers said they would do, rather than watching them in action.

Moreover, spatial distance did affect the transmission of cultures and practices between grandmothers, mothers and children. For some interviewees, living away from their families made it harder to maintain intergenerational bonds and receive child-rearing advice. Megan grew up in a middle-class household in north London, but lived in St Clements, a working-class area of Oxford, when her children were born in the early 1970s, away from her family. She felt she suffered because of this separation: 'My mother didn't live near, and neither did my mother-in-law, so I did feel very isolated, I think that was difficult' (OX11: 7). Women whose mothers had not been around when they were growing up also spoke of the

difficulties that this absence could bring. Tina was born in 1945 and spent her early years in Portsmouth. Her childhood had been a difficult one:

I had a mum and dad and they split up, then I was put in a home, then I lived with my dad's sisters. Then work brought him up to Cholsey, then I was fostered out at Cholsey, but I couldn't say it was very happy. Definitely not, definitely not happy. And I don't often talk about it because it's too painful. (BE3: 2)

Tina felt that not having her parents around when she was little made it hard for her when she married and had her own children between 1964 and 1971, as it had prevented the intergenerational transmission of mothering to occur. She thought: 'That caused a lot of trouble as well, 'cause I'd never been used to a mum and dad to sort of have a role model' (BE3: 4).

Other women, whose mothers were not alive when they were raising their own children, spoke of the consequences of not having their mother present. When recounting her own birth Kim told me, 'I don't know how many days I was in hospital ... the nursing home, I think not many and then I came home and my mother did breastfeed. But because she died when I was twenty-one, which is before my own children were born, all these [are] questions that you normally ask your mother then' (OX15: 1). Nonetheless, Kim still thought she still had tried to emulate her mother's child-rearing style, even though her mother was not there to ask for advice. For example, when discussing family size Kim explained that her dream was to mirror her own childhood experience: 'there would be two of us, two children ... and preferably a girl and a boy, but we didn't [manage that], but the two children was optimal' (OX15: 5–6). Similarly, recalling what happened when her first child was born, she again said she thought she may have been trying to recreate her own childhood experiences:

I was home in two days and really then just had to get on because I'd made a decision to live as naturally. I mean, whether it was because my mother wasn't around and I wanted to kind of experience what she'd experienced, I've no idea why it was, but I wanted ... [that] everything was done naturally so I boiled the nappies. (OX15: 7)

Kim's uncertainty in explaining how she felt when her baby was born and the reasoning behind her decisions reflects the difficulty in interpreting the interviewees' memories of their past lives, which they themselves shared. However it also indicates the contradictory

feelings that they had about their mothering practices, both with hindsight and at the time. This suggests the problems they faced in reconciling the multiplicity of often conflicting messages about how best to care for small children (coming from their own family and friends, advice literature and medical professionals) which existed both at the time and today.

Having children could also make women feel a new understanding for their mothers. Hilda was born in 1942 and grew up in Wembley. One of four children, her father, who had been a regular soldier in the army, died when she was nine and had been ill for some time with tuberculosis before his death. Hilda's mother had therefore worked to support the family. Hilda explained that it was having her own children in 1967 and 1970 that made her realize what it must have been like for her mother. She said, 'I must admit I did not appreciate my mother until I'd had my own children and then I really appreciated all that she did and all how she managed' (BA11: 17). Throughout her interview Hilda referred to her mother as being a supportive and influential figure in how she raised her children, even though she was not nearby, as she continued to live in London while Hilda had moved to north Oxfordshire. Specific child-rearing practices were also passed down from mother to daughter even if mothers were not immediately at hand to learn from. For example Hilda told me that she 'Can't stand dummies. I can't. Probably it's left over from my mum, my mother couldn't stand dummies and you do ... you do inherit these things unknowingly or whatever' (BA11: 24). Gloria was from a working-class family in Benson in south Oxfordshire. Born in 1939, she had lived in the village all her life and her parents were also from the village. Unlike Hilda, she therefore had her mother living a few streets away when she had two children in 1966 and 1969. Discussing how she had looked after her first baby, she said that something that she had thought to be very important was that babies needed regular time outside the house: 'Don't matter if it was winter, or whatever, during the day for her sleep she'd be outside, both my babies. Wouldn't be in here, wouldn't be in her cot, she'd be in her pram, outside, under the plum tree, wrapped up snugly and warm if it was winter.' When asked why she thought it was important, she answered: 'It was something my mum used to do I suppose' (BE14: 18). Gloria was not alone in wanting to behave with her own children as her mother had done with her. Andrea was born in 1952 to a working-class family in London, the eldest of two girls. Her own children were born in 1978, 1981 and 1984. When asked whether she had

tried to be like her parents when she was bringing up her own children, she replied:

Yes. I mean a lot of people laughed how I still make my kids' beds for example, I've still got two that live at home and they say, 'Oh you spoil them'. I say, 'No, my mother did that for me until the day I got married and it didn't do me any harm.' And it's just something mum and dad did for me and I still do for my children. And when [I spoke] to my kids once about it, they said 'No, if you turn into nanny and grandad you'll be alright'. (SA9: 8–9)

While some women recalled that they had had adopted specific child-rearing practices in an attempt to be like their mothers, others, like Andrea, aspired to be like their mothers in their mothering ethos. Jean was born in 1959 and grew up as part of a large extended family living in Cheltenham. Her father was a pilot and her mother a housewife. At several points during her interview Jean explained that she had tried to be like her mother with her own children, born in 1987 and 1990. For example, when asked whether she had helped in the home when she was growing up she answered: 'No. I mean my mum was at home. I think she did everything. She did everything for us, which is what I do with my kids' (EW14: 1). It is striking that at a point in her narrative when she said she had tried to put her own ideas into practice rather than following her mother's example she ran into difficulties and ultimately turned to her mother. She told a story about weaning her son:

I mean I had fairly strict ideas of how I was going to bring my baby up ... I remember I had all these healthy ideas, so my children ate rice with my milk and no sugar and all the rest of it. I couldn't get [my son] to feed. He wouldn't take solids, so I was starting to wean him then. I remember ringing up my mother in floods of tears and she came round with a Heinz baby food pot of chocolate, and of course he ate it in about thirty seconds, so I think the lesson was learnt there. (EW14: 6)

This anecdote therefore supported Jean's overall theme, namely that mother knows best. Later in the interview, when she was discussing the differences between what it was like to be a mother when she had her children and for women today, she said that a lack of discipline was characteristic of modern parenting. In contrast, Jean had 'always been very strict about bedtimes and pretty strict on discipline as well'. When asked if that was something she also took from her mother, she answered, 'Absolutely, yes. It's funny because I've

brought my children up very much as I was brought up. They never took days off school sick unless they were so ill they could hardly get out of bed' (EW14: 8).

It is notable though that Jean felt her sister had behaved in a very different manner. She explained: 'My sister has done completely the opposite. Her children are ill disciplined. They've only got to say that they've got a headache or stomach ache and they don't go to school. It's really bizarre. Mind you, I was always the goody-goody and she was always the rebellious one, so there we go' (EW14: 8). Jean was not alone in comparing herself with her sister. Carmel was born in 1949 in Rochdale and had one elder sister who was born in 1943. Carmel's three children were born between 1977 and 1985 while her sister's children were born ten years before. In contrast to Jean, Carmel felt she was the sister who had taken a more relaxed approach. She was less bound by routine than her sister, recalling that her sister had a 'completely different' parenting style (NO16: 8–9). The interviewees regularly used the experience of friends and family as a point of contrast in their narratives, frequently as an example of what they felt was the wrong way to behave, and this reflected how they developed their sense of identity as a mother by positioning themselves against others. Indeed, interviewees of all backgrounds and social strata, including those who lived close to family and those who did not, said it was other mothers of young children who provided their principal support networks.

### **Trying to Do Something New**

The figure to whom women most frequently compared themselves was their own mother. While women who had enjoyed close a relationship with their own mothers could try and consciously or unconsciously imitate their mothers' behaviour with their own children, those women who had more troubled relationships with their mothers, or who had doubts about their mother's child-rearing style, could try to behave in a different way. Carmel did not present her childhood as unhappy, but she did think it was old-fashioned, and described it as having 'more in common with the Victorians than it does with the twenty-first century' (NO16: 1). When Carmel's own children were born she therefore wanted to depart from her mother's child-rearing practices. She felt that the divergence between her own approach to childcare and that of the older members of her

family caused a significant degree of conflict between them. She explained how: ‘they felt, my mother probably less than anybody, but they did feel a bit challenged by it all and tended to say “Oh you can’t. Breastfeeding on demand. Don’t do that”’ (NO16: 8–9). In part Carmel’s desire to do things differently represented generational change. However, as Julia Brannen and Ann Nilsen (2006: 340–341) demonstrated in their study of intergenerational transmission of fathering practices, generational change does not have to imply generational conflict. One of the fathers they interviewed said that what was transmitted from his family was the freedom to choose to live his life in a different way to his parents’ generation. Likewise, it is of note that Carmel felt that her mother was more supportive of her decision to parent in a different manner than other members of the family were.

Generational change between mothers and daughters was commented upon by a number of women. However it is interesting that some women felt that their own generation of post-war mothers was the first to break with the attitudes of the past, whilst others felt it was the generation of mothers today. Harriet, who was born in 1955, grew up in an upwardly mobile family in suburban Taplow. Harriet was a twin, her mother was also a twin, and Harriet had twin boys in 1986. She thought that she had taken a far more active approach to her pregnancy than her mother who had been resigned to her fate. Harriet explained:

she said ‘I just didn’t want to know. What will be, will be.’ And I said, ‘But didn’t you ever ask the doctors?’ [She replied] ‘No. Well, you know, the doctors know best. You leave everything in their hands.’ And I think that was the attitude then. My mum just thought, okay, her mother had had twins and they were really tiny and they’d survived. And my mum was going to have twins and they survived ... And I think ... there’s less questioning of things. My mum just blithely just carried on with it. (CR8: 12)

In contrast, when discussing why she had chosen to have a natural birth, she explained it was because she had decided that, ‘I’m not just going to go along with what the doctors say’ (CR8: 5). Unlike Harriet, however, Hilda thought that it was today’s generation of mothers who were breaking the chain. She said:

Well fashions change don’t they? I think we relied perhaps more on our mothers for guidance. And I think, as I say, they’re a lot older the mothers these days. And obviously they’ve been out working for a



number of years so they're kind of independent minded aren't they?  
So (a) I don't think they'd ask for help and (b) even if they did, it would be, 'Well we don't do it that way mother'. (BA11: 13)

Hilda presented her own generation as trying to replicate the behaviour of their mothers while women today did not. In doing so, she also alluded to the effects of social mobility as women moved away from working-class attitudes towards child-rearing, which lost influence in post-war Britain in the face of welfare reforms, the foundation of the National Health Service and economic affluence. Middle-class women were less likely to follow their mothers' advice because of greater geographical mobility and higher levels of education, which facilitated their access to the latest childcare theories (Davis 2012: 117).

However Hilda's account of continuity and change in mothering practices that occurred down the generations reflected wider ambiguities and tensions that occurred across class and regional boundaries. Indeed Lucinda McCray Beier has also referred to this generational shift in attitudes with reference to the oral history interviews that she and Elizabeth Roberts conducted with working-class women in Lancashire (Beier 2004: 409). Sandra's account exemplified such generational ambivalence. Born in London in 1950, Sandra was one of three girls. Her father was a quantity surveyor. Her own children were born in 1976, 1979 and 1982. Discussing her daughter-in-law, Sandra indicated that she felt women learnt how to mother from their own mothers and would repeat their mothering practices. She said her daughter-in-law 'didn't breastfeed for very long. She only breastfed him for six weeks. She wasn't enjoying it. Her mother didn't breastfeed' (EW13: 11–12). However, Sandra then went on to say that she herself had behaved in a different way to her own mother by choosing to breastfeed her children. She said: 'My mother only breastfed for a couple of months and then she smoked. They used to smoke during their pregnancy then' (EW13: 11–12). Although Sandra had attended a comprehensive school after failing her eleven-plus exam and had not gone to university, she added that, rather than seek the advice of her mother she 'did a lot of reading when I was pregnant. I read Hugh Jolly, a great book, Penelope Leach, and I went to quite a few lectures and things up at universities' (EW13: 11–12). Sandra's mother suffered from health problems, which meant she could not provide her daughter with as much practical help Sandra would have liked. While Sandra did not say how her mother felt about the situation, other than explaining

that she did try to help when she could, the lack of support was difficult for Sandra (EW13: 6–7).

Figures such as Penelope Leach were influential in the post-war period and Sandra was not alone in preferring to follow the advice of experts rather than family (Davis 2012: 112–141). However, wanting to follow the advice of experts did not mean women did not love or respect their mothers. Contradictions and ambivalence were inherent in the mother-daughter relationship. Women could believe their mothers had tried to do their best for them while also thinking that their mothers' actions were misguided. Recalling the difference between her own and her mother's approach to baby-care, Pippa told me: 'she has said things to me like, "Oh, you were expected to sort of just leave you crying", you know, from that regimented view of childcare'. In contrast, Pippa said: 'I never could. I had to pick him up'. However Pippa wanted to defend her mother and stated: 'But I think she was, she was and still is a very loving mother' (CO13: 17–18). Cynthia was born in Kettering in 1957, the eldest of two children. When asked whether she had tried to be similar to or different from her parents she replied:

Yeah that's a good question ... It's hard to say ... I suppose my ... mother was a stay at home sort of mum, certainly for the first eight or nine years. So there wasn't really a sense in which I was trying to be like her because our lives were just so very different. I mean I certainly felt that my parents were very good parents. So in that respect, yeah, I've tried to model myself on them a bit. (WY12: 10)

## Conclusion

Using Nancy Chodorow's thesis of the reproduction of mothering as a starting point, whilst remaining sensitive to its limitations and acknowledging that her theories are products of the time period and social milieu in which they were written, in this chapter I have considered how women's experience of being mothered influenced their behaviour as mothers. Inspired by her idea that women come to be mothers because they have been mothered by women, I have explored how attitudes towards motherhood and mothering practices in the second half of the twentieth century were passed down from mothers to daughters. While not all the women interviewed experienced their mothers as their primary caregiver when they were growing up, with nannies, grandmothers and fathers also acting as

'mothers', women whose mothers were absent during their childhood still recalled them as influencing how they themselves behaved as mothers. Women learnt what it meant to be a mother through watching their own mothers. In part, this transmission of mothering could take the form of women inheriting their mother's attitudes or behaviours in relation to specific child-rearing practices, such as infant feeding or child discipline. In some cases the transfer of knowledge had occurred through habituation, with interviewees relating how they learnt from their mothers through helping them with the care of younger siblings. However, their mothers' influence was also felt at a broader and more diffuse level. It was through the example of their own mothers (whether present or absent) that girls learnt how adult women were expected to behave and these representations of motherhood remained deeply influential upon their later lives. Furthermore, the imagined figure of the ideal mother was as important to the interviewees as the real mothers or other kin who raised them, and this understanding of what a mother should be like was also transmitted across the generations.

In consequence, the social and geographical mobility experienced by many of the women interviewed did not mean that they believed the transmission of mothering between mothers and daughters had ceased. As Thomson et al. (2011: 119) found in their contemporary study, 'intergenerational work' is central to the project of motherhood. Differences did emerge in terms of the class and educational backgrounds of the women interviewed. Housewifery practices were less likely to be transmitted in middle-class families due to the presence of domestic servants. Women who had been educated for a professional life spoke with particular ambivalence of replicating the domestically-orientated lives of their mothers. Despite these differences, though, all the interviewees discussed the importance of their mothers as role models. Women who tried to imitate their mothers and those who rejected their mothers' model of motherhood thought their mothers were important in shaping their own maternal identity. However, confirming the findings of Beier (2004), the women's accounts also indicate the effects of wider social change as women referred to the increasing emphasis placed on following expert advice. This chapter has built upon these existing accounts by exploring the limitations of the dichotomy of women either rejecting or emulating their mothers. As the narratives of the women presented here demonstrate, the mother-daughter relationship was a complex one, characterized by ambivalence and subject to change over time at both the individual and societal level. Women could

relate to their mothers in different ways in relation to different aspects of motherhood, at different points in the life course, and at different points in the interview reflecting their simultaneous identities as daughters, mothers and grandmothers. Mother-daughter relationships were more multifaceted than the often over-sentimentalized portrayals popular in post-war British sociology allow for (Davis 2012: 21–22).

Indeed the chapter's use of oral history has enabled particular insights into the process of generational transmission. The subjective nature of oral history as a methodology sheds light on the interviewees' thoughts and feelings about their experiences, which have often been absent from the historical record. It also reveals how their understanding of these experiences is shaped over time. Developing this theme, the dual nature of the interview, whereby interviewees are reflecting back on their past lives from the perspective of their present selves, offers an insight into the relationship between memory and experience and the complexity of generational transmission within this process. As well as discussing the reality of their experiences of mothering and being mothered, as they constructed their life stories interviewees also actively created, consciously and sub-consciously, the model of motherhood they wished had been passed down to them and which they hoped to transmit.

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