

Motherhood c. 1970-1990: An Oral History

Important social, cultural and demographic changes took place between 1970 and 1990, which all potentially impacted on motherhood in Britain. Growing feminist activism encouraged a reassessment of the place of women in the family and society. The Divorce Reform Act of 1969 precipitated a sharp increase in the divorce rate. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed increasing rates of cohabitation. This collapse of the assumption that childbirth would take place inside marriage was a profound change. Industrial unrest and male unemployment from the mid-1970s meant that the political and economic climate was also altered. Additionally, growing numbers of ethnic minority women, particularly from South Asia, immigrated to Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Significant developments occurred in the provision of maternity care with the Peel Report of 1970 calling for 100% of births to take place in hospital and the 1974 reorganisation of the health services.

This project will question how this new social climate challenged existing conceptions of motherhood and what women felt about its consequences. The research will be based on sixty history interviews with Oxfordshire women. These will be contrasted with sociological and medical studies, educational and advice literature and media representations of motherhood. Reflecting the ways in which oral history can offer both objective and subjective information, the research will uncover the experience of motherhood c. 1970-1990, and also demonstrate how interviewees construct their accounts. Oral history reveals the subtleties in the experience of motherhood and the diversity of responses, which can challenge existing assumptions and traditional historical accounts. For instance, my DPhil research demonstrated that while interventionist medical procedures were becoming more common by the later 1960s, their impact was affected by locale and the relationship women enjoyed with the health and welfare professionals they encountered. The proposed research will enable me to investigate how oral history can reveal women's experiences of the increasing technologisation of birth in the years after 1970, with increased rates of induction, caesarean and episiotomy. Did the same variety of experience remain?

Aims and objectives:

- How did social, economic and political changes seen between 1970 and 1990 affect women's experiences of motherhood?
- Did the deprivations and hardships women reported in the period before 1970 persist; how did the post-1970 generation of mothers articulate them; were they influenced by increased feminist activism; how were they affected by the changing attitudes of employers and new legislation such as the statutory maternity provision provided by the 1975 Employment Protection Act?
- Did informal associations women formed between 1945 and 1970 continue post 1970; did women instigate formal organisations; how were they affected by their increasing participation in the labour force?
- Did the increasing technologisation of pregnancy and childbirth in the latter decades of the century affect women's experiences of maternity; were the power relations between women and medical professionals altered by the rise of patient groups; did a more liberal attitude towards sex and reproduction mean that women felt better prepared for pregnancy and childbirth?
- What generational changes can be seen in the ways women compose their narratives; do they share similar narrative traits; how does memory shape identity and experience?

Methodology:

- The project will be based on c. 60 oral history interviews with Oxfordshire women. As demonstrated in my DPhil thesis 'Motherhood in Oxfordshire c. 1945-1970: A study of attitudes, experiences and ideals', oral history is a methodology that provides objective information about women's lives, but also reveals their thoughts and feelings through the subjectivity of their accounts. The interviews will be semi-structured and based upon the life cycle in order to encourage the interviewees to reflect upon their own lives, those of their parents' generation, and their children's generation. This model worked particularly well in my thesis and I will employ it for the proposed research. Interviewees will be located through community groups, the local media and using the connections I made during my prior research. My thesis revealed how the post-war generation of women felt significant transformations in the experience of motherhood occurred in the years after 1970. The proposed research will enable me to examine how the later generations of women perceived this change.

- The case study approach will be employed to investigate variations in women's experiences. It will reveal the affects of locality, ethnicity, social and economic contexts, housing and community structure. It will allow developments in motherhood to be set against a survey of changes in maternity care and welfare provision in the county. Six localities (rural, urban and suburban) will be selected.
- Oral history will be complemented by the evidence of contemporary publications and records. While women's personal testimony will be the primary source material, it will be evaluated in the context of debates amongst sociologists, psychologists and medical professionals, and within the media. Literature on maternity, influenced by the work of authors such as Kitzinger (1962), will also provide essential background for my study.
- I will also locate my study within existing qualitative surveys of motherhood by undertaking an analysis of contemporary sociological studies of women's experiences of maternity such as those undertaken by Cartwright (1979), Oakley (1979, 1980), Breen (1981), Pheonix, Woollett and Lloyd (1991) and the current study of Bethnal Green women, 'Becoming a Mother: Identity, culture and the transition to first time motherhood' being undertaken by Holloway, Phoenix and Elliott. However, unlike an oral history approach, these existing studies have not revealed how women's attitudes have altered over time. The proposed project will therefore offer an opportunity to study developments in experiences of motherhood between the 1940s and present day.

Outcomes:

- Year zero:
While I am employed as a teaching fellow I will continue to publish from my thesis, including an extended article targeted at *Social History of Medicine*. I will give papers at the Economic History Society Conference and I will host a workshop at Warwick on 'Advice to Mothers' to be held in June 2008.
- Year one:
I will collect complete the oral history interviewing (60 interviews) thereby creating a new body of oral history interviews, which both I and other scholars could use, to be deposited at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies and the British Library, Sound Archive. I will give papers at various conferences and prepare a further paper targeted at *Gender and History*.
- Year two:
I will complete a monograph on women's attitudes and experiences of motherhood in Britain in the period 1945-1990 based on the current research and my DPhil thesis. I will continue to disseminate my findings at international conferences. I will organize an event at the Modern Records Centre at Warwick to present my oral history recordings to a wider audience with an associated webpage and broadcast on *Woman's Hour*.

References:

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