

Title of proposed research:

Pre-school Childcare, 1939-1979

Abstract:

This research will investigate how competing developmental discourses surrounding the under fives influenced the provision and organisation of childcare outside the home between 1939 and 1979. It will examine how theories which developed during the war about the psychological harm caused by separating an infant from its mother influenced the provision of childcare outside the family in light of the social, economic and demographic changes seen during the years that followed. Focusing on 4 different forms of childcare - day nurseries, nursery schools and classes, playgroups, and childminders - it will consider how both individual families and wider society managed the care of young children in the context of dramatic increases in the employment of married women. Through the use of oral history it will also examine the experiences and effects of care on those involved and the current policy implications raised. In order to see how the demand, type and availability of childcare varied in different localities 3 case studies will be employed - Coventry, Oxfordshire and Camden.

Previous research:

My doctoral thesis, 'Motherhood in Oxfordshire c. 1945-1970: A Study of Attitudes, Experiences and Ideals', is based on 92 oral history interviews with women from different locations in Oxfordshire. It forms a qualitative study looking at 6 aspects of motherhood. 1) It examines the portrayal of motherhood in contemporary social surveys and community studies. 2) It looks at the issue of education for motherhood. 3) It investigates maternity care provision; disputes over who should provide it; where this care should take place; and whether pregnancy and childbirth were medical conditions. 4) It discusses theories of child development and discourses of 'good' and 'bad' mothers. 5) It considers critiques of working mothers and debates over whether women should work outside the home and, if so, what strategies they should employ to combine work and motherhood. 6) It analyses popular conceptions of motherhood, marriage and the family, and how interviewees related to these representations. The thesis demonstrates the difficulties mothers faced during the period 1945-1970; that interviewees from all types of background shared an understanding of how 'normal' women should behave; and the ways in which women were already organising themselves to improve their lives. The thesis also revealed that interviewees thought significant changes took place in the lives of mothers after 1970, which encouraged me to continue the research during my Leverhulme Fellowship project 'Motherhood c. 1970-1990: An Oral History.' Women's lives were transformed during the period 1970-1990. Less than a third of married women were in paid employment in 1961, in 1991 it was over half. Women had fewer children, were less likely to marry and increasingly cohabited. Second-wave feminism demanded a reorganisation of the division of labour between men and women and campaigned for maternity services to show greater respect to their female users. Based on 70 oral history interviews with Oxfordshire women, this project questions how this new social climate challenged existing conceptions of motherhood and what women felt about its consequences. During the remainder of my Leverhulme Fellowship I will be completing a monograph (under contract with Manchester University Press) combining this new research on the period 1970-1990 and my DPhil research on the period 1945-1970 which will form a study of motherhood in postwar England using the 160 oral history interviews undertaken for both projects. Both my doctoral and Leverhulme research has revealed that questions surrounding child development were being hotly contested in the decades after WW2. Building upon my existing findings on motherhood, the proposed programme will enable me to examine how the competing discourses surrounding child development which I identified as being so important in the postwar decades came to fruition with the provision of organised childcare outside the home.

Proposed programme:

This research seeks to question how efforts to promote children's healthy development and protect them from detrimental influences were translated into the provision of pre-school childcare. The years from 0-5 were seen as a crucial period in children's development. Arguments against childcare outside the home centred on the fear that separating infants from their mothers caused psychological harm, whilst its proponents believed it provided children with opportunities for cognitive and social development. The research will investigate how these competing discourses influenced statutory and voluntary provision,

focusing on 4 different forms of care: local authority day nurseries, nursery classes and schools, pre-school playgroups and childminders. There were significant differences between them. Nursery education was conceived of as a positive intervention to promote development. Day nurseries were often seen as way to safeguard children from deleterious home influences, such as broken families and poor housing.

Whilst research has been conducted into children's health and welfare for the first half of the century (particularly infant welfare), less attention has been paid to the second half, despite tremendous social, economic and demographic changes. The health, educational and welfare systems were transformed. Women entered the workplace in larger numbers (about 1/6 of all mothers of dependent children were employed at the 1951 census; by 1981 it was almost 1/2) and geographical mobility meant many lived further from their families. They therefore faced new decisions about the care of their young children. The women's movement identified childcare as a central campaign. Research has also demonstrated how WW2 brought questions surrounding the wellbeing of the nation's youth to the fore, but the legacy of war still needs fully interrogating. Were wartime ideas actually adopted into subsequent childcare practice? Riley examined the relationship between the disbandment of wartime nurseries and psychological thinking in the war's immediate aftermath (Riley, 1983). This project will examine how the continued belief that mothers were best placed to care for young children conflicted with their increasing presence in the workforce. In what ways did the provision of childcare outside the home address these competing demands and how did it change over the period? The election of the Thatcher government has been chosen as the project's end date. Its new ideological climate and financial cuts marked a break in state provision and addressing these changes would be beyond this project's scope.

The importance of this research also lies in its innovative approach. It will not only chart how the debates surrounding child development influenced the provision of care and vice versa, but will also reveal the consequences on those involved. Oral history will be used to consider how adults think their childhood experiences affected them throughout their lives; the difference between the accounts of children, parents and carers; and how changing attitudes and representations of pre-school childcare influence their memories. Childcare remains an issue fraught with controversies and in the public eye. This research programme would enable a consideration of the relationship between current perspectives and past attitudes. Influential reports on childcare have been recently released (Layard and Dunn, 2009; Leach, 2009), with a longitudinal study (of children 3-51 months) being undertaken by Sylva, Stein and Leach. Despite the intensity of the debate over whether care by persons other than the mother has long-term consequences, there is an absence of research on the later lives of those who received such care. This research will therefore have future policy implications by revealing the effects of childcare on those who received it.

Aims:

- To see how ideas of child development which developed during WW2 (such as theories of maternal attachment) and subsequent reactions to them influenced the provision of care outside the home in the postwar decades.
- To consider how childcare theories and practices were shaped by the increased employment of women with dependent children.
- To investigate diversity in regional, ethnic and class experience.
- To examine the experiences of users and providers of childcare to see what effects they thought it had upon them, how these opinions have developed over time, and their implications for current policy.

Hypotheses:

- Theories of child development in the years 1939-1979 directly influenced childcare provision. This relationship was complex, though. The practice and experience of childcare also influenced theory.
- The legacies of WW2 were long-lasting. As Hendrick (Hendrick, 2004) has argued, the experience of evacuation proved a formative influence on postwar policy.
- The 4 types of provision - day nurseries, nursery schools and classes, playgroups and childminders - had different aims, met different needs and inspired different reactions.
- Provision varied in the case study areas according to their different class, employment and ethnic profiles. Local personalities and practices had significant influence.

- The users of pre-school childcare recall their experiences of care as influential upon their later lives. However, their memories are also continuously refashioned by the ongoing debates surrounding childcare.

Methodology and sources:

- The project will be based on c. 100 oral history interviews divided between 3 localities - Coventry, Camden and Oxfordshire. I will interview c. 10 children who attended forms of pre-school childcare, c. 10 mothers who sent their children to pre-school childcare and c. 10 providers of childcare in each area. They will also be distributed across the different forms of care. As for my prior research, interviewees will be located through community groups, local and national media and professional organisations. It is not unproblematic interviewing adults about their experiences as young children; while people's memories of childhood are often more vivid than later events, they can also misremember. However the work of oral historians (Dawson, 1994; Passerini, 1987; Portelli, 1991; Thomson, 1994) and my own previous research on motherhood has demonstrated that oral history is a particularly suitable methodology for the study of subjective experience. It is not intended that the oral history material will supply a comprehensive picture of provision or practice (which will be achieved by other sources). Rather, it will be used in order to uncover the subjective experience which cannot be accessed by other means.
- I will also make use of pre-existing oral history collections with material on childcare, such as Elizabeth Roberts' and the national sound archive.
- I will consider the oral history evidence in relation to contemporary publications and records. I will draw on local authority reports, parliamentary papers and institutional records to determine levels of provision. The papers of prominent individuals (ie John Bowlby, DW Winnicott) and bodies (ie the Tavistock Clinic, Pre-School Playgroups Association), published contemporary studies, medical journals and newspapers will be used to explore professional, academic and lay debates.
- The provision of pre-school childcare, and the demand for it, was highly variable and regionally dependent. I will employ the case study approach in order to consider this diversity. Until 1972 local authorities had the power to determine provision based on what they believed to be the needs in their areas. That offered by London Local Authorities was consistently higher than elsewhere in the country; the provision in rural areas the most limited. Employment opportunities, housing and a population's ethnic make-up were also influential. I have therefore selected Coventry, Camden and Oxfordshire as suitable case studies to examine this variation.

Planned research outputs:

- A collection of 100 oral history interviews.
- Conference papers presenting findings from the research at both national and international conferences.
- An article comparing the provision of day nurseries in Camden, Oxfordshire and Coventry aimed at Twentieth Century British History.
- An article on the use of oral history with adults to find out about childhood experiences aimed at Oral History.
- A monograph on pre-school childcare in England, 1939-1979 aimed at Oxford University Press.
- A workshop on pre-school childcare aimed at researchers, practitioners and policymakers. An edited collection will arise from the workshop after the period of the fellowship.
- A range of public engagement activities a website, local and national radio broadcasts and articles in the local and national press to promote the findings from the research.
- Research-led teaching in the form of an undergraduate module based on the history of children, the family and society in modern Britain.

Plan of action:

- Year 1:

October-December:

I will conduct the literature review for the study.

January-March:

I will complete all the printed primary research for the study and begin the archival research for the project.

April-June:

I will continue the archival research and analysis, and I will begin an article on local health authority day nurseries.

July-September:

I will continue the archival research and analysis, and complete article one.

•Year 2:

October-December:

I will complete archival research and analysis for the project and plan the oral history interviewing.

January-March:

I will begin the oral history interviewing (100 interviews) and analysis of the interviews. External funding will be sought for the purpose of transcribing the interviews.

April-June:

I will continue the oral history interviewing and analysis. I will begin preparing an article on the use of oral history in the history of childhood.

July-September:

I will continue the oral history interviewing and analysis. I will complete article two.

•Year 3:

October-December:

I will complete the oral history and begin the monograph on pre-school childcare.

January-June:

I will continue to write up the monograph.

July-September:

I will prepare the monograph for publication. I will hold a workshop on pre-school childcare aimed at researchers, practitioners and policy makers (an edited collection arising from this workshop will appear after the period of the fellowship). Throughout the 3 years I will give papers at various conferences and undertake public engagement activity relating to the project.

Plans for publication / dissemination:

- Conference papers presenting findings from the research at national and international conferences, including those of the Social History Society, Women's History Network, Oral History Society, Society for the Social History of Medicine, European Association for the History of Medicine and Health, and the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians.
- An article on local health authority day nurseries aimed at Twentieth Century British History. The article will examine the aims and practices of local health authority day nurseries in the 3 case studies. It will consider how their objectives conditioned the type of care that was offered to children who attended them. The article will examine how this provision related to discourses of the 'problem family' and the wider aims of protecting children from deleterious home conditions.
- An article examining the use of oral history with adults about their childhood experiences aimed at Oral History. The research project is innovative in its methodology of using oral history to consider how people think their early childhood experiences affected their later lives, and its consideration of how people reappraise these experiences within oral history narratives. The article will discuss the implications, benefits and future applications of this approach.
- A monograph on pre-school childcare 1939-1979 aimed at Oxford University Press. The monograph will examine the relationship between theories underpinning the provision of childcare outside the home; how the attitude towards childcare of both the state and society changed during the period's social, political and economic transformations; and the experiences of the users of childcare (both mothers and children) and its providers, over the period 1939- 1979.
- A workshop on child development in the postwar period, aimed at researchers, practitioners and policymakers and an edited collection arising from the workshop.
- A new body of oral history interviews will be created that will be deposited at relevant local and national archives (in the form of copies of the interviews and transcriptions) and available to interested researchers. I will seek external funding for the costs related to preparing these copies and transcriptions.
- Talks to community groups, professional associations, family history societies and local history societies at the start of the project in order to locate interviewees and updates during the course of the project.
- Talks to professional bodies, childcare practitioners and policy makers on the findings from the project.
- Articles aimed at local and national newspapers, newsletters and magazines, on the history of childcare.
- Local and national radio broadcasts on the history of childcare.

- An exhibition on the history of childcare to be held at the Modern Records Centre, Warwick University, with associated website.
- An undergraduate module based on the history of children, the family and society in modern Britain.