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Trends and social divisions in maternal employment patterns following maternity leave in the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the social divisions in maternal employment patterns post-childbirth, recorded by earlier studies have persisted for a later cohort of mothers that had a pregnancy in the early 2000s, in the context of an expansion of childcare and other improvements in reconciliation measures.

Design/methodology/approach – Longitudinal data from the UK's Millennium Cohort Study are analysed using logistic regression.

Findings – It was found that mothers are more likely to be employed, and employed full-time, when their child is aged three if they were employed during the pregnancy and resumed employment within nine months of the birth. The mothers' occupational class, ethnicity, household composition and the working hours of a partner also have independent associations with the probability of maternal employment once the child is aged three.

Research limitations/implications – The authors would expect these results to be modified – but not overturned – in a different national setting, for example where childcare services are more extensive or part-time employment is less common.

Originality/value – These new longitudinal survey results for a recent cohort of mothers in the UK demonstrate that resumption of employment following maternity leave is pivotal for women's subsequent employment integration. Yet maternal employment trajectories remain shaped by social inequalities. Both results are important for informing debates about reconciliation policy for the pre-school years, including monitoring the impact of the recession on the employment integration of women following childbirth.

Keywords United Kingdom, Women, Employment, Maternity leave, Women's employment, Mothers, Employment transitions, Childcare, Part-time employment

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the employment rate for mothers has increased faster than that for other women in the UK. The rise was particularly rapid for mothers with pre-school children, for example, the employment rate for mothers with a child aged under five years rose from 31 per cent in 1980 to 58 per cent in 2008 (Martin and Roberts, 1984; Twomey, 2002; OECD, 2011). We start with a review of the research in the 1980s and early 1990s which has shown that the post-childbirth employment trajectory of mothers varied markedly according to their household circumstances and labour market opportunities. These studies were conducted prior to improvements in childcare and other reconciliation measures that were introduced in the late 1990s in the UK. In this paper we use the UK's Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) to explore the post-birth employment transitions for a cohort of mothers who had a pregnancy in



2001-2002, in this context of improved childcare services and other reconciliation measures. Using longitudinal, multivariate analysis we show that mothers are more likely to be employed and employed full-time when their child is aged three if they were employed during the pregnancy and returned to the same job nine months after childbirth. In addition to the influence of the initial employment transition, the mothers' occupational class, ethnicity, household composition, and the working hours of a partner also have significant and independent associations with the probability that she is employed once the child is three years old. In the concluding discussion we reflect on the policy implications of these results.

2. Developments in maternal employment rates and work-family reconciliation policies in the UK

The increase in maternal employment rates in the UK has occurred due to a combination of social and economic changes. Economic growth during the 1970s and 1980s produced an increased demand for women's labour. This coincided with a shift in social attitudes and expectations concerning women's roles which was encapsulated in the women's movement and the ensuing legislation and other measures to promote equal opportunities and equal treatment. Part-time employment had been expanding since the late 1960s as one means of enabling women to combine employment with domestic responsibilities but it was not until 1979 that statutory maternity leave was introduced and there was little expansion of either public or market childcare services until the 1990s. In this context more mothers made the decision to either seek or remain in paid work post-childbirth, mainly through part-time employment, and the average duration of periods out of the labour market following childbirth fell (Harrop and Moss, 1995; Smeaton, 2006; Burgess *et al.*, 2008).

During the 1990s the then Labour government initiated a suite of work-family reconciliation measures to support women's employment. Maternity leave was extended and the government introduced paid paternity leave, unpaid parental leave and an employee "right to request" reduced or flexible hours to accommodate childcare and other responsibilities. The National Childcare Strategy, launched in 1998, produced a significant increase in public expenditure on childcare, including targeted provision and subsidies for low-income families, with over 920,000 childcare places created since 1998 (Fagan and Teasdale, 2008). This includes the introduction of a universal, free part-time pre-school nursery education place during school term-time for children once they reach three years old. Assistance with childcare costs for low-income employed families was extended via the tax credits system, and for all employees if their employer adopts the tax efficient childcare voucher system, introduced in 2005 (Fagan and Norman, 2011a, b)[1]. These measures produced a major improvement in reconciliation measures but shortfalls remain. In particular childcare between the end of maternity leave and the child reaching three years old is still expensive and the universal free pre-school childcare is part-time and only available during school term-time (Fagan and Teasdale, 2008; Bartholomeou *et al.*, 2009).

In this policy context, part-time employment is the main way in which women combine employment with raising children. Furthermore, working-time decisions are shaped by social norms and "moral rationalities" concerning the socially acceptable way in which mothers should combine employment and parenting practices, which in

the UK, often centres around part-time employment being more acceptable than full-time employment for women with young children (Duncan, 2006).

Employment continuity following childbirth, particularly on a full-time basis, is beneficial for women's subsequent career progression, occupational mobility and earnings in the UK (Dex and Budoki, 2010; Jacobs, 1999; McRae, 2008). Jacob's (1999) longitudinal analysis demonstrated that occupational status declined over time for mothers who were employed part-time compared to men and other women employed full-time. McRae's (2008) longitudinal analysis of a later cohort of mothers who gave birth for the first time in the late 1980s concluded that employment continuity helped part-timers maintain their pre-motherhood occupational level but continuous, full-time employment offered more protection from occupational downgrading post-childbirth. Periods of part-time employment have a "scarring effect" on occupational mobility and future earnings, and as a result the hourly gender pay gap is even wider when the comparison is made between employed men and women employed part-time (Dex and Budoki, 2010; Francesconi and Gosling, 2005). The penalties incurred from part-time employment are more pronounced in the UK compared to the situation in the other European countries where this is a common form of employment for mothers (Fagan *et al.*, 2006; Gash, 2008). However, it should also be noted that the penalty incurred from switching to part-time working varies according to labour market position. Dale and Holdsworth's (1998) longitudinal analysis of the 1981-1991 ONS (2011) longitudinal study revealed that women who maintained a full-time employment profile in manual occupations did not gain much in terms of subsequent upward occupational mobility due to the general lack of promotion opportunities in women's manual jobs.

Research for the UK based on earlier cohorts of mothers revealed that maternal employment rates and transitions post-childbirth vary. Women are more likely to pursue full-time and continuous employment after childbirth if they have high levels of human capital, measured by education, as well as on-the-job training and employment experience; and if they were returning to a high level occupation with the better earnings and career prospects that such positions offer (Chanfreau *et al.*, 2011; Harrop and Moss, 1995; Hudson *et al.*, 2004; Jacobs, 1999). Well-paid jobs also provide more scope to cover childcare costs, which are typically offset against the mothers' rather than the fathers' earnings when couples estimate the financial returns from a dual-employed household arrangement.

McRae (2008) examined a cohort of mothers who gave birth during the late 1980s. She found that a continuous and full-time labour market profile for up to 12 years following childbirth was significantly more likely if the mother had attained a high occupational position; controlling for the effects of the number of other children in the household, childcare availability and usage, and the partners' preferences and attitudes towards the mothers employment. Likewise, Hudson *et al.*'s (2004) analysis of the PSI Maternity and Paternity Rights Survey showed that mothers in higher occupational classes were more likely to return to employment compared to other mothers, but that the occupational difference narrowed between cohorts that gave birth in 1996 and 2002. This suggests that the effect of occupational class on women's returns to employment may have reduced but Hudson *et al.* did not control for other variables in their analysis.

Other employment and workplace factors are important. Women who are employed during pregnancy are more likely to return to the labour market and resume

employment more quickly (Burgess *et al.*, 2008). Women are more likely to return to employment post-childbirth if they are employed in the public sector, in larger organisations and in workplaces that offer enhanced maternity pay beyond the statutory minimum and better work-life balance policies (Chanfreau *et al.*, 2011; Hudson *et al.*, 2004).

Household composition and circumstances also have an impact. Maternal employment in the UK is primarily reduced by the age of the youngest child rather than the number of children. However, Glover and Arber's (1995) study of mothers with a young child in the 1990s showed that the effect of the age of the youngest child is mediated by the mother's occupational position: it was least pronounced for mothers in professional and intermediate occupations and more pronounced for mothers in manual occupations. Mothers are also more likely to be employed if they are partnered rather than lone mothers, and have an employed partner rather than one who is unemployed or economically inactive (Harrop and Moss, 1995).

Previous studies show that employment patterns vary according to the mothers' ethnic origin (Dale and Holdsworth, 1998; Harrop and Moss, 1995). Mothers were least likely to be employed if they were of Pakistani or Bangladeshi ethnic origin, while white mothers were the most likely to be employed part-time. Differences in migration histories, current economic conditions and cultural attitudes towards maternal employment contribute to these variations by ethnicity (Dale and Holdsworth, 1998).

This review of previous studies exposes the differences in mothers' employment trajectories following childbirth, which arise from human capital inequalities (education, occupational position), household circumstances and resources and ethnicity. However, many of these studies were of earlier cohorts of mothers, conducted prior to the recent improvements in work-family measures. Others provide descriptive analyses and do not control for multivariate effects (Hudson *et al.*, 2004).

Hence our analysis explores the factors which influence maternal employment for more recent cohorts of mothers in the period following childbirth until the child is three years old in the context of the improved childcare and other work-family reconciliation measures. Given previous research has demonstrated the pivotal role of human capital factors, we are particularly interested to disentangle the extent to which the initial post-birth employment transition is associated with the subsequent employment status once the child is aged three, independent of the mother's occupational status. We expect household composition (lone or couple household, children) to remain salient for this cohort as shown in previous research for earlier generations, but we seek to advance the understanding of these factors by including a focus on the hours worked by a partner. Finally, we explore whether the mother's ethnicity remains significant once these human capital and household characteristics are taken into account.

3. Data and methods

Our analysis uses the MCS, which is a nationally representative survey that follows a cohort of children born around the year 2000 in the UK. Through cross-sectional interviews with the parents or guardians of the cohort children, the MCS covers issues of poverty and wealth, education, employment, parenting and the quality of family life, in the context of changing family forms, labour markets and social attitudes (CLS, 2010). The first MCS sweep was carried out in 2001-2002 with a cohort of 18,819 babies aged nine months (brought up in 18,552 families); the second sweep in 2003-2004 followed the same cohort of children plus 692 newly recruited families.

For this analysis, we take the subset of mothers present in both sweep one and two so that their longitudinal transitions could be traced. We excluded the small proportion of families (0.43 per cent) headed by a lone father, where the grandmother was the carer of the cohort child or where the mother had a partner of the same sex in either sweep. This produced a final sample of 14,651 households (i.e. 76 per cent of the original merged sample). Of these, approximately 15 per cent were lone mother households in both sweeps[2] with the remainder consisting of mothers living in heterosexual couple households.

We present some descriptive analyses and then use logistic regression to explore the factors associated with mothers' employment status when their child is aged three: whether they are:

- employed or not ($n = 14,651$); and
- of those employed whether they are full-time rather than part-time (i.e. working less than 30 hours per week) ($n = 7,917$).

Logistic regression is chosen because it is a robust and highly effective method for estimating the probability of an event occurring, given a set of conditions (Sweet and Grace-Martin, 2002). As we are predicting two binary outcome measures, this was deemed the most suitable method to examine the relationship between mothers' employment and several other variables that will not necessarily be constituted by a normal distribution (Table I). Following the recommendations of Mood (2010), our conclusions are based on the direction of the impact as well as the relative, rather than substantive, effects of different variables within the models given unobserved heterogeneity is present.

For both models we investigate the influence of the mothers' employment transition between pregnancy and nine months after the birth on their employment situation once the child is three years old. To see whether this initial transition had an independent effect from that of human capital we include the mothers' occupational position nine months after childbirth, using their current position if employed and their last occupation if non-employed at this point in time. We considered including educational level as well, but this is highly correlated with occupational position; for example 80 per cent of mothers with a degree held managerial or professional occupations while 70 per cent of those with no qualifications had manual employment (Spearman correlation of 0.55 for this sample of mothers), and so we decided to omit education. As a check, we re-ran the model substituting educational level for occupational position and the results barely altered. We also take into account whether they have younger or older children in the household; whether they have a partner and if so, how many hours he works and the mothers' ethnicity (defined by the six category UK Census classification).

Due to the disproportional sampling design of the MCS, the data has to be weighted with survey weights to take account of the sample design features. The overall weight is used in analyses for this study in order to account for both sampling design and non-response (Plewis, 2007; Jones and Ketende, 2010). As the analysis here uses variables from both sweep one and two, the overall weight for sweep one is used for the descriptive analyses of variables from sweep one data and the overall weight for sweep two is used in the regression models[3] (MCS, 2010a, b).

Variable	%
<i>Maternal employment transition from pregnancy to nine months post-childbirth</i>	
Employed when pregnant and ...	
... returned to work with same employer	35.4
... returned to work with different employer	6.8
... still on leave	4.9
... not employed because job finished	9.2
...not employed because left job	8.1
Not employed when pregnant but employed nine months post-childbirth	2.2
Not employed when pregnant and not employed nine months post-childbirth	32.9
Total <i>n</i> (unweighted)	14,583
Missing	0.5 (<i>n</i> = 68)
<i>Mothers' occupational status (current or most recent job) when child is aged nine months</i>	
Managerial/professional	28.4
Intermediate	17.5
Small employer and self-employed	3.6
Low supervisory and technical	5.5
Semi-routine/routine	34.9
Total <i>n</i> (unweighted)	13,166
Missing	10.1 (<i>n</i> = 1,485)
<i>Father's (current) employment hours when child is aged three</i>	
Mother is lone parent	16.2
Partner is not employed	8.0
Partner works part-time (1-29 hours per week)	2.9
Partner works average full-time hours per week (30-44 hours per week)	46.0
Partner works long full-time hours (45 + hours per week)	26.0
Total <i>n</i> (unweighted)	14,535
Missing	0.8 (<i>n</i> = 116)
<i>Mothers' ethnicity</i>	
White	85.5
Mixed	0.9
Indian	2.5
Pakistani and Bangladeshi	6.2
Black or Black British	3.1
Other ethnic group (including Chinese)	1.6
Total <i>n</i> (unweighted)	14,617
Missing	0.2 (<i>n</i> = 34)
<i>Younger child in household when cohort child is aged three?</i>	
Yes	26.8
No	72.2
Total <i>n</i> (unweighted)	14,651
Missing	0
<i>Older children (aged five to 16) in the house when cohort child is aged three?</i>	
Yes	29.2
No	70.8
Total <i>n</i> (unweighted)	14,651
Missing	0

(continued)

Table I.
Variable distributions
(unweighted)

Table I.

Variable	%
<i>From subset sample of employed mothers (n = 7,917): mothers' weekly work hours (when child is aged three)</i>	
<20 hours per week	36.9
20-29 hours per week	27.8
30-40 hours per week	27.1
> 40 hours per week	4.1
Total <i>n</i> (unweighted)	7,587
Missing	4.2 (<i>n</i> = 330)

4. Results

Just over three quarters of the mothers in our sample had been employed during the pregnancy (77 per cent). The probability of employment during pregnancy fell with birth order: from 91 per cent if it was the first birth to 72 per cent for mothers who already had one child, 58 per cent for those with two other children and 50 per cent for those with three or more other children at the time of the pregnancy.

Table II shows that just over half of the cohort mothers were employed nine months after childbirth: 44 per cent had been employed during pregnancy and resumed employment with the same employer, 9 per cent had resumed employment but with a different employer and a small minority (2.3 per cent) had moved from non-employment during pregnancy into employment by the time the baby was nine months old. The probability of having been employed while pregnant and having resumed employment is highest for mothers with managerial and professional positions, followed by the self-employed. The likelihood of this scenario declines with occupational level.

Occupational differences are also evident among the mothers who were employed when the baby was aged nine months old in terms of hours worked (Table III) and childcare arrangements. One-third of employed mothers worked full-time (30 + hours per week), rising to 44 per cent of those in managerial or professional occupations. Conversely, short part-time hours (less than 20 hours per week) were most prevalent among employed mothers with lower semi-routine and routine jobs or in self-employment. Mothers employed in managerial or professional occupations were also more likely to use formal private childcare; made more viable by their higher earnings. Just over half of them (53 per cent) used formal childcare as the main arrangement, and another 7 per cent used a combination of formal and informal arrangements. In contrast, overall, 34 per cent of the employed mothers used formal childcare as the main arrangement and the majority relied mainly or entirely on informal care arrangements provided by family or friends.

Table IV indicates that the initial employment transition following childbirth affects the subsequent employment profile up to when the child is aged three. Employment during pregnancy and resuming with the same employer nine months after childbirth is the transition most conducive to the mother remaining in continuous employment up to when the child is aged three. Two-thirds of the mothers who were continuously employed by the time their baby was nine months old were continuously employed from that point until the child reached three years old (67.3 per cent). Mothers who returned to employment but with a different employer nine months after

Maternal employment patterns

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Transition	Managerial and professional	Intermediate	Small employer and self-employed	Lower supervisory and technical	Semi-routine/routine	Total
<i>Employed when pregnant and nine months post-childbirth ...</i>						
... returned to work with same employer	57.7	46.3	47.7	37.2	25.6	44.1
... returned to work with different employer	6.3	7.8	12.0	7.9	13.2	9.0
... still on leave	7.6	7.1	4.8	3.0	3.0	5.7
... not employed because job finished	5.9	7.9	12.0	8.3	13.7	9.1
... not employed because left job	9.5	12.1	1.9	14.7	10.8	10.3
Not employed when pregnant but employed nine months post-childbirth	1.0	1.6	4.5	0.6	4.3	2.3
Not employed when pregnant and not employed nine months post-childbirth	12.1	17.1	17.2	28.4	29.3	19.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Weighted (<i>n</i>)	3,736	2,065	480	511	2,890	9,682

Table II. Maternal employment transitions from pregnancy to nine months after the birth, by occupational class^a

Notes: Occupation is current or most recent; Pearson $\chi^2: p = 0.0000$; based on longitudinal sample, $n = 14,651$ (unweighted)
Source: MCS sweep one (2000-2001), sample is weighted by survey weights using the overall weight for sweep one (aovwt2)

Weekly work hours	Occupational status (%)					Total
	Managerial/professional	Intermediate	Self-employed	Lower supervisory and technical	Semi-routine/routine	
< 20	25.8	41.3	50.7	36.6	59.7	38.3
20-29	30.4	33.4	20.2	27.4	25.9	29.5
30-40	36.2	23.8	16.8	29.8	12.9	27.1
> 40	7.6	1.1	12.4	6.3	1.6	5.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Weighted (<i>n</i>)	3,057	1,422	357	269	1,408	6,513

Table III. Employed mothers' work hours by occupational class when child is aged nine months old

Notes: Based on subset sample of employed mothers, $n = 7,917$ (unweighted); Pearson $\chi^2: p = 0.0000$
Source: MCS sweep one (2000-2001), sample is weighted by survey weights using the overall weight for sweep one (aovwt2)

Employment transition from pregnancy to when child is aged nine months (sweep one)	Employment transition from when child is aged nine months to three years (sweep two)				
	Continuously employed	Interruptions ^a but now employed when child is three	Interruptions ^a but now not employed when child is three	Continuously not employed	Weighted (<i>n</i>)
<i>Employed when pregnant and nine months post-childbirth ...</i>					
... returned to work with same employer	67.3	21.1	9.7	1.9	4,295
... returned to work with different employer	38.5	40.5	16.6	4.4	874
... still on leave	37.2	22.4	9.4	30.9	559
... not employed nine months because job finished	5.0	29.4	14.3	51.3	892
... not employed because left job	5.5	31.5	13.8	49.2	1,001
Not employed when pregnant but employed nine months post-childbirth	24.9	33.6	27.7	13.7	219
Not employed when pregnant and not employed nine months post-childbirth	2.0	12.8	27.3	57.8	2,217
Total	30.6	21.7	17.1	30.6	10,057

Table IV. Maternal employment rates when child aged three years according to employment state when child was aged nine months

Notes: Row %; ^amoved in and out of employment between sweep one and two (periods of maternity leave are counted as employment service); Pearson χ^2 : $p = 0.0000$
Source: MCS sweep one (2000-2001) and MCS sweep two (2003-2004), sample weighted by the overall weight for sweep two (bovwt2)

childbirth were still more likely to be either continuously employed (38.5 per cent) or employed when the child is aged three following some interruptions (40.5 per cent) than mothers who were still on leave or not employed when the baby was nine months old. Put another way: of the mothers who were continuously employed from nine months after birth until three years after birth, 79 per cent had been employed during pregnancy and returned to work with the same employer nine months after birth and another 9 per cent has returned at nine months but to a different employer (data not shown in table).

These results demonstrate that returning to employment nine months after childbirth is a pivotal factor supporting a continuous employment profile for at least the next two and a quarter years. Conversely, mothers who had quit or lost their jobs, or had not been employed during pregnancy, were more likely to have remained non-employed across this period. In other words, employment continuity promotes

further continuity, while non-employment reduces the likelihood of subsequent integration into employment.

However, does this relationship persist when other factors are taken into account, and in particular occupational class? To explore this, the next stage of the analysis uses logistic regression. The first regression models whether or not the mother is employed when her child is age three (with a value of 1 if the mother is employed). The second regression analyses the subset of mothers who are employed and models whether mothers are employed full-time or part-time employment (with a value of 1 if the mother is full-time employed). We explore the association with the early employment transition up to nine months post-birth, their occupational status at this point, whether there are older or young children in the household, the mother's ethnicity and her partner's work hours when the child is three years old given there has been little previous research on the relationship between fathers' and mothers' employment post-childbirth[4]. Table V presents the odds ratios of mothers being in employment and being full-time employed when their child is aged three associated with each explanatory variable.

Table V confirms that the employment transition which the mother makes between pregnancy and nine months post-childbirth has an independent and significant association with the mothers' employment status when the child is three years old, controlling for occupational status, the hours worked by their partner, ethnicity and the presence of other children. Compared to a profile of being employed during pregnancy and returning to work for the same employer nine months after childbirth, all other types of employment transitions within this period are less likely to culminate in the mother being employed and being employed full-time when their child is aged three.

Occupational status has an independent association as well. Controlling for the type of employment transition made between pregnancy and nine months after childbirth, the models show that mothers' are less likely to be employed when their child is three years old, and if employed, they are less likely to work full-time, if their current or most recent job was not managerial or professional. Self-employed mothers were slightly less likely to be employed than mothers with managerial or professional occupational levels ($p < 0.05$) and if employed there was no significant difference in the likelihood of being full-time employed. This confirms that full-time employment for mothers with a pre-school child continues to be associated primarily with managerial and professional jobs. It implies that mothers who held managerial or professional positions during pregnancy may have to downgrade to a lower occupational level if they want or need to secure part-time working arrangements in order to reconcile employment with raising young children.

The association between mothers' occupational class and early employment transitions was explored further by modifying the model to include an interaction between the two variables. Occupational class was recoded into a binary variable to distinguish mothers in managerial or professional occupations from mothers in the lower occupational classes (hereafter referred to as "non-managerial/professionals"). The inclusion of this interaction term showed that women who had resumed employment within nine months of giving birth were even more likely to be employed, and employed full-time once the child was three years old if they held managerial or professional positions than mothers who had resumed at a lower occupational position. The positive interaction with high occupational status was smaller among mothers

Variable	In employment versus not in employment when cohort child is aged three ($n = 9,333$) ^a B	Full-time versus part-time employment when cohort child is aged three ($n = 5,937$) ^b B
<i>Maternal employment transition (from pregnancy to nine months)</i>		
Employed when pregnant and nine months post-childbirth . . .		
. . . returned to work with different employer	0.59 ***	0.89
. . . still on leave	0.20 ***	0.23 ***
. . . not employed because job finished	0.10 ***	0.32 ***
. . . not employed because left job	0.08 ***	0.52 ***
Not employed when pregnant but employed nine months post-childbirth	0.23 ***	0.29 ***
Not employed when pregnant and not employed nine months post-childbirth	0.03 ***	0.31 ***
Reference category: employed when pregnant and returned to work with same employer nine months post-childbirth		
<i>Mothers' occupational status (current or most recent job) when child is aged nine months</i>		
Intermediate	0.65 ***	0.47 ***
Small employer and self-employed	0.71 *	0.78
Low supervisory and technical	0.65 **	0.63 **
Semi-routine/routine	0.53 ***	0.40 ***
Reference category: managerial/ professional		
<i>Father's (current) employment hours when child is aged three</i>		
Mother is lone parent	0.65 **	1.42 *
Partner is not employed	0.72	3.15 ***
Partner works part-time (1-29 hours per week)	0.83	1.38
Partner works long full-time hours (45 + hours per week)	0.81 **	0.92
Reference category: partner works average full-time hours per week (30-44 hours per week)		
<i>Mothers' ethnicity</i>		
Mixed	0.35 **	3.04 *
Indian	1.96 **	2.08 ***
Pakistani and Bangladeshi	0.43 **	0.86
Black or Black British	1.51	6.04 ***
Other ethnic group (including Chinese)	1.03	3.42 ***
Reference category: white		
<i>Younger child in household when cohort child is aged three?</i>		
Yes	0.40 ***	0.67
Reference category: no		
<i>Older children (aged five to 16) in the house when cohort child is aged three?</i>		
Yes	0.74	0.85
Reference category: no		

Table V.
The factors (odds ratios)
associated with mothers
being in employment and
being in full-time
employment when their
child is aged three
(logistic regression)

Notes: Significant at: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ and *** $p < 0.001$; overall sample sizes for ^amodel one: 14,651; ^bmodel two: 7,917
Source: MCS sweep one (2000-2001) and MCS sweep two (2003-2004), sample weighted by survey weights for sweep two (bvowt2)

who had taken an extended period of maternity leave and negligible for the other transitions in which employment had been interrupted. These results indicate that the human capital factor of high occupational status has an additional positive influence on the future employment integration of those mothers who resume employment within nine months of childbirth.

Mothers are significantly less likely to be employed when the cohort child is three years old if they are a lone parent or have an employed partner working 45 or more hours a week. Among the mothers who are employed, those who are lone parents or have a non-employed partner are significantly more likely to be employed full-time than are mothers with an employed partner. This indicates that if the mother is employed while being the sole/main breadwinner then she does so through full-time rather than part-time employment.

Mothers are less likely to be employed when the cohort child is three years old if they have had another child subsequently; but if employed the presence of a younger child does not have a significant association with whether she works full-time or part-time. With the presence of a child aged under three years old taken into account, the presence of older children in the household is not significant. Finally, mothers are less likely to be employed when their child is three years old if they are Pakistani, Bangladeshi or mixed race but Indian mothers are more likely to be employed compared to white women. Among the mothers who are employed when their child is aged three years, white mothers are significantly less likely to be employed full-time than mothers of all other ethnic backgrounds except Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers. These results fit with previous research that showed that in the UK women from some Asian backgrounds are more likely to experience restrictions on their employment outside the home, while different cultural factors and employment-related reasons for immigration contribute to full-time employment being more pervasive for Black women (Dale and Holdsworth, 1998). What our analysis has shown is that ethnicity still has some association even when other factors are taken into account, including the actual employment transitions made between pregnancy and nine months post-childbirth.

5. Conclusions

Maternal employment rates have risen dramatically in the UK over recent decades, largely via part-time employment, and with marked differentiation among mothers according to their human capital, measured by indicators such as education or occupational attainment prior to the birth. In the late 1990s, the policy environment in the UK changed as the then Labour government initiated a suite of work-family reconciliation measures designed to increase maternal employment; including enhanced maternity leave, the introduction of paternity and parental leave and the employee “right to request” reduced or flexible working hours, as well as a significant expansion of childcare and targeted additional childcare support for mothers in low-income families. Shortfalls remain, in particular childcare prior to the child’s third birthday remains expensive despite targeted subsidies for low-income families, and the free pre-school childcare places for children once they are three years old are part-time and only during school term-time. Nonetheless, the new cohorts of mothers are now making their post-birth employment transitions in a distinctly different institutional environment to that faced by women who became mothers in previous decades.

We have analysed the employment transitions made by a cohort of mothers who gave birth during 2000-2001, and thus took decisions about maternity leave and employment post-childbirth in the context of these improvements in reconciliation policy. Our analysis shows that both occupational position at the time of pregnancy and the early employment transition post-childbirth have independent and significant associations with the probability that the mothers are employed, and employed full-time, when their child is three years old.

While differentiation in employment trajectories according to occupational class was expected based on the results from previous research, our study has shown two things. First, that the actual employment transition made by the time the baby is nine months old has a significant bearing on subsequent employment trajectories for all mothers: those who resume employment within nine months of childbirth are more likely to be employed and employed full-time, when the child is three years old. Second, that an occupational cleavage persists despite the improvements in reconciliation measures, including targeted support for mothers in low-income families. This means that whichever type of transition a mother has made nine months after the birth, she is more likely to be employed when the child is three years old if she held a managerial or professional position during the pregnancy. The higher earnings that managerial and professional occupations offer, and the risk that a longer absence may mean career progression is stalled, are some of the incentives for pursuing a continuous employment profile, and the purchase of childcare is less prohibitive for women who can command this level of pay. Conversely, mothers in the lower occupational classes are less likely to remain in employment nine months after childbirth and if they do so they are more likely to work shorter, part-time hours facilitated by informal childcare arrangements. This is worrying because recent research shows the penalties of part-time employment in the UK remain pronounced, in terms of low hourly rates of pay, low weekly earnings and a trajectory of limited upward occupational mobility (Perfect, 2011). Employment continuity from pregnancy to nine months post-childbirth offers some protection and employment integration for mothers in the lower occupational positions but they are still significantly less likely to be employed when the child is three years old compared to women with a higher occupational status nine months post-childbirth.

Whether mothers are employed, and employed full-time, when their child is aged three remains differentiated by ethnicity, even for this recent cohort of mothers. This occurs even when the employment transition between pregnancy and nine months post-birth and occupational status at this point are controlled for. This points to the continued influence of ethnicity in the UK labour market: the interplay of economic and cultural factors on mothers' labour supply decisions on one hand; and labour market discrimination on the other hand.

Once we take account of the employment profile between pregnancy and nine months post-birth our study has also shown that mothers were less likely to be employed when their child was three years old if they have had another child; but if she is employed the presence of a child younger than three years old has no bearing on whether she works full-time or part-time. Whether she is a lone mother or partnered, and the partners' working hours is also significant. Mothers with a three year old child are less likely to be employed if they are a lone parent, or if they have an employed partner working long hours. However, among the mothers that are employed, full-time employment is more

likely for those who are the sole or main earner, i.e. lone mothers or mothers with a non-employed partner.

Institutional conditions have a substantial impact on women's employment in most countries (Petitt and Hook, 2006; Prince Cooke and Baxter, 2010). The current recession has made the employment integration of mothers post-birth more difficult. Families may rely more than ever on the woman's wage because of the financial pressures they are facing due to inflation, wage freezes and unemployment (Johnson and Semmence, 2006). There is some political commitment to improve childcare support for low-income families, but the expansion of services has stalled and in practice cuts to public childcare services via Sure Start Centres have fallen particularly heavily on provision in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods (McVeigh, 2011). In this evolving political and economic context, occupational class divisions in maternal employment patterns are more likely to widen than to erode.

Notes

1. Within the active labour market policies the job seeking requirements placed on non-employed lone parents were also increased over this period, so that now lone parents are obliged to seek employment once their youngest child reaches the age of five.
2. There were 2,235 (15.2 per cent) lone mothers in s1 and 2,377 (16.2 per cent) lone mothers in s2.
3. This was the recommendation of Sosthenes Ketende, Research Officer at CLS, during an MCS workshop at the Institute of Education in 2011.
4. Mothers' educational level was also initially included in the model given it has been found to have an influence on returns to employment post-childbirth by previous research. Due to multicollinearity issues, education could not be included alongside occupational class. A separate model was run, which substituted occupational class with education but this did not alter the odds ratios of the other explanatory variables by a meaningful amount. It showed that mothers with low qualifications (i.e. GCSEs) or no qualifications at all were less likely to be employed compared to mothers who had higher qualifications (i.e. a degree or higher). Mothers were also less likely to work full-time when their child was aged three if they had a lower level of education. Specifically, mothers with diplomas or GCSEs or no qualifications at all were less likely to work full-time than mothers who had a degree or higher qualification. The decision was taken to report only the model with occupational class included since this has been the focus of the discussion in this paper and in most of the older literature reviewed here.

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