

Heini Martiskainen de Koenigswarter

An Interpretive Study of the Transition to Motherhood in Contemporary France

My drive to understand motherhood was born simultaneously with my daughter. Now that I had a new social role to play, a tidal-wave of change swept over the career-oriented person I used to be. The loss of professional identity (I was fired from my job during pregnancy), the restructuring of my relationship with my partner, the radical alteration of my everyday routines, and the new attitudes of those close to me, forced me to examine the changes this biographical event had triggered.

As the illusions I had about the control of my life in terms of autonomy of agency and about an equitable parenting relationship (strengthened by my Nordic origins) came tumbling down—overwhelmed by a passionate attachment to my baby—it was probably my refusal to succumb to guilt that saved me from a whirlpool of discouragement, as well as the personal conviction that I could not be the only new mother who was *not* blissfully serene.

If 90 percent of women in contemporary France (and 85 percent in Finland) become mothers at one point of their life cycle, I wondered how come I had not been aware of the overwhelming sense of responsibility a child would bring, about the ways in which my new status would constrain my autonomy, and the general assumption that I, and not my partner, was the principal parent? Bewildered by what I considered a “conspiracy of silence,” I remember feverishly taking down some notes in my Clichy apartment, the conclusion of which was: “study sociology.” I placed my bets on sociology as the most appropriate “toolbox” for my purpose as opposed to psychology. I intuitively felt that psychology would naturalize a process which I was resisting. In other words, the origins of my *mal-être* were due not to personal and/or interpersonal factors, but essentially to social and cultural ones.

Three years later with a Master’s degree in sociology in my hand, I began



Mika Collins

my DEA thesis (*Diplôme d'Etudes Approfondies*), a first-year post-graduate degree that precedes a PhD, on "The Transition to Motherhood," that was to challenge the interpretation of self-transformation during the maternity process. This paper relates to that adventure: a comprehensive study of the experience of becoming a mother in contemporary France.

Rather than stressing the structural constraints and norms women face at the birth of their first child, I take a phenomenological approach and present the voices of mothers as they describe their reality. The thesis I develop is that motherhood has become a structural turning point in the lives of French middle-class women. This is contrary to the dominant discourse in current French sociology of the family as seen, for example, in the work of François de Singly (1996) on the family's new function as the *haut lieu* of the construction of personal identity. His approach is based on the work of Berger and Kellner (1988) who maintain that the most important secondary socialization process in adult life is provided by marriage. The French obsession with the study of marital life is influenced by Durkheim's legacy as the inventor of the *famille conjugale* and the negation of Ariès (1973) stance that the family is centred around the figure of the child (a stance he tempers in a later article [1992]). The French nuclear family has thus been constructed by sociologists as a "marital family." Alternative approaches on intergenerational relations (for example, Attias-Donfut 1995; Deschaux 1994) have focused for the most part on relations between adults. When the relationship between children and parents has been studied, the focus has been on step-parents and teenagers (Théry, 1993; Blöss, 1997).

While French feminists have concentrated on the study of women at work, the issue of mothering and motherhood is only implicit in studies that critique the sexual division of labour. The family with small children has not been studied in France as a specific entity, nor has transition to parenthood. This is surprising in a cultural context where the birth of the “family” is socially constructed as coinciding with the birth of the children. Although some historical work in this area does exist (Knibiehler, 1997; Knibiehler and Fouquet, 1977; Badinter, 1980), there is a dearth of sociological research on contemporary mothering, a field which has tended to be dominated by psychological and psychoanalytical normative constructions.¹

The transition to motherhood

As the term transition² suggests, motherhood is here conceptualized as a *social process*. Personal identity is defined as the outcome of different socialization processes—primary and secondary, of childhood and adult age—constructed through interaction with significant others during which time identities are appropriated (by ourselves) and attributed to us by others (Mead 1963; Berger and Luckmann, 1996; Dubar, 1991, 2000).

In order to describe and understand the experiences of women as they become mothers, I interviewed 13 middle-class women in the Paris area. All were the biological mother of at least one child under three years old, had university educations at the level of a BA or higher, worked in professional or semi-professional occupations, and lived with the father of their child(ren).³ They were keen to participate in the study and almost all of them expressed a desire to one day read my thesis (and many indeed, have). It was clearly important for them to share their experiences.

A major source of inspiration was Martha McMahan’s book, *Engendering Motherhood. Identity and Self-Transformation in Women’s Lives* (1995), which underscores the centrality of motherhood to a woman’s identity. I discovered this book while doing my field research and my study is, in fact, to some extent an application of her Canadian study to French counterparts. A part of my study focuses, however, on the experience of maternity leave as a critical phase of transition—an area McMahan does not address—but which has been studied in the United Kingdom (Oakley, 1979, 1980) as well as in France (Romito, 1990). McMahan’s statement on the centrality of motherhood to a woman’s identity has also been developed by an attempt to articulate marital, maternal, and professional role identities (McCall and Simmons, 1966) in terms of a new hierarchy of self.

Motherhood, primary socialization and recruitment to maternity

Before marriage, motherhood was seen as a desirable eventuality in the lives of the middle-class women I interviewed. Only two mothers stated that they had not thought about having children when they were single. I think of

the former group as “ever mothers” and the latter group as “never mothers.” My analysis of the “ever mothers” shows three distinct models in the construction of maternity as: an “absolutely evident,” a “natural” occurrence, or a “conditional” life event in the period prior to marital life.

The ever-mothers

When motherhood is represented as an absolutely evident occurrence, as having always been an inseparable part of self—“I never could have imagined myself without children” (Albane)—it is associated with the desire of a large family (three or more children). These women are themselves from large families. They are also the only ones to declare having considered interrupting their professional activity in order to have a family. However, these initial representations were, for some, reconstructed during the marriage and/or after the birth of a child. This was the case for Valérie: “I realize that having chosen the husband I chose and the occupation that I now have, the number (of children) will never be that high.”

For those who categorize motherhood as a “natural” life event, the experience is less intense: “It was something that I thought was ... bound to happen, at some point of my life. Yes, I was in that sort of a logic” (Sarah).

For those women who saw motherhood as a “conditional” life event, although children had always been desired, they were equally clear that having children would be subordinate to their personal/professional achievements.

Nevertheless, however ardent and early their desire for children had been, the data points to the fact that almost all the mothers were really in the “conditionalist” category. With the exception of one, the French middle-class mothers I interviewed had completed their studies, gained a few years experience in their careers, and lived with the future father of their children who also agreed and wanted to have a child before the women became pregnant. No reluctance on the behalf of their partners was mentioned (contrarily to the results obtained by McMahan).

The never-mothers

The two women who did not consider having children in their youth expressed different reasons for not wanting a child. Clara, who was abandoned in her childhood, refused to even consider having a child until she met her partner. Colombine describes her amazement at the attitudes of young women who discussed having children early in their lives; her preoccupations were school, studying, and becoming an adult, not children. Colombine completed a double DEA and was a successful consultant before becoming a mother.

The women’s accounts testify to the concomitance of two primary socialization processes—a traditional gender socialization—and (a less traditional) socialization towards success in school. These processes are later articulated with a secondary socialization process that occurs upon marriage and results in a reconstruction of reality (Berger and Kellner, 1988). However,

the traditional gendered primary socialization process did not include the transmission of techniques and/or “know-how,” as other socialization processes most often do (Berger and Luckmann, 1996). As such, most of the mothers I spoke to felt themselves unprepared for the arrival of a baby.

I argue, therefore, that these women were socialized to desire children but not provided with the necessary information and skills for their care. Indeed, the women I interviewed (born in the late '60s) are representative of the first generation of people born to educated mothers who had access to oral contraception and were, therefore, raised in smaller families as well as in a context of rising female workforce participation. I also argue that we are witnessing a rupture in the transmission of the mothering agency, accentuated by the popularization of child-psychology theories that focus on the central nature of the mother-child relationship as well as new educational norms.

As in Martha McMahan's study, despite the “innate” desire for children, women are often perplexed when questioned on their reasons for desiring children. McMahan concludes that “an absence of articulate reasons does not indicate a lack of meaning or reason.... Reasons are called for when behaviour needs explaining: the ‘choice’ of motherhood generally does not” (1995: 52).

The themes some women invoked were coloured by the anticipation of emotional benefits: sharing the experience with the partner, the discovery of a new individual (the personality of the child to come), or the child constructed as a promise of happiness. However, before being able to benefit from the emotional fulfilment that having a child had promised (and often procured at first sight), the mothers also described the difficulties they experienced during the specific period of transition constituted by maternity leave.

The period of critical transition: maternity leave

If pregnancy is described by many women as the happiest time of their lives (Hakulinen, 1997), and childbirth often referred to as a miracle, the accounts of maternity leave (two-and-a-half months in France after the birth of the child) are filled with memories of weariness and loneliness. Many of the middle-class French women spoke of their initial disenchantment: “It’s terrible for a woman. I think after the *dream*—the *magic* of motherhood—it’s sad. I think mothers are very, very, much alone in those moments. I think, in those times, the father should help more” (Colombine).

The marital relationship is described as having often been tense and once the three-day paternity leave is over, the return of a partner from work is feverishly anticipated: “Just to be able to go for a walk around the block! and get some rest from the incessant tête-à-tête, day and night” (Isabelle).

The feelings of amazement and wonder that the baby illicit are mingled with an awakening awareness of responsibility. The weight of the western “motherhood mandate” (Russo 1978; McMahan, 1995) is compounded by the psychological responsibility the mother now bears for the child on top of the daily physical care the child demands. “It’s the distress of someone who knows

that she is now responsible for someone else, because, well, her life will never be the same again” (Colombine).

The women talk about being constantly fatigued and having to learn to cope alone with the infant and the housework while trying to recuperate from the physical trauma of the childbirth and the psychological stress of the transition period. For many women, maternity leave was seen a “housewife’s probation-period” and one they were not willing to renew. As Romito (1990) argues in her psycho-sociological study, hormonal changes cannot account for the dark side of motherhood. The weariness and loneliness that mothers often feel are a result of the lack of social support for maternity. The act of childbirth by the mother (the *birth* of the mother) is, in fact, eclipsed by the birth of the child itself which is the focus of everybody’s interest.

I argue that the idealization of motherhood as personal fulfilment has become as tyrannical (as does Vincent Caradec [1996] in his study on marital transition to retirement). The lack of adequate anticipatory socialization processes as well as that of social support for motherhood contribute to make this transition particularly difficult and guilt-ridden. Understanding, therefore, that there might well be a crisis in the transition to motherhood (which, in the meantime, is conceptualized in terms of post-partum depression which many may have difficulty identifying with) would be helpful.

The reconstruction of personal identity

Accounts of the experience of motherhood as a whole—which do not focus only on the first months—reveal the bright side of motherhood. Indeed, the French middle-class mothers in this study never saw their experience principally in terms of constraint. The benefits and uniqueness of their experience were linked to their discovery of a very particular bond that they weave with their children, as well as meaningful accounts of self-transformation. One indication of the degree to which the experience of motherhood is considered very special is the fact that words are considered *inadequate* to describe the embodied experience. Some mothers liken the experience of motherhood to a sacred event: “Becoming a mother is a miracle. One cannot imagine the emotions it procures. There is something, yes, indescribable about it” (Isabelle).

The deep emotional tie that mothers have to their babies is described by these middle-class Parisian mothers as the most meaningful experience of motherhood:

I think the major experience of motherhood is the... visceral bond you have with your children. The imperious need to see your child, to touch her, to kiss her, to make her happy—it’s nearly physiological! I’m astounded by the strength of the bond. That’s the most powerful experience. (Albane)

Clara exclaims: “I couldn’t even have imagined the experience, I couldn’t

even explain it! It's like falling in love! You can't explain that to someone who hasn't fallen in love! It's the same thing for childbirth, I was really surprised. It's an extremely strong emotion."

If this mother compares bonding with her child to falling in love, many women, however, explain their relationship with their child by underscoring its *difference* in terms of the relationship they share with their partner. Marie states, "You'll never be alone again when you have a child. It's stronger than any other relation: with the partner, friends, the rest of the family. I think it is the strongest bond you can ever have." The mother-child-relationship is seen as more permanent, much stronger, and more forgiving than the relationship to the partner.

Arlie Hochschild (1998) speaks of a weakening of the marital bond which she claims is due to the "paradox of modern love." If the social construction of a spousal relationship is that of an intimate, playful, and sexually fulfilling one, and strongly valued in western contemporary culture, it is at the same time fragile (as the probability of divorce has increased). This may potentially lead to a rationalized management of emotions towards the partner. Its symbolic strength may also have weakened as a "pantheon of meaningful relationships" emerge: homosexuals are claiming a new social status and a series of heterosexual relationships associated with friendships have emerged as an alternative model of emotional life.

Is the child becoming the "god of gods" of the contemporary pantheon of meaningful relationships for women? The data suggests the possibility of an important transfer of emotional investment in the mother-child relationship on behalf of women after the transition to motherhood. Hochschild (1998), analyzes emotion as an indicator of an event's impact on personal identity. Hence, I decided to explore, in this study, the degree of self-transformation that these women experienced.

A comprehensive typology of the phenomenological feelings provoked by this major life event, in terms of the intensity of self-transformation, point to three different types of experiences of the process of motherhood: of alteration, of deepening of self, and of continuity of self.

Alternation—becoming someone else

Corinne describes the process of becoming a mother as having represented a phenomenological feeling of alternation (Berger and Luckman, 1996), a rupture with an ancient self:

You really become another person, finally. Even if you still live in the same place and all that—you're not the same anymore, and there's no going back, no turning back anymore. Because it's such an experience, it's so strong: giving birth and the continuation—emotions, responsibilities that crash down on you, it's a wheel that turns. I'll never be the same again, because there is that experience between the two.

Cylia's and Columbine's accounts also mention alternation. Their earlier construction of self as "never-mothers" explain the degree of self-transformation they experience at childbirth. The inconsistency between primary and secondary socialization processes—that Berger and Luckmann (1996) consider as a prerequisite of a resocialization or an alternation process—does not, however, seem adequate to explain Corinne's experience: she was an unconditional "ever-mother". The intensity of transformation she experiences may be related to the difficulties she was confronted with in her workplace after her maternity leave. After an enormous personal investment in her career, Corinne's responsibilities at work were then subsequently diminished.

This suggests that her concept of a rupture in her identity is the result of an important shift in her priorities and investments: the respective place of work and family in her life. I will argue in my conclusion that the degree of self-transformation described by the women in this study is due to a new hierarchy of multiple role identities (McCall and Simmons, 1966) that these women assume.

Deepening of self

Other women spoke of motherhood as a deepening of self and of meaningfulness in their lives. For these mothers in particular the degree of self-transformation is seen as extremely profound, but they do not spontaneously refer to a rupture with an ancient self in their personal testimony:

It's a discovery that began at pregnancy—the discovery of something transformed forever. I'm not my principal centre of interest anymore. It's someone else. Having a real responsibility. A real reason for getting up in the morning, for doing things. A serious reason, a REAL reason ... for living. Even if something tragic happened, it would always be there. It's a profound, irreversible change. But at the same time, it's not a radical change: I didn't wake up different, it's something more diffused. (Marie)

Continuity of self

A minority of the women did not feel that motherhood resulted in any kind of self-transformation. These women saw motherhood as a "natural" life event: "Maternity was natural for me" (Pascale). This phenomenological sensation of the continuity of self may be explained by the fact that she was an "ever-mother" who considered motherhood as a "natural" occurrence prior to marital life.

Conclusion

The data shows that there are turning points in biographies. Strauss (1992) refers to critical periods which make us recognize that we are not the same as before. Furthermore, these periods are not always linked to tragedy (such as death, incest, illness) (see, for example, Leclerc-Olive, [1997]).

I identify the powerful source of self-transformation that women experience as arising from the sphere of personal ethics; religious convergence is also evoked as a prototype of alternational by Berger and Kellner (1996). Thus, the ethical dimension of the transformation is related not only to the powerful mythology, in the West, of love as redeeming character (McMahon, 1995), but also, to a perception of the moral *choice* that mothers are obliged to make when arbitrating between the priority accorded to work or family.

Establishing priorities in one's life is an ethical issue and one of the major characteristics of the accounts of this study was precisely the recurrent references to adjustments mothers had to make with respect to the degree of importance given to work and to children. When the women spoke about self-transformation, they spoke about their new and shifting priorities (the "children come first" of Colombine, Albane and others). These mothers describe having acquired a new "capacity," intimately linked to the transformation of their personal identity, the capacity to distinguish between important and less important issues, the ability to establish priorities in their lives. As Colombine declares:

Motherhood changes you. You have a vision of things that is transformed. One thinks more about the relativity of things, one becomes stronger (...) our behaviour changes in the sense of more responsibilities and maturity, because as maternity brings a shake-up of organisation, material life, of feelings, you have to manage all that! You have to be energetic and juggling everything. All this teaches you to see the relativity of everything and to keep a certain distance to some issues.... Children become a priority. I organise my life taking their comfort in to account. A lot. And it demands organisational capacities. A lot—and a sense of priorities.

I argue that, if motherhood as a turning-point has become a structural element in numerous lives of middle-class women, this is due to the incompatibility of two contemporary socialization processes. The first process during which young women are socialized towards higher education and a career is not contradictory with marital socialization before the transition to motherhood.

It is the process of secondary socialization to maternity that is inconsistent with the above mentioned processes. The investment in a professional life and career, which plays a prominent role in personal identity, is suddenly confronted with the compulsion and social constraints to conform to another role. The strength of norms, as well as the emotional benefits of having and raising a child lead to a shift in priorities—an ethical adjustment engendering feelings of profound self-transformation. The transition to motherhood is thus built upon a volcano of ancient history that erupts in a modern woman's life.

¹Some social debate and sociological study exists, however on fatherhood. It is

the expression of the institutional concern for the fragility of the father-child relationship subsequent to divorce.

²The term transition implies a reconstruction of reality during a period of entry, passage, and exit (for a synthesis, see Hakulinen, [1997]). The family is faced with the necessity of responding to the physical and relational needs of the newborn, of redefining roles and relations, integrating the baby in the couple, and identifying the resources of the family. The maternal role is in place two to six months after birth (unsatisfactory marital relations may however delay its construction). Studies on marital transition to parenthood such as Belsky and Rovine (1990) suggest the presence of marital tension and a diminishing of the feeling of insularity between the partners.

³The “bias” of the sample, limited to this very “normative” situation has several reasons: first of all, as no interpretative study on motherhood existed in France, I had to begin somewhere! As I was interested in the eventual variations of the impact of experience on personal identity, it seemed pertinent to me that they could be analyzed as arising in (relatively) similar economical, social and marital contexts. A sample of women having fairly important occupational responsibilities seemed potentially interesting for the study of the impact of motherhood on the meaning of professional life.

⁴I asked the mothers *how* they thought they changed. The results in terms of transformation of personal identity concur with McMahan’s: women declare, for example, having become more loving, mature, tolerant and responsible after the birth of their child, corresponding to a claim of female adult identity and a “feminized sense of self” (McMahan, 1995).

References

- Aries, P. 1973. *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, Paris: Seuil.
- Aries, P. 1992. “L'Enfant, la fin d'un règne.” *Autrement: Finie la famille?* 8: 229-35.
- Attias-Donfut, C. 1995. *Les Solidarités entre les Générations*. Paris: Nathan.
- Badinter, E. 1980. *L'Amour en plus*. Paris: Seuil.
- Belsky, J. and M. Rovine. 1990. “Patterns of Marital Change Across the Transition to Parenthood: Pregnancy to Three Years Post-Partum.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47: 5-19
- Bendelow, G. and J. Williams, eds. 1998. *Emotions in Social Life: Critical Themes and Contemporary Issues*. London: Routledge.
- Berger, P. and T. Luckman. 1996. *La construction sociale de la réalité*. Paris, Armand Colin,
- Berger, P. and H. Kellner. 1988. “Le mariage et la construction de la réalité.” *Dialogue* 102: 6-21.
- Bloss, T. 1997. *Les liens de famille. Sociologie des rapports entre les générations*. Paris: PUF.
- Caradec, V. 1996. *Le Couple A L'heure De La Retraite*. Presses Universitaires De

Rennes.

- Crossley, N. 1998. "Emotion and Communicative Action: Habermas, Linguistic Philosophy and Existentialism." *Emotions in Social Life: Critical Themes and Contemporary Issues*. Eds. G. Bendelow and J. Williams. London: Routledge. 16-39.
- Dechaux, H. 1994. "Les trois composantes de l'économie cachée de la parenté, l'exemple français." *Recherches sociologiques* 25 (3): 37-52.
- Dubar, C. 1996. (1991). *La socialisation. Construction des identités sociales et professionnelles*. Paris, Armand Colin.
- Dubar, C. 2000. *La crise des identités*. Paris: PUF.
- Hakulinen T. 1997. *The Family Dynamics of Childrearing Families, Related Family Demands and Support Received from Child Health Clinics*. Finland: University of Tampere.
- Hochschild, A.R. 1998. "The Sociology of Emotion as a Way of Seeing." *Emotions in Social Life: Critical Themes and Contemporary Issues*. Eds. G. Bendelow and J. Williams. London: Routledge. 3-16.
- Kniebheiler Y. 1997. *La révolution maternelle depuis 1945*. Paris: Perrin.
- Kniebheiler Y. and C. Fouquet. 1977. *L'Histoire des mères*. Paris: Montalba.
- Leclerc-Olive M. 1997 *Le Dire de l'événement*. Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion.
- Mccall, G. J. and J. L. Simmons. 1966. *Identities and Interactions*. Toronto: The Free Press, Collier-Macmillan.
- Mc Mahon, M. 1995. *Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-transformation in Women's Lives*. New York: Guilford.
- Mead, G.H. 1963. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Oakley, A. 1979. *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Oakley, A. 1980. *Women Confined; Towards a Sociology of Childbirth*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Romito, P. 1990. *La naissance du premier enfant. Etude psycho-sociologique de l'expérience de la maternité et du dépression post-partum*. Lausanne: Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Russo, N. 1979. "Overview: Sex Roles, Fertility and the Motherhood Mandate." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 4 (1): 7-15.
- Sanchez, L. and E. Thompson. 1997. "Becoming Mothers and Fathers: Parenthood, Gender and the Division of Labour." *Gender and Society* 11 (6) (December): 199-215.
- de Singly, F. 1993. *Sociologie de la famille contemporaine*. Paris: Nathan, coll. 128.
- de Singly, F. 1996. *Le Soi, le couple et la famille*. Paris: Nathan.
- Strauss A. 1992. *Miroirs et Masques*. Paris: Métallié.
- Théry, I. and M. T. Meulders-Klein, eds. 1993. *Les recompositions familiales aujourd'hui*. Paris: Nathan.