

What is the debate around paid maternity leave really all about?

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Introduction

The debate around motherhood and its role has been good media copy for many years. The forces of conservatism ranged against those of feminism have delivered name-calling and vitriol that is the fodder of journalists and editors. It seems that every six months or so, a report is released which attempts to heap guilt upon the shoulders of those mothers interested enough to read them. Usually it is childcare arrangements, working mothers, stay at home mothers, single mothers or divorced mothers that are under investigation. Regardless of which category one falls into, there is always a columnist or researcher ready to suggest ways in which children are harmed by their mother's (mis)behaviour. Where are the investigations into the impacts of fathering on the life chances of children?

When a female journalist wrote a heartfelt piece in a large metropolitan newspaper stating: "I am childless and I am angry. Angry that I was so foolish to take the word of my feminist mothers as gospel. Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfilment came with a leather briefcase".² There was an outcry and a flurry of letters to the editor in most major Australian cities either attacking or supporting her position. The majority of respondents felt she had exercised her *individual* choice. It was also apparent that many of the respondents were also angry, either at also missing the reproductive boat or at the circumstance they had found themselves in once they became mothers. A common theme among her respondents was that they had been "sold 'a crock'...it seemed that no matter where a woman stood, be she a mother, mother-to-be or non-mother, something was wrong".³

Those research reports which relate 'facts' about women and their experience of birth and child rearing have delivered some interesting statistics. The Australian Bureau of Statistics released figures in

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October 2006 which found that pregnant women suffer widespread discrimination at work, with one in fifty demoted and one in fourteen denied promotion. One in five found that they suffered some kind of difficulty whilst pregnant in the workplace, either missing out on opportunities for training and development or having to fend off negative comments and facing a drop in the number of hours worked.⁴ The same report also found that 35% of women take paid maternity leave whilst 4.5% did not take maternity leave at all when their children were born due to running their own business or not having access to leave entitlements. This left 60% of the sample, 280,000 women, who took unpaid maternity leave or were not employed at the time.⁵

This underscores the response by Australian women to the situation in which they find themselves once they are identified as a mother. As Malcolm Turnbull, an Australian conservative parliamentarian once noted: “There is compelling evidence that while women are increasingly accepted into responsible and well paid roles, their acceptance is often, albeit tacitly, on the condition they don’t have children”.⁶

The commentary around this issue brought many vested interests into stark relief. It illustrated the lack of depth in the debate of issues surrounding motherhood, childrearing, fertility rates and the effect that economic incentives can have on reproduction. The application of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) to the ideological positions of those involved in the media skirmishes will illuminate the myths on which their arguments are based, and can provide guidance as to the real issues requiring discussion.

Background

The images used by the media and commentators of the ‘Superwoman’ and ‘stay-at-home mum’ have been developed over the last thirty years. The debate has grown more divisive over the past ten years, as the neurobiological development of children is researched⁷. This research has shown that:

Virtually every aspect of human development, from the brain’s evolving circuitry to the child’s capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning well before birth and extending until a child is six.⁸

The relative importance of this period of a child’s life has centred the motherhood debate on the period before a child attends school, and around where and with whom that child will spend most of its time.

The myth of the ‘Superwoman’, supported by mostly American feminist writers, has only just started to die. This was the archetypal feminist woman, especially popular in the 1980’s and 1990’s, who was able to juggle work, relationships, motherhood and self-improvement, without missing a beat. She was well groomed, her family life ran like clockwork, and she was able to reach the highest rungs of her chosen profession. This mythological beast started to die in the late 1990’s as women began to report exhaustion and high profile women opted to ‘bow out’ from the corporate world in order to pursue their families.

The ‘stay-at-home mum’ stereotype has a much longer history, harking back to the ‘apple pie’ images of the 1950’s. This was a mythical time where ‘real’ men supported their families by working and ‘real’ women subjugated themselves to their husbands and families. This stereotype became popular amongst conservative commentators and press during the 1970’s as women appeared to turn their collective backs on the family to pursue their own goals.

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Of course, the reality of the lives of individual women was, and is, different to those images portrayed in the media. Similarly, the images and stereotypes used to back up much of the rhetoric in the debate over paid maternity leave have tenuous links to real women and their families.

During the late 1990's a new group joined the fray. Generation X feminists started to make their voices heard, talking about what it was really like to be a woman and wanting also to discuss the role of men within the family. The battlelines were drawn between feminists, those 'other' women and the conservatives.

Alongside these debates is the growing concern, on the part of the media and Government, about the ageing of the Australian population and the effects this will have on economic growth in the future. In August 2002, Kevin Andrews, Federal Minister for Ageing, wrote in *The Age* newspaper under the title 'The challenge: procreate or perish'. He argued that the Australian population is ageing; however the real issue is "structural ageing caused by the decline in Australia's fertility rate"⁹. This issue is faced by many Western countries and is usually discussed in terms of the threat to economic growth, the costliness of welfare required for an aging population, and the effects of a shrinking tax base. Increased immigration and increased fertility rates are the offered answers, and it is a reflection of the rise in xenophobia within Australia politics that it is fertility rates that are under the microscope.

Paid Maternity Leave

This first became an issue in 2000, when the International Labour Organisation revised the Maternity Protection Convention and recommended fourteen weeks paid leave, two weeks longer than the standard set in 1952.¹⁰ The United States, New Zealand and Australia refused to ratify the changes. This was an issue during the 2001 Federal Election, when the Democrats and Greens floated paid maternity leave policies that differentiated them from the major parties.

During 2001 and 2002 Pru Goward, the Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner, began to open the debate more forcefully within the media. She made a number of speeches and gave interviews around the need for a raft of policies to support women in the workplace. Amongst these were "paid maternity leave, affordable and accessible childcare, access to flexible work arrangements, and part time work and protection from discrimination faced by many women as a result of their family responsibilities".¹¹

In 2002, this generated a furore in Australia over the issue of paid maternity leave for working women. The debate was particularly vigorous in April 2002 after the release of *Valuing Parenthood, Options for paid Maternity Leave: Interim Paper 2002* by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

Causal Layered Analysis

This technique, developed by Sohail Inayatullah, allows a depth analysis of an otherwise surface discussion. There are four layers to the analysis:

1. Litany – official public description of issue, most visible and obvious, requiring little analysis

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2. Social science analysis – attempt to articulate causation, i.e. economic, cultural, political and historical factors. Data is questioned but not the paradigm in which the issue is framed
3. Discourse analysis/worldview – problem constituted by frame of analysis, discern deeper assumptions behind the issue
4. Metaphor or Myth – the deep stories, collective archetypes¹²

The strength of this analysis when dealing with an issue such as the debate around motherhood is that it allows space for differing perspectives and worldviews. It is also a powerful tool to assist in the recognition of the driving myths below the surface discussion. What is this particular debate really about? Once the root dissention is recognised, targeted solutions can be developed that answer the ‘real’ questions, rather than those surface issues that have been debated so far.

The Litany level - Women want paid maternity leave?

The argument at the litany level, pursued by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and her supporters, is that Australian women deserve paid maternity leave for two main reasons: international benchmarks and to achieve workplace equity. Australia and the USA are the only two OECD countries without a paid maternity leave provision, this is one argument put forward in the report, ‘Valuing Parenthood’. In addition, having paid maternity leave afforded to women is one method whereby workplace inequities can be addressed. The Report attempts to take a first step in assisting women to meet the challenges of being a ‘superwoman’. Provision of paid maternity leave will address declining birth rates; provide the time and means to ensure the well-being of women and babies at the time of birth; and deliver economic security for women at a crucial time in their lives.¹³

Pru Goward argues that the Government is:

offering support for women who make the choice to stay home...but what he’s (Prime Minister Howard) not doing is offering anything to the woman who says ‘I don’t have a choice. I have to go back to work in order to pay a fat mortgage’...the fact is that one income families are now a fantasy. Certainly in our big cities.¹⁴

The opponents of such a scheme argue that it is too expensive and will discriminate against those women who choose to stay home and raise their children. The Federal Liberal Government has been using incentives to keep women at home with their children since it gained office; the decrease in public provision of childcare, targeting of the family payments and the newly enacted ‘baby bonus’ all aim to encourage more ‘stay-at-home’ mums. This group believe that the only way to raise fertility is to encourage earlier marriage and childbearing, and entice women to stay at home.¹⁵

The 3rd wave feminists argue that mainstream feminism ignores the issues around motherhood.

After all these years of feminism, we still do more of the child care than our husbands or boyfriends do, we often have to contend with inflexible work schedules or ridiculous hours, and many of us manage all these things on a piddly income.¹⁶

Therefore, they argue that paid maternity leave will only assist those women in the workforce and will not affect the decision to have more children. The issues around flexible workplaces and the value placed on motherhood are more important. The issue for this group is deeper than just the public litany.

At this level it appears that there are three very different views on the issues surrounding paid maternity leave.

The Analysis level - Paid maternity leave means higher fertility rates?

In the report 'Valuing Parenthood', the provision of paid maternity leave is linked to a rise in the fertility rate. This reflects the view that "the declining birth rate is the result of the financial and professional/social disadvantage encountered by many families"¹⁷. The argument is that women are still discriminated against in the workforce when they choose to reproduce. They are penalised due to their greater share of the responsibility in child rearing. These penalties are what drive women to put off having children and discourages them having more children. Pru Goward comments, "the only people I can find who are romantic about babies are men. The women are very rational. Very calculating. They do a cost/benefit analysis and say 'Why should I?'"¹⁸

The argument put forward is that women would feel more valued by their employer if they had access to paid maternity leave. This would then give them the economic security they need to embark upon child rearing. In addition, "it would help families have more children and to have them earlier... families saved and made sacrifices for the first child but often could not do it for the second one."¹⁹

The conservative camp believes it is ridiculous to suggest that providing paid maternity will raise fertility rates; instead parents should stay home and be paid to do so²⁰. A West Australian Federal Liberal MP, Julie Bishop, undertook a survey within her electorate, in which 42% of respondents stated that they were against paid maternity leave. "I have not spoken to a woman yet who says "I would have left work and had a child" if there was paid maternity leave."²¹

Prime Minister John Howard particularly likes the work of Catherine Hakim, a British sociologist. She identifies three types of lifestyles chosen by women: family-centred, work-centred or adaptive.²² The size of the groups differs within different societies, but the largest group are the 'adaptives' who want to combine employment and family. Her argument is that women are on a 'baby-making strike' because the terms and conditions of motherhood are poor compared to those in employment. To increase the birth rate, "they need to be made an offer they cannot refuse"²³. She advocates a home-care allowance to whichever parent looks after the children full-time.²⁴ She also states that maternity leave payments are a 'redundant irrelevance' for the 'adaptives' as it is primarily of value to career women who would return to work anyway.²⁵

Another researcher, Barry Maley who is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies, argues that paid maternity leave will not achieve anything; instead the answer is "stable marriages, tax credits and enhance value of motherhood"²⁶.

Commentators working from the 3rd wave feminist perspective argue that work is important but children matter more – paid maternity leave is not the answer, rather the workplace needs to change. They encompass the role of fathers and try to move the debate to one that includes men. They

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challenge the notion that men are applauded if they take time off work to look after a sick child, while a woman is frowned upon. The issue for this group is that second wave feminism promised ‘they could have it all’, but many found that they either did not want it, or were burnt out trying to have it. “Work hard and have it all was the unspoken feminist promise. Establish a career first. Delay motherhood until the time is right. Women can have babies in their forties, you know.”²⁷

They point to structural issues within a society that does not value parenthood. “The dominant culture of which I had been a part considered child rearing as unskilled labour, if it considered child rearing at all.”²⁸ In the USA, the wage gap between childless women and mothers is greater than that between young men and women.²⁹

The 3rd wave is attempting to value all mothers, regardless of the choices they make around work. They are accusing the feminist movement of ‘dropping the ball’ on the motherhood issue and not valuing women who choose to leave the workforce.

All three perspectives focus on women as the decision-maker about a family’s fertility. This is not to say that women do not control their fertility, obviously contraceptives have made this possible. Rather, that men are removed from the debate, when in reality the decision to have children, especially more children, is commonly a joint one that takes into account men and women’s needs. By moving the analysis to a deeper level, it becomes obvious that there are some similarities in what, on the surface, looked like opposing positions.

The Worldview level – Children? An economic decision

At a worldview level, the Western feminist position is that there are others to blame for the falling birth rates; the government for failing to support working women; business for not valuing mothers within their workforce; and society at large for not placing the working woman at the centre of all its considerations. If these ‘others’ are just made to change their ways then the problem will be solved. However, feminists also argue that women should not be expected to bear children, so even if all these measures were put in place there would be no guarantees.

Feminists have sold to women the need to make a rational decision about motherhood. To weigh motherhood vs economic independence and ensure they choose wisely. Those women, who are perceived to have chosen badly, i.e. become economically dependent on a male whilst raising children, are removed from the Sisterhood. This division amongst women is a weakness in second wave feminist thought. To try and ignore the pivotal role that motherhood will play in a woman’s life, whether she chooses to have children or not, alienates women when they do become mothers.

For women who do choose ‘wisely’, they need to be protected from the ‘sacrifices’ they have to make. In fact, parenthood should be as sacrifice free as it appeared to be for men in the fifties. Women too, should be able to walk through the front door, be handed a martini and have dinner served to them. The 3rd wave feminists see this belief as part of the ‘failure’ of feminism. The aspiration is simply to achieve equality with what men already had, rather than true liberation for both sexes.

The role that men play in a woman’s decision to be a mother is relegated to a secondary one; an economic backstop, someone to whinge to about how hard it all is, someone to whinge about, the ‘father’ as a symbol. There seems to have been a move away from making men responsible for their

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genetic material, except in an economic sense. There is an acceptance of the economic ‘realities’ of a two-income household, with a large mortgage, and that women would be pursuing the same economic and lifestyle goals as the men they aspire to be equal with.

The conservative viewpoint has a slightly different direction. There is a ‘natural’ order of things that has been upset. That the economic ‘realities’ of today are a result of allowing women into the workforce, that two-income families are the worst thing to happen to the stability of marriage and to the birth rate. Again the solutions offered are economic, only slanted differently. To make combining work and motherhood as economically unsavoury as possible, and to use economics to sway the ‘rational’ choices of women towards staying at home.

There is value put on motherhood, as long as it is a self-less and sacrificing kind of role. That compromise by mothers is to be expected and applauded. Fathers are relegated to a traditional male-breadwinner role. Encouraged to stay at work, stay with the family, and ‘do their best’ for the family.

The view of the 3rd wave feminists also reflects a wish to value motherhood economically and socially. They argue that the feminists are pursuing the wrong means, that there is no correlation between policies that promote workforce participation and higher birth rates. If, however, women are told that life is long and they have time to take 5 to 10 years out of the workforce, they may feel confident enough to have a second or third child.³⁰ It is these additional children that will help lift the birth rate.

Another aim is to have the hard work that is required to raise children appreciated. “A society that treats child-rearing as pesky inconvenience makes as much sense as a fine restaurant where diners are made to stand in the entrance, eating out of their hands”.³¹ There is some comment around the role of men, and how they could be encouraged to participate a little more fully in the rearing of children, but it is still done in a manner which accepts that winning that fight is unlikely. There is some discussion that maybe the economic goals of men and women need to be different in order to parent children, but mainly there is little questioning of the ‘reality’ of a two-income family. Many women writing from this viewpoint make it clear that they do on a part-time basis, with their children at their feet. “I play with the baby then put him to bed and run to the desk.”³²

Research done into narratives about working life and family life in the 1990’s “found that there was no coherent pattern to be found in attitudes towards the needs of small children”.³³ This contrasts with that held in the 1950’s, male breadwinner/female home carer, which was homogeneous and widely shared. There is some debate that Australia should move towards a gender-equity family, the Scandinavian model, which is supported by Government allowances that enables parents to manage work and family.³⁴

The perceived success of the ‘gender-equity’ model is seen in Sweden, Finland and Norway, where women are given up to three years leave, with a guaranteed job at the end. Men also have access to leave, but were not using it until ‘use it or lose it’ provisions were put in place.³⁵

There are many similarities between the three worldviews; economic need is seen as central to child rearing decision making by all groups, and the role of men is either marginalised or not dealt with.

The Myth/metaphor level - Children as personal indulgence

Four ‘myths’ can be identified that are accepted by all viewpoints. It can be argued that these implicit, deep-seated assumptions sit at the root of contemporary Western society.

‘Children as personal indulgence’

One of the underlying mythologies of the debate is that having children is a personal indulgence on the part of parents, and as such they should make their own arrangements. The argument over paid maternity reflects this, as it revolves around giving *individual* women support while they *individually* care for their children. If they are unable to personally care for their child then they are *individually* responsible for finding an appropriate, high quality substitute. If this substitute is found to be lacking in terms of the child’s development, then that too is the mother’s *individual* responsibility. Throughout the debate, there has been little discussion around alternative ways of raising children.

‘The missing Father’

The common element in each view within the debate is the ‘the missing Father’. Each of the viewpoints implicitly believes that a child’s ‘Mother’ is most important. The caring of children is referred to as a women’s issue. Women are assumed to make all reproductive decisions to do with the size of the family; men are seen as secondary. As Belinda Probert states: “the revolution in expectations about women’s labour market participation seems to have occurred without any corresponding revolution in the care of children and the domestic sphere. The practice of fathering is relatively unchanged”.³⁶ Carmen Lawrence adds that the debate “ignore(s) a new generation of fathers who also want to redefine their work and family roles”.³⁷

All sides debating the issue have ignored the effect of men’s career options and choices on the size of families, all the emphasis is placed on women. While this is still the case the debate will continue to stay at a litany level and is unlikely to resolve any of its stated aims.

‘Growth is good’

Another underlying ‘myth’ that is shared by all groups is that of ‘growth is good’. The feminists, conservatives and 3rd wave commentators, all agree that two income families and large mortgages are an uncontested part of their image of the future. The image of continued economic growth and corresponding consumerist boom will and should continue. This image stands unchallenged. New ways of framing the debate cannot occur unless these deep beliefs are exposed and evaluated.

‘Work is totally fulfilling’

A deep-seated myth throughout the debate, for both men and women, is that work can be totally fulfilling. This myth, along with that of ‘growth is good’, keeps career at forefront of many people’s minds. That family or personal needs should come first became an anathema to some feminists as a way of subjugating women to a less important role. Conservatives are happy to cast men in the role of career focussed, with its associated risks, whilst 3rd wave feminism still appears to believe this myth; they are simply trying to find ways to incorporate it around child-rearing. The challenge of re-structuring the current work/life balance or envisioning a different future, one where the nurturing of the next generation was central to society’s undertaking is not discussed.

What is missing?

The debate around paid maternity leave is ostensibly about the future, how we want society to look in thirty years. If the current birth rate continues we will have an ageing society, with births below replacement. Throughout the discussion there has been no discussion about how we want to raise our children, structure our families or re-order our society in the future. The location of the debate at the litany level has meant that none of the worldviews or foundation myths have been questioned. The result of this is that all the ideas discussed are simply tampering at the edges and assume that what is in existence now will always be there.

There are some examples that we can look to for inspiration when trying to reframe the debate, taking into account the assumptions at the deeper levels. These examples are most readily found in the futures field through feminist science fiction. Two writers, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Marge Piercy have envisioned alternative structures around raising children.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote 'Herland' in 1915, as a serial in a monthly magazine she wrote and published. It was first published in book form in 1979. The novel describes the adventures of three young men who find themselves in an isolated mountain valley, with cities and dense forests, populated entirely by women. Many generations earlier the women found themselves separated from the human race, with the men dying off. The women then became capable of parthenogenesis; the society subsequently organised itself around raising children and living in harmony with their surroundings.

Gilman describes Motherhood as being "Conscious Makers of People. Mother-love with them was not...a mere 'instinct', a wholly personal feeling; it was religion."³⁸ The entire community revolves around child rearing as a core goal. Those born were children of the society, valued by all, not just their parent.

Marge Piercy in her 1976 book, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, describes a future society, 150 years hence. In Mouth-of-Mattapoisett is a village that is built so its inhabitants can live in a sustainable manner. Solar energy is primarily used, and the community grows enough produce to feed itself. The reproduction function is a community one, in that a child is only born as a replacement when someone dies. Three 'mothers', male and female, are chosen for each child from those who have volunteered for the role. *All breastfeed and bond with the baby*. A community, not a family, raises the child. Children are seen as a social responsibility rather than an individual one.

Scenarios, such as those developed by Gilman and Piercy reframe the maternity leave debate by suggesting that more than just leave provisions must change if want our society to prosper. Men and women are jointly responsible for conception and should be jointly responsible for rearing the child, once born. Evidence is growing indicating that children thrive more readily when their care is a social responsibility and goal, not just an individual one.³⁹

Conclusion

Causal Layered Analysis is a powerful method for delving beneath the surface of an issue or problem. It is more so when used in a group setting, and having only one person investigating this issue will not have uncovered as many hidden 'myths' as a group would have done. Nonetheless, there have been a number of enlightening issues brought to the forefront; the convergence of beliefs by all 'competing'

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points of view in the debate, the removal of co-parenting as an issue, and the lack of questioning about alternative ways of raising children. In this debate, the future is seen as a linear extension of the present with little thought as to how we might like to make it different or even whether a different future is preferable. A couple of examples from fiction illustrate that there are endless scenarios available to society if we are brave enough to delve beneath the surface and debate the 'real' issues.

Endnotes

- ¹ Horacek cartoon from <http://www.horacek.com.au/> reproduced under fair use educational copyright provisions
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