

## **Choosing to compromise: Women studying childcare**

Reporting on a study of mature women training to work in childcare, this article demonstrates how, some women choose to be part-time mothers, workers and students, wanting 'the best of both worlds'. It presents a theory of integrated lives that contrasts with customary deficit models, and shows how a series of reciprocal links bind the women's different roles together, introducing an adaptation of Coser's theory of greedy institutions to demonstrate how this is an inherently stable position.

Whilst the theory can stand alone, it is usefully recast as a localised example of a capability set as it frames the co-realizable choices open to the women. Making further links with Amartya Sen's capability approach, it is suggested that we should encourage governmental interventions that enable individual choice and support those women who want to integrate their lives alongside those who seek parity in the public sphere.

### **Introduction**

For more than a decade I taught successive cohorts of mature women who enrolled on a Childcare (Note 1) Diploma in a further education (FE) college. Recognising that, uniquely, I had sole access to this group of former students, I decided to make them the focus for my doctoral research. Initially, I planned to ascertain their views of adult education but in an attempt to broaden the research and give the students more control I subsequently decided to let them determine the fine content of their interviews, making my role one of questioner, interpreter and most importantly, narrator of their opinions.

This was truly real world research (Robson 2002), creating a mass of complex conversational material that defied immediate interpretation. However, after a considerable period of verbatim transcription, of special attention to the structures within the speech and further immersion in the data, patterns did emerge and these were patterns that challenged any preconceived notions that I held. Not only did I find it impossible to separate the students' educational accounts from other aspects of their stories but, paradoxically, I also found that students cheerfully offered biographical

tales that suggested that life should be fraught rather than immensely satisfying.

Accounts of poor pay, difficult working conditions, inadequate study facilities, and insufficient time were eclipsed by positive expressions of satisfaction, personal achievement and self-fulfilment, leading me to question why this should be so.

Eventually I understood that human values mattered far more than structural conditions. The women, who in the main were mothers of young children, wanted ‘the best of both worlds’, to work and study but always in a context that protected their families’ needs. The women were managing their lives in ways that required me to construct the ‘triple triangle maintaining integrated lives’, a theoretical model that demonstrates how some women choose to compromise, preferring to be part-time mothers, workers and students rather than to pursue any one route in isolation. This triangle and the reciprocal links through which it is built form the focus of the current article.

I offer the theorisation to a specialist gender readership with some trepidation as I recognise that the division of labour in the home and gender equality in society are highly contested issues. It is not my intention in this article to undermine ongoing attempts to achieve gender parity or to stir up new clouds of controversy. It is for others to determine whether the findings have validity beyond the specific childcare sphere from which they derive. My aim is simply to report the research findings for this project, explaining, as part of the process, how I worked with the students to clarify their thoughts. I have tried to articulate the views and actions of a group of women in society whose voice is seldom heard. Like bell hooks (1990, 152) I wanted to avoid any suggestion that ‘I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself’ but nevertheless, I did play an active role in ‘forcing’ understanding as I came to realise how our prior acquaintance enabled a powerful dialogue to take place.

People who know and like each other can talk at deeper levels. Lisa Mazzei (2007a, 1130) talks of ‘recognizing and listening to the silence’ and wonders what would have happened if she had voiced her ‘interior monologue’ (2007b, 637). In my research I took this step, learning to listen closely and make ‘a very interesting and informative detour’ when I heard dissonance, denial or doubt. I adopted psycho-social interviewing strategies to probe meaning and, in a further transgression of paradigmatic boundaries, this could be construed as an alternative means of ‘working the hyphen’ (Fine 1994, 72) between researcher and researched.

### **The research context**

Whether gender is viewed as a biological fact (Goldberg 1999), a social construct (Millet 1971; Kimmel 2000), a performance (Butler 1999), or as nuanced combination of theories, few would deny that within the home even in the twenty-first century the majority of household tasks fall on women’s shoulders (Irving 2008); a pattern discernible since the industrial revolution and considered by many to stem from the capitalist division of labour (Davidoff and Hall 1987; Hart 1992; Jackson 2008). In the United Kingdom, feminist activity may have led to a ‘break with Victorian gender values’ and the ‘creation of conditions for the narrowing gender divide in education’ in a schools context (Arnot, David and Weiner 1999, 7) but in the family women still appear to bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities. At the start of the new millennium, Carol Vincent (2000) was reiterating Diane Reay’s (1998) view that the term ‘parental involvement’ may disguise an absence of paternal input and restating Miriam David’s belief (1993) that changes within the family and workplace had increased ‘maternal responsibility’ and that this was a situation that held true for dual earner households (Brannen and Moss 1991; Vincent and Ball 1999).

However, terms like maternal responsibility and parental involvement, in themselves carry diverse connotations. In an article on women in higher education in this journal Karen Danna Lynch (2008) presents an American perspective on maternal responsibility that, to me, feels very different from the English usage of the term. In Lynch's context maternal responsibility appears a much stronger concept carrying structural expectations that women *must* put their children first and be seen to cater for their every need. She describes this as 'a gendered model that advises women to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children' and links it to a 'dominant cultural script of "intensive mothering"' traceable to Sharon Hays 1996 work (ibid, 586). Perhaps, however, pressures to conform are simply more covert in English society as in Ireland. Maeve O'Brien's study, deconstructing parental involvement in a school context, claims that schedules and practices may be 'reinforcing a traditional gender order' but does acknowledge that this is, 'perhaps unwittingly' (2007, 174); thus leaving open the debate about whether such persuasion is overt or covert.

In contrast to this study, the participants in my doctoral research claimed maternal responsibility knowingly, wanting to be available to spend time with their children, putting their children's needs above their own and planning their lives around developments within the family but from a position of choice not compulsion. This recognition that choice was centrally important led to an association of integrated lives theory with the broader conceptualisation of Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA). Sen's is a liberal ideology that sees how policies seeking optimum solutions are often deeply inegalitarian, favouring those with the capacity to utilise options over weaker members of society. Refuting economic instrumentalism, Sen promotes human values claiming that 'ultimately the focus has to be on what life we lead and

what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be' (Sen 1987, 16). He believes that policy makers should focus on expanding people's 'capability' their potential to achieve, and leave them to choose their own 'functionings', or actual achievements. Explaining his approach, discussed in detail in *Development as freedom* (Sen 1999), Sen identifies that choice is neither open-ended nor prescribed, but bounded. Individuals, and collectively groups of individuals, have 'capability sets'; frameworks from which they can choose a set of co-realizable options. As we shall later see, the integrated lives triangle represents such a capability set for mature women training in childcare who seek to fit their life choices within a frame that covers family, work and study.

This framing contrasts with other accounts of women's education, perhaps because the women are engaged in Further education rather than HE. Earlier work on women in HE (Edwards 1993; Pascall and Cox 1993; Merrill 1999; Parr, 2000), takes a different stance on family commitments and on aspirations; describing, like Alsop et al (2008, 624), those for whom 'HE is a gateway (back in-) to the labour market, and/or a better position within it'. For many women, education provides an escape from the domestic sphere rather than a means of maintaining part-time involvement. So often this 'juggling' of study and family commitments carries more negative connotations, leading to a deficit model of women's education. As Penny Burke (2002) explains, applauding students who can juggle their responsibilities draws attention away from the problems experienced by those who cannot manage to do this, and thus absolves the government from effectively funding education. In offering an alternative construct, through integrated lives theory, I accept the validity of Burke's viewpoint but reiterate that for some women part-time is a positive choice. Indeed Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson's (2006) work on the 'good mother'

finds part-time employed mothers consider themselves to be more patient, and happier because they get breaks.

It seemed appropriate to adopt Sen's capability approach in a study of women for many feminist policy writers recognise that his beliefs are supportive of their views. Indeed, there are many aspects of the approach that feminist philosopher, Martha Nussbaum and Sen (1993) developed or disseminated together. Ingrid Robeyns (2008) has considered CA in relation to 'feminist concerns' and offers a useful summary of feminist critiques of other more androcentric well-being theory, referring to work by Okin (1989), Elizabeth Anderson (1989), Iris Young (1990), Nancy Fraser (1998) and Eva Kittay (1999). Robeyns concludes that, in contrast, 'Sen's capability approach has much more potential to address gender issues and feminist concerns than most other well-being and social justice theories' (2008, 101). For the most part this is because it is 'ethically individualistic' (ibid, 94), that is, it recognises that within a family and broader society each individual should be equally enabled rather than subsumed within a household or community grouping. This notion of individualism is very different from Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) self-seeking conceptualisation of 'individualisation' or indeed the view 'exhibited in third wave assertions' of feminism (Budgeon 2011, 16).

The growing number of feminist educational researchers seeking to apply the capability approach in educational contexts (such as Melanie Walker, Elaine Unterhalter, Rosie Vaughan, Caroline Hart, and Priya Chattier) implies a continuing acceptance of its complementarity to feminist beliefs. Most studies engage with the CA from the outset. Some discuss CA from a philosophical perspective, maybe drawing up ideal-theoretical lists (Nussbaum, Walker) others also explore the approach in real contexts (Unterhalter, Vaughan, Chattier). What is different about my

own study is that it started with no such intention. Data was collected, preliminary analysis commenced, and typologies and a model were derived holistically before I, the researcher, began to see the relevance of the approach. To me, it is the unforeseen nature of the connection with CA that makes it both exciting and credible.

### **The research design**

The research was planned, implemented and analysed over a four-year period, from 2006 to 2009, with most of the interviews carried out during 2006 and with each woman being interviewed once, customarily in her own home. From the outset my intention for this research project was to explore the students' perspectives on education so my methodology was designed to be flexible and reactive. Out of a potential cohort of 170, 150 students returned background questionnaires and a representative sample of 33 were iteratively chosen for interview. The students came from diverse social backgrounds, ranged in age from early twenties to late fifties, and spanned the qualification spectrum from no certificates to graduacy. Thus they were distinctively different from the young working class students central to earlier studies (Skeggs 1997; Colley 2006). The majority worked in the voluntary sector in pre-school settings, but some had taken teaching assistant jobs in state schools and a few worked in private nurseries. Most of the women were married (80%) and living with young children (70%), factors that make them typical of many mature women childcare staff in England (see the *Labour Force Survey 2001-05* in Simon et al, 2007). These were all students who had enrolled on a Diploma in Childcare in an FE college over a ten-year period commencing in 1997, a course for which I was the sole tutor. Our prior acquaintance facilitated a friendly interactive style of interviewing, so I quickly discarded my initial semi-structured lists of questions. I chose instead to listen closely to the discussions and, informed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), to

use psycho-social techniques to investigate hesitations, juxtapositions and contradictions in the student narratives.

Although my initial interest was in education the student discussions spanned their broader lives and I decided to transcribe the interviews in full to capture all possible insights. Determined to explore the student viewpoints, rather than my own preconceived notions, I persevered with an ‘emergent’ methodology. So, on recognising the power of intersubjectivity when interviewer and interviewee share common ground, I adapted the coding of conversation analysis (Ten Have 1999) to clarify those instances when meaning arose from shared debate rather than from clearly quotable text spoken by the interviewee alone, thereby evidencing inference. I then entered an extensive and exhaustive stage of analysing-through-writing to ensure data saturation, finding like Richardson and St Pierre (2005, 970) that quite often ‘thought happened in the writing’. It was when I attempted to structure and edit the ensuing texts that I realised that it was impossible to separate the student views on education from other aspects of their lives. I claim a ‘eureka’ moment when, after a considerable struggle, I recognised that I had learnt to hear what the data was telling me, and, from this enlightenment, developed the theory of integrated lives. The overall research process is discussed more fully in an earlier article (Wright 2009b) but here it is important to note that, I have worked to combine a range of methods that enabled me to use my prior knowledge of the students to support our joint creation of their narratives. This is a hybrid methodology. It associates strategies that *will* work comfortably together but that rarely are required to do so, as they occupy different ideological spaces. I label this ‘recall methodology’ and discuss it in greater detail elsewhere (Wright 2010).



## **Women's choices**

I now wish to offer an overview of the women's choices, using their own words to establish credibility. I recognise that choice is a contested term and that in contemporary feminist debate it carries individual affirmational third wave connotations (Burden 2011) but I am neither aligning with or rejecting this position. Choice implies agency and notions of agency and well-being are central facets of Sen's philosophy. As an economist, he is also concerned with preference, using the concept of 'adaptive preference' to indicate when choice is constrained by structural conditions (Elster 1982).

To return to the research narrative; it seems appropriate to model the style of the research itself. The intention was always to explore student perspectives, to analyse their accounts, seeking patterns and themes that naturally occurred. I was hoping to theorise from a mass of complex real-world data so it was consistent to create typologies and a model that simplifies reality, reducing individual variation to a single explanatory framework. I was very pleased when I found such ideas emerging out of my repeated immersion in the data and my struggle to make sense of it. As with grounded theory approaches (Glaser and Strauss 1967) I was seeking to move from the detail to the generalities, so I shall now try to give a flavour of this process.

First we should note that few of the women entering childcare sought careers at the outset. Many 'drifted' into the profession, deciding to study after volunteering or acquiring part-time work in childcare settings in their local communities so were making choices reactively, following pathways trodden by other parents before them. Evelyn, joined a playgroup team chaired by 'a friend of mine'. Aileen, describes childcare work 'as a decision that I sort of slipped into' after a history of stepping in 'whenever their workers were off'. Amy did apply for her job but admits that 'people knew me' as she had been both Secretary and Treasure on the committee. Some, like

Danni were persuaded to join up. She ‘was actually offered a position’, and agreed to try it for a while as it was convenient. ‘Part of the deal’ was that her son could attend the setting early. A few, like Bella, created opportunities for themselves:

I poked my head round the corner and asked if there was anything I could do to help: I’m here early. Then it would just be I’m here early and was one of the helpers and then it would be if anyone was off ill they would ring me and I’d be there as a paid helper.

Economic reward was rarely given as the reason for making the transition from volunteer to worker: being paid represented being permanent. When asked about the benefits of childcare work, most described its convenience in terms of hours (‘it fitted in with the hours, the school hours’), locality (‘that’s handy, I can walk down there’), and familiarity (‘it seems a natural thing to me that the mothers do the caring’). Students were aware that pay was poor but, like Aileen, accepted this situation: ‘family conditions and working around the children – that came first rather than working conditions and salaries’. A few were unable to do this (‘I decided I would have to go and earn some more pennies as well so that contributed to my leaving’), or less keen to compromise (‘I’d like to be able to have some money spare to be able to say “Okay, we are going to something nice this weekend” and all go off and do that’).

Many students sought satisfaction in other ways: in status (‘and it is quite nice when they think, oh yes, she’s not as daft as she looks’); in self-esteem (‘I just think it really helps you as a person – your well-being and self-worth’); and in notching up future possibilities (‘I’m feathering my nest to make it bigger and better so that, should I want to move on and get paid a better wage which I deserve I will be able to do it’). Altruism was important too. Frances is typical when she says: ‘We loved children and we wanted to help them and we wanted to help the community and the mothers that perhaps couldn’t do that’. Education provided its own reward as

achieving a qualification certified their efforts in a way that public approval and personal satisfaction could not. Avril, for example, very clearly describes ‘the satisfaction of getting a qualification’ as ‘quite addictive’ and developed a ‘study mode’. Alex, who can no longer afford to work in childcare, also values certification: ‘I got my bit of paper and therefore I am as good as the next one and I can go and check out whatever life throws at me’.

The students are not blind to discourses of crisis or of actual problems within the early years sector but the majority choose to stay in the field as they enjoy working with young children and care passionately about them. As Imogen says: ‘I don’t see them as *just* children. I see them as people who need to be treated *well* and given respect and love mainly – and cuddles’. Overall, the advantages of childcare work are seen to outweigh the negatives but a common complaint is that workers’ efforts lack recognition. Emily explains: ‘at the end of the day I think that a lot of people see us as just somebody to look after the children for just a few hours’. Ilisa finds it frustrating that: ‘they just think a load of women rock up and look after kids in a big room for hours’ and Arianne complains: ‘I don’t think we have got a very obvious place in society’. Frieda also believes: ‘that nobody actually outside the job really understands how much responsibility you hold – and how high the standards have to be’. These comments demonstrate, that public acknowledgement does matter.

What was really noticeable however was the way the students linked different aspects of their lives. Talking about studying Faye claims ‘you have to work it around your family life’. Barbara claims the course taught her to be ‘more confident to ask and query things with schools now’. Alex gained the background knowledge needed to support her son in secondary school: ‘now I know that if I push and I push and I push I am going to get somewhere’. Ilisa uses her practical knowledge of children to

support her sister-in-law who is 'struggling with her youngest at the moment' and Emily also describes being asked for advice by friends who 'wanted to know what was normal at what age'. Fiona took her knowledge of child development and study skills into paediatric nursing and Diane her equality and community development learning into a job with an environmental agency. Celia, on leaving pre-school work plans to combine her liking for children and course-related ability to write fluently with an earlier interest in art and see if she can write and illustrate children's books. Avril, who caught the study habit, now works as a tutor herself.

Linkages take another form too. Fuzzy-life work boundaries are common, with women doing additional unpaid work at home rather than spend more time in the workplace. The voluntary sector is seriously under-funded so planning and recording children's learning is viewed as a semi-voluntary if obligatory task, additional work that is accepted as long as the demands do not become too onerous. Danni explains that she gets £20 per week for administration and that this goes nowhere but recognises that 'in all fairness to the committee, they can't afford to pay any more'. Some students pride themselves on their dedication: 'Hours and hours I spend of my own time, doing things' (Bethany); others admit: 'you suddenly feel that's it, you've had enough' (Heena). Often it is partners who complain about this transgression. Gina admits that you 'you do get a bit of grumbling, you know, at home' and in Frieda's case it is a concern that the work is affecting her mood that annoys her husband: 'okay you have to be working but you don't have to be taking on board stress'.

Most of the women related their decisions to their own children's needs. Sometimes the links are emotional. Arianne quite openly attributes her childcare career to dislike of separation from her son: 'I was hating the fact that I was paying someone else to look after him' but subsequently found the work intrinsically

‘worthwhile’. More often they are practical: ‘I got back in plenty of time to pick the children up. So in terms of disrupting them, it didn’t happen at all’ (Felicity).

Decisions to move on are considered carefully and put aside until this fits with changes in the family. Bella, for instance, decided she could study as her husband ‘got a day off in the week’ and this became ‘college day’. She also describes how she changed jobs when her daughter ‘was going up to primary school’. ‘I just thought, well, I still only do three mornings a week. Well, I can do more than that now’.

Generally, the students radiated a combination of pragmatism and satisfaction. They were content to wait until the time was appropriate rather than fret about life’s limitations. They enjoyed compromise. Overall, Evelyn sums it up nicely when she claims:

I want the best of both worlds. I want to be able to work and also I want to be at home with my children when they are at home. And childcare, teaching, working within that environment, allows me to do that and it’s rewarding because you are giving the children you are with, hopefully, quality time and input and if going to course and college progresses children and gives them courage and all the things we hope children will learn and grow up with, I can’t see that’s a bad thing.

### **Integrated lives theory**

The integrated lives theory is built up through a pattern of reciprocal links (see figure 1), generalised from the individual student comments at interview. These operate at two levels, to describe how the student lives within a framework bounded by the family, education and the workplace. In the inner frame, the connections directly involve the student. To take family first: the student considers and meets her family’s needs at every point of decision-making and, in turn, the family offers the student practical and emotional support. To the educational provider, the student makes a commitment to study hard, to develop an enquiring mind and complete the tasks set. Reciprocally, education expands the student’s confidence, outlook and knowledge

base, raises self-esteem, and accredits her achievements. To the workplace, the student demonstrates a serious commitment, often putting in additional unpaid hours. Reciprocally, working gives the student a personal, if limited, income but more importantly a sense of self-worth derived from doing something useful and from interacting with others.

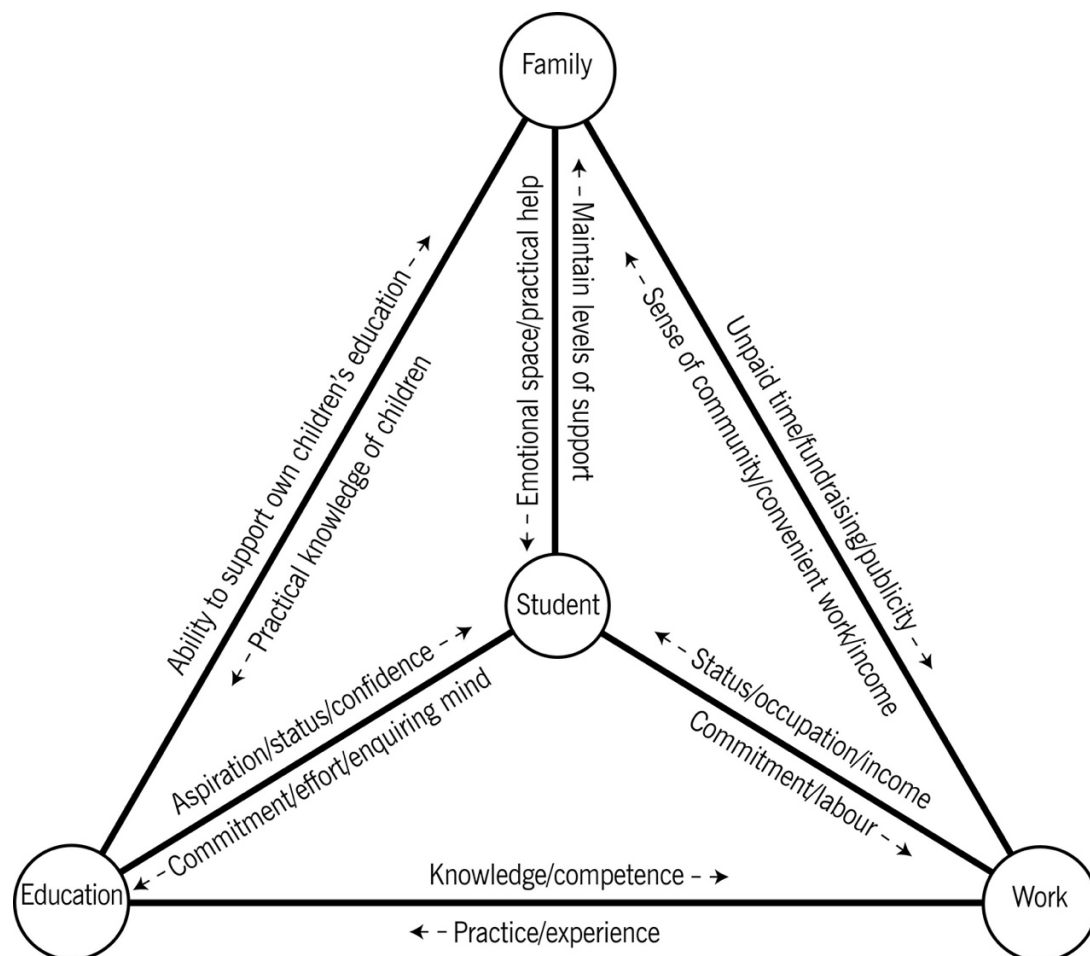


Figure 1: The triple triangle maintaining integrated lives

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These primary connections are further strengthened by direct reciprocal links between family, education and the workplace that form an outer framework. Family responsibilities enable students to acquire a practical knowledge of children and parenthood that makes sense of theoretical ideas. Reciprocally, education improves a

parent's ability to support her own children's education, and indeed, to meet their emotional and physical needs. Education provides the underpinning knowledge base that supports and improves practice within the workplace. Reciprocally, the workplace provides the experiential element needed for vocational training. The workplace is part of the local community and families support these groups regardless of the employment status of the mother. Family members volunteer in settings, help with publicity both formally and through word of mouth, and involve themselves in fundraising. Reciprocally this gives the family a sense of belonging in the community and its members the opportunity to undertake convenient and flexible, possibly paid, work.

Thus we have an idealised model of interaction that captures and generalises connections at the micro-level and embodies the concept of community involvement. It is essentially very strong as a triangle is a very stable framework and this model comprises multiple triangles. This is an ecological model where changes in one sphere are absorbed by adjustments to other areas, creating a stasis in the women's lives that allows them to live at a pace that suits their growing children. We have a model that casts the pre-school setting as a transitional space for the parent just as it serves this purpose for the children. Parent and child together use the provision to move from the domestic sphere into the broader community, a trajectory discussed in more detail in my book (Wright, 2011). The triple triangle maintaining integrated lives is a localised model attempting a tidy theoretical explanation of a particular aspect of our 'messy' world. However, it gains further credibility from its association with Sen's capability approach, for the model can be recast as the childcare worker's capability set.

### **Links to the capability approach**

Earlier, I briefly introduced the notion of the capability set as a framework from which an individual, or group of individuals, can choose co-realisable options and now we should consider this framework in more detail and see how association with a broader theorisation affects the integrated lives model. It was actually Bernard Williams (1987), working alongside Sen, who talked about co-realisation but Sen supports this idea using other words. Sen (1999, 75) distinguishes between a person's 'functionings' 'the various things a person may value doing or being' and 'capability' 'the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve'. Thus a person's capability set represents 'her real opportunities', the things from which she can actually choose. Some choices will operate in tandem, more of one thing allowing more of another; some may operate in opposition, more of one leading to less of another but within a framework where opposition is relative rather than absolute. Thus, the childcare students are pursuing lives in which the needs of the family, of education and of the workplace are intrinsically linked and changes that benefit one aspect often benefit the others. However, within this framework there is also a need to balance competing demands. Time spent on one aspect means less time spent on the others even if the longer-term benefits are mutually satisfactory. Thus the capability set is held together by both concord and competition.

The capability approach is deliberately 'incomplete' to encourage users to apply it to their own circumstances; staying true to Sen's belief that over-generalisation disguises inequalities. Indeed, he expends considerable effort demonstrating how, for instance, a focus on the household as a measure of assessment hides the potential oppression of weaker family members – women, children, the elderly and the unwell – whose inferior treatment is rendered invisible. It is his concern that policy based on either Utilitarian or Rights philosophies fails to



recognise that equal treatment ‘can, in fact, be deeply inegalitarian’ (Sen 1992, 1) that motivated Sen to formulate an alternative perspective. He understands that it is ‘conversion’ that matters, what a person is able to do with a resource, rather than the resource itself and identifies capability as a new space for political action. If policy were to address capability – the ‘potential’ to achieve – users could be left to choose their own options, more efficiently addressing their own needs. Thus, rather than assuming an optimum preference, policy-makers should focus on extending the capability set, the range of options from which an individual can choose her functionings. Viewed in these terms, the capability set becomes a powerful site for intervention.

Taking up Sen’s invitation to customise the capability approach, I looked for additional support for integrated lives theory and found it in Coser’s (1974) work on ‘greedy institutions’. These are institutions that seek total commitment from their members, making demands that allow no space for other concerns and Coser and his wife examined the family as a commonplace example. Coser noted that in the public sphere convention or legislation normatively curb the excesses of a greedy institution. So, for example, any tendency to work excessive hours is curbed by laws that limit the working day. However, in the domestic sphere, boundaries are difficult to enforce; indeed we have already seen that they can be deliberately blurred. For my research cohort, family responsibilities are perceived as perpetual if not always physically manifest, and the physical roles of carer, cook, cleaner, chauffeur, are continually in demand. Ackers (1980) cast education as another greedy institution, an idea taken up by Rosalind Edwards (1993) in her study of mature women in HE. The desire to do well introduces unlimited aspiration into education: there is always one additional source to be read or final check to be made to written work. Students who are mothers

tend to work in the odd moments when no-one needs them so education fills the interstices in days (and nights) that are already very full. I believe that childcare work is yet a third greedy institution, certainly in the voluntary sector. My research describes, fuzzy life/work boundaries that establish expectations that staff will carry out planning, preparation and record keeping in their own time. Work creeps into the domestic sphere, often into core family time, as several husbands complain.

I now develop Coser's ideas further, using the theory in a way that transgresses its original intentions. In the initial theorisation, a greedy institution held a dominant position. It commanded the entire commitment of any individual pulled into its sphere, so, effectively defied competition. In the integrated lives theory, however, three potentially greedy institutions combine to create a stable framework for the women's lives. Family, work and education are held together by an inward tension as each domain claims but cannot gain the women's full attention. No one aspect can achieve dominance as the combined weight of the other two counteracts any tendency to move too far in a single direction. The triangle favours the status quo. Gradual change is possible but only if all three areas are given time to readjust harmoniously so the women tend to live in the present, seeking change when, and only when, the time is right.

The triple triangle also offers insight into abrupt changes. With all three apexes intact it is incredibly stable and change in one area can be managed by a gradual rebalancing. However, if two areas of the triangle are simultaneously challenged, the triangle can become destabilised. When this happens it precipitates change and this is often when women leave the childcare field or drop out of education. Looking retrospectively at the interview material, I found that several women who decided to change their occupation fitted this pattern. They initially

offered stories that focused on just one institution, but on further questioning, admitted that another area was challenged too. Irma, for instance, talks of changes at work but later suddenly mentions pertinent family issues. Celia wants to leave work but, as she claims to have spent ‘ten years treading on glass’, this decision only makes sense when she mentions an impending divorce. Irene talks about her children needing more attention but then admits to problems in the workplace, battles with the committee and an acrimonious email exchange.

Government policy can also play a destabilising role here, for women unsettled by exponential changes in the early years sector would become vulnerable if additional problems occur in the educational or family apexes. This is a concern that transcends the current research project as many women currently working in the early years sector now sign up for years of study as they work towards a level 3 diploma, a part-time honours degree and either Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) or a Post-Graduate Certificate of Education to fully qualify. The integrated lives theory presents a positive model of part-time work and study alongside time out from family responsibilities. It is potentially very stable and supportive of human agency but, nevertheless, at risk from careless exploitation and ill-considered change. If, in the ‘masculinist, neo-liberal project of de- and re-professionalising’ practitioners (Osgood 2006), government policy is allowed to destroy this triangle, it will not easily be restored. This pattern of choosing arises from grass roots initiatives that emerged over many years, and perpetuates commitment to others in the local community. It should not lightly be cast aside in favour of externally imposed discourses of ‘progress’ and ‘professionalisation’ but nor should choosing childcare equate with exploitation, as has long been the case in most sectors providing early years education. Even schools underpay nursery and classroom assistants. Janet Moyles (2001, 85) decried the ‘lack

of clear perception in our society as to what kinds of values, respect, funding or time young children's education and care should demand'. She also recognised that to stand against 'those of political prescription' required strength of mind (ibid, 93) and to this I would add collective action. Indeed, Mathew Urban (2008) calls for a focus away from the individual practitioner towards a complex, layered relational professionalism that creates space for constant inquiry. This would leave the responsibility for improvement in the hands of those who work with children but fails to address directly issues of pay and working conditions. These remain prey to the vagaries of the political and economic pendula.

Deconstructing recent policy initiatives Osgood (2009) demonstrates how by valuing 'fairly rewarded skills and responsibilities' (DfES 2003, 10) the government maintains the focus on the individual worker and effectively obscures structural explanations for workers' poor status and image. This creates a competitive individualistic culture and, as workers strive to achieve targets, ultimately assists the embodiment of an 'externally set vision of professionalism'. Additional funding follows the individual, enabling the government to avoid raising general levels of pay, so the many workers who cannot become graduate leaders continue to be exploited financially. This does not mean that those same workers would necessarily make other choices if they could. My research demonstrates that mothers who start their careers by drifting into settings make their choices within the integrated triangle, and this holds true across a range of intersectionalities.

Indeed in both thesis (2010) and book (2011) commonality is demonstrated in a number of ways. At an early stage of analysis I created two independent typology sets: *Occupational* and *Attitudinal*. Later, recognising that the women arranged their stories around a number of common themes, I recast these themes as 'capability

indicators' to begin an exploration of the complexity of individual achievement. Occupational typologies (five in number: samplers, stagers, settlers, switchers and step-uppers) explored the extent to which the students saw childcare as a career. Attitudinal typologies (four in number: accepters, agonisers, accumulators and asserters) explained the differing senses of 'agency' that came across in the interviews. To give a flavour of the students' narratives and how the students live within the integrated triangle I offer two contrasting cases studies below.

Beryl is a middle-class graduate whom I classified as *settler* cum *switcher* for she has decided to make a career working with children (settler) but I am ambivalent whether her performing arts degree constitutes a former career opportunity (from which she 'switched') or merely an alternative capability. Married with two children, she was already employed on enrolment. Beryl was paid to run a small rural pre-school, demonstrating an ability to capitalise on her earlier degree and experience as a childminder (and turn capability into functioning).

Beryl is an *accepter* with a laid back attitude to life. She enrolled on the Diploma because it 'was there and available and fitted in with work' (note the importance of integration). She describes childcare work as underpaid but thinks that 'a lot of people do it because that's what they want to do'. Her comment that 'you have to be a certain type of person to work with young children' suggests that the work forms part of her self-identity. She discusses 'juggling' family matters but found her family 'supportive' and demonstrates an ability to prioritise: she 'didn't vacuum everyday' and was quick to 'get on and do' her work rather than 'have a cup of tea' if the children 'went out to play with a friend'. She assertively claims her 'turn' on the computer so protects her own needs within the family. Yet studying had to fit around

the family and was possible because she had put drama on hold while ‘the children were young’.

Beryl secured a teaching assistantship towards the end of the course when her husband complained she was ‘getting a pittance’. She made the move easily but recognised the downside for she talked twice about ‘not being in charge’: autonomy mattered. Beryl only moved on again when the school was forced to ‘cut my hours’ – a reactive decision. The new nursery class is more regimented and Beryl admits to being a bit ‘jaded’, having learned to accept that she gets told ‘what’ to do but rarely ‘why’. She is not tempted to become a teacher: ‘not after seeing all the heartache and hair-tearing that goes on’. Later the real problem becomes apparent: funding cuts have blocked her promotion to a higher level. Beryl is beginning to investigate further openings but still working with children: ‘I am geared to this kind of work at the moment because this is what I know’. She is considering further training as a therapist to use her ‘performance’ knowledge. In Sen’s terms this would be combining ‘co-realiseable’ capabilities to form a new functioning.

Linking Beryl’s story to that of others, I believe that she will take on something new when she feels that her children are sufficiently independent. A relaxation in the family aspect will enable minor adjustments to both education and work and Beryl will move towards a new level of functioning. Beryl had previously employed a childminder who ‘took them into school’ and used an out-of-school club so could probably afford paid help if she was truly ready to make a change.

Ingrid offers a very different scenario. She has *switched* from a 10-year career in hairdressing but held casual jobs in retail between pregnancies. She is in *agoniser* who recognises, at times, a need to ‘bring myself into perspective’. I am able to describe her as working class by association as she lives in a working class district

and claims to have attended a local school. After failing her 11+ she was placed in the 'top class' where she found studying a 'little bit of a struggle' but learned to 'push herself' and achieved 5 O-levels and 4 CSEs (level 2 qualifications taken at around 16 in England).

For Ingrid it was a change in family structure that led her to adult education. Separated from her partner, she wanted 'something to go for' and took a distance learning course in psychology. Later, in a new relationship, she had a third child and when he started school, a friend asked her to work in the pre-school and she decided 'well, I'll give it a go and see how I get on', demonstrating how mothers often drift into pre-school work. She 'really enjoyed it', finding the children like 'little sponges' 'that soak up knowledge'. Studying for the Diploma, Ingrid says her manager would 'read through her work' or, if she had a question, would 'help me look it up' and this demonstrates a supportive link between work and education. Her family also supported her studies. Ingrid's older children 'sat there, sometimes until about 12 o'clock at night doing word counts for me and reading things through' or doing 'hole-punches' when assignments were due in and 'you just go completely off the rails'.

This latter statement belies the level of learning that was occurring. Ingrid talks of the importance of the 'little things' and describes how 'you then taught us to sort of look behind the behaviour'. She also describes moving beyond 'black and white' thinking, becoming more confident and tolerant and applying this in her local community. Ingrid now talks to strangers whereas 'I would probably just have passed them by in the street before'. She stands as a school governor 'which I would never have dreamed of doing before', taking her new functioning as a confident person into the 'family' aspect.

At the time of interview Ingrid is looking to move into school as changes in the voluntary sector 'are not going to be to my advantage from the point of view of the family situation'. Ingrid does not want to 'put my own child in childcare for the sake of me going to work', demonstrating how convenient hours matter more than pay. Indeed, she recognises that schools are cutting budgets and is prepared to take a reduced salary: 'I am quite happy not to work for level 3 just give me a job'. It is clear that Ingrid likes a degree of flexibility and autonomy in her work. She does not apply to work at an excellent local nursery school as it is very 'structured', and Ingrid likes to be able to 'have a mad five minutes' if a child wants to do something spontaneously.

Together these two case studies offer a flavour of the variety of student type and interested readers will find further case studies and vignettes that demonstrate the turning of functioning into capability in the published monograph (Removed for the purposes of peer review 2011). Space prevents the inclusion of further examples here.

## **Conclusions**

Altogether this study offers a view of complex and integrated lives that is credible, despite discourses which construe women as oppressed by a patriarchal society, by an under-funded educational system and an exploitative and unprofessionalised work sector. Whilst recognising the importance of all of such claims, and respecting that some women want (and all deserve) equality with men in the public sphere, we should also listen to the voices of the people who choose such complicated existences. We should hear that they want to balance the roles of mother, student and childcare worker rather than focus, in a full-time capacity, on any one activity individually.



Recognising the richness of their complex lives, the effort they put into achieving a balance, and their dedication to their local communities and the children who live in them, there is surely a case for providing more support.

Integrated lives that focus around childcare will always be busy ones but the women who pursue them need not be financially exploited, struggling to qualify, or short of sleep due to family crises. Sen suggests that there are ways of developing policy that could ameliorate the human condition whilst still supporting individual choice. Look at these women's lives and respect the generosity of time and spirit, the flexibility of approach and the sense of commitment to the next generation. Surely these characteristics should be protected. Is not the freedom to choose a worthy cause of similar value, if different in detail, to equal rights?

1. The term childcare is used for simplicity and brevity in preference to early years education or Early Childhood Education and Care and should not be construed as neglectful of the integral inclusion of both education and care.

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