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### In this Issue

The Centre for Leadership for Women presents a lecture presented by Dr Elizabeth Reid Boyd on her thesis: "*Being There*" : *Mothers who stay at home: A study of Separations in Nature and in Time.*

Dr Boyd begins by reflecting on how her exploration of why mothers stay at home and how this is experienced, lead to the realisation that, "mothers at home were usually discussed in tandem with mothers at work...Mothers were at war, or so it seemed. It was female hand-to-hand combat." This debate, between working mums versus stay at home mums, she points out, does not only involve mothers, but is also prevalent in the media, in politics and in child rearing discourse.

More interestingly, as she continued her research, it became evident that Feminism had a place in the child care debate. Outlining both sides of the controversy among feminists, she shows how certain strands of feminist thought came to be a part of the child care debate. Suggesting, that a feminist analysis of mothering at home is applicable and appropriate since half the women with children under five stay at home, and this is a significant group of Australian women, Dr Boyd arrives at her pivotal argument: "But most importantly, I argue that a feminist analysis is particularly necessary in spite of, and because of, the representations of mothers at home versus both mothers in paid work and feminism, in the Australian child care debate. This representation is significant for mothers at home, as well as for feminism, in the dichotomy it reveals and what this dichotomy disguises."

In her concluding remarks, she argues, "for recognition of the *relationship* between feminists (and mothers at work) and mothers at home, for clearly, in the child care debate, nothing is gained when they are set up as opposites – and as such – THE DEBATE IS LEFT TO WOMEN." She implores us to look more closely at the gendered parameters of the child care debate which reinforce man made divisions and dualisms. "It is only by unravelling these discourses, and seeing the dualisms which lie beneath them, that we have any hope of the gendered division, which ensures care is a woman's responsibility, have any chance of being dissolved."

You can access the Centre's interview with [Dr Elizabeth Reid Boyd](#) Director, Centre for Research for Women by clicking here.

### Lecture on "BEING THERE" By Dr Elizabeth Reid Boyd

(presented at Murdoch University on 20 March 2000 in Women and Society Lecture Series - Humanities)

My lecture today is based upon my thesis subject; mothers who stay at home to care for their children. The title of my thesis is "Being There": Mothers who stay at home: A study of separations in nature and in time". This will probably sound rather odd now, but by the end of this session, I hope this title makes sense to you, or at least sounds a little less peculiar.

It may not sound peculiar to you at all, but you may be wondering what mothers at home have to do with feminism. It's not a crazy question. A couple of months ago, I was talking to a feminist colleague I hadn't seen for some time about handing in my research and she said "What was your thesis on again? When I told her, she still looked mystified.

"Mothers at home and feminism?" she repeated "WHY?"

Why is something else I hope will be clear by the end of this lecture.

When I started my research, I began with interviewing mothers at home. I had two questions I wanted to ask them – Why are you at home, and how is this experienced? But in the early stages of my explorations, these initial questions became disguised. The more I read about mothers at home – in the media, in childcare literature, and the more I spoke to mothers, the more I realised that mothers at home were usually discussed in tandem with mothers at work. There was rarely an article or discussion about mothering at home, which did not include a weighing up of the relative merits of being at home versus being at work. Mothers were at war, or so it seemed. It was female hand-to-hand combat.

I heard, for example, from the mothers I interviewed that

*Samantha*: There's always a huge working mum versus stay at home mum issue, always, at school, at kindy, the working mums feel that they do more, the stay at home mums feel that they do more, it's really obvious.

In one case the debate was internalised, *Helen* felt she was "expected to have two roles ... it's created a terrible conflict ...I have not been at peace."

It's not only mothers at home who are involved in this debate.. The debate is significant politically and in the media. According to the current Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard, the Federal government does not particularly support one type of child care over the other. He said

It is a wholly unhealthy trend for there to be a continuing debate within our community as to which is the right or wrong way in which to care for young children. There is no right or wrong pattern.'" (*The West Australian*, 1997, March, 15/16:7).

In spite of Howard's belief that there is no right or wrong way to care for children, there has been an undoubted shift away from support for public child care, to support for private or family child care, under his government. This is discernible in reductions in financial support to child care centres and constraints on the Child Care Rebate, in contrast to payments such as Parenting Payment and portions of the Family Tax Initiative, which often been specifically for couple, single incomes families, in which one parent stays at home.

In the Australian media, in print, in film, on television and on radio, there is always a lot of time and space dedicated to motherhood. Much of this is a blend of idealisation and commercialisation: Mother's Day, for example, is an advertising bonanza. Day to day,

mothering is the bread (“Good on Ya Mum, Tip Top’s the one”<sup>1[1]</sup>) and butter (“You oughta be congratulated”<sup>2[2]</sup>) of domestic goods advertising.

But over the past five to eight years, beneath the maternal hype, a particular discourse has developed. Although motherhood is celebrated as eternally fulfilling, (especially if you’ve got the right appliances), and sometimes deplored, (if you haven’t got the right appliances), the word ‘mother’ is now frequently qualified. There is the working mother on the one hand and the mother at home on the other. If they are being discussed together in any particular piece, they are compared and contrasted, and all too often, one group is found wanting.

However, there appears to be an advertising risk in dividing too harshly mothers at home and working mothers. The division between mothers at home and mothers who work was part of a television advertisement for White Wings cakes, aired in 1998. The advertisement showed two small schoolgirls sitting with their lunchboxes, eating their lunch. One commented that her mother thought that homemade cakes were the best. The other, unwrapping a bought White Wings cake, said that her mother agreed, but that her mum didn’t make cakes, because she “had a life”. This final section of the advertisements was eventually deleted. Presumably, an overtly derogatory explication of a divide between mothers at home and mothers at work, in advertising at least, is not a popular ploy.

Still, there are also headlines debating mothering at home versus mothering at work: “Working Mothers Better Off at Home” (*The West Australian*: 1998); “Working Mothers on Trial” (*The West Australian*: 1997); “Mothers Club split on Home – Work Issue” (*The Weekend Australian*: 1998); “Working Mums left at home” (*The West Australian*: 1998); “How can I go to work and be a good mum?” (*Woman*: 1997); “The British Nanny Case: Should Mums Stay at Home with their Kids?” (*The Ricki Lake Show*: 1998).

The debate is found on letters pages, and the language in the letters selected for publication is frequently inflammatory:

Subsidised childcare must be paid by the taxes of all people ... I can think of better uses for the taxes I pay than supporting a lady who chooses the privilege of motherhood without accepting, at her own expense, the responsibilities inherent in looking after children that go with that choice. (*The West Australian*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1996)

Families who claim to need two incomes would not need two if they were happy to work towards goals instead of borrowing big sums of money. Please publish this letter if you can find it among that barrage of protests from guilty working mothers (*The West Australian*, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1996).

Give working mothers a break. We are not sitting on our backsides at home, watching our husbands working their butts off to make life rosy (*The West Australian*, 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1997).

The child care debate has also been taken up in child rearing discourse. Steve Biddulph asserts that children in long day care have a seriously deprived childhood experience and

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1[1] Advertising jingle for Tip Top bread.

2[2] Advertising jingle, congratulating mothers for using Meadow Lea margarine.

that problems and deficits occur in the areas of emotional stability, intimacy and trust. In contrast, Christopher Green (1987, 1995) argues that “Working mothers DON’T disadvantage children”. (1995: video cover). He has consistently maintained his support of working mothers, or more recently, working parents, in his writing. (Leach)

That gives you some background on the child care debate and mothers at home and mothers at work, and the areas in which the debate has been prominent. But you may still be wondering what this has to do with feminism.

Well, feminism has had a particular placement in this debate. This is partly because in the early stages of the second wave of feminism, following books such as Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* and Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and radical books such as Firestone’s *The Dialectics of Sex*, it was thought and hoped that motherhood would be radically changed. Terri Apter has suggested the only thing that did change was that women saw they could not expect total fulfilment from motherhood. “While expectations of motherhood were decreased, this did not decrease the amount of work motherhood involved” (Apter, p xi, 1985). In the UK, Maureen Freely claimed that feminism had failed mothers by devaluing motherhood and regarding children as an obstacle to fulfilment (Freely, 1996). In the US, Anne Roiphe wrote “I remain a mother linked - or is it chained – by a thousand thoughts to her children. It is clear to me that feminism, despite its vast accomplishments, has not cured me of motherhood.” (1996:ix). In Australia, Lucy Sullivan has asserted that a feminist speciality is misunderstanding mothers (*News Weekly* August 13 1994:13).

A controversy among feminists was also evoked in 1996, when Catherine Hakim argued that it is a feminist ‘myth’ that the majority of women want to work full time, and that many women want to stay with their children (Hakim, 1996). Hakim also argued that the continuing unequal division of labour in the home suggests that both women and men accept it..3[3]. Burgess (1997) however, has suggested that feminists have contributed to the devaluation of women’s work and overstressed the negative aspects of domestic labour and child caring so that it is therefore not surprising that men are not taking it up.

This positioning has occurred in the child care debate in spite of other feminist writings which were significant in the 1980s, such as that of Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow and Sara Ruddick, works which have formed part of what Jane Flax has called ‘the maternal turn’ and Segal has called ‘maternal revivalism’ This strand of feminist thought has not been played up in the child care debate.

Feminism’s positioning in the debate came through in a number of aspects of my research. If the mothers I interviewed described themselves as feminist they also qualified the term. *Helen* was “angry at the women’s movement, because what have they done for mothers at home?” *Gaby* was a feminist but not with a capital F, because she stayed at home, and *Tania* said, “a lot of people accuse me of being a feminist. And I say I don’t like the extremists, but I would say I definitely believe in a lot of feminist things”. The use of the word ‘accuse’ is salutary here; *Tania* is required to defend herself against the charge of feminism.

For the advocates of mothers at home, (explain women’s groups) feminism was a term utilised and qualified in similar ways. Women’s Action Alliance members said they were

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3[3] Hakim’s research has been taken up in the Australian media, in letters to the editor and the writing of columnist Bettina Ardnt, as discussed in chapter four.

“feminist in, that, well, the term feminist, and the broad feminist, is that you are supporting women in all avenues” but they were not “radical feminist”. Carole Carroll said

*Carole Carroll:* I never thought of myself as a feminist, because to me it was Germaine Greer and the radical type thing. I said to Eva Cox, you are one of the 70s feminists, Eva, you are not in touch with the women of the 90s. Women of the 90s are quite happy about sharing their lives with men. They want to do the parenting of their own children, with support and choice of how they do that.

President of the Australian Family Association Susan Bastick told me that she found feminist contributions to the child care debate “hostile” (Bastick, 1997). She said that she was a feminist if “you mean a system of thought, which is that women should be respected for themselves” but not “if feminism means that the only work of dignity is paid work”.

In the media, feminists have been accused of spouting academic nonsense about women and work. In party politics too, in the last election, feminism and the child care debate was an issue. Jackie Kelly, Liberal Candidate for Lindsay, NSW said:

“Hard core feminism is a complete turn-off to my generation and the next. The modern feminist is not attracted to that sort of bra-waving carry-on. Most of my girl friends are quite happy to stay at home with their kids. One of them is quitting work and she’s [the] ultimate thoroughly modern Millie. Don’t box us in, we can do things in whatever order we want.”

So you can see very clearly the ways feminism has been portrayed as opposed to mothers at home in the child care debate I: And certainly, here *has* been feminist opposition to mothers at home..

For example, Reva Landau (1992) argued explicitly that mothering at home adversely affects all women, and should not be condoned by feminists. She contended that mothers who stay at home damage the chances of all working women, by proving an assumption that women will leave work, to stay at home, when they have children.

Feminist and writer Eva Cox has also opposed mothering at home, and in the child care debate has been held up as the counterpoint or as opposition, to advocates for mothers at home. She was, for example, put up against Carole Carroll of Choice for Families in a television debate about the Child Care Rebate.

Cox has written:

Motherhood and sacred cows: Do women really choose to stay at home – or do such choices reflect the fact that we are still caught in a web of assumptions and values that tilt the balance towards traditional roles? (Cox, 1996:35)

But according to the feminist philosopher, Mary O’ Brien,

The passionate feminist scholar ... must be prepared to round up sacred cows and put them to the question, - not ... in the Inquisitional sense of that word, the sense which forces conformity by torture - but in the sense of a collective pilgrimage which will leave no theorem, no common sense, no platitude, no convention unquestioned, and in the sense that being in the world actively, critically, creatively and collectively is the condition of changing the world. (O’Brien, 1989:255)

I suggest, then, that a feminist analysis of mothering at home is applicable and appropriate for a number of reasons. It is appropriate since half the women with children under five stay at home, and this is a significant group of Australian women.

But most importantly, I argue that a feminist analysis is particularly necessary in spite of, and because of, the representations of mothers at home versus both mothers in paid work and feminism, in the Australian child care debate. This representation is significant for mothers at home, as well as for feminism, in the dichotomy it reveals and what this dichotomy disguises.

I am going to explain these terms, and then apply them to the child care debate, to show you how we have ended up in this position.

In defining dualism, dichotomy and difference, I draw on Nancy Jay's (1981) seminal discussion of dichotomy. Not all dichotomous distinctions form dualisms. A dualism takes the form of an A/not-A distinction (Jay, 1981:44). That is, they are not mere contraries, but logical contradictions. In the A/not-A binary pair, only one term has a positive reality and not-A is defined as being the lack of A. Continuity between A and not-A is also impossible (Jay, 1981:44). Dualism, A/not A, requires and either/or. This is particularly explicable with regard to gender, as Jay points out, "thus men and women may be conceived as men and not-men, or women and not-women" (Jay, 1981:44).

A dualism is not the same as a dichotomy that can be conceptualised as A/B. In A/B distinctions both terms may have a positive reality. Further, there is nothing in A/B distinctions that *necessarily* limits the consideration of A/B/C, and in this, I believe, lies the possibility of difference, although a dichotomy *seems* limited in scope. A/not-A, however, is structured so that a third (C) and other terms (D, E) *seems* impossible. I choose the word *seems* with care, for

"[A]s a fundamental principle of formal logic the A/not-A dichotomy is wonderfully simple and supremely all encompassing. But it is necessarily distorting when it is applied to the empirical world, for there are no negatives there. Everything that exists (including women) exists positively." (Jay, 1981:48)

As a conceptual framework, imposing an interpretative order on the world, a dualism is a powerfully simple ideological device. This can be demonstrated by exploring the Australian child care debate in these (distorting) terms.

Mothers at home versus mothers at work form a dichotomy (A/B). They are not strictly a dualism, since they are not mutually exclusive (A/not A). A mother at home may do some part time work (and still define herself as a mother at home, i.e. one who does not work) 4[4]. Mothers who work are also mothers at home when they are not doing their paid work and so on.

In view of the continuity and links between A and B, mothering at home and mothering at work, how the debate works in terms of dualism may seem limited. The two states do not logically contradict each other, there is continuity and commonality, both have a positive

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4[4] As did some of the mothers I interviewed, an issue I discuss further in the methodology.

reality. Yet this debate is often played out in terms of positive and negative, virtue and vice, presence and absence, and these representations are strongly reminiscent of dualism (Jay, 1981:44). In my thesis, I show the way that one kind of mothering is viewed as good, the other bad, one natural, one unnatural and so on.

This still does not make the dichotomy of mothering at home/mothering at work a dualism. But these dualistic features are not inexplicable. I contend that the ideological power of dualism in this debate is not in the dichotomy of mothering at home versus mothering at work itself. This breaks down, as a dualism, under preliminary examination. The strength of the mothers at home/mothers at work dichotomy (A/B) is that it rests upon, and is upheld by, a number of dualisms.

The conceptual dualism at the heart of the child care debate is male/female, or, as it is played out, man/not-man and woman/not woman. I am not simply referring to biological manifestations of sexual difference, for

‘Men’ and ‘women’ and their ‘interests’ rest not on biological difference, reproductive relations, or the sexual division of labour, but on the discursive practices which produce them (Pringle and Watson, 1999:216)

As a discourse, the child care debate operates as both *reflector* and *producer* of the male and the female, with powerful effects for the parameters of male and female responsibility for children. The male productive worker (using his mind) and the female reproductive carer (using her body) are familiar ideological figures. In this dualistic framework, a male is worker/not carer, and a female carer/not worker. Thus the dichotomy between mothers arises, because men are deemed not carers, based upon them being not-mothers. Even though mothers do paid work, the male/female dualism holds: the debate is between mothers, because mother equals carer.

Other dualisms uphold the separation between men and care and women and work by reinforcing and reinventing male/female. Those that are especially pertinent to the debate between mothers at home versus mothers at work, are public/private; production/reproduction; mind/body and culture/nature. These dualisms work together, as well as separately.

The dualisms I have identified form old divisions. According to Mary O’Brien, they rest upon the separation of man from nature and continuous time (O’Brien, 1981: 34). For O’Brien, it is not women’s nature that excludes them from culture, public, and work. It is the construction of the historically male public world of work, which separates men (and ‘pseudo men’) from the so-called private care of children (O’Brien, 1981:34).

Today, this hierarchical ‘man-made’ separation lies largely unaltered. But in the Australian context, it is (women’s) child care, rather than (men’s) work, which is problematised. Implicitly, work is valued over care, production over reproduction, and historically, ‘malestream’ social and political theory has reflected this value.

In contrast, Mary O’Brien (1981) argued that social and political theory must be grounded in the experiences of women, in the *politics* of reproduction. She argued that reproduction was not simply biological, or natural, as had been argued in much malestream theory.

*Being*, rather than *doing*, is how the mothers I interviewed described their reproductive role, their child caring. They wanted to *be* there. In current discourse, reproduction is (coming into) *being* (there) versus production and *doing* (it). But following O'Brien, I've not argued that *being* (there) just (naturally/biologically) *is*, and as such can remain untheorised. *Being there* is bio-social and political.

Also, crucially, O'Brien provided a dialectical account of reproduction. Reproduction as dialectic is integral to my analysis. Hartsock (1999) cites Ollman's (1993) statement regarding dialectics, which I have found valuable:

Dialectics resources our thinking about reality by replacing the commonsense notion of 'thing' as something that *has* a history and *has* external connections with other things, with notions of 'process' which contains its history and possible futures, and 'relation' which contains as a part of what it is, ties with other relations (Ollman, 1993).

Hartsock contends that thinking about reproduction as a dialectical process marks an important step forward for feminist theory. The idea that what had previously been categorised as "nature" should be thought of as historical, material, and understood in dialectical terms is very valuable (Hartsock, 1999:64). For my research, a dialectical account of reproduction views it as process, in itself, and in process and relation with other processes, such as production. It involves relations across production and reproduction, between women, men and children.

These relations are currently obscured by the dichotomous framing of the child care debate, for women and men. In a straightforward dualistic manoeuvre, male reproductive responsibilities are made logically inconsistent. But reproduction is not "only body" any more than production is "only mind". To view only the female as embodied is misleading, for the 'male' productive sphere is made up of a populace as embodied as the 'female' reproductive sphere. There are both mothering and fathering bodies in the public sphere, and both mothering and fathering bodies in the private sphere, in dynamic social and political relationship with each other.

Social transformations involve *a relationship between positions*, and nothing is gained if they are set up as opposites (Eveline, 1994:464, my italics). I am arguing for recognition of the *relationship* between feminists (and mothers at work) and mothers at home, for clearly, in the child care debate, nothing is gained when they are set up as opposites – and as such – THE DEBATE IS LEFT TO WOMEN. This is demonstrable politically, in the pendulum of child care policy between the Child Care Rebate and Parenting Pay; in the media in its fuelling of debate and argument; in swings of view and support in child care literature and advice and in arguments between women, especially 'different' kinds of (equality, cultural, capital, modern, 1970s, 1990s, radical, not radical, broad, femo-nazi, real, proto etc.) feminists. (Working on relationship).

But most importantly, we must realise that it is not necessarily debates between women, or feminist debates, or oppositional positions held by individual feminists, that are the problems in and of themselves. Instead, it is the point of reference; the prior privileging and advantaging of male norms (Bacchi, 1990:252). This means we must look more closely at the hierarchical man made divisions, which constrain our lives, and reveal that for women, they form a flimsy membrane, which does not hold water. This means we must look more closely at how the gendered parameters of the child care debate work and how they are sustained.

It means we must look at the discourses which continue to reinvent and reinforce these dualisms and divisions. The debate between mothers at home and mothers at work is only one such discourse. Another, is contemporary fathering discourse including the work of writers such as Biddulph and Daniel Petrie – which does not impinge on the mothers at work and mothers at home debate in any significant way. Instead, male commentators tend to stand on the sidelines of this ‘women’s issue:” One writer, Petrie, echoes John Howard, in his comment that he applauds mums at work, and mums at home, but women shouldn’t argue about which is the easier road.

It is only by unravelling these discourses, and seeing the dualisms which lie beneath them, that we have any hope of the gendered division, which ensures care is a woman’s responsibility, have any chance of being dissolved.

O’Brien’s view offers the possibility of a world which abolishes “the artificial, magical and symbolic barriers erected between public and private, between production and reproduction, between women and men” (1981:193). Such a world can only come from objectively based transformations of consciousness in the lived dialectics of people and nature. This, O’Brien argued, must not rest upon mere promise or real perplexities. Instead, women (and men) must seek to understand our own possibilities and freedom in a creatable future (1981:194).

I hope we will all become passionate about that. Thank you.

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