

## Maternal preferences: From ordinary celebrity to the sitcom star

There are a myriad of maternal figures represented on the small screen, spanning reality to fiction, comedy to serious drama, presenters, pundits, commentators and personalities. In this same way, there are a myriad of ways of mothering in line with age, class, geographic and lifestyle preferences. With this in mind, it is enlightening to see which mothers, maternal figures, tropes and archetypes have proved popular with mothers in the audience. Responses in this chapter relate to a question that I posed early on in the questionnaire, namely, ‘who are your favourite mothers on television, what is it that you find entertaining or appealing about these women?’ The added help text provided a prompt if necessary, asking ‘do you like to watch maternal characters on soap opera, sitcoms, police, hospital, teen drama or television adverts? Alternatively, do you like to watch “real” mothers in reality television, celebrity programming, gossip and chat shows, make-over fashion, cookery, gardening or home improvement programmes? Do you like where they live, how they behave, how they relate to their family or their working role?’

### Televsual and vocational personalities: More than a mother

It is interesting to see that in commentaries about preferred and favourite mothers on television, many respondents were, knowingly or otherwise, in dialogue with extant research on television stardom, or what theorists such as James Bennett refer to as the ‘television personality’ (Bennett

2010). Theorists from within the fields of film stardom and celebrity culture refer to the ‘impossibility’ of television stardom because the on screen/off screen duality of performance demanded by the film star cannot be emulated by presenters, pundits, hosts or newscasters (Langer 1981). From this perspective then, they have used the phrase ‘personality’ to refer to those presenters whose televisual ‘image enters into subsidiary circulation’ such as appearances in magazines, newspapers, chat shows and advertisements with such promotion and publicity then feeding back into their later small screen appearances (Bennett 2008). The fame of the televisual personality ‘rests on their work in such a way that there is very little sense of a private life and the emphasis is on the seamlessness of the public persona’ (Geraghty 2000). In this way the televisual personality is distinct from that of the television actor because while the actor takes on parts akin to the film star, the personality merely plays themselves, with authenticity, credibility and ordinariness said to be key to success, with limited juxtaposition between their television role and their private persona.

In terms of popular television presenters, there is a distinction made between the televisually and vocationally skilled. The former are professional presenters while the latter are on screen due to a previous skill-set in terms of cookery or nutrition, gardening or house renovation for example. That said, since the emergence and development of lifestyle programming in the 1990s, beginning with the popular and long-running *Changing Rooms* (1996–2004), the lines between the televisually skilled and vocationally talented performer has blurred somewhat, so that vocationally skilled performers become the sole presenter of a show and the televisually skilled performer tries to develop a talent or skill beyond their original presenting role. Indeed, the boom in factual entertainment on British television from the late 1990s onwards has led to the vocationally skilled presenter no longer simply divulging their specialised knowledge, but producing or maintaining an image similar to the televisually skilled performer. This is notable in lifestyle programming’s increased reliance on the ability of one of its vocational performers to present the programme, rather than using a presenter (who is solely televisually skilled) acting as an

intermediary between expert and ordinary contestant/viewer. However, irrespective of their skillset, these performers must exemplify a sense of everyday 'ordinariness' so as to appeal to the television audience, so much so in fact that many skilled and socially connected presenters play down their personal networks and professional accreditations in order to maintain popularity. Indeed, Jamie Oliver seems to have spent his entire television career encouraging us to forget his training as a sous chef at the Michelin star restaurant, The River Café. Moreover, the more Ant McPartlin and Dec Donnelly seem to be like they appear on television, the more commercially and critically successful they become. And yet, however popular or professional Jamie, Ant or Dec might appear to a viewing public, these figures say little about the ways in which mothers in the audience read and respond to depictions of motherhood on the small screen. Rather, women in the audience who responded to my questionnaire commented on a small number of favourite maternal personalities, with the ability to balance professional and domestic responsibilities playing a key role in their popularity with viewers.

### Approval for working Mothers: Daly, Willoughby and Berry

In terms of televisually skilled performers, two names appeared frequently in response to the questionnaire, namely, Tess Daly and Holly Willoughby; and although they were never named individually, the presenting team on *Loose Women* (1999–) were seen to be popular with the audience. What is interesting here of course is the fact that many respondents looked to women such as Daly and Willoughby who are rarely, if ever, seen on screen with their children. Rather, we see their pregnancies develop week by week in their role as professional presenters, and then follow the birth stories and motherhood narratives in the wider media marketplace in general and the gossip and women's magazine sector in particular.

*I like Tess Daly, she appears to have a great family life, exciting job and amazing figure.*

*... seem real and striving to 'do well' at motherhood whilst retaining their own careers and identity.*

*Tess Daly, she looks amazing, is great at her job and has a beautiful family. She does really well to balance work and motherhood.*

*I like the working mothers that manage to have children and work but that are honest about the struggles ... so usually TV presenters.*

*Tess Daly is just another working mum taking on the weekend night shift, it is just that hers is more glamorous and pays much better than the rest of us.*

*... down to earth, opinionated, glam/career yet with a sense of self-depreciation and humour about the real world, acknowledging difficulties and shortcomings.*

*I do like to watch glamorous mums such as Tess Daly and Holly Willoughby hosting programmes as I like the professionalism and maternalism that they portray.*

*Tess Daly, I found her baby book to be really honest and helpful, it was nice to find out that someone as famous and glamorous as she is can still struggle with motherhood at times.*

*Tess Daly is such a natural, normal mum even though she has such a high-profile presenting job. She seems to be just like the rest of us, the only difference is she gets to be dressed up for her job!*

*Tess Daly, I read her baby book and it made me really warm to her as a mother and a presenter. She comes across as totally normal, just like the rest of us working mothers, but she just gets to wear better clothes.*

*Tess Daly is amazing, she is beautiful, stylish and normal. She seems like a normal mum that you could talk to in the playground. You can tell that she looks after her children and doesn't use loads of nannies and paid staff to help with the family.*

*Tess Daly, I feel that she is totally normal, and really loves being a mum and spending time with her children. She is lucky that she actually gets to be with them a lot because she does not have a normal 9-5 to work around for childcare.*

*I think that many of the women primetime presenters are a good role model to show you can have a career and children, like Tess Daly taking maternity leave during Strictly Come Dancing, and talking about sharing childcare with their partners.*

Tess Daly is the forty-something model and television presenter, best known for her co-presenting role on the long-running and popular celebrity programme, *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004–). She has been married to Vernon Kay since 2003 and they have two daughters. Much commentary from respondents and the wider media marketplace refers to Daly's 'ordinariness' in terms of her idyllic childhood in the Peak District, her down-to-earth nature and her marriage, irrespective of the fact that the duo are considered a celebrity power couple with all the financial and material accoutrements that come with that title.

In this way, Daly must be understood as the ideal television personality because she manages to combine a critically and commercially successful modelling and television career with an air of 'normalcy' that viewers feel that they can relate to. And Daly's role as a wife and mother is crucial in this regard. Audiences feel that they can relate to Daly as a mother, in part due to her baby book (Daly 2010) and her more recent family-inspired blog (Daly 2013). Daly currently models Florence and Fred designs for the high street supermarket Tesco, and each Daly performance within and beyond the television landscape goes further to reaffirm her very ordinariness and authenticity. It is not uncommon for interviewers to comment that the 'abnormal thing about Tess Daly is her normality ... She is so ... unpretentious' (MacDonald 2008). And when Daly reveals details about her private, domestic life, she does so as a working mother struggling to maintain the ideology of intensive mothering. In short, she presents herself as a struggling yet satisfied, hence appropriate mother figure:

My life is no longer recognisable to the life I had before kids. I wouldn't change it for the world obviously. Now my whole life revolves around my girls – the school run, doing ponytails and plaits and making them porridge with chocolate sauce faces on top to encourage them to eat it. That's just how it is and I love it. To me it's just a role that I was born for, it's the most important role of your life. (Mumazine 2013)

And in terms of her working role, she presents her recent blog for Yahoo as if it were simply an ordinary diary that may be familiar to other contemporary mothers keen to document the trials and tribulations of their motherwork efforts, rather than anything demanding real time, energy, effort or labour. We are told that it is 'a weekly diary of what we are up to whether it be making ice cream sundaes or our plans for Halloween, and it's so much fun because I could talk about parenting all day long' (ibid.). Rather than see Daly as a working mother spending less time with her children, or having to seek support for the daily school run and extra-curricular playground activities, it comes across as something that is done for the family, rather than for a financial incentive.

Daly is successful in making her glamorous career seem everyday and her celebrity marriage appear anything but, and it is her ability to appear ordinary while maintaining an extraordinary lifestyle that endears her to mothers in the audience. The star reminds us that, like most working mothers, her life is a constant struggle between work and family. Daly sighs, 'ah the pressure of being The Perfect Mother – who NEVER forgets a thing! Deep down we all aspire to and (hopefully) manage to pull it off sometimes' (Daly 2013). Elsewhere she informs us that 'I'm lucky to do a job I LOVE but those special moments with my family are the ones I value most', reminding readers that after her interview, she is on her way to a reception class picnic, as one example of those school events that she prioritises and cherishes over her well-paid working commitments (Ison 2013).

The celebrity mother profile that dominates the media environment offers an incredibly narrow, and to some, unrealistic narrative of pregnancy, birth and new motherhood. Since the late 1970s a myriad of recognisable women have spoken at length about their serene pregnancies, exhilarating natural childbirths and joyous maternal experiences, with little acknowledgement of emotional, physical or financial pain. Depression, sleep deprivation and maternal anxieties are seldom seen in these high-profile celebrity interviews; rather, the celebrity confessionals and accompanying interviews routinely and regularly present a serene, selfless and satisfied image of both mother and child (Douglas and Michaels 2005). And although Daly is not entirely debunking this profile, she presents herself, and by association, her readership and audience as 'good enough' mothers. In reminding us

of the importance of motherhood above all else, Daly is not straying too far from acceptable notions of good parenting, but by acknowledging that the maternal role can be a struggle, especially with more than one child, she offers a more candid and approachable take on motherhood, albeit celebrity motherhood:

If there's one thing that puts us all on a level playing field it's becoming a mum for the first time, everything else – work, sleep, sanity – goes out of the window. When I was handed our first daughter, Phoebe, I was terrified. This tiny bundle seemed so small and helpless and it was down to me and Vernon to take care of her every need when between us we couldn't change a nappy. This book is the story of my journey into motherhood. From the shock and excitement of the positive pregnancy test to trying to look 'stylish' when I couldn't even see my feet, the overwhelming emotion of having our beautiful baby and the horror to come of not sleeping properly for over three years. And then deciding to do it all over again! I do hope that by sharing my story you will have a better idea of what to expect, pick up a few tips and gain a little reassurance that even if the journey is rocky at times (as ours was!) we all become brilliant mums ... eventually. (Daly 2010)

Daly is not alone here; there are a growing number of female celebrities who have put pen to paper and shared their well-meaning, but not perfect, maternal experiences with an interested readership. Books such as *From Here to Maternity: One Mother of a Journey* by Mel Giedroyc (2005), *Minus Nine to One: The Diary of an Honest Mum* by Jools Oliver (2006), *My Bump and Me* by Myleene Klass (2009) and *Bumpalicious: How to Relax and Enjoy Your Pregnancy* by Denise Van Outen (2011) are all presented as honest, revealing yet entertaining narratives about pregnancy and new motherhood. In all cases, these books play to a shared experience with the reader, a commonality of experience, foregrounding a camaraderie that can only really exist because the notions of celebrity and the trapping of wealth and luxury are played down, or told with humble humour in these offerings.

According to these titles, difficulties in finding stylish maternity wear is less about the cost of clothing or the accessibility of luxury stores, and makes little mention of the fact that many of the aforementioned women have spent time modelling due to their 'thin ideal' physiques, but rather, about the difficulty of dressing for the later stages of pregnancy due to a changing body shape. Likewise, sleep deprivation and nappy changing are

presented as a social leveller for working mothers, irrespective of the fact that the celebrity can afford specialist nursery and childcare staff. These books, like celebrity reality television, are popular when they make celebrities appear ordinary, with motherhood being presented as the common point for entry for celebrity mothers and maternal audiences alike. These texts all talk about intimate experiences, they share candid photographs of the stars in question and offer what they deem to be helpful hints, tips and advice to new and expecting mothers. What is most revealing here in terms of building a relationship with their reader is their promise not to pass judgement, but rather, to applaud all motherwork efforts, which would of course seem appealing to new mothers who are struggling to maintain a serene, selfless profile. Although the anecdotes differ depending on the star in question, these volumes can be understood as predictable in their narratives, carefully balancing routine symptoms and emotions with a life more glamorous than the average reader, with the overriding agenda that motherhood is more important than any celebrity lifestyle or television role. And the popularity of these titles suggests that they are a welcome addition to those pregnancy and baby manuals that are currently available. The role of the celebrity is key here, and the delicate balance between ordinary mother and extraordinary working role is key to their success. And it is these maternal narratives that go some way to informing their screen appearances, even though their maternal role is not 'seen' on screen, audiences are able to read these women as mothers due to their ancillary maternal materials.

Daly reminds us of the balance when she comments that her children have grown up with her *Strictly Come Dancing* commitments, making it clear that they are involved with her work, not separate from it: 'I was pregnant with both of them on *Strictly* so the show's been there from day one for them ... They watch it every week and come to the studio to see me when they can. Phoebe wanted a *Strictly* dress for her ninth birthday so I had one made. She has a purple organza ball gown that she wears to watch the show' (Della-Ragione 2013). And it is this maternal commitment combined with professional success that remains key to Daly's career longevity. Daly speaks of the glamorous hair, couture clothing and flawless make-up demanded by the show as escapism, as a fun part of the job that

is at odds with her own day-to-day sartorial choices, because ‘ball gowns aren’t great for the school run’ (ibid.). Televisually skilled personalities present a unified image, and each time we see or hear from them, it must accord with the on-screen image. One might suggest therefore that Daly’s *Strictly Come Dancing* performances are at odds with the more natural, maternal role that she speaks about in the wider media marketplace, creating a sense of discord between on-screen personality and the broader celebrity profile; however, the fact that she draws attention to the seeming disparity between these roles, continues to remind us about her maternal priorities and finds a way to bring her family and working life together goes towards cementing her maternal star image for those women who have an interest in the performer outside of her professional presenting role. Indeed, the fact that Daly has been pregnant, twice, throughout the show’s history makes it difficult to overlook her maternal status, irrespective of interest in ancillary materials. And the same seems to be true of Daly’s younger counterpart, Holly Willoughby.

Thirty-something Willoughby is married to her television producer husband Dan Baldwin and has three young children, and her career, like Daly before her, stemmed from modelling, with Willoughby presenting another celebrity dance format, *Dancing on Ice* (2006–14), before presenting *This Morning* (1988–) four mornings a week, alongside a myriad of other presenting projects. Maternal audiences heap praise on the personality, for her natural charm, humility and maternal instincts:

*I like people like Holly Willoughby who can relate to those mothers that she is interviewing.*

*Holly Willoughby ... I like to see working mothers on television, as that’s the reality for most people now.*

*Holly Willoughby would be a great mum friend; she seems nice, approachable and dedicated to her children.*

*Holly Willoughby seems so nice, you can just tell that she is a normal mother when at home with the children.*

*Holly Willoughby from This Morning is beautiful and down to earth; I bet she even does normal PTA things like bake sales and fund-raising.*

*Holly Willoughby always looks stunning on This Morning, she seems like a really nice person and she sounds like she is a really doting wife and mother.*

*Holly Willoughby should be applauded, I know her job looks glamorous and effortless but she must be working really hard to present, write, design and spend quality time with her children, she stands as a role model for young women contemplating motherhood.*

*Holly Willoughby is beautiful and successful but she isn't pretentious, in fact she seems really down to earth when she is on This Morning and blogging about her children, I always find it fascinating to listen to her talk about her family, it makes me think we're not that different after all.*

*I like watching Holly Willoughby on This Morning and try to imagine her hectic morning at home with the kids before going in to hair and make-up ready for work. I convince myself that her life is like mine, although I realise that she has help to achieve her home and work balance.*

*Holly Willoughby ... it is interesting and inspirational to see working mums on television. I am one myself, who is juggling quite a hectic career whilst caring for my little boy, so it is good to see mums who are doing just that on TV. I think sometimes, nowadays it is much more fashionable and socially desirable to be at home with your children, and that women who do both are frowned upon.*

Like Daly, Willoughby is applauded both for her flawless appearances on the small screen, and for speaking candidly about her more pedestrian domestic commitments and fashion choices. In the same way that Daly made light of the juxtaposition between her glamorous work and more comfortable domestic attire, so too, Willoughby tells us that she is not camera ready when off air, reminding us that 'I work a lot so when I don't its down time, I don't put on make-up, I don't blow-dry my hair' (Bale 2011). Moreover, even though she is an established clothes designer with a successful range for the online boutique, Very, she tells us that 'I literally grab anything I can shove on. On a practical front, if I'm taking Harry to the park and putting him on a slide I can't wear something that, when I bend over, I'm going to flash my pants. Most things have leggings underneath nowadays' (ibid.). Again, like Daly, Willoughby has spoken about the ways in which she negotiates her maternal and professional roles by taking her children to her place of work, an option unavailable to most women outside of the

entertainment area. Indeed, some might say an option unavailable to many women within it. Veteran newsreader Jon Snow recently announced that:

... many female colleagues had sacrificed careers when they had children while others lost out on children because of their jobs ... Television has an undue quantity of women who don't have children ... They are less likely to advance someone with children ... It's beyond imagination to think that an employer would say, 'You're going to have a third child? My dear, it doesn't matter at all! Men don't have to face that – ever. (Prynne 2014)

However, after announcing her third pregnancy, Willoughby made it clear that she has neither seen nor faced such sexism in the industry. She has rejected claims that sexism in television made it impossible to be a mother or to hold down a presenting job and gives an example of former Spice Girl, Emma Bunton as another mother who is successfully balancing the two (Foster 2014). Indeed, she speaks approvingly of her profession for its flexibility and family-friendly practices. Willoughby was heard speaking as part of a panel including Rebecca Hopkins founder of beauty brand Balance Me, Bec Clarke of jewellery brand Astley Clarke and *Marie Claire* editor-in-chief, Trish Halpin on the importance of work–life balance, telling her audience that she has got the work–life balance 'nailed' (Kendrick 2012). Willoughby tells us that her success here is down to a heroic amount of planning and organisation.

Willoughby speaks at length about her ability to combine maternal and presenting work, referring to her commitments as part time and to her volume of work as comparable to that of the teaching profession (Bradford 2012). She tells us that she works Monday to Thursday with Fridays, the weekend and summer as family time, describing her typical working day on *This Morning* ending at 1pm, with a variety of different work projects filling her afternoons. Willoughby states that 'I also get a massive chunk of time off in the summer and I ring fence that and protect it with my life. Any job offers during that time are a complete no' (ibid.). The presenter is adamant that she finishes at 5pm 'so that I'm home for dinner and bath with the kids in the evenings' (Styles 2013). Willoughby states that 'I consider my work to be part-time. Most weeks I do four mornings, and whenever things start heading into the territory of being full-time I start reining it in'

with family taking priority over the entertainment arena (Kendrick 2012). However, one might pick up a hint of defensiveness when she tells us that she only works during term time, and says that her schedule always *looks* far busier than it actually is (Bradford 2012, italics in original) in response to questions about her professional commitments, perhaps aware of the importance of maintaining the mask of ‘good’ motherhood which demands prioritising the maternal role.

Willoughby offers an interesting example of contemporary working motherhood that can be seen to, at least ostensibly, negotiate notions of intensive mothering. After all, she appears entirely comfortable with her work–life balance, something that many mothers appear anxious about. She is clearly aware of the pressures and judgements aimed at working mothers, but she suggests that she has found personal and professional harmony. She is clear that what she sees as a balance may not be suitable for others, but rather, that it works for her and her family:

There are a lot of working mums on TV now. You’ve just got to work out a balance ... Everybody’s balance levels are very different. I’ve got mine figured, but that doesn’t mean it works for anybody else. I can’t judge anyone else on how they run their life and I wouldn’t want anyone to judge the way I live mine. (Foster 2014)

Willoughby tells us that she ‘loved returning to work’ after each of her children, without apology for her desire to combine motherwork with her professional role. However, it might be worth revisiting the notion of celebrity motherwork here. After all, Willoughby has ‘fessed up to a magazine that her ability to master the perfect work/life balance is down to her “brilliant” nanny’ (Bradford 2012). ‘Fessed up’ indeed. While television audiences are not naïve as to the importance of childcare and other domestic professionals to performers such as Willoughby, indeed, the fact that Willoughby refers to 5pm as the end of her working day, when the school gates close at 3.20 makes it clear that she has help with her childcare routines. The reason why Willoughby is seen to have ‘fessed up’ is because many families in the entertainment arena play down their reliance on childcare providers beyond the family unit. It is rare for these women to talk openly about the role and responsibilities of such assistants, therefore

when Willoughby tells us that ‘I do have a nanny, who’s here when I’m at work. She’s brilliant. I couldn’t do anything without her’ (ibid.) we may feel envy that she can afford such provision but perhaps also grateful that she acknowledges the need for and value in such childcare. As respondents were happy to point out:

*Juggling work and motherhood is not easy, but it is a little easier if you have family to help or the finances to pay for good childcare. Knowing your children are safe and happy makes it much easier for a mother to go back to work and enjoy her job without worrying about the children.*

*I find working mothers have always got to have a certain level of admiration as it is hard juggling motherhood and work together, however a celebrity mum, in my opinion has it a little easier than most, as they have a much more flexible approach to work or simply pay a nanny, something most mothers could not afford to do.*

*Celebrities who can afford the best childcare make combining motherhood and work look easy because they are not worrying about the school run, sick days or what to make for dinner that evening. I know they say that money can’t buy you happiness, but I am pretty sure it can make life easier for working mothers.*

Willoughby’s popularity is evidenced by the fact that she received no public outcry or furore when she returned to work on *The Xtra Factor* (2004–) just five weeks after giving birth to her son, Harry, when other women within and beyond the entertainment arena have received hostile criticism for taking such short periods of maternity leave. Indeed, perhaps this is why Willoughby went out of her way to remind audiences that not only was she able to take her new baby to work with her and continue breastfeeding, but that she also had her own mother with her during these periods of work, so that she wasn’t seen to stray too far from the ideology of the ‘good’ mother. A recent entry on Parentdish Celebrity entitled ‘Celebrity Mums and their Micro Maternity Leaves’ points out the relatively short periods of leave taken by several women in the entertainment sector, stating that although most new mothers ‘enjoy every moment of our maternity leave with our new baby and away from work it’s not quite the same for celebrity mums’ such as Karren Brady (three days), Myleene Klass (ten days), Denise Van Outen, Amanda Holden, Vera Farmiga and Kim Raver

(two weeks), Nicole Kidman (three weeks), Una Healey (four weeks) and Gisele Bündchen (six weeks), with Victoria Beckham jokingly asking what maternity leave actually was (Stansfield 2014).

Although Willoughby appears entirely comfortable with her domestic and professional work practices, one might question her prompt return to work, especially after her first child, before she had established herself as a household name with *This Morning*. After all, one might suggest that the harsh reality of motherhood in the fickle entertainment industry is to blame for the micro-maternity periods outlined here. Willoughby makes the point that ‘you can’t just take three years off, because people move on quickly and you’re forgotten about ... I’m freelance, so I’ve got to keep my finger in the pie’ before quickly adding ‘But I only do what feels right’ (Kendrick 2012) so as not to betray the mask of appropriate motherhood. Therefore, although Willoughby’s short period of maternity might appear surprising, or problematic to mothers outside of the entertainment sector, there is a sense that it is relatively routine within her field of work. After all, performers such as Klass take only days, and occasionally weeks off after childbirth because they do not want to be overlooked or ignored by the viewing public. We are told that there are many who criticise Klass for being overexposed or for not taking what is deemed appropriate periods of maternity leave. After all, the mother of two is a television presenter and a classical musician; she has a radio show and a children’s line for Mothercare; she is a model for the high street shop Marks & Spencer and the catalogue store Littlewoods and hosts a film show on CNN. However, although she is aware of the negative commentary she:

has no intention of stopping. Having won and lost fame twice before – she broke records as a member of reality TV pop group Hear’Say before they split, and then signed a five-album deal with Universal Classics and Jazz, only to be dropped after one record – she’s not prepared to take time off. (Lampert 2011)

In her own words, Klass is ‘petrified’ showbusiness will leave her behind (Stansfield 2014). And although Klass goes to great lengths to remind us of her appropriate maternal role, making it clear that she takes her daughters to work, one might question her exclusion from the ‘favourite’ mothers list

and commentaries precisely because she is seen too frequently in the media environment, drawing attention to time spent away from her children, which in turn leaves women in the audience questioning her priorities.

Both Daly and Willoughby are beautiful models turned popular presenters who have combined motherhood with high-profile television presenting work; both have presented during pregnancy, taken brief periods of maternity leave and returned to their professional roles. They each speak of the importance of balancing motherhood with professional careers, suggesting that the entertainment arena offers flexible and family-friendly working practices, and point to the fact that they are in a position to employ child-care provision beyond the routine nursery and school hours. Willoughby hints at the reality of the fickle entertainment marketplace, and one is therefore left wondering if her return to work and presence on screen is less about finding a harmonious work and life balance, and more about understanding that if she took an extended period of maternity, she would not be in a position to return to her televisual role, especially given Snow's recent comments and work by Dent on the number of women who leave the creative industries each year (Dent 2013).

### *Applauding the 'mumsy' principle*

While the beauty, approachability and admirable work–life balance endeared Daly and Willoughby to contemporary mothers, a more mature image of motherhood appealed to a broad demographic of women in the audience, both mothers and grandmothers alike mentioned their fondness of the vocationally skilled personality, Mary Berry. Berry is an English food writer who has studied catering, published more than 70 cookery books and hosted several food shows. Although Berry's name has been synonymous with traditional cooking for decades, her recent claim to celebrity is through her role as a judge on the popular and long-running *The Great British Bake Off* (2010–). Berry and her antique bookseller husband, Paul Hunnings had three children, and later, three grandchildren. Berry has suffered from polio, has been diagnosed with a bicornuate uterus, has experienced repeated miscarriages, and years later, the death of her teenage

son. And although television audiences may not know the intimate details of such diagnosis and tragedies, Berry has spoken openly on screen and in her writing of such events. Therefore, when one sees Berry on screen, she stands as both a fragile-looking domestic judge and an incredibly resilient maternal figure depending on how much attention one gives to ancillary materials outside of the television frame:

*I like Mary Berry for her domestic goddess prowess.*

*Mary Berry is stylish, kind and witty, it is difficult not to warm to her when she shows such compassion for the people baking around her.*

*Mary Berry is a stylish and elegant mother and grandmother, I don't like to think of her as a celebrity cook because she just seems to be herself.*

*I like Mary Berry who I know is a mother but not specifically for this reason, because she is a good cook ... I've personally met her and she was lovely!*

*Mary Berry is a British institution, she should be treasured. She is kind and supportive to those around her, and I think this is her genuine nature.*

*She is proud to be a domestic cook, and that endears her to women at home. She makes food that we all love and that we might (on a good day) try and copy, nothing too fancy or elaborate.*

*Mary Berry is a great role model for older women everywhere, she is not afraid to age gracefully in the public eye which is refreshing when you look at most other women resorting to surgery and enhancement.*

*Mary Berry is a lady with manners and compassion, unlike many other reality television judges who seem to thrive on humiliating their contestants. She seems to really want people to bake well, rather than relishing their disasters.*

It is worth noting that Berry took only five weeks off from work after giving birth on each occasion, and although this seems consistent with the aforementioned film stars, television personalities and models, it was incredibly rare during the 1960s and 1970s. After all, it was assumed that Berry, like all married women who became mothers during the pre-feminist era, would leave the workplace in favour of full-time motherhood. Despite the gradual

decline of the 'marriage bar' between the 1940s and late 1960s, married women in the UK were still facing discrimination in the workplace. Indeed many women were routinely sacked for becoming pregnant up until the late 1970s during the height of the second-wave feminist movement. Victoria Beckham may well jokingly ask 'what is maternity leave' as she continues to take on designing duties, but mothers have only recently been granted extended periods of paid leave (Jarvis 2010). It may surprise contemporary mothers to know the recent history of maternity policies, namely that:

The UK introduced its first maternity leave legislation through the Employment Protection Act 1975, which was extended through further legislation, such as The Employment Act 1980. However, for the first 15 years, only about half of working women were eligible for it because of long qualifying periods of employment. In 1993, coverage was extended to all working women, in order to bring Britain into compliance with a European Commission Directive on this issue. (*Striking Women* 2014)

When Berry talks about periods away from work she acknowledges that her desire to return to her professional roles after childbirth was uncommon and that her time spent away from her catering duties was not part of any formal or financed maternity leave. Berry goes on to commend her husband for his participation 'with things like the school run' (Foster 2011), which was rare for men of the time to embrace or even engage in, and to some extent continues to be so today (McVeigh 2012).

Some might suggest that Berry's desire to work and the acknowledgment of her husband's role in the domestic context appears in keeping with gender role equality, said to be rare even in contemporary family unions. And although Berry is adamant that she is not a feminist and goes as far as to suggest that 'feminism is a dirty word' because she doesn't 'want women's rights and all that sort of thing' she continues to speak of the importance of both her private and professional role, a stance in keeping with the early feminist agenda (Glennie 2013). Indeed, Holly Willoughby has herself referred to Berry as 'her inspiration for sticking with the day job after becoming a parent' (Styles 2013).

Berry speaks of her need to return to her professional position mere weeks after giving birth for fear of being replaced, making the point that 'if you didn't come back to your job soon, someone else would jump into

your shoes. By then, I was cooking editor of a magazine and there was lots of competition' (Foster 2011). And later, 'I was too afraid to ask for more time off ... I would have liked to have stayed with the children, but I didn't have enough confidence to say, Okay, I'll take two years off' (Thomas 2012). Her words echo those of Willoughby and Klass nearly four decades later. Although all three women speak of their love of their professional life and their desire to combine motherwork with their public role, there is the suggestion that these women are easily replaced rather than respected as professionals. These women have all felt the need to explain or justify their maternal and professional choices to the woman in the audience, taking the time to point to their flexible and child-friendly workplaces and the role of fathers and grandparents and their early guilt at balancing both roles in order to alleviate any threats to the performance of appropriate motherhood. Indeed, decades later, in an interview for *Hello! Magazine*, Berry tells us that her decision to be a working mother in the late 1960s and early 1970s is one that still fills her with guilt:

I really didn't think I was the most brilliant mother ... I was very keen on giving the children the right food, but I didn't play as long as I could have ... My husband always did the reading every night with the children because I was always trying to do two things at once. I didn't do enough homework with them. (Thomas 2012)

Berry is a seventy-something baking phenomenon, and there is the suggestion that her popularity, like other long-standing and successful television personalities is down to the seamlessness of her public and private persona. In short, the quietly spoken, encouraging, supportive and maternal Berry of *The Great British Bake Off* fame is the authentic, 'real' persona off screen. And although Berry has balanced her maternal and professional commitments for several decades, there is a sense that she exists in a world without feminism. She incited feminist outrage when she spoke about her daughter's love of cooking, telling a magazine that the young woman in question was 'lucky' because as a wife and mother she was going to be doing it her whole life so she, and other young wives and mothers 'might as well enjoy it' (Glennie 2012). The suggestion here is either that young wives and mothers will not return to the workplace or that they will combine professional

employment with the ‘double shift’ of domestic duties. Either way, the role of maternity leave is crucial as it gives women time to consider their personal and professional options while spending time with their newborns.

Women in the UK are now entitled to more paid maternity leave than previous generations, with the promise of their old job available on their return, and yet although one might assume that this situation would please Berry on the back of her own experiences of unpaid maternity leave and precarious employment prospects on returning to the workplace after a short time away, this is not the case. Berry has spoken openly, albeit quietly, about the problems of contemporary maternity policies and practices, condemning rather than championing those women who take the full leave period to stay home with their children. She states that:

I had about five weeks off and now I think, gosh, they haven't half cottoned on to it! ... You have a year off, and you don't have to tell [your employer] whether you're coming back or not. It makes it terribly difficult for the small employer to employ young women, young married women or [women] with children. You've got three in the department and they all go to have children and you've got to leave the job open. (Hall 2013)

Mother and *Vogue* editor, Alexandra Shulman goes as far as to suggest that maternal rights are making women unemployable:

... while a slew of government policies are aimed at helping working women achieve a more satisfactory existence, are they not losing sight of the real workplace picture? And are they ignoring the evidence, not documented but heard in the beat of the tom-toms if you listen hard enough, that some of this legislation might even be harming women's chances of employment? Nowadays, the majority of pregnant women I know take close to a year off, during which they are entitled to statutory maternity pay for up to 39 weeks. They return with the expectation and right to have their old job back after 52 weeks. Except that, when they do return, many of them don't want exactly their old job back. They want the same role but moulded into a time frame that suits family life better. They want to investigate four-day weeks, flexitime, job shares, and they often then have another baby and are entitled to take another year off. But is this realistic? (Shulman 2009)

Likewise, successful fashion entrepreneur Anya Hindmarch makes the point that:

If we are not careful (and I speak as a mother and an employer), maternity leave and benefits will become too biased towards the mother and not considerate enough for the employer. In which case, it can start to work against women as it becomes too complicated and expensive to employ them. To me, it shouts of shooting ourselves in the foot. (Hindmarch, cited in Shulman 2009)

Another, this time anonymous, female employer agrees:

You're not allowed to say it, but the reality is that the maternity situation is a nightmare. Of course what happens is that the younger ones in the office step up to fill the gap and they're cheaper. At the end of a year, how much do I really need that person back? (Anon., cited in Shulman 2009)

Shulman suggests that maternity practices are 'increasingly encouraging small businesses, individuals, or employers in small rural communities who simply can't work around an employee's year off and who don't have a pool of freelance cover, to look instead for women who won't have more children – or indeed men' making it clear that while employers certainly should have a duty of care for their employees, employees should in turn have a certain duty of responsibility to their employer, and that working nine months out of three years then demanding flexi-time when resources are already stretched during a recession is anything but respectful or responsible (Shulman 2009). The fashion editor, like Berry, is not against maternity benefits for mothers in the workplace; indeed, they both work in a feminine, majority female sector, concerned that the next generation of female workers might be seen as 'too inconvenient and awkward to employ' the fear here then is that women might well find themselves 'legislated back into the home' (ibid.).

However, while Berry and Shulman worry that generous maternity packages and family-friendly contracts will become an obstacle for future mothers, Rosalind Bragg, director of the national charity Maternity Action has challenged such ideas and spoken of her 'disappointment' at hearing Berry's recent comments. Maternity Action would like to see 'greater support for women balancing work and caring responsibilities, not ill-informed complaints about women who exercise maternity rights' (Hall 2013):

Maternity rights are fundamental to women's ability to maintain employment during their child-bearing years. If we backtrack on maternity rights, we will force women out of the workforce, losing valuable skills from the market, and leaving more families in poverty and reliant on benefit. (Bragg, cited in Hall 2013)

The 'Everyday Sexism Project' is peppered with stories of mothers who have been unable to return to work after their period of maternity leave has come to an end (Bates 2014), perhaps unsurprisingly as recent research has found that 14 per cent:

... of the 340,000 women who take maternity leave are unable to return to the job that they had left because of discrimination by employers, with many finding their positions under threat when they try to return to them. They are denied the right to work part-time, or flexible hours, to enable them to factor in childcare pickups and drop-offs. Others are shoehorned into more junior posts, or return to virtually no job description at all, while others still are effectively constructively dismissed. Pay rises and promotions are also harder to come by for those that do go back. (Joseph 2013)

These figures do not tell us 'how many mothers had the option to go back to work, but faced with the choice of not seeing their children much, or lack of childcare provision, or rigid working hours, decided that they couldn't or wouldn't return' and yet, they remain a cause for concern (ibid.). With such statistics in mind, many new and existing mothers have lambasted what they see as Berry's 'antediluvian views' on maternity leave (White 2013), but in so doing, they appear to have ignited the 'mommy wars' by critiquing those women who do not take extended periods of maternity. Writing in response to Berry's claims, several mothers have suggested that 'leaving small babies as early as five weeks is tantamount to neglect. At that point the little ones are feeding every four hours and need round the clock, drop-of-a-hat care from mum' (ibid.). While Berry and Shulman suggest that new mothers are exploiting generous maternity packages and showing little respect for loyal employers, there is evidence not of a glass ceiling at the upper echelons of a profession, but a 'cliff' at the middle which women are said to fall off when they have children (Rowley 2013). As such, it is crucial that maternal charities, politicians and policy makers continue to discuss maternity leave in the hope of giving new mothers genuine choices

about their personal and professional roles, and without judging or ranking those choices in line with romanticised notions of maternal care.

Berry has made her comments about feminism and maternity leave clear in the Sunday broadsheets and it sparked commentary in the women's magazine sector and maternal networking sites, and yet none of the respondents to my questionnaire made reference to her views; rather, they spoke approvingly of her televisual performances, with the suggestion that she was a kind and gentle judge with a nurturing and compassionate personality that existed within and beyond the screen space. Maternal audiences did not comment on Berry's opinions concerning feminism and maternity leave; her views were seemingly unknown or of little importance to audiences interested in the vocationally talented presenter in question.

While Daly and Willoughby remind us of their maternal status in terms of their on screen pregnancies, references to their maternal role and images of their children in the wider entertainment arena, Berry's status as an older mother and grandmother is notable in its absence. The Berry persona seems generally warm, welcoming and maternal, almost irrespective of her actual mothering status. Indeed, one might suggest that she stands as a generic maternal figure in her role as food critic. Most respondents speak about Berry in her televisual role or through her multitude of cookbooks, rather than via any attributed celebrity status that demands revealing intimacies and sharing candid domestic images. In short, the extra textual interviews and confidences appear to be of less interest to Berry audiences than those invested in the maternal presence of Daly and Willoughby. After all, as a vocationally rather than televisually skilled performer, Berry's credibility with audiences is based on her culinary skills and expertise, which are evident in her screen appearances.

Berry is appreciated and applauded as a working mother with expertise in the culinary tradition; so too, mother-of-two, Kirstie Allsopp was spoken about in a similar way, as a warm, nurturing maternal figure, but this time, with a skillset in the property sector. Before appearing on our screens with Phil Spencer in *Location Location Location* (2000–), she worked for her mother's business, Hindlip & Prentice Interiors, studied at Christie's and set up her own Home Search company, Kirmir, focusing

on top end purchases in Central and West London. Either because of or in spite of Allsopp's professional career, mothers in the audience spoke with admiration and interest in the television presenter:

*... very family focused – lovely lifestyle.*

*There is something very likeable about Kirstie Allsopp.*

*Kirstie Allsopp ... I appreciate her honesty regarding childcare arrangements when working.*

*I really like Kirstie Allsopp as a working, crafty mum ... I prefer a more simplistic, crafty lifestyle that she represents.*

*Kirstie Allsopp seems warm and funny, she comes across as a stay at home mother by heart, even though she is obviously doing presenting.*

*Kirstie Allsopp. My admiration has come more from what I have read about her rather than from watching her. The life choices that she has made, and her family values.*

*Kirstie Allsopp does seem to know a lot about the property market, she is not just another pretty face on television, she seems genuine, you want to think that she really is that person.*

*Kirstie Allsopp is a positive role model of motherhood and womanhood, she seems kind, considerate, affectionate and fun. She stands out against the more predictable thin, blonde, attractive presenters on television.*

*I might not make the things that Allsopp makes, but there is something welcoming about her presence on screen. She comes across as 'mumsy' in a good way, someone that you would like to spend time with at the school gates.*

*I find it relaxing to watch Allsopp in her 'at home' programmes, you get the sense that she is quite traditional, which is rather endearing. You can imagine her making packed lunches and organising football kits before the school run.*

*I know Allsopp has 2 sons and stepchildren, and from the way she appears on television, I imagine her to be a doting wife and mother. She looks and sounds very conservative, not boring, just traditional, a mother who puts her children first, and I think this is why I watch her with fondness.*

*I have always liked Allsopp on the Location shows, and because of that I have taken to watching her Handmade programmes. I imagine her home to look like something Cath Kidston and Gisela Graham would put together, warm, welcoming and feminine. I think she has 2 boys so it might be wasted on them, but I always picture her wearing Laura Ashley against a floral backdrop, but then that might say more about me than Allsopp!*

Respondents seem to be in agreement when they stated their opinions of and attitudes towards Allsopp. The presenter is deemed, in different commentaries traditional, conservative, stay at home and ‘mumsy’, with a penchant for those most middle class and romantically feminine of shops, namely Cath Kidston and Laura Ashley. What is interesting here is that the mothers who completed the questionnaire said nothing of Allsopp’s recent media interviews on the topic of fertility education, which have caused controversy in the wider blogosphere and social networking sites. In an interview with *The Telegraph* she tells Bryony Gordon that:

Women are being let down by the system. We should speak honestly and frankly about fertility and the fact it falls off a cliff when you’re 35. We should talk openly about university and whether going when you’re young, when we live so much longer, is really the way forward ... At the moment, women have 15 years to go to university, get their career on track, try and buy a home and have a baby. That is a hell of a lot to ask someone. As a passionate feminist, I feel we have not been honest enough with women about this issue ... I don’t say it from a position of smugness. I only whistled in there by a miracle when it came to children. This isn’t something I’ve just decided in an arbitrary way. [Fertility] is the one thing we can’t change. Some of the greatest pain that I have seen among friends is the struggle to have a child. It wasn’t all people who couldn’t start early enough because they hadn’t met the right person ... But there is a huge inequality, which is that women have this time pressure that men don’t have. And I think if you’re a man of 25 and you’re with a woman of 25, and you really love her, then you have a responsibility to say ... men need to know, men need to be taught in school that there is a responsibility, that if you love someone, decide if you want to have a child with that person or not. I don’t have a girl, but if I did I’d be saying ‘Darling, do you know what? Don’t go to university. Start work straight after school, stay at home, save up your deposit – I’ll help you, let’s get you into a flat. And then we can find you a nice boyfriend and you can have a baby by the time you’re 27 ... that might sound wholly unrealistic. But we have all this time at the end. You can do your career afterwards. We have to readjust. And men can have fun after they have kids. If everyone started having children when they were 20, they’d be free as a bird by the time they were 45. But how many 45-year-olds do you know

who are bogged down ... I don't want the next generation of women to go through the heartache that my generation has. At the moment we are changing the natural order of things, with grandparents being much older and everyone squeezed in the middle. Don't think 'my youth should be longer'. Don't go to university because it's an 'experience'. No, it's where you're supposed to learn something! Do it when you're 50! (Gordon 2014)

There are three different yet related issues being presented here: firstly, in relation to notions of age-related infertility; secondly, in terms of educating young women about the condition; and thirdly, about the role of higher education. Infertility is a common experience among women within and beyond the UK, and this experience 'is not usually discussed publicly' (Striff 2005). And yet, although a woman's infertility story is generally only witnessed by the medical profession, there has been a recent trend in the women's, tabloid and gossip sector whereby celebrities share their infertility stories with a willing public. The problem here, however, is that celebrities tend only to announce their infertility struggles once they are holding their healthy newborn, which in itself sends out a rather misleading finale to the infertility narrative (Feasey 2014a).

And although an exhaustive number of contributions to newspaper blogs and postings congratulate these women for speaking publicly about their infertility (Yuppy Mom 2010; BustedKate 2013; Wertman 2013; Gorenstein 2014), what these maternal narratives overlook is the cost of IVF, the role of egg donation and the limited success rates of such treatment. The success of IVF depends on the age of the woman undergoing treatment, with 32.2 per cent success rate for women under 35, a 27.7 per cent success rate for women aged 35–37, a 20.8 per cent success rate for women aged 38–39, a 13.6 per cent success rate for women ages 40–42, a 5 per cent success rate for women aged 43–44 and a 1.9 per cent success rate for women over 44 (NHS 2014b), and yet these statistics have no place in the successful celebrity infertility narrative. The average age of a first time mother in the UK is growing (ONS 2013b); more women than ever before are having children in their late 30s and early 40s and beyond (ONS 2013b); assisted reproductive technologies are advancing; the number of women taking advantage of such techniques is increasing and more celebrities than ever before are presenting their infertility stories in

the women's tabloid and gossip sector. Although one might suggest that the celebrity infertility confessional can offer hope through identification with the celebrity revelation, by defying the privacy of infertility treatment, the partial account on offer here could perhaps lead to reproductive complacency, false hope or go further to reinforce the sense of stigma and failure that many infertile women are said to experience (Woollett 1994), none of which can be understood as helpful to individuals or beneficial to society. I agree with Allsopp that age-related infertility is rarely commented on in a way that is meaningful to the next generation. Indeed, a 'survey of educated young professional women found that 90% thought that they could wait until age 45 to start having their own biological children, even though next to none over 44 are able to, despite advanced technology' (Bonifazi 2003). If female readers are looking to the celebrity sector as a source of good, responsible and aspirational motherhood, and these stories about more mature mothers overlook problems with conception and fertility and ignore the use of assisted reproduction then no wonder readers are confused and ill-informed about the reality of the experience.

However, it is harder to agree with Allsopp's statement that, if she had a daughter she would be telling her not to attend University. Indeed, many commentators, both conservative and liberal were heard challenging Allsopp for her suggestion that University is neither important nor necessary to young women, making it clear that the daughter of Charles Henry Allsopp, 6th Baron Hindlip, may well not need the formal qualification, but that a university degree is the pathway to social mobility and financial security for many women, irrespective of decisions over marriage and motherhood. Allsopp was critiqued for what many saw as a disservice to feminism and mothers alike with her views by giving maternal advice to a hypothetical daughter rather than parenting advice to her own sons here (Freeman 2014; Gyngell 2014; Mumsnet 2014c).

While respondents made no comment concerning Berry's statements on maternity leave, likewise, the women who completed my questionnaires said nothing of Allsopp's views on infertility or education, even though such comments have been debated at length in the popular press, on popular social networking sites and maternal forums. Again, these respondents were either unaware of the debates, uninterested in such commentary or simply

see such views as in-keeping with the Allsopp persona that they speak of liking and warming to, which go further to confirm her status as a skilled television personality. On screen, Allsopp is routinely talking to families about their property needs and asking pertinent (or inappropriate) questions about their current or future children in order to secure them the most suitable home. So too, in her *Homemade Home* (2009–11), *Handmade Britain* (2011) and *Handmade Treasures* (2013) programmes she speaks of making artefacts for the home, drawing attention to the needs of children's bedrooms and playrooms and suggesting how children can in fact help on some of what she calls the easier 'Child's Play' projects (Allsopp 2015).

Respondents referred to Allsopp's traditional and feminine status in terms of her dress code, creativity and maternal status, but no one made reference to her father's peerage, her relation to designer Cath Kidston or her long-term partnership with millionaire property developer Ben Andersen. In short, her privileged status was of no importance to the mothers in the audience, she was neither liked nor disliked due to her socio-economic background, but rather, applauded for her warmth and humour, said to be evidenced throughout her televisual career. In terms of her on-screen performances, Allsopp gives away little of herself or her domestic, family or maternal behaviours; rather she presents herself as a welcoming friend, which is often read by many in the audience as 'mumsy'.

## When the professional is not personal

While the majority of respondents favoured presenters such as Daly and Willoughby and vocationally skilled performers such as Berry and Allsopp, a small number of women spoke of an admiration for women such as Mariella Frostrup, Kirsty Young, Fiona Bruce, Kirsty Wark and Julia Bradbury. These women were chosen despite their maternal status not because of it. Indeed, one might suggest that news bulletins, documentaries, consumer affairs and arts programmes such as *Antiques Roadshow* (1979–),

*Watchdog* (1980–), *Newsnight* (1980–) *Crime Watch* (1984–), *Countryfile* (1988–) and *The Book Show* (2007–13) are not reliant on the personability of the presenter or the performing presence of the reporter in the same manner as escapist fare or more deliberately domestic offerings. The women who present these programmes are professional, capable, admirable women, leaving little place for a maternal presence or an acknowledgement of any domestic or family context.

For those women who spoke fondly of figures such as Bruce and Wark, they made the point that they didn't look to them as mothers, irrespective of their off-screen maternal role, because, in doing so it would somehow lessen their credibility or mark them out as one-dimensional. One respondent went as far as to tell us that she was '*not particularly drawn to mothers on television*' while another states that she '*doesn't really see these women in relation to their role as mother*'. Indeed, we are told that '*real mothers actually give away very little of their private lives ... as if this may diminish them as performers*'. And although for popular entertainment presenters such as Tess Daly and Holly Willoughby, their maternal status plays a key role in their public visibility and audience investment, for more arts, culture and news presenters, the notion of motherhood is viewed as a distraction, rather than an accompaniment to the professional role:

*I like many of the presenters on the news channel ... we never really get to know what they are really like.*

*I'm interested in women who are also mothers, rather than stock mother figures.*

*I regard Fiona Bruce as a person of integrity who appears to have a successful career.*

*I tend to see female characters as just that rather than mums, it is just an aside that they have children and can't really say that I think about them any differently than male characters that may be dads.*

*Kirsty Wark, but I don't think of her as a mother – just an amazing woman who has had children – and I admire that about her (no one ever thinks about Jeremy Paxman as a dad) and also that she has forged a career as an individual.*

When women in the audience spoke of newsreaders, arts and cultural commentators, they often made a point of saying that they did not actually know if these women were married or mothers, which goes further to remind us of the difference between these figures and the appeal of the aforementioned television personality. We are told that 'I like Joan Bakewell, Angela Rippon, Sally Maggneson, Jenny Murray and Susanna Reaid. I don't know if they have children' and although this information does not inform their television persona, it may be worth noting that Joan Bakewell and Jenny Murray have two children, Susanna Reaid has three, Sally Maggneson has five children, while Angela Rippon is not a mother. The general point here then is simply that these women are liked as credible, intelligent and charismatic women on television, not as mothers on the box, and Angela Rippon's status as a newsreader and non-mother is testament to that fact.

Although female presenters and newsreaders are deemed popular with contemporary mothers in the audience, these figures were historically frowned upon (Holland 1987; Holland 1998). Female newsreaders were barely tolerated while pregnant performers were routinely shunned. Although Janet Ellis has commented that she left her much coveted *Blue Peter* (1958–) presenting role voluntarily in the late 1980s after she became pregnant, as an unmarried mother, BBC management at the time felt that it would set a bad example to the children who watched the show and the presenter has since been 'written out of Blue Peter history' (Dowell 2013). If one thinks that this is understandable given the age group of the audience, it might come as a surprise to find that during the same period, *Good Morning Britain* (1983–92) anchor, Anne Diamond was lambasted for continuing to work throughout pregnancy. Reports of the pregnancy were front-page news, and although Diamond was initially 'inundated with flowers, cards and hand-knitted booties from every corner of Britain' public and professional opinion changed as she continued in her role (Diamond 2010a). Her pregnancy was even the subject of a leader article in the *Guardian*, along the lines of 'what is the world coming to when a pregnant woman expects to continue with her high-profile job as though nothing has changed?' (Diamond 2010a). Diamond was surprised to find that she had been the first television presenter in Britain to be pregnant and to continue working, and talks about her experiences of that time:

Obviously pregnant women had appeared from time to time on TV, in the occasional drama or on a baby programme. But never in a daily job, live and in front of millions ... what truly shocked me was the attitude, which continued through my four later pregnancies, to the pregnancy itself. In the words of one young producer, shocked that I was continuing my job to the very end, it was 'a bit icky'. A wardrobe mistress, a genius at choosing my daily outfits, became flustered at my growing girth. She simply couldn't handle my changing shape. She backed off, as though I had become something slightly distasteful. In response to viewer demand, I – just once – showed off my ultrasound pictures. I was hurt then, that when I went on Gloria Hunniford's afternoon show as a guest, she put it to me that I 'was flaunting my pregnancy'. She even asked me why I didn't take the next few months off screen, and not return until the baby was born – 'like actresses do'. I don't think for a second she meant to be unkind, but her attitude floored me. Actresses retire from the spotlight when they are pregnant because it doesn't suit their profession, unless they're playing a pregnant woman. I was appearing on TV to do a job, presenting and interviewing, which was entirely unaffected by the size of my stomach. As for myself, I feel proud that I paved the way for generations of female TV presenters to go on doing their jobs as real human beings, not bimbos. Every time I saw the likes of Lorraine Kelly or Kate Garraway on breakfast TV, happily patting their baby bumps to the chuckles of a delighted studio, I felt I'd done my bit for pregnancy liberation. (Diamond 2010a)

## When the professional is entirely personal

Mothers in the audience announced that '*it's good just to see pregnant women on the television*' and again that '*it's good to see Sarah Beeny and Kirstie Allsopp presenting programmes whilst heavily pregnant*'. However, the proud moment must be reasonably short lived as a number of models, film and television actresses, judges and presenters have come in for criticism for 'flaunting' (Cox 2014) their pregnancies and in several cases, dismissed during pregnancy, with Denise Van Outen as a very public case in point. Van Outen was told that she would not be returning to Andrew Lloyd Webber's latest BBC TV series because she was expecting. A senior member of production is said to have told her that 'you're pregnant, so of course there's no way you can do the show', which was then repeated to

her by other producers (Plunkett 2010). Van Outen went on to say that being pregnant at work is part of a wider problem for women, saying that 'it should be up to the woman to decide if they feel well enough to carry on working' (Nathan and McConnell 2010). A wider problem indeed. Outside of the entertainment arena, women are suffering escalating levels of illegal discrimination at work when they get pregnant, and are often made redundant while they are on maternity leave:

... one in seven of the women surveyed had lost their job while on maternity leave; 40% said their jobs had changed by the time they returned, with half reporting a cut in hours or demotion. More than a tenth had been replaced in their jobs by the person who had covered their maternity leave. (McVeigh 2013)

There is clear discrimination in the workplace for celebrity and ordinary mothers alike, and although 'only a very small percentage of women take any action against an employer who has broken the law' one might hope that the public furore caused by more visible pregnancy discrimination will help encourage others to seek legal advice (*ibid.*). Anne Diamond famously used her media profile to raise awareness of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) after the death of her son back in 1991. She fronted the 'Back to Sleep' campaign, telling parents to ensure that babies slept on their backs. Since then, there has been a significant fall in incidents of SIDS in the United Kingdom, from more than 2,000 per year to around 300, which has been attributed to the campaign. Diamond was awarded the Gold Medal from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the only time it has ever been awarded to a non-medic (Diamond 2010b) for her efforts. With such media interest and public change in mind, one might hope that if recognisable women speak out over maternity discrimination, they might change individual circumstances and wider social practices.

Mothers on television, can be seen to embrace or underplay their off-screen motherwork depending on their professional roles, responsibilities and wider media contracts, with Cherry Healey standing out here as a young woman who actively exploits her maternal status for her work. Healey is a British television presenter, frequently featuring in self-titled light-hearted lifestyle documentaries on topics such as childbirth and parenting. Younger,

new mothers made reference to Healey as a woman that they could relate to precisely because of her documentary productions:

*I liked ... the Cherry Healey documentaries about breastfeeding and children's eating.*

*... hear about the day-to-day struggles like getting a child dressed in the morning. It makes a celebrity more real.*

*I like to watch Cherry Healey documentaries about motherhood type subjects in the past. I like her because she is honest.*

*I like to watch Cherry Healey – she seems like someone I can relate to, very down to earth seems intelligent as well as a sense of fun.*

*Cherry Healey seems like a normal mum, dazed, confused and well meaning. It is refreshing to see a celebrity ask the same parenting questions as the rest of us.*

*I love that Cherry Healey admits that she struggles with motherhood, she lets us know it is ok to cherish our children but struggle with the day-to-day reality of looking after them.*

*... natural, honest women who talk openly about motherhood, their work life balance, how they cope with various situations. I am interested in those that share their experiences.*

*Cherry Healey asks useful questions but never preaches about motherhood, she seems a sensible young woman who is not afraid to reveal a little (or a lot) about her own parenting, and doesn't pretend that she has all the answers to the day-to-day struggles with eating, sleeping and sharing.*

Healey frequently relates documentaries to her own life both during the programmes and on her blog, with follow-up publications in titles such as *You Me Baby* magazine. For example, in relation to the documentary *Cherry's Parenting Dilemmas* (2011), the official synopsis tells us that:

Cherry Healey may be a proud new mum, but she is facing a battle of wills with her daughter Coco. In this personal documentary, Cherry goes to meet other mums with very different parenting styles. From a pro-smacking strict parent to a super-liberal single mum, and from a mum who works all hours to buy her kids everything they want to a mother in crisis with her teenage daughter, Cherry finds out what being a mother is all about. (BBC 2011a)

Healey goes on to write a candid confession that led her to make the programme, pointing to her own trials and tribulations with motherhood, telling us, in the mode of a confession that:

Before I had a kid, I thought parenting was ...

- a) a doddle
- b) boring
- c) totally instinctual

What I have experienced is that ...

- a) it can be pretty complicated
- b) it is far from boring
- c) I need help

I used to walk past playgrounds on my way to the pub/club/shops and think to myself 'wow those parents look bored'. I realise now that they aren't bored because being with your child is both surprisingly fun and challenging (okay, so sometimes playing peek-a-boo for the hundredth time is a touch boring). One of the things I'm often told is 'oh, don't fret about it, trust your instincts'. Well, I have found that my instincts can sometimes be pretty unhelpful. For example, my daughter does not like sitting in her high-chair ... oh no she does not. My instincts told me that it wasn't a big deal and it was more important that mealtimes were relaxed. In reality, this has meant I have spent the past year chasing her around with a spoon or leaving bowls of food on the floor in the hope she will eat something. Eating in restaurants or having a simple cuppa in a cafe is a no-go. I have since tried and tested a few new tactics, spoken to dozens of mums, been on a dozen websites, read a few books and come up with ... a solution: no chair, no food. I won't bore you with the details of why or how this works, but, for some reason, it just does. But there is no way on earth my instincts would have given me this information at the start. What I have learnt from experiences like this, and from making *Cherry's Parenting Dilemmas*, is that being a good parent doesn't just happen overnight. Like most things, it is a skill that you learn and that you can become better at. (BBC 2011b)

It is precisely this candid address to audiences and readers alike that respondents welcomed here, not because she is saying anything particularly controversial or original in terms of childbirth or new motherhood, but because she is revealing her maternal vulnerabilities and giving credibility to those women who are themselves unable or unwilling to present themselves in line with the serene, satisfied 'good' mother. In this way Healey performs

in line with many fictional mothers who present themselves as well meaning but struggling figures, mothers who are available for us to laugh at, cry with or find encouragement or amusement in.

## The appeal of the sitcom mother: Marge, Lois, Sue and Claire

Indeed, although many women found ‘real’ mothers such as Daly, Berry, Allsopp and Healey to be their favourite, most trusted or treasured maternal figures on television, other women pointed to fictional representations of motherhood and motherwork as their preferred small screen counterparts, with a small number of sitcom characters being routinely and repeatedly mentioned by those women who responded to my questionnaire, namely Marge Simpson/Julie Kanver (*The Simpsons* 1989–), Lois Wilkerson/Jane Kaczmarek (*Malcolm in the Middle* 2000–06), Sue Brockman/Claire Skinner (*Outnumbered* 2007–14) and Claire Dunphy/Julie Bowen (*Modern Family* 2009–). Although I invited participants to comment on maternal figures from any factual, fictional category, genre or hybrid format, with no set period for programmes being screened, it was interesting and rather surprising to see the homogeneity of the figures and genre pointed to here. That said, the findings remain consistent with a number of annual ‘Best Television Mother’ and ‘Favourite Television Mothers of all Time’ polls that appear annually around Mothers day and in line with many comments made on a recent mumsnet thread on television mothers (Mumsnet 2013).

Situation comedy has, since its emergence on commercial radio in 1930s America, been committed to the family unit. Since that time, the genre has presented dramatic changes to family life, in response to wider social, sexual and political periods, ranging from the happy suburban middle class housewife to urban and ethnic representations, divorced, widowed and single mother formats to irresponsible and unsentimental images of working-class families. The situation comedy has presented a diverse set of family representations, and has historically spoken of the importance

of motherhood and motherwork within its comedy conventions (Feasey 2012a).

For the majority of women who spoke of fictional programming, they made mention of popular situation comedy texts from the past decade, and spoke warmly about the representation of mothers from within a limited number of titles, titles seemingly dedicated to the depiction of harried and hurried mothers outnumbered by their children. What was said to be endearing about these maternal figures was their valiant parental efforts under strained circumstances, be they emotional, logistical or financial. Although there are some differences in terms of the characters being presented in relation to class, country and cartoons, there are numerous similarities between these mothers and, in many cases, participants commented on more than one character, to the point that they seemed somewhat interchangeable in their maternal practices. Marge, Lois, Sue and Claire are seen to be strong, hard-working women who are committed to their families and work tirelessly to support them, irrespective of mistakes and misdemeanours. They are loving and compassionate, strict and demanding in equal measure, and want nothing more than to see their children happy and content. Although they are authoritarian figures in the domestic environment, they do not always find satisfaction or fulfilment in this space, and on occasion yearn to experience love, life and laughter outside of the confines of their maternal role.

Marge Simpson is the stay at home mother of three with blue hair from *The Simpsons*, the popular and long-running animation best known for its social, sexual, religious and political commentary on education, corporate capitalism, the health-care system, modern child-rearing, globalisation, commercialism, consumerism, racism, religious intolerance, alcoholism, drug abuse, environmentalism, immigration, violence, media effects, sexism, homophobia and changing gender roles. It has been suggested that the situation comedy has 'offered oppositional ideas, depicted oppression and struggle, and reflected a critical consciousness that stops just short of political mobilization' (Hamamoto 1991), and that it is able to do this because of its recognisable characters and conventional settings, as they go some way to neutralise the potential threat or discomfort with such

commentary. It was surprising to see just how many mothers in the audience favoured, felt affection for and recognition with a cartoon creation:

*I love Marge Simpson*

*Marge in The Simpsons seems close to reality!*

*Marge Simpson ... running around doing everything!*

*Marge Simpson ... She's patient, funny and tries her best!*

*I nearly forgot Marge, how could I forget Marge – Best mum ever!*

*Marge Simpson is great because she tries her best but is a flawed character.*

*Marge Simpson is also a great mother role model. Calm and caring and always there for her kids.*

*Marge Simpson ... being kind, gentle accepting and supportive of her children – these are great mothering qualities.*

*I like Marge Simpson as she is responsible, hard working and so much brighter than her husband. I think it reflects real life!*

*Marge Simpson is one of my favourites. She seems like a very real mother to me, despite being yellow with unusual blue hair.*

*Marge Simpson ... does seem to be a remarkably calm, mature and nurturing mother on the whole. I would like to have these qualities.*

*I like Marge Simpson as they portray her as a mother who is trying her best but isn't perfect and you can see the sheer frustration she feels at her husband and children.*

*Marge is a maternal legend, she is not just a long-suffering wife and mother but a compassionate and passionate individual who has her own needs and desires. She might not always (if ever) be able to act on them, but it is clear that, given the opportunity, she is more than her domestic role, and I find this both endearing and refreshing, and dare I say believable.*

*I have been watching Marge my whole life, at times I thought I would like her as my mum, and now I would value her as a friend. Watching her domestic triumphs as well as her well-meaning mistakes is far more potent than any Supernanny episode because you are invested in her life and value her efforts.*

*I have spent a while thinking about this and the mother that I warm towards is a cartoon, Marge Simpson stands out as a loveable and believable mother. I like her because I am her, her struggles with routine, discipline, tantrums and misdemeanours are my struggles. She makes motherhood look like work, which it is.*

*Marge Simpson. She is surprisingly three-dimensional for a two-dimensional character. I love that we see her wanting to do more (almost having an affair, becoming a cop, starting a pretzel stand, getting into trouble with her gang of lady thief girls) all the while trying to toe the morality line that she is trying (without success at times) to instil in her kids. It's touching when she has breakthrough moments and gets the point. And you always feel mad on her behalf when she's mistreated!*

*Marge Simpson from the cartoon The Simpsons. She's totally devoted to her family and wants the best for them. She isn't perfect, but tries her best. She also finds it hard to reconcile the fact that her family expect her to do everything around the house for them and doesn't have much of a life, if any, outside of this so she sometimes goes off and does her own thing and leaves the older ones to look after themselves more (whilst still making dinner quite often). In relation to this, she also gets quite upset in the episode(s) where she discovers that her family don't think she could hack being in the 'real world' with a real job, instead of being a stay at home mum.*

*The Simpsons* family in general, and Marge in particular, have been on our screens for over two decades, and since that time the character has developed as a fully rounded, credible and relatable figure for women in the audience. Looking past the colourful images and slapstick humour of the programme that appeals to the child in the audience, the programme has presented a complicated, contradictory maternal figure who is both committed to her domestic environment, yet on occasion stifled by that self-same domesticity, and it is this challenging maternal figure rather than a narrow domestic stereotype that has proved popular with mothers in the contemporary audience, who have quite literally in many cases grown up with this maternal figure.

While *The Simpsons* is well known and much loved for its animated version of working-class family life, *Malcolm in the Middle* has proved popular for what many have suggested is the live action version of its animated predecessor, with Lois stepping into the role of Marge. And although *Malcolm in the Middle* finished nearly a decade ago, this programme continues to prove popular with audiences, either due to its impact on maternal audiences when it first aired in 2000 or due to its continued presence on our screens through a range of terrestrial and satellite channels. This American sitcom is set in a working class suburban neighbourhood, focusing on the educational, social and domestic tribulations of Malcolm/Frankie Muniz, his three, and then later four brothers, and their parents, Lois, who works full time at a drugstore and Hal/Brian Cranston. The title character of the series, Malcolm, is a genius with an IQ of 165 and a photographic memory, and as such he is placed in a class for gifted students, which simply compounds existing adolescent feelings of alienation and otherness experienced by the average teen (Feasey 2008a). Irrespective of his educational abilities and gifted status, he and his brothers are given strict rules and responsibilities by their mother, which are repeatedly and routinely ignored. As the series progresses, storylines focus on the other family members, but it is the character of Malcolm who breaks the fourth wall by talking directly to the viewer in a mockumentary style of commentary.

With five wilful boys (and possibly a sixth in the final episode of the show), a full-time job and a hapless husband, Lois takes on the responsibility of the family in terms of organisation and discipline. Her maternal style is akin to that of a drill sergeant. She demands respect from and for her family and she always follows through with her threats. The actress who plays the role tells us that:

Those kids are naughty, but what I love on that show is that they just never got away with anything, as naughty as those children were. And I think that's part of the reason that show was so funny was that if you let your kids get away with stuff it's not funny to watch. If you know that Lois is like a hawk watching those kids, they have to really be clever on what they're trying to get away with. And that's where the humor was. (Graham 2008)

Lois has high aspirations for all of her children, but none higher than Malcolm. When, in the last episode, he is offered an impressive professional role with a six-figure salary she turns it down on his behalf, telling him:

... it's not the life you're supposed to have! The life you're supposed to have is you go to Harvard, and you earn every fellowship and internship they have. You graduate first in your class, and you start working in public service, either district attorney or running some foundation, and then you become governor of a mid-sized state, and then you become president ... of the United States ... you're gonna do it ... you'll be the only person in that position who will ever give a crap about people like us. We've been getting the short end of the stick for thousands of years, and I, for one, am sick of it. Now, you are going to be president, mister, and that's the end of it ... you know what it's like to be poor, and you know what it's like to work hard. Now you're going to learn what it's like to sweep floors and bust your ass and accomplish twice as much as all the kids around you. And it won't mean anything because they will still look down on you. And you will want so much for them to like you, and they just won't. And it'll break your heart. And that'll make your heart bigger and open your eyes and finally you will realize that there's more to life than proving you're the smartest person in the world. I'm sorry, Malcolm, but you don't get the easy path. You don't get to just have fun and be rich and live the life of luxury ... you look me in the eye and you tell me you can't do it. (S7:E22)

Lois is a strong and demanding mother who works tirelessly for her family, and although there is little reward or recognition for her efforts, it is clear that her husband and children care deeply for her and for one another, in spite of, or perhaps because of, her authoritarian demands. Lois' maternal sacrifices are paid off in the final episode of the show when Malcolm speaks of the importance of family in his valedictorian speech, quoting Paul McCartney as his mother had asked him to do. It is only a few words and a small gesture, but in the context of the programme's long history it speaks volumes about her maternal influence over her family, and offers a reward for all of her emotional, physical and financial commitments to her children.

Lois stands as a proud working-class matriarch, and although we are asked to view her class battles throughout the series, her commentary on their lower socio-economic status is most clearly felt in this final episode. The character appears a firm favourite with mothers in the audience because

of her commitment to her family, her efforts to support them and her need to speak out against injustice:

*Lois is queen of them all ... I love her big speech in the very last episode.*

*I am always drawn to those strong, dominant mothers who demand respect (rather than a friendship) from their children (and husband) ... classic example of this type of maternal role model.*

*I find mothers appealing who have their own personalities and who are in relationships with their children that demand effort and energy. Blissful babies that conveniently run in at the end of conversations just for hugs make me feel a bit ill.*

*Lois is controlling and demanding of her children but it clearly comes from a place of love and frustration, because she wants her children to have a more comfortable life than she herself has experienced, and surely that is a sentiment most mothers can relate to.*

*When Lois gave that speech about her son becoming President one day, the hard way, from his working class roots it was genuinely moving, I know sitcom is meant to be funny, but Lois actually makes me think about politics and parenting while I am laughing.*

*Strong, smart, capable and compassionate in equal measure. She is an incredibly dedicated mother who doesn't always find satisfaction in her maternal role, but she does not apologise for these feelings. She is a good mother, not an impossible ideal of how mothers should be.*

*Lois is the best mother on television, she really cares about her family but not in a sugar-coated way, she sees their flaws, loves and accepts them and tries to support them through mistake after mistake. She makes motherhood look hard, relentless, unforgiving and unappreciated ... she is the nearest thing to a real mother I have seen on television.*

*Lois is the queen of sitcom mums, she is a strict disciplinarian who would give Supernanny a run for her money, but then Supernanny never had those smart, scheming boys to contend with. She is a wilful woman and a caring mother, and she always did her very best to care and provide for her children, which was admirable under strained circumstances.*

*Lois is by far the most developed 'mother' character – she is complete in her frustrations and successes with family and work and in the midst of trying really really hard to make sure her kids have a better life, she occasionally finds humour and time to enjoy herself with them. You can feel the palpable relief when she can actually let go and enjoy her time*

*off ... you empathise with her stress and frustration and her desire to keep vigilant in a tough world ... hilarious but believable relationships with her husband ... and children.*

While *The Simpsons* and *Malcolm in the Middle* are popular for their representations of strong, working-class mothers, their middle-class counterparts have more recently returned to our television screens, and although the size and location of the home and the quality of furniture and home furnishings may differ, maternal practices remain reasonably consistent, the fathers appear hapless, the mothers harried and the children outnumber their parents.

*Outnumbered* is the south London-based middle class suburban sitcom centred around the Brockman family, focusing on the exploits of parents Sue and Pete/Hugh Dennis and their three children. While Sue works part time as a personal assistant, Pete works full time as a history teacher in an inner city London school. The show has received critical acclaim for its semi-improvised scripting and realistic portrayal of children and family life, due in part to the fact that although the adult actors rehearse their comedy scripts, the children are given last-minute instructions by the writers:

The words those children speak are of their own, on-the-spot devising. In probably any other family sitcom you can name, the child characters talk not like children but tiny adults, all slick wisecracks and old-before-their-time wisdom. The ones in *Outnumbered*, though, display the stumbling speech patterns of real-life children – and their adult-confounding logic. (Deacon 2010)

However, although critical commentators praise the improvised nature of the show for its ability to capture realistic communications between parents and children, writer Andy Hamilton echoes the maternal audience when he says that the show's success with parents is based on debunking the 'good' mother, for one that is well meaning and just 'good enough'. We are told that *Outnumbered* was 'conceived in small part as a counterblast to the great torrent of books about 10 years ago advising people on parenting, as if it was a perfectible art' going on to tell us, that 'all those books do is make people feel inadequate and miserable' (ibid.). Therefore, while parenting advice manuals were encouraging women to adhere to the ideology of intensive mothering and present themselves as selfless and satisfied caregivers, the

sitcom in question was keen to ‘celebrate the incompetence of parenthood’ because ‘when you talk to ... parents and get them to be honest about some of the abysmal parenting they might have done, you realise that most parents ... muddle through at best. That’s just the way nature plans it’ (ibid.). This notion that the programme can be seen to reflect and respond to the reality of contemporary family life is echoed throughout much cultural comment on the show in question, so we find that:

The magic ... is that it’s close enough to real family life to strike a chord with parents and children alike. Watching the Brockmans’ wonderfully frazzled Mum, Sue ... and put-upon Dad, Pete ... desperately trying to work out how best to enforce decent moral codes in their middle-class madhouse of a family home, must be recognisable to any parent watching from the sofa, nodding along in despair. (Stock and Smith 2014)

Mothers in the audience echo these sentiments as they comment on the ordinary, mundane and everyday nature of the scenes and sequences that make up the programme, with participants routinely commentating that they have observed, understand or experienced much of the parental behaviours being presented in the show. They are clear to point out both the poor parenting practices and the well-intentioned decisions behind such practices, and it is this combination of mother love in concert with well-meaning yet ineffectual maternal practice that speaks to mothers in the audience:

*The mum in Outnumbered I found easy to relate to.*

*No one other than Sue Brockman in Outnumbered*

*I like Outnumbered, it is a clever and funny series about parenthood.*

*I love the fictional but realistic mums – the mum on Outnumbered is great – it looks like real family life!*

*I like Sue in Outnumbered ... something of the ‘ordinary’ about their lives ... even though they are fictional!*

*The mum in Outnumbered who is constantly juggling – it reflects my life. Also, the children are not perfect or outrageous.*

*I find the series Outnumbered has more of a realistic view on motherhood, that being said, the narrative is written for comedic effect.*

*I loved the programme Outnumbered as that seemed to show it how it is and was very well and realistically observed – and very funny.*

*I do like the mum out of Outnumbered as she is, in a funny way, a real mum muddling by with everyday challenges of raising kids.*

*One that I can think of is the one on BBC's Outnumbered. They have a normal family house and a realistic family life ... even if it is a comedy.*

*I like Outnumbered, the parents literally outnumbered by their three children ... the kids are challenging, the father loving ... the mother trying to keep the peace.*

*I'm just doing my best balancing the needs of all members of my family including myself ... If I had to pick a character it would be the mother in Outnumbered!*

*The show Outnumbered – that's amazing, the mum is spot on, frazzled trying to do everything for everyone and somehow always getting it wrong, however well intentioned.*

*The mother on Outnumbered. This to me is the most realistic portrayal of parenthood; messy, unplanned, feeling your way through life rather than having the answers to every problem.*

*The mum on Outnumbered! I guess because she's most closely portrayed to real life! (And she's probably the only mum in a show which I watch which is actually about being a mum really).*

*I generally find the portrayal of mothers traditionalist and unrealistic, stay at home mums or super-mums, not in between ... the mother in Outnumbered is the only one that is a believable mother.*

*I do ... love the way that family life is portrayed in Outnumbered. I know many fellow parents who find it so close to the truth that they find it painful to watch! I find it hilarious, and somehow comforting!*

*Outnumbered. It's not a million miles from reality. We watch it as a family and poke each other when the frequent observant remarks are made. The attitude to the children is probably similar to mine. And their lives seem real.*

This notion of realism, or at least recognition is key to the appeal of another long-running sitcom on the other side of the Atlantic, *Modern Family*. *Modern Family* is an American sitcom based on an extended family unit over three generations. The programme is based on the exploits of Jay Pritchett/Ed O'Neill, his second wife, his stepson, and their infant son; and his two adult children and their families in suburban Los Angeles. Although *Malcolm in the Middle* broke with traditional sitcom conventions by employing a mockumentary mode of address for the eponymous Malcolm, *Modern Family* asks all characters to talk to camera, in a confessional, break-the-fourth-wall style. Although there are a number of mothers seen in this programme, it was Claire Dunphy, the stay at home mother of three married to real-estate agent Phil/Ty Burrell who received acclaim from audiences. Moreover, it is the Dunphy unit that draws repeated comparison to the Brockmans of *Outnumbered*, with commentators asking 'middle-class parents, unruly kids, mishaps involving dad shooting people by accident with a toy gun, the middle son getting his head stuck in the bannisters. Remind you of anything yet?' (Frost 2009).

Irrespective of whether audiences noted the comparison, they found Claire, like Sue, to be a believable maternal figure struggling with the changing daily difficulties of contemporary parenting. The character biography tells us:

If her teenage daughter, Haley, never wakes up on a beach in Florida half-naked, then Claire Dunphy feels she's done her job as mom. See, it's not easy to keep everyone in line when you're raising three very different kids (four, if you include hubby Phil). As exasperated as she sometimes seems to be, we get the sense that Claire wouldn't change a thing when it comes to her family. Claire will always fight for what's right. An ignored request for a stop sign at a dangerous intersection led to a run for town council against smarmy Duane Bailey. Things didn't go well at the debate as evidenced by the autotuned 'Sex Freak Candidate' video that went viral afterwards. Election day didn't go much better as Claire not only lost the race, but she also lost a fake tooth incurred during her 'Fire and Nice' ice skating days with brother Mitchell. Nevertheless, Claire Dunphy will always be a winner at home and the persistent one who keeps this *Modern Family* going. (abc 2014)

This biography is echoed by cultural commentators when they tell us that:

Claire is a control freak, and as the series has gone on, she has become more so. Tasked with overseeing the smooth running of her household, she can be shrill and bossy, finger-pointing and cutting ... It is understood by all the Dunphy's, Claire included, that she is what makes their family run and also that she is no fun ... Despite all of this, I still really *like* Claire and I'm not the only one ... She plays, on paper, *Modern Family's* most unlikable character and she does so with no caviling or pulled punches, just spiky, committed energy and a knack for pratfalls. As sitcoms get older they often end up being about, inadvertently, people's inability to change. Characters stay more or less the same, because the traits and quirks and jokes they have and make stay more or less the same. Claire knows that she is high-strung and lacerating, and that she can't stop herself. She is constitutionally fated to be the grown-up. (Paskin 2012)

On the spectrum of mommy sainthood ... Claire Dunphy ... lands somewhere on the higher end of the scale but falls far short of perfection ... a mom who believes she knows best – but much to her chagrin (and the audience's delight) very often doesn't. Women especially respond to Bowen's character because she makes so many laugh-inducing mistakes. They love her because she mirrors just about every well-meaning if fallible mother out there. (Kennedy 2011)

Mothers in the television audience can be seen to form a consensus with the shows creatives and cultural commentators when they state:

*Claire from Modern Family ... I enjoy any programme where there is a real sense of family.*

*Modern Family – Claire Dunphy. It might be satirical but many of the situations could be my life!*

*Claire is a believable character, not just a mother, and that is why I find her enjoyable to watch.*

*I like watching comedy series with my son ... Modern Family is very funny and also often awkwardly close to reality!*

*Claire is a believable mum of three struggling to get her husband and children to behave like civilised and responsible individuals.*

*I like narrative settings where the mothers seem 'human' – that means not one-dimensional, with admirable and flawed aspects.*

*Claire is a brilliant 'bad cop' in the show because she has to show her children the importance of rules and responsibility when their 'cool dad' is behaving like another child.*

*Claire is rigid and uptight, but I still find her endearing, she takes on a difficult maternal role and is doing her best to maintain order and teach her children about responsibility.*

*I like the fact that Claire is not a one-dimensional housewife who adores every maternal moment and household chore, I think her frustrations make her more realistic for mothers to watch.*

*Claire may not be laugh out loud funny, but she is certainly a character that I find entertaining to watch, mostly because she reaffirms my own parental practices, well meaning but not always well considered.*

*Modern Family is wonderful, I know that there are a host of endearing and comedic figures, but I feel that I can relate to Claire, three children and a buffoon of a husband, she is the only one trying to bring order to the chaos.*

*I like ... Clare Dunphy from Modern Family and Marge Simpson. I think they both have a happy family life and are both secure in their decisions and situations. They are both stay at home mums which I can relate to and have happy families who look to the mother as the core of the family. They are both strong, caring and loving mothers.*

*Claire in Modern Family!!! It's hilarious. The house is of a similar type to ours. We have our ups and downs with our teenage children. Then there are the grandparents ... ours have dementia and grumpiness. We have the mad aunt and demanding nieces and nephews. The family squabbles and fantastic holidays together. Yep it's a melting pot but I wouldn't have it any other way.*

Claire is liked and even admired by mothers in the television audience due to the fact that she is both a warm and generous maternal figure but not restricted to this role. This character is both a stay at home housewife and sexy, smart and sarcastic woman in her own right. She is a full-time mother but refuses to be reduced to a domestic title, and it is this multi-dimensionality that is appealing in an era seemingly dominated by the notion of intensive mothering. Claire may ostensibly stand as a 'good' mother due to the fact that she is a stay at home caregiver in a middle class nuclear unit, committed to nurturing the emotional, cultural, social and educational development of her three children, but her inability to find serenity and

satisfaction in this role and her demands for social and sexual fulfilment outside of the domestic environment position the character as something more recognisable and relatable to the women in the audience, a mother who is 'good enough'. After all, even though caring for children might at times be pleasurable, fulfilling and emotionally rewarding, the show, like *Outnumbered* before it, makes it clear that 'the burden of caring for children can become routine drudgery or emotional torment when it is done constantly, repeatedly, because of one's obligations, and when it consumes nearly all of one's energies and time' (Held 1983).

What is interesting here is the way in which the maternal traits of the character and actor accord. After all, while Claire Dunphy is admired and applauded for her 'good enough' mothering outside of the ideology of intensive mothering, so too is actress Julie Bowen. Indeed, we are told that it is easy to find similarities between role and star because both are the harried mother of three children, both are quick-witted, funny, fiercely protective of their families and blunt about motherhood. Bowen, like Dunphy strayed from the romanticised image of ideal motherhood when, in a moment of candour, confessed that raising babies was 'pretty awful' at times, stating that she 'did not always enjoy' her children's younger years (Neithercott 2014).

Moreover, Bowen admits to needing childcare help during the week and finding a return to the working week a welcome relief from the maternal role, telling interested parties that 'I really resent the militants who insist things must be one way or another. Do what works for you, and cut yourself some slack with the comparisons' (Kennedy 2011). While she admits that time spent with her first child was in line with professional motherhood practices, her twins demanded a change of parenting style, meaning 'fewer Mommy & Me classes ... and an ability to stop sweating the minutiae of her children's lives' (ibid.). Bowen announced:

I like the episodes where Claire has to have a glass of wine and collapse, and they all know it and no one really judges it ... I didn't know, maybe lots of people in the world didn't realize, that there were other parents out there who were kind of just holding it together with tissue paper and twine some days of the week. Claire is doing a great job, but still there's times that she's like 'Mommy's gotta lie down now,' and I find that very comforting. (Shewfelt 2013)

Bowen has been vocal about the pressures of contemporary mothering and the ways in which women set themselves impossible maternal goals, to the point where she has been applauded by psychotherapist Debra Gilbert Rosenberg for her candid views on parenting. Rosenberg tells us:

The pressures of modern-day motherhood can feel overwhelming ... Women buckle under it. They simply can't be in three places at once ... yet they try to be. With so many women working full-time jobs while attempting full-time motherhood, there are many false expectations. And this combination of factors pushes toward ever higher, often unattainable standards of what it means to be a good mother. (Rosenberg, cited in Kennedy 2011)

Rosenberg has referred to Bowen's more relaxed approach to motherhood as 'healthy' for both mother and family unit; that said, even though Bowen suggests that there is too much pressure on contemporary women to become ideal mothers, her comments can be read in line with the ideology of 'good' motherhood. After all, Bowen makes it clear that her work on the set of *Modern Family* 'happens to dovetail nicely if you have a family ... There's a lot of kid time, and there's a lot of work time. It works' (ibid.). She goes on to comment that while her co-stars in the sitcom work on other projects when the show is on hiatus, she makes a conscious decision to stay at home:

The boys are finally at an age where I find them so luscious and fantastic that I don't want to be away if I don't have to be, she says. It's such a gift not to feel the pressure to go hunting down a job right now. I'm just lucky as hell. (Neithercott 2014)

And in case readers and audiences remain uncertain as to Bowen's parenting credentials, she informs us that 'I'm constantly shocked that I am successfully taking care of this family and that I'm capable of putting their needs in front of mine' (MacIntyre 2011). And interviewers are happy to anchor this appropriate maternal image by telling us that 'Bowen's changing diapers. And building towers out of Legos ... they're content to just spend time with their mom. And Bowen is, first and foremost, Mom' (Neithercott 2014). Under the title 'Motherhood is Well Worth a Few Sacrifices', the *Modern Family* actress informs us:

Once the kids were born, 'me time' went away. But I have years and years of me time ahead of me. I didn't really do anything that valuable with it. I did not cure cancer, I did not write the great American novel in blood on a stone. I volunteered, I took up different forms of exercise, I traveled. But ultimately, not having that same me time and giving those extra minutes to my kids is, right now, much more rewarding. (Horten 2014)

Bowen plays a 'good enough' mother on screen and although her earlier comments about her own maternal role positioned her in this self-same struggling position, her more recent remarks are in line with a more idealised figure who finds motherhood the priority and motherwork fulfilling. There is little mention of the demands of the working mother outside of the fact that she refuses to have professional help at the weekends (Leon 2011). The change of tone here might be to do with her growing sons, her work routine or the desire to promote a more acceptable face of contemporary motherhood, and yet, irrespective of the reason behind this shift, audiences were keen to comment on the maternal character rather than the mothering practices of the actress behind that role.

## When the professional is political

I have already stated that a small number of women spoke fondly of news-readers and culture reporters because they were smart, intelligent women who were not defined by motherhood; so too, a minority audience made this same point regarding fictional television characters. A small number of women commented that they liked strong, complex professional characters who also happened to be mothers, women who are defined by their working role rather than their domestic commitments. These mothers were not favourites for the majority of women, but are deserving of notable mention due to the fact that they speak of a very different portrayal of motherhood, namely Abbey Bartlet/Stockard Channing (*West Wing*, 1999–2006), Dr Lisa Cuddy/Lisa Edelstein (*House*, 2004–12), Skyler White/Anna Gunn

(*Breaking Bad*, 2008–13), Alicia Florrick/Julianna Margulies (*The Good Wife*, 2009–), Lori Grimes/Sarah Anne Wayne Callies (*The Walking Dead*, 2010–) Birgitte Nyborg/Sidse Babett Knudsen (*Borgen*, 2010–13), Rachel Matheson/Elizabeth Mitchell (*Revolution*, 2012–14), Freya Hoynes/Emily Watson (*The Politician's Husband*, 2013) and Ellie Miller/Olivia Colman (*Broadchurch*, 2013–). This audience highlighted the astute, expert or skilled status of these women before making mention of their maternal role or motherwork practices:

*I like Alicia Florrick for her strength and career focus whilst also being a caring mother.*

*I tend to watch drama, I like to see strong articulate women ... I think I prefer motherhood to be almost incidental to the character.*

*Birgitte Nyborg, she is a powerful and resourceful woman. I enjoyed watching her juggle her career and mothering responsibilities.*

*Dr Lisa Cuddy is an interesting portrayal of wanting to have children and facing the challenges that it brings ... She is smart, capable and seeks a balance between work and home life.*

*I find characters such as Rachel Matheson in the show Revolution interesting – she is intelligent, able and willing to fight for her kids, but isn't portrayed as the typical 'sappy' mother.*

*I tend to watch box sets of US dramas where motherhood is part of life, not a topic, brunt, joke or stereotype. A good portrayal of mothers on television is Abbey Bartlet. She is intelligent, has a great career yet prioritises her family in an appropriate way.*

*Emily Watson's role in The Politician's Husband was brilliant as it showed a power struggle in a honest way, and the balance which mothers and wives have to make, and it made you question the status quo, i.e. the media-ready impression of politicians' relationships.*

*I ... like to watch interesting women who happen to have children, rather than characters defined as mothers. For example Skyler White on Breaking Bad is a very interesting, complex, rounded character and her role as a mother provides just one element of this*

*complexity. Similarly, Ellie Miller on Broadchurch brings motherhood as an important element of her outlook and worldview but is not defined by it.*

*I like characters in which a woman is a mother as well as her other roles. I particularly like Alicia Florrick in *The Good Wife*, as a mother who has returned to work as a successful lawyer as well as a caring mother. I love how successful, gorgeous and three-dimensional she is ... I also love Birgitte Nyborg, who really demonstrates the challenges of combining a high flying career with motherhood, and does it with such charm. She loves her family, but also makes compromises.*

These women are all seen struggling to maintain a working balance between their personal and professional lives, but they rarely apologise for their work commitments and make little attempt to hide their interest in their professional role; this does not mean that they are not being judged or ranked for their personal or professional endeavours, but that they continue to maintain, and in many cases, prioritise their hard-won professional positions. Indeed, there was only one mention of a mother in a professional role who was immune to playing out the difficulties of balancing the personal and professional arena, and that was in the shape of Dr Beverly Crusher/Cheryl Gates McFadden from the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94) universe:

*Dr Beverly Crusher. She works, raises an independent kid, and maintains a love life without jokes or story lines about mommy guilt. Not only does she behave like a whole person who also has a child, but she is treated as a whole person by her peers. No one constantly questions her choices.*

The fact that the only maternal character to be removed from debates concerning 'good' or 'good enough' mothering belongs to a fictional future in the world of science-fiction and telefantasy, is perhaps unsurprising given the predominance of such debates to the contemporary landscape. I am not suggesting that factual or fictional programmes are held up as a mirror to reality, but rather, that they can be seen to be in dialogue with existing social, sexual and political debates, in short, they are located in, if not entirely committed to, the reality of a given period.

## Conclusion

Mothers in the audience pointed to a wide range of maternal favourites on the small screen, spanning presenters, personalities and fictional characters. The majority of the women who commented on these maternal images, be they 'real' women or televisual constructions suggested that they liked them precisely because they were associated with the maternal role and a wider domestic context. That said, while the majority of audiences responded to presenters such as Tess Daly and Holly Willoughby by way of their maternal status, others foregrounded newsreaders who, although mothers, were not performing in line with a maternal role. Likewise, although the majority of participants spoke with fondness about situation comedy characters such as Marge, Lois, Sue and Claire because they were read as mothers first and foremost, this was not to suggest that they were only mothers, nor solely defined by their maternal practices, but that for the most part, they were seen in and understood in relation to their maternal role. Maternal favourites and likeable mothers are intertwined with notions of recognition and identification; it is as if many women respond to or invest in those characters whose domestic patterns or family department reflects, on some level, their own family unit, choices and behaviours, and the majority of the women responding to the questionnaire appear to acknowledge and look sympathetically upon the harried wife and mother struggling to find satisfaction in the domestic role.

What is interesting here is the generational differences between responses, whereby mothers with younger children appear committed to both the fictional depictions of motherhood and to those television personalities whose fame rests in part on their maternal presence. Alternatively, those mothers with older children look for escapism, entertainment and information via mothers removed from their motherwork role. The former finds favourites because of a woman's maternal role, the latter, in spite of it. I asked mothers in the audience to talk to me about their 'favourite' mothers on television, asking them to consider the plethora of factual, fictional, long standing and more recent representations and these women

seemed to share a consensus in terms of those women mentioned in their commentaries. The number of fictional characters praised by these women was small in number and so too, those maternal performers who appealed to this demographic can be counted on one hand. Although one might suggest that the small number of case studies being spoken about might tell us something about terrestrial viewing, the role of domestic and imported programming or perhaps about the rise of Netflix, where many of the aforementioned texts and characters can be found; what I take from these comments is that, irrespective of the multi-channel, 24-hour television environment, very few characters and personalities on screen appeal to mothers in the audience, and irrespective of where, how or when these figures can be accessed, it speaks of a dearth of appropriate or appealing mothers on the small screen.

