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Changing Families,  
Changing Food.

Photograph: Frank Chen

# My mother, My self

## Researchers

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## Summary

This project takes an inter-generational approach to explore the ways in which women manage their eating and identities in relation to both 'expert' advice and personal body image over the transition to motherhood. Motherhood is a pivotal time in a woman's life (each time it happens) with implications for her identity,

quality of life and mental well-being, as well as rapid physical and bodily change. Drawing upon the experiences of recent mothers and their own mothers in South-East England we examine changing perceptions of pregnancy, diet, body image and motherhood over the past forty years.

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## Research questions

- Has the experience of pregnancy become more 'medicalised' during the late twentieth / early twenty-first century? How is this linked to the 'medicalisation' of women's bodies and types of 'treatment' and care given?
- What advice is given to women in the pre and post natal periods? How has this advice changed over time and how does it affect women's 'lifestyle' and eating habits?
- Where do women gain advice about pregnancy / child-rearing especially in relation to food (guidebooks, medical professionals, family and friends) and how do they make decisions about the validity of this advice?
- How do women perceive changes in their bodies during and after pregnancy? How is this linked to dominant cultural perceptions of beauty and motherhood and how have such expectations changed over time?



## Research design

The research involved an email survey of approximately one hundred mothers (both recent and those of earlier generations) containing open-ended questions relating to diet, health and advice during pregnancy. Mothers and daughters were then self-selected from this survey to take part in in-depth interviews on the changing experiences of pregnancy across two generations, with eleven new mothers and seven of their own mothers taking part in total. Women were given the choice to be interviewed together or separately and covered a range of topics including pre-natal care, diet and lifestyle, body image and infant feeding practices, with interviews lasting between forty-five minutes and three hours. Interviews were then transcribed and data analysed thematically.

## Key findings

- Experiences of pregnancy in Britain have become more 'medicalised' over the past forty years, both in terms of available care (e.g. scans) and constantly changing advice relating to food and lifestyle
- Today's mothers are subject to constant surveillance of their diet, lifestyle and behaviour during pregnancy, with a variety of foods (in addition to alcohol and tobacco) now deemed to be harmful to the unborn foetus. Women who fail to follow such advice find themselves open to potential criticism from friends, family, medical professionals and even complete strangers, to an extent where such guilt becomes internalised as a specific form of self-surveillance and control
- However women are not merely passive recipients of such advice, but actively seek out information via midwives, family, friends, books and the internet, balancing 'scientific' or 'expert' recommendations with their own 'embodied knowledge' such as food cravings, particularly during second / subsequent pregnancies
- Expectations regarding pregnancy and body image have also changed over time, in the light of new forms of maternity fashion, increased media attention and the rise of the 'celebrity mum'. Women of the 'my self' generation feel more confident to wear fashionable or revealing clothes during pregnancy than their mothers, however this is coupled with increased pressures regarding body size and shape.

## Publications

Fox R, Heffernan K and Nicolson P (2008) 'It wasn't such an issue back then: changing experiences of pregnancy across two generations of women in South-East England' *Gender, Place and Culture*, forthcoming

Fox R, Nicolson P and Heffernan K (2009) 'Pregnancy police? Maternal bodies, surveillance and food' in P Jackson ed. *Changing families, changing food*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.