

Women, Reproduction and Mental Illness in the 'Long' Twentieth Century

A Two-Day Workshop

Centre for the History of Medicine, University of Warwick, 8-9 April 2024



Around 1900 the separate existence of puerperal insanity, or insanity of childbirth, began to be questioned by medical practitioners, untethering the close bond between childbirth and mental illness that had existed for much of the nineteenth century. For many psychiatrists, the coincidence of childbearing and insanity was no longer regarded as sufficient to warrant a discrete diagnosis, and childbirth was increasingly described merely as an associated cause, a contributing factor, of mental breakdown. However, others working in psychiatry and obstetrics continued to identify pregnancy and childbirth as direct and major causes of maternal mental illness, and, though the patient's voice is often muted, women and their families also attributed their mental ill health to childbirth, experiences of traumatic deliveries, stillbirth and miscarriage, or difficulties adapting to the accepted ideologies of motherhood. Meanwhile, puerperal insanity was still employed in the courtroom in cases of infanticide well into the twentieth century, as it offered a clear and recognisable description to judges and juries of the stress associated with childbirth that might prompt women's mental breakdown and violent crimes. After the 1960s puerperal (and by the 1970s postnatal) depression emerged as a 'new' category of mental illness, one which was increasingly acknowledged by doctors, women, the public and the media, as women strove to gain recognition and support for what was described as a common and serious condition following on from childbirth.

These are just some of the issues and complexities regarding maternal mental illness researched by the 'Last Taboo of Motherhood' team at the University of Warwick, prompting a wide range of questions. How did changing theoretical and diagnostic frameworks translate into practices of care and treatment? How did doctors, women, their families and support networks explain the relationship between childbirth and mental breakdown? And how persistent was the perceived relationship between reproduction and mental health across the twentieth century?

This work builds on the long-term interest and interrogation of the relationship between women's mental health and reproduction from puberty to menopause, a theme which has engaged historians, sociologists, and feminist and literary scholars since the 1970s. In recent decades, this scholarship has increasingly considered how class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, geography, politics and economics have affected and conditioned the language and processes whereby society identified and responded to mental illness among women.

The proposed two-day workshop aims to re-ignite conversations on the relationship between reproduction and mental illness, focusing partly – but far from exclusively – on postnatal mental illness between the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the current day. In this final workshop of our 'Last Taboo of Motherhood?' project, our aim is to explore how pregnancy and childbirth were envisaged as a cause of mental breakdown, and the ways in which this was shaped by social, cultural, emotional and medical factors, including poverty, family circumstances, women's employment, and social isolation and dislocation. The workshop also plans to explore the perceived relationship between puberty, menstruation and menopause and mental wellbeing, as well as the impact of pregnancy loss, infertility and abortion on women's mental health.

The workshop aims to investigate how support and treatment have been offered to women experiencing mental breakdown from the late nineteenth century onwards, especially in terms of institutional provision and the care offered by peer supporters, voluntary organisations, and by family and community. It seeks to uncover how feminist health campaigns and other organisations lobbying for change in policy, legislation and service provision have explained mental illness among women, and, in some cases, utilised explanatory frameworks of risk to mental wellbeing to underpin and strengthen their campaigns. The workshop also aims to examine the accounts produced by women themselves, as they sought to understand their experiences, and the role of those with lived experience in shaping and campaigning for improved care and services. Alongside historical research, the workshop is keen to draw on sociological, literary and gender studies perspectives, to consider how we can work with a variety of sources and approaches, while also considering the ethical dilemmas and questions prompted by this field of research.

The Last Taboo of Motherhood? Project Team:
Hilary Marland, Kelly Couzens and Fabiola Creed
<https://www.ltomhistory.org>



Women, Reproduction and Mental Illness in the 'Long' Twentieth Century Programme

**Faculty of Arts Building (FAB), University of Warwick
Room: FAB 2.43**

Day 1 Monday 8 April

Lunch FAB 12.00-1.00

**Introduction to Workshop
1.00-1.30**

**Session 1 Mothers, Violence and Mental Illness
1.30-3.15**

Alison Pedley (University of Roehampton)

'There was never any trouble in the family before this': 'Criminally Insane' Mothers, their Families and the Experience of Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. c.1895 to 1920

Louise Benson James (Ghent University)

'Screaming oneself into a mother': Reproduction and Mental Disorder in Djuna Barnes's *Ryder* (1928) and *Nightwood* (1936)

Kelly-Ann Couzens (University of Warwick)

Maternal Mental Illness and Crimes Against Children During the Second World War in England and Wales

Tea break 3.15-3.45

**Session 2 Diagnosing and Understanding Mental Disorder
3.45-5.00**

Hilary Marland (University of Warwick)

'Never out of mind before': Diagnosis, Mental Disorder and Childbirth in Early Twentieth-Century London Asylums

Jenny Smart (University of Cambridge)

Mental Illness and the Menopause: Climacteric Insanity in England in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Drinks 5.00-6.00pm

Conference Dinner Scarman 7.30

Day 2 Tuesday 9 April

Session 3 Activism, Advocacy and Agendas I

9.30-10.45

Laura Kelly (University of Strathclyde) (online presentation)

'Post-Abortion Syndrome' and Anti-Abortion Activism in Ireland, c.1985-95

Udodiri Okwandu (Harvard University)

Postpartum Psychosis as Compromising Racial Uplift: Elizabeth B. Davis and Family Planning at Harlem Hospital in the 1960s and 1970s

10.45-11.15 coffee

Session 4 Activism, Advocacy and Agendas II

11.15-12.30

Rebecca Jennings (University College London)

Psychiatric Models of Lesbianism and the Construction of the Lesbian Mother in Late 20th-Century Britain

Rachel Moran (University of North Texas)

Professionalizing the Postpartum: The Rise of Advocate Psychologists in the 1980s

Lunch 12.30-1.30

Session 5 Narratives, Testimony and Media

1.30-2.45

Zara Christmas (University of Oxford)

'This isn't like a nice little fairy tale': Teenage Mothers and their Mental Health in England, 1979-2010'

Fabiola Creed (University of Warwick)

Postnatal Depression on *Woman's Hour* Radio in Post-World War Two Britain: Airing Narratives, Treatments and Reception

2.45-3.00 Coffee and comfort break

Session 6 Emotions, Experiences and Mental Health

3.00-4.15

Tracey Loughran (University of Essex)

Stories without Pattern, Lives at the Edge: Emotional Histories of In/fertility

Jill Kirby (University of Sussex)

‘When a woman reaches the “change” she goes all funny’: Menopause and Mental Health in Late Twentieth- and Early Twenty-First-Century Britain

4.15-5.00 Rounding up, general discussion and workshop ends



Abstracts

Session 1 Mothers, Violence and Mental Illness

Alison Pedley

'There was never any trouble in the family before this': 'Criminally Insane' Mothers, their Families and the Experience of Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. c.1895 to 1920

Abstract

In 2004, the late Sian Busby published *The Cruel Mother: A Family Ghost Laid to Rest*, an account of the life of her great grandmother, Elizabeth ('Beth') Wood. Beth drowned two of her babies in 1919 and subsequently spent two years in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. She was discharged in late 1921, returned to the care of her husband and to a diminished role within her family. Busby's closely-researched and personal account highlights the often-hidden but lasting emotional impact on family life following such calamitous events.

The indefinite incarceration of an 'insane' mother in Broadmoor for killing her own child or children, would not only have had an obvious impact on her future life, but also on the future of her whole family. The death of a child within a household at the hands of its mother and her subsequent confinement, wrought deep emotional changes both in the home and in the wider society of their kith and kin. Suddenly a mother's status within the domestic hierarchy would dramatically change and the dynamics of the family unit would be irrevocably altered.

This paper is an evaluation of the physical and emotional effects on families following the mothers' violent criminal acts for which they were incarcerated in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. The cases reviewed are of women admitted for having killed or attempted to kill one or more of their children. Their assigned causes of insanity were associated with female physiology and gynaecology. The life-stories illustrate how the women's mental ill-health and subsequent indefinite confinement changed them as well as altering their emotional and social relationships with their immediate and extended families. The conclusions for this paper are drawn from case files and records presently open for research at the Royal Berkshire Archive, supported by information from genealogical websites and contemporary press reports, supplemented by Sian Busby's detailed personal reactions and insights.

Bio

Alison Pedley is Senior Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at University of Roehampton. Her 2020 PhD research focused on mothers who had murdered their own children and were adjudged as insane between 1835 and 1895. The women were committed as 'criminal lunatics' to various asylums to be held 'until her Majesty's pleasure be known'. Alison's 2023 monograph, *Mothers, Criminal Insanity and the Asylum in Victorian England: Cure, Redemption and Rehabilitation*, extended the period

researched to 1900 to encompass the whole of Queen Victoria's reign. Alison's present research is focused on Broadmoor State Asylum (as Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum became known) in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1917, the majority of female admissions was still of mothers who had committed child homicide and who had had their insanity attributed to female physiology and reproduction. The research is a continuation of her earlier work and analyses the infanticidal and homicidal mothers' lives inside and outside Broadmoor up to around 1920.

Louise Benson James

'Screaming oneself into a mother': Reproduction and Mental Disorder in Djuna Barnes's *Ryder* (1928) and *Nightwood* (1936)

Abstract

In 1927 E.M. Forster noted that childbirth was never described in literature; that in fiction babies 'come into the world more like parcels than human beings. When a baby arrives in a novel it usually has the air of having been posted. It is delivered "off".' This paper examines two novels by the modernist writer Djuna Barnes published in 1928 and 1936 which unusually and defiantly incorporate graphic depictions of pregnancy and birth, and considers what they can tell us about the perceived relationship between reproduction and mental health.

Ryder (1928) is an epic family chronicle which draws on multiple antiquated literary forms to present the legend of Wendell Ryder and his family. Wendell's doctrine of free love, and patriarchal dream of fathering hundreds of children, results in the subjection of several women's bodies to excessive, unfettered pregnancy, and traumatic, unanaesthetised, home birth experiences, resulting in pain, death, and madness. *Ryder* explores the dangers of stories: narrative's capacity to construct arguable social 'truths' about the body. Children in the novel attend their mothers in childbed, and are schooled in their own prescribed reproductive roles. In *Nightwood* (1936), Robin's dissociated response to pregnancy and birth provokes physical and mental wandering, dysmorphia, body horror, and infanticidal tendencies. She physicalises individual bodily fears around reproduction, but also social concerns about heredity and what is passed down: mental weakness and afflictions, such as hysteria, and neurasthenia.

Barnes's vehemently anti-procreative stance critiques the patriarchal equation of femininity with reproduction, and speaks to the dangers of reproduction for both body and mind. This paper presents a literary studies perspective on the topic of the workshop, exploring fictionalised accounts of pregnancy, birth, and mental illness to consider what we can learn from them about cultural attitudes and women's experiences in the early twentieth century.

Bio

Louise Benson James is based at Ghent University, Belgium. She recently completed a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral project on internal biology in women's fiction, and has just begun a Research Foundation Flanders Senior Postdoctoral Fellowship looking at the

gastrointestinal in popular fiction and periodicals. Her research examines literature, culture, and medicine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly hysteria, nervous disorder, internal organs, and the digestive system. She is currently working on her first monograph, *Medicine and Women's Fiction: Hysteria, Bodies and Narratives, 1850s to 1930s*, under contract with Edinburgh University Press.

Kelly-Ann Couzens

Maternal Mental Illness and Crimes Against Children During the Second World War in England and Wales

Abstract

On 7 November 1945 the *Daily Mail* reported the outcome of an inquest into the suspicious death of Hull resident, Mabel Croft, and her nineteen-month-old infant daughter, Jean. Croft's body had been discovered in the scullery of the family home less than a week before by her husband, John Croft, who had recently been demobbed from the army. The inquest revealed that Mabel had gassed herself and her child to death following a quarrel with her husband earlier that same day. The inquiry also uncovered that since John's return to civilian life six weeks earlier, relations between the spouses had been highly acrimonious. John alleged that Mabel had stolen £2 from his wallet, a claim she had vehemently denied while alive. Moreover, he had also criticised her capabilities as a homemaker leading to a violent argument precipitating the murder-suicide. Nervous and worried over the increasingly bitter relationship with her husband and concerned over the physical health of her daughter who had been unwell, Mabel Croft took the life of herself and her child while alone in their home. Interestingly, the coroner attributed central blame for the tragedy to John Croft, noting that it was: 'a very sad story. It was a case of a man returning from the Army, and being unable, apparently, to adjust himself to post-war conditions.' This paper explores the relationship between motherhood, mental illness and violence against the backdrop of the Second World War in England and Wales. It seeks to interrogate how this global conflict shaped the mental health and socio-economic-realities confronting everyday women implicated in the deaths of their children during (and in the wake of) World War II (c. 1938 – 1948). This paper also seeks to explore the ways in which war, and the social and moral upheavals it instigated, impacted existing discourses of female criminality and insanity associated with reproduction and childbirth.

Bio

Kelly-Ann Couzens is an Australian historian of criminal and forensic history. Since June 2021, she has been based in the History Department at the University of Warwick and is currently working as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the Wellcome-funded project 'The Last Taboo of Motherhood? Postnatal Mental Disorders in 20th Century Britain' (2021-2024), led by Professor Hilary Marland. She is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia and is currently working on a book to be published by Palgrave, entitled *The Victorian Police Surgeon: A History of Crime and Forensic Medicine*.

Session 2 Diagnosing and Understanding Mental Disorder

Hilary Marland

'Never out of mind before': Diagnosis, Mental Disorder and Childbirth in Early Twentieth-Century London Asylums

Abstract

After the 1870s the separate existence of puerperal insanity, a diagnostic category that had done good service since the 1820s, framing the relationship between childbirth and mental illness, began to be questioned, a process reinforced around 1900 when it appeared to have been eliminated from the psychiatric canon. The coincidence of childbearing and insanity was no longer regarded by many psychiatrists as sufficient to warrant a discrete diagnosis. However, rather than producing taxonomic clarity, the result was diagnostic confusion.

This paper explores how this evolving and disputed diagnostic backdrop translated into practice. Drawing on evidence from two early twentieth-century London asylums, Colney Hatch and Claybury, it examines different approaches to categorising and explaining mental illness among women experiencing postpartum mental disorders. While for Claybury's medical superintendent the Victorian term remained a valued and accurate diagnosis well into the 1920s, by the 1910s his colleagues at Colney Hatch had resolutely dropped puerperal insanity in favour of new psychiatric terminology, with childbirth framed merely as an associated cause of mental disorder. This paper argues that in practice childbirth and 'difficult obstetric careers' remained critical in both institutions in explaining women's mental breakdown, alongside poverty, domestic circumstances, and, notably in Colney Hatch, race and ethnicity. Both asylums responded to women deemed at risk during pregnancy, admitting them as patients, and some remained in the institutions to give birth. Colney Hatch admitted the majority of London's Jewish patients, many recent migrants from Eastern Europe. The institution's casebooks reveal how explanations of the women's illness were often shaped by the interventions of family members, particularly when patients were unable to speak English. These interventions described the adverse impact of difficult childbearing careers, involving multiple births, overlong breastfeeding, miscarriage and the loss of children, on the women, and in some instances prompted a revised diagnosis.

Bio

Hilary Marland is Professor of History at the University of Warwick and Principal Investigator on the Wellcome Trust Investigator Award, 'The Last Taboo of Motherhood? Postnatal Mental Disorders in Twentieth-Century Britain'. Her research strand focuses principally on diagnosis of maternal mental illness, and the involvement of diverse groups of health professionals and other stakeholders in developing provisions for support, care and treatment. Her previous research and publications have explored mental illness in prison, migration and mental illness, insanity and childbirth in the nineteenth century, household medical practices, girls' health and the history of midwifery. Her most recent book, co-authored with Catherine Cox, *Disorder Contained: Mental Breakdown and the Modern Prison in England and Ireland, 1840-1900* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2022.

Jenny Smart

Mental Illness and the Menopause: Climacteric Insanity in England in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Abstract

Insanity associated with the female menopause, has, unlike puerperal insanity, received little academic attention. Yet the Annual Reports of the Commissioners in Lunacy show that the incidence of insanity attributed to the 'climacteric' or 'change of life', rose from just over 4 per cent of total female asylum admissions in 1876 to just over 10 per cent by the period 1907-1911. It was also extensively discussed in nineteenth-century medical texts and journals. Climacteric insanity was therefore a significant form of disorder in asylums from at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century. My research explores the phenomenon of climacteric insanity from the opening of county asylums in the mid-nineteenth century to the eve of the First World War. It uses the patient records of the two geographically contrasting county pauper asylums of Derbyshire and Norfolk, as well as nineteenth-century medical texts and journals and official records. It examines the disorder's emergence as a diagnostic category, its prevalence and diagnosis, the social characteristics, behaviours and symptoms of the women admitted, and their care, treatment, and outcomes. It considers the age group affected by the disorder, and the extent to which climacteric insanity was a default diagnosis for middle-aged female patients. Additionally, it examines how the disorder was understood by both lay people and medical practitioners. It also explores wider questions, such as how far the disorder was connected with perceived violation of working-class norms about femininity, family and community, and the light which climacteric insanity can shed on the place of working-class middle-aged women in Victorian and Edwardian society. This paper provides an overview of my research and some of my initial findings.

Bio

Jenny Smart is a PhD student at the University of Cambridge. Her research interest is the history of female insanity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her first degree was in History at the University of Warwick. Prior to beginning her PhD, she completed an MSt in Local and Regional History at the University of Cambridge. The topic of her dissertation was a comparison of puerperal, lactational and climacteric insanity in the Buckinghamshire County Pauper Lunatic Asylum between 1873 and 1893.

Session 3 Activism, Advocacy and Agendas I

Laura Kelly

'Post-Abortion Syndrome' and Anti-Abortion Activism in Ireland, c.1985-95

Abstract

From the mid-1980s, the idea of post-abortion syndrome (PAS), a mental health condition which was said to be characterised by feelings of guilt, regret and depression, began to be weaponised by American anti-abortion activists, soon gaining traction internationally. As R. L. Moran has shown, anti-abortion campaigners appropriated vocabulary from the feminist health movement in their framing of PAS which encompassed the idea that abortion was not only a threat to motherhood but to women's mental health. In the Irish context, PAS similarly began to be utilised by anti-abortion activists as part of their campaigns against abortion and as a move from painting women who sought abortions as 'murderers' to 'victims'.

In the Irish context, PAS was highlighted in particular by two key groups: CURA, an anti-abortion counselling service, and Women Hurt By Abortion, a network of groups established by Dominican priest Father Brian McKeivitt in 1987, which enabled women to meet and speak about their experiences of abortion. By 1985, in their Lenten pastoral *Love is for Life*, the Irish bishops stated that through CURA "Many girls have thus been caringly helped through their difficult experience and have been saved from the still more harrowing experience of abortion and post abortion guilt." From 1988, "post-abortion syndrome" was used by McKeivitt in interviews to describe the feelings experienced by women after an abortion. The long-term impacts of PAS were discussed at the first national convention of the group in 1988. PAS was described as a "time-bomb" because it could take five to fifteen years "before it explodes into the woman's consciousness". Journalist Isabel Healy, writing about the group, argued that while she was sure they were well-meaning, she felt that they were "trying to instil into suggestible women that if they decide on such an option they will be punished, in an effort to create fear of abortion, and thus curb it."

In recent years, while there have been numerous studies of pro-choice activism in Ireland, scholars have been slow to explore the history of anti-abortion activism. Drawing primarily on archival sources, the publications of Irish anti-abortion groups and medical professionals as well as newspaper accounts, this paper illustrates how PAS and concerns around the mental health of women who had abortions became a key focus of Irish anti-abortion campaigns from the mid-1980s. It also illustrates how women's testimonies were used as an effective campaign tool. Through a focus on the mental health of women who had abortions, Irish campaigners attempted to present themselves in a compassionate light and refute critiques that their activism was focused solely on the foetus.

Bio

Laura Kelly is professor of modern Irish history at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Her most recent book, *Contraception and Modern Ireland: a social history, c.1922-92*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2023 and emanates from a Wellcome Trust

Research Fellowship in Medical Humanities. She currently holds a RSE Personal Research Fellowship for a project on anti-abortion activism in Ireland, c.1972-92.

Udodiri Okwandu

Postpartum Psychosis as Compromising Racial Uplift: Elizabeth B. Davis and Family Planning at Harlem Hospital in the 1960s and 1970s

Abstract

This paper delves into the profound impact of emphasizing family planning as a solution for poor childbearing women experiencing postpartum psychoses in the 1960s and 1970s, specifically exploring how this emphasis reinforced the pathologization of Black mothers in American urban centers. To do so, this paper examines the work of Elizabeth Bishop Davis – a Black American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst – and her team at Harlem Hospital Center. As Director of Psychiatry at Harlem Hospital Center, Davis observed that the number of Black women diagnosed with postpartum psychosis was 200 percent above the national average – a trend that reinforced broader medical discourses that articulated a link between maternal mental illness and poverty. In the absence of intervention, she argued, Black psychotic mothers would raise disorderly families, produce emotionally insecure and unstable children, and, ultimately, exacerbate the cycle of poverty that plagued the Black community. Consequently, she advocated that poor Black women with children voluntarily submit to tubal ligation and underscored the importance of family planning. While Davis envisioned her project as a means of promoting racial uplift, I contend that the efforts to diminish and regulate Black women's reproductive capacities mirrored early twentieth-century eugenic approaches to maternal mental illness. Consequently, this paper critically examines the limitations of purported Black liberatory initiatives that rely on reproductive management.

Bio

Udodiri R. Okwandu is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History of Science and Presidential Scholar in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University. Her scholarship explores the history of race, gender, and medicine and sociocultural understandings of health and disease in the United States from the late nineteenth century to the present. Her dissertation -- *Transgressive Motherhood: Maternal Mental Illness, Diagnostic Privilege, and Race in American Psychiatry, 1890 - 1970* -- investigates how racial science and racialized constructions of motherhood have informed the evolving classification, diagnosis, and treatment of maternal mental illnesses (i.e., mental disorders associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period) in the United States from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Udodiri's work has been supported by organizations such as the American Association for University Women, the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, the Consortium for History of Science, Technology and Medicine, the Commission on Women and Gender Studies, and the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History.

Session 4 Activism, Advocacy and Agendas II

Rebecca Jennings

Psychiatric Models of Lesbianism and the Construction of the Lesbian Mother in Late 20th-Century Britain

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of post-war models of female homosexuals as neurotic, unstable and psychologically immature on attitudes toward lesbian motherhood. In a context of limited debate about female homosexuality, psychiatric literature was influential in shaping cultural attitudes toward lesbianism in the 1950s and 1960s. Personal testimonies indicate that women attempting to make sense of their same-sex desires consulted works of popular psychology, while parents of girls exhibiting same-sex attraction routinely sought medical advice. Infrequent media and cultural depictions of lesbians typically drew on these models in portraying their subjects.

As lesbian motherhood began to emerge as a discursive possibility in the 1970s, these ideas framed legal and medical responses to the phenomenon. Divorce and child custody cases in which the former wife had formed an attachment to another woman occurred with growing frequency in the 1970s and, in 1978, newspapers widely reported on the revelation that lesbians were utilising donor insemination to conceive children. For women seeking to become mothers or requiring medical support for themselves or their children at this time, interactions with medical professionals were frequently imbued with assumptions about the neurotic or unstable characters of lesbians. Drawing on testimony from lesbian mothers and literature produced by, for and about them, this paper will trace the ways in which psychiatric models of lesbianism impacted on encounters between lesbian mothers and medical and social work personnel in the late 20th century.

Bio

Rebecca Jennings is an Associate Professor in modern gender history in the Department of History at University College London. She has published widely on Australian and British lesbian history and her most recent book, *Lesbian Intimacies and Family Life: Desire, Domesticity and Kinship in Britain and Australia, 1945-2000* (Bloomsbury, 2023) explores the history of lesbian relationships and parenting in post-war Britain and Australia.

Rachel Moran

Professionalizing the Postpartum: The Rise of Advocate Psychologists in the 1980s

Abstract

A small number of women therapists adopted postpartum specialties in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United States. Most of these therapists experienced some level of postpartum distress themselves, which sparked their interest in the topic. These were women who were already psychologists before their pregnancies, so their own bad postpartum experiences with psychologists motivated their choices as they recovered. Their choice of specialization was both professional and personal. This paper follows the stories of

three such therapists who built private practices around postpartum depression and anxiety in the late-1980s and early 1990s. Using oral histories, I discuss these postpartum therapists and how each built a professional career and postpartum-focused private practice that sought to help women, but that was also entrepreneurial. Sometimes this led to contradictory positions; most were influenced by the women's health movement, but most did not take health insurance and only saw private pay patients. All of them wrote mass market books, and all of them balanced providing therapy with media appearances and advocacy. Their career goals fueled their advocacy, and their advocacy fueled their career goals. These histories both tell a story of women's professionalization, depoliticization, and the longer arcs of postpartum activist groups like Postpartum Support International and Depression After Delivery. The activist groups welcomed therapists, especially these survivor-therapists, and the therapists found these advocacy spaces more comfortable than the main psychiatry-dominated postpartum illness organization. But by the late-1990s, the once-grassroots postpartum organizations were transformed into postpartum professional organizations. Each of the women profiled here eventually held a major leadership role in one of those organizations. Their ascent offered legitimacy and stability to the organizations, but it also displaced non-professional women from the groups and sped up the medicalization of postpartum depression in the US.

Bio

Rachel Louise Moran is an associate professor of history at the University of North Texas. She is the author of *Governing Bodies: American Politics and the Shaping of the Modern Physique* (University of Pennsylvania, 2018). Her new book is *Blue: A History of Postpartum Depression in America*, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press in fall 2024.

Session 5 Narratives, Testimony and Media

Zara Christmas

'This isn't like a nice little fairy tale': Teenage Mothers and their Mental Health in England, 1979-2010

Abstract

Teenage pregnancy was increasingly pathologized in late twentieth and twenty first century England, labelled a modern 'epidemic' by contemporaries. Exacerbated socioeconomic problems and issues of mental health, including loneliness and isolation, were among the consequences often cited by the media, sociologists, and health professionals. However, this paper draws on sources of personal testimony to place teenagers' own thoughts and feelings about their pregnancies at the centre of historical analysis. It considers the impact of personal circumstances and the proliferating contemporary representations of teenage mothers on the mental health of individuals. It explores the historical significance of their dual identity of both mother and teenager, and to what extent their experiences converged or diverged with those of other mothers of the period. This paper therefore seeks to generate new perspectives on how classed and gendered understandings of age affected perceptions and experiences of maternal mental health at the turn of the century. In doing so, it situates teenage mothers' narratives within the wider histories of youth, motherhood, and mental wellbeing.

Bio

Zara Christmas is a DPhil candidate in Modern British History at the University of Oxford. Her research explores the history of teenage pregnancy in late twentieth and early twenty-first century England. Her thesis focuses on the experience of pregnant teenagers and how this was impacted by their relationships and society's attitudes. She previously completed an MSc in the History and Philosophy of Science at UCL, and a BA in History at the University of Warwick.

Fabiola Creed

Postnatal Depression on *Woman's Hour* Radio in Post-World War Two Britain: Airing Narratives, Treatments and Reception

Abstract

Launched in 1946, *Woman's Hour* became one of the first radio programmes in Britain organised by women for mothers. In 1960, *Woman's Hour* transmitted the first mass media broadcast on 'childbirth depression' to approximately four million people. However, discussions on maternal mental illness only became standard on *Woman's Hour* in the twenty-first century.

This paper first explores why the BBC, and by extension *Woman's Hour*, developed an interest in maternal mental health. It then evaluates the differences in how *Woman's Hour* approached the originally 'taboo' topic of postnatal depression in post-World War Two

Britain. To illustrate these changes, this paper both analyses and compares the narratives included, treatments discussed, and the reception towards the only three postnatal depression features on *Woman's Hour* in the twentieth century. These reports were produced a decade apart in 1960, then in 1974, and finally in 1985. The medical experts included Dr Russell Barton (psychiatrist) and Dr Katharina Dalton (gynaecologist and endocrinologist). The 'experts by experience' included growing numbers of recovered mothers.

To study these changes, I use sources from the BBC Written Archives (*Woman's Hour* transcripts and listeners' letters), British Film Institute, British Library oral history collections (Mental Health Testimony Archive), *Woman's Hour's* employees' and interviewees' autobiographies, medical texts by interviewees, and the press.

The novel focus on postnatal depression through *Woman's Hour* contributes to the history of motherhood and maternal mental illness, medical advice through the media, the changing roles of experts, the influence of women's voices, and changes over time in the BBC and *Woman's Hour* in post-World War Two Britain. This will be of value to scholars within the medical humanities, communication and media studies, women and gender studies, and cultural studies.

Bio

Fabiola Creed (she/her) is a historian of health, mass media, stigma, and patient-consumer narratives in twentieth-century Britain. She is a Research Fellow on Hilary Marland's Wellcome-funded project 'The Last Taboo of Motherhood?: Postnatal Mental Disorders in Twentieth-Century Britain' (University of Warwick, 2021-4). Fabiola has published on the history of motherhood and 'health advice' on television talk shows (*'Everyday Health', Embodiment, and Selfhood since 1950*, MUP), auto-fictional television plays (*Women's History Review*) and the BBC's *Woman's Hour* radio programme (*Medical Humanities*).

Session 6 Emotions, Experiences and Mental Health

Tracey Loughran

Stories without Pattern, Lives at the Edge: Emotional Histories of In/fertility

Abstract

In 1960, it was taken for granted that most women would marry, bear children, and spend the majority of their lives home-making. Those who did not become wives or mothers were pitied or perceived as deviant. Lone motherhood and cohabitation were socially unacceptable, birth control was an imprecise art, and divorce was rare. By 1990, this picture had changed out of all recognition. The oral contraceptive pill ushered in new horizons for women; childlessness began to be recognised as a potential choice, while IVF gave hope to those who had difficulty conceiving; pre-marital sex, cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage were normalised; sexual liberation movements challenged compulsory heterosexuality and conventional family forms.

This paper examines the emotional histories of women negotiating fertility problems and involuntary childlessness in these liminal decades, when motherlessness was simultaneously not yet socially acceptable, a potential choice, and a state that could be fought. Using Mass Observation testimonies and oral histories, I explore women's experiences of in/fertility and their place within attempts to narrate life stories during and after these decades. This is an effort to recapture emotional experiences of in/fertility, but also to probe how we can locate and interpret stories about emotions that were difficult to articulate and experiences that did not cohere into shared or easily recognisable social identities. As such, the paper contributes to understandings of in/fertility, cultural discourses of motherhood, emotion, and the relationship between experience, representation, and articulation.

Bio

Tracey Loughran is Professor of History at the University of Essex. Her research interests centre on gender, embodiment, and selfhood in the twentieth century. Her publications include: Hannah Froom, Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney, and Daisy Payling (eds), *'Everyday Health', Embodiment, and Selfhood since 1950* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2024); Tracey Loughran, *Shell-Shock and Medical Culture in First World War Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Gayle Davis and Tracey Loughran (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Infertility in History: Approaches, Contexts and Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Jill Kirby

'When a woman reaches the "change" she goes all funny':¹ Menopause and Mental Health in Late Twentieth- and Early Twenty-First-Century Britain

Abstract

Historically, understandings and representations of menopause have often focused on its most outwardly visible signs such as hot flushes and unexplained changes in behaviour, as

the above quote suggests. It was understood as a time when women might be subject to wild mood swings, apparently causeless weeping, irritability, outbursts of anger, depression and anxiety to the extent that they seemed to have changed personality or, more extremely were labelled as ‘mad.’

Drawing on women’s testimony from the 1970s to early 2000s, in particular letters to *Nova* magazine and the Mass Observation Project, this paper will examine the lived experience of menopausal mental ill-health and its impact on individuals and their colleagues, friends and families. It will explore how women explained it and how they navigated the challenges of its effects and sought help and treatment. I will argue that women experienced a wide range of symptoms, often not realising they were linked to menopause, and sometimes struggled to get appropriate help and/or support from family or the medical profession. Where they did seek medical assistance, their concerns were often dismissed or subject to trends in pharmaceutical prescribing that were not necessarily helpful. Whilst some women benefited from increased women’s health activism from the 1970s onwards, the culture of silence and stoicism that surrounded menopause meant that for many their menopausal mental health challenges were a personal and private struggle with occasionally life-threatening consequences.

¹ ‘Replies to Winter Directive Mid-Life Transitions’ (Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 2009), D3644.

Bio

Jill Kirby (she/her) is a Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Sussex. Her first book on the cultural history of stress in 20th century Britain was published in 2019 by Manchester University Press. She is currently researching a similar history of Menopause in Britain. She is a founding member of the Scholarly Association of Menopausal Studies as well as current Director of Teaching and Learning for Sussex’s Central Foundation Years.

