PHOTOESSAY

Born in Bradford: Madonna and child or?

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Looking through the photographic archives at the National Media Museum at images of babies, revealed that most photographers and parents aimed to portray the baby in a romantic and idealized fashion. Most of these images are heavily influenced by the iconic Christian paintings of Mary and the baby Jesus. They depict the mother as carer and emphasize the bond between the mother and child.

I could find very little representation of fathers in early childcare. Why? Has the sheer weight of religious representation suffocated the development of an alternative, or is it because the majority of painters/photographers are men? Even when I researched portraits of babies by women photographers, this stereotypical/traditional depiction of mother and child was reinforced.
On my visits to the delivery suites at the Bradford Royal Infirmary (BRI), when the fathers are there, it is more than likely that the father will be holding a camera than holding the baby.

Discussions with the midwives and research team for the Born in Bradford project (see below) gave me the idea of producing a series of portraits of fathers with their newborn children. I was influenced in part by changing practices in childcare within a 21st century multicultural society (over the last few decades the work patterns of many families have changed: often both parents work and in some cases there is a role reversal where the mother has become the provider and the father prime carer) and by a desire to provide positive images of fathering for display within the maternity units at the BRI. The latter seemed important as poor parenting skills have been associated with poor role modelling and Bradford has one of the highest rates of single mothers and absentee fathers in the UK.
As I produce more of these portraits, and they are viewed as a collection, a number of factors become noticeable: the wide age range of fathers, the diverse ethnicity, the styles of dress, the dressing of the baby and the way the baby is held.

The reaction of parents when I ask if I can take a photograph of just the father and baby is often interesting. In most cases the parents are enthusiastic, ‘Perfect he is such a proud father just what we want’, or ‘I am glad you’ve said that ‘cos I don’t want my photograph taken in this state’, are typical of the comments made by mothers after giving birth.

Though in a few cases the request is met with suspicion and the parents endeavour to persuade me to take the traditional mother and child photograph, which I do, as you can see in one of the photos here.

A selection of the work is on permanent exhibition in the maternity unit at the BRI and the completed body of work will be exhibited at The Bradford Number One Gallery (http://www.bradfordmuseums.org/bradford1gallery/index.htm) from May to August 2009.
Born in Bradford

Born in Bradford is a new pregnancy/birth cohort that began in 2008. The lives of more than 10 000 babies born in the city will be tracked from pregnancy, through childhood, until they become adults.

By involving a community rich in cultural diversity such as Bradford, the project is one of the first of its kind to research the impact of ethnicity on health, well-being and educational development across life from birth to older adulthood.

Recruitment to the study began in March 2007 and is planned to continue until 2010. Researchers will collate a wide range of information about babies born at the BRI as they grow up in a city with high levels of illness and disease. They will piece together a picture of each child by examining such factors as their genes, diet, lifestyle, schooling, neighbourhood and upbringing to help the world of medicine understand—and prevent—the causes of childhood illnesses and adult diseases. For more details about the study visit the web site (http://www.borninbradford.nhs.uk/Pages/Home.aspx) or see the published protocol.1

Reference