

Why Study the Maternal

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The maternal is a relationship of two different but mutually evolving and transforming subjectivities. Yet, despite recent observational studies that reveal mothers and babies entering into a reciprocal relationship from conception, our fascination with infantile development leads to a curiously static representation of maternal development, with mothers praised, blamed or just ignored.

‘Mothers don’t write, they are written.’ Since Susan Suleiman (1985) coined her aphorism, mothers have increasingly written. The challenge facing Maternal Studies is to enable maternal words to be heard and understood. Understanding maternal experience requires bringing together cultural representations of motherhood, the raw experience of motherhood, and the contribution of the child in the context of necessary re-working academic disciplines from the maternal perspective. I will discuss the co-existing, interlacing contexts beginning with the re-configuring of an academic discipline.

Psychoanalysis

My own field of study has been psychoanalysis. I do think that psychoanalysis has the potential to illuminate maternal subjectivity and that Maternal Studies potentially constitutes a transformative intervention into psychoanalysis. But there are problems with employing the discipline to gain insight into maternal experience.

Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have tended to become deeply implicated in what the French psychoanalyst Monique Plaza has termed ‘the patriarchal regulation of families’ (Plaza 1982). To be fair, I think things have improved but, nevertheless, across the heterogeneous schools of psychoanalysis there has been a homogenizing tendency to reproduce normative representations of motherhood with the mother being viewed from the position of the child, whether current, recollected, concrete or symbolic. This has inevitably constructed a monolithic, timeless, somewhat discouraging image of the mother, to the neglect of what I have termed ‘maternal development’ (Parker 1995). For it is not only children who grow within the relationship: mothers change. Take for example the experience of maternal ambivalence. I have argued that there is a continuum of maternal ambivalence from the manageable to the unmanageable. A woman’s experience of maternal ambivalence can profoundly transform from manageable to unmanageable,

and vice versa, according to a host of factors ranging from the age of the child, to the financial circumstances of the family, to the individual mother's history and her experience of being mothered herself.

Thinking about the dynamics of mother-child separation illuminates the specific processes of maternal development. Within psychoanalysis, the father is usually seen as instrumental in effecting the separation of the mother-child dyad, which suggests there is no process in the mother prompting separation. I have argued that it is the dynamics of maternal ambivalence – the insight, the aggression and reflection prompted by the conflict – which fuels the process. While children move with more or less difficulty towards an ever-increasing sense of themselves as individuals separate from their mothers, women evolve from one maternal identity to another. They move from being a mother who supports a head, to a mother pushing a buggy, to a mother waving a hand, to a mother waiting for a hand to hold. But always a mother. Theirs is a vertical development compared to their children's more 'horizontal' growth away from them.

Cultural Representations

Maternal Studies ask that we hold in mind many complex interactions between psychic reality and external reality, exploring how cultural and public representations of good and bad mothering interact with the unique, personal emotional meanings mothering carries for a woman. Our culture permits flexibility in other activities that involve intimacy, some heterogeneity, some diversity of style but hardly any at all when it comes to mothering. A sense of the rigidity imposed on mothers can paradoxically be gauged from the schism that opens up between different generations of mothers. Yet alongside prescriptions on mothering there flourishes the assertion that 'mother knows best' with the implications that there can be no hard and fast rules for mothering, which is essentially an instinctive, intuitive affair.

I have coined the term 'the maternal ideal' for the expectations facing women embarking on motherhood (Parker 1995). Julia Kristeva comments that the fantasy of the omnipotent, beneficent mother involves less an idealisation of the mother than the idealisation of the relationship that binds us to her. Here she claims that our culture is in the grip of an idealisation of primary narcissism (Kristeva 1977). In other words, a relationship of unproblematic unity. Yet here, as with every other aspect of motherhood, there is a contradiction. While harmony, unity and the attainment of ever greater emotional closeness are held up as the norm of mothering, the pursuit of oneness is

simultaneously considered to be a symptom of the maternal inability to separate. Mothers continue to face, on the one hand, warning of overprotection and, on the other, accusation of neglect. Maternal Studies involves identifying and analysing such dissonances and disjunctures between the lived experiences of mothering within different cultural contexts, and the contradictory ideals that mediate mothering. This is the framework within which maternal identities are forged.

Shamed and Blamed

So much for the 'how' of maternal studies. Perhaps more important is the 'why'.

To my mind the purpose of maternal studies, through the deconstruction of the idealisation and denigration of motherhood, is to enable mothers to release themselves from persecuting blame and shame, abandoning fantasies of omnipotence and perfectability. Understanding the power of maternal shame, with the associated defences of violence against the self in depression, or against the child in abusive behaviour, entails exploring how care-taking relates to the individual mother's shame-history in conjunction with the crude mother blaming so rife in our culture. In other words, we need to conceptualise the interaction of a mother's particular ego ideal (built on positive identification with parental images) with the cultural maternal ideal. Once again this necessitates a degree of re-reading of the psychoanalytic concept of shame. The discipline has tended to separate shame and guilt. Shame, in the context of infantile development, is seen as developing earlier and focusing on failures and weakness of the self, while guilt focuses on the thing done. Motherhood is both an identity and a set of behaviours, hence for mothers the two affects act particularly closely in concert. ('I am a bad mother. I am getting it all wrong.') A mother said to me:

A mother is a provider. I felt mothers were supposed to satisfy, soothe and make children happy, contented and fat. I had a baby who refused food and who cried and cried. It tormented me beyond endurance. It was intolerable to feel useless, unloveable and unloved.

In sum, I think Maternal Studies involves a profound recognition that the personal is the political, demanding that we trace the relationship between cultural formations, individual experience and the limitations of academic discipline, to allow maternal words – of both pain and pleasure – to be heard and understood.

References

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