

What Is Maternal Studies?

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Maternal studies seek to critically investigate, and provide a theoretical framework to, the variety of perspectives on mothering. Pivotal to this study is the belief that mothering is a set of socially constructed activities and relationships which are positioned and contextualised within social, historical and cultural frameworks. Notions of mothering and gender are also closely intertwined and the work of successive feminist scholars across diverse societies have been to utilise gender as an analytic concept in questioning and documenting how mothering is continually constituted, contested and reproduced within family and domestic relationships, as well as in social interactions and identity. In my view, the term 'maternal studies' has had limited usage as a distinctive disciplinary category in Britain. However, the study of maternal issues is an ongoing and growing concern, most notably perspectives of maternal identities, practices, social interactions, relationships and values. Importantly, feminist writers have been at the forefront of such debates.

I would define my own research interest in maternal studies as contributing to a body of knowledge that seeks to decentre mothering discourses. I attempt to do so by continually challenging assumed universal patterns in mothering and mothering relationships. The primary focus of my work has been black mothers (Reynolds 2005). However, I am also interested in the views and experiences of other groups of minority ethnic mothers living in disadvantaged communities. These social groups of mothers are conventionally under-represented in research outside of problematical and pathological assumptions. With regards to black mothers it was during my social sciences undergraduate degree in the early 1990s that I first came to the realisation that they occupy an almost 'invisible' role in mothering discourses and their views are frequently invalidated. I decided to research the experiences and practices of black lone-mothers for the final year dissertation. In part my decision to focus on this group of lone-mothers was influenced by many 'scaremongering' stories emerging in the popular mainstream press that highlighted the detrimental impact of black lone-mothers on their children's wellbeing and the construction of black fathers as 'feckless' and 'irresponsible' men who are absent from parenting and unwilling to take responsibility for their children (see Reynolds 1997). Although this represented the popular view of black families in the mainstream press, it

did not reflect my own personal experiences as a black child of Caribbean parentage raised by two parents within a loving and supportive household. Consequently, I wanted to find out whether these problematical views matched the reality of everyday lived experiences among other black mothers.

My interest in black lone-mothers was also influenced by the fact that 60% of black families are represented by lone-mothers households. Rather than relying on existing stereotypes, I wanted to explore the cultural, historical and social contexts informing this prevalent type of family pattern and household arrangement among black families. However, I remember it provided to be an almost impossible task trying to locate empirical data on black mothers that came from a British perspective. Indeed, black mothers in general were virtually 'invisible' and 'marginal' within existing mothering debates. In the end I had to draw on and rely upon empirical data drawn from the USA concerning black lone-mothers to develop my analysis and complete my dissertation. This experience raised important questions, which even today continue to inform and provide the backdrop to my research. How are the experiences of black and minority ethnic mothers represented in mothering literature and studies? What resources could these mothers turn to in order to investigate the cultural, social and material contexts under which they are mothering? Also, importantly, and as a black mother myself, I wanted to know who is speaking on my behalf of, and giving voice to, mothers belonging to marginalised communities?

Following on from these key questions, my understanding of maternal studies is shaped by the belief that intersecting identities of race, class and gender inform all mothering contexts, practices and relationships. Race and class hierarchies establish difference and diversity among mothers in Britain despite the assumed commonality of gender. Racialised and class-based structural divisions also produce systems of interdependence among mothers. A classic example of this is provided with the issue of childcare provision. Historically, white middle class mothers regard mothering and childcare services as commodities that are purchased cheaply from working class and black, minority ethnic women on low incomes. These women who provide cheap childcare services are often mothers themselves, who then often have to rely upon family members, friends or unregistered childminders to care for their own children because of the lack of affordable childcare provision for black, minority ethnic and white working class mothers on low-incomes (Glenn *et al.* 1994).

Other social and cultural developments also inform racial and class contextualisations of mothering. Thus, for example, mothering is typically represented as an individual act of caring and nurturing performed solely within the confines of family and kinship households. For black and minority ethnic mothers, mothering reflects both individual and community concerns involving paid work for family economic provision, strategies designed for the physical survival of children and community, and issues of formation of individual and collective identity (Reynolds 2003). Research evidence points to the fact that high and middle-income women have largely benefited from the medical advances in reproductive technology, because they have greater access to economic resources that allow them to privately fund their treatment. Lower income women, in contrast, who are traditionally white working class and minority ethnic women, have less access to the latest forms of reproductive technology because of the limited availability of free or financially affordable treatment offered under the National Health Service and private health care. High infant mortality rates continue to disproportionately affect the poor, working class, black and minority ethnic groups. The rapid rise of HIV/AIDS in developing countries such as Africa and the Caribbean has expanded the number of young children who are orphaned or who provide mothering care themselves for their sick parents and siblings. In Britain HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects African and Caribbean heterosexual women, and whilst their access to anti-retroviral drugs and treatment means they have improved life-chances compared to women in developing countries, this does have important implications in terms of influencing their decisions to become mothers and there are also related health and social care provision for mothers affected by this illness (Connell *et al.* 2003).

In conclusion, I believe that maternal studies provide a powerful theoretical and methodological framework that brings together research and writers from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, such as sociology, anthropology, law, history, political science, literature, racial and ethnic studies, to highlight important recurrent themes which stress mothering as being socially constructed. This allows a theoretically informed contextualisation of the historically, socially and culturally specific relationships, interactions and identities of mothering to emerge.

References

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