

Thoughts around the Maternal: A Sociological Viewpoint

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‘But we never thought *you* were maternal’, my brother said to me in the early weeks following the birth of my first daughter. And indeed I am not sure that I was or have been particularly maternal although I do have three lovely daughters who I love beyond words. But this remark reaffirms how closely women’s lives are patterned in relation to ideas of the maternal regardless of whether or not they have or may want children or see themselves in such ways. Ideas of the maternal can be seen to shape overtly, and seep more subtly, into all areas of women’s lives: encompassing assumptions about, and perceptions of, their bodies, their age, sexual orientations, abilities to work, to think and so on. Notions of what being maternal involves are woven in different ways across generations of women’s lives, fashioned in relation to biological assumptions, structural conditions and economic demands. Pausing to reflect upon the maternal confirms its enduring, shifting, liberating and oppressive dimensions. Yet whilst these facets of the maternal can be conjured up, it is less clear exactly what falls (or should fall) within, and what outside, its field of study.

In writing this I realise that I have never used the term ‘maternal studies’ in any of my writing on women and motherhood or to describe what I do. I have much more particularly couched my work in a space called ‘maternal subjectivities’ which for me as a feminist sociologist locates the focus in individual experiences in particular structural conditions and gendered circumstances which are classed and ‘raced’ – and lived in particular historical moments. A focus which has illuminated the ways in which in every culture childbirth and motherhood are culturally inscribed and socially produced (Jordan 1993). Similarly, I have been conscious of foregrounding the term ‘woman’ when writing about individual experiences around motherhood rather than ‘mother’ (Miller 2005, 2007). This is in an attempt not to lose sight of the women I am writing about, or deny their agency in circumstances where the identity ‘mother’ and its maternal associations can become all consuming, diminishing traces of other identities. My sociologically driven disciplinary interests have also led me to tread what I regard as the tricky path through and around ‘fleshy sensate bodies’ and essentialist claims in order to make visible women’s everyday experiences of mothering and motherhood (Jackson and Scott 2001, p.9). This focus

has in turn led me to explore the interplay between discourses, narratives and individual circumstances and to contribute to ‘discussions about how motherhood *should be* socially constructed’ (Chase and Rogers 2001, p.xx; emphasis added). But I am also aware that others working in an arena they would identify as ‘maternal studies’ will be claiming and celebrating what they regard as women’s essentialist tie to mothering alongside associated biological and other assumptions about women’s lives. And whilst I might want to challenge such a position, I think an area of study called ‘maternal studies’ necessarily has to accommodate a wide spectrum of competing and complimentary *disciplinary* perspectives: its parameters continually being contested and re-imagined. Indeed mapping the constant dimensions and shifting contours of maternal experiences has become even more important as configurations of motherhood and associated ideas/claims of the maternal are (re)framed in relation to changing understandings for example of the paternal, fatherhood and parenthood. Teasing apart the relational, gendered and ambivalent dimensions of the maternal necessarily takes us into considerations of masculinities and men’s lives just as it does into political, policy, medical and legal areas. But not everyone will agree.

Irrespective of the competing disciplinary views that will be held it is timely to note that researching women’s lives – often with the maternal as a central experiential feature – has only relatively recently been accepted as a legitimate area of academic study. Ground-breaking work by feminist writers from the early 1970s made visible the processes and experiences which differently shape women’s lives especially in relation to mothering and motherhood (Firestone 1971; Rich 1977; Chodorow 1978; Oakley 1979). But the continuation and expansion of a critical gaze on women’s lives, shaped in relation to the maternal, signifies that much remains to be done. This is because the ‘certainties’ and taken-for-granted aspects of ‘gender fates’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) seen to characterise earlier times have been transformed. This is in part because of wider societal and global change but also in response to the findings of this earlier feminist research. The maternal as an empirical, theoretical and philosophical field of study has extended its range in order to encompass contemporary developments for example in medicine and genetics, assisted reproduction, changing fertility patterns and regulatory and legislative changes arising in relation to these. Yet such ideas of the scope of the maternal in the West will stand in stark contrast to understandings of the maternal in parts of the developing world.

For too many women here the maternal is much more narrowly focused around surviving birth in circumstances of poverty, patriarchy and sometimes war which limit life 'choices' in particular and invidious ways. Taking a global view of the maternal, challenges where and how we might trace around the outline of this field of study and underscores our privileged western positions: but for me it is essential that we do not look away. The maternal then is also political requiring us to be vigilant about practices which contravene women's bodies and their human rights and continually questioning across country borders what constitutes progress.

I recognise that my sociological interests and meanderings on the maternal span biographical moments, through social and cultural constructions of motherhood and identities to global concerns, in contrast to more psychosocial or psychoanalytically informed dimensions of the maternal. This I hope marks out my specific disciplinary interest in relation to what is an increasingly crowded landscape as issues around caring across generations, rights and responsibilities continue to dominate political and policy agendas. Responding to, and challenging, the threads of maternal understandings which are woven through these areas, and which shape individual lives and everyday practices, has never been more timely.

References

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