

Maternal Studies: The Why and Wherefore

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Ever since I became a mother, nearly twenty five years ago, I have known it was a transformative experience and that transformation has continued ever since, affecting who I am in every way. While my relationship with my daughter was and is central to this, I experience my 'maternal' identity as extending far wider, perhaps even into all my practices and all my relationships (for example, as a manager, friend, even as a daughter). And why would any facet of my life be insulated from this powerful transformative force? Understanding what had happened to change me continued to challenge and engage me as a feminist psychologist.

My formation – as an adult woman and then as a mother – was shaped by early second wave feminism, within which motherhood was seen as a problem. The radical texts of de Beauvoir (1949), Firestone (1970) and Greer (1970) came from the position (crudely summarised) that being a mother was a fundamental part of women's subordination and failure to achieve equality on men's terms. Like many of my generation of feminists who remained childless during those decades, I did not treat motherhood with much respect. We were busy breaking away from the model of womanhood and gender relations that our mothers provided and the critique of the nuclear family was widely accepted amongst us.

After I became a mother, my work as a psychologist, social scientist and empirical researcher gradually moved closer to a concern with mothering, gender relations and the understanding of identity or subjectivity. I became familiar with psychoanalytic literature, especially the British 'object relations' school that among others encompasses Klein, Bion and Winnicott, because it provided me with insights into these questions that I found nowhere else. In retrospect, I see this move towards the study of mothering as requiring some criticism of feminist, as well as mainstream, thinking. This is my political reason for thinking that constituting a field of maternal studies might help focus a set of issues that trouble both mainstream and feminist political thinking. While I would be naïve to think that rigorous theoretical work and empirical research into mothering and motherhood could transcend power-knowledge relations, I do think it important to open up to evidence beliefs and ideologies about motherhood, especially in light of political disagreements about the value and status of the maternal in contemporary neoliberal Europe.

In this context, I will pick out one theme that is relevant to the question why now to constitute maternal studies as a field. From a political vantage point, this issue manifests in use of the term 'parenting' and its relation to policy on women's employment. It raises the question: are mothers, fathers and other primary carers interchangeable? The policy shift to a notional model of gender neutral parenting has provided the premise for the expectation that women should be in the workforce apart from brief periods of maternity leave. Is this working in practice? For whom? Even in Scandinavia there is no convincing gender equality in childcare. Under what circumstances and when do mothers want this and what (when they have some freedom of movement) affects their 'choices'?

Behind the politics and policy is a bigger challenge: it is time to understand and re-theorise the fundamental importance of mothering to ethics, wellbeing, the 'good society'. I mean not just motherhood (the abstract position or state of having borne a child) but mothering (the quality of the practices involved in nurturing children and, by extension, others). Adoption of the term 'parenting', much influenced by feminism's struggle for men to share the labour of domestic work and childcare, as well as by New Labour economics, implies that there is no meaningful distinction between fathers and mothers in providing the care of infants and children; that they are interchangeable. To me this is a symptom of the fact that much of feminism and wider progressive thought has steered clear of addressing the issue of what, if anything, is unique in the mother-child relationship. If there is, as I believe, how does this impact upon families and gender relations? The answers are avoided precisely because they might conflict with women's emancipation and the issue has been relegated to the right wing agenda, where it largely resides, reduced, distorted and oversimplified, but nonetheless touching a sensitive nerve. The field of maternal studies could, among other things, try to reintroduce ethics in the context of a period of historical relativism, and take it to the core question of how moral selves are constituted.

Maternal care (I am not restricting this phrase to biological mothers) is central to this process. Why, you might ask, do I invoke maternal and care together, when care extends so far beyond the maternal? This question has informed one recent strand in my work, precipitated by my discovery, a few years back, that amongst all the literatures on care there was no sustained exploration of the capacity to care – how it develops, how it is nurtured and how it fails. I realised how profoundly the maternal genders the capacity to care (Hollway 2006). Theoretical developments centring on intersubjectivity, from

feminism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, ethics and developmental psychology have laid foundations for exploring this cluster of questions in what, for the purposes of this piece, we can call maternal studies.

My interest in intersubjective dynamics (embodied, suppressed, repressed and taken for granted, articulated in speech and action, and in constant dynamic conflict) spans maternal relations and research relations. Based on the premise that affect is not an individual property but moves across the porous boundaries of individuals to achieve usually unconscious and unintended communications, I am pursuing the theme of using researcher subjectivity as an instrument of knowing. Such methodological developments have a chance of being significant for understanding something of the ineffable quality of the maternal. There is a long historical tradition of understanding this in clinical psychoanalysis, under the rubric of transference and countertransference, but these dynamics are not confined to the consulting room. Empirical research can, for example, pick these up in the form of gendered and generational dynamics that play out in relations between participants and researchers and they can become a central part of methodology and used as sources of data. Taking seriously an ethic of care within the relations of research means going beyond the mechanics of informed consent to interrogate our research practices throughout. Unconscious intersubjective dynamics raise issues of asymmetrical power, trust and ethical conduct in a new way. This too is a relevant agenda for maternal studies (Hollway 2008).

A recent empirical project aimed to incorporate these theoretical and methodological principles (Hollway *et al.* 2008). It asked the question what psycho-social processes are involved in becoming a mother for the first time (picking up my own experience of it being transformative). Our sample broadened the evidence base from the group of white middle-class mothers who have so often been used to define norms of mothering, by recruiting twenty first-time (biological) mothers living in the London borough of Tower Hamlets who were diverse in terms of ethnicity, class, education and employment, partner status and living arrangements. We kept in contact from late in their pregnancies to around one year after their babies' births, using in-depth (psychoanalytically-informed) methods (see Urwin 2007).

Despite conditions that were often not ideal or intended, we found that the experience of becoming mothers turned these women, without exception, into 'ordinary devoted mothers' (Donald Winnicott's phrase from the 1950s); that is, mothers who wanted the best for their babies and did whatever they could to provide it. However, this

process was riven with conflict, a far cry from the ‘natural’ processes that characterise romantic portrayals of motherhood and feed the tendency to demonise mothers who do not successfully fall in love with their babies and provide unconditional good enough care. Mothers want to give good enough care. I find it useful to apply a Kleinian theoretical framework based on the idea of incessant ordinary conflict between love and hate and the struggle to live with the resulting ambivalence. Rozsika Parker’s exploration of maternal ambivalence (the inevitable coexistence of conflictual feelings) is very useful here (Parker 1995, 1997). It was clear from our data that becoming a mother for the first time was a psychological upheaval, however benign the circumstances, as new mothers adjusted in the face of conflicts between ‘time for myself’ and ‘putting the baby first’. External conflicts are however experienced in the light and shadow of cultural and biographical meaning, embedded and embodied in affect and practices. This perspective provides a psycho-social approach to mothering which entails a generational time perspective on the maternal and how it is reproduced and changed. We found that becoming a mother positioned women as a generational pivot because of the new availability of identifications both with their mothers (as babies) and their babies (as mothers). In such ways – and more – my psycho-social perspective is casting light on that twenty-five year old question and an extension of it: why was becoming a mother transformative for me and why does it matter?

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