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Conflicts of Motherhood, Then and Now

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This piece reflects on the changes in the author's relationship with her daughter over the ten years since the inaugural issue of *Studies in the Maternal* was published, in conjunction with the ways that philosophical exploration of motherhood has developed over the same period.

When *Studies in the Maternal* published its first issue in 2009, my daughter – my first and only child – was two. In the essay that I contributed to that issue, ‘Thoughts on French Feminism: The Maternal Against Disciplinary Power’, I began to articulate some concerns about the power relations surrounding contemporary motherhood. These concerns would be elaborated more fully in *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (Stone 2011). What concerned me in the essay was the highly demanding set of normative expectations that now confront mothers of babies and young children, expectations by which I had been deeply troubled since my daughter was born. More and more demands are placed on new mothers, and ever greater pressure imposed on them. This is at a point in their lives which is already highly volatile and emotionally and physically exhausting.

Mothers are held to ever higher standards in terms of what they are expected to give their children. This may be by way of caring and continual emotional openness and availability; or, conversely, of expectations that mothers should regulate their children’s and their own lives with careful and unfailing control, constantly maintaining a tight ship, so to speak. In this context, even a minute and short-lived act of maternal inattention is suspected of being able to destabilise or damage a child for life. To give just one example, the popular psychologist Oliver James has claimed that month-old babies can be reliably expected to suffer from insecurity in 30 to 40 years’ time if their mothers leave them to cry at night (James 2010). It is not only parenting and childcare experts who voice these demanding expectations. So do parents themselves, particularly mothers – as we can see from the virulence of many online discussions of, say, breastfeeding or controlled crying.

We can see this field, in which norms and demands crowd in on mothers from all sides, as embodying the particular form of power that Foucault calls disciplinary power, operating as it does through normalising judgement and internalised observation (see Foucault [1975] 1977). It is characteristic of this form of power that it does not operate primarily by prohibiting a definite range of acts, so that those who refrain from performing these acts are left free. Rather, disciplinary power is more pervasive and insidious; under its decree, all individuals are ranked and measured against a set of ideal norms in light of which they are liable to be scrutinised at any

time.¹ Individual mothers are constantly judged – by authorities or experts, other individuals and mothers and, in the end, themselves – as deviating, more or less heavily, from the ideal norms of motherhood. These judgements exert pressure on mothers to make their behaviour conform better to the ideals. And through this mechanism, maternal behaviour comes under disciplinary control. Within this field of power, even ideas that might seem positive can become oppressive, such as Winnicott's idea of the 'good-enough mother'. Although Winnicott intended it to be reassuringly open-ended and anti-perfectionist, in practice, the 'good enough mother' is 'not so much a reassuring minimum as an exact, indefinable measure' against which all mothers are ever-liable to be found wanting (Segal 1992, p. 5).

In my short piece from 2009, I wanted to suggest that 'the maternal' exceeds and can be a source of antagonism and potential resistance to this field of disciplinary power that has come to surround motherhood. I appealed to an idea of the maternal that derives from French feminism, where the 'maternal-feminine' has at times been seen as a reservoir of forces and affects, a domain of bodily relations between mother and infant, and a force-field of latent meanings – in Kristeva's work especially. These maternal forces and affects are never perfectly aligned with the set of actual meanings encoded in the 'symbolic order' of a given society – its ruling framework of ideas, values, assumptions and imaginings. The maternal-feminine domain, then, can harbour potentials and complexities, tensions and difficulties, feelings and energies, which go beyond what is expected of the good or good-enough mother in a particular society. A case in point is mothers' feelings of ambivalence – about their motherhood and status as mothers, their children and their relationships with their children. The social expectation is that mothers should feel no ambivalence: they should be whole-heartedly delighted to become mothers, they should enjoy looking after their children, and they should throw themselves into doing so without any regret or unease. Yet, the reality is that many women experience a complicated mixture of feelings about becoming mothers, having children, and about their own children in particular (see Parker 1995). Amongst these feelings are anger, hatred,

¹ On the features of disciplinary power as Foucault conceives it, see Gutting and Oksala (2019).

resentment, regret, bitterness, and much else. When mothers experience these emotions it is not because they are 'bad mothers', as social norms would have it. Rather, they do so because becoming a mother is an immense change, psychically and socially. This change throws up mothers' myriad feelings about their families of origin, their parents, and their own childhoods. And it confronts mothers with the rawness of their babies' needs and feelings, and with their responsibility for these existents who begin life utterly helpless and dependent. This is a responsibility that can at first seem overwhelming, even terrifying.²

In 2009, then, I was looking for ways to move beyond prevailing images of motherhood which I found saccharine, moralising and unhelpful. I sought ways instead to acknowledge maternity's complexities, difficulties, and passions. This reflected my preoccupation at that point with the lived difficulties of early motherhood. For me, it was a particularly intense, visceral and passionate period, when my relationship with my two-year-old daughter was close, physical and entangled, and its effects were powerful and all-pervasive. In contrast, today, my daughter is twelve and our relationship has become much less immediate, bodily and direct. She now spends much of her time alone in her room, doing her own thing, often shunning my attempts at physical affection – indeed, frequently rejecting affection and intimacy altogether. In short, she has become the typical teenager evoked by Anna Freud, who lives 'in the home in the attitude of a boarder, usually a very inconsiderate one so far as the older and younger family members are concerned' (Freud [1958] 2015, p. 197).

In consequence, this has been, in part, a time of mourning for me. I have mourned the passing of my daughter's childhood and the end of the kind of relationship we had for her first eleven years. I have also been mourning the disappearance

² Having said this, recognising ambivalence can become yet another means of ranking mothers against an ideal norm. This happens in Winnicott's work, for instance. On the one hand, he recognizes that mothers normally feel some degree of hatred for their children. But, on the other hand, he maintains that a mother who can accept her own hatred is better than one who cannot – better not only because she is honest and open to her own feelings but also because she is better *for her child*, since by accepting her own hatred, she is more able – more motivated – to allow her child to separate from her. Ambivalence, then, becomes part of the ideal norm of the good-enough mother against which mothers are judged and ranked. (See Winnicott [1958] 1975, p. 201–2).

of the person that my daughter used to be, replaced by someone new and disconcertingly unfamiliar. To my surprise, though, I have also found the new distance in our relationship to be liberating, much more so than I anticipated. For years, I dreaded the prospect of my daughter breaking away from me and making a psychological separation after which our closeness would be lost forever – at least, that was what I fearfully envisaged. In fact, I have found myself rediscovering a wealth of activities that I used to enjoy before motherhood, and rediscovering aspects of myself, and of my interests and character, that had withdrawn during my daughter's childhood.

Yet, as I am undergoing this self-rediscovery, my psyche after all remains bound up with that of my daughter. She too, in parallel, is developing independent interests, forming a personality different from mine, and expanding beyond the confines of our earlier relationship. And just as she is moving away from her childhood, the deeply felt reconnection with my own childhood which I experienced during her earlier years has receded. As my daughter's world is broadening, I find myself re-living that adolescent moment along with her – the extended moment in which the self grows past the purview of the previously encompassing parent-child relationship.

These experiences have made clear to me how far theoretical and feminist writing on motherhood has focused on *early* motherhood. Sometimes, this focus is implicit. But, on occasion, it is explicit, as with the UK Society for Women in Philosophy 2018 conference on *The Philosophy of Pregnancy, Birth and Early Motherhood*.³ The occurrence of this conference shows that motherhood has become a more accepted topic for academic, and specifically philosophical, inquiry since the first issue of *Studies in the Maternal* appeared in 2009. Yet it is still not accepted and discussed as much as one might hope. For example, notably, the recent *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* – with fifty chapters, ordered alphabetically and covering, e.g., 'Affect', 'Embodiment' and 'Identity' – has no chapter on mothering or motherhood (although there is a chapter on 'Pregnancy, Personhood, and the Making of the Fetus').⁴ Also notably,

³ See https://www.southampton.ac.uk/southampton_ethics_centre/news/events/2018/06/21-conference-the-philosophy-of-birth.page.

⁴ For the *Handbook*, see Disch and Hawkesworth (2015); the chapter on pregnancy is Samerski (2015).

within a recent symposium evaluating this handbook in *Politics & Gender*, neither the essay that is specifically addressed to 'Profusion, Contestation, Missing Pieces' (Corrêa 2018) nor any of the other symposium contributions mentions the 'missing piece', motherhood.

So, there remains room for more discussion and reflection on motherhood overall. There is also scope for more inquiry into the distinctive features of motherhood at different stages, such as being the mother of an adolescent. There is, to be sure, theoretical literature on adolescence – for example, within psychoanalysis, Waddell (2018). However, Waddell treats adolescents' difficulties as deriving from unresolved difficulties in their first years, and she treats difficulties in parent-adolescent relationships as deriving from unresolved difficulties during that early formative period. My experience, though, is that my relationship with my daughter now is markedly different from how it used to be – that it has been undergoing profound change and is set to continue to do so. Those psychoanalytic approaches that gravitate incessantly back towards infancy and childhood obscure and underplay the differences between childhood and adolescence. From my daughter's side, she is now in a period of heavy repression. To carve out her independent identity, she is repressing much of her prior attachment to myself and her father, and to our bodies.⁵ Correspondingly, I sometimes feel painfully rejected and abandoned by her – but not always, and not nearly as much as I had feared. This is because, in tandem with my daughter, I have moved into a different place, psychologically, from that of early motherhood.

Given this difference between early and later motherhood, some features of early motherhood now stand out to me more clearly: namely, the overpowering pressure on mothers to comply with normative expectations; and its tension with the passionate intensity of the early mother-child bond, its unruliness and resistance to regulation. It is just when that bond is most unruly and intense that maternal behaviour is most forcefully regulated – which is surely a defensive reaction to its unruly intensity. With some relief, I find that I am no longer in that conflictual dynamic of

⁵ To be fair, Waddell indeed points out this prominent role of repression within adolescent personality formation (2018, p. 6), but the full significance of this cannot be accommodated within her infancy-oriented approach.

early motherhood. Where I am, however, is less clear to me. I look forward to reading future work in maternal studies that will shed light on the social, emotional, and psychological positions through which mothers move, as their children pass into adolescence and beyond.

Editor's Note

This contribution to the 10th anniversary issue of *Studies in the Maternal* were invited by the editorial team. As such they were internally reviewed by the journal's editorial team.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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