

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION – PAPER

Gender and Maternal Identities

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What effects do contemporary changes in women's gender identity have on women's experiences – in their variety and particularity – of becoming a mother? How do these identities accommodate, conflict with, sit well with, the core experience of birth-mothering a new infant, central to which is the asymmetrical demand of care by a vulnerable dependent infant, to which that mother has given life? This is a large question, larger than can be answered here, but this article will try to open it out further.

With the perspective that a decade brings, with the ability to look back at the whole 'Becoming a Mother' project on which I reported in 2009, three topics emerge which – when I follow their threads – all lead to the same overarching issue: *What effects do contemporary changes in women's gender identity have on women's experiences – in their variety and particularity – of becoming a mother?* How do these identities accommodate, conflict with, sit well with, the core experience of birth-mothering a new infant, central to which is the asymmetrical demand of care by a vulnerable dependent infant, to which that mother has given life? This is a large question, larger than can be answered here, but I will try to open it out further.

The details of our empirical project (research team: Ann Phoenix, Heather Elliott and me) can be found elsewhere (Hollway 2015) and were sketched in my 2009 contribution: a diverse sample of 20 first-time mothers in Tower Hamlets, in-depth psychoanalytically-informed and reflexive methods, psycho-social conceptual approach to identity transitions. The dual perspective played on in the title of my subsequent book *Knowing Mothers* (2015) required a continual exploration of the researchers' knowing, through reflexive methodology (for example Elliott, Ryan and Hollway 2012), in addition to the detailed attention to new mothers' situated experience, elicited not solely through language (Hollway 2012a).

Three threads, plaited together, offer my psycho-social response to this question:

- *The patterns that were suggested between research subgroups, especially those based on intersections of class, level of education and ethnicity.* From an analysis of the whole sample (not published), the finding that stands out in my memory is a tendency for the middle-class, higher educated, largely white, professional women in our sample to have a harder time adjusting to the maternal demands they experienced.
- *The radical theoretical revision of femininity and the maternal offered by Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory was invaluable in offering a nuanced, non-dualistic approach to the relation of gender and the maternal, which I could use in understanding the ordinary conflicts involved in becoming a mother.* It was in the first issue of *Studies in the Maternal* that I came across matrixial theory

through Griselda Pollock's scholarly and accessible introduction. It changed my way of seeing.

- *The matrixial account of the difference between feminine^m (feminine to the power of the matrixial) and feminine^p (feminine to the power of the phallus).* This provided me with a non-dualistic account of women's gender that presented fresh insights into the politically sensitive issue of differences in maternal and paternal care in early parenting (Hollway 2016).

Writing the book from the 'Becoming a Mother' project, I intended to incorporate not only single case analyses but a whole-sample analysis. In the event the whole-sample analysis ground to a halt at about 20,000 words, still unfinished: there would be no space for it. My approach to a psycho-social whole-sample analysis was to take an exemplary case in some detail, then select a contrasting case on the themes that had emerged. I then used further clusters around and beyond these two cases to find out if and how the differences thus produced held across the sampled social variables, notably age, class, ethnicity, educational level, family, housing and work status. The theme of 'ordinary conflict' (Hollway 2010) emerged from the data as a whole (afforded, I believe, by the psychoanalytically informed methodologies where it might conventionally be glossed over by descriptive narrative methods and entrenched conventions about the natural endowment of maternal feelings in women).

The first pair of cases was selected to explore the 'ordinary conflict' encountered when women became (birth)mothers for the first time. Sarah, 29, was a graduate highly involved in her work for a large organisation, while Becky, 20, had worked in low-paid evening work. My general impression of Becky was her eager embrace of a maternal identity that was new but already inscribed, through her family of origin and sibling role, to become a fundamental staging post in her life and identity. Sarah, by contrast, was relieved to feel that she had got back to who she was before her pregnancy (a working woman with an unchanged body), yet with a maternal identity as a welcome addition. An initial comparison of Sarah's and Becky's relations to objects and events produced several salient points of contrast: the mixed feelings (Sarah) or unambivalent delight (Becky) with which they approached the prospect

and early experience of motherhood; a wish to return to prior body and appearance (Sarah), or embracing the marks of motherhood on her body and changed lifestyle (Becky); commitment to (Sarah) or distance from (Becky) paid work/career, and reliance on expert knowledge and research (Sarah) as opposed to reliance on maternal intuition (Becky).

Further detailed case studies of women similar to Sarah (for example, Hollway 2015 chapter 7) left me with a lasting impression that the kind of gender equality that characterises contemporary Western post-modernity has exacerbated the identity upheaval that accompanies maternity. I call this, following Susan Hekman, gender equality based on a male identity model. Socially, white, educated women have a solid presence in the workplace, and the version of feminism which got taken up by Western governments and organisations was one that Hekman (1999: 7), in her categorisation of recent historical feminist strategies, labelled 'the erasure of difference and the pursuit of equality'. This was not a symmetrical partial erasure of difference by both sexes, but one based on an erasure of women's difference from men. Led by the goal of employment equality, the strategy was for women to gain economic equality by being as like men as they could be. Domestic and maternal care was devalued (Hollway 2016). Indeed, it was split off, recognisable in what, according to Hekman, was a second subordinated strategy: that of valorising the feminine and women's difference from men. I remember the 1980s feminist emphasis on the relational woman and connectedness and how it was criticised for fixing women in a maternal model of caring that threatened gender equality (Hollway, 2008 chapter 2). As long as thinking is dominated by the dualisms of feminine and masculine, maternal and paternal, care and work, the femininity-as-connectedness account will tend to look retrogressive, a way of theorising women's particular fittedness to mothering and caring.

For a psycho-social approach to gender formations in identity, such external world changes pose the question of if and how these come to be reflected in women's identities. Lynne Layton, back in the early 2000s, observed what she thought was a changed psychic structure among young high-achieving American women students. Focusing her psycho-social argument on historically recent changes in formations

of female subjectivity, she concluded this career-orientated group of women was often characterised by a changed psychic structure away from the traditional relationship-based femininity based on the maternal, towards a defensive autonomy that formerly characterised mainly men. Defensive autonomy refers to when autonomy is split off from relational needs and capacities, thus denying its embeddedness in relationships. For Layton, feminism began to change 'the proper way to live a white middle-class female heterosexual identity': the liberated woman was now 'expected to have a career, not a job, a career'. Now, 'to fit into a man's world, women had to be able to inhabit the male version of autonomy, the psychic requirements of which conflict dramatically with those of the so-called "relational female"' (Layton 2004: 34).

This seemed to be the case in our East London sub-sample too (the field research conducted between 2006 and 2008). However, Layton was observing young women prior to any encounter with motherhood. For our research cluster of career women, pregnancy set off – to varying degrees – an inexorable train of embodied and affective changes that conflicted with the male model gender equality that predominated, and arguably still does.

The state of pregnancy is radically unsettling in the way that it defies and transcends discourse. Lisa Baraitser, from the perspective of a maternal ethics, reaches out to the mother as 'impossible subject, par excellence. Caught in an ever-widening gap between her idealization and denigration in contemporary culture, and her indeterminate position as part object, part subject within the Western philosophical tradition' (2009: 4). For Imogen Tyler, 'The pregnant subject defies the logic of classic ontology (...) it cannot be contained within forms of being constrained by singularity (...) there is an impasse between the 'I' that writes/speaks and pregnant subjectivity which is the exact antithesis of that I's implied individuality' (Tyler, 2000: 292). Griselda Pollock (2004: 57) cites Julia Kristeva 'the uncanniness of the experience [of pregnancy] in terms of a space, both double and stranger, where *there is no one to signify* the experience. Where *It* is happening, according to her, *I* am not there. The *I* cannot think *it*.' This renders women 'unhinged from language itself'.

Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory treats differently the both/and of what in the 1980s was called connectedness and autonomy and split between women and

men. She posits two contrasting strata in the make-up of subjectivity: transsubjective (prior to and beyond language) and individualised (depending on the symbolic). The former starts prenatally and generates a matrixial potentiality operating along a different unconscious track to the post-natal 'individual' stratum, generated under the cutting and separating logic of the phallus. The matrixial is heavily foreclosed in the current conditions shaping middle-class career women but becoming a mother awakens this stratum of subjectivity and precipitates 'fragilization'. (I discussed this in relation to Winnicott's phrase 'primary maternal preoccupation' using a different case example, Hollway 2012b.) With pregnancy, according to Ettinger, 'memories of the primordial condition of her own becoming [...] are newly reactivated from another position: the transsubjective matrixial encounter in a trans-subjectivising archaic environment' (Pollock 2009: 9).

Griselda Pollock explains that in matrixial theory, the baby-to-come is familiar in two temporal registers, 'diachronous as well as synchronous'. The diachrony is particular to the becoming mother because 'at the same time memories of the primordial condition of her own becoming [...] are newly reactivated from another position: the trans-subjective matrixial encounter in a trans-subjectivising archaic environment [...] asymmetrical, regressive, remembering and at the same time anticipatory and projective into living futures to come' (2009: 6). The primordial condition is available also to a baby's father or other – social – parent, but synchronously, deriving from 'what once he co-vented at the register of his own becoming' (Pollock 2009: 9). It is in this second, synchronous, sense that femininity to the power of the matrixial (feminine^m) is 'open to all' – women and men – if they are available to it. This is radically different from feminine^p, femininity produced within a phallic model, constructed on binaries and characteristic of language and the individualised stratum. The gender equality model that depends on erasure is also trapped in this binary logic, even while intending to erase it. The matrixial claim, symbolised in the formula feminine^m, successfully interrupts the binary whereby fathers are either completely estranged from maternal feelings or have exactly the same relation to their babies as mothers.

In parenting practice, much depends on the ability of someone, woman or man, to tune into the trans-subjective stratum, never erased since their own beginnings, but heavily foreclosed in neoliberal global culture. This retuning unsettles the 'I' based on singularity and autonomy, which has been so central to a masculine subjective formation and become more available to women through the erasure of feminine gender difference in the dominant gender equality model. This clarifies why career women would be likely to have a harder time adjusting to the non-negotiable demands of new mothering. Men's parental connection is different from women's – delivered at their earliest beginnings but more or less heavily foreclosed by masculine culture. The term parenting, with its political imperative to treat mothers and fathers as not just equally responsible but having the same relation to babies, is a direct product of the model of gender equality based on the erasure of difference. It relies on and perpetuates the phallic assumption that birth and post-natal life preclude prenatal transsubjective experience.

Editor's Note

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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