Education, Employment, and Everything
The triple layers of a woman's life

Edited by
Majella Albion
Pauline Collins

iWC
2007

Becoming a Mum: Conflict between the Ideal Mother and the Self

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Abstract

This paper explores the dominant narratives present in in-depth ante- and post- natal interviews with 10 first-time mothers from south-east Queensland. Using a feminist post-structuralist paradigm, the idealised conceptions of motherhood adopted by these women are juxtaposed against their desires to maintain and regain an identity separate to their mothering one. Beliefs about what constitutes 'work' are also explored. These findings resonate with the tension between second-wave feminism's view of the institution of motherhood as a primary means of women's oppression, and later studies which attempted to validate women's experiences and work. Furthermore, these mothers' beliefs suggest that they are grappling with the integration of the often contradictory aspects of mothering into a workable whole. In some ways, repeating many of the struggles their own mothers faced. This hypothesis, along with current societal concerns with delayed mothering, picket-fence families, and a return to paid work for mothers of school-aged children, suggest that the influences upon mothers, to be all things to all people remains.

Introduction

Despite significant societal changes over the last decade, "…decisions about whether, when and how to mother continue to face almost all women" (DiQuinzio, 1999, p. xi). Society in general and mothers in particular, are caught by the many contradictions of motherhood. Is mothering innate or a learned skill that has been used to oppress women? Is a full-time mother at home better than one who is in paid employ? Is it a private or public responsibility? Who is a 'good' mother?

These questions have engaged maternal scholars since the 1970s (Brown, Lumley, Small, & Astbury, 1994; Everingham, 1994; Ex & Janssens, 2000; Hays, 1996; Hrdy, 1999; Kitzinger, 1992; Le Blanc, 1999; McMahon, 1995; Miller, 2005; Oakley, 1992; Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991; Porter, 2006; Rich, 1995; Wearing, 1984; Yeo, 2005). More recent research has considered how the views of feminist and pro-natalist thinkers have informed dominant, cultural, mothering narratives, and the resultant identity and health difficulties this may pose for new mothers (Blumenthal, 1999; Carolan, 2004; Hays, 1996; Kitzinger, 1992; Lupton, 2000; Maushart, 2006; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Miller, 2005; Nicolson, 1998; Thurer, 1994;

Wall, 2001). Finally, researchers have investigated the more modern phenomena of lesbian, step, adoptive and IVF mothering, as well as childlessness (Cannold, 2005; Downe, 2004; Hewlett, 2002; Letherby, 1994)).

Australian National statistics at the beginning of this century fuelled public concern about a population that was ageing, delaying parenthood and having fewer children than ever before. However, the birth rate of 1.73 babies in 2001 rose to 1.81 in 2005 and as at 31st December 2006 births were the highest recorded since 1971. Additionally, mothers in 60% of all couple families with children under 15 years old, were in part- or full-time paid employment in 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, 2003b, June, 2007, March 2003, November, 2002).

These data prompted governmental and public debate concerning the position of Australian families and the resultant family-focus of the Howard government[28] appears to have encouraged women to have babies. However, social commentator and feminist Anne Summers, suggests that hidden in the current debate is a subtle, but strong anti-woman rhetoric in which no-one talks about women, only about families. Equality has been replaced by a new ideology she calls "the breeding creed". She further suggests that the options offered to women will push them back into the home and full-time motherhood (Summers, 2003).

Against this background it is considered timely to examine the expectations and experiences of modern Australian women who are becoming mothers. How do modern women deal with conflicting ideologies and cultural mores when they become mothers? How does this impact on their health and well-being? If we consider that mothering has the greatest impact on children and, therefore, the future of our country, then the welfare of all Australian mothers is a fundamental concern.

Aim, Methodology and Method

By listening to, interpreting and reporting women's stories of their journeys to early motherhood, I aimed to

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investigate the beliefs, expectations, and experiences about motherhood held by modern Australian women. Additionally, I was keen to learn how they incorporated their new mothering role into their sense of self.

A feminist, post-structuralist approach was used for several reasons but mainly because it allowed for a multiplicity of stories and truths which are socially located, and, most importantly, demanded respect for the participants, and their stories, at all times. Therefore, I formed whole narratives from the ante- and post- natal interviews which are presented in my dissertation. Additionally, I used thematic analysis to find dominant themes or master narratives. It is part of this analysis that will be discussed in this paper.

Recruited using snowball techniques, the 10 women were all middle-class, trade or tertiary educated, lived in south-east Queensland in stable, heterosexual relationships and, bar one, had planned to have children. The median age was 30 years. They were all pregnant with their first child at the first interview, and that child was 8 to 9 months old for the second interview. Any names used are pseudonyms chosen by the mothers. All appropriate ethical clearances were obtained.

Thematic Analysis

Four dominant themes, Conceptions of Ideal Mothering; Likely and Challenging Realities; Upholding the Self; and Life Progression/Personal Growth were found. This paper briefly discusses the themes, Conceptions of Ideal Mothering and Upholding the Self.

Conceptions of Ideal Mothering

This was the first category of talk to catch my attention and multiple readings only strengthened that first impression of its dominance within the discourse. The premise underlying the mother ideal is the notion of the 'good mother' or, 'good mothering', which encompasses beliefs concerning attributes of good mothers as well as ideas about the correct way to parent. Views about what constituted ideal or good mothering (the mother they wanted to be, or felt they should be) were easily accessible for these women.

The beliefs clustered into three sub-themes; Instinctive, Wonderful Mothering; Exclusive Mothering; and Good Mother Attributes. Biological, instinctive mothering is the notion that mothering is innate, natural and the ultimate self-fulfilment for women. Exclusive mothering encompasses the child-centred nature of these participants' mothering. Lastly, good mother attributes comprises a list of mothering characteristics and behaviours that these mothers considered paramount.

Instinctive, Wonderful Mothering The notion of mothering as natural was a universal belief. Most felt all mothers/women possess these instincts and having a baby was something that millions of women did every day.

And I think it just comes, it almost comes naturally. You just sort of, automatically, switch into this new mode. Meg, AN interview

Although the realities of life with a new baby challenged this notion, several mothers still spoke post-natally about knowing instinctively what to do for their child. However, awareness of the ideal had led some, like Lucy, to challenge it.

If it was all to do with mothering instincts, then you know, why would men make such good carers? AN interview

Nevertheless, a few felt that being a mother was the ultimate goal of womanhood, although some felt their lives had been complete before the baby.

…having a little baby I think also, just emotional fulfilment, it's spiritual, it's physical fulfilment, it's everything. Jasmine, AN interview

Exclusive Mothering Not only indicative of the life-fulfilment aspect of mothering, Jasmine's comment also suggested the notion of exclusive, monopolistic mothering that these mum's thought appropriate. Most talked about the child being the pivot about which all else revolves.

And I don't think we're as selfish as we were, because you can't be when you've got children, I mean, they always come first. They do….I mean, and you're, I'm happy to do that…. PN interview, Amy

This was especially dominant post-natally in which the children, as one mother said, ran their life completely. They spoke of babies' moods controlling whether they went out or what they achieved for the day. For a few mums, monopolistic mothering was evident in terms of beliefs of being responsible for stimulating and developing their babies mentally. An important aspect of this exclusivity was trusting others, such as day care, grandparents and friends, with the baby. For example Liza talked of a friend's mother's offer to baby sit so she and her husband could go out for dinner

And I thought, oh that would be great, but then I have to think, oh she's never looked after her before. PN interview

Good Mother Attributes Like much other research, these mothers felt a good mother needed to be nurturing, calm, patient, capable, and all-knowing.

I think I might be a strict mother…I don't want to be a pushover…I want to be the sort of Mum that they'll respect me and they can approach me…that I'm there for the child…you know, mother's role in just keeping

them safe…and having fun with them as well and not being a stick in the mud   *AN interview, Heidi*

The potency of the mother ideal was especially evident in the way *all* the mothers reverted to culturally appropriate mothering talk (See underlining below) after making negative or self-focused comments.

I've never had, had to worry about leaving him but sometimes I wish I could just go. <u>But then I'm only gone for 10 minutes and I'll be like, 'oh I hope he's okay'</u>
                    PN interview, Jenny

Even though many felt it was important for them to have time away from their baby, for most of the mothers, talking or thinking about their own needs was fraught with guilt and difficulty.

Upholding the Self

Juxtaposed against the ideal mother discourse was a subtle, but significant theme which focussed on these mothers' strong desire to maintain or regain time for their independent selves.

The talk in this section clustered into two main sub-themes: Individual Focus and The Partner. Individual Focus concerned the centrality of the individual in terms of career and private needs. The Partner encompassed wishes for shared parenting and housework, as well as maintenance of the couple relationship.

Individual Focus A self-identity separate from that as mother was central to this theme. Ante-natally, most were confident that despite some compromises, they would still be able to pursue their own interests and find self time. These ideas had changed post-natally to a growing realisation amongst the mothers that they had somewhat lost themselves in their babies' needs. For some the challenge to their sense of self and agency had been substantial.

There have been bad days where I've thought, and it's not been, it's not been because she's been a hard baby to look after. It's just been the lack of freedom for me where I've thought, 'God, if I knew now, if I knew then what I know now, would we have made the same choice?'   *Lucy, PN interview*

An interesting adjunct was the notion that having time for the self, especially for leisure, was selfish. Heidi's comment about not wanting to have another baby just yet was revealing,

Because, I, um, I've got to get my body back into shape… and, um, get back into my healthy stuff that I used to be in. Um, yeah, and just try and, um, to be a bit selfish in the sense that I've just got to look after myself for a few months   *PN interview*

Several participants cited their paid work or career as a significant aspect of their selves as separate from being a mother. Apart for financial needs, paid work was seen as providing rewards such as social stimulation, competence, and recognition. Moreover, post-natally, paid work was seen as enjoyable and providing freedom from the demands of the baby. Additionally, for most of the participants, return to paid work was a way of regaining a part of who they were before they became mothers. Aphrodite captured this sentiment when she said

But it's nice to just drive to work…And you get there and you just get out and shut the door and you don't unclip, and come on in, and gather thirty thousand things. So it's probably reminiscent of what life was like before Alex   *PN interview*

Many of the mothers had to adjust to the bodily changes pregnancy and birth had wrought. Illness and injury, temporary or lasting alterations to size and shape, and difficulties incorporating breast feeding were spoken of by most of the mothers. Sarah talked about the anger she had felt trying to breast feed while managing a life.

So I just sort of had enough. It was too hard umm for my lifestyle….trying to run a business and leaving her with other people and I was constantly feeding, expressing and um I had the most ridiculous mammaries - they were just so big!   *PN interview*

The Partner The sharing of child- and house-work, as well as maintenance of couple identities was also seen as a way of protecting the mothers' personal selves. However, feminist expectations of chore sharing were not realised post-natally, something which all the mums commented on. As well, couple time had become family time due to the pragmatics of life with a new baby.

So, but no, there's been no couple time. It's just been more family time….I mean when Justin goes to bed we spend a bit of time together…We really haven't gone out on dates…   *Alison, PN interview*

Concept of Work

A final point needs to be highlighted. A covert but vital element of the mothering discourse was the nature of talk about 'work' and was inextricably linked to the themes above. On the one hand the terms 'mothering' and 'work' were viewed as being independent and unrelated. As Meg said post-natally

James gets up as much as I do at night and does as much as he can considering that he works all week…

implying that her motherwork was not as legitimate as her husband's paid employment. On the other hand, mothering was *hard* work and vital to self-esteem.

Before I had her there's no way I would say, 'a mother's working'…when people ask me, oh would you go back to work, [I say] 'yeah I'm a mother. I work.
                    Liza, PN interview

Discussion

Conceptions of Ideal Mothering and Upholding the Self are two salient and important aspects of new motherhood for these women and reveal how they (a) conceptualised motherhood and mothering in the modern world, and (b) conceptualised their own identities as mothers within that world. The dominance of the themes suggests that these are key facets of two aspects of these mothers' emergent maternal identity (Blumenthal, 1999), Ideal Mother and Independent Self. Additionally, thoughts about what constituted work were related to the tension between these themes/selves.

Ideal Mother The view of the ideal mother (devoted, nurturing, instinctive, responsible, selfless, baking, stay-at-home, maybe sacrificial, fulfilled and happy) is long-enduring and easily accessible in our western society (Brown et al., 1994; Carolan, 2004; Kitzinger, 1992; Le Blanc, 1999; McMahon, 1995; Phoenix et al., 1991; Rich, 1995; Wearing, 1984).

It is not surprising, given the western master narrative (Miller, 2005) or myth, of the ideal mother is compelling and has become so culturally entrenched that it is seen as a statement of fact (Barthes, 1993) rather than an evolutionary, historical construction (Hrdy, 1999; Rich, 1995; Thurer, 1994; Yeo, 2005). The data in my study confirm the continued and robust influence of this model. It was the foremost mother-identity drawn upon, and was still evident even when faced with the realities of early mothering experiences.

The salience of archetypical maternality had a profound effect on how these women thought about themselves as mothers. Able to birth successfully, love and care for their babies, and to 'just know' what the baby needed, was reassuringly familiar and enabled the women to feel confidence and profound joy in their baby and new life. However, this same ideal caused feelings of guilt and inadequacy when expectations were not validated or unanticipated consequences occurred. Breast-feeding difficulties and the constancy of a new baby's needs caused self-doubt, frustration and sadness. For most these difficulties and lack of self-time led to a wish for a regaining of their pre-baby identity.

Upholding the Self Exhortations to find one's self, to be an individual are part of our modern cultural narrative of individualism (DiQuinzio, 1999). Although temporary challenges to the sense of self were anticipated by the women in terms of loss of time and an interrupted career, they were unprepared for the obligatory sense of exclusive responsibility and the demands of living up to an ideal. They spoke intensely about feeling a loss of self and, additionally, expressed guilt and apology about their need for self-time. Seen as paradoxical to the Ideal Mother identity, they were struggling to reconcile the perceived conflicting demands of these two selves, even if they could rationalise focus on the self as being good for the family/baby. Extending also to the career domain, the competition between the Ideal and the Self reflects the argument about public and private responsibility for child-rearing as well as what constitutes 'work'.

Although cognisant that their mothering was work (and often hard at that), the word 'work' was generally used to refer to the domain of paid work outside the home. The unconscious implication appeared to be that paid work was more important and legitimate than their child-rearing endeavours. This outlook is a significant factor in the dissonance which underpins the conflict between the different mother-selves as well as the tensions between the home and the world of paid work.

Closing Thoughts Becoming a mother (or not) remains a key aspect of the development of western women's adult identities (Rich, 1995). The birth of a child, especially the first, is a time of significant transition, in which women need to face themselves and their many identities and try to reconcile them with the emerging mother self. Contradictory selves compete for time and space causing feelings of chaos and self-doubt. Furthermore, these identities are fluid and changing depending on context and salience for each person.

Although all these mothers, bar one, had always imagined having children, they still found the reality different, chaotic and confronting. Incredibly, and notwithstanding major social changes, the principal reference for mothering these mothers were using was the 1950's ideal that has been spoken of since maternal research began in the 1970s, even though they did challenge some beliefs. Additionally, they embraced the 20th century's ethic of individualism. This research highlights that not only are women repeating many of their own mothers' struggles, they must also integrate newer, often contradictory ideals into a workable mothering whole.

My concern is that despite a broader range of potential mothering contexts, things are not easier, but more complicated. Despite this, and 30-odd years of maternal research, why do the traditional ideals of motherhood still dominate? Where are the modern images? Why do we hold simplistic concepts of motherhood rather than appreciating and understanding a complex, holistic model?

Acknowledgments

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