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EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERHOOD: CHALLENGING IDEALS

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Abstract. *This qualitative study explores how "ideal" images of motherhood have come to interact with the personal everyday experiences of mothers. Four mothers participated in individual, semi-structured interviews. The data was organised and analysed under thematic headings. Three main themes are highlighted in this study: a mother's account of the maternal ideal, the experience of maternal ambivalence, and motherhood as a natural condition. The analysis provides insight into the personal experience of motherhood and highlights its complex and multifaceted nature. The study illustrates the oppressive nature of maternal ideals as mothers attempt to achieve the unachievable in their everyday experiences of motherhood. It is argued that tensions coexist within a mother that render her neither as "bad" as society fears nor as "good" as society desires (Parker, 1996). A reconstruction of the "ideal mother" emerged as the mothers provided a personal account of their experiences of motherhood*.

INTRODUCTION.

When we consider that most people have been mothered at some time and that most women become mothers and are occupied with this role for a large part of their lives, it is perhaps not surprising that motherhood has been, and still is, a popular theme in many novels, developmental psychology books and child care manuals (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991a). Most of this literature reflects what is considered to be "good" mothering by contemporary Western cultures. Virginia Woolf's novel **To the lighthouse** provides what Parker (1996) describes as a case history of the workings of the maternal ideal, where Mrs Ramsay, as the mother figure, is the object of idealisation. Developmental psychology books present theories on mothering based on empirical research that focuses on the mother's influence in the first year/s of the life of the human infant, both physically and emotionally. An example is Winnicott's **The family and individual development** where the expectant mother is described as developing "primary maternal preoccupation" which is "the thing that gives the mother her special

ability to do the right thing" (Winnicott, 1965:15). Child care manuals, written mostly by medical practitioners and a few psychologists, are basically "cookbooks" instructing women on how to mother "properly" (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991a). Dr Spock's infamous **Baby and child care manual** is a prime example. Spock assures mothers that bringing up children is not a complicated job as long as they take it easy and trust their own instinct (Spock, 1976). Although extensive, much of the literature is based on knowledge about motherhood that tends to be assumed rather than critically examined (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991a). In addition the diversity and multiplicity of women's self-identifications and experiences as mothers are ignored, rather mothers tend to be categorised, homogenised and their experiences generalised. The mother that emerges from the literature is primarily middle class, (mostly) white and part of a nuclear family, with very little attention being given to cultural and structural diversity. While this article recognises and problematises such exclusions, its focus will be on how and to what extent middle class, first world ideals around motherhood have come to interact with four white South African mothers' personal experiences of motherhood.

According to Phoenix and Woollett (1991b:217) the literature may be extensive but much of it neglects many important issues: "Women's experiences as mothers, their insider perspectives are rarely examined. As a result little is known about how women experience motherhood ... " Alldred (1996) provides a review of feminist critiques of the role (male) experts have played in relation to mothers. These critiques reflect on the way in which male child-raising experts of 1950s, mostly from Anglo-American cultures, lead to advice, warnings and instructions being directed at mothers. The outcome was that the complexities of motherhood were pathologised rather than normalised. Other feminist writers such as Woollett and Phoenix (1991b) are critical of the way in which male writers have significantly influenced women's experiences of motherhood despite it being primarily a female experience. Alldred (1996) recognises the impact of the male expert but suggests that women have increasingly been encouraged to write about their own experiences, particularly in contemporary parenting magazines. However, these magazines are a medium through which "messages about what is viewed culturally as contemporary good childcare and parenting behaviour are communicated ... " (Alldred, 1996: 138). Allred (1996) goes on to argue that although a mother's account of her experiences promotes an overriding tone of support for mothers in these magazines, it also encourages mothers to think of themselves and their roles through the discourses of, inter alia, psychology and medicine which inform many parenting magazines. The personal accounts given by mothers are therefore informed by and regulated within the terms of psychological and medical thinking, reproducing and maintaining particular conceptions of motherhood. However, feminist writers on the subject attempt to critically question naturalistic assumptions that exist around motherhood, arguing that motherhood is a social, historical and cultural construct rather than a natural consequence of the maternal instinct (Burman, 1994a).

In an analysis of seven child care and parenting manuals Marshall (1991) examines the ways in which motherhood is represented and discussed. Marshall (1991) comments that often these manuals describe and evaluate motherhood as satisfying, with exalted terms being used to describe the experience of having and rearing a child. Motherhood is more often than not described as the "ultimate fulfilment" (Marshall, 1991:68). It is also assumed that a mother *will* experience an overwhelming love for her child. Much of the advice offered to mothers has undoubtedly been influenced to a certain extent by

theoreticians such as John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott. Bowlby argues that the basis for mental health is established in the early years of a child's life " ... when mothers provide a warm, continuous and loving relationship with their infants" (Birns & ben-Ner, 1988:50). The emerging assumption is that it is the mother who can provide the necessary conditions for the healthy adjustment of her child and for this reason *she* is primarily responsible for her child. Both Tizard (1991) and Smart (1996) suggest that Bowlby himself cannot be held directly responsible for the way in which his theories have been taken up and applied but suggest that the work of Bowlby did give rise to a widely accepted belief about the need for mothers to be completely available for their young children almost constantly (Smart, 1996). The idea that it is only the mother who can best offer the intensity of care needed and that she *should* do so is left largely unquestioned. None of this is " ... considered too great an expectation of mothers because the mother's ability and willingness to abandon herself to the needs of her infant are seen as the natural behaviour of a 'healthy' woman" (Nice 1992:26). Winnicott's (1965:18) "good enough mother" and Bowlby's conception of the "ordinary sensitive mother" (Nice, 1992:25) have given rise to conceptualisations of a mother who is naturally able to understand her infant's needs and to give the right sort of care. Motherhood is constructed as a biological outcome while its complexities are rarely recognised or normalised. Such conceptualisations are not based on accounts by mothers of their personal experiences, but rather on the empirical research stimulated by the work of theoreticians such as Bowlby and Winnicott, within a particular historical and social context.

Parker (1996) argues that idealised representations of motherhood as both fulfilling and natural are not simply imposed on mothers, rather we all help to maintain them. Flax (1993:154) proposes that stories about motherhood reveal something about people's desire for a " ... benign force or agent out there in the world looking out for us, attending to our needs, and ensuring their satisfaction." This is likely to be true for societies which are becoming increasingly competitive. These wishes form the basis on which men and women form a community through sustaining fantasies about maternal possibilities, suggesting that these fantasies about mothers help to ward off anxieties and discontents. These stories can only serve their function by the " ... simultaneous operation, denial, evasion and pushing other material to the margins, rendering contradictory aspects of maternity almost unspeakable" (Flax, 1993:154). The expectations placed on mothers by themselves and others are thus the result of a complex combination of psychological, social and historical factors, yet motherhood presents itself as a natural outcome (Smart, 1996). Generally accepted notions about motherhood do not change quickly or easily because many of those who concern themselves with issues central to motherhood fail to acknowledge or even recognise that motherhood has this social and historical character (Atkinson 1991).

Parker (1996) argues that many representations of motherhood have become persecutory ideals for those mothers who are exposed to them. These ideals feature the "perfect" mother as, among other things, someone who always feels loving towards her child. Welldon (1988) reports that over time society has glorified motherhood and denied that it could have any negative aspects. She explains how in the 1960s the phenomenon of baby battering was of great concern, but because of the glorified representation of motherhood even doctors failed to acknowledge that mothers could have been the possible cause of the babies injuries: "No one seemed to understand

these women as mothers: 'women' were seen as capable of such action, but not 'mothers'" (Welldon, 1988:10). The reason for this disbelief was quite clearly based on the assumption that when a women becomes a mother she is *naturally* equipped to be a mother, that patience and unconditional love accompany the birth of her child, that she will be able to meet her child's every need and therefore keep him/her content and happy at all times. Welldon (1988) suggests that this is not necessarily the case, in her opinion many women enter motherhood without having had much, if any, emotional preparation. The lived experience of motherhood often, if not always, contradicts the glorified representation of motherhood that many women, particularly white middle class women, are exposed to before they have children. There is quite clearly a gap between what we claim to "know" about motherhood and what mothers themselves experience as mothers.

This study aims to close this gap by allowing four mothers to give an account of their everyday experience of motherhood. It aims to take further the literature that *has* been produced, primarily from a feminist theoretical perspective, and which has served to challenge the idealised representations of motherhood as both fulfilling and natural. Adrienne Rich (1977:23) gives an emotionally charged account of motherhood describing how she was haunted by the stereotype " ... of the mother whose love is 'unconditional' and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single minded identity. If I knew parts of myself that existed that would never cohere to these images, weren't those parts then abnormal, monstrous?" Rich (1977:23) "confesses" the following about her experience of motherhood: "I did not understand that this circle, this magnetic field in which we lived was not a natural phenomenon". Kitzinger's (1978) book on motherhood also suggests that the role of mothering is not, contrary to popular belief, intrinsically rooted in woman's nature. Kitzinger (1978) attempts to break the silence that existed amongst mothers about the everyday experiences of mothering by looking at the subject of motherhood from the point of view of *her own* mothering. A more recent book by Parker (1996), a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, focuses on the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence that problematises the notion of attachment of mothers to their children. Parker (1996:x), who bases her account of motherhood and the experience of maternal ambivalence on her interaction with mothers as a therapist, argues that cultural and public representations of good and bad mothering results in mothers being unable to even acknowledge the mere existence of "maternal ambivalence", and thus preventing mothers from seeing that "most mothers are neither as 'bad' as we fear, nor as 'good' as we desire".

This study aims to explore how the images of the "ideal" of motherhood have come to interact with the everyday experience of motherhood (Parker, 1996). It aims to redress some of the omissions in current literature and research by encouraging mothers to give a personal account of their individual, everyday experiences as mothers. The question of whether these mothers in fact try to live up to ideal representations and if they do, whether their everyday lived experiences contradict or are disjunctive to these ideal images is central to this study. The implications of such a study are that idealised representations of motherhood are challenged as mothers engage in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings around motherhood. The accounts in this study are seen as influenced both by features of each mother's personal experience, and by the social and psychological expectations that surround motherhood. The ideas that emerge in the discussion reflect the "reality" of four white,

middle class mothers, and their unique contexts produce experiences which cannot be assumed to represent all South African mothers, or mothers in general, and yet resonant *beyond* the confines of the particular experiences of these four women.

METHOD.

Participants.

The participants were four white South African, English speaking, heterosexual mothers who ranged in age from 25 to 40. Although there was no particular criterion for selection other than that the respondents were mothers, I was fortunate enough to interview mothers whose children varied considerably in age, ranging from seven months to twenty one years. Two of the participants have one child, while the other two participants have two children. Three of the mothers are married and one is divorced, living with her parents at the time of this study. One of the mothers has chosen to stay home with her new born baby, two are employed full-time and one part-time. The variety of personal contexts within which each of these mothers mother ensured that a variety of unique experiences were accounted for. *The interviewer in this study is the first author: Kerry Frizelle.*

Procedure.

The participants were all interviewed individually, up to three times each. The interview was semi-structured and each interview lasted about 45 minutes. Although a list of topic areas was prepared in the form of questions these were not adhered to rigidly in the interview itself, but rather treated flexibly so as not to intimidate the mothers or interrupt their train of thought (Burman, 1994). Having reviewed feminist literature that challenge maternal ideals I was interested to see whether these four mothers would confirm some of the complexities that these authors had identified in their discussions. I was particularly interested to see whether mothers would admit to the experience of maternal ambivalence (Parker, 1996); to see whether mothers would acknowledge that they attempt to live up to ideals (Nice, 1992); to record *how* mothers give an account of their experiences; to see whether mothers would challenge the idea of motherhood as a natural condition (Bartlett, 1994); and if and how mothers reconstruct the maternal ideal. The aim of interviewing was to encourage mothers to explore and relate their personal experiences of motherhood and for this reason each interview began with an invitation to the mother to begin with whatever she felt was significant about her experience of motherhood. Any other questions asked were aimed at exploring and stimulating discussion around issues central to motherhood: a mother's expectations and images of motherhood; the first few weeks of being a new mother; the advice offered to mothers; the help and support received from their partners and family; and the range of emotions experienced by mothers are some of the issues explored in the early interviews. The questions asked in the subsequent interviews aimed to focus the discussion by further investigating some of the issues that the mothers had raised in the preceding interview/s. This mode of interviewing the mothers was practised by conducting two pilot interviews with a friend who is a mother.

Although mothers are not rare, not being a mother myself meant that finding participants for this study was not as simple as I had anticipated. It was for this reason that I relied mostly on "referrals" from friends who knew mothers personally. Being referrals as opposed to complete strangers had the added advantage of ensuring a certain level of trust and therefore " ... facilitated greater disclosure and reflexive

commentary" (Burman, 1994b:67). Parker (1994:13) writes that " ... research is always carried out from a particular standpoint". The meanings of motherhood brought to the study by the researcher and the mother are different, the latter has an insider's perspective, while the former, although female, is an outsider with no direct experience of motherhood other than being a daughter and having been an *au pair* for one year. For this reason I was particularly careful to phrase my questions in such a way so as to ensure that I would not appear as a judgmental outsider.

Each mother was contacted by telephone at which point an interview time was set up. It was requested that the interviews took place where we would be alone and undisturbed. This was an easy request for those mothers who had older children or children who were at school. It was not an easy request for the mother of a seven month old baby who had to reschedule our first interview because her baby's teething had interrupted his sleep schedule. It was requested that I came earlier while her baby was asleep. On arrival I was met by a very awake baby and a very apologetic mother who needed to be reassured that we could wait and proceed when it suited her. When I phoned one of the other mothers to set up our first interview she had to put the phone down to attend to crying children in the background. This mother also completely forgot about her first interview and when we spoke about it at her re-arranged interview she agreed that it was symptomatic of a mother's life which is just "nonstop". These two mothers, even before the interviews began, provided insight into the conditions of motherhood and mothering! Each interview was recorded and transcribed in full.

As a qualitative researcher I believe it is not possible to engage in research in a completely impartial way, and it is therefore acknowledged that as I worked with the content of the interviews I was vigilant for *particular* interpretations of motherhood. Using feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, I analysed and discussed the interview content in terms of three key themes; an account of the maternal ideal; the experience of "maternal ambivalence"; and motherhood as a natural condition. The experience of motherhood is complex and multifaceted; mothers mother in widely differing circumstances (Woollett & Phoenix, 1991). As Denzin (1989:25) argues: "Every human action is novel, emergent, and filled with multiple, often conflicting, meanings and interpretations". Although multifaceted and complex, many commonalities also emerged in the "thick descriptions" (Denzin, 1989) mothers gave of motherhood. All these themes are worth considering but cannot be meaningfully dealt with in a single article, and for this reason only those themes which relate specifically to the aim of this study were included.

The way in which Croghan and Miell (1995:30) describe the process of women giving accounts of their childhood abuse and disruption can be applied to the way in which women give an account of their experiences as mothers, and that is of a complex process in which women " ... are both presenting a public account of past events while at the same time struggling to create a coherent and meaningful internal narrative which involves a continuous process of relating and recreating meaning". In giving an account of their experiences of motherhood mothers are involved in much the same process. On the whole mothers have never really been given the opportunity to express or "own up" to the complexity of being a mother and therefore do not have a readily available, coherent internal narrative that is representative of some single reality "out there". This makes the already difficult process of reflection even more difficult for the mothers who

were continuously engaged in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing meanings around motherhood. Particular care had to be taken to ensure that this process of reflection (over time) was facilitated, and for this reason it was necessary to have more than one interview with each mother. It was equally important that the preceding interview be re-read carefully before conducting the next interview so as to facilitate the continuous process of relating and recreating meaning. Parker (1994) proposes that a process of change often occurs in the course of research, and that talking about the experience of motherhood often changes a mother's understanding of it. The moment a mother begins to talk about motherhood, the production of knowledge begins, and on many occasions speaking about it will restructure not only the way it is understood by the mother herself, but also by others. This process of restructuring was facilitated by encouraging mothers to expand on and clarify issues and meanings explored in the preceding interviews.

All four mothers were assured of confidentiality and informed that the content of the interviews would be used only for the purposes of this study. All names in the text have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.

A mother's account of the maternal ideal.

According to Parker (1996:34) mothers have " ... to negotiate their lived experiences of motherhood with the maternal ideal". The strength and content of this ideal varies with each individual. One of the aims of this study was to explore whether mothers actually attempt to live up to ideals around motherhood. Nice (1992) argues that mothers are driven by expectations placed on them by others and themselves to be an all-embracing, perfect mother, an ability which is a natural disposition, requiring little or no effort because mothers will do it "instinctively". Because a mother's personal and unique experience of motherhood interacts to a large degree with the social and cultural representations of motherhood (Parker, 1996), their accounts of the ideal emerge entwined with an account of their individual, personal experience of motherhood. An analysis of their accounts suggests that mothers are clearly trying to live up to "something"; to expectations that are placed on them by themselves or other significant people, and yet their personal responses suggest that achieving this ideal is more often than not problematic.

We see in Jane's account of the experience of motherhood the notion of motherhood being the "ultimate fulfilment" for a woman. Jane equates the experience of motherhood with a hobby that requires time and sacrifice, but she is quick to add that she doesn't "want to describe it as little as having a hobby". This suggests that it may be difficult for women who have internalised motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment to express the "disjunctive" feelings they may experience. Although Jane incorporates the reality of her experience of motherhood into her account, she does this in such a way so as to achieve the "correct" response to motherhood (Ussher, 1989). This difficulty was clear in Jane's account when after her first interview she suddenly and unexpectedly expressed that she hoped she had not painted a really negative picture of being a mother! She spent a few minutes reassuring me that the good times far outweigh the bad times. Although motherhood is clearly a source of fulfilment for Jane she felt the need to emphasise the good times perhaps " ... for fear of being branded a bad mother,

and thus a failure as a woman" (Bartlett, 1994:65), if her account appeared too "negative".

Jane: "Um ... no I think the whole idealised image is real in that it definitely is part of motherhood, and what you see is a wonderful thing, and you don't really see the negatives because you don't see the people going through the sleepless nights or whatever, so you can't look at that but the part you see in the public eye is what you normally, sort of, get your concept from and that is very much part of motherhood and there to be enjoyed. That wasn't like a total: no that wasn't real, it is real what you see but at the same time you have got to mix that with reality of, um the negatives as well. Generally if a mother has got a screaming baby she will take it out of the public eye because she is getting embarrassed because she needs to calm the child or whatever, so you don't see a lot of that but um ... "

Jane is providing an insider's perspective in this account. She acknowledges that what is seen in public is what one comes to expect of motherhood. People rarely see the complexities of motherhood and may therefore come to believe that motherhood is primarily a positive experience. Sayers (1989:35) argues that there " ... is an aspect of truth in all ideas that are actually believed". Jane confirms this in her account when she argues that the idealised image *is* part of motherhood, as for her motherhood *is* a wonderful thing and therefore what people see is the truth but not the whole truth: "You have got to mix that with reality". Jane confirms that there is an ideal representation of motherhood, but her account also suggests strongly that these representations are ideological notions of motherhood. Eagleton (1991:16) argues that ideological discourse is " ... true at one level but not at a another: true in its empirical content, but deceptive in its force, or true in its surface meaning but false in its underlying assumptions". For Jane the idealised image of motherhood *is* something to be truly enjoyed, but the assumption that motherhood is and should always be a relatively easy and enjoyable task is far from the truth. By giving mothers the opportunity to give an insider's perspective on the experience of motherhood it becomes possible to identify a combination of 1) ideology, 2) ignorance, and 3) competence that exists around the experience of motherhood. Through the perpetuation of the ideology and the myth of the ideal mother, mothers come to compare themselves with what they perceive to be the ideal mother, " ... accepting the dominant ideology and often finding that their experience is not synonymous with that" (Ussher, 1989:82). Jane acknowledges that an ideal of motherhood does exist and has a profound influence on the mother who will take her baby out of the public eye because a crying baby in public is embarrassing. In a later interview Jane suggested that there is pressure not to have a crying baby in public because a crying baby suggests she is not an adequate mom, that she is not fulfilling her child's needs.

Jane: "... I just think that I am terrified of someone saying that, you know, 'oh she doesn't seem to be handling (laughs) too well as a mom.'"

Jane clearly feels the need to be *seen* as "handling". Her fear of being judged as not handling, that is, of not being an adequate mom, indicates the oppressive effect of ideals that exist around motherhood: as a mother you are meant to handle. If you don't you stand the chance of being criticised, judged and left feeling inadequate. Jane went

on to tell me about a lady at her church who would often come and take her baby from her if he was niggly during a service.

Jane: "... she actually makes you feel inadequate by coming and taking him, it gives a powerful message to me that 'you are not handling well enough I will do it better.' Um, I know that it is not what she is saying, you have just not got to be sensitive as well."

This account by Jane suggests again that mothers do try to live up to ideal representations, and that they are often engaged in negotiating their personal experience with these representations. The result of this negotiation for Jane is a sense of inadequacy, even though she recognises that it may be unfounded.

In Mary's account there is evidence of the notion that a mother is solely responsible for her child's growth and development, both physically and emotionally and that any problems in an adult have their roots in the relationship between a mother and her child (Nice, 1992).

Mary: "Well I was married very young and we were just very, quite happy with each other, we didn't really have a big social life, I think that could have been a bit damaging to the kids, we were just content with ourselves ... although they are fine now, the one, my youngest one, he is a bit, not nervous but shy because I think he wasn't exposed to adults and I was quite strict you know ... "

Mary clearly feels that she may have "damaged" her children by not providing more of a social life and perhaps because she was too strict a mother. Mary held this view of a mother's responsibility quite strongly throughout her interviews.

Mary: "It is not the child's fault if it is a spoilt little brat, it is the mother's fault for letting it, you know, for not correcting it and for not ... you know if it wants its own way all the time she should try and make the child learn that it can't always have what it wants."
Mary: "Ja, I think it has a lot to do with the mother herself, how if she is neurotic, panics a lot and tries to be over protective, you known then you have all these problems ... "

Towards the end of her final interview Mary shared with me that her son had, had an assault charge (unfairly) laid against him, because they had not had the money for a good lawyer they had ended up being conned into pleading guilty and as a result, he had a five year suspended sentence.

Mary: "The prosecutor said that he was a menace (laughs) to society, (sighs) ja."
Kerry: "How did that make you feel?"
Mary: "It was terrible."

In the light of what Mary had said about a mother's responsibility for her children's problems, it appeared that this incident with her son caused her a great deal of guilt. Like Jane, Mary also attempts to live up to an ideal. This example suggests that a mother is set up for denigration if anything should happen that suggests she "didn't get it right". Jo comments on this process of self evaluation.

Jo: “Oh like my second child she had the most incredible temper tantrums, incredible, um I always think, maybe it is me. And I stand there and think ‘why is she doing this, and is it something that I am doing?’ And she [friend] will turn around and say ‘but Jackie is doing the same thing’ and that makes one feel better, when you think ‘God, I am doing it wrong!’”

In Parker’s (1996:1) opinion mothers look to each other “ ... for confirmation that they are getting it right, in the face of fears that they are getting it hopelessly wrong”. There is a deep need for reassurance that as a mother you *are* getting it as right as you *should* be getting it. For Jo, her child’s tantrums are an indication that she is doing something “wrong” and therefore as a mother she is getting it “wrong”. Jo’s sense of relief after her friend reassured her that her own child was doing the same thing suggests that mothers need to be encouraged to speak openly and honestly about their experience. The above extracts suggest that Jo, Mary and Jane each attempt to live up to various maternal ideals, even if they are not consciously aware of them. What is of great significance is that although these personal experiences reflect that mothers may measure themselves against maternal ideals, actually achieving them is extremely fraught.

The experience of maternal ambivalence.

Parker (1996:1) defines maternal ambivalence as: “ ... the experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side”. Parker (1996) notes that the term ambivalence has been widely misused and often employed to describe mixed feelings rather than as an experience in which quite contradictory impulses and emotions towards the same person coexist. The reason for this misuse is possibly the unacceptableness of the element of hatred, the very fear of hatred, especially by a mother towards her child.

Exploring the experience of ambivalence in the mothers (in the interviews) is one means of determining whether the lived experience of mothers meet up to the ideal images of the mother as someone who feels constantly and unconditionally loving towards her child. Parker (1996) suggests that most mothers experience guilt because of contradictory feelings provoked by maternal ambivalence. This guilt is evoked because according to cultural representations of motherhood the “perfect” mother has no negative feelings towards her child, she is instead constantly loving, patient and available, a representation of love shorn of negativity. Parker (1996:47) argues emphatically that ambivalence is not synonymous with the inability to love, “ ... but [rather] in a society wedded to the maternal ideal, it can seem that way to women”. Ideal representations of motherhood render contradictory aspects of maternity almost unspeakable and unacceptable, and as a result mothers may be left feeling guilty and in turmoil over the experience of maternal ambivalence. These “unacceptable” maternal emotions are referred to as “ ... fleeting (or not so fleeting) feelings of hatred for a child that can grip the mother, the moment of recoil from a much loved body, the desire to ... smash the untouched plate of food ... scrub too hard with a facecloth, or the fantasy of hurling a howling baby out of the window.” (Parker 1996:4). Although Parker (1996) would argue that “maternal ambivalence” is a universal experience, we would want to be more cautious of implying that such an experience can be so broadly generalised. Although three of the four mothers did acknowledge “incongruent” feelings towards their children, each experience is unique and occurs within specific contexts and

circumstances, and therefore cannot be assumed to be experienced by all women in the same way.

Kate: "I get very stressed. In the last couple of weeks I have been through a really bad patch where I wake up in the morning and Jess would come: 'Mommy I want a biscuit' and I just feel the hackles on my neck rise: 'Just go away from me. Leave me alone.'"

This was the first indication that Kate experienced maternal ambivalence, as she continued to speak it became increasingly clear that she was finding motherhood exhausting and overwhelming. When I asked her how she felt when Jess seemed to be demanding too much of her she responded.

Kate: "Sometimes ... um, (laughs) no I wouldn't say hate, that is a very strong word, sometimes I dislike her very much, um, I have actually had problems in the last two or three months where I have got myself into such a state and felt so guilty: 'how can I have these feelings about my child' that I phoned FAMSA one morning in tears: 'I cannot cope with her anymore, um, I am beside myself'... sometimes I can almost understand, at that stage I could understand how some mothers end up battering their kids because you just reach the end of your tether, I smacked her so hard that I hurt my own hand and that is when I thought: 'Hey, woo! You have got to get control here', and I phoned them and said: 'I don't like my child. I just don't want her anywhere near me.' Um, and they put me onto the children's assessment centre and I have been to see them two or three times now, um, very, very, it was very helpful."

FAMSA referred Kate to a local assessment centre where she was able to acknowledge her experience of ambivalence to a psychologist and find relief. For this reason it was perhaps easier for Kate to talk about and even "own up" to her experience of maternal ambivalence. Parker (1996:6) suggests that " ... specific experiences of motherhood inevitably produce fluctuations in the intensity of feeling within ambivalence". Kate was finding the pressure of being a divorced single mother, and of living at home with her parents an extremely pressurising and stressful experience. These particular circumstances clearly served to intensify her experience of maternal ambivalence to a point almost unbearable for her. In addition Kate quite clearly believed that she *should not* be having these feelings towards her child, that she *should* always want her around and that she *should* like her child constantly. This is reflected in her need to use the word "dislike" as opposed to "hate" when describing her feelings towards her daughter. Kate clearly believed that there was something wrong with her as a mother, failing to recognise that her circumstances, more than her ability as a mother, were contributing to a difficult experience of motherhood. Kate's circumstances, in combination with her belief that mother's should not "hate" their children, intensified her experience of guilt to the point where she felt desperate enough to seek help.

Jane Price writes that for many mothers " ... anything short of perfection begins to feel like a failure and they become caught up in a spiral of trying even harder to achieve the unachievable, and then became increasingly guilty with what they see as the worst failure of their lives." (quoted in Bartlett, 1994:65). The representations that exist around motherhood are likely to send those mothers exposed to such representations into a spiral of trying harder and harder to achieve something that is unachievable. Kate

appeared to be caught up in this spiral, believing that her experience was foreign to other women.

Kate: "... you do, I suppose you look at all your friends and their children and you are not with them 24 hours a day so you don't see if they have problems of their own, you think that you are the only one that is going through it, you think that you are the only one who is doing this wrong and is not handling it and coping with it and having these feelings of dislike towards your child, um, so when she [the counsellor at the assessment centre] sort of sat there and said to me: 'it is so common' I thought: 'Shew! (laughs) it is not just me', it was, you know, a relief, definitely."

Kate's response suggests that mothers may not openly speak to each other about their feelings of ambivalence because they may fear criticism. There clearly is a received view that there is a way of "getting it right", and part of getting it right for Kate is feeling love towards her child at all times, and never "dislike". Kate was clearly constrained by the representations of the maternal ideal, and because of the fear of being branded a "deviant" mother, she kept her experience of contradictory feelings to herself. Mothers have been given limited opportunity to express their experiences, in addition to which representations of the ideal mother may make it difficult for mothers to acknowledge emotions such as hate. Difficulties are equated with inadequacies, rather than the outcome of a number of factors such as lack of (emotional) support, financial constraints, and / or even plain human frailty! Kate expressed her fears in the following way.

Kate: "I think you think everybody is going to turn around and start pointing fingers you know: 'Oh, do you know what she is feeling about her child ... '"

Throughout the interviews there was evidence of the experience of maternal ambivalence, as in another instance when I asked Jane if she could describe some of the most extreme emotions she experienced as a mother, she started like this:

Jane: "Well on the negative side, as I say Monday was one of the worst where, at one stage I just, the thought went through my mind of just hitting him once you know, I was horrified that it even entered my mind. I just think, I was so, when you are just so exhausted and they are niggling and they are not stopping and you just want to go to sleep. I suppose also for once you just want to be selfish because I just wanted to go to sleep you know (laughs): 'Just go to sleep so that I can go to sleep!'"

Jane was quite clearly experiencing maternal ambivalence towards her baby at that moment, but she was also experiencing great guilt and a sense of horror at her reaction. Wanting something for herself, sleep, was a sign of selfishness. As Nice (1992:31) comments: "A mother is expected to be wholly available for her children: all-giving, all-understanding and totally selfless ... " Jane went on to expand on how she felt about her experience of wanting to hit her baby.

Jane: "I think I felt horrified at myself, that I even thought of it you know, ja, actually I was horrified (laughs) at myself when thinking about it. You can understand that you are exhausted but you know that if you had hit him their would be no excuse for it, I don't know. You know those mothers who batter their children? The mothers must feel terribly

guilty afterwards, I think they, maybe I am blessed with a little more self control, but I can understand how people do it you know."

Parker (1996) suggests that the persecutory ideal of the "perfect" mother who always feels loving towards her child invariably means that the experience of maternal ambivalence will create an awareness of the "imperfect" in the mother. Jane's interpretation of her frustration as "horrifying" suggests a level of discomfort and fear. In addition Jane's account implies that if she were to hit her child it would be because she was not "blessed with a little more self control", failing to recognise that full-time mothering with little time for herself, could be what contributes to mothers' (occasional) lack of self control.

While talking about the extremes she felt as a mother, I mentioned to Jo (after she had said that anger was one of the emotions she experienced) that some mothers end up not liking their children, and that it appeared to be quite a common experience, to which she responded:

Jo: "You hate them but you love them, you love the child but you hate what they do. I have had that with my second one, she has incredible temper tantrums, she can scream for two hours nonstop, and it's high pitched, it is not even a scream, it is a howl. We call it 'the howl' and it is high pitched and it can go on for two hours and you think: 'Please stop it!' I have actually told her: 'Mandy I hate you, I hate what you are doing. I love you, but I hate what you are doing.' And it does, you can hate the child and 'how can you produce, how can you be half of that child?', but then the next day they are absolute angels."

When I asked her why she thought some mothers were not able to readily admit that they experienced such feelings she said:

Jo: "Because you shouldn't hate your child, but you do. Children have got their own characters, their own personalities, you can't walk up to every single person you see and like every single person, you have personality clashes all the time, and you are going to have it with your children because they are their own person, they are not you, they are not your husband, they are their own person. You are going to have it."

Parker (1996:1) suggests that in white, middle class cultures flexibility is permitted in most activities that involve intimacy. Heterogeneity and some diversity of style is acceptable, however when it comes to mothering, hardly any flexibility is permitted. Jo's account suggests that mothering does involve diversity, that a mother is dealing with not just her children but with people, and in the same way that she won't always like everyone she engages with, she won't always like her children. Jo recognises that it is the expectation that "you shouldn't hate your child", that makes acknowledging such feelings difficult.

Motherhood as a natural condition.

Bartlett (1994:62) points out that there " ... is an assumption that one does not need to learn how to be a mother, that the role is intrinsically rooted in a women's nature. Give her a baby and it will all somehow happen instinctively, magically. Mother love will know what to do". Welldon (1988:18) quotes Kestenberg saying: "' ... our ideal picture of a

truly maternal woman is one of an omnipotent, all-knowing mother who knows what to do with her infant by sheer intuition". Motherhood is more often than not viewed as a natural condition, that is, motherhood is considered to be part of a women's human *nature*, the skills of motherhood are not acquired but are rather an innate quality, a natural gift of biology that ensures that a mother will know just what to do with her child. Kate's personal experience challenges this conceptualisation of motherhood as "an essentially instinctive, intuitive affair" (Parker, 1996:2). This is how Kate described her reaction to the arrival of her daughter:

Kate: " ... I just panicked, I thought you know, everybody thinks that you have this baby and you know exactly what to do, and you feel this incredible maternal bonding immediately! And it is not true, it is not true! And I went and I had no idea what to do and unfortunately when I was in hospital they didn't show me how to bath her or anything, so I got home and I was a nervous wreck: 'how am I going to do this? I am all on my own and I don't have my mom to turn to.'"

Kate recognises that people do assume that motherhood is intrinsically rooted in a woman's nature, and her account suggests that she herself had believed that she would "know exactly what to do", and panicked when she realised that she didn't know that to do. Kate's account of her personal experience suggests strongly that the assumption that motherhood happens instinctively "is not true", and that a new mother needs some advice and assistance ("my mom") in learning how to care for her infant.

Jane had this to say about the idea of motherhood as a "natural" condition:

Jane: " ... I think also mothers who have been moms they will say to you: 'ah don't worry it all comes naturally'. But they actually did get all the information along the way, it all just becomes so much part of the brain that it is natural for them."

Jane, like Kate, also recognises that people, including many mothers, assume that motherhood "comes naturally". Jane suggests in this account that motherhood, rather than being natural, as in biological or instinctive, has in fact been *naturalised,* that is, through a life process of socialisation motherhood has *become* "natural" for many mothers. The skills of motherhood have become relatively automatic as mothers actively engage with their children and other mothers over time. Through this process of socialisation everything a mother learns "becomes so much part of the brain that it is natural for them". The boundaries between what is natural and what has become naturalised through a process of socialisation have become blurred for many mothers. This is evident in both Mary's and Jo's account.

A few minutes into Mary's first interview I asked her if it was strange to actually have to think about being a mother, and she responded:

Mary: "It is strange because things come naturally and you just take things for granted, you know, you don't really think about it."

When I went on to ask Mary about her mother and whether she had ever spoken to Mary about being a mother she resplied:

Mary: “No, not really no, I am very close to my step-mother and I don’t really think, she had a child from my father who is ten years younger than me, she is only ten years older than me. Um, I think I was ten when he was born ... ”

When I reread this interview and reflected on it, I began to wonder whether Mary was confusing what came naturally for what had been naturalised though the experience of having a younger sibling. I considered that maybe having a younger sibling had given her the opportunity to gain (maternal) skills long before she became a mother herself. When I interviewed Mary the second time I asked her a little more about her younger sibling:

Kerry: “So that was quite a small baby and were you living with them [parents]?”
Mary: “Ja.”
Kerry: “So were you very involved?”
Mary: “Yes, me and my sister, we loved it.”
Kerry: “Okay, what were you involved in?”
Mary: “Well pushing the pram and just generally helping, change and bath my brother, I am very close to him.”
Kerry: “I am just thinking, do you think that prepared you somewhat for motherhood?”
Mary: “Mm.”
Kerry: “I mean handling your own babies, because last week you said ... ”
Mary: “It came naturally.”
Kerry: “Ja, that it came very naturally.”
Mary: “Maybe that could have had something.”
Kerry: “I mean, some people don’t know which end to pick the baby up and I was just wondering if that ... ”
Mary: “It could have, it could have, we were involved a lot, we loved doing things, it was like playing with a doll.”

Theorising about the experience of motherhood is not an attempt to generate some stable, enduring “truth”, but rather it involves a process of exploration of the meanings mothers attach to motherhood. As mothers talk about their personal experiences of motherhood, the meanings they attach to them are not static and unchanging. Instead the meanings motherhood has for a mother are (re)structured and deconstructed as she speaks about it, and therefore her accounts will vary from one interview to the next (Parker, 1994). Although Mary was still relatively undecided about whether what she considered to be natural, innate and instinctive, was actually something she had acquired long before she became a mother herself, she did begin to consider that perhaps her interaction with her younger sibling had prepared her somewhat for motherhood. This process of restructuring is more evident in Jo’s account. Jo began her first interview in much the same way Mary did. We began the interview by talking about my non-mother status and she commented that when I became a mother I would know what to do because I had done this study. When I asked if as a woman she thought we were prepared to be mothers most of our lives, Jo responded:

Jo: “Yes, it is actually amazing how things come naturally, it is actually amazing. ... I mean I had this tiny baby the first time, I mean she could fit into a shoe box, and it was amazing, I thought ‘I can’t handle this thing’, but you just sort of pick it up and you know what to do, it is just there.”

Interestingly Jo had already suggested to me that a lot of what motherhood entails is learnt when she commented that because I was doing this study I would "know just what to do" when I had children of my own. Yet, at the same time, she was quick to assert that mothering comes naturally. When I spoke to Jo about whether her mother ever spoke to her about motherhood she came to tell me that she, like Mary, had had a much younger sibling:

Jo: "I was actually very lucky, my brother is actually eight years younger than me, and he was a very prem baby as well. He was prem so I still remember this tiny baby, so ja, when my first child came along I thought: 'man I have done this before'. It was a long time ago but I knew how to hold the baby because I had a much younger brother which did help a lot ... "

After reading through the first interview I focussed on this again in the second interview when Jo suggested again that there is a maternal instinct that teaches you how to mother.

Kerry: "That is interesting because you also said last week how easy, that you first say: 'ah what do I do with this child?' and then ... "
Jo: "You know how to hold it, you know how to pick it up."
Kerry: "But you also said that you had a younger brother, do you think that prepared you?"
Jo: "Yes it did, it did. Andrew was tiny, ja he was three months prem. Ja Sandy was six weeks prem, he was tiny and it did help me a lot fortunately, but even still, mothers aren't scared of their own children, unless I suppose they are still very young and they have their own children and they have never had to live life and experience it, which I think could have made quite a difference. I don't know, I was twenty five when I had Sandy, I had travelled, I had enjoyed myself and it was time to have children then. I don't know. It might have made a difference having Andrew much younger, I was quite involved with him being the oldest, I think it did help, did help."

For Jo, like Mary, the natural had become (con)fused with what had become naturalised and therefore relatively automatic, and consequently mistaken for some natural, innate ability. Jo's comment that "it was time to have children" suggests strongly that having children is seen as inevitable for woman; that a woman's "biological clock" will tell her that "it is time". This process of deconstructing of the notion of motherhood as a natural phenomenon, as opposed to a *naturalised* (therefore, socialised) phenomenon, carried on through to the third interview when I asked Jo if she could give me some examples of things that come naturally for a mother: I asked her to start with breast feeding, whether she thought that breast feeding came naturally.

Jo: "It did for me, but for some mothers it doesn't. They have to be shown how to do it, for me it came totally naturally, I don't know why. For Sandy it didn't because she was tiny, the other two it was fine, but then it is experience, you see, that taught me. Ag, you need to be shown a bit, if you weren't shown in hospital you would be shown by your mother or other women in the community, you would be shown things by the others, other woman, but once you get going, totally natural. You know when your child is hungry, that is a natural thing, you can feel when they are hungry. You hear that cry: 'ah,

they are hungry or tired', but all that is experience as well, you learn through the first two days."

Jo's account of motherhood suggests that motherhood becomes "totally natural once you get going", not natural in the biological sense of instinctive, but rather natural in the sense that it becomes naturalised with experience. By speaking about motherhood (in the interviews), and by being engaged in a process of self-reflection, the relatively inflexible meanings offered by Jo and Jane in their first impressions of motherhood as a "natural" condition were challenged and re-thought. Through the relatively in-depth, self-exploratory discussions more intricate and complex meanings emerged concerning motherhood as a "natural" condition.

Kate's response (above) indicates that there is an image of motherhood that (problematically) assumes motherhood is intrinsic to a woman's nature. Welldon (1988) proposes that such an ideal image leads people, including mothers, to believe that all mothers will be able to deal with motherhood with a kind of instant skill, precision and dexterity. Welldon (1988:18) says that most women in fact know very little about babies and that they often expect that a " ... 'maternal instinct' will come to the fore and will perform miracles." The accounts given by these mothers challenge these conceptions and suggest that mothers need to be prepared for the experience of motherhood and not just left to their own devices. The accounts given also suggest that much of what mothers "learn" is not taught to them directly or formally, but rather that much of the "learning" is relatively indirect and vicarious. Some mothers will, as Jo and Mary did, find the experience of motherhood relatively easy and "automatic" in some respects, while others may find it difficult and overwhelming. These differences make motherhood multifaceted and complex, and question the many assumptions that exist around motherhood. Motherhood presents itself as though it were " ... a natural manifestation of an innate female characteristic, namely the maternal instinct" (Smart, 1996:37), but what these mothers' accounts suggest is that although motherhood may become relatively "natural" for mothers over time, it does not necessarily mean that motherhood is innate or instinctive.

CONCLUSION.

This study has made use of a series of interviews to explore how idealised images of motherhood interact with the personal everyday experiences of four, white, middle class South African mothers. As the mothers shared their experiences an account of the "ideal" emerged suggesting that mothers, to differing extents, try to live up to a set of ideals and experience a sense of guilt and inadequacy when they feel they are not living up to these ideals. This became evident as mothers shared their emotional reactions to mothering and grappled with whether motherhood came naturally for them as women or not.

Although commonalities emerged in the accounts given by these mothers, the context and circumstances under which they mother differ, and as a result their understanding of and the intensity of their experiences as mothers differ. This suggests that the experiences of mothers cannot easily be homogenised or generalised. Motherhood is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which needs to be recognised by those disciplines that theorise about it. Psychology is one such discipline, which instead of

recognising the complexity of mothering has rather "formed and reproduced a constricting ideology of motherhood." (Clumpus, 1996:110).

The qualitative approach of this study aimed to allow for exploration and understanding of the diverse experiences of mothers, rather than linear explanations. By allowing mothers to give a personal account their own understandings of motherhood were challenged and new understandings emerged. Such alternative ways of making sense of motherhood need to be fostered so that women can resist and contest some of the restrictive meanings motherhood may have (come to have) for them.

What is especially significant about these four mothers' accounts is that they illustrate that living up to a set of ideals is problematic. The accounts illustrate that although mothers experience loving feelings towards their children, find them fulfilling, and at times seem to know just what to do for them; mothers *also* find themselves having hateful feelings towards their children, find them both exhausting and demanding, and at times are in need of direction and advice. The complexity of motherhood needs to be acknowledged, recognised and validated rather than problematised or pathologised. For as Parker (1996:235) argues, motherhood is about the " ... experience of lack *and* plentitude, about a sense of power *and* powerlessness, about the desire to hold on *and* to be rid of the children." By recognising this coexistence and by acknowledging that mothering occurs within a particular social, historical and cultural context we can move closer to an understanding of mothering as a complex and diverse experience while moving away from a belief in *the* "perfect" or "ideal" mother (Price, 1988). By perceiving motherhood differently it can be experienced differently, and finally to close with a comment from Stephanie Dorwick (quoted in Ussher, 1989:103):

"I believe it can be different. We are truly victims if we cannot create those new realities. We are undone unless we break those rules which can and do make motherhood a prison and a burden. I would be undone if I had to forsake the rest of my life as a price for motherhood. The twigs of a nest would soon rub me raw. I want to expand my limits by having a child, not reduce my world, no matter how precious my fellow occupant."

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