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A CONTEXTUAL ACCOUNT OF MOTHERHOOD

Kerry Frizelle and Gabrielle Kell*
School of Psychology
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Howard College
Durban 4041
Frizellek1@ukzn.ac.za

* To whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract.
The data for this paper was originally collected and analysed by the second author for her master's thesis. The first author (the second author's supervisor) has re-visited and re-worked the data and analysis for the purposes of this paper. The data was collected during two focus groups with six, white middle-class South African mothers. The study adopted a feminist method of analysis, the voice-relational method, with the aim of opening up for exploration the way in which mothers' everyday experiences of mothering are impacted on by the specific social context in which they are embedded. The voice-relational method of analysis, based on the principles of relational ontology, proved a useful tool to explore the way in which individual mothers' experiences are informed by their location within particular relational, structural and cultural contexts. The analysis reveals the way in which race, class, sexual orientation and gender intersect with dominant ideologies of motherhood to inform the experiences of sub-urban, middle-class women negotiating, within a complex set of relationships, what it is to be a mother.

INTRODUCTION.

While motherhood continues to be celebrated as the ultimate experience of womanhood it is a relatively under researched topic in South Africa. Much of the small body of existing psychologically framed research tends to focus mainly on mothers who are considered to be "problematic", primarily because they challenge the idealised, heteronormative construct of "mother". This list of "problematic mothers" includes single mothers, teenage mothers, working mothers, jailed mothers, and depressed mothers (Kruger, 2006: 195).

In addition to the psychological studies there have been a number of interesting "historical-political" studies that have engaged with the "ideologisation and institutionalization of motherhood" (Kruger, 2006: 194). An example of such work is that by Kaufman (2000) who highlights the way in which black women's childrearing practices (the decision of whether to become a mother or not) are linked to the social

and political context of racial domination. Another important paper is that of Walker (1995) who, through a review of literature, historicises the “politics of motherhood” in South Africa.

Kruger (2006: 194) proposes that what is missing from the body of South African literature on motherhood is an exploration of “contemporary regular mothering experiences and practices” and its multi-layered and complex nature. To overcome this limitation Kruger (2006) proposes a feminist agenda to researching motherhood, which involves exploring, firstly, the different experiences of mothers mothering in different contexts and, secondly, the various social processes that produce these experiences. For example, how do the social constructs of race, class, and gender intersect to impact on the experiences of mothers? (Kruger, 2006).

An example of research that takes up part of this feminist agenda is that of Jeannes and Shefer (2004). They, like Kruger (2006), argue that while it is important to acknowledge the unique experiences of mothers, these experiences are “inseparable from various social and political structures, which, through discourse, she maintains and perpetuates” (Jeannes & Shefer, 2004: 3). Through a discourse analysis of interviews with five middle class, white South African mothers, Jeannes and Shefer (2004) illustrate the way in which constructs of femininity and discourses of inequality invoked by the participants maintain normative constructs of motherhood, while at the same time constrain different or alternative constructions and experiences. While the authors focus part of their analysis on the way in which gender intersects with class to impact on how the women in their study construct motherhood, it would have perhaps been interesting for them to have explored how (hetero)sexuality, and racial and cultural positionings intersect with gendered positions of inequality to maintain normative constructs of motherhood amongst these women.

Walker (1995: 423) would perhaps challenge Jeanne and Shefer’s (2004) research for its exclusive focus on the *discourse* of motherhood, which she argues runs the risk of reducing the experience of motherhood to “a patriarchal institution and mothering … to a role imposed on women”. By focusing too much on the role of dominant ideologies of motherhood, the way in which mothers are themselves actively involved in negotiating and re(enacting) the meaning of motherhood is overlooked. Walker (1995: 425) acknowledges the role of dominant discourses, but argues that by making them *the* focus of analysis two other important, but interlinked, terrains of motherhood are overlooked, that is, the “practice” of motherhood and motherhood as “social identity”. The practice of mothering refers to the “work of mothering” and includes providing for the physical, emotional and socialisation needs of children. The discourse of motherhood includes ideas about what makes a good mother, which are in turn embedded in ideas about womanhood, gender identity, and childhood, which together “informs and orders the practice” of mother work (Walker, 1995: 425). The social identity of motherhood “involves women’s own construction of an identity as mothers – informed by the discourse of motherhood, mediated by the practice of mothering, but not a simple derivative of either” (Walker, 1995:426). A focus on social identity is important as it acknowledges the way in which mothers individually and actively construct the identity of mother within particular contexts and thus enables an exploration of “the interplay between individual and collective processes” (Walker, 1995:426). Such an interactionist approach recognises that the identity and practice of

mothering embraces both “resistance and complicity with dominant norms” (Walker, 1995: 427).

An analysis of these three interlinked terrains of motherhood (discourse, practice and social identity), according to Walker (1995: 428), will allow for a re-examination of motherhood in South Africa that will highlight “its complexity, as an institution but also as a relationship”. Motherhood is, after all, an identity that is actively negotiated within a web of social interactions against a backdrop of wider cultural expectations.

Jeannes and Shefer (2004: 3) argue that it is by exploring and acknowledging both multiplicity and difference amongst mothers “that women may begin to define alternative and more progressive ‘mother identities’ and ‘mothering practices’”. Interestingly what is considered to be “more progressive” is not identified by these authors. Where identities and practices are oppressive there is, without doubt, a need for social change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005), but there is no guarantee of a progressive outcome. The outcome of resistance is, as Allred (1996: 143) puts it, “complex and multilayered”. Resistance does not necessarily result in a more progressive alternative, but rather in “struggles with dominant psychological meanings of motherhood” (Allred, 1996: 143). In this way “alternative” mother identities and practices are actively constructed as women contest what it is to be a mother, but the political implications of these contestations and shifts are not “simple or predictable” (Allred, 1996: 147). They will be experienced as negative or positive depending on who is experiencing them and in which context they are being experienced. While dominant mother identities and practices are powerfully normative, they, however, remain contested and contestable (Allred, 1996).

This paper, therefore, acknowledges the need for research that focuses on everyday contemporary experiences of motherhood while recognising the intersectionality of race, class and gender on these experiences (Kruger, 2006). It also acknowledges the need to move beyond a discursive analysis to include an analysis of the practices and social identities of motherhood (Walker, 1995). In an attempt to take into consideration the different terrains of motherhood and the impact of wider social meanings on these experiences it was necessary to find a method of analysis that would enable such an exploration. The study on which this paper is based, therefore, used a feminist method of analysis referred to as the voice relational method of analysis. This particular method of analysis allowed for a reading of motherhood that opened up for exploration the complex and varied experiences of six white South African mothers negotiating motherhood in a middle class context.

THE STUDY.

To collect data for this study a group of mothers who attended the same postnatal group were approached to participate in two extended focus group discussions. The first author is a friend of one of the mothers from this postnatal group. During a discussion of the challenges this mother was facing as a new mother, the first author asked whether her group would be open to discussing these issues with a researcher. A number of mothers indicated that they were interested in participating, but due to reasons that included sick children only three arrived for the first focus group. The low turnout reflects the unpredictable and demanding nature of motherhood (Frizelle & Hayes, 2000), which made it impossible for some of the mothers who had agreed to participate to attend at the last minute. Similar constraints meant that only one of the

participants from the first group attended the second focus group, which included three new participants.

All six women who participated in the focus groups were middle-class, white, married and lived in nuclear homes. The mothers had access to all of the amenities and services available to those living in the middle class suburbs of South Africa. At the time of research all of the mothers' children were under the age of two years. Two of the mothers, Madison and Elle (the mothers chose their own pseudonyms), were engaged in paid work outside of the home and Erin intended returning to work in the future. All six mothers had access to domestic help.

One of the mothers kindly hosted the focus groups (on two different evenings) in her home. The second author facilitated these groups (although the first author attended the first focus group in a supportive role) and provided wine and snacks to create a relaxed and informal setting that the participants felt familiar with and in which they felt comfortable and safe to discuss their experiences. The fact that the mothers knew each other from their interactions at the postnatal support group for new mothers further enabled open discussion. The facilitator explained to the group of mothers that she was interested in exploring the everyday experiences of mothers, and in particular those experiences which challenged the idealized image of motherhood. The facilitator aimed to foster open discussion amongst the participants and therefore immersed herself in the group discussions. The facilitator was also concerned that speaking about difficult experiences would be sanctioned by these mothers, and so she devised creative ways to encourage discussion around these topics. For example, during the first focus group the women were shown a scene from a series called **Desperate housewives**. The scene depicts an exhausted mother who can no longer cope with the demands of motherhood. Her friends find her contemplating suicide and she confesses to taking her son's Ritalin in an attempt to keep up with the other, seemingly more energetic mothers. Although humorous, this scene makes a serious statement about the pressure many mothers feel to perform and the levels of desperation they can reach. It is suggested that this activity successfully facilitated discussion about the more difficult experiences of motherhood.

The voice-centred relational method of analysis was used to analyse the verbatim transcripts of the focus groups. This method of analysis is an adaptation, by Mauthner and Doucet (1998), of an earlier method develop by Lyn Brown, Carol Gilligan and their research colleagues. Through this adaptation Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 125-126) attempted to translate relational ontology, which views individuals as located in complex webs of "intimate and larger social relations", into a concrete method of analysis exploring people's experiences "in terms of their relationships to the people around them and to the broader social, structural, and cultural contexts within which they live". It is this focus on relational ontology that made this method of analysis an appropriate method for an exploration of the different terrains of motherhood (discourse, practice and social identity) and the way in which various contextual factors such as race, class and gender intersect to impact on motherhood.

The voice-relational method involves four separate readings of the transcripts. Reading one involves "reading for the plot" (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998: 126) and entails teasing out the mother's stories by focusing on the characters involved, recurrent words, metaphors and images that emerge in their talk. The second reading focuses on

“reading for the voice of I” (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998:128). During this reading we focused on how each of the mothers talked about themselves in relation to being a mother and made use of highlighters to physically trace when the participants made use of the personal pronouns “I”, “we” and “you”. Reading three involved “reading for relationships” (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998: 131) during which we were vigilant for instances where the respondents made reference to significant interpersonal relationships or broader social networks. The final reading, reading four, focused on “placing people within their cultural contexts and social structures” (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998: 132). This reading enabled us to contextualize motherhood and to understand how wider social, cultural and political constructions come to impact on the experiences of mothers.

Although the analysis involves four “separate” readings, these readings cannot really be separated from each other. The reader will note that there is considerable overlap between the different readings. In this way, the reading process serves to “artificially” disentangle the multilayered accounts of the mothers for the purposes of analysis. The difficulty of separating the readings through the process of analysis also serves to illustrate the interaction of various social factors that make motherhood such a complex identity and experience.

ANALYSIS.

READING ONE: DOMINANT DISCOURSES OF MOTHERHOOD.

Retrospectively, we found that through this reading we had, in fact, identified traces of dominant discourses or cultural notions of motherhood. That is, by focusing on the main plot or themes emerging from the mothers’ talk we had actually teased out “strands” of dominant ideologies of motherhood.

The following analysis illustrates the pervasiveness of the ideology of the “ideal mother”, that is, the ever present, ever available mother who naturally takes to the role. The mothers clearly struggle, mostly in private, with the practice of mothering, which in turn impacts negatively on how they view themselves as mothers. Isolation, alienation and despair pervade their talk of their experiences of being a mother. This is not to say, however, that these women only experience motherhood as negative. Rather, the participants were given a unique opportunity to openly acknowledge the struggles of mothering that are often silenced and made invisible by dominant images of the ever present and ever happy mother.

Silence and invisibility.

Many of the mothers acknowledged how difficult it was to “break the silence”, that is, to acknowledge that they were “not coping” with being a new mother. The mothers frequently made reference to “not talking” about their struggles and this silence is clearly informed by wider cultural expectations of the “good enough mother” (Jeannes & Shefer, 2005) who neither struggles nor complains about her position as mother. In the following quote Madison illustrates the pressure she initially felt to be seen as coping by the other mothers in her group.

Madison: *"Ja, I think along the way it's got better, but in the beginning, we met once a week. And everyone's all hunky dory 'I'm just sitting there on cloud 9 with baby'. Meanwhile deep down inside … er … I was really battling. But you wouldn't talk about it then … over time more and more comes out".*

Madison's silence is clearly the outcome of comparing herself with other mothers who appeared to be "all hunky dory". It is only with time that the ability to acknowledge the struggles becomes possible.

Sophia was the newest member of the postnatal group and had the following to say about joining the group:

Sophia: *"I was scared to join at first because I didn't know anybody and I was last in the group. And, I'm really opening up here now … (pause) … it seemed like everyone else was coping and I wasn't".*

It is only within the context of the focus group that Sophia feels courageous and perhaps safe enough to share that she felt, in comparison to the other mothers that she was the *only* mother not coping. This reflects an underlying assumption that coping is the norm for a new mother, while any difficulties must suggest that there is something wrong with her inherent capacity to mother. Madison and Courtney both acknowledge that they had had similar experiences:

Madison: "*I was battling with breast feeding and everyone else was breastfeeding beautifully or they all seemed to be coping fine".*

Courtney: *"I cried all the way home and I just thought 'I can't cope, my husband goes away for a few days and I can't cope. What's wrong with me?'"*

Silence is not the only emerging feature of these mothers' accounts. It is also apparent that these struggles were actively kept invisible, that is, that these mothers worked hard to conceal their struggles.

The extent of the silence and concealment maintained by the individual mothers is evident in the dilemma of whether to tell expectant mothers "the truth" about motherhood.

Madison: *"It's terrible because, like seeing you pregnant, like so happy to have a baby, and I've got a baby whose got colic or whatever. And you see this happiness in someone's face, and you can't say 'just prepare yourself for a nightmare session' (verbal agreement from the other mothers). You can't say that (sigh), not nightmare, but it's … you can't just say it's going to be so hard, you don't want to burst their bubble, so you are also torn then. Do you tell someone the truth, burst their bubble and make them depressed before they've even had the baby?"*

In the above quote the mothers agree that it is socially unacceptable to talk to happy and excited expectant mothers about the difficult aspects of motherhood. Again mothers are expected to conceal their struggles. This is a powerful reflection of the functioning of the family, "private" domain in which normative behaviours are regulated and maintained (Rose, 1998). Images of "normal" (happy) mothers, generated partly by

the expertise of psychology, are kept in tact by rendering the struggling mother invisible and silent. Madison refers to motherhood as a “nightmare session”, but moments later retracts this metaphor and describes it as “hard”. This illustrates Madison’s own hesitancy when it comes to acknowledging just how hard mothering can be. She feels compelled to soften her description, despite the fact that she is clearly expressing concern about the disjuncture between pervasive images of motherhood and the actual practice of mothering.

Madison goes on to share how her husband, who had picked up that she was struggling, encouraged her to talk.

Madison: *“And I started talking about it, and I have never stopped talking about it, because it was so bad, I didn’t talk about it. I’ll talk about it now to anyone because I feel like I have to and you should talk about it [verbal agreement from the other mothers]. So ja, it definitely helped … it got me out of it … As soon as you start talking about it to moms who are in the same boat, it’s not like they, you know, have it easier, but, like other friends, they’ll start pouring out their heart to you. And sometimes it’s worse than yours or just the same, and they wouldn’t have spoken about it until you actually started talking about it. And it’s amazing, it is, a lot of them are in the same boat”.*

It is through the process of talking about the struggles that these experiences are increasingly normalised for Madison and she learns that she is not the *only* mother struggling. The talk, however, also carries connotations of a “confession”. Rose (1998: 96) describes confession as the “truthful rendering into speech of who one is, and what one does”. Madison has spent a considerable amount of time concealing her struggle and “spills” out her confession when asked what is wrong. It is clear that Madison and the other mothers she encourages “to talk” feel they are not living up to the standards of motherhood. “Talk” becomes a technology of coping as these mothers attempt to make sense of their experiences in relation to each other, without actually critiquing the expectations of motherhood.

The feminization of mothering and caring.

A sense of desperation permeated all of the participants’ stories. This desperation is clearly linked to a discourse that positions mothers as the primary caregiver (Jeannes & Shefer, 2004). In the following quotes Courtney highlights the gendered nature of her desperation.

Courtney: *“So that’s kind of why you have a meeting with a teacher from school because your child has kind of done something wrong, they always phone the mom, they don’t phone and say can mom and dad please come in for a meeting”.*

Psychological discourses focus on the mother-child dyad and, therefore, position women as the primary caregivers of children, while simultaneously constructing mothers/women “as objects of surveillance and regulation” (Alldred, 1996: 136). Courtney is held responsible and expected to attend a meeting when her child has done something wrong. She is acutely aware of not being able to escape this surveillance and regulation, while the father of her child is.

In the following quote Sophia highlights the frustration she feels at being solely responsible for her child's well-being.

Sophia: *"You are the sole person responsible for them, getting that nap and getting that meal, if he doesn't get a good meal, he's distracted, he'll wake up in the night two or three times …"*

In the following interaction Erin and Madison express their frustration with the "full-time" nature of mothering practices.

Erin: "*So I just know that when I go back to work, I know that I'll be fetching my little girl from day care, coming home, bath her, feed her, put her to bed, cook supper, then finishing my marking and he'll just come in from his meetings, so even though we both have full-time jobs, he won't be able to …"*

Madison: *"You have to do that full-time job, on top of your full time job!"*

Not only do the preceding quotes illustrate the demands placed on mothers, they also show how the practices of motherhood are linked to wider discourses of motherhood and gender. As Walker (1995) argues, mothering is ordered and practiced around ideas about womanhood and gender. Motherhood as the sole responsibility of *women* produces a number of tasks that become the work of the mother. Bathing, cooking, feeding and sleeping routines are the work of women and so mothering practices remain largely feminised.

In the following quote Madison describes the difficult process involved in negotiating buying a loaf of bread as a mother.

Madison: *"You think when you are driving, 'I need a loaf of bread, but how can I do it? Where can I leave my daughter in the car and just run in?', and they have fallen asleep, and you don't want to wake them up … 'should I ask someone to watch her? No! I can't ask someone to watch her. Should I just leave her? No one will know'… and you can't and you feel so guilty and you drive home and you've got no bread. And your husband comes home and craps all over you … 'What have you done all day? There is no bread!' Meanwhile you fought with yourself for like an hour and then gave up on it. And the whole thing is that your life has changed so much that you can't even buy a loaf of bread!"*

In this quote Madison expresses guilt around not being able to manage to buy a loaf of bread while caring for her children. When her husband comes home from work and questions what she has done all day, she does not defend her caring as work, but rather guiltily laments on the fact that she simply could not work out a way of managing to buy the bread and care for her daughter. Women's caring for children is experienced as a "naturalized prescription" (Burman, cited in Alldred. 1998: 138), rather than a normative construct. Caring is not valued as another legitimate form of work that both men and women can engage in (Benn, 1999).

The following quote from Elle further illustrates the gendered nature of caring in general, where her baby's and husband's needs are put above her own.

Elle: *"My husband will be like 'let's go watch jet skiing at the beach' and I'd be 'ok, but I have got to pack baby's cooler box', and then 'babes he's going to need like a sleep at 9h30, so, er, I'll stay and you go!'"*

Challenging dominant meanings of motherhood.

While dominant motherhood ideologies could be traced in the participating mothers' accounts of their mothering practices and identities, this does not mean that women passively collude with these ideologies. On the other hand, if she challenges the normative meanings of motherhood, this does not necessarily mean that she rejects these meanings. Alldred (1998: 143) argues that it is problematic to see women as occupying one of only two subject positions in relation to being a mother, that is, as "either 'duped' by the rosy images of motherhood" or as having " 'seen through' its ideological effects" and, therefore, able to resist. Alldred (1998: 143) argues that this "either/or possibility… restricts a more complex exploration of how forces operate at a subjective level". Women are involved in a process of challenging discourses and practices around motherhood, but in complex ways that are both regulatory and resistant. This regulation and resistance is evident in Rochelle's accounts of mothering.

Rochelle: *"I could never stay at home all day everyday with her, so I go out! So, I plan, generally, my days. I go to yoga every morning. I have a maid so that helps, so I leave her with her in that time. Then I'll quickly do grocery shopping or whatever, go home, try to make supper before she wakes up and then I always plan something for the afternoon. For example, this afternoon I met with a friend for coffee, her little girls and my little girl play, and um, tomorrow I'm also taking her to a friend's house to play, but I am going to leave her there and I'm going to go off. Thursday mornings is Moms and Tots so that takes up the whole morning … And then Friday, I'm going to visit my sister, and she's got three boys. But then it's quite tiring because you're never at home, but I can't stay at home, I just get frustrated and irritated".*

Rochelle clearly sees herself as ultimately responsible for the well-being of her child and her house-hold in general. From the above account it is clear that she spends a considerable amount of time ensuring that she does everything that is expected of her, from caring for her daughter and doing the grocery shopping. What stands out about Rochelle's account is that she, unlike the other mothers in this study, actively ensures that her own needs are also met. She finds ways to share her caring responsibility so that she can do yoga and have time to herself. While it is clearly exhausting to manage this balance it is necessary for her well-being as she is clear that she "can't stay at home". In this way Rochelle struggles with the dominant meanings of motherhood and this struggle enables another kind of mothering experience that is exhausting, but more acceptable for her.

Rochelle also encourages other mothers to practice motherhood in ways that best suit their needs. Consider her following discussion regarding breastfeeding.

Rochelle: *"I would never say, oh you have to breastfeed … I did it, because it suited me. To me the whole bottle thing seemed like a nightmare, so it suited me and that's why I did it! But I would never be … say you needed to breastfeed, because I believe you must do what best suits you, and your baby and your life".*

While the other mothers in this study all expressed immense pressure to breastfeed, Rochelle confidently challenges this assumed practice and argues for what suits the needs of each mother and baby and, importantly, their lives.

Rochelle's account further highlights the importance of not polarizing oppressed versus empowered experiences of motherhood. While mothers are undoubtedly influenced by cultural notions of motherhood, they are also actively involved in negotiating and transforming these ideologies in their everyday practices.

READING TWO: READING FOR THE VOICE OF "I".

Through its focus on how each mother talked about themselves as a mother, reading two can be seen as focusing on the social identity of motherhood (Walker, 1996). This reading represents an attempt to hear a mother voice her "sense of agency", while also recognising her "social location" as she talks (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998: 130).

We found that at times mothers spoke with an active "I", while at other times mothers shifted from the personal pronoun "I" to that of "you", which often indicated an experience that the mother recognised as socially shared by other mothers. Reading for the voice of "I", therefore, gave voice to the personal and individualised experiences of the mothers, but also illustrates that the mothers recognise themselves "as part of a distinct social group, that of mothers" (Walker, 1995: 426).

Disappearing self.

Five of the six participants made reference to a loss of self once becoming a mother. In the following quote Sophia describes herself as having become a "shadow", while her child's existence becomes fore-grounded. The use of the collective pronoun "you" by Sophia indicates that she recognises that the "disappearing self" is a shared experience and therefore characteristic of being a mother.

Sophia: *"No one is really interested in **you** first, they always 'oh, hello little one, how are you?' Even family when they come round. **You're** just a shadow now".*

Madison and Elle both make reference to what they at times experience as a non-existent self.

Madison: *"Its like **you** don't exist anymore. I mean, to put make-up on **I** think 'should **I** put make-up on this morning, **who cares**?' Got to get my daughter dressed and whatever, so if I get five minutes then fine, but **no one** really cares about **me** anymore, so it doesn't matter".*

Elle: *"I mean **I** do not exist anymore, **I'm** Ben's mom, who **I am** what my interests are, and what **I want** to do with **my** life, **my** hopes and dreams are like … it's not about **me** anymore, it's all about Ben".*

Through the use of the active "I" these mothers make a clear statement about what they experience to be the subjugation of their own individual interests, needs, dreams and hopes. There is no hesitation in the way in which they talk about how motherhood has engulfed their identities. Jeannes and Shefer (2004: 8) refer to the "selflessness" of mothering, where the mother is expected to centre her life around the needs of her child. Perhaps, however, what these mothers experience to be a "loss of self" can be

better understood as the outcome of shifting identities. In other words, it is not likely that these mothers have lost some pre-existing identity, but rather that the experience of having a child has resulted in the negotiation of multiple identities, where the needs of a child force the identity of mother to the fore. As Alldred (1996:146) puts it, "an identity as mother can probably not be 'thrown off' for more than a limited time period". Motherhood is one of the multiple identities these mothers negotiate, but one which is often experienced as constricting and dominant.

In the following quote Madison describes powerfully how the role of motherhood overshadows any previous experience of herself:

Madison: "*It's separate; it's that life and this life. It's not one life, its two completely different lives. That life didn't become … it's just totally different, that life stopped, it's gone! This is a new life, and* ***no one*** *tells* ***you*** *that!* ***You know, they say*** *'life will change, it's a big change'. No [with emphasis]!* ***Your life is over!*** *It's not a change, its finished! [Laughter]"*.

Her comment that "no one tells you" illustrates an understanding that while the disruption of self that comes with becoming and being a mother is a shared experience it is, ironically, not an experience mothers are adequately prepared for. Again the struggles of motherhood remain silent and invisible.

Healthy development = mothers' work.

In the following quote Madison uses the personal pronoun "I" to emphasise how *she* (woman and mother), rather than anyone else, has come to take on personal responsibility for the healthy development of her child. After her opening statement about the pressure she feels Madison comments "you know", highlighting that she is aware that this pressure is shared by other mothers. As she speaks the other mothers comment in agreement, again suggesting a collective pressure to ensure the psychological well-being of ones' children.

Madison: *"****I have*** *all this pressure and* it's **all on me***,* ***I have to do… you know****, give my baby a good brain [rest of mothers agree], and* ***I have to*** *do this and stimulate that. So it's true,* ***I'm thinking*** *everyday, '****have I*** *done colours,* ***have I*** *done this [Elle agrees],* ***have I*** *done the feel thing,* ***have I*** *done this?' Because otherwise the sensors are not going to develop,* ***and its all on me****. Hah,* ***if I don't*** *do this my baby's going to be a cabbage".*

Madison not only sees herself as responsible for ensuring the healthy development of her child, she also sees herself as a potential obstacle to her child's development if she cannot do what she "has to do". In this way mothers are seen "not only as the major agents of child development but also as the main obstacles to it" (Alldred, 1996: 137).

Her repeated reference to "I have to" highlights that Madison has internalised ideas about what is expected from mothers for children to develop normally. These ideas are strongly rooted in the discipline of developmental psychology. These internalised ideas become the basis for self-regulation on the part of mothers. As Rose (1998: 77) argues, internalised ideas (like those around motherhood) are linked to "the apparently 'private' question of how we should behave, how we should regulate our own conduct, how we should judge our behaviour and that of others". It is clear that Madison (and the other

mothers in this study) engage in processes of "self-scrutiny" and "self-evaluation" (Rose, 1998: 77) by which they regulate their own conduct as mothers.

In the following quote Courtney further confirms that it is the mother, who is expected to take on the responsibility for the wellbeing of children.

Courtney: *"**My whole life** revolves around these children, if somebody falls off the jungle gym; **no one phones him** (her husband) at the office … **they phone me** …".*

The roles of men and women in child care are taken up in relation to "images of normal mothers, fathers, parents and families generated by expertise" (Rose, 1998: 77). The expertise of developmental psychology has been partly responsible for the gendered nature of child care through its production of the responsible mother. Courtney is clearly dissatisfied with the fact that is she, as mother (rather than her husband), who is ultimately responsible for the health of her children. In this way "the pronouncements of experts" are "woven into the fabric of our everyday experience, our aspirations and our dissatisfactions" (Rose, 1998: 78).

The good mother.

The immense sense of responsibility mothers feel is linked to the idea of the "good mother". In the following quote Madison's use of the personal pronoun "I" serves to separate herself from what she assumes to be the characteristics of a "real" mother:

Madison: *"**I can't** change, **I know I've** got no patience and **I'll throttle her,** like I'll feel like it. So mine is awkward because **I know I'm not going to change,** and **I feel like I should** to be a mother, **you know, mothers aren't like me** [emphasis], **they're** [emphasis] not impatient, **they** [emphasis] like to spend all day long with their babies, **I can't do that".***

While the ideology of the good mother is evident in Madison's talk, she is clearly struggling with this ideology in the way in which she owns her limitations through the use of "I". While she feels that her limitations exempts her from being a "real mother" (an "ideal mother") she has come to accept this and adapts her mothering accordingly.

In relation to having her second child Madison says the following:

Madison: *"**I've learnt** from my mistake and **I wish someone had told me the**n, but **you can't, you have** to experience it to know it. **I have** (emphasis) learnt from my mistakes and **I will** (emphasis) leave my new born baby with someone to baby sit".*

Adaptations, like Madison's, are evidence that mothers are not simple recipients of wider cultural expectations of mothering (Walker, 1995: 39). The practices and identities of mothering are constantly and actively constructed through an often painful process of negotiation. Sophia and Elle illustrate this negotiation in the following interaction.

Sophia: ***"I blew up** in front of everybody, and **I started screaming** at them in the restaurant … **I was so embarrass**ed to face **everybody** … and Elle actually texted me and said 'I hope you ok' and that meant the world to me. That really made a difference".*

Elle: *"Well, **I would** have done exactly the same thing, **we** [emphasis] **all would**".*

Through the use of the collective pronoun "we" Elle acknowledges that Sophia's reaction in the restaurant is not an isolated one, but a common experience for mothers. Again the silence and invisible nature of mothers' everyday experiences is highlighted in this interaction between Sophia and Elle. It takes Elle's direct support to assure Sophia that she is not the only mother to react in these ways. This support, however, is not public, but rather shared privately between these mothers through the medium of a cell phone text message.

READING THREE: READING FOR RELATIONSHIPS.

This reading, by focusing on how respondents talk about their relationships and broader social networks proved to be an important reading for understanding the way in which motherhood is (re)constructed through daily social interactions.

This reading suggests that, on the whole, mothers find few sources of support and as a result are often left to negotiate their journeys primarily on their own. Mothers often feel incredibly alone and isolated as they engage in mothering. It is only through their interactions with each other and with time that they find some sense of relief.

Mothers' mothers.

Most of the mothers made reference to the level of support they received from their own mothers once becoming mothers. There appears to have been an underlying expectation and assumption that their mothers would provide support when they themselves became mothers, which is evident in the sense of disappointment reflected in Sophia, Erin and Elle's accounts:

Sophia: *"So I didn't get any help. She (mother) didn't cook supper, she didn't, she did nothing, absolutely nothing. So I always get very frustrated when I hear of other people's help, because, why me? Why don't I have support?"*

Erin: *"I must admit, also, I found when I had her, I felt for the first time in my life that I really felt like I needed my mom. Like having my mom living overseas was like really hard".*

Elle: *"I did not have anyone, my mom works all day, so does Mark's mom, I sat by myself all day".*

The participants' need for the support of their own mothers suggests that these mothers desire to be valued, supported and guided by a maternal figure who could affirm their mothering abilities and experiences (Pacella, 2005). Their expectations, however, further reinforce the gendered nature of mothering. The mothers in this study expected the support of their mothers, not their fathers. The role of support and care is again women's work. Embedded in this need for the support of their more experienced mothers is, perhaps, an acknowledgement that mothering is not an innate, natural instinct, but rather a skill in which new mothers need instruction. Ironically, few of the mothers found this support from their own mothers.

Husbands.
Most of the mothers felt that their husbands did not understand the struggles or work involved in mothering. This is reflected in the following interaction between Erin, Courtney and Madison.

Erin: *"I just couldn't stop crying and even my husband was like, are you going to stop crying soon? I think he didn't know …".*

Courtney: *"You actually have to understand that they (husband) will never understand. You can't make them, they're different, so you once again have to deal with it … you just have to!"*

Madison: *"I've never fought so much in my whole life with my husband, because you are trying to make them understand how you feel, but you don't want to sit there and have an hour long feeling conversation, you want them to look at you and know".*

It is clear that Erin, Courtney and Madison are frustrated with the lack of "parenting" in their homes, where they do most of the 'parenting' work. Although they express frustration with the situation and have fought with their partners over this, there is ultimately a level of acceptance from the mothers. As Courtney puts it "they will never understand… and once again you will just have to deal with it". There is a sense that despite her frustration Courtney feels she has not option but to accept that "this is the way it is". Caring remains the work of mothers.

Elle describes an argument she had with her husband when debating whose life had been most impacted on by the arrival of their baby. Elle has calculated the hours she spends mothering and compares this with her husband's working hours.

Elle: *"But mine is from 05h30 in the morning until 19h30 at night. You get up at 07h00 and your day finishes at 16h00, and you come home and I cook and do everything. So, my days are like fourteen and a half hours, whereas yours is like eight, but I don't do anything all day apparently".*

The mothers in this study feel that their husbands have little insight into the nature of mother work, which appears to be based on the assumption that this is what women are naturally wired to do. This misunderstanding becomes the source of conflict and frustration as the mothers' battle to secure their husbands' understanding and support. As Backett (1982) argues, men are not expected to make fathering the centre of their identities, and unlike women, are not required to undergo an entire transformation of self in order to take on the role of father. It is clear that in the homes of the mothers who participated in this study "domestic democracy" is largely missing, that is, the men do not contribute a meaningful half towards caring for their children (Benn, 1999: 245).

Other mothers.
Throughout the discussions the mothers made reference to the way in which they either compared themselves to other mothers, or felt observed and potentially judged by other mothers. This is reflected in the following interaction between Elle and Sophia.

Elle*: "You definitely do always worry about what others are thinking of you, like how's her child, ooh, he's got a dirty face, his shirt's dirty. You always do think, like, ok, that shirt he's got on is dirty. I will quickly change it before we go anywhere else [agreement from other mothers]".*

Sophia: *"I think, I think for me is that if I started talking about it [the difficult experiences], I think nobody would join in and suddenly the light's on me".*

Elle: "*Ja".*

Sophia: *"And then there's this awkward silence and then there's like … you are a bad mom".*

While Sophia expresses the need to acknowledge and discuss her struggles with other mothers, she knows that there is a risk that she will be labelled a bad mom if she does this. Elle's example of having to change her son's dirty shirt before being seen in public illustrates the need to keep up social appearances.

In the following quote Erin compares her own baby's sleeping routine with that of her sister-in-law's.

Erin: *"My husband's sister has just had this baby that just sleeps all day and I said to my husband 'I just want to pinch him so he screams'. I'm so tired of him being the favourite grandchild who is like, 'look how cute I am, I never cry', and my one is 'Waaah!'"*

Erin has concluded that her sister-in-law's child is favoured because he is a quiet baby who sleeps easily. Reflected in her desire to pinch him so that he screams is a need to not feel judged because of her own crying baby. She longs to be the mother of the "favourite grandchild" and perhaps, in this way, the favourite (good) mother.

All of the above examples are similar in that they reflect a process of self-scrutiny as the mothers evaluate and compare themselves with other mothers. Another similarity is the outcome of this self-scrutiny, that is, a sense of failure and despair. Perhaps it is better to suggest that what these mothers are ultimately doing is evaluating themselves against a socially produced mythical image (Rose, 1998) of the "ideal mother".

READING FOUR: PLACING PEOPLE WITHIN CULTURAL CONTEXTS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES.

Reading four was particularly important for exploring the way in which race, class, gender and sexual orientation intersect to impact on the experiences of the mothers in this study.

The role of experts.

The mothers in this study made reference to three primary forms of expertise that influenced their experiences of motherhood: child care magazines, general practitioners, and clinic staff. The following discussion of magazines between Madison and Courtney suggests, firstly, that the advice given in magazines can be confusing and overwhelming for a mother who is trying to do the right thing and, secondly, that

they fail to acknowledge the difficulties of motherhood and in this way collude with the maternal myth.

Madison: "*That's the thing, you've always read everything is wrong and you don't know if you are doing the right thing, and this is right and that right".*

Courtney: *"The way a lot of the editorials and that sort of thing are written are kind of to make you feel like you are a bad mom because you can't cope, how can you not cope?"*

Madison: *"Those mags ask you what you want to hear more of, on all of them I've said postnatal depression, moms being depressed, write more about it, tell people about it. Not even PND, but just suffering with emotions like what we talking about, write more about that".*

The influence of experts, is however, not exclusively described as negative. Elle, for example, points out that the nurse at her clinic was the *only* person to recognise her needs alongside those of her baby:

Elle: *"Oh, I'll bet you he's eaten more than you have today', and she would be the only person that would actually say stuff like that to me. And I'd say 'actually you are right hey, actually I managed to wolf down a piece of toast this morning, that's all I have eaten today'".*

Alldred (1998) points out that there has been a shift from giving scientific advice to mothers towards providing psychological knowledge. There are few magazines or professionals who will give explicitly prescriptive advice to mothers in an authoritative tone. Rather, a more empathic approach is taken, with emphasis on providing support. Allred (1998: 140), however, points out that the authorial tone has simply been replaced with an "identificatory and confessional stance that belies any hierarchical relationship … but invokes 'an expert' in specific ways and places". So while Elle feels comforted by the concern of the nurse, this "concern" is ultimately for the wellbeing of the child. The reason for Elle not eating (her consuming mothering) is not questioned or problematised in anyway.

The impact of race, heterosexuality and family structure.

Although not spoken about directly by the mothers in this study, there are four other important cultural and social influences that impact on these mothers' experiences that are worth mentioning.

Firstly, all six mothers have the support of a domestic worker. Rochelle, for example, was able to explore her own interests because she had a domestic worker and Elle makes reference to her domestic worker who clearly helps with managing the home. Although these mothers did not speak directly of it their positioning as white women in a particular socio-political context has made the support of a domestic worker possible. It appears that the help of cheap domestic labour is taken for granted by these mothers who appear to underestimate the impact these women have on their mothering experiences. This is reflected in the fact that while these women spoke of the influence of other social relationships none of the mothers chose to discuss these women in detail.

Secondly, all of the mothers in this study are married and identify as heterosexual. Heterosexuality is "a category divided by gender and also depends for its meaning on gender division" (Richardson, 1996:2), and there is therefore a "relationship between motherhood and heterosexuality" (VanEvery, in Ricahrdson, 1996: 47). Heterosexuality is characterized by a relationship between genders and it is therefore a relationship that serves to reproduce gendered divisions of labour. Heterosexism refers to the tendency to view heterosexuality as "normal", therefore "natural" rather than as socially and historically produced. In this way the position of women as care giver in the male-female dyad is a taken-for-granted assumption. Motherhood is further reinforced, through their heterosexual positioning, as the "natural" task of the women in this particular study.

Thirdly, all of the mothers are embedded in nuclear families. This particular family structuring undoubtedly has an impact on the mothering experience. As Sudarkasa (2004: 2) argues, "motherhood is first and foremost defined, affected and impacted by the type of family structure or kinship grouping in which it is lodged" and that the behaviour and values associated with motherhood "reflect the constraints and elasticities that derive from the family structure themselves". Sudarkasa (2004: 2) further argues that the nuclear family with its "relative insulation, and its inward-looking philosophy that stresses the 'husbanding' of resources unto itself" imposes particular constraints on mothers. In the current study it is clear that the nuclear family, and its gendered division of labour, contributes to the sense of isolation, alienation and desperation these mothers report.

Fourthly, the mothers share a middle-class status. At a social level these women personify mothers against which marginalized mothers (teenage mothers, poor mothers and working mothers) are often defined. It is suggested that it is precisely these mothers middle-class status that makes them particularly vulnerable to self-regulatory mothering discourses and practices. While these mothers are actively involved in negotiating these mothering discourses, they are never able to entirely escape them.

Due to their middle-class status these mothers have the support of domestic workers, access to post natal support groups, clinics and supportive literature. With all these resources at their disposal they are not likely to think of themselves as "troubled mothers". Apart from expressing their frustration with the lack of involvement of their husbands, none of these mothers actively challenge the social assumption that they as women should take ultimate responsibility for the care of children. In this way they are expected to accept their situation and continue to self-scrutinise and regulate their behaviour against the normative image of the good mother.

Although it is tempting to see these mothers acceptance of their mothering role as part of a wider "collusion to patriarchy" (Walker, 1991: 491), it can also be understood as evidence that despite the struggles, these mothers also value their role as mothers. As Walker (1991: 437) puts it mothers "in the most fundamental sense *are* life givers: this is a capacity which could be celebrated without endorsing women's submission to men or the tyranny of particular under-resourced domestic and childcare regimes".

CONCLUSION.

The voice relational analysis of the participants accounts of their mothering experiences opened up for exploration the way in which wider discourses of gender, race, sexuality and class intersect to influence mothering identities and practices.

The analysis suggests that mothers are actively involved in regulating their mothering practices and identities against wider normative images of mothering, fathering and the family (Rose, 1998). Mothering, as does general caring, remains the work of women. While the mothers in this study were openly frustrated by the lack of support of the fathers of their children, none of them directly questioned the assumption that it is ultimately the responsibility of women to ensure the well-being and healthy development of their children.

Against a wider discourse of “good mothering” these women kept their own difficulties silent and invisible as they struggled with their own identities and practices as mothers. Along with the silence and invisibility most of the women in this study experienced a disappearing sense of self as their identities as mother was increasingly fore-grounded over and above their other identities. The women in this study also spoke about a strong sense of social isolation as they tried to manage their everyday mothering experiences. It is suggested that this social isolation is an outcome of limited domestic democracy (Benn, 1999) in these women’s homes and the ongoing feminization of care.

The mothers in this study were all actively involved in processes of self-scrutiny and self-evaluation as they compared their own mothering experiences and identities with those of the mothers they engaged with. Wider discourses of developmental psychology and the ideal mother provided these women with a set of standards against which they measured their own success as mothers.

These mothers did not, however, passively absorb pervasive discourses of motherhood, nor did they directly reject them. The accounts of these mothers illustrate that the negotiation of motherhood is a complex and layered experience as mothers actively take up dominant subject positions as well as actively resist them in their everyday experiences. Motherhood is enacted and transformed in particular social contexts.

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