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Mothering on the margins: special issue editorial

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Mothering and feminism

The proliferation of mothering as a topic in the cultural, policy and public health arenas seen in a preoccupation with older, celebrity, working and young (adolescent) mothers provides fertile ground through which to locate a feminist analytic. That women are positioned in relation to a mothering identity is powerfully evident in the public domain. For example, in recent press commentary of the (first female) Australian Prime Minister the focus has been on the fact she is unmarried and child free and seen to be 'deliberately barren' (Connolly, 2010). The expectation that women will become mothers forms part of the normative regulatory discourses governing motherhood which construct women's sexuality and identity through their reproductive function (Ussher, 1989). Cultural representations of the idealised and sometimes "yummy" mummy (middle class, attractive, healthy, sexy and heterosexual) contrast with depictions of 'bad' mothers which proliferate the popular press. The women/mothers often given visibility illustrate the margins of motherhood: minoritised women as mothers such as working class, lesbian, black, disabled women as well as the physically and emotionally absent working (often middle class) mother. In this special edition we interrogate the contribution of critical, feminist informed psychology to this cultural landscape.

Mothering at the margins

Feminist work has held up the dominant construction of the ideal mother (one in which women are constructed as selfless, nurturing, subsuming their own needs to attend to their children's) for scrutiny, arguing that it is often illusory, partial, and divisive. Far from the pinnacle of achievement, the idealisation of motherhood can deny the negative or difficult aspects of mothering which can be experienced as

oppressive to those women whose experiences differ from the 'idealised' norm (Nicholson, 1986). Feminist work has highlighted ways in which idealised views of motherhood form the backdrop to other forms of mother trouble where 'mothering' is problematised (see Craig, 2010 for example). This may be because women occupy particular social location or identity statuses, for example: older, adolescent, lesbian or disabled mothers or, where women engage in specific parenting practices such as those women who bottle rather then breast feed (Lee, 2007) which in Anglo-Northern contexts is often viewed as selfish or harmful.

In their analysis of women's accounts of mothering children with ADHD, Carpenter and Austin (2007) use the analogy of the 'text' and the 'margin' to describe how they experience 'difference' in their family. This is exemplified by women's talk of their children's disability and challenging behaviour, which they perceived to reflect badly on their parenting skills, locating them within the margins rather than the 'text'; the space colonised by normative familial forms.

'Othered' mothers are constructed in relation to the centre, the assumed and idealized norm of mothering. Normative practices rely on producing a distinction between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal', where the norm is based on the white bourgeois family (Phoenix, 1987; Urwin, 1985). Phoenix and Woollett (1991) have been particularly critical of psychology's narrow focus on what constitutes acceptable mothering practices and argue that this not only creates a disjuncture between dominant social constructions of motherhood and the reality of women's actual experiences of mothering, but has served to maintain negative constructions of 'otherness'.

In this special issue we take as our focus the margins where mothering is troubled. Arguably both editors feel drawn towards the margins in relation to dominant discourses of mothering: one of us a non practising mother, the other a working mother trying to balance the demands of an academic career with children. Both of us are engaged in work that draws on critical, feminist theorising to address and challenge the marginalisation of women. This special issue has been worked to reflect a range of feminist approaches to scholarship in order to render legible women's experiences of mothering from the margins.

The articles

This special issue reflects a range of feminist approaches to scholarship. Authors have grounded theoretical formulations in empirical research through a critical feminist, reflexive, queer lens and use theory to render research praxis and the production of knowledge intelligible. The articles also draw on a range of methodological resources with which to interrogate the concepts of motherhood. Common to all papers is the way motherhood is recognised as: 'a culturally and historically specific set of discursive practices' (Carpenter and Austin, 2007, p661). In this issue, authors have shown a commitment to locating the production of knowledge in its discursive context. The contributors all seek to render public the lived realities of mothers who in some way 'trouble the boundaries of mothering' (Carpenter and Austin 2007, p662). There are a number of themes that span the collection of articles. These include: a concern with reflexivity and subjectivity, challenging myths and stereotypes, the expert gaze, and spaces and dislocations.

Reflexivity and subjectivity

In their articles, Jude Clark and Damien Riggs draw our attention to the role of subjectivity in the research process and cast a reflexive gaze on their institutional positioning, as privileged academics, and interrogate what it means to make 'knowledge claims' from within the academy. Both Riggs and Clark reflect on ways in which institutional privilege and power places and positions them as academics in relation to their research subjects (Clark) and the gatekeepers of scientific knowledge (Riggs). Clark illustrates how poor, black rural African women draw on the power/image of black African motherhood and mobilise their status as mothers to marginalise and 'discipline' her while simultaneously recognising her power as a representative of an academic institution and as a possible means of access to its (white, male) privilege from which they are excluded. In positioning her as 'child' and, therefore, refusing her adult (research) status in one of the focus groups, they subvert her institutional power and subordinate her to their privileged status as mothers.

Challenging myths and stereotypes

Myths and stereotypes abound in relation to non-normative constructions of motherhood and serve a particular function in regulating parental forms and maintaining differential power relations. They work to locate particular constructions of parenting as different and, therefore, inferior and serve to reinforce notions of who is fit to mother.

Feminist work is often the site of struggles with dominant constructions of mothering and with knowledge claims that sustain or challenge the experiences of women. For example, in his article Riggs argues that the trend in LGB research which seeks to refute/challenge myths about lesbian, gay and bisexual parenting drawing on scientific evidence may serve to reinforce, rather than challenge, the very stereotypes the production of evidence seeks to destabilise.

Sandra Roper's and Rose Capdevila's article on the experiences of stepmothers using Q methodology challenges conventional stereotypes of the wicked stepmother portrayed as the archetypal manifestation of bad m/other and duplicitous woman. The vilification of stepmothers within contemporary culture stands in sharp contrast to the idealisation of motherhood. The authors argue that psychological research has contributed to the pathologisation of step families and other different familial forms. They suggest that the diversity of accounts and subjective experiences of step mothering illustrate that women bring many different ideas, identities and practices to the role.

The expert gaze

The proliferation of parenting advice forums is a theme addressed by Tracey Jensen and by Sam Mungham and Lisa Lazard. The ascendance of the 'expert' in contemporary discourses of parenting would appear to challenge the age old adage, mother knows best: thus, essentialising and privileging women's knowledge about child care while simultaneously discounting their knowledge claims.

Drawing on text in action methods and psychoanalytic social research Tracey Jensen offers a cultural critique of instructional parenting TV and its colonisation in the public sphere. She analyses the investments women make as spectators in order to render intelligible the 'ugly feelings' that the genre (of presenting extreme examples of

parenting in need of expert advice as 'must see' TV) engenders. She argues that the performance of bad mothering, underpinned by class prejudice perhaps, constitutes a form of 'new cruelty' (McRobbie, 2004) that locates bad parenting and working class mothers in the same discursive space. TV programmes and the 'psy professionals' (Ingleby, 1985; Rose, 1999) who work with and through them, serve to reiterate the 'centre' and demarcate the boundaries of 'appropriate' mothering. The experts offer transformed lives and subjectivities - becoming a better mother and 'being there' for their children for example - as a form of redemption gained through public display, through confession and the internalisation of psychological technologies.

The theme of the expert gaze and psychological technologies is addressed further in Sam Mungham's and Lisa Lazard's article which raises the possibility of whether on-line parenting provides a space for empowerment rather than regulation. The authors illustrate how 'spaces' can be subverted and the spectre of totalising mothering subjectivites resisted in some instances. They suggest on-line parenting forums gives rise to politicised mothering identities which challenge the traditional view of mothering as located within the private realm. Whereas instructional reality TV takes as its focus the individual and improvement of the self Mungham's and Lazard's study suggests that on-line parenting forums may offer sites of resistance and, as such, reengages with possibilities for collective action. Women's agency, as they actively create and engage in lay knowledge networks, gives rise to alternative forms of embodied mothering.

Spaces and dislocations

The 'absent' mother has a particular resonance in the context of transnational migration where women from the global 'South' seek carework in the global 'North' in order to provide the very necessary economic support for their families at home (Uy-Tioco, 2007). In theorising the experiences of those mothers who engage in carework there is a need to foreground discursive constructions of subjectivity in the context of global, political and economic factors which impinge on the racialised and gendered trajectories of migration.

Ann Phoenix's article focuses on transnational mothers involved in

global care networks. The analysis of women's accounts brings into stark relief the contradictory good/bad, m/other subject positions available to migrant mothers, geographically separated from their children in order to secure a better economic future, within discourses of attachment where mothers who are unable to fulfil the 'overdetermined requirements of emotional provision and physical co-presence' are pathologised.

The physical and temporal separation between the migrant women and their children described in Phoenix's article contrasts with one mother's narratives of space described in Nollaig Frost's research. She draws on Winnicott's concept of the ever present mother through her analysis of one woman's desire to construct spaces and experiences (both physical and psychic) outside of those colonised by mothering identities/subjectivities to afford 'psychic retreats' from the almost totalising presence of the 'good mother'.

In several of the papers in this collection authors discuss the intersections of race and class: Frost's analysis of mothering and space, Jude Clark's analysis of women in rural post conflict South Africa and Ann Phoenix's migrant mothers. These accounts illustrate how access to resources - psychic (Frost) and material (Clark, Phoenix) - impact on mothering identities and women's concerns with how they can materially provide for themselves and their (grand) children's futures pointing to the interplay of the discursive and the material in shaping m/other subjectivities.

Conclusion

This special issue reflects a range of feminist approaches to scholarship which seek to render legible women's experiences of mothering from the margins. The body of work does not claim to represent all experiences and voices from the margins. Indeed we argue that our interpretations of margin and centre shifts through time, place and political contingency. Neither do we suggest that feminist work speaks with one voice and from one place. Individual authors have navigated and incorporated the different theoretical strands loosely termed feminist research with the aim of addressing 'mothering at the margins' from their own perspective. In so doing, the authors document their positions on women's lives, motherhood (as a collection of embodied identities) and mothering (as a series of social

practices) from different physical and psychological locations. The articles collectively discuss intersections of class, race, (dis)ability, expert/novice status and others serve to render some women's lives marginal and others as central to dominant constructions of mothers, mothering and motherhood.

Acknowledgements

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Biographical notes

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