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First childbirth has a capacity that other births do not have to brand reproduction with a lasting meaning for the mother, to influence all other reproductive experiences. And it is a turning point, a transition, a life crisis: a first baby turns a woman into a mother, and mothers' lives are incurably affected by their motherhood. (Oakley 1979: 24)

Motherhood changes everything. The rapid transitions that occur in women's lives, bodies and identities as they journey into motherhood are largely without parallel. A woman entering motherhood can experience changes in her bodily appearance and functions, her emotions and psychology, her sleep and work schedules, the tasks she performs, her social circle, her sense of self, her sexuality and the roles she plays. These dimensions of life are never completely static for anyone, but the speed, ubiquity and pervasiveness of change that accompany motherhood are unique among life transitions. Motherhood places women in a new social category; it would appear, in fact, that motherhood also places women in a whole new cultural space.

The motherhood metamorphosis is embedded within, facilitated and constrained by, and reified and rendered articulable within particular social, cultural and historical contexts. These processes frequently remain invisible, or obscured by romantic sentimentality, to all but the women who are experiencing them. In her omnipresence, "mother" becomes the taken-for-granted, and the real, live women who occupy the role of "mother" are left to negotiate, by themselves and with each other, the tensions between the ideals and the realities of motherhood.

We often speak easily, too lightly, of someone becoming a mother, generally when she has given birth to or adopted a child, without giving much thought to what this "becoming" is. There is a general social acknowledgment that motherhood entails the care and nurturance of children, and, accordingly, we find a wealth of materials, including books, magazines and videos, designed to assist women in doing that. Much less attention, by academia or popular culture, is paid to the subjective experiences of women as they traverse motherhood. I mean "traverse" here in both of its major senses, as a journey through a terrain and as a thorough exploration and discussion of a subject.

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The latter meaning is of particular interest. We all travel through our life experiences, but there are few “personal” transitions that automatically catapult a person into an identifiable social group, the members of which actually seek out each other for the purpose of discussing and sharing their experiences, who are on the lookout for similar others, catching their eye in public places and striking up conversations in parks and grocery stores. But becoming a mother is this type of transition; mothers do engage in these types of activities.

In making the personal transition to motherhood, women also make a social transition both in terms of their role and status, and in terms of the complex and conflicted social meanings attached to their new role and status. Furthermore they enter, willingly or not, a community of people who are generally identified by the “outside” world as having much in common and who sometimes identify themselves as having some things in common. Not all wish to enter this community, not all feel that they *have* entered this community and not all are equally welcomed by this community, but none is left untouched by it and very few are totally isolated from it. It is with this community, and the entrée therein, that my research has been concerned. Much as an anthropologist would study any new culture, so have I undertaken an ethnographic study of the culture of motherhood.

## Background

In the 1990s, I spoke with some lesbian mothers in Alberta about their experiences of motherhood (Nelson 1996). There are two primary means by which, in the course of that research, I became aware of the “culture of motherhood.” First, as a non-mother, I sometimes encountered the disdain that some mothers have for non-mothering people who presume to speak authoritatively about motherhood. Like many men and unchilded women, I had heard statements along the lines of “no, if you’re not a mother, you cannot understand this.” I was aware that, at the very least, there is some realm of knowledge, and some claim to authority, that is solely maternal. This, of course, does not necessarily constitute a culture, although it can be an important part of one.

Second, the idea of a culture of motherhood became clearer to me as lesbian mothers recounted conversations they’d had with other mothers. In particular, donor insemination mothers were asked questions that they found problematic. These included: “Is his father’s hair that colour?” “Which of you is the mother?” and “How was the labour/are you still nursing?” At first I was taken aback that people would ask these kinds of personal questions of strangers, in public places, but was soon informed that this is how mothers speak to each other; these are the things mothers discuss. Thus sensitized to a form of exchange I had been previously unaware of, I began to hear

my respondents speak of the “mommies’ club” and “the inner circle,” to which the biological mothers were admitted by virtue of their maternity but within which they felt marginal (or even invisible) due to their lesbianism. The non-biological mothers often felt that they were not welcomed into the inner circle at all; they had no traditionally identifiable claim to the status of motherhood. The parameters of the culture of motherhood began to emerge. It appeared that mothers occupy a particular cultural space with its own entrance requirements, discourse and ideologies.

### Studying Motherhood

Motherhood is a topic of interest in many disciplines, but much of the mass of information about motherhood talks *around* motherhood, *about* motherhood, without speaking *of* motherhood *from within it*. Jackson (1992: 3) claims, in fact, that, despite “endless amounts of secondary material on the concept and institution of motherhood,” there exists an actual “conspiracy of silence around ordinary motherhood.” She explains that in reviewing literature on motherhood (ranging from self-help books to fiction) she found that “there seemed to be a hole in the culture where mothers went.” She goes on to say that “motherhood may have become an issue, but it’s not yet a narrative.”

This silence around the experiences of motherhood leads to what Jackson calls “maternal amnesia,” a tendency mothers have to forget or subsume those experiences for which they have no language in the first place. She contends

With cunning reverse psychology, our culture encourages this amnesia, simply by excluding mothers from its most conspicuous rewards — money, power, social status. Everything from the shameful wages for day-care workers to the isolation of the at-home mother is evidence of how, despite lip service and pedagogical theories, our culture remains inimical to children and to the people raising them. (1992: 4)

Contrary to Jackson’s claim, however, there is not complete silence around the experiences of motherhood. A sizable number of researchers and writers, particularly those working from a feminist perspective,<sup>1</sup> have taken on the challenge of bringing the voices and experiences of mothers into some sort of mainstream discourse. These researchers demonstrate the importance of studying motherhood from the perspectives of mothers themselves. Although these efforts have created room for mothers’ voices in mainstream, feminist and/or academic discussions about mothering, they have generally not captured the discourse of mothering that occurs among mothers. So the problem is not so much that we never have a chance to hear what mothers

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have to say about mothering; the problem is that we have not had much of a chance to hear, or contemplate, what mothers say *to each other* about mothering. In an anthropological sense, this narrative and the culture giving rise to it needed to be unearthed.

There are several reasons why studying mothers, as a social group, is so important. First, mothers occupy a cultural space that has not, to this point, been studied *as* a cultural space; doing so uncovers dimensions of becoming and being a mother that have been, for too long, overlooked. Second, mothers as a group, however loosely defined, are a centrally significant body in the social construction of motherhood (and childhood), in the cultural transmission of those constructions and even in the resistance to, and refutation of, those constructions. Third, there is a great deal of identity-work that goes on in the interactions between mothers as they negotiate and articulate profound shifts in their sense of self. Fourth, the self-identification and articulation of one's position relative to the group (i.e., as a member, as marginal, as a non-member) are also central to identity-building for women. Fifth, other mothers are often essential in making it possible for any individual mother to actually do the job of mothering. Whether providing pragmatic advice and assistance or simply offering adult companionship, other mothers are often an individual mother's life-line. This leads to the sixth point, that the conceptualization of motherhood as a job performed by individual women, within the confines of their own home and family, reflects a traditional patriarchal view of motherhood that would perceive mothers as occupants and possessions of individual households. This has never been women's experience of motherhood, even when women are physically isolated from each other in separate domiciles (as is the current norm in Canada.). One of my participants explained that viewing motherhood as an individual undertaking is like trying to imagine one hand clapping; motherhood is an intrinsically social activity. If we wish to produce a sociology that illuminates women's lives by starting at the level of their lived experiences (Smith 1987), then we must examine motherhood as the distinct social world that it is.

## Culture and Subculture

There is no consensus as to what exactly culture is, what constitutes a cultural study or which methodological approaches are most appropriate. Although this allows a degree of creative freedom in designating something as a cultural study, it can contribute to a certain murkiness in trying to "pin down" exactly what is being studied. I believe that this murkiness should be embraced rather than feared. Even if it were possible to give a definitive account of what culture is, we are still faced with the knowledge that people's positions within and outside of the culture, their relationships to the culture and its products, and the inter-relationships of culture and identity are always complex. This

suggests that culture, both as concept and as lived experience, is multidimensional. Cultural research must be sensitive to this fluid multidimensionality and of what might be called “cultural experiences.”

The meaning of the term “culture of motherhood” is not self-evident. On the broad, societal level, the culture of motherhood can be understood to be the “mainstream,” or hegemonic, ideas, values, symbols and ideologies of motherhood to which everyone in the population has some access. These include, among many other things, self-help materials addressed to mothers (or that address mothering), popular notions of “good mothering” and “bad mothering,” and representations of mothers in popular culture. Although these were not the explicit focus of my study, I discuss some of the ways mothers are influenced by them.

When we contemplate the cultural space shared by mothers, we see that it would be most accurate to call it the *subculture* of motherhood. Short (1992: 360) defines subcultures as “shared systems of norms, values, or interests that set apart some individuals, groups or other aggregations of people from larger societies and from broader cultural systems.” He explains that the “critical elements” of a subculture are

- (1) the degree to which values, norms, and identities associated with membership in a category or with types of behaviour are shared, and
- (2) the nature of the relationships, within some larger cultural system, between those who share these elements and those who do not.

This definition of subculture offered some starting points for my research, namely shared norms, values and identities. This definition also suggests that subcultures have ways of delineating those who are “in” from those who are not. Ann Swidler (1986: 273) notes that culture is a “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” If mothers do actually occupy a cultural space, then we would expect to find most, if not all, of these elements present.

The subcultural space that I am calling the “culture of motherhood” is fully accessible only to mothers who have earned their entrée. One feature of this subculture is that many of the values, norms and identities that characterize it are derived from the broader surrounding culture of motherhood, although the relationship is certainly reciprocal. Another feature, and one that complicates a study such as this, is the fact that it would be unreasonable to claim that there is just one subculture of motherhood. This subculture is actually composed of numerous sub-subcultures. These sub-subcultures can be organized around differing ethnic, racial, class and sexual identities/positions or based on differing ideologies of motherhood (as experience and as identity) and of mothering practice. One of my guiding questions, however,

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was whether there is an over-arching subculture of motherhood, a space where the sub-subcultural differences can be transcended and mothers can come together in shared discourse and identity. My conclusion is that, at least to some extent, there is.

We must bear in mind that motherhood at all these levels (mainstream culture, subculture and sub-subculture) is historically and culturally variant. My findings in Alberta in the early 2000s will differ from what I would have found in the same place at other times. My findings could well differ from what I might find in other Canadian provinces and will definitely differ from what would be found in other countries. We must also remember that cultures and subcultures (and sub-subcultures) cross-cut each other. Occasionally multiple cultural memberships and identities co-exist relatively independently. Sometimes, however, they conflict with each other and sometimes they complement each other. Women's different ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, regional, political and sexual identities and affiliations each affect, and are affected by, women's experiences of their position relative both to the large, societal motherhood culture and to the subculture of motherhood (and its specific sub-variants).

Out of this tremendously complex picture, my primary concern was with what I have identified as the overarching subculture of motherhood and, only secondarily, with some of the sub-subcultural elements within it. By looking at the social world of motherhood as an actual culture, and studying women's entry into it, I have unearthed the following elements:

**Symbols:** The pregnant body, maternity clothes and simply being a woman in the company of children are all powerful symbols of motherhood. Other mothers respond to these symbols in quite consistent ways — opening conversations about pregnancy, birth and childcare.

**Stories:** There are particular sorts of things that only mothers discuss, and topics that are more likely to be discussed by mothers than by other people. The sharing of mothering experiences, the discussing of mothering philosophies, and the telling and retelling of birth stories serve to establish a sense of solidarity and a shared identity for mothers. This is not to suggest that there is only one identity for mothers in our culture, but there do appear to be efforts made to establish common grounds of experience.

**Rituals:** New mothers engage in rituals, although the fact that these *are* rituals is often not apparent to the participants. Prenatal classes, for example, can be seen as ritualistic behaviour. Baby showers are another ritual that mark a rite of passage to motherhood. Although non-mothers are welcomed at baby showers, part of the activity that takes place at baby showers is the sharing of

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stories, particularly birth stories, and, if older women are present, the passing of maternal knowledge down from one generation to the next.

**Norms and Values:** Mothers, of course, have a wide range of beliefs and values, and the conflicts that mark the discourse of motherhood in Canada in the early twenty-first century are not the same as we would have found even twenty years ago. Hot topics of discussion for Canadian mothers these days include the midwife versus doctor question, the breastfeeding versus formula dilemma, the question of whether to circumcise baby boys, cloth versus disposable diapers, “natural” childbirth versus medicated, homeopathy/naturopathy versus traditional medicine and “attachment” versus “structured” parenting styles. These are the sorts of issues and questions that have the power to divide into different ideological camps, whatever solidarity there might be among mothers. Women generally feel very strongly about these issues, and sharp differences can limit the extent to which women are able to engage in the maternal discourse together.

**Identity:** Mothers have a particular type of power when it comes to recognizing other women’s shift of identity to “mother.” It is frequently with other mothers that women can discuss what it means to be a mother and that they can explore the “woman behind the role/label,” working to reconcile the “real self” with the “maternal self.” Being shut out of maternal discourse and interaction, being marginalized within them, feeling that one is being marginalized, or removing one’s self from them, can profoundly impact a woman’s ability to develop and/or sustain a maternal identity.

**Initiation:** This is linked with shared rituals although initiation into motherhood requires more than formalized ritualistic events; it appears to require a certain amount of labour. The labour that accompanies birth is a fine example. The labour that is involved in keeping children alive, healthy and thriving is also part of this. It sometimes seems, in fact, that what is required is a trial by fire, or the appearance of such. Rounds of birth stories, ever-increasing in their gore and horror, are an example of the proof that sometimes seems to be required that one has suffered enough to have earned motherhood.

### The Mothers who Participated in this Study

A “new” culture is most salient to those who are in the process of entering it or who are relatively new members — before it has simply become a taken-for-granted fact of life and, in this case, before Jackson’s (1992) “maternal amnesia” sets in. For this reason I chose to speak with women who were either pregnant for the first time or who had been mothers for three years or less.

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My goal was to get a broad sample that would cross-cut many sub-subcultural variations and in this aspiration I was largely successful. I interviewed fifty-three new mothers. The group of participants contained heterosexual and lesbian women; single and partnered women; women of varying social classes and education levels; women who had hospital births, home births and birthing-centre births; women who became mothers by vaginal birth, by caesarean section, by adoption and by being lesbian non-biological mothers; and mothers who espoused “attachment parenting” philosophies, “structured parenting” philosophies, and almost every philosophical/stylistic position in between. The ages of participants ranged from twenty-one to fifty-eight. In many ways, this was a very diverse sample. Most participants, however, were white. Of fifty-three women interviewed, only five were not Caucasian.

Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that I, for the most part, did not target any particular racial or ethnic groups. I did advertise for participants in *Alberta Native News* (a monthly news magazine) but this was the only specifically targeted advertising I did and it resulted in no volunteers. Other than this, I advertised in the mass-distribution magazines *Alberta Parent Quarterly* and *Birth Issues*. Both advertisements resulted in several volunteers, most of whom were Caucasian, although claiming numerous ethnic identities.

I do not know if white women are more likely to read these publications, although there is some evidence that women of minority racial and ethnic groups are likely to turn to other women in their own group for information and social contacts. Sokoloski (1995), for example, examined First Nations women’s beliefs about pregnancy and prenatal care and discovered that they had different understandings and expectations than did the largely white culture around them. First Nations women were thus very likely to turn to other First Nations women for advice, guidance and support through pregnancy. Likewise, with Ghanaian women I interviewed, I heard a preference for speaking with women from their own culture, who understood their customs and traditions around mothering behaviour and baby care. It was not that they could not enter into mothering discussions with women of other racial and ethnic groups — they could and they did — but that they felt there were limits to the possibility of shared understanding. None, therefore, had chosen to attend the moms-and-new-babies drop-in sessions run by the Public Health Department.

All three Ghanaian women in my sample were fairly recent immigrants to Canada, having been here for only a few years. If they had been second-generation or beyond they might have felt more culturally integrated and/or they might have lost some connection with their Ghanaian culture. This would probably also depend on where they lived in Canada. There is a sizable, relatively cohesive Ghanaian community in and around Toronto (Owusu



1999; Wong 2000), and it is likely that second generation immigrants there will still have fairly strong connections to other Ghanaian people, customs and beliefs. In Alberta the Ghanaian community is not so large, concentrated or well-connected.

The two women in my sample who were of Asian descent, and were at least second-generation Canadian, expressed no particular allegiance to their Asian ethnic groups and had diverse friendship circles and Caucasian partners. These women identified their ethnicity as Canadian or as Asian-Canadian, attended the Public Health new mothers' groups and interacted freely with diverse groups of other mothers.

We must be very careful in considering these issues not to conflate race and ethnicity. It would be a mistake to assume that "white women" are a culturally homogeneous group (or, in other words, that they share an ethnicity). A sample that is largely Caucasian can still capture some of the ethnic diversity that characterizes Canada. Nonetheless, it is easier for white people, as the dominant, or "default," group, to feel that they have no race and, for the same reason, for people of Western European descent to feel that they have no ethnicity (Waters 1990). This was supported by the many women in my sample who, when asked their ethnicity, were unable to answer, said "Canadian" regardless of ethnic heritage or tried to list all the places their ancestors came from while not claiming a meaningful ethnic identity for themselves.

It would also be severely mistaken to assume that women who have been classified as a race other than Caucasian share any sense of ethnicity with other members of the same racialized group or to assume that women of colour do not share some of the same ethnicities as white women. For example, each of the three Ghanaian women identified herself as coming from a distinct ethnic and linguistic group; they shared neither ethnic identity nor "mother tongue" with each other. Although the racial categories within which people are placed by their larger culture can be extremely meaningful in terms of social stratification, there is nothing about skin colour or hair texture (or any of the other physical characteristics used to make racial designations) that will lead to different mothering practices. Thus, although race might not directly influence mothering practices and experiences, racism might. The ways in which racial categories are conceptualized and enforced, with their life-and-death consequences, can have very real implications for the social, cultural and economic worlds in which people live.

In addition, what would certainly be of relevance to a study such as this are ethnic differences — culturally derived practices and beliefs that *can* actually be associated with particular mothering practices, experiences, traditions, identities and contacts. For the Ghanaian women in my sample, ethnicity was salient; for the Asian women and most of the white women,

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it was not. Ultimately, of course, the Ghanaian and Asian groups were too small to allow for any generalizations to be made about them *as* groups. These observations do, however, support my central contention that there is an overarching subculture of motherhood that transcends sub-subcultural divisions, but that these sub-subcultural differences can also remain very meaningful to their occupants. It is certainly a limitation of a study such as this that all sub-subcultural variations cannot be included but I would posit that the basic principles and components of culture that I identify by looking at the over-arching subculture of motherhood are also applicable to its sub-subcultural variants, where the same cultural components will simply manifest themselves in different ways. This is always the case with the components of culture.

Given the tremendous diversity of my sample, it is possible to identify a number of cross-cutting, meaningfully identifiable subsamples. By “meaningfully identifiable” I refer to categories that were significant to the interview participants in terms of how they identified themselves. One set of subsamples is heterosexual and lesbian mothers. Although the heterosexual sample is larger (thirty-seven heterosexual mothers to sixteen lesbian mothers), the lesbian sample was sufficiently large to make comparisons between the two groups and to follow up on some of the findings of my earlier research with lesbian mothers (Nelson 1996). These two groups of mothers have much in common, although they might not always perceive this. Further, despite a fairly accepted notion of a “lesbian subculture” in Canada, or even just “lesbian communities” situated within broader communities, there is not, as yet, a well developed culture of lesbian motherhood. Despite some increase in the number of publications about gay and lesbian parenting and despite the presence in most major Canadian cities of a gay and/or lesbian parenting group, most of the lesbian mothers with whom I spoke were still getting the bulk of their parenting information from the mainstream culture and most of their maternal contact from heterosexual mothers.

Another significant set of subsamples is biological and non-biological mothers. Each of these categories contains members of the above two groups. The heterosexual non-biological mothers were adoptive mothers. The lesbian non-biological mothers were the partners of lesbian biological mothers. What is missing from both the heterosexual and lesbian groups is stepmothers. No women who participated in this research identified themselves as mothers when they became stepmothers, although at least two of them were stepmothers; they volunteered to participate because they were pregnant or had recently given birth. Given the difficulties that both lesbian and heterosexual stepmothers can experience in establishing a maternal identity (Dedaic 2001; Jones 2004; Nelson, 1996; Waterman 2003), it is

perhaps not surprising that none self-identified as a suitable participant in a study on new motherhood.

Also meaningful was the distinction between partnered and single mothers. These categories, again, cross-cut the sexual-orientation categories. Although partnered mothers were not always aware of the ways in which being partnered affected how other mothers interacted with them, single mothers often were aware of the stigma that, still, seems to be attached to single motherhood.

Among the biological mothers, those who had experienced vaginal births and those who had experienced caesarean sections also constituted identifiable sub-samples. Within the culture of motherhood, the folklore, values and beliefs surrounding these two methods of giving birth tend to devalue caesarean sections and even sometimes to stigmatize the women who have them. Although, of course, these two groups of mothers had much in common, this one difference could be divisive.

Despite the fact that the group of participants can be classified in so many different ways, for the most part, I discuss them all together. There are, of course, places where it is meaningful to draw out the experiences that are unique to, say, lesbian mothers, adoptive mothers, midwife-attended mothers or partnered heterosexual mothers. It should not be assumed, however, that the mothers I am discussing represent the cultural “default” norm — white, heterosexual, partnered, vaginal-birth-in-the-hospital mothers. The full diversity of the group of participants is present throughout, and only in clearly identified places do I draw forth for consideration certain sub-groups.

We must always bear in mind that this sample cannot be taken to be representative of all Canadian mothers. Apart from the fact that the group is mostly Caucasian, the participants were also mostly middle class. Although several participants could also be classified as working class, there were no upper class participants. Overall, and certainly on a global scale, the participants were a relatively privileged group in terms of their access to resources, life choices and support networks. That said, there was a tremendous range within the group along these dimensions.

It is never the goal of exploratory qualitative research to produce generalizable results; it would not even be possible to gather a true statistically representative sample of Canadian mothers. This type of research seeks themes and patterns; in this case I was investigating the presence of components of culture. The constituent components of culture (including, for example, symbols, norms, customs, ideologies, identities) exist across cultures, although the specific content of them varies. Thus, the specific cultural content I discuss can be expected to vary according to location and larger cultural factors such as ethnicity.

Apart from advertising in magazines, I also placed ads in women’s

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bookstores and gay and lesbian drop-in centres. I attended a few of the City of Edmonton's Public Health new mothers' groups, where I discussed my research and invited participation, and I wrote a short article about my research for *Alberta Parent Quarterly* that also invited participants. The bulk of my respondents, however, were referred to me by other participants, which is likely another reason for the racial homogeneity of my sample. In the discussion that follows, the participants are identified by pseudonyms.

Of the fifty-three women who participated, forty-three were already mothers<sup>2</sup> when I interviewed them and these women I interviewed once.<sup>3</sup> The other ten women were pregnant when I first interviewed them, and these women I interviewed at least twice over the course of their pregnancies and early motherhood. One of these women I interviewed three times and one, who was also my friend, I had seven formal interviews with (in addition to many informal conversations and attending the birth of her daughter).

I gathered information about the culture of motherhood by two other methods, in addition to interviews. I attended a few new mothers' groups at local public health offices over the period of a year. Both the facilitators and the participants in these groups were informed of the reason for my presence. I did not participate in the discussions, nor did I record, or note, the events. I simply observed the discussions and interactions and made general notes later.

Additionally, each woman who was interviewed was asked if she would be willing to participate in a focus group with some of the other participants. Several expressed a willingness to be involved, and so I ended up hosting two groups, each with about eight prior interview participants. The purpose of the focus groups was two-fold. First, they allowed me to involve the participants in my interpretive process. I was able to ask for clarification or elaboration of some issues and concepts from the interviews. I was also able to "run past" the participants my preliminary analysis to see if what I was thinking, and how I was interpreting what I had heard, made sense to them. Second, they afforded another opportunity to witness the sorts of conversations that can occur between mothers, both casually, around their gathering and parting, and more formally with the topics I provided.

### A Feminist Research Journey

I would like to take a moment to consider what it means, to me, to be a feminist conducting and reporting this research. The question of what is feminist about any given piece of research is a tricky one. The feminism does not lie within any one method, approach or practice. I do not believe that it lies solely within the political convictions or personal identity of the researcher. I believe that feminism, whether in activism, theorizing, teaching or writing, lies strongly in the intent of the person doing it. Having said that, I am very

aware that it would probably be impossible to get the whole range of feminist theoretical and political positions to agree as to what “the” feminist intent is. I do not think there is only one feminist intent although I think they are all related to a desire to mitigate the inequalities and damages associated with gender, as those inequalities and damages manifest variously across cultural, class, racial, ethnic and sexual/sexuality categories.

I feel that my primary obligation as a feminist researching women’s lives is to the women who participate in the research. I agree with DeVault (1999: 30), who argues that “feminists seek a methodology that will do the work of ‘excavation,’ shifting the focus of standard practice from men’s concerns in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women.” My research has been very much an excavation of dimensions of women’s lives that are often overlooked in mainstream social science.

I see it as my obligation to believe what women say to me, to know that their truths are true and meaningful, and to know that their worlds make sense, even if I might not share that sense. It is my obligation to listen to what women say even if they are speaking of experiences I have never had. This is the only way to retrieve maternal discourse from its silence in the broader culture. We must know that when women are speaking about mothering they are speaking about something very meaningful, very important, very real. Part of my job then is to try to create a bridge between two discursive worlds, that of motherhood and that of academia. Mothers have heard from academia; it would be very good for all academic fields to hear from mothers and it would benefit mothers to be so heard.

This is consistent with DeVault’s argument that “feminists seek a methodology that will support research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women” (1999: 31). This leads to the question of what my research actually offers to the women who participated, and to mothers in general. Part of the answer lies in simply bringing together the voices of women in a way that might not always happen within the culture of motherhood itself. In short, I would like mothers to hear each other, even more than they already do. Mothers know how much they need the contact, the company, the conversation of other mothers and yet they are sometimes unable to critically transcend values and ideologies that often have been filtered in from the larger culture. There are topics, as we will see, that mothers told me they did not discuss with each other; they were thus generally not discussed at all, even if they were important to the health and daily lives of mothers.

As I elaborate more fully in later chapters, I witnessed many women’s need to be seen as unique and full individuals not over-invested in mothering, and simultaneously their willingness to cast other mothers as the exact thing they refused to be. How terribly frustrating that the people who could be

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each other's strongest allies are sometimes divided and silenced by broader cultural values that denigrate them all. The salvation of self does not lie in distancing oneself from the devalued mothering persona; it lies in reclaiming and rehabilitating that persona. It lies in the sociocultural changes that would have to occur for mothers' own experiences of motherhood to become ruling rather than subjugated discourses of motherhood.

Many feminist researchers argue for the importance of clearly situating oneself as researcher within the research process. Kirsch (1999: 14) explains the rationale for this very well:

The goal of situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives is not to overcome these limits — an impossible task — but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, and the research reports we write. That kind of knowledge can help readers understand (rather than second-guess) what factors have shaped the research questions at hand; it also helps ground the research report in a specific cultural and historical moment.

It is not an easy task to identify all the ways in which my own biography informs my approach to this research and my interpretations of what I found. The writing and conducting of this research occupied much of my thirties. It spanned a period of time during which I met my life partner and married her, with the upfront agreement that we would not pursue motherhood. It also spanned a period of time during which I moved from being a sessional instructor of sociology to a tenure-track professor of women's studies. I began this research as a relatively impoverished graduate student and I concluded it as a relatively comfortable professional.

It is easy to say that my partner and I agreed that we would not pursue motherhood but life is rarely that simple. During the course of this research, exactly like the last time I researched motherhood, I experienced an ever-increasing desire to be a mother. I had to think through what it was that I desired. Was it pregnancy? Was it birth? Was it interacting with a baby, a child, a teen, an adult offspring? Was it a companion and caregiver in my old age? Was it a grandchild with whom I might recapture the very special bond that I have experienced with my own grandmother? It was all of these things, and yet none in particular, but pregnancy and birth were the least of it. I eventually had to approach my partner and tell her that I needed us to revisit the baby question. We conducted a brief investigation into international adoption and then were able to set aside the topic again. This decision is not without pain but neither of us can see a way, in terms of time or finances, in which we could raise a child. The bottom line is, I think, that

## In the Other Room

we must just not want it enough, because I have seen people make all kinds of sacrifices to become parents.

I believe passionately in the value and necessity of mothering work, even though I myself am not willing to engage in it. I am, however, willing to put my political and intellectual energies into the project of bringing motherhood not merely into academic discourse but into the cultural mainstream. This piece of research is, of course, only a small portion of that project. Let us begin, then, by listening to what women said to me, and what they say to each other, about this amazing journey into motherhood.

### Notes

1. Including Bergum 1989, 1997; Blum and Deussen 1996; Bobel 2002; Boulton 1983; Brown and Small 1997; Chase and Rogers 2001; Fox 1998, 2001; Fox and Worts 1999; Hays 1996; Kaplan 1992; Lewin 1993; McMahan 1995; Miller 2005; Nelson 1996; Nicolson 1998; Oakley 1979; Pollock 1999; Ribbens 1995; Simkin and Klaus 2004; Walzer 1996, 1998; Wearing 1984.
2. Three of these women were also pregnant with second children.
3. With the exception of two of the women who were pregnant for the second time. These women I interviewed twice, like the other pregnant participants, once before and once after birth.