

# Insights from a Humanities perspective on maternal health

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## Introduction

We are at a historic moment in relation to changes in gender norms. Social agents are required to bridge gaps between the so-called traditional and post-traditional eras and these tensions between equity and care led Kathryn Abrams to characterize the era as ‘the second coming of care’ (2001, 1616). We need to find new ways to think about and quantify the work of care, which link up everyday practices within families and a reconceptualization of care at an institutional level. I am arguing that what appears to be a return to ‘traditional gender scripts’ can be more accurately depicted as new ways of doing things, a revaluing of care. In the context of these changes becoming a mother is generally a profound and life-changing experience of important social, cultural and personal consequence. The birth of an infant raises issues to do with the social structuring of care. Cultural traditions and beliefs about what it means to be a mother are also in flux and are played out through the sense of self. Furthermore there are the interpersonal dynamics between the woman-as-mother and her infant. These three levels come together through the meanings and the practices associated with being a mother and are often experienced in relation to identity. In light of propositions that have linked agency with reflexivity, the critical reflection on the self, studies cited in this chapter demonstrate an interlinking between stratification and identity, and how these are played out through families or mother–infant interactions. The production of both social and cultural capital, whereby the woman-as-mother is drawn in through identification, is perpetuated through information that is passed on through association and tradition. These factors are caught up with intersubjective dynamics between mothers and their infants.

In this late modern period social and cultural change can result from a coalescence of interests, overlapping between the state, the market and the family. In my presentation I will provide snapshots in the form of Report Cards on developments and debates that are taking place within a series of disciplines from within the Humanities. I have divided these into two sections. After the first lot I will open up the floor for your comments and/or discussion. So while I move through the paper please think about topics that you might like to explore. I will begin with sociological work on the family and propositions on individualization. This is followed by work on equity and how this relates to the social structuring of care and women-as-mothers. I turn to findings from studies on the Transition to Parenthood and the relevant outcomes. Then I move on to work from within midwifery and the maternal and child health services and demonstrate how these serve the wider social structures. And at this point I take a 10 to 15 minute break and ask for your questions/comments or points for discussion. After this I will introduce some emergent work from welfare economics, literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis to demonstrate the wealth of materials that can contribute to renewed understandings for practitioners who are working with mothers and/or families. Occasionally through this jaunt I refer to findings from my qualitative study of women in the early years of being a mother in order to demonstrate a point. More specifically I bring to your attention calls for transformational change in regard to the social structuring of care. I am arguing that the psychoanalytic discourse, that I set out in the later part of the paper, can provide for an explanation of mother-infant dynamics and self-other intersections

that are played out through meanings and identifications of the self. I am saying that the ambivalences that are often experienced in relation to the self of women-as-new-mothers and are evident through raised levels of depression, dissatisfaction and issues to do with identity are indicative of an attitudinal stance that is questioning the status quo. However, the complex of factors that are brought together through mother-infant interactions are in turn filtered through traditional meanings which serve to reify movement.

I have a more extensive exposition with references and an accompanying bibliography in a paper that is available either from me, on the table in the entrance hall, or if there are none left today please send me an email and I will send the paper as an attachment via the net.

There may be times when there are no strong links between health indicators and the social and cultural context, however, I am arguing today that particularly in the context of change this is not the case with maternal health. This calls for a holistic approach whereby the disciplinary barriers are broken down and there be a preparedness by practitioners to look outside the square and engage with debates in this wider social and cultural context.

### **Sociology – families and individuals**

Throughout the twentieth century, dependency has been relegated to a gendered family form, and the workings of the state and the market have been structured around gendered roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, western notions of citizenship and autonomy are derived from an assumed division between public and private realms that do not accommodate rights associated with dependency; within families there is an inequality between the dependency worker and the breadwinner. Australian social policy both in the workplace and throughout social institutions such as education, health, housing and welfare has been historically built on the assumption of privatized care through the family. Yet over recent decades there have been continuing changes in form and function within families, and this has been accompanied by a commodification of care through market-based and/or government services. The breadwinner ideal of the family is more recently giving way to a male full-time, and a female half-time worker family. These changes have nevertheless been accompanied by rising levels of divorce, a substantial proportion of sole parent families, and high levels of cohabitation, with tensions between care and equity being played out within families.

The family as a social institution has proven difficult to access and analyse. For decades feminists have drawn attention to the interconnections between the so-called public and private realms, often encountering difficulties in conceptualizing the links. When a woman becomes a first-time mother she is confronted with the most entrenched aspect of our patriarchal history, the relegation of dependency to the privatized family unit. This takes her to the heart of the feminist debate between equity and difference that arose from feminist critiques of philosophy such as the landmark work by Genevieve Lloyd (1984) titled *The man of reason*. The family is an interesting and prolific area of research and is valuable to explore from both an historical and a sociological perspective.

**PROPONENTS:** for example: Donzelot; Jamieson; Irwin; Beck-Gernsheim; Smart & Silva; Smart & Neale; Stacey.

## **The structuring of identity**

What it means to be a mother today is in flux. There is a coming together of historical associations, social structures and cultural expectations through the lives and the experiences of women-as-mothers. While family forms and practices are tied in with this change, a divide in the sociological work on women-as-mothers has included a move away from the family as an analytical category with an emphasis on the mediating role of identity. Class, narrative, rationality and the promotion of cultural capital are themes in this research on women-as-mothers.

Tensions between social and cultural factors are evident to women after the birth of their first child and are reflected in the common retort 'no one can tell you what it's like'. My thesis examined research on the experience of women-as-mothers, highlighting links between identity, class and gender in light of propositions from within sociology on what is said to be this period of reflexive modernity. Critical debates are taking place within sociology on the proposition that individuals are overcoming structural constraints through critically reflecting on their circumstances and effecting change. This is how we can get female Prime Ministers or black Presidents for instance. This emphasis on the individual is, however, covering over the gendered options that are played out within families.

While there has been an emphasis on the limitations of the thesis on reflexivity and individualization as explanatory devices there has been a reliance on them as analytical tools. Research on the workings of narrative, class and power, nevertheless, points to a congruence between structural factors and gendered choice.

**PROPONENTS:** for example: Duncan; McDermott and Graham; Lawler; Skeggs; Bottero & Irwin; Australian research – Maher; Strazdins & Broom

## **EQUITY – Barriers to equity for mothers as primary care-givers**

A long held debate within feminism has been between proponents of a gender equity position and those who uphold the centrality of gender difference. The contours of the debate have been refined in the work of Eva Feder Kittay (1999, 2002). Her thesis brings together concerns regarding equity and diversity with issues regarding dependency or care. Dependency theory provides analytical categories that are useful for locating the social position of the primary care-giver, particularly in the early years after the birth. Dependency is a feature of the human condition and thus there are 'inevitable dependencies' that are associated with infancy and childhood, illness, disability and with frail old age. The patriarchal marriage, which is carried over through institutional practice, relies on gendered roles whereby women, as dependency workers are held apart from claims to equity.

This social structuring of care is mediated by race/ethnicity and sexuality through intersections with cultural practice. This is exemplified by 'other mothering' within social groups that can ameliorate the effect. Importantly, class privilege can mitigate the effect of structure through privatized services. Most often there is a 'dependency worker' and in the case of infants 'the charge', the primary care-giver, or dependency worker, is generally a woman. This dependency relationship is marked by care, concern and connection, tending to others in their state of

vulnerability. The dependency worker is structured according to a form of ‘derivative dependency’ within the family where relations between the provider and the care-worker are inherently unequal. The autonomy of the dependency worker is not the same as the provider and this is exemplified by an inequality of ‘exit options’; the bargaining position of the dependency worker is worse than the provider. These conditions have important economic consequence but also have the potential for psychological, political and social dependencies. This is an argument that holds true for women as primary care-givers outside of this family form, in that the welfare state supplements this work through family policy that upholds the privatization of care within varied family forms, sole parent families for instance.

The project by Kittay, together with work by Ruth Lister (1997, 2003) on citizenship, Susan Moller Okin (1989) on justice, and Martha Fineman (2001) on social contract, contextualizes issues often experienced by women-as-mothers. This work provides a platform to identify and articulate factors that contribute to the contradictory nature of the dynamics. An experience, characterized by Bittman and Pixley (1997) as cognitive dissonance, was evident in my research through the participants’ ambivalences. Critical work from within feminism continues to contest the public–private divide, with the current emphasis being on interconnections between macrosocial and microsocial factors (Irwin 2005; Smart and Neale 1999; Jamieson 1999). This claim is exemplified by evidence of a reinforcement of gendered roles within families by workplace practices.

**PROPOSERS:** for example: Kittay; Fineman; Lister; Moller Okin;

### **TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD (TtoP)**

There is currently a drive to bring more women into the workforce, while countries across the globe have brought in policies to promote the fertility rate. The research on the TtoP, however, shows that attempts by many couples to achieve a form of gender equal or egalitarian family after the birth of an infant are being stifled by what has been referred to in the literature as a ‘logic of gendered choice’ (Singley and Hynes 2005, 395).

The TtoP is a term used within social psychology to describe the adjustments that both men and women negotiate when they become first-time parents. These adjustments are said to begin during the nine months before the birth and carry on into the first two years afterwards (Cowan and Cowan 1998, 175). The indicators generally fall under the categories of: changes to identity; changes to life course; changes to relationships; including partner, friends and family (Cowan and Cowan 1998, 175); and negotiating more housework. A further and central element in this transition is in the developing relationship between the mother and her infant/child, the interpersonal dimension of care.

An impetus for the study of issues related to TtoP has been gender equity within the household but further to this Cowan and Cowan (1998) stated that they were concerned to strengthen the couple relationship and support children. Herein is a key tension between the requirements of care and gender equity. The TtoP most often occurs within families, and the couple relationship is central to family dynamics. Couples negotiate issues related to equity and care within a social and economic system that has been built on an assumption of the male breadwinner model. These tensions and

dynamics are often dramatically played out through dispositions that are socially and culturally constructed.

In numerous studies on the TtoP the birth of a child was found to be ‘a critical life stage’ that is often experienced as overwhelming. This period was also said to be followed by a trend towards ‘traditional’ gender roles, however, the use of traditional as an analytic category in the relevant literature is questionable. The basis for this characterization has been that men often work longer hours and the vast majority of women take on a greater load of the household and childcare duties, even if they too are working full time; an assertion that is descriptive rather than analytical. Women are most often doing more housework than men, even if they have children and are working full time, but this is generally followed by raised levels of stress and/or depression; an unfulfilled expectation that both the care and the housework would have been shared.

This was a finding that was replicated in a review of fifty-nine studies on Family Therapy and the TtoP by Glade, Bean and Vera (2005). Nystrom and Ohrling’s (2004, 328) also analysed thirty-three studies by nurses and argued that there was an association between maternal self-efficacy, depression and social/marital supports, while Cowan and Cowan (1998) found links between a failed expectation of gender equity and depression. Golberg and Perry-Jenkins (2004, 233) linked this outcome to an incongruence between the expectations and the experience, and an ambivalence between a right to express discontent and the status quo. And the problem of these disciplinary boundaries is evident here whereby the researchers often went on to reflect on a need to review expectations and/or strengthen the couple relationship by way of overcoming these shortfalls, falling back onto the individual, rather than structural change; for more on this research see the accompanying paper and bibliography.

There was a decline in the postnatal health and well-being for approximately one-third of the women interviewed for my thesis, a figure that is consistent with findings from research on the TtoP (McHale et al. 2004). While there has been little research on the TtoP in Australia a significant 10 to 15 per cent of women have been documented as suffering with ante- and/or postnatal depression (Williamson and McCutcheon 2004; beyondblue 2008). The Australian Perinatal Mental Health National Action Plan (2008) and Buultjens and Liamputtong (2007) identified the social context of birth as an important contributing factor, however research has most often continued to focus on the pathological rather than the contributing social factors (Nicholson 1998; Ussher 2006). Buultjens and Liamputtong (2007) extended this emphasis to the cultural and political context of birth, including unrealistic expectations and stigmatization, as important contributing factors to depression after childbirth.

The spectrum for the experience of depression after the birth ranges from psychosis to mild anxiety. In an environment that shies away from the social-cultural context of health, gender and depression are held together through a continuing medicalization that in turn individualizes the effect (Hasler 2009). The biomedical model of health that informs practice in Australia is based on a physiological understanding that is treated with an individualized response; medication and/or talking cures. The condition is pathologized whereby the experience of depression is understood as a product of a biological deficiency manifested by a chemical imbalance (Hasler 2009, 49). Hasler

argues that PND is similar to other depressive episodes other than the fact that there is a baby that requires care and that this should be the main focus of research. She continues:

Although depression is experienced as a personal problem, sociologists generally agree that it can also be understood as a type of social distress that originates in the larger social problems of inequity, alienation, and powerlessness that affect certain groups of people (Mirowsky and Ross 1989). (Hasler 2009, 50).

Hasler's qualitative study of twenty women who experienced PND in Australia found that seventy five per cent of her participants believed that psychosocial factors were of primary concern, rather than the biomedical. These issues are indicative of a serious health problem and yet a continuing emphasis on pathology individualizes the effect and contributes to a conspiracy of silence around the effects of motherhood on maternal health (le Blanc 1999). Drawing from interviews with focus groups and individuals, Le Blanc detailed evidence of maternal fatigue, stress, depression, isolation, frustration, anger and guilt. Furthermore, Jane Ussher argues that ante- and postnatal depression may well be an expression of rage that women turn on themselves in response to a continuing and gendered structuring of care that effectively seals off change for many (Ussher 2006).

The social context of birth and early parenting, the social structuring of dependency, clearly has a significant effect over the experience of first-time parents, an emphasis recognized in a Swiss study by Perron, Von Wyl, Burgin, Simoni and Klitzing (2005). Because the family is an embedded unit within the larger social system, social factors such as a small apartment and/or low income have a serious effect on parental feelings and behaviour. Couples need to negotiate financial and caring requirements within a gendered structural framework. A major European study drawing from both quantitative and qualitative findings from eight countries on work-family boundaries concluded that 'gender shapes parenthood and makes motherhood different from fatherhood both in everyday family life and in the workplace' (Nilsen and Brannen 2005, 9), a finding that is echoed in the assertion by McHale et al. (2004, 725) that 'mothers, but not fathers, see themselves as ultimately responsible for child care'. The 'transition to parenthood' was identified by Nilsen and Brannen as critical in attempts to achieve gender equal outcomes. A claim substantiated by Australian research by Baxter, Hewitt and Haynes (2008) in relation to the development of a gender wage gap, which has been labelled 'the motherhood wage penalty'; another proposition that is substantiated by multiple studies.

A distinction between childcare and housework is useful in this case. The quantity of housework expands during this period, with many of the tasks related to the care of the infant/child. The negotiation of this work coupled with the prime responsibility for care contributes to maternal stress. The women interviewed for the thesis were not taking time out from the workforce to attend to the housework and conform to traditional roles, but because they are concerned with the health and well-being of their infants. There has often been a reliance on 'traditional' to hold together an array of characteristics that have been associated with gendered roles, whereas in this period of change it is critical to break down and examine the constitute parts.

The vast majority of couples are seeking to establish a form of gender equity within their families after the birth. This significant trend is evident in the results of two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households in the USA cited by Kaufman (2000, 135)

whereby 76 per cent of women held an egalitarian attitude to family formation<sup>1</sup>. This trend towards egalitarianism is, however, implied in most of the referenced studies by the largest proportion of participants ascribing to equal or egalitarian arrangements within their families. The study by McHale et al. (2004) is an intervention in a field of ‘co-parenting studies’, and while they were concerned with the effect of the infant on family dynamics, they note a link between a failed expectation of gender equity for women and marital dissatisfaction (also noted by Glade, Bean and Vera 2005, 715). Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005, 343) found evidence of inequitable gender outcomes with couples who had children under five years of age ‘despite ideals to the contrary’ which they said were perpetuated through an ‘idealization of motherhood’ that became a ‘self-perpetuating cycle’.

**PROPOSERS:** for example: Cowan & Cowan; Glade, Bean & Vera; Nystrom & Ohrling; Singley & Hynes; Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins; McHale et al; Australian - Feeney et al.

### **Midwifery and Maternal and Child Health Services**

Motherhood has historically been associated with altruism and moral virtue. Debates about the welfare of the child often fall back onto moralized expectations of mothers and arguments for the primacy of mother care, while the bio-medical model of maternity has been concerned with quantifiable health outcomes for mother and baby. This has been, however, to the exclusion of the social and cultural context of birth effectively augmenting views of the ‘good mother’ and women as natural carers (Oakley 1993; Niven and Walker 1998; Kitzinger 2005; Miller 2005; Buultjens and Liamputtong 2007). This strategy is, furthermore, reinforced through the associated privatization of care, whereby practices within families have been understood as private and separate from the public realm.

Nevertheless, pregnancy and birth are unique events. They are clearly biological with potential for medical complications, yet they are importantly social with significant cultural import (Oakley, 1993; Thomas 2000; Kitzinger 2005). The effect of pregnancy, birth and mothering is often profound and life-changing for many women, unearthing ‘a continuing and troubled relationship between maternal embodiment, choice and freedom’ (Kevin 2005). Landmark work by Anne Oakley (1980) found a considerable gap between the expectations of women and the reality. This issue is of continuing concern and yet health services have generally retained uniform practices (Miller 2005, 113). Meanwhile, medical and psychoanalytic discourse has been scrutinized precisely because of an essential divide between body and mind, often played out through notions of femininity and masculinity that inform everyday practice.

I am looking at the ante- and postnatal services as a conduit between social structuring and cultural trends. While mindful that pregnancy, birth and early mothering are predominantly social events, the health services are central to the milieu in which the social relations of reproduction are played out. An articulation of the associated social and cultural representations of care takes place through messages conveyed in unspoken assumptions to the clientele, the women who are birthing, and are identifiable through the training manuals of midwives. Because the subject of the woman has been historically brought together with the infant/child through care and a naturalization of the role of woman-as-mother, women are often left to grapple with meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Gender roles, housework and employment are explored from U.S. figures by Sanchez and Thomson (1997).

These health services remain heavily medicalized (Reiger 2006, 338; Thomas 2000). The vast majority of births occur in hospitals with a reliance on a technological response to variance. There has been a recognition in the international research on the lack of both services and research on the postnatal phase (Henderson 2001; Marchant 2004) while the emphasis continues to be heavily focused on the well-being of the infant and the physical recovery of the mother.<sup>2</sup> Denis Walsh (2004) accentuated the lack of midwife-initiated and -led research on pregnancy, birth and maternal care, with an absence of focus on women's experience.

Entrenched divides between a maternity movement and the medical profession have resulted in a continuing failure to attend to these concerns. And further to this when movements for change insist on 'woman-led care' and/or 'continuity of care', their demands are individualized and thus enhance the interest of groups of women at the expense of the recognition of social determinants and institutional change. In my thesis I spoke about practices carried out by nurses, midwives and postnatal services as a form of social structuring, drawing from an array of techniques and discourses to manage the conduct of individuals. Objectives were most often formulated in terms of the well-being of the woman-as-mother and family functioning (Borjesson, Paperin and Lindell 2004; Killoran Ross 2001; Haggman-Laitila 2003; Leahy Warren 2005) or maintaining a sense of identity (Earle 2000). This generally happens through a common reliance on an assumed maternal role in the perinatal services that characterizes the good mother as naturally devoted to care. This is perpetuated through social and cultural practices (Rogan et al.1997) that have historically conflated the woman-as-mother with the maternal role in references to 'maternal role attainment', adjustment and/or transition to motherhood, a naturalization of motherhood that links women with the requirement to care in midwifery literature.

Practices and assumptions built into the related health services need to be considered in light of a continuing, gendered association between the work-of-care and selflessness (Williams 2001; Rubenstein 1998). This proposition is conveyed through a continuation of associations between gender and care. The message carries with it a profound contradiction whereby the good mother does not put her needs first but she sees the world in terms of her child/ren's needs (Oakley 1993, 24). The women interviewed for my project prioritized the care of their infants, however, they did so within a context that conflates the interests of the mother with the child. Therefore, women often project themselves into the future through their role as mother, as a role model, with this associated assertion of selflessness.

This belief informed the decision-making of the interviewees; their sense of self was tied to their role as mother. This was clear when discussing the required adjustments after becoming a mother. In regard to this Hilary (12) said 'when you are faced with some sort of crisis, like being a mother, and suddenly you are trying to redefine yourself'. Tamara (4) continued 'you just don't think about yourself any more, you've got your baby to look after because they are so dependent on you'. Marine (6) commented in regard to identity 'oh its gone out the window' and Barbara (7) 'It changes how you look at yourself, motherhood has made me constantly question myself'. Carol

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<sup>2</sup> A Mother and Child Health Research Centre established by the Victorian government is conducting research on postnatal issues. These studies have been primarily hospital based and thus concerned with the early months after the birth but have more recently expanded the focus up to four years afterwards.

(7) remarked ‘it’s a wonderful and rewarding experience but it is very hard to lose the sense of who you are’.

### **Changing midwifery practice**

The focus of postnatal research has been most often confined to the early months postpartum and thus generally bypasses this social perspective. The homebirth strategy has been to empower women, and/or couples in their birth decisions. Yet an entrenchment of polar positions between the so called organics and the mechanics is evident through an increasingly privatized and medicalized model (Marchant 2004; Thomas 2000; Reiger 2006; Tew 1998; Kitzinger 2005) which in Australia has forced midwifery services into hospital settings (Tew 1998, 23) or resulted in increasing numbers of doulas<sup>3</sup> going into private practice.

Walsh (2004) calls for a holistic approach to birth, bringing together the physiological, psychological, emotional and the social. He joins Reiger (2001, 7), MacColl (2008) and Marchant (2004) when they speak about a lack of feminist academic engagement with issues and topics related to maternity and birthing practices. This outcome results from a segmentation of critique through disciplinary boundaries. Within the field of midwifery an important study by Hunt and Symonds (1995, 139) provides a critique of cultural practices within two hospitals in Britain. Yet, embedded within this important study is the public/private divide that has plagued the wider field. Furthermore, Rafferty (1996), Holmes and Gastaldo (2002),<sup>4</sup> McKeever (1996) and Rudolfsdottir (2000) are concerned with the workings of knowledge and/or power and how these are constituted through nursing practices.

### **Nurses as social practitioners**

Critiques of nursing raise issues to do with the political role of the discipline. They explore tensions between the medical and the nursing professions and question the role of the nurse within the framework of social divides such as gender and class. Anne Marie Rafferty (1996, 187) sees the dilemma for nurses being that they are charged to care in a society that refuses to value caring. This is fuelled by a ‘cult of domesticity’ (Williams 2001) whereby the character of the nurse is essentially tied in with the caring role of women within the private realm of the family; and therein is the source of her subordination and her supremacy. Nurses operate within a web of power relations producing knowledges that are conveyed through expectations. Assumptions are embedded within the healthcare system that are indicative of a knowledge and power nexus (McKeever 1996; Oakley 1993, 20). Essentialist beliefs that underlie the curricula are passed on, often without comment, something known by association. This institutionalization of knowledge informs individual women, the micro-social, and is thus harmonized with the external social environment, the macro-social.

This focus is evident in a study carried out by Holmes and Gastaldo (2002), who analyze the role of midwives as a form of governmentality. Midwifery practices are understood as a means of

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<sup>3</sup> A doula is an assistant who provides various forms of non-medical and non-midwifery support (physical and emotional) in the childbirth process.

<sup>4</sup> Note: Holmes and Gastaldo (2002, 560) referenced Foucault (1990) saying that epidemics, fertility, and life expectancy are at the core of the rationalities of government.

governing individuals through techniques and discourses which affect the management of subjects, effectively promoting desirable subjectivities. The aim of policy is to establish standards of the 'good patient', the 'healthy citizen', or the 'caring mother'. 'What remains', say Holmes and Gastaldo (2002, 564) in this project, 'is the need to articulate power exercises with political rationalities to which groups of nurses subscribe and to analyze the governmental technologies we develop and support'. Their focus is on the social location of nurses, competing discourses within the discipline, and the relations between social and health policy, whereas my study is concerned with the women who are birthing, the clientele. What of the social relations of care? To what extent do women-as-mothers have agency, and what part do the health services play?

In the literature there is a recognition that women suffer ill-health beyond the twenty-eight day period after giving birth (Henderson 2001). Yet there is very little research with proponents such as Lucy Marchant (2004, 81) described the divide between the intention and the provision of postpartum care as a 'yawning gap' with a significant discord between the services and the postpartum need.

I understand that postnatal services are changing around Australia in response to the community needs and that there is a current National Review of Maternal and Child Health Services. Nevertheless, there is an international trend towards a reliance on expert knowledge on childbirth (Miller 2005) with increasing rates of caesarean midsections and a high incidence of medical procedures (Tew 1998; Thomas 2000; Kitzinger 2005; Woollett and Nicholson 1998, 89). Yet as stated by Thomas:

As childbirth has been increasingly medicalized, obstetricians have increasingly taken control of the care provision for women in pregnancy and labour (but have actually had little interest in the puerperium, leaving the adjustment to parenthood primarily to others, including midwives). (Thomas 2000, 176)

This continuing failure by most obstetricians to engage with the social, cultural and personal impact of the birth leaves many women to grapple with the after-effects without information and/or support. Despite these documented health issues, staffing levels remain inordinately low, particularly for postnatal care; issues that are exacerbated by a lack of trained workforce.

The social relations associated with privatized social reproduction construct childbirth as isolated, medicalized and removed from the social context. There are indicators of class differences between women in maintaining a sense of control over the birth and evidence that many women welcome medical intervention because of a lack of postnatal support. Bonnie Fox and Diana Wort found that this social support may be a critical factor, which influenced decisions made by women towards medical interventions.

The burgeoning literature, predominantly carried out by relatively new Maternity Research Centres,<sup>5</sup> is often surprisingly out of touch with contemporary feminist theory. There is little midwifery research that acknowledges the diversity of family forms and contemporary practices.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example: Centre for Midwifery, Child and Family Health, University of Technology, Sydney; The Royal College of Midwives, London; Otago Polytechnic School of Midwifery, New Zealand; Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery, Kings College, London.

<sup>6</sup> By way of an exception, Tina Miller (2005).

An inherent problem with a woman-led approach to care is that women may not know or understand the breadth of the issues they may well confront after the birth of a child, or the social relations of reproduction.

The attention to ‘continuity of care’ by midwives has been as a means of alleviating the ‘shock’ of becoming a mother and thus, as Sarah Earle (2000) has noted, contributes to the maintenance of a satisfactory self-identity. However, like the preponderance in the research on the TtoP the prime concern of much of the relevant literature is on the mental and physical health of the infant/child (Borjesson et al. 2004; Haggman-Laitila 2003; and Rogan et al. 1997). Two of these reports assert that midwives and maternity nurses are well placed to provide information and facilitate support networks, while Haggman-Laitila (2003) concludes that the overall analysis of the family situation by maternity and child welfare clinics is inadequate. A concern evident in much of the literature is in smoothing women into their new life as a mother, with an assumed and gendered association between women and care. This emphasis is perpetuated through continuing references to adjustment and transition to the maternal role or birth is seen as a ‘rite of passage’.

References to woman-centered care are hollow in light of this continuing lack of attention to assumed and gendered divides that informs practice whereby the woman and infant are held together through care. These tensions are individualized and carried over to the meanings and practices associated with being a mother and, in turn, played out through identity.

So, I hear you ask, what are the alternatives to this privatization of care through the family – through roles and responsibilities? In the second part to this paper I will turn to some introductory pointers from literature from welfare economics on the social structuring of care. I will then introduce some influential authors whose work in both philosophy and literature is centered on the maternal and I will finish up by talking about conceptions of intersubjectivity and intra-psychic processes of the self that are useful for locating the subject of the woman as mother. But for now I will take a break and open up the floor for ten to fifteen minutes your comments and/or discussion.

**PROPONENTS:** for example: Oakley; Buultjens & Liamputtong; Thomas; Marchant; Henderson; Walsh; Rafferty.

### **WELFARE ECONOMICS – And rethinking on the social structuring of care**

Throughout the twentieth century the state has become increasingly enmeshed in workings between families and the market; the state mediates these intersections in both law and policy. The gendered breadwinner form of the family has been upheld through wage fixing practices and supplemented by welfare policy by providing financial support and/or services to struggling families. Continuing economic factors, a companionate form of couple relationship within families, and a drive for talent within the workforce has fuelled an international interest in issues related to work-family balance by attending to both paid parental leave and family friendly workplace practices. Throughout this period two significant bodies of work have developed in response to the gendered structuring of care. The bulk of the literature operates at the macrosocial level, with proponents calling for transformational change.

The first is manifest in the work of the feminist social theorist Selma Sevenhuijsen (1998, 2003) who questions notions of ethics that fail to account for dynamics that arise from relationships and she highlights tensions between intersubjectivity and autonomy. The second compelling body of work is concerned with a reworking of welfare economics through Nancy Fraser and Anne Orloff amongst others. A related liberal feminist respondent is Martha Nussbaum who, through debate with Amartya Sen, has proposed a capabilities approach to the restructuring of welfare economics, while acknowledging the need to promote the sharing of care between men and women.

Feminist critiques of ethics by Gilligan (1982) and Rawl's theory of justice by Kittay (1999) highlight a theoretical divide between ethics and justice that has been perpetuated through a conception of the independent and autonomous individual who is not responsible to care. Within this formulation women have been attributed a specific morality of self-denial; the self-sacrificing and moral mother (Sevenhuijsen 1998, 49; Abrams 2001, 1443-4). Nonetheless, a reworking of these notions has led to a feminist ethic in which 'care as practice' has become the centre of concern. This configuration is distinguished from an individualized association with women and morals, and arises from the recognition of dependency rather than maternal relations (Kittay 1999, 2002; Fineman 2004). The intersubjectivity that is born from relationships provides a renewed basis for identity and selfhood in a feminist 'ethics of care'. A political ethics that emerges from this feminist work incorporates care as both a political and a democratic virtue. Care stands as a mean between excessive autonomy and excessive dependency (Sevenhuijsen 1998, 67) and thus informs an agenda for change.

**PROPONENTS:** for example: Sevenhuijsen; Williams; Gilligan; Nussbaum; Kittay; Abrams.

Another body of work concerned with these macrosocial issues in regard to care arises from the current debate contrasting the European and the US models of welfare economics. The Scandinavian models of government support and workplace change have led to an entrenchment of gender divides. Generous care provisions have not broken down gendered care routines. In contrast, the emphasis in the United States is on individual initiative which is compatible with the capabilities approach advocated by Nussbaum (Lewis and Giullari 2005; Orloff 2006; Robeyns 2006). This work is critical of contract theory and is building a theoretical framework for reconceptualizing capabilities that contribute to wellbeing and human flourishing.

**PROPONENTS:** Lewis; Orloff; Folbre; Robeyns; Abrams.

Gender differences in the capacity to care were formulated in the breakthrough work of Nancy Chodorow through processes located in the historical, social and cultural context. These understandings emphasize the inclusion of men in the care of infants and children so as to break down the effect, and there is a growing call for a decoupling of gender from care (Beasley and Bacchi 2005). The later work by Wendy Hollway (2006) recognizes these gender differences and sets out means by which the capacity to care can be enhanced. Trends towards an equal or egalitarian family form have led to more men taking part in the work of care. These moves are, nevertheless, being surpassed by the involvement of women with children in the workforce contributing to a gendered 'second shift'. Women are disproportionately attending to requirements

of both the workplace and the home. Embodied aspects of gender have become a medium of identity and thence calls for the recognition of points where 'sexual difference' does matter and where it does not (Sevenhuijsen 1998, 81). This is a topic that is relevant to the two last report cards, the first Philosophy and Literature and the second Psychoanalysis in theory and practice.

**PROPOSERS:** for example: Chodorow; Hollway, Baraitser.

## **PHILOSOPHY and LITERATURE**

A body of work that is concerned with the maternal, running parallel to the rethinking of welfare economics, is situated between philosophy and language. Some of this has been inspired by a reexamination of notions from within psychoanalysis, for example, both Lucy Irigaray and Julia Kristeva who challenge the paternal emphasis built into psychoanalysis by what they said was writing out the maternal. This emphasis has been captured in the phrase 'white ink'; bringing to light the invisible, the unspoken. Both authors have set out to articulate difference and challenge notions that reify patriarchal domination through language and the symbolic by representing female experience. Their work gives rise to a conception of gender difference that has been grounded in the female body.

The early years after the birth of an infant have been recognized as critical to aspirations for gender equity and yet practices established in these early years can feed into entrenched gender divides. There has been exponential growth in a popular discourse of women reflecting on their experience after becoming a mother, along with the emergence of a political movement for change (Bravo 2007; MacDonald Strong 2008; Blades and Rowe-Finkbeiner 2006). The literature on mothering/motherhood including autobiographical pieces whereby women describe and reflect on the associated meanings and practices (for example: Rich 1976; Chesler 1979, 1998; Lazarre 1997; Fox 2003; Buchanan and Hudock 2006; Gore 2000; Maushart 1997; Power 2009) is ever-expanding. The links with identity for women-as-mothers are evident through the power of the good/bad mother discourse.

What is of interest here are the points of tension, and the part that an understanding of intersubjectivity can play in accounting for distinctions between self and other and formulating negotiated pathways (Hollway 2006). See the bibliography for examples from this body of work as well as the internet site for the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement at: <http://www.motherhoodinitiative.org/> There are Australian scholars who have taken up this challenge you can see more information: <http://www.uq.edu.au/mothering/> (or a google search on mothering Australia) and there is a forthcoming conference in April this year. There is more information about this on the internet site or contact me by email and I will forward this to you.

There is also an emergent assemblage of feminist mothers associated with third wave feminist movements for change (for example: Bravo 2007; MacDonald Strong 2008; Blades 2006). Women are critically reflecting on and responding to the social and cultural context in which they are mothering and reflecting on the experience of being a mother. These bodies of work inform a movement of women, sometimes with the support of men, who recognize the structural constraints and the potentialities that are an inherent part of the mother infant relationship (see: MIRC and Demeter Press at: <http://www.motherhoodinitiative.org/>). They form the historical and cultural

context for the dynamics between women-as-mothers and their infants; movements that are indicative of a collective recognition of a need for change.

The issues, however, go deeper than more childcare and changes to workplace practice, though these are important. There are calls for substantial institutional change that is cogniscent of the central role of care to well-being. Care has become the casualty of an insufficient response in the law, the labour market, schools, the institutions of care, and cultural constructions of motherhood with a contemporary trend towards 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1996).

Both gender equity and gender difference feminists are concerned to provide the conditions in which women can articulate what being a mother means while promoting the conditions for genuine choice. Both argue for fundamental change in the social structuring of care, whereby women can navigate the relations between themselves and their children in a context that facilitates freedom of expression while providing for care. Proponents within gender difference feminism, such as Kelly Oliver (1997) attribute a moral dimension to care, as do some gender equity feminists, though the basis for their moral arguments differ. The first is individualized through the woman-as-mother. The other draws links between this individualized base to collectivized notions that are associated with a reconceptualization of citizenship (Sevenhuijsen 1998) or the aforementioned reworking of welfare economics. Maternal subjectivity is located between social structure and cultural change and expositions on maternal experience are problematizing the dynamics. These represent a range of feminist positions that are attempting to reconceptualize an ethical foundation to accommodate the needs, interests and rights of women arising from the work of care. An understanding of the intersubjectivity between the woman-as-mother and infant in terms of a dynamic process between self and the other can importantly inform this work while not relying on this moral base; these are practices that are dependent on freedom of choice.

**PROPOSERS:** for example: Oliver; Irigaray; Kristeva; Bravo; Rich; Chesler; Lazarre; Maushart; see: <http://www.motherhoodinitiative.org/>

### **Psychoanalysis and mother–infant connections - the impact on women through an ideal of selflessness**

There have been continuing attempts to critique naturalized associations between women and femininity, and the mother–child relationship stands at the centre of this discourse. The interests of both mother and infant/child are held together through care and feminist work from within psychoanalysis provides for an understanding of intersubjective dynamics between mothers and their infant/child that locate the subject position of the woman-as-mother. Here below I have integrated some of this thinking with the interview data, including references to notions of the omnipotent mother, and/or the omnipotent child, in light of the knowledge base that informs midwifery practice.

I was surprised to learn that John Bowlby's influential work in attachment theory emerged from the British psychoanalytic field in the early 1960s. The initial standoff by most psychoanalysts has been overcome by a refinement and deepening of understanding that has included a recognition of the important role of representational systems in the separation and individuation processes

between mother and child. Bowlby's initial emphasis on the physical presence of the mother gave way to the representation of the absence to the infant; an understanding that alleviates fear of abandonment. Yet the later work on critical processes of interaction between mother and infant, the intersubjective dynamics, has been rarely taken on within research on this postnatal phase. Women are most often sent home with little reference to the complexities of the experience between themselves and their infants in terms of the self. There is a continuing emphasis on the physical health of the infant which is coupled with this cultural predilection towards maternal attachment, bonding and maternal role attainment. Propositions that are based on an understanding of the well-being of the child that does not account for the subjective experience of the woman-as-mother. A necessary development in this regard is a reappraisal of these services to incorporate recognition of the separate subject position of the woman from a maternal role so as to promote reflexivity; this is in the interest of both mother and baby.

In the context of care, women's aspirations can easily slip from self to other, and there is often a conflation of the self with the other in the mother–infant dyad. Psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity provide a basis for both explaining this overlapping of interests but also render a means for distinguishing the mother self from the child self. An understanding of differences between self and other through dynamics between recognition and negation provides a means for articulating necessary processes of connection and separation. These are dynamics that provide the basis for the ethical subjectivity in the infant/child but also the alterity, a separation of the psyche between mother and infant/child.

The psychic work of care is concerned with reciprocal identification, which is drawn from a sense of shared reality and/or mutuality whereby the mother is separate from the infant, a centre of subjective experience. This relational school of psychoanalysis, which includes the work of Hans Loewald, Thomas Ogden, Stephen Mitchell, Jessica Benjamin and Wendy Hollway, locates the psychic work which is at the centre of care within the wider biological, historical, structural and psychological context that influences and/or facilitates change.

This project to elucidate intersubjective dynamics between women-as-mothers and their infants links with the sociological critique through the associated meanings. Publications reflecting on this juxtaposition capture this disquiet in titles such as: *The Impossibility of Motherhood* (DiQuinzio 1999); *Weaving Work and Motherhood* (Garey 1999); *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Hays 1996); and *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the age of anxiety* (Warner 2005). These are works have been accompanied by multiple biographical accounts, women reflecting on the associated meanings and practices in their everyday lives (for example: Fox 2003).

### **Intersubjectivity, alterity and the health services**

The mother–infant bond is developed through an organic relationship constituted through day-to-day experience rather than a preconceived role perpetuated through structure and discourse. This psychic dimension is at the centre of the work associated with care (Hollway 2006, 68; Benjamin 1998; Baraitser 2009; Parker 2005). A responsible adult can attend to the physical requirements of a baby. The feeding of an infant can be done by a 'mother substitute' depending on access to breast or other kinds of milk but these aforementioned continuing and intimate connections hold mothers together with their infant/child.

Jessica Benjamin (1998, 92–93) formulated interactions between self and other through notions such as ‘reciprocal identification’ in ‘a third symbolic space’ whereby negotiated conflict can establish a sense of shared reality, reworking experiences of anger and abandonment through love, play and pleasure. Accordingly, it is critical for the woman-as-mother to hold on to a sense of self that is separate from her infant, whereby the infant/child can both recognize and in turn identify in this ‘third space’ that is created through interactions between self and other. These negotiations necessarily take place on a daily basis between woman-as-mothers and their infants, but it is a recognition of the critical nature of this work that is missing from the related services that perpetuates notions of the ‘selflessness’ that are associated with mothering.

The mother’s body is more than a container. The early ‘two-body’ experience promotes the recognition of difference. This psychic work that is associated with care represents affect and assists in processing the pain of separation between the mother and her child (Benjamin 1998, 28). Accordingly, the mother, or primary care-giver attends to and thus recognizes this emergent self while representative of the other. There is a distinction between the woman-as-mother and the fantasy of the mother that operates in the symbolic (Benjamin 1995). A demystifying of the maternal relationship through ambivalence can reveal the double-sided nature of interactions. These dynamics are fleshed out in the work of Hollway (2006, 78) who highlights the critical role of differentiation between the maternal subject and the infant/child. Benjamin (1998, xiv–xv) emphasizes the associated tension between what she describes as ‘complementarity and mutuality’, in contrast to the continuing references to paradox and contradiction. Complementarity describes an instrumental relationship between the ‘doer’ and the ‘done to’ which does not rely on a reflexive position, whereas the second mutuality draws on an understanding that the mother is not only separate but is also a centre of subjective experience. The dynamics are complex and fraught, however, they provide a basis from which to promote differentiation and creativity.

When I asked the interviewees about the meaning of mothering, some of them reflected with relief on the selflessness of the task. Their lives had taken on a meaning that was greater than personal gain and through their children they were contributing to the future. They saw this as a meaningful goal, which had the effect of trivializing issues that they had been concerned with before the baby came along. An objectification of relationships through roles, however, can slip over into omnipotent dynamics whereby the interests of the mother, or the interests of the infant/child, become paramount. This conflation of self with the other was evident between the women interviewed for the thesis and their infants in that the interests of the child required the women to displace the ‘sense of self’; as Carol said:

I guess I had this fairytale ... It’s a wonderful and rewarding experience, but it is very hard to lose the sense of who you are because you just become this machine that is purely there to serve everyone’s needs and at times I don’t even remember what it is to just be a wife, let alone, just to be [Carol]<sup>7</sup> (Carol, 7)

Carol’s experience can be explained in terms of Lawler’s argument in *Mothering the Self* in that the psychic work that women associate with care is to reproduce a sense of the autonomous self in their child. This forces her to navigate the contradiction between promoting the autonomous child

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<sup>7</sup> I have changed the actual name.

and yet subjugating the autonomous self (Lawler 2000,158). In this quote Carol is clearly aware of a sense of self that is separate from her aspirations for her child/ren. As with the women interviewed by Lawler, Carol needs to determine a course for herself but, as Lawler argued, insofar as she is being a mother, 'there is extraordinarily little space for manoeuvre' (Lawler 2000, 171). Women most often want to be 'good mothers' but the social structuring of care in concert with the cultural discourse presents the issues in moral rather than practical terms. An association between mothering and selflessness lies in this juncture and is at the heart of Lawler's thesis. This belief and association holds currency today and was clearly evident in my interview data.

An adherence by the interviewees to care, in the face of substantial personal cost, is indicative of this close connection between the interests of the woman-as-mother and her infant, an assertion of the primacy of this work, particularly in these early years after the birth. These negotiations are distorted, however, through an over-emphasis on the role of the woman-as-mother at the expense of recognizing and embedding the subject of the woman; the work associated with care that is bound up with interactions between self and other. The current weight given to bonding between mother and child needs to be reconsidered in light of the material on intersubjectivity. Important processes of recognition and negation need to take place between mother and infant/child. The current emphasis does not acknowledge or take account of, critical psychological processes that the mother is also traversing.

**PROPONENTS:** for example: Benjamin; Chodorow; Baraitser; Hollway; DiQuinzio.

### **Current emphasis in health policy**

And yet over recent years health departments in the United Kingdom and Australia have renewed and revised their early childhood strategies in line with the management of populations. The new emphasis includes, says Robert Nye (2003,123), a 'rearticulation of the notion of the citizen into an organic being conceptually inseparable from his or her family, neighbourhood, or society in general'. Thus midwives are being called upon to play a greater role in the public health strategy, which includes a raft of target areas such as: the promotion of effective parenting skills, healthy lifestyles, child protection, relationship screening and sexual health (Bennett, Blundell, Malpass and Lavender 2001). A recently released edited collection of Australian papers (Barnes & Rowe, 2008) is indicative of this instrumental approach to policy, with many of the chapters looking at strengthening communities via child and family health services. The result of these trends has been a fragmentation of women's health into areas related to bodily function, for example, reproduction, maternal and family issues, and neonatal and baby health while there have been calls for a return to the holistic approach to research on birth which includes both the psychosocial as well as the physical aspects. The current challenge has been to restore agency to women (Marchant 2004, 80; Walsh 2004, 63) however the continuing lack of social support, or a commodification of care is contributing to divides: those who can, and those who cannot afford to pay.

As governments pull away from a commitment to the welfare state, the home and family have been reasserted as the most important site for health care, health promotion, and women are, by tradition and by gendered association, the main producers of these health services. The individual psychological burden of care giving has been stressed over social and economic issues such as class, ethnicity, occupational history, or power relations between family care-givers, care

recipients, or professionals. Genderless health promotion campaigns assume a healthy diet will be cooked without asking by whom and current practices generally assume that women will do the caring of babies (Holmes and Gastaldo 2002, 560). Furthermore, essential to the social meaning of midwifery is the meaning of childbirth. The place of children in society has changed over time. The recent trend towards low fertility has made children highly valued and they have in turn become the centre of medical health concerns (Hunt and Symonds 1995, 4). This emphasis perpetuates an understanding of the interests of the infant/child and family as separate from, and more important than the interests of the woman-as-mother.<sup>8</sup> These assumptions inform policy and practice and work through the symbolic, through signification – meanings associated with motherhood and family.

Social imaginary significations are not something that individuals mould or negotiate but are always contested and reified through collective meanings, by groups making claim to particular understandings which form the basis for stereotypes. These processes are evidenced through the identity politics that followed second wave feminist movements when women began to see themselves differently, both individually and collectively. Anti-colonial, gay and lesbian, youth, black, liberal, conservative and fascist movements, amongst others, draw on a process of individuals identifying with a collective that they, in turn, create. The legitimacy of a movement is gained through an articulation of attributes and goals that are of central concern to the greatest number. This work on intersubjectivity provides a basis from which to understand a psychic dimension to the work of care that locates the subject of the woman-as-mother and thus challenge the long-held belief that mothering requires women to become selfless.

## Conclusions

There is a serious lack of research and services in the postnatal phase of pregnancy and birth, particularly as this relates to the woman-as-mother. The standard for midwifery and obstetric practice in Australia concludes six weeks after the birth. The related health services through maternal and child health nurses are primarily focused on infant health outcomes, and the related physical recovery of the woman-as-mother. It is clear that the medicalization of ante- and post-natal services has resulted in an emphasis on the physical aspects of pregnancy, birth and mothering to the exclusion of the social and/or psychic dimension. These claims are substantiated through the respondents' reflections. The current trend is towards population management with an emphasis on parenting, healthy eating, and anti-smoking. Privatization of care through the family, which is individualized through gendered roles and responsibilities informs policy and practice, a governance carried forth through beliefs which often translates into an understanding that women-as-mothers need to become selfless. This trend is evidence of a nexus between knowledge and a working through of power whereby the sense of self is projected into the future through aspirations for the infant/child. The work on intersubjectivity provides a means for explaining a convergence of the self with the other through omnipotent dynamics advancing the interests of the woman-as-mother through the associated role. This work in itself is not an ethical endeavour but facilitated by the social and cultural context; practices and meanings. While the outcome provides the conditions for an ethical base in the infant/child, the dynamics necessarily take place within the context of biological, historical, structural and psychological constructs that perpetuate gendered understandings through experience. Therefore the current challenge is to formulate a sociological

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<sup>8</sup> See: Martha Fineman (2004).

perspective on the dynamics while mindful of a collective response to a public ethics of care. My aim hasn't been to overwhelm you with references or themes but to emphasise to you that there is a wealth of material from within the humanities that is relevant to your everyday work as practitioners and to commend this richness to you. For an extended discussion of these topics see my thesis online at: <http://dspace.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/49388>

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