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Knowing Mothers

Researching Maternal Identity Change

Wendy Hollway

The Open University, UK

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In memory of Cathy Urwin, who died on 3 June 2012

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Preface

How do women experience the identity changes involved in becoming mothers for the first time? When this is the question posed by an empirical research project, it sets a methodological challenge: how can research bring to light such experience; how can identity change be documented, conceptualised and written about? This book revolves around these methodological questions, addressed throughout via data from the 'Becoming a Mother' project. Nineteen women's lives populate this book, as they become mothers for the first time, each unique and all having much in common amidst the diversity of East London.

I initially wrote this preface in Oslo, where – just ten minutes' walk from where I lived – Gustav Vigeland's sculptures inhabit the park like a huge community, all naked and, at that time of the year, capped and shawled in snow. The mother image that I photographed and chose for the book cover expresses a theme that had been brewing in my mind for several years: the ineffable in maternal experience. Ineffable has two allied meanings, both coming from the Latin root [in]ex – fare, to speak out. The first is 'incapable of being expressed'; the second is 'not to be uttered'. What is her wordless experience as she sturdily plants herself on all fours, with two children on her back? Her face is almost impassive. A conventional reading of the scene would be that she is playing a game with the children and indeed on one of the websites I found, this image is called 'mother plays horse'. But I don't find her expression playful, nor – to my eyes – is it resentful. Perhaps the children are playing horse, especially the boy on the front who is gleefully using her plaited hair as reins, complete with the part that works like a horse's bit. The girl behind looks slightly askance. What imaginative world is their mother enabling them to inhabit? Perhaps she looks a little resigned, her body grounded in the present moment while her gaze is also somewhere else, looking forward, not down, into the middle distance ahead. Like most of Vigeland's adults, this mother is huge, with arms and legs as thick as pillars. Her back is not straining under the children's weight; her hands are grounded like strong roots; her belly and breasts full and firm. In the

background are other images of fecundity: the ant-heap of children and another, smaller number who look as if they are rooting for the mother's nipples like a litter of piglets under the sow.

The feature of this maternal figure to which I am recurrently drawn is the tress across her mouth, not quite a horse's bit ('bite') because it is not inside her mouth; more like a loose-fitting gag, with which she cooperates to keep it in place, cooperates in being wordless in her act of maternal bearing. This is the feature that suggests maternal ineffability to me. To the extent that ineffable means incapable of being expressed, I must acknowledge that such aspects of the maternal will remain outside the scope of this book. To the extent that early maternal experience has been ex-communicated, I am motivated to extend the available language and methods of knowing to make it more accessible. Loosely based around the idea of wordlessness, then, I pattern the two interdependent themes in this book: maternal knowing (how – in what modes – do mothers know their pre-semantic infants?) and research knowing (how do researchers know about this partly ineffable maternal becoming?). In practice, how did we, the research team, learn about the mothers participating in our project?

Qualitative psycho-social research has largely been based upon what participants say, while this project recorded new mothers' words as well as observing them in the wider context, often of family. Both interview and observation methods have gradually drawn me towards what is not said. The not-said manifests in many ways, each challenging researchers to ask if, when, how and how well we know. So the ineffability of maternal experience calls into play a parallel in the researchers' experience in which the ineffable must be transformed so that it can be meaningfully communicated. If it is to some extent beyond words, how can it be researched and validated? What methods do I have for grasping the maternal ineffable and what words and concepts might do justice to it? Has it got lost in discourses and representations of the maternal, with what consequences? Do maternal discourses also reflect what is not to be uttered (what is taboo)?

Not everything about maternal experience is ineffable: mothers, like all human beings who have entered language, use language to make sense of their experiences and to communicate; researchers likewise. What these 19 mothers say in the research setting forms a considerable part of the information on which this book is based. However, words act on many levels, and this book is also about what exists on, behind and beyond the borders of language and symbolisation; that exceed it and escape it, and yet are communicative and co-exist with it. This is

the unthought known, residing initially in embodied affect, or emotional experience, through which the excommunicated can be made available to language. Throughout this book, I illustrate how a different research methodology, underpinned by a psychoanalytically informed epistemology, can transform our understanding of the early foundations of maternal identity.

Acknowledgements

The original research idea about first time mothers' identity transition was hatched within the Open University Psychology Department's Discourse and Psycho-social Research group. It was worked up with Ann Phoenix, Yasmin Gunaratnam and Cathy Urwin. The Economic and Social Research Council funded the project. Heather Elliott, appointed as researcher, was central in putting the proposal into action. The 20 participants in that project welcomed us into their homes at a time of considerable upheaval and, apart from one, stuck the course. Others, including a pilot interviewee, contributed data. Six observers, Monika Flakowicz, Sandy Layton, Elspeth Pluckrose, Judith Thorp, Ferelyth Watt and Sarina Woograsingh, generously committed many hours of their demanding working lives travelling weekly to six participants' homes, observing, writing notes and attending the weekly observation seminar. Cathy Urwin took responsibility for recruiting them and led the weekly seminar at her home in London. Her wisdom and experience were crucial to the success of the observation side of the study. She continued to develop infant observation as a research method, in many ways that have informed this book, until her death in 2012. Her approach was an inspiration for this book; an inspiration only magnified by the loss and my wish to do justice to her memory.

Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Hanne Haavind invited me to the Norwegian government-funded programme at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo where I took case data to work with the group in one of four eight-week sessions. A scholarship funded (again) by the Economic and Social Research Council enabled a period of digestion and further analysis without which the book would not have resembled what has emerged. The intellectual climate and growing post-graduate research culture of psycho-social studies in the UK has provided me with a lively network within which to situate my work.

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