RE-WRITING MOTHERHOOD: RESEARCHING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING TO MOTHER FOR THE FIRST TIME

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ABSTRACT

Objective:

The aim of this paper was to examine one woman's experience and memory of learning to mother during pregnancy and the first postnatal year.

Design:

Narratives of experience and memory were elicited through three in-depth interviews: during the third trimester of pregnancy; at four to six weeks postpartum; and, when the infant was nine months old. Feminist poststructural approaches informed the interview process. Through discourse analysis the detail of this woman's experiences was read closely in terms of the constructions, tensions, gaps, absences and contradictions as she reflected on what and how she learned to mother.

Setting:

The woman was interviewed in her home.

Participants:

The larger research study from which the data in this article are drawn was an extended interview study of 15 women over a 12-month period.

Results:

The close analysis of the data exemplifies the outcomes of the larger study from which it was drawn, in its demonstration of the complex and often contradictory processes of maternal learning. An understanding of this complexity is argued to be an essential condition for effective and inclusive nursing and midwifery intervention.

Conclusions:

Norms of 'good' mothering have been traditionally narrow within nursing literature. Although this is changing, these norms still serve to shape and also restrict possible positions women can take up to make sense of their experience. They provide background to the complex, and sometimes contradictory, processes of learning that take place during the perinatal period.

INTRODUCTION

Descriptions of constantly attentive and protective mothers who provide nurturance and unconditional love to their infants have traditionally dominated discourses of motherhood in nursing and midwifery and hence they have a powerful impact on practice. The lack of a critical exploration of these dominant motherhood discourses can blind nurses, midwives and parent educators to the complexity and diversity of mothering experiences. This may especially be the case when women's early experiences have resulted in traumatic or 'deviant' memories.

There is limited exploration of maternal learning within the other health-professional literature. This is often subsumed into discussions about the development of maternal competence (eg. Marja-Terttu 2003), which frequently discusses the process of becoming a mother in ways that suggest a consistent, generalised outcome for all women (eg. Barclay et al 1997; Rogan et al 1997), rather than acknowledging that learning outcomes are influenced by and influence all aspects of women's life-long experiences to varying degrees. The literature usually foregrounds learning through the evaluation of parent education groups and the achievement of learning outcomes as part of a formal learning approach (eg. Hanna et al 2002; Huebner 2002). Rarely does this literature identify or explore 'incidental learning', the learning that happens through the normal business of everyday life and experience and the transformation of memory into new meaning (Fowler 2002).

Incidental learning is the richest, most widespread and also often the most problematic type of learning. This literature does not acknowledge the complex, sometimes contradictory, and problematic nature of maternal learning as women try to make sense of their own memories of being mothered nor how they overcome the disjunctures that may exist between their experiences and the dominant motherhood discourses. An exception to this is the work on some infant and mother relationship intervention programs that focus on the development of maternal 'insight', where the focus goes beyond the group or interaction structure of an

educational experience to the psychological and social reasons for implementing these programs (eg. McDonough 2000; Erickson and Kurz-Riemer 1999).

Incidental learning is defined as learning which is '...incidental to the activity in which the person is involved, and is often tacit and not seen as learning, at least not at the time of its occurrence' (Foley 2000, p. xiv). Incidental learning can be closely linked to the understandings gained from psychology and neuroscience about the development of implicit or non-declarative memory systems (Siegel 1999), which enable us to know more than we can say. Non-declarative memories are unconscious memories of knowledge and skills that are usually available as somatic knowledge about how to interact with people and how to do things without conscious recollection (Siegel 1999).

When early experience is traumatic, however, conscious and somatic memories are created, lying dormant ready to be awakened by powerful new somatic experiences that have links to previous experience. Providing women with opportunities to bring these memories into consciousness enables women to use their somatic knowledge as they learn to mother. Importantly, incidental learning does not have a pre-given or pre-defined outcome. Women do not always learn what might be assumed that they learn, nor can it be determined in any a-priori way how they are to learn or what will count as learning. Much learning could best be described both as a process of *unlearning* (critical and often anxious engagement with the normalised discourses of motherhood and the cultural norms of the 'good' mother) and of *re-writing* (appropriating or investing in enabling discourses within which memories can be transformed meaningfully into the present). Rarely is it linear, purely rational or predetermined.

The absence of a focus on maternal learning and specifically on the significance of memory in learning to mother in parent education literature has led to the conduct of a large research project from which the material in this article is drawn. In what follows we excerpt a section of data and attempt to demonstrate the importance for effective nursing and midwifery intervention in early mothering of an understanding of this complexity of the learning processes. In this sense, it is hoped, the notion of 're-writing motherhood', critically examining and reconsidering the dominant discourses of motherhood and of learning to mother, might emerge as a central task for the nursing and midwifery professions.

We would argue for an urgent need to expose the always complex and sometimes dark sides of women's experiences and memories of mothering, as they proceed through the crucial first-time perinatal period. This is not to pathologise such memories but rather to enable women to imagine different possibilities and, if necessary, to re-write their understandings of motherhood. This writing and re-writing of mothering memories is, we argue,

central to maternal learning and the ability of women to position themselves appropriately as mothers.

METHODOLOGY

Discourse analysis is becoming a powerful emerging tool in nursing, midwifery and health related research (eg. Schmied and Lupton 2001; Barclay and Lupton 1999). Discourse analysis informed by poststructuralist understandings was used to explore women's constructions of maternal subject positions and the development of new and more acceptable (to them) meanings of motherhood. The term discourse has a complex genealogy; for the purposes of this discussion we use the term '...as a way of attempting to capture regularities of meaning used by those positioned as members of particular institutions, regularities which serve both to make sense of, but also to continuously effect, such positionings' (Poynton and Lee 2000, p.6).

According to these understandings, women experience themselves as multiply positioned by others through multiple discourses, through regimes of surveillance and normalisation. In turn, women actively work to make sense of their experience and memories and to construct their identity. It is through positioning in discourse that women learn to construct who they might be and sometimes also the impossibility of that being (Dormer and Davies 2001). To speak from a 'self' invariably situates or positions the speaker within the world; it results in engaging with others in a process of production and exchange (Hanks 1993). These discourses frequently reflect the cultural and social rules of a society in which people live (Poynton and Lee 2000).

Fifteen women were recruited through antenatal classes and 'by word of mouth', resulting in a broad range of social and personal experience. The study did not seek to differentiate or systematise differences in social positioning but rather to focus on processes of learning. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Technology, Sydney and Central Sydney Area Health Service, New South Wales, Australia. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality. The small number of subjects was necessary due to the depths of the exploration and sufficient due to the primary research aims: to garner and question the detail of women's memories, and to read closely the constructions, tensions, gaps, absences and contradictions in the accounts, as women reflect on what and how they learn to mother during this major change period in their lives.

Data collection: The generation of spaces for engagement

Three in-depth interviews with each subject were conducted: during the third trimester of pregnancy; at four to six weeks postpartum; and, when the infant was nine months old. The women were invited to attend a final group to discuss their participation within the

research and to provide an occasion of closure at the end of the series of interviews.

The study methods were conceptualised and designed within well-established feminist and post-structuralist frames, where the research practices of interviewing and analysis were understood as social practices, partial and situated activities which were subject always to processes of interpretation and re-interpretation within specific circumstances (Usher 1996; Georges 2003).

Interviews were based on a dialogue or conversation with the women, rather than an 'interrogation' using a scripted interview schedule. The use of a dialogue as an appropriate interviewing technique is perhaps most powerfully supported by Cotterill's (1992, p.294) assertion that the '...best way to find out about women's lives is to make interviewing an interactive experience'. The interview practices draw strongly on Oakley's (1993) principles of intimacy and equality between participants. These feminist principles minimised hierarchic difference and optimised trust and richness of disclosure (Fowler 2000).

The first interview explored women's initial construction of themselves as mothers and their expectations of motherhood. During the second interview, questions were asked about the women's childbirth memories and their early weeks of motherhood. The third interview provided an opportunity for the women to focus explicitly on their experience of maternal learning. During each interview the women frequently asked about issues of concern to them such as breastfeeding, infant behaviour and emotional and physical changes they were undergoing. Open exchange on these matters helped to realise Oakley's egalitarian principles of open and honest information exchange.

Each interview was at least an hour and a half in length. The audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim and an unedited copy of the interviews was sent to the woman for verification, to make further comments and to remove any information she did not want included as research data.

A series of discourse-analytic questions was used to work with the transcribed interview data. These questions included: how the women were positioning themselves as subjects; whether there were contradictions and tensions within the stories that are told; and which discourses were being spoken. Analysis included a systematic assembling of regularities and irregularities in utterances, within each sequence of three interviews and across the interview field. These regularities, as well as the irregularities and internal contradictions, were then matched against discursive regularities and taken-for-granted understandings - dominant discourses - of motherhood. A picture of learning emerges, where each woman participates as an active member of a culture, working to make sense of the specificities of personal experience within regimes of intelligibility and cultural norms.

In this article, we discuss a series of extracts from the three interviews with one woman. Through a close reading of the extracts, we seek to illustrate the method of interrogation of the interview material. Specifically, we seek to highlight the difficulty one woman had in constructing a maternal position that was not alienating and disabling. The particular purpose of this is to demonstrate the incidental learning that is involved in the construction of an acceptable maternal position and the process of re-writing that takes place in order to effect such learning.

DISCUSSION

Meredith's story (name changed)

Meredith is a 30-year-old woman who is pregnant for the first time. As a teenager she had been a victim of father-daughter rape. When Meredith tried to tell her mother about the rape, her mother refused to believe it had occurred. This experience left her with memories of her mother as many things other than the nurturing, protective mother of normalising cultural discourses.

At the time of the interviews, Meredith had stopped all contact with her parents and did not anticipate seeing them again. Making the decision to become pregnant was difficult for her. In the first interview, she reflects on the shape or colour of her anticipatory thinking: 'blackness, that's what I thought of motherhood for a long time and I was never going to have a child'. This thinking seems to indicate trauma and only partially integrated memory of her past trauma. Her decision was further complicated when she found out her baby would be a boy. Meredith had desired a daughter and had used techniques related to timing in her menstrual cycle to try to conceive a girl.

During her pregnancy, Meredith began to engage with her emotional dilemma by actively and consciously naming her unborn child in a manner defiant of, or alternative to, normative discourses of masculinity for her unborn son: 'I called my baby "Little Fem" and that's how I felt very positive about him...That I was growing a feminist. Meredith's belief that she was 'growing a feminist' appears to signal a significant beginning step in emotionally attaching to her unborn son. Thinking in this way possibly indicates her desire to ensure her son did not have the negative masculine characteristics of her own father in her memory. By calling her unborn child 'Little Fem', Meredith not only is consciously constructing a viable subject position or identity for the growing entity within her, she is possibly also beginning to allow herself to consider an alternative position for men and ultimately a viable position for herself as a mother. In this she is articulating and transforming traumatic memory and working to construct a discourse of possibility for herself.

Rejecting the term 'mother'

The following story demonstrates Meredith's struggle to contend with the contradictions inherent in the discourses of motherhood and the lack of a 'speakable' discourse about her memory of being mothered.

Meredith explicitly rejects the position within a dominant pregnancy discourse of 'joyful anticipation'. Indeed, she rejects the use of the term 'mother' altogether. It seems that the stresses of being unable to reconcile memory of her actual experience with the 'joyful anticipation' version of pregnancy resulted in an initial refusal of a motherhood discourse at all. Through the next nine months, however, Meredith learns to make sense of, and gradually reconstructs or re-writes, the term 'mother' for herself, reconciling contradictions and constructing practical possibilities. Half way through the first interview Meredith was asked if she could imagine herself as a mother. Meredith's response identifies the difficulty she is experiencing discursively constructing a subject position using the term 'mother':

'I suppose, first of all, I should say, I'm not sure that I really like the word mother anyway. So I have ambivalent feelings about putting that label on myself anyway and so tend... well, tend not to think in those... those terms... And so, when I think, when I think about myself having a child, I think... I think there'll be that I'll find there's plenty of frustrations involved... As well as hopefully, lots of joys. But that I'll have to be careful not to let my... my nature of being well organised and... having been a control freak, to getting, to be (giggle) a bit more realistic about life.'

For Meredith, the term 'mother' has mainly negative attributes that have come from her particular memories of being mothered. Meredith's rejection of the term 'mother' can at this stage be seen as a rejection of all the good that might normally be assumed to be embedded within the term. This ambivalence about the term 'mother' could equally be the acknowledgement of the existence of feelings of loss, sorrow and separation (Parker 1997) felt by Meredith about the missing relationship with her mother. In any case, normatively positive discourses of motherhood cannot be simply assumed to be available to Meredith, and her learning process has to be active and critical as she engages with the problem.

Meredith does not directly answer the question about imaging herself as a mother, but articulates the emotions of having to care for a baby - *frustration* and *joy*. Her comments about the emotions are provided in a considered manner, which is emphasised by the pauses in her statements. In her response Meredith balances the inevitable *frustrations* of mothering with the *joy* of a baby; her words give an impression that she is working to construct a positive stance towards the prospect of caring for her baby. Through partial disassociation - the separation of the process of anticipating caring for her baby from the unwillingness to identify with her position of mother - Meredith seeks to integrate traumatic and contradictory positionings of self. At this point in her story she is in an unstable subjective space.

Developing a hybrid name

During the second interview, four weeks after the birth of her son Daniel, Meredith is asked if she felt like she was a mother now. In her response Meredith talks of how she has started to construct a mothering position through the use of a hybrid name:

... that was the tricky part from our, from our first interview about not wanting to be called a mother and not, not really wanting to own... that, that name. I suppose... well we sort of... we overcame that because Thomas [partner] came up with, Thomas came up with the name while I was still in hospital... of calling me Merrimum, cause lots of people call me Merri anyway. It's short and... and I like that and that's the way I refer to myself now so I guess the distance from my own mother and the negative experiences there and what I didn't want to relate to...and align myself with that... that. I can still use part of that name but it's very much just about me, about how I want to be as a mother or as a parent and differentiate that from how a lot of other people... parent.

Meredith's initial response provides an impression of welcoming the question as something that she has considered and is ready to talk about. Meredith reflects back to the first interview and recalls the discussion about her feelings toward the term 'mother'. With the support of her partner Thomas, Meredith seems to be starting to make sense of how she might position herself within a discourse of motherhood. Constructing a new name that does not have the same connotations for her that the term 'mother' held has provided a solution. A process is occurring of constructing new and positive understandings of the idea of 'mother', which no longer constrain her through her memories of her previous experiences and meanings. The new name *Merrimum* allows Meredith to position herself in a way that is familiar. Rather than saying 'mother', Meredith states *I can still use part of that name* but it has now been constructed to be about her and not her own mother.

Construction of a new subject position as mother

During the third interview, when Meredith's son Daniel was seven months old, her response to a question about whether there had been anything really difficult for her to learn as a mother was:

... I think it's probably been the more the mental jump of... calling and naming myself as mother, is the... has been the biggest thing for me. Rather than the physical... caring sort of aspects... that mental sort of... identification... process has been... the slowest and the biggest sort of... hurdle... I suppose if you want to call it that.

When asked whether she had maintained the name 'Merrimum', Meredith replied:

I'm still really happy if he'd rather call me Meredith or Merri than Mum, but I don't find it offensive any more when other people call me a mum or a mother or whatever. Which... which I did find difficult... to begin with... I suppose now that I've super-imposed... my positive image of what it is to be a mother for me on... to that - you know. When I read it on forms and all those kind of things, well I have that image to put in my mind now. Rather than a bit more negative one that I had, I had before he was born.

Meredith acknowledges the difficulty of *calling and naming myself mother,* that this process requires a *mental jump.* She differentiates between *calling* and *naming* as if there is a subtle difference; possibly, *calling* does not carry such a sense of permanency and acceptance, whereas *naming* indicates a considered act of acceptance, legitimacy and finality. Meredith talks about the process of *calling* and *naming* using words which denote a physical effort - *jump, slowest, biggest, hurdle.* These words offer some insight into the struggle faced by Meredith, in naming herself as a mother, as being a difficult act. She compares this struggle with learning to manage the physical aspects of caring for her baby that contributes an understanding of this physical care as much easier to learn. This realisation provides a powerful contrast to the emphasis on physical tasks of mothering that overwhelm the material for learning within parent education courses (Fowler 2000).

The question about maintaining the name *Merrimum* is answered in a seemingly more relaxed manner than in previous interviews, as indicated by the confident tone of her voice and her relaxed body posture (from the interviewer's notes). There is also acknowledgement of her acceptance of being positioned as a mother by others. The use of offensive to describe her reaction offers an understanding of the difficulty Meredith had faced in taking up the position of mother. Meredith highlights the use of positive images to assist her reach an acceptance of her various mothering positions.

A new understanding of what it means to be a mother has emerged for Meredith, which could be posed as being a significant learning experience and could have come out of using the conscious and unconscious knowledge of her traumatic memory of rape and abandonment to explore the discomfort, disappointment and anger she felt about her mother's lack of support. This occurred over an extended time period and will probably continue throughout her life as new challenges and conflicts trigger unconscious and conscious memories of being mothered and the need to continue to work to rewrite those memories into a positive subject position for herself.

CONCLUSION

The mismatch between the dominant discourse of motherhood and a particular woman's actual memories of being mothered was problematic for her at the time of the interviews, resulting in tensions and contradictions. This dominant discourse of motherhood construing mothers as for example willingly 'laying down their lives' to protect their children, is not available for Meredith. Indeed such a discourse does not accord with the experience of many mothers (Blaffer Hrdy 1999; de Mause 1974; Oakley 1981). As Meredith's experience demonstrates, her mother was unable to protect her from her father or even to believe her father was perpetrating such an act as rape on their daughter.

Using the understandings gained from this story, a major learning task some women need to attend to is the development of alternative constructions for the literally unspeakable constructions of past traumatic memories. These discourses are unspeakable for at least two reasons: firstly, the experience of incest does not provide a discourse in our culture that can be used to construct a nurturing mothering position. The second is that talking about incest, in most instances, remains a taboo within western society. For actual women like Meredith, learning to mother her baby involves surfacing, articulating, and transforming unspeakable memories, thus unlearning disabling positions and re-writing a positive mothering discourse for herself.

Meredith's experience is perhaps extreme but in terms of its complexity was consistent with the other mothers in the larger research project. What was common was that each woman underwent a complex struggle to make sense of and transform memories of personal experiences, come to terms with the complex actuality of family life as they began to learn about what it would mean to become a mother for the first time.

The research from which this article was drawn was a serious attempt to come to terms with the complexity of experience, memory and learning undergone by women becoming mothers for the first time. In seeking to account for complexity and contradictions, the silences and gaps in their stories, such research inevitably fails to reach a simple conclusion that would lead to a simple construction of a new theory. Experience, memory and learning by their very nature are not easy to reduce to models and formulae. The implications for practice are similarly complex and involve a maturing of the discipline to encapsulate the fullness of the human experience.

We would argue there is a real and practical need to challenge and go beyond the top-down, homogenising normative discourses of motherhood which pervade the nursing and midwifery literature. Such discourses potentially silence, marginalise and pathologise actual women. Opportunities are needed for women to start to develop an account of their mothering that is far more richly complex and that generates spaces for women who do not immediately connect with the dominant discourses of motherhood. Women learn a great deal during this period, making sense of memory and experience and transforming that experience into a viable position for themselves within this powerful cultural discourse.

Learning theories such as incidental learning, which attend to the conscious and unconscious processes of making sense of memories, offer a great deal to nursing and midwifery practice, supporting a necessary shift of focus from rectifying maternal deficits to actively support maternal learning.

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