

Researching Motherhood as a Feminist

Reflecting on My Own Experiences

Although the burgeoning studies beginning to emerge across disciplines in research on motherhood attest to the growing interest in scholarship in this field,¹ research on mothering stills seems to trigger a curious mix of emotional responses that are often critical, resistant or defensive in nature. A typical remark such as “but ... what about fathers?” or other such accusations mistakenly assume an essentialist devaluing or marginalizing of people who are not mothers. Other reactions infer that this work may be self-indulgent “soft” research or that there is nothing much to question that we don’t already know. After all, aren’t mothers generally well respected and honoured? For this inaugural edition of the A.R.M. journal, it seems appropriate to revisit my intentions as a feminist researcher and to consider how my own personal work has challenged traditional images and ideologies of motherhood. I will begin by reviewing the many faces of feminism that give impetus to the diverse range of studies on motherhood. Next, I will point out that the social construction of gender is largely responsible for much of the complacency surrounding maternal ideologies and the status quo. I will end this essay by addressing new challenges that may arise with respect to the maternal narratives we are encouraging people to share.

Reaffirming a feminist standpoint

Since feminism is a large movement without official leaders, it is not surprising that it lacks a single definition of how to do feminist research. However, most feminist researchers generally consider personal experiences to be a valuable asset and our work is frequently presented in our own voice. A personal connection between the research project and the researcher’s self frequently takes the form of starting with one’s own lived experience or feminist

standpoint (Smith, 1987) and reflecting on what is learned in the process. A troubling or puzzling experience becomes a need to know and often we are willing to disrupt conventional research etiquette with our passion. As a result, feminist research reads as partly informal, engagingly personal, and even confessional. It involves an explanation of the author's relation to the subject matter or the explicit study of a phenomenon that concerns her in her personal life, thus merging the public and private.

Feminist researchers working with a variety of qualitative approaches take their interest in understanding lived experience one step further by making women's diverse situations central and problematic in the interest of realizing social justice for women (Olesen, 1994: 158). At the outset, it is important to stress that while feminist methods may not be unique or exclusive to women (Levinson, 1998), Judith Lorber (1988) suggests that "feminists do uniquely contribute to social science by seeing patterns and interrelationships and causes and effects and implications of questions that nonfeminists have not seen and still do not see" (6).

Briefly stated, feminism can be defined by any number of descriptors such as: a very personal act; a struggle against sexism, racism, and classism as paradigms for all oppression; a woman's assertion of her own power and a refusal to compromise; a commitment to end white male domination; the creation of inclusivity and mutuality; and the insistence on the well-being of all women. Much feminist research is focused on social change, consciousness-raising or specific policy recommendations and strives to recognize diversity. Shulamit Reinharz (1992) describes feminist research as "looking at the world through women's eyes and seeing how the lack of knowledge is constructed" (248). She identifies key elements in this work such as "making the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, [and] understanding women as subjects in their own right rather than objects for men" (248). She challenges feminists to be particularly concerned about the ideas of women who are not in print and the defining of these women out of existence.

As connected knowers, Reinharz also points out that feminists seem drawn to work on the borders and are interested in blending disciplines. She rejects the notion of a transcendent authority that decides what constitutes feminist research and resists generalizations which can be misleading and inadequate and instead identifies a multitude of feminist voices and plurality of feminist research methods which are contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant, multimethodological, complete but not necessarily replicable, open to the environment, and attuned to subjective emotions and personal events as experienced. "My approach" she states, "requires listening to the voices of feminist researchers at work and accepting their diversity" (1992: 5).

Ann Oakley's (1981) pioneer work in feminist methodology documents how advice about formalized interviewing did not work for her and limited her ability to communicate with female respondents. Ignoring the rules of positiv-

ists not to become personally involved in her research and challenging the subject-object separation codes, she made friends with her participants and answered their questions. As a result, she became an important source of information and a reassuring support figure for them. Likewise, in their landmark book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) continued to chart the course toward a paradigm shift that validated a subjective, relational knowing which they described as "an orientation toward understanding and truth that emphasizes not autonomy and independence of judgment but a joining of minds" (55). By turning their attention to the "voices and perspectives of women," they began "to hear the unheard and unimagined" (11) that had previously remained silent and devalued. Their work served to heighten awareness about the distinctions between objectivism, relativism and the resulting informational biases as well as about the failure to acknowledge women's roles, activities, and rituals as significant.

Michelle Fine (1992) points out that the experiences of women researchers investigating the lives of women have been forbidden pools of data and that women collaborate in keeping the pool hidden out of fear that they will be accused of biased scholarship or overidentification with respondents. Instead, Fine encourages women to deliberately integrate their repressed, unconscious female subjectivity. She argues that the notion of personal experience is an asset to research and describes feminist research as "an attempt to wedge between women's layers, to hear what has been hidden, swallowed, suffocated, and treasured by, for and despite women" (xii). Other feminists have pursued similar modes of personal inquiry and have succeeded in pushing the boundaries of relativism and narrative inquiry further by raising critical questions. What is recognized as "knowledge" and who is authorized to produce it? Do we trust caring ethics, self-reflective knowledge and intuitive practical reasoning as much as logical empirical thinking? If so, where does the female researcher fit into the ways of producing "knowledge?"

Joyce Nielsen (1990) was also an early proponent of relativism or the belief that there is no final, ultimate measure of truth that all can agree on. Instead, she argued that "all knowledge is culture-bound, theory-bound, and/or historically specific—that is, understandable and valid only within a specific time, place, theory or perspective" (3). Similarly, Lorraine Code (1991) described her position as a feminist standpoint theorist whose quest for truth and politics has been shaped by the understanding that knowledge is situated at a particular time and place and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced. This viewpoint problematizes the issue of difference and the fact that all knowledge is partial and necessarily from some perspective.

The social constructionist theory of gender

Sandra Harding (1996) identifies recent shifts in theorizing gender in order to encourage an antiessentialist way of understanding gender relations.

First, she points out, gender is now understood to be a relationship between men and women, rather than an isolated property and it is always about power. It is produced not by individual choices but by social structures that are interlocked with distinct cultural organization. Gender relations are dynamic and historically changing, never fixed or transcultural, making universal statements and generalizations problematic. Of course, we can treat the genders as distinctive cultures—as “gender cultures”—in order to consider gender cultures in social science and academic scholarship. To the extent that gender social structures assign women and men to different activities, they tend to interact with different parts of nature or have different interest in such interactions. Furthermore, men and women can have different relations to the cultural discursive traditions that direct their practices and give them meaning. Finally, Harding argues that men and women often have different, socially developed ways of organizing the production of knowledge. The idea that women may inhabit different worlds than men is fraught with complexities however and could be viewed as equally dualistic, dichotomous, and essentialistic or even the simplistic valorization of women’s experiences and virtues. Although each of us experiences our gender as belonging to us, as individuals, we now understand gender to be social and cultural rather than biological.

Daniel Goleman (1998) also grounds his theories about emotional intelligence on assumptions about gender differences, pointing out that girls are raised to be more attuned to intuitions and feelings in the North American culture and, as a result, having more practice at interpersonal skills they may attribute greater value to understanding personal experience for its own sake than their brothers do. Many feminist researchers also support this claim, raising questions about a male bias that shapes basic assumptions about the nature of truth and reality as well as the higher value placed on the rational and objective over the emotional and the subjective (Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1989). Early feminists drew attention to the fact that male researchers tended to focus on issues related to autonomy and independence, abstract critical thinking, and the unfolding of a morality of rights and justice with little concern for gender differences. On the other hand, little attention was paid to the development of interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought. Male experience was simply accepted as a baseline norm for all human experience. These feminists also pointed out that the nature of the research question changes and dualism gives way to multiplicity when the conceptions of self are rooted in a sense of connection and relatedness to others rather than when one defines self in terms of separation, autonomy, and competition.

Consistent with such conceptualizations of gender, my own would be significantly shaped by my limited experiences as a white, heterosexual, middle-class female living in a capitalistic democracy in North America during the fifth decade of my life. I can look outside of myself, but I can never be outside of myself. My experience as an only daughter and as a mother of a son and

daughter, for example, certainly led to the kinds of topics I have chosen to pay attention to over the past decade, including a strong interest in images of mothering and motherhood (Abbey and O'Reilly, 1998; Abbey, 1999). There is little authorized language and few words available to describe: the intense involvement with my children during pregnancy; the emotions I felt as I experienced my body change or felt life move for the first time inside of me; the passionate commitment and restrictions I stringently imposed on myself to safeguard the health of my unborn children; the fear, uncertainty, and pain during childbirth or the ultimate joy and sense of oneness with the universe when I first heard the mewling sounds of my newborn children; or to describe the terror surging through me when I first realized I was ultimately responsible for the survival and nurturing of another human being.

Of course, it is true that men can and do write about their exclusive experiences as sons and fathers but such studies are neither as prevalent in the literature nor as personal. For example, child psychologist Jean Piaget (1923) studied his own children for his research on cognitive development and then translated his results into generalized universal truths as did others such as John Bly (1990). Furthermore, most studies on fatherhood tend to address only male relationships between fathers and sons set within a masculine hegemonic context, often inferring a subordinate role for mothers as patriarchal conformists or compliant enforcers of the status quo. As a result of the normative implications of such studies, women often internalize limited, androcentric male descriptions of the mother-child dyad as subtle interactions between letting go and clinging. Even liberal feminist interpretations (Arcana, 1983; Caron, 1994; Forcey, 1987; and Smith, 1995) emphasize the oppression of motherhood which also tends to impede mother-son identifications. Such literature tends to discount and marginalize the responsibility, authority, and power of women to socialize their sons and their daughters with respect to gender identity (Abbey, 1998) and warrants a feminist critique related to gender bias. As insiders of a particular lived experience, women necessarily see the world differently and as such, notice things that will bring about new and diverse ways of understanding.

Reflection on my own research methodology

In designing a qualitative study with two female colleagues to examine our maternal influence on the education of our sons and daughters (Castle, Abbey and Reynolds, 1998) we charted new ground in a number of ways that is consistent with many of the identified elements of feminist research. For example, we were not only co-researchers investigating the thinking of mothers and their children, but we were also the subjects of our own research who were personally involved with the other participants (our own sons and daughters). We were also using our own lived maternal experiences as the substance of the study starting with our experience as insiders. Without this gender-specific experience our research questions would not have been as immediate or as

compelling nor would the voices of our sons and daughters have been made so apparent and tangible.

Our goal was to create an opportunity for focused conversations about mothers' relationships and educational influences on young adult daughters. We envisioned these conversations as the "helping" kind that Benjamin (1981) describes, in which one sets out not to direct others or to teach them anything, but instead to listen and to enter into the other's thinking, avoiding premature judgment. We were also influenced by Van Manen's (1990) notion that co-researchers can examine issues in a collaborative conversational format that leads to the unfolding of deeper meaning as individual input is examined, and by Hollingsworth's (1992) contention that collaborative and non-evaluative conversations allow those involved to identify and understand personally and contextually relevant issues in education. Also influencing our thinking was a belief in the value of narrative inquiry and autobiographical data as sources of self-knowledge and critical self-reflection (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). We agreed with Bruner's (1990) notion that narrative is a primary way humans make meaning of events in their lives, and with Diamond's (1994) view that narrative is the key to studying the self and reconstructing one's experiences.

The gendered structuring of language discourse

In our studies on mothering roles, it became increasingly apparent that our sons and daughters were using language for different purposes and also that our involvement as researcher/participants was qualitatively different when we interacted with sons or with daughters. We noticed, for example, that our daughters seemed to be more comfortable sharing their feelings and more willing to confront their thoughts on a deeper emotional level. In contrast, we felt that our sons were holding back to some degree. When we shared this observation with them, they countered that we had not make our intentions explicit enough. They insisted that they could share their feelings if only we had asked them to, and they expressed their resentment that the rules and expectations had not been clearly explained to them in advance. In spite of this, it appeared that our sons had more to say about the issues raised, including many analytic, theoretical and interpretive comments peppered with references to laws, theories, and statistics as well as unsolicited advice. It seemed evident, upon analyzing the transcripts, that our sons were engaging in skillful power games with words.

In contrast, we had not noticed the same use of linguistic tactics to control the conversations and take charge in our work with our daughters. As Robin Lakoff (1990) points out, "both sexes use the same words in the same constructions, but understand them differently." She suggests that gender differences in language constantly cause comparisons and the need to polarize. Related to her findings, we noticed that our sons seemed to engage in more "report" talk and closed statements that focused on the final outcome of the research process itself, while our daughters preferred "rapport" talk and

immersion in the research process itself. For example, in spite of no previous acquaintance with each other, the girls tried to find common ground right away and quickly established a positive trusting relationship with one another. They seemed content to linger after each session, chatting and laughing together about common experiences. In contrast, their brothers took off immediately after each session, making little attempt to relate or get to know each other.

In our all-female group sessions as mothers and daughters, we found ourselves talking on a more personal level, using expressive adjectives and making an effort to be collaborative and polite by encouraging one another with tagalong questions. The girls remarked privately to their mothers just how much they had enjoyed meeting one another and how easily they seemed to get along. It was obvious that they found the group encounters to be supportive and therapeutic and that they were willing to trust each other with very personal feelings and confessions from their early school days. They seemed to bond readily and to share many similar personality traits and values such as their quiet reserve, their sensitivity, and their underlying sense of independence.

Our sons, however, seemed to have two distinct conversational modes—one for the “guy circle” and another for the mothers. Among themselves, their comments seemed relatively brief and guarded and their conversations tended to be more superficial. They often made jokes that trivialized the significance of the points they were raising, presumably to keep their dialogue on safe ground. They also seemed to avoid subjective references to emotions that might expose their vulnerabilities. They may have also used theories and objective remarks to guard their personal feelings and to maintain a position of authority. Sometimes they even chose to be silent, ambiguous or indirect. As one of our sons explained:

I don't let my feelings get in the way because once they get in the way my mind gets all fogged and once it gets fogged I can't think clear ... I don't let a lot of different groups know my feelings or my interpretations on certain aspects because I don't want people to know what I am thinking ... I don't reveal. It's a control game.

With their mothers present, however, our sons raised more topics and their comments became more theoretical, assertive and lengthy, almost to the point of lecturing. They were overtly assertive and confident during our group conversations, offering us advice on how to improve our study, altering our procedures, and even presuming to interpret the data for us. We think we know our sons fairly well and believe that they were all quite eager to impress one another and to put on a “show” for our benefit. They were conscious of presenting themselves well and concerned about not letting their mothers down in front of each other. To some degree, they tried to predict our purposes in order to deliver what they thought we wanted to hear or backpedal if necessary in order to win the approval of their mothers. At times, our sons even

included deliberate “shock” statements to gain our attention. Deborah Tannen (1994) argues that these kinds of linguistic strategies are predominately used by men in mixed groups to dominate the conversation or show solidarity for one another.

We also observed that our sons had learned to use silence as a form of resistance or rebellion whereas our daughters, modelling their mothers perhaps, had used silence to please, to comply or to avoid confrontation. By refusing to answer certain questions in the interviews or declining to comment during our group discussion, our sons were demonstrating their understanding of the power of silence to guard their privacy, to reveal very little about themselves or to withhold information from us. Their silence may also serve to mask male power relations and structures and, according to Frank Blye (1996), such masculine hegemony is a highly rational, if not costly, choice that may also result in a loss of freedom of relational experience or a tendency to ignore needs and desires. As insiders of a male culture which excludes their mothers, our sons may have felt the need to serve as informants to enlighten us. A remark by one of our sons exemplifies this point:

I've said things honestly and I've left things out that I don't want you to know about. There are things you don't know about me and you're probably never going to know. I only gave you a quarter of the package. Certainly it's couched in terms of you [mother] sitting there.

If the power of style and language is culturally learned and engendered (Lakoff, 1990; Tannen, 1994), then we must recognize these factors at work during our conversations with participants. Would our sons withhold the same information from their fathers or would they engage in less restricted “guy talk”? Would our daughters have been more inhibited or less comfortable talking about some of their emotional recollections with their fathers? To answer these question it might also be useful to consider that our daughters were involved in women-only discourses while our sons took part in a mixed-gender dialogue. Reinhartz (1992) suggests that women have an easier time crossing gender boundaries than men (57). For our sons, this would obviously involve not only a code switch from peer (guy) to intergenerational dialogue but also one with women who held power positions as their mothers and also as researchers. The context of our dialogue was academic, professional and purpose-oriented rather than familiar and egalitarian. Unlike ordinary conversation, Lakoff (1990) suggests that “institutional and professional talk, has, until recently, been almost totally a male preserve, so the rules of male discourse are not only seen as the better way to talk but as the only way” (210). This complicates the power balance significantly. It is also important to remember that when we embarked on the study with our sons we had already been strongly influenced by the work with our daughters. Knowing that they were being compared with their sisters in this study might also make our sons more self-

conscious and cautious. In fact, among themselves they acknowledged their vulnerability and suspicions and wondered if their mothers were deliberately trying to set them up, or make them look bad as men. For example, one son asked the other, “do you withhold stuff, knowing your mother would be reading it and you would have to answer for it?”

Conclusion

Perhaps it is not enough, as feminists, to be satisfied with encouraging more marginalized voices to be heard and more maternal stories to become visible. Susan Heald (1997) also cautions us to consider that all our experiences are constituted in language and discourses and that culture imposes a certain coherence and structure on the stories we tell. Although “relationships and chance have an enormous influence on what gets done and said ... we write these things out of our accounts in our attempts to make our stories, and ourselves, rational and coherent.” (38) It seems to me that this censoring and reconfiguring of stories to fit a prescribed framework presents a new challenge to feminist researchers. If we are to encourage authentic stories of mothers and mothering, we will need to find ways to honour and validate multiple or contradictory realities that do not necessarily adhere to conventional forms of discourse. We must also keep probing how we are shaped by the stories we choose or feel compelled to tell and how we might tell them differently.

The current work contributing to the scholarship on mothering roles is not intended to be exclusionary or elitist. It does not attempt to exalt the maternal experience of insiders but instead tries to understand it more clearly from multiple perspectives. This research attempts to transform and emancipate rather than trivialize or sentimentalize. It crosses all disciplines and divisions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class. To this end, I venture to say that understanding the multiple and complex realities of motherhood has only just begun. There is important work ahead.

¹See, for example the recent edited collection of papers by Abbey and O'Reilly (1998) and the special thematic 20th Anniversary edition of *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*, 18 (2,3), 1998, which examine mothering and motherhood from such perspectives as literature and poetry, legal policy and rights, health, popular culture, agency, narrative, education, sexuality, generational transitions, and cultural diversity.

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