

**The Mothers' Stories; Representations of
Authenticity, Authority, Agency and Autonomy**

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an exploration of matricentric feminism, an emerging theory of a mother focused feminism that positions mothers and mothering at its centre based upon the scholarly work and definition of Andrea O'Reilly. The thesis considers how embedded within matricentric feminism is empowered mothering which is focused on a woman's practice of mothering from a position of authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy (O'Reilly, 2016). It sits in the field of Maternal and Motherhood Studies. The purpose of this research was to collect mother focused narratives to understand experiences of mothering from marginalised mothers, explore if they presented the attributes of empowered mothering and to centre lesser-known experiences of mothering.

The methodological framework for the research was matricentric autoethnography which enabled the inclusion of my own maternal narrative alongside those of the mothers. My narrative is woven throughout the study and alongside the other stories of mothering each are presented together as layered accounts. Adopting an autoethnographic approach created the opportunity to unite both our life and experiences with theory. By offering the reader our stories we invite her/him to understand marginalised mothers more and in turn to further understand their selves.

The research explored aspects of our experiences that have been neglected or overlooked within conventional social science research and revealed findings that conclude marginalised mothers can and do practice as empowered mothers and implement authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy into their mothering. This signifies the importance of exploring mothers and mothering using a mother focused lens. The study makes an important contribution to the portrayal and understanding of mothering in challenging circumstances illustrating the strength and assets asserted in our mothering as well as signifying the value of mother focused autoethnography. In addition, it strengthens the integration of matricentric feminism into academia while illustrating various versions of mothering that move beyond stereotypical identities.

Key words: autoethnography, matricentric feminism; matricentric autoethnography; mothering; marginalised mothers; narratives.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
List of figures	iv
Glossary	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Statement of Confidentiality	vii
Dedication	1
Preface	1
A Mothers story: Part one	8
Fourteen	8
Introduction and Overview of Thesis	13
Background and Rationale	15
Rationale	17
Research Aims and Questions	18
Thesis Structure	19
CHAPTER ONE: MOTHERS and MOTHERING	23
Introduction	25
Mothering Ideals	33
Matrifocal Narratives	35
Feminist scholarship and theory	37
Introduction	37
A Mother-Centred Perspective: Feminism for mothers	38
Feminist scholarship on motherhood	44
Mothers Matter	49
A Theory of Empowered Mothering: Matricentric Feminism and Outlaws	50
Out Law Mothers	53
CHAPTER TWO: THE TRAVELLER	58
Introduction	60
Methodology	63

Ethno/Auto	66
Qualitative Methods	70
Writing as Enquiry	71
Bad Mothers.....	77
Ethical Considerations	78
Anonymity and Ethical Issues.....	81
Methods	82
Data Collection and Analysis	83
Sampling and Participant Recruitment	83
Participant Criteria	84
Data Collection	89
Matrifocal Narratives - The Maternal narratives.....	89
Movement of Thought.....	90
Integrating the Image and its 'story'	92
Unstructured interviews	95
The Unexpected	97
Maternal Narrative Collection	99
The Mother's Voices	102
Movement of Thought.....	103
The Particular Truth of Stories	104
Layered Accounts of Narratives	109
Meeting the mothers - Keeping the Stories Together	110
Lori.....	111
Kerry	112
Julie.....	113
Jenny.....	113
Conclusions	114
CHAPTER THREE: AUTHENTIC MOTHERING	116
Introduction.....	119
Lori.....	122

Kerry	129
Jenny	135
Julie.....	138
CHAPTER FOUR: AGENCY AND AUTHORITY.....	150
Introduction.....	152
Lori.....	154
Kerry	158
Jenny	162
Julie.....	167
CHAPTER FIVE: AUTONOMOUS MOTHERING.....	178
Introduction.....	181
Lori.....	181
Kerry	185
Jenny	190
Julie.....	193
CHAPTER SIX: MY STORY	208
Introduction.....	211
My Story	215
Uniting My Story with Others	226
Conclusion	229
CHAPTER SEVEN: MOTHERING FROM THE VELVET EXILES	232
Summary and Overview of Findings	232
Introduction.....	234
The Velvet Exiles.....	234
Finding Empowered Mothering	236
Authentic Mothering.....	240
Agentic and Authoritative Mothering.....	243
Autonomous Mothering	245
Conclusion	250

CHAPTER EIGHT: COUNTER NARRATIVEs EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN IN ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES	253
Conclusions, Recommendations and reflections.....	253
Introduction.....	254
Matricentric Feminism	255
Extraordinary Women in Ordinary Circumstances - Findings from the study	256
Additional Findings.....	260
Contribution	261
Methodological Contribution: Autoethnography.....	264
Advantages and Limitations of Autoethnography.....	266
Recommendations for future research and Alternative Considerations	268
Alternatives to the Study Undertaken	268
Recommendations for Future Research	269
Conclusion	271
A Mother’s Story: Part Two.....	273
Forty -eight	273
References.....	280
Appendix A – Framework of Associated Words	303

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Hayley aged 14 - 1987	7
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GLOSSARY

Matricentric/ Matrifocal - gravitating toward or centred upon the mother/mother focused

Matrifocal narrative/matrifocal narrative/maternal story – is one in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued; it is structurally central to the plot.

Matricentric feminism – Matricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment.

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To find a fellow traveller while on this journey was an unexpected surprise. I am deeply grateful to Tessa Muncey for her comradeship and expertise.

My dearest children, Andrew, Theodore, Eliza, Oscar, Ruby, Ethan, Jensen and Mila, thank you for your encouragement and understanding of my decision to write this. I hope it helps you to realise you can be anything you want to be. I am also especially grateful to have had love, support and encouragement from my wider family and friends.

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Most of all, I wish to thank the mothers who so generously shared their time and stories of mothering and allowed me to include them in my research.

STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

All names have been changed to pseudonyms for the maternal narratives included in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The name of the location has been included as have the name of the two housing estates where the participants reside or have previously resided, including myself. When the interviewees identified other people, such as friends, professionals, teachers, schools and their children I have omitted these. There are different approaches that can be adopted when including autobiographical material and a full explanation of my choice not to remain anonymous has been explained in Chapter Two.

DEDICATION

Andrew, I dedicate this thesis to you. For without you, this would never have been written. I love you dearly my precious son.

PREFACE

As I arrived in my supervisor's office for our first meeting I was overwhelmed and not exactly sure where this road would take me. I frantically explained that I wanted to undertake research with mothers who were often not heard from. We discussed my ideas and I went away feeling excited but unsure of what laid ahead. The graduate school, the handbooks with new terminology that was unfamiliar to me appeared slightly mysterious but as time moved on it slowly began to make sense. Eventually, I began to arrive at meetings with bags of hard back books hunted down in an effort to understand mothers and the meaning of mothering. Keeping my own experience shut away for fear someone might judge me had become exhausting but it was a while before I told my supervisors I was a teenage mother. This might have been because I thought perhaps if they knew, it might change their perception of me. Clearly misguided, but old thought processes can be difficult to shift. Once we discussed this, the direction of my research transformed and a new possibility of including my own story within the research emerged. This was both exciting and frightening but I immediately realised what an opportunity this could be.

It was not an easy decision though to embark on a piece of research that would require revealing the most vulnerable pieces of myself. As I said, I initially still thought I could set out on this voyage and hopefully speak to mothers about their experiences of mothering but keep my own experience neatly packaged in a metaphorical box that would never need opening. Several months on though, I understood it would be impossible for my story to stay in the box if I expected others to open theirs. This was a huge challenge to overcome, but one I finally addressed by eventually returning to my teenage self. I spent many hours immersed in *Ruth Behar's (1997) The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* and *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story (2003)* which helped me to visualise a way I might begin to construct a collection of stories. I was mesmerised by Behar's work where her voice can be heard, and her open heart offers an unexpected view of experiences different to our own. Her refusal to give in to more traditional 'norms of academic writing' and create a new way of telling.

I had already begun to question many of the choices I was making in my life and how they were impacted by my past experiences as a teenage mother and my reluctance to face this. So much of my avoidance was probably to mask my shame, fear and pain that was associated with the label of teenage mum. I believed it was all best left unsaid and wondered if other mothers felt the same. Therefore, it took me a long time before I felt I was ready to address it. The more work I did with mothers as a professional, the more conferences I attended that were aimed at maternal health, the more students I met who shared their stories

of mothering with me eventually made me appreciate that by keeping my own experience separate from these I was ensuring lesser-known narratives remained hidden. As much as I was interested in the roles I undertook, Lead Teenage Parent Worker, Breastfeeding Support Person, Student Midwife, Senior Lecturer, Course Lead because I felt I could support mothers, I was constantly searching for a way to do more. There did not appear to be any stories like mine nor were there many stories identifying the strength of mothers who were struggling. Signifying to me that opportunities to share these stories must be limited. Much of what I discovered seemed to be focused on telling mothers they needed help, what type of help they needed or politicians telling the professionals that worked with mothers that particular mothers needed help.

I was hoping to find people and places, a village of sorts in academia of those interested in researching similar situations or taking similar paths that were hoping to understand mothers who struggled. I thought I would find researchers to meet with and conferences to attend that would connect me to others who wanted to understand mothers and mothering in the UK and somehow, I would feel I belonged once I met this village of people. I assumed it would confirm to me I was heading on the right path in pursuing an exploration of the lives of mothers but I couldn't find them. I had already travelled to Florence and Canada where I met academics, artists and writers investigating the topic of mothers and mothering but no one closer to home.

One day, I discovered an event being hosted by an academic institution in London that gave me some hope. I was overjoyed! However, the day was not what I thought it would be and not long after arriving I became aware

of my doubts despite trying to remain openminded and optimistic. I was unable to see what I might take away from the day. The day began with the distribution of prompts with only a few words intended to inspire our writing. *If They Saw This Writing* – was the first one. As I began to contemplate this phrase, I began to imagine the mothers I interviewed, Lori, Kerry, Jenny and Julie. I considered how they would want to be written. I was relieved as I knew then I had found an answer to at least one question inspired by the prompt. I recognised I needed to credit each of their stories individually as well as my own but I appreciated our stories together could also become one. I felt the process of my research slowly beginning to emerge but I still had uncertainties as to if there might be something further I could gain from the session.

As we were having a break and drinking tea and biscuits, I looked around and was fascinated by the Georgian property the event was being held in and tried to convince myself I should simply appreciate the beauty of the building, be grateful for the opportunity and enjoy meeting the other academics and poets who were there. I started to recall the stories of the mothering that had been voiced to me by each of the mothers I met as part of my study and how questions or prompts could be created to discover more. I wondered who an authentic mother might be and where I might find her if she was hiding. Although it may be challenging to find mothers, who want to share their stories it does not mean they are not there. I also thought about how a mother's story might be shut away because of her fear of judgement from others.

After the break, I was writing in my notes to look busy and focused as I was sure I would be unable to say much

more in response to any further prompts. I wrote, 'I was struggling to write very much and the prompts felt very alien to me and I was unsure how I could connect with them in any way. I kept questioning in my mind, 'What did they mean?' 'What was I supposed to do with them?'. When I look in my notes, I see I have written, 'I am here in desperation to find people who are passionate about mothers but these ideas feel too abstract for me.'

The next prompt was *Clothes*. This seemed an impossible task but I began to unravel it and realise its connection to judgement, stigma and acceptance which were issues the mothers I interviewed had spoken about. What clothes should a mother wear? How should we mother? What are the expectations around mothering? How should we present ourselves as mothers? What is acceptable? What does this mean if we do not meet these expectations and does it attract the 'gaze of others' for the right or wrong reasons? This was followed by *Food* and I quickly recognised that this too could represent and symbolise parts of our mothering. The way our mothering is an offering to our sons and daughters across time the same way that we offer meals. How do we adapt this/these and in doing so what is it that we pass on? Our previous methods of mothering/cooking that we have learned, traditions we have collected and how throughout this we end up creating our own mode of mothering/cooking in order to construct solidarity that will withstand outside energy from others. The most challenging prompt provided on the day was, *I'll Give Her a Nursey Rhyme*. I am uncertain as to what I can do with this prompt.' I consider leaving early. I resisted the urge to take out my laptop and just write about the mothering I know and feel most connected to. Suddenly,

it dawned on me, maybe I was not in need of a village just now but of myself and my own direction to lead me along the way to where I needed to go. That is to represent myself and the mothers, our mothering and the mother-work that we do. Nothing more. And here we are. My journey and passion for mothers and mothering was established long before I realised it. Thirty-three years ago I became a mother.....I was 14 years old.



Figure 1 Hayley aged 14 – 1987

A MOTHER'S STORY: PART ONE

Fourteen

When I was a small child if I hurt myself, I used to believe as long as you didn't look at it, it would be fine.

It's mid-July and I am in Baltimore Washington Airport saying goodbye to my mum and dad number two as I prepare to board a plane to London for my annual summer holiday. I never actually thought I would get to this day and to be honest, I cannot wait to just get on this plane. All I want is to be back in England and have been begging my mother for this for a couple of years. By this stage I have well and truly mastered pretending everything is fine and cannot believe I am finally getting exactly what I have wanted for several summers; To remain in England with my Dad and not return to the USA. Though not without being taken to a psychiatrist to give his professional opinion this was the right thing for me to be allowed to do. I felt as though it was a crime to miss people that you love. Each summer it had become harder and harder for me to leave my dad and all my family in England. I have a big family with lots of relatives and it is lonely being away from them. I previously had dreams of either going to the Vidal Sassoon School of Hairdressing in London or going to university in Cambridge to study medicine. I really have no idea where these dreams have gone since the previous summer, but they seem to have disappeared and I know they are impossible now.

I felt lost and lonely at times as I was moved around the USA from the age of seven. It is hard to keep making new friends, starting again at new schools

and between August and October 1986 my loneliness got the better of me. I succumbed to the attention of a man six years older than me. I don't think of it as rebellion but I am not honest about this man's age and had no idea what he wanted from me. I never really liked him much he was just *someone*. Eventually his demands became quite forceful ending in an incident occurring in November of 1986 which resulted in me becoming pregnant.

So, as I prepare to board the plane with my open-ended ticket, I am sure I will not want to return. Ever. For the past eight and half month's I have been sick in my kitchen sink in the morning before school, hidden money given to me for a termination between my mattress and pretended that the feelings of tiny feet kicking me each day were nothing, hoping and praying they would stop and somehow this frightening problem will miraculously disappear. It is all buried beneath those layers of baggy clothing I am wearing despite the soaring summer temperatures but I am getting on that plane no matter what.

Back in England on August 8th, 1987 I wake at 6am and do not feel at all well. The most terrible abdominal pains have woken me and no one else is at home. My father is at work. I am not quite sure what is happening, and I need to try and stop the pain. I get up, make a hot water bottle and go back to bed hoping and believing that I will feel better soon. However, a couple of hours later I feel much worse. The pain is so bad that I truly believe I am dying and that by the end of the day I will be dead.

I wander slowly around the house in agony, sometimes having to stop and hold onto a piece of furniture for

a minute or two wondering when I will die. 'What is happening to me?'. When my father returns home from work it is clear to him that I am not well, and he decides I must be suffering from some type of gastro-virus. I am feeling especially worried but cannot seem to convey to him quite how bad I am feeling. I have no knowledge of labour or giving birth or time frames for when that might happen. Therefore, I have no idea I am in labour. My father noticed I appear to be worsening and makes the decision to call for his sister and her daughter, who is a nurse, to come. As soon as they arrive, they quickly recognise the pattern of contractions.

I pretended so long that everything is fine. As if nothing out of the ordinary could possibly be wrong. I have no idea that by the end of the day on August 8th, 1987 I will have a baby. That I will be a mother.....aged 14 years old.

After being rushed to hospital in an ambulance at 16:30 my son is born at 18:20 weighing 7 pounds exactly. I am scared. I am petrified! I am in labour; I do not even know if I will see my baby. They keep asking me, 'Hayley, do you want to see the baby when it's born?' but to me it was not a baby it was a frightening problem that I had no idea how to face. It felt overwhelming. However, when my baby arrives, I look at his sweet face and watch surreally as everyone in the delivery room passes him around. Could it really be that I have just had a baby? I visualise the room now and everyone there was so kind and caring to me and my baby but I am certain that they too are also very shocked which I am able to look on and see. I think it is a minor crisis for them - a 14-year-old turning up in an ambulance and

having a baby two hours later. They hide it very well though and the care I receive is exemplary.

My first thought is of my Mum and that tomorrow will be her birthday. I keep repeating, 'please don't phone my mum tomorrow because it will ruin her birthday'. 'I really don't want to spoil her birthday'. I seem to have persuaded them and eventually everyone left the hospital. I am moved from the delivery suite to a side room of the ward (it is very shameful and unusual for a 14-year-old to have a baby at that time so the side room is used to hide me away) with a baby in a crib that I *thought* I have no idea how to care for. The lights are turned down low and there is just me and this baby alone in a hospital room. He isn't making a peep and I just keep looking at the beautiful, perfect baby wondering what we are going to do. His crib is at the foot of my bed and every few minutes I edge it closer and closer until he is next to me. Right by my side. By the middle of the night, I am feeding him his bottle on my own.

The next day there are telephone messages left at the ward reception for me from my maternal grandmother which were simply, 'Tell Hayley her grandmother called and we love her'. This brings tears to my eyes because through the shock and surprise and the questions of how and why, what they care most is I know they love me.

Seven days we have stayed in the hospital with many comings and goings of professionals wanting to know how this has happened? Am I going to have my son adopted? How am I going to look after a baby? How can my father and I look after a baby? A hospital social worker came the very next day and said to my dad, 'What do you think Hayley should do?'

My dad's response is, 'Whatever Hayley wants to do, I will support her 100 per cent.' And he did.

Beyond the walls of the hospital, a pram is being bought, a cot, baby clothes, bottles, steriliser and central heating is being installed. This might sound very matter of fact but it is very chaotic. I returned to England for my annual summer holiday with my father and just had a baby. My father lives a very frugal life. Still living in the house that I was born in, there was no television, no central heating, definitely no dishwasher and coffee maker, microwave or even a washing machine. None of this mattered though. We have a home to go back to. Eventually, the launderette will become one of our favourite frequent outings.

My dad feeds and clothes me and my son. Yes, he has central heating installed into his house and makes sure we have all of the practical items we need but what he also does, is give us unconditional love and support without expectation and loves us for who we are. Never wavering once. Not everyone has that.

I am blessed. He is the perfect baby. Almost as if he knew I need a little help from him. He sleeps through the night most nights. Drinks his milk. Gains weight. Is toilet trained before he is two years old. A textbook baby. Navigating hurdles along the way. School teachers. Other parents in the playground. We were strong together. He is the easiest part of this experience. He is not going to judge me. All that matters is that he is loved.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THESIS

This thesis sits in the field of Maternal and Motherhood Studies and ascribes to previous research undertaken by theorists within Maternal Theory including Adrienne Rich, (1976), Sara Ruddick, (1986), Baba Copper, (1987), Marianne Hirsch, (1989), Patricia Hill Collins, (1993, 1994), Andrea O'Reilly, (2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2016, 2019, 2020), Sharon Hays, (1996), Fiona Joy Green, Susan Maushart, (1997), Mielle Chandler, (1998), Erica Horowitz (2003, 2004) and Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, (2004) and many more. This thesis intends to impact and contribute to the dearth of scholarly research focused on mothering and mother work in the United Kingdom positioned from a positive perspective in the hope of retrieving voices from marginalised mothers that are often left unspoken and to support the integration of matricentric feminism into academia. By gathering lesser-known maternal narratives through feminist enquiry, additional versions of mothering will become accessible to mothers, scholars and law and policy makers, helping them to understand mothering beyond the dominant discourses that offer restricted configurations of mothering.

Therefore, undertaking research that seeks to understand the experience of mothers and mothering will support and enrich a mother centred feminism, a wider understanding of mothers mothering in challenging circumstances and acknowledge the value rooted in their perspective of mothering. Ultimately, the aim is to challenge possible misrepresentations of mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds and illustrate the realities of their lives. There is a common assumption that compliance with

local and national policy initiatives improves outcomes for marginalised mothers but focusing on statistics only does not allow us to *know* and *understand* the experiences of these mothers nor realise the circumstances they are mothering under. It is possible statistics might reinforce negative stereotypes sometimes assigned by professionals, other mothers and politicians. They may help us understand facts and figures but are unable to expose the layers of complexities that shape the lives of mothers. They do not allow us to capture the mothering strategies implemented by mothers. Statistics can serve to emphasise epidemiological data but this offers a superficial understanding of the *actual* experience of mothering.

This autoethnographic and narrative research has collected matrifocal narratives from four mothers. In addition, the thesis has my own autoethnographic account woven throughout its entirety. The rationale for collecting mother focused narratives was to help readers connect to differing ways of mothering and experiences they might not have had themselves. Matrifocal narratives encompass mothers' stories and experiences to help us make sense of different and diverse perspectives of mothering and to understand that mothers may be ordinary women mothering under *extraordinary* circumstances. Sharing and including my own story allows my experience as a mother to interweave with the experiences of other mothers who are also sharing theirs.

My matrifocal narrative is important, for the readers and participants to understand my position within this work and what has driven me to collect, interpret and share these stories. The thesis will focus solely on mothers with no mention of fathers. This is not to place lesser value on fathers. I feel fathers have a fundamental and essential role to play both as a father but also in situations where it is a father who is mothering. However, it is beyond the scope of this work to research mother work when

undertaken by someone other than the biological mother due to the latitude of its range. Omitting those aspects is not to place lesser value on other mothering or mothering undertaken by a male or any other figure.

Although this thesis will provide details and background on motherhood the focus will be on mothering. Interchangeable terms will be used when referring to empowered mothering and include outlaw mothering, empowered mothering, courageous mothering and feminist mothering as these are the terms used as alternatives in the literature (O'Reilly, 2016). In reference to the maternal narratives interchangeable terminology will include matrifocal narratives, maternal narratives and maternal stories. The thesis makes a significant contribution to research both due to its matrifocal autoethnographic methodology using a mother focused lens to undertake research with mothers and its innovative use of Ronai's (1992) layered account which allows ethnographers freedom from conventional writing formats by incorporating abstract theoretical thinking, introspection and emotional experience.

B a c k g r o u n d a n d R a t i o n a l e

The women who participated in the research are mothers of two to four children. The education levels of each mother vary. Two of the mothers are married or have a partner and two are single mothers. The two estates where the participants either live/ed or frequent is situated in one of the most picturesque parts of the town. I am a mother of eight and also lived on one of the selected housing estates. The estates sit behind a river and are surrounded by meadows and paths that lead directly to the town centre. Walking away from either of the estates you can take the path along the river either towards or away from the town. They are positioned either side of the river. In springtime there are ducks with their ducklings dotted

all along the riverbed, as well as snow drops, daffodils and muntjac deer making regular appearances. The Red Castle Estate has a community centre, a school and a small row of shops including a news agent and a fish and chip shop. It has an open central green with blocks of houses surrounding it. The centre of the estate is pedestrianised with paths leading in all directions. Similarly, there can be no denying the abundance of green spaces on the Abbey Estate. Between each row of the mainly large three storey houses there are grassy greens. The estate also houses some flats, a row of mainly empty shops, a former Sure Start Centre, a school, and a community centre, but all is not what it seems.

It may sound idyllic and might be difficult to imagine that one of the estates falls into the category of high deprivation and the other also suffers. When assessing levels of deprivation across the town, the overall picture appears positive. However, the town struggles with hot spots of this which is mainly concentrated on two specific estates (Child Health Profile for East and West Thetford, 2017). The Red Castle Estate does not have the reputation of the Abbey Estate but does not fare well either. The Abbey estate suffered from a poor reputation with negative connotations associated with its former name, Abbey Farm. The estate is still highlighted and identified as the most deprived in the town. Previous experience of working with health professionals has highlighted biases even within the medical profession towards those that live in the town. The West side of Thetford where the Abbey estate is located, fares significantly worse than the rest of England in crucial areas that include breastfeeding, income deprivation, violence, domestic abuse, teenage conceptions and child poverty. (Health and Well Being Profile, 2017).

The estate was developed in 1967 when there were 3000 homes built across the town to support the rapidly growing population increase of

154 per cent (Norfolk County Council, 1981). The town was referred to as an 'island of deprivation' by the Keystone Development Trust in 2004 and for many who live there it may well still feel like that. It is not unusual to meet people who have never left the town, even for a day. Thirty percent of households do not own a car (Local Government, 2017). My extended family included, who choose to stay only local and view venturing further as unnecessary. Many of the town's problems resemble challenges often faced by more urban locations but the rural setting of the town limits the expertise and solutions required to address many of the issues.

R a t i o n a l e

I have searched far and wide to find research and writing that illustrates a counter story to the negative stories often told about teenage mothers, poor mothers, lone mothers, abused mothers or mothers living in the wrong neighbourhood that shows the strength, honesty and empowerment in how they mother (Smithbattle, 2007, 2013). I realised if I wanted to share their counter narrative to the more commonly presented stories, I was going to have to find them myself and write about them.

Collectives of maternal narratives contribute to the normalisation of mothering experiences and elevate the strengths of mothers which commonly go unrecognised. It has been said, that, 'mothers have heard from academia; it would be very good for all academic fields to hear from mothers and it would benefit mothers to be so heard' (Nelson, 2009, p.24). Muncie (2010) highlights the authority and expertise afforded to academics based purely on the methodology they had implemented in their research. She came to realise that to 'inform social policy' that she would have to tell her own story (p.7). Her words have helped drive this research and to help me believe these stories must be shared.

Therefore, I have written this thesis for mothers, including my fourteen-year-old self. The one I spent a large part of my life running away from. Our experiences *have* determined the way we mothered. To make decisions others judged and did not understand. This is for the mothers who have been prepared to share their experiences to ensure there is a counter narrative that may impact others by doing so. By sharing counter narratives within these pages, we may reduce the ‘alienation of others’ within those communities seeking to understand our position of mothering (Behar, 2003, p.xvi). Together we sit at the heart of this thesis. We are the ‘*Velvet exiles*’. I adopt this term from the anthropologist and ethnographer Ruth Behar (2003) and it forms the basis for why I am determined to share the stories of marginalised mothers. She explains this as being ‘the outsider within’ and as women who belong to the culture of mothering but are often mothering against the dominant discourses we are often left feeling on the outside. In sharing our stories, we have chosen to be the ‘velvet exiles’ of mothering and by chronicling our experiences of mothering we contribute to offer new ways of knowing and telling that may help others feel less on the outside.

This thesis intends to contribute to both feminist and matricentric feminist scholarly work, autoethnographic methodologies and to explore the experiences of mothering in areas of deprivation by using an alternative lens that opposes the more common discourses often positioning marginalised mothers as inferior, irresponsible and ignorant.

Research Aims and Questions

1. Does the mother work marginalised mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds living on deprived housing estates

- undertake in challenging circumstances define them as mother outlaws/courageous mothers/empowered mothers?
2. Do mothers in challenging circumstances exercise authenticity, autonomy, agency and authority in their mothering?
 3. Offer alternative perspectives of lesser-known discourses of mothering.

T h e s i s S t r u c t u r e

This thesis explores maternal narratives using autoethnography to understand how mothers undertake mothering in challenging circumstances to support and increase scholarly work demonstrating their strengths. The research draws on multiple disciplines and engages with feminist influences and the impact of excluding mothers' voices when shaping health, education, policy and the direction of future research. The research also aims to develop wider understanding and insight for scholars, professionals and other mothers by presenting underrepresented experiences by implementing mother focused autoethnography. I explore the matrifocal narratives of marginalised mothers, to strengthen not only the body of research in this area but to elevate mothering that mothers from marginalised groups practice. I align this with Andrea O'Reilly's (2016) mother centred mode of feminism — *matricentric feminism*.

The thesis begins with *Part One* — The Mother's Story. This is written in COURIER font to simulate a diarised account and details the background to my own introduction to mothering aged 14. It begins by establishing my situation and circumstances just before and shortly after I became a mother. Section One follows with an *Introduction and Overview* of the thesis. Chapter One begins with *Part One: Mothers and Mothering* and introduces the differences between the definitions of motherhood and

the practice of mothering and the complexities around this. It also highlights the neglect of mothering in academia. This is followed by *Part Two: Feminist Scholarship and Theory* which provides an overview of a mother centred feminist theory in order to address the exclusion of mothers and mothering from other modes of feminism and defines a theory of empowered mothering. I discuss the meanings and expectations associated with mothering from prominent maternal theorists highlighting a range of mothering ideologies and the influence they may have on mothers and their mothering alongside the expectations this creates. I consider how judgements of mothering sometimes arise from the most commonly known ideals. There are numerous mothering ideologies that attempt to define the way a woman should mother, but I suggest the judgement mothers may face might be due to the lack of knowledge and understanding around alternative discourses of mothering. There is insight into the theoretical framework and concepts that this thesis intends to encompass. A brief history is given on the evolution of feminism and how we are striving towards a mother centred feminist theory to address the possible exclusion of mothers and mothering from other modes of feminism. It defines concepts such as outlaw mothers, empowered mothering and the practice of mother work and how these concepts might offer a new lens through which we may view mothering.

Chapter Two, *The Traveller*, follows to explain the methodology. The chapter outlines my theoretical approach, methodology and methods. It defines the foundations of this research and provides justification for the choices of the researcher. The chapter also explores the value of personal narratives as well as situating my position within the research. It details the chosen representation of the narratives and how they have been analysed. It concludes with narrative introductions of the four mothers who have

provided their matrifocal narrative. Section Two begins with Chapter Three, Four and Five and details the unstructured interviews of each mother focusing on the themes of authenticity, authority, agency and autonomy - the four main attributes of empowered mothering understood through a matricentric feminist lens. The maternal narratives are offered as layered accounts, representing the layers detailing the mother's stories, the literature and the researcher's accounts. Asterisks will be used between each layer I detail to denote a shift to a different temporal/spatial/attitudinal realm (Ronai, 1992). I will also use a different font style for each of the shifts to further clarify the voices and literature. For the voice/account of the mothers Helvetica Neue (Light) will be used and offers only the written experience without interruption from sources that may interrupt the narratives. For my own voice *Segoe Print* will be used and for the literature Times will be used. Chapter Three, *Authentic Mothers* explores maternal authenticity, Chapter Four, *Authority and Agency*, explores maternal authority and agency and Chapter Five, *Autonomous, Mothers* explores maternal autonomy. Section Two concludes with Chapter Six, *My Story*, which focuses more closely on my own narrative of mothering, offering deeper insight into this and unites it with the stories of the other mothers.

Section Three begins with Chapter Seven, *Mothering from the Velvet Exiles* and details a summary and overview of the research findings. It returns to the concept of the 'Velvet Exiles' as well as the aims of the research and their connection to matricentric feminism and empowered mothering. Chapter Eight, *Counter Narratives: Extraordinary Women in Ordinary Circumstances*, offers conclusions, recommendations and reflections of the research and identifies the methodological and main contributions to areas of specific knowledge to feminism, autoethnography

and mothering. It discusses an evaluation of the research and offers the advantages and limitations, as well as the practical applications. Section Four concludes the thesis with *Part Two - The Mother's Story*. This clarifies for the reader where my current locus as a mother is now.

CHAPTER ONE: MOTHERS AND MOTHERING

She is quietly strong, selflessly giving, undemanding, unambitious; she is receptive and intelligent in only a moderate, concrete way; she is of even temperament, almost always in control of her emotions. She loves her children completely and unambivalently. Most of us are not like her.

Jane Lazarre 1976

There are many practical things I must learn now. How to prepare baby formula in bottles safely, how to fold and pin terry towelling cloth nappies and even how to bath a baby. I have never been around any babies and am surprised at these new things I need to learn how to do. Perhaps other teenage mothers would have their mum guiding them but despite my father's sister and her daughter's practical assistance it is still my baby, my dad and I behind the closed door at the end of the day. Tonight, my baby is unusually crying for hours. I began to panic. I think I must be doing something wrong or maybe there is something I was supposed to be doing that I am not aware of but my father is reassuring both me and my baby all is fine and by morning it will be calm again.

My decision to keep my baby is accepted by most but there are a few people who thought they would make a better parent than me and could offer far more materialistic resources for my baby. I do not know if this comes from the deep intrinsic love I have felt my entire life from my father, no matter what side of the Atlantic ocean I was living on, but I am certain those things were not the most important thing I could offer a baby. Nor do I need 'time to get over having a baby'. In their frustration, they contact social services and ask that my mothering be monitored weekly and reports sent to confirm that I am performing appropriately as a mother.

There is never any thought given to me not returning to school. I return to a new school in England. I do not want to return overseas. However, there will be childcare issues to arrange as my father works full time and I will be in school. This means I can access funded nursery place where I attended myself as a baby. I am to walk my baby to nursery and then follow on to school but starting a new school at 14 can be difficult for any young person. I am starting both a new school and a new life with a baby. I have no idea what to expect.

The visits from social services have been arranged for a time when school has finished. After three visits from the loveliest social worker, she informs me she feels she is wasting her time visiting me and is sending a letter stating she will not be monitoring my mothering anymore. I probably should be relieved but I am so young and naive I have no idea of the magnitude of this. Scrutinised and investigated by those closest to me. This was in great contrast to the way the rest of my family behaved towards me and my son. All my relatives went out of their way to ensure we felt loved and accepted. It seems this is rarer than I want to believe.

There is little hope or expectation for a single 14-year-old mother living in a small town. The prospects are bleak. People I encounter have little or no expectations of me. I feel isolated because I am different and other people's actions spell this out to me. As I was walking through the high street with my aunt and my baby in a pram. A family she has been friends with for years, crossed to the other side to avoid speaking to her as she had heard the rumours and stories of her niece (me) who just had a baby at 14.

The feeling that invoked in me – shame, hurt for my aunt, exclusion and difference. These feelings will stay with me. Always.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

I was truly not aware this thesis would ever have my story at its heart. That may sound a bizarre thing to say. I am conscious, that to an outsider it must have been obvious it would be my story that would drive me to want to tell the stories of others. That it is my story that determined the path I would take, and it is my story I hope will help others realise they do not have to be what a person or place expects them to. I subconsciously attempted to forget the girl I used to be or even the girl I believed I might have one day become. Until I stumbled across the book, *The Vulnerable Observer* by Ruth Behar (1996). I was enjoying the book and it was one of the first books I read that focused on anthropology and ethnography. I froze as I turned to page 134 and read the words, ‘The woman who forgets the girl she harbours inside herself runs the risk of meeting her again’. I think I have.

In 2011 Samira Kawash highlighted the dislodgement of the topic of motherhood in feminist studies in her article, *New Directions in Motherhood Studies* for the leading feminist journal *Signs*. The result is a call and demand for inclusion of a mode of feminism that is mother centred. The justification for this is based upon the ‘distinct’ category of mother and the way in which this connects mothers to the social, economic, political, cultural and psychological specifically related to their identity and mother work (O’Reilly 2016). O’Reilly states, ‘Mothers, in other words, do not live simply as women but as mother women’.

Marginalised mothers, such as low-income mothers, single mothers and teenage mothers are often most affected by the policies and practices of professionals, (educational, medical and social), and conservative politics despite the fact that many of these are based upon typical nuclear families (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, Wallbank, 2001). The portrayal of mothers from these groups is rooted in demonisation whilst comparisons are made to more normative examples and representations of what good mothering is (Wallbank, 2001). This research is focused on generating a fresh perspective that is not usually portrayed of marginalised mothers living on deprived housing estates, acknowledging their power and strength. Although the thesis will focus specifically on exploring this it is worth acknowledging why a counter narrative such as this is necessary.

Lone mothers, mothers receiving benefits and mothers living in areas of deprivation have been considered a problem due to their cost to the state (Berrington, 2014). It is also claimed that children of poor mothers fare worse than others due to their poor parenting and childcare choices as they are unable to 'deliver positive outcomes for their children' leading to intense scrutiny by others (p.5). Single and working-class mothers are often targeted and viewed as the, 'producers of the children who are or who will be a threat to social order. And they are seen as doing this through inadequately nurturing the selves of those children' (Lawler, 2000, p.2). Advice on parenting guidance and strategies is also modelled on normative representations of two parent families with two children (Edwards and Gillies, 2011). The normative ideal is supported in policy and showcased as a model of family organisation (Dermott and Pomati, 2016). There is an absence of qualitative research with mothers used to inform relevant policy identified by Mc Dermott and Graham, (2005). Clavering (2010) has

also raised the symptom of marginalisation in lone mothers as a result of their exclusion from public discussions on the issues they may be facing.

Michaels and Douglas (2004) wrote an entire piece on welfare mothers, *The War Against Welfare Mothers*, and began with a profile written in the New Yorker (1975) that was trafficking factually incorrect stereotypes of mothers as evidence of its continuation through the decades. The article exploited its readership and their lack of awareness on the true realities of citizens from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The voices of poor women were excluded, as well as any factual information and the stereotype they constructed was used by the media to highlight failure to fulfil the ideals of mothering and the consequences of not doing so (Michaels and Douglas, 2004).

Although their lengthy overview of so-called welfare mothers, is mainly focused on the United States they provide an extensive account of how and where the media and politicians portrayed inaccurate profiles and outlines of these mothers. Most significantly, they highlight 'academic experts' who studied these mothers 'unsympathetically' without ever sharing maternal practices from the women themselves (p.181). This has continued and despite these mothers being in the firing line from politicians and the media, the family policies developed are mostly based upon normative discourses of the ideal mother/family as previously mentioned.

Additionally, the study of mothers and the cultural space they occupy is often neglected and ignored (Nelson, 2009). This seems absurd when mothers are the centre of the social construction of motherhood, both in their constructions and resistance and more significantly, the fact that the identity of mothers is built upon a mother's 'position' in relation

to the group such as marginal, a member or a non-member (Nelson, 2009, p.15). Finally, in order for mothers to undertake mothering they need other mothers and their experiences to make sense of the possibilities that exist which often occurs when mothers meet together.

Mothering is concerned with the personal lives of mothers and their experiences. Mothering is a significant aspect of women's lives and some of the difficulties faced by mothers are connected to their identity as a mother. Dana Raphael (1976) describes the time when a woman becomes a mother as *matrescence* - the time of mother becoming. Raphael continues to explain the components of this transition which include physical changes, her emotional state, her position in the group, her identity, the focus of her daily activity and in 'her relationships with those around her' (p.19). This chapter will introduce the differences between mothering and motherhood and feminist scholarship and theory which will include matricentric feminism and outlaw/empowered mothers.

One of the challenges of researching mothering is the complexity between the definitions of mothering and motherhood. It is important to at least attempt to clarify the difference between these two terms to eliminate possible confusion and illustrate that in this thesis mothering will be referred to as an experience or practice and is understood to be undertaken within the institution of motherhood. Mothering within this institution can impact the way women carry out mothering. Adrienne Rich (1976) wrote the first feminist text on mothering and motherhood which has become a highly influential book, *Of Women Born*. She described motherhood as having two distinct meanings, 'between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution-which aims at ensuring that that potential-and all women - shall

remain under male control' (p.7). Andrea O'Reilly (2016) reinforces this definition when she explains, 'The term 'motherhood' refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which is male defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women' (p.15). Motherhood is, thus, primarily not a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors (O'Reilly, p.16).

Rich (1976) raises two points of motherhood in her writing she considers to be especially damaging to mothers. The first is the notion mothering comes naturally to women and that raising children is solely down to the biological mother. The second is the assignment of *mother work* without the power to decide the working conditions you practice this work under. Rich (1976) describes the 'powerless responsibility' attached to mothers and the way they are denied the authority and agency to decide what their own experience of mothering will be. However, despite this, Rich believes that motherhood can be a site of a women's empowerment.

In 1989, an additional significant publication on mothers and mothering by Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking Towards a Politics of Peace*, initiated a change in the way the word mother was perceived from a noun to a verb and in doing so, she paved the way for mothering to be recognised as something both men and women could do. Her work allowed mothering to be conceptualised as a practice. She is considered one of the most influential theorists on mothering because of her extensive accounts of the experiences of mothering. Ruddick also refers to the demands of mother work as protection, nurturance and training and ultimately, calls this '*maternal thinking*'. Ruddick explains,

Mothers meeting together at their jobs, in playgrounds, or over coffee can be heard thinking. This does not necessarily mean that they can be

heard being good. Mothers are not any more or less wonderful than other people – they are not especially sensible or foolish, noble or ignoble, courageous or cowardly. Mothers, like gardeners or historians, identify virtues appropriate to their work. But to identify a virtue is not to possess it. When mothers speak of virtues they speak as often of failure as of success. Almost always they reflect on the struggles that revolve around the temptations to which they are prey in their work. What they share is not virtuous characteristics but rather an identification and a discourse about the strengths required by their ongoing commitments to protect, nurture and train (p.25).

Mielle Chandler (1998) says, the word 'mother' is something 'one does as a practice'. This is echoed by La Chance Adams (2010) who explains that it is the *practice* of mothering that determines if someone is a mother and not biology. The confusion and overlap in the definitions are not the only aspect highlighting the complexities when exploring the meaning of mothering. Previously, writers and researchers have acknowledged the difficulty in offering a definitive definition. Some scholars attribute this to censorship, silence and distortion of the truth both in literature and theory (O'Reilly and Caporale-Bizzini, 2011, Rose, 2018). This may be because mothering has often been centred around a dominant or 'normal' model with other varying and diverse experiences outside of this sometimes pushed to the margins. Instead of searching for the universal and placing emphasis on this, attention could be assigned to greater variation (Glenn *et al.* 1994). It may be there is not a universal meaning or definition of mothering. Simply, that mothering means something different to all mothers and may be shaped by the circumstances they are mothering in.

It has been argued that part of the reason why motherhood and the experience of mothering have been left out of academia is because of the confusion between the two (O'Reilly, 2016). This may stem from prominent scholars and writers such as Betty Freidan (1963), Rosemarie Putnam Tong (2014) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) who argue motherhood has been responsible for much of women's oppression.

However, Andrea O'Reilly (2016) highlights that by taking this stance, the difference between motherhood as an institution and a woman's actual *experience* of mothering is ignored. Women's actual experiences of mothering can be a source of power, particularly when we distinguish between mothering and motherhood (Rich, 1976).

Friedan (1963) and Firestone (1970) have been driven to disavow and condemn motherhood because of their belief that motherhood is a 'patriarchal institution that causes women's oppression' (O'Reilly, 2016 p.201). O'Reilly (2016) is critical of this stance and reminds us of the importance of remembering that patriarchal motherhood must be 'distinguished' from feminist mothering (p.201). However, her nor Rich's criticisms are directed towards families or mothering, 'Except as defined and restricted under patriarchy' (Rich, 1976, p.14). Rich has argued, if mothers are freed from motherhood, their mothering may allow them to become, 'outlaws from the institution of motherhood' (p.195). It is Rich's (1976) distinction between mothering and motherhood that has allowed feminists the realisation 'motherhood is not naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive' (O'Reilly, 2016, p.202). These crucial differences between mothering and motherhood are still often misunderstood and confused within academic feminism leaving a mother's experience sidelined.

Further complexities arise between motherhood and mothering when we consider the ways society expects us to mother under a set of specific circumstances that may only be accessible to some. Even though, this might represent a shift in feminist consciousness by women who previously felt women were unable to be both a mother and a feminist, these relatively new views of feminist mothers may still exclude stories of what it is like to mother under a different set of circumstances. How can

mothering be defined and where do mothers acquire their knowledge is a question, we need to ask *all* mothers. Kay Standing (1998) believes mothers' knowledge comes from their own experiences, including individual, personal and private. The unsettling part of this is that mothers from particular backgrounds might view their knowledge as having lesser value than that of middle-class mothers, academic knowledge or knowledge professionals hold. This is why it is significant to acknowledge the 'validity' of a mother's experiences that she asserts to create her own standards of mothering (Glenn, 1994 p.18). Attributing less or more significance and value towards differing perspectives because the lesser known are not part of a dominating narrative may hinder further understanding.

By refraining from insisting mothers and mothering are assigned a particular definition we can challenge the assumptions made around mothers and mothering. This may be possible if we encourage mothers to share mothering stories as opposed to simply being written *about*. By sharing/writing their experiences mothers can assume an active role in detailing both their personal experience of mothering and its connection to outside influences. Sara Ruddick (1986) suggested we had 'no realistic language in which to capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work'. Although, her seminal work on maternal theory was undertaken many years ago it is still beneficial to consider this suggestion now as sharing and exchanging diverse experiences of mothering is still a challenge in many ways today. The requirements of being a mother means it is often viewed as an idealised role that is impossible to achieve (Krane and Davies, 2000). Some mothers might feel policed by other mothers, fathers, and by the structures and institutions who judge individual interpretations of mothering. Ruddick (1986) calls this

the 'gaze of others' where a mother will 'relinquish authority to others [and] lose confidence in their own values' as a result of their judgmental glare or advice (p.111). This can erode a mother's belief in her own ability to mother.

Mothering Ideals

Many mothers are bombarded with literature, stories and advertising that impose ideologies of mothering onto them. When we present or discuss ideologies it is easy to simply explain them as formulated ideologies rather than as actual contributions to producing associated practices, structures, institutions, and the maintenance of them (Di Quinzio, 1999). It is useful to explore some of the ideologies of mothering in order to understand how women may be vulnerable to the influences of them and feel they must conform.

One of the dominating ideals of mothering is that of the 'good mother' or 'new momism' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004). The *good mother* means being a child's primary carer, endless devotion twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and doing things for your children. Douglas and Michaels (2004) termed this the '*new momism*' in the 21st century. They argue that this type of mothering, portrayed as celebratory, can lead to feelings of inadequacy due to the emphasis on perfection, which is unobtainable.

Intensive mothering is another idealised vision of mothering and has been prominent in white middle-class circles. The characteristics of *intensive mothering* include the 'mother as the central care giver', 'mothering is more important than paid employment' and that 'mothering requires lavishing copious amounts of time, energy and material resources on the child' (Hays, 1996). This extends to provision of this care round the

clock, children must always come first and the reliance on experts for guidance. To what depth and how mothers 'internalise' this ideology is difficult to quantify (Hays,1996). Rich (1986) believes that the imposition of these ideologies renders mothers as powerless.

There are also books offering an idealised life in which they impart that intensive mothering might be possible. For example, some of the most purchased and popular parenting authors write parenting books that offer this type of guidance and include Penelope Leach's (1977) *Your Baby and Child* parenting guide, *Your Baby and Child* and Dr. Spock's (1946) *The Commonsense Book of Baby and Child Care*. Leach's book covers the first five years, with over three million copies sold. However, the baby is the central focus with little account of the position of the mother nor her circumstances considered. The most recent 9th edition of Dr. Spock's manual has a foreword that does now include cultural diversity and different sorts of family units and the book is heralded for its non-dictorial tone that many other parenting guides have.

There are major contradictions to the ideology of intensive mothering that Sharon Hays (1996) clarifies in her book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. She discusses the way mothers are almost prescribed to endlessly give their time, money and love but how this is in combat with the real world'. Hays (1996) continues to say we 'could dispense with the logic of intensive mothering' with it being a challenge for working mothers. However, I would argue it is not simply a challenge for working mothers. It is a challenge for all mothers.

Baba Copper's (1987) theoretical concept of radical mothering was rooted in her own experience as a lesbian mother raising a lesbian daughter. Copper describes 'radical mothers [as] involving children in

disloyalty to the culture the mother is expected to transmit at the expense of woman-bonding and female empowerment'. The strength of this is the mother centred system where women come first. Tuula Gordon (1990) writes about feminist mothering in her book of the same name. She explores the realities of women adopting alternative ways of mothering with research undertaken of fifty-two employed mothers living in England and Finland.

In offering an explanation as to which of the mothers would be defined as feminist mothers, she offers the following,

'the way in which they challenge and criticize myths of motherhood; the way in which they consider it their right to work (in the labour force); the anti-sexist way in which they bring up their children; the way in which they expect fathers of their children to participate in joint everyday lives; and the way in which many of them are politically active' (Gordon, 1990:149).

In *Mother Journeys Feminists Write about Mothering*, Reddy et al, (1994) made a conscious decision to include the voices of the feminist mother - those who 'criticise the status quo' and 'does not want to turn her children into little patriarchal replicants'. Their book emphasises the importance of challenging the stereotypical ideas surrounding mothering by attributing value to the experiences and wisdom of feminist mothers who their intention is to honour. The stories they listen to and write about come from mothers mothering from various unique circumstances.

MATRIFOVAL NARRATIVES

Collecting matrifocal narratives is one approach that can be used to address the lack of maternal stories and is where the role of the mother is viewed as one of 'cultural and social significance' and 'structurally central to the plot' (O'Reilly and Caporale Bizzini, 2011). We *need* to hear of the practice of mothering. In *From the Personal to the Political*, O'Reilly and

Caporale Bizzini (2009) ask, 'Where' are the 'stories and voices' of mothers in the United States and Great Britain who are relying on welfare benefits? They also question 'the attack' by the media and political circles in the United States and Great Britain on these mothers (p.14). This is reiterated when O'Reilly and Caporal Bizzini encourage us to return and 'listen' to Ellen Ross (1995),

Telling the hard things about motherhood has usually been labelled gossip and been confined to women's private conversations on playgrounds, doorsteps, or telephones. But in 1990 I was seeking not feminist books on sick or dying children so much as full recognition of the practice of mothering in its various circumstances —— how it is done day by day, its particular skills, its pleasures and its sometimes great costs (p.398).

This illustrates the significance of collecting and recovering mother's stories and experiences which may help us to defy and dispel stereotypical views on mothering and provide an alternative lens in which to view mother work. However, the difficulties surrounding understanding and definitions of mothering may arise from the vast array of 'diversity and contradictions regarding expectations, assumptions and practices of mothering' (Walks, 2011, p.3).

Andrea O'Reilly (2010) highlights the omission of a mother's actual lived experience despite feminist theorists researching the effect *policy* has on areas of their life. Furthermore, the feminist law Professor, Martha L. Fineman, believes we need to encompass mothering, law and policy in a positive way rather than as problematic. 'The invisibility of women's mother-work creates an incongruence between what policy says about mothers and what many women experience as mothers' (Fineman, 2004, p 6). Marni Jackson (1992) refers to a 'maternal amnesia' where mothers fail to remember or absorb their experiences as a result of not having the language or means to convey them. She explains,

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

Nelson (2009) highlights the fact that there has not been total silence around the 'experiences of motherhood' due to the efforts of researchers in encompassing some voices and perspectives but she insists that the culture and narrative arising from what mothers say and experience as mothers must be 'unearthed' particularly from an anthropological perspective (p.15). In essence, more research is needed to further develop and strengthen a matricentric view that may alter the more common assumptions around mothering. When we include the knowledge and experiences of mothering at the centre of a mother focused feminism, 'new themes and angles of vision' can be discovered (Hill Collins,1994 p.49). Through encompassing a broad range of individual mothering experiences and perceptions of mothering we may begin to acknowledge the value in differing aspects.

Feminist scholarship and theory

Part one has offered insight and explanation into the meanings and expectations associated with mothering from prominent maternal theorists. I clarified the meaning of the word mothering and its use as a verb, identifying mothering as a practice and explored the significance of hearing the different stories of mothers.

Introduction

Part two will discuss the feminist scholarship on motherhood. It will also include an overview of a mother centred feminist theory to address

the exclusion of mothers and mothering from other modes of feminism and define a theory of empowered mothering based upon the feminist Professor of Motherhood studies, Andrea O'Reilly's wide breadth of scholarship. This thesis intends to strengthen the body of research that uses a matricentric feminist lens to understand the practice of empowered mothers and mothering from their perspective. My intention in part two of this chapter is to offer some background to clarify the evolution of matricentric feminism and its relevance to representing mothers through a new theoretical lens.

A Mother-Centred Perspective: Feminism for mothers

Much terrain has been travelled searching for the perfect theoretical fit for this thesis and various possibilities have been examined. Each time believing the right theory had been found to approach and base this work upon. Feminist theories are wide ranging and feminist research is undertaken from many theoretical perspectives that include, Black feminism (hooks, 1982, 2000a, 2000b), Pasifika feminisms (Teaiwa, 2014, Figiel, 2014), feminist economics (Waring, 1988), feminist psychology (McHugh, 2014, Harding, 2012), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, Rowe, 2000, Malhotra & Rowe, 2013) and queer theory (Halberstam, 2012, 2011, 2005, Sedgwick, 1990) to name a few.

There have been several debates surrounding the different modes of feminism and the varying views on mothering and motherhood. Some are contradictory views based on whether feminism and motherhood has already been thoroughly explored and it appears this disconnect results in part from the difference in time and the shift in historical views on mothering. Critical views on whether feminism has ignored mothers or

motherhood come from numerous academics and includes Sylvia Ann Hewlett (1986), Laura Umansky (1996), Di Brandt (1993), Sharon Hays (1996) Andrea O'Reilly (2016) and Petra Beuskens (2017). This has resulted in a call from some scholars and mothers for a feminism that is centred upon mothers. Upon reviewing the progress of a mother focused feminism there is some global scholarly research and work being undertaken by maternal theorists. These include Australia's Petra Beuskens, (2017) Canada's aforementioned Andrea O'Reilly (2016) alongside Fiona Joy Green, (2004) as well as Lorna Turnbull, (2001). Petra Beuskens and her colleague Carla Pascoe Leahy (2020), in the recently published, *Australian Mothering: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* join forces to utilise a matricentric feminist framework researching and exploring how mothering has evolved across Australian history as well as the joys and challenges of being a mother today. O'Reilly has written and edited numerous titles focusing on mothering and motherhood as well as founding Demeter Press and the Journal of the Motherhood Initiative established in 1999 (2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2016, 2019, 2020).

However, when reviewing progress in the United Kingdom things appear to have stalled. In 2012, Jane Chelliah published an article in the contemporary feminist journal the *f-word* detailing her view on progress of maternal studies in the UK and documents the absence of UK representation of scholarly work focusing on mothering and activism around motherhood. She discusses her experiences of speaking at the international Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement conferences and I concur with her view. I spoke at one of these conferences myself in 2018 and felt the absence of UK academics with only two attending. Those in attendance held a specialism in literature. Remarkable, when you consider the high volume of submissions

for the annual conference each year as well as the international speakers it attracts (O'Reilly, 2016). Chelliah's (2012) frustrations with what she refers to as an 'alienating and divisive paradigm' in the UK where, 'policy-makers favour the family model and stereotype the single mother as one who relies on state benefits' ultimately leading her to expand the Toronto based Outlaw Mothering to the UK. Unfortunately, this movement sadly appears to have now floundered in the UK.

The recent UK publication *Mothers: An Essay On love and Cruelty* by the scholar Jacqueline Rose (2018) explores the cultural implications surrounding mothers and the pressure for perfectionism. The book offers a much-needed voice on the subject of mothers and has opened the door for others to begin questioning exactly why things are the way they are. Rose questions, 'What are we doing when we ask mothers to carry the burden of everything that is hardest to contemplate about society and ourselves' she adds, 'mothers are the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings' (p.146). Her work cites numerous writers who have spoken of the more uncomfortable aspects of mothering and motherhood but these are still not enough to dispel the quixotic ideals that persist. It is Rose's contemporary and courageous writing that may be identified as an essential petition for a revolution on the idealisation of mothers. Prior to this there has been earlier research undertaken in the UK focusing on mothers but none specifically focused on the strengths of mothers.

In 1979, Anne Oakley's *Becoming A Mother* (later retitled *From Here to Maternity*) was written based on Oakley's interviews with mothers and their transition to motherhood. The research included lengthy quotations from the mothers themselves which provided details of their personal experience and was well received. The book was heralded for offering a new perspective of mothers by refraining from criticisms of them and

instead illustrated the insensitive and aggressive actions of the doctors caring for them. However, the majority (93%) of the participants were middle class leading critics to note that some of the views expressed might be generalised causing those who read it to believe all women were experiencing the same. Oakley's work was recognised as having a huge impact on establishing new paradigms of feminist research some of which stemmed from her approach to interviewing. (discussed in further detail in Chapter 2)

There is no suggestion that the development of feminism has stalled, and this is evident from the diverse range of representation and experiences of specific groups of women such as global feminism, queer feminism, third-wave feminism and womanism. The argument is that despite this, there has been no embracement of a feminism 'developed from and for the specific experiences and concerns of mothers' (O'Reilly, 2016). The emergence of a feminist framework based upon maternal empowerment theory has developed to give mothers and mothering their own feminism. What this means is a feminism where the identity of mothers can be understood. This specific mode of feminism that encompasses mothers and mothering allowing us to understand both through a matrifocal lens is matricentric feminism. Matricentric Feminism is a mother centred mode of feminism contrary to gynocentric feminism or maternalism. Gynocentric is used to define a woman centred perspective and maternalism, 'conforms to the dominant ideology of motherhood and emphasises the importance of maternal well-being to the health and safety of children' (Showalter 1986, Tucker, 2004).

Matricentric feminism is a relatively new feminist framework that encompasses the mother alongside her mothering (O'Reilly, 2016). It is guided by central and governing aims and principles that include attaching

significant value to the subject of mothers, mothering and motherhood through scholarly inquiry, acknowledges the importance of the role of mothering but recognising that this is not the sole duty of mothers, and seeks to increase research from the perspective of mothers and rebalancing the emphasis placed upon the child centredness that has previously been assigned to this scholarship. Matricentric feminism can offer us a new framework in which women as mothers that are undertaking mother work are given the deserved credibility.

Andrea O'Reilly is the central force behind matricentric feminism, and she has deemed this an intellectual and political urgency. She is tirelessly committed to ensuring we 'identify *empowered mothering* practices and politics' (Bueskens, 2017). O'Reilly (2010) commands we alter the focus of research from the ideology of motherhood to the way motherhood is enforced through governments, policy, health and education. She declares that policy is already critically examined but vehemently concludes it is without consideration of a mother's lived experience. Mothers are often labelled as good, bad or deviant with these labels determined by professionals, law, policy, and politics (Turnbull, 2001). Matricentric feminism is '*seeking to deliver a mode of feminism in which mothers and mothering count*' (O'Reilly, 2016, p.8).

Matricentric feminism draws upon many disciplines which include anthropology, history, literary studies, sociology, philosophy, psychology, sexuality studies and women's studies and is 'informed by traditional schools of academic feminism and some of its most prominent theorists: bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Sara Ruddick, Ann Crittenden, Nancy Chodorow, Baba Copper, Adrienne Rich, Mielle Chandler and Ariel Gore (O'Reilly, 2016). The overall criticisms to academic feminism from

supporters of matricentric feminism are focused on the designation of matricentric or mother focused feminism to the peripheries.

Being completely unfamiliar with the concept of a mother focused feminism when embarking on this research propelled me to continually explore if there was an area of feminism that aligned with my passion for appreciating the unique experiences of mothering alongside acknowledging the strengths a mother has. I wanted a lens that would allow the experiences to be understood from a mother's perspective when recovering and sharing their stories of mothering. Eventually, I discovered matricentric feminism. It was little wonder it was difficult to find, as O'Reilly (2016) had been working across the past *three* decades to define a feminism for mothers. She is adamant when she states, 'Motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism' (p.2). It is another piece of the 'puzzle' or part of the 'web'. O'Reilly is clear in her explanation of why this matters so much.

Mothering matters, and it is central to the lives of women who are mothers. In saying this, I am not suggesting that mothering is all that matters or that it matters the most; rather I am suggesting that any understanding of mother's lives is incomplete without consideration of how becoming and being a mother shape a woman's sense of self and how she sees the world (p.1).

The significance of this lies in its focus on both women's specific identity and work as mothers but this does not mean that matricentric feminism should replace more 'traditional' feminism. It is to place emphasis on the category of mother as 'distinct' from the category of woman. It stems from the acknowledgement that many problems mothers face is a direct result of their role and identity as a mother - social, economic, political, cultural, historical and psychological.

For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to firmly situate matricentric feminism in order to avoid confusion between similar or overlapping categories and to clarify this mode of mother centred feminism in 'response to women's specific identities and work as mothers' (O'Reilly, 2019, p.15). There has been intentional avoidance of choosing 'maternal feminism' as an alternative label due to the theory and politics of maternalism (O'Reilly, 2016, 2019). Maternalism positions the wellbeing of the mother as important but *in* relation to the health and well-being of the children (Stadtman Tucker, 2004). There could also be confusion with difference feminism which focuses on the differences between men and women and the caring, nurturing, nature of women (Gilligan 1982). Although, O'Reilly (2019) acknowledges that even though there may be similarities between maternalist and matricentric perspectives,

'they are largely limited to the activism of certain motherhood organisations. Moreover, matricentric feminism understands motherhood to be socially and historically constructed, and positions mothering more as a practice than an identity. As well, central to matricentric feminist theory is a critique of the maternalist stance that positions maternity as the basis of female identity; as well, matricentric feminism challenges the assumption that maternity is natural to women (i.e., all women naturally know how to mother) and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill' (p.16).

This does place matricentric feminism firmly as an independent feminist theory and movement but establishing this as 'legitimate and viable' will only be achievable with integration into academic feminism (O'Reilly, 2019).

Feminist scholarship on motherhood

For mothers to claim a specific theory and practice is not an unreasonable appeal. If women were to embark on a Women's Studies course many syllabi include a range of feminisms, including social feminism, global

feminism, queer feminism, third-wave feminism and womanism but requests by Andrea O'Reilly to include matricentric feminism were 'dismissed, trivialised, disparaged, and ridiculed: why would mothers need such a mother-centred feminist perspective?' (2016 p.198).

There is suggestion that matricentric feminism (mother focused feminism) has been intentionally excluded by academic scholars and kept on the outside of academic feminism, but this is not to say that work around feminist scholarship on motherhood has not been undertaken (O'Reilly, 2016). There may be disagreement as to if mothers have been disavowed by feminists, but several scholars argue this is not the case. The economist and Columbia Professor, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, stated as early as 1986 in her book, *A Lesser Life*, 'Motherhood is the problem that modern feminists face' (p.184). In countenance to this, Laura Umansky has written *Motherhood Reconceived* and claims, 'Critics who accuse feminists of ignoring mothers or motherhood are not only wrong [but] have completely missed the mark' (p.2). Her view is that motherhood and the practice of mothering have been thoroughly interrogated. Her stance is clear, 'Feminist discussions have subjected the institution of motherhood and the practice of mothering to their most complex, nuanced and multi focused analysis' (p.2). However, it has been argued that Umansky's (1996) publication is not a representation of 'hundreds of motherhood scholars' and therefore limited (O'Reilly, 2016).

According to Kawash (2009) as early as 2000 the topic of motherhood was banished to the side lines. The well-respected journal *Signs* published only two book reviews of books on motherhood and reproductive technology in 2009. Prior to that it was in 1998 they reviewed a publication. This is in stark contrast to the period between 1993 - 1996 when the journal published three review essays on motherhood studies

discussing more than 30 published titles. The prominent journal *Frontiers* published a special edition on 'Motherhood and Maternalism' in 1999 but it was not until 2009 a feminist journal focused on a theme connected to motherhood. *Women's Studies Quarterly* published a special issue on motherhood. Kawash further cements the disappearance of motherhood from academia when she details her experience as a director of a PhD programme in women and gender studies across the mid 2000s and declares she could not 'recall receiving a single graduate application that proposed a study on mothering - motherhood'.

O'Reilly and her research assistant undertook their own more recent study in 2016 looking back to 2006 across conferences, articles, book reviews, textbooks and course syllabi. The results are surprising, and O'Reilly concludes,

'the percentages of motherhood content in women studies, conferences, journals, textbooks, and syllabi range from under 1 per cent to just under 3 per cent. Given that 80 per cent of women become mothers in a lifetime, there is evident disconnect between the minimal representation of motherhood in academic feminism and the actual lives of most women (p.197).

There is no disputing that mothering was explored extensively across the 1970s to 1980s and further but moving two decades ahead, O'Reilly argues, 'In the twenty-first century, not only is motherhood now viewed negatively, as it was with liberal feminism, but it has all but disappeared as a topic in academic feminism' (p.192).

While the UK based network Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics (MaMSIE) was established in 2007 and aims to bring together those working across different knowledge and practice communities including feminism, psychoanalysis, gender and sexuality studies, the social sciences, philosophy, visual and performance art,

literature, and creative writing it is still challenging to locate or connect with academics focusing on mothering and mothering work. According to their website, MaMSIE opens up and sustains critical debates about the maternal and explores the unique site it occupies at the potent intersection between scientific possibilities, psychosocial practices and cultural representations. Alongside the network is an open access peer reviewed journal, *Studies in the Maternal*, published twice yearly and upon scouring their archives it is difficult to locate articles, reviews or position pieces that specifically mention mothering, empowered mothering, mother work or matricentric feminism, with much of the discipline specific focus based upon psychoanalysis, art and literary writing. This is not to disregard the highly valuable platform MaMSIE creates and the contribution the journal makes, which is essential to the multidisciplinary perspectives required to represent mothers and their experiences but to simply acknowledge the dearth of work focused on these areas.

Previously, in her visionary work, bell hooks (2000) commended the feminist movement in their endeavour to change direction following self-criticism of their approach to gender, race, sex and class. She discusses the need for feminism that is written in 'accessible language to spread the word, that the theory must maintain fluidity, be open and responsive and feminist writing that speaks to everyone' but this fluidity and responsiveness has still not embraced a mother focused feminism.

Feminist theories of mothering offer a view that may appear limited as often they fail to include women who are not white and women from poorer backgrounds. They illustrate the views of the women who created the theory (Collins, 1994). What is formidable about Collins' view is that she does not dismiss the value of the white middle class women's experiences or black women's experiences or any other women. She simply prizes the

diversity brought by 'examining perspectives of motherhood' to uncover 'rich textures of differences.' Another profound point Collin's (1994) makes is the contrasting view of women from backgrounds that differ from the dominant one held in relation to their mothering goals. She provides a straightforward explanation, when she compares the desire white, middle-class women have for a break from their children and possibly further their career. Conversely, black or working-class women may hold the opposite view and feel desperate to spend time with their children instead of chasing every hour of a low paid job in order to provide the very basics their children require.

The dominant ideology of mothering has permeated political and legal doctrine, academic discourse and dominant popular media (Glenn, 1994). Potentially blinding these areas to the mothering practices of others. Glenn (1994) asserts that alternative practices of mothering are virtually ignored when they are from non-middle class, marginalised and segmented groups and do not conform to the mainstream political and academic discourse definitions of mothering. Lesser-known experiences appear shut out. Most narratives around mothering and motherhood are based upon the dominating groups. Sarah La Chance Adams (2014) has written extensively on the complexities of maternal life and is adamant that we should be attempting to understand mothering broadly.

'This is why I strongly advocate an interdisciplinary approach to studying mothering. We ought to be making use of all available perspectives and avoid relying on popular assumptions about motherhood or on the experiences of a few if this investigation is to be adequate from a feminist point of view. None are harmed more by the maternal ideal than mothers and children' (p.23).

She is keen to point out that mothers also have failings just the same as everyone else. By ignoring the realities and dualisms mothers are faced with, mothers and children will suffer. LaChance believes 'that if we

care for the well-being of children we *must* care for the well-being of their caregivers' (p.25).

M o t h e r s M a t t e r

Another challenging area for matricentric feminism that warrants addressing and which cannot be ignored is its focus on the gendered experience of mothering. Andrea O'Reilly believes that the,

'apprehension over gender difference is the elephant in the room of academic feminism; it has shut down necessary and needed conversations about important — and yes gendered—biological dimensions of women's lives: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and mothering' (p.22).

Niamh Moore (2011) claims it is feminist theorists that have wanted to disavow the differences between men and women and 'challenging biological determinism and other essentialisms has been a crucial policy strategy'. Some feminists feel that by acknowledging a woman's 'gendered subjectivity then we subscribe to an essentialist viewpoint' (O'Reilly, 2019, p.23). Julie Stephens (2011) writes of this in *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking* and elaborates on the biological, cultural and ideological struggle against essentialism and refers to the possibility of any discussion that connects 'women and care, or mothering and nurture, particularly troubling' (p.10). She highlights, 'Any activism done in the name of the maternal will be unsettling, particularly for those who perceive feminism as primarily a struggle against essentialism' (p.141).

Fiona Joy Green (2019) recalls many feminists during the second wave of feminism who were, 'closeted as mothers because parenting was seen as secondary to organised feminist activism and movement' (cited in p.84 Practicing) In *Feminist Theory From Margin to Centre* bell hooks (2000) also recollects, 'Early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of

women from the movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated' (p.135). Green has been undertaking matricentric feminist research since 1995 where she has demonstrated her commitment to feminist mothering by exploring a mother's actual experience of mothering.

However, O'Reilly has clear and steadfast justification for adopting a matricentric framework and believes that 'gender is constructed and that motherhood matters and that maternity is integral to a woman's sense of self and her experience of the world' and clarifies that maternal scholars do not 'reduce a woman's sense of self to motherhood, nor do they say that this is what makes her a woman or that motherhood is more important than other variables that constitute herself' (p.23). Simply, that mothers need their own theory, practice and feminism to align with their experience and identity as a mother.

*A Theory of Empowered Mothering:
Matricentric Feminism and Outlaws*

Empowered mothering signifies a theory and practice that begins by positioning mothers as 'outlaws from the institution of motherhood' and seeks to apply a practice that empowers them (Rich, 1976 p.31). Andrea O'Reilly (2012) has undertaken research focusing on empowered mothers and emphasises the impact on maternal well-being when mothering is empowered. Empowered mothering makes motherhood more rewarding, fulfilling, and satisfying for women by affirming maternal agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism, and by opening up new maternal practices and identities. Such mothering allows a woman selfhood outside of motherhood and affords her power within

motherhood. Although it is evident that empowered mothering is better for mothers, it must also be noted that empowered mothering is better for children. O'Reilly, ((2016, p.71).

In searching for an understanding of mothers and mothering and where mothers on the periphery might fit, this thesis draws significantly on Rich's (1976) extensive coverage of motherhood and mothering and her offering of personal testimony combined with research and theory to illustrate both motherhood as institution and experience. However, O'Reilly (2004b) insists that even though Rich (1976) neglected to define what empowered mothering is, her text has allowed feminists to 'envision empowered mothering for women' (p.18). O'Reilly (2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2019) has attempted to fill the gap left by Rich (1976) through defining empowered mothering and developing a theory of it. Although, feminist scholars and academics have sometimes chosen to overlook or ignore the 'history' and 'silences' of, *Of Woman Born*, highlighted above, particularly when they have focused so closely on motherhood and mothering (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010).

The significance of this is worthy of exploration because Rich's (1976) text has become the central reference point for many women's studies and maternal scholars amid the search for defining empowered mothering and when trying to make sense of a mother's experience. Rich's (1976) overarching main points on empowered mothering are that motherhood is a patriarchal institution that oppresses women and that mothering has the potential to be empowering to women if they are allowed to define and practice mothering for themselves (p.21). Rich (1986) re-defends the position she took in the earlier edition of *Of Woman Born*, 'mothering, should be defined by mothers for themselves'.

It may come as a surprise to some but Rich's seminal text was initially 'demonised' and viewed as 'anti-motherhood' or at the very least 'against motherhood' (Snitow, 1992, Mc Cabe, 1977). Though Rich was not the only woman at that time to have her feminist writing criticised other books such as *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Firestone, 1970) and *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963) also faced a barrage of criticism (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010). Although the focus of the writing from these other authors was not on empowered mothering, they, like Rich, were also daring to challenge motherhood. Lazarre (1976), Sinitow (1992) and Sheridan (2006) all agree that it is the books' 'unapologetic criticisms' of motherhood that leave them open for the demonisation they faced. Sinitow's (1992) work confirms that regardless of a feminist book's content at that time, it was viewed as a demon text if its author had been brave enough to critique motherhood.

What was remarkably 'groundbreaking' in Rich's work was her distinction between motherhood and mothering, although she was never explicit on the possibilities of empowered mothering and of the potential for a positive mothering experience (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010, p.28). However, in addition to the aforementioned criticisms, Rich also faced further backlash as a result of her actual writing style and the way she 'challenged the intellectual writing norms of the times (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010, p.29). It is unclear whether Rich realised the gift she was giving when she chose to pave the way for a distinct approach when writing within feminist maternal scholarship by integrating intellectual ideas, scholarly principles and personal experiences (Eleff and Trethewey, 2006).

Despite this, the approach to her prose was highly criticised but Rich determined she wrote first and foremost as a feminist social critic and it is the renewal, not the abandonment, of Rich's ideas that may help us to

make sense of mothering. It is Rich's text and ideas that has led me to showcase the mother's experiences alongside the supporting literature. By 1986 Rich's writing style had become more acceptable than it had first done in 1976. Maraini (1979) declares,

'No essayist or psychoanalyst or scholar of social problems would speak of his matrimonial or paternal experiences in a scholarly book: it would be considered offensive, irregular, uselessly exhibitionistic, and hardly objective' (p.690).

Feminist mothering is central to matricentric feminism but adopting the more generalised term, empowered mothering, alongside this, allows for the inclusion of mothers 'who may not identify as feminist' but who are in fact practicing empowered mothering (O'Reilly, 2004 p.13). It is across the previous decade that O'Reilly has been determined to seek a theory of empowered mothering 'that considers how mothers from various cultural positions resist patriarchal motherhood to achieve an identity and experience maternal empowerment (p. 69).

O u t L a w M o t h e r s

Positioned within empowered mothering is outlaw mothers/ing. A 'mother outlaw' was defined as a woman who chooses to negotiate the tensions, fringes and margins of patriarchal culture and its prescriptive ideologies for motherhood by engaging in mothering practices that challenge and resists the status quo (Baran, 2011). It was the original idea from Rich, combined with O'Reilly's (2010) determination to offer a space and place to create a new discourse and practice that is known as empowered mothering. Previously mentioned and in relation to feminist mothering and maternal empowerment, the concept of outlaw mothers originated from Rich's (1976) vision of mothers mothering against motherhood. Rich (1976) called for a theory and practice of outlaw

mothering. Together, empowered mothering and outlaw mothering are described by O'Reilly (2010) as an identity and practice.

The four attributes and 'organised aims' of empowered mothering as laid down by O'Reilly (2006, 2007, 2016) are maternal authenticity, maternal agency, maternal authority and maternal autonomy. Maternal authenticity, according to O'Reilly (2007) is when a mother remains true to herself and rejects the pressure to pretend that she is perfect (Butterfield, 2010). She is honest in her portrayal of the complexities and disorder of mothering. She does not pretend to be perfect but attempts to live according to her own values in a culture where there may be a more dominant norm (O'Reilly, 2007). Ruddick (1986) highlighted the experiences for some mothers that resulted in maternal *inauthenticity*. Ruddick believed that this was a result of the confusing so called 'training' for mothering work and the 'self-doubt' associated with it (p.104). She went further by adding, 'Maternal thought embodies inauthenticity by taking on the values of the dominant culture' (p.103).

Maternal agency is 'the notion that mothering can be a site of empowerment and a location for social change for women. Maternal agency draws on the idea of agency—the ability to influence one's life, to have the power to control one's life—and explores how women can have agency via mothering' (O'Brien Hallstein 2010, p.2). This can be demonstrated further when mothers are engaged in practices that support their authority when they challenge aspects of their lives that are constricted. It is a place of resistance to the dominant or normative models of mothering. Maternal agency allows new definitions outside of these normative models to be considered. The value of mother work is also attached to empowered mothers and maternal agency by assigning value to the work mothers do (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010).

Maternal authority and autonomy refer to 'confidence and conviction in oneself' (O'Reilly, 2006, 2016). This could expand to 'holding power in the household and the ability to define and determine one's life and practices of mothering' (p.70). Additionally, maternal advocacy - activism relates to the 'political and social dimensions' of mothering which may be linked to social or community activism.

However, O'Reilly's definition of feminist mothering has been met with criticism and deemed, 'problematic' as empowered mothering is only accessible to, 'educated, middle to upper class women with access to financial and human resources (Middleton, p.74). These criteria and the way in which they are realised in these women's lives are extremely difficult, and in some cases impossible, for women who do not have access to resources such as substantial finances and good childcare and/or women who are in other situations of duress such as being in an abusive relationship, having a mental illness, or being addicted to drugs or alcohol (Middleton, 2004 p. 74).

However, O'Reilly (2016) is eager to clarify her position on this to avoid misinterpretation. She is adamant that empowered mothering is 'as available to marginalised women as it is to women of privilege' (p.74). She elaborates further,

'I would argue that such agency, authority, autonomy, authority and activism-advocacy of empowered mothering are more evident in the maternal practices and theories of mothers who are poor, lesbian, young, or women of colour. Privileged women, I would suggest, with more resources and status in motherhood, are often less able or likely to perceive and oppose their oppression' (p. 74-75).

Conclusively, the aim of collecting and analysing matrifocal narratives is to explore the mothering experiences that are lesser known through a matricentric lens in order to represent empowered mothering in

challenging circumstances. This representation of feminist mothering differs from more recognised and common discourses so I wish to be explicit and clear that following collection of the narratives I will be exploring if marginalised mothers demonstrate authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy in their mothering. As previously mentioned, it has been argued that these attributes are unavailable to mothers without adequate financial resources, supportive relationships or addiction issues (Middleton, 2004) but using these four attributes as an analytical framework offers a structure to ascertain if this is the case with the mothers sharing their maternal narratives as part of this research.

Overall, the emerging theory of matricentric feminism may influence the previously narrow and limited collection of maternal narratives by considering a new lens in which we might broaden understanding of lesser-known experiences of mothering. Rich (1976) long ago asserted her belief that if mothers wished for their growing children to behold agency, authority, and authenticity in *their* lives, they needed to witness their mothers modelling these attributes. Which is why there is a call for scholars to take up the baton and increase the multiplicity of maternal narratives and exploration of these. It is impossible for the issue of motherhood to be avoided when considering feminist theory, but it is also impossible for feminist theory to resolve it (Di Quinzio, 1999). In adopting the aforementioned matrifocal perspective, O'Reilly (2016) suggests that this will reveal and redefine motherhood and maternity and could in fact be a solution.

This chapter has provided the background to some of the feminist literature on motherhood scholarship and the challenges of defining a theory of empowered mothering. It has detailed the fundamental attributes of matricentric feminism and empowered mothering based

upon the feminist Professor of Motherhood studies, Andrea O'Reilly's scholarship for which the analysis, interpretation and representation will be based upon.

CHAPTER TWO: THE TRAVELLER

'We begin to understand others when we can imagine ourselves in their world and we make sense of ourselves by weaving stories. '

Tessa Muncey 2010

I am just a girl, a child, but all at once I must be a mum. People look at me funny sometimes. Like it is ridiculous that I am walking around pushing a pram with a real live baby in it. I need to make appointments for immunisations and get to the baby weighing clinic every week to make sure my baby is putting on weight. The other mums there don't really talk to me. I must go to school. It doesn't matter though. Then I think about my precious beautiful baby. The one I have fallen madly in love with the first night we spent together. How I held his hand and looked into his eyes and forgot I was 14 and forgot I was scared because he needed me. He needed his mummy.

I'm a happy mum though who is mostly surrounded by love and support. I believe this love and support makes a huge difference. Especially, when you are facing the stereotypes of the outside world, and the gaze of others and the low expectations - you need that love and support. More than anything. It makes you forever grateful when the health visitor speaks to you kindly, or the GP you had to call out in an emergency treats you with respect or the teacher encourages you to attend college or sixth form. These make up for sniggering looks, whispers, labels and all the unspoken things people are thinking but do not say. Even the things people are saying. It feels lonely at times when I am trying to ignore what I think people might be saying about me. It must seem unusual to see a child walking around with a child.

The girls I meet at school are nice to me and do their best to manage a new girl turning up at their school with a slight American accent and a baby. I am not sure what I expected but they seem to think it is a bit of a novelty and quite interesting. I am grateful as most of the time I carry feelings of shame and embarrassment partly due to the difficulty of explaining the circumstances in which my son's conception occurred. They even ask me if I would like to meet them at the local shops in the evening to hang out. The idea seems strange to me as I cannot understand why they would hang around the shops when they are closed but part of me realises the weight of my responsibility which means there will be no hanging around shops in the evening socialising with girls from school. I also feel a bit sad in the geography class when the teacher is giving out information on a three-day trip. The class seems excited about this and I again am aware of my life being very different to that of a carefree schoolgirl.

I used to convince myself that having a concealed pregnancy and giving birth at 14 was not a 'big deal'. I still try to convince myself that's true, but it isn't. It is a hugely frightening and life changing event that ensured I would never be the same again nor would those who were closest to me. I feel very guilty about that. Being a teenager without responsibility is difficult to comprehend for me as my life and the lives of those around me has changed so much. Since becoming a 14-year-old mother I so often feel I do not quite fit in many different settings. That I am different. I am.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

I am reluctant to write endless words in this chapter that may appear as abstract ideas or might seem as if they set out to re-enforce the sometimes-perceived mystery surrounding academic processes and research. I am acutely aware of feelings such as these and felt them myself at the beginning of both my academic journey and particularly upon embarking on this PhD. There were many concepts I did not understand but felt I should. The acute awareness I have of this reminds me to remain principled in this thesis and ensure 'my writing will not be a tool for the alienation of others' (Behar, 2003, p.xvi). Terminology and procedures that were new to me left me questioning whether I was really in the right place. I felt that familiar feeling of being an outsider, as if I did not belong but I also realise I would not be in the position of writing this thesis had I not studied intensely and subscribed to many of the academic traditions. I also know I am a 'velvet exile' willing and able to do what is expected but 'choosing instead the more difficult position, that of the outsider within' (Behar, 2003 p.xvii). Cultivating a worthy piece of research that would do myself justice and more importantly, would do other mothers justice is an incredible task. Would I really be able to demystify these processes and shine a positive light on lesser known and diverse experiences of mothering? Currently, I seem to be immersed in these processes and feel as if they are taking me further and further away from the heart of what I believe should be heard. I fear this may be one of the greatest challenges of this thesis. Especially, when I acknowledge that no matter how my own narrative is written or that of the participants, the reader or listener has the freedom to interpret the story how they choose (Goodall, 2000).

At times, I have felt overwhelmed by which path to travel in telling my story along with others. What is the right way? Is there a right way? I

have concluded after some slight detours that there is no 'right way' but only the 'right way' for *me*. The detours have led me to consider alternative options but thankfully also led to great discoveries. Tessa Muncey's work and book (2002, 2005, 2010) *Doing Autoethnography* has reassured me that representing lesser-known stories like my own story and the lesser-known stories of others are worthy of being told if only to dispel stereotypical misperceptions. Ruth Behar (1985, 1987, 2003, 2013, 2017) has written and discussed autoethnography extensively and despite the occasional controversy surrounding her open-heart approach to autoethnography, my values align very closely to hers in why I have chosen to deliver my story in the way I have.

I am trying to overcome the reluctance to share my own story and the tools that have supported me in conquering my resistance to telling it has been literature mostly written by other women and mothers. The literature has nurtured me and offered a protective layer to help me see that it is safe to write about myself as a mother. It has also helped me to realise the connectivity I feel to other mothers as well as the necessity there is to tell my story alongside others. Meeting other mothers as part of this research has finally afforded my 14-year-old self some solace I never knew I would find.

This thesis does not have the breadth to include mother - daughter/son relationships but one of the unavoidable and hardest parts of this research has been considering myself as a 14-year-old mother, myself as a 47-year-old mother and reconciling the two, the way new knowledge and understanding has made me think of my relationship with my own mother and the impact of my mothering on my children today. It has helped me to realise that if we refrain from casting judgement on

ourselves and others when we hear a personal experience, our perception of a person or situation is drastically altered.

As I said though, this chapter is challenging due the academic expectations surrounding methods and methodologies and the plethora of options. At times I seem to be going around in circles trying to find the perfect fit for the research and methods. It is important to me that readers have a sense of who I and the participants are when they read this thesis and has influenced the method used to illustrate our experiences. This is not as straightforward as it sounds partly due to the fact part of this process involves understanding who I am as both a researcher, a writer and a person. These have evolved through my own life experiences, the work I have read, my thoughts, my loves, conversations and reflections. For this reason, all I have learned remains incomplete (Goodall, 2000).

The difficulty surrounding this result from the expectation that as a scholar my academic contributions are assumed to be complete (Goodall, 2000). What is required while attempting to write from personal incompleteness but at the same time providing scholarly completeness is 'writing that tension that honours the incompleteness, the desire, the learning. It shows the self, and the self's construction of knowledge, as a jointly produced work in progress' (p.8). Goodall (2000) also acknowledges the challenge of producing adequate ethnographic texts and reminds us, 'what we write is *never quite good enough*' and '*this is a hard way to live*' (p.26). This fits well with my own core beliefs of self-doubt and inadequacy. We may interpret a story very differently to how it has been told. However, despite academic criticisms towards interpretive writing this can be counterbalanced by uniting 'solid fieldwork' with 'good writing' but also remaining mindful as to the interpretation of those (p.31).

My intention in this chapter is to provide some background and basis for the methodological choices I made but to ensure the representation of the stories/narratives remains true. After a recommendation of a thesis to read, which later became a book, *Adult Learning and la Recherche Feminine Reading Resilience* and H  l  ne Cixous, by Elizabeth Chapman Houlton (2012) where she illustrated her determination to hold on to what she believed in, to write the way she trusted despite the reservations of others, I felt encouraged by this more than she could know. She resisted conforming to ‘mainstream social scientific approaches’ and simply wrote ‘the experience of the resilience of the adult learner’ (p.20, 23). Although, her thesis sits within another field, her work kept me exploring the right way for *me* to do this. Although, I had no idea that this exploration would take me on the journey it has nor that I would travel a path that would take me right back to the beginning of where my instincts told me all along, I should be. The following pages and sections will briefly discuss feminist epistemology, the research paradigm, the methodology and methods that I eventually embraced.

METHODOLOGY

To clarify the foundations for the research methodology and paradigm used it is necessary to briefly explain the background to these. Bearing in mind the earlier justification I have given for the multiple disciplines I will borrow from; it may sound contradictory to try and delineate a specific approach to this thesis. Part of me feels compelled to force myself to follow prescriptive processes in order to remain close to academic and scholarly methodological influences but research is an iterative process that moves constantly between ideas and experiences (Muncey, 2005). There is some suggestion that qualitative researchers

sometimes neglect to engage with the epistemology, methodology and methods concerning qualitative research and this has even been described as 'insufficient' (p.5). Carter and Little (2007) have also discussed the misinformed choices based around methodological fundamentalism.

'Methodological fundamentalism: insistence that a particular methodology is somehow the 'one true' qualitative research and should never be changed or combined with elements of other methodologies' (p.5).

Therefore, it is important to recognise the influence of the methodology on the research practice and the awareness of the researcher regarding the theory of their approach, subject and methods. Although there is flexibility between methods and methodologies allowing for the development of non-customary approaches, the personal and theoretical reflexive awareness of these remains the responsibility of the researcher (Davies, 2008). Although this may appear to deviate from my desire to remain steadfast to writing in a way that avoids reenforcing 'academic processes' the above is justification for the need to ensure clarity on the rationale for the epistemology, methodology and methods of this research.

When I first heard the term epistemology, I had no idea what it meant but realised if I were to embark on my longed-for journey in academia I would have to. Epistemology simply means: the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. The term is derived from the Greek *epistēmē* ('knowledge') and *logos* ('reason'), and accordingly the field is sometimes referred to as the theory of knowledge. Feminist epistemology is the study of knowledge from a feminist perspective. This extends to producing knowledge through a feminist lens (Leavy and Harris, 2019).

Therefore, the feminist research landscape is vast and wide and worthy of celebratory recognition, but it can also raise challenges for

researchers when trying to align their work with a particular stage or variant of feminism or when their research extends beyond the boundaries of those stages. As a result of the historical changes and development of feminism, which very broadly speaking, include First Wave (late 19th - early 20th century), Second Wave (1960s - 1970s), Third Wave (1990s - present) and Post-feminism (2000 - present) it may appear that feminism is locked or bound by these distinct waves but that is not the case.

Feminist scholarship and research are 'rather like a web, a crossword puzzle or a grid' (Leavy and Harris, 2019 p.27). It is this that may make feminist scholarship difficult to categorise. There is no standardisation or categorisation due to the vast differences across feminist research, but this is to be expected if we accept the individual and multi-layered ways of undertaking this work. Beverley Skeggs, (2001) reinforces this when she states what she deems an 'essential' point, 'very few feminists have ever believed in a feminist methodology' (p.428). This demonstrates further justification for the usage and borrowing from a multitude of perspectives and refraining from a prescriptive, narrow stance on undertaking this research. However, these differences in ideas and research do not have to signal a lack of solidarity. There are many layers and differences to feminist research that create variations, but feminist researchers all belong to the same movement.

Overall, feminism is not limited to one method or approach nor in the 'personal identity' of the researcher but is based upon the 'intent of the person doing it' (Nelson, 2009, p.23). However, DeVault (1999) argues, 'feminists seek a methodology that will support research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women' (p.31). With this in mind, my commitment is to the voices of the mothers sharing their stories of mothering.

E t h n o / A u t o

The combination of feminism and ethnography includes a 'multitude of routings, objects and enquiry' that can be placed beneath the umbrellas of feminism, ethnography and autoethnography. (Skeggs, 1994 p.1). Ethnography has its origins in anthropology and it

'alludes to the situated, empirical description of people and races. There are other terms which also cover the same procedure - field work, qualitative sociology, participant observation, what Geertz (1973) called 'thick description' — and they all aim at a method that is imbued with many interpretive strands and layers, committed in some measure to reconstructing the actor's own world-view, not in a lordly way but faithful to the everyday life of the subject' (Rock, 1979, p.30).

However, Behar (1996) highlights a notable difference that, 'in anthropology, which historically exists to 'give voice' to others, there is no greater taboo than self-revelation' (p.26). Ethnography is 'the art and science of describing a group or culture' (Fetterman,1998, p.1). Culture includes the patterns of behaviour of a particular group of people and their customs, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge (Roper & Shapira, 2000). In traditional ethnography a researcher is usually unfamiliar with the cultural field they intend to study and may access a setting with an unspecified purpose or research question (Morse and Richards, 2002). Over time though, ethnography has evolved from its origins and adopted, 'characteristics based on ideological currents of a given time' (Wall, 2015 p.2). As a result, there are now various new forms of ethnographic research including visual ethnography, autoethnography, and institutional ethnography (Ellis, 2002, 2009, Wall, 2015).

Traditionally, ethnographic researchers were 'objective outsiders' and were specifically describing the culture but refraining from critiquing or creating strategies for change ((Wall, 2015). Wolcott (1999) explains, 'ethnography has long since slipped out from under the anthropological

tent' and it can no longer be said that it means what it meant in the past or what particular ethnographers would like it to mean (p.42). It is not merely data collection techniques that permit the use of the label ethnography for a study but the intention of the research that legitimises its use (Wolcott, 1999).

There is also criticism aimed at ethnographers for doing minimal fieldwork, observation of too few cultural members, and for not spending enough time with (different) others (Buzard 2003, Fine, 2003, Delamont, 2009) but as Fielding (1993) previously noted, 'Ethnography is intense, lengthy and 'data-rich, and it cannot and probably should not embrace too many people and too wide a field of activity' (p.155). There are also disadvantages to using ethnographic methods including autoethnography which is sometimes dismissed as being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic (Ellis, 2009, hooks, 1994, Keller, 1995).

Autoethnographers are also periodically referred to as navel-gazers (Madison, 2006) and can be blamed for biasing data through the inclusion of their personal experience (Anderson 2006, Atkinson, 1997, Gans, 1999). Behar (2003) confesses in the foreword in *Autobiographical Writing Across the Disciplines; A Reader* (Freedman and Frey, 2003) that what she likes 'best' about the method is 'you yourself, the knower, didn't know fully what you knew about this method until you wrote it down, until you told the story with yourself included in it' (p. xiv).

However, by joining principles of ethnography and autobiography the process and product becomes autoethnography (Ellis, 1996). Autoethnography is now a well-known method to study, interpret and analyse sensitive topics (Ellis, 1996). Justification for this approach comes

from its ability to engage readers, its therapeutic properties and the personal nature of the work (Bochner and Ellis, 2002). However, autoethnography means different things to different people and includes a list of labels that includes auto-observation, first-person accounts, evocative narratives, critical autobiography and many more (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Not only are there numerous labels of what constitutes autoethnography but many associated terms are often used differently by different people (Bochner, 2016.) For me, autoethnography opens a door into rooms we would not usually enter. It offers windows to look in and out of and in doing so allows the reader to be able to relate to my experiences as well as the participant's. Determined to offer a complete view, autoethnography seems the most rational choice.

In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voicing — complete with colloquiums, reverberations from multiple relationships and emotional expressiveness—is honoured. In this way the reader gains a sense of the writer as a full human being (Gergen and Gergen, 2002 p.14). Importantly, it permits the showing and telling of missing stories and narratives which research can deem as too subjective or self-indulgent to tell (Muncey, 2010). Feminism has influenced the trend in ethnography towards 'reflexivity' as well as emphasising self-disclosure (Cole, 1992).

Prominent forward thinkers in the field provide explicit explanation of bringing together their personal (autobiographies) and professional (practices) (Ellis and Bochner, 1996 Okley and Callaway, 1992). Ethnographies may appear as one story or narrative but really, they are two stories informed by both the personal and the professional (Goodall, 2000). There has been previous ethnographic work undertaken where the 'natives' who are telling their stories are the ethnographers of their own

culture (Jones, 1970, Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). Others who 'incorporated the self' (Reed-Danahay, 1997b) into their ethnographic writing have been visible for some time (Cole, 1992, Pratt, 1986, Stivers, 1993). When combining both ethnographic writing and self-narratives it can be referred to as 'autoethnography' (Reed-Danahay, 1997b). It might be asked, 'Who has the right to speak for a culture?' and this has also been explained as asking, *who is entitled* to represent it (p. Goodall, 2000). I am claiming the freedoms within this particular methodological approach of ethnography as *mothering* is an ethnographic field, of which *I* am a part.

There may be no consensus on a cultural study or what might be the most appropriate methodological approaches to employ but this allows for the multidimensional aspects of culture to encompass the complexity of lived experiences (Nelson, 2009). However, Anne Swidler (1986) believes culture is a 'tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals and world views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems' (p.273). Therefore, adopting elements of ethnography and autoethnography within my methodological approach is appropriate for this research because it allows an examination of the collective practice of mothering from mothers and study of the culture of mothering.

I explored Anderson's (2006) model of analytical autoethnography and in essence, this has evolved as part of the research to encompass a mother focused lens or matricentric model of autoethnography while adhering to his criteria where the emphasis remains on the membership of the researcher to the group, the researcher being visible in the published texts and a focus on improving theoretical understandings of a wider social phenomenon. It allows us to explore the social and political and to understand something shared.

Ultimately, in order to respect the experiences of the mothers I am working with, to gain their trust and to acknowledge the reflexivity at the heart of this, my story is here, alongside theirs. Anderson's (2006) insistence of 'enhanced textual visibility of the researcher's self' aligns closely with my approach to accurately representing the social world under review. Therefore, as I am the *auto* in this autoethnographic project my story must be on an equal footing with the other stories included. To facilitate this there has been an exchange of experiences and stories between us and in turn, a shifting of how the participants viewed my position.

Qualitative Methods

Adopting a qualitative method which emphasises the value in subjective experiences and in contrast to quantitative methods involves a more intense interaction between the researcher/s and the participants. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to discover more about an area that the researcher may have little or differing knowledge of. Instead of limiting experiences to numbers and statistics, such as in quantitative methods, we can foster strong relationships with participants and gain rich, in-depth and meaningful understanding of experiences. A notable qualitative study was undertaken with only one participant to explore the experiences of a woman who felt trapped inside a man's body (Bogdan, 1974). A narrative was used to understand the experience of being trapped inside a woman's body but also to help develop theory around the area (Waller *et al.* 2016 p.5). Importantly, qualitative research acknowledges how people 'attribute meaning to their own lives' (Leavy and Harris, 2019).

Writing as Enquiry

I am vehemently committed to understanding and illustrating the experiences of mothering in diverse circumstances or circumstances of mothering that people are less likely to hear about. I also wish to create a space for myself and the mothers participating in this research to offer insight into my/their authentic experiences of mothering so that others might see things from a perspective different to their own. As a researcher I am seeking to appreciate and understand the differences between people and to acknowledge and remove the potential power disparities between interviewer and interviewee. Therefore, I drew upon Laurel Richardson's (2001) 'writing as enquiry'. Writing as enquiry allows me to situate my work and be honest about how my experiences have influenced who I am both as a scholar and writer. Richardson explains she believes that people who write are 'always writing about their lives even when they are trying to disguise this through the omniscient voice of science or scholarship' (p. 34). Acknowledging this is not always straight forward and always requires you to consider the consequences of writing about your own experiences and those of others. Most significantly, writing creates connections to others and is 'a way of finding out about yourself and your world' (p. 35).

Although, I shared my own experience in part from the same geographical location as the participants, this prior experience makes no assumption that my former insight permitted me to follow a fixed research design as a result of the multiplicity and unpredictability of what is perceived as reality for the participants (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). I remained open to new knowledge throughout the study and its development was based upon the help of the participants.

As mentioned earlier this research will borrow from some areas of ethnography and will refer to specific aspects of ethnographic interviewing

in this section while remaining fixed to feminist research. Ethnography does encompass terms such as fieldwork, qualitative and sociology with an aim to reconstructing an 'actor's own world-view.....to the everyday life of the subject' (Rock, 2001, p.30). This can cause challenges when attempting to plan the approach in advance. Most probably due to the addition of the 'external world' of the researcher and researched that relies on more than just 'intellect and reason' (p.30). This unique process has unfolded again and again at every turn and has led to my discovering the iterative nature of autoethnography that Behar (1996) refers to with such delight.

I share Muncey's (2010) admission of her quest to, 'finding a narrative that portrays teenage pregnancy in a positive light' (p.1). It is not *this* I aim to find but similar in representing narratives of mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds in a more 'positive light'. It is also important to me that readers have a sense of who I and the participants are when they read this thesis. This is not as straightforward as it sounds partly because part of this process involves understanding who I am as both a researcher, a writer and as a person. These have evolved through my own life experiences. To reject the inclusion of who I am throughout my work is to separate my experiences from this thesis. Kirsch (1999) offers explanation for a rationale on the researchers position within the research,

'The goal of situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives is not to overcome these limits —an impossible task—but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, and the research reports we write. That kind of knowledge can help readers understand (rather than second-guess) what factors have shaped the research questions at hand; it also helps to ground the research report in a specific cultural and historical moment' (p.14).

This is a reflexive project which is why my voice will be included alongside the voices of the other mothers. I have embedded my own

narrative within the research for the participants to know and understand my position within this work, what has driven me to want to show their stories and to ensure they realise that I also want to show mine. However, in partial agreement with Bochner and Ellis (2002), Chang (2008) argues that simply exposing oneself without interpretation and analysis places the writing as autobiography. Therefore, as well as analysing and interpreting the mother's stories I have also interpreted my own. This story is *my* story but is also *your* story because this autoethnographic account of both mine and the mothers included can be interpreted by the reader to generate more questions and knowledge on what we think we know and how we know it.

After careful consideration I have chosen not to fictionalise *my* narrative in this research. Fictionalising my narrative would have allowed me to protect myself and others from the reactions of readers alongside feelings my narrative might invoke in them, but my aim is to preserve the reality of my experience. Examples of fictionalising writing are co-authors Stacy Holman Jones and Tony Adams (2011) who choose to disguise whose experience belongs to who to protect their identities. Utilising numbered voices and historical characters to speak his words are also implemented by Norman Denzin (2003, 2008, 2015) to prevent identification of who he is writing about. Some writers assign roles rather than names (Poulos, 2008).

I highlight these alternatives to clarify options that could have influenced the choices of participants of this research on how they wished their narrative to be represented. I am at the centre of my story, but I am acutely aware that what I write has the potential to cause hurt or discomfort to readers of this work. However, I am prepared to accept the consequences of *my* story and this is based on the premise that my story

may have something to offer others (Ellis, 2016). For it to make sense to myself and others I feel writing in this way will allow me to move beyond the innate feeling of 'never being good enough' that still seems to permeate through every pore of my being.

To further support the authenticity of my narrative I have chosen to use a photograph that is symbolic to me. It represents and captures the contributory factors that have created the intrinsic parts of myself that have shaped the mother I am. Alternative choices of mediums could have emerged from collaborating with participants as they too could have chosen a photograph or similar to symbolise or facilitate sharing their experience of mothering, but this did not evolve the way I had envisaged. Nothing ever appears as straightforward as it might seem, and qualitative research is one of those.

So that I remain true to myself and the mothers, I am committed to ensuring the research questions more traditional research processes and demands that preconceived ideas are examined, that data representation is questioned and that the way research is disseminated is also challenged. It would be impossible for me to do this research in a way that does not seek to understand the lived experiences of each mother from their own perspective. Each are valid. Therefore, it is essential to explore in some detail the rationale and thought processes behind the decisions and choices made in order to acknowledge any biases or preconceptions that might be perceived.

I also wish to make clear that the common assumptions around feminist qualitative researchers undertaking research where the research may be considered 'too close to their heart' are worth briefly deliberating over (Griffin, 2012 p. 340). This is an area that warrants brief

acknowledgement due to the opposing rationale for and against. Diane Reay (1986) refers to her choice of undertaking feminist research that was 'central to her own experience' (p. 62). Barbara Du Bois (1983) offers the following explanation,

'The closer our subject matter to our own life and experience, the more we can probably expect our own beliefs about the world to enter into and shape our work - to influence the very questions we pose, our conception of how to approach those questions, and the interpretations we generate from our findings' (p. 105).

I am not claiming the mothers I am researching are the same mother as I am or vice versa. Neither am I claiming that because we are both mothers, I have a greater understanding of their experiences and it should be me who is entitled to convey them. I am claiming that each of us, myself and the mothers included in this research and the mothers beyond, *each* have a valid experience of mothering that deserves to be heard in order to shape perceptions of mothering and mother work which may help to challenge educators, law and policy makers to listen and create policies that are matrifocal in their focus particularly when mothers are the focus of many of those.

Due to the reasons explained above my research methodology and methods needed to align with creating research that would allow mothers who wanted to share their experience the opportunity to do so outside of the boundaries of more traditional research approaches. It was essential to develop research in a way that notably included my own experience of mothering but also one that removed any hierarchy between the researcher and participants and between each of the individual narratives shared. The intention is to strengthen the collection of matrifocal narratives while maintaining the foundation that there is not one more valuable than another.

I have had to pretend and feel ashamed of mothering at 14 years old and again mothering at 47 years old for the simple reason that my experience is lesser known than the more commonly heralded examples of mothering. This must change. I passionately believe that we *should* hear the stories of mothering and that we should adopt methods in research that encourages and reassures mothers they have permission to share their experiences with others in order for others to 'walk in their shoes' which may ultimately facilitate positive change and solidarity between feminists, mothers and policy makers. Maternal theorist Patricia Di Quinzio (2007) reminds us,

'to the extent that mothering in all its diverse forms, remains an important aspect of women's lives and that decisions about whether, when and how to mother continues to face almost all women, feminism cannot claim to give an adequate account of women's lives and to represent women's needs and interests if it ignores issues of mothering' (p. 545).

I am not suggesting there has not been research undertaken representing variations of mothers and mothering but I *am* suggesting that the research focusing on mothers mothering in challenging circumstances neglects to represent the value, strength and honesty in their mothering work. Donna Haraway (1988) insists on accountability as an element of feminist research or projects and Kay Standing (1998) turns to Kum-Kum Bhavnani (1993) who heralds the use of Haraway's principle for accountability in feminist projects which is, that any study whose main agent is a woman or women and which claims a feminist framework, should not reproduce the researched in ways in which they are represented in dominant - that is, the analyses cannot be complicit with dominant representations which re-inscribe inequality.

It is the lack of representation of mothers who do not appear to fit into the normative models of mothering that will be represented in this

research and who I am accountable to. This supports the intention of this research which aims to understand the various lived human experiences of mothers and *their* way of mothering. The research will support and enrich wider understanding of the position of mothers living in an area suffering from deprivation and acknowledge the value from their perspective of mothering. In a special issue of the feminist journal *Frontiers*, Sherna Berger Gluck wrote in 1977:

'Refusing to be rendered historically voiceless any longer, women are creating new history - using our own voices and experiences. We are challenging the traditional concepts of history, 'of what is historically important,' and we are affirming that everyday lives are history (p. 70).

That was in 1977. What has changed?

B a d M o t h e r s

It seems necessary at this point to briefly discuss mothers who are referred to as 'bad mothers'. La Chance Adams (2014) states that to avoid the 'idealization' of motherhood we should turn to its reality (p.7). Bad mothering has been described as abuse, neglect, failure to care for your child, abandonment, emotional and psychological violence, immoral conduct and in its most severe infanticide (Hughes Miller *et al*, 2017). The difference between good mothers and bad mothers is understood as doing different 'types of mothering and being different types of mothers' but meaning and understanding of a bad mother varies depending on social contexts and location (p.1). There have been suggestions that society imposes two opposite depictions of motherhood, the supportive, self-sacrificing 'good mother' and the self - centred, careless 'bad mother' (Phoenix and Woollett, p.25). This presents challenges and has attracted criticisms with the most significant being the near unattainable ideal of the 'good mother'. With such emphasis on the mother other significant factors

go unacknowledged, such as poverty and violence leading to the label of the 'bad mother' assigned to mothers who are from specific cultures or socio-economic backgrounds or mothers who are not conforming to societal stereotypes (Fineman, 1995, p.217).

However, despite what many believe, the label of bad mothering is restrictive and can cause further idealisation of the narrative of the good mother by narrowing the diversity of the way mothering is constructed. There is undoubtedly, more critical analysis of the construction and effect of the bad mother necessary but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to expand on this. It is worth noting that most feminist research avoids using a generalised description of the bad mother 'figure' which is largely referred to as the 'Other' when presenting cases of mothers who have abandoned, abused, neglected and even murdered their children (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, Rich,1976) (p.7).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research ethics are the guiding principles for institutions or individuals who conduct research with human participants. Miller *et al* (2012) and the Department of Health, (2011) advocates ethical considerations should protect everyone that is concerned in the research process including: participants, researchers and the institution. The research was undertaken after gaining full ethical approval from the university ethics board. The participants dignity and rights were respected within this research and ample information was provided to ensure they were able to make an informed choice as to if they wanted to take part in the research. I was aware throughout the duration of the research there was a need to monitor and review ethical decisions.

In order to continually inform the research process, feminist research must remain cognisant of the fundamental question, 'in whose interests' throughout (Skeggs, 1994, p.11). This research held the interests of the participant mothers close to mind by adopting an 'ethnographic attitude' that is possible with any research enquiry; it simply requires consistent mindfulness and accountability (Haraway, 1997, p.). This supported my approach to ethics which deviates from the more dominant and traditional position. The traditional approach is driven by absolute confidentiality and many assumptions regarding the participants. There is little room for important details about the research such as its potential audience, casting many assumptions on where and how participants may want their data to be used. These details are either omitted or ignored in the traditional approach, often as a result of the procedural and initial conversation regarding confidentiality and protection of participants that happens at the beginning of the research. I feel strongly that it is important to re-address confidentiality again at the conclusion of data collection.

Karen Kaiser (2009) writes openly and explicitly on the challenges she herself encountered in her early research stemming from the use of a more traditional approach. Her research focused on survivorship after breast cancer using in-depth interviews (Kaiser, 2006). It was a disclosure by one of her participants that presented Kaiser with an ethical dilemma not addressed by the standard ethical practices. Upon completing her research, she acknowledged her own discomfort stemming from the fact her participant had revealed information that may have been able to help others but due to her confidentiality agreement at the start of the research she felt unable to pursue this further. Kaiser (2009) also highlights the piece of major ethnographic work Carolyn Ellis undertook with a small community of fishermen, *Fisherfolk* (1986). The

work caused distress for many participants due to the handling of the data by Ellis. Much of this was a result of deductive disclosure. Members of the fishing community were still identifiable although Ellis had altered their names in the published work. I feel this is particularly relevant to my own research as the research Ellis undertook was in a small and isolated community. The publication of the work caused residents to feel 'humiliated' and 'betrayed' (Ellis, 1995). Upon reflection, Ellis (1995) has since declared that the alternative would have been to consult her participants and explained to them how and where she intended to use and publish the data.

These experiences by other researchers have been valuable in confirming for me why it is important to address confidentiality and consent in an alternative way to what is often done that will address the common assumption that all participants wish themselves and their data to remain anonymous. These are big assumptions to make and at the beginning of most traditional ethical considerations in research we have already made this decision for our participants. Typically, as researchers, we can base disclosure decisions on the harm we think we might do should we reveal details provided by participants that may be deemed harmful. However, there are several examples that highlight the opposite to this (Beck, 2005, Carter et al, 2008, Dyregrov, 2004). Participants have been keen to share painful and sensitive topics with the view of the help it may offer others.

Therefore, embedding an alternative approach to ethical procedures into my research was necessary. This required ongoing conversations around potential audiences for the research and a selection of confidentiality options. Being explicit with participants that confidentiality will be continually reviewed may be more reassuring than a

standard consent form offered at the start of the project. This approach strengthens ethical conformity by offering participants greater autonomy over the stories and data they have shared. In addition, I remained aware of the need to acknowledge my own self-care when exploring personal and sometimes painful experiences deeply. This led to continual self – reflection and ongoing conversations with both myself, my supervisory team and occasionally with a specialist therapist to ensure I maintained a safe, personal connection to my work.

Anonymity and Ethical Issues

I have considered my own anonymity as a participant and researcher carefully and feel more than prepared to share my identity publicly but I acknowledge that by disclosing my identity this may cause disclosure of others who are connected to me. This has led to the exclusion of many people with varying levels of significance in my story. This was intentional and a decision based on ethical considerations. I bring this to attention due to the incorrect assumption that when you are the focus of the writing/story/narrative there is no need to apply the same ethical considerations applied to the other participants whose narratives were shared (Chang, 2016). My refusal for anonymity is grounded in my desire for honest connection with the readers of this work. However, I have consciously adhered to the ethics code of research in order to protect anyone that may be affected by my role as researcher, informer and author. Anyone who is named in *my* narrative has been done with their full consent. Due to the possibility of an identity being discovered, other participants of the research were asked how they wished to be represented to ensure their anonymity remained and their response was honoured.

A further ethical issue surrounding ethnography comes from the 'appropriation of others' cultures, performances, life histories, and so on for the purpose of advancing an academic career' (p. Goodall, 2000). There are strategies that can be implemented to address this challenge such as doing something in return to those who have participated in the research and/or directing the 'ethnographic lens' back to the ethnographer. It is the latter I have adopted by scrutinising my own story alongside that of the participants (Ellis and Bochner, 1996).

METHODS

It remains challenging to adopt an appropriate methodology and method when attempting to maintain integrity to your values and beliefs as a researcher as well as abiding by the institutional and academic standards, which are often prescriptive, when setting out the methodology and method of research. Identifying the appropriate method is intended to ensure the correct procedures are followed and adhered to. As a researcher I am expected to ensure my work conforms to a set of prescribed standards and ensure my proposal and ethics adhere to university regulations. This has led me to also question what a method could or should be when undertaking a study gathering maternal narratives and attempting to analyse and interpret them while also determined that the research remains original and authentic.

Frank (2012) refers to method as providing assurance of our final 'product'. This extends to meeting strict deadlines and conforming to institutional guidelines for publication. However, Frank (2012) suggests there may be a more 'ad hoc' approach to method that can be considered. This seems a more appropriate way to understand and represent the experiences of mothering in a sensitive manner that will allow the

narratives to remind us that we ‘have to live with complicated truths’ (Frank, 2012 p.5).

Replacing more traditional criteria with something different may be questioned and require defending but there are alternative possibilities that these criteria can be replaced with. While drawing on previous research and considering the methods used for guidance with this is valuable, adopting a heuristic guide to the method and research may yield more authentic findings. Therefore, the following section offers an outline of the methods which ultimately came to fruition.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

Ethnography does not dictate a particular approach to sampling. It aims to offer insight and explanation into a specific group or location in a comprehensive way at a particular time and space (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). Ethnography allows in-depth discussion of social situations and circumstances and provides deep understanding of the beliefs, actions, constructions and meanings of the group being studied (Harper and La Fontaine, 2009).

There was previous preliminary work in the community in order to establish the feasibility of the research and the recruitment of participants (Edwardson, 2019). This helped in establishing connections with the local community. This is also supported by the previous experience I gained working in this community as a student midwife, breastfeeding peer supporter/coordinator, teenage parent lead, community-based resilience coordinator, researcher and Public Health Officer. This afforded me the opportunity to develop strong relationships with local stakeholders as well

as with members of parliament. I have an established rapport with GP surgeries, local schools, Sure Start Centres, Keystone Development Trust, Breckland District Council, Norfolk County Council, and organisations within the voluntary sector. I have previously undertaken a Photovoice project in the community, 'Understanding the Experiences as life as mother in Thetford', which has given me insight into the day to day lives of some of the residents living there.

The sampling strategy used in the research was snowball and opportunity sampling in the hope of recruiting mothers via the local neighbourhood centre located on the housing estate where I posted ethically approved post cards about the research. Although, closed for a period time, the neighbourhood centre has reopened and previous research had shown that the centre is a hub and social support space where mothers like to spend time (Edwardson, 2015, 2019). There is a community cafe run every day as well as art sessions, youth projects and bingo.

Due to the limited variation in participants the sampling strategy might yield, I used additional recruiting processes such as formal and informal advertising locally by distribution of postcards, social media and local contacts. This provided opportunities for inclusion of participants from outside of the main network of participants who used the neighbourhood centre (Waller et al, 2016). The final sample size was four participants which offered rich and thorough accounts of experiences and the following criteria was sought:

Participant Criteria

- Any mother over the age of 18

- Living or have lived on the Abbey Estate or a housing estate in Thetford identified as suffering from deprivation for a minimum of one year

These criteria were chosen as I wanted to understand the experiences of mothers mothering in challenging circumstances who were residents in areas of deprivation in Thetford. It is likely I could have spoken to teenage mothers but was aware of the ethical requirements relating to participants under the age of 18 despite the fact they may be a parent themselves. Each participant that expressed an interest in participating in the research, regardless of if it was clear they did not meet the criteria was contacted.

Despite this initial plan, upon visiting the community cafe and centre located on the Abbey Estate, as well as the local school and shop, I was greeted with the reality that these places were uninterested in raising awareness in the community of the opportunity to participate in the research. It felt as if I was met with suspicion in the local shop and perhaps I was not there to do what I was saying I was when I asked if could leave a few postcards. As a result of my local knowledge, I was aware there was only one shop on the estate that mothers frequently went to, particularly at the beginning and end of each school day. Reluctantly, they agreed to let me leave a couple of postcards.

In addition to this, I reached out to local councillors who have a social media presence on local forums, a local student/teenage and parental support worker as well as the town's mayor and councillors. There was no response from any of these. I was contacted by a local charity organisation who supports the community as well as mothers by running a weekly group, who asked me if I could explain more about the research and

introduced to me to several mothers who expressed an interest in taking part.

Four participants committed to being part of the research. Three mothers from the weekly meet up, one mother who contacted me independently. The interviews and interactions with participants were undertaken at a location of the participant's choice where privacy and identity were protected. Consideration of the environment was carefully taken due to the sensitivity of the subject being discussed. The research focused on the experiences of mothering with mothers who live in a specific location. Therefore, there were no mothers from minority groups, that participated in the study as there were none from the estate who expressed an interest. Due to the geographical location of where the participants are from and the very small numbers of subjects involved, it was difficult to include participants from minority groups. However, I want to acknowledge that there may be different traditions and practices that apply to the experiences of mothering that may have been discovered had there been a more diverse group of mothers who participated. Conversely, aspects of mothering perspectives may also be applicable to those who belong to other minority groups of mothers.

The thesis begins with an introduction to my own narrative in Courier font. Courier is a monospaced slab serif typeface. The typeface was designed by Howard 'Bud' Kettler (1919–1999). I have selected this to symbolise a diarised typed biographical account where typical academic frameworks are rejected and resources are not cited. To join this with the scholarly literature is necessary even though I realise it may appear incongruous to some readers. The thesis does not fit with the 'classical norms of academic writing' but nor does it intend to (Behar, 2003, p. xv cited in Freedman and Frey). I am seeking connection to the readers of this

work by demonstrating through my narrative how I discovered what I know. Rich (1976) previously called for writing informed by, 'lived experience' alongside Freedman and Frey (2003) who highlight a feminist approach to writing which unites 'lived experience, and theory, one's work and one's life' (p.3). In addition to my own narrative, I have also written and included my responses to the mother's narratives alongside the academic literature. I had never previously considered writing or expressing my own experiences of mothering in Thetford or as a teenage mother.

Initially, I attended a meeting with the manager of a local charitable foundation where I provided details of the research with a view of the organisation making mothers who attended aware of the opportunity to participate. Several mothers wished to participate and a date was arranged for me to meet with those interested. I had also been contacted by two other mothers independently who wanted to take part in the research. I met one of the mothers at a cafe and we spent nearly two hours together discussing her experience as a mother. Another mother who contacted me did not meet the criteria for the study as she did not/had not live/d on or near the Abbey Estate. This proved a difficult situation for me as has been justified throughout this thesis, that all mothers and women should be able to share their story. Rejecting her offer to share her story was a hard decision to make and felt as if I was going against my personal and professional values. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to include participants who do not meet the criteria, but I have offered to meet with her following completion of this research to discuss alternative possibilities she might wish to be involved in.

It is essential when writing, interpreting and analysing my own experiences of mothering, as well as those of other mothers, that the

language and style of the narratives are written accurately and faithfully and that these components of the work are genuinely represented in honour of those who have participated in it. Hence, the narratives are presented verbatim. Recognising, that some mothers may lack knowledge on finding a platform for having their voices heard and knowing the correct way to speak is essential to accept (Standing, 1998). Kay Standing elaborates further by explaining that language can act as a barrier and reinforce yet further inequalities. Therefore, it is necessary to refrain from using negative language and negative stereotypes.

The research undertaken carefully considered the language used in feminist research and addressed the exclusion of participants as a result of using inaccessible language in participant information and follow up reports. This can raise challenges, when in order for this work to be academically worthy it must demonstrate thorough knowledge and understanding and be able to withstand academic scrutiny. During the interview process there were occasions when I was confronted with challenges over language I chose to use during interviews with mothers. There were several commonly used words that had different meanings to different people. One participant interpreted a 'sense of community' among mothers as meaning what the authorities are doing in the community to provided services. In retrospect, I should have explained this more thoroughly as it is difficult to challenge this with a mother you are interviewing due to the sensitive nature of the information being exchanged as well as the possibility of demeaning them when they speak with such certainty around a specific term. This was unexpected due to careful planning as detailed above but has left me with approaching the simplest of terms more cautiously, particularly if there is the slightest possibility of a misinterpreted meaning.

DATA COLLECTION

Matrifocal Narratives - The Maternal narratives

To understand my own experience of mothering in extraordinary circumstances and the experiences of other mothers and their ways of mothering this research collected matrifocal narratives. Narratives are understood by Frank (2012) as one thing that happens as a consequence of another. Upon reaching the end of a narrative or story we ultimately happen upon another beginning (Frank, 2012). Sara Worth (p. 2005) developed the idea of 'narrative knowledge' as a way to gain understanding of something we may not comprehend. She argues that stories or narratives offer knowledge that creates empathy for others as well as an 'enhanced capacity and moral reasoning' (p. Goodall). Stories also allow me as a researcher 'to be into a way of life that gives meaning and value to those sources of knowledge that can be gotten at in no other discursive way' (p. Goodall, 2000).

Collecting narratives aligns well with interpretivism and the rationale for collecting matrifocal narratives is the opportunity to represent and interpret voices in order for others to understand life experiences for the researched group (Cortazzi, 1993). There is a broader meaning and implication though when referring to matrifocal narratives. According to Daly and Reddy (1991), a matrifocal narrative is a narrative that will '*begin* with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective,' and 'hold fast to a maternal perspective; in addition, a matrifocal reading attends to and accentuates the maternal thematic in any given text' (p.24). By gathering narratives, representations of mothers and their mothering stories can be

examined and interpreted using a matrifocal lens to support a more nuanced explanation of the experiences of mothers.

Further understandings offer us a comparison of stories to the expectant tick tock of a clock as well as the notion that stories begin with an *abstract*, followed by the *orientation*, then a *complicating event*, a *resolution*, the story teller's *evaluation* and finally the *coda* (Kermode, 1973 Labov and Waletzky,1997). Labov (1997) refers to stories encompassing these components as 'fully formed' narratives but this is rarely the case. Often narratives have some of these elements missing or they appear in a different order. Upon reaching the end of a narrative or story we ultimately happen upon another beginning (Frank, 2012).

M o v e m e n t o f T h o u g h t

The previous research I have undertaken in 2015, Using Photovoice to Understand the Experiences of Mothering has underpinned my knowledge of the value in removing the traditional way of undertaking research alongside participants where the researcher may be perceived as holding more power over the participants. While I adopted the methods of a photovoice methodology I refrained from following it prescriptively. Adjustments were made to support and include the mothers who participated and even led to elements of the methods being rejected in favour of alternatives. Some of the benefits to this were the organic development of the data and of less emphasis and time given to photographic training and instruction allowing more time for data collection and unstructured interviews.

Initially, my intention within this thesis research was to use narratives alongside photo elicitation to demonstrate a rich and deep understanding with both elements enhancing the other. I researched

several examples of this which provided insight and justification of using photographs alongside written text. Harper (1989) and Jacknis (1988) heralded Bateson and Mead's (1942) work, *Balinese Character*, as an innovative visual ethnography that has had greater impact on visual sociology than on visual anthropology as one might expect, due to the nature of the study. In order for readers to fully comprehend the study they must use both the written text and the photographs to understand the work. The work is significant as it 'shows how still photographs, together with a descriptively precise and theoretically informed commentating text, can serve to illuminate and further ethnographic understanding (Ball and Smith, 2007).

Researchers Collier and Collier (1986) refer to photographs as the 'third party' during interviews. In effect, this creates a dynamic whereby the participant feels as though there is less emphasis and focus on them because they are not the 'centre of attention' (p.105). Prosser and Burke (2006) further support this theory by explaining that the maintenance of eye contact and any possible embarrassment is lessened due to the mutual fixation on the photograph. Donna Schwartz (1989) suggests many participants respond directly to the photograph rather than the interviewer. This is especially important when conducting interviews that may involve the discussion of sensitive issues.

Although I selected a photograph of my own, the mothers did not. They were most interested in sharing their story not photographs. Initially, I had intended to implement this as part of the research process for the mothers who I would interview. This was in part driven by my fear that the mothers might find it difficult or uncomfortable to tell me about their experiences. I did not realise at the time how useful the photograph I chose would be in helping me to recall and return to my 14-year-old self as a

mother and how much it would reassure and demonstrate to the mothers the genuineness of my experiences and background. This was a simple medium that facilitated the collection of narratives, including my own but undoubtedly increased the willingness of mothers to share theirs.

Integrating the Image and its 'story'

Although integrating the image and the story did not come to fruition in the way I had expected it to the justification for using photographs alongside narrative came from my own response in sharing my experiences of mothering in this research as well as evidence from previous research undertaken in this way. It is argued that using photographs alone are not enough. Photographs can make a distinct contribution to the research, but when considered in isolation from other sources they were of little value (Bolton *et al*, 2001).

There are several varying approaches that can be used when analysing photographs alongside narratives. These include 'reworking photographs', 'staging photographs' (Spence, 1995, Martin,1986) and 'working below the surface' (Walkerdine,1991). Reworking photographs was initiated as a valuable therapeutic method and may enable me to draw upon aspects of this when reviewing my own personal narrative and photograph included in this research, particularly when Spence (1995) recalls how the process of 'reworking' allowed her creative thoughts to reverse the way she had been constructed as a woman. I am able to reflect on my own construction as a mother. The method involves using much larger collections of personal photographs to create a self-history. However, utilising a method such as this was beyond the scope of this thesis and the researcher.

At first glance the photograph I chose to use alongside my narrative may appear simple and devoid of having any deeper meaning but the photograph helped and allowed me to tell my story and explore the meaning and significance behind the picture. Most likely it encouraged me to acknowledge the catastrophic reality that I did indeed have a baby aged 14. More significantly, sharing this photograph with the mothers I interviewed took on an entirely unexpected meaning and purpose. Its significance was such, that without sharing it I am certain that the interviews would not have progressed as they did nor would each of our positions as participants of the research been established on an equal basis from knowing our shared origins.

It might be questioned if there is value in collecting maternal narratives and conducting social research using photographs. There are critiques of this approach but it is difficult to deny that this can provide insights into various aspects of life. This method can be intensive, unsettling and challenging and requires honest consideration of if adequate resources can be given to analyse the emergent data (Tinkler, 2013). Including photographs as part of data may not be straightforward due to issues surrounding the photograph origins and meaning. However, this type of photo-work can foster the exploration of identities and memories. It also allows the researcher to examine more closely their own responses when they are a participant of the research (Tinkler, 2013). Further to this, reflexivity can be enhanced surrounding the research topic and it's influences on the findings and interpretations can be heightened. Rachel Thomson explains:

'By exploring our own and each other's' memories we began to engage with the emotional terrain that we would be inviting others to share with us, helping us both to gain a sense of what was possible within the

research, but also to gain a perspective on the sensitivities involved (Rachel Thomson, 2010, p. 9-10)'.

Upon meeting each mother, I sensed and realised there was some trepidation. Who was this stranger wanting to hear stories of experiences of mothering in Thetford, particularly from the Abbey estate? One mother openly admitted she thought I must be a 'weirdo'. I wondered how I would reassure each of them appropriately and convey my genuine passion and dedication to recovering the voices of mothers in Thetford. This 'simple' photograph of me aged 14 with my baby proved to be worthy evidence in conveying this. I displayed the photograph included at the beginning of the thesis on an Apple i-pad and offered a brief explanation of who and what the photo was. I explained the girl in the photograph was me, aged 14 with a baby in Thetford. My baby. This was not how I had originally envisaged using the photograph I had selected but it quickly became apparent that by sharing my photograph the mothers understood my authenticity.

I was cautious not to go into too much detail as I was conscious of appearing self-centred. I did not want to create an impression that the research was all about *my* story just that I wished to share my own alongside theirs. I felt I also needed to offer genuine visual evidence of my experience. I wanted the mothers to know I had genuinely lived near to where they meet each week and I had been a very young mother in the town. The photograph seemed to authenticate this. Although, I wanted the mothers to know I was including myself as part of the research I was aware this was an unusual opportunity for them to share their own experiences and that the sharing of the interviewer's may be considered intrusive (Lawler, 2000).

The dynamics changed immediately. It felt as if there was almost a metaphorical sigh of relief. As if I was safe to talk to. Although, I had never

used a photograph of my own before, when I had conducted previous research with mothers in Thetford, I had experienced that feeling of acceptance. Once the mothers I had met with in my prior research knew I had been a teenage mother in Thetford they were also willing to speak to me and to participate in the photovoice project. This appeared similar.

Unstructured interviews

Kvale (1996) offers two metaphors of a research interviewer, a miner and a traveller. The miner lends herself to more traditional approaches by collecting data and facts. The traveller views the researcher as on a journey that she will return from with stories to tell. The route may be planned ahead of time but will lead to unexpected twists and turns as interviewer-traveller follow their particular interest and adjust their paths according to what those met along the way choose to share (Kvale, 1996 p.4).

It was anticipated that using unstructured interviews to collect matrifocal narratives would take me on an unexpected journey and generate worthy data. I wanted to be sure the mothers had 'greater control' over the interview hence less structured questions (Riessman, 1993). This did not mean I did not have an outline of the topic with some guiding questions to assist with the interview if I felt respondents needed some help expanding on their story but overall, I had hoped and was pleased when the unstructured interviews felt more like conversations. The original Latin meaning of conversation is, 'wandering together with' (Kvale, 1996 p.4). According to Barbara Sherman Heyl (1997) feminist researchers 'view ethnographic interviewing as a 'conversation' and as such, many of them focus on the talk going on in the interviews and how it is shaped by both parties (p.374).

I also wanted to ensure there were minimal power imbalances between myself and the mothers I interviewed. Eliot Mishler (1986) is critical of traditional interview techniques and argues that structured interviewing detaches respondents and their responses from their day to day lives. 'To obtain and 'develop detailed, coherent narratives' the interviewer needs to share the power over the interview process with the interviewee (p. 122 - 32). It was important that participants did not feel different to me but I realise how challenging this is when clearly as the researcher from an academic institution I am different. I have previously witnessed people in their professional life exerting their power over those with less. I always perform a mental check to make certain I do not do the same. Interviews, classrooms, midwifery. I do not want to be different to the mothers I interview and by this I specifically mean more powerful than them. It is possible this originates from times of feeling powerless and inadequate when I was a young mum, a student midwife and even as an older mum and has given me an acute awareness of causing anyone else to feel this way. However, it was our experiences as mothers living in the same area in the same town that ultimately united us and seemed to push the differences to the periphery.

Literature both supports and questions this approach and in particular, the major study undertaken by Anne Oakley (1979, 1981, 2016) is a useful example as this illustrates how she felt there were two issues in the interview process of power and reciprocity. By adopting a less traditional interviewer researcher approach she felt the interviewing process had been made more equal. She mentions the more traditional interview expectation of not responding to women's questions they may have for the researcher and distracting them in order to deflect these questions to avoid producing biased data but she felt this attitude would

prevent her obtaining 'full and honest accounts' from the women. Oakley's research became very well-known but not only for its focus on the transition to motherhood but due to her approach to interviewing the participants where she addressed the controversial political and social relationship between the researcher and the participants. Oakley remained steadfast to her belief that for women to trust and reveal their true experiences it was important for the interviewer to respond honestly to questions the interviewees might ask. She also felt that by insisting the interviewer's performance should neglect to reveal their attitudinal stance was based upon more traditional interviews where it was considered biases of the interviewer would affect or 'contaminate' the results (p.36).

The nature of this research challenges and questions some common assumptions around imbalances of power between the researcher and participants. I would question this power imbalance in research such as this or similar. The participants were informed at the initial stages that this research was seeking to represent mothers in new ways and hear about their experiences and strategies of mothering. In making this clear from the beginning the mothers held the gift of their story which they could either choose to keep or share. This altered the dynamic. Many marginalised mothers are strong and powerful but are not always portrayed that way. Much research focuses on the negative experiences or behaviours of mothers but this is a fresh approach to identifying strengths.

The Unexpected

Initially, I had intended to adopt a memory and oral photographic method to support the collection of matrifocal narratives. Partly, once again, because I believed that mothers might find it difficult to share their stories with me and the use of photographs would be a welcome focus for

them but as sometimes occurs in qualitative research due to the flexible and evolutionary process of the method/s, as explained above, during two of the interviews, an additional element emerged that I had not planned nor did I have any idea would be a part of the interview. The collection of two of the narratives included an unstructured interview while each mother was undertaking an art-based activity. This was not planned or discussed. Each mother just opened her bag and took out the art activity she was working on and started gluing/colouring. These art-based activities were different in each of the interviews. This possibly transpired as at the weekly meet up the mothers attended; they often undertook craft activities while they shared their weekly updates with each other. Although, I had considered my original plan of photo elicitation as abandoned, when I reflected on this, as well as my rationale for wanting to implement photo elicitation I realised that the art-based activity may have served a similar purpose I had hoped the photograph/s might similar to the aforementioned Collier and Collier (1986) who compare a photograph as a 'third party' in an interview and to Prosser and Burke (2006) who suggest that when there is something else to focus on (a photograph), in this case an art-based activity, that it is less embarrassing to respond.

Nguyen (2018) compares implementing arts-informed activities while collecting narratives to the utilisation of photo elicitation (Torre and Murphy, 2015). This may not be instantly obvious but after seeing this process unfold, I agree with this alignment. One of the participants was using decoupage to cover a wooden jewellery box and the other was colouring small intricate patterns with a wide range of colours. Both of the mothers explained to me how relaxing it was for them to have something to focus on each time they visited the centre. It was mentioned in a wider more general conversation, that previously the mothers did not have a

particular focus if they came to the centre apart from listening to the stresses and problems of each other. They explained how pleased they were to have access to individual activities now to take such emphasis away from their problems alone. They expressed that at times, if they were in a group and one person was particularly struggling it had consumed hours of time and energy leaving all of them feeling overwhelmed. This had been mitigated by the opportunity for mothers to speak to the centre manager individually should they require intensive support or signposting to other support services. I hope the natural evolution of the interviews demonstrate the aforementioned desire to create authentic research using a more speculative, heuristic approach (Frank, 2010).

Maternal Narrative Collection

Collecting the narratives took place at two different locations and each unstructured interview lasted 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. I wanted to understand if mothers living in areas of deprivation and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were practising matricentric feminism or empowered mothering but framing questions using this language could be a barrier to their responses. I knew I had to shape questions using language that would not be misunderstood or misinterpreted. I made no assumptions about what the mothers might or might not share with me and hoped the semi-structured questioning would act more as a conversation starter.

After the initial discussion and participant information provided about the research the interviews progressed well. I asked each of the mothers when I met them what it was like to be a mother living on either the Abbey or Redcastle Estate. The mothers all seemed eager to share their experiences and I believe that part of this may stem from the fact that they

felt I had genuinely faced challenges as a mother myself and that I explained I was not seeking to portray them in a negative manner. I provided very little information about myself, apart from the photograph I presented before we spoke. This was intentional but I would have provided further details if they had wanted at that point. However, at times during our conversations, parts of my experiences became clear to them as we discussed various aspects of our mothering in Thetford that included education, health and support services. I described the meet up group that was available when I was a teenage mother located very close to where I interviewed three of the mothers and we discussed how difficult it can be when someone knows you live in Thetford. What dawned on me when I was at the centre meeting the individual mothers was the centre just a few minutes down the road that I had attended each week as a teenage mother with several other teenage mothers. What a sanctuary and safe haven that had been for me. A place where I was safe from the gaze and judgement of others. I rarely, if at all ever recall going to that centre but speaking to Kate, Sarah, and Wendy reminded me what a significant support it had been and how it gave me a type of permission and freedom to be who I was. To be me. No judgements.

The mothers did not need much prompting but occasionally I referred to my guidance questions/notes to try and understand something more clearly. Again, I believe the interviews progressed in this way because the mothers were keen to speak with me. I also compare this to the work of Anne Oakley and criticism she faced and responded to in her work *Becoming a Mother* (later retitled *From Here to Maternity*) (1979) suggesting the mothers were more receptive due to their isolation. In addressing assumptions as to why women and mothers might willingly speak with a researcher, she offers the possibility that the mothers she

interviewed engaged with her in the way they did due to the vulnerability and isolation that these mothers may have faced which may have led them to taking any opportunity to speak to another woman about their experiences. As Benjamin (1968) states 'the storyteller takes what she tells from experience – her own or that reported by others. And she in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to her tale' (p.87).

This could be applicable to this work as it is not often mothers are invited to sit and share their stories with a researcher. This undoubtedly creates a unique opportunity for a mother's story to be heard and in doing so may facilitate a mother's engagement. This has also been discussed by Janet Finch (1984) who made the similar observation: 'Women are almost always enthusiastic about talking to a woman researcher, even if they have some initial anxieties about the purpose of the research or their own 'performance' in the interview situation' (p.72). Women and mothers might have more time or be more isolated, therefore welcome the opportunity to speak about their experiences with someone who is genuinely interested. However, I would argue that many people, men or women, mothers or fathers, if asked, 'What's your story?' would welcome the chance to tell it.

In the follow up with the women Oakley interviewed it is interesting to note their response after such time had elapsed since the original study. Most of the women who did remember taking part in the study recalled this positively, saying that they had been pleased to talk about their experiences, had valued the effort to think things through, contribute to a study that might help others as well as making them feel more important and have an opportunity to find out about other women's experiences (Oakley, 2016, p.200).

The Mother's Voices

Despite reassurances from work such as Oakley's one of my greatest fears of undertaking this research was the possibility that mothers would not want to share their stories with me. There have been days at a time when I have wished I was doing a book-based study and even considered abandoning my passion for wanting to represent and recover the voices of mothers in a way not often done. One of the biggest obstacles to overcome was the fear of having no participants. For me, this is to resurrect the feelings of not being good enough. This may be my default position - that I have no place or credibility to be doing this.

Mothers will not want to participate because I am not good enough. Doubts of my expertise and if perhaps that allowing me to do this work has been a very big mistake. Who am I? I was beginning to feel overrun with these doubts when as if by magic, *a deus ex machina* appeared, just as Paul Rock (1979) describes in the Handbook of Ethnography. The New Latin saying translated from Greek means, 'a God from a machine'. This was the Meet Up Manager [MT] who was able to connect me with mothers who wanted to offer their voices.

So, I found my *deus ex machina* of a sort. I began to trust in the process and to have faith that on days when I feel as if I am deeply immersed in uncertainties that days will follow where I am certain. I want this work to be open and honest and true. To be fair and give voice to mothers who want to have theirs heard. I am not insisting this is a complete or final representation but a valuable and important one. I realise these doubts and concerns plague many researchers and I have allowed the work of others to reassure me that I am not alone. I know how fortunate I was having met someone who was able to facilitate introductions to several participants. That this path has been walked many, many times before, and

to continue I have to push through these nagging doubts that come and go regularly because when I have met each of these mothers and heard their stories, I am first, humbled and then determined. Determined that our stories *will* be told.

M o v e m e n t o f T h o u g h t

I was unable to guarantee exactly what hearing the stories of experiences of mothering from other mothers alongside my own might reveal upon interpretation and analysis. I did not want to manipulate or dictate any narrative to fit into preconceived methodologies, interpretive analysis or expectations from others. I cannot predict the experiences that will be shared from the different circumstances of mothering but similar demands should allow some commonalities to be compared. This caused anxiety, excitement and a good feeling of unashamedly holding onto to 'my rules' that I have deemed appropriate in my interpretation and analysis. Arthur W. Frank (2010) declares,

'The study of stories I propose is less about finding themes and more about asking what stories do, which is to inform human life. Stories inform in the sense of providing information, but more significantly, stories give form—temporal and spatial orientation, coherence, meaning, intention, and especially boundaries—to lives that inherently lack form..... stakes on studying stories are high.' (p.12)

A different theoretical framework might produce a different analysis. Therefore, as Riessman points out, the basis for assessing the validity of an analysis no longer resides with the impossible task of representing the 'truth' but instead focuses on the notion of 'trustworthiness'. Taking all of this into consideration it is still important to remember that the analysis of the matrifocal narratives is still a part of the research process. The emphasis of this research is based upon maternal narratives but this is because this is a talk-focused study. In contrast to

more common approaches to analysis, I resisted the temptation to begin coding and analysing immediately, as is often recommended (Reissman, 1993) This seemed counterintuitive at a time when I felt it was important to hear and understand a story as a whole as opposed to fragmenting it into parts or pieces. This part of the research process set to ensure the complete analysis of the project alongside the data as well as producing a trustworthy and honest interpretation of the narratives raised a lot of questions as to how to do this best but if we understand method as 'a prescribed set of steps that the analysis should follow' then there is no method available to use when analysing narrative (Reissman, 1993, Frank, 2012). This has caused me both reassurance and fear that I would not find a suitable method. However, I eventually did.

Transcribing the recorded interviews was a daunting task but one I was also looking forward to in many ways. I knew that listening to the interviews again and again would help me to gain clarity and feel close to the participants. I felt it was a time I could tune in to the data and fully absorb myself in the stories of the mothers. Sometimes during the interviews, they might say something that surprised me, or made me feel sad or caught me off guard but I was always conscious during the interviews of keeping those feelings hidden for fear of causing any offence or showing any surprise.

The Particular Truth of Stories

The rationale behind the data selection and analysis was ongoing throughout the entire research process but did not fully evolve until after the interviews were transcribed verbatim as I faced new uncertainty as to how I would undertake the analysis. The decisions surrounding this part of the research was the hardest and where I felt most conflicted. I had been

entrusted with the stories of mothers and knew it was my responsibility to interpret and represent them in a trustworthy manner (Reissman, 1993). I considered various options and tied myself in knots trying to find the perfect way. Diane Reay (1986) writes of a similar experience when she details much of the analysis during her doctorate research. She writes of her need to acknowledge and explain her difference. I too am aware of how my position impacts the entire research process I am undertaking and how it may limit the wider perspective I have not had access to. However, like Reay has previously asserted, I acknowledged that as the researcher I 'have access to more valued knowledge than that of the women I have interviewed' (p.62). This does not seem enough though when I am attempting to remain true to the stories the mothers have told. All of this is a reminder that as the researcher I am in a powerful position and am the only one in the position to make choices on the key stages of the research process.

These feelings were intensified because at the root my research is advocacy research. I have a message I want to tell: 'that there are myriad injustices that are being perpetrated' (Reay, 1983, p. 62). Despite this I am aware I will be drawn to particular parts of the narratives and that my interpretation can be only partial and 'imperfect' (Reay, 1993 p. 57). I query if *my* experience of being a mother might impede the analysis and interpretation or my understanding of the mothers I have interviewed.

I contemplated thematic analysis but this alone might have broken and separated the narratives into smaller parts leading to a loss of the context of what the mothers had said. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to the 'fragmentation of data' which can interrupt the flow of the narrative and Riessman (1993) also expresses concern for the fragmenting of data during thematic analysis. However, there is little evidence on definitive

processes for thematic analysis therefore, I felt justified in pursuing a framework in keeping with my original research aims and objectives (Bryman, 2016). This initially took into account various terms that were associated with the main codes/themes I was questioning. For example, when considering the term *authentic* other associated words, I considered were honest, valid, original, actual, real, genuine, trustworthy and credible. When considering the terms *authority* and *agency* other associated words I considered were power, resistance, agent, direction, influence, confident, strong-minded, strong-willed and determined. For the final theme of *autonomy*, I considered associated words such as freedom, self-ruling, liberty and independence. (See appendix for full list of words used in the framework). These core elements of feminist mothering are useful analytical units for making sense of the data. Specific considerations were also given to repetitions within the data, transitions in topics mentioned throughout the narrative, omissions in the interviews, similarities and differences between the transcripts and linguistic connectors (Green, Steinbach and Datta, 2012).

It is also worth noting that there may appear to be some overlap between the four attributes of empowered mothering that have been explored as themes in the thesis. This is due to their overarching connection that each of these have to each other and to empowered mothering which signifies them as practices 'of mothering that seeks to challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women' (O'Reilly, 2016, p.136). To clarify further, it is worth highlighting the difference of empowered mothering to patriarchal motherhood as it is in opposition to this. Patriarchal motherhood is often thought of has the norm and often

marginalises and declares that alternative practices of mothering are illegitimate (O'Reilly, 2016).

'As a normative discourse, it polices all women's mothering and results in the pathologizing of those women who do not or cannot perform normative motherhood. Finally, the patriarchal institution of motherhood, as a normative discourse, restrains women's power to challenge and change the oppressiveness of their motherhood experience (O'Reilly, 2016, p.19).

Despite their overlapping connectivity, the selected themes serve as the framework for analysing the maternal narratives as they are based upon O'Reilly's (2016) theory of empowered mothering which is grounded in authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy.

I initially considered Labov's model of narrative analysis but realised very quickly this may be more suitably applied to complete narratives. Labov's six sequential stages include an abstract, the orientation, a complicating event, resolution, followed by evaluation and finally the coda. The narratives I had collected did not have a distinct order nor did they all include each of the stages. Therefore, I continued my search. Consideration was given to some of Arthur Frank's ways of analysing narratives which include movement, reciprocity and constant flux (2010). This allowed me to visualise further meaning that the narratives might have through questioning them in a less prescriptive way than Labov's (1972). I found myself returning to the four attributes and 'organised aims' of empowered mothering as laid down by O'Reilly (2006, 2007, 2016) - maternal authenticity, maternal agency, maternal authority and maternal autonomy. This reminded me that I was aiming to adopt a level of advocacy for myself and the other mothers I interviewed and lead me to the following,

'How does the story, and the particular way it is told, define or redefine those stakes, raising or lowering them? How does the story change people's sense of what is possible, what is permitted and what is responsible or irresponsible' (Frank, 2010, p. 74-75).

It was clear to me from the beginning I wanted to gather matrifocal narratives and question if they offered insight into empowered mothering from mothers mothering in difficult circumstances as opposed to illustrating negative aspects of mothering in challenging settings. By undertaking the analyses and writing simultaneously I was certain I would be able to focus on my own experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature. The aforementioned literature throughout the thesis demonstrates the need for a vision that offers an alternative perspective to portraying mothers and to confirm the presence or absence of their agency, authenticity, authority and autonomy but I realised I needed to ensure my analysis provided an in-depth inquiry that linked the findings to theory. From the outset I was committed to recovering counter narratives to the more commonly known discourse around mothering. I questioned if any of the narratives represented mothering in these categories and how this was different to what might be discovered and portrayed if someone else was undertaking the research. Other specialist fields could have been considered and included in the analysis but aligning the research with a matricentric feminist lens provided the justification for the exclusion of an alternative analysis such as health promotion, inequalities or public health. Finally, the sample is in no way a representative of all mothers living on either of the estates or am I suggesting it is a representation of the experiences of all mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Neither will the research offer generalisable results, however it will identify patterns, themes and/or components of empowered mothering.

Layered Accounts of Narratives

Layered accounts have been described by Charmaz (1983) as similar to grounded theory. Layered accounts illustrate how 'data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously' (p.110) and frame existing research as a 'source of *questions and comparisons*' rather than a 'measure of truth' (p.117). In contrast to grounded theory, layered accounts use vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection (Ellis,1991) to 'invoke' readers to enter into the 'emergent experience' of doing and writing research (Ronai, 1992, p.123).

According to Ronai (1995) a pioneer of the 'layered account', she describes it as one that shows connections among 'personal experience, theory, and research practices' (p.395). The layered account is a recognised form of autoethnography that interweaves multiple voices and uses research literature as a source of comparison to experience (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Layering text is also defined as 'text that juxtaposes different time periods or topics to create evocative ruptures and to hijack the reader's assumptions oftentimes sections are separated by asterisks * * * * *' (p. 271 Tracy, 2013). Asterisks will be used between the layered accounts I detail to denote a shift to a different temporal/spatial/attitudinal realm (Ronai, 1992). I will also use a different font style for each of the shifts to further clarify the voices and literature. For the voice/account of the mothers Helvetica Neue (Light) will be used. For my own voice **Segoe Print** will be used and for the literature Times will be used. Offering layered accounts of each of the mothers' narratives allowed me to keep each of their stories as individual whole parts and negated the need of breaking narratives into small phrases, words or parts which might cause a fracturing of the narrative. Studying a story is less about finding themes and

more about asking, 'what do stories do, which is to inform human life?' (p.2 Frank, 2010).

Meeting the mothers - Keeping the Stories Together

'Where were the mothers, symbolic or otherwise, whom I might have turned to in that moment of aloneness and desperation?' (Di Brandt, p.4). There is a multiplicity of mothering circumstances we rarely get to hear of resulting in major gaps in our understanding of mothers. The following chapter provides background for each of the mothers who generously shared their experience of mothering in the form of a matrifocal narrative. To demonstrate the value of the narratives and represent them in a holistic way, I developed summarised narratives of the transcripts prior to the layered accounts (Frank, 2010).

The overarching aim of the research is to explore the experiences of mothers mothering from lower socio-economic backgrounds within challenging circumstances. I have intentionally chosen not to include specific details or a particular profile of the mothers but to simply introduce the narratives based on the stories they told. Narrating, or 'telling', is one way in which people tell what they know about who they are (Medlicott, 2004). They are not a complete representation of their lives or their mothering experiences but the experiences of mothering and mother work they have chosen to share are central to this thesis.

It is important to note that the layered accounts of each mother vary in length in each of the chapters focusing on authenticity, authority, agency and autonomy. The reader may be uncertain as to why the length of each differs. To clarify, the interviews were unstructured with limited guidance resulting in narratives of varying degrees. The mothers are

individuals who naturally offer their story in a way unique to them. For example, one of the mothers was much quieter and shy and was very succinct in the narrative she offered. One mother was hesitant at times, two others were confident and expressive and the interview time was more limited with another. There were also short conversations and discussions before and after each interview that were not recorded but where each mother permitted details from these to be included in their narrative.

L o r i

Lori moved to the estate eight years ago. Lori is a mother of four and lives with two of her daughters. She has not had the opportunity to discuss her circumstances of mothering before and she tells me it has been helpful to share her story. Throughout our interview, Lori is focused on a wooden jewellery box she is covering using decoupage. She explains to me that having something to focus on when she comes to the centre and group is helpful and makes her feel serene. Not having to focus so intensely on the problems of others that may cause her to feel, 'as if the life has been sucked out of her' when she leaves. Lori attends a group at the community centre once a week to meet up with other mothers. She tells me that she attends the group on this estate which is about a 15-minute walk from the estate where she lives as this is the only group of its kind. When we meet, Lori reveals that when she heard about the research I was doing she thought I was a 'weirdo'. She reassured me that once she had met me, she realised this was not the case. Lori crosses much terrain in sharing her story and begins by explaining the negative perceptions associated with living on the estate and in Thetford. 'Yep, I have people, cause I work in the town, who just constantly moan about it. It's just like really. Cause actually, I like living here and if it's that bad, 'Get out'.'

Kerry

Although we found it difficult to arrange a mutually convenient time to meet due to our other commitments, I was looking forward to seeing Kerry. I had a sense from her communication of how determined she was to offer her input to the research. It felt surreal as I prepared to go and meet Kerry though, due to the previous night's events less than a quarter of a mile from where we are meeting and even closer to my father's house. A fatal stabbing had occurred and although this is very rare, I had to plan my route carefully due to road closures and police patrols. Kerry expresses her concerns, 'Like I say there was a stabbing down the road just last night and my son literally came in as the police were turning up and I can't help but think 'Oh my god, what if that was ***** walking home?' You know as a parent you can't help but worry about the safety of your children because of the behaviours'. I met Kerry at a local cafe on a Friday morning near the estate where she lives with her two children aged 4 and 14. She had limited time but she had been adamant since our first contact that she wanted her voice included. She has just made the decision to home educate her 14-year-old son due to punitive punishments imposed at the only local high school situated in the town. She expressed her distress at punishments to her child, such as isolation and exclusion due to the fact that she is unable to afford to replace her son's shoes. Kerry has also conveyed to me the stress and upset she has felt as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit and Bedroom Tax. Particularly upsetting is the numerous telephone calls and meetings she has had to endure as well as huge, incorrect reductions in her payments due to working, not working and attending higher education.

J u l i e

After meeting Julie and heading home I recall her analogy of parenting to going on a holiday. She explained to me that you pack for a trip to a particular holiday destination but when you get there you arrive in a completely different destination to the one you were meant to. She says someone told her this is what parenting is like and she tells me she is happy for me to share it. I think she might be right in many ways. Upon visiting the community centre Julie is the second mother that I meet. She has lived on the estate where the community centre is located for many years and has an abundance of local knowledge. She has a daughter and a son. She initially volunteered at a children's centre and eventually undertook various training to support families in schools. She visits the centre each week and often visit's other mothers and friends across the two estates. Julie vehemently speaks of the strong sense of community across the estate and talks of two different scenarios that illustrate this. She says that when inside her home she simply has to shout and her neighbours will come running to check all is okay. She also refers to an evening when she was returning home in the dark and was called to by some teenagers, 'Excuse me miss, excuse me miss' they called. She tried to ignore them but after their persistence she asked them what they wanted. They had been trying to warn her of a group of drunk men ahead and offered to walk the rest of the way with her. Julie is dismayed by much of the negativity associated with the estate.

J e n n y

Jenny has two children and previously lived on the estate. I also meet Jenny at the community centre where she has been attending for 18 months. Jenny explains to me the enormous difficulties she has had in her

search for a suitable school for her son with multiple needs and her relief when he was not offered a place at the only high school in the town. Jenny is carefully colouring small patterns throughout our interview which I can gently hear each time I listen to our recorded interview. It reminds me how incredibly focused Jenny was on the colouring but how she was also able to speak so openly and detailed about her mothering experiences.

C o n c l u s i o n s

Ultimately, by composing matrifocal narratives and re-presenting them within this thesis as maternal narratives we have endeavoured to unmask the misconceptions surrounding mothers and their mothering. The research also serves as an invitation for readers to participate in this work as a 'compassionate participant observer' and allow themselves to understand the lived experiences and stories of the mothers' lives contained within these pages (Ellis, 2009). This is important as there is sometimes a lack of understanding of experiences that are different to our own. The implications of this can be far reaching as plans, policies and actions are often developed by people who have little concept of the actual lived experience. The work will contribute to the more recent ever-growing body of existing research on matricentric feminist theory, activism and practice as well as strengthening maternal scholarship.

This chapter has outlined my methodology and methods. It has defined the foundations of this research, provided justification for my choices as researcher, informer and author and introduced the mothers who are at the heart of this research. The following chapters will detail layered accounts of the matrifocal narratives drawn from the analytical framework. It will provide a brief summary of each category before the findings are offered on each in order to represent mothering and mother

work. It is not possible to convey the depth of each of the mothers' narratives as they ranged from 30 minutes to two hours but the following layered accounts will ensure our stories remain as complete as possible.

CHAPTER THREE: AUTHENTIC MOTHERING

The unmasking of motherhood, thus, necessitates what may be termed 'an archaeology of maternity': an excavation of the truths of motherhood disguised and distorted beneath the mask.

Andrea O'Reilly 2016

I crossed the road from my house once a week to attend a special group for teenage mothers. Just three of us would attend with our children. We would talk and the children would play. No one asked questions about how it was you came to be a teenage mother. There was no judgement or shame. This gave each of us strength. The group fuelled camaraderie and support. After a couple of years, the centre I attended the group meetings at closed. We no longer had our group but we signed up for adult education being offered in the town and would see each other there. Without the support of each other and the non-judgemental professionals who ran the group that never could have happened but authentic honest mothering came much later for me. I began to realise and became aware that yes, there was a lot of judgement, that perhaps it was not so easy to be known and recognised as a teenage mother making it more difficult to talk to other mothers about mothering. If I had discovered or read about something that might be helpful around mothering it appeared it was better left unsaid. What could a teenage mother know? Being myself was much harder beyond the walls of the group. Even now, I think I am still trying to negate the embarrassment I felt and the shame I felt I brought upon my family.

If I walked through the town and ever saw one of the other mothers from the group, it was always a pleasant surprise. Just having another mother to say hello to and chat with who you didn't feel was judging you or looking at you strangely. As much as this meant to me, I still felt very different though as compared to the other two mums I was still much younger than them at 14. In some ways I feel as if my naivety and disconnection to living in a town I have not lived in for many years protects me from some of the prying stares from others. It seemed as if my limited knowledge and lack of awareness around policies, procedures and practices of doctors, social workers and educational establishments offered me some form of protection from much of the stress that lays on the shoulders of mothers who may have had more experience or interactions within these organisations. Even though I was mothering under these bodies myself I was oblivious to any compliance that was expected.

In many day-to-day settings I felt very different and carrying the layers of difference with me since I was 14 has never really left me. When I am asked how old I am now, how many children I have, how many fathers do my children have, how old was I when I had my first child? Hesitation when asked where I am from? As if any mother of eight could ever be ambitious, be the mother of many as well as trying to carve a career for herself or discover who she is in her own right. So much judgement from those who have no idea of my everyday life and experiences make it hard to tell others of some of the difficulties of being a mother.

It feels important to share some of the struggles and realities I have had and the challenges I continue to have. I am not a super mum and as times goes by I

am fairly sure that I do not want to be one. Every day I usually face another challenge as a mother either big or small. I know there is only one or two people I can really remove my mask with and be honest about mothering. I have uncertainties around my mothering and consider sometimes that maybe I am not a great mother. I doubt myself all the time and when that is combined with the labels and stereotypes assigned to me it feels impossible. I long for time to myself too particularly when the demands of mothering accumulate.

Today I am overwhelmed and even suffocated by the roles and demands I feel I must fulfil. It's too much at times. I also often feel fraudulent because the Hayley the world sees might appear to be someone who has it all figured out but I don't and I want to be honest about that. I wish that group was across the road now that was there when I was 14. If only I could just sit down with a group of other mothers and we could talk about our mothering.

I saw him recently, the GP, the one who was always kind to me, last weekend. He is retired now and I was hoping he would recognise me and say hello. After all these years I feel grateful I was treated by him like any other mum because that is what we all are – any other mum. If only people realised this. Instead, it feels the world doesn't really allow much room for stories of the teen mums or the single mums or the mums who have an address on the wrong side of town. Not our own stories anyway. People have already decided who we are which makes it even harder for us to tell the other side.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Within the Thesis Introduction, I provided the context and rationale for this study. I introduced the research questions, my impact intentions, the aims and purpose of the study and the summary of each chapter. Chapter One discusses the difference between the definitions of motherhood and the practice of mothering, including background information on feminist scholarship and theory. It extends to include a discussion focused on the ideologies of mothering. Chapter Two delineates the methodology and methods for the research. Each chapter responds to the aims of the research:

- 1) Does the mother work marginalised mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds living on deprived housing estates undertake in challenging circumstances defines them as mother outlaws/empowered mothers?
- 2) Do mothers in challenging circumstances exercise authenticity, autonomy, agency and authority in their mothering?
- 3) Offer alternative perspectives of lesser-known discourses of mothering from marginalised mothers.

This chapter details the unstructured interviews of each mother focusing on the theme of authenticity, one of the four main attributes of empowered mothering understood through a matricentric feminist lens (O'Reilly, 2011, 2016). Maternal authenticity, according to O'Reilly (2007) is when a mother remains true to herself and rejects the pressure to pretend that she is perfect (Butterfield, 2010). She is honest in her portrayal of the complexities and disorder of mothering. She does not pretend to be perfect but attempts to live according to her own values in a culture where there may be a more dominant norm (O'Reilly, 2007). The chapters that

follow consider the three remaining themes of empowered mothering - authority, agency and autonomy. Ronai's (1992) 'layered account' is adopted to illustrate each of the maternal narratives that have been represented and interpreted throughout the research. Asterisks will be used between the layered accounts I detail to denote a shift to a different temporal/spatial/attitudinal realm (Ronai, 1992). I will also use a different font style for each of the shifts to further clarify the voices and literature. For the voice/account of the mothers Helvetica Neue (Light) will be used. For my own voice *Segoe Print* will be used and for the literature Times will be used.

While the four main conditions associated with empowered mothering have been discussed previously in Chapter One, this chapter provides deeper insights of authentic mothering from the experiences of the mothers who participated in this study. As argued by O'Reilly (2016), the foundation of empowered mothering originates in recognising mothers and their children feel the most benefits when 'the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity' (p.142). Empowered mothers' practice from an alternative perspective in opposition to normative mothering ideologies. Child rearing is not considered to be the 'sole responsibility of the biological mother' and empowered mothers rarely rear their children in isolation but often with community support from 'othermothers' (p.142).

In addition, when mothering from this position, mothers may question if mothering necessitates excessive energy, money and time and often combine mothering with employment, activism or voluntary roles (O'Reilly, 2016). Most significantly, they view their selfhood development as a benefit to their mothering which may be exhibited by putting their own

needs before their children's needs and not viewing motherhood as their sole identity. This allows their 'selfhood' to be demonstrated and realised through their work, friendships, relationships, interests and motherhood (p.142). This contrasts with dominant ideologies where mothering can be experienced in isolation and privately.

A list of words associated with 'authentic' were used to evaluate the narratives and can be found in Appendix A. These words were gathered after using the Oxford dictionary and a thesaurus to create a framework when analysing the transcripts that included any words/phrases that had the same or similar meaning to the four main attributes. Throughout the unstructured interviews the mothers discussed what it is like being a mother while living on or near the Abbey Estate. They also explained the challenges they have encountered and how they have practiced mothering under these.

A layered account (Ronai,1992) follows to illustrate each of the mother's narratives, the researcher's account, alongside the academic literature. The varying font styles and what they denote are as follows - For the voice/account of the mothers Helvetica Neue (Light) will be used. For the literature Calibri will be used and for my own voice *Segoe Print* will be used. The voices are presented to illustrate authentic mothering from each perspective. Ronai's (1992) 'layered account' is adopted to illustrate the maternal narratives that have been represented and interpreted throughout the research making accessible to the reader as many 'ways of knowing' as possible (Ronai, 1992).

Layered accounts allow the writer to create and present a dialogue of experiences for the reader as an arrangement of reflexive voices that both interpret and produce the text simultaneously. Including myself,

offers the reader an account enveloping the parts of my own experiences as a mother from a biographical perspective, the theories and ideologies of mothering and my position as a researcher. What is most appealing about the layered account is 'the authority the readers' own experiences of the text' permit (Ronai, 1994, p.399). To make sense of the experiences, I realised very early on in the analysis it would be impossible to split the transcripts into parts that would reinforce already known constructions of mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds because what they were sharing with me was their *own* individual experiences, despite the fact that they were all mothers. The layered accounts begin with Lori's matrifocal narrative and is followed by Kerry, Jenny and Julie.

LORI

Before I arrived at the community centre, I felt excited at the prospect of meeting Lori. Lori sat down at the long table in the main room at the centre where the support group meets weekly. We sat next to each other at the table. Lori to my left. It was a warm, informal room where mothers meeting here could freely wander between rooms and use the kitchen as their own. Lori explained to me how she felt when I asked her what it was like to be a mother living on the Abbey Estate.

'Constantly challenged and criticised over my parenting. Stuck in the middle cos your constantly under criticism for everything that you do and my children are all different. I have

four children. Three of them have ADHD diagnoses. They're all different.'

I sense that our conversation earlier on, where Lori thought I might have been a 'weirdo' in wanting to understand her experience of mothering while living on the Abbey Estate had actually facilitated trust and reassurance. That I was not like other external professionals she had spoken to who were only interested in 'talking about the experiences of mothers on the estate in a negative way'. Following this initial conversation, it was clear Lori felt she could speak to me openly about her own circumstances and I realised what a privilege this was to be entrusted with her story. Lori has had a lot of 'social services involvement due to challenges with her 17-year-old son. Lori explains that at times his behaviour had been 'extremely violent'.

'He'd seen a lot because I came out of a violent relationship after 13 years. I mean it got to one point where I text my social worker going, 'I really need some help.' I wasn't denying that I needed help. I was like, 'I really need help' um 'one of us is gonna kill the other' and I didn't hear from her until January and I text her in October'.

I keep my fury over this hidden. I am all too aware of the status of Children's Services in the county and their reliance on duty social workers instead of permanent employees because of their poor reputation. I am reminded of this daily in my email inbox detailing the job advertisements describing the resettlement packages available and

the 'beautiful' county you could reside in if you would like to be a social worker here. Sadly, I am not surprised when she tells me this. I hear the gentle frustrations in Lori's voice when she informs me, she is,

'Constantly challenged. Constantly criticised over my parenting. I'd be taking my children to school. At the time my kids were having meltdowns. I was having to fireman's lift them just to get them in and the looks you get from parents because you have a child hanging over your shoulder. It's just like really but it is constant criticism and not always verbal criticism but it's just the looks'.

I am slowly sipping a coffee Lori made for me before we began the interview and I am conscious of anything I might say or do that will interrupt anything she might want to say about her experiences of mothering. Although she explains in a matter-of-fact way about the 'looks' she gets from other parents she is warm and genuine in the way she conveys this. This leads me to wonder if she already mothers as an outlaw or empowered mother even if she may not assign such a label to herself. She does not seem phased by the 'looks' and it is as if it does not matter. That perhaps she somehow has an unspoken awareness in the value of mothering on her own terms.

'The group is some where I can tell them that I want to bury my kids under the patio and they know that I don't mean it. But they are all here going we will give you an alibi. It's fine. That support network. That and having good friends and having good friends that you can just rant at. The professionals

you can't. If I told them I wanted to bury my kids under the patio they would freak and take it as a literal and yeah, the group has saved me'.

This is a powerful statement and I make a mental note of this as accessing a support network feels especially significant. If people could access a supportive and non-judgemental group like the one described to me many might find comfort and support. All the while she's talking, Lori is gluing and sticking her decoupage and every so often looks up at me. I am almost mesmerised. She looks relaxed and serene but I am aware it has taken her sometime to get to this point. I feel in awe of the support group Lori refers to and the space it provides for mothers. Particularly when its impact is so palpable.

'Living on an estate like the Abbey, there are a lot parents with difficult children, so you feel less judged because there are other parents who are going through exactly the same as you are. And wider. I felt less judged here than I have anywhere else when my kids are kicking off. Here, because other people are struggling, there isn't that sense of, 'oh I can't go round to so and so's for a coffee cause I know that so and so will kick off'. They don't mind. They are more understanding. Especially on the Abbey. I can't speak for anywhere else. You don't feel that you're being judged cos you're moaning about your kids and that you wanna kill em or slap em or whatever because actually that parent is feeling exactly the same'.

In my mind I quickly scan through images of mothers I have witnessed dealing with a child having a tantrum. The glares and the stares when all you really need is for someone to ask if you are okay. Not to stare and glare at you and make assumptions. Being around other mothers who understand your experiences and refrain from judging you is a gift. It does not often happen and the response from others, including other mothers can be driven by a lack of understanding or a desire to maintain the expectations of mothering ideals.

The enactment of authentic mothering is central to empowered mothering. Zufferey and Buchanan and Butterfield (2010) explain maternal authenticity as a mother's ability to make decisions that are founded upon her own beliefs and values. Dominant discourses of motherhood help to maintain discords between mothers demonstrating honest, authentic mothering and those that wish to keep the 'mask of motherhood' firmly in place. The 'mask of motherhood' is described as, 'the outward and visible sign of this silent conspiracy—the public face of motherhood that conceals from the world and from ourselves the momentousness of our common undertaking' (p.5). Lori demonstrates her authenticity and honesty and refuses to wear any mask in stating clearly, '*I really need some help*'. She is not simply conveying her honest experience to those closest to her but expressing this to her social worker. Someone in a position of power who could cast judgment and even implement safeguarding measures that would affect Lori and her son.

If the mask slips, mothers feel they are incompetent but our 'fears, frustrations and confusions' are not evidence of incompetence. They are the

‘legacy of unworkable social structures and contradictory cultural demands’ (Mausart, 1999 p.xxi). For mothers who are marginalised some might suggest it is even harder or impossible for them to mother authentically or for them be honest about how they mother (Middleton, 2006, Horowitz, 2004).

As I left my car, I headed towards the small row of shops at the bottom of the estate leading to the community centre. I loved going to those shops when I was small and again when I was a 14-year-old mum. I would go with my dad and choose penny sweets and later took my eldest son to do the same. Sometimes we would get chips from the fish and chip shop and a comic from the news agents. The nostalgic feelings and familiarity quickly surpassed as I headed up the steps into the community centre. I am not sure I had ever been into the centre before. I was pleased about that as although I had offered flexibility in the location we could meet I was glad the meeting point was arranged where my nostalgia or any potential feelings good or bad would not impose on the actual research setting. I wanted to keep an open and clear mind.

I decided to do something I never do and switch my phone to aeroplane mode to allow myself to be completely absorbed in meeting each mother. I mention this because small things like this all contribute to who I am as a mother and turning my phone off goes against my personal benchmark of being a good mother. However, I rationalise this

extreme belief which was made much easier because I was all too aware of the gift of time Lori had given me.

I left my car parked on a nearby street and felt apprehensive about leaving it there. I have had the car a short while and at 46 it is the first car I have bought. Materialistic objects hold such little value for me but proving that despite being a mum at 14 I have proved myself as somewhat successful. That is not to say being a mum is not an incredible achievement. As time goes on, I am becoming more and more aware of what an achievement that is but unfortunately, the way much of society views success is based upon status and economic security. It was unusually extravagant for me and I oscillate between feeling guilty for having bought it and thankful I reached a point where I was able to.

At the start of the meeting, I took my iPad out of my bag and scrolled through the photographs until I found the one I needed. (the photograph at the beginning of the thesis) The photograph of me holding my firstborn. I was on my dad's doorstep, smiling slightly, aged 15 (I turned 15 2 months after my son was born) with braces on my teeth. I was certain that as much as my own story had driven me to want to collect and share the stories of other mothers, I never wanted to overshadow their stories with mine but I knew having something tangible would somehow demonstrate the genuineness of my own experience to them as well.

I am acutely aware that once I leave my meeting with Lori and walk back past the row of estate shops I will get back into my car and drive off to a different life to the one I might have had. This too is a double entendre - the one I might have had means two different things. If I did not have a baby at 14, I would have had a very different life but having a baby at 14, resulted in the life I have. There could have been a very different one where I did not achieve what I deem as some degree of success but I still sometimes mourn for my old hopes and dreams I had while growing up. It often feels though that no matter what might be considered any level of so-called success, it will never prove my worth to myself.

KERRY

As I arrive to meet Kerry, I am relieved to make it on time as there are roadblocks and lots of police patrolling the area. I can see the forensic tent from the road where the body of the young man stabbed the previous evening lays. This is unusual for the town. Unlike the other interviews which were at the estate community centre I meet Kerry at a local restaurant. We sit at the back of the restaurant in the corner. I am both glad and annoyed because the radio is blaring from the speaker but I know this will also provide privacy to us if any other

customers arrived. Kerry confidently and directly begins to tell me exactly what her experience of being a mum in Thetford is like.

'So being a mum living on the Abbey estate is not so bad. If I'm honest. It's the nicer end'. Kerry is referring to the far end of the estate that some people attribute to being 'nicer'. 'But what's hard about it, is for all the changes I'm trying to make and better my life for myself and for the children it comes with a kind of stigma. You know, it kinda diminishes yourself worth a little bit. People make judgements about it and it's not that I mind but everything's a struggle. You know, just to be in affordable housing with the money, the benefit side of things, how it doesn't matter how much you work and earn you're only ever really given so much from the government. Never been able to even make this home on this estate look nice. You know and that's the thing. It is when your there it doesn't feel like you can make anything better'.

Her reassurances that it 'is not so bad' is in stark contrast to the low self-worth she feels because of the judgement made by others.

'There has been times when I have been at my lowest. Self-worth has been so low and I come home from a day's work and I'm with the children and they're not getting the best of me because I feel so miserable and everything is so hard but it's like I don't feel that I can be a happy mum'.

Kerry appears to have carefully reflected on mothering and is open in explaining to me the struggles she has felt to be a 'happy mum'.

Her feelings towards this seem the catalyst for the many changes she has made to ensure she feels differently.

'You know, I know now that what my children get from me in comparison to what they got two or three years ago is at least 95 percent better quality so that makes me happy but it's not because of anything anyone else has done apart from myself. I've had to make those changes, so you know and it's not what anyone else has done and if everybody else on a low income and low self-worth gets this wave of empowerment like 'Wow! I'm gonna do this' are we all gonna be that supportive?'

I cannot help but recall the support Lori had told me she gained from other mothers at the group she attends. I wonder if Kerry would find similar support if she was able to meet with other mothers.

'Is it gonna be that difficult for everybody? There's no incentive for people to want to try. There's no incentive for people to want to do better because everything is hard work'. You have to go through a hundred different scenarios to actually get it or forms and phone calls and when you're trying to work and be a mum you just don't get time. The tax credits you ring up and you have to go through like half an hour of like voice messages before you even get to talk to anybody. I'm a single parent. I work. Where do you think I've got time to just sit here waiting? It was hard and it's a battle and you keep pushing and you keep going'.

This reminds me of similar battles I had encountered when I had relied on benefits and part time employment. Fighting against a

system that seems to have endless bureaucratic processes in place which are huge hurdles. I realise Kerry seems slightly hesitant when suddenly, she says,

'Some days I feel exhausted and some days I just feel like chucking a blanket over my head and saying I don't want to do this today. I need a day off. I would like to avoid this but I will tell you because this is the reality of it. I was depressed. I would spend the majority of my days sitting on my kitchen floor crying, smoking fags, drinking tea, not really eating, 'how I could get out of this?'

It had taken Kerry a little while to express how awful she had begun to feel but she seemed intent on conveying the true reality of her experience. I felt great empathy and admiration as she had been honest in how bad she felt but by her own acknowledgement and acceptance of her circumstances and feelings she was able to realise she wanted things to be different.

Research undertaken by West (1992) affirms the reticence among mothers to discuss the stress, anger and frustration a mother experiences because publicly revealing its dark underlying elements is a 'clear breach of cultural protocol' (Mausart, 1999, p.244). Mothers who do express feelings such as these may be faced with the anticipation of negative feelings and responses and it is this that may ensure many of them remain muted but the group is somewhere Lori has found comfort and acceptance of her truth about mothering. This not only benefits Lori but helps the mothers in the group begin to re-envision mothering in a more inclusive way. By sharing

their experiences of mothering with each other empowerment is fostered despite their differences and circumstances due to the absence of criticisms and ideals. Although Kerry has not been able to share her experiences in a similar setting, she is certain of sharing her experiences now to impact the unjustified opinions and judgements of others.

As Middleton describes, authenticity is the ‘ability to be truthful and true to oneself’ (p.75). Kerry demonstrates her authenticity by speaking truthfully of her mothering experiences but initially is cautious of doing this and it takes until nearly the end of our interview before she removes the ‘mask’ and can be her authentic self. This reticence aligns with Kerry’s experience and perception of stigma that is connected to living on the Abbey Estate but she finds the courage to be honest about how she had begun to feel. If you feel stigmatised because of where you live it may be harder to discuss some of the challenges you face in those circumstances but Kerry acknowledges, ‘*I would like to avoid this but I will tell you because this is the reality of it*’.

I feel grateful Kerry has taken the time to meet with me and share her narrative. Her experience is unique and impels me to consider aspects of living on the estate I had not previously thought of. I try to recall what inspired me to want more and to keep going. How did I keep getting up everyday and walking a mile to drop my baby at nursery and then nearly a mile in the opposite direction to attend school? I am still clearly able to recollect and feel the shame and embarrassment of being a marginalised mother then and I am reminded regularly it does not take much to resurrect those feelings

now. My more recent experience as an intern at the NCT when the then Chief Executive asked me, 'How many different fathers do your children have?'. A final year student in my office letting me know she would have 'killed her daughter' had she of become pregnant at 14 after noticing a newspaper article pinned to my board that published my comments on teenage mothers.

She has reminded me very much of the stigma I felt when I was younger when people discovered where I was from and which part of town I lived. Add to that the fact that you have a baby at 14 and you have a blot on one's escutcheon. I am not certain Kerry has an awareness of her strength and resolution and how powerful this is. I used to like going to other places and parts of town as if to separate myself from the stigma or embarrassment. It may have been that I thought if I went to these other places people would not expect me to go, I was proving that I was not the stereotypical mother they had me down for. I was forever trying to be different from what was expected. I have thought long and hard about that difference and it is difficult to know whether I wanted to be different or if I would have always been 'a velvet exile' regardless of being a teenage mother (Behar, 2003).

I also feel relieved when I leave Kerry. Relieved that the types of struggles she is facing are challenges I have already overcome. Hearing her turmoil has moved me and I wish somehow, I could impart

some of what I have learned along the way. I still have many struggles, but they are very different. Sometimes the hardest thing is knowing the struggles I face now are as a result of the struggles I had then.

JENNY

I meet Jenny in the same community centre that I meet Lori. At first, Jenny seems shy and reserved but when I sit down to talk with her, I am immediately struck by her strength, resolve and courage.

'It was when we went to [school] and sat in a multi-agency meeting and I went to the social worker 'Right, I'm packing his stuff up. You can come and get him later cause I don't want him no more' and then his school were like 'whoa!' and then they started offering more support'.

It may be hard to read Jenny's words and they may seem difficult to relate to. I have never experienced a situation anything like Jenny's but when she describes her experience as she sits across from me, I am very aware that she felt this was the only way her son would receive the support he needed. She was emphatic in truthfully expressing she could not bear the situation any longer. It is clear to me throughout the whole time Jenny shares her story that she loves her children very much.

'I was ready to actually do it that day cause I was fed up of him hitting me, kicking me, biting me, thumping me constantly, shouting at me every day pulling my hair and everything. I had just sort of had enough that day'.

It is difficult for me to imagine just how emotionally and physically painful this must have been for Jenny. She is calm and direct and wants others to know how challenging the circumstances have been for her.

'At the time my son was medicated for ADHD and the ADHD nurse asked me 'Do you feel safe in your own home and I went 'no, because he's actually got me by the throat and actually pushed on my throat to stop me breathing'. The group is the only place to get support'.

While Jenny was managing this situation, she was able to share her fears and frustrations with the group. She talks of their encouragement, lack of judgement and understanding. I am not sure how she would have managed such difficulties without this.

'I have had doctors say to me 'why is one child like that but the other one isn't'? That's not on for a professional to say it's my fault. I've had schools say, 'It must be something you've done at home.' You are not gonna beat me and one day someone is gonna listen to me and this is gonna be sorted. You have to do it for your child cause it's not your child's fault that they are like they are. He was really kicking off and I was

like, 'Don't you dare hit me!' I was like, 'I want to get downstairs I want to get away from you'.

Mausart (1999) described mothers as 'brave' for maintaining their position, that all is always well in the land of mothering. Why is speaking out so honestly about mothering seldom done? In contrast to this, I question how remaining silent is 'brave'. Speaking the truth about both the challenges and ambivalence can be courageous. Mothers who engage in mothering practices that challenge ideologies of mothering are resisting the status quo and increasing practices aligned with 'outlaw mothering' (O'Reilly, 2011). If mothers speak authentically and honestly, they are revealing the truth and ultimately unmasking themselves (O'Reilly, 2016). Blakely (1994) also writes of a mother's reluctance to admit having difficult days and the challenges that led to them but acknowledging this allows actualities to be heard on the impossibilities of mothering ideals.

Jenny has revealed how difficult mothering can be and by expressing this may dispel myths and ideologies surrounding mothers. This is not an easy thing to do.

Jenny illustrated to me the undeniable power of being truthful and honest of her experiences of mothering. She faced the questioning and blame of professionals but remained steadfast by refusing to be a victim and advocated through her honesty to get the support she and her son needed. I am amazed at her tenacity particularly as it was at a time she was mothering in a very challenging situation. The judgement and questioning from professionals whose role is to support

you can cause you to actually question what you thought you were certain of yourself.

I feel as though the value of having a supportive circle of other mothers is continually being reiterated to me from each of the mothers I meet whether it is something they have access to or not. I cannot help but draw comparisons to the mothers that do have this, to myself who had this and to Kerry who appears to be mothering without the interaction with other mothers. It is something I have always accredited much of my own resolve to and as I reflect on this now, I consider the cruciality of having the small group where I would meet other mothers. I question if some of my resoluteness to overcome the challenges I faced originated from that space where there was no stigma, judgment, feeling too different or not good enough.

JULIE

Julie has a warm demeanour and I know she has lived locally for many years. Although, we have never met or spoken before. She has had her own experiences of mothering in the town but has also spent time in voluntary roles giving her various degrees of local insight. She has been faced with similar challenges as Lori's and Jenny's while mothering her son who was diagnosed with ADHD and autism.

'It's amazing what happens when you actually threaten to drop them off with the social workers. Sometimes when you've got children who've got special needs, my son's autistic/ADHD, you do have to do things that are counterintuitive to being a mum cause as a mum you are loving and caring and nurturing and I did all that with my daughter and with my son I was sitting on him and fighting with him'.

Julie conveys much wisdom when she tells me about her experiences but I sense a resigned sadness that might stem from wishing things had been different with her son. The emotional conflict this must have created is something I find hard to imagine despite the array of difference in demands and challenges I have faced with my own children. She is direct when she elaborates on having to call the authorities and she candidly shares the opinions her 'friends' had of her doing this.

'Calling the police when he was going off the rails. Who wants to call the police on their children but you have to because somebody needs to take control of things. I had friends saying, 'I couldn't call the police on my child, I would never call the police on her' but I had to on him, cause he's out of control'.

I wonder if her wisdom and experience has helped the other mothers she meets when she attends the group as she seems to intuitively combine her insight with empathy and supportive statements.

'It's tough being a mum here. Everybody has an opinion. Everybody is happy to voice their opinion. Everybody is happy to put you down if your parenting doesn't quite fit with what is seen to be 'normal' you're challenged. Sometimes you just want to go home and shut the door and home educate cause then nobody would see you. It can be really tough'.

Julie refers to the opinions of others and how if what you are doing appears to deviate from what is considered 'normal' then you may be demeaned. Making a stand against that is hard especially if you feel you are under such scrutiny. Retreating from that could be appealing to escape the views and opinions of others.

McDonald-Harker (2016) interviewed 29 mothers for her research into mothering in marginalised contexts and one of her participants articulated that when you are mothering in difficult circumstances, being a good mother is not performing as a 'good mother' but doing what it is your children need. This is poignant when trying to understand what Julie experiences when she has no choice but to call the police. Other mothers that McDonald-Harker interviewed conferred that even though they were making difficult choices around their mothering, these choices were made because they loved their children. They had to ignore the opinions of others in order to be authentic mothers and make decisions that helped them to be better mothers. Women who conform to the ideologies of mothering are labelled as 'good mothers' and the women who do not appear to conform are labelled as 'bad mothers'. However, O'Reilly (2010) explains that the social construction of the so called normal and loquacious

classification of mothers as either good or bad creates norms for women to comply with that are far removed from their everyday reality.

When I interview Julie we talk about her experiences and exchange information about being a mother in Thetford. I refer to the location of the family centre I used to attend and she knows exactly where it was located. She also knows the direction of each of the steps I would have taken across the estate, weaving in and out of the blocks of houses and the route I would take to the nursery school. I also know exactly what she is referring to when she describes the positioning of her house in relation to others in the block. This allows our conversation an ease that might not be so easily found if we did not have a strong mutual understanding of the location.

Once I leave, I also reflect how her personal and professional experience and knowledge have enhanced my understanding of aspects around educational support available to parents (parent support officers) and the voluntary services and groups that have been available locally at certain times in the town. My knowledge of the role of PSO's was limited as this was not established position in any schools I had interacted with. This has given me a wider perspective of what was previously available and/or accessible to local mothers and how services have changed over time. The time I spent with Julie and the other mothers affirm to me the rationale and reasons of why this research

is so important in terms of dispelling the stereotypes and myths surrounding marginalised mothers.

I naturally draw other comparisons to the experiences each mother has shared with me to my own and I feel thankful the professionals I came into contact with were very supportive and non-judgemental. This may have contributed to my initial oblivion to outside scrutiny and judgment from others. I soon realised that scrutiny and judgement would continue ... always.

Two days after meeting four of the participants they are constantly on my mind. I know it will be me who transcribes the recorded interviews and I realise this will be a time-consuming task. I understand why some researchers seek the services of professional transcribers but there is no way that I could imagine removing myself from this stage of the research. I want to listen and understand each and every word each mother had gifted me. Did I miss something? Was there anything I misunderstood? I wanted to be close to the data and explore the stories the mothers had given me.

The layered accounts above have invited the reader to gain insights to authentic mothering from the experiences of the mothers who participated in this study alongside the academic literature. Using a layered account has made accessible to the reader as many 'ways of knowing' as possible (Ronai, 1992). Different scenes and views have offered perspectives from various positions to illustrate authentic mothering.

Three of the mothers who were interviewed are explicit in their narration of the importance and significance of having a place to share their experiences that challenge dominant discourses with other mothers. These are sometimes connected to larger, social and political structures but coalescing has allowed the mothers some level of overcoming difficulties together. Having a space to meet and share their mothering experiences makes certain the mothers are not mothering in complete isolation and are able to validate their maternal practices (O'Reilly, 2014). Extending this small circle of momentum to other mothers and enabling honest talking about mothering may help to build a more supportive matrifocal community.

The depth of the narratives illustrates the impact of having a place to meet for mothers. The mothers highlight their positive experiences of attending a supportive group and its impact upon them. The unusual opportunity presented itself during this research to interview three mothers who all attended the same support group. Therefore, this indicates that access to a supportive network might help to facilitate attributes such as authenticity, authority, agency and autonomy demonstrated. Attending a group is a significant point mentioned throughout the narratives and there has been several pieces of previous research investigating this. Research on previous support groups for mothers, such as the Mothers' Center Groups throughout the USA indicate that mothers attending support groups such as those described by the women in this research feel more validated, reflective, are able to take action, feel entitled and are more aware of what they can learn when listening to other mothers (Slepian, Sylla, and Weston, 2011).

In contrast to this, Kerry seems to be mothering from a more isolated position and does not appear to have a group of other mothers to

meet with. She may subscribe to the idea that there is a lack of interest in her experiences as Brown *et al* (1994) have previously written of and even expressed their surprise and dismay that, 'women had very low expectations of anyone being interested in their experiences as mothers, or that anyone would think that these experiences were important'. It may be that she feels her experience of 'unmasking' mothering and motherhood must also remain private. West (1992) writes, 'Being a mother means having radical surgery. Yet, it remains for most of us a backstreet operation. Like other women's problems, public revelation of its indelicate, murky depths is a clear breach of cultural protocol' (p.29). In spite of this, she, alongside the other mothers, has courageously done this by sharing her maternal narrative.

Despite Kerry not attending a group nor having access to a supportive network of other mothers via a group she demonstrates various aspects of the attributes of empowered mothering. She distances herself from other mothers living on the estate. Chase and Walker (2012) explain how people experiencing financial hardship often distance themselves from others in similar positions and sought to ensure they were not perceived as one of them. Their research demonstrated that 'others provided an alibi for one's own circumstances and served to deflect or lessen the sense of internal shame' (p.752). This plays into the division mothers often face when focusing on normative portrayals of such circumstances. However, previous scholarship on motherhood has highlighted that having a supportive community or network of supportive people around you is important for women who are resisting dominant discourses (Gordon, 1990, Green, 2003, 2020, O'Reilly, 2011).

Three of the mothers extensively describe the stigma they face from living on the estate but do not let this deter them from speaking

honestly about their mothering. Stigma is a broad construct and covers many distinctive processes operating across different levels (Inglis *et al*, 2019). These encompass individual experiences of stigma, structural stigma by way of policies and practices and the social attitudes and stereotypes towards people from the public. For example, Kerry explains, *'The way I feel people see me when I tell them where I live. Sometimes I feel embarrassed of it. It doesn't matter what I do to try and get away from it. I'm stuck there. Nobody wants to live on that estate. Nobody wants to be there. So, it's like ok I'm just stuck here with the rest of the rubbish if that's how people wanna refer.'*

Stigma may enable inauthentic mothering to prevail and lead to mothers rejecting or ignoring what they know, almost to the point where they 'forget they know anything at all' (Mausart, 1999, Ruddick, 1986). It was Ruddick (1989) who introduced the idea of inauthentic mothering and explains that maternal inauthenticity is mothers 'relinquishing authority to others and losing confidence in their own values and in their perception of their children's needs' (p.112). Perceptions of being judged in a negative way by other people can cause an internalised sense of failure (Chase and Walker, 2012). This could make it very difficult to resist the internalisation of stigma and stereotypes directed at you because of your circumstances and even more difficult to refuse to conform to expectations surrounding your mothering practices. Kerry discusses her 'embarrassment' and says she has felt like this ever since living on the estate as a young girl. Jenny describes how she feels stigmatised by health and education professionals, *'I have had doctors say to me why is one child like that but the other one isn't. That's not on for a professional to say it's my fault. I've had schools say, 'It must be something you've done at home.'* I too recall the shame and

judgement I felt both as a teenage single mother and residing in a town with a widely known poor reputation.

Despite marginalised mothers practicing authentic mothering, it may not be easy for them to be open and honest about it. This might be due to the opinions and judgements of others who do not refrain from making their voices heard. However, Lori may not feel as judged living on the Abbey Estate as she acknowledges there are other families living there who are in a similar position. Mothers are often judged according to dominant standards and ideologies set with their mothering measured against these but when you feel others are experiencing the same as you, you may feel more able to be authentic in your expressions. The mothers have been both brave and courageous in sharing their honest accounts which can be especially challenging when you already feel judged. Mausart (2000) offers her own notion of sharing honest accounts of mothering,

'What human beings need to know about mothering is perhaps the greatest story never written. The journey to motherhood is an odyssey of epic proportions, and every woman who undertakes it a hero. Celebrating our very role at the core of humanity means learning to sing every line of the topic freely, lamentations along with the hymns. When the masks of motherhood do crack through, they will have been eroded by tears that have been shed and shared, by the tremors of secrets unclasped, by the booming laughter of relief. What lies beneath the brave and brittle face of motherhood is a countenance of infinite expressiveness, a body of deepest knowing' (p.246-247).

However, resisting normative discourses of mothering alongside stigma and judgement is no easy feat. These mothers have created their own discourse of honest mothering through resistance and demonstrating characteristics of empowered mothering rather than merely accepting identities constructed for them. Green (1995, 2019) explains how mothers she interviewed for her research on feminist mothering are, 'Driven by their feminist consciousness, their intense love for their children and the

need to be true to themselves, their families, and their parenting, [these] feminist mothers, choose to parent in a way that challenges the status quo' (p.130).

O'Reilly's (2016) stance is that 'to be authentic is to be truthful and true to oneself in motherhood'. She has faced opposition to the fact that she strongly believes it is marginalised mothers who evidence authenticity in their mothering practices by refusing to wear the 'mask of motherhood' and their refusal to pretend we are all 'perfect mothers' (p.74). Middleton (2006) argued that O'Reilly's empowered mothering definition was limited to 'educated, middle to upper class women with access to financial and human resources' (p.74) but O'Reilly counters this with the suggestion that mothers with more 'resources and status in motherhood, are often less able or likely to perceive and oppose their oppression' (p.75). O'Reilly's (2006, 2016) response is based upon her belief that Middleton's criticism stems from her misinterpretation of her use of the terms agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity but O'Reilly is adamant that these 'are not to be read as restricted to economic and educational resources' (p.22).

Although, Lori, Jenny and Julie all identified support from other mothers as significant in our story, Kerry's experience is different as she did not mention attending any support groups. She also said she was unaware of anywhere that mothers from the estate were coming together and supporting each other. Lori, Jenny and Julie all expressed to me that they did not think many people knew about the group and this could impact the number of mothers attending and accessing available support. However, previous research has recognised that many mothers recoil from discussing the emotional impact of mothering and are not comfortable expressing anger, frustration, stress and monotony (Maushart, 1999). Ironically, Maushart (1999) reveals that, 'research also suggests that while virtually

every mother does experience such emotions, most consider that they have no right to do so, that such feelings are abhorrent and shameful' (p. 244). She also alludes to mothers feeling as if they have failed should they disclose such feelings. Kerry tells me frankly, *'I would like to avoid this but I will tell you because this is the reality of it'*.

Returning to the ambivalence expressed by the mothers we can gain some understanding into the contradictory feelings they sometimes have towards their children. They provide examples of their ambivalence and are candid in conveying this. Ambivalence is a characteristic of all relationships and seen as a 'sign of good mental health' (Almond, 2010 p.8). However, due to the 'impossible standards of mothering' women are left feeling 'disappointed' with both themselves and their children when they reveal feelings such as these (p.11). According to Parker (1995) when a mother is honest about her ambivalence, she places herself open to harsh judgements. Almond (2010) believes these judgements stem from unrealistic expectations around being a good mother and because of the pressure on meeting these expectations mothers are left both struggling to comply as well as deal with being condemned if these ideals are not achieved.

Rich (1976) realised the challenge she was undertaking when exposing the masks of motherhood and their legacy. She selected a quote from Dante to preface *Of Woman Born*,*but to treat of the good that I found there, I will tell of other things I there discerned* (Dante, 1:3) which emphasised the declaration of what she intended to do within the pages of *Of Women Born*. She declares, 'that only a willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours' (p.16).

In summary, this chapter re-presents the matrifocal narratives of the five mothers who participated in the research with a focus on authentic mothering. Their narratives have illustrated how they practice authentic mothering despite the challenging circumstances they have found themselves in. A mother focused lens has been used in which to view their experiences to counterbalance the more commonly offered narratives. The following chapter will focus on the agency and authority the mothers hold.

CHAPTER FOUR: AGENCY AND AUTHORITY

'The fact is, as mothers, we don't do what we want, we do what we can. Real motherhood means exhaustion, contradiction and ambivalence'

Esther Vivas 2019

Part of the time, as a teenage mother, I had a feeling I might be doing it wrong but I think some of this came from comments outsiders made and not professionals. In the beginning I did what I thought I was meant to do and copied the mothering of others. I wasn't in a place to challenge those in powerful positions because the less attention I attracted the better. I wanted to avoid being in the spotlight any more than I already was being a teenage mother in a small town. I always worried about what people might think of me and that they would assume I had a child at 14 because I was promiscuous. Which was not at all true but it is not something you are able to justify to every person you encounter just because you feel they might be second guessing why you do have a baby.

I felt I had to prove my worthiness as a mother by conforming in the beginning. That if I did not, we might be treated differently. My confidence grew though and eventually, I felt I could question a teacher or disagree with well-meaning advice if I thought it was not appropriate for my set of circumstances. Finding my own way to mother evolved and this allowed me to discover creative ways of what might work for us. I eventually became a bit of a non-conformist and would think nothing of prioritising well-being and happiness over the rules. Sometimes this meant taking a slower walk to nursery school causing us to arrive a little

late or advocating for my child when he was being bullied at school even though I was the single teenage mother. There were times when I would stand resolutely firm on particular issues and remained unwavering but this developed over time the more I learned and understood about processes and rules and that I deserved to be treated the same as other mothers.

It may be easier for me to hide behind the portrayal of a good mother now but I have come to realise that is just a mask that as a mother I feel I have to sometimes wear. I long to remove it though. Finishing college, then university and eventually finding secure employment provides me with a strong alibi to appear to practice mothering the way I am expected to by society. It was especially difficult and challenging achieving those things though and many times I felt I might give up. Even feeling that sometimes people thought I should give up or might have even expected me to. I do not think it is reasonable for me to pretend to others it is easy. I am not sure that anyone is a 'good mother'. I might employ confident, strong-willed and determined efforts against those in positions of power which my position enables me to do more easily now but I realise how unfair this is and also how misrepresenting it is. If I rewind over the years, it was most definitely not the same. I put down the telephone following a call from the Deputy Head teacher after advocating for my son and wonder and doubt if my approach is the right one.

I recall a huge variance in my resistance to lawful, medical, educational establishments and even other mothers that has changed between my mothering with my older children and my younger children. It used to feel daunting attending those parent's evening as a

single mother. There would often be other mothers or couples lining up to wait for their turn. I would also wonder what they were thinking of me. What was the teacher thinking of me?

This variation of course, could be attributed to my increase in experience in these scenarios but the reality is that my status change and the societal perception of me is different making certain choices easier for me to make. Perceptions of me may have changed over time but one of the reasons I still struggle in many ways with being an authoritative agentic mother is because my choices around mothering are still questioned. The scrutiny around the number of children I have and how many fathers my children have and then again when it is realised, I became a mother at 14. This has never gone away.

Introduction

The previous chapter has represented the matrifocal narratives of the four mothers who participated in the research with a focus on authentic mothering. This chapter will focus on the agency and authority that the mothers demonstrate and interprets the unstructured interviews of each mother focusing on the aforementioned themes. The chapter that follows will explore the final theme of autonomy. In opposition to the institution of motherhood maternal agency is practiced as empowered mothering (O'Reilly, 2010). This has incited numerous discussions resulting from the standpoint that, yes, 'mothering that is modelled on maternal agency is better for mothers and their children' but the question remains on how this might be 'achieved and sustained' (Green, 2006, O'Reilly, 2007a 2007b, Jeremiah, 2006, Hewett, 2006, Di Quinzio 2007, Stooke *et al* 2010, Stadtman Tucker 2008). As discussed in Chapter One authority is

referring to the confidence and conviction a mother has in herself and has been combined with agency in this chapter to signify the reclamation of power by these mothers and their awareness of the struggle to practice mothering from a position of agency and authority. O'Reilly (2006, 2016) claims that,

'Privileged women, I would suggest, with more resources and status in motherhood, are often less able or likely to perceive and oppose their oppression. Furthermore, when I speak of agency and the like I do not mean to say that mothers necessarily have these things, but rather that empowered mothers understand that they should have them and seek to attain them' (p.22).

Stereotypes and ideals of mothering and motherhood can leave some mothers feeling as if they have limited control but when a mother practises mothering from a place of maternal agency and authority, control can be taken and manifested in her 'efforts to challenge and act against aspects of institutionalised motherhood that constrain and limit women's lives and power as mothers' (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010 p.698). The mothers who have shared their accounts of mothering demonstrate their refusal to be victims or reject their *own* values and perceptions.

A list of words associated with 'agency and authority' were used to evaluate the narratives and can be found in Appendix A. These words were gathered after using the Oxford dictionary and a thesaurus to create a framework when analysing the transcripts that included any words that had the same or similar meaning to the four main attributes. As in the previous chapter, a layered account (Ronai, 1992) follows to illustrate each of the mother's accounts, the researcher's account, alongside the academic literature. The varying font styles and what they denote is explained previously in Chapter Three.

LORI

Our conversation touches on poignant topics but Lori does not shy away from what might be considered uncomfortable. I wonder if this might be due to her resolution and commitment to sharing her experiences with me. Although Lori has explained to me how important the meet up group is as a space for mothers to talk about their experiences, I sense Lori is keen to explain some of what she has encountered to an outsider.

'My daughter's 13 now. She went to [SCHOOL] and in year 6 the SENCO, who is also deputy head, said, (bear in mind), she's got special needs. We will put her in for her SATS. We don't expect her to pass them but we will put them in because it will be good practice. She came out in the top 5% of her year. She's aspiring to go to university and to do Physics and I'm not stopping that aspiration but from the school and the SENCO to say, 'you're never going to make it' that's all she's heard. Because she is special needs and she couldn't learn the way they wanted to teach her. She wasn't going to aspire to be anything and that's from a school and a SENCO and you just think.... well, no wonder the kids on the Abbey are running riot and not aspiring to do anything if that's what they're hearing from their teachers'.

Throughout this conversation Lori made it clear to me that she was not prepared to let negative expectations be assigned to her daughter. Her determination to challenge and question the defeatist

attitudes of staff in positions of power highlighted her strength to me. I hear the refusal in her voice to accept what the school were saying. She is also aware of the potential impact the attitude of the teachers could have on the 'kids' in the wider community.

'For me it was really important to encourage my daughter. I had [DAUGHTER] in the middle of doing my degree and I have done a Diploma in Counselling too. It took me six years to do my degree but I graduated ten years ago this weekend just gone. I did my degree while going through domestic violence, having a mental break down and being sectioned. How did I do it? I wasn't allowing the schools There were people in the school that saw [DAUGHTER'S] potential but the SENCO didn't and she wanted [DAUGHTER] to sit in a classroom and learn like that and that's not how she learns because she's ADHD with Autistic and Aspergic traits. They wouldn't even allow her to have things in class that she could fiddle with but she pays attention even if she's messing around. Constantly battling with the school going, My child is not stupid! Please stop saying it because that's what she's hearing'.

Lori is exerting her authority by rejecting labels and assertions from the school. This is brave as she has already expressed stigma felt as a mum living on the Abbey Estate but Lori still remains undeterred. She has chosen to navigate her daughter's educational experience by countering it using positive examples and encouragement to illustrate to her daughter that possibilities do exist.

'At home going, do you know what, "ignore them". "You know, whatever they say you can do what you wanna do". Ya know and seeing and having for [DAUGHTER] having people on telly, she loves Big Bang. Knowing that Sheldon is autistic. Knowing that he's got almost the same issues as her and seeing where he's gone has been a real plus for her'.

Lori's navigation of systems and expectations can be seen as essential in honouring her own beliefs. Her confidence in this should not go unnoticed nor should her creation of a mothering practice under her own set of rules. Mothers are sometimes blamed when their children suffer from conditions such as ADHD which can leave a mother in the difficult position of questioning the appropriateness of a teacher's behaviour or responses towards a child. This did not deter Lori.

O'Reilly and Green (2004, 2004) assert that mothers *are* able to cultivate agency and resist the pressure from outsiders and this may help a mother to feel more confident and alter her own perception of herself as an agent as opposed to a victim (Horowitz, 2004). It is the constraints and limitations imposed by others that restrict a mother's maternal agency and authority and cause her to doubt herself. O'Brien Hallstein (2010) highlights maternal agency as the 'ability to influence one's life, to have power to control one's life' and in doing so creating a counter narrative of normative ideologies of mothering.

Sara Ruddick (1989) discusses the way a mother's self-doubt might hinder her agency and authority and even leave her 'plagued with shame and powerlessness' (p.106). She explains,

'A mother's daily power to make or to implement decisions is brooked by the world - by the people, policies, institutions, or natural happenings that contradict her values and disciplinary strategies.....a teacher who insists on a particular pace of learning checked by a competitive test..... these and other outsiders deny mothers a world in which training can effectively yield the excellences and virtues for which it strives' (p.110).

Hearing the way Lori clearly spells it out for the school, '*My child is not stupid!*' and insists the school refrains from labelling her daughter this way, '*Please stop saying it because that's what she's hearing*' enables the reader to gain a sense of her authority. Mothers often fear being 'judged, censored and blamed' when speaking truthfully to authoritative figures but some mothers have found the courage to be 'structurally central to the plot' of their own mothering (O'Reilly, 2009b p.11). Ultimately, the desire to share such examples of these experiences with a researcher may originate from a desire to illustrate a position and identity as an ordinary mother that is 'making the most of the extraordinary circumstances of their lives' and offering empowered resistance as a counter narrative (Patterson, p.58).

I am incredibly moved when Lori explains to me the situations she has faced at the school and how she has dealt with them. My fear of being judged further and not feeling confident in my own mothering may have prevented me taking the stance that she has with the school when I was a 14-year-old mum. Regardless of the circumstances, she questions the school's approach as well as questioning how this approach may be impacting the other children in the community and

possibly even limiting their aspirations. It is not clear to me if Lori realises the significance of her reflection.

I recall being in a school deputy head's office some years ago, battling the labels and sanctions they wanted to impose on my own son. The feeling of vulnerability as I sat in that office with his sister, a newborn, in my arms, still haunts me now. It seemed that what the school represented was especially powerful and it would be impossible for me as a mother to refute the things they said. When I recall that situation, I bitterly regret my approach and wish I would have handled it differently. I still felt I was that 14-year-old mother even though it was nearly 20 years later. This rendered me helpless and unable to mother the way I wanted to.

KERRY

Listening to Kerry describe her frustration with the education system is refreshing. Though it is not her descriptions but her responses to the frustration she feels that astounds me.

'My drive is not feeling happy with certain things within the education system. I feel like while they are doing a lot of good for some children, I don't believe people like my son are getting the best. We're not getting the best out of them from schools. I find myself spending a lot of time feeling frustrated and like I had no control. Like I was powerless. I felt powerless!

I just had to send my son to go and do something that genuinely was making him so miserable. He was so unhappy. Referring to it like it was like a prison. With no sort of passion to want to learn or be educated. It was all about the way he felt with the relationships with the teachers. And like I say, his grades were just gradually dropping and dropping and dropping. I didn't want my son to spend the last two years in a place where he was really unhappy coming out with no achievements and never really having any future prospects for himself'.

Although Kerry explicitly expresses her 'powerlessness' and lack of control over the education system and local school, she realises that there are possibilities. She did not want her son to remain in a place that was making him unhappy and where she believed his development was being hampered. She found that in contrast to initially feeling, 'powerless', there was something she could do which allowed her to exercise her power and influence.

'So, that was what empowered me to home school [SON]. Finding other forms of education where I felt we were gonna get the best of him as a person as well as his education cos now he feels slightly more respected. Fourteen years old is that age where they think that they're adults. They want to be treated like adults but they are still adolescents learning how to make choices, learning how to get the best from situations and I don't believe that the academy that's in the area

supported what my son needed to flourish to get the best of him'.

I cannot help but feel great admiration for Kerry in her decision making and her awareness of the impact on her son this could have. He feels heard and 'respected'. She is not prepared to accept the situation as it is and reflects upon it before asserting her own resistance. Kerry sought to discover if there were other options that were more suited to her son and in realising there was, she was able to command a new way forward for him.

Despite being written many years ago, Ruddick (1989) shifts the perspective from motherhood to mothering and this heightens the relevancy of her work to understanding the experiences of mothering. Ruddick (1989) writes of the powerlessness that mothers can feel in the societies in which they live 'in respect to men, public officials and experts of both sexes' and the 'little power to fight the interests of armies that they as well as their children serve' (p.114). Kerry expresses the 'powerlessness' she felt at having to force her son to 'go and do something that genuinely was making him so miserable'. Ruddick (1989) declares, 'From a mother's point of view, maternal powerlessness is very real indeed' (p.35). She discusses the difficulty 'for the most clear-sighted mother to keep her power and powerlessness in focus' particularly when it involves external bodies (p.36).

It may appear that there is uncertainty surrounding a mother's doubts and desires around applying her authority and agency and how these are actualised. This may arise from the conflict sometimes felt between the power a mother feels she has with her children but with outsiders becomes diminished. This can also cause confusion for children when they see the

limitations of their mother's power. As a result of this conflict, mothers can lose confidence in their own mothering practice (Ruddick, 1989). Feminist researchers agree that empowered mothering based upon maternal agency is beneficial for both mothers and their children but achieving or sustaining this may be more challenging (O'Reilly, 2010).

Kerry's experience feels more familiar to me and my mothering now than it does to my mothering as a 14-year-old mum. There were times when I was oblivious to what I was meant to do but there were others when I knew it would be easier not to make a fuss. I had and have feelings of disenchantment with the education system but in all honesty, acting upon those feelings now would feel much easier. This is based on the perceptions I have of others, even the gaze of others and how the choices I make would be interpreted. It is difficult to justify why mothers may feel guilty for mothering their children in the way they feel is best for them but I feel that judgement from other mothers and professionals causes some of this.

Kerry exhibits deep awareness of her son's feelings and declares her own feelings of powerlessness. She can articulate these well and uses them as a call to action. She wanted to command the direction of the situation and its outcome and was strong willed enough to find an alternative. She may not have found a permanent solution but I feel that if she needed to try something else she has the determination and courage to do so. I always long to show my children we will find a way

to overcome challenges and that we can influence outcomes but I feel we sometimes hide the power we have to do this. I think sometimes we confuse our children with this as they may see us as able to conquer the problems and challenges we are faced with but when we are actually up against external structures we sometimes retreat. Today, I am aware that the power and influence I hold, varies greatly to any I may have had as a 14-year-old mother but I am asking myself why. I do not think it is as simple as being a teenage mum. I believe it is far more complex.

JENNY

Jenny refers several times to the parent support officer at the school and the way she returned to her again and again. She refused to give up until she got the support her son needed and the suitable school placement.

'It's like fighting to find somebody. We didn't have anyone in the end'.

All I can think when Wendy says this is, 'Thank goodness your son had you'.

'I'm just so pleased that [SCHOOL] Academy refused to take my son when he went to high school and he ended up going to special needs school at [SCHOOL] cause he's now in]

college which I never thought when he first started there that he would ever get to go to college because he couldn't even do half an hour at school. A lot of people said to me, "you want to appeal against it but I was like, 'NO!! I've been waiting for this since he was seven/eight years old'" and 'I was so happy!'.

I am able to see and hear the joy Jenny exudes as she is telling me this. She knew exactly what her son needed and she held fast to her beliefs. She trusted her own mothering and resisted the expectations of others despite the fact that she needed support to ensure her son's needs were met. She may have been expected to surrender her own knowing to the often-assumed expertise of educational professionals.

'That was a bit of a nightmare, cause we were told to go to [SCHOOL]. We met staff there and they said they could meet his needs. Then County Hall turned around and said [LOCAL AUTHORITY] County Council, said, "we're not sending him there cause it's too expensive" and chose two other schools for him to go to which we found weren't suitable. So the parent support advisor at [SCHOOL] Academy, I went to and said to her "you've got to help me write a letter. He's not going to them two other schools. He needs to go to [SPECIALIST SCHOOL]". But they were schools that were on industrial estates. Bearing in mind that he was diagnosed ADHD but we knew that he was more autistic than ADHD and he doesn't like noise. It easily distracts him when he's trying to learn'.

This left Jenny in a position where she had to either reject or accept the options that the educational professionals intended to impose and which they expected Jenny to agree to. Some parents are marginalised due to their lack of knowledge surrounding particular issues and it may have been easier for the school if Jenny had remained a passive recipient. She was aware she did not have all of the skills to address this situation alone but she knew it must be contested. Thankfully, at that time Parent Support Advisors were present in schools.

'The poor parent support adviser at [SCHOOL]. Academy, well, I kept going to her all the time "who can help me with this? Who can help me with that?". We got to the one in [TOWN]. We got up to the classroom before we got challenged by anyone cause it was in a community church. Got no outdoor play areas and the students had a little triangular table and they could position it wherever they liked in this room that was their classroom, kitchen and playground and everything. I was like, "oh my god, he's gonna be out that door down the road to the industrial estate". It wasn't far to the main road. Cause he'd escaped from the [PREVIOUS SCHOOL] and we had to go and pick him up cause he wasn't safe to be in school. And then the other one was [TOWN] right near the airbase with the big planes taking off. No outdoor play area for him. Obviously, he was a lot shorter than what he is now but it was an industrial unit that had been made into different classrooms and upstairs there was a great big gap

down metal stairs. He's got Cerebral palsy, weakness to the left side and he was quite sort of unsteady. He almost fell down when we was with him. So that was a big no no'.

Jenny's story is incredible. She fought against the two options she was given. Her son's outcomes and future depended on it and she realised this. Nothing else mattered. He now attends college. The triumph that Jenny eventually achieved is something she may not perceive as such. If she had been consciously considering her ability to act accordingly when trying to understand her position, she may have been deterred. She discarded any thoughts of risk regarding the connection between her own actions and the possibility there may have a been negative outcome for her son as a result of the power of the professionals she encountered.

Horowitz's (2004) study of 'how mothers can deviate from the dominant discourse in a manner that, although challenging at times, may be empowering to them' explores how women resisted dominant discourses of mothering and how they experienced resistance (p.44-45). Horowitz (2004) draws attention to the point that mothers are sometimes portrayed in the literature as powerless, passive, victims of the dominant discourse but that despite this there are varying degrees of resistance that some mothers found more challenging than others. Significantly, the women in Horowitz's study made it clear that the resistant choices they made could only be taken so long as there were no negative repercussions for their children. Jenny's resistance is grounded in choices that will benefit her son and his wellbeing. The choices she made positioned her as an active agent constructing her own

practice of mothering. This is in stark contrast to dominant discourse that sometimes suggest mothers are to blame for the negative outcomes surrounding children.

Research by scholars into feminist mothering is limited but Gordon (1990) noted that the mothers included in her research did not view themselves as 'downtrodden, depressed victims of circumstances; [or as] passive recipients of society's dictums' (p.64) It was their discontent and dissatisfaction that led to them making choices they believed were most beneficial for their children. Ruddick (1989) discusses the obstacles mothers sometimes face when asserting authority which can result in self-denial but a 'reflective' mother would not deny her own authority due to the betrayal and hurt this would cause her children (p.115).

All the maternal stories shared with me allow me to gain greater understanding to situations I have never experienced and would not be able to understand in such depth. It is challenging for me to hear some of the things each of the mothers tell me about their experiences but listening to Jenny's narrative about her son leaves me feeling shocked and wanting to express outrage. Hers is not the only story that does this but hearing the treatment her son received and her battles to support him are a real testament to her resistance and intent to ensuring her son received the school place that would support his needs. It would have been easy for Jenny to give up and abandon her quest for what she knew was right for her son. Even when she felt she could not complete the forms herself or needed letters she still made sure she got them.

It may be that my interpretation and understanding of Jenny's resistance differs to the way she experienced it. I feel very aware of this and am cautious of making sure I do not blur the line between how I might react if I were in her shoes. Each of our experiences are unique and this is part of the problem when we are not prepared to let mothers tell their own story. She explains it to me without mentioning any doubt or hesitation. That does not mean she did not experience those but it is this that gives me a sense of her courage. When I listen back to the recorded interview Jenny is quietly assertive. She articulates well the difficulties she faced.

JULIE

When Julie begins to tell me about the criticism she received as a parent she does so in the calmest manner but this does not stop me from seeing her disappointment with what she went through.

'All the time I found it really hard. I didn't have social services involved but I did have lots of medical people involved and there was lots of, "You need to do this. You need to do that". With me going, "I am doing all that and look at her. It's fine. He's different". So yeah, I felt I was challenged a lot as a parent. That it was my parenting. Well, "if you'd just do this". "I don't want to just do this. I want you to look at him!". I felt I was challenged the whole way and even now, I still get

challenged, "Oh you allowed your son to do that!" You still get challenges'.

What Julie describes sounds frustrating and addressing the power imbalance between herself and health professionals that she was having to challenge cannot have been easy for her. She had the expertise on her children and knew the differences between them, yet she had to assert her authority to be listened to. She explains to me that she instinctively knew her children were different but had to face the accusations that her parenting might be the cause.

'The collecting at the end of the school day,"Mrs. [NAME] can we just have a word?"

'I went through a period where I was so anxious about that I took my friend's daughter to school and she picked my children up and then they had to phone me so that conversation didn't happen in front of the other parents because I didn't want all the parents going Mrs. [NAME]. So, I put a strategy in place where they couldn't do it. They didn't like it but I just could not do it.'

The navigation and negotiation of this situation that Julie strategized illustrates her determination and her explanation of it is so calm and matter of fact that I can only imagine how this situation made her feel at the time. It makes me wonder if educational professionals are aware of the lack of sensitivity they sometimes have when addressing these issues and the impact this might have on a

mother. Of course, they are under pressure but Julie should not have had to feel anxiety about collecting her child from school. A more discretionary approach would have alleviated this.

'The hardest thing about the school is they got one size fits all and it doesn't. The hardest thing about parenting is they've got a view of what it should be and it's not the same - cause every child is not the same'.

Julie has connected her own experience to the wider experiences of others and I wonder if this comes from her interaction with other mothers who she meets at the group or from the time she spent volunteering and working with parenting groups. I am immediately aware of the positive impact her approach would have on the other mothers she interacts with and how beneficial this would be for those who are facing similar challenges with educational and medical professionals.

Julie's experience and strategizing resulted in her resistance in order to avoid the interaction with her child's teacher taking place in front of other mothers. Women have often cited other mothers as the harshest critics and judges of their mothering and even pressuring mothers to conform to the common expectations around mothering (Horowitz, (2004). This has resulted in some mothers speaking out in order to help others understand their choices but this has also led to isolation and silence to avoid criticisms from others managed by balancing their own needs and those of their children's.

Green (2006, 2008) writes of the way mothering can be ‘a dynamic place for creativity’ when established on its own terms and when within it mothers are able to practice ‘agency, resistance and renewal’ (p.113) (O’Reilly, 2016, p.139). Green (2006, 2008) acknowledges two differing approaches to resistance. One is a more ‘deliberate act of resistance’ and one is a ‘less overt’ approach to mothering (p.130). The less overt approach is more focused on a mothers actual mothering experience while the overt approach involves a more direct challenge to the institution of motherhood. Even when mothers do not identify their resistance in this way or label themselves as a ‘feminist mother’ they are able to recognise they can make changes for their children by making changes in their approach to mothering (O’Reilly, 2016).

Sadly, I am not surprised by what Julie tells me about the medical professionals she had to meet with. Training as a student midwife allowed me to witness first-hand professional judgements being made by women who were in a paid role designed to support women through pregnancy and beyond. I found it very difficult to ignore comments by these professionals that were aimed at and focused on a mother’s choice of partner, her address and the number of children she had. It made me shudder to think of what they would have said about me if this is the way they judged other mothers. It was also a long way from how the midwives and health visitors had treated me when I became a teenage mum. I credit my early mothering experiences to their supportive approach. Hearing Julie explain how she felt challenged rather than supported in both a medical and

educational setting is troubling. When I was a teenage mum, this was not my experience. In some ways I felt more able to advocate for myself and my son as a teenage mum than I did as I got older. I always recall lots of mothers and other people staring at me though and I am sure this was because I was so young.

Over time I have definitely become more aware of the perceptions of others and feel the very real expectations of the 'good mother' all around me but my response to this is different to what it would have been previously. I have family and friends and other professionals ask my advice on mothering and I feel terribly guilty they believe I have some authority on what they should do. I think this is partly because I am a mother of eight and partly because of my academic and professional experience but I know how important it is a mother makes the decisions that are right for her and her children in their own set of individual circumstances. Sadly, this is often easier said than done.

The accounts above have offered informative experiences of mothering from a position of authority and agency alongside the academic literature. Again, a layered account has made accessible to the reader as many 'ways of knowing' as possible (Ronai, 1992). Various scenarios have offered perspectives from diverse positions to illustrate how mothers have demonstrated their authority and agency to resist dominant discourses and societal expectations. It has considered the definitions and meanings of

maternal authority and maternal agency and how the mothers have expressed this. The practise of empowered mothering is defined and based upon maternal agency and the process of resisting normative discourses and ideologies (Rich, 1986, Horowitz, 2003). The maternal narratives above detail how the mothers have imagined and implemented their own mode of mothering resisting those ideologies.

The mothers interviewed all expressed difficulties when interacting with educational establishments. The most troublesome aspect of mothers struggling with powerful structures such as this is in them relinquishing their own authority to others, losing sight of their children's needs and confidence in their 'own values' (Ruddick, 1989, p.111). Maternal authority is the 'confidence and conviction in oneself as a mother' as well as the refusal to reject your own values and perceptions as a mother (O'Reilly, 2006, p.22, Ruddick, 1989). Rich (19) highlights maternal agency as the refusal to be a victim.

The differences between the experiences of the mothers may be understood to a greater degree by examining the individual circumstances more closely. Four of the maternal narratives demonstrate mothering from a position of agency and authority. However, mothers sometimes feel their mothering must comply with expectations associated with normative mothering but across time mothering can alter as a mother grows in confidence. It can also be argued that Lori and Kerry may have found it easier to act as authoritative agentic mothers due to their recent access to education as according to Middleton (2006) conditions of empowered mothering are more 'easily achieved' when a woman is educated (p.76). She suggests that in order to recognise the 'power dynamics in society' there will be a particular level of education required providing access to particular resources (p.76).

The commentary from the interviews also displays the maternal authority in the narratives shared when measured against the definitions of this. Middleton (2006) has written and focused on each of the four attributes of empowered mothering and also writes of the challenges on whether women mothering in difficult circumstances are able to assert their authority. She highlights that both the mother and the child would be under the control of external bodies rather than a mother's own 'internal regulations authentically chosen by the mother' making it difficult for her to assert any kind of authority (p.80).

However, Middleton's view could be contested because all the mothers demonstrate authority and agency in various scenarios at different times and levels throughout the experiences they describe. For example, Lori, Julie, and Jenny all mothered prior to further access to education and all cite professionals and outsiders as catalysts for developing their own way of mothering regardless of if these interactions were positive or negative, Middleton's (2006) argument can be further dismantled when she argues that achieving agency for a mother is dependent on her involvement with external agencies or bodies making it hard to accomplish because mothers in this position have limited control over their lives compared to women not requiring outside support. She explains that women mothering under duress will find it more challenging to portray themselves as so called 'good mothers' but this does not mean that mothers who do this are more empowered or resistant, just that the lack of scrutiny and policing allows their mothering to go unmonitored and unnoticed.

It would be wrong not to acknowledge that for some marginalised mothers resisting expectations placed upon them by governmental bodies and educational settings would be challenging but this is not because they

do not understand or want to assert their agency and authority but because they must remain complicit with the expectations of services, they are in contact with in order to avoid excessive scrutiny. In addition, mothers may also be under the scrutiny of not only services but the gaze of other mothers, especially in educational settings where many mothers' cross paths with others. Julie talks of her embarrassment each day at the school when she collected her child and being singled out by the teacher to discuss her child's behaviour. She may not have felt she could challenge the teacher but she was still able to create a strategy that meant she would not be placed in that position in the future. Mothers who feel targeted do create strategies that allow them to perform mothering in a way that draws little attention to themselves. This is based upon their perception that enough negative attention is focused on them already.

Lori uses television as a tool to help view and explore the wider issues with her daughter. This helps her to question and critique expectations and aspirations the school has for her daughter (Horowitz, 2004 Green, 2004). She uses this to engage in the process of resistance. As mothers, we do have the ability to subvert the institutions and organisations and employ confident, strong-minded mothering but the challenges around this further emphasises why community and support groups are essential to mothers in these positions as well as other women and mothers (Ruddick, 1989, Green, 2004).

One of the greatest challenges of mothering is resisting dominant discourses and powerful structures. Mothers may not have seen themselves as active authoritative agents resisting societal expectations but upon analysing their experiences, I have begun to consider that they are in fact resisting the cultural pressures and expectations of being unambitious and incapable of providing what their child/children need in

order to secure their physical and emotional development (Byrd, 2019). This less overt resistance implemented in their own practice of mothering still allows negative stereotypes to affect them but is strategized the same way that Julie did. This ensures the mothers are able to mother the way they chose to and made choices that were right for them and their children.

Green (2004) discusses her research with mothers and provides examples of strategies implemented by creating their own solutions to address difficulties they were facing as mothers. Willow, a mother in Green's study opts for a similar approach to Julie when she enlisted the help of her friend to set up an arrangement that would support her in avoiding her after school experience with her child's teacher. Willow addressed her daughter's behavioural needs as well as her own by seeking support from another mother. By reinventing ways to mother, mothers such as Julie and Willow find strength and freedom they would not have felt had they conformed to what was expected. This type of resistance in mothers may often go unnoticed and be unaccounted for but these are worthy approaches that support the needs of mothers themselves and their children.

Mothers are affected by dominant mothering discourses which they feel they must comply with but Horowitz's (2003) study with 15 mothers revealed that not all women subscribe to the dominant discourse perpetuated in Western society to the level that we might think (Gordon, 1990). When enacting authoritative and agentic mothering mothers are resisting society's dominant discourses as agents of their own lives (Horowitz, 2004). Research undertaken by Tuula Gordon (1990) was one of only a small number of studies exploring resistance and mothering from the perspective of feminist mothers. However, Gordon (1990) only included mothers who identified as feminists, whereas Horowitz's study

explored the experience of resistance (described for the purposes of the study as the efforts of oppressed groups to challenge and act against aspects of the dominant discourse) and the implications of this to feminist and empowered mothering. Ultimately, the mothers who participated in Horowitz's study revealed that they were not required to follow the societal expectations placed upon them and that through their agency and authority they were able to experience guilt free mothering and have more power over their lives. Horowitz (2004) also questioned the impact on the self and self-esteem that these mothers may have gained from the belief, 'they did not *have* to follow the status quo and that they were agents who made the choices best suited to them and their families' (p.53). She thought it might actually 'promote further resistance' in mothers' p.53). The challenge to mothering as you choose is still a difficult aspect of this though, and it cannot be underestimated that some mothers choose isolation and silence to avoid the criticism they may face similar to Julie.

The variation in the way mothers throughout this research display their authority and agency stems from each of their own maternal voices situated in a specific social location and vantage. Resistant mothering is not about finding the right way to mother but about choice (Horowitz, 2004). When mothers engage in reflective and critical questioning around their choices, they protect themselves from the self-doubt other mothers have reported (Boulton, 1983). The narratives shared by Lori, Kerry, Julie and Jenny have demonstrated their agency and authority through resistance but it is important to contextualise these experiences appropriately by clarifying that asserting resisting mothering varies in accordance with the number of points a mother is resisting against. Horowitz (2004) elaborates further,

Resistance, then, may fall along a continuum; it does not appear to be a simple process but one that entails the negotiation of many different, and often conflicting, discourses. Finally, the complexity of the process of resistance is also reflected in the degrees of empowerment versus struggle that each participant experienced p.46).

The mothers in this research have evidenced agentic power which appears attached to their practice of mothering. They created their own version of mothering displaying a sense of personal authority and agency. By engaging in this type of process the mothers were able to have a more positive experience altering their own perception of themselves as victims. It may be surprising that mothers mothering in difficult circumstances are able to locate ways to create their own identities of mothering through agency and authority and is in opposition to some assumptions and stereotypes assigned to them. It has been argued though, that the very reason this is possible is because of the ability to perceive the way ideologies of mothering delegitimises and dominates them as mothers allowing them to create new ways of mothering (McDonald-Harker, 2016, O'Reilly, 2016). The narratives have provided insight into the changing status, education levels and experiences of the mothers and their interactions with institutions, professionals and other mothers. This appears to illustrate that regardless of those changes and position that a mother finds herself in, that mothering is still regulated despite this. Just with different sets of regulations.

In summary, this chapter re-presents the matrifocal narratives of the four mothers with a focus on authority and agency. The narratives illustrate how they practice agency and authority in their mothering in spite of the challenges they face from external agencies, other mothers as well as in medical and educational settings. Their experiences have again been viewed through a mother focused lens in order to illustrate their alternatives to those more frequently shared. The following chapter will focus on the autonomy the mothers hold.

CHAPTER FIVE: AUTONOMOUS MOTHERING

If we want girls to grow into free women, brave and strong, we must be those women ourselves.

Judith Arcana 1979

I drop one of my children with an older sibling before I attend one of the interviews and casually say, 'I shouldn't be too long, maybe about an hour and a half'. This is unlike me as I hate to rely on my children for childcare. This is a big assumption that I constantly face - that my older children will be babysitters for their younger siblings. This comes from people who think it is their right to comment on my life. It seems to be that if you are a teenage mum or a mother of many that your life is up for public comment and speculation. 'I bet you get your older children to look after the younger ones for you, don't you?' 'No, I don't actually.

I went into Tesco Express one evening a few years ago when I was studying midwifery and a lady was in there who I knew from school. She called to me across the shop and shouted, 'I bet you're on benefits aren't you with all those children?' I was mortified that she thought it was appropriate to shout across the shop and assert her assumptions.

Me asking one of my older children to have a younger one is a rarity though. I end up being much longer than I expected though and receive a barrage of curt texts and frustrated voice mails from my son. 'Have they no idea how important this is to me?', I exclaim to myself as I frantically drive to relieve my son of his younger sibling. I feel hurt that there is no concept of how important this work is to me and that

I would never want to abandon a mother who is giving me her time. Deep down I know they understand this but it reminds me of how hard trying to be the perfect mother, researcher, interviewer and academic can be. It's too much sometimes.

I think because of my own experiences I have a strong sense of awareness and appreciation for another's situation and I have tried to pass this on to my children. I try hard to never let them down and always be the mother that never relies on them but I realise there is no need to be racked with guilt over asking one of them for a baby sitting favour. I feel both joy and relief the interview is finished and that I am now driving home. When I recall this moment now, I am aware of how important it is for them to see me doing something for me as I believe it will also ensure they realise the value of doing something for themselves.

It is hard to shake off those feelings and ideals of being the perfect mother though. It feels as if the script is written and you just need to follow it. Everyone looks to you to make the right choices and do the right things and if you express wanting more that perhaps you cannot be thought of as that so called 'good mother'. People seemed so surprised when I insisted I wanted to attend school still after having a baby at 14. Then again when I wanted to go to college and get a job. I can honestly say that looking back I wanted those things for me. I was too young to have any awareness of the long-term benefits and security it might offer a child. So, I think I really was self-ruling.

Several months after I began this work, I attended a conference in Florence in 2018. It was the first time I had been anywhere focused on scholarly work and academia with a focus on mothering and motherhood. I was especially excited and nervous as I had been asked to speak about my own experiences at the conference. A few days before attending, Carolyn Ellis responded to a panicked email from me in the midst of her moving to a new house. Her response, *'You have a great story. Email me back if u don't hear from me in a few days. Go for it'*. She gave me the encouragement I needed. Thank you, Carolyn! I was still doubting myself and if I should really be attending such a conference, let alone speaking at it. Although my work on mothering was at the heart of the trip, it was still going to be about me travelling as an independent woman who was trying to do something for herself and her own career development. Knowing that when you return from pursuing something for yourself you feel you are able to be a better mother. Having something for yourself that is yours.

I have come to realise the importance of carving out a piece of time or something for yourself. Even something small that might seem inconsequential to an outsider. In small ways I have been doing this for a long time but I know this is not easy for all mothers. This is not because they do not long for independence separate from mothering but because mothering in isolation or alone does not always permit opportunities for this.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The previous two chapters discussed authenticity, agency and authority as attributes of empowered mothering through a matricentric lens. The chapters represent the courage, confidence and values the mothers unconsciously conveyed in their interviews. This chapter provides the maternal narratives that demonstrate autonomous mothering. Autonomous mothering refers to mothers who are meeting their own needs, acknowledging that being a mother does not fulfil all of a woman's needs, involving others in their children's upbringing, questioning expectations that are placed upon them by society, challenging mainstream mothering practices, not believing they are responsible for the way children turn out and challenging the ideal that women only ever feel the emotion of love for their children (O'Reilly, 2016). The maternal narratives detailed below as layered accounts illustrate the incredible attempts by different mothers to meet their own needs whilst challenging societal expectations of mothering (Ronai, 1992).

LORI

Lori discusses her job with me and the significance of it in her life. She has a sense of pride when she talks about the way it makes her feel and also the connections she feels to others this gives her with people that are completely separate from her mothering.

'It makes me feel like me again. I've got a history of mental health issues and just sitting indoors doesn't help that. So, volunteering somewhere I can meet new people. Felt like I

became me again for a while. So, it was, for me. It was just about being me and not mum all the time. Being a single parent, it felt good to not just be mum constantly.

'I've always loved volunteering or something just to feel like I deserve the benefits that I was getting from the government. I did my degree while on benefits and did my counselling diploma and then became a TA and then just got into deciding I wanted to do retail and it felt good just to get out and do something. People I work with and the volunteers I work with are amazing. Most, I'd say 95% of the customers are amazing and I've kind of got to know them over the years I have worked there. It's nice. Doing my degree, I did it when I was still married and it was an escape from domestic abuse but then moving here when we split, it was more about showing my children that doesn't matter what happens in life you can, there are still chances and you can still make something of yourself.

It seems as though Lori is conscious of the example she sets for her children and wants them to see that there are opportunities. She also contradicts the stereotype sometimes attached to single mums receiving benefits. To hear Lori, make a point of explaining she needed to feel she 'deserved' the benefits she received made me want to question her more on this but she was very focused on elaborating about her job that it felt untimely to ask further questions. I wondered if this feeling comes from her awareness of such stereotypes or if it originated from something else. To hear her say, 'just to feel like I

deserve the benefits that I was getting from the government' really moved me as I am all too familiar of the stigma associated with being in receipt of benefits.

'It doesn't matter that you've had a mental break down and ended up in a psychiatric unit. It doesn't matter that you've been through domestic abuse. It doesn't matter. None of that matters as long as you've got a drive to do what you want to do you will get through anything. It took three years of counselling to get to that point. I have to admit I went through it, cause when I finally kicked my ex-husband out, I was really at a low point, with no self-esteem. I didn't know who I was. He had taken away my entire identity.....so I had to find myself. I was totally different then to who I am now. I ninety per cent know who I am now. You become whoever you need to be to protect yourself.

Lori has invested time in reflecting on her experiences and journey which helped me to understand the progress she feels she has made. Throughout our conversation I have also been able to witness her strength and desire to not only set an example to her children but to also harness her own needs as a person. She has shared with me her own vision of the love she has for her children and her desire to be true to herself.

Adrienne Rich (1976) acknowledges her withdrawal from her identity as a mother at particular times. She expresses, 'For me, poetry was

where I lived as no one's mother, where I existed for myself' (p.31). Having an alternative identity is what allowed Rich to escape her mothering. Kate expresses similar, '*Felt like I became me again for a while*'. The feelings and honest expression of them are in contradiction to the ideologies of mothering such as intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and the new momism (Douglas and Michaels, 2004) which are both unachievable ideals. When such ideals are imposed onto mothers, mothers are rendered powerless (Rich, 1986). Copper (2007) explains her own feelings, 'I face the assumptions that my motherhood somehow defines my life, instead of being a small but important part of it' (p.187).

Practising as an autonomous mother enables a woman to demonstrate the value in herself and her work. Hochschild (1997) explains that women spend time doing work because they feel appreciated there and have increased self-esteem regardless of the nature of the work. We have been led to believe that mothers must be nurturing all the time, a standard that is impossible to meet (Hochschild, 1997). Douglas and Michaels (2004) write of the new momism and intensive mothering which leave no room for a mother who might want to do anything else. They assert that the only option for women who want careers, or to do anything else other than stay at home with the children, is to prove they can 'do it all' (p.22). Mothers have given up education, hobbies, writing and more in subscribing to intensive mothering but a more mother-centred focus could help a woman to see that her identity does not have to be limited solely to her role as a mother (O'Reilly, 2007).

Lori's explanation of needing something for herself is something I can relate to. She has already completed a degree and committed to study for a long period of time all while going through challenging

times. In continuing to pursue something for herself outside of her mothering she sets the scene for her children to understand she has her own identity too. Studying has been an essential vehicle for me during times that were difficult but having that balance and something that was about me and not me being a mother mattered and felt a life saver despite the challenges of assignments and deadlines. It definitely raised my self-esteem.

'After careful consideration, I eventually enrolled onto an Access to Health and Science course in order to gain a qualification that might be my key to attending university. I was very fortunate on my journey to meet several people who have counterbalanced my nagging feelings of not being good enough or being too different to fit in. My Access course director was one of the first. She did not care who I was, where I lived or how many children I had or even who their fathers were. She believed in me as Hayley. I had my own identity as a student doing something outside of being a mother. Taking control and doing something for me was not only good for me but for my children as well.

KERRY

Kerry is determined that she is going to take charge and achieve her goals. I hear how she has agonised over this and if and how she could really make it happen. For her to do what she wanted she would

be sacrificing her time, part time jobs and benefits but after careful thought and contemplation she is willing to make those adjustments.

'I just don't want to be in that box just Kerry [SURNAME] on benefits. Working and you know I just want more. I just want more and I am tired of this constant battle with the government to get anywhere in life. I'm tired of it so you kind of have to say, 'Alright Kerry, if you want this you got to make it happen. There's no point in relying on anybody'. And that is what I've done. I didn't even know what sort of direction I was going to take it in.

When I hear Kerry say this I start to wonder if she is partly driven by the stigma she feels from living on the estate as well as the stigma attached to benefit claimants. There have been questions surrounding stigma associated with this and whether its intended consequence is to shame lone mothers into working. These points leave me reflecting on what is driving Kerry's determination.

'It was just this sort of kind of emptiness where you get up and you live on a rubbish estate, you're gonna do the same old rubbish job for the same old rubbish money you know if you earn any more money the government will take that off you and never being able to move on and just progress. You know studying counselling and psychotherapy, it's given me a massive understanding of how our life and how we grow up and how things, our childhood is so important. It affects us.

'So, starting university was a fear because it's like I could lose so much. Then I had to think. 'you know what? I don't care'. There's so much I can gain as well and if I would have let the fear and self-doubt you know come in, I would have give this up a long time ago but you know I want more. I feel like I deserve more and there's nobody out there helping me.

'I want to be able to speak to people and for people to say, 'I want to listen to this lady cause she actually talks sense.' I just want to feel I can make some improvement. I just want to feel like I'm giving back. I am doing something. I am trying to share my experiences to make other people feel better.

Kerry seems deflated when she tells me how she eventually had a conversation with herself about the reality of any changes she wanted to make being down to herself alone. I sense it may have been the deflation which eventually propelled her to make the adjustments she wanted, although, not before hardship and struggling. She refers to her 'constant battle' and alludes to the possibility of her identity being tied up with the fact she received benefits.

Ideologies of motherhood have 'an effect on women's autonomy, so that we are often not viewed as persons in our own right with choices to make about ways of being and living' (O'Donnovan and Marshall, 2006, p.103). What restricts these choices is when a mother has limited social and familial support networks encompassing her mothering, then inevitably, the options she has in which to pursue her own interests and the capacity to make her own choices are constrained (Boyd, 2010). Kerry has to carefully

consider any decisions that she makes and what the impact of these will be on herself and her children despite her own wants and needs. Fineman (2004) wrote of derivative (economic and structural) dependency of children on their care givers who are most often women (p.35). Fineman (2004) argues 'derivative dependency' is unrecognised by society and this inhibits a mother's autonomous decisions she wants or needs to make that will ensure her economic stability.

Kerry has expressed that she wants something for herself that will also benefit her children. She wants to improve her circumstances. Smith (2003) writes that what a child needs is a mother who has 'resources to enable her to make real choices, but also to create a feeling of adequate control'. This is especially challenging for a mother in Kerry's situation who has relied on benefits and as has been argued by Middleton (2006) that mothers in Kerry's position, such as those mothering in difficult circumstances, may 'lack' autonomy. This is based on the view that these mothers will be intensely scrutinised by the system and are treated as cases as opposed to autonomous individuals. Greaves *et al* (2000) also support this and state,

'The mothers (are) subjected to a unifying, bureaucratic gaze that typifie(s) rather than individualise(s), reducing and simplifying the women and their lives. The problem with being a case is that it limits one's ability to be seen as a mother or an autonomous individual (p.100).

Kerry has explained the difficulty she has experienced in dealing with the 'government' concerning her benefits and has made the brave decision to forfeit that support but in doing so has gained a sense of empowerment. Empowered mothering is about the *mother*; it is about making herself count as much as her children (when possible); it is about being part of the equation; and about her making choices that are not only beneficial to her children but also to *her* (Horowitz, 2004, p. 55).

I will never forget the day I walked onto the campus to study Public Health. I was nobody. I was free from the stigma of being a teen mum from Thetford. From having eight children. From all of it. No one had a clue who I was and it was down to me if I ever wanted to tell them. This was freeing. I was a person in my own right. I stepped through the gates to the university and felt as if I was in another world. The difficult decisions I had made to get there all seemed worth it and it took me a long time before I began to share any of part of who I was outside of the campus. It felt as if I was in control of my future and the direction I wanted it to go in.

Kerry talks of the decisions she made to study and the impact she hopes this will have on her own life and others she might be able to help. I know that fear causes hesitancy in what we say and do but I know if Kerry keeps going on the journey she has started she will find what she loves. She has such strength and drive which has arisen from her dissatisfaction. She has taken brave steps to make the changes she wants. With limited support this is incredible. She has considered the various aspects of her life and knows she wants things to be different. Without speaking to Kerry, you would not know any of this nor realise her resolve.

JENNY

My meetings with each of the mothers were unstructured and allowed for the mothers to share with me the aspects of their experiences that they wanted me to know. I could not predict what the results of this might be or what mothers might share in our conversation. My conversation/interview with Jenny illustrates the difference in her personality to the other mothers I interviewed. Jenny is quiet but confidently explains what she wants to say but without saying anymore. This makes what she does say noteworthy and before, during or after the recording not only did Jenny convey during our interview the independence the group helped her achieve but also in our follow up conversation. Jenny discussed with me the significance of the group to her and its impact on her as a person. Jenny explained to me she felt she was now at a point where she was thinking about finding something else for herself in addition to the attending the group.

'I was considering it but then I broke my ankle last September but yeah, I was thinking, 'I really need to get out and do something for me. Volunteering in a shop or volunteering somewhere. Go and be with other people rather than being stuck at home all the time. When my mobility is better then I can go out and do something.

'Through coming to this group, I actually made the decision that one night a week my daughter would cook, one night a

week my son would cook and one night a week my husband would cook and they enjoy it. I just went home and said one night a week 'you're cooking'. So, sort it out between you what night you want.

'I was doing everything. Everyone was just sitting around and things weren't done the way they wanted and they were moaning. It made me think, right, yeah, this is going to happen I have found my voice again, That has been from coming to the group on a Tuesday. Having something to focus on. It really does give you a focus on something else.

Before, during and after the recording Jenny expressed to me the independence the group helped her achieve. She explained how when she first attended, she was very quiet and shy and found it hard to speak out in front of others and she had not expected she would begin to think about having time or something for herself.

Rich (1976) wrote many years ago,

What woman, in the solitary confinement of life at home enclosed with young children, or in the struggle to mother them while providing for them single-handedly, or in the conflict of weighting her own personhood against the dogma that says she is a mother, first, last, and always—what woman has not dreamed of 'going over the edge,' of simply letting go, relinquishing what is termed her sanity, so that she can be taken care of for once, or can simply find a way to take care of herself?' (p.279 - 280).

Rich (1986) wrestled with these feelings and lack of control and wrote in her diary in November 1956, 'I had never really given up on poetry, nor gaining some control over my existence' (p.15). Once again in August 1965, she relays a question she was asked, 'Don't you ever write poems about your children?' Her response referred to the 'male poets of her

generation that did write poems about their children—especially their daughters. For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself’ (p.18).

Jenny describes, almost with surprise, her newfound sense of independence and the thought that she may be able to have time and a place for herself. It appears as if she had never imagined that there might be other possibilities available to her. Green (2011) writes of the difficulty of choosing to make and accept changes to a mother’s parenting who may have previously subscribed to societal and cultural views about mothering. Jenny takes time for herself at the group and enjoys small art projects as well as delegating household tasks to her husband and children. O’Reilly (2016) and Ruddick (1986) characterise autonomy as the confidence and conviction a mother has in herself and her ability to define and determine the way she lives her life and practice of mothering. Without attending the group and sharing her practice of mothering, Jenny may not have developed the certainty, confidence and determination that empowered her to identify her own way of mothering and to consider pursuing a hobby or some volunteering.

Jenny helps me to recollect some of the feelings I have experienced in different group settings and how each of them have evoked an array of feelings. When visiting the baby weighing clinic with other mothers, when attending the group with the other two teenage mothers in Thetford, when starting a midwifery degree and when beginning my Public Health degree. I have encountered various other group settings across time both as a student and mother but none have made me feel as safe and comfortable as the supportive setting of the

group for teenage mothers. I have written of this previously but I feel as if I want to write this again and again to reiterate the message – A group of mothers with similarities and differences, uniting together as comrades can foster all sorts of autonomy, agency, authority and authenticity in each other. There is nothing else quite like it.

I am not saying other groups cannot provide excellent support in other aspects but mothers supporting each other can pay dividends. Jenny describes her feelings about herself and the realisation she gained from the group that she could do something for her. The camaraderie no matter how subtle, patient and kind is precious if you have felt alone or isolated. Jenny has found her 'voice' and her 'independence'. I finish our conversation and story exchange feeling renewed to know that these little pockets of powerful transformations are happening even though we do not often get to hear of them.

JULIE

Julie allowed me to really understand the essence of what the meet up group meant not just to her but to others. I am unable to forget my local knowledge when she explains this to me. This causes me to consider the impact of the group on the mothers that attend and the other important people in their lives.

'So, to have a group like this, seven years, and sometimes you can just come, 'I'm having a really tough time today, that long term support doesn't happen anywhere else and we are so grateful for it'.

'There is nothing on the Abbey Estate and there is nothing on the other estate. It's almost like this group doesn't have an agenda. The art group is around well-being or you can go to this group that's around foot care or you can go to that group that's around cancer or that group because you're a carer or that group because you got a disability. It's got the funding for that but this is just, 'Come along and be you'. We've all cried here. The group is a very safe place. It is a safe place but it isn't just a safe space on a Tuesday between 11 - 1. I know that when I have had some awful news at times and it's Monday and I have needed to off load that I have been able to.

This sounds both incredible and unusual when services and resources are so limited. It is disappointing that more people do not realise it is running when I hear the value of it and what it means. Although, I have become aware that some mothers do know about the group. However, they choose not to attend partly due to conflict between mothers and partly because some mothers prefer not to attend groups that are led by organisations with links to professional services.

'We had people who came to the group who were quiet, little mice, downtrodden, you know social services involved all the

time, danger of losing their kids who are now healthy happy families working. Mum working, dad working because they had the confidence to say 'I can challenge that because [FRIEND] is behind me' or I can change that because the girls are behind me. Ok, maybe I could volunteer. 'Oh, maybe I could go for a paid job, 'and its opened possibilities tiny steps at a time.

It is a warm place. Obviously not without its tensions but the genuine openness of Julie makes it easy for me to understand how important the group meeting at the centre is. The time scale that she has been attending speaks volumes. I wonder if the wider local authorities and health professionals know or realise it exists? Could there be a system of referrals or signposting for the group from health visitors or GP surgeries?

'I had poor mental health and initially started volunteering at [AN ORGANISATION] Eventually that led to me completing training and getting a paid position. I have also run training sessions and parenting sessions to support other parents. Having something for myself really helped.

Julie has also been able to share lots of experience and knowledge with other mothers who attend the group and help them to do things they never imagined possible. I am not sure Julie realises what a difference she and the other mothers who attend the group have made. In my mind I recall some of the points Jenny made about

the confidence and support the group gave her to seek support with her son and to pursue independence and time for herself.

Listening to Julie describe the group and the purpose it serves makes it clearer to see the importance of a mother's own self-hood. O'Reilly (2016) discusses the fact that empowered mothers do not always put their children's need first or rely on being a mother to fulfil their identity. Further to this, their self-hood is expressed through work, friendships, relationships and hobbies. Kerry talks about what she could 'gain' and how she 'wants more'. The study undertaken by Horowitz (2004) explored how mothers needed time away from being a mother and the demands of that. The following example from a mother she interviewed illustrates how one woman felt about this, 'If I was going to love that baby, have any quality of time with that baby, I had to get away from that baby. I had to meet my own needs' (p.48). The mothers she interviewed also highlighted how woman spoke of their own wants and needs and honouring those meant they would be a 'better mother' and 'have a better quality of life' (p.47, 52). Bernard (1983) a sociologist wrote a letter to her daughter and confessed, 'For your sake as well as mine, I must not allow you to absorb me completely. I must learn to live my own life independently in order to be a better mother to you' (p.272).

The experience outlined above, of a college professional and her need to return to work 'in order to feel competent' is also similar to that of other mothers in her study (p.48). They explain that you do not need to 'be with your child constantly' and that, 'a mother does not need to be around 100 per cent of the time to be a good mother' (p.49). They also involved other mothers in their children's lives with a significant emphasis on the role of community and other mothers. 'The comradeship of other mothers proves exhilarating and freeing' (Lazarre, 1976). Lazare (1976) advocates for more

mothers to share their maternal stories of being a mother in order to inspire other mothers and share their experiences of life beyond their role as a mother. This is important if we are to dismantle the notion that, ‘the ideology of motherhood includes the notion that a good mother is both self-reliant and selfless. Mosoff (1997: 237).

Adrienne Rich (1976) made public some of her diary entries on the struggles she faced as a mother and the realisation of the importance of sharing these contradictory struggles she eventually honoured by including autobiographical parts of her mothering in *Of Woman Born*. She was conflicted by this as she knew both this as well as scholarship and literature were essential for the book if she were to write from the heart. Rich allows me to be open with my struggles and share with readers my own struggles of mothering and experiences that we do not often share such as acknowledging that we do want something else, something more in addition to being a mother.

It can be challenging to make decisions that do not fit with the expectations of others, particularly professionals and support services. Mothers labelled, ‘as problem mothersfind themselves at the intersection of expectations surrounding both professional expertise and normal mothering’ (Croghan and Miell, 1998, p.446). Many people make assumptions based upon the usual negative outcomes they are more familiar with. When focusing on teenage mothers these include things such as health problems, dependence on benefits, lack of opportunity for employment and lower educational attainment (Keegan and Corliss, 2008). You are also faced with labels such as ‘irresponsible and unmotivated’ (Smithbattle, 2013, p.238). Teenage mothers who have a counter narrative to this are not often heard.

The articulation of Mielle Chandler's account of writing about mothering while mothering has resonated deeply with me since the first time I read it.

To write a paper is to leave mothering, or, rather, it is to leave the type of subjectivity I engage in while mothering. A clean break is neither possible nor desirable, mothering being my topic, and so integral to my identity. Indeed, to leave it would be to become someone completely different (p.530).

I too feel a 'part of me is still on duty' and on call all the while I am trying to undertake my writing. The homework, the washing that must be hung on radiators or the school uniform will not be dry, the lunches, the dinner, the essays to mark. The trips to the orthodontist I must juggle with work and writing and can only be on a Thursday 40 minutes from home. What if my daughter forgets to keep the antihistamine tablets with her in case, she has an allergic reaction to something? Must make a mental note to tell the school the doctors now suspect she has an allergy syndrome and as yet have no idea what triggers it. Oh, hold on, I haven't heard from my fourth eldest today - is he okay? Must call him again if he does not respond to my text soon. Include bananas and apples to the shopping list and don't forget you aren't eating until one and not after 7 to lose that excess weight, so forget that chocolate bar to see you through this morning.

It creates conflict and guilt as I try to write, negotiate life and deadlines and mother. Chandler (1998) says, 'and could I please have an extension on that paper as I won't even be able to turn on my

computer until about ten every night and by then I'm tired. Tired' (p.529). I make promises that are hard to keep. Mostly because life happens and gets in the way but sometimes because I am exhausted and simply feel too overwhelmed with it all. Other times I feel eternally grateful I have writing and deadlines as these are a welcome escape. They take me away from the worry and the lists and duties. They will hopefully, eventually, allow me to become a credible success outside of my role as a mother. Ironic though, that my writing is all about mothers and I want it to stay that way.

The accounts above have offered informative experiences of autonomous mothering alongside the academic literature. Again, a layered account has made accessible to the reader as many 'ways of knowing' as possible (Ronai, 1992). The multiple voices have expressed their perspectives from diverse positions to illustrate how as mothers they have performed autonomy to resist dominant discourses and societal expectations. It has considered the definitions and meanings of autonomous mothering and how the mothers have expressed this. The practice of empowered mothering encompasses autonomous mothering as one of the main attributes. The maternal narratives above detail how the mothers have carved their own identity and found spaces where they are able to meet their own needs.

Autonomy is closely connected to agency and is often thought of as a mother's ability or opportunity to work outside of the home but less commonly brought to attention is the concept of a mother seeking her identity outside of her role as a mother and doing something for herself

whether that be work, study, pursuing a hobby, attending a support group for herself or forging friendships/relationships (Smith, 2003). In addition, Horowitz (2003), argues that empowered mothering is distinguished by mothers determining, 'the importance of mothers meeting their own needs' and that being a mother may not fulfil all of the needs a mother might have (p.52). There is also further research that was undertaken by Galinsky (1999) for her book *Ask the Children*, that suggests children are most happy when their mothers are less stressed and less guilty and not when their mothers spend even greater amounts of time with them. It was also highlighted that mothers who work outside of the home experience less depression and better well-being and health.

As a teenage mother and as I became older, I always remained steadfast to my aspirations and longing to create an identity for myself that was separate and freeing from that as a mother. It could be that the origins of this were from my hopes and dreams of being a medical doctor from a very early age and not wanting to give up on that or from outside influences that subconsciously made an impact. Adair (2002) writes of the unseen stories from mothers who were teenage mothers but also sought their own self-hood and autonomy in forging something for themselves. She discusses the way she, 'learned and grew. Little by little the larger social, creative, political and material world exposed itself to me in ways that were resonant and urgent, inviting me to negotiate, analyse, and reframe experiences, identities, histories, pathways and questions that had previously seemed inaccessible. The process was invigorating, restorative and life altering' (p.2334).

It may be that the gaps, misrepresentations of teenage mothers or marginalised mothers are able to move beyond the 'imposed shame' they have often felt by developing their identities from the communal support

offered by groups they have been a part of. However, many mothers mothering alone are aware of the benefits a supportive network can provide but access to these networks is not as easy as you might expect. As three of the mothers interviewed identified that they felt very few mothers were aware of the group and this had become worse since the loss of Parental Support Advisors in schools who directed mothers to the meeting place. Three of the mothers who shared their maternal narrative highlight community support/groups of remarkable importance. Although Kerry expressed through our conversation that she felt no sense of community with other mothers or on the estate. Her determination and assertion of her independence is rooted in wanting 'more' for herself but if she felt less isolated and more connected to other mothers this may feel easier for her. She reminisces on how there was once a sense of community on the estate when she was much younger and the value in it.

O'Reilly (2006) discussed the importance of community centred resources and mother and child centres and their role in uniting mothers. She claims from her analysis of these groups, their success was due to the *organisation* of the groups and centres (O'Reilly, 2011). These groups had 'grassroot origins' and were created 'by mothers and for mothers' (p.526). Although, many communities and mothers across the UK have had some access to Sure Start and Early Year Centres before their recent closures, these were driven by the government. O'Reilly (2011) believes that 'predominantly government managed' centres lead to the loss of opportunities for mothers to meet, share their experiences together and build communities (p.527). Jane Lazarre's feminist memoir, *The Mother Knot*, talks of the phrase her friend used on posters advertising ways mothers could connect with other mothers. 'Come to Jean Rosenthal's

house on Monday night. Talk about your real feelings. Women's group forming'.

One of the reasons it is so important to raise the impact of mothers meeting is the 'very significant role other mothers play in any one mother's ability to make liveable meaning out of her mothering experiences' in addition to the 'outright denial of mothering experiences that are considered wrong or deviant' (Nelson, 2009, p.111). Nelson (2009) is an advocate for mothers uniting with other mothers and questions what can be done to facilitate this. Although, her research is mainly focused on mothers who have not been mothering very long she recognises the value of the experiences from a wide range of mothers including the length of time they have mothered, their ethnicity and their geographical location. In belonging to a group, mothers may benefit from some advantages such as a sense of community and connectedness (Nelson, 2009). Nelson (2009) also writes of the way the mothers belonging to a group that she interviewed spoke of how they felt equal to other mothers and that their contributions to the group of knowledge and authority was appreciated. This has also been highlighted by Julie and Jenny when they have not only received support from the group where they meet with other mothers themselves but they also offer support and encouragements to other mothers attending which extends beyond the group sessions.

When considering Kerry's points about the lack of a sense of community she feels in contrast to Julie's sense of ongoing support it is difficult to justify and argue against community support for mothers. Julie shares her positive experience and the positive experience of others in turning to the group when they have been upset or faced challenges. Kerry has reiterated how she has had to face many difficulties alone, where had she known of the group, she may have found encouragement and support

in making autonomous choices and decisions. Aspects similar to this are highlighted by bell hooks (1984) in her article, *Revolutionary Parenting*. She explains the concept of collective parenting or community-based childcare which provides mothers with support from each other whether they are working or if they are at stay-at-home mothers. She writes of the responsibility of shared parenting which may be less common more recently. However, her emphasis is on the need for collective parenting due to the detriment to both mothers and children that parenting in isolation causes. Green (2015) also asserts hooks' (1984) points and states,

'Having collective parenting practices acknowledged and supported by people and social institutions including, for instance, family, medicine, religion, law, education and government would also aid in this revolutionary social change (p.202).

As highlighted before, Kerry does not interact with a group or other mothers on the estate and mothers researched elsewhere have explained that this left them feeling alienated and lonely. Although, a mother who is isolated might feel different, even 'special or unique and possibly superior' this 'can be effectively undone by being an alien outsider' (Nelson, 2009, p.104). It is other mothers who are in a position to validate each other's experiences of mothering so without the contact of other mothers this could leave a mother deprived of this validation. Community support appears to have played a large part in facilitating the choices and decisions three of the mothers have made and is aligned with O'Reilly's (2016) description of autonomous mothering as they involve others in their child's upbringing, they are able to acknowledge that they also have the desire to pursue interests outside of being a mother and question the expectations of mothering and more commonly known ways of how-to mother. Despite Kerry's feelings of disconnection from neighbourhood mothers or a

community she has still created her own way of performing autonomous mothering.

There are writers who challenge traditional practices around mothering and insist that mothers need to have a selfhood beyond being a mother (Mellor, 2004, Simpson, 2006, Bort, *et al*, 2005). This is beneficial to both mothers and their children. Children find empowerment through their mothers and need to see examples of this. When women develop a greater sense of independence from their relationship with their children a mother's self-esteem increases (Chodorow, 1974). Children begin to recognise their mothers as strong and in control of the important parts of her life (Chodorow, 1974).

Judith Arcana (1979) has written of mothers and daughters and declares, 'If we want girls to grow into free women, brave and strong, we must be those women ourselves' (p.33). The strength Kate exhibited in realising she must find *herself* is a courageous act. Rich (1976) has written,

'The quality of the mother's life —however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create lovable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist' (p.247).

This is in stark contrast to standards and ideals of mothering such as the previously mentioned intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and new mommism (Douglas and Michaels, 2004) which promote unrealistic standards of 'perfection that are beyond your reach' (p.4). The expectation is that in order to be a 'remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being, 24/7 to her children (Michaels, 2004, p.4). Standards such as these almost make it difficult for mothers such as Lori, Kerry, Jenny and Julie to be open about

their desires for a personal identity outside of being a mother. Fox (2003) discusses her unease and dissatisfaction with mothering ideals that require a mother to dedicate themselves entirely to their children. She draws attention to attachment parenting and offers,

If practiced fully, [attachment parenting] required that you carry your baby with you all day in a sling, nurse on demand all day and all night, let baby doze on her own schedule during the day (in your arms) and let her sleep with you all night long.... based on the exhausted faces and bodies I saw around me —at La Leche League meetings, in the midwife's office, at library sing-alongs — full adherence to attachment parenting could nearly kill a woman. Certainly, I feared it would kill a woman who wanted to be a writer, a woman who needed time alone (p.217).

One of the greatest challenges of mothering ideals she identifies is the judgement and presence of other mothers on her parenting leading her to feel troubled by her own mothering. She realised that in order to create a balance between work and mothering she needed to commit time to each of them separately.

Introducing the idea that mothering could be a positive experience for some young mothers may also seem taboo and off limits. However, there are scholars who have recognised that a young woman's prospects have been improved, and even altered her life for the better. This includes her academic ambitions and living a healthier lifestyle (Byrd and Gallagher, 2009, Lesser *et al*, 1998, McGrady, 2014, McDermott and Graham, 2005). Other research, such as that of Furstenberg and Crawford (1978) found that their experiences had helped in transforming a mother into becoming an activist and also helping other mothers as occurred with Lori, Jenny, Julie and some of the other mothers they have come into contact with at their group meet up. Further to this, Rich (1986) has written and recognised the connections that foster a daughter's empowerment which comes from

having an empowered mother. She discusses what we might wish for as daughters and could provide as mothers,

Deeply and primarily, we need trust and tenderness; surely this will always be true of every human being, but women growing into a world so hostile to us need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves. But this loving is not simply the old, institutionalised, sacrificial, 'mother-love' which men have demanded; we want courageous mothering. The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with reductive images of females in children's books, movies, television, the school room. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life (p. 246).

However, after carefully reflecting on her own work, O'Reilly (2016) draws attention to this often referred to argument and justification, that, 'children are best served' by a mother's demand for autonomy and agency (p.182). She refocuses her 'rationalisation and justification' for the requirements of empowered mothering. O'Reilly (2016) is supported by Smith (2003) and Horowitz (2004) who also acknowledge that the characterisations of empowered mothering are positioned as 'necessary and essential *for children*' (p.182). O'Reilly (2016) openly declares that her campaigns and drive for feminist mothering was centred upon its benefits to children by reasoning that, 'empowered mothers are more effective mothers'. This has now left her questioning why the main focus is on children and not on mothers ourselves even though she does not deny the improvements that have been made for mothers as a result of this.

Overall, the mothers have presented autonomous mothering which has been expressed in various practices according to their individual circumstances. Lori discussed her position as a volunteer initially, leading to a paid position which ensured she had an identity outside of being a mother. Kerry explained her dissatisfaction and tiredness with her situation and decided that enrolling on a university programme would help her

achieve what she wanted. Jenny and Julie both found the support group they attended a site of empowerment and in addition felt able to support other mothers. Each of the mothers have illustrated their desires to do something for themselves, whether that be continuing education, volunteering, undertaking paid work or simply attending a group which enable them to pursue support from other mothers and even hobbies.

In summary, this chapter re-presents the matrifocal narratives of the four mothers with a focus on autonomy. The narratives illustrate how mothers practice autonomous mothering despite the challenging situations they encountered. Their experiences have been viewed through a mother focused lens to illustrate alternatives to those more frequently shared. The following chapter, My Story, illustrates how my own narrative unites with those of the other mothers and provides deeper insight into this continuing with a layered account.

CHAPTER SIX: MY STORY

If we consider that the dominant voice of the research world is not representing our experience, then we have to find ways of redressing the balance.

Tessa Muncey, 2010

It has been a strange and challenging journey in many ways with unexpected twists and turns. I have desperately wanted to belong and to prove my worth yet to who I am not sure anymore. It has felt exhausting at times trying to secure a position for myself as a mother who is more than just a stereotypical single teenage mum. Even now I am questioning myself as to why at this point in my story I still struggle to embrace and accept who I am. This feels so important to conquer as I want to help other mothers in similar positions who might also experience this. I also long for the true essence of who I am to shine through so I may be viewed worthy of respect despite my experiences. I cannot help but believe that if we heard and understood the stories of others, we could offer them our understanding.

The interviews are complete, the transcripts have been listened to over and over and each time I feel more appreciative of this gift. I am uncertain that had someone come along when I was a teenage mother that I would have been brave enough to share my story with them. As I was just beginning my academic journey, I was invited to a round table meeting with academics and outside organisations at the university where I worked. It was a small intimate meeting with about 12 people in attendance. I was both pleased and apprehensive to

be there. There was a kind man leading the meeting and he was going around the table asking a bit about each person's life. The meeting had a slightly unusual tone to it which I think came from the fact the leader and his colleague were practicing Buddhists. I thought I had escaped but no, he came to me last and looked directly at me across the table and asked, 'What's your story?'. I was almost speechless but did manage to compose myself to convey in brief a bit about myself. This has stayed with me because I was able to witness the power of what he had done by taking the time to ask each person who they were. Perhaps this is why I long to hear and share stories of mothers.

Can it really be that I have arrived here at this point? After travelling from 1987 to 2020 I finally feel I found a voice for myself and for other mothers. I have had to alter my dreams and plans and make new ones. I have had to travel many metaphorical miles to come to terms with my journey and the feelings I have experienced because of the roads I have travelled but I never realised that one day I would be able to tell this story of becoming a mother at 14 years old. I realise by sharing my story and inviting other mothers to share theirs an opportunity has been created for others to appreciate them. I recollect and recall the beginning of this new journey that enabled me to do this. It began with a long road trip with my maternal grandmother. The one who called the hospital to let me know she loved me when I became a 14-year-old mother. She came with me for my interview to gain a place to write this thesis. She kept saying to me after, 'I think they really liked you'. I wasn't so sure but when I look back on this moment we shared sitting on chairs outside the offices of the academics who interviewed

me, I realise the serendipity of the moment. My grandmother had given me her support right at the very beginning of the journey and as I was nearing the end. I have since reflected on her experiences as a single mother in the same town 34 years before I was that she had sometimes shared with me. Even though we discussed her experiences of mothering from time to time we had not formally acknowledged our similar introductions to motherhood. Yet, we had always remained firmly rooted together perhaps because of our comparable history. The poignancy of her unwavering support more recognised now than ever.

It was several months before I received the news that I was successful. Was I really going to be undertaking a PhD? I managed to find a little B & B in the heart of Canterbury and booked in to stay so I could attend the registration and induction. It was hidden in the back garden of a townhouse. That was to be the first of many more trips to the B & B. Sometimes these were for a few days at a time and I would be allowed the use of the second-floor drawing room of the main house. I would spread out my notebooks and textbooks and read and read trying to find my way on this path I found myself on. I would wake each morning and stroll into Canterbury for a coffee and a quick look in the shop windows before heading back for an entire day of reading and writing. There seemed many hurdles still to jump and I was constantly wondering if I would ever be able to get over them. I never realised this time would pass so quickly and I would find myself nearing the end.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The previous three chapters, *Authentic Mothering, Agency and Autonomy and Autonomous Mothering* discussed and analysed the maternal narratives of the mothers who participated in the study in alignment with the four attributes of empowered mothering. In addition, my own story has been embedded at the beginning of each chapter with two significant parts of it introduced at the beginning of the thesis and with a concluding diarised narrative at the end. Although my story has been included, there has been limited discussion on my experiences as a mother. Therefore, at this point in the thesis it seems appropriate to look more closely how my own narrative led to unity between myself and the other mothers. This chapter provides deeper insight into this. I have continued to use a layered account to illustrate my story as a mother, my account as the researcher, as well as presenting the academic literature. The differentiation between the fonts is the same – *Courier* has been used to emphasis the diarised account of my experiences as a mother. *Times* has been used for academic literature and for any reflections/notes as the researcher *Segoe Print* is used.

I have been gifted a quote this evening, I am familiar with but seem to have long forgotten, '*The darkest hour is just before the dawn*' (Fuller, 1650) but in desperation, I begin to pick up textbooks scattered in nearly every corner of the house, that I had bought earlier on at the start of my research. Nothing is speaking to me or helping me to fill this void or shut down the deeply buried feeling I am not meant to finish this. I have had to refrain from purchasing more books over the past year upon the advice of my supervisor but I confess, books are where I find my comfort. However, two weeks ago I made a wonderful discovery of a rare symposium focusing

on Maternity and Wellbeing and I noted one of the main organisers had recently edited and published a book, *Autoethnographies From the Neoliberal Academy; Rewilding, Writing and Resistance in Higher Education*, Jess Moriarty. I could not resist.

Just as I was ready to call it a day due to my frustration, I noticed the book sitting in the pile next to me and picked it up. I randomly opened it to the last page of the chapter, *Insecurity During and After the PhD; An autoethnography of mutual support*, by Bryn Tales and Jess Moriarty (2020). How very apt. I frantically flipped the pages backwards to the beginning of the chapter. Once again, I find further confirmation of being a 'Velvet Exile' as Jess explains, 'Writing into the dark with no encouragement or belief in your work beyond friends and family is isolating and demotivating' (p.157). It makes the doctoral students feel more outside the academy when they should feel as if they are finding their way in (Moriarty, 2013, cited in Moriarty, 2020, Moriarty and Tales, 2020). As I reach the final page of the chapter, I am reassured by Jess's words. 'Autoethnography.....should help us to feel surer about who we are and the value of our work, sharing insecurities and anxieties in a safe and supported space – dialogues and the writing – in order to move on and up together' (p.166). Therefore, I feel able to return to my own part in this story in the hope I will feel surer of who I am and see the value in my work.

I have known whole heartedly since I embarked on my undergraduate dissertation that if I ever wrote my thesis, it would be *with* mothers I would research. In the beginning I may have thought I wanted to undertake research similar to accomplished scholars but on my journey, I have never become more aware of the value of authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy. Not only do these align closely with empowered mothering but they also align closely with my research approach. Most of

all I have aspired to undertake original and valuable research that would break down the 'taboos' and 'crack the masks of motherhood' open (Rich 1976). When I was re-reading *Of Woman Born* (Rich 1986) much of what Adrienne Rich wrote resonated with me and felt immensely relevant to this research. As I said, I have always known I would write about mothers but I never knew I would include myself as one of those mothers. Mothers that might be misjudged or stereotyped and perhaps even disregarded by some of the people closest to them. Rich says, 'I did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen me'. She acknowledges the way in which many parts of our lives become buried and to avoid the pain and anger associated with that we refrain from returning to them, 'Preferring to think of it as long resolved and put away'. Rich is certain,

'I began to feel strong enough ... so that I could dare to return to a ground which seemed to me the most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous I had ever travelled, a ground hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings (p.3).

She is referring to feeling haunted by the stereotypes of mothers who love unconditionally who are represented perfectly in literary stories. She felt guilty that her vision of herself did not seem to align with these. She elaborates further on the ways in which she felt she had become caught up with the history and analysis of theories taking her further from the painful parts of her life. She describes this as, 'preparing' or 'delaying' her from 'plunging into areas of my own life which were painful and problematical, yet from the heart of which this book has come'. I compare my own feelings to this as I have allowed the vast array of literature to distract, defer and obstruct the process of my own construction and writing of my maternal narrative. This originated in a misguided belief that my story and those of mothers in challenging circumstances were less important than others and should be kept quiet.

Nonetheless, arriving at this chapter of my thesis feels surreal and exciting. I am still not sure if burying the difficult aspects of my life is better than acknowledging them and using them to help others but it seems absurd I could expect the participants to delve deeply into their experiences of being mothers yet then refrain from sharing my own. Midway through the process of writing my methodology and wrestling with autoethnography I felt very unsure as to how and if I should be writing this at all and especially in the manner in which I had chosen. A thesis was shared with me and it led to my discovery of Tessa Muncey. It was hard to believe that this was sheer coincidence because Tessa, an incredibly successful academic and nurse had a background very similar to mine. Tessa had become a teenage mum just like me when she was 15 also in unpleasant circumstances.

I felt compelled to contact Tessa and decided to write to her. I had no idea if she would respond as when trying to locate her, according to her most recent academic roles it seemed as though she had retired. However, I managed to locate an email address and wrote to her explaining how I discovered her work and what it meant to me to discover not just a story similar to my own but one that she had been brave enough to write about. Her story gave me the final courage I needed, along with my supervisory team that this thesis *should* be written. I struggled with writing this some days though, due to the nature and content of the narratives. I have many other legitimate reasons and even excuses to give up on it such as my roles as a mother and employee. When each of these are broken down the list becomes even longer. Confidante, cheerleader, taxi driver, chef, friend, financial assistant, cleaner, lecturer, pastoral worker, presenter, assistant and the list goes on.

I have not wanted this research to be a reproduction or replication of former interviews with mothers. I wanted to offer our stories as additional versions of mother's experiences and resist the conventions of typical research. This was amplified after discovering Tessa's story because finding a mother who had faced similar challenges made me realise that I was not alone. In her writing Tessa describes her experiences of attending events in the hope of discovering experiences like hers. However, she faced challenges when attempting to offer alternative evidence as to what was presented by researchers at conferences attempting to explain teenage pregnancy, the reasons behind it and the experiences of teenage mothers justified only by the influence of their research method (Muncey, 2010). Muncey (2002) expresses her discomfort at the 'official versions and theoretical formulations that try to account for her experience' and this has enabled me to realise that without listening to stories from mothers and women, the 'official versions' will prevail. My story and those of others *must* be told - in order to 'refute ill-informed and incorrect assumptions about our experiences' (p.163).

My Story

Although I have imagined sharing parts of my story, I did not envisage sharing some of my deepest and innermost feelings about becoming a mother at 14 until they began to unravel throughout the writing of this. Once I realised I would be including my own story I recognised the challenge ahead of me.

NEVER do I buy chocolate milk. I don't even like milk much at all but when I noticed it on the supermarket

shelf one random lunch time a sudden pang of nostalgia came over me for when I was 11 or 12 years old, standing in the kitchen of my house in California making chocolate Nesquik. It was one of the only ways I tolerated milk. Our house was a typical modern Californian Bungalow and had been the show house for the development. It was a short walk from the bus stop where I would catch the bright yellow bus to school and where I would spend weekends roller skating and playing with Barbies but remembering moments like this before I was 14 is rare as I usually forget I ever existed before then.

As I picked up the glass bottle of chocolate milk from the shelf it felt ice cold and I couldn't wait to open it. I sat with the door wide open, closed my eyes, felt the sun on my face, swallowed the cold chocolate milk and forgot I was 48 years old in a supermarket car park 35 miles away from home. I was a kid again, for moments only, where I had nothing to worry about. I was riding my navy blue ten speed around the block with no hands. To my surprise, the chocolate milk gave me a few moments of recollection, taking me back to a time before fear and doubts and babies ever existed in my world. Never had I enjoyed chocolate milk so much. I wanted to stay longer and spend more than just a few minutes reminiscing about who I was before November 1986 but how could I? I promised I would be back by early afternoon. Everyone expected me to return home laden with groceries and ready to make dinner. Not turning up wasn't an option. I had to go.

As I began the drive home, I questioned how the past was finally manoeuvring out of the depths it was buried in to reveal itself now. Somehow it had. For so long I

avoided recalling any of it but drinking the chocolate milk suddenly became an unintended catalyst that allowed me to acknowledge the child I once was but had forgotten. She was packed away in a metaphorical box. I pretended so well. I convinced myself every day that I wasn't petrified. I carried on as normal. Went to school each morning after being sick in the kitchen sink and still managed to convince myself everything was fine. I wore shapeless clothes that became baggier and baggier and even went to swimming pools where I sat on the side wearing my clothes still convincing myself. I stated a new school and I got on a plane when you weren't supposed to. Pretending over and over again that all was well.

These occasional moments of being alone where I find myself scratching at the surface of the past often end abruptly and today is no different. The winding roads eventually lead to the dual carriageway and as if they knew I was getting closer my phone starting ringing with,

"Mum, the bus hasn't turned up. Can you pick us up?"

"No" is never an option.

I quickly wrap my thoughts up as if they are a parcel and put them away. Will I ever be able to unravel them? I knew as soon as it happened that I would be pregnant. I just knew. I don't know how but I remember feeling very uncomfortable and in some physical pain as I walked to the mailbox with the key to check the mail. It wasn't just the fear after what had happened. It was something more as if I just had this feeling I would be pregnant.

I silently hoped I was wrong but I wasn't. How could this be happening? Who could I tell? It doesn't seem real when I think back to it. I have no idea how I found out about the pregnancy clinics. There were no mobile phones or internet. Women of all ages were in the waiting room. The pregnancy test was obviously positive. I didn't know what I was going to do though. Feeling symptoms of pregnancy was frightening because I had no idea what they really were. I wondered what was wrong with me much of the time. I suffered from dreadful morning sickness but I don't think I accepted this was a direct result of pregnancy or perhaps I did but just denied it. Either way, I had very little experience of pregnancy and knowledge of its symptoms as no one close to me had been pregnant. Not my mother or any relatives. I lost my appetite because I felt so sick and was given huge calcium vitamins each day before school which I would swallow with water and then vomit straight back up. Toasted bagels with nothing on them was about all I could manage. The friends I thought I had all seemed to be going their own way as most of them were a school year above me. I isolated myself, probably intentionally and the painful uncomfortableness of carrying such a huge secret alone. Surviving was reliant on completely ignoring the fact of what was happening to me and if I could convince myself everything was normal, everything would be fine. The days of getting ready for school each morning and being sick I ignored. The gentle kicks, as I sat watching soap operas each day after school, I longed to stop as they were a constant reminder to me that I was pregnant. Life carried on and I continued pretending this wasn't happening. How could I ever tell anyone I was pregnant? It would be impossible.

I didn't know I would have a baby at 14. Who would? It still seems unimaginable. I begin to wonder if looking back is too difficult or too painful as each time I try to find the right words to explain it all I can't seem to find them. I distract myself with thoughts of how I can skip bits of my story but something tells me that is the part I need to write down. The hours run into days and the days run into weeks. These weeks have run into years. Sometimes I think I am used to it. Really used to it. Where it doesn't hurt me at all anymore.

It might seem logical that over the years, people are more accepting of mothers being truthful about how they feel, mother and experience everyday life but on the contrary, not only are mothers more harshly judged, but it is even easier to direct and aim that judgment and garner support for it via the numerous social media outlets. I feel the stakes are much higher as are the expectations placed upon mothers and those, we place upon ourselves. Today I feel overwhelmed and even suffocated at times by the roles and demands I feel I must fulfil. It's too much at times. I also often feel fraudulent because the Hayley that the world sees might appear to be someone who has it all figured out, but I don't.

Across time young mothers have been labelled as irresponsible, lazy, promiscuous, self-indulgent and unmotivated (Byrd *et al*, 2019). I am sure this is what people have thought of me time and time again. It is not only

unpleasant but also has far reaching consequences when you experience judgement and stigma from others. It is known stigmatisation affects the psychological wellbeing of adolescent mothers as well as causing further vulnerability (Byrd *et al*, 2019). It is also an incredibly painful experience and can lead to isolation, loneliness, including stress, anguish and despair (Weiman *et al*, 2005).

This was in stark contrast to what Smith Battle (2013) reported where teenage mothers experience feelings such as guilt, shame, anger and worthlessness associated with the stigmatisation they experienced. It was the support from the group that spurred me on in thinking that I could probably still achieve most things that I wanted to. Several quantitative studies focusing on teenage mothers and their negative outcomes, such as poverty and postpartum depression, can be compared to qualitative studies that allowed teenage mothers to share their lived experience and in fact displayed positivity and resilience in their life (Wilson and Huntington, 2005). This makes perfect sense to me.

Teenage mothers may feel able to identify closely with other marginalised mothers who also feel the need to represent themselves and their mothering in a positive way to defend themselves against undeserved criticism of their mothering. Being honest when mothering in challenging circumstances is courageous but authenticity may feel as though it is at odds with the socially accepted norms and expectations of mothering. O'Reilly (2016) confesses questioning her own doubts over being an authentic mother and acknowledges the fear of causing further isolation for herself and her children in practicing this. I too am plagued with doubts.

As a young mother I fluctuated between wanting to prove myself to professionals and families and feeling less constrained than perhaps older mothers did. This

might have been due to a lack of expectations others had of me due to my age. Maybe they thought that each outcome, no matter how small, was a success for a teenage mother. Although, I am not certain this was the case, as the professionals I interacted with seemed genuinely supportive or it could have been my compliance with the so-called rules of mothering I was fast trying to learn.

It was these situations that made it difficult for me to navigate systems and challenge professionals. I felt I had to prove my worthiness as a mother by conforming. I honestly felt there were unspoken rules that I just knew I must comply with. That if I did not, we (me and my son) might be treated differently. There were other times when I was initially, naive and ignorant of this and would stand firm on particular issues and remained unwavering but much of this came later when my confidence and knowledge of systems and processes grew. I did not realise it then, but I was resisting ideological norms and creating my own version of mothering.

There were definitely times when my confidence grew, that I felt determined to resist certain issues. I started listening more to my inner voice, the one that must have made me realise that although I was only 14, I could do this. I think I believed in myself long before I ever realised it.

Try attending a doctor's surgery for immunisations with a three-month-old baby at 15 or a parents evening as a 19 year old mum with a five year old. You get some funny looks from receptionists, teachers and other mothers. You feel as though people are staring at you and sometimes people do feel they have the right to make all sorts of comments. Now when I think of some of the shameful, hurtful comments I have read on social media

over choices a mother has made I think it must be even worse.

Facing professionals, family and other mothers is sometimes harder for me today as I am exerting my own mothering, the model that works for me and my children with conviction. It does not mean I do not find it immensely exhausting and at times I feel unintentionally rebellious, but this is because as time has passed, I have grown more able to advocate for my children and their needs. I might still be judged, and it might not be easy to demonstrate my rebellion openly for fear of retribution but interactions with professionals can be fraught when they are not used to being questioned over their decisions around your child by you.

This rebellion arises from the conflict between the demands of societal expectations of mothering and the need to resist those demands. Exploring various circumstances of marginalised mothering can help to draw attention to the lesser-known details of these experiences and help others to understand the circumstances from our own perspective rather than embracing myths surrounding the dominant discourses. Early experiences of mothering can help to illustrate the difficulty in resisting these which may be due to the socially constructed sense of self a mother feels from the way she perceives others view her. As time moved on my own confidence grew and I began to realise that I was not a 'social problem in need of remedy' which led to me resisting and creating my own mode of mothering (Darisi, 2007, p.29). However, Kelly (1997) states that young mothers are frequently portrayed by researchers and the media as 'either unworthy choice makers or as passive victims: either fully in charge of their lives or without any agency' making it difficult for them to mother their children the way that they choose (p.10).

For the first couple of weeks after having my son I must have been in an initial state of shock. The seven days I spent at the hospital were surreal, but we soon developed a daily routine of feeding, bathing and sleeping. I would sit and stare through the clear cot gazing in shock and amazement I had a 7lb baby next to me. In the evening I would look at magazines and eat rice crackers and bars of chocolate. I was slightly scared to do what once appeared normal things for the first two days like using the loo and having a bath, but my cousin arrived with lovely soap and clean nighties and talked me through everything. She brought me Knights Castille soap which was ever so comforting at the time. Strangely the sight and smell of it now does not fill me with fear or cause me to repel. It reminds me of those early days in the hospital when I was learning to be a mum and if I ever see it in the shops now, I always buy some.

Being a mother for many years now I know that everything I experienced with a newborn was probably very similar to what most mothers feel. The early days are tiring, you worry if you are doing things right and you are getting to know your new baby.

At such a young age, I already had an awareness of my identity as a mother and a young girl but also as an independent person. I could not imagine leaving my baby to hang around at the shops that were closed in the evening as I was not sure how this would benefit either of us. Obviously, this is no different to going out to meet friends the way we would do as adults, but it seemed pointless to me. However, I was still focused on attending school each day and eventually, college.

Occasionally I would go to the sports centre to do aerobics as well when I was able to.

This decision to go was difficult to make in many ways as I thought it may have appeared selfish, but this work was important to me and could provide further research focused on mothers and mothering as well as setting an example to my children that they must pursue their ideas and independence.

In contrast to popular opinion and despite the social construction of teenage mothers as problematic it is possible to hold a compassionate attitude towards them recognising that they too may be facing much adversity but also feeling love and nervousness at having become a mother (Aparacio *et al*, 2016). My own experience signifies this. There are also assumptions that teenage pregnancy is more common in mothers facing poverty and that becoming a teenage mother is more likely to cause poverty (Marialdo and Gutierrez, 2005, Wilson, 2007, Briggs *et al*, 2007). Although, in contrast to this it is important to note that young mothers are able to perform their parental duties adequately (Byrd, 2019, Keys, 2007, Horowitz *et al*, 1991, Ross, (1995) Leadbetter and Way, 2001). Despite this evidence, young mothers still face the pressure to prove their parenting ability and to demonstrate their worthiness to the professionals involved in monitoring them (Weinberg, 2004, Ahola-Sidaway and Fonseca, 2007). As well as feeling my mothering was questioned simply because of my age from a family member, I also experienced further scrutiny from social services as previously mentioned, after a request to social services from this family member to monitor my mothering. This is difficult to understand even now considering the parenting choices that person had made themselves.

‘Winning’ autonomy for women has been a preoccupation at times for many feminists but we cannot forget that autonomy for some mothers

has come at great cost (Chandler, 1998). Some women remain conflicted between their freedom of movement and the desire to have their own identity when it is enmeshed with the external strains. I felt this as a teenage mother and even more so now. Chandler (1998) also considers mothering to be 'extremely restrictive' for non-affluent mothers and this makes sense. Are they able to do what they want and make choices as easily as affluent mothers?

I was able to attend the conference due to the research fund attached to my scholarship. Otherwise, I would not have been able to afford the travel, let alone the cost of the conference. It was probably the closest I will ever get to a student exchange programme and I was excited and overwhelmed as I wandered the streets of Florence at the end of the conference each day listening to the Italian voices and drinking coffee. I loved being somewhere new and European but also felt melancholic for my youngest daughter when I saw one of the keynote speakers had brought hers along. I would be home soon, but I was thrilled to have met other women passionate about similar topics and also to have spoken at the conference.

It is difficult to contest that mothering is intensely demanding but it can be even more so when practiced with limited support and minimal acknowledgement of the various ways of mothering. Chandler (1998) favours the embracement of 'mothersefhoods' and demands for social, political, and economic respect for mothering practices (p.284). She suggests that we refrain from adopting autonomy as an 'ideal' (p.280) and presents the following,

'Mothers make my head turn. I want to kiss their tired eyes and lay them down—not in ecstasy, for small hands are ceaselessly tugging, small tongues licking and mouth groping—bit to sleep, alone, in puke-free warmth. I'll take the babies to the park. And perhaps someday, after the house is clean and there is enough money to cover the rent, we will uncork the small filigree bottle, if we can still find it, and discover what remains of our passions (p.284).

It may be that autonomy should not be heralded as an 'ideal' but although my work on mothering was at the heart of the trip, it was still going to be about me travelling as an independent woman who was trying to do something for herself and her own career development. Knowing that when you return from pursuing something for yourself you feel you can be a better mother. Having something for yourself that is yours.

Therefore, finding autonomy for me as a mother most certainly helps me to be the mother I want to be and displays who I am as a person in my own right to my children outside of my role as a mother. In demonstrating this to my children, I hope they will see this as a model of behaviour to aspire to. Copper (1987) articulates,

'viewing one's lifestyle not as an extension of who-I-am but of who- I-want them-to-learn-to-be. No mother succeeds in always being how she wants her children to be, but the radical mother structures her lifestyle so that her child has ample opportunity to see her trying (p.192).

Most of all, I want them to understand that without meeting other mothers and exchanging our stories we would not have been who and where we are.

Uniting My Story with Others

For us to reject the ideological encapsulation of mothering we must reject the 'restrictive bifurcation of mothers into categories of either 'good'

or 'bad' mothers and to re-envision a more inclusive understanding of mothering, one that is empowering to all mothers, regardless of differences in their lives and social circumstances' (Mc Donald Harker, 2016, p.262). These chapters that focus on each of our maternal narratives have explored alternatives to the dominant constructions that have ensured the shaping of mothering and neglected to acknowledge and encompass the variation of mothers and our roles and identities. However, disconnection still exists between the ideologies of mothering and the experiences of real women (Arendell, 2004). If this remains, we continue to deny mothers the possibility of empowered mothering that encompasses their authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy. To recognise and validate ourselves as mothers it is essential that we seek to understand we and other mothers assert our own standards of mothering in opposition to the narrative claiming we are inadequate.

The issues all mothers face are not identical and it remains impossible to try and generate a single, normative, pattern of mothering (Glen *et al*, 1994). The narratives in the previous chapters, including my own, have clearly illustrated that mothering has multiple and often shifting meanings (Josselson, 1996, McMahon, 1995). hooks (1984) also highlight the need for recognising that the experiences of mothering are not the same for all mothers. Her argument is focused on the fact that for many women who are non-white or are from poor backgrounds, motherhood is a site of empowerment because this is where they feel, 'appreciated and affirmed' (p.133). Hill Collins (1994) discusses her view of marginality and she believes, 'One cannot use the same techniques to study the knowledge of the dominated as one uses to study the knowledge of the powerful' (1994, p. xiv). If we scrutinise the experiences of mothers who are

mothering at the margins using a matricentric lens, we can help to counter the,

'Homogenous collection of voices which speak of predictable values and in normative tones on the subject of motherhood and mothering. Recovering the voice of marginalised mothering and the voice of marginalised mothers reveals not only the structures of alienation, oppression and marginalisation but also the strengths and innovative strategies for survival that such persons and their social networks create' (Hall, p.36).

O'Reilly (2010, 2016) discusses the norms established for mothers to meet which have little bearing on their real lives. This oppresses mothers and leaves them unable to determine their 'own experiences of mothering' (p.46). Mothers mothering in difficult circumstances can challenge the demands of ideologies of mothering and this assertion is based upon their realisation and perception of lower status and oppression (O'Reilly, 2010, 2011, 2016).

Mothers have often performed mothering based upon what they learn from others. This might be from their own mothers or from other mothers that they spend time with, but some mothers choose to unlearn the ways of mothering that does not suit them or their children. Butler (2004) argues, 'What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is liveable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unliveable for some' (p.8). It appears that all women, regardless of their status, are held to the dominant ideologies of mothering and motherhood but 'differences in resources, however, lead to differences in the strategies used to actualise or represent these norms' (Garey, 1998, p.70). Our mothering has been dictated to us. Gore (2007) wrote of this and explained,

They tell us all — in a thousand ways — that we are not enough for our children. The world tells us that we are too young, too old, too poor, too

extravagant, too permissive, too controlling, too urban, too rural, too eccentric, too square and everything in between' (p.758).

It is clear to see why mothers might feel under such pressure to be 'good mothers' and feel that they may not be living up to societal expectations, leaving them feeling guilty and inadequate (Bernard, 1981, Thurer, 1994). I have felt it myself and still feel it now. Such ideologies imply to mothers that as long as they abandon their own needs, they will raise children who conform to the expected ideals (Horowitz and Long, 2005). Mothers are often blamed and labelled when children misbehave and are viewed as somehow failing (Horowitz and Long, 2005). To undo the bounds of such ideological encapsulation mothers must refute mothering identities and create their own version and rules (Hays, 1996, Douglas and Michaels, 2004).

The significance of portraying and heralding the strengths of mothers is advantageous for women, mothers, children, society and families (Slepian, Sylla, and Weston, 2011). An important point to acknowledge is that it was the practice of mothering that led to mothers resisting dominant ideologies of mothering not a feminist ideology or identification as a feminist. Smith (2003) argues that more than anything in the world, a child needs, 'a free and happy mother' (p.167). By resisting the norms, she may in fact achieve this. Ruddick (2006) states,

'We are not as good as we should be, not as good as we could be. We will try to extend our grasp of 'other' mothers' lives. And perhaps when we do, we will find that some mothers, acting together and deliberately on behalf of all their children, can weaken just a little the forces of violence that are aimed against us and the forces of destruction that are aimed at us' (p.36).

C o n c l u s i o n

Originally, I began this enquiry without knowing where I was going – without a map as Ruth Behar once described her journey in getting to

know others for her work (1996). She explains how she came to 'know others by knowing herself and who has come to know herself by knowing others' (p.33). This so adequately captures the way I feel when I sit here now with our stories at my fingertips. Carefully writing each of them to enable the reader to join us by turning the pages through our journeys and consider their own responses to them. This has been my intention throughout.

This chapter has interwoven my story into this thesis and allowed me to interpret my past and present experiences as a mother. Those experiences can never be changed or undone. Nor would I want them to be. However, I can only interpret and understand them from my present position while leaving the reader to interpret them from theirs. Significantly, discovering the stories of the other mothers within this research has facilitated and encouraged the sharing of my own. Every time I returned to question myself about my experiences and if I would be able to write about them, I felt a little braver each time. Each time I listened to the interviews I began to believe I could share my story too and I would return to it again and again slowly adding more detail as and when I felt able to. There were times when I was not sure I could confront some of the more painful parts or even which road I should take. At these times, random happenings would occur, such as a conversation, the discovery of yet another book and even connecting to a mother with a story so similar to my own. For all of this I am grateful.

My passion in undertaking this research came not only from my experience as a teenage mother and a mother of eight but also as an academic who is determined to abandon the insistence of a generalised or universal norm of mothers and mothering that we could aspire to but one that encompasses all variations of mothering as opposed to relegating

them to the periphery. It is these experiences that may need shifting to the centre for this divergence from the dominant models to happen. Attending to the variations as opposed to the universal may be the only way to establish a more inclusive construction of mothering.

In summary, I have closely examined my own story of mothering and situated it alongside the four attributes of mothering – authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy. It draws on the experiences I have had as a mother and shows and tells the impact of those upon my mothering across time. *Section Three* follows with Chapter Seven and Eight to offer the summary and overview of the findings as well as the conclusions, recommendations and reflections.

CHAPTER SEVEN: MOTHERING FROM THE VELVET EXILES

Summary and Overview of Findings

'Ten years ago, I believed that if every woman could tell her life story and be heard, we could change the world. I still believe it. I still believe it now' Ruth Behar, 2003

Thirty-three years on and I am still a fourteen-year-old mother. This may surprise you but the label that has defined so much of my life is not easy to cast off and now I am not sure I want to. As I attempt to retell my own story I return again and again to the hope that each time I recall it, it will feel less and less peculiar. To cope, flourish and survive I have buried the most painful parts of my experience and tried to pretend those fragments never happened. Time has allowed it to recede, but I cannot know what it is like not to be a mother. My daughter is 14 years old now and I find it difficult to imagine her as a mother.

It may seem to an outsider and even to some insiders as though it all turned out perfectly. I think about me in the photograph and it is difficult to express in words how looking at that now makes me feel. It is almost indescribable. It is very painful as a grown woman to be able to comprehend the enormity of the situation as the girl this happened to. I find each time one of my children reaches their 14th birthday I spend time feeling grateful they do not have to face what I did. I cannot imagine how they would possibly care for a baby and I wonder how I ever did.

I have worked hard and been driven by the desire to prove my worth again and again. I remind myself I am good enough and I have a right to do what I am doing. There is still so much I feel I need to prove to myself,

but I also feel desperate to demonstrate to every person that ever judged me, doubted me, ostracised me or my family, looked down on me, to show you that I am everything you never thought I was and more. To every doctor, pharmacist, teacher, dentist, receptionist, shop assistant, mother-in-law, mother, ex-boyfriends, ex-husband and beyond. I am simply 'just another mother'.

I have begun to realise now why I am drawn to situations where others struggle or might be deemed different. I wish I had discovered the term, 'Velvet Exile' long ago as knowing that even though I was an outsider within, the fact there were others within would have been all the more comforting. These are situations where I feel most at home and comfortable. It is as if I fit in. I will be protected from feeling different or face the prying 'gaze of others'. A gaze that reflects their confusion when they realise I am a mum of eight and I have a career. They are expecting me to say otherwise. How can this be? This makes me feel I have betrayed what I was supposed to be, that my early experiences should define me. Well, they did. Just not in the way that was expected.

I feel guilty when people such as friends, acquaintances and students I teach think it should be easy for them to do the things I have done and feel frustrated with themselves for not doing or achieving more than they think they should but none of it is easy for anyone. Sometimes at work or beyond work, I am used as an example of how if you work hard, you can get there in the end. Yes, it does take hard work, but it also takes someone to believe in you. Not everyone has a Ken (my father) to be their constant. Someone on both sides of the door after the rest of the world has

decided who you are and what you will become. Mothers need each other.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The three preceding chapters, *Authentic Mothering*, *Agency and Authority and Autonomous Mothering* have presented the matrifocal narratives from the interview transcripts as layered accounts from different perspectives in order to re-present the maternal narratives as whole parts of stories in order to maintain the essence of each mother and her journey and to offer a layering of experiences, thoughts, feelings, perceptions and reflections of the mother's stories alongside supporting literature. The previous chapter, *My Story*, has outlined my own experience of mothering and included a more in-depth exploration of this to sit alongside the maternal narratives included. This chapter summarises the narratives of each mother, Lori, Kerry, Jenny, Julie and me and presents an overview of the findings. It draws together the key aspects of each mother's narrative and illustrates how they align with authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy. Reiterating this is crucial to further enrich the limited research exploring which mothers are able to practice empowered mothering and the dispute over if this is possible for marginalised mothers in challenging circumstances. The chapter also re-introduces the 'Velvet Exiles' and draws together the overarching summary of the previous chapters focusing on authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy.

T h e V e l v e t E x i l e s

Although our maternal narratives re-presented portray our unique circumstances, we are still each connected, with attachments to our own stories and experiences. A mother at 14, a mother of two, a mother of four, a mother of eight, difficulties with mental health, domestic abuse, children

with special needs and parenting as a single mother are just some of our differences. We are determined, capable, strong, educated, resistant, stigmatised, shamed and stereotyped. As explained in Chapter One, I adopted the term, '*Velvet exile*' used in the title of this chapter from Behar (2003). To reiterate, she explains this as being 'the outsider within' and as we are women who belong to the culture of mothering but often mother against the more commonly portrayed normative narratives we are often left feeling as if we are on the outside (p.xvii). In sharing our stories, we have appeared to be the 'velvet exiles' of mothering and by chronicling our experiences of mothering we contribute to offering new ways of knowing and telling that may help others feel less on the outside.

I was not expecting to get to this point in the thesis and find myself struggling so desperately to write. I feel as if my status as a 'velvet exile' might be preventing me from completing this. I have the skills and knowledge acquired throughout my studies and in my role as an academic that should help me, but it is the incongruence of being an 'outsider within' that is causing me to doubt myself. Fourteen-year-old teenage mothers are generally not meant to go on to be doctoral students but why not. Is this because we are led to believe this is not possible? If only I could shake these doubts and fears. These paralyse me and leave me in turmoil over if I can reach the summit even though it is clearly in my view. I realise that to dispel this notion, I must embrace my own maternal narrative the way I have embraced the stories of other mothers. Collecting and listening to the experiences of the mothers who have participated in this research has allowed me to see I *must* afford myself the compassion and understanding I have for them. Without telling their stories, I would never have been able to tell my own.

In seeking to understand more than the common negative portrayal of mothers who mother in challenging situations I also discovered my own experience as a mother was so much more than that representation, which was the very reason I struggled to ever share my story. Feeling embarrassed and ashamed, even now. Connecting and confronting our mothering practice has shaped the process of discovery and joined our experiences with the theory of empowered mothering (O'Reilly, 2016). All of these combine and make it possible to assign depth and recognition by offering what we know and how we know about our mothering. Our stories have demonstrated authenticity, authority, agency and autonomy in spite of our situations and the following section summarises this.

Finding Empowered Mothering

I set out to discover if a small group of mothers from Thetford living on two housing estates suffering from deprivation, display some or all of the four main attributes of empowered mothering. I chose this location due to my personal experiences of living there as a teenage single mother. This inspired me to explore the experiences of other mothers living there in order to understand how it felt for them. Lori, Kerry, Jenny, Julie and I have shared our experiences of mothering and in doing so have also shared our differences. At the beginning of this research, I did not know I would be sharing my story of mothering or considering if I practiced as an empowered mother or if other mothers, I had hoped to speak to did either. I had not yet discovered O'Reilly's (2016) theory of empowered mothering, but I was all too familiar with and tired of the way mother's experiences that deviated from the norm were portrayed and written about as well as the way government policies supporting mothers and children were

created. Even more frustrating was the divide I witnessed between mothers themselves which appeared to become greater if a mother was practicing mothering in a way that was different to another mother.

What I did know I was looking for were maternal stories that I could share in a manner unlike many of the previous methods marginalised mothers were written about that could establish despite a mother facing challenges in her life and circumstances she had many strengths that were ignored and disregarded if she was mothering in lesser-known situations. Finding co-mothers to research with was the only way for me to do this. Hall (1998) also argues that 'Recovering the voice of marginalised mothering and the voice of marginalised mothers reveals not only the structures of alienation, oppression and marginalisation but also the strengths and innovative strategies for survival that such persons and their social networks create' (p.36). This is what I was seeking. However, one of the difficulties in addressing the way we, as marginalised mothers are portrayed is that the challenges, we often face stem from the consequences of the poor choices' others consider us to have made. This perpetuates the idea that we are different as a result of our social position. Yes, our experiences are not the same as others but that does not mean our experiences of mothering should not be shared. It is these differences that could be used to unite us with other mothers in a positive way.

The maternal narratives provide in depth insight into where and how mothers practice empowered mothering. Julie, had to strategize and navigate challenges with both other mothers, the medical profession and her child's teacher which led to her isolating herself in order to mother the way she chose. Jenny also faced criticism from medical and social care professionals. Kerry, Lori, Jenny and I have faced opposition in the schools and felt challenged by professionals and judged by others. These

experiences make it difficult to realise and create our own identity as a mother when the implication is that we will follow a set of prescribed rules. Particularly when much of what is written about mothers is focused on the sameness of them rather than their differences.

My hope here is that by making these stories known we may begin to heal the line of division created between women and mothers incited by professionals, politicians and other mothers. Their lives and the stories they tell about those lives are unique, each with their own successes, struggles, hardships and celebrations, heartaches, and histories that demonstrate the multiplicities of mothering experiences often overlooked. These stories are essential in supporting other mothers to mother as there is no woman who mothers either privately or alone (Ruddick, 1986). By this I mean that there are common experiences that mothers share, such as those expressed by the women in this thesis. However, there are also experiences that lead mothers to feeling as though they are outsiders within the culture of mothering leaving them feeling marginalised and struggling to create a maternal identity of their own. Further to this, regardless of a mother's individual circumstances she is governed by the economic and social policies of the government of which she has very limited control (Ruddick, 1989, p. 35). She does not mother in private as the matrifocal narratives demonstrate when the mothers refer to their experiences and interactions with medical professionals, educational professionals and benefit officers. Ruddick (1989) wrote of this about mothers many years ago and asserts,

'They are always in public, in doctors' offices and clinics, supermarkets and welfare offices, courthouses and schools, movie houses and amusement parks. Mothers are almost everywhere, and almost... Even a child's teacher is apt to treat the mother condescendingly and belittle her advice' (p.35).

As women who do not fit typical stereotypes of mothers, my participants and I can never be the 'good mothers' of normative motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016, p.75). The criteria set for 'good mothering' is dictated to mothers without considering the context of their mothering (Buchanan, 2017). 'Good mothering' is described as nurturing by a mother who is always emotionally available for her children, continually entertaining her children, investing in their development and a mother who is individually responsible for the care of her children (Hays, 1996). O'Reilly (2010, 2016) discusses the norms established for mothers to meet which have little bearing on their real lives. Mothers who conform to these are often referred to as 'good mothers' while those who do not are considered 'bad mothers' (p.75). This oppresses mothers and leaves them unable to determine their 'own experiences of mothering' but mothers mothering in difficult circumstances *can* challenge the demands of ideologies of mothering and this assertion is based upon their realisation and perception of lower status and oppression (O'Reilly, 2010, 2011, 2016, p.46). Mothers who mother in difficult circumstances have the ability to perceive that the impossible standards of mothering used to measure and judge women against are unnatural, unrealistic, exclusionary and unachievable (McDonald-Harker, 2016). Social constructions such as 'good mothering' have been rejected by the mothers in this study in favour of creating our own mothering standards and identities through empowered mothering.

Although, we operate on the outside as exiles, sharing our stories has allowed us to demonstrate alternatives and develop our own practices of mothering when raising our children. Each of our stories have communicated an array of scenarios and accounts of empowered mothering without any of us identifying ourselves as an empowered mother. In many ways, non-normative mothering can be more rewarding

and empowering but mothers who choose to or who are facing challenging circumstances must create these new alternatives for mothering (O'Reilly, 2016).

The suggestion from Middleton, (2006) discussed in previous chapters (p. 43,44, 115, 125) that mothers with limited resources would be unable to assert authenticity, authority, agency and autonomy does appear logical. The suggestion originates from ideas around mothering in situations associated with restrictions such as lack of financial support, inadequate childcare and mothers who may also be suffering from mental or physical illness, addiction or an abusive partner. Middleton (2006) rightly raises the issue of the mothers who participated in the limited research undertaken previously by Green, 2004, Horowitz, 2004, and Gordon, 1990 which focuses on empowered or feminist mothers and she questions the socio-economic status of them. She insinuates that because many of the mothers involved in the research were not from low-income families, they would be more able to practice as an empowered or feminist mother but when looking at the participants of Horowitz's (2004) study the mother's status and education levels varied greatly as did Green's (2004). The mothers in this research have shown exactly the opposite of Middleton's (2006) claims and our maternal narratives have demonstrated insight into our own practices of empowered mothering.

A u t h e n t i c M o t h e r i n g

Authentic mothering is described as 'being truthful about motherhood' and honestly discussing the aspects of mothering that are considered taboo or secret (Butterfield, 2010 p. 701, Mausart, 2010)). The mothers who took part in this research have all exhibited various aspects of authentic mothering which ranged from being able to share their candid

stories of difficult experiences of mothering across different settings to acknowledging to themselves how they were feeling. These include other mothers (at the weekly meet up group), with educational professionals and educational settings, social services and with me in my role as researcher and mother.

Lori expresses her authenticity by explaining how mothering can make you feel sometimes,

'The group is some where I can tell them that I want to bury my kids under the patio, and they know that I don't mean it'.

Although, she does attribute being able to do this to having a supportive network of other mothers that she meets with and who she interacts with on the Abbey Estate where she feels able to be honest. Kerry also shared with me her honest feelings about her circumstances,

'Some days I feel exhausted and some days I just feel like chucking a blanket over my head and saying I don't want to do this today. I need a day off. I would like to avoid this, but I will tell you because this is the reality of it. I was depressed. I would spend the majority of my days sitting on my kitchen floor crying, smoking fags, drinking tea, not really eating, 'how I could get out of this?'.

I feel she has shared this with me because she is determined to convey the reality of her situation, but I have no idea if Kerry gets to talk about this with other mothers. When I consider this, I cannot help but think of Lori, Jenny and Julie and the support they have found in meeting together as mothers. This thought bothers me a lot when I think of Kerry. It also reminds me of the support I found as a teenage mother and how comforting that was for me. When I visited the community centre to meet the mothers for this research and heard about the group meeting every week it took me back to crossing that road each week to be in a space where I was accepted. Even though this was many years ago. I realise the strength in joining a community of other mothers, no matter how small. I

question, despite the numerous toddler groups and mother and baby groups and yoga for mums and babies' groups why there are not more community, mother led groups where mothers can be free from ideologies and have a supportive, non-judgemental space to just be.

Middleton (2006) has argued that one reason it would be difficult for a mother who is mothering under duress to be authentic in her mothering and what she is experiencing is due to the gaze of others from the institutions that she relies on for support, but it is because Jenny realises the urgency and importance of the support that she articulates her experience.

'It was when we went to [school] and sat in a multi-agency meeting and I went to the social worker 'Right, I'm packing his stuff up. You can come and get him later cause I don't want him no more' and then his school were like 'whoa!' and then they started offering more support'.

Jenny feels that without honesty and authenticity of her mothering experience the professionals involved in her son's care would not have provided the adequate support that he needed. Throughout her story, it becomes further obvious how essential this was because Jenny's son not only gained a place at a specialist school that could meet his needs, but he now attends college. Something Jenny never thought would be possible.

'I'm just so pleased that [SCHOOL] Academy refused to take my son when he went to high school and he ended up going to special needs school at [SCHOOL] cause he's now in] college which I never thought when he first started there that he would ever get to go to college because he couldn't even do half an hour at school.

Julie also had similar struggles with her son and explained,

'It's amazing what happens when you actually threaten to drop them off with the social workers. Sometimes when you've got children

who've got special needs, my son's autistic/ADHD, you do have to do things that are counterintuitive to being a mum cause as a mum you are loving and caring and nurturing and I did all that with my daughter and with my son I was sitting on him and fighting with him'.

Irrespective of the conflict this caused Julie as a mother she still acknowledged she needed help and without being honest about her circumstances she would not have received it.

A g e n t i c a n d A u t h o r i t a t i v e M o t h e r i n g

When referring to the term agency in mothering it is in reference to a mother resisting the demands of others who might be monitoring her mothering and as a result building her own confidence (Green, 2004, Horowitz, 2004). Likewise, a mother's authority is focused on the challenging aspects of her life that is constricted and extends to her ability to determine her own life and practices of mothering (O'Brien Hallstein, 2010, O'Reilly, 2006, 2016). The narratives reveal the mothers all exhibited their agency and authority in various settings which are considered challenging. Lori was unhappy when the Special Needs Coordinator at the school was not facilitating her daughters learning, resulting in her daughter feeling negative about herself. Lori says she was,

'Constantly battling with the school going, 'My child is not stupid! Please stop saying it because that's what she's hearing'

She found ways to counter this by asserting herself at the school and resisting the attitudes of the educational professionals. Similarly, Kerry was conflicted by her son's unhappiness and her feeling of powerlessness.

'I find myself spending a lot of time feeling frustrated and like I had no control. Like I was powerless. I felt powerless!'. She wanted to find a solution.

I didn't want my son to spend the last two years in a place where he was really unhappy coming out with no achievements and never really having any future prospects for himself. So, that was what empowered me to home school [SON]. Finding other forms of education where I felt we were gonna get the best of him as a person as well as his education cos now he feels slightly more respected.

It became clear the more time I spent listening to the recorded interviews that it was the practice of their mothering that led the mothers to resisting dominant ideologies of mothering not a feminist ideology or any type of identification as a feminist. They were defining mothering for themselves. Jenny had waited years for the local high school to refuse her son a place because she knew with support and a strategy in place that she could secure a better future for him.

So the parent support advisor at [SCHOOL] Academy, I went to and said to her 'you've got to help me write a letter. He's not going to them two other schools. He needs to go to [SPECIALIST SCHOOL].

Julie has also negotiated and strategized how to use her authority and agency in finding ways to mother that work for her. She describes what the end of day collection was like at school before she found her own way to manage that.

The collecting at the end of the school day, 'Mrs. [NAME] can we just have a word?'

I went through a period where I was so anxious about that I took my friend's daughter to school and she picked my children up and then they had to phone me so that conversation didn't happen in front of the other parents because I didn't want all the parents going Mrs. [NAME]. So, I put a strategy in place where they couldn't do it. They didn't like it but I just could not do it.

When I hear these stories it reinforces for me the strength the mothers hold. Rarely, if ever are they able to divulge their narratives and are often viewed and stereotyped in misleading ways because of the assumptions of others. Their resistance confirms Ruddick's (1989) assertion

that mothers do think. Ruddick (1989) was the first scholar to explore and examine the actual experience of mothering and create language that allowed for a definition and analysis of mothering as a practice. She highlighted the challenges to speaking about mothering and how hard it is to 'capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work' which this research has sought to exhibit (p.29). Ruddick's concern with maternal practice and thinking emphasises the necessity of helping others to understand what mothers actually experience because the problems with acknowledging that mothers *can* think arise when outsiders who do not practice mothering have little or no 'critical restraint' and feel able to 'interpret and control' as opposed to listening to what mothers have to say or do (Ruddick, 1989, p. 26).

A u t o n o m o u s M o t h e r i n g

It has been suggested that for a mother to be autonomous she must have financial resources from working herself or having a partner that works to facilitate her choice to either work or be a stay-at-home mother (Middleton, 2006). As revealed from the maternal narratives it is clear this is not the case. Lori's story offers a powerful example of how she has made autonomous decisions in her life over what she chooses to do.

It makes me feel like me again. I've got a history of mental health issues and just sitting indoors doesn't help that. So, volunteering somewhere I can meet new people. Felt like I became me again for a while. So, it was, for me. It was just about being me and not mum all the time. Being a single parent, it felt good to not just be mum constantly.

Similarly, Kerry also makes decisions that will *allow* her to become self-sufficient and independent.

So, starting university was a fear because it's like I could lose so much. Then I had to think. 'you know what? I don't care'. There's so much I

can gain as well and if I would have let the fear and self-doubt you know come in, I would have give this up a long time ago but you know I want more. I feel like I deserve more and there's nobody out there helping me.

Decisions such as giving up part-time employment to study, taking a voluntary role which eventually led to a paid position and attending university which led to writing a thesis are not always easy to make but through our own reflections as mothers we have contemplated these choices carefully and in doing so have discovered our autonomous selves in a variety of ways.

I was considering it but then I broke my ankle last September but yeah, I was thinking, 'I really need to get out and do something for me. Volunteering in a shop or volunteering somewhere. Go and be with other people rather than being stuck at home all the time

The significance of portraying and heralding the strengths of mothers is advantageous for women, mothers, children, society and families and evidencing this by collecting maternal narratives will only strengthen this further (Slepian, Sylla, and Weston, 2011). For each of us either education, volunteering and/or employment have helped us to realise our independence.

Smith (2003) argues that more than anything in the world, a child needs, 'a free and happy mother' (p.167). Crittenden (2001) is passionate about what mothers and children need in her book, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued* and explains,

Studies conducted on five continents have found that children are distinctly better off when the mother possesses enough income and authority in the family to make investing in children a priority (p.120).

Julie reiterates this when she describes her own journey of finding something outside of mothering that shows she values her own identity beyond her role as a mother.

I had poor mental health and initially started volunteering at [AN ORGANISATION] Eventually that led to me completing training and getting a paid position. I have also run training sessions and parenting sessions to support other parents. Having something for myself really helped.

Middleton (2006) wrote about empowered mothering and attempted to address authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy basing her piece upon the three aforementioned studies, described as 'notable exceptions' by O'Reilly (p.94). There is a fourth piece of research on feminist mothers by Gordon, (1990) which is not discussed in her work. Middleton (2006) also encompasses O'Reilly's four attributes of empowered mothering to support her explanations. Although, Middleton's paper was written in 2006 there has still been very little, if any, further research specifically focusing on empowered mothers/mothering or authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy as characteristics of empowered mothering.

I refer to Middleton because she has focused on the relevant research on feminist mothers and considered this in accordance with O'Reilly's theory. However, what has changed and developed since her publication is the clarification of meaning between empowered and feminist mothering which are both used interchangeably throughout her discussions. In her defence, at the time, O'Reilly also used these terms in a similar way. This is important to capture because the debate is centred around the question of if it is possible for mothers who practice mothering under duress to demonstrate empowered mothering. Middleton argues that this is *not* possible but the mother's narratives re-presented in this research contradict this. However, part of the conflict in Middleton's assertions appear to be based upon the question of if mothers are able to

practice either. Her assertion this is not possible may arise from the dissonance between empowered mothering and feminist mothering.

Feminist mothering has since been definitively explained by O'Reilly (2016) as a particular *style* of empowered mothering where a mother's resistance stems from and is demonstrated by identifying as a feminist, practicing mothering from a feminist standpoint while being influenced by the politic and philosophy of feminism. The conditions of empowered mothering are different to those of feminist mothering and do not rely on a mother's access to education or finances as Middleton (2006) asserts nor do they exclude mothers who are involved with 'external agencies' (p.77).

Empowered mothering is challenging to definitively describe due to the fact that it has not been 'fully defined, documented or dramatized in feminist scholarship on motherhood' but conclusively, empowered mothering is 'mothering against motherhood' (O'Reilly, 2016 p.66). O'Reilly (2016) declares that across the past decade she has sought to develop a theory of empowered mothering and states, 'Most pointedly, the overarching aim of empowered mothering, I argue, is to confer to mothers the agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy and advocacy-activism that is denied to them in patriarchal motherhood.....by opening up new maternal practices and identities' (p.69). In opposition to normative discourses of mothering, a 'multitude of maternal identities' are encompassed within the themes of empowered mothering such as low-income mothers, young mothers, old mothers and employed mothers (p.70). This is entirely different to feminist mothering despite there being commonalities between the two. More specifically, feminist mothering is rooted in the theory, philosophy, politic and practice of feminism and empowered mothering is grounded in a mother's resistance and the

personal reasons for this such as improving a mother's life by demanding increased time for herself as well as assistance from others (O'Reilly, 2016).

It is only as a result of discovering O'Reilly's (2016) 'empowered mothering' I began to realise I practiced empowered mothering myself and by adopting a mother focused lens I was able to recognise that despite the daily challenges I faced I could still do this. I also began to accept and appreciate this was not something new and despite feeling different and marginalised I had probably been an empowered mother since I was 14 years old. It is here that I can unite my story with those of the mothers despite the changes in my circumstances across time. I am certain that if more mothers could 'unite' their stories, we would discover more empowered mothers. This leaves me questioning if more mothers knew about the concept of empowered mothering and more stories of mothering were told, could the way marginalised mothers are portrayed and supported be different?

This signifies the importance of how marginalised mothers are written about and represented and has major implications for shifting the image and perception of mothers mothering in various circumstances. By re – presenting a diverse variety of maternal narratives, not only would mothers begin to recognise other women mothering under difficult circumstances but mothers whose strengths and attributes were acknowledged and highlighted. It could be asserted that it is in effect more challenging for mothers mothering in more favourable circumstances to mother as empowered mothers due to difficulties associated with mothering differently to normative discourses of those around them. However, without doubt, there is not a right way to be a good mother (Lazarre, 1997).

There is not a straightforward strategy a woman must follow to be an empowered mother. The way we have done this as mothers is through our determination despite the unique circumstances and situations, we found ourselves in at the time. Our stories demonstrate the multitude of methods we have strategized in order to practice as empowered mothers and illustrate that this was shaped by our own unique circumstances. This means that our mothering responds to the issues we are facing in that moment and serves to demonstrate the complexity of empowerment.

C o n c l u s i o n

The overarching goal of this autoethnographic research was not to produce generalisable results, as a complete true representation of mothers would not be possible but the research does provide insight into the contemporary experiences of mothers residing in a rural town on housing estates identified as deprived in order to dispel the stereotypes, stigma and misunderstandings attached to some mothers living in these areas. The research was seeking to explore themes and examples of authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy by examining if these were present in the matrifocal narratives shared. I have not classified myself nor the other mothers into specific categories but have illustrated the uniqueness of each narrative by implementing the layered account allowing the reader to have a wholesome narrative of each mother's individual story. The narratives were viewed through a matricentric lens (mother focused).

The maternal narratives may appear messy, confusing and fragmented. This is because they are. The stories differed greatly as did the individual circumstances. The collection of matrifocal narratives not only revealed that mothers mothering in challenging situations exhibit and

practice the four attributes of empowered mothering (authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy) but they also demonstrate how these attributes help to combat some of the challenges faced while mothering allowing mothers to create their own practice of mothering.

In order to finally dismiss any uncertainty surrounding access to authenticity, authority, agency and autonomy for mothers with limited resources, I reiterate O'Reilly's (2016) argument that the attributes of empowered mothering are '*more evident* in the maternal practices and theories of mothers who are poor, lesbian, young or women of colour' and she argues that mothers in a position of privilege and status do not seek to fulfil them (p.75). When O'Reilly (2016) refers to authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy she means to 'signify struggle, not necessarily success' and this is grounded in a mother's belief in herself, 'who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her' and who demonstrates these possibilities exist (O'Reilly, 2006, p.22, Rich, 1986, p. 247).

The narratives remove the veil, make no apologies and allow readers to share in real experience by inviting them to participate in our journey in creating a counter narrative to the dominant discourses of mothering. Sharing maternal narratives generates spaces to challenge cultural norms around the culture of mothering and reflection and analysis of the most commonly known practices of mothering. The findings reveal that the mothers who participated in the study were able to practice the four attributes of empowered mothering as defined by O'Reilly, 2016). The findings displayed provide examples of resistance to normative mothering discourses and the expectations placed upon mothers by those in positions of power and how this was replaced with alternative mothering discourses by constructing their own mothering identities.

This chapter has summarised the previous chapters which detailed the four attributes of empowered mothering — authenticity, authority, agency and authority. It has discussed and summarised the variations and complexities around how these are practiced and demonstrated that mothers mothering in challenging circumstances are able to practice empowered mothering. The final chapter culminates with the conclusions, recommendations and reflections of the research concluding with Part Two of *The Mother's Story*.

CHAPTER EIGHT: COUNTER NARRATIVES EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN
IN ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

*Conclusions, Recommendations and
reflections*

I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experiences can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will truly be ours...I am keenly aware that any writer has a certain false and arbitrary power. It is her version, after all, that the reader is reading at this moment, while the accounts of others—including the dead—may go untold' Adrienne Rich 1986

I am a mother of eight with five boys and three girls ranging in age from 14 - 33. Each day I feel the greatest love for all of them. There are problems I face daily because I am a mother. Sometimes they are trivial and revolve around something simple like finding money for the school bus or what food I have left to make the lunches and dinner with. Is it nutritious? Does it have too much sugar? Will they like it or complain about it? Other days I am worrying about severe anxiety issues that one of my children is suffering from, addiction to benzodiazepines my other child has and how can I help? Is it my fault that he is suffering like this? Collecting an adolescent from the police station for possession of drugs and having acute awareness that once I walk inside to speak to the officer on duty everything changes when he realises, I am a public health professional. Thankfully, I can take my son home quickly but what if I had been perceived differently. Would the outcome have been the same?

The honest reality is that I am in a position that allows me to hide behind many of the everyday issues I face as a mother. Writing this without including those

elements is easily doable but it is not authentic. It would not be my authentic story and therefore to do what I am expecting of others I must tell you the truth. Being a mother is sometimes hard. Being a mother of eight is sometimes hard. Not only hard, but heart breaking. If we keep hiding and pretending and not telling stories about our mothering, we are doing ourselves and other mothers a disservice because all of our mothering is important. By sharing our stories with each other I am certain we can feel less alone, less isolated and in turn our thoughts, feelings and experiences will become validated.

I went to a party at the weekend with family and friends and for the first time ever I realised what I had done and all I had accomplished. It seemed for a moment I was on the outside looking in. Not in the way I have felt an outsider as a teenage or single mother. I realised and understood that despite the challenges, the struggles, the uncertainties, the doubts, the not feeling I knew the right way to mother, the mistakes, I could now actually acknowledge that my own version of mothering mattered. There was once a time when I wrestled with the turmoil that becoming a mother at 14 caused me but I now know that it has made me all that I am.

Mothering has enabled me to write this thesis.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The previous chapter provided the main summary and overview of the matrifocal narratives and illustrated to the reader the authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy of the mothers. It tied together the layered accounts of each mother and aligned them with empowered

mothering. This concluding chapter discusses the research conclusions, reflections and recommendations which are separated into two facets to clarify their contributions to areas of specific knowledge around autoethnography and mothering. The chapter incorporates a reiteration of matricentric feminism and summarises the main findings. The section entitled *Methodological Contribution* focuses on autoethnography as implemented within this thesis and discusses the advantages and limitations of it. *Research Contributions* highlights the implications of the research and is followed by the recommendations for future research and practical applications.

Matricentric Feminism

A matricentric feminist approach was embedded throughout this research to support and impel the significance of encompassing mothers while applying a mother focused feminism. 'Matricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment' (O'Reilly, 2019 p. 13). As O'Reilly (2019) declares, 'Matricentric feminism begins with the mother' (p.18). When we centre mothers at the core of our research, we ensure their perspectives are heard and used to shape and inform the future professional practice of those doing work on their behalf.

When matricentric feminism is used as a basis for mothering we are able to establish a practice that even if mothers do not identify their mothering as feminist, they still have a counter narrative of mothering in which to disrupt the dominant ideologies. Feminist mothering has been described as 'any practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and change' the limiting or oppressive aspects of mothering (O'Reilly, 2007, p.796,

2011, 2016). O'Reilly realised the need for a specific definition of feminist mothering both in theory and in practice which led to her theorisation of matricentric feminism (2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2016). In addition to O'Reilly's manifesto for determining a redefinition of mothering that is less oppressive and more empowered, affording and affirming agency, authenticity, autonomy and authority, I sought to collect narratives from mothers who are implementing these attributes but are often overlooked by scholarly work and media publications commonly leading to a negative portrayal of marginalised mothers.

*Extraordinary Women in Ordinary
Circumstances - Findings from the study*

In preparing to offer and announce the findings and conclusion to the reader I proceed with some hesitancy I will explain. There are definitive findings that have been summarised but there is also much more. There are five narratives of mothering that illustrate our journeys as women and mothers and to impose on the reader what you must conclude from these stories would not allow them to breathe as they should. The findings are presented here as they ought to be. The findings contribute to the scholarly research in the field of maternal and motherhood studies and will foster further research with a range of diverse mothers. They will facilitate change in the way professionals perceive and interact with marginalised mothers but as I said at the start, I was determined for the reader to hear these stories to help their understanding of situations they had not experienced themselves. Worth (2005) explains that stories are a way to gain understanding of something we may not comprehend. She argues stories offer knowledge that creates empathy for others. Therefore, I urge the reader to absorb the findings but to be aware of the possibility of the stories each of us has shared allowing you to reach further conclusions of

your own. The findings from the interviews with each mother illustrate marginalised mothers in challenging circumstances do practice authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy in their mothering. The summary of the findings responds to the research question - do marginalised mothers mothering in challenging circumstances practice as outlaws/courageous mothers/empowered mothers? While this is significant, the collection of mother's stories in this thesis also provides more than examples of empowered mothering. So, to offer a conclusion that presents them as simply as that, is not giving them the full recognition, they are deserving of. The stories shared by each of us, layer by layer throughout, unfold at each turn of the page inviting the reader to leave with their own interpretations and conclusions from our experiences as mothers.

Significantly, the research and findings make a noteworthy and meaningful contribution to autoethnography and its use as a feminist methodology. It introduces and defines a matricentric model of autoethnography that can be employed in future research with mothers demonstrating a mother focused version of the model. Autoethnography presents creations for submission where there is a need to both listen to the experiences of others but also understand those experiences. Identifying an alternative model, matricentric autoethnography as a method that can be used by other researchers exploring experiences of mothering, will strengthen the autoethnographic approaches implemented to write about and tell mothering in a multitude of ways. Ultimately, it permits the interrogation of mothering. Finding autoethnography created the possibility for me to present four matrifocal narratives that impart experiences of mothering under challenging circumstances alongside my own story of mothering. It

allowed me to explore my own experience as well as the experiences of mothers and offer alternative perspectives of lesser-known discourses of mothering. Without sharing the intricacies of our mothering, it would be challenging for the reader to understand our position. By arranging in depth unstructured interviews with each mother I was able to gather a thorough narrative of the parts of their lives they wanted to share. The findings from the interviews with each illustrate that marginalised mothers in challenging circumstances do practice authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy in their mothering. The summary of the findings responds to the research question - do marginalised mothers mothering in challenging circumstances practice as outlaws/courageous mothers/empowered mothers? While this is significant, the collection of mother's stories in this thesis also provides more than examples of empowered mothering. So, to offer a conclusion that presents them as simply as that, is not giving them the full recognition, they are deserving of. The stories shared by each of us, layer by layer throughout, unfold at each turn of the page inviting the reader to leave with their own interpretations and conclusions from our experiences as mothers.

Importantly, the findings do address a gap in scholarly work by offering a counter narrative that reveals the strengths marginalised mothers hold that is often unacknowledged. This is a counter narrative to a deficit model of mothering where emphasis is placed on the deficiencies of mothers as opposed to their strengths. Instead, we as mothers have expressed our pride, love and care for our children and regardless of the negative portrayals sometimes offered, we actually have positive views of our mothering. There is rationale and purpose for that which is clear throughout. The thesis has demonstrated that marginalised mothers are able to practice empowered mothering despite mothering under difficult

conditions with limited resources. I do not dispute that research has been undertaken representing variations of mothers and mothering but I affirm that research undertaken focusing on mothers mothering in challenging circumstances neglects to represent the value, strength and honesty in their mothering work. The research revealed many other aspects of our lives as mothers and our experiences but at no point do I claim that we *only* assert authenticity, agency, authority and autonomy in our mothering. In fact, the assertion of these four attributes varies considerably depending on each set of our circumstances at particular times. In contrast to some portrayals of marginalised mothers this research has intended to illustrate variations of mothering in order to re-centre the more often asserted universal norm.

It has sometimes felt as though there has been a line of division created between women and mothers because of the representation of mothers from professionals, politicians and other mothers but our stories offered in this study show a more heart-warming, complex, multidimensional perspective of mothering in challenging circumstances. Our lives and the stories we tell about those lives are unique, each with their own successes, struggles, hardships and celebrations, heartaches, and histories that demonstrate the multiplicities of mothering experiences often overlooked. However, the misperceptions that endure as a result of the social construction of mothering appear to persist and impact the identities, aspirations and experiences of mothers.

The significance of portraying and heralding the strengths of mothers is advantageous for women, mothers, children, society and families (Slepian, Sylla, and Weston, 2011). It exposes the myths and untruths of mothering ultimately freeing them. The alternative is to continue to ignore the divide between different mothering discourses

which continues to leave marginalised mothers portrayed as lacking in power and pathological. By highlighting the authenticity, authority, agency and autonomy marginalised mothers hold as an alternative viewpoint, the stigma, judgement and stereotypes often assigned can be removed. A feminism organised for the identity of mothers and work of mothers, namely, matricentric feminism, will ensure we use a matrifocal lens to make progress. Although women may claim to be more empowered today as a result of feminism mothers are not.

Overall, there has been a limited amount of scholarly work in the United Kingdom (UK) documenting the strengths and assets of marginalised mothers. Several of the UK based studies have been connected to the maternity experiences of women from lower classes but feminist research undertaken to understand the various ways of mothering is lacking. I am not claiming these issues have not been written of in scholarly work previously but they need to be written of more. These stories are our stories and by gathering more, the assumptions, gaps, stereotypes and misunderstandings can be dismantled to facilitate further understanding.

Additional Findings

The thesis has focused on analysing maternal narratives to determine if Lori, Kerry, Jenny, Julie and I practiced attributes of empowered mothering. This has been the main aim throughout. However, the collection of maternal narratives also revealed additional themes that I do not wish to dismiss due to their significance and potential in helping to frame further research focused on mothering. These include the themes of stigma, expectations, aspirations and negativity and positivity surrounding the town and estate where we have either lived or live.

These additional themes illustrate depth to the layers of complexities we face as mothers and the way they impact everyday lives as well as the interactions we have with others. The themes may also affect how we are able to practice mothering and are worthy of further research and exploration. Highlighting these serves as additional testament to our strength and practices of empowered mothering as despite feeling ostracised, shame, stigma, embarrassment and stereotyped due to our circumstances and our place of residence we are still able to practice authentic, authoritative, agentic and autonomous mothering.

C o n t r i b u t i o n

The study makes an important contribution to the portrayal and understanding of mothering in challenging circumstances and illustrates the assets asserted in our mothering. We are not powerless women and have each created our own versions of mothering. Our voices and stories included in this thesis are a response to changing the normative ideologies of mothering by demonstrating true and realistic mothering experiences and their variations. The findings have important implications for future research with mothers, scholarly work on mothers/mothering, feminist theories, policy, practice and the dominant ideologies of mothering as they expose our experiences of mothering and put forward an alternative research method that allows others to understand the identity of the storytellers as well as considering their own. By cementing a mother focused autoethnographic path, dialogue between professionals and mothers are afforded new discoveries and importantly, 'challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others (Spry, 2001). The more we create research *with* mothers the more mothers we will hear from. The research provides significant insights into our lesser-known

experiences of mothering and each of the unique circumstances we have lived. It details the experiential knowledge and diversity of our mothering which may facilitate change of how other marginalised mothers are portrayed. A major contribution of the research is the counter narrative these stories offer to a deficit model of mothering where we as mothers have expressed our pride, love and care for our children and regardless of the negative portrayals sometimes encountered, we actually have positive views of our experiences of mothering.

Referring to feminist theory, this research is one of the limited studies that elevates empowered mothering in marginalised mothers. The findings add further weight to O'Reilly's (2016) theory of matricentric feminism in which a mother's experience, identity and work are acknowledged. A mother-centred feminism is 'needed' and should be seen as a given if we seek to empower mothers (p.2). The research with the five of us provides evidence for a mother-centred feminism as it recognises the role of the mother and its value culturally and structurally enabling a redefinition of the work of mothers. As a researcher I have also aligned this thesis with the central and governing principles of matricentric feminism in order to contribute to this emerging feminist field. I affirm that mothers and mothering are worthy of ongoing scholarly enquiry, that the work of mothers is important and valuable to society and I have endeavoured to establish this research as a contribution to the establishment of maternal theory as an 'autonomous, independent and legitimate scholarly discipline' ultimately creating a mode of feminism where both mothers and mothering count (p.7-8).

I have already begun to make further contributions to this field of research and this includes presenting my autoethnography, *A Mother's Story*, at the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community

Involvement, Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Politics, Practice and Representation conference in Florence and publishing an article in the Journal of Motherhood Initiative's anniversary issue, entitled Matricentric Feminism based upon my underpinning research with mothers in Thetford. Further to this, I undertook the role of Guest Editor for the journal in 2019.

This research is a response to the call from researchers, academics, policy makers, including some government ministers, to conduct research that will establish the evidence required to inform future policy and interventions focused on mothers and to offer perspective from alternative views which are often neglected. Public Health alongside other organisations with a focus on maternal health and health and wellbeing are seeking and adopting alternative approaches to address health and social inequalities. A matrifocal lens *could* be the basis for this where mothers and mothering are concerned. I echo the call from the aforementioned researchers and specialists to carry out research *with* mothers in order to develop further insight and understanding of a mother centred feminism and the way it might contribute to a new manner in how we support mothers and families in practice.

My priority as a feminist researcher is to the mothers who have participated in this research by exploring aspects of their experiences that may have been neglected or overlooked within conventional social science research. Eventually, I applied the same prioritisation to my own story and experiences once I became aware of the importance of unheard or ignored stories of mothers. As an ethnographer, I feel obligated to trust the stories that have been shared with me and have confidence that they are true, sincere and meaningful to the women that shared them. We only know what we have been told *about* marginalised mothers. Not what they have actually told us. Nelson (2009) makes an essential point,

We must know that when women are speaking about mothering, they are speaking about something very meaningful, very important, very real. Part of my job is to create a bridge between two discursive worlds, that of motherhood and that of academia. Mothers have heard from academia; it would be very good for all academic fields to hear from mothers and it would benefit mothers to be so heard (p.24).

This research has built a bridge that further supports the integration of matricentric feminism into academic feminism. It has explored the matrifocal narratives of mothers living on disadvantaged housing estates in Thetford, Norfolk. It has endeavoured to illustrate an alternative version of mothering recognising the strengths of mothering from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Their circumstances of marginalisation and the lack of knowledge surrounding these are often ignored in favour of popular stereotypes. Reproducing research that has already been done and regurgitating the negative attributes of mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, living on deprived estates was never my intention. I was very frank about that. I sought to gather stories and discover if and what strengths might emerge from these to create a new narrative of the experiences of mothering in challenging circumstances. At no time throughout the interviews did the mothers who participated describe their mothering as authentic, agentic, authoritative or autonomous. However, their descriptions correlate to these four main attributes of empowered mothering.

*Methodological Contribution:
Autoethnography*

Implementing autoethnography has afforded me the freedom to write and reveal to readers my vulnerability unbound from the restrictions associated with some methodologies. By featuring each mother's story using a layered account I have been able to balance the complete accounts with the narratives, reflexivity and the literature while refraining from pure

indulgence. It has allowed me to explore and unravel my own experience, alongside that of other mothers. Acknowledgement of and my response to the impact of my own history and life experiences has been possible with the inclusion of these and their interaction with the research. This has ensured the research offers rich stories from a small group of mothers — all of whom have shared unique and individual experiences. This approach and framework inform the unification of both researcher and participants that supports further studies allowing more mother stories to be told and heard.

I have situated myself as the researcher openly and honestly throughout this thesis and call on Kirsch (1999) in support of my rationale for this.

'The goal of situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives is not to overcome these limits —an impossible task—but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, and the research reports we write. That kind of knowledge can help readers understand (rather than second guess) what factors have shaped the research questions at hand; it also helps ground the research report in a specific cultural and historical moment (p.14).

My intention with this research was to invite and engage the reader as well as encourage questions from them that may help further their knowledge and understanding of a particular cultural phenomenon (Ellis, 2000, Mendez, 2013). In doing so, what develops is autoethnography as educational research (Ellis and Bochner, 2006) by 'showing people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live and what their struggles mean' (p.111). Overall autoethnography should teach, inform and inspire (Le Roux, 2015).

I am clearly visible within the research and have included my own story of mothering which began when I was 14 years old. I have shared and

explored my own journey of becoming a mother as a teenager and as a mother of eight. The process helped me to gain self-understanding and acceptance of who and where I am now which is evident as the story continues. It was essential to write this autoethnography in a way that would enable the reader to engage and connect with each of our stories on both an intellectual and emotional level. My story has purposefully been interwoven throughout each chapter and the mother's stories presented as layers. The credibility of the narratives is demonstrated by maintaining their wholeness and presenting them as layered accounts (Ronai, 1992). This leaves room for the reader to weave their own experiences alongside ours allowing both worlds to intertwine and create meaning around the human experience of mothering.

Advantages and Limitations of Autoethnography

Evaluating autoethnography is not straightforward as there are a range of specific rules or criteria to measure against due to its diverse possibility of approaches. This is in opposition to the objectiveness of other modes of research (Mendez, 2013). However, Medford (2006) has propositioned a primary ethical standard for which we can evaluate autoethnography against — 'an ethic of accountability' which means writers should write his or her truth as though the people involved in those events were listening (p.861). Medford makes further suggestions that,

'Our subjects might disagree with our representation of shared experiences or they might question our decision to write about an experience in the first place, but we should be willing to confront these issues, even when avoiding them by quietly publishing our work in academic journals/texts is a viable alternative (p.862).

By offering personal narratives the research allows us to access rich data and provide entry into private worlds (Pavlenko, 2002, 2007).

Autoethnography is an important form of enquiry presenting cultural or social accounts that create awareness of experiences the reader has not had themselves (Mendez, 2013). It helps the reader to form connections to the stories and invites them to understand more. However, there are also limitations of autoethnography that should not be dismissed. The reader/s may have unexpected reactions to the narratives that may evoke uncomfortable feelings within them (Bochner and Ellis, 1996). Ethical issues around sensitive topics regarding the researcher and those connected to them, alongside the exposure of the participants due to the disclosure of private thoughts and feelings can all bring challenges.

Limitations in the sample of this study were in the role of ethnicity. The participants were white mothers but this was not as a result of intentional recruitment but may have been due to the geographical location of the study in an area with a low number of ethnic minorities. There was one black mother, who met the inclusion criteria and attended the mother's group. I was informed that she might have wanted to take part next time she visited the centre. However, she sadly passed away suddenly before I had the opportunity to meet her. Religion, sexual orientation or marital status were not mentioned at any point in the study but there was great variation in the number of children the mothers each had and their ages, the age of the mothers, educational background and employment. I intentionally kept an open mind and wanted to limit the preconceived ideas of the reader hence provided limited background information on the mothers apart from the fact that they lived in a particular area.

Recommendations for future research and Alternative Considerations

The completed thesis offers recommendations for future research and applications based upon its methodological approach and interpretation of maternal narratives. There is an array of methods and approaches that can be implemented to include the voices of mothers in research that could be considered as alternatives to the more traditional methodologies often relied upon. There are also additional recommendations pertaining to the collection of narratives within this study.

Alternatives to the Study Undertaken

The narratives gathered within this research provide thorough experiences of mothering. However, increasing the number of maternal narratives collected and increasing the various settings and locations would allow further versions of mothering to be collected. Increasing the timeline of the research could allow for several meetings with the same mothers and capture different experiences of mothering across time. It is an increase in the stories of mothers being told and heard that will help to transfer outside experiences to the centre.

Undertaking further research implementing the co-construction of narratives with mothers could promote a stronger collaboration between the researcher and participants as a result of the co-producing of each story. The participants would become co-authors of the written pieces which could further serve to alleviate any power imbalances between themselves and the researcher. An alternative for future study might be to consider a methodology that encompasses this opportunity to write their own account.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research around mothers and mothering must be undertaken to develop a wider understanding of lesser-known experiences. Marginalised mothers do not often recognise their strengths, nor do they realise the possibility exists that they have assets such as autonomy, agency, authenticity and authority that are demonstrated in the mothering they do. We must consider alternative methods of research *with* mothers to foster a major shift in how mothers are portrayed who live in deprived areas and beyond. These could include photovoice, community co-production, and methods that encompasses documents, artifacts, and a range of visual data. This will stand to strengthen the theory of empowered mothers by grounding this in actual experiences of women and by utilising a variety of methods we can gain even deeper understanding of the individual circumstances of mothers.

To support and strengthen the work of professionals who are working in deprived communities and with marginalised mothers they must facilitate and build a more supportive community to halt the demonisation that is directed to some of the mothers under their care. This could be achieved by exploring the impact these professionals and institutional bodies have on mothers and their children. Students and professionals should have appropriate access to relevant publications and research in order to understand the various ways in which women mother. These should be embedded into training programmes and undergraduate and post graduate courses. The adoption of these materials could provide new perspective and insight into the strengths and assets of marginalised mothers and families to counter the negative judgement from professionals and those in positions of power who work or engage with mothers and families.

There is an immense role for supportive mothering groups to help break down the barriers in communities which isolate mothers from each other and to nurture and care in unity. By collecting additional maternal narratives from those mothers who do attend a group alongside those who mother in isolation would most certainly provide further insight into the experiences of each. As would trying to ascertain what types of spaces mothers would like to have access to and what might facilitate them meeting other mothers. This could lay the foundations for the establishment of a matrifocal space/ community/ group such as mothers' centres that harness a culture which values women, children and families while fostering deep connections among women, embracing diversity and uncertainty rather than a prescriptive model. Creating a platform for women and mothers where they can develop expertise on the developmental and societal needs of themselves and their families.

The analysis of policy through a mother focused framework must be adopted in order to develop mother centred policies with the inclusion of mother led consultations to support future policy development. Many of the policies, processes and procedures that affect both the mothers featured in this study and those mothers beyond are in need of revision and include the voices of mothers within this. Examining and assessing policies directly connected to women's employment, economic well-being and other structural barriers that women and mothers are faced with could enhance and raise the aspirations of mothers. It could alter the lack of understanding of disadvantaged mothers in communities across England. Without this we will continue to see professionals and policy actions that have little impact on the issues they claim to address and repeat approaches as to how women should mother based upon repetitive

negative narratives that may fail to illuminate the true reality, challenges and circumstances being faced.

Listening to and recalling the interviews with each mother reinforces to me the importance of hearing and learning from the stories of other mothers. It does feel that alongside other mothers who are marginalised for a variety of reasons, if we are mothering in these situations we are seen as doing ourselves and our children an injustice. When I hear the voices of each mother as I play back the interviews it is clear to me that each mother is truly invested in sharing her story. Even though our stories are different we seem to have become allies in trying to dispel the generalisations often made about us.

Mothering against motherhood can help mothers reject the regulations and restraints placed upon us but until wider experiences of mothering are shared it will be difficult to implement and validate empowered mothering despite the increase in more and more academic examples and definitions. Until we have empowered mothers, theory and practice may continue to remain the same leaving some mothers forever on the margins with their voices and experiences overlooked.

C o n c l u s i o n

Naturally, the visions presented within this thesis are limited based upon the fact that these are our own individual circumstances. The examples provided and our understanding of these are limited by the spaces we inhabit. The passion I held in undertaking this research came not only from my experience as a teenage mother and a mother of eight but also as an academic who is determined to abandon the insistence of a generalised or universal norm of mothers and mothering that we could aspire to but one that encompasses all variations of mothering as opposed

to relegating them to the periphery. It is these experiences that may need shifting to the centre for this divergence from the dominant models to happen. How can mothers begin to rebel against systems that are continually supported by the literature if it frequently details how bleak life is for marginalised mothers. Attending to the variations as opposed to the universal may be the only way to establish a more inclusive construction of mothering.

Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to learn *about* mothering *from* mothers. These matrifocal narratives sought to unmask mothering by storying honest authentic experiences. Representing the experiences of the mothers and their lived mothering faithfully alleviates the need for external validation as it invites the reader to appreciate the insights and honesty within these maternal narratives. I, like Ruddick (1989) may sound as if I am trying to portray mothers 'better than we are' (p.31). I have written with passion and understanding for mothers both as a researcher and mother myself but it is my refusal to accept commonly told stories of mothering beyond stereotypical identities that has led me to offer alternatives. Quite simply, mothering matters.

A MOTHER'S STORY: PART TWO

FORTY-EIGHT

It's mid-December and I am in a rural village with another lockdown looming due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. I didn't think I would get this far and to be honest I cannot wait to complete my writing. I have wanted to write about the stories of mothering I have been gifted alongside my own and illustrate our lives to help others understand our circumstances. I am finally doing what I needed to do – write my PhD. The necessity of doing this has become stronger and stronger. It seems incredible that my dreams of medicine or the Vidal Sassoon school of hairdressing seem light years away but they are and here I am.

At the beginning of this story, I was starting a new journey. I prepared to board a plane with an open-ended ticket and very soon after became a teenage mother. Since then, I have had to prepare for another journey of meeting that 14-year-old mother again. Oh, I tried to avoid it at first and danced around all sorts of ways of leaving her behind in this work but deep down I knew I had to go and get her. I wasn't sure where we were going or who was coming with us but we were on our way regardless.

I knew I had to write openly and honestly about mothering as a teenager to help the reader understand my experience and how it all began. Nonetheless, I believe it is also of equal importance to share my

experience of mothering beyond those circumstances and therefore, I have endeavoured to write about my mothering experiences across time as they unfolded. It is impossible to say where or how this story ends, because my experience of mothering continues but I do want to share some of my mothering now as this story draws to a close. My doubts and worry as a mother continue and it seems that each day that passes brings something new requiring my attention. Often immediately. I feel as though I am drowning when it all comes at once. Most of the time I initially return to my default mode of doubting if I am good enough. Then I recentre my thinking and know that I will find my way to face these mothering challenges that are best for me and my children. That is when I am able to hold fast to my instincts and what I know. Even if it does often involve resistance and some determination. I am more aware of this now than I ever was at 14 but then I had not been exposed to as many outside influences and opinions. When I look back it seems easier in some ways. I mean everywhere you go someone has something to offer on what they think about your choices. It might be good. It might be bad.

Maybe if I had made better choices. They see me cry sometimes or visibly worried about finances, deadlines or concern for one of their siblings. It seems for weeks, no months, that I have been saying, 'I have to get this writing done'. I hope when I finish this they will be able to understand why I felt compelled to do it and that they will have something as adults that may help shape their understanding of mothers and mothering.

My authenticity feels more and more necessary as time passes though and I think some of this comes from

the bravery I witnessed from the mothers who shared their stories with me. It has made me feel I need to be authentic on behalf of the mothers who feel they can't. Yes, we can have a bad day. Yes, we did feed our children a takeaway. No, I don't have the energy to wash the clothes and try and dry them on a radiator yet again because it has been raining all week. I can't be bothered. I want to do something for me. Have a bath. Read a book. Phone my friend.

I explain these scenarios to the readers of this work in order to strengthen the points and position I take and to reiterate that mothers each face their own set of individual circumstances that determine how they choose to mother. Judging ourselves and others serves only to punish us as mothers. I have experienced what occurs when mothers do meet with each other and it can be brilliant if it is established in a genuine way. They support each other and I experienced such support as a teenage mother. I also heard this when I met with the mothers who participated in this research and heard them describe the way they felt when they could share their day to day lives of mothering with other mothers who needed to do the same. When mothers refuse to wear 'the mask' and when they come together, this is where they find the support they need. This is the space where they can say, I am struggling. I am scared or I don't know how to do this. I need help. This seems to continue throughout our lives as mothers depending on the circumstances, we find ourselves in. So, uniting with other mothers who are truly authentic might help you through. We need each other.

My shoulders and neck are so sore with tension. I am sitting in front of my laptop day after day, night after night, trying to will myself to finish this

thesis. To ignore the feelings of doubt and the imaginary force still trying to convince me this cannot be done. The letters I type don't appear to accumulate quick enough and turn into words or if they do, they feel wrong and I have to keep deleting them. Constantly going backwards and forwards. A bit like being a mother. I still keep hearing those silent whispers that maybe I shouldn't finish it. That maybe I can't finish because I am just a teenage mother but I refuse to believe this anymore. For so long, I believed I needed to prove my worth to my mother and by studying for a degree followed by a PhD I would finally feel I was worthy. As time has gone on, I have been able to acknowledge to myself and reflect on my story from where it began at age 14 and I have learned this was a misguided belief. It was NEVER anyone else I needed or wanted to prove anything to. It was myself!

I was recently sent a photograph of my former 13-year-old self from a friend in the USA. He was clearing his parent's house after one of them passed away and found the picture. I was truly taken aback when I saw it because this was a person I had long forgotten existed. At first, I looked at the picture and thought, who is that girl? Was I ever her? I think I may have erased that carefree teenage girl who existed before I suddenly became a mum at 14. It was as though I was meeting myself for the first time in many years. The person I once was. I reflected on her (the girl in the photo) for a few days and thought about the way things so quickly changed for me. I felt pleased that I had seen her again and was able to acknowledge that I had once been a girl enjoying a typical teenage life. I have carried such guilt for so long based on the belief that I had done something wrong and I perhaps deserved

something awful to happen to me. Finding my girl self who was so long forgotten was affecting as my writing is coming to its final stages. Writing this now as a mother of eight is enormous for me.

It should never matter what other people think but I often feel frustrated when I hear some of the stories from mothers I meet. It frustrates me. I am able to see from a different view as I am perceived as being on the other side. My speech and language, my appearance and my status all ensure now that teachers, head teachers, health visitors and doctors all address me in a way *they* feel I deserve to be addressed. Do I? What makes me so different from the mum at the school who might be driven by her lack of comprehension of the words they are using or the fear of being judged by the professionals or more damning, from other mothers. It frustrates me that mothers are bound up and labelled in both positive and negative ways before we even know who they really are. Assumptions are made and roles are assigned that can impact the trajectory of a mother's life and even destroy aspirations that were once held dear.

Before the pandemic I would sometimes stay late at work to miss the traffic home. I would look out of my office window on the fourth floor across London in disbelief wondering if it is really me and if I am meant to be there. I can see the Olympic Park and other famous landmarks and it feels surreal. I often enjoy being there in the evening seeing the city lights, my cork board on the wall with the newspaper article that has a photograph of me and my dad at my graduation. I realise without my experiences I would not be able to relate to my students and their feelings of isolation and marginalisation or mother my own children the way

I do, instilling in them a belief that they truly can be who they want to be not who I or the world defines them as. These are places I feel safest sometimes. Staying later allows me to have time to myself and occasionally I stay over if I have an early start the following day. I have grown to realise how important it is that we carve out small moments that are just for us. That I do not have to feel guilty because having these moments makes me a better mother when I do arrive home.

As time has moved on throughout the past months the pandemic we are facing is inciting all sorts of fears and anxieties in me. They appear huge but this is okay. I don't seem to have any moments for myself and some days I want to scream. I am screaming inside because a trip to the grocery shop or to get petrol is the only time, I can manage for myself. I am in a house full of people that I love and cherish but I have no idea how to soothe *their* anxieties, let alone my own and I wonder if things will ever return to normal. I keep thinking of the mothers I interviewed and wonder if each of them has found a way to maintain a support network and how the pandemic is affecting them and their families. I know we are all learning new ways to mother as a result of our current situations but it is hard for everyone. This is an incredible time to finish a thesis and not at all what I had envisaged. The last year, I have not been able to find the same space and solace to write and I see and hear everywhere mothers struggling now more than ever. I hope that soon the mothers can come together.

As I reach the close of this final part of *My Story*, I need to reiterate to myself and to the reader that I had tried to forget who I was in many ways. I

didn't want to forget becoming a mother but I wanted to forget that I was a teenage mother. At many points I believed this was necessary. This stemmed from the way I was perceived by others and led me to believing I could not be my authentic self. I have carried this with me for a long time. I reflect on the past three years of writing and research and it has dawned on me that I have not been carrying my story around for three years but in fact 33 years. It is time to set it free. The ending seems both poignant and beautiful and writing this has allowed me to finally face and accept what happened to me and honour who I am and who I have become because of it. I will no longer hide her and shut her away due to my fear and shame. Returning to collect you, 14-year-old Hayley, and to take you along with me on this journey as we met others along the way has been illuminating. I have discovered there was so much that I had forgotten about you and all the strengths you had. You were capable and brave and inspired. My 48-year-old self has reassured me that it was perfectly acceptable that I was scared. That it was perfectly acceptable for me not to know what to do and perfectly acceptable that I felt so confused and ashamed. I don't have to forget my 14-year-old self again because I know who she is now and she is a mother who just happened to be a teenager.

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APPENDIX A – FRAMEWORK OF ASSOCIATED WORDS

Authentic

Honest Legitimate Certain Valid Credible Creditable Original
Actual True Trustworthy Real Life Genuine Real

Agency

Direction Power Resistance Influence (over one's life) Agent
Question/ing Command/ing Challeng/ing

Authority

Intent Fixed Powerful Confidence Strong willed Determined
Unwavering Firm Strong minded Confident Decided

Autonomy

Independent Self-governed Self-ruling Liberty Freedom Self-
determination

APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Introductory Letter and Information

Programme of Study: MPhil/PhD

Title of Project: The Mothers' Story - Feminist Mothering from the 'Outlaws'

Principal Investigator: Hayley Edwardson

Project Supervisor: Dr. Ruth Rogers

Dear Participant,

My name is Hayley Edwardson and I am a research student from Canterbury Christ University as well as a lecturer in Public Health. I have previously conducted research with mothers in Thetford and East London. I am currently researching the experiences of mothering as I believe it is important that we understand and hear stories of mothering from different perspectives.

You are being invited to take part in this research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

What will I have to do if I take part?

- Taking part involves a one-off interview that will last between 1 - 2 hours. There will be the opportunity to meet again to ensure you are satisfied with the written interview. The interview will take place at a safe location of your choice. You will be asked to choose a significant photograph that is related to your mothering to bring along to the interview. The photograph may be of you at any stage in your life or of an object or place. The only restriction is photographs of others as it may be difficult to obtain their permission to use the picture. The photograph will be used as part of the interview discussion.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

- The opportunity to document and discuss your experiences of mothering while residing on the Abbey Estate, Thetford
- Sharing your experiences in order to offer insight to researchers, policy makers and other mothers

- Raise awareness that mothering is undertaken in many different circumstances and sharing the voices of mothers may impact development of future plans/support locally and nationally
- To participate in a unique piece of research *with* the researcher also as a participant

What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

- There is the possibility that you could provide information in the interview or a photograph alongside your interview, that you may change your mind about sharing. This is why you will be offered several opportunities to review your decision on any verbal communication or photographs you have shared. This will be at the beginning of the initial meeting, again at the end and also upon your review of the completed written interview. You will have the opportunity to remove the photograph you do not wish to share or any part of the interview should you change your mind.
- The researcher does not anticipate this experience to be distressing but acknowledges the possibility for you to feel heightened emotional sensitivity when reflecting on your experiences. In the event of this occurring, you will be offered initial support by the researcher and immediately directed to third sector organisations for additional support.

Distress or discomfort during interview

Talking about photographs is often enjoyed by many people but sometimes a person might be unprepared for what they remember and feel when they do this. Unexpected discomfort could arise. These reactions do not mean that researchers should not use photos with interviews. It means the researcher will be attentive to signs of discomfort in the interview. This might require the photo to be removed, a break in the interview, and if the subject matter is important to you we can return to it later (not necessarily with the photo).

- If possible please let someone close to you know where and when you are attending the meeting and a time frame you will be gone for your personal safety.

Do I have to take part?

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you do decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If you do not take part or withdraw from the study at a later date, it will not disadvantage you.

What will happen to the information?

Your participation in this study and all information collected will be kept strictly confidential. Where necessary, information collected will be coded so that you cannot be recognised from it. The results of this study will be reported as part of my postgraduate degree programme and may be further disseminated for scientific benefit. The results will be available to you in the form of a report.

Who should I contact for further information or if I have any problems/concerns?

Hayley Edwardson - h.edwardson102@canterbury.ac.uk 07909737073

Dr. Ruth Rogers ruth.rogers@canterbury.ac.uk

Using Photographs in Social Research:

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERING IN THETFORD

Looking for mothers living on the Abbey Estate to discuss their experience of mothering. An opportunity to share your photographs and experiences

- Would you like to share your experience of mothering in Thetford?
- Are you a mother aged 18 or over?
- Have you lived in Thetford for at least 1 year?
- Do you reside on the Abbey Estate, Thetford?

NO EXPERIENCE OR EQUIPMENT REQUIRED

Time slots available in June, July and August 2019

Contact:

Hayley Edwardson mobile – 0*** or h.edwardson102@canterbury.ac.uk**

APPENDIX D – SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPT

Jenny

J – I'm just so pleased that Thetford Academy refused to take my son when he went to high school and he ended up going special needs school at ***** cause he's now at ***** college which I never thought when he first started there that he would ever get to go to college because he couldn't even do half an hour at school. It got that bad. He was supposed to do English and maths and then we go and pick him up and do some work at home and um he couldn't even do half an hour at school. We'd get a phone call, 'Can you come and pick him up? He's kicked off' but he kicked off because he knew school were gonna say for him to go home cause they don't want him school.

H – So it was a blessing in disguise they said no?

J – A lot of people said to me you whatto appeal against it but I was like, 'No!' I've been waiting for this since he was seven/eight year old and I was so happy but they turned round and said, but that was a bit of a nightmare cause we were told to go to ***** *****. We met staff there and that they said they could meet his needs. And then County Hall turned around and said ***** ***** said, 'We're not sending him there cause it's too expensive and chose two other schools for him to go to which we found weren't suitable. So the parent advisor at ***** *****, I went to and said to her, 'You've got to help me write a letter. He's not going to them two other schools. He needs to go to ***** *****. But they were schools that were on industrial estates. One was at ***** and one was at *****. Bearing in mind that he was diagnosed with ADHD but we knew that he was more autistic than ADHD and he doesn't like noise. It easily distracts him when he's trying to learn. We got the one in *****. We got up to the classroom before we got challenged by anyone cause it was in a community church. Got no outdoor play areas and the students had a little triangular table and they could position it wherever they liked in this room that was their classroom, kitchen, playground and everything.

H – Was that operational as a special needs school?

J – I was like, Oh my god, he’s gonna be out that door down the road to the industrial estate. It wasn’t far to the main road. Cause he’d escaped from the ***** and we had to go and pick him up cause he wasn’t safe to be in school. And then the other one was ***** right near the airbase with the big planes taking off. No outdoor play areas for him. There was, obviously, he was a lot shorter than what he is now but it was an industrial unit that had been made into different classrooms and upstairs there was a great big gap down the metal stairs. He’s got Cerebral Palsy weakness to the left side and he was quite sort of unsteady. He almost fell down when we was with him. So that was a big no, no.

H – You fought against those two choices and what happened?

J – Yeah and go to **** but it wasn’t until like two weeks before he was due to start school before we found out where he was going.

H – All that unsettling worry of not knowing where he was going.

J – The poor parent support advisor at ***** , well, I kept going to her all the time, “who can help me with this? Who can help me with that?’ Cause my son, obviously, ADHD, epilepsy and Cerebral Palsy, there wasn’t a lot of organisations that could help because they could do the epilepsy and the Cerebral Palsy. So it’s like fighting to find someone. We didn’t have anyone in the end. It was when we went to **** and sat in the multi-agency meeting and I went to the social worker, ‘Right, I’m packing his stuff up. You can come and get him later cause I don’t want him no more’. Then his school were like, ‘Whoa’ and they started offering me more support. I was ready to actually that day cause I was fed up of him hitting me, kicking me, biting me, thumping me constantly, shouting at me everyday, pulling my hair and everything. I had just sort of had enough that day and then cause at the time my son was medicated for ADHD and the ADHD nurse asked me, ‘Do you feel safe in your own home and I went, ‘No, because he’s actually got me by the throat and actually pushed my throat to stop me breathing’.

H – To think your child might be able to over power you must be a very frightening thing.

J – He went outside with a great big kitchen knife and um, I’m on the phone to the police and the police said, ‘It is likely he is going to get tasered’ but his dad managed to get him in. The social workers response was, at least you know how to call the police and keep everyone safe.

H – We are talking about mothering and the professionals are telling you what you need to do. How do you mother with those instructions?

J – The group is the only place to get support. I have had doctors say to me, why is one child like that but the other one isn’t. That’s not on for a professional to say it’s my fault. I’ve had schools say, ‘It must be something you’ve done at home’. You are not gonna beat me and one day someone is gonna listen to me and this is gonna be sorted. You have to do it for your child cause it’s not your child’s fault that they are like they are. We had good neighbours then but unfortunately they moved out. We had another neighbour move in. Oh my god they were a absolute nightmare. They would shout. They would argue. They would fight. They’d be rugby tackling in the garden and they turned round and called the police on me cause my son kicks off. He was really kicking off and I was like, ‘Don’t you dare hit me’. I was like, ‘I want to get downstairs. I want to get away from you’. They obviously thought it was my husband. I had six police officers come marching in the house but then they were no better than we were.

H – Were there any positive aspects to where you lived? Was there any sense of community?

J – I had the odd one or two that would look down their nose. We’d be one side of the pavement, cross over the road and by the time we got to the middle and, ‘Oh look at him, he’s at it again’ and then you’d get one parent who would say something not nasty but it would shut that parent up. So quite often I would have him under my arm. I would have my daughter but yeah. Where ever you are you are always gonna get one person, two people that are gonna judge you. You’re gonna get others that will stick you know up for you and say, I had my son kick off over the shop on the Abbey Estate and I had to take him outside and one mum turned round and was like, ‘Oh god, he’s off again’ and this other man turned round and said, ‘She’s struggling, she’s trying her best for her child. Do not judge her when she’s doing right by her child’.

Lori

L - Yep, I have people, cause I work in the town, who just constantly moan about it. It's just like really. Cause actually, I like living here and if its that bad, "Get out". I also think its down to education systems as well, there is (pause) no, because you come from Thetford especially when you're at the high school, "Well, you're not gonna make anything of yourself so we won't bother".

My daughter's 13 now. She went to *****'s and in year 6 the SENCO, who is also deputy head, said, (bear in mind), she's got special needs. "We will put her in for her SATS We don't expect her to pass them but we will put them in because it will be good practice".

She came out in the top 5% of her year.

She's aspiring to go to university and to do Physics and I'm *not* stopping that aspiration but from the school and the SENCO to say, "you're never going to make it" that's all she's heard. Because she is special needs and they, she couldn't learn the way they wanted to teach her.

She wasn't going to aspire to be anything and that's from a school and a SENCO and you just think.....well, no wonder the kids on the Abbey are running riot and not aspiring to do anything if that's what they're hearing from their teachers. And I've had conversations with S***** about the fact that I don't feel that maybe she will make university but I'm not bursting that bubble for her. If that's where she's aiming for it means she's working harder and she might get there. She might surprise all of us and get there. But why not, if she's got aspirations to get there I'm gonna make sure that that's where she's aiming for.

I lived in my brother's shadow growing up. I could never, even now, my dad is always going on about what my brother does and everything but I've got a degree. He hasn't but ya know my dad doesn't seem to realise that. So for me it was really important to encourage my daughter.

I had C***** in the middle of doing my degree and I have done a Diploma in Counselling too. It took me six years to do my degree but I graduated ten years ago this weekend just gone. And I did my degree while going through domestic violence. Yeah.....yeah, having a mental break down and being sectioned.

How did I do it? I wasn't allowing the schoolsThere *were* people in the school that saw C*****'s potential but the SENCO didn't and she wanted C***** to sit in a classroom and learn like that and that's not how C***** learns and because she's ADHD with Autistic and Aspergic traits

they wouldn't even allow her to have things in class that she could fiddle with but she pays attention even if she's messing around and um, constantly battling with the school going,

"My child is not stupid. Please stop saying it because that's what she's hearing. But at home going, do you know what, "ignore them", you know, whatever they say you can do what you wanna do.

Ya know and seeing and having for C***** having people on telly, she loves Big Bang. Knowing that Sheldon is autistic. Knowing that he's got almost the same issues as her and seeing where he's gone has been a real plus for her.

Yeah, but no, doing a lot of research on people who done things in their life that have got the same issues as my daughter and going look, "Albert Einstein had ADHD look what he did. You could do that too".

While the school are constantly going, "well she's not learning anything. This is impossible. Can't deal with her". It doesn't even come down to just those that don't fit. Kayleigh went through the Academy and they missed the fact that she's dyslexic. She's deaf. Wears hearing aids and the school were given things to help her. They refused to do it. They refused. The teacher would be at the board but they wouldn't write and then face and talk. She can't hear and yet she came through and is in her fourth year of college. Still not getting all the help she needs because you know, having failed her maths and English four times, um but she's got where she wanted to go and that's no thanks to the Academy that's down to her strength.

H - Can you mother the way you want to?

But yeah constantly challenged and criticised over my parenting. Stuck in the middle. No. You can't. Cos your constantly under criticism for everythingthat you do and my children are all different. I have four children. Three of them have ADHD diagnoses. Um and they're all different. Um, but no, you can't because I mean I've had a lot social services involvement because my 17 year old was *extremely* violent. He'd seen a lot because I came out of a violent relationship after 13 years. He'd seen a lot. Um, he would pull knives and stuff and there was no help. Um at all. I mean it got to one point where I text my social worker going, "I really need some help." I wasn't denying that I needed help. I was like, "I really need help" um "one of us is gonna kill the other" and I didn't hear from her until January and I text her in October. Um yeah. But yeah constantly challenged. Oh, constantly criticised over my parenting. Constantly criticised for not calling the police. Then criticised for calling the police. I'm like stuck in the middle.

Um I don't now but I have because it's that constant threat, "you can't discipline me cause I can call phone Childline or the police".