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# The making of modern motherhoods: Storying an emergent identity

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## **The Making of Modern Motherhoods: storying an emergent identity**

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(ed.) Margaret Wetherell

### **Introduction**

The increasing participation of women in further and higher education and the labour force since the Second World War has transformed the shape and meaning of women's biographies reflected in a trend towards later motherhood (Lewis 1992). Yet stagnation in social mobility and widening inequality has also heightened differences between women, reflected in differential patterns of family formation depending on educational and employment status (Crompton 2006). The transition to motherhood is not only an important site of identity change for women but also an arena where socio-economic differences between women are defined and compounded through the creation of distinct cultures of child-rearing (Byrne 2006, Tyler 2008, Clarke 2004).

The Making of Modern Motherhoods research project funded under the Identities and Social Action programme(1), builds on existing qualitative investigations of the process of becoming a mother (Bailey 1999, Miller 2006), and negotiations of changing opportunities and circumstances over generations (Brannen et al. 2004, Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 1994, 2000). Bringing together a longitudinal and intergenerational research design with an analysis of popular culture, the study explores how contemporary motherhood is both a site of solidarity and division between women. Building upon previous work on the transition to adulthood (Henderson et al. 2007), we explore how the project of motherhood can be understood as an expression of social location - arrival and departure points within journeys of social mobility. This is an empirical project with the potential to speak back to dominant late modern theories which suggest a whole scale shift from biographies shaped by tradition to those shaped by choice (Beck 1992). By focusing on the transition to first time motherhood, we are able to contextualize and compare accounts of pregnancy and birth within and between generations. Our approach captures the interplay of historical, generational and biographical processes, connecting the subjective intensity of motherhood with the remaking of inequality and privilege (Smart 2007).

In this chapter we explore the ways in which the emergent identity of 'mother' takes shape for women in our study. We summarise and comment upon the main features of this identity shift in ways that make new motherhood intelligible to the self and to others. We begin by outlining a theoretical framework for locating these accounts before exploring the formal components of conception narratives. Our argument draws on an analysis of the full sample of 62, but is made through two contrasting case studies. These examples map the situated identity work that marks the opening gambit of the project of motherhood. They show how personal and popular narratives come together in concrete settings and moments in such a way that ensures that what it means to become an adult and live a good life continues to privilege middle class experience.

### **Motherhood and recognition**

Metaphors of communication are central to the ways in which theorists have attempted to capture the process of identity formation, and the relationship between the individual and the social. In recent work on the ways in which the performance of particular gender identities relate to broader configurations of class and gender, Judith Butler (2004) explores the 'social intelligibility of an action' (p.41) that allows for 'certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable ... imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social' (p.42). Identities, practices and performances that lie outside of the norm are unrecognized, illegible and as such unliveable, yet there is always potential for recognition, and in lying outside the norm such identities maintain a (troubling) relationship with the norm. Norms may not be obvious, but are most noticeable in what Butler calls an implicit *normalizing principle*, 'difficult to read, discernable most clearly and dramatically in the effects they produce' (p.41).

Approaching identity as a communicative practice finds points of resonance with Volosinov's (1973 [1929]) concept of 'speech acts' in his study of language as a struggle for meaning embedded in the social world. For Volosinov, all speech acts are addressed to another's word or to another listener; even in the absence of another person, a speaker will conjure up the presence of an imaginary listener. In an evocative and much quoted passage Volosinov conjures up the reciprocal relationship between speaker, listener and their social world:

Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other'. I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown down between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee (Volosinov 1973, p.86).

Arguing that all forms of communication and social experience are dependent on social context, Volosinov identifies two poles; the 'I-experience', which tends towards extermination as it does not receive feedback from the social milieu, and the 'we-experience' which grows with consciousness and positive social orientation. From this perspective, self confidence, for example, can be viewed as an ideological form of the 'we-experience', deriving from positive and affirming social relations rather than individual strength and personality.

Echoing these themes of the storied and legible life Plummer (1995) suggests that personal narratives remain an inherently conservative form, speaking to the past rather than the future. It is hard to tell new stories, which can only emerge in the confluence of developing identities and available resources that facilitate both the story telling and its reception. The transition from private story to the generation of a public problem involves struggle and recognition of subjecthood, and the privilege to narrate oneself (rather than to be narrated by others) reflects wider dimensions of social, cultural and economic status (Adkins 2003, Skeggs 2004).

### **Conception stories: remembering and forgetting**

Motherhood is one thing and many. The subjective experience of pregnancy and birth are dependent on the personal and economic circumstances of expectant mothers, their positions within families and the intergenerational legacies that come into play as maternal subjectivities are formed. The social circumstances that structured women's options as well as the cultural resources that they draw on in order to imagine motherhood can be understood as part of a common culture (Willis et al. 1990) that women put to different use. Yet this common culture is also structured in such a way that affirms and recognizes particular experiences which do not resonate with popular cultural resources or policy discourses and must be made sense of in more private, local and disjointed terms. In Judith Butler's terms, some women's experiences may be less 'intelligible' within the wider culture. If we look at the resources offered within families themselves, we can see how intelligibility may be secured in other less public ways, as well as how such identifications may be blocked or closed down, making individuals more vulnerable to the disciplinary effects of popular and public discourse.

Our starting point for exploring the relationship between the situations of first time mothers and the common culture of motherhood were the stories that expectant first time mothers told us about their pregnancies. Interviews were designed to elicit narratives using open questions such as 'Can you tell me the story of your life until now?' and 'Can you tell me the story of your pregnancy/ how you found out that you were pregnant?' Discussing her longitudinal study of the transition to motherhood, Miller (2005) describes accounts produced in the antenatal period as 'tentatively constructed' (73) 'anticipatory narratives' (70), which are 'all about presenting an acceptable, culturally recognisable narrative of preparing appropriately and reasonably for motherhood' (88). We anticipated that women's accounts of their pregnancy might take the form of discreet narratives within the interview, defined in terms of having a beginning middle and end, and by the sense that they had been forged and told outside the interview encounter. Our analysis confirmed our initial hunch that this aspect of the pregnancy is already 'storied' prior to the interview and that these stories are an important source for understanding the project that motherhood represents to individual women. We approach these stories as a record of and a response to the 'situation' that pregnancy poses for the woman concerned. The characteristic elements of conception narratives followed an identifiable pattern: knowing you are pregnant/ finding out; identifying/remembering the moment of conception (including who the father is); telling others: the father, own mother, siblings, peers; public/ private/ exposure. Remembering and forgetting are explicit tools through which a narrative is forged, setting out the parameters of the project of motherhood and the characters included in the endeavour.

Memory (and its corollary forgetting) are integral to our research. We invited grandmothers to 'remember' their first pregnancy and birth. We found that for both expectant mothers and grandmothers, late pregnancy and early motherhood are suffused with powerful evocations of the embodied practices of mothering and being mothered. The preservation and passing on of special objects (books, baby clothes, health records, toys, cots, blankets, talismans to ensure safety) can be seen as a memorialising and materialising of these intergenerational connections. Yet as Annette Kuhn (2002) observes when considering the family photograph album, the staging of memory through such material practices always also involves an editing

out. The partial, constructed and staged character of memory has become an accepted part of historical scholarship: what is remembered is not simply understood as a record of the past but rather a representation of the past in the present that must be accounted for, shedding light on the identities, anxieties and situations of those involved. Riceour (2004) talks in terms of a 'reciprocal relationship between remembering and forgetting' which shapes both the perception of historical experience and the production of historical narrative. But can this approach help us in making sense of small scale, intimate yet nevertheless historical narratives: the stories that women tell about becoming pregnant.

In the following sections we present two examples, both strong narratives involving an explicit staging of memory. The first is a story told by a Jade, a 17 year old woman, and is an ensemble piece involving many characters and detailed yet obscure plot lines. Here remembering and forgetting are staged to achieve ambiguity in terms of agency, causality and outcome. The second example is told by 33 year old Deborah, whose pregnancy is planned and desired yet also involves complex negotiations with her partner and friends. Although her story appears at first sight to be polished and contained we can also see the intensive work that her narrative is doing for her as she negotiates boundaries between the private intimacy of the couple and the public declaration of pregnancy. Although we sought stories of conception we found within them stories of telling/revelation/and exposure. The staging of remembering and forgetting that is so central to conception narratives is integrally related to the exposure of the self to others that pregnancy involves.

### **Conception as survival:**

We met Jade, at an educational project for young mothers. She was four months pregnant and had been evicted from her mother's house following conflict arising from her pregnancy. As her account indicates, the project of becoming a mother is contoured differently depending on resources and circumstances. Jade provides a detailed account, in which agency and the sequence of events are dissected and confirmed to moral effect. It is important to know who did what, to whom and when. Yet Jade has relatively little economic, social or interpersonal power and struggles to be heard and believed by others. She is faced with the problem of transgressing norms, thus becoming an object of gossip and rumour within her wider peer group. Her conception story has to do some very particular work, to establish her integrity as the narrator of her own life, in the face of both popular discourses that might pathologise her as 'too young' but more immediately, local discourses within which her 'story' becomes subject to the normalizing effects of local value systems.

Jade's story was not 'typical' of the accounts that we gathered from the younger mothers, which were in general rather taciturn and cautious. She tells her story in a flood of words, episodes of uninterrupted narrative. The interviewer (Lucy Hadfield, herself a young woman) provided an audience; Jade addressed her as a supportive 'bridge' for the reception of the tale. The story of conception is marked by an intense and continuous flow of narrative detail. This part of the interview is framed by two episodes: first, an account of her mother's violent reaction to her pregnancy and her resulting homelessness, and second, a romantic description of how she met the baby's father and developed a sexual relationship. She then embarks on the following complex account, explaining how he disappeared for 3 months after she had told him

that she was pregnant, and how her mother had intervened to inform his family. Unusually, Jade's conception story begins with 'telling others' rather than the story of conception:

when I first told him I was pregnant he wasn't there for me for 3 months and I was very very upset and I was like, I wanted him there and stuff, but because we wasn't together it was just a casual thing er...he was too interested in his life and he didn't want anybody to know. And one night I went round to my mums house, me and my mum spoke for quite a few hours which was quite shocking. And er...she asked me for his house number so I gave my mum his house number and she spoke to his step mum and told his step mum because he hadn't told his parents, and an hour after she spoke to his step mum, his dad rang, and his dad said I'll get Darren to ring so...an hour after that he rang and then he started coming in to me and the baby's life basically for 3 months, well 6 weeks. And then he told me he was going in to the army, went 3 days after my birthday, I didn't know he was going he just disappeared, and I rang up his dad and his dad told me he's gone in to the army, and I've not, I've only just recently got hold of him and that was two weeks ago. [...] his dad was lying for him saying he was in the army... and then two weeks ago I thought oh I'll try and ring him because he'd always, his phone was always on, but he doesn't answer the phone to me. So I tried ringing him and he answered to me and he goes ring me back in 15 minutes, so I left it 20, 25 minutes and ring him back and we had a good conversation, because I was actually falling in love with him, and I was like really upset how he was treating me, and I told him on the phone that I'm not in love with him anymore, I just really care for him and I don't want anything to happen, and er...he'll try turning it around and say he could change that and I turned round and said what do you mean you can change that? He says I can change you falling back in love with me. [...] Because he knows how to work my mind and he knows what changes me cos if he was to turn up he would know, that the way I was with him before, because that's what use to happen, we never use to see each other for months on end and then I'd meet up with him and I'm like I'm glad he's here and he knows that, that's why. .. But he's just he's too interested in his personal life ... I don't count anymore, I don't rely on him anymore, so I don't need him now. I just want the baby to know he's got a dad, because he didn't grow up with a dad, from 5 years old he didn't grow up with a dad so if he wants to be the same with his child then let him. But rumours were going around that it wasn't his kid, it wasn't his baby.

This is an incredibly dense passage of speech, including a great deal of crucial and conflicting information. Although it does not have narrative slickness, it does manage to convey all the key characters involved (herself, Darren, her mum and his dad). The problems (her lack of influence, his own ambivalent feelings about fatherhood), and the context (a situation devoid of privacy in which communication is difficult and mediated by rumour). Jade's narrative communicates a very personal story: the patterning of an intense but intermittent relationship and the chaos of conception as she forges an account that speaks to an imaginary audience of parents and peers likely to comment on her pregnancy and speculate on matters of paternity. In keeping with many other women in our study, men are central to the shaping of a maternal identity, even when marginal or absent. For Jade, Darren is the absent centre; his role as the

baby's father counts but cannot be counted upon. The final comment, that Darren might believe that the child was not his provides the 'complication' on which the narrative turns. It is at this point that remembering becomes important and Jade's account turns to a reconstruction of the past.

I fell pregnant on the 17<sup>th</sup> April, and I slept with someone two months previous. And she [friend] thought she worked out the dates and she thought I was pregnant with the other persons baby. And I was like no, because I fell pregnant on this time and I know I fell pregnant on this time because I had a period whatever, and I thought I could trust her and I told her and then she went back and told him that I'd slept with someone a month before I slept with, so basically I slept with someone in March, so it looked like it was the person's I slept with in March and not his, but I didn't sleep with no one in March if you know what I mean, so she made it out as if, I didn't know who the baby's dad was. So I asked him and he said no he's not heard anything about it whatever, but he turned round and said if the baby isn't mine, keep it quiet. And that was ticking over in my head, and I put the phone down to him and it was ticking over in my head what does he mean by that, does...if the baby isn't his, does he still want anything to do with it, do you know what I mean? And it was like, confusing so I rang him back a couple of days later, and I asked him and he just said if the baby isn't mine to keep it quiet. But I said the baby is yours.

It is not until this point that Jade tells the story of finding out that she was pregnant. The story that emerges suggests that from the very beginning the experience was 'public', 'shared' and contested. As with many other conception stories her account begins with mistaken embodied symptoms.

I'm just being sick cos I've still got a hangover and it comes up positive and I'm crying and I'm really upset cos I'm saying I don't know what my mum's going to be like, and er...I got my mate to come in, so the lady went and got my mate, and my mate's cuddling me and I'm crying more because she was cuddling me and comforting me. And I was just worried about what my mum would say. And then the lady at the clinic advised me to get rid of the baby. And I was really angry because I was shocked, just found out, worried, and she was advising me to get rid of the baby.

R What did she say then?

A Well me and my mate were sitting there and she turned round and said, if you're so worried about your mum, or my parents cos I still weren't speaking to my dad, if you're so worried about what your parents are going to say I really do recommend, advise you to have an abortion and she goes come back in a week and let me know and then we'll sort it out from there. .. I need a fag, so I had a fag and I was like how am I going to tell him? How'm I going to tell the baby's dad? And I was thinking it over and over in my head, how'm I going to tell him? And I went to my best mate how'm I going to tell him I don't know what to say? And she was like I'll tell him, I was like alright then, I was shaking and I was crying, and all upset. .. I text him saying, just casually hi what are you up to? We need to talk. And he didn't text me back... So we rang from the pay phone and she turned round and said er...Jade's just been to

the clinic and he went yeah, she goes she's just found out she's pregnant and he goes you're joking...he thought she was lying and I turned round, I was angry and I was really mad, I says does he think I'm lying? And she goes yeah, so I said give me the phone, so I took the phone and he goes stop crying, I says I'm upset, I just found out I'm pregnant. And I said we need to meet up and he says alright I'll meet up on Saturday, 3 months later he finally met up with me and that's what's shocking because I was like, he's going to be a dad and he left it 3 months to meet up with me and I was always on his back saying come and meet me and stuff. Yeah...I'll never forget the day I found out.

This final episode in Jade's conception story can be seen as a condensation of what comes before. The setting and the conversation are described graphically, almost cinematically. As readers we can also imagine being there, or at least watching. The difficult decision of whether or not to keep the baby is dispersed and Jade's ambivalence expressed in several ways: shocked by the counsellor's advice, having the fag, insisting on telling immediately yet passing responsibility to her friend. In observing that she would 'never forget the day' that she found out, Jade is also positioning this story as emblematic of the way in which she is imagining her project of becoming a mother: with herself as an ambivalent yet active agent within a wider dramatic landscape, with a present yet absent father and grandmother. Almost by default, the counsellor plays a critical yet 'off stage' role. In voicing the possibility of a termination it becomes possible for Jade to turn away and engage in the drama that is the pregnancy.

### **Conception as inevitable**

The second conception story is told by Deborah a woman who is well resourced, secure and unlike Jade, the conception described was planned. Nevertheless the core components of the narrative: finding out, 'knowing', remembering and telling still structure the account. Deborah was nine months pregnant with her first child when we met her. Until that point she had been working full time as an information worker in a large public sector organisation. The pregnancy she describes was a shared project between herself and her partner. She too was interviewed by Lucy Hadfield who described her as being friendly and co-operative interviewee, yet noting there were issues concerning the couple relationship that are 'too complex to be articulated in interview'. Deborah's conception story begins with the relationship:

Bit disorganised really because we have been together eleven year, well seven years before we got married erm and we were engaged for about six years something like that, just not very, we didn't really have any big plans or anything like that about where we wanted to be or whatever but I think we always knew that we wanted to be together, we wanted to have a family and then I guess a couple of years ago, about a year ago probably, we said, "right are we going to do this baby thing?". And so, I came off the pill and erm we said "Right in the next two years we will see what happens and if it is meant to happen it is meant to happen and if it doesn't happen it won't". So we were sort of using other forms of birth control whilst we were trying to come to terms with the fact that if we do it now we might have a baby in nine months time and erm ended up getting really drunk one night and forgetting! (hearty laugh) That was really the first time that I could have got pregnant because I had been secretly doing the maths and counting

the days so yes in September within about two weeks of trying properly it was just the first time (laughs) really funny!! ... I didn't find out that I was pregnant for about six weeks and it was a really big shock. And then I thought oh ok well it is meant to be then, that's fair enough. My mum had had problems conceiving my sister and she said to me, "Well if you are going to do it you better get on with it because if you take as long as I did to have your sister, if you have the same kind of problems..", erm I think she had a blocked fallopian tube or something like that so there is a six year age gap between me and my sister erm, "You better get on with it". So we did and it took six weeks instead of six years! (laughs) But there you go! That's just one of those things.

Deborah's description of herself and her husband as 'disorganised' appears ironic, in that the pregnancy is planned and appropriately synchronised within the norms (i.e. after marriage, in stable emotional and financial circumstances). Yet as the narrative unfolds the 'disorganisation' emerges in the form of uncertain communication between the two. The initial narrative episode articulates a simple story that allows both for them to be planners (coming off the pill) and to be more romantically caught by fate (forgetting one drunken night). Yet in mentioning her 'secret calculations' and her mothers warnings about infertility we get a sense of a more anxious and individual account beneath the surface. On Lucy's prompting Deborah airs some of these feelings in a much less articulate manner.

Lucy: So you came off the pill but you still kind of backed it up a bit?

Deborah: Yeah, yeah (coy). I mean my husband was not... I mean did I make him aware that I was doing the counting? I mean, (laughs nervously) I was thinking 'Do we need to use a condom now or do we not?' And then sometimes I would go, "Yeah I think it is alright but then sometimes I would go "I am not quite ready yet, not quite ready." So we had some kind of... it was kind of.. I don't know really. I think, well I am just trying to remember, we didn't really ask questions about are we really going to do this now it was just kind of we will see what happens but I knew in the back of my mind when wasn't a ,when it was like days 14- 17 I was thinking, 'Well, maybe not.' Not that anything really happened between days 14- 17 anyway because we were both too knackered (both laugh).

She then goes on immediately to narrate the experience of discovering that she was pregnant. Despite all the secret calculations, this is constructed as a story of shock, and returns to a more assured and rehearsed story telling style.

Lucy: So you say you felt really shocked when you -

Deborah: Yes I was really, really shocked. Erm I think I was shocked because I had been out on several drunken weekends (laughs) in the first sort of five weeks which was erm and actually we were away for a weekend with friends and one of my friends, she had her baby in December so it was last October, that's right. She said to me, "Are you sure you are not pregnant you have been to the loo about six times in the last hour." She said, "I have got a pregnancy test upstairs go and do it." And I said "No I am not doing it, I am not doing it. I feel fine!". Oh yes I am about a week late but I think my period is coming you know and I've got the cramps and whatever and she said, "You should probably do a test you know. I had that when it was like an implantation so you should probably do a test". So I

thought well you know I better do one and I did it and I didn't tell my husband I was doing it and I came downstairs into the kitchen and I just handed him the rest of the bottle of wine and showed him the test. And we were both standing there in the kitchen going, "Oh my god, oh my god, oh blimey, oh my god!". I don't know I felt kind of caught out. I mean I am thirty three (laughs) and I felt like how I would imagine a seventeen year old would feel cos it had just been the first time and I hadn't thought it would happen. But it did and it was like, blimey and I have got to do something about this. So I did, I made an appointment with the doctor and erm we confirmed it and did all the dates and it was just a question of keeping it all quiet then from work because I think I was about six weeks something like that.'

In contrast to the earlier 'we' ness of her account of planning to get pregnant, Deborah's story of finding out is characterised much more by a sense of herself in relation to her peer group. She talks of friends having babies and encouraging her to think that she might be pregnant. Again alcohol features prominently: and a drunken weekend with the girls is juxtaposed with the drunken night when they had not used contraception. It is fascinating that Deborah describes herself as feeling like a 17 year old when she realises that she is in fact pregnant: citing the well worn cliches of feeling 'caught out' and it 'not happening the first time'. This both gives us insight into the extent to which women are aware of and fluent in a wide range of narratives of motherhood, but also might help us see how exposed Deborah feels by the experience of becoming pregnant. It is instructive then to see how Deborah's narrative turns, and relates the experience of pregnancy back into the couple and the private. The care that Deborah and her partner take in regulating who is told, when, and in what order, suggests that 'telling' involves important work in the process of constructing a new identity and relationships. Perhaps the most important part of this is to forge the pregnancy as shared enterprise for the couple. Lucy asks Deborah why she waited to tell everyone.

Deborah: Well just the twelve week thing really. I wanted to leave it just to be safe erm cos ... I mean a few of them have had miscarriages and whatever and I just thought I knew that for my parents it was their first grandchild. For my husband's parents it is less of an issue because it will be their third erm and I thought when I start on the whole I am pregnant thing I am going to get the phone calls like every second day like, "Are you all right? Are you okay? Are you feeling sick?" And I thought, 'I think I will just keep this special time just for me and Partner to tell everyone'. We would sort of grin at each other and make excuses about why we are not eating pate and whatever (laughs). Which was quite hard actually.

The final episode in Deborah's conception story is the stage at which she is ready to 'go public' to the group of girlfriends who form the audience for her account, all now mothers, egging her along, waiting impatiently. Here she returns to the opening motif of organisation / disorganisation

I think I did a mass e-mail to everyone actually saying, "We finally got ourselves organised and Junior it is on it's way". And the particular friends, the weekend I think it happened the friends that were here, we were having a girly weekend and I sent my husband to bed and we were [doing here] watching Bridget Jones and drinking several bottles of Chardonnay - it was dreadful and I had to e-mail them

and say “You know that weekend when you were here and I got really, really drunk well I think it may have been then. That could be too much information for you but (laughs).

This final sentence serves to tie all of Deborah’s key themes and characters together, and implicate them in the moment of conception. It is a moment of deliberate and controlled exposure of the self to others, the intimate to the public and the sexual to the social. If conception is a moment in which individual agency is relinquished (and marked as such by alcohol) then the re-staging of this memory, both in the email, and its subsequent re-telling can be understood as an articulation of a new identity settlement, the beginning of the project that is motherhood.

### **The identity work of new motherhood**

Remembering and forgetting are part of the substance of these tales, pointing to the importance of securing paternity, and a normative sequence of respectable reproduction within the western late modern culture that these women share. Forgetting also plays an important role in the way that women narrate the profound change in their situation. Alcoholic confusion, fatalism, incompetence and misrecognition are all performed in these stories enabling the self and the intimate to be opened to the view of others. ‘Telling’ can be a way of seeking to control this exposure and to regain control. Selective remembering is the process through which a narrative is forged. Yet what is not told can still be present in its effects, a lingering feeling left with the interviewer and the reader.

Conception stories are part of the identity work of new motherhood and give insights into the necessary features of the changing identity and the nature of the project. The way in which women narrate this situation has common elements: with recurrent motifs around ‘knowing’, ‘remembering/ forgetting’ and ‘telling’. Yet each also shows how women encounter motherhood in extraordinarily different circumstances. While it is productive to read these examples against each other, comparison should remain cautious. We are not seeking to identify ideal or typical narratives of early/late or planned/unplanned motherhood. Rather, we want to capture something of the paradoxical nature of motherhood that is both one and many things. The women in these examples are fluent in the popular narratives of motherhood. Both are aware of the need to construct an acceptable narrative that is recognized in the local culture of their lives and the wider cultural community to which they belong. Their accounts are highly moral tales, constructed heteroglossically in relation to broader narratives and normative expectations as well as personal fears and individual circumstances. They are aware of and position themselves in relation to the ‘shame’ of pregnancy and work to narrate themselves within the boundaries of normalizing principles. Irrespective of their situations, both women struggle to make motherhood intelligible and their narratives bear the marks of a search for audience and for others to witness, affirm and react to this change.

Understood in narrative terms, these are both extraordinarily rich and inventive accounts – harnessing and shaping meaning, attributing responsibility, inventing causality. Their comparison is productive, enhancing an appreciation of form as well as the ways in which context shapes the narrative challenge. Yet reading these

accounts together can also be uncomfortable, revealing a stark inequality of security and resource between the women. It is hard to hear these voices without also evoking a wider welfare discourse that places Jade's story safely beyond intelligibility and recognition. This does not mean that Jade does not claim recognition - her account is dominated by them, yet these claims have no purchase on public morality. Where Deborah's story employs the ironic comic form of Brigid Jones's diary, Jade's story can too easily be stripped of pathos by hearing it through the voice of Little Britain's Vicky Pollard – the increasingly acceptable popular portrayal of the 'undeserving' poor. A theoretical focus on intelligibility such as that argued in different ways by Butler and Plummer, encourages us to understand the cultural realm as a site of politics and potentially of social change. Yet a focus on norms and normalization can also impoverish our understanding of the social world. To call certain lives unintelligible or unliveable may well reveal the operation of normalising principles and the paradoxical contingency and continuity of privilege, yet it does not provide us with many tools for appreciating the forms of recognition and sustenance that are in always in play, however marginal and fragile.

**Note:**

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