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Citation

Hollway, Wendy (2016). Feminism, psychology and becoming a mother. *Feminism & Psychology*, 26(2) pp. 137–152.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/45679/>

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Feminism, psychology and becoming a mother

Abstract

The period of becoming a mother is a fundamental issue for feminism and a challenging one for psychology, involving a specific set of psychological processes and psychic changes that are hard to access through available language and discourses. How we understand, theorise and represent the perinatal period mothering reaches into questions of gender equality and gender difference, parenting and how feminist psychology has tended to treat bodies and the biological. The article draws on a piece of empirical research about becoming a mother for the first time. I ask how feminist psychology addresses the question of women's subjectivity that takes account of our reproductive capacities and the consequences of what is now a widespread use of the term 'parenting' in a way that fails to discriminate the age of the baby or child. The link between these two issues – the avoidance of the implications of women's reproductive bodies and the current dominance of a 'parenting' discourse - is that both parents, in the name of gender equality within this current view, have been shorn of their gender difference.

Introduction

My chosen topic is the period of becoming a mother because it is a fundamental issue for feminism and a challenging one for psychology. I focus on a period that usually emerges during pregnancy (although its roots lie in the early knowledge of what it is to be a girl not a boy), is at its most intense during the peri-natal period and gradually (never fully) blends into something else¹ (more settled? less intensely maternal?) over a period of years. I have defined my topic in this way because this period involves a specific set of psychological processes and psychic changes that are hard to access through available language and discourses. How we understand, theorise and represent early mothering reaches into questions of gender equality and gender difference, parenting and how feminist psychology has tended to treat bodies and the biological.

This article is based on a piece of empirical research about becoming a mother for the first time.² During the research I had to be prepared to consider the possibility that the experiences of women in our sample did not conveniently tally with dominant feminist and other progressive discourses concerning motherhood and gender equality. Before I move on to describe the research, let me try to exemplify the potentially troubling nature of this discrepancy through my response to a recent newspaper article describing policy changes on parental leave in the UK.

The Guardian newspaper (4/4/15), financial section, reported on new parental leave measures, introduced by the coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, based on the principle that 'parents who both work will have the right to take up to almost a year off after having a new baby or adopting a child'. Already the father could take up to six months, but this was after the child reached 20 weeks. (Few fathers take this leave.) Now, sharing parental leave between the parents can

¹ Denise Riley's exploration of the crystallisation of time after the death of her adult son illuminates movingly the complexity of the ongoing identity implications of becoming a mother. *Time lived without its flow*. 2012. London: Capsule Editions. See also Lisa Baraitser's discussion, 'Time and again: Repetition, maternity and the non-reproductive', *Studies in the Maternal*, 6(1).

² The research project was funded as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's "Identities and Social Action" programme, 2005-2008. The research team consisted of Ann Phoenix, Heather Elliott, Cathy Urwin, Yasmin Gunaratnam and myself. A subsequent ESRC Fellowship, 2008-2010, enabled me to pursue further data analysis and writing.

start two weeks after a baby's birth: 'mothers will continue to take the first two weeks, the compulsory part of maternity leave, and fathers will still be entitled to two weeks' paternity leave'. Reportedly, more employers are now on board: the Chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses said that the measure had the potential to enable more women to return to work sooner after childbirth. A woman Vice President of a large multinational waste management corporation said 'for too long our archaic parental leave laws have hampered career women's opportunity by not giving them the option to share leave with their husbands. It's about time we recognised women's careers are just as important as men's. This is an approach fit for the 21st century and something men and women will equally welcome'.

Here we have a concise statement of a basic principle of progressive politics, derived from feminism, about women's equal employment rights. To disagree would be unfeminist and I wish more fathers would – could – take time off work after babies are born. But I was troubled: women returning to work two weeks after birth! Career women may ostensibly have a 'choice', the kind often made because of outside pressures, such as employers wanting to disregard the inconvenient fact of a woman employee becoming a mother. Other women, such as those working on zero hours contracts with not a hint of maternity provision would also have little choice. In either case, given my psycho-social focus on identity, I am concerned here with the dominant discourse, here producing an image of an employee based on an autonomous (historically masculine) subject who prioritises work over all other aspects of life. I feel shocked at this new minimum of time after birth that a woman was deemed to need for becoming accustomed to her new baby. It seems like a further step - facilitated by medicalised perhaps prescheduled birthing, plus bottle feeding aided by drugs to suppress new mothers' lactation - in squeezing the creation of new life into an instrumental neoliberal paradigm where everything revolves around notionally non-gendered individuals as productive workers. But this figure of a woman, whether career-intent or simply intent on earning a basic livelihood, has a reproductive body. In her body, she has been co-creating life for nine months and feels responsible for the new dependent and vulnerable being. I am referring to birth mothers here because our sample was entirely birth mothers and more broadly because this remains by far the most common experience by which women become mothers. I discuss later the distinction between birth and social mothering, to the extent that it has implications for my focus on women's experiences in becoming mothers.

This focus raises my central question about how feminist psychology addresses the question of women's subjectivity that takes account of our reproductive capacities. Connectedly, I am troubled by the indiscriminate use of the term 'parenting' which facilitates the kind of policy taken as an exemplar above. For perhaps two decades now, 'parenting' has been increasingly treated as the correct usage in order to make no distinction between mothering and fathering. In practice it has facilitated an omission of considerations about the situation of infants (as opposed to the generic category 'children') whose care needs are the object of this discourse and the unique experiences of women who have been pregnant and give birth.

The link between these two issues – the avoidance of the implications of women's reproductive bodies and the current dominance of a 'parenting' discourse - is that both parents, in the name of gender equality within this current view, have been shorn of their gender difference. We might even need to interrogate that usage 'gender difference' because, by implying that gender is a social construction, it encourages us to bracket off the implications of reproductive biology (the earlier usage – sex difference – was cast aside precisely because of its essentialist, biological determinist connotations). I am suggesting that earlier feminist moves from

biological explanations to social constructionist and socialisation accounts have left us bereft of a psychology of gender that takes seriously women's reproductive, life-giving capacity³. How do we theorise women's changing identities as they become mothers in a way that goes beyond biology-society dualism and pays attention to the likely psychological issues at stake; the issues to which the above parental leave policy pays no attention? This is where the empirical research project comes in, which I shall now briefly describe⁴.

Researching the identity changes involved when women become mothers for the first time

By locating participants in East London, we wanted to situate mothers' experiences geographically and also to sample the ethnic and class diversity that would help us avoid falling into normative treatments of motherhood. In our sample of twenty first-time mothers, ranging from 17 to 35 in age, nine were of Bangladeshi heritage, seven were white (four English, two from continental Europe and one from South Africa), two African-Caribbean heritage and one West African. Their previous employment, partner, family and housing situations covered a wide range. The study followed the women from the last trimester of pregnancy to the baby's first birthday and sometimes beyond. Three interviews covered that period. Additionally, six of the twenty women agreed to be visited weekly by an observer for a year following the baby's birth.

Our research question was located in debates about identity that were high profile in the early 2000's in British social science, sufficiently so to be awarded programme status and substantial funding⁵. From my psycho-social perspective, identity theory has been a key place where social science is faced with the effects of an entrenched dualism between sociology and psychology. Social psychology – in principle the bridge discipline – has, in my view, been hampered by that same dualism such that social psychology itself tended to split into two approaches that didn't talk to each other; approaches that we might roughly call psychological social psychology and sociological social psychology⁶. Critical of the cognitivism and individualism of the former, many feminist psychologists, myself included, took the latter route. Consequently - to cut a long story short – a social constructionist approach, specifically a discursive emphasis, became dominant in feminist social psychology: the question of identity tended to be approached through the prism of discursive positioning⁷. The primary critique of this influential approach in feminist psychology was that it worked with a thin theorisation of subjectivity⁸. For example, questions of identity investment, desire or anxiety barely figured, a lack that hobbles the understanding of maternal identity change. Our research question – about the

³ It seems likely that this weakness has influenced the recent renaissance of social science and feminist literature on mothering, called "matricentric feminism" by Andrea O'Reilly, to refer to a 21st century turn to a mother-centred perspective (2010) 'Introduction: Maternal activism as matricentric feminism', in A. O'Reilly (ed) *The 21st Century Motherhood Movement*. Toronto: Demeter Press. 1-33.

⁴ Full detail of design, methodology and detailed examples of psycho-social data analysis can be found in Hollway (2015) *Knowing Mothers: Researching Maternal Identity Change*. London: Palgrave.

⁵ The "Identities and Social Action" programme was led by Margaret Wetherell, who edited its collected work in two volumes, both 2009, with Palgrave: *Identity in the 21st Century* and *Theorizing Identities and Social Action*.

⁶ See Hollway, W. (2007) 'Social Psychology: Past and present'. In Hollway, W., Lucey, H. and Phoenix, A., Eds. *Social Psychology Matters*. Open University Press.

⁷ In this and the subsequent claims, I have purposely not referenced examples. They are numerous and it would be invidious to select a few. I rely on readers recognizing the general accuracy of these claims about a history which I have been familiar with from the inside.

⁸ A copy of a chapter on this topic, Hollway (2011) 'Through discursive psychology to a psycho-social approach', can be found at Open Research Online: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/32610/>

experience of identity change for first time mothers - emerged from the wish to generate a more dynamic, more psycho-social (less binary) account of identity change ('becoming') that went beyond the conscious, surface, available-to-language aspects of identity. For this we developed a psychoanalytically informed epistemology and methods.

In feminist psychology, there has been a valuable methodological history – linked to the discursive approach through its reliance on language – of privileging participants' accounts and respecting participants' voices (often those subordinated in dominant discourses). Likewise, my own earlier research practice was based on interviews, which, as for many other feminist researchers, moved away from highly structured replicable formats and towards eliciting narratives structured by participants. In a previous research project with Tony Jefferson, I had become concerned with what participants were not saying, or could not say. This led to an interview method, the 'Free Association Narrative Interview'⁹, which paid attention to the inexplicit associations between ideas in participants' narratives, which could illuminate the emotional structure of those narratives. This succeeded partially in moving interview data beyond rationalised narrative coherence to reveal more conflictual and feeling-related meanings and investments.

Nonetheless, the Free Association Narrative Interview method depended primarily on what could be said, whereas in this new project we were using a theorisation of maternal becoming that suggested the need to tap, through our methods, the affective, relational, practical and embodied aspects of mothering. Our ontology suggested that the deeper identity changes involved in maternal becoming are – after babyhood – the most inaccessible to language. For this purpose, we used, alongside interviewing, a form of psychoanalytic observation originally developed to observe infants (only marginally re-orientated to observe mothers and families more broadly)¹⁰. The research focus on women's experiences when they become mothers for the first time was chosen partly as an extreme case of the more general principle that methods are required that can go beyond what can be expressed in language. In relation to this particular object of research it was important because becoming a mother entails two features that defy discourse. The first is the transgressive corporeality (the neither/both one/two character) of pregnancy that defies (masculine) notions of the 'I'¹¹ and, second, the fact of relating to a vulnerable being who communicates, but not through language¹² – a situation whose importance is magnified by a new mother's inordinate feelings of responsibility for the life she has created.

Outcomes

Did these approaches work and did they vindicate our theoretical propositions: did they provide nuanced, deep, complex, rich and recognising insights into becoming a mother? I think they did. The data left me with the overarching impression that becoming a mother involved considerable psychological upheaval, even under

⁹ Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2013) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*. 2nd edition. London: Sage.

¹⁰ Cathy Urwin, who led the observation side of the research, edited a special issue of the journal *Infant Observation* (2007, vol 10,3) describing our methodology and presenting case studies.

¹¹ 'The pregnant subject defies the logic of classic ontology (...) it cannot be contained within forms of being constrained by singularity (...) there is an impasse between the 'I' that writes/speaks and pregnant subjectivity which is the exact antithesis of that I's implied individuality' (Tyler, 2000, p.292), 'Reframing pregnant embodiment'. In S. Ahmed, J. Kirby, C. Lury, M. McNeill and B. Skeggs (eds). *Transformation: Thinking through Feminisms*. 288-302. London: Routledge.

¹² The term infant – from the Latin 'infans' - means unable to speak, and historically could include a baby as yet unborn.

favourable circumstances. Something profound was happening, difficult to understand for the participant mothers and the researchers. The question that drove me was to make that 'something' accessible, at least partially, in a way that existing discourses and methods failed to do¹³.

Although this headline finding about psychological upheaval may seem unsurprising, I think the profound upheaval of maternal becoming is ill-recognised and is compounded by mothers finding it hard to make sense of what they are going through. Julia Kristeva commented that we are the first civilization to lack a discourse on the meaning and complexity of motherhood¹⁴. To examine this idea further, before I return to discuss its implications for my starting questions in this article, I next explore a theme from some interviews before and soon after the births. I recount it as a story about my own discovery of something unanticipated and strange, something I did not initially have the discursive and conceptual resources to make sense of. I found these in Bracha Ettinger's matrixial theory.

Pre-natal becoming

Part of the research design was to talk to women in the last few months of their pregnancies, recognising that pregnant women are 'preparing' for the birth. More particularly we were informed by a psychoanalytic literature that explicitly talks about the way that pregnant women's fantasies and ideas about the future are part of her developing relationship with the baby-to-be and a significant part of her emerging maternal identity¹⁵. I was well into the data analytic activities before realising that I was paying almost no attention to the prenatal interview data¹⁶, despite having listened to the successive audio records for all the interviewees in addition to reading the transcripts. Looking back, I would say that I was taking a retrospective view of these interview accounts, using the chronologically later data as the culmination point of the narratives, with birth as the fulcrum. Perhaps this would have continued, had I not come across matrixial theory, whose powerful and unusual contribution is to refuse the idea that birth is where the story of the individual starts.

By and large, developmental psychoanalysis and psychology start their inquiries at birth. Of course the mother-baby relationship has been a significant theme in both these disciplines, but it is usually conducted in the language of the 'interpersonal', as if the units involved were automatically two beings and the baby, who is 'attached', learns appropriate separation. Griselda Pollock, discussing matrixial theory, talks about this worldview based on the 'phallic' principle of 'the cut and separation of birth'¹⁷. Bracha Ettinger rejects the dominant psychoanalytic account based on the assumption of birth as the origin of subjectivity (which of course leaves the birth mother as the vessel of life from which the infant must separate in order to achieve personhood). By contrast, matrixial theory is about prenatal/pre-maternal life in which the mother and child-to-be are in the process of being co-born throughout pregnancy through a process that is both joint and differentiated. In this language, distinctions

¹³ This is the theme of my book about the becoming a mother project *Knowing Mothers: Researching Maternal Identity Change*, which, as the word play in the title suggests, maintains a dual focus on Mothers' knowing their babies and how researchers come to know the mothers' becoming (2015, London: Palgrave).

¹⁴ Cited by Griselda Pollock in 'Mother Trouble', 2008, *Studies in the Maternal*, 1.

¹⁵ Joan Raphael-Leff's work is exemplary in this respect: 'The mother as container: placental process and inner space', *Feminism and Psychology* (1991), 1, 393-408; *Pregnancy: The Inside Story* (1993). London: Karnac.

¹⁶ In the event, we managed to interview only half of the participants before they gave birth and the observation data only commenced after birth.

¹⁷ Pollock, G. (2008) 'Mother Trouble', *Studies in the Maternal*, 1.

between the foetus and the pregnant woman as separate units are avoided and the continuity of pregnant into post-natal experience is of central significance. Matrixial theory creates a new language that transcends the logic of separation, notably in the idea of trans-subjectivity originating in the language-defying state prior to birth, a state of neither two nor one, in which 'the transgressive corporeality of pregnancy' (defined as 'being alive in creating life', starts 'a psychic and mental transgression of the boundaries of unicity of being'¹⁸. The matrixial trans-subjective encounter underpinning all our subjectivities is better characterised in terms of a physics than a biology: concepts such as waves, resonances and rhythms are useful for conceptualising 'occurrences at shared borderspaces whose mutually unknown and unknowable partners-in-differences register a shared event, but differently for each partner'¹⁹. This initiates profound continuities that survive the separation of birth. It originates what Ettinger calls a 'trans-subjective stratum' of subjectivity, which exists in everyone by virtue of our pre-natal experience, never erased by the separation of birth that initiates the later, 'phallic', or individuated stratum²⁰. As we shall see, this has profound implications for feminist and parenting discourses.

Matrixial theory opened my mind to noticing different aspects of the pre-natal and early post-natal data. For example, I noticed the frequency with which the word 'weird' cropped up. Justine expressed the experience of many in one sentence: 'I can't explain, it's like weird knowing that you've got a life growing inside of you and you can feel the life every day.' 'Weird' connotes Ettinger's 'transgressive corporeality'; it points to the extent that pregnancy cannot be expressed adequately in available language and consequently is hard to understand. Significantly, the most common context for its use in the research context was to talk about the experience of a life beyond the women's own, inside their bodies. These comments were often, but not always, in response to questions about the first time they felt the baby move and the occasion of seeing their scans. For example, Sarah describes trying to make sense of the inner feelings of movement through working out how the baby was lying: 'I know where the legs are ... and I can feel the bum as well ... and the head is there. I still haven't figured it out, I need to sit down and think of it'. Sarah used the word 'weird' before and after the baby's birth: 'It's a bit weird the whole fact that I'm, my body's producing the food for the baby', her hesitation over the subject of the action suggesting that 'I' didn't feel right, perhaps because it referenced a conscious intentional subject, the pre-pregnant one, whose 'unicity of being' was no longer clear-cut, but one of 'transgressive corporeality' (to use Ettinger's phrases). This is what Imogen Tyler illuminates theoretically when she claims that 'the pregnant subject defies the logic of classic ontology' (note 11 above). The pre- and peri-natal data provided evidence of how this language-defying state is experienced (varying at different times and across different participants) as a thrill and joy or an existentially threatening state of self, casting into turmoil what Tyler called 'the I's implied individuality'. It was only when Sarah gave up trying to breast feed and started working again that she began to feel 'back to normal', in which state 'everything's more in control'. For the sample in general, while this idea was attractive, it was also evident that it was limited: something had changed that could not be undone.

¹⁸ Ettinger, B. L. (2006b) 'From proto-ethical compassion to responsibility: Besidedness and the three primal mother-phantasies of not-enoughness, devouring and abandonment', *Athena*, 2, 100–135 (cited pages 101 & 104).

¹⁹ Pollock, G. (2008) op cit, p.4

²⁰ This alternative mode of conceptualising the trans-subjective aspects of bodily sensation which form the basis for later psychological processes supports the current interest in affect theory, which is refreshing psychological thinking informed by both social and embodied realities.

Becky's example illustrates an unreservedly positive experience, albeit still weird, of being pregnant. In response to the first interview question 'Can you tell me the story of your pregnancy so far? How has it been?' Becky replies 'Yeah, it's been (.) nice, been weird [...] like having something inside you, it's just (.) such a weird feeling but (.) really overwhelming.' She then elaborates by contrasting her own feelings about this with imagined others who 'ain't maternal'. 'But when you want a baby, really want a baby, you're really happy about it (.) when you feel it moving it's like (2) *warms your heart* [her emphasis] and you think oh my god that's my baby'. Becky then puts her wanting this baby in the context of a 'devastating' recent miscarriage. Neither pregnancy was planned. Her use of a bodily, sensory image - 'warms your heart' - to describe the emotional experience connected with feeling maternal comes after many pauses during which she finds the word 'weird' and then, closely linked, 'overwhelming'.

The need to control their experiences as first time mothers through getting information and understanding was patterned, applying more strongly to higher-educated women in 'careers'. Sarah was one such, with a busy working life she found difficult to suspend. She expressed a wider tendency amongst this cluster when she said 'as long as I have the knowledge and as long as I know what it is that it means, I'm OK'. However, the kind of informational knowledge she was relying on did not always work: for example, she did not recognise for a long time that what she was experiencing at the beginning of her labour was contractions. She attributed this to her lack of prior knowledge when she said:

you can do, you learn about umm what's happening to your body but I I've never actually thought to ask what contraction pains felt like. I guess that's the only question I didn't ask, so I didn't know that it actually, that these were real contractions [until] 9 o'clock I had a midwife appointment.

Becky had left school at 17 and done unskilled part-time work before getting pregnant (to which she did not return). She rejected expert knowledge of all kinds and paid close attention to her body's changes. Becky wasn't sure about her early contractions either, but this seems not to have been an issue. Her description of early labour was 'Well I knew I was in early labour, but (.) I didn't really (.) 'cos you don't think "Oh I'm in labour"'.

Becky, who saw herself unequivocally in the category of 'women who are maternal', did not want to return to the kind of unfulfilling work that would have been available to her. She found continual pleasure in attending to and learning about what her baby needed and remained close to her mother and siblings. Others, with the benefit of a six-month paid maternity leave, could relax into their new situation, secure in the knowledge that they had an income and a job to return to. Some of the women whose identity was the most heavily invested in having an independent career, found it harder to be the kind of mother that their baby seemed to want of them in the early months. While such a pattern, reflected with variations across participants, is only suggestive²¹, it did lead me to consider the different – and differently gendered - subjectivities that women in the sample seemed to be expressing through their experiences of first-time motherhood.

²¹ Relatedly, although not focussed on identity, research has found correlations between voluntary childlessness and higher education, commitment to career and occupational status. See Gilla Shapiro, 2014, 'Voluntary childlessness: A critical review of the literature', *Studies in the Maternal*, 6(1).

Lynne Layton²² observed what she thought was a changed psychic structure among young high-achieving American women students. Focusing her psycho-social argument on historically recent changes in formations of female subjectivity, she concluded that one trajectory taken by this career-orientated group of women involves a changed psychic structure away from the traditional relationship-based femininity, based on the maternal, towards a defensive autonomy that formerly characterised mainly men. Defensive autonomy is involved when autonomy is split off from relational needs and capacities, thus denying its embeddedness in relationships. For Layton, feminism began to change 'the proper way to live a white middle-class female heterosexual identity', the liberated woman was now 'expected to have a career, not a job, a career' and that 'to fit into a man's world, women had to be able to inhabit the male version of autonomy, the psychic requirements of which conflict dramatically with those of the so-called "relational female" ' (2004, p.34). The social diversity in our sample amply showed how their transitions to being mothers were bound up with their prior identities. Extrapolating from the data, the theoretical proposition suggested by this pattern is that higher-educated career women's subjectivities are more closely based on the model of an autonomous (masculine) subject. Other features, for example ethnicity, intersected with this pattern.²³

It appears that such changes in subjective formation coincide with changes in the last fifty years, in expectations about what women should prioritise when they become mothers. Daphne de Marneffe²⁴, for example, concludes that in the contemporary West women's desire to mother does not get strong social approbation and criticises the binary of career and motherhood as a 'scheme that pits individual and maternal aspirations against one another'. (There was plenty of evidence in the data of conflicts between a new mother's maternal desire and her desires for a 'non-maternal psychic space'²⁵.)

Devaluation of the maternal in the current gender equality model

A situated historical analysis is reflected in Susan Hekman's narrower focus on feminist political discourses on gender. Hekman²⁶ characterised the initial stance of early second wave feminism as 'the erasure of difference and the pursuit of equality'. Being an erasure of women's difference from men, the goal was for women to gain equality by being as like men as they could be. This was followed, according to Hekman, by a second strategy, that of valorising the feminine and women's difference from men. I remember the 1980s feminist emphasis on the relational woman and connectedness and how it was criticised for fixing women in a maternal model of caring that threatened gender equality²⁷. I also recognise Hekman's strategies in current ideology. The parenting leave policy with which I started this piece is a striking example of the erasure of difference as the route to gender

²² Layton, L. (2004) 'Relational no more', in J. A. Winer, J. W. Anderson, and C. C. Kieffer (eds) *Psychoanalysis and Women (The Annual of Psychoanalysis, XXXII)*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.

²³ Such subject formations are in continuous historical movement and a new career-orientated middle-class subjectivity would not be the first time a female subject formation was characterised by distance from maternal desire: think of generations of bourgeois and aristocratic women whose infants were farmed out to wet nurses or relegated to the nursery under the care of paid nannies. Working class and rural women for whom work was essential would be obliged to make a different set of arrangements.

²⁴ De Marneffe, D. (2004) *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love and Inner Life*. New York: Little Brown.

²⁵ Alcira Maria Alizade (2006) 'The non-maternal psychic space', in A. M. Alizade (ed) *Motherhood in the Twenty first Century*. pp.45-58. London: Karnac.

²⁶ Hekman, S. (1999) *The Future of Differences: Truth and Method in Feminist Theory*. Cambridge: Polity. p. 7.

²⁷ See Hollway, W. (2008) *The Capacity to Care: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity*. London: Palgrave.

equality and the second strategy is expressed in a recent right-of-centre UK policy paper, which represents 'real women' as those 'who reject the masculine value system for one that rates caring above a career and interdependence above independence'²⁸. The trouble is that these strategies are in binary, therefore exclusionary, relation to each other, with the consequence that childcare policy, dominated by what Hekman sees as the pursuit of women's equality through the erasure of difference²⁹, cannot easily recognise the tensions in women's position: a discursive erasure of difference that narrows the focus to women as primarily gender-neutral members of the workforce inevitably comes up against the reality of women's sex difference, namely the essential difference from men that gifts women with a womb, ovaries and breasts that lactate. In the provision of a mere two weeks of immediate post-natal, specifically maternal leave, this biology is not only compressed in time, but emptied of psychological considerations about women's experience of the maternal.

Binary thinking occurs not just at the level of characterising autonomy and connectedness, masculinity and femininity as opposites, but more widely in what matrixial theory calls phallic logic, the deeply ingrained way of thinking in terms of separations and either/or. My interest – because I am theorising identity psychosocially – is not in these discourses *per se* but in how they are lived through the psychic investments and desires of women. So, for example in *Knowing Mothers*, I explore the theme of conflict in women's gendered and maternal subjectivity, amplified as it is in the changing subjectivities of new mothers, through two cases, Justine and Arianna, who differed in terms of their educational, career and partner positions prior to getting pregnant (also in terms of class and ethnicity). In Arianna's case I was able to build a detailed picture demonstrating the unique, complex and traumatic nature of the conflict into which she was precipitated by becoming pregnant. Her condition made her fearful not just about losing her status as an autonomous subject who prioritised her career but through what she experienced as an almost unbearable feminisation of her body, which started in pregnancy.

In the following section, I want to show the subjective reach of what matrixial theory calls phallic logic, using Arianna's experience of becoming a mother³⁰. Matrixial theory exposes the profound problem of living binary gender difference and also the potential, in women and men, mothers and non-mothers alike, of the matrixial alternative.

Femininity beyond phallic logic

The key point about matrixial theory is that it transcends the binary logic of gender/sex difference and is framed outside binary categories (which also makes it quite difficult to grasp). Ettinger's non-binary framing³¹ distinguishes feminine^p (feminine to the power of the phallus; feminine in phallic logic premised on gender and sexual difference), from feminine^m (feminine to the power of the matrixial). Pollock³² describes the latter as 'a supplementary, shifting stratum of human subjectivity and meaning (...) delivered to us all'. In *Knowing Mothers*, I show how

²⁸ See my discussion in *Knowing Mothers*, pp164-5.

²⁹ The erasure of difference, as in the current dominance of the gender equality model is in my view a continuation of binary thinking, because it relies on a denial that ensures the reappearance of its opposite, a return of the repressed in discourses.

³⁰ While here this case example is in highly abbreviated form, fuller analysis – with different emphases – can be found in *Knowing Mothers* (chapter 7) and in Hollway (2012) 'Rereading Winnicott's "Primary Maternal Preoccupation"' *Feminism and Psychology*, 22(1), 22-40.

³¹ Ettinger, B. L. (2006a) 'Matrixial trans-subjectivity', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23(2/3), 218–222.

³² Pollock, 2008, op. cit., p.13

the unstable collision of the two strata – phallic (separated) and matrixial (trans-subjective) - in Arianna's subjectivity pervade and plague her becoming a mother. In matrixial terms, my analysis traces how Arianna's earlier gender settlement becomes unsettled with pregnancy, as a co-affecting matrixial trans-subjectivity presses into awareness, previously under erasure within phallic logic.

Griselda Pollock explains that in matrixial theory, the baby-to-come is familiar in two temporal registers, 'diachronous as well as synchronous'. The diachrony is particular to the becoming mother, because 'at the same time memories of the primordial condition of her own becoming [...] are newly reactivated from another position: the trans-subjective matrixial encounter in a trans-subjectivising archaic environment [...] asymmetrical, regressive, remembering and at the same time anticipatory and projective into living futures to come'³³. The primordial condition is available also to a baby's father or other – social - parent, but synchronously, deriving from 'what once *he* co-vented at the register of *his* own becoming'³⁴. In Arianna's case, Vincent, her husband 'loved the baby, really loved her, from the start' - unlike her, Arianna suggests. It is in this second, synchronous, sense that femininity to the power of the matrixial (feminine^m) is 'open to all', if they are available to retuning in to the trans-subjective stratum that accompanies everyone's own beginnings, woman or man. Much depends, however, on the ability of someone to tune into the trans-subjective stratum, never erased since their own beginnings, but heavily foreclosed in neoliberal global culture. This retuning unsettles the 'I' based on singularity and autonomy, which has been so central to a masculine subjective formation and become more available to women through the erasure of feminine gender difference in the dominant gender equality model. Matrixial logic suggests that the early experience of birth mothering, diachronous, is not identical to social mothering (or 'parenting') because of the experience of pregnancy. However, for women who are social mothers/parents, the two temporal registers do operate in the following sense: 'the woman *doubly* experiences the matrixial borderspace: first in the last period of prenatal life in the maternal womb [...], and second, as someone who has a womb [...], whether she is a mother or not'³⁵.

When Griselda Pollock³⁶ introduces Ettinger's understanding of the feminine and its connection to the maternal, she is explicit about the sensitivities she expects to arouse amongst feminists. For example: 'Ettinger invites us to recognise, to recognise, a subjectivizing partnership that is primordially *feminine* [...] Let me be careful here,' and Pollock goes on to differentiate Ettinger's use of 'feminine' from feminists like De Beauvoir, historically influential in the 'gender equality on male terms' strategy. For De Beauvoir, the feminine was 'understood to be the stereotype of woman from which feminism was in revolt'. Matrixial theory, Pollock continues, provides 'an understanding of a certain deforming imposition of negativised otherness onto the feminine as the cipher through which the masculine is positivised and rendered both dominant and universal'. This is the 'feminine' that Arianna is rejecting. The matrixial feminine reconceptualises the feminine body so that a bodily organ such as the womb is not understood as determining, but like the body more generally is 'imaginatively understood as cycles, pleasures, sexualities, surfaces, contacts, even traumas'. Because such experiences are available to any being that emerges from intrauterine life, this matrixial version of the feminine (feminine^m as opposed to feminine^p) does not reduce to the maternal, although it is intimately

³³ Pollock, 2008, op. cit., p. 6

³⁴ Pollock, 2008, op. cit., p. 9, emphasis added.

³⁵ Ettinger, B. L. (1997) 'The feminine/prenatal weaving in matrixial subjectivity-as-encounter', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 7(3), 367–405, p391.

³⁶ Pollock, 2008, op. cit., pages 11 and 12 cited in this paragraph.

bound up with the maternal as guarantor of life and founder of a proto-ethics based on com-passion.

Ettinger³⁷ addresses a feminist political objection when she clarifies that her matrixial approach:

doesn't indicate any limitation on a woman's rights over her body, quite the contrary! As a concept, the matrix supports women's full response-ability for any event occurring with-in their own not-One corpo-reality and accounts for the difference of such response-ability from the phallic order.

The same surely applies to women's timing of their return to work after giving birth.

Through matrixial theory I was able to grasp that ineffable quality of the upheaval that characterised all new mothers in the research sample, whether they embraced it wholeheartedly, like Becky, wanted to find safe rational categories for it and wishes to find the normality of a prior identity, like Sarah or, like Arianna, were traumatised by the threats maternity posed to her identity. 'Ineffable' has two allied meanings, both deriving from the negative of the Latin *ex-fare*, to speak out. The first is 'incapable of being expressed'; the second is 'not to be uttered'. The ineffable aspects of becoming a mother threaten to undermine the settled feeling of 'I' and the accompanying phallic-based identity (the 'masculinity' mired in binary logic) that language and rational logic afford³⁸.

Conclusions: gender and women's reproductive bodies in psychology and feminism

To conclude, let me revisit the claims made in the opening paragraph of this piece: 'How we understand, theorise and represent the peri-natal period of mothering reaches into questions of gender equality and gender difference, parenting and how feminists treat bodies and the biological in psychology.

I have located a certain identity formation associated with the dominant 'gender equality through erasure of difference' perspective. While patterns in the sample suggested that higher-educated, career-orientated women are more prone to find the requirements of early mothering highly unsettling, as a consequence of being strongly invested in this identity formation, the subjectivity associated with an autonomous, historically masculine subject is widespread. This 'masculine' subject is 'defensively autonomous', in Lynne Layton's phrase (*op. cit.*), a product of a defensive splitting off from connection. The identity transition occasioned by becoming a mother, which threatens this identity formation because of the 'life that has unfurled itself within your own life'³⁹ is therefore going to be conflictual, potentially a profound upheaval. I have used matrixial concepts to illuminate the difficulty of this transition, notably the idea that the prenatal and postnatal matrixial experience defies language and reawakens a foreclosed trans-subjective stratum: this baby is neither me nor not-me; it is both me and not-me. Categories based on the unitary 'I' collapse. This can be both wonderful and terrible.

When the idea of the trans-subjective stratum is applied more generally in theorising subjectivity, it affords a way of thinking that challenges binary gender difference. The

³⁷ Ettinger (1997), *op. cit.*, p.370, footnote.

³⁸ In *Knowing Mothers*, I explore in detail the parallel processes in the researchers' knowing, and show how we used them as a rich resource for the kind of knowing that would not be accessible through restriction to the semantics of language and narrative.

³⁹ Denise Riley, 2012, *op. cit.*, p.255.

trans-subjective stratum is reawakened in pregnancy from the state of foreclosure that characterises both sexes in contemporary globalised societies, but unequally across cultural settings. This is an example of feminine^m (feminine to the power of the matrixial) rather than the gender difference of binary logic. The gender equality model that depends on erasure is also trapped in this binary logic, even while intending to erase it. I outlined the upheaval of Arianna's identity upheaval as an example of a gender equal subjectivity that prior to pregnancy was settled within a model of erasure of difference.

The term parenting, with its political imperative to treat mothers and fathers as not just equally responsible but having the same relation to babies, is a direct product of the model of gender equality based on the erasure of difference. The press extract with which I began showed a relation to the consequent child care policy that claimed a two-week-after-birth return to work for new mothers as 'progress', no longer 'archaic' and 'an approach fit for the 21st century' (as the century of the triumph of neoliberal globalisation, I had to grimly agree with this last claim). The sorts of upheaval I have documented, the time required to tune in to a new baby's communications; these are excluded from thought in this policy. Crucially, such a policy places under erasure the continuity of prenatal and postnatal trans-subjective experience. If she can tune in to her prenatal experience, the birth mother knows her baby like no one else, despite the physical separation initiated by the severance of the umbilical cord. For example, Becky explained how she had worked out her newborn son's preferred sleeping routine based on the patterns of his sleep and wakeful states in the womb. Arianna, conflicted about her impending maternal state, dreamt of a baby girl the night before she was due to have an abortion.

At the same time, fathers, and other non-birth parents or carers (in Arianna's case, it was the baby's father and her own parents), have access to identifications with the new-born infant through their own trans-subjective attunement. This matrixial claim successfully interrupts the binary whereby fathers are either completely estranged from maternal feelings of have exactly the same relation to their babies as mothers. It explains why, in the example of Vincent and Arianna, Vincent had easier access to the feelings deriving from the trans-subjective stratum than Arianna did.

In early second wave feminism and 20th century feminist psychology, the concept of bodies (women's bodies) was in thrall to a biological perspective whose history was inextricably tied in with the pathologising and derogating of women's biology, stemming from her reproductive sexual differences (differing from the norm and ideal of the male). Unsurprising, then, that feminist psychology enthusiastically embraced the social constructionism that provided a radical perspective for social sciences from the 1970s on. Even now, when bodies are back in intellectual fashion, biological determinism has the capacity to capture feminist discourse and, in binary fashion, send us back to one-sidedly social explanations. Psychological processes that forge our identities from bodily, as well as social, realities often seem to be squeezed out by this binary.

Mothering an infant is a fundamental issue for feminism because it is a point of contradiction when women's formations as notionally gender-neutral individuals collide with the actuality of women's life-giving capacities. It is where contemporary feminism comes up against its pursuit of gender equality via the erasure of (women's) differences. And for the purposes of this new, 'state of the discipline', journal format, it is where we need a psychology which theorises the psychological implications of women's capacity to create life for their changing subjectivities over a life course, and does this in a manner that recognises both the materiality of

reproductive bodies and the social circumstances, past and present, within which their maternal identities are in continuous process.

Finally, a central theme about the state of the discipline that pervades this piece is the ubiquity of binaries and the regrettable limitations they place on our thinking and on feminist (as well as all other) politics. I have found over time that my attempts to go beyond binaries are central to my pursuit of a psycho-social approach to psychology. If feminine^m can help us go beyond the binaries of current hegemonic gender discourses, it could open up new feminist and psychological vistas. I hope I have exemplified this possibility in the case of mothering infants.