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Knowing Mothers: Researching Maternal Identity Change

Book

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Chapter 1, 'Knowing Mothers, Research Becoming', outlines both the theoretical and methodological foundations of the book. I start by launching readers into a direct experience: a case study in rough verse, a format designed to preserve the affect and the participant's idiom, through the content and form of her language including rhythm, cadence, intonation and associations. Reflection on the experience of reading makes space for emotional experience in the process of meaning making. I then outline the project, starting with the milieu in which the research was generated: intellectual and funding context of identities research, the two psychoanalytical approaches to knowing on which I primarily draw, and the biographical resources I bring to the topic of maternal becoming.

Chapter 2, 'Empirical Psycho-social Research: Design and Psychoanalytically Informed Principles', provides detail of the research project in the context of the principles guiding the design of a psycho-social project, centrally its psychoanalytically informed methods and the core psychoanalytic epistemological principles guiding the project methodology. An alternative modality of knowing, necessary for researching identity change, can be conceptualised as unthought known, transference-countertransference, com-passion and intuition. I describe the practices and principles involved in the parallel use of Free Association Narrative Interviewing (FANI) and Infant Observation (IO) and discuss two themes which address practically some abiding questions about the trustworthiness of research knowing: using the support of other minds and the value of triangulating interviewing and observation to go beyond the limitations of singular perspectives and methods.

Chapter 3, 'The Reality of Being a Young Girl: Agency, Imagination and Objectivity', uses a single case study to illustrate and explain the shifts in my usage of concepts and approaches that dominated critical qualitative research – construction, positioning, social identity categories, power relations – towards a psychoanalytically informed psycho-social approach (still informed by the concepts of construction and positioning) which takes into account agency, the flow of becoming, the 'in between' of a transitional space, conflict and the strain of facing reality. The chapter pays attention to key binaries in dominant academic knowledge – knower and known, internal and external, objectivity and subjectivity – and situates my intellectual project in this wider context.

Chapter 4, 'Weird Beyond Words: The Transgressive Corporeality of Pregnancy and Compassion-Based Ethics', is the first of three illustrating diverse psychoanalytically informed approaches. It uses the matrixial theory of Bracha Ettinger, which takes prenatal experience as the model and origin of uncognised knowing, thus casting a radical further light on maternal knowing and maternal co-becoming. Using data examples, I describe how matrixial concepts provided new insights into the prenatal data, beyond 'phallic logic', and into both maternal and research ethics. The core topics of identity change and knowing require interpretation (neither topic presents as such in raw data), and enable me to explore the value of psychoanalytically informed interpretation, which has been contentious in psycho-social studies.

Chapter 5, 'Psychoanalytically Informed Data Analysis', the second example of taking psychoanalysis into research methodology, again a single case, takes the example of how I infer anxiety in one new mother's experience during data analysis. In the course of the single case analysis, I develop the concept of anxiety through concepts that link mother-infant relating and research knowing: projective identification, containment, reverie and learning from experience. Wilfred Bion's theory of thinking transcends several entrenched binaries in Western thought: mind/ body, cognition/

emotion and individual self/ trans-subjective connectedness.

Chapter 6, 'Scenic Writing and Scenic Understanding', is the third example of a psychoanalytically informed approach to qualitative, psycho-social research. It introduces the German psycho-societal tradition, using Alfred Lorenzer's concept of scenic understanding to inform data analysis and case writing, using extracts from the observation of one new mother. The 'scene' is an affective, embodied form of meaning. I give examples of the risks of using stereotypical social identity categories (black, young, etc.) and provide an alternative, scenic, mode of writing a participant portrait. The data analysis, using a scenic composition based on observation notes, follows Lorenzer's injunction to use the 'provocations' in the text and demonstrates how through scenic understanding it is possible to access the embodied societal-cultural and bring it to symbolisation.

Chapter 7, '“I'm Not the Mother type”: Gender Identity Upheaval', is the first of two that focuses socio-political themes, especially the maternal and gender difference in discourses, including feminist discourses. It also continues to demonstrate a reflective stance to research. Drawing further on matrixial concepts, in particular 'fragilisation', I explore in detail the case of a first-time mother, diagnosed medically with postnatal depression, who experienced extreme conflict about becoming a mother. Intrapsychic conflict is conceptualised by psychoanalysis. Here, through a psycho-social analysis, I make precise links between Arianna's internalised conflict and the larger socio-political culture in which her identity as a self-governing autonomous career woman was formed. In my exploration of Ettinger's matrixial feminine, I draw out implications for contemporary feminist discourses on mothering.

Chapter 8, 'Theorising Maternal Becoming Psycho-socially', is the second of two chapters exploring discourses of motherhood and gender relations. Themes of conflict and binaries are explored in a single case example. I contrast the effects of a cluster of binaries – motherhood versus career, mothers' needs versus children's needs, gender equality according to a masculine model versus maternal-feminine difference, social versus biological, separation versus clinginess – with the possibility of learning from experience and tolerating ambivalence. I analyse examples of three facets of this participant's relation to becoming a mother: the discourses, the actualities and the echoes of a previous generation, facets that are expressed together in her experience of the ordinary conflicts in becoming a mother.

Chapter 9, 'Unfinished Business', notices, reflects on and resists the fantasy of bringing it all together, and of including everything left out. I focus on how the shape of the book emerged over a long period, in tandem with changes wrought in me by the research and writing and link these to conceptualising subjectivity as becoming. I discuss what happened to whole-sample analysis and trace some overarching patterns on first-time mothers' becoming and mothers' knowing derived from the data and how these showed up through the sampling categories we used (ethnicity, class, occupational status, partner status, housing and family situation).