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FROM MOTHERHOOD TO MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY

By Wendy Hollway

Abstract

In moving from concepts of motherhood and mothers to a theorisation of maternal subjectivity that emphasises unconscious intersubjectivity, this paper casts light on the following questions:

- ⇒ What is meant by maternal and who qualifies?
- ⇒ Do gender and sex of parents and carers make any systematic difference to an infant, child or adolescent's experience of parenting and their own capacity to care?
- ⇒ If it is agreed that a universal characteristic of the infant-mother relationship is a one-way, non-negotiable dependency, what are the implications for changes in the subjectivity of women who become mothers?
- ⇒ If it is necessary to uncouple the idea of maternal subjectivity from the figure of the mother, how do we understand the continuing relationship between these two?
- ⇒ How does the theorisation of infantile phantasy, and in particular the phantasy of maternal omnipotence, affect how we understand the effectivity of maternal, paternal and other-figure care?
- ⇒ Modifications to a Freudian Oedipal account of the father's role in boys' and girls' separation from the mother are necessitated by the theorisation in this paper. What are the implications for social policy in the context of changing family forms in which many boys and girls grow up without fathers present?

In the context of changing family forms and reactive claims that 'families need fathers', it is of considerable relevance to inquire seriously into the gendered and moral nature of parenting and its consequences for children's wellbeing using the theoretical perspectives that critical psychology has been involved in developing. This paper is intended to contribute to such knowledge.

Introduction

In this paper I try to work out what would be involved - and what would be some of the implications - in moving from the idea of motherhood to maternal subjectivity (which I theorise through the lens of unconscious intersubjectivity).

Motherhood connotes a natural state or condition which functions as an empty

category into which children's needs can be placed. Critical psychology, at least the post-structuralist variety, has instead seen mothers as objects of government regulation. Feminism has argued for theorising mothers as autonomous subjects with rights. Feminist psychoanalysis has gone further and argued that children need that their mothers be subjects in their own right.

Using feminist and post-structuralist critiques and building upon British and feminist psychoanalysis, I theorise developments in subjectivity and the capacity to care that are made possible by certain characteristics of the relationship with a developing child, characteristics which change over time. More specifically I explore the concepts of maternal ambivalence, containment, recognition and maternal development - all ways of understanding the specific workings and effects of unconscious intersubjective dynamics - in the context of asking how maternal subjectivity is constituted. In this way, the subject of inquiry is shifted from mothers to mothering.

This conceptualisation of maternal subjectivity aims to go beyond subjectivity as subjectification and mothers as the objects of children's needs (or, more recently, rights) and also beyond the idea of mothers as 'autonomous' subjects in their own right (to the extent that the idea of autonomy is one deriving from the rational unitary subject of modernism). Throughout I use the politically relevant theme of who can and should mother to inquire into the boundaries of maternal subjectivity and thus as a lens through which to illuminate the relations among mothering, fathering, parenting, primary caring

and caring more broadly. I discuss the effects of these dynamics on adult subjectivities in general.

Women as objects

The lesson drawn from post-structuralism is that we can usefully begin by situating the subject under consideration - mothers in relation to children - in a historical context of power, knowledge and subjectification. Contemporary Western mothering can thus be understood in the light of 20th century moves in the governmental regulation of families, in which 'childhood [became] the most intensely governed sector of personal existence' (Rose 1990:121). A whole complex of apparatuses were targeted at the child: child welfare, school, juvenile justice and the education and surveillance of parents. Rose argues that government and regulation were achieved through a strategy of normalisation in which parents (mothers) took on the aspirations, norms and desires which were being articulated, so that 'state' interference was secondary and indirect: 'The strategy of family privacy .. stands .. as a testament to the success of those attempts to construct a family that will take upon itself the responsibility for the duties of socialisation and will have them as its own desires' (Rose 1990:208). This is an example of what Foucault meant by subjectification: a family (in this case) that takes on its own regulation. However, we know from feminist critiques that fathers were not being held responsible for the welfare of their children, either in expert knowledge or in social policy. They were at most secondary while mothers were the main and particular target for the normalisation of children, through the mass media (for example, Winnicott's influential radio broadcasts to

mothers), through childcare manuals, through advertising and changing cultural emphases and images.

We also know that in the British post-war period psychology and psychoanalysis have been profoundly influential in this process of 'familialisation' (Rose 1990), generating many of the experts who produced the knowledge about normal development, normal 'families' and good mothering. Bowlby, whose publications started in the 1940s and spanned forty years, reproduced the idea of the naturalness of the mother-child bond through an authoritative amalgam of scientific discourses. According to Rose, in Winnicott's (1958) work, for example, 'the family is simultaneously allotted its responsibilities, assured of its natural capacities and educated in the fact that it needs to be educated by experts in order to have confidence in its own capacities' (Rose 1990:203).

From the 1960s familialisation came under attack from many angles. In particular, feminist critiques pointed out the way in which mothers were positioned solely as objects of their babies' and families' needs, rather than people in their own right:

The claim that mothers had rights and needs of their own provided a standard by which to assess psychological theories of child development. Feminist writers used this standard to highlight the innumerable ways in which psychological theories and models of child development oppressed women, through their failure to consider the other's separate set of needs and interests (Everingham 1994:3).

In this perspective, mothers' and children's separateness is taken as a given and to that extent reproduces the premise of unitary (if not also rational) subjects.

Within much of feminism, then, mothers' and children's needs and interests were set up in opposition. It is difficult (at least I find it so) to cast maternal subjectivity in a perspective that does not fall into these still-dominant ways of knowing and does not get carried off in the tide of relativism in relation to what children need from carers in order to grow up moral, creative and productive. Whether a mother has a unique position, whether some elements of her position are universal, and what differences this may make, are unresolved and often avoided questions.

Into this contested domain, I must place my own maternal subjectivity¹. I have one child - a daughter, now 16 - who until recently lived with me only half the time, the other half of her time being spent with her father (both of us white, Northern English and middle-class). I am positioned in the aforementioned British discourses of mothering, not only as a mother but biographically in my own family of origin: my mother was a post-war, back-to-the-home mother². However, she was plenty more than that description of her economic, cultural

¹ I do not believe that the requirements of reflexivity in social science writing are adequately met in the rather sociological convention of describing ones own identity along the key dimensions of social difference, although that is informative. Elsewhere, I have argued for the use of the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and counter-transference as a complementary approach to tracing the effects of ones own subjectivity in knowledge production (Hollway, unpublished 'Reflexivity, unconscious intersubjectivity and the co-production of data'.)

² Correlatively, my father was out of the house, at work, five days a week, ten hours a day, 49 weeks of the year, working in a medium-sized family business not unlike that of my mother's father and his brothers.

and discursive circumstances could predict. My mother did not feel oppressed by her domestic circumstances and neither did she lose sight of her own wishes and desires in the course of bringing up three children. My own combination of career, financial independence and quasi-single mothering is structurally and discursively different from my mother, but in relational terms - my identifications, investments and mothering practices - we are quite similar. I think this is one of the reasons why I am not convinced by exclusively sociological accounts of mothering, be they structural or discursive.

This does not exempt me from the post-structuralist analysis that I have summarised above: it does, however, raise questions about the subjectivities which provide the material for governmentality and subjectification. Post-structuralist accounts usually sound as if the power is all one-way; as if subjects are malleable material onto which childcare manuals, expert knowledges and government policies can be applied to shape our subjectivity. In my view this is evidently not so: policies, advice and knowledges only effect change in so far as they are pulling in a direction made possible not only by people's circumstances, but by their desires, identities, commitments and anxieties. In my view these require the conceptual tools of psychoanalysis. As Brid Featherstone points out in the introduction to our coedited book:

There is a tendency to assume that the structures, institutions and practices of mothering have clear-cut and uniform effects. .. What is lost in the process are accounts of maternal subjectivity which can take into account the ways that fantasy, meaning, biography and relational

dynamics inform individual women's positions in relation to a variety of discourses concerning motherhood (1997:7).

These dynamics are forged over a longer period than a single generation. Clinical psychoanalysis provides plenty of evidence for the need to encompass at least three generations in the analysis of maternal subjectivity (for example, Mills 1997). On a larger canvas, the inevitable connections between woman and mother are universal and go back beyond history. Contraceptive technology created the first fissure in that connection and now, with technologies like cloning, a more radical break is made possible. That motherhood has histories is incontrovertible and rescues it from biological determinism. It does not, of course, make its significance any less real in terms of the effects that being a mother has on subjectivity.

In retheorising maternal subjectivity through unconscious intersubjectivity I draw on British psychoanalysis, including theorists who have been criticised for positioning mothers as objects of children's needs: Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion and, especially, Donald Winnicott. Nonetheless, this psychoanalysis can be read in the light of current feminist and critical developments and, I hope to show, provide the conceptual tools for this endeavour.

Defining mothers and mothering.

As I run through in my mind the myriad possible approaches to my topic, I notice that I end up thinking about the welfare of the child; that is of mothering as the activity that is for someone else (a dependent person). I try to avoid

falling into the position that feminists have so vehemently criticised, in which women-as-mothers are understood as objects of their children's needs. I feel as if I should be an example (in my life as well as in what I write) of the claim that 'whereas history has recognised maternal work almost exclusively in terms of its impact on the child, contemporary culture is beginning to articulate the mother as a subject in her own right' (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan 1994:9).

A further important definitional point is that women who are mothers are not only mothers. Surely this is a crucial distinction. For a few decades after 1945, in Britain as elsewhere in the West, mothering was an entrenched and totalising vision of what women were for. In the communist East, mothers' roles as workers did not diminish their exclusive responsibility for children (as grandmothers as well as mothers). In parts of rural Africa³, women share mothering (or the aspects of it that qualify as maternal work and everyday care). All these versions rest on an age-old conflation of womanhood and motherhood (evident in virtually every culture in time and place). Although this conflation has now been unsettled by a whole new visible set of circumstances: contraception, education, employment, lesbian sexuality and women's independent living as a challenge to marriage, we should avoid a juxtaposition of mothers to other women, as if one has to be one or the other. Mothers are not just mothers. Mothers may be employed, engaged in some other productive or creative venture, have relational commitments outside the family. It seems to me that psychoanalysis and psychology, by looking at mothers through the prism of the child's needs, have been compromised by

³ And in Freud's own family, according to Anna Freud's biographer (Young-Bruehl 1998).

representing women who are mothers as being entirely the objects of their children's developmental needs. This blindness⁴ to women's outer and inner lives echoes the narcissistic blindness of a young child to its mother as anything other than an extension of its demands. It suggests a general failing amongst psychologists and psychoanalysts and their audiences to be sensitive to countertransference dynamics in their own emotional relation to the knowledges they were producing.

There remains a question as to how being a mother coexists with these other parts. A post-modern view of multiple fragmented selves would suggest that they simply coexist - quite possibly in tension. I favour a version of subjectivity that includes the issue of coherence or integration, but does not take this for granted like modernist versions of the individual. In what ways, if at all, does maternal subjectivity permeate a mother's (and other's) subjectivity more generally and extend beyond the relations of mothers and their children? I will return to these questions at the end.

Despite women being more than mothers, being a mother is defined by a relationship. One is a mother by virtue of having a child. And when those children are of dependent age, mothers are usually primarily responsible for their welfare. The practices through which this is expressed vary and there are exceptions in some cultural arrangements. However the early relationship between a biological mother and her child has a universal status and the

⁴ It also goes hand-in-glove with traditional images of women's lacks, especially the lack of an active, desirous and sexual subjectivity.

primary characteristic of this is that it is based on a one-way and non-negotiable dependency.

Ruddick (1980, 1989) argues that certain realities of maternal work (meeting children's demands for preservation, growth and social acceptability) produce universal requirements on mothers. These are not culturally constructed, though others are. Here we are confronted with practical realities that are not compatible with the relativism of most social theories of subjectivity. I want to extend Ruddick's idea of universal maternal work to encompass unconscious emotional work. Within a model of intersubjectivity, this necessitates accepting the powerful effects of children's emotions on maternal subjectivity, what Rosalind Minsky characterises as 'being able to respond creatively to another human being's helplessness' (1998:119). Who then qualifies? The biological mother? Any woman who stands in for her? The father? Any or every carer of a child? It is important to uncouple the idea of maternal subjectivity from the figure of the mother, but also to look carefully at the relationship between the two.

As Ruddick argued, mothers are not - or at least should not have to be - the sole adults who do maternal work⁵. It would be misleading to imply that psychoanalysis conflates biological mothers and other primary carers, however. Even Bowlby and Winnicott in their understanding of mothering encompassed the primary person who cared for the child consistently and over time. The contemporary debate focuses on fathers in this primary care

role. Claims that fathers need to be involved equally in childcare in order to transform the binary gendered identities of children (for example, Chodorow 1978) are based on two assumptions. The first is that gender and sex of parents and carers need make no systematic difference to an infant or child or adolescent's experience of parenting. The second is that actual parental care determines the way it is experienced and effects it has on children.

Psychoanalytic theories complicate the relation between a child and maternal or parental care in both these ways.

Having set out a range of preliminary issues which are relevant to a political debate about mothering and the gender of parenting, what are my own positions concerning current critical discourses on mothering? The dismissive claims of some feminist work concerning the relativity of children's needs do not ring true to me. Nor does any too simple claim about a child's or mother's autonomy or connectedness in our emotional bonds. Neither does the position that mothers and fathers are indistinguishable as carers. As for whether mothers' and children's needs are in harmony or necessarily in conflict, neither position is credible in a bald form.

Unconscious intersubjectivity

Melanie Klein (1988a&b) worked with a model of love and hate being intrinsic in all object relations (relations to people and things). The earliest experiences of human infants, outside time and language, are split: 'separate worlds of timeless bliss in one ideal universe of experience, and terror and persecution

⁵ That mothers often feel primary and may want to feel that way is an aspect of maternal

in another alternative universe' (Britton 1993:38). There are no distinctions between self and object; between the emotional experience and the combined external and internal reality that precipitates it. So love and hate are inseparable from good and bad. Good and bad are kept apart (split) to protect the infant from the threat to its psychological survival of the possibility that the good and bad breast/ mother is one and the same. Love and hate are separable - by splitting - but at the cost of acknowledging reality. Splitting is the characteristic mode of unconscious intersubjectivity for infants (what Klein called the 'paranoid-schizoid position') and a necessary way of mediating external reality in a dependent state. However, the growing ability to acknowledge, understand and interact with external reality produces a pressure on the infant to acknowledge that good and bad exist in the same object. Klein calls this the 'depressive' position and it is characterised by ambivalence and the increased likelihood of engaging with external reality. Both positions are contingent, unstable and dynamic. They oscillate (and do not therefore resemble 'stages').

These core dynamics in the achievement of relative integration and coherence of self are first of all experienced in relation with the mother. No wonder, then, that the maternal relation is so deeply embedded in everyone's subjectivity in one way or another. This is not the same as saying, however, that other, often subsequent, relationships are not profoundly important.

Maternal ambivalence

subjectivity that deserves more attention.

At no time in our lives are people beyond the constant, unconscious use of splitting and other intersubjective defences against anxiety. Projection and introjection refer to the unconscious movement of mental objects, ideas or feelings, expelling them in the case of projection and incorporating them in the case of introjection. The purpose is always the same: to protect the self from threats (whether external or internal) and preserve the good where it can aid this protection. Contrary to cultural constructions about maternal love, mothers too are not immune from the splitting of love and hate in their relations with their children.

Rozsika Parker (1995,1997) applies the concept of ambivalence to mothers and points out how hard it is for mothers to acknowledge their hate in a culture where the idea of maternal hate is feared, split off and demonised in 'pathological' mothers. This makes it difficult for mothers to access ordinary hate, that is, to acknowledge their less than loving feelings for a child, and therefore to integrate hate, with love, into ambivalence. Parker argues that when hate is incorporated into an ambivalent whole with love, rather than being split off, it helps mothers to think about what their child needs in a realistic way. She takes issue with the way that maternal love has been constructed as the singular emotion that characterises the mother-child relationship. In Western discourse (and arguably beyond) maternal love is usually assumed to be natural⁶ and real mothers who do not behave lovingly

⁶ For example, Deigh, a philosopher who is trying to understand moral agency in a more relational way than is traditional, sets up a category, applied to mothers, of 'natural feelings and attitudes' (affection, love, dependency, feelings of protectiveness) based on the model of 'an infant's trust in its mother, in which it recognises mother's goodwill' (1996:4-5). Influential feminisms have reproduced this assumption, notably the self-in-relation theorists of the Stone School (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver and Surrey, 1991). Their theory of women's subjectivity

are consequently regarded as pathological (for example, see Coward, 1997). I see this discursive production of loving mothers as having its roots in a shared defence against the threat (to the child that each of us remains) of maternal hate. This defence against hate reproduces, and is reproduced by, existing language and discourses⁷.

For Winnicott, the infant's earliest relationship (with the mother or other carer) is one of primitive love. By primitive he means that it is prior to any capacity to consider the needs of the other. The infant is solely driven by the need to use the (m)other in the service of its own development. It is 'ruthless', meaning prior to the development of 'ruth', in the sense that the infant is not yet capable of feeling concern. This is a universal condition of infancy which, according to Winnicott (1947), is bound to evoke the mother's hatred. Indeed, following from this principle, he lists 18 good reasons why a mother ordinarily hates her infant.

Not only does he see maternal hate as inevitable (and by this he does not mean inevitably to act it out), but Winnicott argued that 'hating appropriately' is integral to a child's development⁸. As Phillips summarises: 'if [the child] is not hated, if what is unacceptable about him is not acknowledged, then his

is not only based on the idea of connection or relation (rather than autonomy and separateness), but these relations are understood as basically good, based in empathy.

⁷ If you have already reacted with irritation or dislike against the use of this word hate, think again. It is only the opposite of love and should be able to encompass ordinary emotions like dislike, irritation, anger, rejection. Yet in our culture it is regarded as too strong: a defence against anxiety operating at a discursive level and reproduced through unconscious dynamics. Kleinian psychoanalysis, in insisting on the coexistence of love and hate, was making a point about the primitive character of emotions in unconscious life, emotions which we are likely to defend against.

love and loveableness will not feel fully real to him' (1988:89). In this way of thinking, hate is necessary for recognition (see next section). Hate (in this example just a realistic acknowledgement of unacceptable aspects of the child) enables both mother and child to acknowledge the imperfect reality of each other and act accordingly. It helps them to separate (without the father's intervention).

If one accepts Winnicott's account, this has implications for understanding the subjectivity of the infant's primary carer. It means that struggling to meet the ruthless demands of an infant (and of course, sometimes failing) is inescapable. If women are to mother, a struggle with these intersubjective conditions - which are bound to be a major assault on anyone's own wishes and desires - come with the job. They position that person. Not within a 'discourse' of perfect mothering (though that is likely to intrude), but within a very real set of relations, infused variously by feelings of love, hate, obligation, envy and guilt, among others.

These dynamics modify mothers' subjectivities. It is too soon to insist that the baby modify its demands in the light of the mother's needs and desires. It cannot. This fact is extra-discursive, though how it is lived is not. For example, the concept of maternal ambivalence can help a mother's mixed feelings to be better integrated and aids acknowledgement that babies need imperfection, not perfection, from mothers. In summary, there is a period in children's lives (of variable length depending on historical and cultural factors in the

⁸ Unlike Klein, for whom hate and love are expressions of innate capacities, Winnicott

construction of childhood) when their ruthless narcissistic demands place terrible strain on mothers, since, in this relationship, they are getting no consideration whatsoever. To bear this is a developmental challenge for anyone⁹.

Winnicott extended this to both parents. He wrote of the child needing to 'test, over and over again their ability to remain good parents in spite of anything he may do to hurt or annoy them. By means of this testing he gradually convinces himself, if the parents do in fact stand the strain' (1964:204, cited in Phillips 1988:67). Winnicott was of the opinion that only the child's real parents were likely to be able to provide and survive this much (Phillips 1988:67). Winnicott's insights here were empirically based on his work with English families. Again it is a matter for empirical observation if similar dynamics exist elsewhere, how they vary and with what effects.

Psychoanalysis, including feminist psychoanalysis, has theorised differences in the way that the 'real' (natural) mother and other primary carers signify for children. Fathers signify differently to mothers because of the infant's initial relation to the mother's body. To this is later added the father's special significance in relation to the mother and her body. The way in which such significations would change if fathers were involved in sole or shared parental care from the start is a challenging question for psychoanalytic theory (Frosh 1997). The initial dependency on the biological mother's body provokes

believed that 'the mother hates the baby before the baby hates the mother, and before the baby knows that mother hates him.' (1947:200).

unconscious fantasies in which the mother is a powerful and dangerous figure¹⁰. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1976) calls this the fantasy of the omnipotent mother. Such phantasies can be experienced in relation to other intimates and carers, through transference and counter-transference dynamics. However, they are at their most powerful in relation to the biological mother. A further effect of the fantasy of an omnipotent mother is the unconscious need to idealise mother: if she were not ideally good, her power would be too dangerous for the psychologically vulnerable child to contemplate (and we all remain the children of our mothers). Chodorow and Contratto (1989) argue that the fantasy of the perfect mother is evident even in feminist writings which imply that if 'current limitations on mothers were eliminated mothers would know naturally how to be good' (1989:90). What psychoanalysis adds here then, is a series of conceptual reasons why, although the idea of maternal work can be extended to apply beyond the mother, the significance for the relationship within which maternal work takes place will be mediated by quite specific unconscious factors to do with dependency and its effects on child-mother gendered power relations. The extensive existence of misogyny suggests that these factors are universal. Maternal work involves more than conscious intentional practices of care. It involves unconscious intersubjective dynamics.

Recognition

⁹ These implications are applicable across cultures. It is a matter for empirical inquiry how babies' ruthless narcissistic demands are expressed and contained and responded to in different times and place, how they change with time and with what effects.

¹⁰ This condition has been universal until now. The consequent phantasies on both sides and their effect on the relationship would be universal too, although expressed in specific ways, depending for example on dominant representations of mothers in a given culture.

In the way that Winnicott's work was taken up, the idea of maternal hate was left aside (for reasons which I have already considered as having to do with unconscious difficulties of acknowledging anything but mothers' love and the way this has been reproduced in culture). A different theme in Winnicott's work was his claim that if (m)others fail, grossly and consistently, to recognise the gestures of their infant (see below), this will have an enduring effect on its emotional and moral capacities¹¹. This claim was criticised because of its implications which lead to the charge of mother-blaming. There is overwhelming evidence, from developmental psychology (eg Murray 1992), clinical psychotherapy (too numerous to mention), literature and everyday experiences, that this claim is broadly true¹². For example, the containment provided by institutions, beliefs and cultural practices in pre-modern societies is likely to affect children's vulnerability to not-good-enough mothering. Critical psychology and feminism cannot afford just to blame the mother-blamers: we have to tease out the reality of diverse, complex and variable effectivity of maternal, parental and other care.

According to Winnicott, the development of what he saw as the true self of the baby depended on the lively and authentic response to that baby's gestures. Only in this way can it come to recognise itself as distinct (me from not-me). 'For Winnicott, everything depends on the mother's capacity to relate to her

¹¹ It is important to clarify a conceptual distinction here; that between recognising a child's communications (responding to its gestures) and meeting its needs. Winnicott was interested primarily in the child's needs for recognition (a category that does not appear in Ruddick's understanding of maternal work).

¹² Although 'true' is a contentious claim, I am using it intentionally, consistent with my critique of relativism. While much of the evidence for this claim derives from late modern, western cultures, it is unlikely to be limited to these. However, the mother's effectivity will be expressed differently according to cultural and social positions.

baby intuitively which, for him, means the ability to allow the baby to create reality for itself rather than having it imposed on it' (Minsky 1998:52). If a mother repeatedly fails to meet her infant's gestures this will result, over time, in a false self (Winnicott 1965).

Jessica Benjamin has developed a similar notion to Winnicott's, that of recognition, which she understands as 'to be known as oneself' (1984:301). She too traces recognition back to the initial mother-baby relationship:

In order to become human beings, we have to receive recognition from the first people who care for us. In our society it is usually the mother who bestows recognition¹³. She responds to our communications, our acts, and our gestures so that we feel they are meaningful. Her recognition makes us feel that vital connection to another being as necessary to human survival as food. (Benjamin, 1984:293)

The need for recognition involves a paradox which stems from the omnipotent fantasies of the baby in relation to its mother. The way for the baby to defend against the anxiety of dependency is to control the one on whom it depends. This resembles Winnicott's description of the infant's ruthless use of its mother. But Benjamin moves on to consider a later development where this desire conflicts with a move toward differentiation. If the baby controls her, it cannot experience true recognition from her, because she can only practise

¹³ In this statement, Benjamin illustrates one good reason why psychoanalytic theory does focus on the mother-child relationship: because of the common reality. Psychoanalysis does not tend to talk about families or parents when it means mothers and this is usually because it sees the maternal relationship as distinct and unique for the child, both consciously and unconsciously. It can be argued that psychoanalysis is ideologically blinded in so doing.

recognition from a position of independence. This, for Benjamin, constitutes a 'conflict of differentiation' (one that is replayed in many adult relationships). From this argument, Benjamin develops a position regarding the importance of the mother as subject, rather than object of the baby's demands¹⁴. This has been taken up by feminists because it transcends the polarity in arguments about women's or children's needs, as if these were necessarily in conflict (Featherstone 1997).

In Benjamin's argument, it is in the child's interest, as well as the mother's, that the mother is a subject; that is a person in her own right, differentiated psychologically from the person of her child, capable of recognising the differences between her own wishes and desires and those of her child(ren). Benjamin's explicit stress on recognition, combined with the acknowledgment of conflict in a struggle for control, helps us to make a clear distinction between a mother's capacity to meet her baby's demands and her capacity for recognition of her baby as having different wishes and desires from her own. The emphasis on meeting demands (something I associate more with a 1960s humanistic-permissive discourse) tends toward a model of the mother as object of her child's needs, whereas the latter stresses her as subject, able to meet the child, in its constantly changing manifestations, as nascent subject. Benjamin (1998) has now criticised the whole psychoanalytic terminology of subject-object and speaks of subject-subject relations.

Intersubjectivity, separation and differentiation

Alternatively it can be argued that psychoanalytic theory is reflecting the significance of

Thus far I have developed an approach which casts maternal subjectivity in relation to an initially dependent but developing being whose own sense of self is contingent upon the quality of its relationship with a maternal subject in the process of being differentiated. This relationship is constituted primarily through unconscious dynamics which operate between subjects. Stemming from the infant's dependency are fantasies of maternal omnipotence, defences against anxiety, conflicts of control and failures of recognition which, in manageable doses, aid differentiation. Caring for babies in these circumstances means that good enough maternal work involves bearing babies' ruthlessness.

The radical implications of this revision of psychoanalysis can be appreciated if we compare it with Freudian theory about the mother-child relationship. We have seen how, in the popularisation of psychoanalysis, it tended to follow from positioning mothers as objects of their babies' needs that mothers should respond to everything a baby demanded. However, in this scenario, a mother would psychologically remain an extension of a baby's omnipotent fantasies, not a separate entity. It is for this reason that, for Winnicott, ordinary failure to meet a baby's demands is a necessary part of its forging a differentiated identity: the mother and child can achieve differentiation between them. However, in the kind of Freudian theory that claimed that baby and mother were an inseparable pair, the father was seen as a necessary 'third term' that imposed separation through the trauma of Oedipal conflict. The father may nonetheless stand for difference: 'not the mother/ not me'. His symbolic role is

mothers in the internal and external realities of the people it tries to understand and to help.

about 'not being the body in which the baby has been carried, suckled and about which the baby fantasises a perpetual, fused future' (Minsky 1998:13).

It is well known that this account focussed on the boy child (whose defences against his forbidden desire for the mother were supposed to endow him with a thoroughly autonomous ego (rather than, as is more likely, a misogyny based on displaced anxiety). Girls' relative failure to separate from the mother resulted, according to Freudian theory, in weaker superegos. In the context of changing family forms in which many boys and girls grow up without fathers present, it is relevant to look closely at the ways that mothers and children have of differentiating without such Oedipal intervention.

I try to maintain a distinction between the terms differentiation and separation. The former refers to the developmental processes that I am trying to theorise that concern maternal-child intersubjectivity. The term separation is used in the context of Oedipal theory, summarised above, and has been criticised for its connotations of defensive individualism and failure to reflect the relational nature of self development, the account preferred by feminist psychoanalytic theory, particularly for girls (for aspects of this debate, see Mens Verhulst et al 1993, Lombardi 1998 and Stern 1985).

Containment

Maternal survival is a key notion in Winnicott's accounts (1947, 1951) of the baby's psychic differentiation from its mother; 'the process by which a subject

¹⁴ See also Lombardi 1998.

places an object outside her or his control' (Parker 1995: 115) and which therefore is the means whereby the other's different identity can be acknowledged. Winnicott, in his idea of the mother's survival, recognised how important it was that she was not damaged by the infant's destructive desires. This relational process is another example of how ordinary maternal failure to meet the child's every demand is necessary for its sense of being separate. A child will experience hate for the mother when she fails to meet its omnipotent and narcissistic demands and wish (in fantasy) to destroy her. By being 'destroyed' (in fantasy) and being unharmed in reality; that is, by surviving, the mother demonstrates that she can safely be 'used' and at the same time that she is not an extension of its unbridled love and hate or phantasies of seduction and destruction.

If we are to understand maternal subjectivity in this light of the infant's 'use' of the mother (and the changes which occur as the child gets older), this process needs to be theorised in more detail. What happens in the unconscious intersubjective dynamics which means that the mother may survive? What enables her not to retaliate or precipitates her retaliation? What happens to the baby's negative projections into her? According to Bion, the answer hinges on the mother's capacity for containment (Winnicott often used the term 'holding').

Bion and Winnicott both learned something about infant-mother dynamics through the transference and countertransference in their work as analysts with psychotic and borderline patients. Winnicott claimed that such patients

can 'teach the analyst more about early infancy than can be learned from direct observation of infants ... since what happens in the transference is a form of infant-mother relationship' (Winnicott 1965:141, quoted in Rayner 1990: 131). Bion's concept of containment theorises what he regarded as the most primitive unconscious modes of communication (outside an awareness of time and outside thought) originating in the mother-child relationship. He first described containment through a clinical example:

When the patient strove to rid himself of fears of death which were felt to be too powerful for his personality to contain he split off his fears and put them into me, the idea apparently being that if they were allowed to repose there long enough they would undergo modification by my psyche and could then be safely reintrojected (Bion 1959:103, quoted in Hinshelwood 1991: 247).

Bion contrasts this 'detoxification' with what happens when the other - mother or analyst - fails to contain the subject's fears:

On the occasion I have in mind the patient felt ... that I evacuated them so quickly that the feelings were not modified but had become more painful ... he strove to force them into me with increased desperation and violence. His behaviour, isolated from the context of analysis, might have appeared to be an expression of primary aggression. The more violent his phantasies of projective identification, the more frightened he became of me. There were sessions in which such behaviour expressed unprovoked aggression (Bion 1959:103-4, quoted in Hinshelwood 1991:247).

In a characteristic psychoanalytic move, Bion then explores the origins of these powerful fears which, through the transference, the patient has brought into therapy. These have their origins in the patient's relationship with his mother:

This patient had had to deal with a mother who could not tolerate experiencing such feelings and reacted either by denying them ingress, or alternatively by becoming a prey to the anxiety which resulted from introjection of the baby's bad feelings (Bion 1959:104, quoted in Hinshelwood 1991:247).

Here Bion is claiming that the failure of this mother to contain the child's hate had negative consequences for his development. This does not address the question of the child's other relationships and whether they might have served this function. Nor does it consider the institutional cultures within which the primary relationship is situated and their capacity for containment. However it does reflect the probability that this child, like the majority, had to depend primarily on his mother for these capacities. This can change. Bion is demonstrating the biographical, socially-situated workings of intersubjectivity, a biography starting, as it does arguably for all of us, in the early relationship to our mothers. The questions that follow are: to what extent do these dynamics apply beyond infancy and to what extent do, or could, they characterise all relationships?

Bion is claiming that the dynamics of containment are transferred into the adult relationship with the analyst. More generally, psychoanalysis understands such transference dynamics as extending into a wide range of adult relationships (arguably they are a defining characteristic of all relationships). If so, what effects does it have that the earliest version of this unconscious dynamic existed in relation to the mother, with the accompanying fantasies of her omnipotence, the desire to control her but be recognised by her and the tendency to split good and bad when under threat in that relationship? What are the implications for the gender of the transference? Male analysts do work with maternal as well as paternal transferences. However Chasseguet-Smirgel's analysis suggests that the effects of the fantasy of the omnipotent mother would be visited most powerfully upon the primary maternal figure; if available, the biological mother or one who can represent the mother, in particular the mother's body. If women are routinely in receipt of such maternal transferences in a way that men are not (paternal transferences are commonly forged out of gender difference from the mother) this will affect their relationships and their subjectivities.

Maternal development

Work on motherhood has been criticised for focusing on the 'initial event' and now I want to consider the effects of children's transformations on maternal subjectivity. In terms of a model like Ruddick's, we could ask, when do the child's needs change or end? At that notional point, presumably mothers would be mothers in name but not in terms of maternal work. Winnicott understands children proceeding from 'absolute dependence, rapidly

changing to relative dependence, and always travelling towards, (but never reaching) independence' (1968:90). The dependence may well reverse at times too. The identificatory connections and thus the unconscious emotional work does not stop at the end of childhood, nor adolescence. I intermittently experience vestiges of my own childlike demands on my mother - who is nearly 80 - which are produced in the dynamic between us. Nonetheless, self or moral development can be seen as the capacity to feel what Winnicott called 'ruth' (concern). In Klein's terms, it involves integrating love and hate into ambivalence, facing reality where good and bad can be acknowledged in the same object. This is an ongoing struggle¹⁵. As and when a child is capable of relating to their mother in this way, it will change the nature of the maternal subjectivity which is constituted in response. The care involved will hopefully become reciprocal.

Rozsika Parker (1995) introduced the idea of maternal development to challenge the exclusive emphasis on child development and as part of her aim to theorise mothers rather than continue in the tradition of casting them as static and empty theoretical categories to be filled by their children's needs. I want to take up the idea of maternal development in order to go beyond the notion of mother as subject in her own right, to situate it in unconscious intersubjectivity.

¹⁵ Using Kleinian principles, Alford (1989:152) regards 'the integration of love and hate' to be the common task 'faced by every human being'.

The inevitability of the child's development¹⁶ is mirrored in maternal development. This is not just an effect of positioning the mother as an unmediated respondent to the changing needs of the child, but can be understood through the frame of unconscious intersubjective dynamics. The child's ruthless demands place great strain on mothers to develop out of their own childlike narcissism. Being used as an extension of a controlling and narcissistic infant's demands usually gives way gradually to a relationship with someone who - most of the time - can imagine themselves in your position and recognise the differences between you in so doing¹⁷. These developments are neither inevitable nor entirely stable when they are achieved. However, the maternal figure is not simply on the receiving end of these. She changes. Every developmental move (regress as well as progress) is inevitably and interminably produced and reproduced (and changed) intersubjectively.

In this case, it has implications for other relationships and other subjectivities. The capacities which have been constituted in the (good enough) maternal relation are not stranded there. Maternal development is subjective development: containment and recognition, integration into ambivalence. These capacities, to the extent that they are developed, will be used in relation to others. They can enhance our capacities as friends, lovers, team-members, managers and neighbours. As they do so, they help to constitute

¹⁶ I am aware of the critiques of developmentalism (for example Burman 1994) and the consequent pressure to abandon the term 'development'. I prefer to retain it, but to take care not to embrace connotations of development as fixed, inevitable or teleological.

¹⁷ Britton (1993) argues that a child's experience in a triangle, rather than a dyad, is important in this move. The third person may be the father, but significant aspects of the logic of his argument applies whether this is the case or not.

the subjectivities of those others: recognition helps the development of the other's integration and differentiation; containment helps them face formerly unbearable ideas and helps toward integration of love and hate into ambivalence. Survival (in Winnicott's sense) demonstrates to the other the boundary between their destructive fantasy and reality. These capacities are mutually constituting. Arguably this is a model for all adult development¹⁸. Where adult relationships are concerned, it is important that the relationship is characterised by reciprocity in these qualities. The numerous examples where women remain in a maternal position with adult men (notably their partners) demonstrate both the possibility of not becoming 'adult' in this way and its importance for gender equality.

Maternal subjectivity

From the perspective of unconscious intersubjectivity, we could identify the defining feature of the specifically maternal as the dynamic which is constituted in relation to ruthless infantile needs and the consequent capacities of ambivalence (integration of love and hate), recognition and containment which may be developed as a result. These are capacities which depend on a robust sense of one's own differentiated subjectivity. Not all mothers will manage this (if they have been too damaged as a result of previous relationships, for example, see Maynes and Best 1997). If it is a capacity which women can develop (or fail to develop) as part of the challenge of being mothers, then others in equivalent positions can develop (or fail to develop) this aspect of 'maternal' subjectivity too. Any adult can

¹⁸ This bears upon the debate about an ethic of care and its relation to gender (Gilligan 1981,

potentially put themselves in this relation to a dependent infant. Preserving a distinction between the term maternal, and 'mother' makes it possible to conceptualise capacities like containment as available, in theory if not always in practice, to us all: women and men, psychoanalysts and patients, adults and (over time) children.

On the other hand, there are specific conditions, biological and historical, structural and psychological, that render actual mothers the most susceptible to the intersubjective dynamics within which maternal subjectivity is constituted. Psychologically, it seems likely that there is a systematic difference in the extent of ruthlessness to which young children subject their real mothers, other women and fathers as primary carers. This will also depend on the age of the child. This does not mean that only mothers will develop maternal subjectivity. Empirical research has reported such characteristics (albeit not theorised in this manner) in men who mother (Risman 1987). Such differences can be explained, according to psychoanalysis, because the same actual care (integration of love and hate, recognition, containment) does not mean the same thing to the other (in this case the child), for whom it is mediated by gendered and generational fantasies about that other. It may be that biological mothers, or women, will occupy a unique place in a baby's imagination because of its relation to the female body, starting before birth. If so, this will unconsciously affect their relation to the sexed differences of all bodies/others. Nonetheless it may be that diminishing polarisation in the gender of parenting and caring would

Tronto 1993, Hollway 1999b, Sevenhuijsen 1998)

eventually affect unconscious fantasies about the omnipotent mother. To address that question more work needs to be done in theorising the maternal body within the framework of unconscious intersubjectivity and in family conditions which challenge the gendered division of maternal unconscious emotional work.

The intersubjective capacities that enable a person to bear the demands of others in the service of their moral development should not be belittled, as part of the critique of a gendered division of emotional labour which discriminates against women - although in some respects it has done. Rather we can look at this maternal capacity - or rather the struggle to develop this capacity in relation to children - as something inherent in everyone, which can enhance all relationships. In contrast to either masochism or narcissism, Kristeva described this process as 'the slow, difficult and delightful apprenticeship in attentiveness, gentleness, forgetting oneself' (1992:200, quoted in Minsky 1998:119). If 'forgetting oneself' has unfortunate connotations of abnegation, I offer an interpretation which is more like Bion's idea of reverie: a temporary suspension of memory and desire which draws on subjective resources far removed from the phallogocentric subject. This is where another kind of communication resides, one rooted in empathic identification with the other from a foundation in a differentiated and integrated subjectivity.

Conclusions

The development of the capacities that I am collecting together under the term maternal subjectivity is not guaranteed by becoming a mother, but the infant does demand them and good enough conditions (external and internal) make their development likely. I have argued that while the demands are likely to be most powerfully experienced by a natural mother (who, after all, has grown that life as part of her own body), an equivalent position is likely to elicit these resources in others as well. While some men find it more difficult to find a creative identification with a helpless, dependent and ruthless infant, because of the history and biography of masculinities as other than the maternal, some men can and do. By focussing on intersubjective dynamics such as these, I have been able to extend the idea of maternal subjectivity beyond natural mothers and beyond women. These dynamics extend beyond women and children also in the way that the effects of ambivalence, containment and recognition carry into any relationship. We are all better off in relationships characterised by these reciprocal capacities.

I have found myself moving beyond the idea of a mother as autonomous subject in her own right, reinstating it with an intersubjective set of concepts in which a differentiated and integrated maternal subject is nonetheless central. Throughout, the child is in the picture in a way that might alarm some feminist sensibilities (including my own). This not only corresponds to my own experience of mothering, but theoretically with the idea of the intersubjectivity of the mother-child relationship. While a mother, in her other relationships and activities, may be temporarily free from these dynamics, to understand what is

going on in the ongoing relationship between mother and child requires a challenge to this rather Enlightenment idea of a bounded autonomous subject.

I know that in traditional psychoanalytic thinking, a focus on the interpenetration of maternal and child subjectivities was seen as a problem for the child and a deficit in the mother. Yet at the same time British clinical psychoanalysts were theorising the most basic aspects of understanding another person in terms of the mother-infant relationship. Winnicott's and Bion's own capacity for containment, ambivalence and recognition were not achieved at the expense of their differentiated and integrated subjectivities but rather because of them.

The theorisation of subjectivity is made difficult in the context of current binaries: separation or connection, autonomy or relation, integration or fragmentation, unity or multiplicity, and my understanding of maternal subjectivity in terms of unconscious intersubjectivity requires more development of these issues than this paper can provide. My position, following the Kleinian principles outlined at the beginning of this paper, has been that differentiation and integration go together, as desirable but difficult achievements, and that, in this specific sense, what is good for a mother, or any adult carer, is good for her developing child. My uses of the terms mother and maternal have been impossible to fix, since I have to try to hold on to the paradox of both broadening their applicability as I proceeded and keeping in view the particular psychological significance of the natural mother. Usually

mother signifies, as in psychoanalytic usage, that primary carer who is still most likely to be a child's natural mother

This close look into the function of maternal subjectivity demands a parallel look at paternal subjectivity. The British psychoanalytic tradition has rightly been criticised for emphasising the mother-child dyad at the expense of the triangular relationship which traditionally consisted of mother, father and child. Ron Britton (1993) has been exemplary in developing Kleinian thought to take account of the importance of the triangle in the child's developing subjectivity. Just as I have included a consideration of men and fathers in the maternal, such an exploration would extend to how women and mothers participate in paternal functions.

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