

Running head: THE SUPERMOM SYNDROME

The Supermom Syndrome: An Intervention Against the Need to Be King of the Mothering
Mountain

by

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In order to protect the identity of some individuals, identifying information has been removed. All names have been changed to honour confidentiality.

This journey of understanding would not be possible without the grace of my ten mother co-performers. I humbly utter a heartfelt thank-you to Rose, Carolyn, Deb, Trudy, Violet, Nancy, Jen, Ella, Emily, and Ann for their honesty and inspiration; I hope to hear your responses to my interpretations of your voices and perceptions.

Abstract

Through a layered account format combining theory, performative autoethnographic vignettes, and dialogical exchanges, the author explores the performances of Supermotherhood as they materialize within her life and potentially within the lives of, and through interactions with, other mothers inside and outside of her immediate peer group. The author analyses the ways the pervasive ideology of perfect mothering manifests itself within motherhood culture, and how it ultimately impacts maternal agency, self worth, and by extension, the family unit, and the culture of motherhood-mothering in general. Guided by a feminist poststructuralist approach, the author argues that the Supermom, or rather, *Super Mom* meta-identity offers all subjective labels and ideologies of mothering a place to *become* and celebrate possibility, individuality, transition, and maternal empowerment.

Keywords: mothering; feminism; performative identity; autoethnography;
poststructuralist feminism; maternal empowerment; layered account

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Who I Was-Am-Could-Will Be

June 26, 2010, 3:26 p.m.

Images of my life flash casually on the computer screen. They mark time and show a life I feel is not mine. I do not recognize the pictures of myself sometimes as I play at being mother. Tired eyes. Tired body.

I like to say that I *chose* to be a mother. Orchestrated is probably a more accurate term. I like to tell myself that at the age of 28 I decided to stay in Vancouver and meet a nice man, get married, and have a family—in that order. Marriage never made sense to me unless the goal was to produce a family. Children need stability, and stability equals marriage.

My eyes dart back up to the computer screen. I see a long-ago picture of my two boys and myself. I am holding my newly born son, and my 19-month old son is anxiously staring at his new brother, desperately trying to assess this new competitor-on-the-scene for Mommy's attention and love. My body is heavy—emotionally and physically—and my eyes...

Someone said the eyes are the windows to the soul. If that is true, then my soul is full of dark shadows: shadows of guilt; shadows of doubt; shadows of my former skinny self; and shadows of self-hate and loathing. Those early days of double motherhood were relentlessly, disgustingly, wet and smelly—God, how I wanted to be clean.

For the first five years of my motherhood experience, shadows continued to live next to me; actually, “swallowed me” is probably a more accurate description. The darkness had escaped the confines of my psyche and had burst into reality, like some megalomaniacal,

imprisoned criminal from a *Superman*TM sequel. The shadows constantly challenged me for my sanity and eventually—after four and half years of bitter battles—won.

It was a Tuesday, the sun was shining, the cherry blossoms were blooming, and I was actually in a good mood; “Hungry Like the Wolf” by Duran Duran was cranked on my car stereo, and I was singing along with Simon LeBon loving every “Doo do doo” that flew past my lips. Then, a young, male driver’s enraged squeal of “You fucking cunt!”— I had dared to stop at an intersection and let a woman pushing a baby carriage cross the road—reduced me to a heaving, howling mess of snot and uncontrollable, shaky tears. Just. Like. That. Traffic backed up behind me. More horns shrieked their displeasure and impatience. Duran Duran’s “Hold Back the Rain” was the soundtrack for my breakdown.

I don’t remember how I got home.

I continue to stare at the display of photos—of myself, my husband, and my family—and it is glaringly evident that my Motherhood has been divided into two distinct periods of time: BD and AD—Before antiDepressants and After antiDepressants. Pictures taken between 2003 and 2008 hold little meaning to me. I don’t know who that woman playing-at-mother is. She is not consistent. The stolen moments reveal a woman who is sad, scared, and doesn’t like herself very much. A woman whose experience as a mother was clearly marked by a constant series of lost negotiations: “Just feed the babies, and then you can sleep”; “If you don’t scream, you can have a nice, warm bubble bath”; or “Just get the kids to bed and you can have a glass of wine.” Wine. Mother’s little helper...mother’s little dis-connector. Pictures after 2008 reveal a calmer woman who has been seduced and subdued with the aid of pharmaceuticals. At least I appear to be a little thinner (finally!) and have a little less shadows tugging at the boundaries of my sanity (I hope).

The slide show continues on my computer monitor. Now there are countless, endless images of my boys at play—my beautiful, crazy, heart-bursting boys. Engaged bodies. Sparkling eyes. Exploring. Living. Enjoying a life that I have helped to create for them. Enjoying opportunities that I have organized, shaped, and arranged—wonderful memories that I barely remember.

I do not think I have failed my children. But I know I have failed myself.

This is hard.

I believe I have embraced, embodied, and devoured being a Supermom in order to prevent my running away from motherhood altogether. After all, the show must go on.

At least that's where I am at today

The Problem

What is the appropriate performance of motherhood, and who has the right to dictate, oversee, and judge the numerous interpretations that are played out daily in Western culture? Dialectical discourses on motherhood have persisted since the end of the Second World War (Odland, 2010; see also Foster, E., 2005; Hays, 1996; Vavrus, 2007). Literature, film, parenting magazines, and pop culture depict and emphasize the conventional beliefs, behaviours, values, and opinions of motherhood-mothering and aid in developing and shaping identity constructs such as womanhood and motherhood (Arendell, 2000; see also, Francis-Connolly, 2003; Johnston & Swanson, 2003; May, 2008). However, if a woman's lived experience does not equate to the prescribed, cultural performance of motherhood, what then? What options are there for the modern mother to negotiate, and ultimately triumph over, the innumerable maternal contradictions in today's society?

The current social construction of femininity, and how it is performed within motherhood, does not leave room for inadequacy. Consequently, women are forced to make “greater efforts to portray themselves as supermum [sic], superwife, supereverything and hide the opposite” (Choi, Henshaw, Baker, & Tree, 2005, p. 167). Unfortunately, suppressing one’s true feelings and experiences in order to present a front of a superwoman who is able to cope with and triumph over so many competing demands is a recipe for disaster. I know this to be true firsthand. I am a Supermom.

The concept of the Supermom has been parodied in popular fiction (see Hauser, 2005), used in advertising campaigns (see Skenazy, 2007), and dismantled within the pages of various scholarly books and journals (see Hays, 1996; Paré & Dillaway, 2005). The Supermom holds a job, maintains a smooth home environment, and presents herself as together, in control, and on top of it all. The Supermom is competitive, complicated, and ubiquitous, and she is simultaneously vilified and celebrated within the “mamasphere.” The performance of the Supermom identity in modern, Western culture results in women contemplating deflated self-images and lack of perceived agency.

Maternal feminist scholars and authors have relentlessly described the institution of motherhood as an unwelcome, unwanted conception. Despite women and researchers sharing their feelings and findings, motherhood continues to function as a patriarchal, oppressive entity (O’Reilly 2010b). The question begs, “Why is this so?” While much has been written about the necessity for change, and maternal activists and researchers have presented strategies for maternal empowerment, it remains a challenge to express how to bring change about on both the micro and macro—or private and public—sphere of identity existence. How do we lift the words off the page and put them into action as a catalyst for a positive revolution?

I am a feminist, *and* I am a mother. I have been raised to understand that women can have it all, and that the battle for equality—so deftly won by women during the second wave of feminism—is settled and no longer in need of my generation’s focused attention. That is a lie. Women are judging each other, and of greater concern, their own “self,” to prove that they are King of the Mothering Mountain. For some perverse reason, we are addicted to “The Mess” (Warner, 2006) of motherhood and unable to make peace with our so-called choices to be everything to everyone.

The performance of motherhood I choose to portray continues to propagate the need for perfect parenting and enables an environment of judgment and unattainable possibility rather than sisterhood and support. The difference between what I publicly display and what I privately experience is incongruous, uncomfortable, and unhealthy. Therefore, by exploring the multiple meanings and embodiments of motherhood-mothering and moving between my personal experiences and narrative conversations with other mothers—who may or may not self-identify as a Supermom—a greater understanding of the impact personal performances of motherhood-mothering have on the self, on other mothers, and on society in general may be revealed and altered (Bell, 2004; Youngblood Jackson, 2004). Further, it is with optimistic hope that the re-telling, re-listening, and re-absorbing of these co-constructed maternal exchanges will provide a way, permission even, to re-think my own journey of Supermotherhood.

It is time for this Mess to be cleaned up—at least in my life.

What I Know and What is Known

Motherhood-Mothering in the Third Wave

The relationship between feminism and motherhood continues to be complex (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hallstein, 2007; Medved & Kirby, 2005; Porter, 2010). Adrienne

Rich's influential text *Of Women Born* was one of the first within North American scholarship to theorize "both the oppressive and potentially empowering components of maternity" (Hallstein, 2007, p. 269; see also O'Reilly, 2010a, 2010b). Rich (1976/1986) perceived motherhood as comprised of two parts—a woman's subjective experience of *mothering*, and the influence or effect of the *institution of motherhood* on her mothering. The institution of motherhood is said to include "societal expectations, assumptions, laws and rules which govern how a woman is expected or, in some cases, forced to mother her children" (Porter, 2010, p. 5; see also Rich 1976/1986). However, Rich's text has been accused of forwarding anti-family and anti-mother sentiments, and the media has continued to attach those notions to most second wave feminist scholarship (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; see also Bell, 2004; Hallstein, 2007; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Medved & Kirby, 2005; Porter, 2010). The notion that society's devaluation of mothering is a direct result of the feminist movement has gained increasing public support (Medved & Kirby, 2005).

Today, according to feminist rhetoric, mothers are mothering in the third wave of feminism, an era of contradictions and confrontations where women want it all, have it all, and are striving to make a difference (Edley, 2004; Kinser, 2008). Modern women can choose to play any number of roles in today's society: worker, mother, wife, sister, and lover—to name but a few. However, this apparently seamless co-mingling of self-identities has only resulted in women having to prove that they can *do it all* (Hughes, 2002; Kahu & Morgan, 2007; O'Reilly, 2010b).

Some feminist critics believe third wave feminists are undoing the gains made by second wave feminists by embodying a "so-called choice feminism" (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008, p. 504; see also Foster, E., 2005). Statements such as "I am choosing to stay at home for the children,"

are exemplary of third wave postfeminist presentations of choice that obscure power struggles between men and women as well as women of differing ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic circumstance (Vavrus, 2007). Yet, others believe that third wave daughters may not be as educated as their second wave mothers about the possibilities of combining mothering and feminism (Medved & Kirby, 2005). Education is needed to teach young women that it is possible and acceptable to be both a feminist and a mother regardless of whether or not they work outside of the home or mother full-time. Consequently, as the complicated relationship between feminism and motherhood continues to evolve, the real challenge will be to not merely question the values and rules that men place upon the institution of motherhood, but also to challenge the values that women have adopted and hold up as the societal norm for their own sex (Tardy, 2000).

Mother Identity

The media are an effective vehicle for delivering culture's code of conduct and ensuring its propagation within public discourse (Arendell, 2000; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Foster, E., 2005; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2003, 2004; Medved & Kirby, 2005; Vavrus, 2007). Media depictions continue to favour a traditional presentation of motherhood and are "increasingly pervaded by an individualistic rhetoric of choice" (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008, p. 501; see also Vavrus, 2007). Consequently, mother identity is negotiated through a maze of either-or characteristics and qualifiers: a mother is selfish or selfless, independent or interdependent, a success or a failure, or a "natural" or needing the help of experts (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; see also Foster, E., 2005; Tardy, 2000). A woman who prescribes to communally accepted norms of motherhood is said to display a moral presentation of the self (May, 2008), and a perceived lack of cultural support may be used as a "moral justification"

(Johnston & Swanson, 2004, p. 506) for a mother's choice of self-portrayal (see Heisler & Ellis, 2008).

A mother's self-identity is also constructed through her "collective experiences, thoughts, ideas, memories, and plans for the future" (Heisler & Ellis, 2008, p. 447; see also Buzzanell et al., 2007). However, *cultural* (Austin & Carpenter, 2008) or *master narratives* (Porter, 2010) of motherhood give meaning to experience and may propagate—consciously or subconsciously—the patriarchal position that all women are biologically destined to become and thrive as mothers (Arendell, 2000; Tardy, 2000). These repetitive value judgments produce and reproduce culturally sanctioned ways of mothering that "labels and then privileges those mothers considered to be good by the parameters of the narrative" (Austin & Carpenter, 2008, p. 381). A mother's innocent complicity in this cycle allows for *misrecognition*—"this is simply the way things are" (Austin & Carpenter, 2008, p. 383)—and thus solidifies the presence of oppressive ideologies and structures in society. Although women may be resistant to the dominant interpretations of good motherhood (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005), societal role expectations and the acceptance and validation from peers and strangers can also play a pivotal role in a woman's sense of mother-self (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Heisler & Ellis, 2008). After all, motherhood is a status characteristic (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

A woman's personal vision of motherhood, or maternal *face* (Heisler & Ellis, 2008), is an extension of her self-identity. If a woman's mother identity includes socially perceived, negative mothering behaviours, she may employ culturally endorsed, positive traits and actions in order to (over) compensate for the negative opinions. These constant adjustments and concealments contribute to and propagate modern mothers' collective wish for perfect mothering (Austin &

Carpenter, 2008; Duquaine-Watson, 2003; Hays, 1996), and permits a dialectical judgment of mothering to emerge: good mother versus bad mother.

The “Mommy Wars.”

Working mothers and stay-at-home mothers have been pitted against each other in an effort to answer the question: “Who is the better mother” (Brykman, 2006; Hays, 1996; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Kahu & Morgan, 2007; Johnston & Swanson, 2003, 2004, 2006; Lupton & Schmied, 2002; Medved & Kirby, 2005; Paré & Dillaway, 2005; Zimmerman, Aberle, Krafchick, & Harvey, 2008)? This ideological divide has mothers who work outside the home defending their position as a means to be better mothers and well-adjusted women on one side, while on the other, pundits of the stay-at-home camp instruct employed mothers to tie their tubes and get on with their careers (Schlessenger, 2000). Ultimately, what defines a good or bad mother will depend on the context of the mother constructing the definition, and almost all women will construct definitions “that exclude mothers different from themselves” (Johnston & Swanson, 2004, p. 498).

Stay-at-home mothers define a good mother as accessible, present, self-sacrificing, and committed to the motto, “children first” (Johnston & Swanson, 2004)—a definition that excludes working mothers. Working mothers define a good mother as someone who recognizes the importance of embodying a diversity of roles outside the scope of motherhood and committed to the motto “happy mother, happy child” (Johnston & Swanson, 2004); this definition, in turn, excludes stay-at-home mothers. Therefore, the “Mother War” rhetoric does affect all mothers, regardless of whether they stay-at home or work (Johnston & Swanson, 2004), and creates an atmosphere of mother-blame (Medved & Kirby, 2005; Zimmerman et al., 2008) and perpetual self-justification (Tardy, 2000).

The stay-at-home, good mother.

The current construct of the good mother evolved over the course of the last century and came into prominence during the 1950s (Paré & Dillaway, 2005; Porter, 2010). From 1945 to 1965, women were encouraged to have large families in order to replenish the war-ravaged populations; motherhood was “presented as a woman’s true and only destiny” (Porter, 2010, p. 9). A good mother during this period in history loved her children unconditionally and cared exclusively for the household and the children. By the 1970s, the good mother definition had evolved to include complete responsibility for her child’s intellectual development and personal entertainment.

A “new and improved” stay-at-home mother emerged on the motherhood scene in the 1990s. This modern version of the good mother now included active and financially draining involvement in *all* components of the sacred child’s psychological, emotional, and physical well being and development (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Paré & Dillaway, 2005; Tardy, 2000; Warner, 2006). Consequently, many professional women chose to *opt out* (Belkin, 2003; see also Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Vavrus, 2007) of the workforce citing a desire to be at home with their children as an increased priority over corporate success.

The stay-at-home mother is a *mother* first (Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Paré & Dillaway, 2005)—as opposed to a wife or a worker. Her decision to replace the glass-ceiling barrier to the upper echelon of corporate power with a maternal wall (see Brykman, 2006) is “couched in a discourse of choice and feminism” (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008, p. 513; see also Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Medved & Kirby, 2005). These *Minivan Moms* of the 2000s (Warner, 2006) are depicted as literally pursuing a romantic, child-centric ideal (Duquaine-Watson, 2003).

The working, bad mother.

The working mother gained momentum in the 1970s and early 1980s on the second wave of feminist idealism (Paré & Dillaway, 2005; Porter, 2010). Liberal feminists believed the working mother would alter society's negative opinion on combining work and mothering and facilitate the inclusion of flexible work hours, extended parental leave, and job sharing as workplace norms (Paré & Dillaway, 2005). The working mother works, at minimum, 40 hours per week, and is characterized as a bad mother obsessed with body image, money, advancement in the workplace, and material possessions (Paré & Dillaway, 2005; see also Johnston & Swanson, 2004). Further, the bad mother or "*good professional*" is constructed as promoting self, demonstrating independence, lacking in natural mothering qualities, and fulfilling her potential" (Johnston & Swanson, 2003, p. 245). The cultural assumption is that the working mother's predilection for work and external objects and stimuli prevent her from embracing and participating in all aspects of her child's life (Hays 1996; Paré & Dillaway, 2005).

According to some scholars, "[c]areer women are undermined in their attempts to include both mothering and career in their lives" (Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2009, p. 1209; see also Mausart, 1999; Warner, 2006). Contemporary mothering is considered non-work, yet constructed as a job (Kahu & Morgan, 2007), and motherhood as a job is not generally rewarded or respected by society—it is devalued. Therefore, women must turn to paid work to feel accomplished and accepted (Kahu & Morgan, 2007; Warner, 2006).

The working mother has also been described in the literature as a Supermom who effortlessly switches between the demands of a high-powered job and busy home life without damage to the wellbeing and success of her children or career (DeMeis & Perkins, 1996; Hays, 1996; Paré and Dillaway, 2005). However, the label Supermom "suggests that, when women

work outside the home, motherhood should still be their primary duty” (Paré & Dillaway, 2005, p. 72). Consequently, many working mothers continue to put their family first in an attempt to dispel the bad mother label (O’Reilly, 2010b).

Intensive Mothering

Whether working or stay-at-home, both competing mother-identities are trying to attain their own version of the good Supermom “based on a binary conceptualization of motherhood that *does not exist* [emphasis added]” (Paré & Dillaway, 2005, p. 81: see also Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Warner, 2006). These internalized ideologies are employed to determine, describe, and dissect personal as well as societal mothering behaviours (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Although women’s expectations of motherhood are influenced by the current cultural ideology, they may be unable to fully meet the prescribed ideal resulting in depression, increased irreconcilable feelings of time pressure, decreased work-life balance, and negative feelings towards motherhood in general (see Choi et al, 2005; Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, & Andrey, 2008; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Webber & Williams, 2008). No mother wishes to be perceived or labeled as a bad mother by society; however, the overwhelming drive for a woman to be recognized as a good mother by her peers and strangers alike reveals a political investment in motherhood that is exemplified by the “risk women take if they dare suggest motherhood is anything but emotionally rewarding” (Duquaine-Watson, 2003, p. 100).

Intensive mothering is the prevailing ideology in North America (Arendell, 2000; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays 1996; Pare & Dillaway, 2005; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Warner, 2006); an ideology that places the child above all else, perpetuates cultural hegemony (Johnston & Swanson, 2006), and intensifies the necessity of the do-it-all mother. This idealized conception of motherhood serves only to “pit women against each other rather than join them

against the structures that have created the idealization” (Tardy, 2000, p. 440). Hays (1996) contended that all mothers, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic circumstance “share a *recognition* [emphasis added] of the ideology of intensive mothering” (p. 131; see also Buzzanell, Waymer, Tagle & Liu, 2007). However, intensive mothering still tends to favour the idealized image of the family unit—White, middle class, heterosexual couples with one or more children (Arendell, 2000; Kahu & Morgan, 2007; Tardy, 2000).

Intensive mothering promotes the image of the sacrificial mother, equates dependency with intimacy, and deems the maintenance and nurturing of relationships as the sole responsibility of the mother (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Consequently, the stay-at-home mother will justify her position by stating and showing that she is putting the child’s needs first; a choice that the mother will trumpet as being natural (Warner, 2006), without question (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008), and the equivalent of paid employment (Kahu & Morgan, 2007; Pare & Dillaway, 2005). However, the working mother will also justify her decision to work by stating that she is a role model who teaches gender equality through her actions, brings more income to the family (Warner, 2006), and through daycare, allows for increased socialization and independence for her children (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). In both instances, whether stay-at-home or working, mothers use intensive mothering to justify their actions and choices and to demonstrate to society that they are good mothers (Tardy 2000; see also Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). While some scholars contend that working mothers are the most guilty of propagating the intensive mothering ideology, women who attempt to combine employment and good mothering are more vulnerable to feelings of failure, anxiety, isolation, and impotency (Medved & Kirby, 2005; Pare & Dillaway, 2005; Tardy, 2000; Warner, 2006).

Today, intensive mothering is referred to as the *New Momism* (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) or the *Mommy Mystique* (Warner, 2006); the media, through fear, celebrity mom profiles, and guilt tactics, are perceived as instigating the modern mother's need for continual perfection. Unfortunately, this need for perfection cripples a mother's agency and confines her to a realm of mothering that is unattainable and unforgiving (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Warner, 2006). Further, this new ideal of motherhood continues to marginalize minority mothers, trumpets the enlightenment of women who choose stay-at-home motherhood over the work force, benefits men, panders to capitalism, and contributes towards the elimination of second wave feminist fought societal changes (see Bell, 2004; Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2009; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Warner, 2006).

The State of Maternal Affairs

Motherhood has been naturalized and is considered to be a woman's calling and purpose (Arendell, 2000; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; O'Reilly, 2010b). In addition, the literature pervasively supports the concept of dialectical maternal identities (see Foster, E., 2005; Johnston & Swanson, 2004, 2005; Medved & Kirby, 2005). Yet, not all women are mothers, and mothering as caregiving is neither exclusively the "domain of women" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1192), nor an exclusive identity. In order for a consistent transformation to occur in both public discourse and personal, private practice, it is imperative to challenge the thinking on mothering identity and expectations to embrace a *both/and*-non-gendered over an *either/or*-gendered perspective (Johnston & Swanson, 2006; O'Reilly, 2010b).

Almost all researchers agree that motherhood—as it is perceived and performed in Western society—is disempowering and oppressive (O'Reilly, 2010b). One of the challenges with mother identity is finding ways for women to feel empowered without “engaging in the

negative personal and political consequences of the [maternal] organizational frame” (Medved & Kirby, 2005, p. 465). O’Reilly (2010b) believes the use of the phrase *empowered mothering* is ambiguous as the “term fails to answer who is doing this, for whom, and why” (p. 18). Further, when maternal scholars attempt to define empowered mothering, focus tends to shift from the idea of maternal activism to anti-sexist childrearing techniques; therefore, empowered mothering does not equate to an empowered mother (O’Reilly, 2010b).

Proposed solutions.

Although feminist scholars continue to frame motherhood as imprisoned by patriarchal rules and attitudes, those rules are frequently enacted and enforced by women. Hallstein (2007) believed that maternal empowerment was possible if women could look within themselves and reject *matrophobia* and the accompanying rhetoric. The term *matrophobia* was developed by Rich (1976/1986) and is defined as a fear of becoming one’s mother that manifests itself through mothering behaviours that are usually the antithesis of the woman’s mother’s mothering (O’Reilly, 2010a). This notion of “not-like-her” mothering may also be extended to include other mothers in a woman’s mothering reality (see Johnston & Swanson, 2004).

Some maternal scholars believe that it is essential for society to view mothering and caregiving as a real job if the artificially constructed boundaries among work, family, and life are ever going to shift or be deconstructed in their entirety (Kahu & Morgan, 2007; Medved & Kirby, 2005). However, feminist maternal scholars contend that modern motherhood will continue to be “impervious to change because it is grounded in gender essentialism, a gender ideology that establishes a naturalized opposition between public and private spheres” (O’Reilly, 2010b, p. 17; see also Butler, 2004; Foster, E., 2005). Feminist writings are equally guilty of conforming to the notion of naturalized motherhood (O’Reilly, 2010b).

A proposed solution to the current intensive mothering ideology is to adopt the practice of *outlaw motherhood* (O'Reilly, 2010b). Outlaw motherhood underlines the importance of a mother meeting her *own* needs, questioning societal pressures and demands, accepting and welcoming help in childrearing, and embracing emotions that are contrary to the idea of maternal desire as the norm (O'Reilly, 2010b). Further, if the word *mother* is re-classified as a verb, and if the creation of a “feminist ‘ethic of care’ paradigm” (O'Reilly, 2010b, p. 28) re-characterizes motherhood issues as parental and family concerns, it may be possible to challenge the current intensive, patriarchal mothering environment in Western society (O'Reilly, 2010).

Areas for future study.

In order to further develop maternal theories and deeper understandings of mothering and motherhood, it is essential to merge quantitative and qualitative approaches to motherhood studies (Arendell, 2000). There is also a need to broaden motherhood studies to include the effect of mothering on the spousal relationship, and the effect of parenting on the father image (Arendell, 2000; Heisler & Ellis, 2008). It is essential to acknowledge that men parent as well.

Future maternal scholarship needs to focus on the effects of maternal decisions on the individual mother “in the context of *her own life*” (O'Reilly, 2010b, p. 19). It is also imperative for feminist maternal scholars to resist matrophobia and theorize “a new feminist subjectivity on maternity” (Hallstein, 2007, p. 293). In summary, Arendell's (2000) recommendations, though over a decade old, remain salient today: “We need more attention to the lives of particular mothers—to mothers' own voices—and to the lives and voices of diverse groups of mothers” (p. 1202).

Whether feminists, mothers, feminist mothers, or women, we are perpetuating judgment and the very obstacles and issues we declare publicly we want eradicated. If we say we want

choice, why do we choose the hard, negative path? Our pointed finger of mother blame must be directed back at our self (Warner, 2006); it is evident that mothers need to work to find and accept *their* version of mother (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Brykman, 2006) without guilt, condemnation, or apology. Future research needs to focus on how the cultural messages of good motherhood may positively influence mothering behaviours (Heisler & Ellis, 2008), and for what purpose—perceived or factual—our mothering must be framed within a rhetoric of competitive negativity.

Where I Am Coming From

Theoretical Motivations

Experiences, practices, and performances of motherhood are “inescapably and irreducibly gendered” (Byrne, 2006, p. 1002; see also Butler, 2004; Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; O’Reilly, 2010b). A poststructuralist feminist lens reveals the effect of discourse on identity, reality, and subjectivity, and the implication these shifting power struggles have on human agency (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005). Poststructuralism views the subject of woman, for example, as always in process, conflicted, and devoid of binary thinking (Hughes, 2002). Some feminist critics believe that a poststructuralist approach “deconstruct[s] woman out of existence” (Hughes, 2002, p. 10); I disagree. Tearing apart, questioning, challenging, and willing forward, positive movement over apathy is the way to understand who or what is pulling and distorting the edges of identity and self-knowledge (see Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Buzzanell, Sterk, & Turner, 2004; Foster, V., 2007; Hughes, 2002; Kinser, 2008). Sometimes it is necessary to peer into the shadows to understand and embrace the darkness in order to transform it into light.

Of late, there is a growing interest in creative, critical, and reflexive research approaches amongst feminist scholars (see Foster, V., 2007; Livholts, 2009; Madison, 2006; Richardson,

2007; Smart, 2009; Spry, 2001, 2006). An account of the self, of “woman-as-subject-always-in-the-process-of-becoming” (Hughes, 2002, p. 10), calls for alternative, performative approaches that *show* not just *talk about* feminist theory in motion (Richardson, 2007). Reflexive, creative writing, or *post/academic writing* (Livholts, 2009), challenges the notion of normative academic scholarship and has the capability to transform the relationship between author/scholar-performer and audience into a shared experience.

Performance Autoethnography

Autoethnography celebrates the power of personal stories to “address both our ways of knowing and our ways of being” (Foster, E., 2005, p. 59; see also Denzin, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Humphreys, 2005; Spry, 2001,2006). Performance ethnography gives “life to people in context, makes embodied practices meaningful, and generates analysis for seeing the conditions that make the socially-taken-for-granted visible as a process” (Warren, 2006, p. 318; see also Conrad, 2008; Denzin, 2003). My personal journey and experiences of motherhood allow for my inclusion in the culture I am studying (Ellis, 2004; Spry, 2006). Therefore, by embodying the researcher experience, through courageously inhabiting lived reality and becoming a performative-I (Spry, 2006), an intervention may occur. Through autoethnographic explorations, preconceived opinions, theories, and culturally dominant performances of motherhood may be challenged and provide opportunity for discovery, recovery, and a renewed engagement with the self and others (see Spry, 2006); yet, autoethnography may present “more questions than it answers” (Rambo, 2007, p. 364).

Performance is always in process, imperfect, instantaneous, and a method to view, share, and build understanding (Denzin, 2009; Spry, 2006). A *dialogical* performance—speaking and engaging *with* and *to* rather than *about*—seeks to synthesize differing voices, opinions,

worldviews, values, and beliefs (Conquergood 1985). When a researcher undertakes ethnography using this performative stance, he or she is undertaking a dialogue that leaves both the “ethnographer and the human ‘subjects’ of ethnography, as ‘*co-performative witnesses*’ [emphasis added]” (Donkor, 2007, p. 822; see also Conrad, 2008). A true dialogical encounter is a balanced exchange that allows for acceptance of another’s culture while simultaneously challenging the limits and boundaries of one’s own culture.

If a dialogical performance is not embraced, the ethnographer will fall victim to an unethical, disjunctive, performative stance.¹ Therefore, a dialogic performative stance is the moral centre, the point of balance, and the space where “mutually contrasting pulls of energies” (Madison, 2006, p. 323) can neutralize the possibility of an extreme performance. When an ethnographer pays attention, is able to move past reflective knowledge of the self, and embraces reflexive knowledge, a true co-performance will occur. Reflexivity and vulnerability are essential components for the process of researching to change the researcher (Richardson, 2007).

My Dilemma of Presentation

I am a performer; I always have been. It is impossible for me to ignore the performative way I look at, interpret, and share my world. However, I also love the power and challenge of the written word, and the personal satisfaction that is achieved by interpreting and extrapolating knowledge from “between the lines.” A *layered* account allows a “writer to incorporate multiple voices including theory, subjective experience, fantasy, and more” (Rambo, 2005, p. 563) in order to share knowledge about a subject that might be overlooked by strictly employing an academic approach. A *somatic layered* account (Vannini, Ahluwalia-Lopez, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2010) “draws its multiple perspectives from the *combination* [emphasis added] of

¹ Conquergood (1985) named these extreme stances The Custodian’s Rip Off, The Enthusiast’s Infatuation, The Skeptic’s Cop-Out, and The Curator’s Exhibitionism.

diverse researcher's voices...and diverse social agents (e.g. both reflexive researchers and reflexive informants)" (p. 380). This presentation style combines the interpretive with the reflexive and the sensual with the cerebral in a poetic attempt to mitigate performative writing's "tendencies to self-indulgence and theoretical irrelevance (Vannini et al., 2010, p. 381; see also Ellis, 2004). Further, a somatic layered account challenges the usefulness of standard academic formatting and borrows filmic devices, such as flashbacks, in an attempt to motivate and captivate an audience (Vannini et al., 2010).

The juxtaposition and contradiction of necessary academic components and language with personal beliefs, emotions, accounts, and reactions is also representative of the inner turmoil over self-representation and -presentation I have experienced during the past two years of my academic journey. I have come to believe that the actor and the inquiring, qualitative, boundary-pushing academic are indistinguishable identities. As the renowned stage actress and teacher Uta Hagen (1991) wrote:

The actor...learns to understand the psychological problems of human beings when putting his own passions, his loves, fears, and rages to work in the service of the characters he plays. He will learn to face himself, to hide nothing from himself—and to do so takes AN INSATIABLE CURIOSITY ABOUT THE HUMAN CONDITION. (p. xiii)

Whether performance ethnography, autoethnography, or layered accounts, somatic or otherwise, all approaches seek a way to lift skeletal words off the page and wrap them with flesh and lived experience. Therefore, by layering co-performative and autoethnographic vignettes over theory and multi-vocal mothering accounts, it is my intention that "the accumulation of the traces left

behind” (Rambo, 2005, p. 571) will portray an intervention against modern motherhood and provide a catalyst for the metamorphosis of my mothering identity.

I am interested in co-exploring understandings to the following questions:

RQ1: How do mothers experience the need to be (or not be) a Supermom in light of the many roles women play in today's society?

RQ2: What lengths will I go to in order to achieve the utopian ideal of Supermotherhood?

The performance *has* already begun.

August 9, 2010, 4:30 p.m.

The droning of my neighbours’ voices breaks my train of thought.
Brilliant, thinkings and doings of motherhood.
Meanwhile, I am missing mothering.
Missing the sun, the smells, and the summer day.

For what?!

To prove that I can,
that I am able,
that I can be anything...
Except a mother.

I am not mothering.
I am absent.

I cannot see the smile on my boys’ faces
as they ride ferociously into the wind.
Bicycle wheels spinning, spinning...
Propelling them further away from childhood...

And needing me.

I cannot feel their pain when they tumble and skin their knees.
I cannot offer kisses...
A shoulder...
A warm and protective embrace.

All I am offering is a shut office door and the incessant clicking of keys.
Brilliant thinkings and doings of motherhood.

Right.

One less memory in my memory banks.
But am I ever making a difference with what I am writing right now.

I am doing it again. I am procrastinating through tears by writing guilty poetics. All this reading and absorbing has made me dreadfully depressed—and numb. According to the “experts,” I have no agency, and my performance of motherhood is a masquerade that can have very serious consequences on my health and to the relationships around me. Lovely. Blah, blah, blah.

Do I have to cite within my personal journal? (UGH!!!)

This herculean attempt at juggling school, artistic expression, and family is insane. Ridiculous. I don’t even know if it is an honest cathartic experience or just another performance towards my ultimate presentation of Masters Student-Mother-Actress-Insane Asylum Inmate. How can it be honest—and what does *honest* mean—if I am *trying* to express how I feel, listen for the buzzer to go off on the dryer, and fend off the nagging feeling of exhaustion that is beckoning my eyelids to shut? (Just for a moment.) I am simultaneously investigating and writing about mommy identity as I attempt to get a grip on what I really see when I look in the mirror. I am enacting, right now, the role of Supermom.

However, she is my self-protector and deflector. She is my warm, comfy, broken-in, chocolate brown, cashmere sweater. She is familiar. Sometimes I think it is much easier to play a part that is comfortable, even though it is bad for you, then to try and just be real. That’s too scary. Can I write gazillions of words, fold laundry, solve children’s emotional crises, and work

simultaneously? No problem. Can I seem to be a perfect student, perfect mother, and a shitty wife? Absolutely.

People keep asking me, “What are you going to do with your degree?”

All I can think of to reply is, “I don’t know.” Perhaps I will frame it, and hang it on my wall along with all my other awards and accolades that no one else sees.

There is a reason I am doing this—all of this. Yes, there is.

I just do not know what *this* is anymore.

Who I Have Met

My Co-performers

Conversations were conducted with women who ranged in age from 32 to 49 years; self-defined as a stay-at-home, working, or part-time, working mother; and had at least one child under the age of ten years. All of the women were White, Anglo-Canadian, married, middle-class, and held, at minimum, a high school education. The individual conversations occurred at each woman’s home between January 30 and February 17, 2011. The interviews were semi-structured², open-ended, averaged one hour in length, audio recorded, and eventually transcribed; pseudonyms were employed to protect the confidentiality of my co-performers.

Co-performers were established through personal contacts, peer referrals, or by responding to a flyer that was posted at the local (Vancouver, B.C.) elementary school and community centre. Interested women were encouraged to share the names of friends, family, or acquaintances—snowball and contact sampling (Byrne, 2006; Chaudhary & Bhargava, 2006) — that may be interested in talking about motherhood-mothering. While I eventually spoke with

² See Appendix for the Interview Guide.

ten women, over fifty women responded with a desire to share their stories of mothering: a number that reinforced the notion of the importance of a women receiving public validation of her subjective mother story.

While other studies have made concerted efforts to avoid sample groups of “like-minded people” (Johnston & Swanson, 2004, p. 500), my exploration’s contributors were all known to me—some more intimately than others. Belonging, being accepted, and respected by one’s peers contributes to a person’s sense of moral self (May, 2008). In order to confront, absorb, and better understand the personal impact of the culture of motherhood I subscribe to, it is essential to try and understand how other women around me embody and perform, or *do*, motherhood. While I cannot claim that as a group we are representative of all mothers, our interpretations, explanations, and performances of motherhood-mothering may be of interest to other women, men, mothers, fathers, and parents (see Kahu & Morgan, 2007).

My Process

My personal journal entries³, memories of motherhood, and transcripts of my conversations with my ten co-performers were managed, refined, and analyzed on an ongoing basis and considered from both a holistic and sectional perspective (Chang, 2008). Thematic analysis of narrative (Ellis, 2004) was used to discover common ideas within personal accounts and interviews. The salient and impactful passages were then reorganized under main themes, and subheadings were added for further contemplation and clarity.

Individual interview transcripts were emailed to each woman in order to encourage her to address anything—either in written form (email) or verbally (telephone)—that did not ring true (Ellis, 2004). Coding (Saldaña, 2010; see also Tardy, 2000) also aided in making cultural sense

³ Journal entries were dated from November 2009 through May 2011.

out of a mass of information (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) and allowed for the emergence of recurring cultural themes, omissions and recurring patterns, temporal connections (Chang, 2008), and comparisons with not only social constructs but also with other mother's realities.

December 21, 2010, 10:00 a.m.

This morning, I arose and headed straight to my computer to check in on the latest witty banter and intelligent pontifications that had been posted overnight on moodle. I now crave this virtual connection to my classmates and professors almost as much as my first cup of coffee in the morning. Almost. Then my eyes landed on the following post:

As to women and working mothers: contrary to popular myth, there is no significant gender-based discrimination against women in hiring and pay. The discrimination is based purely on value.... Women who have never been married make exactly the same average salary as men who have never been married. It's women who have been or are married that make less than both. Just as men who are or have been married make the most of all...the variable here is marriage and mothering. To the extent women carry the lion's share of domestic work they put themselves at a disadvantage in the labour market and effectively subsidize their husbands by relieving them of domestic work they'd have to undertake as bachelors. However, contrary to all the silly feminist talk about social construction, a propensity for women to be nurturers and men to be risk-takers are [*sic*] wired into us genetically from millions of years of evolution. (Personal communication, date withheld)

To say that I find this opinion problematic is a massive understatement. To know that this post was made by one of my *professors* is beyond disappointing.

I am a working mother, and I have experienced discrimination in hiring and pay. However, I know that I am *valued* and *valuable*, and to suggest that I place myself at a disadvantage because I have breasts, a vagina, and a uterus speaks to the prevalent patriarchal, culturally normative opinions of women, mothers, and gendered role expectations. And further, to say that this disadvantage is wired into my being—effectively removing agency and free will from my sphere of knowing, showing, and doing—is narrow-minded and just down right...STUPID!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

BREATHE.

I wish I could send what I just wrote back to this professor. But I will not. I will not engage. Really, how can I? There is no room in this professor's bubble for any other possibilities to exist, and I have no interest in getting into a sexist "nature versus nurture"-style argument. More importantly, I do not want to fail this professor's course and have to pay another whack of cash to repeat what has been one of the most painful and patience-testing experiences of my degree to date. I do believe in social constructionism, I just do not believe it has to be socially determining. I am responsible for the path my life takes—good, bad, and ugly—and the stories I co-construct within it.

I am angry.

Or perhaps, I am defensive because my professor is...right. Could these ideas of social construction merely serve to deflect personal responsibility? It is so much easier to blame that great actor "society" than to accept that perhaps the reason I feel inadequate or judged is because I am, in fact, inadequate, and therefore, I am rightly judging myself. If social constructionism is a feminist myth then it should follow that all women *must possess a natural mothering instinct*.

Great.

January 5, 2011, 12:45 a.m.

Motherhood is like putting on a role, right? So until I can figure out who the hell I am, being a Supermom is the only role I know, so I'm going to put that one on. Besides, I have never done anything half-assed; I am hyper-competitive, so why start now? I am also incredibly insecure, which is a screwy dialectic to allow space for in your psyche.

What I Found Out

“Mothering is neither a unitary experience for individual women nor experienced similarly by all women” (Arendell, 2000, p. 1196).

Conversations revealed four main tactics the women used—with varying degrees of success, awareness, and admission—in order to function within the current Supermothering ideology: a) deny Supermom membership; b) create and sustain a Good Mother environment of support and purpose; c) resist labels, but judge others; and d) engage in competitive parenting.

Tactic #1: Deny Supermom Membership

The boundaries around identity statements and categories are fiercely protected and policed (Hughes, 2002). So protected, that almost all of the women I conversed with were reluctant to acknowledge the Supermom as a desired, positive identity or possibility in their universe. Carolyn strongly rejected the existence of a Supermom, calling it “a fallacy. That’s F-A-L-L-A-C-Y” (personal communication, February 2, 2011). Deb, Jen, and Emily’s definitions of a Supermom were synonymous with their described lived realities, but they were unwilling or unable to accept Supermotherhood as their lived *possibility*. For example, Jen described a Supermom as “needing to meet everybody’s needs, [your needs are] second or last, feeling too

much guilt when everyone else's needs aren't met, and needing to be perceived as having all the *Is* dotted and *Ts* crossed" (personal communication, February 15, 2011). However, although Jen required everyone's needs to be met in order to have a good day, was exhausted by day's end, felt tremendous guilt when needs were not realized, and accepted putting her "stuff on the list [for] tomorrow" (personal communication, February 15, 2011), she was not a Supermom: "I don't have a cape. I don't have a letter. I didn't get invited to a secret society" (personal communication, February 15, 2011). Deb also employed humour and sarcasm in order to deny that her lived reality—emotional, loving, involved, supportive and supported, engaged with and self-sacrificial for her children—could be misconstrued as that of a Supermom's: "I have too many grease spots on my t-shirt to be a Supermom" (personal communication, February 3, 2011). Emily explicitly used the notion of perfection, or rather, perceived self-imperfection to reject her association with the label:

Some people say I am, but I don't—I would not want to be categorized as that.

<laughs> . Because how do you know you're a Supermom? Who's defining that? So a Supermom would mean that everything is perfect in your life—but it doesn't feel like that on a day-to-day basis. (personal communication, February 16, 2011)

While all of these women made a concerted effort to be "the best mom they could be," their best was not wanting of Supermotherhood status.

Rose, Ella, and Ann admitted to being a Supermom; however, not without caveats or discomfort. Rose felt the label could perhaps be applicable, but was aware that her admissions could be misconstrued as bragging: "I mean, I don't think I'm perfect by any means....I wouldn't want to be, like, 'Yeah, rah, rah, I'm Supermom!' Get out the cheerleader pom-poms, you know" (personal communication, February 1, 2011)? Ella's initial confidence with her

association with the label devolved from feelings of pride and positivity to doubt: “I guess you could say I’m a Supermom. But I have a lot of things I can still do better and work on and improve on in myself.... I mean nobody is perfect, right” (personal communication, February 17, 2011)? Ann was a Supermom as long as her definition—“Being relaxed in your family; having a lot of love and a closeness in your family “(personal communication, February 10, 2011—*could* be applicable as opposed to the “classic magazine definition [of] someone who is working and still looking fabulous, and getting kids to school” (Ann, personal communication, February 10, 2011).

Violet and Trudy acknowledged the presence of a Supermom in their behaviour, but the effects were far from positive. While Violet’s definition of a Supermom—“ someone who would choose to give up their career...and make the tough decision of focusing on the kids...to help them fulfill their potential” (personal communication, February 3, 2011)—echoed both her past and *present* mothering behaviour, she firmly believed she had forsaken Supermotherhood and was quite content to be *just a mom*. Finally, Trudy, while embracing a dismissive perspective similar to Carolyn, acquiesced that the Supermom mystique overshadowed all women’s mothering choices: “Somehow people along the road have drunk the Kool-Aid™ and think that this is something that’s doable, that they should try to achieve.... We’re all trying to do it, but we all think it sucks” (personal communication, February 4, 2011).

The Supermom is a bad mother; therefore, no one wanted to be labeled as her even though personal definitions lined up with self-descriptions and lived realities. However, even though the shadow of perfection is denounced, personal discourse attempted to justify a standard of mothering that was still emblematic of the good mother and intensive parenting ideologies.

January 10, 2011, 10:45 pm.

"I'm too hot."

"Read this."

"Tell my brother to stop hitting me."

"Move over!"

"Why can't you read to me first tonight?"

"He always gets way more time than me!"

As my boys' voices rose in volume, all I could hear was the sound of bees buzzing in my ears. Their demands, though mild mannered, sounded like relentless screams of greedy wants and selfish needs—*it was all too much*. My children's mouths were flopping open and shut like little fish gasping for water, my ears and eyes were vibrating, and slowly one relentless thought dominated my being: What had I done to lead to these two ungrateful, pushy brats paying me absolutely no attention, no manners, no grace, and no respect? In a flash I decided that *it*—keeping the peace, raising two well-intentioned members of society—was not my problem.

I turned to my spawn and declared, "That's it. You guys are not listening. You are being too demanding. I'm not perfect, you know. I am your mother. "

I did not yell; my voice was calm and quiet. I arose from the bed and walked away. I did not look back.

I trudged up the stairs from the boys' rooms to my office; they seemed steeper than usual. My legs ached, my breathing quickened, a burst of sweat (and tears) blinded my progression. When I reached the top stair, I was absolutely certain that I had just relegated my two boys to a lifetime of therapy.

I am not good at full time parenting. Short bursts of manufactured, performed brilliance—yes. The day in, day out minutiae—no.

I took a deep breath and walked back down the stairs to meet my fate. The sounds of sobs assaulted my ears. As I passed the door to my younger son's room, I could hear my husband offer, "Mommy lost her patience, yes, but you boys were rude."

I dawdled into my older son's bedroom. (Why does my younger son always seem to get my sloppy-seconds mothering?) It felt colder and looked darker than usual.

I spent the next while sitting in silence. Eventually the space between us started to feel warmer, and I found the courage to look him in the eyes. Oh, how his eyes looked like mine. I could see the worry, crinkled forehead, and the tear stains on his cheek. I smothered him with every bit of my being.

I felt like a worthless excuse for a human.

I apologized for being impatient, but not for why my sanity took a holiday. I assured him that I loved him (desperately) and that he was a good boy. I overwhelmed him with kisses, promised to come back for a snuggle, and swapped conciliatory positions with my husband. The walk across the hall to my other son's room seemed to take forever.

My littlest boy's spinning truck lantern covered the room with a warm, red glow. He looked so tiny in his big-boy bed. I lay down next to him and just breathed with him for a time. He was half asleep; creases of worry were nowhere to be seen. His face stuck in my throat, and for a moment I could see the little baby he used to be.

I could barely squeeze out a half-assed, full-hearted mea culpa: "I'm sorry. I was angry but I could have handled it better."

Slowly, a sweet smile lit up his face. He grabbed my sweaty hand, and behind closed eyes he muttered, “I’m sorry too Mama. But we all have bad days. It’s ok. I love you forever and for always.”

“I love *you* for always and forever.”

Maybe I have succeeded in completely fucking up only one child.

February 3, 2011, 11:30 a.m.

Nicole: I'm the most insane. You all are fine, I'm the screwed up one.

Deb: No, we just keep it well hidden, Luv.

Tactic #2: Create and Sustain a Good Mother Environment of Support and Purpose

Whether pre-planned or evolutionary, being a mother was something all the women wanted to experience. Further, as a group, knowing *how* to be a mother was described as natural, intuitive, evolving, and “an extension of who I am” (*Deb*, personal communication, February 3, 2011). Although all the mothers admitted to struggling with motherhood, any challenge was framed as a necessary rite of passage to get to the reward—the child—or camouflaged within a commentary of good motherhood. *Ella* stated:

I refer to what I do as a full time job and more than that. You never get a break. It’s what you do all the time....[but] it kind of gives a purpose to our days a lot, more than probably even just a job and a paycheck at the end. We can spend that paycheck really quickly and then it’s just for stuff. But kids, you’re investing in a lot more than something you can ever buy. (personal communication, February 17, 2011)

Rose also stressed the importance of the child over fulfilling her own needs:

I feel like two people sometimes.... there's a little bit of mourning for that loss of that individual piece of yourself [sic]. Like the piece that you can go out and do whatever you want when you want to do it. You know? That's a bit of a selfish thing I think. But now there's something more important that you can never turn your back on. You've got to look after your kids, first and foremost, number one. (personal communication, February 1, 2011)

Ann, Carolyn, and Violet extended a higher purpose to their good mothering behaviour. Ann expressed that she viewed her decision to have a child as “an opportunity to bring people into the world that will make change” (personal communication, February 10, 2011). Meanwhile, both Violet and Carolyn believed that it was in everyone's best interest to raise “good kids because they are the ones that are going to be the future for us” (Violet, personal communication, February 3, 2011) and “take care” (Carolyn, personal communication, February 2, 2011) of an aging population.

Social and spousal support, whether perceived or actual, is an essential component for identity validation and affirmation (see Johnston & Swanson, 2004). All of the women sought out messages of reinforcement for their mothering decisions, either from external or familial sources. Husbands, mothers, mother-in-laws, parenting groups, and how-to manuals aided in creating and sustaining a good mother environment. For example, Trudy exchanged gossip and parenting advice with other stay-at-home, mother entrepreneurs through social media. Her virtual support network provided moments of levity, community, and a “personal connection” (Trudy, personal communication, February 4, 2011). However, Emily connected best with other working mothers who were also on a quest for balance. In the end, by associating and

surrounding themselves with like-minded mothers, almost all of the women were able to enjoy and justify their chosen role of good mother.

February 3, 2011, 9:15 p.m.

Violet: I look around at mothers that I know and I think they're really doing an awesome job and they're parenting purposefully and they're doing the best that they can.

Nicole: Do you think we tell other mothers that enough?

Violet: Probably not, no. I don't hear it enough. Do you?

Tactic #3: Resist Labels but Judge Others

All of the women preferred the generic self-brand of good mother in combination with other complementary labels—e.g. entrepreneur, school volunteer. Labels of motherhood were described as: educational, “comforting” (Trudy, personal communication, February 4, 2011), as a status symbol (Jen, personal communication, February 15, 2011), a tool to “find your place” (Violet, February 3, 2011), and as a benchmark of success (Ella, personal communication, February 17, 2011). However, whatever self-tailored “Identity Combo” the women embraced, the perception of societal and personal judgment—i.e. “The Judgey Dance” (Trudy, personal communication, February 4, 2011)—threatened and compromised everyday behaviour, interactions, self-confidence, and self-perceptions. As Jen expressed:

I'm more threatened by other labels, like am I a professional? Am I green? Am I a good person?...I feel more like I need to be a good mom, and I need to be a good person, and if somebody told me I was a terrible mother, I would die. (personal communication, February 15, 2011)

Some of the women were uncomfortable with the stereotypes attached to certain mother labels. Emily did not want to broadcast her working mother status “because in society it would seem that you’re a working mom because you’re taking time away from your kids. It’s not a necessarily a positive term” (personal communication, February 16, 2011). Meanwhile, Ella resented the assumption that a stay-at-home mother would wear “sweatpants and look like a slob” (personal communication, February 17, 2011). No matter what identity was embraced, there was always the feeling that women were somehow missing out (Mausart, 1999) or not measuring up. The consequential mother guilt fed the need to fulfill the edict that the measure of the mother was the child (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Brykman, 2006; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Warner, 2006). As Deb stated: “I do get concerned about whether people think that my child is behaving. That is obviously a direct reflection on my parenting style, in my mind” (personal communication, February 3, 2011). However, the blame for that guilt, while resting on each mother’s own shoulders, was also directed at another “permissible target: other mothers” (Warner, 2006, p. 33).

Comparison or mother judgment was described as a constant worry (Deb, personal communication, February 3, 2011); human nature (Ann, personal communication, February 10, 2011); a way to fortify mothering choices (Trudy, personal communication, February 3, 2011); and a difficult, jealousy-inducing habit to break (Ella, personal communication, February 17, 2011). While the women were aware of and denounced judgmental behaviour, all admitted

complicity in judging others, or in displaying alternative mother behaviour to distract other's lenses of mother judgment. Violet automatically fell "into certain roles with different people" (personal communication, February 3, 2011), and Nancy admitted that fear of judgment, especially in a foreign environment, made her act "outside of my actual personality" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). Carolyn decided to keep her "work face...[and] mom face" (personal communication, February 2, 2011) segregated to the point that some colleagues at work were surprised to learn she even had children. Further, Carolyn admitted that her mom face was susceptible to external pressures to behave as the good mother, especially if she had to discipline her child in public: "I took him off that trampoline and nicely walked him around the corner. And then, gave him complete crap on the other side. And then, brought him back in very nicely" (personal communication, February 2, 2011). However, Jen acknowledged that while some people judged her mothering negatively other's judged her opinion and behaviour as worthy of repetition; therefore, it all balanced out. As Jen reasoned, "Your kids are shit today, my kids are going to be shit tomorrow" (personal communication, February 15, 2011).

Almost all of the women articulated the importance of trying to respect another mother's decisions—i.e. "everyone has their own issues" (Emily, personal communication, February 16, 2011). However, in some of the conversations, the umbrella of mother judgment was extended to include women who had chosen *not* to become a mother: "Now, I look at people who don't have kids, and I think, "You are absolutely missing out. Like, what's the point?" (Carolyn, personal communication, February 2, 2011; "I feel sorry for people who don't have kids because they'll never experience life to its fullest" (Violet, personal communication, February 3, 2011); "You could regret not becoming a mother, but you'll never regret becoming a mother" (Ella, personal communication, February 17, 2011); and "I think of people that won't have kids, and I

always think their lives will be so lonely, and they don't know what they're missing" (Emily, personal communication, February 16, 2011). Passing judgment on mothering choices reinforces gendered stereotypes and promotes a culturally sanctioned performance of motherhood (Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2009). Extending that judgment to womanhood in general is divisive and reinforces the exclusive notion that the role of mother is the only legitimate female identity worth undertaking.

February 8, 2011, 8:45 p.m.

Nancy: I think that we are all Supermoms. I pull out the Superman costume every Halloween, and I believe that every mom should wear one....But I think that we all have amazing qualities to be able to do all the things that we do. And no one person is doing it better than another one because everybody's got different strengths and weaknesses....I think the term of Supermom is used in the wrong way. I think that we use it as a term that's meaning that that person is more amazing than somebody [else]. And I don't believe that. I believe that just being a mom is being a Supermom.

February 8, 2011. 9:30 p.m.

Awesome dialogue with Nancy. And that is what these encounters are...a dialogue about mothering and the insanity of it all. I think she views life in all the lovely shades of grey; that is a new concept for me. I think a lot of mothers judge in absolutes. That's my opinion. But the more I'm around other women that celebrate the "shades of the in between," the more I want to

live in the “in between” as well. She is so funny, self-depreciating, and...wonderful; I know why she is my friend.

Eight interviews down, two to go.

February 8, 2011, 10:00 p.m.

As I pulled into the driveway, my head was racing with possibilities; I had to get to my computer and get everything out before I confused it with too much thinking. It was nine o'clock. The fact that every time I headed out to interview a mother about mothering cut into my family time was not lost on me—or the rest of my family. I stealthily opened the side door hoping to avoid, drama, questions, and the cloud of guilt that was usually awaiting my return. Well, the cloud turned into a hurricane. My exhausted- and perturbed-looking husband delivered the news that my oldest didn't appreciate yet another night of no Mommy-bed-time-cuddling. He cried when I left, and my husband had just managed to get him to sleep moments before I came home.

Now I was the one crying. I seem to be doing a lot of that lately. I immediately take all the blame onto my shoulders and start wearing it like a cloak of thorns: It must be because I went back to work when he was five days old; or because I fed him formula after my milk dried up; or because we have had a parade of nannies for seven years of his life so that (selfish) Mommy could work.

“Well,” I squeaked out to my husband, “*I had a great night.*”

I hate this project.

Self-serving Pollyanna. Who's world am I trying to save anyways?

Tactic #4: Engage in Competitive Parenting

Blogs, broadcast media, and how-to manuals have replaced the more traditional spheres of influence—family, church, and experts (i.e., doctors)—for determining what one’s mothering performance should look like (Medved & Kirby, 2005). However, almost all of the available media-based advice left the women feeling conflicted. Deb stated, “You’ve got all of these bloody books that tell you how to parent and what to do, and how you should be doing it....[that] you end up finding yourself being pulled in four directions... [wondering], so, how *do* I do it” (personal communication, February 3, 2011)? Yet, all the women were equally aware of the heightened and unrealistic expectations within media driven messages of motherhood and felt that it was best not to mistake “celebrity moms...for reality moms” (Ella, personal communication, February 17, 2011). As Carolyn expressed:

I think you're seeing more and more movie stars who are having kids. And I mean, I can't believe how often that the, quote, "movie stars" are out there with their kids. It seems a bit bizarre to me, in fact, how much they are out. I mean I'm never out with my kids that much walking the streets. Are you? Everybody's walking the streets with their kids in the magazines! Except me! I must be at home too much or something. (personal communication, February 2, 2011)

Additionally, all of the women felt that any unacceptable behaviour on their child’s part was not necessarily a direct result of their mothering: “You can’t control what your kid may do in front of someone else” (Trudy, personal communication, February 4, 2011); “You’re not shaping them. They have themselves” (Ann, personal communication, February 10, 2011); “You have no control after they are born...and it’s got nothing to do with how crap...or good you

are at something” (Deb, personal communication, February 3, 2011)⁴. However, all of the women also used the word *competitive* when describing the current culture of motherhood, yet camouflaged any perceived competitive mothering displays within excuses of good mothering behaviour—e.g. “I do wear my kids like a badge of honor, but not in an obnoxious way” (Jen, personal communication, February 15, 2011). In order to advance, support, and provide the best for their children many of the women felt they needed to enroll, do, and provide everything. As Nancy stated, “We all think that we’re right. We all think that our kids are the best thing ever” (personal communication, February 8, 2011).

Winner-take-all (Warner, 2006), or competitive parenting, “has a nasty underside: the compulsion to have your kid step over the others, be the envy of others, rise above the mass of the others—to be, and to be seen as, well, a star” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 307). Violet, Jen, and Rose all admitted to their complicit participation in competitive parenting: “I think there’s a lot of competition between mothers somehow. And I think I sort of want to show a persona of someone who knows what they’re doing...even on days when I don’t really feel like it” (Violet, personal communication, February 3, 2011); “I do keep an eye on what every other mother is doing, and I want my kids to have everything that other kids have, and everything I didn’t have” (Jen, personal communication, February 15, 2011); “I spend hundreds of dollars on birthday parties trying to outdo the other parents.... It’s actually really shitty that there is that feeling of pressure in parenting right now” (Rose, personal communication, February 1, 2011). Carolyn thought society’s commoditization of children through the promotion of “certain carriages and clothing and things your kids have to do and types of schools they should be in”

⁴ Interestingly, within the same interview, many of the women, such as Deb, espoused sentiments of not being responsible for their child’s behaviour as well as credited their mothering skills for their children’s successes or deflected criticism when others would judge their mothering based on their child’s indiscretion (see Deb’s comment on p. 40, para. 1 of this manuscript).

(personal communication, February 2, 2011) nourished a competitive streak in parenting. Trudy also blamed societal pressure, but she singled out feminist rhetoric for contributing to unrealistic expectations and aggressive mothering behaviour (personal communication, February 4, 2011).

In the end, competitive parenting was motivated and sustained by judgment and fear of failure—the “fear of not being a good mother” (Jen, personal communication, February 15, 2011). All the women I met were educated, intelligent, competent, and formidable, but they were not always confident that their mothering decisions were the right ones to make. However, as long as the decisions that were being implemented had the appearance of working, then they would defend their choices. For as Trudy said, the alternative—“to show the little chinks in the armour that we have” (personal communication, February 4, 2011)—was simply not an option.

February 14, 2011, 8:30pm

I asked my mother, “Why as new mothers, do we shower our children with ridiculous amounts of extras? What void are we trying to fill? Our children don’t remember all the ‘yeses’ they only remember the ‘nos’; and they certainly don’t remember how generous we were with them before they could walk, talk, or poo on the toilet.”

The phone was dead silent on the other end.

“Well,” my mother began in her dramatic, dulcet voice, “It was Christmas, 1972. You were two—no little brothers yet. Santa left you a table and chair set, a rocking horse, and a play kitchen under the tree that year. When your father and I brought you into the living room to reveal your presents—that I stayed up half the night putting together, by the way—you were so scared and overwhelmed that you just clung to my legs. It took me a good half an hour to get you to play with anything!”

I laughed with my mother at the forgotten memory. It felt good to laugh together. Shared moments of joy seemed to be coming more often these days.

After a moment of silence, my mother continued, "I know now that it was all too much, but it took me many years to kick the habit of trying to buy your love."

February 15, 2011, 8:45 p.m.

Jen: You know what, Nicole? When you're doing what you're doing, you're working hard and you're creating a lot of energy in this area. So of course you're attracting all of these people in your life and you have a lot of energy coming towards you right now.

Nicole: Motherhood has been such a huge thing for me. It's been very challenging because of my control freak, competitive personality, but also because of the Industry I work in. It's next to impossible at times to find a human reality within some of the external factors and people that I am forced to surround myself with by virtue of my employment. I found it very complicated when I chose to be a mother to add it to some other identities I had. It's funny, after my second child, I thought, "I'm going to take some time with this one, and not go back to work after three days." But then my reality show came along, which was about motherhood, and I thought, "Perfect!" But instead it was this...*thing*.

Jen: That must have been so in your face. You were on these shows seeing all these different families...

Nicole: And I was falling apart. I'd put on weight with both my kids and in an industry they really judges you on your physical being, well, I really wasn't comfortable with that. Yet, here I was in the public eye, projecting this great "together image" of a working-mother-hosting-a-show, and being paid to judge others on being a mom. You take the work when it comes, but what I did was take something so private and lovely and make it part and parcel of the public, entertainment machine.

Jen: Because you had to be the good mother. But we all have our loop right? My loop isn't necessarily about mothering, but we all have our loop. See, I sort of separate my whole being. My mothering identity is there, but it's just a part of me. I also have my individual part of me, and I have my relationship, and I have my kids. And it doesn't mean I love them less, or I am not as interested in that but I don't—you sound like you're taking on so much when you talk about that. Maybe it's my coping mechanism to compartmentalize. It's still a lot of pressure.

Nicole: I try to separate it. But, at that time, when the shit really hit the fan, I was a mother of two young kids. The reason I got the job was because I was a mother of two young kids; they needed a mother to host the show. And so trying to separate my work identity from my home identity—

Jen: —got really frustrating—

Nicole: —it just became a huge mush mesh.

Jen: Maybe we all have different coping mechanisms and somehow, for me, it kicked in. I could just push the part of the loop aside right now and be there—it felt right and good for me at that time. Whereas, I think other people that let that it all crash down on them must feel completely overwhelmed, because it's a lot to take on at one time.

Nicole: And I guess that's where I'm at now—trying to figure out what feels good and right for me.

March 17, 2011, 6:00 p.m.

I have just finished listening to my conversations. Again. My head hurts. Everyone's voice is starting to sound the same, and I keep getting the pseudonyms mixed up when I transcribe notes to my rough work-in-progress document.

I AM NOT SURE I BELIEVE EVERYONE. Especially me.

Ok. I said it.

I am stressed and want to vomit.

Who am I to judge honesty of performance? Is that not what this is really about? I think we get so enraptured (or repelled) by other people's projected images that we prevent ourselves from getting to know the real person behind the mothering mask.

The more I read, talk with, and listen to women who are mothers share stories of triumph, embarrassment, hilarity, or pain, the more it is reinforced in my mind that community is essential for survival, debunking myths, and creating, broadcasting, and reinforcing lived realities —glossy,

media-influenced depictions of perfect motherhood are ridiculous. But, I am also convinced that that same community so desperately needed for survival is devouring itself in some perverse, pre-school game of King of the Mountain. Yes, I said King. We have not come a long way baby. We have tried to convince ourselves, as White, Anglo-Canadian, middle-class, heterosexual women-in-marriages that we can have, want, and do it all, but that is crap.

Initially, a woman may appear to be quite content to state that there is no such thing as a societal or oppressive force that judges, makes subservient, denigrates, or condemns the myriad of choices that a woman-as-mother must face countless times every day. But, once that same woman experiences the pointed finger of maternal judgment and is kicked out of her self-made, protective fraternity of motherhood, then heaven help herself. Get out of her way. The very woman who denies the existence of judgment rails against those who judge her *with judgment*. Interesting. Insane, actually, yet perfectly understandable to me; I am a mother. I judge and condemn judgment in the same breath.

The Intervention

The Supermom Syndrome

I believe that my co-performers are casualties of the Supermom Syndrome. It was a near impossibility for any of the mothers to admit—without apology—that they were a good mother let alone a Supermom. Symptoms of the Supermom Syndrome include, but are not limited to: an inability to recognize that the actions and emotions embodied during the course of a woman’s “mother day” are representative of her subjective definition of a Supermom; an acquiescence to self-doubt’s demands to unravel the edges of identity (see Hughes, 2002); matrophobia (Hallstein, 2007); a desperate need to *reparent* (Warner, 2006) herself; fear of overshadowing

the sacred child; fear of maternal failure; marital strain; a compulsion to surround herself with like-minded people for social and personal validation (see Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Johnston & Swanson, 2004); continual list-making, busyness, and an unrequited need for control (see Warner, 2006); involuntary engagement in competitive parenting; public espousal of the virtues of the Good-Enough Mother; and a false perception of not having the agency to affect change. As an eight-year veteran of the Supermom Syndrome, I recognize and embody many of these characteristics. The words coming out of our mother mouths—our spoken intention—are not representational of the actions we take and the underlying motives—subtext—for those actions. Our process of *becoming* (Hughes, 2002) is stuck in a protective loop.

Transition is a key concept in mother identity studies (see Choi et al., 2005; Heisler & Ellis, 2008). I believe the Supermom is a meta-identity that invites and provides all subjective labels and ideologies of mothering a place to *become*; all mothers are Supermoms, or rather, *Super Moms*. The space between the words, the liminal space, represents possibility, individuality, and transition (Schechner, 2006; Turner, 1969). Perhaps this proposal appears utopian⁵, but I am open to trying something new; my current path is exhausting and toxic. We need to celebrate mothering choices as fluid, *possible* options, as opposed to viewing them as challenges to our own self-perceived inadequacies. I am hopeful.

The call to put aside labels and dichotomous definitions of mothers and mothering is not new (see Garey, 1999; Paré & Dillaway, 2005; Warner, 2006); however, it appears we are refusing to accept the message to disengage from our self-mutilating, competitive performances.

⁵ Butler (2004) presented an alternative for rethinking gender that required the audience to imagine “a world in which...the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express[ed] nothing*” (p. 164). While Butler admitted her prescription was utopian, and that it remained politically essential to represent women, she also cautioned that the re-representation should not “reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to emancipate” (p. 164).

Perhaps if we can separate behaviour from identity (Johnston & Swanson, 2004) and concentrate on the actions as opposed to whom is doing the acting (Butler, 2004; O'Reilly, 2010b), things will evolve—for some.

April 5, 2011, 11:15 p.m.

Ann: It's that women have fought long and hard to have a vote, to have a voice, to be paid equally so maybe this is just another one of those battles in establishing that you can be a mom and you don't have to physically be the mom, if you know what I mean (personal communication, February 10, 2011).

Rose: It's therapeutic to talk to people about [motherhood] because you feel like you're not the only one....having other people go through the same thing makes you feel like you're kind of normal, that you'll get through it (personal communication, February 1, 2011).

Ella: I think it's just to truly, sincerely be happy and to enjoy the moment today and not to always be thinking about the future (personal communication, February 17, 2011).

Deb: And so I think people just need to let go and just accept that everybody's different. What works for one person and their family does not work for another person and their family, and everybody makes their decisions and their choices. And just because you choose one way or another doesn't make it right or wrong (personal communication, February 3, 2011).

Nancy: Let's just all take it down a notch (personal communication, February 8, 2011).

Whether I will feel this way tomorrow is unknown, however, today, at this moment, I know:

- I am not alone; although mothering feels solitary at times, the silence of solitude should not be confused with a cloud of silent judgment.
- It does get easier with time. For some, longer time is needed, but it does get better. It will be tough, it may spiral down; however, it will get better. What constitutes “better” is entirely subjective and no one else’s business.
- Reading the words of educated women who have really thought about what they are saying, as opposed to women and men who write for profit, makes a difference. However, it is not your exact, unique life circumstance that is depicted on anyone’s printed page but your own; and even that is sometimes a fiction-of-the-moment.
- Talking is good. Starting a dialogue with anyone about your triumphs, concerns with, or questions about mothering is essential. Sharing without a hidden agenda is the key.
- Sleep is imperative, and help is necessary. However, while nannies were an essential part of my mothering, it delayed *my* acceptance and immersion into mothering. Childcare is a means to an end, not the end itself. Mothering, to me, is a symbiotic relationship; it needs a safe, balanced place in your body to dwell, even if it is not being physically engaged, otherwise it may be rejected.
- Personal acceptance without competition is a pathway to inner peace.
- My children are wonderful individuals. My husband and I are raising two empathetic young men to believe that women and men can equally do and be anything when fueled by determination, hard work, and passion. I embrace Outlaw Motherhood and my

husband and I are empowered parents who believe in maternal empowerment⁶—some days more so than others. However, I really don't need another label hanging around my neck. Labels such as the Supermom are not unlike boxed macaroni and cheese: while it tastes delicious, is convenient, and readily available, it leaves you feeling bloated, unable to fit in your jeans, and wanting more.

Limitations?

The limitations of this project are common challenges found within other studies of motherhood-mothering (see Arendell, 2000; Edley, 2004; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Kahu & Morgan, 2007; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2008). For instance, the number of women I interacted with was limited numerically, and I knew all of the women to varying degrees; familiarity may not necessarily be perceived as an asset. Ethnicity, marital status, sexual preference, and socioeconomic conditions were homogenous co-performer characteristics—all of the women were White, Anglo-Canadian, married, heterosexual, and middle-class. Moreover, no women embodied *deviant*⁷ mothering characteristics (see Arendell, 2000; Zimmerman et al., 2008); therefore, I did not fulfill the feminist directive to shed light on other kinds of mothering outside the idealized norm.

Although the women shared their struggles and triumphs, their accounts were of events in time. Additionally, the degree of honesty may be questioned (see Heisler & Ellis, 2008), for who wants to admit that they “pretend to be someone else” while mothering? Participant observation may have revealed greater truths, and therefore, increased understanding about the difficulties

⁶ O'Reilly, 2010b, p. 19

⁷ Any mother who differs from the dominant discourse (e.g. single mothers or lesbian mothers) is regarded as deviant or imperceptible by society.

and challenges with mother identity in today's society. Further, focus groups, as they more closely resemble everyday social interactions, may have made more apparent how women interact and support each other (Kahu & Morgan, 2007).

During the actual conversations, I felt myself alternating between relating to and distancing from the mothers' shared narratives. It was very difficult to maintain a true dialogical, co-performative stance. However, this very act of relating and distancing is representative of my "own slippery subjectivity, power interests, and limitations—the recognition that...[my] knowledge production is partial, contextual, and inevitably flawed" (Richardson, 2007, p. 459).

Framing one's personal narrative as a story of growth and development can in itself be a misrecognition that supports suffering as metamorphosis (Austin & Carpenter, 2008); however, personal growth was one of my goals with this project, and change as a process is messy. I was seeking a self-understanding that I could celebrate, nurture, and prosper with. As such, I could not remain strictly impartial; I used my subjective experiences of motherhood to gain stronger interpersonal connections and inform my co-performative, autoethnographic quest for peace and clarity.

Beginnings

The validity of the relayed, emotive, personal narrative is essential for the successful transmission and translation of academic discourse into a publicly accessible, transformative, and informational tool. Emotions "transcend public and private discourse, operating in a space that allows rewritings and transformations of the stories" (Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2009, p. 1222). I believe future research should consider fathering, mothering, and parenting, the relationship and

representation between the three, and the performative effects of culturally normative prescriptions of identity upon individuals and the family unit.

Social constructions like the Supermom perpetuate misleading maternal stereotypes and restrictive identity labels that underestimate and misrepresent the complicated reality of what it means to “be a mother” in today’s Western culture. It is a disservice to women and mothering to dictate what is right or wrong, proclaim a “best and only way” to succeed in society as a mother, and reject each other as mothers based on circumstance, culture, or personal beliefs. The rhetoric of choice is one of loss, not power. *Choice* is embodied through the action of discarding a place, thing, or person that is not wanted; it is enacted often at the expense of other women and mothers. We must share and celebrate our personal stories. There must be room for diversity, variation, empathy, and grace: “Local, individual stories are at the heart of all emancipatory movements, great and small” (Austin & Carpenter, 2008, p. 391).

Is it possible to understand and grant oneself permission to be in a constant state of revision? Can we enjoy and accept responsibility for the direction of our mother journey? Parenthood is a performance (Warner, 2006), and all performances have a beginning, middle, and end. The women I interacted with are receptive to possibilities that suit their unique position and moment in life. They are living examples that a new mother-awareness is developing; we are living in the age of the “in between” of mothering. By embracing their needs to be independent *and* nurturing, cerebral *and* emotional, driven *and* caring, my co-performers highlight the complicated, beautiful, and exhausting terrain of mothering in the 21st Century, and have provided a bridge for theory to be put in motion and personal doubts put to rest—for now. The process of change can be a kind or unpleasant journey; however, the possibility is always up to each individual.

May 8th, 2011- MOTHER'S DAY

Older Son: Mom, can we play on your computer?

Me: No, I'm doing school work.

Younger Son: STILL?!?!

Older Son: When are you going to be done?

Me: Soon. Tomorrow. It has to be tomorrow.

Older Son: Good. No more staring at the computer anymore and you get a chance to look at the real world.

Younger Son: And you're gonna get to hang out with ME!!!

Older Son: Me too!! Are you happy?

Yes. I am. I feel happy, grateful, exhausted, numb, overstretched, proud, scared, guilty, full of love, determined, capable, brave, mournful, and *so* finished with this.

I need to let this part of my journey come to a pause. There will always be more to write, but I need to get out there in lived life and just *be*.

The performance has begun...again. But first, I need to sleep.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. How many children do you have and what are their ages?
2. Why did you decide to become a mother?
3. Is it (motherhood-mothering) what you thought it would be?
4. Who were you before you were a Mom? (Follow-up questions as needed.)
5. Describe what an average day is like for you as a mother?
6. If you were asked to express in one sentence or phrase "What is it like to be you as a mother/woman," what would come to mind?
7. Can you share an example of an event or interaction that would represent, in your mind, the experience of being a (fill in the blank with self-descriptive phrase from question #6) mother?
8. What needs to happen during the course of a day to enable you to feel good about your day? (Follow-up questions as needed.)
9. How are these needs being met?
10. How do you know how to be a mother?
11. Do you ever feel compelled to act a certain way as a mother? (Y-N) (Follow up questions as needed, i.e. how do the negative judgments affect you?)
12. Do you ever feel judged by other mothers for your choice? Explain.
13. What or who has helped to shape your mothering style? -- *Perceptions of influence on identity from self, family, other moms, media.*
14. What is a Supermom? How do you define a "Supermom"?
15. Do you hold up an ideal for yourself as a mother? (Could be a follow up to Question #8.)

16. Where does the pressure to achieve--to be successful as a mother--come from? (Or- do you not agree with that statement?)
17. How does your role of mother affect your sense of self? Your husband or partner? (If applicable) Your children?
18. Are you a Supermom? If yes: Why? Who identifies you this way? If no: How do you perceive the term "Supermom"?
19. If you had to label yourself as a mother, what would it be?
20. How do you feel about labels?
21. Do you think that society places labels and expectations on motherhood-mothering?
22. If Mommy Lit books and certain scholars point to a dysfunction within the current mothering ideology as well as a desperate need for an alternative discourse about motherhood-mothering, why are we still stuck?
23. How would you describe yourself as a mother?
24. What is that one burning memory of something you did as a mother, where you seriously questioned your decision or the right you have to be a mother?
25. What do you want for yourself, short-term, mid-term, and long-term?
26. How would you describe your transition to motherhood? (Identity crisis?)
26. If a genie walked in and said, "I can give you your old life back, before children, if you push this button," would you?
27. Based on everything you have shared with me, what animal best reflects you and your experiences as a woman and mother?
28. What colour would best reflect you as a mother? Has it changed? Why?
29. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?