
Mothering as a Psychological Experience: A Grounded Theory Exploration

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to characterize the psychological experience of mothering. By asking the broad research question, "What are the psychological processes women experience as they move from childlessness through the first twelve years of mothering?", a grounded theory was developed representing the processes of mothering. Unstructured interviews were conducted with 11 mothers who had one or more children under 12 years of age. The grounded theory is comprised of two linear time dimensions, Engagement and Immersion. Predominant psychological processes associated with each dimension were identified and counselling implications are discussed.

Résumé

Cette étude a pour objectif de décrire l'expérience psychologique du maternage. En posant la question — dans son sens le plus large "Quels sont les processus psychologiques vécus par les femmes lorsqu'elles se trouvent confrontées aux changements apportés par le maternage des douze premières années," on a pu élaborer une théorie à base empirique représentant les processus du maternage. On a soumis à des interviews non structurées 11 mères ayant un enfant ou plus âgé de moins de 12 ans. Cette théorie à base empirique comprend deux dimensions à temps linéaire, l'Engagement et l'Immersion. Les processus psychologiques prédominants associés à chaque dimension ont été identifiés et les implications pour le counseling sont discutées.

This article is based on a research project which investigated women's experience of mothering using grounded theory methodology. The intent of the study was to explore the psychological experience of mothering by considering the challenges and opportunities that childbirth and child rearing offer to women. Attention is directed to the psychological effects on women of being mothers rather than to the more commonly studied issue of how mothers affect the psychological development of children.

Data acquired in response to the research question led to a description of the mothering experience which reflected how women psychologically incorporate and adjust to the tasks of child rearing. The resulting grounded theory suggests that women's experience of mothering involves a continuous re-evaluation of attitudes, beliefs and personal characteristics and provides opportunities for personal growth and development (see Table 1). Counselling implications derived from the study are based on the central finding that mothering is an active, self-directed process of psychological development for women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mothering as a psychological growth experience for women has not been extensively discussed by either traditional developmental theorists or feminist researchers (Block, 1990; Swiggart, 1991). Rather, mothering research has principally focused on maternal-child interaction, or, more recently, on mother-daughter interaction and its effects on child development (Debold, Wilson & Malave, 1994). Two principal factors are related to the under-representation of the mothering experience in psychological literature. The first is the low status of parenthood in general, and of motherhood in particular, in western culture, which may dissuade researchers from exploring this topic (Friedan, 1962; Mikus, 1980; Polatnik, 1984, Rich, 1976); and the second is the fact that western society has an historical tradition of silencing mothers (Heilbrun, 1988) and of presenting a reductionist view of women's development.

Caplan (1989) and Swiggart (1991) believe that mother blaming and the consequent fear of being blamed keeps women silent. Cultural myths about mothering suggest that mothers are endless fonts of nurturance to their children—an expectation that may be difficult for mothers to sustain in that childrearing can often evoke emotions such as indifference, cruelty, envy, possessiveness, and resentment. Mothers are expected to know instinctively how to raise children, and inadequate mothering is usually believed to be the source of children's problems and suffering. Western culture presents mothering as fulfilling women in ways that no other experience can. Women are, therefore, seen as individuals who can effortlessly engage in the task of emotional giving, and are likely to feel inadequate and guilty when they cannot meet this ideal, or when their children experience problems.

The limited usefulness of traditional developmental theory for understanding women's experiences are outlined by Greggs and Cairns (1990) as follows:

The use of all-male samples, with subsequent generalization of results to both genders; the incorporation of historic, sociocultural perceptions of women as inferior to males; the exclusion of data on female subjects when these data did not fit theoretical predictions; theoretical assumptions of the male as exclusively and adequately representative of humankind; and the assumption that separation is requisite for mature self development. (p. 11)

A notable exception to this pattern is the work of Sarah Ruddick (1984), who presented a model of maternal thinking which acknowledged mothering as a complex affective and cognitive process. Feminist research (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Mercer, Nicholas & Doyle, 1989) has suggested that a reconsideration of the mothering experience can enrich our understanding of women's development, by clarifying the process by which it occurs within and through relationships. "By focusing our attention on the family and

the mother's role—an institution devoted to care, connection and human development, we might help to bring a different language into the study of psychology." (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 157).

GROUNDING THEORY METHODOLOGY

Since the task of the research was to discover the personal meanings and experiences of individual mothers, and to develop a beginning theory of their impact, grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was selected. Data used to develop the grounded theory were derived from interviews in which women described their mothering experiences. The task of the research was to understand the psychosocial process of mothering from the participants' point of view, rather than to impose external "realities" (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Grounded theory method is compatible with feminist research and counselling perspectives which view therapy as an "... ongoing process of facilitating change, as that change is defined by the client. The 'expert' about their own life is the client not the therapist." (Rosewater, 1988, p. 140). With these considerations in mind, exemplars taken from the transcripts are used throughout the remainder of this paper to ground the theory in the participants' own words.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants

Participant selection criteria were guided by the simultaneous collection, coding and analysis of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The minimal criteria for initial participant selection were that participants have one or more children under the age of twelve and be able to articulate their experiences of mothering. As data collection continued, mothers of preschool children were selected to reflect the fact that this period of child rearing is particularly intense, taxing women's emotional and physical resources (Arnup, 1994). Mothers of older children between the ages of six and twelve were also included to provide a retrospective view of psychological aspects of mothering.

Participants were self-nominated or nominated by a network of personal contacts. The self-nominated participants requested inclusion in the study after hearing about it from friends or from academic presentations made on the subject. The network of personal contacts included colleagues who were familiar with the study.

The final sample included 11 women whose children were between the ages of 2 and 12. Of these women, eight had two children, two had three children, and one had four children. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 40. One woman was divorced, three were separated, and seven were married. Participants included women on public assistance, part time

students, and women working full or part time, as well as full time homemakers. Their family incomes varied, representing a range from poverty to middle class levels.

Interview Process

Two unstructured interviews, averaging one and a half hours in length were conducted with each participant. The initial interview began with the statement, "Starting where you would like, tell me what this mothering experience has been like for you." The interview continued with the participants being encouraged to include whatever descriptions they wished in order to describe their experiences. Researcher tasks included clarifying, reflecting, paraphrasing, and the use of open questions and prompts.

Prior to the second interview, the complete transcript of the first interview and a copy of the coded transcript were delivered to the participant for review. Participants were asked to review the transcript for errors or omissions, review the category assignments and suggest a time for the second interview. The second interview was a collaborative effort in which each participant reviewed the accuracy of the transcript and of the coded categories derived from it.

Transcript Analysis

In compliance with grounded theory methodology, the transcripts were read line by line in an attempt to answer the question "What does this incident represent?" Codes were established which reflected the substance of what was said. The strategy used for category development was constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical memo writing was initiated in a simplified form, becoming more complex as the analysis proceeded. Sorting of theoretical memos provided the impetus for theory formation. The initial draft of the grounded theory was presented to the participants, providing them with an opportunity to correct errors of fact and interpretations and allowed them to assess the adequacy of the categories. The theoretical model was then revised in accordance with participants' feedback. The theory was also presented to a continuing qualitative research group where six members, all of whom were conducting qualitative studies, acted as auditors, ensuring that the categories were grounded in the transcripts and that the fittedness of the emerging theory was evident.

THE GROUNDED THEORY

The theory generated from the research data includes a core category called "Expansion of Self," and two major sub-categories, Engagement, which coincides with the first year of mothering, and Immersion which

represents the ongoing mothering experience (see Table 1). Each sub-category contained several themes, which are discussed below.

TABLE 1
Grounded Theory of Mothering as a Psychological Process

<i>Core Category Themes</i>	<i>Expanding the Self Sub-themes</i>			
Engagement	Establishing the intention to mother	Encountering ghosts of mothering received	Committing to new life circumstances	Engaging in the process of self-socialization
Immersion	Renegotiating relationships	Preserving child Preserving self	Self-constructed mothering	Replenishment

The core category descriptor emerged as best capturing mothers' personal growth processes as they attempted to come to terms with the question: "How will I mother?" Their search for answers provided opportunities to learn new information about self and others, which then merged with a continually evolving self-concept. Through this process, they were led to interact with the world in new ways, discovering unknown aspects of themselves.

One participant, found that being put in the position of having to respond to a child's needs was a powerful catalyst for change, and defined the experience of mothering as expanding the self, "... because you can't be selfish and it makes you reach into different areas and grow and learn from that."

Engagement

Engagement is the first stage in the process of expanding the self, and is temporally equivalent to the first year of mothering. It was defined by the presence of four psychological processes which characterized women's engagement in mothering: establishing the intention to mother; encountering the ghosts of mothering received; committing to new life circumstances; and engaging in the process of self-socialization.

Establishing the Intention to Mother

The decision to have children was described as a conscious process which included intra-psychic, normative and couple factors. Intrapsychic factors were related to deeply personal processing of thoughts and feelings around past events, which then led to a decision to mother. Four women were influenced by negative childhood experiences, and the intention to

mother was shaped by the need for a corrective experience. For these women, this meant the creation of a family structure which contained essential features that had not existed within the family of origin. One participant, for example, feeling a deep sense of isolation in her family, recalled thinking, "If I ever have a child, I'd love it to death, you know, just to show her. I really feel hurt by the way my mother treated me."

Normative factors represented the participants' cultural endorsements and reinforcements for the decision to have a child. One participant described the strength of cultural pressure as follows, "Being oriental, and being Asian, you probably realize that the family is real important. I felt that I wouldn't be fulfilled unless I did have children."

Couple factors, such as choice of prospective partner, were based on women's assessment of a man's ability to father. The criteria they used included education, potential for earning a good income, and motivation for fathering. Nine women reported engaging assertively in decisions related to timing of parenting and number of children. Such decision could be characterized as "reluctant mutuality," since women often initiated the process and convinced their husbands that the time was right. "We knew we wanted kids. I decided actually. My husband said 'not yet' and I kind of talked him into it."

Encountering the Ghosts of Mothering Received

A significant aspect of the engagement stage was a consideration of the woman's own experience of being mothered. As one participant phrased it, "How I mother is probably reflective on how I was mothered, or at least that's what I think the general rule is." The ghosts of mothering received had a variety of faces, some predominantly nurturing and supportive, others distant and cold, and one hostile and abusive. The women who assessed their mothering-received as being inadequate described feeling ill prepared to mother because of a lack of positive role modelling. Recognizing that unresolved issues around mothering received could have a detrimental effect on their maternal functioning, these women employed two strategies directed to self-healing: coming to terms with maternal rejection and acknowledging the reality of their childhood experience.

Coming to terms with maternal rejection was a process of retrieving, even in a limited way, memories of their mother's demonstration of love for them. "It took me until a year ago to really recognize that I was actually, you know, that my mother loved me even though I don't recall being hugged or told 'I love you.'" Often, the pregnancy experience led to new insights about their own mothers. For one participant, experiencing the joy of pregnancy and feeling intense love for a child she had not seen or touched, led to a belief that all women must, in some way, feel love for their child.

As women in the study became mothers, and found themselves at times inattentive, distant or impatient with their children, they looked to environmental variables as a way of explaining their behaviour. Through this process, they had to revise their understanding of their own mothers' behaviours: blame was diffused and empathy emerged, as the causes of their mother's behaviours were considered in terms of environmental variables as well as intrapsychic factors. One participant said, "Like, I throw it back and forth. She had a lot of mental problems and I don't know if that was the problem. Or if it was because I was adopted, or because we never bonded."

Committing to New Life Circumstances

Committing to new life circumstances was defined as the affective, cognitive and behavioural engagement of mother with child and was characterized by emerging dedication to new life circumstances. This growing commitment was influenced by a strong awareness of responsibility for the child and an increasing sense of self-efficacy and specialness. A participant stated that, "You look at this baby and you think, I'm responsible, and then nothing is ever the same again. It's not like a dread looming. It wasn't a bad thing, it was just a sort of acceptance of responsibility." and, "That little baby needed something from me that only I could give him, and that was the most wonderful feeling in the world."

Loyalty to societal expectations also influenced commitment to new life circumstances. For example, one participant initially did not question traditional parenting role descriptions, and began mothering without consideration of the choices available to her, "The major theme of my life was that I always did what everybody expected and wanted me to do. I never got into trouble and choices were always made for me." As a mother, she defined the "right thing to do" as being full time mothering and was unprepared for the intensity of the commitment, "No one told me the changes would be mostly on my back."

Engaging in the Process of Self-Socialization

The process of self-socialization included developing a repertoire of effective parenting skills, and was characterized by active striving to adapt to the mothering role. It required a proactive mothering stance which consisted of assessing role models to determine which behaviours warranted emulation and which required change, developing self-empathy, consulting the experts, and establishing the support of the community of mothers.

In the process of assessing role models, women often emulated positive parental models and rejected negative role models, replacing them with other sources. Women who had experienced negative parental

models recognized their personal vulnerability and the subsequent challenge presented to effective parenting. Hence, they often engaged in self-monitoring strategies. Recognizing that successfully changing negative models of parenting behaviour, one participant said that:

Even if you don't like it, it's something you fall back on because it's comfortable. It's what you know best, and just do it without even thinking. And then after you think "oh, why did I get sucked in to doing that again because it doesn't work right, but I just did it."

Developing self-empathy was a second strategy used for self-socialization. Seeing their own child's vulnerability enabled several participants to connect with their child within and use their own memories as a guide to mothering. Recalling how she would like to have been treated as a child provided one participant with a trusted guide for maternal practice, "I think I looked at it by how I would have liked to have been loved as a child and what had made me, me."

Seeking to further expand their knowledge, five women consulted child rearing manuals, attended self-help parenting seminars or sought family counselling. As a rule, they approached the literature with caution. "Somebody could pick up one of these books and think that this is the gospel and it may not fit their particular style or the temperament of their child, so it might lead to a sense of failure."

Seven women discovered that traditional notions of child rearing, as represented by the experts and modelled in their family of origin, were incompatible with their own value systems. Hence, they turned to contemporaries, the community of mothers, for guidance and support. The community of mothers offered not only a wealth of practical information on child care, but also emotional support. However, as with all resources, mothers were discriminating in their use of information garnered from other mothers. They sifted, sorted and evaluated.

You learn a lot of coping skills from other people and you throw out the bad ones and you try some others. I'd listen. If it's something that suits you, you know right off the bat. If it's not your personality you're not going to try it.

Immersion

Immersion represented the period after the first year transition to mothering, and included the year until the woman's oldest child was twelve. Unlike the engagement process, this stage represented a longer time span and often included mothering more than one child. As well, while engagement was a time of adjustment to new circumstances, the immersion stage involved settling into the day-to-day, year-to-year realities of child rearing. It was also a time when the enormity of a woman's commitment began to fully reveal itself, as lifestyle decisions had to be made,

as more children arrived, and as the stresses of the mothering role accumulated with the years. Immersion was characterized by processes involving renegotiation of relationships, preserving self and child, and replenishment.

Renegotiating Relationships

Participants reported expending considerable energy in redefining relationships so as to better accommodate the needs of their growing children. Significant renegotiation of relationships with their workplace and their partners were central to this process.

The process of decision making about the integration of the home and workplace was guided by both financial considerations, and by the woman's knowledge of herself, and her knowledge of what was best for her children. Participants chose either to renew their commitment to income earning, to modify expectations of success in the workplace, or to disengage from the workplace. Women who made the decision to return to work did so out of concerns for their personal well being;

The business saved me. I think if I didn't have that I would be lost, definitely. I wouldn't have a direction. And it's little things like if I didn't have to go out of the house I wouldn't care about me so much. Like even the way I looked, just general appearance and stuff like that.

In contrast, women who stayed at home struggled to come to terms with their devalued role:

They've tried to redefine, you know, "housewife." It's like calling us domestic engineers. So you give it some fancy title, and you thought you could improve it that way, but of course you can't because you're still not important.

All women reported renegotiating their marital relationships in response to the arrival of children. Their male partners' lack of commitment to child rearing was a major source of conflict and resentment in marriages.

You know it's like one minute he's the greatest father, another minute he just totally cuts off because he figures something else is more important, and that's an option mothers don't have.

Even within the context of previously established egalitarian relationships, traditional role segregation emerged, leaving the woman with primary responsibility for child rearing. This pattern began when the woman stayed home to care for the newborn, and became firmly entrenched in the immersion stage. Women identified two reasons for the reversion to traditional roles: the pull of tradition, and the husband's lack of motivation to become actively involved in childrearing tasks. The constant struggle to equalize parental role responsibilities was described as "a battle."

The renegotiation of role responsibilities often failed, not only because of a lack of conflict management skills, but also because men were

reluctant to relinquish the freedom which traditionally has been a male legacy. Separation and divorce were often the outcome of this impasse. Women who chose to remain in the marriage did so knowing full well that the issue of equality in child rearing responsibilities would be an unending source of conflict. As one woman said, "I get angry a lot. I try all the time to make him see, but if he doesn't want to, well, there are only two choices. You accept it or you leave. For the time being I accept it." A woman who chose to leave provided the following analogy:

It's like climbing up a big hill pulling a little red wagon. And your kids are walking beside you while he's riding in the wagon. Then you ask yourself "Why am I doing this?" So you dump the wagon with him in it and you carry on up the hill.

Preserving Self: Preserving the Child

A second aspect of the Immersion process was that of preserving the life of the child. Concomitant with this process was the preservation of self. In their attempts to reach an appropriate balance between these processes, five women described experiencing a personal crisis, a type of identity disintegration which threatened their sense of self. Early in the process of trying to resolve this dilemma, one participant described believing that, "You can't abandon something which you innately know is important for something you need for yourself. I can't be a mother and pursue my own personal happiness."

A crisis was precipitated by the struggle to balance connectedness and separateness, to balance their own needs with the needs of the child, and to balance giving and taking. Fearing the consequence of insufficient caring—the production of a socially unacceptable child and adult—several women in the study engaged in a process of self-sacrifice, knowing that ultimately they would be held accountable for their child's actions. Hence, as the ethic of care became the ethic of self-sacrifice, with a focus on giving and not replenishing, the definition of self became blurry. For one participant, the crisis became a threat to her own life. Feeling deeply unhappy as a full time mother, she recalled wishing to die. "I wanted to die. I mean, not every day. There were good days and there were bad days." Facing possible suicide, she came to terms with her life, "I had to make a conscious choice, 'No I don't want to die. No I don't think I'm ready to leave my kids yet.'"

Self-Constructed Mothering

The resolution of this crisis came through the decision to change, particularly by developing a personally defined philosophy of mothering. "I didn't know who I was anymore and I decided I had to break the cycle. I had to break past family tradition, past family influences. I couldn't live like this anymore." The tension arising from the growing loss of personal identity was a catalyst for the development of self-

constructed mothering—rejecting reliance on traditional principles of mothering as, “Someone else’s definition of right and wrong”—and acknowledging its contextual nature. Self-constructed mothering emerged as a result of participants efforts to preserve both the self and the child. It involved the development of a personal philosophy of mothering based on the mother’s recognition that what she knew was important, and could legitimately be applied to her relationship with her children.

Replenishment

The fourth aspect of Immersion was termed replenishment, and reflected a process characterized by seeking to regain the positive energy that had been depleted by the challenges of trying to mother according to a philosophy which was not their own. The primary strategies for replenishing were accepting personal limitations and acknowledging the rewards of mothering.

Three women reported facing the darker side of their mothering and using cognitive reframing to come to terms with their limitations. One participant reasoned that seeing their mother’s imperfections and limitations was an important lesson for children. “I feel that children do have to learn that everybody does have a limit. There are certain expectations that must be abided by.” Another stated that, “You see another side of yourself. What happens when a person is driven to their limit of frustration? You scream at them or you behave in totally uncharacteristic ways because you’re frustrated.”

Rewards were directly linked to discovering the replenishing capability of children. One woman described the relationship between mother and child as a kind of “dance to the music of their lives.” The child was seen as an active participant in a mutually interactive relationship, and could reward the mother in ways that kept her engaged in a positive way. Often, in times of stress and seemingly overwhelming responsibility, a loving act by the child served as a major source of replenishment. Hearing words such as “I love you” or “You sure are beautiful mommy,” or receiving a gift made with loving little hands acted as a significant energizer. Feeling unconditional love from a young child was a deeply satisfying experience. “Children, they’ll love you for you. They don’t care what you look like. They don’t care if you’re clumsy. That doesn’t matter to them.”

In summary, the immersion process was tumultuous, requiring women to re-examine occupational aspirations, marital relationships, and traditionally dictated values and beliefs about mothering. During this time, some women experienced a personal crisis which they resolved through the development of self-constructed mothering.

COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

Several important themes emerge from this study and require careful consideration by counsellors working with women who have dependent children. A few central ideas are discussed below.

Acknowledging the Mother as Expert

The counselling implications arising from this study are based on the primary research finding that mothering is a process of continuous personal re-evaluation which offers women many opportunities for personal change, growth and development. By acknowledging the complexity of the mothering role, and recognizing the competencies required to negotiate the role, a counsellor can facilitate women's development of a unique mothering script. When a counsellor invites a mother to describe her mothering experiences, and to articulate her philosophy of mothering, a therapeutic environment is created which affirms the client's expertise and invites her to pro-actively seek solutions which address her unique experiences.

An important strategy used by women as they develop a distinctive mothering style is to review their mothering received, a process which is particularly challenging for women whose mothers were cold, distant or hostile. A counsellor can assist such women by first acknowledging that unresolved issues around mothering received may have detrimental effects on their maternal functioning. Counsellors can encourage women to use self-healing strategies such as acknowledging the reality of their experiences, and consulting the child within, as effective ways to build positive mothering behaviours.

Women in this study reported that developing an empathic response to their mother's situation was a part of their healing that led to increased confidence in their ability to mother. This process is similar to that reported by Dolan (1991) in her work with survivors of sexual abuse when she discusses the importance of sufficiently acknowledging the abusing parent's "good attributes" as an element in the healing process. By acknowledging the good of the parenting received, a mother has "given them their due" (p.79) and is then able to move toward a reconciliation of the good and the bad. The development of self-empathy is similar to constructs developed by some current theorists working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse (e.g., Bradshaw, 1990; Laidlaw & Malmø, 1990). These researchers suggest that allowing the child within to become an integral part of one's present identity can lead to the emergence of a new sense of power and creativity. Women in this study reported that seeing their own child's vulnerability enabled them to connect with their child within. To help mothers move beyond their own painful childhood experiences, counsellors can encourage mothers to honor rather than repress their unique childhood experiences, and to

rework their insights into the development of a relationship with their child that is unfettered by the past.

Ecological Considerations

Since mothering cannot be separated from the society in which it occurs (Ehrenreich & English, 1978), counsellors can assist mothers to become agents of change by helping them understand the effects of powerful societal pressures on their mothering experiences. Educating mothers on how mothering practices are influenced by political, economic and social forces can facilitate this process. Two ecological considerations in western society, mothering myths and the silencing of mothers, are important dynamics which directly impact a mother's feelings about herself and her relationship with her children.

Mothering Myths

The power of mothering myths, such as the belief that mothering comes naturally to women or that full time mothering is essential to healthy child development, is pervasive and endures in spite of contradictory information (Thurer, 1994). This study suggests that self-constructed mothering is in part related to challenging these myths. An important counselling strategy may be to name the myths, determine the extent to which a particular woman is affected by them, facilitate examination of how the myths are reflected in her perception of self as mother, and challenge the myths through cognitive intervention.

Challenging these myths requires not only sensitivity to their power in mother's lives but also an awareness of the purpose served by the myths. Braverman (1989) suggests that women themselves may be tied to the myths since some satisfaction is derived from fulfilling them. To struggle against the myth is akin to being without a script for mothering. For example, if a woman holds strongly to the belief that her most important role is that of mother, to challenge this belief is to challenge her primary reason for being.

Myths cannot be dispelled simply by presenting historical or anthropological evidence which contradicts them. Such data alone cannot create a new story or undo an old story. However, through examination and personal reconstruction of the myths, and through confrontation of the guilt experienced due to unfulfilled myths, a counsellor can help a mother to clear the path for the development of self-constructed mothering.

Silencing Mothers

Women in this study reported a sense of discomfort as they spoke about the anger and sense of inequity experienced in the mothering role. They

were reluctant to voice the negative aspects of their experiences because such a discussion undermined one of their few legitimate roles. One participant pointed out, "There's nothing else. Without mothering, there is nothing left. You already gave everything else up."

Understanding that mothers are reluctant to share feelings of shame or guilt about their mothering experiences can be a beginning step to helping them explore deeply personal mothering experiences. Since mother blaming is an integral part of our personal and professional environment (Caplan, 1989), counsellors may need to examine their expectations about and biases toward mothers. Collier (1982) suggested that therapists monitor themselves as closely as they study their clients by asking themselves, "What are the cultural values which, as a result of socialization, we bring to the situation, and which either blatantly or subtly restrict the choices, options, issues and alternatives which we examine?" (Collier, 1982, p. 18). Braverman (1989) noted that how one thinks about mothers and motherhood will influence both problem definition and solutions. For example, a counsellor who believes that the mothering role is one which women naturally and easily perform may pathologize rather than normalize the experience of a woman having difficulty negotiating role demands.

In summary, several counselling issues emerged from the study. First, since mothering is a time of reevaluation, opportunities for change and development abound. By acknowledging the complexity of the mothering role and recognizing the competence required to negotiate it, a counsellor can facilitate both the development and maintenance of a mother's self-esteem and further her personal growth process.

Secondly, since mothering is an experience which cannot be separated from the society in which it occurs, working with mothers requires a collaborative examination of how their experiences have social as well as personal roots. However, this counselling strategy requires that counsellors develop an awareness not only of the contextual variables of mothering but also of their own stereotypes and values related to the mothering role.

Implications for Marital Counselling

Cowan and Cowan (1988) reported that almost all studies on transition to parenthood reported a decline in marital satisfaction. However, they noted that the decline was not large and was offset by the rewards of parenting. The data from this study suggests that, for some couples, marital satisfaction continues to decline as the stresses of negotiating parenting roles continue. In fact, one of the most striking findings of this study was women's reports of marital dissatisfaction and divorce. While further research on married, divorced, and separated couples is needed to determine whether these problems are found as frequently in

a larger population, counsellors should assess the extent to which a couples' problems are focused around disagreements about parenting roles. Couples can be assisted to arrive at an equal distribution of responsibility wherever possible. School counsellors should also ensure that health education curricula include discussion and debate around this issue.

The limitations of the study are related to issues of theoretical sampling and the use of the interview as a primary research tool. The findings of this study are based on an in-depth study of 11 mothers who clearly demonstrated the motivation to engage in positive mothering behaviours. However, no data was collected from negative cases. In future investigations, purposeful sampling from mothers who are not motivated to practice positive maternal behaviour will be important. The mean age of participants in this study was 35 years. Theoretical sampling from a broader age range might expand the categories. The credibility of the study may also have been enhanced by the use of additional data collection methods such as journals and by expanding the sample size. Future studies should include these adaptations.

Working with mothers requires a collaborative examination of the social and personal roots of women's experience of mothering. Counsellors must develop an awareness not only of the contextual variables of mothering but also of their own stereotypes and values related to the mothering role.

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