DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

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Abstract

The postnatal transition to mothering is experienced in a range of ways and brings with it diverse emotions, reflections on one's own identity and the anticipated actions that should accompany those identities. Accounts of mothering highlight some difficult and contested ideals and behaviours that new mothers have to work through. Based on empirical work conducted with new mothers from a west London borough, I will show how most mothering practices and behaviours appear to continue to be in constant battle with institutional, social and cultural expectations. The paper highlights how participants navigated those contested ideals and behaviours, including judging themselves and other mothers, thereby feeding into discourses of mothering ideals. Constructing different versions of a mothering identity became a way for mothers to legitimise their own feelings and practice autonomy while also trying to fit into a perception of what they think makes good mothering.

Introduction

The last three decades have seen a proliferation of research seeking to understand the challenges or experiences that new mothers or parents in Western societies face after their child is born (Austin & Carpenter, 2008; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Guendouzi, 2005; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Laney, et al., 2015). New mothers are said to be ill-prepared for the transition into motherhood (Bollen, 2015; Brunton, et al., 2011; George, 2005; Smith, 1999), but that, eventually, they transform their identities to happily and readily put child-related concerns before their own (Sears & Sears, 2001). This latter idealistic scenario hides the identity crises which accompany and form part of the realities in the journey of mothering (Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Krzyżanowska, 2020; Wall, 2013). Scenarios that idealise mothering and the transition period are guided by normative ideas of what a good mother is, with no acknowledgement of how time or contexts shape new mothers' constructions of mothering in the immediate postnatal period, or how they adjust to the transition period between birth and early childhood. The ways that new mothers navigate this extended postnatal period shows how they construct mothering identities which respond to perceived pressures to balance their own, as well as societal, expectations to present themselves to the world in particular ways (Lo Cricchio, et al., 2019).

In the absence of written texts to guide new mothers, understanding how women construct certain mothering identities as they transition into the postnatal period and beyond, to the early childhood phase, requires a deeper investigation of the social and familial contexts in which they live. This moves us beyond surface descriptions of mothering identities as binary descriptions of good or bad, but towards the complex and highly reflexive ways new mothers create their identities. This article will argue and highlight that mothering identities are numerous and that accompanying behaviours and narratives of mothering are designed to align or challenge some of the pressures new mothers face in their transition to mothering.

There are various descriptions about mothering identities and the literature has categorised mothering identities by describing them according to age, surrogacy and IVF, same-gender parenting, single parenting and more. While categories can be useful for understanding the needs of new mothers in specific social contexts, the intersectional nature of one's identity means that categorising women can also limit a general understanding of the various pressures mothers face at any one time. Trying to distill and describe what makes good mothering is a mammoth task. Qualitative research can offer insights into some of the ways sections of society have experienced or talked about mothering identity, over time helping to build a picture of the complexity in defining mothering identity as good or bad.

Background

By exploring mothering identities across different dimensions, we gain an idea of where pressures to mother in certain ways originate. How mothering identity is experienced itself differs according to a variety of demographics. Studies in different societies and communities have made attempts to explain mothering identities by describing the type of society in the first place. For instance, in what are termed collectivist societies, mothering practices vary but mothers are broadly taken to encounter the same communal experiences and traditions (Baum & Nisan, 2017; Lo Cricchio et al., 2019). Such practices are opposed to individualist societies where bonding, providing economic stability and other experiences are seen as an individual woman's matter (Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Ritchie, 1982). Veenhoven explored the phenomenon of broad societal differences and suggested that, by becoming individualist, a society lost its previously held (collectivist) traditions, that 'in choosing one's way of life, one is constantly at risk of making wrong choices' (Veenhoven, 1999, p.12). Veenhoven hypothesised that collectivist societies protected new mothers from having to make choices about how to be a good mother, since making choices would expose new mothers to scenarios that risked them making bad (individual) choices. Veenhoven suggested that this perception of risky choices – which in motherhood could equate to bad choices and hence bad mothering

– informed many new mothers' behaviours and the subsequent identities and behaviours they chose (Veenhoven, 1999). The following brief description highlights how some of those mothering practices in collectivist or traditional communities compares with individualist communities.

In Fiji, a study by Becker (1998) reported that there was a belief that if new mothers were not provided with a rest period or appropriate support after childbirth, they could develop the 'flu of childbirth', particularly if those new mothers were 'prematurely subjected to physical or emotional stressors.' (p.438). This traditional guidance was believed to reduce the chance of women becoming depressed in the postnatal transition, and largely saw new mothers passively accepting the mothering role with no societal pressure to partake in physical labour. Conversely, it also meant that women had to rely on others for sustenance and support and would have found it difficult to pursue activities for economic stability, for instance. Similarly, in Chinese tradition, a custom where new mothers were relieved of their domestic duties, known as Tsao-Yeu-Tsu or zuo ye zi, and loosely translating to 'doing the month' (Holroyd, et al., 2011) was another tradition that framed new mothers' experiences. Despite evidence that the practice was altered to suit younger generational mothers, traditionally, after the birth of their babies, new mothers in China were instructed to stay indoors to recover, with their only task at that point being to feed and care for the baby (Holroyd, et al., 2011). Cartwright Jones (2002) also discussed similar mandatory rest periods of 40 days for those women in India who adhered to postnatal rituals, which included celebrating mothering transitions with henna rituals during that time. In these examples, the extended family usually bore responsibility for looking after the new mother and the homestead and for maintaining the tradition itself.

In cultural contexts where women relied on these rituals to help them transition into and through the postnatal period, losing such rituals and therefore the loss of celebration of their status as a new mother, made the transition to mothering more difficult, socially, psychologically and physically. These difficulties were heightened especially if what those new mothers expected did not match what they were offered by their new communities (Taubmanben-Ari, et al., 2009). Such was the experience for Yeoun (2003), for instance, who described her migration from China, where mother identities were celebrated with traditional rituals, to the USA, where her experiences and loss of status as a new mother were opposed to traditional Chinese mothering expectations. Yeoun reported that she felt that new mothers in the USA were expected to support themselves (without the support of other women). This feeling left her struggling with an individualised approach to mothering. Yeoun's yearning for some of her traditional ways of living is a nostalgia for participating in traditional practices that can be seen in social media discussions where women in the West seek ways to create models of mothering that draw on traditional practices (see for example Chang, n.d.; Wisner, 2018).

Another example of communal approaches to mothering was described by Tronick et al. (1987) who documented that in Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo), babies were passed around to various kin in shared responsibility for childrearing. Mothering was taken as shared responsibility, where information and support was provided to the new mother by those kin around her. Despite these broad descriptors of mothering in traditional communities, one study showed that when new mothers are placed into static identities, it will result in conflict of experiences and identity for those mothers. That study, by Mabilia (2010), compared two different communities, in Tanzania and Italy, and described how women developed their own identities and behaviours while upholding the perceived cultural and social mothering roles. That women maintained unique personal identities in the face of general social expectations gave the illusion that Tanzanian women passively accepted a traditional mothering role while romanticising Italian women's role as homemakers and central figureheads of the family. In this study, pressure to mother in specific ways came from different sources: Italian women were under the gaze of the media, family, political and social agencies while in Tanzania, that gaze came from their families

and surrounding community. In both contexts, mothers had to balance potential conflicts by learning through personal experience how to navigate differing and sometimes competing mothering identities. When those balancing acts are hidden, it then appears as if transitions to mothering are seamless and free of tensions.

These mothering approaches can be contrasted to mothering practices in places where such practices and support mechanisms are uncommon or unusual. According to Deave et al. (2008), Heisler & Ellis (2008) and Spinelli et al. (2016), non-communal approaches to mothering support involve having one's mother to visit for a short period of time and the new mother searching for information in books and from healthcare professionals as the norm. For women mothering in North American/Western cultural systems, the models of good mothering are complex. In one study (Christopher, 2012) mothers re-constructed mothering identity by creating personalised versions of what a good mother was. The women justified actions such as delegating mothering roles and being financially independent, as more descriptive of good mothering identity. The ways these representations of mothering are handled, shows that even when mothering is viewed through one lens, the reality is usually different and leaves those in the mothering journey finding ways to balance those differing ideals (Baum & Nisan, 2017; Duarte & Goncalves, 2007; Maher & Saugeres, 2007).

Looking at mothering from a more culturally-specific perspective highlights further complex mothering ideals as described by Segura (1994) who studied a group of Mexican and Chicana immigrant mothers in the United States to see how they perceived mothering in a Western setting. She showed that the women constructed and shifted the definitions of good mothering by balancing different perceptions of good mothering which revolved around going to work or staying at home. On the one hand, it appeared that traditional Mexican and Chicana mothering models dominated Segura's participants' mothering identity but Segura additionally showed that decisions to work or stay at home were balanced against a perception of good mothering in the US, rather than Hispanic traditions alone.

In writing about racialised Black, Japanese, Hispanic and other non-white women in the USA, Patricia Hill Collins argued that reflections on power imbalances across ethnic categories which dominated US society influenced how women mothered (Collins 1994). As many non-white women disproportionately fell into lower social classes with few economic opportunities, Collins suggested that mothering roles were constructed against existing social inequalities which meant learning to balance contradicting identities and expectations. Mothering, seen through a racial/ethnic lens, was subsequently about searching for empowerment in an unequal society, including through employment and education, affirming behaviour and protecting children from that same unsafe society (Collins, 1994, 2000; Elliott & Reid, 2016; Reynolds, 2001). Yet, these framings hide how some mothers perceived a lack of choice about how to navigate through some of those social pressures, leading to them transferring mothering responsibilities to other family as they failed to achieve their mothering expectations (Henderson, 2009). As such, the mothering identity becomes a platform on which ideologies and resulting tensions play out.

Some scholars have suggested that the absence of traditional rituals and habits around transitions to mothering leaves mothers with myriad choices around mothering which increase the risk of their making what may be seen as a wrong choice (Francis-Connolly, 2003; Maher & Saugeres, 2007) and which can lead to negative mothering experiences (Bollen, 2015). While this perceived absence of mothering traditions can ultimately lead to negative mothering experiences (Bell 2004), studies of mothers in North American/Western cultural systems show that mothers remain subject, and also subject themselves, to notions or discourses of good mothering, bringing frustrations and conflict in everyday mothering experiences (Lupton, 2000; Nichols, et al., 2015; Wall, 2013) which become heightened when women are subject to institutional assessments of good mothering (Greaves, et al., 2002).

Given these various constructs and models of a good mothering identity, how new mothers experience the transition to motherhood provides an opportunity to explore the assumptions and perceptions of good mothering that new mothers measure themselves against. Using data from an ethnographic study of eighteen mothers from a West London borough, this study explores identities of good mothering and asks how new mothers balanced the identities available to them as they transitioned into the postnatal period. To further understand the potential presentations of good mothering, this article will first provide a brief overview of how good mothering is discussed in the broader literature. After a brief discussion of methodology, the article presents results from the study and concludes with a broad discussion of the findings where some implications for further research and support are made.

Identity discourses on mothering

There are numerous discourses or notions on what is good mothering behaviour which tend to be noted in the way new mothers describe their mothering experiences – in the lack of, or in the aligning with, certain perspectives. These perceptions of good mothering then influence the identities women adopt, or the ones they anticipate creating. Their behaviours become attached to specific identities or situations (Goffman, 1959; Heisler & Ellis, 2008), if for no other reason than for others to think of them as good mothers. Nuttbrock and Freudiger (1991) suggested that there were many factors such as marital status, age and employment that influenced one's mothering identity resulting in new mothers having multiple dimensions to their identities. Those identities were fluid and hierarchical, in that in responding to a social situation, new mothers evaluated and selected an identity which they saw best fit that social situation, balancing gains against sacrifices, for instance. As such, the transition to mothering could be seen as the interweaving of different and potentially complex identities in response to social circumstances, where different social norms demand that 'stereotypes, expectations, and roles' (Sökefeld, 1999, p. 426) be linked in some way to one's construction of their mothering identity. As being a mother became an identity that one worked to create, the new mother used narratives to explain and validate her behaviour (Gergen, 1985; Sommers, 1994) as part of this 'identity-work' (Faircloth, 2009, p.15). How one chose which identity and behaviour was best for a given situation was therefore driven by their current social situation but additionally considered any previous experiences and histories of mothering (Ewing, 1990).

Deave et al. (2008), Rich (1986), Ritchie (1982), Spinelli et al. (2016) and Zaatari (2006) have all described different notions of motherhood and showed them to be contested with no agreement about which roles and behaviours are ideal. The lack of agreement leads to identity conflicts (Smith, 1999). Like Ewing (1990), Duarte & Goncalves (2007) saw mothering identities and performances as constructs that were steeped in historical and cultural experiences of self which eventually led to divergent ideas about how motherwork should be performed and what it meant to be a good mother. In their study, the latter showed that definitions of good mothering were not suddenly present after the birth of a child, but were already being negotiated from the time a woman was pregnant (Duarte & Goncalves, 2007). The postnatal period served as a platform on which values from the pre-birth and the post-birth worlds competed. Zaatari (2006) described a similar phenomenon of competing values in her study with women in Lebanon who she described as perceiving the mothering identity as one tied up with politics and religion. The cultural descriptions of good mothers portrayed mothers as responsible for raising good citizens, working for the good of society, and never putting their needs before the socio-economic, religious and political needs of their communities. The political dimension of mothering, as responsible for raising good citizens, was itself not too dissimilar to how good mothering roles extended to women leading the call to stand up against political strife, as shown in a study of a group of women in a South African township (Stevenson, 2011). Yet, despite the seemingly persuasive strength of these notions of good mothering, not everyone subscribed to those views. Recalling that there are

negotiations and balancing of competing values that happen in identity-work, one can see similar tensions in Zaatari's (2006) work where some women did not want Lebanese conceptions of motherhood to be their defining identity while others saw their preferences of mothering as withstanding changing social values and continuing with traditional norms of motherhood. For the latter, good mothering was secured through sacrificing personal need in order to benefit family and society (Zaatari, 2006).

The changing relationship between one's mothering identity and their social environment and personal experiences is evident in Spinelli et al.'s (2016) study on new mothers whose babies were in a neonatal intensive care unit. Women in this situation reportedly found that their mothering experience was shaped by the institutionalised and health care professional-led care provided to their babies. As these mothers had to ask for permission to interact with their babies, any mothering confidence they had was limited and so their mothering identities were experienced as incomplete, highly transitory and not something they could control. Just as in Spinelli et al.'s (2016) study, Bobel (2002) and Deave et al. (2008) also showed how the loss of institutional direction experienced when new mothers left hospitals and went home was perceived as a lack of control which led to women being concerned about how to perform mothering identities.

For others still, constructing a mothering identity through a Christian religious perspective (Laney, et al., 2015) provided a way to mitigate potential tense relationships between oneself and a religious mothering role, which was described as ready acceptance of losing or letting go of previous and potentially conflicting identities. In seemingly seamlessly constructing Christianity as the guiding practice to mothering, mothers in Laney et al.'s (2015) study reported that their mothering behaviours and transitions were natural, with any conflicts they faced not bothering them significantly. Even outside of a religious view, similar sentiments were given by respondents in other studies. For instance, Heisler & Ellis (2008) conducted a survey where participants most often suggested that mothering identity was important and transitions to mothering were enhanced by prioritising children first before all else. Finally, despite the potential conflicts in identity that some women faced, they still strove for a 'supermen, superwife, super everything' identity (Choi, et al., 2005, p. 176). Any lingering sense of loss of self, however, should not be dismissed as Mcquillan et al. (2008) and Weaver & Ussher (1997) have shown a decade apart that transitions to motherhood and identity formation influence how one copes with the realities of everyday life. Different communities therefore have models of mothering which filter through to new mothers and understanding what these are for women in Western social systems will highlight what models exist in the supposed absence of tradition.

Methodology

Despite attempts to categorise mothers into different social categories or types of societies (e.g., communitarian/communal or individualist), mothering behaviours and identities cross-cut social categories and communities, and mothers create or perceive what may be termed mental models of mothering, which are ways of organising and evaluating one's reality based on one's experiences and ideas, through which notions of good or bad mothering emerge. Mental models (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008) are a way of exploring the lived realities of mothering where identity constructs are seen through the lens of symbolic interactionist and constructionist theory (Blumer, 1986; Gergen, 2001). This epistemic approach takes new mothers' identities as responses to personal thought, experiences and the subsequent interactions with those around them, where language becomes a window into those lived realities (Blumer, 1986; Gergen, 2001). Mothering identity becomes an ever-changing construct, meaning that the perceptions new mothers have of their selves interact with what they perceive society defines as being a good mother (Choi, et al., 2005; Kirschner, 2010; MacKinnon, 2005; Rothbaum, et al., 2002; St. Clair, 1982). These mental models of mothering are explored in the rest of this article.

Participants and methods

In 2011, I conducted ethnographic research, with University ethical approval, at two children's centres located in a London borough, spanning different socio-economic scales. The children's centres held postnatal mother and baby 'drop-in' sessions where health visiting and midwifery services covered various sessions and classes including postnatal exercise, nutrition, first aid, mental health-focused and baby feeding and sleeping sessions. By participating in these sessions and attending home visits with the midwife or health visitor, there were numerous opportunities to interview and interact with women from a variety of backgrounds, although stratifying women was not the aim of the study.

During observations at the children's centres, I became friendly with one mother who was interested in my work, and offered to introduce me to another mother who, in turn, introduced me to a local group of attachment parents – parents who believed in baby-led mothering, rather than their own expectations (Sears & Sears, 2001). Using purposive and snowball sampling, I invited women to participate in individual unstructured interviews on the general theme of mothering identity. Prior to any social group interactions, my main informant or the midwife would ask if the mothers were willing to let me in.

Any single interaction with a new mother lasted between thirty minutes to just over three hours and I saw mothers between one and eight times. There were numerous other observations with mothers in their attachment parenting group and in children's centers where group and drop-in clinics for first aid, nutrition, sleep support and breastfeeding support were held. Eighteen women took part in the formal interviews for the study. Five of the mothers were members of a local attachment parent group while three mothers were part of a postnatal therapy group debriefing on the difficulties they were facing as new mothers. One woman was aged forty-one while the rest were in their 20s-30s. There was a variety of marital statuses among them, including two women identifying as single parents. Only one mother had recently returned to paid work, but other mothers were planning on returning to paid work, volunteering roles or as main carers at home. The participants came from diverse geographical backgrounds with one woman from the Middle East, three from Eastern Europe, three from Western Europe, one from an African country, one from South Asia, two from East Asia and the remaining seven from mixed British and other backgrounds. Finally, all women but one were first time mothers, with children aged between two weeks old to twenty-three months old.

Verbal consent was sought for informal discussions in the children's centres and in the attachment parenting groups and signed consent taken for formal interviews. Interviews occurred in various public and private spaces and interviews were taped or fieldnotes taken at appropriate times (Emerson, et al., 1995). Data was analysed using thematic discourse analysis grounded in a constructionist and interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1986; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Burr, 2015; Singer & Hunter, 1999), taking mothering identity as an ongoing activity based on constant reflection and interaction with others and their social world. The results presented here (with all names pseudonymised) will focus on two select study themes, relating to constructions and notions of identity and how they framed discourses on transition to mothering.

Finally, this research was undertaken while I was a practicing midwife which brought insider/outsider roles (Berger, 2015) which are acknowledged but not discussed in this article.

Results

Identity claims and good mothering

One common theme among new mothers was the inadequacy of any preparations for what life was like when the baby arrived. New dynamics (for instance from hospital to homes to children's centres) changed the mothering environment such that the women had to constantly adapt their own behaviours to fit in with the perceived expectations therein. In this select group of women, ideas of 'natural mothering' (Martucci, 2015; Rich, 1986) were basic

to seeing oneself as a mother. Those who believed in natural mothering actively sought to portray any personal struggles as moments that emphasised and enhanced their mothering roles and identities.

Several women exemplified this. Marley for instance, believed that being a good mother meant giving up one's previous lifestyle, stressing that one could not pursue mothering while holding onto other social, career or personal aspirations. As such, a natural mothering identity was meant to move on from previous social identities without mourning any losses. Marley and another mother, Barbara, also perpetuated the normative mothering discourse and expected partners to accept that norm:

> Marley (UK): The key to coping with sleep deprivation and exhaustion is to accept it, and not fight it. I think the reason why so many women have so many awful problems with coping with exhaustion of having a baby is because they fight it. And they are constantly trying to find ways to make it better and if it doesn't work, then you feel dreadful and even more tired, because they are constantly reaching for this time when they can go to sleep again. Whereas if you resign yourself to the fact that you are not going to get any sleep, you start to focus on ways to cope with it, rather than ways to... rather than fighting it.

> Barbara (UK): The life you had before baby was born, ends when the baby is born; and men need to accept that.

Economic participation was a contentious issue and influenced mothering identities as either paid mother workers or stay-at-home mothers (Mcquillan, et al., 2008; Turner, 2012). The mothers in the attachment parenting had delayed returning to work as much as possible and, for those who could, given up their previous careers to concentrate on being a full-time mother. These women embraced the discourse of an intensive mothering identity by not employing childminders which meant they assumed all responsibilities for childcare. In this way, the mothers appeared to actively uphold what they viewed as traditional gender roles, where partners were responsible for family income, and they themselves were responsible for household upkeep. Women like Marley uncritically recalled their childhood as a time when their mothers were always at home, thus choosing to idealise their own mothering identities, and making paid work a hindrance to mothering:

> Marley: I always knew I wanted kids. From the age of, of like 6, from the age of knowing that's something that women did, you know. And I really looked forward to the experience of being pregnant and carrying a baby, you know. All of that. So, you know. And I always wanted to be full-time mother. I wanted to do it myself, I didn't want someone else to bring up my child. For me, having children was kinda like a bit of a vocation....

For women like Katu, also part of the attachment parenting group, returning to paid labour was an unwelcome interruption to enacting their mothering identities. Katu confessed to the other mothers at one of the fortnightly group gatherings that she was not looking forward to the time her maternity leave came to an end. Although her son was 11 months old at the time, Katu, a qualified medical theatre practitioner, was already planning on leaving her nursing occupation as soon as she had worked the stipulated number of hours for those returning from maternity leave. She conceded that she had to be realistic about her financial situation and; in preparation, had enrolled into an exercise course so she could retrain as an instructor and conduct classes for mothers and babies. By taking herself out of formal employment, Katu aimed to work more flexibly to continue to be with her son as much as possible. Yet, another mother, an informatician, said while she would miss staying at home, she missed being back at work with her friends.

Some mothers believed it was their right, just as everyone else, to go to work, to vote, or to stay at home and be mothers. They smoothed any potential tension between paid work or staying at home by invoking seemingly contradictory norms. For those women who believed that mothering identities were created from natural and joyous experiences that those in formal employment missed out on, they also believed in biological superiority and feminism as shaping their identities.

> Barbara: In a way, I feel sorry for men, because they miss out on this most amazing experience. That to me is feminism, I mean I haven't read much on feminism but for me...

> Katu (African): I can be whatever I want to be. A feminist. Heterosexual. Mother. I will do things because I want to and not because you tell me I can...and if I want to work then I should be able to do so. People shouldn't say you shouldn't work because you are a woman.

> Nancy (UK): Actually, I feel really lucky to be a mother and to be a woman, because I can do all these amazing things. Being able to spend time with your family is something that isn't really given top priority anymore.

These descriptions of the identities and actions which idealised mothering were contrasted when mothers acted in a manner that may not be seen as 'natural' mothering identity. Even within their supposed acceptance, there were times when, beneath the surface, some mothers preferred to have flexibility to go against the grain of natural mothering. As shown above, mothering identity brought with it ideas about how one should embrace any losses or conflicts as part of the transformation and transition process of becoming a mother. Yet, not all mothers embraced these experiences, and as the next theme shows, for some women, coming to terms with a mothering identity was a fight for retaining control over self instead of submitting to baby/child-led demands.

Fighting for control in a mothering identity

New mothers' perceptions of socially unacceptable behaviours led to stress and anxiety. Inability to control their children's behaviours heightened how fragile their mothering identities were. Crying, for example, was an example of how mothers questioned their abilities as mothers, especially where they felt pressure to be in tune with their children's needs such as instantly telling and remedying the cause of a child's distress. One mother, Gemma, explained how her baby's crying was a sign of failure. Gemma had always prided herself in coping with stressful situations and, as an aspiring lawyer, she described how she had managed to continue her studies and sat her law exams a few days before she went into labour. She was therefore not used to losing control of her life and found that, as she could not fit the baby within set and predictable behaviour, her mothering identity defined a stressful experience. This led to her curbing her own activities and 'accepting' loss of identity by avoiding interaction with other mothers:

> Gemma (Western Europe): I worry when he cries. I think people will think I'm a bad mum [for not being able to quieten him down]. And so at times I don't want to leave the house. It stresses me when he cries.

Children's behaviours also posed concerns to mothers' identity-work and how they built relations with others. The conflict between personal beliefs versus perceived expectations was evident in Karo, a mother who identified herself as liberal minded, and a reluctant member of the attachment parents. Karo was reluctant to set boundaries for her son but did not want to 'mollycoddle' him every time he cried, preferring instead to let him learn

from experience and error. She struggled with how her son Seb had been pushing his behavioural boundaries without any reprimands. So, Karo worried about what this meant for her own identity, seeing these conflicts as potentially affecting the open relationship she wanted to have with him and the face presentation she perceived went with good mothering:

> Karo (Eastern Europe): I don't think he loves me anymore. He sees me as the bad woman who is always now telling him, 'stop it' and 'no'. But when daddy comes home, they have fun together because daddy lets him do fun stuff. But I have to deal with his behaviour when daddy is not around. And these days it's worse because he is pushing to see how far he can go.

That her son's behaviour was tolerated by her partner added to the questions she had about her mothering capabilities and was emphasised during one of the morning sessions at the children's centre, where Seb was taking away other children's toys and throwing items at them. Karo appeared distracted and distressed by her inability to stop Seb from acting this way, especially when the other mothers started to move either the toys or their own children from where Seb was. After a while, Seb left the room, closely followed by another 2-year-old boy and, immediately, that boy's mother. All the while Karo remained seated for a few more minutes, eventually looked up at the other mothers, and to nobody in particular said:

> Karo: You see, there goes a good mother. She gets up and takes her son from outside and always knows where he is.

After this statement, Karo then got up and went to look for Seb. On that particular occasion, Karo left the children's centre almost an hour earlier than she usually did, apologising for her son's behaviour on her way out.

This example of how women's societal expectations and experiences influenced expressions of their identities was also notable within seemingly unavoidable breastfeeding discussions. The women either claimed positive experiences or rejected the underlying assumptions within those experiences, thus either embracing or challenging the actions underpinning a mothering identity. Barbara, described not knowing how she would cope once her son stopped breastfeeding, to which Nancy, reproducing the ideal mother-work discourse, added she felt sorry for her neighbours whom she thought were not listening to their child's cues:

> Nancy: [they are] up at night, singing and walking [around the house] at 4 in the morning trying to get their babies back to sleep [...] it must be incredibly difficult [for them].

Yet, suggesting that breastfeeding or baby-led actions were the only way of coping with a new baby, and thus an example of good mothering (Lee, 2008), was not universal. For those mothers who appeared to want a more flexible mothering identity, their reflections on perceived practices of mothering which they battled through revealed the differences between their current mothering conceptualisations versus what they were experiencing before. In so doing, experiential knowledge became important in claiming a new description of mothering, especially as mothers struggled for agency and control of situations (for instance, fighting against feelings of inadequacy and family pressures).

> Kirsti (Western Europe): It was like torture, I couldn't relax at all, and I was always really angry about this breastfeeding, pumping and then every time like it was getting to that time, I got really in a bad mood.

After making mental evaluations around perceived benefits or sacrifices of particular situations, mothers then created new forms of expertise, as shown by Kirsti who then asked:

> Kirsti: And then also, nappy-free time. Do they need nappy-free time? And I thought, no. I don't bother you know. I don't give them nappy-free time. Maybe I'm a bad person. I'm not doing it and I'm not feeling bad about it. He doesn't have nappy rash or whatever, so. There's things you can do, but you don't have to do it.

By claiming new experiences as legitimate ways of mothering, the mothers transitioned from conflict to embracing their actions as reflective of how they wanted to mother, not the societal expectations:

> Ko (East Asia): I know it's bad, but I like checking my Blackberry for messages and emails from my work colleagues. This makes me happy, to have conversations that do not revolve around the baby all the time.

> Deepa (British Asian): I wouldn't have got so stressed about the breastfeeding, definitely not. I wouldn't have expressed like a loon, I'd have let people give him a bottle of formula...

In these multiple and complex ways, the mothering identity was constructed by how mothers embraced or challenged the self and socially-created narratives and experiences of mothering, which they had to review as their children's and others' behaviours evolved. The transitions into mothering in the postnatal period were not linear but involved mothers either readily adopting and accepting a view of intensive mothering or taking a while to resolve the conflicts in agency and control until they eventually found an identity of mothering that enabled them to enact their own beliefs as they saw fit.

Discussion and conclusion
New mothers face multiple concerns as they transition from pregnancy to their child's early years. New mothers in North American/Western communities are usually thought to mother outside of traditional models of mothering, yet there is evidence to show that mothers still perceive pressures to mother in certain ways. This article highlighted how some of those pressures emerge and the new mothers' responses to them. Describing their actions across two themes, new mothers were shown to be constructing their mothering identities by balancing several new and sometimes conflicting realities. Mothers' abilities to cope with the transition period was linked to how well they managed to construct their new identities and how well those identities led to the least amount of tension. In the absence of formal traditions in Western cultural settings, ideology and norms created mental models of mothering that women perceived they were judged against and to which they subsequently ascribed to or challenged. New mothers still justified how their chosen identities conformed to an unspoken model of being a good mother. Interestingly, while some mothers rejected what they saw as norms, they inadvertently also judged other mothers thereby perpetuating mothering ideologies.

While Chodorow (1999) suggested that some of the beliefs on which certain types of mothering identities are formed are not always in sync with reality, Rich (1986), Hays (1996) and Guendouzi (2005) instead discussed ideologies of mothering as fixed and norms revolving around mothers embracing intensive mothering roles. Instead, this article showed that mothering identities were a constantly negotiated process where women sometimes rejected 'bring[ing] to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism that would involve the cross cloning of Mother Teresa…with a powerful and successful modern woman' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 5). This article has shown, albeit briefly, some of the

ways in which a mothering identity is created by women transitioning into the postnatal period. For these women, there was a multitude of conflicting behaviours based in part on to their perceived ideas on good mothering, and in part on their personal experiences and reflections.

Yet, any models of mothering cannot be dichotomised by type of society i.e., individualist or communal/traditional or by category. Scholars have shown the personal level at which mothering discourse is eventually interpreted as a useful or not-so-useful guide to one's idea of good mothering (Baum & Nisan, 2017; Christopher, 2012; Collins, 1994; Deave, et al., 2008; Maher & Saugeres, 2007; Wall, 2013). Additionally, when mothers convene in multi-cultural communities, their personal models of good mothering highlight gaps in understanding the complexity of mothering in contemporary society when mothering is only explored from set categories like age, marital or employment status. The ways new mothers find mothering identities and behaviours contradictory become more visible (Baum & Nisan, 2017; Sökefeld, 1999) if we move away from these fixed categories to explore mothing, something to which this article adds. Similar threads of discussion have occurred before (Bobel, 2002; Deave, et al., 2008; McMahon, 2020; Redshaw & Martin, 2011; Spinelli, et al., 2016) Just like research before it, this research has shown how constructs of mothering identity are continually embraced, challenged, and resolved. The transition to motherhood remains an identity-forming environment where social, institutional and personal contexts are pitted against previously held constructions of self-identity. This is similar to what Johnston & Swanson (2006) described as a movement between private and public arenas.

While this qualitative research provides rich data for exploring mothering ideologies and lived experiences, it still only provides one way of understanding the constructions of mothering by a small group of women. It does not generalise to all mothers in Western society for instance, and it would be useful to explore in more depth how personal relationships with partners and family may have influenced mothering ideology. Despite the reluctance to stratify mothers, I acknowledge that understanding social categories that mothers find themselves in remains a useful way to further explore notions of good mothering. In the future, more views can be sought by including, for example, more women who were experiencing motherhood for at least the second time round. The study is useful, however, as a dimension with which to explore the myriad ways mothers exist in society, especially where they encounter numerous cultural versions of mothering through their interactions with other mothers from different cultures. In this way, in the lack of prescribed traditions, understanding the creation of mental models of mothering can explain how mothers continue to perceive pressures to mother in certain ways.

Some additional remarks can be drawn from this work. Firstly, when the contradictions of mothering are not recognised, women who express the conflict mothering brings will be labelled bad mothers and the conflicts they face psychologised. Healthcare professions' actions may thus be perpetuating the myths of motherhood by not recognising the formation of mothering ideals, or the multiple identities new mothers balance in their transition to motherhood. Given the increasing gaze on mothering that social media brings, new mothers increasingly find it difficult to self-define in ways that do not cause contradictions or tensions (Wall, 2013). As Western communities become ever more multi-cultural, researchers must consider how to describe what happens in those spaces without universalising new mothers' experiences, yet without creating superficial boundaries along communities lines either. We should continue to critique the reality of mothering to understand what those embarking on the mothering journey experience and how societal norms continue to define gender roles in ways that heighten myths of sacrifice or emancipation of women in contemporary urban societies.

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