1 *Becoming a Mother*
Generational Shifts and Narrative Research

It's such hard work raising a child, but I wouldn't change it.

Rosie

The topic of motherhood holds an enduring fascination and also acts as a barometer of much more, including societal norms and patterns of change. This book examines contemporary experiences of a group of women in the UK as they become mothers for the first time.[1] It uses data collected in interviews that follow their unfolding experiences from before the birth of their first child and across the first year. The qualitative longitudinal research repeats, 21 years on, an earlier study undertaken by the author, which resulted in the book, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (2005). In this latest book, a study using the same research design provides the materials for an updated, contemporary account of first-time motherhood experiences. Importantly, it also provides an opportunity to compare the experiences of the two groups of (unrelated) women interviewed in the two studies, one generation apart.[2] This trajectory reveals the ways in which structural factors pattern and revise aspects of mothering and motherhood, as well as those activities and relationships that remain more resistant to change. What does the passage of time and related transformations enable us to say about women's lives and gender equality, motherhood, childbirth, women's bodies and contemporary,

[1] The term 'mother' is defined by the participants and includes two women in same-sex marriages where they were not the carrying or birth mother but self-identified as becoming mothers.

[2] Data collection in the original study commenced in 1996 and in the contemporary study in 2017; it continued for up to 3 years in both studies. Additional data collection occurred in the contemporary study from March 2020 to April 2021 as COVID-19 lockdowns were experienced in the UK. Generation is broadly defined here 'a group of people born at roughly the same time, usually within a 20-year time interval' (Carr, 2019).

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gendered care and paid work? Indeed, has it ever been a more challenging time to be a woman who is also a mother?

As before, at the core of this book sit temporally sensitive accounts, narrated by women as they experience childbirth and undertake daily practices of mothering, encountering what Rich so appositely defined as 'the patriarchal institution of motherhood', almost 50 years ago (1976). In the intervening years and between the two studies, change and stasis have occurred as the world has become more complex and fragile to navigate, personally, politically and globally. The contemporary context is more cluttered and precarious, encompassing a climate emergency, a pandemic, demographic shifts and transnational mobilities, aspects of a gender revolution seemingly in retreat,[3] digital advancement, developments in assisted reproductive technologies (ART) and significant legislative change in the recognition of same-sex partnerships and marriages.[4] Cumulatively, these features of contemporary life present new questions and underscore existing ones in relation to women's lives, mothering and motherhood: including are women having it all, or just feeling like they are doing it all?

The topic of motherhood has continued to attract research attention, with theoretical and substantive contributions necessarily challenging much that is otherwise assumed of too often, white, able-bodied, women's maternal lives (Bueskens and Pascoe Leahy, 2019; Dow, 2019; Frederick, 2017; Gillies, 2007; Glaser, 2021; Hallstein et al., 2020; Holloway, 2016; Oakley, 1996, 2016; O'Reilly, 2019; Reynolds, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022; Segal, 2020; Zufferey and Buchanan, 2020). This is a busy field of study as personal, maternal experiences continue to be subjected to normative prescriptions of the 'good' mother, which are surveilled – and potentially disrupted – across an increasing number of digital and other domains. Notions of ubiquity and careless essentialist assumptions remain, as apparent choice and constraint simultaneously characterise mothering experiences. Feminist theoretical contributions within the field have continued to challenge, disrupt and revise assumptions, including in relation to intersectionality, neoliberal hegemony and the individual

[3] In 2022, there was a reversal of 50 years of established constitutional protection for abortion, the Court overturned *Roe* v. *Wade*. See www.bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o1622

[4] There are currently thirty-two countries where same-sex marriage is legal (2023). See www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world

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experiences of mothering/parenting and caring as these have become intensified. Observers note the way in which forms of maternal womanhood have been fashioned in different and intensified ways, from 'yummy mummies' and 'professionalised motherhood' to those living precarious maternal lives, in marginalised and highly surveilled circumstances, created by policies of the political right (Jensen, 2020; McRobbie, 2013; Reynolds, 2020). The focus of theoretical explanation and change include 'matricentric feminism', where mothers are positioned as having additional concerns to women who do not have children (O'Reilly, 2019:14). Here, a feminism for mothers is central and key, while others urge that 'reproductive politics', involving 'a wide coalition' of anyone engaged in caring, should be placed at the very heart of politics, if change is to be (finally) achieved (Segal, 2020). These and other contributions show the ways in which, 'despite forty years of feminism' women's maternal lives continue to be enmeshed in debate, contradictory beliefs and practices (Glaser, 2021; O'Reilly, 2020:14). Indeed, perhaps never more so.

Twenty-one years earlier, key findings in the original study (Miller, 1998, 2005, 2007) drew attention to the 'limited repertoire of story lines' available to women as they experienced the ambivalences and myths associated with first-time motherhood and the ways in which structural and other restraints configured their lives. A key question in this latest book will be to explore how and whether these have shifted and what any change might indicate, substantively, conceptually and theoretically about women's lives. Drilling down into unfolding experiences of childbirth and mothering provides a unique opportunity to examine more subtle aspects of how gendered, maternal agency, identity work and narrative storytelling are encountered.[5]

In the sections that follow, the broader social and cultural context of neoliberalism in which maternal imaginings may be invoked and women (may or may not) come to motherhood is outlined. A case is also made for the focus taken on the 'storied human life' and narrative as an act of embodied sense making through transition and an expression of fluid and tenuous identify and selfhood. In this dynamic and situated endeavour, 'the transition from private story to the generation of a public problem involves struggle and recognition of subjecthood' as well as 'the privilege to narrate oneself' (Kehily and Thomson, 2011).

[5] See Appendix Table A.1 for participant characteristics.

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The process and comfort of being able to manage a sense of ontological self-coherence through constructing and reconstructing narratives is premised on a philosophical understanding of selves, which is outlined further below (also see Miller, 2005, Chapter 1; Miller, 2017a). Philosophical and theoretical considerations have also shaped the qualitative longitudinal research design, data collection and phases of analysis, and these are discussed further in Section 1.3.

1.1 Setting the Contemporary Context

This book is written as global trends show that women are delaying first pregnancies and families are getting smaller. Total fertility rates have declined around the world, and childbirth is increasingly 'postponed'[6] or 'delayed' (Vollset et al., 2020). Between the two Motherhood studies, the average age of women at first birth in the UK rose by 4.5 years from 26.1 years in 1996 to 30.7 years in 2022. These shifts reflect a trend towards later first-time births and smaller family size found across most of the 37 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Eurostat, 2020; OECD, 2022). Research also suggests that changing trends indicate more women (and men) are making a choice to remain 'child-free' and not to become parents (Rinesi and Graham, 2017). Of course, it can be difficult to disentangle delayed childbearing from a commitment to be 'childfree' or 'voluntarily childless', which may of course change (Rinesi and Graham, 2017; Shapiro, 2014). Even so, trends seem to indicate that increasing numbers of women and men are making a choice not to become parents (Blackstone and Dyer Stewart, 2012). The reasons for this are of course multiple, including various costs of parenthood, both individually and at a global level, where population size, sustainability and climate precarity can be major concerns. However, whatever the factors that contribute to changing fertility trends, where first-time motherhood does occur, it happens at a later stage of life than anytime previously, across all social classes and ethnic groups in the UK and more widely (OECD, 2022).

The trend of later motherhood is important to note, because it signals various corresponding changes. One being that 'both sexes enter

[6] It is worthy of note that the language of 'postponement' suggests that something has not been done at the right time.

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parenthood on more equal terms, usually with similar levels of educational attainment and employment experience' than at any time previously (Grunow, 2019:3). Turning thirty and becoming a mother for the first time means that an extended period of time has been spent in education and the workplace relative to earlier generations, shoring up an individual sense of a self as a worker/career individual (*I've always wanted to be a mum, but I just had to get to a certain stage in my career first, before I was happy to take a break*). This extended, pre-baby adult time, is also characterised by practices of agency which are not encumbered by the 'mental labor' associated with maternal selves (Walzer, 1996). If plans to become a mother are made, these are likely to include factors such as employment stability, career stage, financial circumstances, maternity entitlements, as well as partnership status. This extended period of adulthood lived without children can frame expectations associated with first-time motherhood and parenthood, which are different to the experiences that later transpire. For example, ideas that maternity leave will be 'time off' and a 'a bit of a break' from a job, can come to feel misplaced. Even if there's an instant connection to your baby and you enjoy many aspects of early mothering, the 24/7 responsibility of caring, can quickly be felt as unremitting. Sleep deprivation, feeding issues and the all-encompassing responsibility for a new human life can feel overwhelming, especially if there's a perception that everyone else is coping (Miller, 2005, 2007). But becoming a mother can also feel like the very best thing you've ever – and will ever – achieve, even so, ambivalence and guilt will feature too (Jensen, 2020; see also Chapters 3–5).

Other changes that have occurred in the intervening 21 years between the two studies, include the legal recognition of same-sex civil partnerships (legislation passed in 2004) and same-sex marriages in the UK (legislation passed in 2014). This legislative move is part of other shifts that characterise increased recognition of the multiple ways in which intimate relationships and parenthood are configured, biologically and socially, and practised (Faircloth and Gürtin, 2018; Morgan, 2014; Roseneil et al., 2020). Developments in ART have also enabled more individuals to become biological parents, including those individuals in same-sex relationships. As Gabb notes, 'parenting possibilities can now feature in the imagined futures of LGBTQ relationships' (2018:2; Golombok, 2015; Golombok et al., 2023). But legal and medical advances aside, access to costly services such as IVF may still

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be limited by relationships status, age, postcodes and other criteria (see Chapter 2). Even so, these developments offer ways of becoming parents to some who may never have imagined that biological, or related social parenthood (in some form) would be a possibility for them. A further change relates to birth itself, with increased intervention and a notable rise in the number of emergency caesarean section births being performed in many countries, including the UK (Betrán et al., 2021; Rydahl et al., 2019). This comes, paradoxically, as apparent options for labour and birth have increased (Browne, 2016; Miller, 2020). This shift to more interventionist births was experienced by a majority of women in the contemporary study reported here (see Chapter 3). This coincides with what has been called an 'alarming' global trend and poses new questions in relation to women's bodies, agency and labour and birth (Miller, 2020; Sandall et al., 2018; Wise, 2018). Factors such as age of mother and changing physiology of women's bodies have been drawn upon to explain this rise, but heightened perceptions of medical risk and litigation are clearly factors, too.

Societal ideas of motherhood are constructed in relation to heteronormative and contingent ideas of what fathers do. Even though this is an oversimplified, binary and narrowly heteronormative way of thinking about assumed responsibilities of familial caring, it also highlights what is taken for granted, unquestioned or is undervalued in relation to maternal caring. Moves to adopt less binary language in the form of 'parent' can be more inclusive but can also mask the lack of change in the ways in which primary maternal care continues to be assumed/prioritised. This is tricky terrain, because research shows that men can father (if not exactly, 'mother') in caring relational ways, yet research continues to show that women are still most likely to be the primary carer in heterosexual couple households (Brooks and Hodkinson, 2020; Dermott and Miller, 2015; Grunow and Evertsson, 2019; Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel, 2020). So, men can care, but remain less likely to do so, even though women with children are much more likely to also be working mothers engaged in significant ways in paid work outside the home. This underscores how facets of patriarchy, patriarchal motherhood and neoliberalism, reinforce and reproduce patterns of caring in which 'falling back' into gendered practices, may be a rational response to managing historical pay gaps, unequal leave entitlements and more (Banister and Kerrane, 2022; Faircloth, 2021; Miller, 2011, 2013a; Twamley and Schober, 2019). In the UK, meagre

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policy attempts to address paternal leave entitlement include in 2015 the introduction of Shared Parental Leave (SPL). Heralded at the time as a challenge to 'the old-fashioned assumption that women will always be the parent that stays at home' (Clegg, 2014). The policy, based on maternal transfer of maternity leave, has had very limited up take. Banister and Kerrane (2022) have recently noted that 'as the policy stands, any widespread impact on the way in which gender relations function in social reproduction is likely to be limited' (2022:12).

In step with patterns found in most countries and as noted above, daily practices of caring for children continue to be disproportionately undertaken by mothers. In the UK, almost three in ten mothers (28.5 per cent) with a child aged 14 years and below, report reducing their working hours for childcare reasons. This is compared to only one in twenty fathers (4.8 per cent) (ONS, 2019). More recently research from the UK-based charity, 'Pregnant Then Screwed', shows that more and more mothers are finding that it no longer makes financial sense for them to work, because of childcare costs.[7] This is not surprising when childcare provision in the UK is amongst the most expensive in OECD countries (OECD, 2022) and provision is patchy and 'failing' parents and particularly mothers (Statham et al., 2022): but this might be about to change.[8] Even so, the number of mothers with dependent children in the labour market has grown substantially in the intervening years between the two studies, with 75.6 per cent (three in four mothers) in paid work in 2021 compared to 61.9 per cent of mothers in 1996 (ONS, 2021). This has been facilitated for some by another social change that is the increased involvement of grandparents in providing childcare, both in the UK and globally (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018; Harman et al., 2022; Zartler et al., 2021). In the UK, demographic shifts, most fundamentally that people live longer, mean that grandparents increasingly fill gaps in otherwise ad hoc childcare service provision for working parents. Grandparents facilitate necessary paid work and economic provision when expensive private care

[7] pregnantthenscrewed.com/three-quarters-of-mothers-who-pay-for-childcare-say-that-it-does-not-make-financial-sense-for-them-to-work/

[8] A long-awaited commitment to improve childcare provision, including extending availability and free hours in England has very recently been announced by the current Conservative government (March 2023) and is noted further in Chapter 6. Also, see response to this new initiative: workingfamilies.org.uk/news/statement-on-the-spring-budget/

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arrangements are not an option (for many), relative to income. The issue of how family life and paid work, or 'work and care' (Grunow and Evertsson, 2019), are managed continues to be a stressful element of contemporary life for many households: further magnified in all sorts of ways, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 5).

This book is written at a very particular global moment.[9] The COVID-19 pandemic has led to over 5 million deaths globally. In the UK, it revealed and reaffirmed long-term, fundamental inequalities and disrupted family and work lives on a scale unimagined in recent history (Dorling, 2020). Lockdowns for those who could work from home, also presented a glimpse into new ways of organising paid work and caring, as these activities along with home schooling converged under the same roof: and so began the type of experiment that would never get past a university research ethics committee (see Chapter 5). Preliminary findings on how mothers, family and work were impacted by the pandemic show the ways in which longstanding inequalities were exacerbated (Craig and Churchill, 2021b; Dorling, 2020; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021; O'Reilly, 2021; Pedersen and Burnett, 2022; Twamley et al., 2022). But, more flexible ways of undertaking paid work have also been trialled on an impressive scale (Chung et al., 2021). Even so, there seems to be a concerted effort by the UK government to reverse, rather than harness, opportunities provided by more flexible ways of organising work and productivity.[10] The particular ways in which a series of government-decreed lockdowns in the UK were experienced by the women in this study and how it affected mothering practices and reflections, are explored further in Chapter 5.

1.2 Contemporary Motherhood and Theorising Change

Questions over how far contemporary motherhood has become more 'professionalised' (McRobbie, 2013), more 'combative' (Abetz and Moore, 2018), more subject to scrutiny and intensified (Hays, 1996; Schmidt et al., 2022) make plain the contradictions and ambiguities

[9] www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-on-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-24-february-2022

[10] See for example: www.reuters.com/world/uk/get-back-work-office-britains-business-minister-says-2022-01-21/

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which run across this most private and most public of experiences. If there is a universal dimension, it is the varied and changing experiences every mother can have, even one hour to the next. But drawing attention to types of motherhood, and the factors which delineate these, helps to continually map this diverse and contingent terrain (Schmidt et al., 2022). Amongst the women who participated in the study reported here, all are housed, employed and some would be defined as more privileged than others, across a range of measures, including employment.[11] But as in the earlier, original study, the variables that appear to infer sameness and uniformity should not be taken to mean that mothering experiences will be the same (Miller, 2007). The original study also drew attention to just how widely the ripples from idealised and normative ideals of the 'good' mother, travel. This means that all mothers in some way or another are subjected to the discourses of this idealisation, which is classed and 'raced' in its narrow focus on white, middle-class, able-bodied and heterosexual women (Dow, 2019; O'Reilly, 2014; Reynolds, 2020). And is now further amplified, as well as contested, through a boundaryless, digital landscape.

In order to situate the women's accounts of contemporary motherhood, the concluding paragraph from the original study (1996–2000) and accompanying book (Miller, 2005) is included below:

Making sense of motherhood is both complicated and at some level intrinsic, and practised in different ways, in different material and structural circumstances by different women. A focus on transition to motherhood requires us to engage with essentialist ideas of a core, biologically determined self. Yet this focus illuminates. the ways in which selves are gendered and embodied, enduring and tenuous. When instinctive knowledge about mothering is found to be absent, it is a social self as mother which women gradually acquire, through practise and meeting the needs of their child. But difficult experiences may be concealed whilst this is achieved. The time taken to feel competent in the practices and skills of mothering vary, and by focusing on maternal practices as a dimension of making sense of motherhood the intention is not to universalise women's experiences, although clearly there are some common threads. In the West the backdrop against which women make sense of their transition to motherhood continues to circumscribe the mothering relationship in particular cultural, social and moral ways.

[11] See Appendix Table A.1 for participant details.

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The conventional and gendered expectation of being there for others continues to be hard to escape. This can make disclosure of what are felt to be unnatural difficulties as early mothering experiences unfold, too risky to voice. Yet concealing experiences helps to perpetuate the old myths of motherhood, and so the cycle goes on and women continue to come to motherhood with unrealistic expectations. It is not, then, the mothering per se that is the problem, although it may be initially difficult and confusing. Rather, the problem emanates from the ways in which mothering and motherhood are configured in the West, which in turn shapes what can and cannot be said about our experiences. It is, then, the narrowly focused and limited repertoire of possible story lines that exist around mothering that we urgently need to challenge. (Miller, 2005:160)

Along with other motherhood scholars writing during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the need to centre first-hand accounts and critique idealisations of motherhood, remained clear (Bailey, 1999; Earle, 2000; Lazarre, 1997; Maushart, 1997; Thomson et al. 2009). In 1996 and having witnessed the birth of her grandchild, Oakley wistfully noted 'I am pleased that childbirth has changed. Would it be ungrateful to say that I would just like it to change some more?' (1996:1427). Writing now in the 2020s, research findings only underscore the need for continued vigilance and to wish for – and demand – more change. The limited aspects of change are notable and noted as mothers, according to O'Reilly, 'remain disempowered despite 40 years of feminism' (2019:15), and motherhood continues to be the 'unfinished business' of feminism (Glaser, 2021).

Some changes are clear, but paradoxically in relation to intensifying aspects of motherhood and mothering, rather than political and structural changes to support those with children. Women are now expected to 'have it all' and 'do it all', whilst making it look easy and according to Anderson and Moore, 'looking good at the same time' (2014:95; Slaughter, 2012). These demands sit alongside now normative expectations in a 'parenting culture', where cognitive development and enrichment activities are part of very early, baby caring practices (Lee et al., 2014; MacVarish, 2016; MacVarish et al., 2015). Indeed, these begin before pregnancy through applications (apps) designed to shape, survey and marketize every step of anticipated motherhood/parenthood. Targeted digital messaging and marketing have become a facet of 'the digitisation of aspects of our daily lives' aimed at parents (Martens, 2018; Ramaekers and Hodgson, 2020).

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Explicit concerns with cognitive development was much less evident in the original Motherhood study, a generation earlier. Similarly, digital developments and the inexorable rise of social media connections that saturate and mediate everyday (maternal) life presents another key change between the two studies (Jensen, 2013:127). Web technologies have developed in multiple ways since the original study and digital connection can be experienced as combative and unsettling, but also as supportive and emancipatory (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Archer et al., 2021; Ramaekers and Hodgson, 2020; Williams Veazey, 2021).

1.2.1 Contemporary Constructions of the 'Good Mother'

As noted earlier, for all the diversity of experiences women encounter in their own mothering, the generic ideology, social norms and discourses of the 'good mother' remain narrowly delineated. A dominant contemporary construction of 'good motherhood' centres on how caring and – not too much – paid work are managed. Essentialist questions of biological determinism continue to lurk here, too. An historical review can show us how aspects of the 'good mother' have changed and which aspects seem more resistant to change: from the 'attached', homemaker mother in the 1950s to the intensive mothering associated with individualised, neoliberal production and raising the 'successful' child from the mid-1990s, with this intensification augmented and promoted by the claims of neuroscience and mother-facilitated 'concerted cultivation' of the child in the early 2000s to more recent configurations of the stay at home 'professional mother' set up in contrast to working motherhood (Craig et al., 2014; Edwards and Gillies, 2013; Faircloth et al., 2013; Gillies et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014; Lareau, 2003; McRobbie, 2013; Miller, 2017a; Schmidt et al., 2022). But across all these versions of the 'good mother' sits the ubiquitous expectation of maternal selflessness and primary responsibility for caring choices made and their consequences. In a recent scoping review of social norms of motherhood, explored across two decades, Schmidt et al. (2022) note the contradictory aspects of social norms and, importantly, draw attention to the ways in which 'social norms of motherhood might have very different meanings for different groups of mothers' (2022:4). The scoping exercise results in five types of normative motherhood being determined in scholarship across the preceding 20 years. These comprise 'the present mother', 'the future-oriented

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mother', 'the working mother', 'the public mother' and 'the happy mother' (2022:12). Unsurprisingly, these overlapping and contingent norms of mothering and motherhood are threaded through the narratives produced in the empirical chapters, which follow.

A conclusion in the original motherhood study was that 'the conventional and gendered expectation of women being there for others continues to be hard to escape' (2005:160), and across the contemporary data this has not abated. But one significant change between the studies is the advent of digital spaces and connectedness through which practices of (maternal) agency and experiences can play out. These virtual spaces can democratise, as well as reinforce normative expectations and/or alienate. For example, Jensen (2013), writing about the online parenting website, *Mumsnet,* agency and the assemblage of a political public, points to the ways in which the 'very architecture of the site offers mothers space to 'vent' – to affectively manage the impossible demands of contemporary intensive parenting – in ways which often collude with neoliberal parenting culture' (Jensen, 2013). Similarly, filtered and curated images of mothers and children apparently 'having it all' can provide alienating and/or combative digital representations (Abetz and Moore, 2018). But the rise of digital connection can also facilitate new spaces for 'alternative matrifocal narratives' (Rogers, 2015:248), counter narratives and 'mumblogging' as part of a postfeminist parenting culture, as well as the possibility of finding or building a supportive community with other women (Pederson, 2016; Ramaekers and Hodgson, 2020; Rogers, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2022; Williams Veazy, 2021). Increasingly then, contemporary motherhood is experienced in digitally mediated lives. This includes (willing) engagement with different digital forms of monitoring (e.g., regular updates on apps showing typical foetal size and development), which contributes to new forms of surveillance, or what Lupton and Williamson have called 'dataveillance' of (even unborn) children's lives (2017) (see Chapters 2, 3 and 4).

As noted earlier, the 'institution of Motherhood' (Rich, 1976) continues to reflect the cultural and structural contexts in which it is produced and experienced. In the intervening 21 years between the two studies, collective challenges to address second-wave feminist concerns have been obscured by the individualising effects of neoliberalism. Put simply, neoliberalist policies which have reduced/removed state support, intensified and biologized mothering responsibilities

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and prioritised the market have provided a harsher context in which to mother. But this harsher backdrop more intrusively patterns the possibilities and experiences for some groups of mothers, even more so than for others (Gillies et al., 2017; Reynolds, 2020).

In structures which reflect neoliberal ideals, mothers are expected to be 'self-optimising economic agents in the 'public' realm and maternalist self-sacrificing mothers in the 'private' realm' (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014:4). This obdurate and contradictory framing of maternal lives has been theorised and critiqued, with for example, McRobbie (2013) noting that 'female labour power is far too important to the post-industrial economy for anyone to be an advocate of long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers' (2013:121). Even so, McRobbie points to the emergence of a particular middle-class, version of 'maternal citizenship' evoked in the (aspirational) professional mother. This is set up against the contrasting 'abject maternal figure', depicted as the failing and benefit-dependent, single mother (McRobbie, 2013). Importantly, these political configurations, which are recognisable in particular policy and online constructions of types of motherhood (and parenting), are also played out across digital spaces.

The term 'mommy wars' has been used in the United States since the 1990s to describe the antagonisms between stay-at-home and working mothers (Abetz and Moore, 2018). In the intervening years, such antagonisms have escalated beyond this oversimplified binary, aided by a proliferation of social media and digital platforms and myriad 'new' approaches to raising children displayed across these sites – so much so that it seems remarkable anyone from previous generations survived. It has also been argued that divisive and combative approaches to mothering and motherhood, sit in contrast to earlier collective feminist efforts, which demanded structural change for all families 'as a public good' (Collins, 1991; McRobbie, 2013; O'Reilly, 2010, 2020; Oakley, 1979; Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1995). More recently, O'Reilly has argued for greater attention to 'matricentric feminism', not as a replacement for traditional feminist thought but as a way 'to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment' (O'Reilly, 2020:14). The need for theoretical, structural and collective revisions is not in doubt, as two decades of research on social norms of motherhood confirm the persistence of 'subjectification and individualization' aimed at mothers (Schmidt et al., 2022:13).

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1.3 Narrating Selves and Qualitative Longitudinal Research

The rich contributions that qualitative longitudinal research can make to more subtle and detailed understandings of social phenomena and subjective experience are well recognised (Neale, 2013, 2021). In the intervening years, since the design of the original Transition to Motherhood study in the mid-1990s, interest in 'storied human life' and narrative-focused research has grown significantly (Squire et al., 2014; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). There are now multiple understandings and applications of narrative research, with methodological innovations responding to how stories and narratives are heard and collected (Andersen et al., 2020; Esin and Lounasmaa, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020). The linking of narrative, social action and past/present and imagined futures continues to be an important focus in how sense is made of everyday unfolding experiences (Neale, 2021; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). This focus can produce nuanced, temporally sensitive and fluid accounts, which can disturb and counter taken-for-granted assumptions about aspects of lives.

The focus taken in the Motherhood research has focused on the 'temporal ordering of events' associated with individual transition and how these are understood and can be narrated (Hydén, 1997:50; Neale, 2013; Miller, 2014, 2017b; Squire et al., 2014). This approach is theoretically framed in relation to understandings of selves and identities and the potential for biographical disruption and ontological insecurity, which can arise or be experienced as episodes of personal change are anticipated, encountered and narrated. Taking this approach, I have focused broadly and analytically on what can and cannot be said about an embodied and performative experience – becoming a mother – as it unfolds. Philosophically, this approach is located within traditions and debates on selves and storied human lives in which we 'are not only the actor, but also the author' (Frank, 1995; MacIntyre, 1981:198; Ricoeur, 1981; Squire et al., 2014).

Birth provides a discursive, narrative turning point, but as noted earlier, the findings in the original Motherhood study revealed the 'limited repertoire of possible storylines' available to women as they become mothers (Miller, 2005:160). But storylines can be resisted too, and counter-narratives can be produced as ways of locating experiences of agency around unfolding experiences; a narrative may be revised or

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indeed 'lapse' (Frank, 1995). So, longitudinal research, which traces unfolding experiences, illuminates aspects of subjectivity as fluid and reflexive. Across accumulated interviews, unfolding, individual stories also reveal tenuous selves in which core and recognisable aspects of subjectivity are edited and re-narrated over time: or may be reaffirmed. But it is also important to acknowledge the intersectional dimensions of agency, identity work and the possibilities of narrative storytelling, especially in relation to public motherhood identities and personal storylines. Similarly, it's important to be continually vigilant about the assumptions we make when we invite someone to share their story.

1.4 The Study: Collecting Accounts

The data, which contribute to the observations, arguments and reflections developed in this book, were generated in qualitative longitudinal, face to face (in person) interviews conducted by the author between 2017 and 2019. Subsequently, diary entries were also contributed by participants in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown experiences between 2020 and 2021. This second Transition to Motherhood study adopted the same research design as the original study conducted in the late 1990s (Miller, 1998, 2005, 2007). The original study was one of five sociological studies selected for inclusion in a 'research synthesis of women's views on the experience of first-time motherhood' (Bailey, 1999; Earle, 2000; Miller, 2005; Oakley, 1980; Thomson and Kehily, 2009). These studies were selected because of their focus on 'societal-level factors influencing women's experience of the transition to motherhood and because of the higher overall quality methodologically' compared to others retrieved in the review (Brunton et al., 2011:20). The original design and subsequent contemporary study involved the participants being interviewed on three separate occasions: in the period before the birth (between 7 and 9 months into the pregnancy), in the early weeks following the birth (at 6–8 weeks), and when their baby was aged between 9 and 10 months, in order to explore unfolding accounts of transition to motherhood. In both studies, prompt-style interview schedules were used for each of the three interviews.

The first interview began by asking the women to describe how they had felt when they found out they were pregnant (also see Chapter 6). In subsequent interviews, participants were asked to begin by describing what had happened since the last interview. 'Consent' was

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renegotiated before each of the interviews (Miller and Boulton, 2007). Prior to subsequent interviews, extracts from the respondent's previous interview were incorporated into the prompt-style interview schedule. In this way, participants were initially reminded of some of the ways in which they had previously presented their experiences, feeding this back to them in their own words. This process also enabled developing concepts to be further explored, facilitating an iterative, analytical process. The qualitative longitudinal research design mirrored the fluidity and unfolding events of transition, not achieved in one-off interviews.

1.4.1 Recruitment and Sample Details

Recruitment involved advertising the study in a wide range of locations, including local shops, personal Facebook accounts belonging to identified 'gatekeepers', community events and eventually snowball sampling, as newly recruited participants shared the study details with other women (usually) attending various preparation classes. Once again, the research was not advertised through more formal health service channels in order to avoid any presumptions that the research was associated with any particular ways of preparing for labour, birth and motherhood. One consequence of the University Research Ethics Committee requirement that potential participants 'opt in' to the study is that a more middle-class/professionally employed sample responded to the advertising materials, despite efforts to make these widely accessible (see Participant characteristics in Appendix Table A.1).

Eventually, twenty-six women who identified as becoming mothers, joined the study. They were all in couple relationships and of these, five women were in same-sex marriages, comprising two married couples and one woman whose wife did not opt into the study. In the two same-sex married couples, there were two non-carrying/non-birthing women who nonetheless identified as becoming mothers and opted into the study (in one case, their wife was carrying their fertilised egg). In the study, twenty-five babies were born (one set of twins and twenty-three singleton births) to twenty-four pregnant women and two non-carrying women. The women were aged between 23 and 38 years (and 19–36 years in the earlier study), with an average age of 32.4 years at the time of the first interview, which is slightly above the average age for first birth in the UK which is 30.7 years (ONS, 2021). This contemporary sample was larger than the original study (which followed

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seventeen participants) and more diverse. The participants who opted into the study lived in the southern half of the UK, from Yorkshire to Brighton. They included two women living in the UK who were not born in the UK (having moved from Spain and Italy as young adults), three women who described themselves as being in ethnically mixed relationships and three women carrying babies in same-sex marriages. One UK-born mother was living in North America at the time of the interviews and another was 'single' for purposes of housing but in an ongoing relationship with the father of her child at the start of the project. Even so, amongst the larger sample, similar demographic characteristics to the original seventeen women in the first study are reflected, such that any comparisons might be drawn (See Appendices Tables A.1 and A.2 for participant details in both studies).

Just as in the original study, all the interviews were conducted by the author in a location chosen by the participant. The majority of interviews took place in participants homes, but on occasion, for a first interview, a coffee shop, pub and my office were also selected. For the contemporary study, additional areas of interest were added to the original interview schedule in order to capture the use of digital technologies, online resources and social media engagement. In addition, new questions designed to explore knowledge and/or use of new Paternity and SPL policies, introduced since the original study, were also included. In all other respects, the interview schedules remained the same and included a shifting and fluid emphasis on experiences as transition unfolded (e.g., from anticipating birth in the first interview to experiences of the early weeks following birth in the next interview). All the interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission, and at the end of the study, following verbatim transcription, participants were offered a copy of their transcripts in print or digital form. A majority of the participants affirmed that they would like a copy ('I would absolutely love to get the transcripts, it would be so interesting to see what I said', 'I would like the transcripts emailed please. Would be nice to keep them'), but not all ('In terms of transcripts, no need to send me a copy. Thank you though'). Once the face-to-face interviews were completed and in line with the original motherhood study, the participants were invited to complete a short end-of-study questionnaire. This was used to collect/confirm demographic details and gather reflections on individual experiences of participating in the study.

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1.4.2 COVID-19 Diaries

An additional and unique source of materials has also informed the contemporary study. Shortly after the interview data collection phase had been completed (December 2019), the global COVID-19 pandemic struck (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). This coincided for many of the women with returning to work, contemplating a second pregnancy and/or managing motherhood and paid work outside the home. In the UK, a national lockdown was announced in March 2020, and quite suddenly, lives were restricted to being lived at home and away from others. In response to what subsequently became extended periods of lockdown and/or other restrictions on daily life in the UK (there were three lockdown periods: 26 March –4 July 2020, 31 October–2 December 2020 and 6 January–8 March 2021), the participants in the study were invited to keep 'diary' entries of their experiences of mothering and family living during this period (see Chapter 5).

1.4.3 Interview Transcripts and Analysis

As in the first motherhood study (Miller, 1998, 2005) and operationalising the philosophical underpinnings of narrative construction (see above), data analysis focused on biographical narrative construction and self-editing/ reconstruction as experiences of transitions to motherhood unfolded (see Miller, 2017b; Neale, 2021; Squire et al., 2014; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Following verbatim transcription of the recorded interviews, analysis of the data from across the three interviews involved examining the ways in which different strands of particular discourse were discernible/woven together or rejected in the women's narratives. This might include descriptions of apparently 'appropriate' preparation for motherhood as well as more challenging accounts of experiences or apparent gaps, omissions and silences (Blix et al., 2021; Mauthner, 2000; Pearce et al., 2020). The next step involved carrying out detailed analysis, working initially from transcripts, a synopsis of transcripts, memo-ing, and mapping, across each participant's interview data (×3 individual interview transcripts). Various steps in the analysis were undertaken manually, but the data set was also managed using various Word documents and files. The unfolding, individual stories of transition to first-time Motherhood were then compared across the twenty-six participants and patterns

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were identified across the whole data set. In a further step, the findings from the new study were then compared to those in the original Motherhood study in order to explore similarities and differences. Just as in the original study, the women contemplate motherhood in the first interviews by tentatively engaging aspects of dominant discourses, which coincide with ideals of the 'good mother' in what is still, experientially unfamiliar, terrain. However, unlike the first study, these now involve navigating a digital landscape of limitless 'information', opinions and competing and confusing 'expert' claims, alongside more formal healthcare interactions.

Thus, taking a biographical narrative approach to data analysis helped to illuminate the gendered narrative practices which might be engaged as a means to present as a new (and working) mother. But underlying these performances, the shifting and sometimes difficult (and sometimes silencing) realities of transition and the juggling of associated societal expectations and personal experiences enabled different stories of transition to motherhood to emerge over time and be shared too. Just as lives may be revealed to be messier, more chaotic, contradictory and interesting than we might at first suppose, the research process should be approached in a similar vein, and any rush to arrive at neat, coherent findings should be avoided. But doing narrative research presents exciting, temporally sensitive opportunities for researchers to examine and theorise less visible and taken-for-granted aspects of people's lives, even as these may be personally understood as unproblematic.

In the data analysed over the course of eighty interviews (comprising over 100 hours of recorded materials), together with additional diary materials, the components and complexities of a shifting sense of self(s) in relation to being a worker, having a career and becoming a mother are illuminated through the resulting narratives. Surprisingly, perhaps, these invoke *and* reinforce particular ideals of primary maternal practice and deeply etched cultural configurations of 'good' motherhood, through particular claims of maternal agency. But there is resistance too, which once again alerts us to the configuration of particular maternal storylines and the structural and other factors which influence them and become taken for granted. It is also important that these findings can be compared to the original study findings too. So, whilst other research has contributed much needed broad-brushstroke pictures of mothering and motherhood, the qualitative longitudinal

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and narrative approach taken here contributes a more detailed and comparative sociological account of transition to first-time motherhood, as experienced by two groups of women, 21 years apart.

1.4.4 Ethical Considerations

Although the research design and interview schedules remained largely unchanged between the two studies, one significant change had occurred in the intervening years: the rise in regulatory ethics and their wholesale application to social research (Hammersley, 2009, 2010). In 1996, when data collection in the original study commenced, there was no requirement (or systems in place) for seeking or gaining University ethics approval for conducting a study. Concerns with the problems of 'ethics creep' (Haggerty, 2004) and the problematic issues associated with applying the principles of medical science to social research have also been debated across the intervening years of the two studies (Mauthner et al., 2012). These have included debate about misplaced ideas of what 'informed consent' might mean and how/when it might be gained, perhaps especially in longitudinal research (Miller, 2015; Miller and Boulton, 2007; Neale, 2013). More recently Neale has urged consideration of thinking about different 'proactive and reactive ethical strategies' in research 'through time' (Neale, 2016:78). In this second motherhood study, the ways in which institutional ethical requirements most overtly influenced the design were in relation to who was recruited (a more privileged sample?) and the requirement that potential participants must 'opt in' to a year-long study, with options to leave at any time.[12] In other respects, both studies were conducted in a similarly ethical and continually questioning manner, with and without the ticks on the ethics form. In both qualitative longitudinal studies, the privilege was to 'walk alongside' (Neale, 2021) each participant as they described and reflected upon unfolding personal transition experiences.

1.5 Conclusion

What can a new study on motherhood tell us about how expectations and experiences are configured in harsher neoliberal conditions and

[12] One participant was not contactable for the 3rd interview, despite several attempts to do so.

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digital landscapes that can empower and individually and experientially, undermine? In the following empirical chapters, unfolding stories of first-time motherhood are shared. These, just as in the original study conducted 21 years earlier, are optimistic stories in that pregnancies are mostly planned, even longed-for and happily anticipated. There are intentions of sharing caring for the new-born baby and balancing careers and paid work, once – happily anticipated – maternity leaves have been taken. These arrangements all feel possible and make sense, discursively, as the women anticipate and narrate their transition. But as in the original (baseline) study, hopes and intentions do not play out in ways that social norms of motherhood and associated maternal imaginings have led the women to believe, beginning with unexpected labour and birth experiences. Across the chapters which follow, it is timely to ask: where are gender equality, flexible working and affordable childcare? Where are the indicators of structural support for the collective endeavour of caring for our children? What has happened in the intervening years? According to Glaser, mothers continue to be 'overworked, underpaid, often lonely and made to feel guilty about everything from epidurals to bottle feeding' (2021). In the twenty-first century, surely things should be different.

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