

BECOMING A MOTHER AND PRACTICING  
CHILD PROTECTION SOCIAL WORK:  
A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHANGING  
CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

BY

KIMBERLY J. MCKEE

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**Becoming a Mother and Practicing Child Protection Social Work:  
A Feminist Perspective on the Changing Conceptualizations of Motherhood**

**BY**

**Kimberly J. McKee**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

**of**

**MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK**

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**Dedication**

To Mothers.

**Abstract**

This research explores the social construction of mothering through the lived experiences of six social workers, who have practiced child protection work before and after becoming a mother. Data was gathered through in depth interviews and the findings, guided by a feminist narrative methodology, suggest that becoming a mother not only changes women's conceptualizations of motherhood, but also their approaches to social work practice based on their unique experiences and personal locations. By revealing the gap between theory and practice, this research uncovers the complexities and contradictions inherent in dominant mothering discourses. It suggests that becoming a mother while practicing child protection work creates another level of dichotomy to an already paradoxical profession. Research implications warrant the need for feminist informed practice and policy in child welfare and social work education.

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## **Chapter 1: Research Problem**

Decades of feminist literature covering all manner of gender issues have brought some new perspectives to old dilemmas. One of the results of this new found knowledge is some major and progressive changes in many areas of society. Mothering and motherhood is one of them. They are now extensively written about by a diverse collection of feminists, who have had to wrestle with some longstanding conundrums about what it means to be a mother and how women might 'do' motherhood within particular contexts.

For social workers whose work brings them into contact with mothers, feminist ideas are important, especially considering the emphasis feminists have given to women's rights and the pursuit of gender equality. It is, then, more than disappointing that the transfer of feminist knowledge into social work policy, practice and education is rather slow and underdeveloped (Featherstone, 1999).

Over the last few decades, feminists have provided some excellent suggestions for how to understand the social construction of mothering within a patriarchal society, and its impact on mothers. As many feminists have pointed out, including some post-modern feminists, dominant cultural conventions prescribe how the institution of motherhood 'should be' enacted (Featherstone, 1999; Krane & Davis, 2000, Swift, 1995 b). As they do so, many women who cannot live up to these expectations are further oppressed. In the area of child welfare, this is particularly evident, yet it is in this area that the complexities of motherhood tend to be dismissed (Featherstone, 1999; Krane & Davis, 2000,

1990, Swift, 1995 a, b & c), and the voices of mothers silenced (Featherstone, 1999; Krane & Davis, 2000).

In this thesis, I begin with the belief that the voices and perspectives of mothers - both as clients and social work practitioners - are largely missing within social work practice literature. I contend that this is a fundamental gap when one considers that the vast majority of child welfare social work focuses on the assessment, counselling and education of mothers, often by other mothers (Brook & Davis, 1985). To help redress this gap, I use this thesis to explore how women social workers who are mothers and work in the area of child welfare, understand the concept of motherhood and interact with the discourses promulgated about how mothers 'should be'. This inquiry involves asking women social workers how their experiences of mothering impact their conceptualizations of motherhood; and how these experiences influence the child protection work that they do with other mothers.

### ***Locating myself within the study***

As a mother myself and someone who has worked in the area of child welfare, I am also interested in exploring my own experiences and interest in feminist ideas. Not interested in reproducing the claim that research is a neutral, objective or apolitical affair, I have tried to observe how my own social location affects my understanding of how prevailing motherhood discourses are played out within child welfare. While I am particularly interested in studying how these diverse – and sometimes contradictory - experiences shape social workers'

approaches, attitudes and judgments of mothers, I admit that I am starting from a particular premise: namely that dominant discourses about motherhood create stress, hardships and barriers for women because of the unfair societal expectations made of mothers. Without wishing to shut down counter positions or views, I have started this study with years of practice experience that tell me how well the child protection system (often unintentionally) reproduces these hardships and barriers for women. And I am not alone to suggest that Western ideals and norms of mothering dictate approaches and practices to child protection social work (Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998, Featherstone, 1999; Krane & Davis, 2000; Turney, 1999, Swift, 1995 b, c).

With that as my starting point, I am interested in understanding both the commonalities and differences that exist between maternal social workers and 'their' clients. Part of this interest relates to the structural arrangements of power that social workers have in relation to the mothers they surveill through the child welfare system (Swift, 1995 b, c). Another aspect of this interest relates to a question clients frequently ask child protection social workers who conduct investigations. It is the question, "Do you have children?" As a child protection social worker, fresh out of the Bachelor of Social Work program, young (and appearing to be even younger than my age), I admit that I mostly ignored or dismissed this question. I think I saw it as a mother's attempt to shift focus and blame away from questionable parenting practices. Yet, after I became a mother myself, I view this question differently. I now see it as important and legitimate. I realize that my own experience of mothering (or lack of) presents a framework for

women clients to understand me within the context of their situations. I also recognize that my own experiences of motherhood have prompted me to question my past work within child welfare. While I am not suggesting that becoming a mother makes one a better social worker, it has influenced *my* approach to working with mothers and increased *my* understanding and empathy. It also explains my growing interest in feminist writings, especially those related to motherhood, which have helped me to demystify the dominant ideologies of motherhood that constrain women in Western society.

### ***Contradictions and ambivalence***

When I became a mother I had never known such joy and such sadness. I had never been so exhilarated and exhausted, felt such confidence and insecurity. I had never felt so full yet so empty, held such love along with such loneliness. It has been over three years since the birth of my son and I have only now started to reflect on these contradictory feelings. Internally, these feelings were compounded by trying to achieve the ideal of 'the perfect mother', and the tremendous guilt that ensued when I could not achieve it.

I practiced front line child welfare social work for two years, from the spring of 1996 - 1998. There was a four year gap from working in the child welfare system to my becoming a mother. During these four years I practiced social work in family and addictions counselling. There was much that I loved about my job in child protection, particularly the people I worked with (colleagues and clients). It was difficult for me to leave because I was passionate about the

work. In some respects, I saw leaving as a personal failure, as I always believed I could do any thing to which I set my mind, a trait that was instilled in me by my grandmother. To defend my decision to leave, when my supervisors, colleagues and family asked why I was resigning I would say, "It is the nature of the work". I felt like I was 'giving up'.

Perhaps it is because of this that the journey I have taken to complete this study has allowed me to develop a clearer understanding of what I meant by the "nature of child welfare work". I have a deeper appreciation of the ambiguities and mixed messages within educational institutions and policy and practice standards, as well as the ideologies associated with child welfare work that make it hard to do the work and justify one's practices within the larger society. Yet, in my view, the institutions and structures associated with child welfare work largely prohibit the expression of uncertainty and ambivalence, which has been crucial to my feeling supported and understood.

Just as other child welfare workers have their own experiences of what it means to be doing the job; women vary in their experiences of motherhood. Through this project I am even more aware that motherhood does not mean the same to all people. In turn, I am loath to judge other women, particularly in light of the good/bad mother dichotomy. As Erma Bombeck says,

No mother is all good or all bad, all laughing or all serious, all loving or all angry. Ambivalence runs through their veins..... what is certain is that there is probably not one of you who has not at some time in your life demanded an answer to the question, "what kind of mother would....".It is an old phrase conceived in innocence, carried with pomposity, and born of condemnation. It is not until you become a mother that your judgment

slowly turns to compassion and understanding. Do not judge them until you have walked in their shoes of clay (Bombeck, 1983, p 3).

I admit that after I became a mother, my respect for other mothers expanded, especially as I realized the advantages that I have that many other women do not. For instance, I have a supportive partner who shares child care responsibilities and shares many of my own feelings and struggles. We are able to lean on each other everyday. I have access to parenting theories and practices that help me to hone my skills. I have financial security and access to extended supports. I had a relatively stable childhood in a white, middle-class family where I was able to enjoy any number of privileges without even realizing it. Now I appreciate these advantages and I am aware of the impact they have had on my ability to cope as a mother. For the many women who did not have these advantages, I am deeply respectful.

By studying how motherhood and child welfare work have related to my own life, I have become increasingly empathic towards mothers and their children. Yet, I realize that becoming a mother may also produce increased sensitivity towards child abuse and neglect, which can lead to negative and perhaps harsher judgments towards client mothers. I also know that both may occur, either at once or at particular times. Furthermore, when diversity in race, class and culture are present between social workers and clients there is potential for a worker to be even more critical of another mother. Since motherhood can precipitate a complicated array of feelings and child welfare work a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty that is not often allowed to be

voiced, maternal child welfare workers may be both more understanding and more critical.

### ***Unsettling idealized notions of motherhood***

Knowing that women who work as child protection social workers and become mothers were likely to undergo many internal struggles as they wrestle with the contradictions and ambivalence so often produced through the work, I was left wondering the extent to which idealized notions of motherhood could be unsettled, through the act of becoming a mother? If they could, how would it occur? And how would it be played out in child welfare work? These have been particular points of interest for me. To put it another way, I have been particularly interested to know whether child protection social workers, who become mothers through the course of their professional practice, have altered their views about motherhood. Comparisons of experiences of their work pre and post motherhood will provide some clues. I am also hoping that through my exploration of their responses, I will be able to gain some insights into the way in which they use formulaic instruments such as 'risk assessment' tools (Krane & Davis, 2000; Swift, 1995 c). Ultimately I hope that these insights may be used to contribute to debates about policies and procedures that relate to the assessments of mothers.

To reiterate: feminists have consistently called for more research to be undertaken that seeks to understand motherhood by 'giving voice' to mothers (Allan, 2004; Arendell, 2000; Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998; Hays, 1996).

Focusing research on the lived realities of mothers is an important step in this process, especially if oppressive discourses are to be challenged and unfair motherhood ideals are to be demystified. One way to do this is through conducting qualitative feminist research about motherhood, with maternal social workers, who are, or have been, employed in child protection agencies. This research challenges present discourses on mothering and motherhood through lived experience.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### ***The Social Construction of Motherhood***

In this literature review I hope to trace some feminist ideas about the social construction of mothering, with a focus on ideology versus lived experience of mothering. Feminisms from the mid 1960's until today have sought to understand mothering and motherhood through intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal domains. Throughout this time feminist ideologies on mothering have evolved to challenge changing oppressions and to meet the societal needs of women and children. They have questioned mainstream scholarly tradition and the classical conventions of positivist social science. Using a feminist constructivist perspective tackles the interrelated systems of gender, race, ethnicity and class stratification. This creates a strong framework for considering mothering and motherhood. Initially, this literature review will offer a brief overview on the development of feminist ideology mothering over the past forty years. I will then explore, in greater detail, both the theoretical and empirical literature feminists have created on mothering as it relates to both social work practice and the experience of maternal social workers.

### ***Evolution of Feminisms on Mothering***

Much of the feminist literature on mothering and motherhood grew out of the identification of need for theory building by exploring the political, economic and societal contexts of mothering (Arendell, 2000; Featherstone, 1999; Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994). To obtain a fuller, richer, and deeper understanding of mothering and motherhood it is vital to ground research within mother's

experiences (Coll, Surry, & Weingarten, 1998; Devault, 1999; Featherstone, 1999; Hays, 1996). Drawing upon the historical analysis of the mothering literature and feminist theory this next section gives a chronological guide of ideologies, developed by feminists, from the 1960's until the present. This overview seeks to offer a framework to consider the development of oppressive discourses on motherhood and their influence on women social workers.

### ***Women's needs are not the same as children's needs***

In the late 1960's and early 1970's feminists emerged to challenge the notion that womanhood and motherhood should not be treated as synonymous identities and categories of experiences. In reality not all women do mothering nor is caring for children the exclusive domain of a women (Arendell, 2000; Glenn, Chang, & Forcy, 1994; Turney, 1999). Feminists saw the need to view women in their own right, and not necessarily locating them in relation to others (particularly husbands and children) (Ambert, 2001; Featherstone, 1999; Nelson Garner, 1994; Hattery, 2001). During this time period it was believed that full time mothers experience increased stress, isolation and economic dependency. Consequently in order for women to develop to their full potential they must expand their identity beyond that of the home and the mother role (Arendell, 2000; Chira, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Peters, 2001). Claiming autonomy through access to the workplace was seen as the most common avenue for a woman to explore self (Arendell, 2000; Featherstone, 1999; Hattery, 2001). Criticism from psychoanalytic thought saw this ideology as selfish by interpreting

this view as supporting women's needs at the expense of their children's development (Ambert, 2001; Benjamin, 1995; Chira, 1998). The idea of developing one's own identity directly challenged the long ingrained notion of self sacrifice as essential to being a good mother (Chira, 1998; Fox, 2003; Rubenstein, 1998; Turney, 1999).

### ***Reality of Motherhood Challenges Oppressive Discourses***

In the mid 1970's feminists saw a clear distinction in the actual experiences of mothers and the way patriarchy organized the institution of motherhood. Unearthing and challenging oppressive discourses quickly revealed the significant gap that exists between theory and practice (Diquinzio, 1999; Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1993; Hall 1998; Hayes, 1996; Thurer, 1994). Space began to open for women to tell their own stories, focusing on a construction of shared meanings and taking into account the historical, cultural and situational context in which mothers act (Arendell, 2000; Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998; Featherstone, 1999). Continuing to question 'who they were', particularly in relation to the fixed roles of wife and mother historically handed down to them over generations, many mothers also had to redefine their relationships with children and significant partners (Deutsch, 1999; Featherstone, 1999; Hattery, 2001; Nelson Garner, 1994; Roiphe, 1996).

Understanding work for women has long been problematic; work women have undertaken is often discredited and undervalued, along with the valuing of motherhood, as work performed (Arendell, 2000; Chira, 1998; Haas, 1990;

Hagen & Davis, 1989; Timpson, 2001). Feminists also began opening up the concepts of shared parenting and childcare more generally as a community concern, not only a mother's or a family concern, stressing the need for children (as well as their mothers) to have access to a wide range of social interactions (Allen, 2004; Day & Brodsky, 1998; Swift, 1995 b; Turney, 1999).

Exploring child sexual abuse through a critical feminist lens is an important theme in the mothering literature in the 1980's. Mothers are often blamed, along with the perpetrator, for abuse against their children as mothers are expected to maintain responsibility for the protection of their children (Allen, 2004; Featherstone, 1999; Krane & Davis, 1996). Sharing guilt for these heinous acts seems preposterous and adds to the oppression of women as it further detracts blame from the predominately male abuser.

### ***Paradoxical Needs and Emotions***

In the 1980's the needs of children started to heighten as both societal and political issues. Feminists saw the need to incorporate literature on child rearing and child development to both debunk the myth that they do not have children's interests at heart (Featherstone, 1999), but also to offer alternatives to raising children that do not play into the ongoing oppressions of mothers (Benjamin, 1995; de Marneffe, 2004; Chira, 1998; Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998; Rubenstein, 1998). Focusing on interrelatedness versus autonomy feminists during this time were concerned with the potential to blur individual

needs within the mother child relationship (Arendell, 2000; Ambert, 2001; Hattery, 2001; de Marneffe, 2004).

This time period is also fundamental in exploring the negative, as well as positive emotions associated with mothering. Feminists saw negative emotions as normal and functional within the mother child relationship. However the influence of oppressive dominant social constructions was seen as having the potential to make these feelings unmanageable, with feelings of guilt often at the core (Chira, 1998; Featherstone, 1997; Fox, 2003; Roiphe, 1996). The mothering ambivalence of the 1980's began moving towards an increased social acceptance of women's contradictory feelings towards mothering and children. New ideas emerged that believe conflicting maternal feelings are intrinsic to mothers' lives, and that these feelings play a valuable role in the quality of mothering. Ambivalence forces women to understand their relationships with their children at a more intimate level (Featherstone, 1997; Turney, 1999; de Marneffe, 2004).

### ***Complexities of Mothering***

During the 1980's and into the 1990's, feminist thought on mothering begin reflecting the influence of post modernist thought. Questioning the 1970's ideas on a uniform experience of mothering, more recent scholarship, sees the need to pay more attention to the differences between mothers and mothering practices, as well as the differences between children (Arendell, 2000; Featherstone, 1999; Hays, 1996). The one right way of mothering does not exist

but rather depends on complex personalities and experiences, emphasizing diversity, and being open to a range of stories that value context. A multidisciplinary approach is flooding our most recent decade. Challenging notions of symbolically laden motherhood with multifaceted and complex realities and experiences has also opened up the possibility to explore class and race differences between mothers. Increasing attention is being paid to mothers of minority backgrounds, looking beyond the white middle class version of the meaning of motherhood (Arendell, 2000; Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998, Swift, 1995 b, c).

### ***Changing Roles of Mothers in Society***

Concurrent with the changes in feminist literature, these last four decades have seen widespread demographic changes within the family system, including a growth in divorce rates and lone parenthood (most often lone motherhood), and the majority of women, including mothers, moving into the paid workforce (Day & Brodsky, 1998; Eichler, 1997; Timpson, 2001). Women are also choosing to delay childbearing, having fewer children or refusing childbearing altogether (Kerr & Beaujot, 2003). Empirical studies also show there is an increase in women leaving unsatisfactory relationships and choosing single motherhood over remarriage (Deutsch, 1999). More women than men petition for divorce and mother's remarriage rates have become significantly lower than men's (Arendell, 2000; Deutsch, 1999; Featherstone, 1999). Women's and men's roles in the home have been studied extensively with bleak revelations of inequality. When

women initially started to flood the workplace some assumed that roles in the home would change radically, in that women and men would become equal partners in marriage, sharing domestic and child care labour. While men's labour is increasing within the home they are far from doing an equal share (Arendell, 2000; Deutsch, 1999; Hagen & Davis, 1992). Women are paying a high personal price trying to balance work and family, including decreasing emotional health, loss of sleep and curtailing family time (Arendell, 2000; Deutsch, 1999).

Deutsch (1999) completed an intensive empirical study of equality between mothers and fathers in parenting. Using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies Deutsch analyzed three hundred interviews with parents. Her goal, not only to identify the present state of childcare and domestic responsibilities within families, but to compare sharers and non sharers; suggests how couples can stop perpetuating inequalities and injustices in order to devise more equal arrangements. She identifies the social constructions and family dynamics that create barriers for women having equal roles in domestic and child care responsibilities within the home. Limiting her study are issues of class and race as her study focuses on mainly white middle class families.

Despite the changes in family structure, social programs have done little to either adapt to these changes or recognize the unequal power relations that exist between men and women (Day & Brodsky, 1998; Timpson, 2001). The feminization of poverty is a term used to describe the persistent economic inequality experienced by women and their children. Women are twice as likely as men to be poor (Hagan & Davis, 1992). The poverty rate for single mothers in

Canada in 1995 was 57.2 %; and if their children were under seven years of age this percentage rose to 82.8 %. Another study of child poverty in Canada found that, two-thirds of the overall increase in child poverty is due to the increase in lone parenthood (Kerr & Beaujot, 2003). Kerr and Beaujot's findings are consistent with Day and Brodsky's (1998) that identifies female sex, motherhood and single status as significant determinants of poverty, pointing out how society's dominant assumptions and social expectations of women's roles contribute significantly to the feminization of poverty. Examples of these oppressive ideologies include the assignment of women to the unpaid role of caregiver, the lack of recognition and adequate support for child care, and unequal parenting responsibilities which either constrain women in the workforce, or contribute to the impossible work load involved in "double duty" and "super mom" status. It would seem economic penalties occur when women are unattached to men. Day and Brodsky (1998) conclude that in general, women as a group are unequal because they bear and raise children in a society that continues to devalue the enormity of this labor. Ultimately, governments and societies have not responded adequately with changing their social policies to meet the changing roles of women and families, rather social policies still support the traditional family form and values (Day & Brodsky, 1998; Hagen & Davis, 1992; Kerr & Beaujot, 2003)

### ***Feminist Discourses and Social Work***

The previous section gives an overview on some of the development of feminist ideas in relation to mothering and summarized demographic information as it impacts women. This next section will expand on specific discourses and ideas that are significant to this study as they relate to social work practice.

These include:

1. The Myth of the Natural and Essential Mother
2. Intensive Mothering
3. The Idealized Mother: The Gap between Theory and Practice
4. The Politics of Women and Children's Needs
5. Mother Blame
6. Maternal Ambivalence
7. The Dilemma of Difference (exploration of class, gender and race)
8. Mothers as Social Workers

#### **Myth of the Natural and Essential Mother**

"The myth of the natural mother" as it has developed in western cultures is not a myth in any simple sense. It is a complex and heterogeneous array of beliefs, stories, images and perceptions connected to an equally heterogeneous array of mothering practices, social institutions, knowledge projects, and ideologies. The myth involves the representation of mothering as natural to women, essential to their being, an engagement of love and instinct that is utterly distant

from the world of paid work and formal education  
(Hall, 1998, p. 59).

In this quote Hall (1998) provides a fairly inclusive definition of the myth of the natural mother through a feminist lens. According to this myth caring for children is intertwined with notions of femininity and gender identity and is seen solely as a women's activity. This idea is born out of the strongly held belief that women have natural internal drives, automatically imbuing them with instinctive desires to bear children and with skills in knowing how to care for their needs. This concept is referred to as essential mothering. Feminists argue that this notion is untrue and has negative consequences for women (Allan, 2004; Arendell, 2000; de Marneffe, 2004; DiQuinzio, 1999; Chira, 1998; Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998; Rubenstien, 1998, Turney, 1999). They further argue that these ideologies play into a romanticized view of motherhood that leads women into believing the path of becoming a mother, as essential, will repair any internal or relationship problems, offering an avenue to personal fulfillment (Krane & Davis, 1996).

'Denaturalizing' motherhood – or challenging the view that all women instinctually want to become mothers and will know how to perform mothering duties has been the intention of many feminists (Arendell, 2000; Farrant; 2004; Schneemann, 1994; Swift. 1995 b; Turney, 1999). Pam Houston (2002) writes about her account of having no desire to mother until her 40's when she decides to adopt a child. Farrant (2004) shares in her memoir, titled *The Turquoise Years*, her memories of being fourteen years old and the journey and reflections she has about her relationship with her mother, a woman, who does not identify with

motherhood. Rather than conforming to ideals of family and society, Farrant's mother left her daughter to be raised by her father and her aunt. Despite her daughter's hope, she soon understands and accepts that her mother does not have the ability to express maternal feelings or actions towards her. In her chapter entitled *Anti- Demeter*, Schneemann (1994) shares her childhood growing up with an absent and resentful mother and, as the title suggests, it was far from a positive experience from the child's point of view. The neglect and abuse she experiences by her mother left Schneemann questioning whether she herself should mother and how she would identify with motherhood in light of her own difficult experience.

It is common for social workers and social work policy to assume mothers (by their very nature) should be ready and willing to protect children. If they are not it is then due to a flaw in their psychological or societal experience. Social workers then believe that all mothers, even those considered abusive or deviant, can be helped to love and care for their children with the appropriate interventions (Featherstone, 1997; Swift, 1995 b). Denaturalizing and arguing that mothering is not innate to all women significantly impacts society's outlook on mothering as well as social work practice. It suggests that in some situations workers may be wasting their time and resources imposing blanket interventions that focus on family preservation when a mother presents as unable or unwilling to care for her children. Furthermore, not hearing or acknowledging a mother's unwillingness to parent potentially places children at additional risk. Believing that not all women want to mother can be devastating and difficult to understand in

light of one's own intense feelings towards one's own children or desire to have children (Featherstone, 1997; Swift, 1995 b). One's own emotions towards motherhood, compounded with dominant discourses of a natural mother, can lead to internal unrest for both maternal and non maternal social workers.

### ***Intensive Mothering***

The concept of 'intensive mothering' suggests that vast amounts of physical, mental and emotional energy should be used when caring for children. Mothering, considered primarily an individual engagement between mother and child, should also be naturally self sacrificing and assume a conventional gender based division of labour (Arendell, 2000; DiQuinzio, 1999; De Marneffe, 2004; Fox, 2003; Hall, 1998; Hayes, 1996; Thurer, 1994).

For reasons of both necessity and autonomy women have increasingly moved into paid work outside the home. Aside from the fact that more mothers are entering the paid labour market, the actual task of mothering in today's society has grown in both priority and intensity (Ambert, 2001; Deutsch, 1999; Hattery, 2001). The societal demands and expectations of how a child 'should be' raised require education, time allocated for emotional, mental and physical development, and more supervision to combat awareness of increased societal dangers. The dominant conception of mothering and motherhood is built from the framework of the white, middleclass, and heterosexual couple with a child living in a self contained family unit (Krane & Davis, 1996). To achieve perfect mother status inside this territory is extremely difficult, outside of it, virtually impossible.

Wolf (2001), in her autobiography describing her pregnancy and experience mothering an infant, is angry and shocked at the oppression within the institution of motherhood. As a feminist, she shares her experience and is frustrated at how society downplays the intensity, contradictions and ambivalence of mothering. In addition she sees society offering little social support, placing unrealistic expectation on mothers and supporting the dominant discourses that continue to silence and oppress mothers.

Other factors that add to the burden of achieving intensive mothering are declining support from extended families due to the decrease in sibling size, and the increasing geographical distances between families. It is ironic that as our society continues to demand more out of mothers, it also continues to isolate them by failing to provide the education, health care, resources and safety required to manage idealized mothering practices within a patriarchal society (Caplan, 1998; Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten; Day & Brodsky, 1998; DiQuinzio, 1999; Hattery, 2001; Timpson, 2001).

Childcare literature and media communication are popular ways for mothers to both learn parenting skills, and develop ideologies around self, family and raising children. The ideology of intensive mothering inundates this literature which feminists critique as being contradictory, unrealistic and often written by doctors and other professionals who have not themselves been mothers (Arnup, 1994; Chira, 1998; Hayes, 1996; Thurer, 1994). It is refreshing to see some emerging child care and pregnancy literature that is narrowing the gap between the dominant theory and the reality of mothering experiences. Douglas (2000)

and Iovine (1995) have challenged the long standing pregnancy and childcare bible of "What to Expect when your Expecting" by honoring the experience and voices of mothers while suspending judgment on their experiences.

While the mention of fathers is limited within this study it is not my intention to exclude or minimize the importance of men and fathers in the role of caring for children. The scope of this study simply does not allow for it. It is, however, interesting to note concerns some feminists have developed around the use of the term parent as a direct replacement for mother and father. Featherstone (1997 & 1999) and Turney (1999) argue there is hazard in using these terms interchangeably. They worry it contributes to fixed notions that mothers and fathers perform the same respective roles with their children, when in reality, what society expects from each and what actually is performed is very different. Understanding them as separate allows for more appropriate practices and policies to be developed in a number of social, economic and political areas; in particular child welfare practice and policies.

Despite feminist influences over the last decade, mothers within social work practice, are still ascribed a particular identity and expected to take prime responsibility for both a child's care and protection (Turney, 1999). This ingrained societal ideology is reflected in different phases within the child protection system. Krane and Davis (1996) report that mothers are more likely to come to the attention of protection social workers than fathers and that it is more acceptable for fathers to struggle with parenting and domestic responsibilities and get help from family and community members. It does not reflect poorly on

fathers' personalities if they do not meet idealized standards; rather they are generally given respect or seen as victims to have to take on 'mothering' duties. The expectation to meet idealized standards is also much greater for mothers since it is seen as a natural role developed specifically for them, increasing the likelihood of being negatively judged and their maternal deviancy being reported to authorities. The differing expectations of mothers and fathers also lead to differing interventions and treatment strategies in social work practice. Fathers may receive more in home support and encouragement of autonomy in the workforce and for their personal interests. Because of the interplay of maternal discourses, interventions for mother led families may focus more on parenting classes or psychological counselling.

Acknowledging the ideology of intensive mothering as an unattainable myth rather than based in the reality of experience is central for feminisms and their approach to influence child welfare policy and practice.

### ***Idealized Mother: The Gap between Theory and Practice***

A picture of the perfect mother materializes through ideologies of 'essential mothering' and 'intensive mothering'. Idealizing mothers shapes normative values and public expectations. These debates have historically created struggles for women trying to do the right thing for themselves and their children. No matter what their experience women are being bombarded with contradictory messages about how 'good mothers' will produce 'good children' messages that usually create intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal confusion

and discomfort (Arendell, 2000; DiQuinzio, 1999; Hays, 1996; Thurer, 1994). Indeed, one might argue that today the publicizing of motherhood as a public issue is unprecedented (Hayes, 1996; Thurer, 1994).

Many feminists have attempted to dispel the myths of the idealized mother by countering it with the notion of the 'impossibility of motherhood'. This ideology suggests that essential and intensive mothering is an unrealistic expectation created by dominant western discourses, which adds to the ongoing oppression and marginalization of mothers (DiQuinzio, 1999; Chira, 1998; Hays, 1996; Thurer, 1994).

Using an ethnographic framework and analysis, Hays (1996) conducted and analyzed 38 semi structured interviews with mothers. She concludes that "intensive mothering" is the dominant ideology of child rearing within the United States and sees this ideology as serving to hold in place patriarchal positions of power. She unearths the cultural ambivalence that exists for mothers in their need to balance care for their children with the development of their own autonomy while parenting within unsupportive frameworks and hearing contradictory messages in society.

The "impossibility of motherhood" also identifies the contradictory struggles of essential motherhood (the one 'right way' as dictated by society) and subjective motherhood (diverse, individually understood) practices. Women seek to define motherhood through a socially defined set of ideas, relationships and activities involved in caring for children. Out of these dominant ideologies mothers shape the way others perceive them and the way they perceive

themselves (Chira, 1998; de Marneffe 2004, DiQuinzio, 1999; 2004; Roiphe, 1996). Fox (1996), in her biography of mothering, shares her struggles with rejecting idealized notions of mothering but in turn finds her self judging other mothers around her and grappling with feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Caring for children is open to public scrutiny and evaluation, especially in the child welfare system (Featherstone, 1999; Krane & Davis, 1996; Swift, 1995 b). The idealized images of motherhood that live in women's minds leave them easily prone to perceived judgment and guilt towards their mothering practices. Riophe (1996) defines maternal guilt as being squeezed between what women feel children need and what they feel they need for themselves. Maternal guilt permeates through almost all the literature on mothering and feminism (Allan, 2004; Caplan, 1998; Chira, 1998; Collins Layton 1994; De Marneffe, 2004; DiQuinzio, 1999; Fox, 2003; Nelson Garner, 1994; Schappell, 2002; Riophe 1996; Rubenstein, 1998).

Part of the concept of idealized mothering is that in order to achieve perfect mothering status, not only should you perform all the actions and tasks involved in 'super mom' status, but, you also should minimize the amount and significance of work you do and its affect on self. This humility is viewed as the ultimate sacrifice and achievement. Denying mothers a voice strengthens the notion of the idealized mother and it creates another barrier to unearthing the realities and myths behind the 'impossibility of motherhood' (DiQuinzio, 1999; de Marneffe, 2004; Hall, 1998; Krane & Davis, 1996; Thurer, 1994).

For decades society has systematically ignored, devalued and silenced the voices and knowledge of the most centrally engaged people within the mothering phenomena, namely mothers themselves. Wide spread enculturation through home, school, literature, television, and art holds gender differences and idealization of motherhood in place (Caplan, 1998; DiQuinzio, 1999; Thurer, 1994). Silencing women's voices hinders informed ethical evaluating of social policies for children, families, daycares and schools, leading to further alienation and frustration that inspire mothers to endure hardships (Krane & Davis, 1996). Allowing mothers the time, space and freedom from prejudice to tell their own stories of motherhood is vital to the process of deconstructing notions of idealized mothering and releasing women from this tightly bound oppression. Women may feel a sense of relief when they learn they are not alone in "the dark side" of mothering or rather the negative feelings associated with mothering.

Many feminist writers are exploring their own experiences of mothering, bravely sharing their reality of mothering that so often flies in the face of dominant social constructions. Within journeys of unique experiences these women struggle with redefining self within society, tell their stories within the framework of feminist thought, sharing their depression and joy as well as making sense of numerous other conflicting emotions, redefining and changing relationships, as well as their struggle to meet or change their own life goals (Fox, 2003; Collins Layton, 1994; DiQuinzio, 1999; Roiphe, 1996; Wolfe, 2001).

Along with education and understanding of the 'idealized mother' and the 'impossibility of motherhood', Krane & Davis, (2000) argue that social workers

should also consider varying approaches to practice that will facilitate listening and hearing client mother's voices within an often narrow system of assessing risk. For example, they suggest incorporating a 'mothering narrative' section within a standard risk assessment tool, giving mothers the opportunity to share their reality and experience outside the institutional framework. This would attend to context and challenge patriarchal ideals. Social workers need to honor and be open to hearing a range of stories from mothers as well as recognizing a mother's need of autonomy.

### ***Politics of Women's and Children's Needs***

The birth of a child is both the beginning of the child's journey and the mother's journey. Just as a mother influences a child's development, having a child also effects a mother's development (Ambert, 2001; Chira, 1998; de Marneffe, 2004; Featherstone, 1999). The idea that both mothers and children go through different psychosocial processes within themselves as well as with each other is often not recognized. The complex, often contradictory nature of the mother child relationship is significant to many mothers, but often hidden to avoid the public scrutiny of mothers being viewed as less than perfect. Fox (2003), in her autobiography, *Dispatches from a Not-So-Perfect Life: Or how I Learned to Love the House, the Man, the Child*, describes her journey and experience as a mother and a woman who did not identify with the dominant discourses and assumptions of motherhood. Coming from a strong feminist background she is angered at her situation. While loving her children she feels her own options for

developing self and autonomy are not only limited, but she too finds it challenging to avoid the guilt associated with the “ideal mother” status. As a result she finds herself bitter, angry and depressed. Her book shares the journey of her individual self discovery and in finding a balance between meeting her children’s needs and her own.

Feminists support the importance of developing a sense of self or autonomy beyond the role of mother and child (Arendell, 2000; Chira, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Hattery, 2001; Rubenstein, 1998). This perspective aligns with the current psychoanalytic thought that if a child is to develop a sense of self she must engage with another autonomous being because a child cannot experience recognition by someone she controls (Featherstone, 1999). This contradicts traditional psychoanalytic theories where a mother’s needs and priorities are to facilitate a child’s development while ignoring her own needs (Benjamin, 1995; Chira, 1998; de Marneffe, 2004).

In Rubenstein’s (1998) book, *The Sacrificial Mother*, she explores the endemic of self sacrifice and motherhood. Calling on her own experience as a sacrificial mother, social scientist and researcher, combined with extensive interviews with mothers, she discovers that for a mother to consistently sacrifice her own needs, however big or small, for her children is detrimental to the psychological well being of both mother and child.

The autonomy verse interdependence issue opens up further feminist discussion within child welfare practices. Along with her belief that feminist literature is lacking within the profession of social work, Featherstone (1999)

argues that child welfare assessment and intervention options focus on how mothers effect or impact their children while ignoring the effect children have on mothers (Ambert, 2001; Featherstone, 1998). Respecting and acknowledging a woman's identity beyond that of wife and mother increases intervention options while recognizing the context of a mother's experience. Challenging the myth of self sacrifice as essential within motherhood creates opportunity for social workers to support client mothers in meeting the needs of their children while still existing as individuals in their own right, not just as wives and mothers. Using a framework that incorporates feminist ideologies of mothering into child protection practices affords a dual approach that increases intervention options and positive outcomes (Featherstone, 1999).

Featherstone (1999) also notes that it is important for social workers to be mindful when working with maternal clients that autonomy needs diversity, because what makes each woman autonomous is different. Understanding autonomy as an individual process, calls for the utilization of unique interventions within child welfare work that focuses on each mother's development. For example, promoting maternal employment in one family situation may be good for a both mother and child to prevent maternal depression. This strategy however may not meet the needs of another family also struggling with depression.

### ***Mother Blame***

Inherent in idealized motherhood is the concept that there are 'good' and 'bad' mothers and 'right' and 'wrong' ways of mothering. Not conforming to the ideology of natural and essential mothering, for whatever reason, earns the label of bad mother. When a woman is seen as unable to meet the societal standards regarding mothering (created by white, middle class values) mother blame ensues and continues. Problems experienced by children throughout their lifetime are frequently attributed to failed mothering practices (Allan, 2004; Caplan, 1989; Caplan, & Hall-McCorquodale, 1985, Chira, 1998; Krane & Davis, 2000, Swift, 1995 a, b, c). Bad mother status is disproportionately given to minority mothers including but not exclusive to welfare, single parent, cultural minority, and lesbian mothers (Arendell, 2000; Hagen & Davis, 1992; Featherstone, 1999; Swift, 1995 b).

Despite feminist attempts at unearthing the myths of mother blaming, it still exists within society and continues to be practiced within helping professions. Allan (2004) offers a recent example of how practitioners continue to blame mothers for their children's problems or behaviors. She studied over thirty children's therapists all responsible for therapeutic interventions with children experiencing sexual abuse. Findings conclude that, despite professionals saying they use feminist approaches within their work, interventions actually encourage and enhance mother blaming practices. Her research further concludes that responsibility for not meeting treatment goals of the child or family is generally placed on actions of the mother. Echoing this notion to women creates increased

feelings of guilt, powerlessness and incompetence, further promoting the 'bad mother' image. In contrast, these same therapeutic assessments of the family, while taking power away from the mother give over more power to fathers. Practitioners maintain that while it is not required for the father to attend therapy, when they do, the intervention is much more successful. Allan's research uncovers the power of dominant ideologies within mothering discourses. Despite therapists' knowledge of feminist theory and mother blaming ideologies these beliefs are "over thrown in the face of the bad mother" (Allan, 2004. p.9). This research supports feminist theory that suggests mother blaming is most evident in cases of sexually abused children, where the mother is held often times, solely responsible for their protection (Krane & Davis, 1996 & Eichler, 1997). It seems ironic that we ask mothers to be powerful in protecting their children, particularly with child sexual abuse, while they are powerless within an oppressive system (Krane, & Davis, 1996). Mothers are also expected be strong during crises and ignore their own state of emotional distress in order to support their children.

Within child protection practice, mothers, more then fathers come to the attention of the public when the well being of a child is being investigated. It is mothers who are judged and held accountable for the problems of their children. The issue of neglect, in child protection practice, is more often viewed as a deficiency within the mother, rather than due to the lack of resources and oppressions mothers and children are experiencing (Featherstone, 1999; Swift, 1995 a; Turney, 1999). The personal and individualized nature of child welfare work functions to separate mothering from its context and as a result conceals

social and economic conditions. Despite poverty, spousal abuse, alcohol and drug addiction, the mother is seen as the causal factor in child neglect and therefore resources in child welfare are put towards changing the mother rather than changing the social ills that they face (Hagen & Davis, 1992; Featherstone, 1999; Swift, 1995 a, b, c; Turney, 1999).

Turney (1999) examines the relationship between care and neglect by exploring the ideas of care ingrained within the concept of "natural mothers". Her theoretical discussion of the social construction of neglect argues that current child welfare work contributes to the development of oppressive practice with women. She labels this the feminization of neglect in which the responsibility for the neglect of children is almost always given to the mother despite social ills they face.

Through her studies in child welfare, Swift (1995 a) sees neglect as more a study of "mothers who fail" which is reflected in the discourses of case files that continue to ignore contextual information while focusing on personal deviance. "Mother blaming has not been stomped out by feminist revelations of its occurrence or impact, rather it is just more covertly practiced on the least-powerful mothers in society" (Allan, 2004. p.10). Swift (1995 a) further notes that mother blame is held in place because shifting blame to social and economic problems would threaten the existing social class and balance of power.

Both Featherstone (1997) and Swift (1995 b) convey the need to understand child abuse in ways that promote child welfare but contribute to the development of anti oppressive practice with women. They caution that feminist

ideas within social work can be equally problematic with the tendency to imply, while arguing against mother blaming, that a woman carries no responsibility in the safety and care of her children. While acknowledging mothers have been burdened with sole responsibility of their children's care and protection, it does not help (women or children) to absolve them of any. Exonerating women from this responsibility diminishes their sense of agency and effectiveness (Featherstone, 1997; Swift, 1995 b; Turney, 1999). Again, it is vital to consider the care of children within the broader network of social, political and economic relations to reveal a more contextual understanding.

Swift (1995 b, c) encourages that a strengths perspective be utilized within child welfare practice. Rather than focusing on clients as deviant or victims social workers should acknowledge that many of these women demonstrate superior strength, resiliency and resourcefulness just to survive and rear children in light of the barriers and hardships they face.

### ***Maternal Ambivalence***

Maternal ambivalence is shared by all mothers to some degree and occurs when both good and bad feelings for their child exist simultaneously. These feelings can involve a mix of personal fulfillment, growth, and joy along with distress, depression, and anxiety (Arendell, 2000; de Marneffe. 2004; Featherstone, 1997; Parker; 1995; Thurer, 1994). Maternal ambivalence is grounded in the paradoxical character of mothering experiences. Both the existence and acceptance of negative feelings towards mothering and children is

understated within families, communities and society. Because of this mothers experience increased feelings of guilt due to the association between negative feelings toward their children and the 'bad mother' label (Arendell, 2000; de Marneffe, 2004; Featherstone, 1999; Parker, 1995; Thurer, 1994).

Rozsika Parker (1995) draws on interviews with mothers and a vast array of scholarly resources to find that, not only is maternal ambivalence a universal psychological experience but it can also have a creative impact on mothering. The ambivalence itself is not the problem; the issue is how a mother manages the guilt and anxiety it provokes. Parker (1995) distinguishes manageable from unmanageable ambivalence. Manageable ambivalence enables a mother to focus on relationship and experience with her children and the influence on their development in both positive and negative ways, and as separate and related. This leads to an increased capacity to think and act within a larger context. Manageable ambivalence is more than just a feeling a mother has; it is influenced by outside factors including support from a partner, physical health, availability of social support, economic factors and the nature of the children (de Marneffe, 2004; Featherstone, 1999; Parker, 1995; Turney, 1999).

Schappell (2002) shares her experiences of maternal ambivalence in her story titled *Crossing the Line in the Sand* she uses an imaginary line to keep her hostile feelings towards her children in check.

Still everyday I feel as if I have to draw a line in the sand, a line I have to promise myself not to cross. Depending on the day's psychic weather – my mood's tide – the line can fade or move slightly, only to re-form again and again. For example: Some days it seems all I do is yell at my kids, then apologize for yelling at them, then feel guilty for being such a lousy mother, then start to feel resentful about being made to feel like a bad

mother. I mean, how crappy of a mother am I really? ... don't knock them around in public or humiliate them by screaming, *If you don't stop crying I am going to give you something to cry about*. I read them books and play pretend... I tell them they are loved so often they often roll their eyes (Schappell, 2002, pp 195-196).

This mother bravely shares her struggles, finding the balance between her good and bad feelings towards her children and being a mother. She shares times when she has "lost it" with her children to the point they withdrew in fear; "but I am scared, too- scared of hurting my children, of not being able to protect them from myself. Scared of how much I both love them and hate them in this moment (Schappell, 2002, p 203)". It would seem understanding this ambivalence as part of normal, constructive feelings, would not only release the guilt this mother is experiencing, but would also, as Parker (1995) suggests, create an opportunity for growth in intimacy and understanding of her relationship with her children and herself.

Drawing from a rich tradition of writers, her own experience as a mother and as a psychologist, de Marneffe (2004) finds that mixed feelings about children and self are basic to what motherhood is. Extreme states of feelings are one of the few things we can reliably assign to mothering. While these feelings are personal, how we interpret these feelings are not personal but influenced by social values, our peer group, life choices and our larger social surroundings. The social taboo about the "darker side" of mothering, or expressing negative feelings about mothering or children, can get in the way of constructive acknowledgment of a mother's own ambivalence. It is our cultural ideals that intensify our self doubts about motherhood. In keeping with Parker's (1995)

ideologies, de Marneffe calls for women to embrace contradictions and their range of feelings as they create growth and balance.

In relation to child welfare, Featherstone (1997) suggests that it is when a mother's feelings of ambivalence are unsupported and unrecognized that the emotions can become unmanageable, potentially leading to acts of violence, abuse, or neglect towards a child as well as depression, anxiety and relationship problems for the mother. Child protection social workers encounter manifestations of unmanageable ambivalence regularly. Treated as a social taboo, mothering ambivalence offers another area of challenge for these social workers. Sharing difficult feelings, which feminists see as inevitable, often puts a client mother at an increased risk for more intrusive child welfare interventions (Featherstone, 1999). Featherstone (1997) moves to normalize feelings of ambivalence through helping maternal social workers come to terms with their own contradictory emotions of mothering; giving client mothers' permission to talk about their internal struggles. It is further important to be mindful that emotions can shift depending on so many factors, including a child's behavior and the availability of supports.

Featherstone (1997&1999) also sees dangerous implications if social workers do not acknowledge unmanageable ambivalence in relation to child abuse and neglect. Buying into the discourse that all women naturally love their children, and if they do not they can be helped to do so, has the potential to place unrealistic expectations on the mother, ignoring the context of her ambivalent feelings. This can create quite a quandary for a worker trying to assess risk and

still do what is right for both the child and mother. Social workers must negotiate through difficult feelings they may have towards a mother who does not want to parent her child. Ultimately, it would seem being open to a range of stories, emotions, experiences and needs of mothers would help in applying interventions to both address and separate manageable and unmanageable maternal ambivalence.

### ***Dilemma of Difference***

Feminists also acknowledge that the ideologies of mothering and motherhood are neither a unitary experience of individual women, nor are they experienced similarly by all women (Arendell, 2000; Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998; DiQuinzio, 1999). The real, lived experiences of mothers challenge the dominant ideologies placed on mothering within society. This distinction opens up the possibilities of seeing the problems mothers experience as being a result of the way society organizes the institution of motherhood. It values mothering practices and appreciates the context in which women mother. Influencing any mother's actions are her childhood experiences, beliefs about family, personality and individuality and even the nature of her own children (Arendell, 2000; Arnup, 1994; Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998). Dilemma arises in that it becomes difficult for mothers to be united in challenging their oppressions when they do not relate or understand others different or unique mothering experiences. At the same time feminists challenge mothers to remember that in respecting diversity of other's experiences, it should not divert from acknowledging commonalities

that exist for mothers; it requires the fine balance of focusing on sameness while honoring and respecting differences (DiQuinzio, 1999).

Feminists stress attention and respect for the multiplicity of mothering experiences and the reshaping of feminist thought to attend to class, race, gender and sexual orientation. Mothering takes place within a historical context, influenced and guided by differing locations that shape a mother's activities and understandings. One cannot ignore the impact societal influences such as poverty, sexism, and racism have on any mother's best efforts (Arnup, 1994; Arendell, 2000 & Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998; & Swift, 1995 a, b, c). Featherstone (1997) and Swift (1995 b, c) observe that mothering ideologies traditionally ignore the experiences of mothers in the working and lower income classes. Dominant research and writings on mothering usually depict experiences of white, middle class mothers, setting a false standard in which to compare experiences of other mothers. They suggest that central to current feminisms are the need to reshape mothering ideologies to include class, ethnicity and race.

'Childcare experts' have defined motherhood and its practices in attempts to educate mothers, but historically they exclude the experience of mothers and in nearly all accounts of parenting, a sympathetic evaluation of the social context around mothering. Giving voices to mothers, of all backgrounds, cultures and locations allows the experiences and perceptions of minority women to be seen as valuable in their own right and not measured by mainstream standards of mothering (Arnup, 1994; Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998; Swift, 1995 b, c).

Not attending to racial and structural differences between mothers creates an environment in which social workers have no choice but to impose a practice of normalization (developed from western, middle class values) on lone, poor and marginalized mothers, creating a very one dimensional system (Swift, 1995 b). Cultural, racial, structural and experiential gaps between social workers and client mothers are potentially very large. A common example within child welfare work occurs when a young, middle class worker, without children tries to empathize with the life circumstance and day to day struggles of marginalized and economically disadvantaged women trying to care for children. Practice interventions and risk assessment tools that address the context of maternal conditions and available economic and emotional resources would help redress this gap (Krane & Davis, 1996). Social workers need to suspend judgment in light of their own experiences and beliefs by being aware these judgments exist and acknowledging their potential to cloud decisions and expectations with respect to clients.

### ***Mothers as Social Workers***

It is estimated that some 70% of direct service work in child welfare is done by women (Swift, 1995 c). Social workers who are mothers are often assisting clients who are also mothers to manage care giving responsibilities (Featherstone, 1997; Brook & Davis, 1985). The Social Work Department at the University of Manitoba report in their 2002-2003 Annual Report that out of 800 students enrolled 655 were female (Mullaly, 2004). A recent ten year study, that

was done by the same university reports, that 36% of all BSW grads, and 23% of all MSW grads work in the child welfare system (Spearman, 2004).

Little attention within research has been paid to the fact that when mothers neglect, beat, or even kill their children it is often other mothers that are involved in investigating, assessing and working with the family (Featherstone, 1997). Women make up the majority of front line workers, support staff, homemakers, child care workers, and foster parents. Despite women dominating both sides of the child welfare system, they continue to be "missing persons" within this area (Brook and Davis, 1998; Featherstone, 1997; Swift, 1995 c). The child welfare system is also largely dominated by male administrators, managers and supervisors which instill patriarchy and power throughout class, culture and race relations (Swift, 1995 c).

Swift (1995) also explores race, culture and class relations between client and worker as well as the hierarchy of care giving that exists among services positions within child welfare. The average profile of a child welfare client is in the lower class structure, experiencing poverty. Homemakers, child care workers, foster mothers generally exist within the working class structure. Female social workers often fall in the middle class category. Caring for children is said to be a women's world, but it is also a world of women serving women within a class structure. Academics, administrators and supervisors have decision making positions at the top of this hierarchy holding a patriarchal system of power imbalances and class structures in place.

Practically all child protection workers are mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, and therefore at different times will share identities and struggle with differences with their clients. In particular, a number of varying emotions toward client mothers may present through identification with the vulnerable child or identification with the mother, especially if a maternal social worker is struggling with motherhood herself (Featherstone, 1999). Featherstone (1997) also suggests that a social worker's development and self reflection as a mother is important in working with clients. She cautions promoting the fantasy of the social worker as the perfect mother as it perpetuates the idealization of motherhood, and works against the worker client relationship.

There is the potential for complex emotional dynamics within child protection practice. As stated, the majority of social workers are women, with a number being mothers. Their own experiences and judgments regarding mothering may, at the same time, within the same or different situations, prevent them from being open to hearing a range of stories from clients. Alternatively they may also be more open to varying experiences of mothers because of shared experiences related to the challenges of mothering (Featherstone, 1997).

Women as social workers pose difficult questions for feminism; one reason is in the nature of their work with other women who are abusing those more vulnerable than themselves, namely children. Many feminists in social work focus on the workers identity as a woman rather than as a social worker. However there is a 'duality of existence' that presents as troublesome to balance both in practice and in theory. Child protection workers hold a lot of power within

the adversarial relationship of authority, and a legal mandate that compels them to practice authority over mothers who abuse or put their children at risk. Key points in feminist social work focuses on the shared and common experiences of women social workers and their clients. It can create quite a quandary when social workers are asked to understand and value the oppressions of mothers while still questioning a mother's ability to protect her children (Featherstone, 1997). Workers struggle with internal contradictions sometimes supporting a family and sometimes pulling them apart.

As stated, women who practice social work often pay a high emotional price, as the nature of child protection work can be emotionally difficult. To add another level of paradoxical feelings and expectations many of these social workers are women and mothers who often come home from this work only to face their own private ambivalence dealing with multiple family roles of superwomen or struggling with changes in their own lives that may leave them depleted in relations with others (Featherstone, 1997; Swift, 1995 c).

Featherstone (1997) further argues that women social workers are both given poor theoretical tools, inadequate space and support to understand the complexities of the relationships they encounter. Social workers are encouraged to maintain boundaries and protect their own sense of self while also remaining close to the client to both help and understand the full meaning of the client's situation. She argues that an understanding of ambivalence is central in dealing with dichotomies that occur within client worker relationships as well as

psychologically informed supervision to explore issues of transference and counter transference.

Despite the emotional challenges of becoming a mother within helping professions this experience also has the potential to improve both professional practice and relationships with clients. Grossman, Hildreth & Chester (1990) saw a change in the style of practice as a result of maternal status. In their study of 44 psychologists and clinical social workers they examine the effects becoming a mother has on the lives of these professionals. After becoming a mother therapists report that they are more open with clients, more comfortable with personal questions and the sharing of their own life experiences. This study concludes that becoming a mother enriches the clinical work, gives new insights into the lives of children and enhances sympathy for the lives of parents. The workers experienced increased empathy for both parents and children and find that clients are generally less defensive to work with when they learn the workers are parents as well.

In 1998, Patricia Barkley conducted research for her Master's thesis on mothering and the social work profession, exploring a multiple role analysis. While the main premise of the thesis was looking at how maternal social workers manage work and home life within the institution of social work, she also notes a change in social workers' approaches to practice when becoming mothers. Ultimately she concludes that maternal social workers are not so quick to mother blame, they have an increased awareness of issues facing parents, they are more intuitive to clients needs, they feel emotionally closer and they have a

better rapport with clients. This rapport is partly due to the increased credibility clients afford maternal social workers. Barkley (1998) also finds becoming a mother increases empathy for parents and children, and one social worker in her study felt that social workers without children have unrealistic expectations and create treatment goals that do not take family dynamics into account. The participants in her study also felt their first hand experience at parenting combined with social work training increases their social worker skill level. However, life experience of mothering remains an unrecognized and undervalued social work skill.

Academic institutions have taken steps to acknowledge oppressions of mothers within social work in an effort to both examine, and challenge expert and dominant discourses on mothering. For example, McGill University developed a "Mothering and Social Work Interventions" course within their social work program. Created out of the belief that social work tends to reproduce oppressive ideologies on mothering, its purpose is to explore the ideology and reality of mothering within patriarchal society. The course incorporates an experiential approach that challenges students to explore what good mothering means to them while fostering discussions of both life experiences and diverse mothering practices that also recognize barriers of race, class and culture for both social workers and clients (Krane & Davis, 1996).

As mentioned, child protection social workers often operate within a patriarchal system that is defensive and adversarial. They carry a range of complex and contradictory positions in relation to clients including that of

advocate, mediator, reporter to court, counselor and therapist. They are an end point for referrals acting as “containers for anxieties of others” (Featherstone, 1997, p 175). There is an ever increasing division between managers and social workers with little time or support given to the emotional side of child protection work. Social workers that are more psychologically aware of their own experience are better able to attend to client needs. Furthermore, the more open supervisors and management are to hearing a range of experiences from social workers the more open social workers will be to hearing the voices of their clients (Finn, 1990).

### ***Gaps in Literature and Research***

Featherstone (1999) calls for fuller debates within social work about the complexity of mothering. Feminist social work literature on mothering is highly theory based, and needs to be grounded within mothers’ experiences, bridging the gap between conceptual and empirical research. In my first chapter I argue that voices and perspectives of mothers within social work are largely missing. The research I have conducted narrows this gap by analyzing, from a feminist perspective, the experiences of six social workers who have become mothers during their work in child protection. As this literature review has conveyed, increasing attention needs to be paid to the enormous multiplicity of mothering experiences, as well as challenging myths of motherhood that continue to oppress women. My research seeks to understand this complexity within

maternal social workers' experiences with respect to the nature of their work with client mothers.

### **Chapter 3: Method of Inquiry**

#### ***Questions and theoretical assumptions***

To fill gaps identified within my literature review, I ask how does the experience of mothering impact child protection social workers' conceptualizations of motherhood? How does this then influence their approach to practice with client mothers? In search for a deeper understanding of these questions I conducted in-depth interviews with six women who have practiced child protection social work before and after becoming a mother. I use feminist and exploratory methodologies with a narrative approach to data collection and analysis.

Feminist research is concerned with challenging dominant assumptions and representations in relation to gender (Yegis & Weinbach, 2002; Standing, 1998). In honoring the subjective nature of women's experiences and making the personal political, feminist research offers ways to broaden methods of qualitative research (Devault, 1997; Neuman, & Kreuger, 2003). Exploratory research provides an avenue to do research when there is limited understanding of the problem, which helps to lay the groundwork for further knowledge building (Yegis & Weinback, 2002). Using an exploratory, feminist research methodology fits well within the context of my research questions. It allows me to explore how the personal lives of mothers are influenced by dominant societal and political structures, how maternal social workers are impacted by these systems, and how they are impacting the systems in which they work. This design acknowledges

the realities of lived experiences through methods that respect the voices of women.

Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams (2003) state the foundation of narrative investigation is to explore a relatively unexplored phenomenon and to reexamine it naively. This is a natural fit with exploratory feminist approaches. This design offers a way to understand the personal constructions of individual experiences through meanings created within their stories (Fraser, 2004; Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams, 2003). Narrative research leaves space to hear the voices of mothers. Interviewing styles and analysis attend to context and consider how culture and social structures surface in the stories mothers tell, while emphasizing curiosity and reflexivity that is open to the subjective nature of the research (Fraser, 2003). Given my own experience as a woman, a mother, and a child protection social worker allows me to bring self into the research, enhancing the process.

### ***Research participants and recruitment***

Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams (2003), discuss the challenges of choosing the size of the research sample within a narrative study. It is important to have enough material to represent richness and diversity of the phenomena, but not so much as to feel overwhelmed. Relatively few multi layered, long intensive interviews can present as much material as having more participants and less intensive text. My struggle was to capture diversity within the women I interviewed while maintaining a deep understanding of their inner experiences

and the context of the stories that they share. At six interviews I was able to obtain rich, descriptive data that tapped into many emotions, stories and ideas, which presented numerous themes, commonalities and differences. These offer a meaningful picture surrounding my research questions. The challenge, due to the extent of the material, was containing and balancing the information with my research purpose and limitations of this study. I want the research to be meaningful to the participants, the reader and me. I am moved by the honesty, courage and knowledge of the women that shared their stories, and to convey this through my analysis is significant for me.

I chose to interview participants who have done child protection work before and after becoming a mother so they can reflect on changing ideas about motherhood, and the impact on their work. I initially struggled whether to include social workers in general, social workers within child welfare, or specifically child protection social workers. I chose to limit the study to child protection social workers simply because the front line work they do is directly involved in assessing parenting practices of marginalized mothers. Child protection social workers carry with them a lot of power while dealing with emotionally charged situations.

I used informal snowballing methods to locate potential participants. Snowballing as an informal technique uses word of mouth to find participants who fit the research criteria. This process allowed me to access informal networks of child protection workers through the use of intermediaries or 'gatekeepers'. I approached social workers and colleagues I am acquainted with

through my job as a Children's Mental Health Therapist, informed them of my study, and asked them to pass on my contact information to friends, acquaintances or colleagues that fit my research criteria and would be interested in participating in the study.

Snowball sampling can decrease power imbalances and increase trust between researcher and participant. Initially I considered using more conventional methods of recruitment, such as advertising directly through administration within the child welfare system. My concern was that participants might perceive the research to be linked in some manner with their place of work and therefore feel inhibited to talk openly about their experiences. Gatekeepers were made aware that their role within the research does not extend beyond 'passing the word'. They were also informed they would not have further involvement or commitments beyond the recruitment process nor have access to any information regarding the participants.

It is significant to mention that all participants were practicing social work in rural community settings at the time of this study. It was not my initial intention to obtain a sample group beyond maternal child protection workers and I did follow up gatekeeper's leads of possible participants in urban areas which were unsuccessful. Given my own professional location within a rural area, finding rural participants, in retrospect, seemed quite natural. All participants were themselves, raised within traditional, intact nuclear families consisting of a mother, father and siblings; sibling sizes of family of origin varied from three to eight. At the time of their interviews all women were either married or in long term

relationships with the fathers of their children, with one family being described as blended. All participants are Canadian born, five are of European descent and one mother being of Asian Canadian heritage; their ages ranged from early thirties to mid forties. The ages of their children varied considerably, with a balance of infants, toddlers, school ages, teenagers, and early adults. All mothers had worked in the child protection system for ten or more years and all within a rural setting. Three of the participants were practicing front line child protection social work and the other three participants had extensive past experience in front line work and are were working within management positions in the same field. Some of these women were practicing social work in the same region as each other; specific demographic information will not be associated with particular individuals in attempts to further maintain confidentiality.

### ***Data collection and the Interview***

The use of conversational style interviewing is important in studying women and other marginalized groups as it leaves participants free to tell their own stories after being historically silenced. It offers room to incorporate trust and sensitivity while engaging the participant and actively involving her in guiding the process (Devault, 1999). Feminist interviewing with women presents some challenges and strengths that Devault (1999) highlights regarding language and personal listening. Devault sees men as the creator of language and, as a result, women's use of language is often limited and shaped by men's social and institutional power. Women's experiences often do not fit the language available

to them, creating potential gaps in understanding and communication. She encourages interviewing in ways that both acknowledges and attempts to overcome these barriers by creating space, and opening the boundaries of topics to provide accounts that are fixed in the realities of their lives. The conversational style of interviewing I use within the narrative approach lends well to create this space. My commonalities and shared experiences with the research participants, as mother, social worker and woman, enhanced the interview style and lessened the socially constructed language barrier. Shared experience allowed the researcher and the research participant to become co constructors of meaning and essentially partners in the research process. This active involvement allows for shared constructions which lead to fuller answers to questions that cannot always be asked in simple straightforward ways. It is critical that feminist researchers practice listening in ways that are personal, closely controlled and sensitive to differences. Researchers need to use personal experience, as resources for listening to more fully understand both spoken and unspoken ideas, and to be disciplined not to leave emotions behind (Devault, 1999).

When using in-depth interviews in research, the researcher generally prepares an interview guide to help focus the interview (Yargis & Weinbach, 2002). Appendix II illustrates the interview guide, along with probes used during the interview. This guide was used sometimes more, sometimes less depending on the flow of the interview. In general the guide kept the interview on track and acted as a reference point to ensure important areas or topics were explored. Using probes and active listening often allowed the answers to reveal themselves

within the mothers' narratives. The average length of each interview was approximately 55 minutes with the shortest being 40 minutes and the longest interview lasting 90 minutes.

I began keeping a research journal at the start of my recruitment process, and continued through to the completion of my analysis. I wrote in my journal after contact with participants (in telephone and in person), tracking information, and any thoughts, feelings and struggles I had, as well, as perceived emotions and non verbal communication. I also took notes on discussions that occurred before and after the audio tape was recording. I did not take notes during the interview process as it prevented me from fully engaging and listening to the participant. This journal was also used during the analysis process to reflect on the material and record my progress and struggles, enhancing my data collection and analysis.

When the participants contacted me to express their interest in participating I discussed with them the goals and purpose for my research and invited them to ask further questions. I also made them aware of the interview process and the time commitment involved. After setting a time and place, comfortable and convenient for the interviewee, I faxed them a copy of the consent to participate form (Appendix I) to review prior to our meeting. In our face to face meeting we reviewed and signed the consent form, discussed the process of audio taping and the conversational style of interviewing. We also spent time answering questions regarding the research process and purpose. Prior to starting the audiotape I shared with each participant my interest and

location in this study. At the end of the interview the women were asked if there was anything else they would like to add, if they had any further questions and how they experienced the process. They were further invited to contact me, at any time, if they had questions or concerns.

### ***Approach to Data Analysis***

“Narrative provides access to people’s experiences and identity and some argue that one of the clearest channels for learning about the inner world is through stories and verbal accounts by people about their experienced realities” (Lieblich, Rivka, & Zilber, 1998). There are a number of ways to approach narrative analysis. In reviewing the literature I often found some kind of art form used as a metaphor for narrative analysis, such as painting, cooking and sewing to name a few (Fraser, 2003; Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams, 2003; Lieblich, Rivka & Zilber, 1998). These metaphors speak to the unique, personal involvement and individual nature of narrative research while acknowledging the energy, closeness to the research, and purity in the findings. In analyzing stories, as with other creative processes one does not know exactly where their findings will go; the use of self and intuition is inherent in the creative process thus making the work uniquely original. The outcome of analysis is also individual. With cooking two people can follow exactly the same recipes but get different results given their interpretations of the instructions; the more I interpret stories the more I bring myself into them. I also found the use of metaphors for interpreting the stories helpful. The idea was given to me by the women I

interviewed, who frequently used metaphors to try and explain their, often complex, reality. Using metaphors in the analysis of their stories helped me stay true to their voices (as the metaphor descriptions were often theirs), but it also helped me categorize and organize ideas, concepts and themes. Since these images made it easier for me to comprehend both multiple and collective experiences it is my hope this process will benefit the reader as well.

To complete my analysis I used, as a guide and reference point, the seven phases of narrative analysis as written by Heather Fraser (2004). Below is a summary of the phases.

#### **Seven Phases of Narrative Analysis**

**1. Hearing stories and experiencing each other's emotions** – Listening to the tape of interview, keeping journal of emotions, and body language. Begin to consider the start, unfolding and ends of stories.

**2. Transcribing material** – There are benefits to the researcher when transcribing. One is closer to the stories while not having the extra task of debriefing the transcriber. Transcribing can be more than just a technical necessity. It can be a central part to the interpretation and analysis.

**2. Interpreting individual transcripts** – Disaggregating long chunks of talk into specific stories or segments of narrative; decipher beginning and end of stories, using numbering or naming of stories. Pull out themes, main points, meanings and contradictions.

- 3. Scanning across different domains of experience** - Examine stories within intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and structural aspects to examine social role of stories.
- 5. Linking personal to political** - Use dominant discourse and social conventions as an interpretive framework for understanding stories.
- 6. Looking for commonalities and differences among participants** – Patterns and connections that can be clustered together for analysis.
- 7. Writing academic narratives about personal stories**- Acknowledging that in putting together other's stories the researcher is telling a story of their own.

Fraser emphasizes this is just one way to approach analysis and that each phase does not have to be done in order. Reflexivity and intuition are a large part of the analysis.

I transcribed each interview and wrote reflections, themes, and ideas that stood out for me during this process. Transcription brought me very close to the data, and the tapes were listened to numerous times to ensure accuracy. Due to the vigor of transcription, the analysis of individual transcripts flowed quite naturally as I pulled out stories and chunks of narrative that focused on my research questions and were relevant to my literature review. Linkages, comparisons, similarities and differences among transcripts were identified. Titles of major themes were given, these titles and themes were often reworked, redefined and reviewed as new themes and ideas emerged. Within this process I

explored narratives through different domains of experience and attended to the personal and political arenas, particularly around the dominant discourses of mothering, social agencies, practice standards and power relations.

It is important to me to stay true to the meanings behind the stories these women shared. They were passionate about the research I was undertaking and I found analyzing and writing my findings to be emotional and frustrating at times. I felt a strong desire to convey the stories in a concise and meaningful way while often worrying I could not do them justice. I found sorting through and deciding which narratives to include onerous as so much of what they shared seemed significant. Staying true to the stories and voices, the feminist and narrative methodology and my research questions helped me contain and focus the study.

Fine (1998) brings to light the contradiction that exists in the commitment to listen to women on their own terms while acknowledging it is the researcher who ultimately shapes the entire research process and product. Knowing my judgments would ultimately be reflected in the overall story I wrote I was still often reluctant to really make it my own. I often worried my own biases would convey a disrespectful tone. On another level, as I was very excited about the stories and findings I found it difficult to be patient through, the often tedious, analysis process. Staying true to the process served well in the end as I was often surprised at the appearance of findings I did not initially note.

Since narratives are seen as reflecting individual identities from the building blocks available in common culture, being able to access this individuality and meaning within the context of the cultural and social world

(Lieblich, Rivka, & Zilber, 1998) offer insights into how the social construction of mothering influences social work practice. There are many ways of representing stories; the researcher should use humility, claim blind spots, and acknowledge their own subjectivity within the analysis.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethics are embedded in every aspect of a narrative study (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). In thinking about ethical considerations I asked, in doing this research what meaning will it have for the participants? On a micro level, how will the interviews, analysis and writing of their stories impact them? On a macro level how will exploring their experiences impact community, practice and policy? A researcher has much power over participants in interpreting their stories. I needed to be aware of the influence in my location, and identify personal dilemmas and struggles I would have within the data. Conversational style interviewing and seeking feedback following my analysis helped give participants more control over the research process. With this in mind, I attempted to be respectful of differences in cultural beliefs, values and worldviews, and consider how they impact me, and my research.

Confidentiality exists to safeguard participants from any harm that can come to them as a result of their identities being associated with the data collected or presented (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2002). I changed identifying information of the participants, and with their cooperation, co-constructed new identities for the final thesis. It was also important to discuss the confidential

nature of the jobs child protection workers do and their need to change identifying information that may be embedded in stories involving clients. The women I interviewed were made aware of the limitations to this confidentiality. There are also ethical and legal limitations to confidentiality in the case of unreported child protection issues that is discussed within the consent form (see Appendix I).

### ***Limitations***

Knowledge gained in an investigation “faces hazardous passage from the writer to the reader, the writer needs ways of safeguarding the trip” (Stake, 2000, p. 443 as cited in Merriam, 2002). To enhance my research credibility, I recognized limitations and potential “safeguards” within my research design. Ultimately I worked towards keeping my findings congruent with the realities of the participants. Strategies of internal and external validity as well reliability that are consistent with use in qualitative research and the feminist worldview are used within this study.

Internal validity is strong within qualitative research given the closeness of the researcher to the data and the research participants (Merriam, 2002). I used Merriam’s (2002) work on evaluating qualitative research to decrease limitations and enhance credibility within my study. Internal validity is promoted using member checks, reflexivity and adequate engagement in the data collection. Upon completion of my interviews I gave the women the option of providing feedback on my findings to ensure what I convey represents accurately, the

stories they share. Four out of the six women agreed to participate in this process and all six women requested a copy of the final thesis. Feedback received from participants was positive and no inaccuracies in my findings were noted.

Stating location and position in relation to the topic being studied also enhanced validity. My reflexivity throughout this research gives the readers a better understanding of my interpretations, in relation to my bias, worldview and experiences.

Qualitative research and narrative analysis involve in-depth engagement in the data collected. My involvement in the stories of these mothers began from my first telephone conversation, through the actual interview, and continued through to the completion of my findings within my own narrative. This engagement was intensified through the listening, transcribing and analyzing of the data. I also used thick, rich descriptions within my discussion to offer a clear picture within my findings so the reader can decide the extent to which the findings can be transferred to another situation (Merriam, 2002).

In qualitative research reliability is enhanced through dependability and consistency of the research results (Merriam, 2002). An audit trail was created by keeping a detailed research journal. Along with my personal reflections and struggles, this journal also presented a detailed account of how the study was done and how I went about analyzing the data. This audit trail enhanced reliability and also gave me space to record any issues and personal reflections to support my location within the final thesis.

## Chapter 4: Interpretation of Findings

### ***Why we are taking this tour, the road we will travel, and the shoes we will wear: Introducing stories***

There were times in the development of this study that I may have questioned its significance. Times when friends and family, far removed from the social work profession, would politely nod with a look of bewilderment when I told them my research focus. With no sense of framework or context they queried, “don’t a lot of people become mothers, in a lot of different professions?” Upon hearing my topic, fellow social workers and professionals in related fields, nodded as well, but smiled and understood that the study of mothering, in any capacity, is worthy of research. But a common question was “why child protection social workers? Why not just social workers, in general, social workers in many fields deal with mothers on a regular basis”. And that is a fair statement; I struggled in explaining why I felt passionately that this area deserves further investigation. As I began my recruitment, any doubts I had around the soundness of this study were quickly put to rest. Participants were eager to be a part of this research and required little explanation concerning the topic and its rationale. “When I heard you were doing this, I thought, that is just like us and this is a subject I am very passionate about,” was a response one of the participants shared in deciding to participate.

Initial telephone conversations introduced to me a shared language that exists among these women. A statement, heard often during this phase is “you must have done child welfare to even think of this as a topic”. This is the

beginning of a common theme that weaves consistently in and out of this research, the metaphor, walking in another's shoes and the sharing of collective experiences. This also reiterates why a research design that focuses on lived experience and researcher reflexivity is an ideal fit.

Devault (1999) finds that commonalities and shared experiences lessen socially constructed language barriers between research participant and interviewer. My experience as a mother and child protection social worker appears to increase my credibility as a researcher, quickly establishing relationship and allowing me to enter into another level of communication with these women. The following conversation with Julie demonstrates this. I asked her if caring for her children has been different from what she thought it would be.

**Julie:** No, not too, well I mean you have set of expectations and hopes of how it will be so, yes it is very different when you think about how you are going to be a parent, yes very different. This sounds contradictory but as much as I thought I was prepared, I do not think you can ever be prepared for what it really is like. You know you are going to be tired, but you do not realize how tired, or you know it is going to be hard when the baby is crying and colicky up at two in the morning, but you don't know how you are going to get through it, so some of those things are different than what I expected but I knew in some ways they would be, but I didn't understand, well I don't think you can. Does that make any sense what so ever?

**Kim:** It does to me

**Julie:** (laughs.)

Tami did not necessarily experience the same revelations as Julie in terms of mothering, but feels, after being in the child protection profession for more than 20 years, very strongly about a bond that is created with professionals in her field,

**Tami:** Truly unless you have lived child welfare, unless you have done it, I do not think people understand. People can look from the outside, and they can certainly tell us, as most people do, everyone seems to know our job and until they actually do it, it is not as black and white as a lot of people think. I do think we are a breed unto ourselves. Most of us would agree that as professionals your support network is other child welfare workers, because you have to actually live it.”

Julie's and Tami's statements reflect mutual feelings held by all participants in both the experiences of mothering and child protection work; having to experience them to fully understand them. This reveals that both mothering and child protection work can be tricky complicated concepts to both grasp and express.

Within these larger complexities I sense speaking with me regarding their personal feelings assists participants in sorting through some of their own contradictory emotions. Dawn, who, after 10 years in the field has decided she may soon leave the profession, shares her own internal struggles and commitment to colleagues:

**Dawn:** I have said myself, many times, that you foster an incredible closeness with your colleagues in this profession. I believe because of the things that you bear witness to, the things that you see together and hear together and the experiences that you share in common, other people just have no concept of... you do become incredibly close to the people you work with. I guess I am extremely defensive over the fact that I am leaving this profession and I know that my effectiveness as a social worker is coming to an end very rapidly. I will always in my heart be very staunchly protective of this profession. It is a job like no other, and my hat goes off and I am humbled everyday by my colleagues and the things that they face, and the decisions that they have to make. And it really, to be frank, pisses me off, when I hear them being discredited in the media and all of that stuff, it hurts me personally, I take it very personally. Until you have walked in those shoes you do not know what this job is like to practice. I care deeply for the women that I work with, and I am passionate about that, as you have gathered.

Raising this topic as one worthy of study and inviting these women to share offers them a voice in a system and society where they often feel isolated, misrepresented and misunderstood. Historically there has been little space or safety for women to talk about or express their feelings and struggles about mothering (DiQuinzio, 1999; de Marneffe, 2004; Hall, 1998; Krane & Davis, 1996; Thurer, 1994). In the remainder of the study I act as a vehicle to communicate the participants' experiences within the frameworks and domains I discuss throughout my literature review and in my research questions. I explore the commonalties and differences of mothering experiences, the impact being a social worker has on family, and how their mothering experiences and identities define and shape their own practice. I also explore these experiences within the dominant social constructs of mothering, the structural arrangements of power and dominant ideologies within our society. I note the different levels of dichotomies that exist, often impalpably, for these women in terms of being a woman, a mother, and a social worker. To add some sense of simplicity in which to communicate and organize the complexities of these unique experiences I use variations of the metaphor, 'walking in another's shoes' for titles to group my findings; the purpose is to help ground the narrative, offering a greater understanding of the material presented.

***My shoes are also for walking, but they look very different than yours: The commonalities and differences of mothering experiences***

The 'dilemma of difference' describes the challenges of honoring complex, individual experiences of mothering while establishing links in developing a unitary approach; recognizing the commonalities while understanding the uniqueness of mothering (Arendell, 2000; Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998; Diquinzio, 1999). The purpose of this section is to introduce these six women through pieces of their narrative while exploring experiences, values and ideologies of motherhood through both personal and political frameworks. I seek to discover their commonalities, while at the same time, appreciate the strength in their differences.

As mentioned, the children of the mothers in this study are of varying ages. All participants themselves were raised within traditional, intact nuclear families consisting of a mother, father and siblings. Sibling sizes vary from three to eight. Generational parenting styles appear to carry over and influence how these mothers parent their own children often choosing to carry over values but modifying parenting strategies. Tami feels strongly about sharing family values with her own children:

**Tami:** So, as far as what my parents modeled, certainly there had to be a work ethic, some real respect and regard for each other and others. And those are values that are important for me to instill in our children.

Julie acknowledges both her own and societies' changes in disciplining children,

**Julie:** I discipline somewhat differently just because society norms have changed and spanking was very acceptable 35 years ago; it is not acceptable now, we understand a little bit more about why it does not work. So I try to change those patterns, it is interesting because my first

reaction is to parent like my mom, with the spanking, like I can feel it as a physical thing that I have to self talk myself out of, and finding new ways to deal with challenging behavior.

Learning to care for children came either from experience of caring for siblings, or support from their own mother. Books on parenting and pregnancy are used, but are not the heart of their learning experiences.

**Beth:** I had the *What to Expect when your Expecting*, which my mother told me to throw out because there are 10 million things that could go wrong with you and your baby and she is like, stop reading that, because every little thing you will get.

There are some ways, in which these women decide to mother differently then how they were mothered. These include increased time spent playing, interacting and communicating with their children. These experiences reflect some of the changes and expectations made in raising children that align with the intensive mothering discourse (Arendell, 2000; DiQuinzio, 1999; Hall, 1998; Hayes, 1996; Thurer, 1994). The following narrative reveals the increasing roles of women in their children's lives.

**Julie:** My mom has even commented when she sees me playing with the kids on the ground and doing the play stuff that she was not able to do that, or she didn't do that.

Dawn discusses some of the ways she mothers differently then her mother in both communication and interaction. It seems to reveal how mothers are tending more to the emotional and expressive needs of their children.

**Dawn:** My mom, until I was an adult was not real verbal and forth coming about her feelings, for example, and this is really cliché, it is like, you never heard the words 'I love you'. You knew it from actions and behaviors and certain things but you did not hear it. I, on the other hand, am very communicative with my kids, not consciously to contradict the way my mother was it is just my personality. I am constantly saying you're beautiful and you're amazing and I look at you and I go wow... so that is a

huge difference between me and my mom. I am also more willing to 'do', like my mom was very, "don't make a mess, don't bake because it will be really, really messy and it won't turn out". But for me it is like yeah go head and make a mess, we will clean it up, not a big deal.

Other ways mothering experiences differ among the participants are in the feelings and experiences of first becoming a mother. A number of women describe the act of mothering as very innate, reflecting who they are. They suggest the sacrifices and challenges of mothering are expected. For Kathy, caring for her children came naturally to her,

**Kathy:** When I was preparing for parenthood I expected to experience more frustration, more not knowing what to do, but in fact that really wasn't my experience. I had lots of practice with babies..... so being a mom was like a piece of cake, it just came easily and naturally.....yeah, I was sleep deprived, oh yeah, for sure.

Kathy believes her acceptance of children as individuals allows her not to take on ownership or guilt if her children are not acting perfectly.

**Kathy:** It is about just accepting these people for the people who they are and not try and make them be something else; and although they are of our bodies, my body and my husbands, they are their own person, who was developed by time and space and I don't know the tides and the sun and the moon (laughs) and the wind and the stars or whatever the external influences. So of course we have big role to play, but there is a lot going on for the kids that is really not about us. And I knew early on that these beings were their own person and it was my job to guide them, not make them "mini me" or something like that. So I did not get bent out of shape when they were perhaps noisy or boisterous or interrupting or doing the things that kids do and I did not think it reflected badly on me as a person. I did not experience any guilt or those kinds of things around how they were behaving or not behaving.

Despite being a confident parent with the ability to deflect mother blame Kathy still finds judgment from others frustrating and annoying; she resists the dominant discourses that affect her and her baby.

**Kathy:** My struggles were more about people criticizing your decisions, about why you are still nursing...people have preconceived notions about everything, about how everything should be, and they put so many rules around stuff, you know, can't a mom and her baby decide, and would it have to be the same for every baby.

The last three narratives Kathy shares offer examples of a number of different concepts discussed within the literature review including that of the natural mother (Arendell, 2000; Hall, 1998; Hayes, 1996; Thurer, 1994), mother guilt and blame (Allan, 2004; Caplan, 1989; Chira, 1998; Krane & Davis, 2000; Swift, 1995 a, b, c), and judgment within the 'dilemma of difference' (Arendell, 2000; Coll, Surrey & Weingarten, 1998; Diquinzio, 1999). She embodies the contradictions in some ways conforming to the natural mother discourse but resisting the mother guilt and blame and rejecting society's right to judge. A natural and instinctual mothering experience is not a myth for Kathy but rather her reality, she sees this influenced by her position as eldest child of eight siblings in her family of origin with lots of practical experience caring for her brothers and sisters. Her strong belief in her children as autonomous beings strengthens her ability to ward off guilt so often felt by a mother when she worries she will be solely blamed for the actions or problems of her children. By others not acknowledging Kathy and her children's unique and individual experiences judgement prevails when she does not conform to the dominant ideologies on mothering.

Other women reveal more in terms of having to adapt to the changes of becoming a mother, including defining self, lifestyle changes and pressures conforming to society's expectations. When asked what are some of her challenges in parenting Dawn shares;

**Dawn:** Oh, the lack of freedom, the lack of freedom, having kids and a job and a home and all that stuff that women struggle with every single day and the limitations that it puts on your time. And being on the run from when you open your eyes until you fall in to bed at night. Everything comes with the territory of little people and working. And that is a reality and I am very aware of, that at the same time I know it is hard.

In this statement Dawn realizes the impact of performing 'double duty' within an environment of intensive mothering and the barrier that it creates in developing self autonomy for women. She sees it as a reality that she is not alone in experiencing. All participants in this study balance work, domestic and childcare responsibilities at a time when mothering roles in society are increasing in intensity and familial and social supports are decreasing (Day & Brodsky, 1998; Hagen & Davis, 1992; Kerr & Beaujot, 2003). There is little time left for women to attend to their own needs. To differing degrees, a diminished time for self seems to be a reality for many of the women interviewed; Julie shares her struggles in finding time to strengthen her autonomy.

**Julie:** The loss of the me time, I was saying to my husband the other day, that when I was pregnant with our first I would come home at five at night from my job, and I would lie in my room and have my toast for supper and I would not have any thing to do all evening and I thought I was tired then, (laughs) no it is not the same..... And those things you miss..... finding time for me is probably the hardest thing to do and don't think I make it as much a priority as I need to, the me going out with my friends, the me going to work out. ...I am consciously aware of what I need to do but putting it in practice however is very challenging. That is probably the hardest adaptation and the biggest struggle that I have as a mother.

Julie experiences the same struggles as Dawn in terms of the impact intensive mothering has on time for self but also struggles with the sacrificial mothering discourse in being unable to meet her needs when her children's needs are given priority (Chira, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Rubenstein, 1998). Julie acknowledges

the importance of attending to her own needs, essentially rejecting this discourse in theory, but she finds it hard to reject it in practice due to intensive mothering barriers. Feminists support the importance of developing a sense of self or autonomy beyond the role of mother and child (Arendell, 2000; Chira, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Hattery, 2001; Rubenstein, 1998).

Interestingly, all six mothers noted the challenges of sleep deprivation in caring for their children during infancy. Now a mother of teenagers Gwen recalls discovering motherhood as more difficult than expected,

**Gwen:** Oh yeah it is a lot harder. Certainly, first of all for the new born thing, no one knows the concept of how tired you are in that first 3 or 4 months, it is absolutely the most exhausting time in your life, you don't get sleep. You get sleep but you don't get a block of sleep like you are used to getting. So first of all you are very, very tired."

She then lights up when I ask what she enjoys about motherhood:

**Gwen:** Oh wow, there are just so many things I enjoy about being a mother. I think probably the sheer joy of spending time with someone who loves you and loves you unconditionally. The whole nurturing piece that comes when they are very little, I enjoy the uh, uh, seeing my children succeed. I enjoy seeing when they do things that I think are very mature, uh just things you do not expect from kids at certain ages, as they grew I enjoyed different pieces of them.

Gwen's experience shows us how natural it is for a mother to experience difficulty in mothering and at the same time have feelings of joy. She discusses the shock and disbelief in how exhausting mothering is, stating nothing has been more exhausting in her life, yet on the other end of the continuum she enjoys nurturing her children and watching them grow through different developmental stages. Maternal ambivalence is grounded in the paradoxical character of

mothering experiences (Arendell, 2000; de Marneffe, 2004; Featherstone, 1997; Parker, 1995; Thurer, 1994).

All participants are currently in long term relationships with the biological fathers of their children, either in common law relationships or marriages. Reference is made by all participants as to the value of these relationships as positive and supportive. Tami and Gwen describe the division of domestic and child rearing responsibilities as a defining factor in their ability to work in this profession. Flexibility in the partner's profession and having an extended support network are additional protective factors, especially with the demands of travel and extended work hours. When I ask if her husband works outside the home Tami shares,

**Tami:** Yes, he has his own business, so he is more flexible around his hours, which is probably why it works; to be on the go as much as I am and raise kids. I do not know if I would be able to do that if I did not have alternate care, and extended family. So if there is a road trip or meeting they can stay with their grandparents.

Gwen shares the following narrative when discussing the importance of her partner in their children's life:

**Gwen:** When I went back to work full time my husband had to do more with our second son, which probably contributes to why they have such a close relationship now. Because he was there more often than I was. I was working full time and he was the one who took him to his check up or when play school started. He was the one who took him to a friends or play group.

Child protection social work is a profession that often requires quite intense emotional work as well as extended work hours to deal with staff shortages and emergency situations (Finn, 1990). I wonder if a supportive partner is a defining factor for mothers to continue in this line of work. As Day and Brodsky (1998)

found in their study of social programs in Canada and the feminization of poverty, marriage is actually an advantage for women in light of the increasing workload and the financial challenges and burdens of bearing and raising children.

High expectations and pressure to be the perfect mother seem to underlie some women's stories. For Beth, despite sharing much love and joy in discussions of her mothering experiences, she places significant pressure on herself when she answers the question, "what she enjoys most about mothering?"

**Beth:** What do I enjoy most about mothering? (ponders), um that is interesting; I don't think I ever thought about that. What do I enjoy most about mothering? Um (pause). I don't really know. I enjoy all of it except for the sleepless nights. I think I am better at saying what I don't like than what I like.

At the end of our meeting, when I ask how she experienced our interview Beth replied,

**Beth:** I think now I have to think more on what I do like most about mothering (laughs). I didn't really know how to answer that, and I should, not should, I would like to have a better answer for that, for myself. What do I like most about mothering?

When asked to explore her feelings toward mothering Beth finds it easier to say what she does not like about it. As this seems to trouble her, she reflects on it and challenges herself to constructively understand these feelings of ambivalence. Beth's self reflection on mothering presents as an example of constructive or manageable ambivalence which Parker (1995) suggests helps mothers grow in their relationships with their children and themselves by increasing their capacity to think and act within a larger context.

Julie discusses feelings of judgment in her parenting practices,

**Julie:** Society has a whole set of what they feel is appropriate for doing things, so you get “is your baby sleeping through the night” yeah (in my bed), oh, covering my mouth, ok.

**Kim:** So, lots of judgment?

**Julie:** I think I worry about it being judgment. I don’t know if it is but it is my perception that is what it is going to be, when that question is asked.

Julie describes how judgment of mothers is often expected and a defense maintained to avoid it. This highlights society’s idealized notion that children’s behavior and parenting have a direct link that does not leave room for context and individuality (Allan, 2004; Chira, 1998; Krane & Davis, 2000). Julie shares a common myth quite strongly held in our society. If your baby sleeps through the night it reflects strength in skill and personality of the mother to accomplish this goal. If a mother cannot achieve this it is viewed as a personal defect and reflects mistakes that she has made. In reality, whether a child sleeps through the night is multi faceted to include temperament, biology and culture, with parenting strategies being just a piece of the puzzle. However Julie is also resistant to this myth by naming it as such and putting up her guard in attempts to deflect judgement.

***Missing my comfortable shoes: Mothering while being a child protection worker***

Participants feel their identities as mothers are impacted because of their chosen profession. This effect on them and their children is seen in both negative and positive ways. They express a loss of innocence which causes significant internal struggles, conflicts of interest between work and family, as well as experiencing hyper vigilance in terms of risk factors for their own children. In contrast these mothers note an increase in theoretical knowledge of parenting, greater ability to keep their children safe in light of societal dangers, and their desire to instill kindness and empathy in the personalities of their children.

For Dawn and her family, this topic is close to her heart, particularly her loss of innocence.

**Dawn:** It does sound really cliché, about never being innocent again, and I remember when I very first started doing this job, I was about a year or two into it and hearing that from a colleague, once you are in protection, once you work the front line, and have seen the things you see etc, etc, that you can never go back and not know all of those things. Not have all of those suspicions fostered inside of you.

Dawn seems to further struggle with the choice she made to enter the child protection field, and the impact it has on who she is as a person. I wonder if she is grieving a loss of self or a loss of an idealized notion of the world that impacts children.

**Dawn:** You know things like kiddy porn on the news, and 'Joe Public' has a vague idea of what that is and that it is horrible. We unfortunately could probably picture what that would look like. Um, now has that been choice going into this profession and you know that going in, sure it has, but at that same time there is, I don't want to use the word trauma, it makes an impact on you, it makes an impact on the way you look at the world. You

do become jaded, you become cynical. I do not like those qualities about myself. I am sad that those things have happened.

It would seem, maybe to cope with these intense emotions, Dawn makes an effort to be optimistic, but this optimism creates greater internal struggle and distress.

**Dawn:** On the flip side I am also kind of thankful that I do have that awareness and I do believe in my heart that it makes me a better mom, in terms of protecting my kids. Some things that are out there, that they may be inadvertently exposed to if I did not know these sorts of things. But again you balance on that line of, am I being vigilant or am I being paranoid, and you know, being aware that you could be either. It is disconcerting sometimes.

Living in a small community, Dawn is further at odds when her knowledge about clients forces her to make difficult choices for her children. She attempts to divert her child from going to a client's home for a birthday party by presenting a more exciting recreation option.

**Dawn:** I find myself, not lying to her, but being, oh god I hate this work, but being almost sneaky and manipulative. Saying "oh, 'so and so' invited you to a birthday party but we also got this we could do" and you do you feel like a total creep doing that, you do, and judgmental and all of that nasty horrible stuff that flies in the face of good social work but at the same time you think, this is my child, it is hard, it is.

Beth shares similar feelings, questioning if her worries and fears are inadvertently impacting her young son,

**Beth:** Sexual abuse is another huge one. And that has made me hyper vigilant because I know that can happen to anybody. So for me I am extremely aware of who has my kids, who is babysitting in my house, um my six year old, I mean we have already read the Secret of the Silver Horse, because, oh, yeah, for me that is horrendous. I am very..., and if I wasn't in this line of work, would I be so hyper vigilant? I am aware of the fact that I have such strong emotions about it so I try not to go overboard with my son, but by the same token it is an extreme real fear for me.

This work appears to make Dawn and Beth more vulnerable to the intensive mothering discourse. They, however, question the validity of their feelings wondering if their professional experiences have made them hypersensitive to protecting their own children. Both Dawn and Beth share some resistance to the intensive mothering discourse by acknowledging and questioning the validity of their feelings. It would seem that the nature of child protection work may strengthen this discourse.

Kathy sees her experience differently from Beth and Dawn but acknowledges it as such, and wonders if it is a result of changes within both the community, and the changing perceptions towards child welfare workers from helpers to antagonists. "We are entering a new world where the work is becoming much more dangerous. I was blessed to enter the field at a time when I did." Practicing child protection work twenty years ago, she sees her role in community as a protective factor rather than risk factor,

**Kathy:** My little one would tell her classmates, well if you are having any trouble I am sure you could call my mom. They have seen me as a champion for kids.

Gwen finds her experience in investigations increases her ability to communicate with her children,

**Gwen:** Probably one thing this job gave me was the ability to talk about anything and not be uncomfortable because once you talk about sexual abuse with a child; you can talk about anything with your children."

How practicing child protection social work impacts one's approach to mothering was not one of my proposed research questions, nor was it integrated

initially into my interview guide. However, in my conversations with these mothers it became clear that this focus is very central to their world, emotionally, within family and community. As Featherstone (1997) points out, very little attention, in theory or practice is given to the fact that when mothers neglect, beat, or even kill their children it is often other mothers involved in investigating, assessing and working with the family. The women in this study discuss how the emotional challenges of doing child protection social work impacts both who they are as individuals and who they are as mothers. There exist occasions when knowledge known as a child protection worker can dictate or influence their own mothering approaches and decisions. The impact within rural settings is likely greater simply due to geographical size, and the isolated community setting. One mother shares that she travels two hours to a neighboring community every week to do all her grocery shopping to avoid the uncomfortable situation of running into clients.

***Did anyone buy dad shoes? The overrepresentation of mothers in the child welfare system***

As stated in my literature review mothers, overwhelmingly, are the main clients within the child welfare system (Brook and Davis, 1998; Featherstone, 1997; Swift, 1995). This is not to negate that there is involvement with fathers, but it is not in the scope of this study. Despite the literature suggesting that social work practices often encourage mother blaming, the maternal social workers in this study show a level of unease in singling out mothers from fathers, or parents in general, particularly when asked to make judgments regarding parenting.

Workers did discuss the inequalities that can occur when working with mothers and fathers. When answering questions regarding ideas about mothering, the term parent or parenting is frequently interchanged in the answer. For me, this signals a way in which these workers are trying to detract blame from mothers and level out the expectations of responsibility. However, feminists do caution using these terms interchangeably as it contributes to the fixed notions that women and men take on similar tasks and roles with children; when in reality what society expects from them is very different; acknowledging them as different does more at uncovering these oppressions (Featherstone, 1997 & 1999 & Turney, 1999).

**Kim:** What does the concept of a “good mother” mean to you?

**Gwen:** There is a lot of factors, I think in being a good parent, I think first of all it has to be time given, and its time, it is not things, it is time, it is uh, you have to be paying attention, you have to know a little bit what to expect, what is normal what isn't, you are the first one who clues into things that are not right, you clue in when they are sick, not just mothers, I think parents, mothers and fathers.

When asked to further discuss using the terms of “mothering” and “parenting” interchangeably and whether she thinks there are different expectations placed on mothers and fathers, Tami replies,

**Tami:** Um, I think generally, um, probably most women would agree that ultimately when things go bad it is the mother's fault, if people don't keep the clean house, no one ever, says oh gee he did not do his job, its like oh look at her she can't keep a clean house, or look at her children they are not clean, oh, she forgot to pack their lunch, you ..... so, generally, I agree, society would blame the mothers, so when things go bad, yeah, when things go really good though they tend to think, it's because there was a good dad around (laughs). We keep saying moms get the short end of the stick, ultimately if someone is very evil and oh yeah, it turns out it is something their mother did. They have had a bad mother. In this profession, uh, certainly we do see that more, because typically we deal

with a lot more single moms, then we would single dads. I am not saying that we deal more proportionally with single moms than married couples I am just saying if you look typically at single parents in general it would be single moms.... Well I shouldn't say that, we do deal with single dads, but um maybe society sees single dad's as needing more help so sometimes their family rallies, where as maybe with a single mom, its like oh why can't you get it together, you um they'll report those people kind of thing. But um, it probably is more single moms in general anyways if you look at that.

Tami's statement reflects society's ideals about motherhood and mother blame that occurs when responsibility is placed on the mother when a child has problems (Allan, 2004; Caplan, 1989; Chira, 1998; Krane & Davis, 2000, Swift, 1995 a, b, c). She further acknowledges that if a single mom is struggling there is a greater chance she will be labeled as a bad mother. This increases the likelihood of child welfare being called in to investigate. Whereas a single father will receive more family support as caring for children has not been socially defined as natural for fathers. Feminists contend that womanhood and motherhood should not be treated as synonymous identities and categories of experiences. In reality not all women do mothering nor is the caring for children the exclusive domain of a women (Arendell, 2000; Glenn. Chang, & Forcy, 1994; Turney, 1999). Viewing motherhood as natural to women adds to mother's oppressions and increases the likelihood of child welfare involvement.

***I need new shoes, these ones don't fit anymore: Child protection work after becoming a mother***

Often, after women have children they need a whole new wardrobe of shoes, not to express their new motherly status but because a woman's feet can grow at least half a shoe size after pregnancy. While not a universal experience, some speculate that pregnancy flattens your feet or stretches your ligaments in some way. This metaphor is significant in this study as the experience of becoming a mother changes in unique and different ways, the participant's perceptions of motherhood in which they have to do the same job as they did prior to having children, but they are wearing different shoes, so to speak, and this new status has the potential to change their approach to practice. Walking in new shoes as a mother increases social workers credibility with client mothers as well as affording them the opportunity to enhance worker client relationships. This lays a strong foundation for an often complex relationship. Credibility and its ability to enhance relationships were two aspects that are well defined and collective for all participants although differences occur in levels of understanding and empathy. Some participants feel their ability to understand experiences of client mothers' increases, while on the other side of the fence others feel their ability to identify with client mothers decreases significantly after becoming a mother themselves. Both of these perspectives also exist side by side for each mother, on different levels, often leading to quite contradictory feelings.

A common question child protection social workers get from clients, especially when they appear young or of traditional child bearing age, is "do you have children?" All participants have experienced this question, to differing

degrees, prior to becoming a mother, and have various methods of dealing with or deflecting the question.

**Beth:** I generally just tried to divert through that. The conversation was not supposed to be about me anyway, it was about what needed to happen for their child. So I tried to redirect to you know what, we are talking about Johnny now, and we need to talk about what is best for him.

Handling this question causes ambivalence and defensiveness for Beth as she perceives it as an attack on her competency. However, after having children, her acceptance of this question increases as does its validity.

**Beth:** I was relatively young when I started, and I looked younger than I was, so I think at times that was very difficult dealing with clients. Looking at me thinking, yeah you are fresh out of university, you little snout nosed kid, you do not know what you are talking about. And I mean to a certain degree, yeah I didn't, and I mean it is hard to relate and say. Yeah, yeah I understand what you are talking about; when you totally don't. Then when people would say that to you, you would become even more annoyed; "How dare you tell me I don't know; I'm smart." But then I would be on the other side of the fence and I'm like you can have an idea, but you don't totally know until you are in.

What Beth seems to be referring to is a common consciousness that mothers often share, which is a complex understanding that one has to live as a mother to understand it.

Both Gwen and Dawn feel their credibility with clients increases after becoming a mother. Despite this being a reality for them, there is an apologetic tone that suggests difficulty justifying the act of becoming a mother as something that might increase your competency in the social work profession.

**Gwen:** I think people accept who you are as a social worker when you can acknowledge that you are also a parent. It does make a difference. People

seem to... it gets you that element of credibility, and uh, it really shouldn't be that way, but it does.

**Dawn:** This is going to sound really shallow, but it is a piece of it, I am aware that I look relatively young, ok and prior to having kids, I looked even younger than I do now, and I would get a lot, like what to you know, what are you 12, do you even have kids, and you would have to say well no. Not that that made a difference in terms of your knowledge or the way you practiced, or what the law says, but now that I have kid, you feel like you have a little more credibility,

Beth feels a sense of relief being able to say she has children after experiencing the challenges of being a young, social worker.

**Beth:** Well it is quite nice to be able to say to people now, when they say, 'well you do not have kids'; I have kids so I know what you are talking about. So I think that has been easier in terms of being able to relate to clients.

Having children has the potential to put workers at different starting points in terms of establishing constructive relationships with clients. There is an increasing understanding and awareness of the issues facing clients and empathy for mothers, parents and children leading to an increasing credibility that enhances rapport building with clients. These factors can be viewed as an increase in professional skill level.

As mentioned empathy and understanding are complex emotions when it comes to becoming a mother within this field of practice, whether one's empathy and understanding increases or decreases within their work depends on their own experiences of mothering and parenting.

Tami understands how important outside supports are for her as a parent, and can sympathize with mothers who are isolated and lack support systems.

**Tami:** I think once I became a parent, I actually could see the value of having that type of family, of support being even more important, and could look at clients and think, wow.

However Tami also struggles to identify with clients and the poor decisions that they make. She can acknowledge the challenges of parenting but her protectiveness towards her own children decreases her ability to understand and relate to client mothers and the vulnerabilities of their children.

**Tami:** So I guess looking at that, I would say maybe I could feel more empathy for clients, but at the end of the day it is still not justifying abuse or whatever they might choose to do to their children that made us involved to start with, so that might be the only thing. I don't think it impacted me, as a parent, more how I would view the client. Like that maybe it really is kind of difficult, maybe we need to look at things a bit differently.....but I think actually, you know after having had kids it really, I could even understand less how someone would abuse a child. Because I would, I would die for my children, like the thought of abusing them, as much as at any given time they annoy you, I could never hurt them, so um I guess when parents get to that point; then it's kind of like wow that is even less acceptable to me.

Opposite feelings appear to exist side by side for Tami; exploring these complex emotions through her own experience seems to help her understand what is going on for her. It makes me wonder if the concepts of manageable and unmanageable ambivalence that Parker (1995) discusses for mothers are also possible for social workers, as 'social worker ambivalence', so to speak.

Manageable social worker ambivalence would address understanding one's own feelings towards client mothers within a broader context allowing for a deeper understanding of individual mothering experiences and therefore integration of more creative and appropriate intervention strategies. Unmanageable social worker ambivalence would happen when conflicting feelings are not understood,

accepted or supported leading to harsher judgments towards clients mothers and potentially damaging intervention strategies. Krane and Davis (2000) emphasize that the more aware child protection workers are of their own conflicting emotions and being able to understand them in relation to social constructions of mothering the more creative they can be in their intervention strategies.

After becoming a mother Kathy finds her self more distant from clients and over time had to relearn empathy for them by acknowledging the individuality of her own experience.

**Kathy:** I can never emotionally relate to what our clients experience because I have never had any of it, not even a moment. When I hear the stories about how they feel and the frustration, anger and all that. My life with my kids is about joy and laughter, they are the part that keeps me grounded and able to do this work. And I have to step back and process and realize that not everybody has had my experience. I was so unable to relate for a period of time I had to transition back to be empathic again,

For Dawn some situations were difficult for her to understand, before and after she became a mother,

**Dawn:** I have always been confounded by how someone could abandon their kid. That is still, you lose me, at how you could possibly. I have a hard time wrapping my head around that. I find myself getting really academic and intellectual about it and severing that emotional piece.

Dawn's own emotions toward motherhood and children make it difficult for her to understand a woman not wanting to parent her child. Featherstone (1999) and Swift (1995 b) argue that mothering is not innate to all women; to assume otherwise can be hazardous to both mother and child. This impacts, not only practice decisions, but forces social workers to challenge their own ideologies of natural and essential mothering.

In other cases, becoming a mother significantly increases Dawn's empathy and understanding towards the actions of client mothers, by understanding the level of frustration within the context of limited resources.

**Dawn:** To throw out an example, this shaken baby thing, prior to having children that horrified me, to no end and I could just not imagine how could any monster shake a baby to the point of brain damage or death. Ok. Having kids, do I condone it, absolutely not, of course not, however I can put myself in those shoes and say ok I have been very frustrated, I have been up with a baby all night who can just not settle, I have been so sleep deprived, so this, so that and the other thing. If I was all those things plus somebody who had no resources, no ability to understand infancy, nobody in my life that could have taught me etc, etc, and have a truck load of issues to boot, can I understand why somebody's at a point where in a fit of rage they shake their baby, now I can, I was not able to before. Um, so yeah in those sorts of respects it has made a big impact because you do put yourself in the shoes of the frustrated parent. And like I said you don't condone those things, but you could see how that could have happened, how all those dominoes could have fallen over and maybe that person isn't such a monster after all.

Becoming a mother helps Dawn understand context within this horrendous act; taking lack of resources and oppressions into account. As Featherstone (1999), Swift (1995), and Turney (1999) suggest this understanding enables a worker to focus treatment goals on changing social, political and economic factors rather than on treatment strategies that view the offending parent as evil or deviant, focusing treatment solely on changing the parent and doing nothing about the situations that perpetuate the incident.

Julie separates love for children from poor mothering practices which heightens the emotional impact of having to remove children from their parents,

**Julie:** I think that is why the hardest part is having to take children away.... Um and I know that most of my clients love their children as much as I love mine.

She further speculates that increasing compassion and understanding for other mothers is one area that has improved her practice. Having this level of empathy does not necessarily change specific practice decisions but rather the approach to the work, which can have overflowing effects, leading to better outcomes.

**Julie:** Before I became a parent I knew that having children was the hardest job out there, I knew it was stressful, but I hadn't walked it..... So I can really feel it from their point of view and have some empathy. I am better at my job I think. And that could be because I am a mother or that could be because I am older and have some more life experience behind me.

Lived experience challenges taken for granted knowledge about mothers and mothering ((DiQuinzio, 1999; Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1993; Hall 1998; Hayes, 1996; Thurer, 1994). It puts one in a position to question the dominant ideologies placed on mothering. Understanding one's own complex realities narrows the gap between theory and practice. It opens up insights into the lives of parents and children depending on the social worker's own personal experience or her experience of the situation. Featherstone (1997) also points out that women social workers are given poor theoretical tools and inadequate space and support to understand the complexities of the relationships they encounter. Social workers are given contradictory messages; they are encouraged to maintain boundaries to prevent transference and burnout while at the same time are expected to remain close to the client to both help and understand the full meaning of their situation. Featherstone (1997), Finn (1990) and Krane and Davis (2000) argue for psychologically informed supervision to help explore the dichotomies of these relationships.

***Which shoes are good for dancing? Contradictory relationships as mother and social worker***

Becoming a mother is an experience that can both bridge and extend the structural gaps that exist between child protection social workers and clients who are mothers. It can help social workers relate and empathize utilizing a bond of motherhood based on individual experiences. However these individual experiences of motherhood also have the potential to stretch the already existing structural balance of power that is inherent in the client social worker relationship. The narratives that exist for these women signify a flowing dance in understanding their relationship with the client in terms of being both a social worker and a mother. There are times when the social worker feels a sense of closeness through greater identification with the client mother, but then must alter this dynamic to cope personally. It would seem when a child protection social worker becomes a mother another level of dichotomy is added to an already paradoxical profession.

Beth speaks to the potential injury of over identifying with the client,

**Beth:** I think what happens is you have to compartmentalize. For example, um we see all kinds of nasty crap with kids and families. I compartmentalize that those people are different than me; that is not going to happen to me. Because if I didn't do that I think I would be constantly worried. What if my kid turned 12 and I can't control them. Well that is not going to happen to me. That just happens to those people. So you compartmentalize it, which I don't know, if I wasn't in this line of work, I wouldn't even think about it that much.....But as for the rest of it I think I have just compartmentalized and kind of gone on with my own things. And I tend to turn off my job when I go home.

**Kim:** I get the sense that is coping for you?

**Beth:** Yeah (laughs) that is how I cope with the stress.

Dawn uses her own experiences as a mother to help normalize client mothers' experiences as well as sharing parenting strategies with them. Similar to Beth, she maintains strong boundaries between her personal and professional life that she values as a protective factor for her children.

**Kim:** Do you share your own experiences as a mother with your clients?

**Dawn:** Yes, I do, it does not happen all of the time, but when I feel it is appropriate I will say, I know how you feel, here is an example of when I felt that way and throw out something. You know, I do not know if I have even ever shared if my kids are male or female. Their privacy is very sanctified to me, and I guess that is a huge thing for me. Because of the fact I am a social worker those lines can never cross, um meaning my work cannot come into my home, ever, um that is just a part of my philosophy as a worker and once those lines start getting blurry, I take a step back and I say no, this is not ok for me anymore. It is not healthy and yeah I am not going to let my kids be impacted by basically the very ugly world that I work in.

Beth's next two narratives describe her 'dance' to balance relationships with clients.

**Beth:** But in general if I believe it is going to help me relate to the client, sort of bridge the gap, because there is a huge gap usually. And I can bridge it somewhat and I am not sharing anything inappropriate or personal, but more along the lines of mothering I will do that if I think it is going to be helpful.

Sharing her own experiences of mothering offers Beth a way to link the structural differences that exist between her and her clients through a rebalancing of power. The power differential that Beth speaks of fits with Swift's (1995) work that sees child welfare work as a women's world of caring, and within this world there is a class structure that mirrors that of a patriarchal society. Despite sharing of experiences between worker and client as a way to decrease these inherent power imbalances the reality is the worker does ultimately always have

an element of control. Beth speaks of a point being reached that this power differential becomes static. When the client is given ultimatums for change (i.e. you must do this or I will take your children away), this is perhaps, when this power has the most weight. This is illustrated in Beth's words,

**Beth:** Sometimes by virtue of the fact that, you *must*, you say, you *must* find somewhere to put your kids when you are drinking. And there becomes a power differential. For sure, does that make sense?

Tami creates further dialogue around power imbalances, she worries that structural or cultural arrangements can be so different, that the sharing of self, specifically parenting strategies can be inappropriate.

**Tami:** Yeah, it wasn't about me sharing this is what works for me, as a parent I still don't think I would do that, if all things equal, this is the way parenting would be, but all things aren't equal. I mean everyone's life is different, right.

Tami appreciates the reality that everyone has experiences, beliefs and social locations that affect how they view the world and ultimately mother their children.

Use of self is central for Gwen in establishing relationships with clients.

But there is unease as to whether this is appropriate within her work. I ask her if she shares her mothering experiences with clients.

**Gwen:** Yes I do, I probably maybe, I guess I sometimes wonder if I do too much of that, but no, I do. I definitely use a lot of who I am personally and talk about uh, talk about my kids experiences and how they could drive me crazy at times and how they can make mistakes and how that can be really hard. I don't necessarily identify what the mistake was, but I definitely will talk about how hard it is to be a parent and those kinds of things. Yeah, so who I am, I do use, probably more than I should, it is always something that I have wondered about, but it is also part of how I establish relationship.

Gwen discusses the importance of keeping your personal and professional life separate but goes on to describe the dilemmas it creates when, in her experience, best practice may involve the use of self.

**Gwen:** You have to draw a line between who you are as a person, and who you are as a professional. Even who you are as a professional, is a bit of who you are as a person, but especially in the job of social work. We are our best tool. Who we are personally is one of our tools and how we get along.

Use of self in social work is highly debated within the social work field. It is a fine balancing act for Gwen and other mothers in this study. It is further complicated as traditional social work encourages workers to maintain strong boundaries with the client to avoid issues of transference and counter transference, which suggest that difficulties in one's own life can affect the work they do with clients. The interplay transference and counter transference are often believed to cloud judgments, decision making, and potentially increase burnout rates (Finn, 1990). Feminists promote that the sharing of self can enhance worker client relationships leading to increasing positive outcomes toward client goals (Featherstone, 1997; Finn, 1990).

Building bonds with clients and then having to make the decision to take children away from their home is challenging for Julie.

**Julie:** That is why I do the job. I like talking to people. I like hearing their stories; you know comparing similar needs, hearing about where they come from. I think that is why the hardest part is having to take children away because generally I have come to like who I have worked with. Or see things about them that I appreciate. Um and I know that most of my clients love their children as much as I love mine. So that is always hard to say "this is not working". When I have to be the one to say, you are not parenting to standard, or, um and we need to take your child from you. It is absolutely the hardest.

The injury here seems to be that when a relationship is built through understanding and empathy it is even more difficult emotionally for the social worker to move from a supportive to authoritative role. This then increases the dichotomy that inherently exists in child protection social work.

Tami speaks to this element of internal conflict that occurs within the intrinsic contradictions of the work, and sees being able to maintain a balance between these areas as central in the ability to survive in this profession.

**Tami:** I think it's basically because, with child protection work you are in a bowl of social control, which does contradict sometimes, your work in general. I think that is just the natural ebb and flow of what we do, is the whole judgment of us having to be the control agent. Saying that is just not acceptable, you know but yet the helper part of us says we should be able to help those people beyond there, yet at times you finally have to make a definitive position. So I think that is a struggle any protection worker has is um, in just dealing with our business, we always say that there is a real dichotomy in the work that we do, and people who can't balance that, usually have to leave, like they just cannot do social work practice, right.

Identities as social workers and identities as women or mothers are very different. Child protection social workers occupy a range of complex contradictory positions in interactions with clients. This is the nature of their job. Maternal social workers are left constantly reevaluating self in relationships, while attempting to balance feelings of ambivalence in their theoretical practices, community reactions, and daily relations with clients. They struggle to maintain a sense of self and are often not given the space or resources to help explore and understand the complexities of worker client relationships, including their own feelings of ambivalence (Featherstone, 1997; Finn, 1990 & Swift, 1995).

Feminisms in social work practice advocate for child protection social workers to explore their bias and location within mothering and motherhood, reevaluating these changes with new experiences (Krane & Davis, 2000 & Swift, 1995). Featherstone (1997) discusses the difficulty social workers have in balancing their 'duality of existence'; in that social workers must take on both an authoritative and supportive role with clients, which generally contradict each other. These contradictory roles create internal struggles for the maternal social workers in this study; it seems they must constantly evaluate their relationship with their clients, shifting the relationship of support to one of power and control. As Beth puts it, "as a worker you have to say *you must*".

***Black, white, or maybe gray: Limitations in understanding context and individuality in mothering experiences***

The dance continues when the client is seen to cross or tread on the line of a workers' morality or the boundaries regulated by the state. These lines are often discussed in terms of black and white, but in reality are more often shades of grey.

**Beth:** I mean I understand the frustration, um, or wanting to yell or scream obscenities at your kid. I mean I yell, but I don't yell nasties, like that is the line for me right, Like stop it!!! , but I would never say "shut up!! I believe at times my parenting skills are limited, but my line is very clear, you don't hit your kids, you don't scream nasties at your kids, that for me was very black and white with my parents. I can understand how some people can cross that line when they have extremely limited skills or they come from a place where it was probably ten times worse then what they're doing.

"Black and white" is a phrase frequently used to attend to context and life circumstance in the situations that client mothers are experiencing. Dawn

introduces this concept when relating the challenges of using risk assessment tools within such a complex field. She speaks to the difficulty incorporating context and attending to individuality within risk assessments.

**Dawn:** Yeah, because a lot of social work is grey and it's individual and it's case by case. Just because family A and family B scored both 10s, if that is the number. You handle them differently because of who they are and how willing they are to work, and what they are bringing to the puzzle and what supports they are bringing to the puzzle. You can't just do it as a black and white check list. It is grey, case by case, and individual.

The grey Dawn is referring to is the circumstance of the situation with the family. Her reflections on the use of risk assessment tools aligns with literature from Krane and Davis (1996) that current child protection practice standards do not leave room to address context or listening to the voices and stories of mothers. They see this reflected most dramatically within tools used to measure risk. It would seem though that within this grey area there is also a line that when crossed the shades become clearer to the worker. Tami also describes these shades as judgments, which are part of who we are, and therefore are unique to the individual worker. When Tami became a mother the black and white lines became clear. Her empathy for children rose.

**Tami:** Ok, well you know, it wasn't quite as black and white, but now, yeah there is some huge black and white lines to me around what is just not going to be acceptable for people to do to children I mean, not to be judgmental, but maybe we are at the end of the day made to be judgmental. I mean as much as we say we are not, we make some decisions based on what our opinions are or based on our judgment, these people are either coping or they are not coping, but at the end of the day it is still not justifying abuse or whatever they might choose to do to their children that made us involved to start with.

Both Tami and Beth describe a point or a line that is crossed by the mother or parent when circumstance does not matter in terms of interventions. This line may be different for each worker depending on their own life circumstance and judgments. Again, Featherstone (1997) advocates for awareness of one's own ideology and experience on mothering and motherhood to combat judgments through deeper understanding. The question then remains, when the line is crossed, whether moral or legal, does context still matter, does relationship and empathy still matter? I would argue that it does. That building a deeper relationship is integral to the continued work of establishing healthy family systems. The challenge that exists is the expectation of the worker to deal with the enormous burden of internal contradictions that are magnified due to lack of acknowledgement and understanding of the existence of this ambivalence within institutions, society and probably within the women themselves. This may add to burnout, depression, and stress, ultimately affecting the client with high turnover, switching of case workers, and the task of both client and worker having to build relationships again (Finn, 1990).

The women shared different ideas about what the concepts of a good mother and a bad mother meant to them. Placing the needs of one's child before one's own and the ideology of the sacrificial mother (Rubenstien, 1998) is a central theme in their discussion of what constitutes a good mother, alternatively not doing so generally defines a bad mother with important clarifications of mitigating factors. Beth's statement reflects a shared ideology of the participants.

**Beth:** Um, what is a good mom? (long pause) I think somebody who puts their children's needs before their own. And I think that sort of

encompasses everything, because no matter whether it is work, school, whatever it is, your child's needs have to become before your own. Yeah.

**Kim:** How about the concept of a bad mother?

**Beth:** A bad mother? That is a little more difficult. Um, (pauses) I don't know if there is a bad mother. Because I guess my belief is that if you aren't able to put your kid's needs before your own, then something else is going on for you. So to say then, that's a bad mother, I don't think it is fair, you may not be able to be a good mother, but it doesn't mean that you are a bad mother. At least that is what I think.

Kathy and Julie acknowledge that a good mother does not have to be a perfect mother, as they acknowledge that the "impossibility of motherhood" and societies' high expectations of mothers creates a sense of deviancy and guilt that can lead to isolation and internal unrest (Arendell, 2000; DiQuinzio, 1999; Hays, 1996; Thurer, 1994).

**Julie:** I get caught up in thinking a good mother has to be a perfect mother, doing everything right and not yelling at your kids and disciplining vs. punishment, but ultimately I truly believe that being a good mother is leaving my child with a sense of total security, that no matter what, I will be their mom and love them through anything, and they can feel secure in that and then giving them the confidence to try new experiences so they can grow as people. In different ways then maybe I have.

Kathy also believes that love and good intentions are fundamental to making a good mother.

**Kathy:** I think that good mothers do the best they can with what they have, with what they know at any given moment and good mothers try and put themselves in the shoes of their kids. I see good mothers lose their patience and good mothers may not always do the right things, but if you step back and look at it and conscientiously make a decision to do something different because the previous thing is not working, or you apologize when you are tired or cranky and it has nothing to do with them, um, that is fine. I mean nobody's perfect, you learn from your experiences and mistakes. So I think the world is full of great mothers, and it is just because they love their kids and want to do right by their kids.

When asked about a “bad” mother, the participants shared their discomforts with making such a statement because of the impact extenuating factors have that are often beyond the control of mothers themselves. After extensive experience in the field of child welfare, Kathy gives a revealing narrative of the factors and causes that can stand in the way of even good intentions.

**Kim:** How about the concept of a bad mother?

**Kathy:** I don't think there is any such thing, but only, I think, people do some lousy mothering and make some lousy decisions and don't always make their kids a priority, but, um, it is more about life circumstances and about lack of knowledge, lack of information, it is more about pressures of survival, more about drug or alcohol addiction, it is more about not having a brain that developed well enough to be touched and nurtured and know how to build relationships in the future. Um it is hard to place an expectation on an individual to do better mothering, often what we do for our job, when we don't even know what events, what trauma, what physiology or what biochemistry happened to that person and their brain um when we know that babies need touching from day one if they want to develop a healthy brain, to be able to develop and establish relationships, and ability to communicate, on a deeper level. How am I to expect them to know what I am talking about, when I ask them to really empathize and feel for their children, because they don't even know how to feel for themselves. Um so is it a bad mother? Oh, that would be a huge leap for me to make.

It would seem for these women defining a “good” mother involves idealized notions of essential or intensive mothering, keeping with dominant ideologies of mothering (Arendell, 2000; DiQuinzio, 1999; Hays, 1996; Thurer, 1994). A good mother makes sacrifices of self and puts the needs of her child before her own. But in contrast participants do not stay consistent with dominant ideologies of bad mothering. Instead they faithfully attend to context and a deeper understanding of a mother as a person. Again the challenge, or question remains, does this matter in terms of approach to practice? Tami provides her

insight into this issue. "At the end of the day it is still not justifying abuse or whatever they might choose to do to their children that made us involved to start with." At the end of the day how much change can child protection social workers make, within their practice, to respect the oppressions of dominant discourses and ideologies, when they are constrained within their own morality of self and the demands of institutions and organizational structures. Are we placing yet another burden and level of complexities on front line workers when we judge their actions without acknowledging the oppressive structures that bind their work, or the many levels of contradictions that exist for them across intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal domains?

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### ***A Summary of Research Questions***

This study set out to explore how mothering experiences impact child protection social workers conceptualizations of motherhood and how these changes influence their approach to practice with other client mothers. My findings present a beginning framework to these questions through the lived experiences of six women.

Through in depth interviews of six maternal social workers and analysis of these conversations using a feminist narrative methodology the findings to my research questions were complex, revealing both individual and collective experiences. All the women interviewed felt their conceptualizations of motherhood did change after becoming a mother, but these changes were unique to each woman. However they also share a common consciousness which reflects a deeper understanding of the complexities in mothering and practicing child protection work; an experience that in order to grasp and understand they suggest one may have to actually live it. With that said, these women reveal an appreciation of being given the opportunity to share their personal realities of both mothering and child protection work. Participants present parallels that exist between practicing child protection social work and the experience of becoming a mother. These include a lack of understanding within society, feeling they have no voice, unrealistic expectations and internal emotional dichotomies.

Feminist ideologies on mothering seek to unearth the myths dominant society invents regarding mothering in attempts to release mothers from the oppressions these myths create. The myths that feminists critique uncovered in this study include ideas of the 'natural' and 'idealized mother', intensive and sacrificial mothering, mother blame and maternal ambivalence. Within their experience of mothering and practicing child protection work the participants both accept and resist these myths in unique and individual ways depending on their childhood history, personality, supports available, the temperament of their child and the list could go on. It would seem the commonalities that exist for these mothers are in the contradictory emotions created for women by the staggering gap between dominant ideology and individual experience. It has been argued by feminists that difficulty trying to find a unitary approach within unique experiences creates barriers in challenging oppressive mothering ideologies. Becoming a mother creates a paradox in expectations for women within the societies and institutions that build barriers to the very expectations that they themselves create. Having different and unique experiences honored, rather than judged by others, particularly other women and mothers are vital to challenging these myths.

Practicing child protection work also influences a social worker's experience of mothering her own children. While exploring this impact was not one of my original research questions it is significant to the mothers in this study. The difficult nature of child protection work is magnified after becoming a mother. The participants share they feel a loss of innocence and hypersensitivity towards

risk and protectiveness of their own children. The women also share positive aspects that practicing child protection work brought into their families. These include increasing theoretical knowledge of raising children, a greater ability to communicate and instilling kindness and empathy in their own children.

The second research question guiding this study is: when conceptualizations of motherhood change after becoming a mother, how does this then influence the work maternal social workers do with client mothers? There are a number of ways that becoming a mother influences a worker's practice. Defining areas that are collective for all six women include the ability to enhance relationships through an increasing use of self and the sharing of collective experiences within worker client relationships. More credibility is also afforded to maternal social workers from client mothers.

Differences between maternal social workers occur in levels of understanding and empathy. Some mothers feel their ability to understand the experiences of client mothers' increases, while other mothers feel their ability to identify with client mothers decreases significantly after becoming a mother themselves. Both these perspectives also exist side by side, on different levels for mothers. Some women realize the need for support due to demands of mothering work; others recognize the normalcy of negative feelings toward children and understand the differences between manageable and unmanageable ambivalence often being tied to situation and circumstance. An appreciation for the context of a mother's individual situation is another area that seemed to change along with maternal status. Some participants feel their

empathy decreases toward client mothers due to a greater sensitivity toward the vulnerability of their own children. What is clear is that becoming a mother changes ideologies towards the practice of these women, in very different ways depending on maternal social workers own experience of mothering and motherhood. The next question then seems to be, do these changes in ideology create shifts in actual practice?

Maternal social workers in this study discuss two opposing sides to their work, the supportive role and the authoritative role. The dichotomy that exists in these roles, as well as the stress and complexities it causes for child protection social workers is immense and is increasingly becoming recognized as such. Women in this study feel that being a mother helps balance the power differentials inherent in their work which in turn improves relationships with clients through increasing empathy and understanding. It is when child protection workers need to execute policies and mandates over client mothers that their role as a control agent increases in intensity and the influence of their collective shared experience in mothering no longer seems valid. I guess I wonder if the beneficial relationship created within a common consciousness of mothering initially might create an environment where outcome levels for positive change with the client occur in the supportive phase lessening the need to move to authoritative phase. In other words, positive worker client relationships may enhance the client's ability to meet risk assessment guided goals decreasing the potential of child removal or family supervision court orders.

The internal conflicts and emotions that a child protection worker experiences, in the paradoxical nature of her work, has the potential to be magnified when she becomes a mother. Not only must she wade through an array of already conflicting practice messages in the work she does as a social worker (being both a helper and a bureaucrat); but now she also has to define and understand her complex identity as a mother within a patriarchal society. Becoming a mother adds another level of dichotomy to an already contradictory profession.

### ***Implications for Education, Policy and Practice***

The findings of this study have a number of social work education, policy and practice implications. Mothering, as an issue, is largely ignored, devalued and poorly understood within personal, social, political and economic domains. Social work education needs to acknowledge this gap and infuse mothering and motherhood issues into already existing courses and curricula, particularly in child welfare education. There is need to create a specific course centering on feminist ideologies and honoring the realities of mothering while offering students the opportunity to critically examine expert and dominant discourses in understanding the oppressions of mothers. This education needs to support students in recognizing their own bias as along with an understanding of their mothering experiences as well as the barriers that race, class and culture play for both clients and social workers. So often, it is new social work graduates that start their careers in the child welfare system. This study reveals that becoming a

mother increases a child protection social workers skill level to some degree, by understanding the opposing realities and myths of dominant social constructions through their own experiences. Revealing oppressions of dominant constructions on mothering through social work education may influence the degree which the act of becoming a mother increases social worker skill.

Featherstone (1999) advocates for social workers to be aware of their own emotions and experiences of motherhood, touching on similarities and shared identities, as well as, feelings of negativity and ambivalence associated with the 'unacceptable side' to mothering. Finn (1990) suggests that the more supervisors and management are open to hearing a range of experiences from front line social workers the more these front line workers will be open to hearing a range of experiences from their clients. Revealed through this study are the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes occurring internally, within worker client relationships and through larger societal messages that create ongoing emotional struggles within social workers who are mothers. Social workers that are psychologically aware of their own experiences are better able to offer appropriate help to their clients. Increased time needs to be given to the emotional side of child protection work. Child protection social workers need to be more supported in addressing the internal complexities of the work they do, this support needs to be extended to an understanding of the effects becoming a mother has on self, family and practice. As front line supervisors are often the first line of support for child protection workers they should be trained in these complexities and given the tools to provide therapeutic support to workers. Their

goals should be to aid in an understanding of manageable and unmanageable ambivalence, increasing practice and intervention options with clients and bringing down barriers of understanding, even with non maternal social workers. Upper management and policy makers need to ensure that the space and time required to provide and process this emotional work is granted (or even required) and built naturally into the work day.

Child protection social workers are noted to be overworked, under appreciated and rarely supported, both within their caseloads and emotionally (Featherstone, 1997; Finn, 1990). Besides the vicarious trauma they are exposed to within the nature of their job they are also struggling internally to deal with the inherent dichotomies of their work. Self care for social workers is consistently put on the back burner; time for emotional work needs to be made a priority to avoid increasingly high staff burnout and turnover (Featherstone, 1997; Finn, 1990; Krane & Davis, 1996). Upper management must also be mindful that in increasing the need for supervisors to provide support they will also require their own support and space to learn and process their own internal complexities in relation to what the workers present to them.

Isolation, complexity and ambivalence are themes that run throughout this study. Practicing child protection social work is a profession that requires workers to play many roles within their job, struggle with many identities of self and have many different relationships with clients. They must be investigator, supporter, teacher and judge. They must focus on the best interest of children, knowing the best interest of the mother is inherently entangled. They are bound by

confidentiality and accountable to all levels of society. It is rare that they receive acknowledgement in any aspects of the work they do. The complexities of their job are so great they feel only understood and supported by others within their field. There are strong arguments made in this research that one has to live the experience of both mothering and practicing child protection work to truly understand it. This is a powerful comment to make. I personally do not feel it means that only mothers can help other mothers or that only those who have done front line work can make practice and policy decisions. But I do think these findings are significant in understanding the value and acknowledging the strength of these experiences and being humbled when one does not share them. This approach would bring down barriers in relationships and honor differences, opening up new lines of communication.

All areas of child protection practice and policy need to understand and consider feminist ideologies on mothering. Child welfare policies need to reflect realities of mothers experiences rather than the dominant myths created by the social construction of motherhood. Feminist informed policies would acknowledge the oppressions of mothers through an understanding of the realities and ideologies of natural mothering, intensive mothering, mother blame and mothering ambivalence as well as the impact social and economic barriers have on any mother's best effort. Giving front line workers the opportunity and resources to influence and support client mothers in their social and economic conditions would address the ongoing oppressions women, particularly minority and single mothers face, and would acknowledge a deeper understanding of

mother blame through a feminist lens. Assessing risk with mothers should be understood as a complex process rather than a black and white process based on a simple risk assessment tool that does not take into account the context of a mother's situation or experience. Krane & Davis (2000) offer a good suggestion in leaving room to hear voices of mothers within risk assessment tools by creating space to incorporate a mothering narrative.

This exploratory research offers some beginning insights into social workers' experiences of practicing child protection social work after becoming mothers. Research in this area could be expanded to include experiences of maternal social workers with more diverse backgrounds including minority mothers and mothers practicing social work in urban areas. Priority should also be given to further qualitative feminist research on the lived experiences of client mothers and their interactions with child protection workers and child welfare policies. This research should attend to hearing the voices of client mothers and examining their experiences across social, political, cultural, structural and economic domains. Creating a secure safe environment that insists on emotional safety for client mothers will be important. Perhaps using focus groups as a method of data collection would, despite its limits in confidentiality, have the potential to empower women through shared emotions and struggles.

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**Appendix I****(on institutional letterhead)****Consent to Participate**

**Research Project Title:** Becoming a Mother and Practicing Child Protection  
Social Work: A Feminist Perspective on the Changing Conceptualizations  
of Motherhood

**Researcher:** Kim McKee, BSW, MSW(candidate)

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The purpose of this study is to explore individual experiences of becoming a mother and practicing child protection social work. This exploration will take place through the use of in depth interviews with social workers that have become mothers. Upon completion of my interviews and data analysis my findings will be written as part of my social work master's thesis.

This interview will be audio taped with a hand held recorder and will require one meeting time, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. I personally will complete the transcription of the interview; the audiotapes and written transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, to which I maintain sole access. Upon completion of my research these audiotapes will be destroyed through

disassembly and the transcripts through a document shredder. Any identifying information, i.e. name, workplace will be changed when the final discussion of findings section is completed. I would also like to contact you at this time to receive any feedback, inaccuracies or criticisms to my findings. If you do not want to be contacted for this purpose please inform me at some point during this interview or contact me at a later date.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions throughout the interview or to stop the interview process at any time. Please feel free to contact me following the interview if you have any further comments, or just would like to discuss the study. In the event that our interview brings out difficult emotions or feelings afterward please call me so we may discuss this as I may be able to offer you some support and referral options.

The information you provide within this interview will be kept confidential and identifying information changed. It is important to mention the limits to confidentiality. Legally I must report any information of a child being abused or neglected or risk of someone hurting themselves or others. Of course, given the nature of your work, I am referring to unreported incidences of abuse or neglect.

The expected benefit of this research is to understand more about motherhood. Specifically, I am hoping to understand more about how women's actual experiences of mothering match or differ from the ideals of motherhood that are in wide circulation, particularly as they are played out in child protection work undertaken by women who are mothers themselves.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher or institution involved their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. To do so please contact myself, Kim McKee at (780) 968-8781 or my faculty advisor, Dr. Heather Fraser, Assistant Professor with the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba at (204) 474-7348.

The Psychology/ Sociology/ Social Work Research Ethics Board have approved this research. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at (204) 474-7122, or e-mail

A copy

of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Please answer the following questions to advise me of your preference:

A) I wish to be contacted in order to provide feedback, inaccuracies or criticisms to the research findings. \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no

B) I would like to receive a final summary of the research findings. \_\_\_yes \_\_\_no

If you answered yes to either A or B please provide an email or mailing address  
in which I may contact you.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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Participant's Signature

Date

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Researcher's Signature

Date

## **Appendix II**

### **Interview Guide**

Identified below are possible ideas for questions and probes used within the interview. Reflections, paraphrases and summaries will be used in an attempt to make the interview more conversational. This also means that priority and emphasis will be given to co-constructing questions and narratives guided by the interview participant.

#### ***Mothering***

- What do you enjoy most about mothering?
- What do you enjoy least? What do you find most difficult?
- Have you had any guides or instructions about how you should mother? If so, what were they about? Where did they come from?
- Have you had any contradictory advice about being a mother? If so, what was it? How did make sense of the contradictions?
- Do you mother very differently to your own mother? If so, can you talk about some of the differences? If not, what have you tried to do similarly?
- Has caring for your child/infant been different than you thought it would be? If so, how?
- What does the concept of a “good mother” mean to you?
- What about the concept of a “bad mother”? Can you give me some examples?

### ***Child Protection Social Work***

- What are the most difficult aspects of your job when it comes to working with mothers?
- Are there particular parts of the work that you enjoy when you work with mothers?
- Is your job different since you have become a mother? If so, how?
- Why have you chosen social work as a career? Why have you chosen child protection social work?
- Do you use 'risk assessments'? If so, can you give me an example of a time that you did? Did any dilemmas arise? How did you manage them?
- Have you discussed or empathized with similar struggles in parenting with clients that are mothers?

### ***Possible Probes***

To adopt an informal, conversational style interview I will use various probes to encourage sharing of experiences and emotions.

For example:

- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "What was that like for you?"
- "When did that happen?"
- "How did you feel about that?"

### ***End of Interview***

- "Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish?"

- “How did you experience our interview?”
- “Are you feeling okay?”