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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD: IMPLICATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

BY

LORI WALLS

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CAMPUS ALBERTA APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY:
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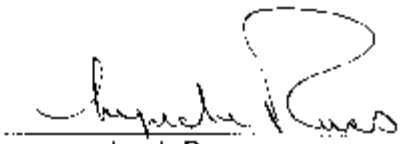

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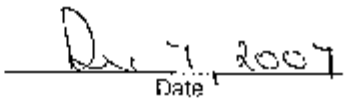

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Gina Wong-Wylie
Project Supervisor

November 29, 2007
Date

ABSTRACT

This project was an exploration of the social construction of motherhood with the goal of creating an information pamphlet which would serve to educate women on the influence that socially constructed motherhood ideals may have on women's health and identity. The project was undertaken using post-modern, social construction, and feminist theoretical foundations. An historical overview of the definition of motherhood was provided. The historical overview was followed by an examination of identity development and the relationship that identity has to the defining of motherhood. Health implications were identified and discussed. The project concludes by outlining intervention suggestions for counselling professionals. The information contained in this project resulted in the production of an information pamphlet for women, as well as a supplemental insert regarding counselling strategies to assist counselling professionals working with women.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Adrienne Rich (1976) wrote "all human life on the planet is born of woman" (p. 11). The simplicity of this statement would lead one to believe that the task of mothering which follows birth would unfold with a similar simplicity. However, researchers have indicated that the social construction of motherhood, as commonly understood in North American culture, has been fraught with a tumultuous history and it is fair to assume a tumultuous future will continue to follow at least in the near-term. The role definition of motherhood in North America has passed from patriarchal systems for much of history through to the rise of feminism where attempts are being made to reduce and eliminate ideas of ownership and imbalances of power. Kirkley (2000) has suggested that although women's organizations and feminist theorists have established women's right to participate in defining motherhood these advances have not simplified the process. Instead, what has resulted is a polarization of theories pointing to biology as either oppressive or liberating with variants of feminist ideology spread across a continuum in between those two points of view.

Mothering can be a difficult journey to navigate and this process of navigation can have devastating effects on women's psychological and physical health. Allan (2004) posited that a mother's role is perhaps "woman's most enduring role in the Western world" (p. 57) and that because the definition and resulting expectations are constructed and reconstructed with each rising and then fading political, social, and cultural wave women often opt to experience the difficult aspects of motherhood in isolation rather than risking the consequences of having publicly failed in their role as mothers.

The implications which have resulted from these social constructions have had direct results on the identity development of women in their roles as mothers. Although a significant amount of literature exists which addresses this topic, it has only recently been acknowledged that women's identity development is different from that of men. Resulting from this acknowledgement Greene (2005) suggested that it is essential that a new perspective on the identity development of women be recognized in a framework which acknowledges and emphasizes the temporality, emergence, and human agency which are intricately woven into the lives of women.

Importance of the Project

Over the years, motherhood has been a focus of media campaigns, political legislation, institutional policy, targeted for commercial gain, and of central importance to the maintenance and creation of culture in general. Concepts of motherhood have been extensively debated among academics and widely written about by mother's themselves; however, seldom has motherhood been discussed in relation to the impact that a women's identity as a mother has on her physical and psychological health. Given that the current discourse on motherhood is promoting an increasingly intensive and competitive view of child rearing it is more important than ever to examine how the social construction of motherhood has contributed to a woman's illusion of choice, inability to seek support without social retribution, and how social construction had first created and since perpetuated the myth of the idealized mother. In the past, counselling interventions related to motherhood have mainly focused on either the biological etiology of a mother's deteriorating health such as focusing on perceived hormonal difficulties, or negated health issues on the grounds that psychological or physical concerns were related to inherent vulnerabilities such as the belief that women were naturally more emotional than men

and therefore psychologically and physically more frail. Such views resulted in intervention strategies that focused on compensating for a woman's weaknesses in order to minimize the impact on her children. It is important to shift the focus from deficit intervention styles to strategies that promote the empowerment of women, denounces rhetoric which promotes the idea of inherent weakness, and focuses on supporting women as individuals beyond and in addition to their roles as mothers.

Purpose of the Project

My own experience as a mother began at the age of seventeen with the birth of my son. The journey which followed involved various incarnations of the motherhood role including single parent mothering, stay at home mothering, working mothering, shared parenting, step-parenting, and parenting while pursuing academic endeavours, among others. My current involvement in the mothering role is as a mother of children who are living independently as well as being in a supporting role as a counsellor of women often dealing with mothering issues. It was my personal experiences of motherhood combined with my role as a counsellor that sparked my interest in this project topic. When I began exploring ways to better understand my own experience, I began with an examination of how the role of motherhood had changed over time. In addition to my findings, I was surprised to discover that motherhood had rarely been discussed with respect to changes in identity development and subsequent feelings of loss and grief. It was the culmination of these factors which led me to believe in the need for a more in depth examination of the topic of the social construction of motherhood.

The purpose of this project is to first trace the history of the role of motherhood, beginning with a brief discussion of the concept of motherhood in pre-industrialized North American society, then focusing on the major influences on the role definition of motherhood in

the following four decades, in order to understand how the concept has evolved, been maintained, and is currently applied to women who are mothers. This knowledge is gleaned to ascertain the role definition of motherhood in our culture and how it affects formation of women's identities and the impact those roles have on influencing a woman's physiological and psychological health. Ultimately, the rationale for creating a greater understanding of the importance of the social construction of motherhood is to equip women with the tools and information needed to reframe their motherhood experiences and to foster increased confidence in initiating discussions within the social categories in which women's lives are centered. In addition, a greater understanding of the importance of the social construction of motherhood could assist in guiding women through a process of taking back control of how mothering occurs and the concept of motherhood is defined. Lastly, the project is intended to assist counselling professionals in achieving a greater understanding of techniques which could serve to create a safe space for women where all of the facets of motherhood can be explored, myths can be debunked, and identity can be examined from a more holistic perspective including loss, grief, and the reframing of identity roles.

Definition of Terms

In this project the terms and phrases *social construction, role definitions, mothering, motherhood*, *post-modern theories,* terms used to reference *feminism,* and *identity* are central to the body of this work and as such require definition. For the purpose of this project the term *social construction* will refer to ideological constructs which have been established, adopted, and institutionalized by participants in Western culture who act together within a social framework following a set of conventional rules and behaving as if the rules have been agreed upon and are immutable (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The phrase *role definitions* will be used as a means of

addressing the socially constructed rules applied to the duties of motherhood. The term *motherhood* will be used in reference to the institutionalization of this term which historically has been constructed in systems dominated by patriarchal perspectives and therefore carries an oppressive connotation. The term *mothering* will refer to the agency of women in their role as mothers and is therefore regarded as having the potential for empowerment (O'Reilly, 2006).

The terms *feminist, feminism,* and *feminist theories* will be used in the singular, however, the use of the singular is not intended to imply a singular unified perspective but rather a "process of understanding that is premised on historical specificity and on the simultaneous, if often contradictory, presence of those differences in each of its instances and practices" (de Lauretis, 1990, p. 116). The terms *identity* and *identity development* will be used in reference to how an individual identifies various parts of the self structure and the process of creating meaning for such structures. For the purpose of this project it will be assumed that *meaning* and thus *identity* are the result of how meaning attributed by the individual is attached to the roles in which an individual may engage (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Structure of the Project

Within this project, I attempt to bring increased understanding to the effects that a socially constructed idealized view of motherhood has had on the identity development of women. In Chapter I, I introduce the topic, delineate the rationale and relevance for such a focus, and provide the structure for conceptualizing the subject matter. In Chapter II, I discuss theoretical foundations and present a literature review within Chapter III focused on the social construction of motherhood from a historical perspective with particular concentration on the period beginning with the 1950s up to the present. Included in this review is an investigation of the identity development of women in their roles as mothers from a feminist post-modernist

perspective. Results of the investigation on identity are then related to the implications that the social construction of motherhood has had on women with particular emphasis on the mental and physiological health of mothers. I conclude the literature review with a discussion regarding intervention strategies for counselling professionals who work with women experiencing difficulties in their roles as mothers.

The findings discussed in this paper are then outlined in a pamphlet (Appendix A) which utilizes a practical and functional format intended to be accessible to women and available in counselling agencies, healthcare facilities, or other organizations commonly accessed by women seeking support. A supplement to the pamphlet (Appendix B) is included as a brief directive to counselling professionals regarding counselling strategies which may prove effective when working with women in respect of motherhood related issues.

Procedures

The procedures forming the development of the literature review followed the suggestions outlined by Mertens (1998). A comprehensive search of both qualitative and quantitative research data was conducted using databases such as PsychInfo, Academic Search Premier, Journals@Ovid, PsychLit, and Francis. Search terminology included *motherhood, mothering, social construction, mother identity, mother blaming*, and *history/motherhood*. A review of postmodern and developmental theories was also conducted using the additional databases of Medline, MDconsult, Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Collection, Blackwell/Synergy, and Embase. Terminology for this search included *feminist developmental theory, narrative theory, hermeneutics, postmodern developmental theory, self-in-relation theory, identity development,* and *women and identity.* Texts on the topics of motherhood, postmodern theory, identity development, and counselling interventions were also examined and

reviewed. Texts were located and accessed through the Alberta Public Libraries inter- provincial loans system as well as purchased using amazon.com.

Information was drawn from a cross-section of academic disciplines and examined for relevance, content, and quality of research conclusions. The organization of literature was established using a time frame focused primarily on the past thirty years and then further sorted by decade and relevant themes within each decade. Once the literature review results were critically analyzed and a draft of the project was composed, the final step involved the creation of a pamphlet designed to summarize and highlight the most relevant aspects of the project. The pamphlet is six panels in length and outlines the most significant aspects of the social construction of motherhood and the implications which have resulted. Additionally, the pamphlet aims to offer women and counselling professionals' ideas and intervention strategies to address negative effects which can occur as a result of women's striving towards socially idealized conceptions of motherhood.

CHAPTER II

Theoretical Foundations

Post-modern Theory

The theoretical foundations that have informed this project are primarily based on *post-modern theories* and the counselling therapies which have resulted from post-modern ideology. Post-modern theories and their commensurate counselling interventions share an understanding that "beliefs, laws, social customs, habits of dress and diet – all the things that make up the psychological fabric of reality arise through interaction over time" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 23). Post-modern theories place emphasis on the social construction and indeterminacy of meaning and language which forms those meanings. Post-modern counselling interventions share this focus and aim to assist clients to construct new meanings by rescripting the stories of clients' lives (Faiver, Eisengart, & Colonna, 2004). and Rowland (1997) contended that post-modern theory is difficult to define because it is derived from the Latin meaning "after just now". Consequently, if taken in the strictly temporal sense everything that is happening at any given time can be referred to as "post": however, in the case of post-modernism a primary tenet is that the theory is a reaction to and rejection of theories of 19th and 20th century modernism. Outside of any attempt at a literal translation of post-modernism, the term is commonly used to reference a group of theories which are concerned with understanding how individuals come to believe they know the things they do.

Understanding how knowledge is accumulated and interpreted is viewed in post-modern theories by examining individual perceptions of reality and how those perceptions interact in reciprocal relationships with environmental, social, and linguistic influences given that a basic tenet of post-modern theory holds that beliefs and values are not formed in isolation. An example

of this concept is explained by Derrida who posited in reference to the concept of presence that "the status of any knowledge that we claim as true is true because of the process we have used to come to know it" (as cited in Mathers & Rowland, 1997, p. 178). The concept of difference is also central to understanding the position of post-modern theorists. Since post-modern theories hold the belief that what is true is based on each individual's perception, then part of the process of how that knowledge was formed is based on forming comparisons of what that knowledge is not. Mathers and Rowland (1997) asserted that an individual's reality is formed by examining its difference from other things rather than by examining its essence.

The concept of difference reveals the complexity of language and acquisition of knowledge which is recognized by post-modern ideology. Post-modern theory points out that truth, reality, and perception are intrinsically tied to complex understandings created in cultural communities. The more one tries to define truth the more elusive the concept becomes. Mathers and Roland stated that "a description of reality, therefore, is only ever a changing approximation" (p. 178). Based on these understandings, post-modern theory, as the term is used in this paper, can be summarized as a theory of concepts believed to be uncertain, multifaceted descriptions of individual perceptions based on comparisons of difference.

Although specific counselling interventions have come to be labeled as post-modern or social constructivist strategies, McNamee (2004) suggested that the process of categorizing therapies detracts from the essence of what post-modern ideology represents. If language creates the worlds in which individuals reside, then therapy is a dialogue about those worlds regardless of the use of labels such as behaviourist, humanist, and so forth. From this perspective, no one reality is believed to be more true than the other thereby eliminating power differentials and freeing both the therapist and the client allowing each to openly discuss differences and

similarities. Post-modern perspectives understand that the co-construction of meaning does not necessarily imply agreement, but rather works to maintain the potential of a fulfilling dialogue. McNamee referred to this approach to dialogue as substantiated by the intention of coordination rather than co-optation.

The interventions section of this project is not intended to identify specific therapeutic strategies in the conventional sense of utilizing what are commonly noted as post-modern therapies such as narrative or solution-focused techniques. The interventions are discussed with the intention of applying the central tenets of post-modern ideology to existing understandings and skills of counselling professionals for the purpose of providing an alternate method of engagement with women in an attempt to create an ongoing dialogue where difference can be examined, appreciated, and rescripted for the purpose of improving women's health.

Social Construction Theory

Social construction theory may be best understood as an intricate part of post-modern ideology. Social construction is the theory that all knowledge, thought, facts, texts and selves are constructs which are created in linguistic communities and are maintained and serve to define those communities (Bruffee, 1986). Social construction as a theory challenges individuals to step outside of traditional notions of objective truths and universal knowledge and develop what Geertz referred to as "critical consciousness" (as cited in Bruffee, 1986, p. 774). Critical consciousness invites individual's to recognize that the knowledge which an individual has come to know as isolated, internal, and objective is merely a creation of social participation and therefore represents a multitude of understandings which were and remain public representations of what is more commonly believed to be individual knowledge and identity.

Bruffee (1986) noted that traditional perspectives tend to view identity as the result of an individual forming internal representations of an outer reality which come to be understood as thoughts and knowledge. This interpretation supports the belief that reality holds objective truths which are then personalized to form an isolated and independent identity. The theory of social construction posits that since knowledge is generated in groups, identity is a reflection of the social categories in which individuals participate. Goffman (1959) suggested that what we think of as our individual self is a construction of community generated and maintained beliefs and values which reflect the context and time in which the process of dominant social agreement occurs.

From the view point of social construction, constructs such as motherhood are assumed to be as the result of a process of typification that occurs through the passing on of beliefs and values from the social categories that define an individual's life. These typifications of perceptions tend to be thought of as truths without consideration of the potential for other possibilities and thus become institutionalized beliefs. Freedman and Combs (1996) suggested that once a construct is institutionalized a process of legitimization occurs resulting in the maintenance and perpetuation of the understanding of the institutionalized dominant social construct truth. Problems arise when constructs contain unobtainable idealizations, such as in the construct of motherhood, and "we forget that it is a useful social construction and begin to treat it as part of some external, preexistent reality" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 25) to the exclusion of other possibilities.

Feminist Theories

Feminist theories exist in response to the recognition by women of the need to make visible various social, political, economic, and theoretical discourses which have been dominated

by patriarchal institutionalized ideologies resulting in the oppression of women (Harding, 1986). Feminist theories traverse many ideological genres each attempting to affect change in respect of the various views of what constitute the barriers to equality in gender relations and what is required for change. Notwithstanding differing ideological views of reasons for conditions of inequality, the main focus of feminist theories at large remains gender politics, power relations, and sexuality.

Cott (1987) made a distinction between the roots of feminism in Western culture and more modern conceptions of feminism. Cott claimed that obtaining voting rights in order to be viewed as a person was initially the singular focus of the feminist movement. Later versions of the movement, and resulting theory, were more concerned with issues related to social differentiation, individuality, and diversity. As the focus of the movement expanded to tackle other issues, discrepancy on how best to interpret and deconstruct these issues arose and different ideological branches of feminism were born. Regardless of the ideological basis of feminism that a woman subscribes to, what remains constant is the belief that women have been relegated to various roles and obligations within society which have reinforced power differentials which have reinforced and maintained the oppression of women.

Hawkesworth (1989) suggested that since feminist ideology in general has a history of challenging the rejection of the experiences of women as different from men as well as unique from other women, post-modern and social construction theories were a welcomed addition to feminist ideas. Post-modern feminists embrace the idea of identities which are constructed in linguistic communities since this supports the feminist principle of the personal as political. Post-modern ideology emphasizes the external influences in identity formation and assumes multiple perceptions while denouncing objective truths. Social construction and post-modern theory

provide a framework in which institutionalized discourses can be examined and new co-created and equitable discourses can evolve with the intended result being the return of agency to women's involvement in creating meanings that more adequately reflect women's experiences.

Identity Theory

Identity theory can be traced back to structural symbolic interactionism. Identity theorists sought to explain how social structures affect the self and how those effects on the self were then demonstrated in social behaviours. Current thinking in identity theory moves beyond this perspective to assert that society is composed of large social structures or institutions with imbedded smaller social categories within which people live their lives. Within these smaller social categories there are a series of interactions which form relationships between communities, organizations, and individuals that "intersect by crosscutting boundaries of class, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, and other variables" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). The larger institutional structures ultimately act as boundaries which are prohibitive to most individuals functioning in the smaller social categories. These institutional boundaries serve to relegate individuals to categories having less agency which may result in fewer identities.

Individuals with likeminded interests and beliefs typically find themselves in social categories with other individuals who hold similar viewpoints. Within these social categories exists behavioural expectations that symbolize roles. When an individual acquires a role or multiple roles they are said to have developed an identity or multiple identities. Thoits (1983) maintained that "identities are claimed and sustained in reciprocal role relationships" (p. 175). Identity theory posits the notion that social roles give purpose, meaning, and direction to one's life. As a result, the more roles an individual has the greater the number of self identities, and the greater the protection against loss of any one role. Additionally, Thoits claimed that identities are

arranged hierarchically by the significance an individual places on a specific role. However, it is important to note that significance of a role is not necessarily related to the amount of time spent participating in that role. Identity theory is central to this project as a means of highlighting how the role of motherhood informs women's identities and the implications that certain identity formations may have on women's health.

CHAPTER III

Literature Review

Historical Overview of Motherhood

Pre-industrialization and Beyond

Tardy (2000) wrote "we are not operating as our true selves, as women, but as socially constructed selves, as mothers" (p. 433). It is difficult to appreciate the implications of Tardy's words without an understanding of the evolution of the role of mothering in North American society. Unlike the 21st century debates involving issues of intense mothering, stay at home mothers versus working mothers, and the controversy which surrounds making the choice to become a mother, pre-industrialized agrarian North American society had very different concerns. During agrarian times the home was viewed not as a place of refuge but as an enclave within the larger world which required laborious and perpetual work. It was a place where women, children, and men carried out the duties of living, and home life was not separate from aspects of a more communal society. Additionally, homes were not viewed as the domain of women, but rather the central place of families and communities at large. In the period immediately proceeding industrialization the concept of childhood was not considered a specific developmental stage requiring specialized nurturing from either parent as is the case today; rather children shared responsibility for maintaining the home as well as shouldering many of the same burdens as adults.

By 1792 a shift occurred as evidenced by the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In this publication, Wollstonecraft advocated that children were delicate sinless beings that deserved their mother's sole attention. Additionally, Wollstonecraft suggested that women needed to take on a more revered status within society. In order to raise women's social status Wollstonecraft believed that women would need to put more

energy into being wives and mothers. As Wollstonecraft's vision of the raising of the social status of women began to take shape, technological advancements were also ensuing in the home. These advancements freed women from many time consuming domestic tasks and enabled them to spend more time with their children. Mothers thereby shifted their attention from housework to mothering practices.

By the 1900s child birth and motherhood became a more celebrated experience. In regard to the increase in status and shift in ideology, Tardy (2000) noted that the concept of motherhood during this period was responsible for elevating women to a place of honour as opposed to the previously held perception of women as a burden which predominated prior to 1900.

Summer (2000) claimed that between the two wars (1914-1945) women had accepted their emerging primary role definitions as housewives and mothers. This came with increased social status attributed in part to first wave feminists (as cited in Johnson & Ferguson, 1990). Friedan (1963) in her book *The Feminine Mystique* claimed that the image of women in popular culture during this period portrayed women as independent, courageous, and determined. Women were depicted as having fulfilling and well rounded lives with identities separate from their husbands and separate from the duties of motherhood. With the onset of World War II (WWII) women who were not already in the workforce were called upon to replace men in the workplace when men were sent off to war. When the Second World War was over getting women back into the home became an issue as many of the women who had gone to work enjoyed the experience of work and the autonomy of earning money.

After WWII the image of the independently fulfilled women was usurped with political and social pressure to have women return to the home and put their focus on the raising of children and tending to husbands. Riley (1983) noted that during this immediate post-war period

legislated attempts in North America were made to have the concept of the working mother erased from public discourse by placing an emphasis on the value of the work that women performed in the home, and by media images representing the woman worker as childless and miserable (as cited in Bailey, 1983). Additional legislative attempts were pursued by having Bowlby, a psychoanalyst, commissioned by the World Health Organization to study the mental health aspects of a perceived lack of maternal contact on the orphaned and homeless children that had resulted from the war (Tardy, 2000). As a psychoanalyst, Bowlby focused on the effects of children suffering from lack of attachment to primary caregivers and opinioned that without a mother's love there could be devastating consequences for children. By 1953 political bodies were using Bowlby's findings to drive women out of the work force and back into their homes.

During the period of 1950 to 1956 forty six percent of United States citizens had relocated to the suburbs with Canada experiencing a similar trend (Tardy, 2000). This period saw the most rapid movement of families from urban city dwelling to suburban neighborhoods than any other period in history. However, with the rise of suburban neighborhoods and technological advancement came increased isolation of the nuclear family. Furthermore, rather than technology simplifying the lives of women, expectations of cleanliness increased as did the size of homes. Women were expected to carry out more of the household work, including mothering practices, without the help of extended families and in less time. The suburban lifestyle became associated with the idealized conception of perfect homes, perfect marriages, and perfect children all of which were created and maintained by the perfect mother. Mass media and cultural images reinforced these constructions and added to the work of mothering. Women, often unaware of these socially constructed idealizations, set their sights on raising children that would conform to and perpetuate these myths.

The consequences of these idealized pursuits resulted in the merging of what it means to be a woman with being a mother. A conception of womanhood that was synonymous with motherhood left women who could not have children, who did not want to have children, who went to work, and who could not identify with the cultural myth of the natural instincts of mothering, to suffer in isolation with feelings of failure and inadequacy. Adding to this suffering was the idea that children's successes and failures were directly attributed to how well a woman mothered her children, which ended up being the socially defined measure of women's worth as human beings (Wong-Wylie, Bordua, & Sandhurst, 2007).

1960 - 1980

In the 1960s the advent of birth control altered the question of "when will I be a mother" to "will I be a mother?" This question served to divide women and the women's movement through the polarization of theories pointing to biology as either oppressive or liberating with variants of feminist ideology spread across a continuum in between those two points of view. Moreover, those women who were already mothers faced internal struggles regarding how best to live up to the ideals of motherhood: working women were faced with having to justify following their own pursuits over the needs of their children: and stay-at-home mothers often wrestled with putting their dreams aside in order to serve their family's needs over their own. Hays (1996) referred to this debate as the "mommy wars". The mommy wars highlighted cultural expectations which appeared to dictate that women needed to be productive working members of society while meeting the needs of their children. This resulted in women adopting one side of the debate or the other with each side advocating their position as a better representation of good mothering. Hays noted that both stay-at-home mothers and working mothers used the justification that they

were doing what was in the best interests of their children as a means of rationalizing their actions rather than rising up against "the good mother ideal".

Regardless of whether a woman worked outside the home or stayed at home with the children, both groups of women adopted the ideological notion that mothering was a natural or instinctual aspect of being a woman. Friday (1977) suggested that subscribing to the notion of motherhood as biologically instinctual placed women in an untenable position and Rich (1976) spoke of the unexamined assumption of natural motherhood when she stated:

> A natural mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is and should be, quite literally selfless. (p. 22)

This confusion over mothering as a biological part of a women's identity and role definition had real consequences for women. From the perspective of motherhood as natural or instinctual, if a mother is seen as failing, if her children become ill, if her children's behaviour is outside of societal expectations, or if nature had not properly equipped her for her role as a mother, then not only does she hold herself responsible, others hold her responsible. Additionally, when motherhood is viewed as natural or instinctual success and failure in that role are tied to biological shortcomings which leave a mother believing she is powerless to change (Tardy, 2000).

In 1973, in the landmark decision of *Roe v. Wade,* women were given the right to choose abortion (Tardy, 2000). Finally, the words written by Simone de Beauvoir in 1952 had come to fruition where she stated that "the relation between parent and offspring, like that between husband and wife, ought to be freely willed" (in Cassidy, 2006, p. 41). However, this victory was

short lived as elements of society and political bodies actively undermined this legal victory. Religious ideology backed by legal and political authorities mounted a campaign against mothering as an option offering tax benefits and enacting laws with the purpose of encouraging women to have children. Governments also restricted funding to programs which offered sexual options other than abstinence, as well as using mass media and other cultural messages to further promote the image of the ideal mother.

Political, religious, and social institutions had seemingly mastered the art of undermining women who were largely unaware that motherhood was being used as a tool with which to manipulate women. Women were encouraged to believe that motherhood was a choice while the real option of choice provided by birth control and abortion rights were usurped by powerful social constructions of motherhood portrayed as the ultimate path to true femininity, purpose, and the only responsible option for those women who were interested in furthering the stability and growth of successful communities. However, these messages were not aimed at all women. Those women who did not fit the white middle-class model or norm were encouraged to make use of birth control, abortion, or abstinence. These women were not seen as appropriate role models for the image of the idealized mother (Cassidy, 2006).

Moreover, pulled between the dominant discourse of the good mother as the stay-at-home mother, as opposed to seeking personal fulfillment through work or academic achievement, many women suffered mental, physical, and emotional turmoil as they struggled to make sense of the mixed messages. Societal messages were further complicated by the feminist movement itself which was facing a similar struggle over whether to promote and valorize public achievement or domesticity. With few resources to wade through these messages, many women experienced the difficult aspects of motherhood in isolation rather than risking the consequences

of having publicly failed in their role as mothers. This was in addition to avoiding the need to choose sides in the feminist debate which once served as a means of support and guidance for many women.

By the late 1970s the feminist movement had generally settled on a position in favour of a child-free movement (Cassidy, 2006). This movement was a revolt against the child-centered thinking which had taken hold as the dominant ideology of the time. However, the media, political, and religious institutions responded by accusing feminists of advocating against women becoming mothers. The campaign proved successful in co-opting many women who had previously supported various forms of feminist ideology since many of these women were already involved in mothering or were interested in mothering in the future.

Cassidy (2006) suggested that although a child-free movement began to dominate in the United States it did not impact every group the same way. Roberts (1995) posited that while white middle-class women were fighting laws restricting choice and demanding access to employment as a means of changing ideology to include motherhood as an option rather than a predetermined biological destiny, low income women and women of color maintained their focus on issues of poverty, oppression, and choice restrictions (as cited in Cassidy, 2006). After all, working outside the home was neither new nor freeing to these women.

At the center of the child-free movement were a series of feminist texts which Johnson and Ferguson (1990) suggested served as guides to what certain feminists considered to constitute an appropriate model of being a woman. The texts advocated women striving to create political and social identities, but also to develop a reflective independent self which was becoming increasingly prized concept in Western societies. Under this new feminist ideology the identities of housewife and mother were relegated to the identities of the women of the past “the

quintessentially prescribed self-who was to be left behind as, bound down by tradition and authority" (Johnson & Ferguson, 1990, p.78). Johnson and Ferguson noted that books, such as those written by Freidan, sought to teach women the road to identity development drawing on the ideology of the second wave feminists and the idea of a linear narrative as the formation of the modern self.

In the 1980s Carol Gilligan's work presented a new way for women to view identity development. Rather than an independent view of the self Gilligan proposed a theory of the self in relation to others. Although the work of Gilligan and others (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Josselson, 1987, 1996; Miller, 1976) served to promote the concept of women having identities separate and apart from their roles as wives and mothers some variations of feminist thought continued to view this shift in the concept of women's identities as promoting an innate female physiology which required women to care for and nurture those around her. Similar interpretations were used to support right-wing media campaigns that pushed for a return to family values touting the rhetoric of stay-at -home mothering as the right choice to make if women were to ensure a brighter future for the planet. The 1980s was a decade in which despite the ideological divisions in the feminist movement, many of the freedoms that had previously been fought for started to come to fruition (Gilligan, 1980). More women were in the work force, pay equity issues were being raised, and women were reaching new levels in academia and entering career areas previously dominated by men. Women in general seemed to be surging ahead with renewed strength and vigor as choice and freedom became more normalized as part of the North American culture.

1990s

Maushart (1999) described the life of women in the 1990s as hyper-caffeinated. This time period was summarized by wealth, opportunity, and technological advancement the likes of which had never been seen before. Maushart suggested that for women, the 1990s was a decade characterized by shrugging off the tranquil yet claustrophobic image of the 1950s and 1960s housewife. Additionally, women continued advancements in opportunity and choice at a level that had previously been available to women. However, instead of creating an egalitarian future with a blank slate for women to build upon, the drive to let go of past stereotypes and expectations resulted in a full-scale identity crisis. Although women's lives over the past several decades were viewed as essentially small and contained, the boundaries, choices, and standards were clearly defined. The process of letting go of past concepts of motherhood left women with a fractured sense of coherence which resulted in a generation of women struggling in transit (Maushart, 1999).

The gains that were made towards equality inside and outside the home now confronted women with the issue of why a woman in the 1990s who had gained independence and power should continue to sacrifice her own desires to meet those of society and her family. Steinem (1995) referred to this as the compassion disease by pointing out that many women were continuing to maintain the household duties and roles as the women in the 1950s with the addition of full-time employment careers and educational pursuits. Steinem noted that what had appeared to have changed was really very little in regard to the actual roles and work of motherhood. The difference was that ideology had shifted to view these events as a choice as opposed to duties thrust upon women. The discrepancy between duty and choice was heightened as women entered into marriage and motherhood placing the concept of the modern independent women in stark contrast to the self-sacrificing and accommodating wife and mother. Unable to

turn to the feminist movement for guidance due to perceived concerns about credibility of the feminist movement, which had been eroding over the previous two decades through the rewriting of women's history by right wing political and religious forces, women found themselves once again standing alone, isolated, and with a lost sense of identity. This made women more vulnerable to the idealized social constructions of motherhood being touted by mass media (Douglas & Michaels, 2004).

2000 and Beyond

The current state of the ideology of motherhood has been termed the new momism which began in the previous decade and continued into 2000 and beyond. This construction is defined mostly by mass media images of mothers participating in a set of ideals, practices, and norms that appear to celebrate motherhood but in reality present a set of standards that are unachievable. Today's mothers may benefit from the changes made previously by the feminist movement, such as having the option to choose between working outside the home or staying home with the children, lone parenting, and the benefit of the fact that subservience to men is no longer the dominant discourse. However, contrary to the opportunities that feminism made possible the overriding ideology remains that "the only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first you are a 'real' woman, and second that you are decent, and worthy one, is to become a mom" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 5).

Hays (1996) suggested that what differentiates the new momism from concepts of motherhood in the past is the intensity with which mothering is carried out. Intensive mothering refers to an "expert-guided, and child-centered…emotional absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays, 1996, p. 46) philosophy which involves scrutinizing every decision made relating to childrearing. Douglas and Michaels (2004) contended that with intense

mothering comes the mandate that the mask of motherhood never be put aside. To ensure that this mandate is fulfilled mothers are vigilant in watching themselves, watching other mothers, and watching other mothers watch them, all in an effort to participate in and witness who is doing the best and the most for their children. The competition is never openly discussed, but exists among friends, family, and strangers. It takes place in public and private spaces and occurs every minute of everyday. This frenzied hyper-natalism leaves women little time to be anything other than someone's mother often at the expense of a woman's relationship with her husband and others, and always at the expense of having any other identity as a woman. The effect that these pressures are having on women's mental health can be seen by the steady increases in the rates of depression, anxiety disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibermyalgia, and other mental health issues common to the female population.

In 2007 it seems that feminism and the battles that were fought in the past to advance the rights of women have largely disappeared from the everyday conversations of many women. Those conversations when kept alive are being carried on by women in areas such as academic institutions, labour unions, and political organizations. A consequence of today's intense mothering practices is that mothers are often left with little time or desire to reflect on how opportunities in employment and education available to women today came to be accessible, nor do many women feel compelled to unite with other women to demand agency over the decisions which affect their lives. Opportunity and agency appear to have become ingrained expectations for many women in North America diminishing the perception of a need for action or participation in women's or feminist organizations.

Douglas and Michaels (2004) suggested "consciousness-raising worked. But whatever constitutes a culture's common sense is never permanent: It is fought over, it evolves, reforms,

and yes, it regresses" (p. 53). The regression that has taken place over the past decade has happened at an alarming rate and has largely occurred without the conscious consideration of most women. Douglas and Michaels posited that in order to prevent further erosion a crusade must be undertaken to reignite an interest in feminism. However, it is my view that a women's movement must not only be reignited, but reconstituted to reflect issues that are relevant to a new generation of women and mothers. Using a hermeneutic approach to open a dialogue with women who helped to create and maintain the feminist ideological traditions of the past and inviting the perspective of a younger generation, a movement of women may begin to coalesce around a mutual understanding of the social and cultural forces currently undermining mothering, isolating women, pitting mothers against one another in competition, and thwarting the development of women's independent identity development.

Understanding Identity Development

History has shown motherhood to be a complex topic. The past has shown that the roles, expectations, and images of what it means to be a mother are constructed and manipulated by political, legislative, media, and community groups, and that historically very little power has rested with women who are actually mothers. An examination of the social constructions of motherhood is a snap shot of the politics and dominant ideology at any given point in time. Armed with this insight, women can begin to deconstruct the process of identity development and examine how it relates to and influences their roles as mothers and its effects on women's mental health. Through this examination women can learn new ways to thrive as well as come together and gain control over the definition of what it means to be a mother and a woman.

For most of history, the defining of what it means to be a mother has been dictated by forces other than the women who were mothers. Even when mothers are invited to participate in

role definition there is pressure to outline the process using a linear unidirectional understanding that reflects a child-centered ideology? Benjamin (1988) contended that there is currently a lack of psychological literature and theory which advocates the acknowledgement of a women's independent existence within and aside from the mother-child relationship (as cited in Oberman & Josselson, 1996). This lack of theory allows those who have a vested interest in maintaining an idealized version of motherhood to draw on and exploit the polarities which commonly exist for women who are mothering. Boulton (1983) suggested that women often describe the experience of motherhood as existing on two levels: one level which represents a woman's feelings about her children, and the other which encompasses the daily routine of raising them. Given that these two levels exist, persons and institutions which entrench and advocate for the concept of the idealized mother are able to isolate and exploit the feelings of love, protection, and the desire to do what is best for children. What results is a social stigma against acknowledging discomfort or discontentment with the role and duties of motherhood, as well as discouraging identity formation beyond that of the motherhood role.

Brewer (2001) suggested that in addition to heightening the contradictions of good versus bad mothering, another way which the myth of motherhood is perpetuated is through the use of mass media and political campaigns which reinforce the depersonalizing of the individual self identity in favour of a group-based social identity. Turner, Oakes, Haslam, and McGarty (1994) noted that the process of developing a group-based identity involves an individual incorporating a view of the self as an "interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of the self as a unique person" (p. 50).

When a woman has a child her individual identity is under the current ideological constructs susceptible to being subsumed by the duties of motherhood while at the same time

women are being drawn into a social category with others who are mothering. Brewer (2001) posited that adopting the group identity of motherhood has the consequence of intrapersonal social comparison. The current ideology which promotes the necessity of intensive mothering practices forms the core of the social comparison competition. While mothers are distracted by the competition, women's individual identities become less familiar and the group identity of motherhood more established. At the same time as a woman is melding into the social category of motherhood, the group identity is being molded by the collective identity of the dominant society with a socially shared set of values and ideals which reflect the dominant political, social, and religious ideology of the specific period in time in which mothering is occurring. Burke and Reitzes (1981) concurred with Brewer by suggesting that an individual's self identity consists of the meanings an individual attributes to them, as well as the perception that the individual has of what meaning others have attributed to them. This understanding of identity holds that identities are social products formed and maintained through social processes that serve to confirm and validate an individual's self-concept. Burke and Reitzes posited that "identities are self meanings that are formed in particular situations and organized hierarchically to produce the self" (p. 84).

In regard to motherhood, a woman comes to know herself as a mother through her interactions with other mothers. The behaviours that a woman exhibits within the mothering group are either confirmed and validated or dismissed and rejected. Behaviours that are based on the current dominant ideology are typically reinforced and hence passed on from mother to mother. It is through this process that the socially constructed idealized concept of motherhood is maintained. Intense mothering is perpetuated by necessarily narrowing a woman's focus in the early stages of mothering which limits mother's contact or involvement with role participation outside of motherhood. When the only role a woman receives reinforcement for is mothering the

tendency to over-participate occurs and previous identity roles are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchical structure of identity. The longer a role is left unattended the more likely an individual will become disassociated from that part of their identity. Steinberg (2005) cautioned that in some instances women may adapt a heightened focus on developing a motherhood identity as a means of avoiding previously fragmented or wounded parts of the self.

Motherhood as Competition

In order to fully understand how a women's identity can be co-opted by the institution of motherhood it is important to examine the roles that make up the mother identity. Motherhood as competition has become the overriding discourse for women mothering in the current decade. In response to this competition occurring between mothers, Johnston and Swanson (2004) investigated the extent that stay-at-home mothers and working mothers internalized the media messages of a binary construction of motherhood which has been previously identified as the mommy wars. Findings from this research revealed that both stay at home mothers and working mothers sought support and group identification from mothers most like themselves in regard to employment status. However, stay-at-home mothers appeared to view themselves to be a more distinct and separate group. Stay-at-home mothers tended to judge working mothers based on appearance and image, and by objectifying working mothers as being removed from their children and without feeling or concern for the importance of their children's upbringing. Working mothers were more likely to view motherhood/work as options which occurred on a continuum, yet still identified stay-at-home mothers primarily by their capacity to mother. Each group of mothers reported feeling pressure to succeed coming from within their individual support groups, although the stay-at-home mothers felt additional pressure internally, between groups, and from society in general.

Stay-at-home mothers indicated that negative messages stemmed from both mass media and family perceptions of the choice to stay home as opposed to working mothers who identified only external sources as the source of negative messages. Mothers who split their time between work and mothering were largely exempt from negative external or internal pressures which Johnston and Swanson (2004) explained as resulting from having multiple group identity associations. These research findings suggested that a woman's involvement with outside employment may serve as a protective factor in regard to individual identity preservation.

Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggested that the phenomenon of women conceding their individual identities in favour of the group-based values of motherhood, such as described in the mommy wars, is familiar to women as it may occur at other times during their lifespan. Research has shown that Caucasian girls entering adolescence are susceptible to social pressures and often suppress certain individual characteristics and abilities instead adopting group-based values (Phillips & Zimmerman, 1990). This concession of identity appears to coincide with periods in development when a girl/woman is most vulnerable, such as the examples of a girl moving into adolescence and a woman into motherhood. When a girl/woman attempts to match themselves to the ideals espoused by cultural pressures it changes their perceptions and thus their identity, and as Seligman (1991), noted self-perception equates with achievement more than ability which results in declining individual self-esteem. This declining belief in the individual is then replaced by the esteem of the group.

Other researchers reported results pertaining to studies of minority girls and women and self-worth (Cross, 1995). Results indicated that minority girls and women often scored higher on self-worth measures than did their Caucasian counterparts. Cross hypothesized that minority girls and women are perhaps better able to participate in the social constructions created by the

dominant culture without internalizing the messages and ideals in the same manner as Caucasian girls and women. MacKinnon (1989) supported this suggestion when she indicated that "minority women's identity would serve as a directing force throughout their lives whereas Caucasian women would have to struggle to differentiate themselves from the restrictive cultural prescriptions" (as cited in Petersen, 2000, p. 64). Petersen's (2000) research indicated that Caucasian women reported ongoing identity struggles during their life, but unanimously noted the existence of additional turmoil in trying to maintain any semblance of individual identity when they became mothers. Even those women who had managed to breakaway from cultural expectations during certain periods in their lives were faced with increased self-doubt as motherhood was believed to have heightened the contradictions between having an individual identity separate and apart from their roles as mothers.

Motherhood as Work

The feminist movement has presented a sound case for the need to highlight the work involved in raising children which is often done in conjunction with work outside the home, work in the home, and the myriad of other obligations and duties women are obligated to and expected to perform well. Within this background feminists have also attempted to highlight the need for separation of women's individual identities as persons in there own right from the institutionalized ideals of motherhood. In furtherance of such attempts the feminist movement has renamed the last of this work as "mothering". Gieve (1987) noted that this term has served women well in the sense that it has helped draw attention to the significant demands of childcare and the drudgery of many of the routines that constitute the lives of women in their roles raising children. The use of the term mothering has also served to present an alternative image of what a mother looks like as opposed to the culturally exploited image of the Madonna with the angelic

child in her lap. This is in addition to attempts to remind society of the unpaid and undervalued work that women do in regard to both child rearing and work in the home in general. The term mothering also highlights the fact that bringing up children within the current societal constructs and norms of what is considered to be good mothering and proper child rearing requires a set of skills and abilities which are learned. This is in stark contrast to the once commonly held belief that motherhood is instinctual. Advocating childrearing as synonymous with work seems a reasonable extension to the other issues raised by feminists surrounding women working outside and inside the home which were at the epicentre of the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Notwithstanding, the question remains why today's mothers, particularly outside of academic circles, have not identified with the term mothering in any large numbers (Tardy, 2000).

From the historical examination herein, it seems clear that by 1990 women had entered into a period of empowerment and achievement which was reflected in the number of women occupying more senior roles in academia (although by no means parallel to men), the workforce, political office, and other social and economic institutions, than had been possible in the past. Women are now educated to higher levels and in greater numbers, and career opportunities and advancement generally are common goals for many if not most women but this is still seen to be as a conjunct to getting married and having children. Gieve (1987) posited that by the late 1980s women working outside of the home began to understand the definition of work as involving measurable rewards, a sense of achievement, individual growth and fulfillment, and projects that when completed was accompanied by a tangible sense of success. At the same time as women are forging ahead and feeling empowered by their employment or other endeavors external to the home an already depleted women's movement was advocating motherhood as work.

With nearly 50% of mothers working outside the home and finding satisfaction in their jobs women struggled to understand how the definition of work paralleled their duties in the home with their children (Gieve, 1987). Gieve (1987) noted that although repetition and drudgery are often seen as part of employment, mothering appears to be lacking in a beginning, middle, or an end. In the work of raising children measurable achievements are often related to biological milestones, and although a child's environment and relationships are known to affect their outcomes, it is only when failure occurs that a mother is seen as having been responsible. Although the analogy of work proved useful as a rebuttal to the idealized constructions of motherhood touted in mass media and society at large, as well as for a small number of women, this rebuttal failed to appeal to the general mass of women who were mothers. Equating motherhood with work also appears to have contributed to the current younger generation of women continuing to struggle with finding anything in common with feminist ideology.

Media and magazine campaigns backed by the current political discourse which pushes family values, attacked the concept of motherhood as work by presenting women with either /or choices that reinforced the ideal mother image. Buxton (1998) suggested that the mother wars are based on the presentation to women of images and messages with contradictory ideals which invite women to attempt to replicate the ideal and then condemn those who do chose to follow the idealized path. This push-pull phenomenon when related to women is referred to as a double bind and has been shown to powerfully influence how a woman relates to her children, herself, and within the larger cultural context.

Kuiken and Hill (1985) suggested that double bind scenarios can be grouped together in four categories which represent maternal contradictions: selfish versus selfless, independence versus dependence, success versus failure, and natural versus unnatural maternal messages. By

examining these categories it becomes clear how these categories have been applied to pit mothers who work outside the home against mothers who stay-at-home. Regardless of the type of work a mother engages in she is somehow going against the grain of what has been constructed as the concept of the good mother. Foucault (1978) summarized the double bind dilemma that women face as a situation where "hegemonic power is preserved by the construction of ideals that can be successfully fulfilled by the dominant group but ensures the failure of subordinate groups" (as cited in Johnston & Swanson, 2003, p. 262). The women's movement may have worked tirelessly to help establish women's place within the work force, as well as for women to have the right to choose the work of mothering, but it is clear that in today's world the appearance of having choices regarding what work to undertake continues to be manipulated by institutionalized ideals pushing its own social agenda.

Working Mothers

Identity formation involves a process of interactions that combine complex connections between self, others, and culture, in order to produce a discursively constituted set of values and beliefs commonly referred to as core symbols. Core symbols are used to direct our connections to larger social groups which share core beliefs and values and which reinforce culturally appropriate behaviour. Johnston and Swanson (2007) suggested that mothering identity and worker identity are two choices of social categories which women raising children must face. Golden (2001) maintained that inherent in this choice is uncertainty which leads to anxiety. As a result women search for validation of their choices from others externally. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) proposed the view that the identity categories of worker and mother exist as dialectic or two positions at opposite ends of a continuum (as cited in Johnston & Swanson, 2007). These identities are described as a "contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two

embattled tendencies" (Johnston & Swanson, 2007, p. 449). In today's society most women subscribe to the practices of intense mothering and 50% of mothers are working outside of the home (Cassidy, 2006). Johnston and Swanson (2007) studied this identity dilemma and reported that working women do not denounce intense mothering practices as a means of minimizing the pull between motherhood and work, but rather take a neutral position between motherhood and work in an attempt to maintain a balance between both identities. What occurred for these women was a state of perpetual disequilibrium which required "cognitive acrobatics" (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, p. 456) to effectively juggle the two roles.

Johnston and Swanson's (2007) findings contradict prior research that proposed that working mothers had transcended the intense mothering rhetoric in favour of pursuing an alternative course for identity development. Most women in the Johnston and Swanson study reported a strong belief in intense mothering practices as well as reporting that they had not altered career goals, but rather just changed how they went about achieving both identity requirements. Bakhtin (1981) suggested that taking a neutral position between the pull of two identities is a temporary means of staving off chaos (as cited in Johnston & Swanson, 2007). Unfortunately, the consequences of such a balancing act are increased stress, anxiety, and burnout for working women who also mother.

Motherhood as a Developmental Stage

According to Hays (1996), from the late 1980s the trend has been that women are identifying and striving towards successful careers. The measure of successful employment status is directly related to length of time in an occupation. This has resulted in many women putting off marriage and childbirth to a later age. Walter (1989) suggested that this trend towards delayed childrearing may serve as a protective factor and decrease a woman's chances of

suffering from additional mental health issues. Walter contended that during late adolescence an understanding of the "totality of experiences, both conscious and unconscious, becomes organized around a sense of cohesion that persists over time" (p. 232). If a woman has children in her late teens or early twenties when this process of cohesion is still taking place the interruption may render the mother more susceptible to suffering anxiety and stress in the role of motherhood. Johnston and Swanson (2003) indicated that a central struggle for mothers is to avoid becoming fragmented by the many demands and messages which attempt to dictate the ideals mothers must meet. Having a strong grasp on one's individual identity is essential when entering the role of motherhood.

Oberman and Josselson (1996) suggested that mothering is a significant, multifaceted, and complex period of time in a women's life, but if mothering can be viewed as one stage of development in the course of many stages it does not have to be all encompassing and at the expense of a women's individual identity or mental health. However, despite the gains made by the women's movement to have motherhood considered a choice, historically most women continue to view motherhood as a natural, essential, and unquestioned part of their life plan. The view that mothering is a single stage in development which can be timed according to what is right for a woman's individual goals and aspirations may help debunk the myth of motherhood as a natural part and consequence of life. There is also a need to reiterate the importance of choice as well as highlight the need for maintaining a strong sense of individual identity. This is in addition to the need to emphasize the developmental importance of having a cohesive sense of personal identity prior to introducing the demands of motherhood.

Hartrick (1997) suggested that the process of self-definition is a task that continues across development but in regard to motherhood includes categories of non-reflective doing (trying out

modeled behaviours), transitional periods where an individual struggles to develop and integrate behaviours and values into their own self-system, and reclaiming or rediscovering new aspects of identity. When mothering is viewed as a developmental stage the content and process of a woman's transition can be normalized within the context of an evolving individual identity. Mothering as a stage can be viewed as an enlargement of a woman's original identity rather than as a replacement. This perspective is consistent with the theoretical viewpoint of feminist poststructural developmental theory which promotes the concept of identity development occurring in the context of social interaction with the self perpetually involved in a process of being constituted and reconstituted across each person's life span. With respect to mothering, this involves embracing a transition into a new reality which requires the restructuring of goals, relationships, responsibilities, and behaviours, all of which will contribute to an expanded sense of self (Mercer, 2004).

Implications

Armed with an understanding that motherhood is a reflection of an historical context, that forces greater than the individual strongly and directly influence the social categories that individuals align themselves with, and how this translates into an individual's self identity through the process of reinforcement, are the initial steps in the deconstruction of motherhood. The next level of understanding involves an examination of how the idealized constructs of motherhood have impacted women's psychological and physical health. Extant research has indicated that women entering their 20s today voice very different opinions regarding work and motherhood than did their age equivalents in the prior two decades. Borisoff (2005) suggested that the reason for this change is threefold. Firstly, about 50% of the North American work force is made up of women in their 30s to their 60s who are offering their reflective perspectives

regarding careers versus mothering. Secondly, women's relationship and definition of work has changed. Thirdly, there has been continued political and media pressure for a return to the idealized and romanticized family system as depicted nostalgically from the 1950s.

In each of these three areas young women have asserted that the decisions they are making are based on freedom of choice rather than as a consequence of institutionalized rhetoric or conditioning. The evidence used to support these beliefs is drawn from legislative changes, such as in the area of abortion rights and childcare reforms, which have occurred in the past four decades. However, what has occurred simultaneously with these changes is a not too subtle undercurrent carrying the message that although choices are available only one choice will lead to the betterment of society. The belief in choice is called into question when women become mothers. Once becoming a mother, women are then shocked by the discrepancies between their lived realities and the discourses which they otherwise hold to be immutable truths.

Motherhood and Guilt

Borisoff (2005) contended that although women today have more choice over the direction of their lives, inherent in the existence of these choices is guilt. From a review of the current literature on motherhood it appears as though guilt transcends the context in which mothering is taking place and exists irrespective of culture, race, or economic status. Klass (1988) described guilt as "an aversive, conscious emotion that involves self-reproach and remorse and a sense of wrong doing, as if one has violated moral principles" (p. 23). It was noted earlier in this project that self identity is a direct reflection of the roles in which an individual participates and the reinforcement from others of how an individual performs the expectations of belonging. Klass explained that the degree of guilt that a mother experiences is related to the perceived discrepancy between her behaviour as a mother, how it compares to the mothering

expectations dictated by society in general, and reinforced within her smaller social network. The degree of guilt that a mother feels is also related to the importance she places on her role as a mother.

Ellis (1962) referred to guilt as the result of irrational, intense, and absolutistic beliefs. Current researchers support this contention by describing mothers' guilt as the result of the all or nothing and good or bad dichotomies which form the foundations for the idealized constructions of motherhood (as cited in Klass, 1988). These attempts to emulate the idealized constructs not only result in women experiencing guilt and expressing recognition of a personal wrongdoing that has violated a core belief, but that women tend to also then engage in unwarranted negative self-evaluation which if repeated and sustained over time may lead to both psychological and physical health deterioration. Elvin-Nowak (1999) suggested that guilt is frequently associated and experienced with the feeling of shame, and although each feeling is a distinct phenomenon, both feelings are associated with strong feelings of discomfort and negative self-esteem and are the direct result of intra-psychic perceptions of situational control.

Enwright (1975), Buber (1957), and Fitz Simmons Allison (1972) proposed the idea of two types of guilt (as cited in Banmen, 1988). The first type of guilt, referred to as real guilt, is an emotion that arises immediately following a behaviour that contradicts an individual's moral code, causes a physical reaction, and often leads to the individual taking action to rectify the discomfort. The second type of guilt is chronic guilt implying an ongoing experience of negative emotion which requires a great deal of energy but serves little purpose in regard to becoming an impetus for change. It is chronic guilt which is most associated with the experience of motherhood. Salzmann (1978) suggested that the chronic guilt that mothers feel is often described as being experienced in the past tense of 'should' and is an "attempt to maintain a

standard for one self that is unrealistic" (as cited in Banmen, 1988, p. 80). Additionally, Salzmann posited that it is because chronic guilt involves a long-term program of self-accusation and deprecation that women experiencing this type of guilt report feeling annihilated, empty, and disassociated from their selves.

The feminist perspective on guilt asserts that the socialization process and identity formation experienced by women is intended to foster feelings of guilt since the foundations of these processes is based on an ethic of care, women's relational interactions with the people of importance in their lives, and a women's responsibility for the well-being of those individuals (Elvin-Nowak, 1999). According to Gilligan (1982) women are constantly dealing with conflicting choices involving degrees of responsibility in different spheres of their lives therefore creating the possibility of guilt. However, unlike other theories of motherhood and guilt, feminist thought does not view guilt as arising from an internal manifestation of a lack of control. Instead, feminist ideology purports that the ethic of care which women are socialized to is the result of women developing ways of coping with patriarchal systems of control. Elvin-Nowak (1999) suggested that although women today appear to have many more choices than women in previous decades, a woman is held accountable for how she uses her choices. However, the right to make a choice outside of the dominant discourse without retribution is largely still an illusion which is maintained by surrounding the choice with a blanket of fear of failure resulting in mother blaming.

Jackson and Mannix (2004) posited that the actions and behaviours of mothers are subject to scrutiny in ways that the behaviour of fathers are not, and that the perpetuation of mother blaming in the media and from other sources is a pervasive and serious problem contributing to the deterioration of the mental health of women who are mothering. Jackson's

and Mannix's research revealed that a woman on the receiving end of mother blaming can expect to be socially ostracized and isolated from mainstream society. Mother blaming is further complicated by the fact that many women internalized the accusations regardless of the circumstances that initiated the process. As a result many women suffer feelings of extreme, guilt, shame, anxiety, and general distress. Mother blaming was found to occur in many situations including women making choices outside of the dominant ideology, the misbehaviour of a child, when a child suffered an illness, or when an adult child made lifestyle choices that positioned them outside the norm. Many of the situations that lead to episodes of mother blaming were found to be the result of normal developmental processes such as egocentric behaviour from two year olds, or emotional outbursts in adolescence, thus highlighting the extent and severity of the mother blaming potential that women face.

Motherhood and Grief

One fact about motherhood which is rarely disputed is that when a woman has a child her life changes. Taylor (2000) suggested that implicit in any change process is loss since change implies both a moving away from something familiar as well as a moving toward something new. Goldsworthy (2005) concurred in this by having indicated that human beings construct their lives around meanings that form the individual's worldview. When a change occurs that moves the individual away from what is familiar, predictable, and stable, negative emotions arise in response to the questioning or shattering of these assumptive points of view thus creating a sense of loss.

With respect to motherhood the loss is usually referred to as a psychosocial loss, meaning that the loss is experienced in relation to something intangible or symbolic such as identity. As was previously stated in this project, identity is intricately linked to the dominant discourses that

form the institutional social categories to which an individual belongs. The implications for motherhood suggest that when a woman has a child her existing worldview is challenged, her social categories changed, as well as becoming the recipient of new information regarding social expectations and role definitions. The changing social demands are further complicated by the extensive needs of newborn children. This situation promotes isolation from former social categories and previously held concepts of identity. Thompson (1996) suggested that changes that involve losses to those things which had previously created structure and meaning in an individual's life, such as identity, may have profound psychological effects that leave that person vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness.

The typical response to the experience of losses of this magnitude is grief. Goldsworthy (2005) defined grief as "the complex amalgam of painful affect including sadness, anger, helplessness, guilt, and despair" (p. 169). Rawlings and Kutner (2003) added to this definition that grief results in changes to an individual's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, spiritual, and somatic spheres of existence. Rawlings and Kutner suggested that up to one third of women experiencing grief may express these emotions through somatic symptoms as a result of the fear of being further isolated if negative emotions related to motherhood are discussed. Examples of physical disorders precipitated by grief include immune, gastrointestinal, and cardiovascular complications (Rawlings & Kutner, 2003).

Disenfranchised Grief

Doka (1989) defined disenfranchised grief as "the grief that a person experiences when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (as cited in Doka, 2002, p. 40). Doka suggested that grief is an experience which takes place within a social and cultural context. With the grieving experience come rules, rituals,

and expectations about the object or person that the grief is directed towards as well as expectations surrounding the individual doing the grieving. When grief is disenfranchised the individual facing the loss believes that to openly engage in grieving would lead to disavowal, renunciation, and rejection since what they are experiencing grief towards is outside of socially and/or culturally accepted expectations. Doka believed that within the disenfranchised grief experience an individual will encounter all of the typical reactions to loss, with the added potential of having to face many other problems as well. These additional difficulties include intense emotional reactions such as anger, guilt, or powerlessness, ambivalent feelings, and concurrent crises (Doka, 2002). Elias (1991) contended that emotions have three components which include thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, so when an individual is in the grieving process ailments may arise in any one of these three categories. If the grief is disenfranchised the possibility of these difficulties becoming intensified, pathologized, or chronic, is significantly increased which may lead to concurrent and overlapping issues.

Doka (2002) asserted that psychosocially disenfranchised grief refers to the loss of an individual's psychological essence, individual personality, or a perception of the self as dead. In the case of disenfranchised grief the loss may occur gradually leading the changes to be undetectable to the self or others for long periods of time. Eventually incremental changes will add up to a significant change which may affect not only the individual but others in the individual's family and community. In the case of motherhood, disenfranchised grief has typically been discussed in terms of the loss of a child, abortion, or mental illness. With increasing recognition that women undergo significant changes when they transition to motherhood disenfranchised grief is being applied to the process of grief experienced by women whose identity prior to motherhood has been permanently changed. During this grief experience

women tend not to discuss their concerns because of the risk of being ostracized by their support networks which are usually made up of other mothers. Instead, women often choose to deny the negative aspects of motherhood and mourn their loss of identity in isolation. Parks (1998) suggested that disenfranchised grief and motherhood tend to involve losses evoking guilt, shame, and stigma which perpetuate the perceived need for isolation. However, if these losses remain unrecognized a woman's physical, mental, and emotional health can be severely jeopardized.

Stress and Depression

Sarafino (2006) described stress as resulting from life events which trigger a perceived discrepancy between an individual's psychological and/or physical resources. Stress can overwhelm an individual resulting from of a single event or can be cumulative over time. If the stressor taxes an individual's physiological system the discrepancy between resources and coping may manifest as physical illness or ailment. If the stressor is concentrated in the psychological sphere of an individual's life the consequences may appear as depression. It is also possible for psychological and physical symptoms to appear simultaneously, or that difficulties in one area may trigger difficulties in other areas of functioning. Davis, Matthew and Twamley (1999) contended that on average women report experiencing a greater number of major and minor stressors than men which in turn results in greater numbers of women suffering from conditions involving depression, anxiety, and disorders related to immune system suppression.

Depression is typically explained using either a clinical/medical model or a model based on social science. Nicolson (1990) explained that depression from the standpoint of the clinical/medical model is seen as an illness or disorder which results from either a previous history of depression which is linked to biological deficiencies, or that the individual possesses vulnerabilities in other areas such as psychological weaknesses which can lead to depressive

episodes. The social science model of depression suggests that depression is the result of social factors such as major life transitions, or events which can affect individuals who possess vulnerabilities with the end result being depression (Nicolson, 1990). Although these two models provide explanations which attribute the etiology of depression as arising from different sources, in both of these models depression is viewed as an object phenomenon afflicting individuals with weaker constitutions. Lewis and Nicolson (1998) suggested that these models have contributed to the belief that because women report being affected by stressors and depression more often than men, women are more physiologically and psychologically vulnerable.

Brown and Harris (1978) posited that what is lacking from models of depression is the subjective experience of the individual suffering. In order to rectify the objective approach to depression and propose a more subjective theory recent feminist approaches have included the influence of social and power relations and the affects that these relationships have on the psychology of women and as a consequence how depression is understood and manifested in the everyday lives of women. Utilizing the feminist approach to depression, Jack (1991) discovered when interviewing women that many women described depression as a sense of loss which arose after becoming mothers (as cited in Lewis & Nicolson, 1998). Jack reported that when women attempted to fulfill traditional expectations of themselves as care givers for others and subordinated their own needs a sense of loss of self and depression followed (as cited in Lewis & Nicolson, 1998).

Crowe (2002) asserted that in Western modern society the most sought after and prized identity is the one that privileges individuality, detachment, and autonomy. This striving may render individuals whose orientation, socialization, or occupation falls outside of these ideological categories likely to suffer distress and social isolation. Crowe further suggested that

the majority of roles available to women fall into this category and typically "involve performances of deference and caring that serve the needs of others" (p. 129). This situation renders women caught between two identities: one striving for detachment, and one striving for reflexivity. As such, women are faced with few alternatives but to suppress or deny certain aspects of their identity which may lead to depression.

The concept of depression and motherhood is most often discussed in relation to the feelings a women may experience in the initial weeks following the birth of a child typically labeled postpartum depression (PPD). Lewis and Nicolson (1998) suggested that like other forms of depression, PPD is most often represented by either the social science ideology which suggests that a woman is suffering from the major transition and life event of having a child, or as prescribed in the medical model as suffering the effects of hormonal changes. However, research revealed that many women do not identify with either of these two commonly held explanations. When the subjective views of what women experienced following the birth of a baby were considered, most women in this study reported feeling grief and loss in relation to no longer living their lives the way they once had including altering or losing relationships with friends, family, colleagues, and partners, as well as struggling to let go of their previous primary identity while simultaneously struggling to formulate a new identity in the mother role. Lewis and Nicolson's research indicated that although these feelings were prevalent among the mothers studied, seldom were the mothers aware of this process occurring in other mothers. These interviews suggested that women have few ways of discussing the losses that occur when one becomes a mother for fear that these sentiments may be interpreted as failure as a mother or that the woman may be alone in her interpretation of any negative aspect of motherhood.

Lewis and Nicolson (1998) and Crowe (2002) posited the idea that the concepts of depression and PPD must include subjective experiences of those who were suffering. It is suggested that because women have no other alternative view of these conditions, and as any alternative would require opposition to the dominate discourse, women have been inclined to agree with the interpretation and diagnosis suggested by others. Another course of action adopted by women in this situation is to reject and deny the possibility that their experience is anything but a "normal" part of motherhood. Choosing either of these two options does little to alleviate the problem which if left unacknowledged can lead to declining health.

Interventions

Addressing Specific Symptomology

Guilt. Identity theorists posit the idea that identity is formed based on the roles an individual acquires through participation in social categories and the significance of those roles is then arranged hierarchically within the self. From this perspective any perceived failure to perform the duties assigned to those roles is likely to result in guilt. For mothers, guilt is likely to be related to any number of perceived discrepancies ranging from feeling inadequate in the performance of mothering duties to the perception of not being sufficiently available to meet the needs of her children. Whatever the reason a mother is experiencing guilt it is likely that the significance a woman places on her motherhood identity makes the role central to her definition of self and is therefore tied directly to feelings of self-worth and confidence. Ellis (1962) suggested that since feelings of guilt are linked to self-worth such feelings are unlikely to promote action, rather, they lead individuals to rumination and self-punishment with the possibility of negative health consequences (as cited in Klass, 1988).

When guilt is tied to the motherhood role it may be beneficial to explore the perceived discrepancy that the woman is feeling between her behaviour and her understanding of the duties and expectations of the motherhood role. Klass (1988) suggested engaging woman in a dialogue which would include a description of how the idealized version of motherhood has been socially constructed and how this construction places women in untenable situations which may result in guilt. This can be a starting point to further discussions of the effects that the dominant discourses have had on how women have developed their mothering identities. Klass contended that exploring the concepts of selfishness, self-sacrifice, and enlightened self-interest may delineate current role requirements so that the requirements can be evaluated for validity against a woman's core values. Once revealed, the role requirements may be rescripted into duties more in keeping with a woman's own priorities and beliefs.

Grief. Neimeyer (1999) suggested that traditional models of grief have failed to address certain aspects of the grieving process because of a reliance on the assumption that grief is a universal experience therefore focusing on the similarities in the grief process rather than the differences. Social construction, post-modern, and feminist theorists choose to focus on differences in individual experience and thus seek to explore the subtle nuances that separate each grieving person's process. Additionally, these theories recognize that although grief may be a private experience, how grief has come to be viewed, valued, and discussed are a reflection of the collective constructions of a culture. The implications of these collective constructions implies that when addressing grief from an intervention perspective, the wider social categories that an individual participates in must also be explored since the grieving individual will eventually turn to those categories for validation of their changed identity.

Janoff-Bulman (1989) commented that "loss is viewed as an event that can profoundly perturb one's taken-for-granted constructions about life, sometimes traumatically shaking the very foundations of one's assumptive world" (as cited in Neimeyer, 1999, p. 68). Although traditional models of grief support this contention, the inability to have any control over the loss is often emphasized. Constructivist approaches to grief suggest that loss can be viewed as a period of "accelerated decision making" (Neimeyer, 1999, p. 68). Taking this view of grief allows for the spotlight to be directed on the agency an individual has in how the grieving process will unfold thereby opening the door to meaning reconstruction.

One similarity that a constructivist approach to grief has with traditional models of grief is the importance of reflection and personal integration of the loss. However, constructivist interventions recommend that this process take place by working with activities geared toward reframing, rescripting, and reconstruction new meanings of the experience. Neimeyer (1999) offered a number of grief interventions based on post-modern assumptions which include journaling, creating life imprints, identifying linking objects, working with metaphoric images, and writing loss poetry. A more detailed description of these interventions is contained in Appendix B.

The topic of motherhood and loss is typically relegated to situations involving infertility, the death of a child, illness of a child, or when a child leaves home. Since the current discourse on motherhood promotes the rhetoric that motherhood is a role involving bliss and fulfillment, many women fail to recognize or acknowledge the loss and transition which occurs related to identity. Discussing the negative aspects of motherhood is not a socially sanctioned and acceptable practice and any such discussions have been shown to have severely negative social consequences for those mothers who have braved these boundaries (Rich, 1976). Lenhardt

(1997) suggested that when behaviours or beliefs fail to be socially sanctioned the grief that is experienced is not legitimized or expected and therefore becomes disenfranchised. Doka (2002) noted that disenfranchised grief presents a greater possibility for the grief to become prolonged and complicated. This may result in increased stress and depression.

Lenhardt (1997) indicated that a central part of moving through the grieving process comes from the support of the individual's social network. When a mother is unable to express her grief regarding the changes and loss to her former life and identity she is forced to suffer this loss without the support of her social category which is typically comprised of other women who are mothering. Central to any intervention involving disenfranchised grief is validation of the individual's loss. Doka (2002) posited that a counsellor's validation is often the first exposure an individual may have to the idea that what they are experiencing is grief. Creating a place where grief can be explored with support is essential to the reconstruction of meaning.

Identity loss. The social construction of motherhood is based largely on dominant institutions application of rhetoric which isolates and highlights the dichotomies of the good versus bad mother concept. In actuality, most mothering takes place somewhere in between the poles of this dichotomy. Oberman and Josselson (1996) posited that "the only way to come to terms with mothering is to view it as a matrix of tensions" (p. 344) rather than as a process situated in either good or bad polarities. Oberman and Josselson propose that the most salient tensions that arise during the stages of motherhood are loss of self versus expansion of self. Understanding motherhood as a matrix of tensions may help women recognize how they are managing and balancing conflicting experiences, attitudes, emotions, and mental states. Developing this understanding can bring acceptance to the space between the polarities of good and bad mothering, as well as increase the level of knowledge regarding how the influence of

culture, social context, and internal and intrapersonal factors affect the role definitions of motherhood.

It is important to assist women to develop an understanding that current definitions of motherhood have come to fruition based on institutional actions that have exploited a collective identity for the benefit of maintaining idealized constructions. Brewer (2001) suggested that the goal of controlling the collective values and ideals in a society is to control political and financial support for motherhood related endeavors. Helping women to recognize these intentions may serve as incentive for women to deepen their understanding of the need to find ways to participate in a shared group identity while preserving and encouraging the development of an individual identity.

Empowerment and Resistance

The social construction of motherhood has left some women on the defensive and needing to respond to the conditions they have had to endure as a result of patriarchal institutions. Even within the fallacies of real choice women have not been able to take a place of primacy in the decision making as to what should be the right choices for their own lives. Legislation, religion, and the pressures of mass media have used children and the ideology of benefiting society against women's identities. In response to this attack Rich (1976) wrote: "we do not think of power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood" (p. 275). The initial step towards altering this narrative of powerlessness is to create conditions under which women can become aware of how the motherhood role has been co-opted and used against them under the guise of doing what is best for children and dominant society. The dominant discourses promote intense mothering practices

which require women to adopt the singular identity of mother while denying any other possibilities. Women must be made aware of historical evolution and alternatives.

O'Reilly (2006) suggested that oppressive definitions of motherhood must be substituted for choices which include autonomy, agency, authenticity, and authority while engaged in the mothering role. A new discourse must include a reversal of priorities which remove the focus from current practices of intense mothering to an understanding that when mothers are well-rounded and fulfilled human beings with multiple identities of their own choosing only then will children reap the full benefits of their parenting. Horowitz (2004) contended that empowering women who are involved in mothering required women to examine who they are as individuals in order to have a firm grasp of what living authentically will mean for their life and the lives of their children. Horowitz noted that recent research has confirmed that women who view themselves as being true to their beliefs and values are less susceptible to oppressive narratives.

Green (2004) suggested that women who chose not to follow the dominant discourses tend to view themselves as *outlaw mothers.* Showing resistance to the institution of motherhood has given these women a sense of pride, autonomy, and legitimacy in their mothering duties. However, as Green has noted, the social construction of motherhood is a well ingrained set of doctrines which strongly influences the social categories to which most mothers belong. Within these categories, resistant women, in an attempt to open new dialogues and educate peers, run the risk of alienation and ultimately isolation. Rich (1976) stated that until women take this risk to engage other women in conversations about motherhood for the purpose of redefining the mothering role, women will continue to live under the illusion of choice and will remain absent from their own definitions.

A potential barrier to achieving such change is highlighted by critics of post-modern theory who suggest that post-modern ideology promotes change at an individual level without advocating for broader societal change and collective action. Indeed, in respect to motherhood, women who resist the dominant discourse may view themselves as outlaw mothers, however, these women will continue to be pressured by dominant ideology to conform, or remain isolated from other mothers and others in society because of their resistant beliefs. Women who resist must be able to struggle for and benefit from a reconstructed definition of motherhood not only on a personal level. Change must be sought simultaneously on a multitude of fronts. Women in positions of power must play a greater role in advocating for broader societal change while serving as mentors for women in positions of lesser power. At the individual level, women participating in empowered mothering must actively encourage other women to critically examine definitions of motherhood. This should be done with the intent of uniting women together in communities for the purpose of reconstructing new meanings of motherhood thereby altering discourses of what it means to be a good mother. The intent would be to offer women meaningful and real choices thereby allowing women the opportunity to reach their full potential as healthy persons within a broad range of identities including, among many other identities, a liberated construct of mothering.

Counselling professionals are in a unique position to support women through the process of self examination. By creating a safe place for women to openly discuss and examine their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and values, women have the opportunity to develop multiple identities including empowered and resistant mothering roles. By offering women alternative narratives that normalize the grief process around identity loss and transition, women can reconstruct new meanings and directions that include an understanding of mothering as work, as a stage of

development, as a single identity among their many identities, and as an opportunity to influence how their children will respond to the social construction of their own identities.

CHAPTER IV

Synthesis and Implications

This project came about as the result of a need to examine the influence that the motherhood role has had on my personal identity development. Additionally, I felt urgency in my pursuit of this understanding as I began counselling women who presented with mothering issues. As part of a counselling team which practices from a post-modern, social construction, feminist perspective, I was surprised to learn how prolific certain motherhood ideas were even among professional women who I consider to be critical thinkers and whose opinions I immensely respect. During this project I came to realize that myths such as those relating to the biological naturalness of motherhood, motherhood as a choice, and beliefs about the benefits of intense mothering, had guided many of the interventions that had been prescribed to clients. Examining how my own assumptions have been formed has allowed me to approach female clients from a new perspective. Introducing options of identity loss, grief, and the reconstruction of meanings, have not only empowered me as a mother but also allowed me to model authenticity, safety, and acceptance to my clients.

Tracing the history of motherhood was an important aspect of this project as it increased my understanding of how the definition of motherhood has been challenged, changed, and applied across time. I also took the opportunity to investigate this learning in discussions with women from different generations. I was amazed at the unique perspectives of women who had been at the center of the various incarnations of the motherhood ideal. I am also fortunate to still have both my grandmothers and my mother as part of my life allowing me to take advantage of their experiences on these subjects. Having gained a grasp of the historical context of the social construction of motherhood from the literature, I then compared these findings with the

anecdotal experiences of the three generations of women in my own family. This not only offered insight into how the daily lives of these women were impacted by those constructions, but allowed me to understand how I had become the women and mother that I am. These new understandings have opened my mind and heart to the women who came before me, as well as proving a stronger and renewed determination to be authentic and empowered in all of my identity roles.

The theoretical foundations section of this project afforded me the opportunity to re-evaluate the theories that inform my beliefs and counselling strategies. Having initially believed that I had a thorough hold on the assumptions on which I based my counselling approach, I was pleased to be reminded of the importance of continued examination of one's own beliefs. Many of the articles which make up the body of the literature review section of this project offered new insights into how the theories of post-modernism, social construction and feminism are currently being applied to different models and intervention strategies. During the development of the theoretical foundations section of this project, I was challenged to explore my assumptions at a deeper level. This came about in part as a consequence of having to put into writing my understandings of the various theories discussed.

Choosing to examine the topic of motherhood from a post-modern perspective may be interpreted as both a strength and a weakness of this project. Adopting a specific set of theories in which to view the motherhood role resulted in the identification of health implications and interventions from a limited range of available literature and consequently many alternative viewpoints and counselling techniques were excluded. Future research is needed to address motherhood issues by expanding the theoretical foundations in order to compare and contrast how the definition of motherhood is understood from various theoretical positions. For example,

post-modern theories, feminist theories, and identity theories were chosen for this project because these are the theories which most closely align with my own theoretical foundations. Filtering the information obtained in this project through a post-modern lens may be interpreted as having biased the research results and conclusions, or conversely may be viewed as remaining authentic in the research process. It is my belief that whether acting as a counsellor or as a researcher, it is not easily possible to be removed from the values and beliefs which form an individual's identity. However, it is important to make public the assumptions that are informing the conclusions on which an individual bases their analysis and conclusions.

Witnessing how the social construction of motherhood has shaped the motherhood role over time, I am reminded that my current adherence to post-modern ideology are also the result of the historical context in which the theories were created. As with all of social constructions these currently agreed upon meanings have the potential to be reconstructed into alternative narratives. My attraction to the ideas put forth in theories of social construction arises from the view that meanings are created and can therefore be recreated. I consider that this ideological view proposes a hope filled position for the potential of both personal and societal change which are two of the fundamental concepts at the core of my counselling beliefs.

The culmination of this project is a pamphlet aimed at informing and educating women about how the social construction of motherhood has and continues to impact how women carry out their role as mothers (see Appendix A). Although the pamphlet is intended for dissemination through counselling agencies, healthcare facilities, and other organizations commonly accessed by women seeking support it could easily be transferable to any number of settings that women might attend including hospitals, play groups, coffee shops, educational institutions, and almost anywhere else. Information contained in the pamphlet may serve as a starting point for

discussions about motherhood in the hope that through such discussions women can be empowered to resist dominant discourses and create new narratives defined for and by the women whose lives are directly impacted through the social construction of motherhood.

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Appendix A

NATURAL MOTHERHOOD?

Feeling that you are failing in your role as a mother?

Not living up to the standards of other mothers at the playground?

Struggling to raise the perfect child?

Feeling guilty about wanting to be more than just a mother?

Don't feel that you can discuss these feelings with anyone?

When motherhood is thought to be a natural part of a woman's identity, women who believe they are different from the good mother images portrayed in the mass media may be left feeling as though they have failed at motherhood, failed their children, and failed society.

Since women are biologically equipped to give birth it is often assumed that motherhood is a role meant for women and the skills and duties attached to being a mother must also be natural. How many of us have ever stopped to consider what is natural about the work involved in the duties of motherhood.

WOULD THE IDEAL MOTHER PLEASE STAND UP

Where did this ideal image of motherhood come from?

Research indicates that motherhood, like many of women's roles, has been defined and controlled by institutions such as politics, religion, and other institutions largely controlled by men. What it means to be the perfect mother is a reflection of what society tells us this should be. The result is that the definition of motherhood has changed over time and will continue to change and be influenced by factors which are largely external to women's lives and realities.

Johnston, D., & Swanson, D. (2007). Cognitive acrobatics in construction of worker-mother identity. Sex Roles, 57, 447-459.

Unfortunately, women have not been in the positions of power within these institutions and have historically had little input into how the role of motherhood is defined. A big problem is that many women accept that the duties of motherhood are biologically based and assume that there is no possibility for change.

Living up to current definitions of what it means to be the ideal mother requires women to spend every minute of every day managing all aspects of their children's lives. This is called attachment parenting. This style of parenting can consumes women's resources at the expense of having any other identity besides 'mother'. Intense mothering practices may lead to competition between mothers resulting in fewer women being able to rely on each other for support.

HEALTH

When a woman neglects certain aspects of her identity feelings of stress and depression may result. If a woman believes that she is failing to meet the expectations of what it means to be a good mother, feelings of guilt and shame may result. Some women experience feelings of depression after giving birth. For these women the added pressure to be the perfect mother can presist which may lead to ongoing health related issues.

Some mothers live in a constant state of tension attempting to juggle the duties of motherhood, as well as meet the demands of other roles such as partner and career. Juggling is an act that can only be maintained for so long before one of the balls is dropped.

The pressure to be the perfect mother is can be so powerful in society that some women would rather let go of all the other aspects of their lives rather than risk being viewed as having failed at being the perfect mother.

HAVEN'T TIMES CHANGED?

Although the number of opportunities and choices for women has generally increased such as job, career and educational opportunities, many family units are more isolated from the rest of society than ever. The modern world has led to changes in lifestyle which have placed greater distances between family members leading to less support from extended family to help with mothering duties.

Place Agency Contact Information Here

Pamphlet created by Lori Walls
lori.walls@abcounsellored.net

For more information contact the The Association for Research on Mothering websight at: www.yorku.ca/arm for a list of readings on the topic of empowered mothering.

IS CHANGE POSSIBLE?

The first step to making change happen is becoming informed. Becoming informed requires mothers to question rather than accept and then compare themselves to what other people tell them it means to be a good mother. Think critically about who benefits from women believing that the duties of motherhood are natural and cannot be changed.

"Only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours."

Adrienne Rich, 1976

Research shows that the most important step women can take towards changing the definition of motherhood is to engage other mothers in conversations about change. Engaging in open discussions about the mothering experience invites women from all walks of life to share their feelings, validate their experiences, and allows women to give and receive support from other women.

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Appendix B

Suggestions for Counselling Professionals Working With Identity Issues Related to Motherhood

Identity Exploration

- In recognition that mothers' lives are part of larger communities and institutions, create life imprint stories (a timeline of defining influences or events) through words, pictures, or diagrams that represent the past and present influences that these systems have on mothers and how they have impacted and changed with motherhood. Discuss what imprints the mother would like to maintain and what imprints she would like to relinquish or change (adapted from Neimeyer, 1999).
- All people have objects in their lives that reflect their identity such as photographs of special people or places, a personal journal, favorite painting, or mementos which may result from a hobby. Work with the mother to devise a way for her to have objects which link the mother's past identity to the present circumstances as a means of reminding the mother of what aspects of her identity she would like to carry forward into the future (adapted from Neimeyer, 1999).
- Explore with mothers the idea of motherhood as a matrix of tensions rather than being situated in the linear polarities of good versus bad motherhood roles. This may include activities such as creating a collage to visually represent the many directions mothers are pulled in regard to the expectations of motherhood (adapted from Oberman & Josselson, 1996).

- Help mothers develop an understanding about how the current definition of motherhood has come to dominance based on institutional actions that have exploited a collective identity for the benefit of maintaining idealized constructions of motherhood.
- Discuss how constructions of motherhood have changed from one generation to the next focusing on the woman's own family situation and extending to larger influences in society.
- Explore "not good enough" self talk and discuss the self talk in relation to how criteria set out by unrealistic social standards and culture punishes women for not appearing perfect.
- Discuss empowering possibilities of mothering such as standing up to others' ideas and advice regarding motherhood.
- Encourage self development by creating a pie chart containing multiple areas of development relevant to the mother which may include family, school, work, physical development, spiritual development, and emotional development. Encourage the mother to plan activities in all areas of her life.

Grief and Loss

- Some mothers have difficulty expressing how loss has impacted their lives. Encourage mothers to use metaphoric images, poetry, or other creative forms of expression to reconstruct the meanings of their loss (adapted from Neimeyer, 1999).
- Introduce the concept of grief and discuss how grief may be related to what the mother is experiencing. If grief fits for the mother, validate the loss and acknowledge that the grief may not be socially recognized or legitimated (adapted from Lenhardt, 1997).

- Encourage journaling about feelings, fears, expectations, and any other topic that the mother may feel is contributing to the presenting concern (adapted from Neimeyer, 1999).
- Normalize the grief process by informing mothers about grief and loss. Explain how these feelings are an expected and appropriate reaction to all forms of change.
- Work with mothers to identify healthy coping strategies to deal with feelings of stress and depression.