

The Public–Private Paradox: An existential exploration of mothers in society

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Abstract

There is a tension for mothers between their own private experiences of motherhood and societal expectations. This paper explores this private-public paradox, elucidating how societal discourse has reduced mothers to silence and explores the difficulties mothers face in voicing their own experience if it is contrary to societal norms. Existential themes on this topic are explored and the author contends that an examination of the paradox from an existential perspective will develop a new understanding of mothers and practitioners. This new understanding will help mothers make sense of their own motherhood experience and enable women to find their own voice.

Key words: *Motherhood, Maternal Roles, Existential Therapy, Motherhood Myths*

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There is an inevitable tension for mothers in Western society, between the very private experience of becoming, and being a mother with the very public expectations of society, which are prevalent in the social discourse around motherhood today. This is not a particularly new area of concern for women, and feminist authors have been describing and discussing how the public and private spheres of motherhood collide for some 70 years (see for example, de Beauvoir, 1997; Oakley, 1987; Price, 1988; Rossiter, 1988; and Kitzinger, 1992). The aim of this paper, therefore, is to highlight how societal discourse impacts, and can contribute to, the existential crisis of motherhood. There will also be an exploration of how existential therapy can offer a new understanding of this predicament as a way of navigating the potential pitfalls that this will inevitably bring.

Mothers come under a great deal of scrutiny in the public domain. Societal views, values and beliefs cover everything from the actual birth experience, baby weight, postpartum body size and shape, feeding and sleeping routines. But it also extends implicitly to other aspects too, such as toys: wooden vs plastic; nappies: cloth vs disposable; educating pre-schoolers vs allowing them to discover the world through play. These are just a few of the lines of discourse that mothers face in their daily lives. As Sartre (1943) stated, everything has to be chosen in life; but for the mother each choice comes with a multitude of opinions, judgements and values, which are handed out by those around them, experts and society in general. This inevitably adds a further burden to mothers who are already grappling with coming to terms with how their life has changed in addition to attending to all the practical demands of

looking after a small infant.

The Silence of the Maternal Role

One of the major influences that society has on women concerns the role of mother. Initially feminists were interested in how this role kept women in a subservient position in a patriarchal society. Kristeva (1987) was particularly vocal in her argument that both science and Christianity, the two main discourses on maternity in society, were inadequate to describe the maternal experience. Both discourses, she believed, reduced the woman to silence – Christianity, through its portrayal of the mother as an empty vessel through which Christ was born; and science through its assertion that maternity is a natural, pre-social and biological process in which the mother plays a passive role. Simone de Beauvoir (1997) took a similar view in her renowned book *The Second Sex*. She noted that mothers became subsumed by their role and struggled to keep a sense of themselves due to a lack of external points of reference, i.e. roles or connections outside of the home. De Beauvoir highlighted the self-perpetuating cycle that women become part of: being based in the home the mother is unable to raise herself above her motherhood role and affirm herself as an individual. Thus society only sees the woman as a mother rather than an individual; and so, the cycle continues. De Beauvoir believed that society's views can only be changed if women find their collective voice to challenge these ideologies.

Both De Beauvoir and Kristeva argue that women are reduced to their role of 'mother' and in doing so become reduced to silence; either through their own lack of expression or by being suppressed by the dominant discourses in society. Latterly, feminists have focused on what has been termed the 'myth of motherhood', extending Kristeva's critique of the scientific, biological basis for motherhood. Oakley expounded on how the myth of motherhood – that children need mothers, mothers need children and all women need to be mothers (Oakley, 1987: 186) – is perpetuated in Western

societies. Oakley argues that this myth is generated through socialisation and has no biological basis. She believes that 'the desire for motherhood is culturally induced, and the ability to mother is learnt' (ibid., 1987: 201). In fact, Oakley contends that the biological aspects of motherhood, i.e. pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding, have been actively suppressed, so that the reality of childrearing bears little resemblance to the idealised vision of what motherhood entails. Oakley believes that Western women are completely unprepared for the actual experience of motherhood, particularly as motherhood is seen as 'an area in which the greatest life satisfactions can be found' (ibid., 1987:197). This mismatch between expectations and reality can understandably lead to feelings of ambivalence.

The silence that surrounds women, Rossiter (1988) believes, has the effect of keeping women in the private sphere of society and this effectively isolates women. Rossiter argues that there is an intrinsic link in society between mothering and a woman's reproductive abilities. However, if we disconnect the two then it becomes clear how mothering concepts are, and continue to be, socially constructed, rather than an inherent essence of being a woman. O'Reilly agrees and suggests that the word 'mother' needs to be considered a verb rather than a noun: in this way 'the work of mothering is rendered separate from the identity of mother' (O'Reilly, 2010: 27) and can therefore be undertaken by either sex.

The Mask of Silence

What is intriguing is how mothers themselves appear to have accepted and are perpetuating the myths surrounding motherhood. It seems surprising that in this day and age women are not actively challenging these myths. However the *mask of silence*, described by Figs (1998), Maushart (1999), Wolf (2001) and Douglas and Michaels (2004), may offer an explanation for this. These authors describe how mothers are reducing themselves to silence by not talking about their motherhood experiences or the difficulties they are encountering. This mask

of silence extends from birth and covers the entire child rearing process. Through not speaking out about their experiences and challenging these societal discourses, mothers are implicitly affirming the myth that motherhood is a natural, simple and wonderful experience. Douglas and Michaels highlight how this view is maintained by what they term the 'maternal media', which produces a constant stream of 'advice, programming and marketing' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004:7) to mothers. This media fundamentally shapes the way mothers feel about their relationships to their children but also to themselves. Maushart (1999) contends that feminism has actually colluded in this myth. By advocating mothers' rights to return to work after childbirth, this has in turn demeaned the motherhood role further and has created the notion of the 'have it all mother': that mothers can be successful at everything, a career and a family. In doing so it also created what became known as the 'mommy wars', pitting stay-at-home-mums (SAHMs) against working mothers (Hays, 1996), where both groups experience guilt and a sense of lack in what they have chosen. This emphasis creates an expectation of success for women and for those who are struggling, this is then experienced as failure. The mask of silence therefore hides the daily struggles and difficulties that all mothers experience as they try to project an image of being successful and coping to the world.

The 'Good' Mother

In addition to this there has been a plethora of psychological research which, to a certain degree, has confirmed the concept of a 'good mother'. Caplan (2000) notes how this research has demonstrated how poor mothering can affect a child both psychologically and emotionally. This notion also hands over total responsibility of the parenting to the mother. Price (1988) believes that the 'good mother' burdens mothers with unrealistic expectations, that they should be constantly available and putting their babies first. This has the effect of creating a discourse for mothers that they have to be successful and good because if

they struggle, not only will they have failed as a mother, but may have caused some psychological or emotional damage to their child. It is hard for mothers to admit that they are not coping for fear of being labelled a 'bad mother' and what that might bring. Price believes that 'it is not the failure, but the guilt and ensuing depression that harms mother and baby' (Price, 1988: 129). Badinter suggests moving away from the concept of the 'good mother' to a 'tolerant and blame-free' attitude towards mothering (Badinter, 2010: 167). This echoes Winnicott's (1964) notion of the 'good enough mother' which Price describes as 'mothering that responds to enough of the baby's needs to allow that child a secure psychological base from which to develop its personality' (Price, 1988: 128). However, it seems that the focus would be better placed on the mother's intentions rather than her actions. If the mother's intentions are good, then she will make the best possible choice that she can in that moment, based on the situation she finds herself in.

The concept of the 'good mother', in conjunction with the silence that surrounds mothers, has had the effect of creating the paradox that women are caught up in. In order to challenge these discourses and concepts, mothers would need to start to express their true experiences of motherhood and how they live their daily lives, both the good experiences and the more difficult ones. Not in a way that suggests there is a right and a wrong way to mother, but rather in a way that allows women an opportunity to see the multitude of different experiences and the reality of motherhood. Giving women a more realistic representation of being a mother will help them manage their expectations and give them more choice in the way they choose to live their lives.

An Existential Understanding

One reason that mothers aren't able to challenge these ideals is that motherhood is a period of intense vulnerability for the mother (Miller, 2005). The mother's life has been transformed in ways that are only possible to see once the baby has been

born. Arnold-Baker's (2015) research demonstrated that on every dimension of existence the mother's life has been affected. There is no dimension of the mother's life that has not undergone some change, adaptation or challenge. Physically, the mother's body changes dramatically during pregnancy, and postnatally due to breastfeeding. But other aspects of the physical dimension, such as the experience of time and temporality, have also changed. Mothers live mainly in the present and time becomes focused on feeding patterns and their babies' physical and emotional needs (Arnold-Baker, 2015). In the social dimension the mother's relationships with others change. She takes on a new role – mother, and this will impact on how the mother interacts with her friends and family but importantly how being a mother will alter her relationship with her own mother and partner. The most notable changes to the mother occur in the personal dimension, where the mother is integrating her new experiences into a new sense of herself.

Finally, the mother will also be grappling with a new sense of purpose and priority in the spiritual dimension. The meaning that she had attributed to her life changes with the focus now on her baby and the family she is creating. When viewing the impact that social discourse has on motherhood from a 'four worlds' perspective (Binswanger, 1946; van Deurzen-Smith, 1988), the complex interactions that occur between the mother and society are highlighted. It comes at a time when a woman is at her most vulnerable, due to the shifts that are occurring in all areas of her life. Societal discourse, as has already been demonstrated, creates an image or images of 'mother' which carry with them a set of assumptions or expectations for the mother. The difficulty that arises for mothers is being able to reconcile these concepts of 'mother' to their actual experience. This process of reconciliation may account for the mother's silence and the inability to state vocally her own experience, particularly if it is contrary to the main cultural narrative.

Motherhood Identity

Central to this problem is how mothers develop a sense of themselves as mothers. Urwin (2007) describes how early motherhood represents a time when the mother has lost her bearings in life and feels confusion over her identity. Urwin conceptualises this as a time of 'existential loneliness'. Arnold-Baker (2015) found that mothers had contradictory feelings about being a mother, on the one hand 'not feeling like a mother', but on the other hand discovering that their whole life, focus and energy are directed towards their baby in an 'all-encompassing' way.

From an existential perspective the self is not a solid, stable entity which exists over time (van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2005, 2018); instead it is a process of becoming (Heidegger, 1962). Sartre (1943) believed that 'existence precedes essence', and this notion demonstrates how we gain a sense of ourselves. We first must live, interact and experience life and through this we gain a sense of who we are. From this perspective, therefore, our sense of self is more fluid and flexible; it builds as we experience more and adapts to the situations that we find ourselves in. This notion of identity formation in motherhood has been well documented and researched (Deutsch et al., 1988; Smith, 1994; Stern, 1995; Weaver and Ussher, 1997; Smith, 1999; Bailey, 1999; Blumenthal, 1999; Stadlen, 2005; Wetherell, 2009 and Laney et al., 2014). Stern describes how a mother needs to 'transform and reorganise her self-identity' (1995:180). Miller believes this to be a gradual process that develops out of the practical aspects of motherhood. This confirms an existential position that we develop a sense of ourselves through how we live and interact. In fact, Miller states that birth and early motherhood represent an ontological shift and a narrative change for the mother (Miller, 2005: 110). Smith's (1994) research found that mothers construct a number of narratives which are often contradictory. He believed that a new identity is developed through a process of retrospection and reconstruction. In order to minimise the impact of the huge change

women experienced becoming mothers, there was a psychological need, Smith believed, for them to create a sense of constancy and order. There is agreement between researchers that motherhood identity is a 'renewal of personal narratives' (Bailey, 1999), and co-created in collaboration with others (Blumenthal, 1999). These studies have highlighted how the transition to motherhood involves a complex re-evaluation of the mother's identity where she incorporates her new experiences of being a mother into a new identity. Therefore, rather than the mother losing her 'old' identity, her identity expands (Laney et al., 2014), and new aspects are added.

When we consider motherhood identity in terms of personal narratives then it is clear that it will not only be the mother's experiences that will have an impact on her identity, but her views and beliefs about motherhood will also have an effect. Stern stressed how cultural issues had an impact on the motherhood identity and in particular the high value that is placed on the maternal role by Western society.

Freedom

Freedom is another existential tension that involves a complex relation between the mother, her baby and society at large. Butterfield (2010) highlights the paradoxical nature of the maternal experience – that mothers can be intensely bound to another, their baby, and yet at the same time are free. Taking a Sartrean position (1943) that we are fundamentally free and can choose how to live our lives, Butterfield posits that the notion of an 'ideal mother' is a pure social construction. This is, she argues, 'because of our fundamental freedom, we are always more than and other than the identities we possess and the roles we play' (Butterfield, 2010: 68). Butterfield believes that motherhood is ambiguous: we are both individual and social, but we are also both free and determined. It is therefore up to the individual mother to decide, or choose, what being a mother means to her and how she will live that identity. As it is through our experiences that we can give value

and meaning to our lives. Butterfield argues that the concept of mother as someone who is selfless and devoted should be rejected and replaced with a more realistic expectation that mothers are a work in progress and that 'mothering' is just one of the many factors in her own narrative development' (ibid., 2010: 74).

The Responsibility of Motherhood

Taking Sartre's concept of freedom further, i.e. that if we have free will, and therefore freedom, then we are responsible for the life that we lead and the person we become. It is this aspect of freedom that becomes acutely visible to new mothers. Mothers are overly aware of the responsibility they hold towards their new-born child. This responsibility is not limited to the care of a vulnerable, dependent baby, but the responsibility extends to all choices that the mother must make. Arnold-Baker (2015) found that the mothers in her research were aware of the burden of responsibility that they faced for all their choices and the worry of how these choices might impact on their child as they grew up. Stern (1995) also noted that the ultimate responsibility for the baby was placed on the mother and yet despite the initial support mothers gained in the early stages of motherhood, there was no training or further support given to help mothers fulfil their maternal role easily or well. Sartre's philosophy on freedom and responsibility centred on the individual being wholly responsible for themselves but he did not consider the situation where individuals become totally responsible for another, as in the case of mothers or other female carers. In this situation, mothers have to make choices for another as if it were for themselves. But whereas from a Sartrean view we take responsibility for our choices, the baby is unable to do this and has to bear the consequences of the mother's choices. This places an extra burden on those who do the caring, and it doubles their amount of responsibility.

Confronting the Unknown

Women often report that becoming a mother involves entering the unknown (Arnold-Baker,

2015). The reality of the mother's life is difficult to imagine or prepare for before the birth and many women feel at a loss. Their familiar lives, in which they often felt competent, in charge and in control, are no longer possible. They often feel unskilled and unknowledgeable. To overcome this feeling of unknowing in their private world, women actively seek out information available in the public domain. Deutsch et al. (1988) showed how women used this to help them construct an identity for themselves before it was replaced by direct experience. They termed this 'self-socialization'. Expanding this idea further can demonstrate how societal discourse and maternal media contribute to identity construction. When women feel a sense of being in the unknown, they will look at the information that surrounds them, actively seeking it out, through talking to others, reading books or magazines and searching the internet. This information helps them to develop a sense or image of motherhood and what being a mother entails. It also explains why the dominant ideologies around motherhood are not challenged. If mothers feel unconfident, because their sense of themselves as mothers has not been sufficiently developed, they are unlikely to feel confident enough to challenge those dominant societal discourses. This highlights the complex aspects of the private and public paradox. The newness of the experience and the mother's lack of experience forces them to seek knowledge from the public domain, and this information will in turn have an impact on whether they can trust their own experiences or if they need to go along with the information that they have sought.

The They

The paradox that exists between the public and private spheres of motherhood can be understood more clearly when we consider Heidegger's notion of the 'They' and its role in inauthenticity and authenticity. Heidegger (1962) believed that the 'They' represented others in the world in an anonymous fashion. The 'They' includes everyone in the world, including ourselves. The 'They' also represents society and culture and tells us what we

'should' be doing. We can see societal discourse as being transmitted through the 'They'. Mothers will get pulled into a 'They' way of behaving, as they feel unconfident in their choices. In those moments they are inauthentic as they are going along with everyone else, trying to fit in, trying to be a 'good' mother. But mothers will also often feel torn between what they 'should' be doing as determined by others and society and how they feel in the moment with their babies. When mothers allow themselves to make choices that are good for themselves and their babies then they interact as individuals and act in more authentic ways. They are also resolute (Heidegger, 1962) in these moments, seeing their life stretched out in front of them towards their death. They become more aware of their existence (Arnold-Baker, 2015), their responsibility and the consequences of their choices and they try to make the best possible choices that they can in those moments. But mothers continue to fall back into inauthentic modes as they get caught up in being a 'They' self once again. As mothers become more confident in their mothering, they are more able to make decisions that are good for them as individuals rather than choosing to go along with what they feel they 'should' be doing.

Existential Therapy

Existential therapy can offer women a new perspective on being a mother. It will enable them to consider the subtle ways in which the private and the public spheres interact and influence the mother's experience. The therapy will focus on how mothers create a sense of themselves through their experiences and how this is a continuing process: a process of becoming.

The existential therapist will also challenge the mother's expectations, enabling mothers to explore realistic expectations, that are based on their experience, rather than idealised notions that they have gained from society or from others around them. This gap between the mother's expectations and their actual experience often causes the most


distress for mothers as they struggle with a sense of failure. When mothers are able to connect with their direct motherhood experience and understand mothering as the development of a relationship between mother and child rather than something that is 'done', then mothers are able to become more confident in themselves. Stadlen (2005) in her book *What Mothers Do* highlights how the focused attention mothers have towards their babies enables them, from early on, to 'know' their babies. Whilst mothering may seem an unknown quantity for many new mothers, this knowledge, focused attention, and wanting to make the best choices for their baby means that mothers really do know what is best for their babies. This is not due to maternal instinct but through the very act of connecting deeply with their babies. This deep connection, likened to Buber's 'I-Thou' (Buber, 2000; Arnold-Baker, 2015), comes through really trying to understand the other. It is where two people meet in a completely open way, where they are able to fully experience each other and a deep understanding flows between them. When we start to think about caring for an infant in terms of relationship, then the concept of 'mother' changes. As with any relationship it is unique to the individuals that form it, rather than being a standardised image to conform to. When mothers begin to think of their mothering in relationship terms, they become empowered, they can begin to see mothering in a new way – not a mystery to be revealed but a connection to be developed. When mothers are asked to consider what they *do* know rather than what they *don't*, it enables them to feel more confident in their mothering choices.

The wholistic nature of existential therapy means that it can take a multidimensional view of motherhood and therefore help women address the private–public paradox. It can allow women to explore the interplay of societal pressures, and their social relationships on their personal identity and how these influence the mother's values and beliefs. All these aspects will feed into the mother's expectations of, and for, herself. Existential therapy

will allow the mother to unpack the complex interaction of these aspects of motherhood. Thinking deeply about these various elements will help mothers make active, individual choices that are unique to themselves and their babies. The existential crisis that is provoked by motherhood can thus be elucidated more fully and mothers are able to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their existence. This exploration will inevitably lead to mothers finding more meaningful ways of meeting the challenge that motherhood brings and may enable mothers to create a new motherhood discourse based on direct experience.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to elucidate the impact of societal discourse on motherhood and to highlight the paradoxical interplay between the private experience of being a mother with public expectations. It was shown that views and concepts around motherhood are often left unchallenged as mothers struggle to speak out about their own experiences if they are contrary to popular beliefs on motherhood. Existential therapy was shown to offer a new perspective on this paradox, not to offer a solution, but rather to explicate its complexity in order to gain a deeper understanding of the paradoxical nature of the motherhood experience. By taking an existential perspective on motherhood, it can be seen how motherhood has an impact on all areas of a woman's life. These changes coupled with feelings of vulnerability which come from feeling unskilled and unconfident in their motherhood abilities mean that the outdated views around motherhood are left unchallenged. Existential therapy can enable women to find their voice and to give them the psychological and emotional space to

explore these differing discourses to be able to find their own. 



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