

# **Maternal Studies: Beyond the Mother and the Child**

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Human subjectivity, ethics, autonomy, gender – from a psychoanalytic perspective, doesn't everything start with the mother? Studying the maternal (the mother, the child, and their relational attachment) becomes a starting point for understanding both subjectivity and autonomy. It could be argued that being an autonomous adult means precisely that mothering is no longer needed. But if we understand autonomy as a process that takes into account relational unconscious dynamics and their entanglements as the way through which one also attempts to know oneself, then providing a space for the other's separate and autonomous living which was once a part of maternal provision, continues to represent what we all need from the other, and the very process through which we also relate. Maternal studies could be described beyond the study of the actual mothering of a child, as the study of the way we relate and separate, and, in our adult life, the way we negotiate and re-enact our selves through the puzzling unconscious and fantasy roles of mother, child, self and other, as well as all third terms that intervene between them. Maternal studies, in a broad understanding of the term, is somewhat the 'mother' of all (other) themes in psychoanalytic and psychosocial studies; the idea of the maternal breaks free from the mother-child couple as if needed as a resource and means to live our life as adults; that is, as supposedly autonomous subjects.

'Prior to sexuality as the unacceptable there was helplessness. Dependence was the first thing, before good and evil' (Phillips 1988, p.7). The maternal, I think, is evoked as the answer to human dependence – doesn't it signify a highly specific and perhaps indescribable ('unacceptable') stance that involves taking care of another person, someone utterly dependent and vulnerable, a child? And can this stance be separated from a wish (demand) for such mothering, and our identifications with such a child? Doesn't the image of the mother evoke the image of the child in an (uncomfortable) reversal of Winnicott's famous statement about there being no such thing as a baby (without a mother)? Feminist theorists have been critical of classic object-relational psychoanalytic developmental theories that persistently focus on the perspective of the child. But we might be able to explore what this persistent perspective as an ideal can tell us of mothering as an expression of the wished-for-mothering that each of us would perhaps like to have received, and incite a theory of what we are able to do with this wish, in order to find

within it the possibility for intersubjective exchange that would support autonomous subjects in relationship.

The mother in relational psychoanalytic understanding is so important in her potential support of the child, that it has been argued that the focus on the child subtly erases maternal subjectivity. Lisa Baraitser shows, for example, as did some feminist psychoanalytic writers before her (i.e., Benjamin 1988; Bassin et al. 1994), that the classical object relations psychoanalytic view of the mother moves between the mother as a function in the development of the child (Klein) to a Winnicottian idealised active and actual mother who is, however, struggling under the weight of the child's requirements for holding and mirroring, and 'failing' in order to achieve that 'just good-enoughness' that is in fact a model of perfection (Baraitser 2009). Not only is she the main supportive foundation in the child's development, the mother is a necessary constituent and transformer of the child's nascent self (Kohut 1971; Bollas 1987). We might even say that the mother's perspective slips out of her own focus in these moments, as she focuses on the child. Critiques from several feminist psychoanalytic writers have attempted in different ways to rethink maternal subjectivity through the task of managing and processing the ambivalence in relation to the child and maintaining a mother's life beyond this defining relation, as well as the importance of the child's recognition of her (Benjamin 1988; Bassin 1994; Ruddick 1994; Parker 2005; Baraitser 2006). Yet, Baraitser also offers the idea that motherhood as the encounter with the child's otherness can generate something new for/within the mother's *own* self; she puts back the active agency in this maternal 'slip' of focus, where the ability to attend to another person's needs becomes an expression of (maternal) creative capacity. Dependency is responded to by something active and autonomous, despite, like any creative bearing, being also difficult. A maternal stance involves surviving destructiveness, tolerating ambivalence and using it creatively (Parker 2005), but it is the capacity to bear oneself in the process, on behalf of the other, that can be described as autonomous, ethical and creative.

The stubborn return to the perspective of the child might also be seen as a narcissistic need of the child-now-adult. Perhaps, outside the actual mother-child relationship, maternal studies also touches on all of our narcissistic wishful thinking about the perfect maternal environment that the world should provide for every infant (including perhaps the one we have buried within our 'selves') and that would have each one of us cocooned in a Winnicottian perfect holding. Thinking of the relationship that is seen as power-sensitive because of the child's fragile and vulnerable self, there is something in the

quality of the mother's careful holding that is nonetheless able to balance the child's development towards becoming a subject who is on some level able to experience itself as equal within a relationship of two subjectivities. And there is something in the reminiscence of this careful holding, in the projections and identifications that appear on the basis of never abandoned narcissistic injuries and (destructive) phantasies, that at the same time evokes compulsive repetitions in the self as well as allowing for new appropriations and possible transformations of the self through the other (Bollas 1987).

Maternal studies, then, might be something to do with this careful holding, and the possible transformations it can create. It could be thought of as an attempt to understand, as Wendy Hollway does in her work on the capacity to care, the need for care as a *lifelong* intersubjective need that does not end with childhood, and the imperative to explore how the potential capacity to care is given meaning; to look at care as a capacity that, like autonomy, is part of the relational self's ability to engage in intersubjectivity (Hollway 2006). Because the mother-child relation acutely exposes the dependency part of intersubjectivity and the need for care, Hollway sees mothering as a time that re-emphasises the tension between intersubjectivity and differentiated subjectivity for the mother. However, if the need for care (and thus dependency) is considered a lifelong need, adult subjectivity and relating must include the capacity to care for another person, although in an adult intimate bond the need for care might be more unclear, changing, and ambiguously related to. This is another avenue that studies of the maternal can open up for us.

In this ambiguity, which could perhaps be said to imbue what Virginia Goldner calls 'relational dilemmas', mothering, care, and everything maternal is too easily accepted as something pertaining largely or naturally to femininity or women. This, Goldner argues, only makes gender a way out of negotiating the process of difficult relational dilemmas that are created in any adult relationships: a magical marker of an ostensibly clear difference that aims to resolve them in prescribed and rigid ways (Goldner 1991). That is, by assigning responsibility for caring to one person only, this defensively covers over the dependence of another, and influences the dynamics of adult relationship in particular ways.

These ideas make space for meanings of the maternal to be challenged, including its resonances in understanding intersubjectivity in general. Intersubjective space has been thought about as the space where separate subjectivities of two participants in the relationship are both separate and connected, with its origins in the mother-child bond.

That makes, in Fred Alford's words, 'the maternal [...] best conceptualized as that transitional space Winnicott writes about, neither self nor other, not because they are confused, but because no one has to ask' (Alford quoted in Hollway 2006, p.70). Importantly, for Hollway this idea 'also applies to adult-adult settings', including the space where it is 'just not an appropriate question to ask whose feelings and ideas belong to whom' (p.70). What Hollway concludes from relational psychoanalytic theories is then not just that early experiences of relationality characterise adult relationships and generate their passions, but that in adult relationships, too, a space is presumed where the question of the self and the other, and the belonging of the feelings and understandings that exist there, is not an appropriate question to ask – or possible to answer.

Winnicott's ideas imply that the space of subjective experience may collapse if any direct claims are made about its objectivity. Something unquestionable, and perhaps mostly unspeakable, although deeply meaningful, is co-created at the core of this space within every intimate relationship. This might be the closeness that is also at the unspeakable core of the maternal. It is not just that each relational subject is described in psychoanalytic theory as fundamentally opaque to itself, but also as sharing the origin of this opacity with the other. At the core of the intimate space between the self and the other is a momentary experience of oneself through the experience of a relationship with another, where, like a memory of the maternal bond, these experiences do not destroy separate subjectivities but rather enhance their capacities and help to constitute them. Perhaps this is also something that maternal studies can help us explore.

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