

**ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION – PAPER**

## Mothers and Others

Polona Curk (with assistance from Jerneja Curk)

University of Essex, GB  
polona.curk@gmail.com

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The author reflects on some of the papers that were published in *Studies in the Maternal* in the last decade, in particular on the theme of childlessness. She discusses anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's view of communal care for babies and children as a specifically human characteristic that makes us uniquely cooperative. Through relations with 'mothers and others', babies compile a picture of how the social world functions, establishing the basis of capacity for concern, care, and recognition. The paper links these views to Winnicott's and Juul's ideas of relating to others on the basis of equality. It argues that the maternal refers to more than just parenting. It is evoked as the answer to human dependence and suggests a particular way of connecting to (vulnerable) adults, creating a social network of relations.

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*Studies in the Maternal* was born in 2009 when I was finishing my PhD. The theme of the inaugural issue was 'Why study the maternal?'. Not being a mother myself, my contribution to the inaugural issue discussed the maternal as a concept; a container for fantasies that we all carry and through which we learn to understand the world.<sup>1</sup> In my short paper, I argued that 'maternal studies' can thus be described as the 'mother of all other studies', for it describes how we learn to relate, separate, and negotiate with others. Indeed, the maternal extends into adult life both as our continuing actual need for care and support and, as psychoanalysis has it, as an unconscious fantasy template for the way we experience and enact all our other relationships.

Some of the contributors to the first issue extended the theme of the maternal and relationality to think more directly about ethics and establishing the moral self. Their articles raised important questions about sharing in the domestic work, providing care, political struggles,<sup>2</sup> as well as our relationship to dependency, both on personal and socio-political levels.<sup>3</sup>

Ten years later, my motherless-ness has transitioned from what I earlier thought was circumstantial to voluntary. If my thinking before was that it was not yet quite the right time or circumstances for me to have children, or maybe that I was just not quite able to decide,<sup>4</sup> this half-conscious thought process appears to have somewhere along the way returned the result: 'no'. This might suggest that *Studies in the Maternal* was not the most obvious journal to turn to for someone like me. Still, browsing back issues to see what the journal has covered over ten years, and what I might have missed, it has proved a good companion and has given name to some of my childless experiences and other roles. Moreover, it has made me think about the social and political contexts, conditions and impetuses that have underlain my choices, whether I was aware of them or not.

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<sup>1</sup> Curk, P. (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Hollway, W. (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Miller, G. (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Salecl (2010) provides a very good analysis of all possible unconscious reasons for this.

For example, in Shapiro's review of literature on childlessness, it was interesting to read that rather than higher education and/or focus on a career (as one might presuppose), the factors that predispose individuals towards parenthood or voluntary childlessness are often less calculated. Such factors include the perception of a parents' marital happiness and valuing of an egalitarian relationship. Shapiro also points out that such research often neglects voluntary childless men.<sup>5</sup> As someone that was long on the fence about the question of having a child, Shapiro's article makes me think whether I would have made the same decision if my partner of the time had wanted children. Was it, in fact, our relationship's childlessness rather than mine? How do we reinforce or challenge each other's choices in couple relationships, and this particular choice about having a child?

Then there is a question Nina Power asks in her (2014) paper in this journal, whether and how women can ever refuse 'to perpetuate things as they are'.<sup>6</sup> Power is referring specifically to how women maintain the operations of capitalism since, for example, having children currently automatically entails generating workers. But her question made me think about perpetuating 'things as they are' in other, more personal contexts. My view of what is possible in terms of 'affective equality'<sup>7</sup> in couple relationships has been that achieving it is a continuous process often not in favour of women, rather than something one can count on. Having a child in this delicate (im)balance was, in my mind, simply too close to the possibility of slipping into perpetuating certain gendered types of interactions.

There are other topics that the journal has covered in the last ten years that have illuminated many of my experiences, as a daughter, aunt, and partner. Especially, I was struck with Rozsika Parker's quote from a mother: 'I had a baby who refused food and who cried and cried. It tormented me beyond endurance. It was intolerable

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<sup>5</sup> Shapiro, G. (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Power, N. (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Lynch et al. (2009, p. 1) describe affective equality as the aspect of equality concerned with relationships of love, care and solidarity. They argue inequality occurs when burdens and benefits of the work around love, care and solidarity are unequally distributed. In their edited volume on affective inequalities, Juvonen, T., and Kolehmainen, M., (2018) focus on subtle inequalities that are shaped in everyday affective encounters. See also my paper in that volume, Curk, P. (2018).

to feel useless, unloveable and unloved.<sup>8</sup> This statement made me reflect upon my relationship with my mother, in relation to the story she sometimes tells about my childhood. She says that as a baby, I wouldn't eat much, so she used to go to my aunt to feed my little cousin just to feel better that someone takes food from her. This prompted me to think: would my mother in a less traditional society have preferred to take a little longer to decide about parenthood? Would this have helped her with her complicated feelings about motherhood? How are her decisions about parenthood and my own connected?

Another birth took place in 2009: my niece's. When my sister asked me to hold her first newborn when she was just three days old, both having just arrived from the hospital, I remember the overwhelming feeling of awe about this brand new tiny human being. But I remember clearly, too, a moment of feeling surprised that my sister would entrust me with holding what must have been for her the most precious thing on Earth. It turns out that, unknowingly, with this gesture, my sister was enacting something very particular to human beings: a mother's willingness to let others share in the care of her baby. Anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, from whose book 'Mothers and Others' this contribution's title is borrowed, speaks about a particular kind of 'innovation' that took place during the evolution of the human society: a communal care for babies and children that involved fathers, grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, as well as other members of community.<sup>9</sup> Blaffer Hrdy believes that when speaking of secure attachment of the baby, what is relevant is how secure infants feel in relation to *all* the people caring for him or her, rather than just continuous presence of the mother herself. Following research by several anthropologists and psychologists, she concludes that through relationships with their mothers *and* others, babies compile a picture about how our social world functions:

Babies ask, in effect, Is this world filled with people who are going to provide for me and help me survive? Can I count on them to care about me? If the

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<sup>8</sup> Parker (2009) p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Blaffer Hrdy, S. (2011).

answer to those questions is yes, they begin to sense that developing a conscience and a capacity for compassion would be a great idea. If the answer is no, they may then be asking, Can I not afford to count on others? Would I be better off just grabbing what I need, however I can? In this case, empathy, or thinking about others' needs, would be more of a hindrance than a help.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, it is the relationships of communal care that influence what the developing child unconsciously understands are the most practical ways to behave. If the environment is not supportive, then 'being extremely self-centered or selfish, being oblivious to others or lacking in conscience'<sup>11</sup> may develop as adaptive behaviour. In Blaffer Hrdy's view, seeing babies as little egotists that need to be socialized to care about others (creating a civilization based on discontent as Freud would have it)<sup>12</sup> neglects 'other propensities every bit as species-typical'. She reminds us that 'humans are born predisposed to care how they relate to others'.<sup>13</sup>

Blaffer Hrdy understands the circle of primary relationships as being much broader than psychoanalytic or attachment perspectives' focus on the mother and child dyad. Nonetheless, her view that primary relationships are relevant for the development of social and moral capacities is in line with psychoanalytic understanding of the emergence of capacity for concern,<sup>14</sup> care,<sup>15</sup> and mutual recognition.<sup>16</sup> An important part of this view in psychoanalysis has been an emphasis on mutuality, which has influenced the understanding of mothering. In particular, in the last decade, maternal subjectivity and experience has come to be seen as a potential for the mother's transformation through her relationship with her child, rather than just vice versa.<sup>17</sup> The maternal has been described as a powerful, even shocking

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<sup>10</sup> Blaffer Hrdy, S. (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> (Freud, 1930).

<sup>13</sup> Both: Blaffer Hrdy, S. (2011) p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Winnicott, D.W. (1963).

<sup>15</sup> Hollway, W. (2006).

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, J. (1988).

<sup>17</sup> Baraitser, L. (2009).

experience that unruffles the self, but which also provides the opportunity to make oneself anew. Through a response to this 'unruffling', a new (part of) subjectivity is 'called into being' in maternal experience, making it a site for a new understanding of ethics and relationality.

This view of maternal subjectivity and experience offers the possibility of seeing bringing up a child as a dynamic bi-directional process, where both parents and children can develop. As I write this, a news item on the radio announces the death of Jesper Juul, a well-known Scandinavian family therapist and writer on non-authoritarian parenting, who argued precisely that. Despite not having published academic articles because, as he stated, he preferred hands-on pedagogical and social work to academic research, Juul's influence was significant. Google Scholar returns over 1,100 citations of his work in academic papers. I already know about the news, for it has propagated faster than the official reports through the international network Family-lab, which Juul founded in 2007 and of which my sister is a member. Over the last decade, I had heard Juul's name mentioned by her numerous times, when she was trying to make sense of her experiences with her children and find the best way to relate to them. Juul argued that mutual reciprocal learning between parents and children exists naturally. He believed that a child is, from the very beginning, socially responsive and expressive of its own needs; a social creature capable of empathy and looking to understand the social world, just like Blaffer Hrdy has suggested. In Juul's view, children connect to and communicate with the parents' inner selves. The child's 'feedback', especially in difficult moments of high emotional intensity, gives a parent an opportunity to re-address and change their own un-useful, unloving or destructive patterns and to re-establish something better within themselves. Juul sees children as 'teachers' of parents: in the sense that they mirror who the parents are and what they feel.<sup>18</sup>

It seems in line with Juul's methods that I have got to know his work mainly through the network he established, from my sister's reports of the training

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<sup>18</sup> Juul, J. (2011/2001).

she received within the Family lab, where he was often teaching groups of parents personally, via Skype. In this sense, I imagine him to be a kind of contemporary Winnicott, striving to work directly with numerous families. Like Winnicott, Juul argued that learning from a relationship with a child is only possible if a dialogue based on equality is developed. This reminds me of one of Winnicott's memorable paragraphs:

A sign of health in the mind is the ability of one individual to enter imaginatively and accurately into the thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears of another person; and also to allow the other person to do the same to us... When we are face to face with a man, woman or child in our speciality, we are reduced to two human beings of equal status.<sup>19</sup>

Winnicott here wittingly installs the ability to relate to an other as an equal – even if a tiny child – as no less than a sign of one's mental health. As Adam Phillips reads Winnicott, such 'equalist' reciprocity defines the mother's relationship with her child. It is a relationship that invokes illusion and play rather than coercion, which makes such mutual exchange possible.<sup>20</sup> In Winnicott's theory, when we are face-to-face with another we are always reduced to two beings of equal status, regardless of the external terms of the relationship that might classify the dyad in question as a mother and child, analyst and patient, or even something less decisive in our adult relationships. For Winnicott, the existing external terms and identities can be deployed to create equality and reciprocity of two human beings, like his theorized mother does in her relationship with the child.

Winnicott believed that mothers need support. *Studies in the Maternal* repeatedly emphasizes this very fact from various perspectives. Indeed, the need to support mothers is perhaps the journal's biggest concern and contribution.<sup>21</sup> This is important beyond simply the purpose of giving mothers, and through them babies, the

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<sup>19</sup> Winnicott, quoted in: Phillips, A. (1988), p. 12–13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 142.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Thompson, R. (2011); Cox, R. (2011).

best possible circumstances to thrive. Blaffer Hrdy contends that social support was not only crucial to human success but was also what made us uniquely cooperative, and in turn uniquely compassionate; and it is these social attributes that are in her view what makes us uniquely human:

Apart from language, where humankind's uniqueness has never been in serious dispute, the last outstanding distinction between us and other apes involves a curious packet of hypersocial attributes that allow us to monitor the mental states and feelings of others...<sup>22</sup>

Amongst the specifically human characteristics, Blaffer Hrdy lists having a good intuition for the mental experiences of other people. In her view this includes, for example, caring that other people share their mental experiences, having spontaneous impulses to give or care about what others receive, and paying attention to others in both the competing as well as cooperative sphere (our animal relatives pay attention to others only when they are competing). Perhaps some characteristics from psychoanalytic insights, such as a special kind of intense joy in sharing your mind with another,<sup>23</sup> can be added here as a consequence of this unique way of 'mothering' together with others.

It is a nice thought that in caring for a child in various roles, one is part of the circle of community from which the child learns about how our social world functions. It obliges us to think how, in a relationship with a child, we might be able to transform some of our ways and learn about creating a relationship of mutuality and equal status. The maternal, whether we are ourselves parents or not, is evoked as an idea that is all-pervasive in our minds as the answer to human dependence – thinking the maternal influences both our personal patterns and our societies. It suggests a possibility of a particular way of connecting with others, especially a vulnerable other, such as a child, that is self-transforming and joyful. The maternal is, indeed, about mothers *and* others, and the social network of relations in between us.

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<sup>22</sup> Blaffer Hrdy, S. (2011) p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, J. (1988).



## Editor's Note

This contribution to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Studies in the Maternal* were invited by the editorial team. As such they were internally reviewed by the journal's editorial team.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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