Narratives of Motherhood: Voices of Selected South African Women

Sharon van Doorene

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Community-Based Counselling)

University of the Witwatersrand, 2009.
Abstract

The study explored whether South African mothers subscribed to the Western ideology of intensive motherhood and how this ideology was altered or resisted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten working South African mothers with a child under the age of ten. Thematic content analysis revealed that motherhood was largely regarded as synonymous with womanhood, where the inherent and biological ability to bear children rendered the mother responsible for intensive efforts in child-raising. As a result, motherhood was a gendered practice situated within a powerful and normative ideology of inequality. These themes were discussed in the racially stratified and gendered context of South Africa from a feminist perspective. The research concluded with a recommendation that alternative motherhood ideologies, more representative of the diverse contexts and experiences of mothers, are explored.
Declaration

I declare that this research report entitled “Narratives of Motherhood: Voices of Selected South African Women” is my own, unaided work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated by means of complete references. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (Community Based Counselling) at the University of the Witwatersrand. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.
Signed this _____ day of ___________ 2009

_____________________________________

Sharon van Doorene
Acknowledgements

While this research project has only one author, many have contributed to it and hence my heartfelt appreciation is extended to every person who has contributed to its successful completion:

- To Dirk – an outstanding man who has not only walked the difficult path of a husband and father during Masters, but who has freed me to be the mother and woman that I have chosen to be.
- To my boys, Lance and Michael – who have taught me more than any Masters degree and continue to be my delight and vulnerability as I journey in motherhood.
- To my great mothers:
  - My mother who taught me and showed me to be a strong woman, despite what life might bring;
  - My grandmother who epitomizes courage and grace;
  - Carol, who gives so much.
- To my sisters
  - Laurentia, who journeyed with me into womanhood and motherhood, making it lighter;
  - My friends, who have laughed, cried and celebrated with me as we have tried to fathom the mysteries of motherhood and croup.
- The participants who so willingly shared their stories of motherhood: the hopes, the vulnerability, the joy. Without your stories this work would be impossible.
- My supervisor, Dr Vinitha Jithoo. Thank you for your commitment to this research project, your conscientiousness in supporting me through the chaos and enabling me to achieve more than I thought possible.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................ ii
Declaration ................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents ......................................................................................... v

Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................. 1

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature .......... 7
  2.1 Constructing motherhood ................................................................. 7
  2.2 Motherhood and Feminist Research .............................................. 15
  2.3 Theorising motherhood .................................................................. 17
  2.4 The ideology of intensive motherhood .......................................... 23
  2.5 Implications of a hegemonic motherhood ideology based on intensive mothering ........................................ 26
  2.6 Experiencing Motherhood ............................................................. 29

Chapter 3: Methodology ........................................................................ 41
  3.1 Research design .............................................................................. 41
  3.2 Procedure ....................................................................................... 42
  3.3 Participants .................................................................................... 42
  3.4 Data Collection ............................................................................... 43
  3.5 Data analysis .................................................................................. 43
  3.6 Reflexivity ..................................................................................... 45
  3.7 Ethical Considerations .................................................................... 47

Chapter 4: Findings ................................................................................. 49
  4.1 Inherent Motherhood ..................................................................... 49
  4.2 Motherhood is child-centred ........................................................ 52