

Abstract

The thesis offers a dual, complementary focus on the maternal subjectivity of non-disabled mothers raising visibly physically disabled children, and on the process of researching this topic, which was partially inspired by the fact that the researcher is herself a disabled person who is also a mother. Prior literature from the areas of motherhood, disability, and psychoanalysis is brought together to address this twofold focus. There has been only limited psychoanalytic research on the maternal experience of raising a child with a disability, and in particular, a visible physical disability. The embodied and social experience of disability, motherhood, and subjectivity is brought into sharp focus by the visibleness of physical disability. Nine women raising physically disabled children were interviewed, using a method informed by psychoanalytic theory and practice. Given the researcher's physical disability, a prominent intersubjective hue to the study became apparent, coloured by complex engagements between her and the participants, requiring careful navigation. A thread that runs through the study is the way participants "used" the researcher to help them tolerate their difficult emotional experiences in the face of raising their children. Five journal articles constitute the body of the thesis. The discussion considers the emotional discomfort around disability which the mothers are confronted with internally, as well as other people's responses to their children. The identified facets of maternal subjectivity are understood in the context of maternal ambivalence, particularly in maternal experiences of the uncanny (Freud, 1919) and the abject (Kristeva, 1982). The coexistence of these experiences with maternal love is examined, as well as the ways mothers navigated this complex maternal terrain. Implications for understandings of disability, as well as understandings of maternity, are examined.

Keywords: disability; disabled child; intersubjective research; maternal subjectivity; motherhood; mothers; psychoanalysis; visible physical disability