

Theorising and Representing Maternal Realities

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Edited by

Marie Porter and Julie Kelso



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For Jackie Huggins — friend, colleague, mother

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INTRODUCTION

THEORISING AND REPRESENTING MATERNAL ‘REALITIES’

MARIE PORTER AND JULIE KELSO

When women want to escape from exploitation, they do not simply destroy a few ‘prejudices’; they upset the whole set of dominant values — economic, social, moral, sexual. They challenge every theory, every thought, every existing language in that these are monopolised by men only. They question the *very foundation of our social and cultural order*, the organisation of which has been prescribed by the patriarchal system. (Irigaray 1977: 68)

Maternal scholarship must be grounded in maternal experiences, in the work and the ideas of real mothers. We have used the word ‘realities’ because the work in this book focuses directly on mothers’ ‘realities’ and on endeavours to represent and theorise motherhood/mothering experiences in their diversity. The understanding of ‘reality’ has changed since Second Wave feminists first argued for research to be based in ‘reality.’ Previously, when women’s experiences had been researched and theorised at all, it was usually from a male viewpoint — women’s reality interpreted by a man.¹ Most women realized that such knowledge was an inauthentic representation of their experiences (Harding 1991; Code 1988; Tanesini 1999; Caplan 2000).

When Sara Ruddick began writing about her personal experiences of mothering, experiences that were crucial to her development of maternal philosophy, books that presented mothers as intelligent, mature women who carried out their motherwork thoughtfully and capably were rare (1989: 11). The growth in academic research into motherhood/mothering by women, especially by mother-academics, has increased rapidly since 1989. This development of maternal study is occurring internationally, across disciplines, at every academic level and is pursued by researchers of

¹ See, for example, Ehrenreich and English (1978).

all ages. We became aware of this quiet expansion of study when, as doctoral students, we decided to hold a small one day conference in 2001. The conference quickly grew into an international meeting of maternal scholars held over three days.² We have since hosted two other successful and intellectually invigorating maternal-scholarship conferences at the University of Queensland (2005, 2007).

The continued relevance of the use of the concept of ‘reality’ in research and writing on motherhood is validated by a search for motherhood articles on the web. Articles with ‘reality’ in the title are abundant.³ Those scholars carrying out research in the area of motherhood studies are aware that there are many areas of life unexplored from the mother’s perspective on reality — areas in which sexist beliefs, sexist attitudes and sexist behaviour abound. Silvia Finzi, a psychoanalyst, claims that ‘while sexuality has found instruments of cultural expression, maternity [...] has remained unexpressed and unconsidered in our time’ (1996; 3). Maternal experience is thus still trapped in a Symbolic framework that has it seemingly frozen in definite, unchanging and unchangeable patriarchal terms, terms that too often are detrimental to the woman who practises mothering.

Mothering impacts on women in every area of their lives. Once a woman becomes a mother, she is a mother for the rest of her life (whether her child lives as long as she, or not). Her ‘reality’ changes physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially (Bergum 1989; Brown et.al. 1994; Rich 1986; Nicholson 1983). Ruddick (1989) argues that maternal practices inevitably lead mothers to think about their work, and how they do it. Thus motherwork is the outcome of thought, discussion, and review rather than instinct or haphazard actions. Mothers know that from the time of the birth of the first child, the woman, if she does the mothering herself, enters a world in which her work is always changing and challenging. She is caught up in a process that requires her constantly to monitor her infant/child/teenager/young adult/adult, to respond to the unexpected, to cope with changing emotions, both her own and those of her infant/child/teenager/young adult/adult, to respond appropriately to her infant/child/teenager/young adult/adult and, if she has other children, to understand and respond to different needs that different children will have

² Porter, Short and O’Reilly (2005) consists of a selection of the papers from this first conference.

³ For example, LaRocca (2006); Petroff (2007); Killoran (2007); Tiemann (no date); Ponte (no date); Blades (2006).

all throughout their lives (Porter 2006). Usually she is also (still!) doing most of the laundry, the cleaning, the cooking, the shopping and the budgeting. Understandably, mothers usually become efficient, capable people, skilled in communication and with a grounded understanding of the concept of ‘reality.’

Although socio-cultural representations of mothering frequently present the work mothers do as uncomplicated and unchanging, neither representations show the ‘realities’ of mothering (Porter 2006: 133; Ruddick: 31–3). The work that women do in their mothering is frequently complicated. Unfortunately, the devaluing of motherwork lulls ‘becoming’ mothers into a false security. New mothers, especially those women who are professionals or have a successful career, *expect* to be able to cope with mothering effortlessly. After more than three decades of feminism, it is depressing to know that becoming a mother is still a massive life change for most women. Three qualitative studies concentrating on mothers’ reflections about their mothering, one study with Australian women who became mothers in the 1950s/60s, another study with English women who became mothers in the 1970s, and a third study with English women who became mothers in the twenty-first century, all show that few women are prepared for motherhood (Porter 2006; 1981; Miller 2005).

Moreover, the representations of motherhood, and the accompanying expectations of mothers, are in constant flux as they adapt to the changing socio-cultural context (Finkelstein 1988; Marshall H. 1991; Wearing 1984). In Australia, fifty years ago, mothers were deemed to be neglecting their families if they were in the paid work force (Porter 2006: 67–79). They were not allowed to be employed in the public service after marriage and, when they were in employment, their wages were lower than the wage of a man doing the same work. The changes in community attitudes in the mid to late 1960s combined with the advent of the birth control pill, and the rise of second wave feminism, resulted in changes in mothering (Porter 2006: 4–13).

Mothers then were expected to intensively mother because it was considered that separation of the mother and child would result in an anxious child. This belief emerged as an effect of the attachment theory that arose from John Bowlby’s work with traumatized children after the Second World War. (Anne Morris’s critique of that theory in Chapter 8 is enlightening.) Despite these general expectations, the number of mothers participating in paid work increased and family size began to decrease.

A glaring difference between the mothering style of fifty years ago and the present is that motherwork now is often treated as if it does not exist. The good mother in the 1950s/60s had to stay at home with her child. Now women who have just given birth may be asked if they are ‘back at work yet?’ as if having a baby to feed and care for is not work. As Pocock claims, there are ‘mother wars’ between mothers-at-home and mothers in paid work (both part-time and full-time), and endless arguments about what age is suitable or ‘best’ for women to become mothers (2003: 7). It is obvious that, despite the achievements of feminism, mothering is still considered problematic for women on so many different levels (2003: 7). Motherhood/mothering is still a contested area with more research, from all branches of the Academy, needed. The contributors to this book are exploring the experiences of mothers, representing, as closely as possible, how mothers grapple with the practices of motherhood/mothering.

We begin the book with a Chapter on assisted procreation — a subject that would puzzle the majority of our foremothers. Because reliable birth control only became available in 1961, historically, women have been concerned with limiting conception and births, rather than seeking help to achieve a successful pregnancy (Mullins 2000: 133–172; Thurer 1995: 223; Porter 1994: 79–83).

Rhonda Shaw’s exploration of ‘postmodern procreation’, an experience of maternal subjectivity, explores women’s accounts of their participation in the process of donating reproductive material and services. In her work Shaw draws on recent empirical studies concerning ovarian egg donation and surrogate pregnancy arrangements, and on her qualitative research based on New Zealand women who have been involved in these processes. Chapter One highlights the diversity of the issues that have to be considered by all those involved in reproductive technology.

In Chapter Two, Fiona Giles challenges maternal subjectivity in a different way. Would a breast feeding woman be viewed in a new way if breast feeding was a result of induced lactation and adult nursing, rather than a result of becoming a mother? The practice of breastfeeding is legitimated both because breastmilk is said to have the best nutritional value and the physical contact between mother and baby is similarly beneficial. Giles asks: if breast feeding was for pleasure, would such lactation enable an exploration of the erotic potential of breast feeding? She explores the internet to look at adult nursing communities in which such relationships are understood and discussed, and also examines

induced lactation, by both males and females who want to breast feed adopted children. Giles' work challenges the accepted breast feeding assumptions.

The next four chapters focus on problems that result from the representations of the 'good mother' and the 'bad mother.' The judgements made by society in general, by families and even (actually, too often) by the mother herself, in the situation where a mother and/or child cannot 'fit the script', can cause unnecessary harm and distress to women who are already suffering (Caplan 2000; Thurer 1995; Porter 2006: 207–232).

Unfortunately, there are many such groups of mothers who are likely to be mis-represented. Four examples of such marginalised mothers are explored in the next chapters. The first of these chapters focuses on a mother who has a difficult child. Vivienne Muller engages with Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* to highlight the 'good mother'/'bad mother' dichotomy. This book recounts the sad story of Eva, a woman who is not sure she ever wanted a child, and her son Kevin, who is different, who does not conform to the social script for children. Kevin, at sixteen, has killed several people, including his father and sister. One of the issues that emerges from the 'good mother'/'bad mother' dichotomy is that society in general seems to feel free to blame the mother for any defect her child may produce. Seldom is the context in all its forms (social, political, economic, religious and so forth) taken into account. The inference is that mothers should be able to cope and bring their children up successfully even if some mothers know a particular child's needs cannot be met in the home; or if the husband is violent; or if the family is poor; or the mother sick. As Muller reflects, Eva judges herself as lacking the necessary traits to be a good mother despite her best efforts; she blames herself for the disaster that destroys her family.

Anne Else's 'Good Mothers and Other Mothers: representation, division and resistance' outlines how there are contradictory prescriptions for 'good mothers' and 'other mothers' in New Zealand, as there are elsewhere. Sole parent benefits are attacked for undermining these distinctions, whereas adoption is welcomed for reinforcing them. Else observes that some recent feminist theorising proposes that, to undermine these differences between mothers, the stigmatising notion of the 'normal' family should be eliminated by doing away with the 'biologism' or 'genetic essentialism' which privileges motherhood based on birth. As she points out, however, complex connections are created by reproduction,

and maternal subjectivities are not only about choice, but also about knowledge and trust. Recognition and knowledge of these connections provides the necessary basis for understanding, resisting and seeking to change the disempowering and oppressive discourses that divide mothers into good mothers and other mothers.

In 'Just the One?' Helen Bowcock examines another area of motherhood where the mother is likely to be deemed as lacking. Bowcock argues that 'single child' families are frequently judged harshly because experts conclude that 'only' children are spoilt. In post-war England, where the population had been stripped of a generation of young men, women were encouraged to have a number of children. 'Experts' speculated that an only child would have all sorts of difficulties, thus making the mother fearful. Despite half of the interviewees in her study failing to conceive another child, mothers of 'only' children are judged negatively. Bowcock appeals to those who sit in judgment on the mothers of 'only' children, to understand that the choice to have another child may not be available, or the parents may have very good reasons to limit their family to one child.

Another group of mothers who experience criticism are lesbian mothers. Sue Kentlyn concentrates on the mother who 'comes out' in mid-life. She describes the experience as a 'seismic shock' for all concerned. It is especially difficult when there are children involved who are understandably upset with the break-up of their family. In the midst of this general angst, the lesbian mother has to construct a new identity. Kentlyn does not pretend that this road is an easy one to traverse, but, in common with all upheavals in life 'if the mother and children can love and support each other through that process, it can be a unique opportunity that will transform their subjectivities for the rest of their lives.'

We move from lesbian mothers to sole mothers in New Zealand who are receiving welfare in the form of Domestic Purposes Benefit. Sole mothers receiving welfare are a marginalized group of mothers who are usually judged harshly in society. Clare Mariskind's focus is on this group of mothers. She identifies the common themes in their narratives as 'mothering, financial difficulties, encounters with welfare agencies, stress, stigmatisation and stereotyping.' Mariskind argues that the mothers show strength and determination in their resistance to the dominant negative representations. They understand themselves to be mothers who did not choose to be sole parents, but who are doing valuable work as good mothers to their children while they plan for a better future. Patricia Short had a similar outcome when she researched a group of poor mothers. She

found that the mothers viewed themselves as strong, self-reliant and able to endure hardship. These qualities enabled their survival (Short 2005).

Anne Morris has two chapters in this book. Both chapters are concerned with the treatment of mothers who are in need of help. In 'Too Attached to Attachment Theory?' Morris critically assesses attachment theory. This theory has had a strong influence on mothering and on mothers. While some aspects of the theory are of value, other aspects are harmful to the mother. Her needs are ignored. The problems with attachment theory are summed up accurately and concisely in Morris' words:

As we 'the expert' categorise, judge, diagnose and prescribe, we discount our clients' views, their expertise, their knowledge, their worth, their differences, and their lives. We become blind to socio-economic context, class and culture differences. We scrutinise, judge and punish 'them' in ways that we would never accept being treated ourselves.

Mothers use available services that hopefully will support them in coping with problems. If they are further criticised by personnel in such services, instead of being supported, the services that are supposed to help them become another source of problems. Unfortunately, this outcome for mothers seeking help is too common.

In 'Monstrous Mothers and Fearless Fathers: The Dynamics of Maternal Alienation Go Public', Morris exposes another difficulty faced by some mothers who have separated from their husbands and are sharing custody. This problem emerges out of Morris' research into a form of violence that needs to be exposed. The concept 'maternal alienation' is used to describe situations in which perpetrators of abuse deliberately set out to alienate children from their mother. Strategies of persuasion and manipulation are used to convince the children and the general community that the mother was 'mad, malicious and monstrous', while the father was the rational and heroic victim. As service providers became aware of the problem, practices were developed to counter maternal alienation. Once the programme became public, it was attacked by the men's rights groups. In this chapter Morris details the political response and the positive change that resulted from the project.

In 'Musical Mothers: Exploring the 'Realities' of Conducting and Mothering on the Orchestral Podium', Brydie-Leigh Bartleet explores how a woman can be both conductor and mother. As she notes, conducting has been almost exclusively a male occupation and is steeped in patriarchal

ideology. Via ethnographic research, Bartleet explores how women conductors balance both their subjectivities. Bartleet has raised questions that will need to be addressed to enable mothers to combine motherhood with a career in conducting. However, as Bartleet recognizes, the discussion will need to be positive, examining ways that both occupations enrich each other, rather than negatively excluding such mothers. Regrettably, the problem of combining motherhood with a career or other paid work is far from being solved. It is a major issue for mothers and is the issue examined in the final four chapters.

Research on work is a strong thread in the tapestry of this book just as it is a much discussed topic in the general community. What is work? Why is the work that women who are mothering take on not recognised as work? For mothers who want to work outside the home, the question concerns the arrangement of paid work and mothering. Most importantly, what choice do mothers have in following the paths that seem to be open to them? Can we even, realistically, call this ‘choice’ a ‘choice’?

In Australia, if you listen to the media or the politicians, it seems that mothers are given the choice of staying at home with their baby, or returning to paid work either part-time or full-time. In Chapter Ten, Sheree draws on qualitative interviews conducted with twenty-seven women to argue that the popular representation of ‘individual choice’ in arrangements after childbirth is misleading and challenging. Her analyses of her data indicate that, rather than a free choice, the interviewees spoke of complexities and contradictions, thus supporting Pocock’s findings that many mothers’ ‘choices’ are dictated by their context (2003: 166–88). Many interview participants say they have ‘no choice’ and many are acutely constrained when it comes to arranging paid work and family life after childbirth. Women often have to make choices that are far from satisfactory. The results raise issues about gender equity in paid work and family responsibilities, particularly the disadvantage that family responsibilities place on women’s paid work lives. The question of family friendly resources, practices and policies are thus brought into the spotlight.

The rhetoric of choice regarding motherhood, care and paid work is inherently problematic and we need to move beyond the dichotomies of ‘working mothers’ and ‘stay-at-home mothers.’ Again, in common with Pocock’s ideas (2003: 35–7), Cartwright argues that the focus on ‘choice’ steers attention away from policy influence and the implication of structural factors such as the ways in which gender is arranged in society.

The awareness of the implications of structural factors can only be achieved by acknowledging ‘gendered practices’ in the day-to-day workplace and household life as well as in the broader social and welfare policy. Highlighting ‘gender’ on the public policy agenda needs to be stringently pursued. A mother cannot live to the rhythms of the single life, nor can she live according to the rhythms of a male lifestyle if that male (father or not) is free from childcare responsibilities. As Cartwright highlights, the mother needs real choices; the choice to stay at home with her baby; to return to work either part time or full-time; to have flexibility in her paid work so that she may be with her child should the child become ill. To have these choices, paid maternity leave needs to be incorporated into the work structure.

In Chapter Eleven Sharon Abbey offers some hope of such an achievement in her documentation of the experiences of three young women who brought the new dimensions of pregnancy and maternity to their roles as school administrators. In ‘The Maternity Factor: Implications for Career Advancement of Women as School Administrators,’ Abbey recounts how, when the morale of educators in Ontario was at a low point, and the increased demands for accountability caused a mass exodus from leadership positions, these women stepped forward. Their stories are surprisingly positive and their practical advice may be helpful to other young women. As the narratives are deconstructed, issues about masking reality, commitment, isolation, coping strategies, and the negotiation of child-care duties emerge and are addressed. This blending of the boundaries between public and private domains, breaking new ground, brings with it the need to establish new guidelines and alternate procedures to accommodate the unique aspects of maternity. Abbey also questions whether this window of opportunity is slamming shut as the focus shifts to alternative ways to attract young men back into these positions. Was affirmative action for girls and women ever really intended to have a significant impact or was it merely a patriarchal political game intended to placate supporters of the women’s rights movement and subvert its momentum? Will the rhetoric of fear about the feminization of schools re-establish the barriers that keep women out? Will the school principal role remain open to Canadian mothers? These are some of the questions that Abbey’s work raises.

The words ‘motherhood’, ‘mothering’ and ‘motherwork’ are frequently used synonymously. In ‘Mothering or Motherwork?’ Marie Porter argues that it may be beneficial to use the term ‘motherwork’ instead of mothering. By motherwork, she means all the unpaid work done by the

mothers in the years that they are actively mothering. Hence the scope of motherwork is very broad. Although feminists have written about mothering as work and highlighted how mothering requires and develops skills just as happens in paid work, it is not recognised as work in any way that counts in the Western socio-economic system (Oakley 1976; Olson 1981; Cowan 1983; Gieve 1987; DeVault 1991; Pocock 2003; Maher 2004; McKnight, 2005: Ch 7). This lack of recognition is to the detriment of those who do the motherwork. Because the word 'work' is usually interpreted as paid employment, it is inferred that mothers at home who are not in paid employment do not work. Hence motherwork lacks the validation and the legitimation society affords to those people whose work is recognised as contributing to the society, despite the basic necessity and value of motherwork. Nor is there recognition of the skills mothers develop. In doing this work with its varied components, mothers develop diverse and valuable skills, not the least of which is the ability to handle responsibility, to motivate self and others, and to manage time efficiently. The mothers Porter interviewed value their mothering, but feel the evidence that society in general supports what they do is lacking.

In the final chapter, 'Maternal Practice versus Motherguilt: Time to Look at What Mothers Actually Do', JaneMaree Maher also examines the work mothers do. Drawing on women's accounts of their mothering, Maher argues that greater focus on maternal practice offers a critical opportunity to understand what women actually do as mothers and move away from the limiting concept of guilt. Hence the concept of 'motherguilt' obscures both the work that women do as mothers and what is really important in their motherwork. Although contemporary popular mothering literature talks about mothers' guilt and it is assumed that all mothers experience it, interviews conducted with many different women suggest that women are more focused on what they do as mothers. The language of motherguilt is often used by default, thus usually emphasizing what has not been achieved rather than the workload the mother has coped with in her work with children.

The chapters in this book present many different issues that arise out of the research of maternal scholars, and, we would argue, issues that *can only* arise when women interested in maternity listen, think and write *as women*, and perhaps especially if they are mothers. These issues *are* 'realities' for women who mother; they are grounded in maternal experiences. In other words, 'maternal realities' need to be theorized and addressed in socio-cultural contexts, and importantly by women who live as subjects and citizens in those contexts or frameworks. In some instances

the contributor draws attention to problems or potential problems that may arise in her area of research, as Shaw does in Chapter One. In other instances the contributor puts forward a theory for coping with a particular issue, as Morris does in ‘Monstrous Mothers and Fearless Fathers: The dynamics of Maternal Alienation go public.’ Morris goes further with her theoretical ideas. The theory has been trialled and proven to be satisfactory.

Frye argues that, when viewed from the patriarchal perspective a lot of issues women raise appear to be ‘anomalous, discrepant, idiosyncratic, chaotic, “crazy”’ resulting in the experiences being viewed as ‘unintelligible or intelligible only as pathological or degenerate’ (1996: 34). She goes on to argue that a woman tends to trust the master narratives of society rather than her own judgement when she thinks her own experiences are not reflected in the experiences of other women:

It is precisely in the homogeneity of isolation that one cannot see patterns and one remains unintelligible to oneself (39).

We consider that Frye’s claims are particularly pertinent for mothers. Mothers frequently become isolated and/or too ashamed of their perceived ‘failure’ consistently to be the ‘good’ mother, thus feeling too afraid to discuss the issue with other mothers. Isolation can then be damaging. Ruddick makes this point well:

An idealized figure of the Good Mother casts a long shadow on many actual mothers’ lives. Our days include few if any perfect moments, perfect children perfectly cared for. Self-doubts are compounded by others’ promptings. “Experts” can undermine the most self-respecting woman’s confidence [...] Many mothers who live in the Good Mother’s shadow [...] come to feel that their lives are riddled with shameful secrets that even the closest friends can’t share (1989: 31) .

During her interviews with women who became mothers in the 1950s and 1960s, Porter was amazed to find that some mothers still had such ‘secrets.’ When an interviewee revealed a ‘shameful secret’, Porter assured the interviewee that she was not alone, nor different from many other mothers. Giving voice to mothers’ realities is of basic importance. Frye argues that voice is fundamental because the use of the patriarchal voice by men or women cannot represent women’s reality:

It is not possible to articulate friendly, cooperative, reciprocally empowering perceptions of patterns in this voice (1996: 45).

We do not want to hear the ‘ominous baritone of patriarchy’ (Meyers 2001: 17). Rather, we *want and need* to hear from mothers who have bravely discarded master narratives in favour of their own ideas and practices; mothers who seek to speak in their own authentic voices, even if those voices are currently inaudible to most so-called informed ears. To address the very real issues that are evident in mothering, we suggest that mothers need to become more politically active—to insist that our voices be heard by those who have the power to address these current problems for the purpose of a beneficial future.

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CHAPTER ONE

PERMUTATIONS OF ASSISTED REPRODUCTION AND THE CYBORG TROPE

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Introduction

A major focus of the contemporary second wave women's movement in the west has been the demand for the right to control human reproduction through contraceptive choice and the right to abortion. However, reproductive freedom for women does not only entail freedom from reproduction. It also entails the right to reproduce and to parent one's offspring. This includes rights for women whose children have been forcibly taken from them, such as the 'stolen generations' of Indigenous Australian children (see HREOC 1997), and women whose reproductive freedoms have been dictated by the political economy of slavery (see Hill Collins 1990). It also includes reproductive rights for women who have been abused by enforced sterilisation or infanticide campaigns (e.g. in psychiatric institutions or in countries with strict population control policies) (see Rose and Rabinow 2003: 21–27). Additionally, and for several decades now, feminist debates about human reproductive freedoms have not been limited to discussions about birth control methods and procedures that prevent or frustrate conception and pregnancy, but have increasingly focussed on a range of technologies that promote conception, and enhance and extend reproductive possibilities (see Birke et al. 1990; Charlesworth 1995: 125–26).

Michelle Stanworth's (1987) early poststructuralist analysis of motherhood and reproductive technologies is instructive in this regard. In her oft-cited essay, upon which numerous scholars draw (e.g., Kirkman and Dew 2002: 231; Leonard 2003: 75), Stanworth divides the sorts of reproductive technologies feminists are interested in looking at into roughly four groups: fertility control, labour and childbirth management, pregnancy screening and monitoring

technologies, and conceptive technologies (1987: 11).¹ Stanworth describes the fourth group, which includes technologies for overcoming or bypassing infertility, as the ‘most controversial’ and the most ‘high-tech’ (Stanworth 1987: 11). Notwithstanding, the conceptive technologies Stanworth refers to actually exist as a range of bio-technological reproductive permutations. Some of these technologies, such as gestational surrogate pregnancy where *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF) is used, are more high-tech than other conceptive technologies. Traditional surrogate pregnancy, for example, which may only require self-insemination methods, is distinctly low-tech. Moreover, the recent development and use of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) in conjunction with IVF causes a blurring of the distinction between the third and fourth group Stanworth identifies (Shaw 2006).

It is worth noting that some of the technologies in this group conform to conventional cultural ideologies of the family and kinship, and are normally sanctioned as part of what Jon Simons (1996: 181) calls the maternal matrix.² This appears the case for participants in Maureen Baker’s (2004) study of women and men undergoing fertility treatment in New Zealand. Following Jan Cameron’s (1990, 1997) empirical research on why people have children, Baker’s interpretation of interview data from her participants questioned the extent of women’s agency in choosing assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), due to the strong social influence of pronatalist views about femininity and womanhood. In Baker’s view, ‘parenthood represents a deep desire to be “normal” and to fit in with friends and relatives in a pronatalist society that equates marital childbearing with maturity and social inclusion’ (2004: 36). Similarly, Maureen Ryan (2002: 230) has highlighted the capacity of ARTs to ‘overshadow other non-medical methods of family building’ and thus approximate normative conceptions of kinship as based in biology (see Brakman and Scholz 2006). Other ART permutations tend, paradoxically, to confound these ideals, not only enabling older women, single women, lesbian women, and gay men to build families where otherwise they might not have had the opportunity, but forcing people to confront their views about the significance of biology, genetics, and care in experience of parenting.

¹ A recent addition to the third group is foetal surgery.

² See Simons (1996: 199) for a discussion of the constitutive aspects of the maternal matrix.

For feminist analysts, the political question *par excellence* is whether women have gained or lost ownership and control of their bodies with respect to these reproductive technologies and strategies. This issue, and corresponding questions about consent and coercion in the domain of assisted human reproduction (AHR), remain a moot point, despite a discursive explosion drawing attention to problems associated with the impact of ARTs on women's bodies and society generally (see Bell 2006; Leonard 2003: 75–115).

Interestingly, recent studies with women who donate reproductive matter to others indicate that their motivations not only confirm traditional gender ideology regarding an ethic of care and self-sacrifice, but also support the assertion of individual agency and the active construction of moral identity in the course of the donative process (see Goslinga-Roy 2000; Thompson 2001, 2005). Although this may seem counter-intuitive in light of feminist criticism, the suggestion is that donors of reproductive matter are engaged in body projects for themselves and not just others (Shaw 2008).

While these issues are important, the primary focus of this paper is to address the 'life-political' orientation of the latter group of reproductive technologies that Stanworth identifies, particularly as they extend women's freedoms to make decisions about lifestyle choices (Giddens 1991: 214). My aim, therefore, is to discuss the ways in which women who are involved in assisted reproductive strategies understand the practices of which they are a part, against the backdrop of beliefs about the human-technology coupling and the relevance of moral ambivalence in the domain of AHR.

In order to animate the notion of life-politics I am deploying to discuss these issues, I draw on data from several studies undertaken with people who have participated in assisted reproduction. I also draw on data from my own research involving semi-structured in-depth interviews undertaken in New Zealand during 2003 and 2004 with 14 women who have been directly involved in reproductive strategies designed to overcome or bypass another woman's involuntary childlessness.³

³ This research was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Ref. 2002/355) and was funded by the Foundation for Research on Science & Technology (FRST) The names of the research participants in my study are all pseudonyms.

Assisted reproduction and life politics

Assisted reproduction refers to a number of methods or techniques that are used to aid conception and achieve pregnancy. In this paper, the techniques to which I refer are gestational and traditional surrogate pregnancy as well as ovarian egg donation. Gestational (full) surrogate pregnancy involves an arrangement where a woman provides gestational services, but others (usually the intended parents) provide the gametes. Traditional (partial) surrogate pregnancy involves an arrangement where a woman gestates a foetus and provides ovarian eggs for the intended parents. Ovarian egg donation involves the extraction of ova from a donor woman. Once extracted, the ovarian eggs are then fertilised with sperm *in vitro* and transferred to the uterus of the gestational and social mother.

There are several reasons for collapsing these different reproductive strategies. First, women who have offered their services as surrogate mothers sometimes donate ovarian eggs. This is certainly true for women in traditional surrogate pregnancy arrangements. Additionally, although the strategies some woman donors choose depend on the importance they place on biological versus biogenetic relatedness, some women ‘cross over’⁴ from ovarian egg donation to gestational surrogate pregnancy (Shaw 2008) or from gestational to traditional surrogate pregnancy (Ragone 1998). The second reason for foregrounding familial resemblances between these reproductive strategies is that it is difficult to determine with any precision which of the human contributors to the reproductive process have parental rights to the ‘life’ that is created in the process of the reproductive arrangement. The question is whether so-called physiological nature and genetic contribution, or performative aspects of mothering such as nurture and commitment, are determining. The accounts of people involved in assisted human reproduction indicate a variety of perspectives on this issue.

Before turning to an interpretation of the empirical data, it is also worth noting the polysemic meanings of the concept of life politics, which I have borrowed and adapted from Anthony Giddens (1991: 209–213). While my translation of life politics adapts Giddens’ notion, I do not slavishly adhere to Giddens’ original formulation or to the disembodied conception of identity arguably accompanying it (see Boyne 1991). In my view, emphasis on the *life* aspect of life politics is significant for sociological analysis because it signals the

⁴ The term ‘cross over’ is borrowed from Helene Ragone (1998: 124).

return of the repressed or silenced body to social theory. In the context of reproductive politics, the concept also heralds a preoccupation with the biological, marking the profound social importance many people currently place on ‘claims to a “right” to life, to one’s body, to health, to the satisfaction of one’s needs’ (Rabinow and Rose 2003: 2). It does so, additionally, in the midst of what Francis Fukuyama (2003: xii) observes as ‘a monumental period of advance in the life sciences’ and in an environment that increasingly privileges biotechnology.

Life politics also connotes reference to *everyday* life, to mundane and taken-for-granted existence. Life politics thus connect personal spheres of social interaction with the political. This does not entail occlusion between the personal and the political. Rather, because life politics occur in an existential climate where there is ostensibly no Archimedean point upon which to ground one’s decisions or against which to make significant choices, ‘new forms of “responsibilization”’ (Rabinow and Rose 2003: 22) make the individualisation of choice both more onerous and constant. In the field of reproductive politics this is especially so for women (see Williams et al. 2005).

The reading of life politics I am adopting here is thus useful because it enables discussion about identity decisions, choices, and constraints that bear upon bodily processes and practices. At the same time, it forces the issue of how to address values about personal and interpersonal relationships *and* the social and collective good in complex evolving biotechnological environments. The pace, scope, and scale of change that biotechnologies are poised to bring about means that any present consideration of life politics and reproductive technologies demands critical reflection on the conditions that have made this situation possible and on future imaginings and possibilities of these conditions. This, in turn, requires attending to the ways in which notions of ethics and politics intersect with people’s actual experiences of and relationships to the reproductive technologies themselves. I suggest that the ubiquitous trope of the cyborg provides a way of opening up this discussion, and refer to the notion of the cyborg in terms of the human-technology coupling, to make sense of the data from the research participants of the different studies upon which I draw.

Ambivalence and the cyborg trope

In accordance with Donna Haraway's (1991) general figuration of the cyborg, reproductive cyborgs simultaneously belong to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning. These organic/natural and technological/human systems involve the intermingling or merger of one with the other in such a way that reconstitutes them as a hybrid species. As a condition of their hybridity, these techno-body mergers are not a fixed part of nature. Rather, as Anne Balsamo has said (1996a, 1996b), cyborgs are boundary figures that foreground the ambiguous constitution of the body in relation to subjectivity and morality.

Cyborgs are significant with respect to human reproduction precisely because they highlight the flexibility of the human body and its capacities, as well as signalling the deconstruction of deep-rooted cultural and moral assumptions about the nature-technology divide. By highlighting the (presumably infinite) plastic freedoms of individuals to choose from any number of different biotechnological innovations, advances in genetic and reproductive technologies reinforce this perceived flexibility (Giddens 1991). According to Adele Clarke (1995), this flexibility stands cyborgs in stark contrast to modern body-subjects who tend to be concerned with regulating and standardising reproductive and childbirth processes in order to gain control over their bodies. Rather, cyborg techno-bodies exemplify high-tech modes of modification, transformation and change, and as such confound to an exaggerated extent, as Giddens (1991: 102) says, the relation between so-called separated nature and human culture.

Despite what appears to be a current cultural fetish for cyborgs or hybrid entities, our immersion and saturation in them has ethical and political implications for how we think about the future of our reproductive bodies, as individuals, as communities, and as a species. Until very recently, much feminist analysis of reproductive technologies tended to focus on whether the intersection of technologies into social and biological life ended up 'mutilating' natural processes or 'improving' and 'enhancing' them (e.g., Birke et al. 1990; Corea 1985; Spallone 1989). For many commentators, assisted reproduction—particularly surrogate pregnancy—magnifies this perceived mutilation and enhancement.

Surrogate pregnancy is notoriously difficult to define. It is also an extremely loaded concept. Many feminists contend that the very idea