Transformative Power in Motherwork
Transformative Power in Motherwork:
A Study of Mothering in the 1950s and 1960s

By

Marie Porter

Cambridge Scholars Publishing
To Strong, Loving, Empowered Mothers
   Especially
My Mother, Grace Sarah Elizabeth Jones
   My Mother-in-law, Dorothy Porter
   My Grandmother, Eliza Moule
My Sisters, Valerie, Zillah, Dalwyn
   Other Mothers in my Motherline
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting the scene</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The book statement</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why this research ?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist motherhood literature</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic feminist mother mentors</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherwork</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power, equality, and agency</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The structure of the book</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Exploring Theories of Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts of agency and power</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative power</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist perspectives on agency</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency, consciousness, and context</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Master narratives’, experience and discursive consciousness</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: The Mother’s Voice</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The method question</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First contact and preliminary interview</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memories</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table of Contents

- The In-Depth Interview ................................................................. 49
- Women’s Interactive Talk ........................................................... 51
- Myself as interviewer ................................................................. 54
- Transcription ............................................................................... 56
- Qualitative analysis ...................................................................... 57
- Grounded theoretical approach ..................................................... 57
- Conclusion .................................................................................... 58

### Chapter Three: Motherhood and Master Narratives

- Introduction ................................................................................. 60
- Master narratives of motherhood .................................................. 61
  - Australian master narratives of motherhood ............................ 62
- Forming women mothers ............................................................. 65
  - Cultural representations .......................................................... 65
  - The family .................................................................................. 69
  - Education ................................................................................... 70
  - Paid employment ................................................................. 74
  - Religion ..................................................................................... 77
    - The Catholic Church .......................................................... 78
- Obedience—an underlying assumption ........................................ 82
- Conclusion ..................................................................................... 84

### Chapter Four: Incipient Agency

- Introduction .................................................................................. 86
- Incipient agency? .......................................................................... 87
  - Unquestioning: Affirmation in practical consciousness .......... 88
  - Family positive: Affirmation in discursive consciousness ....... 93
  - Family negative: Censure in discursive consciousness .......... 94
  - Resistance: Rejection in discursive consciousness ............... 98
- Conclusion ..................................................................................... 103

### Chapter Five: Transitions to Motherhood

- Introduction .................................................................................. 105
- The beginning of the transitional journey ..................................... 107
- Constraints .................................................................................. 108
  - Constrained during pregnancy ............................................. 109
  - Constrained during birthing .................................................... 113
  - Hospital post-birthing constraints ........................................ 121
- Conclusion ..................................................................................... 126
## Chapter Six: Transitions to Motherwork

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The master narratives and motherwork</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherwork</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of empowerment</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The mother</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Family members</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The clinic</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter Seven: Common Transformative Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Power over</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Power to</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Power with</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency and transformative power</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common transformative power</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Significant shifts in common transformative power</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Persistent processes in common transformative power</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter Eight: Transformative Power Under Pressure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressured transformative power: Sources of oppression</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Significant shifts</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Persistent processes</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressured transformative power: Management strategies</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strategies of strength, creativity, and self-sacrifice</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strategies of seeking support</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strategies of adaptation</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter Nine: Transformative Power Impeded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impeded transformative power: Sources of oppression</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Patriarchal law, culture, and violence—Ida’s story</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Master narratives of care—Gabriella’s story</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grazier, carer, mother—Gina’s story ........................................... 221
Impeded transformative power: Agency in resistance
and survival........................................................................................ 227
Reflexive personal strategies........................................................ 228
Outcomes...................................................................................... 230
Conclusion ......................................................................................... 231

Conclusion: Transformed Mothers and a Counter Narrative........... 233

Motherwork: The transformative power relationship ............... 234
Expressions of transformative power relationships ............... 237
Transformed women ......................................................................... 239
A counter narrative? ................................................................. 244

Appendix A
Interviewees............................................................................................. 251

Appendix B
Example of Preparation for the In-depth Interview ..................... 254

Appendix C
Letter for Participants ........................................................................ 256

Appendix D
Timeline................................................................................................... 258

Appendix E
Interview Data Sheet ........................................................................ 260

Appendix F
Transcription Codes................................................................................. 261

Select Bibliography ............................................................................... 262

Index ........................................................................................................ 275
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is impossible to be writing ‘Acknowledgements’ for a book without the help of many people. Since this book began life as a thesis, my main support has been my supervisors—Associate Professor Edgar Conrad and Dr Patricia Short. They have given freely of their time, expertise and encouragement. I appreciate their wisdom and the time and energy both put into helping me. A bonus of being Ed’s student is the participation in ‘Ed’s group’. To colleagues who have been/are part of this group, thank you for friendship and interesting discussions. Thank-you, Ed and Linda, for welcoming us to your home regularly for discussion, companionship, and shared meals. Thank-you, Trisch, for working with me on the edited book *Motherhood: Power and Oppression* published by Women’s Press in 2005.

To my colleagues, whose theses are finished or in process, thank-you for friendship, encouragement, and understanding. To Dr Julie Kelso with whom I have shared the journey, many rooms, and the organization of three International Conferences, you are a great companion and colleague. To Dr Tamara Ditrich who journeyed with us, thank-you for valuable support, encouragement, and for reading my book. Thanks to Jenny Price for being a great room companion, friend and for book reading. To artists Jasmine Symons and Imelda Almqvist, thank-you for allowing me to use your paintings. Colleagues, Lisa Raith, Jenny Jones, Dr Michelle Barker, Dr Angela Coco, Jean Byrne, Dr Helen Farley, Dr Kay Smith, Dr Michael Carden, Dr John Matson, Dr Stefano Girola, Dr Man Soo Choe, and Patrick Kearney, all contributed to making my years of research more enjoyable. Thank-you to the HPRC School office Staff for your kindness and to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit Staff, especially Dr Jackie Huggins and Suz Randall, for friendship and shared laughter.

This book has relied on interview data from mothering stories that the interviewees shared with me. I thank every mother for agreeing to be interviewed. Together you have made a unique contribution to Australian research into mothering and to Australian history.
The Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) at York University, Toronto, Canada, has facilitated my work. I am grateful for its existence and for the energy and enthusiasm of its founder, Associate Professor Andrea O’Reilly. The friendship, ideas and support I have received from ARM members, especially Assoc. Professor Andrea O’Reilly, Dr Ruby Newman and Dr Brydon Gombay have been invaluable. The ARM conferences and the Australian conferences provided opportunities to present my research to informed maternal scholars. Thank-you all for your participation and interest.

While I am a researcher and enjoy and am stimulated by academic research, I am also a mother, a wife, a mother-in-law, a grandmother, a sister, an auntie, a friend to many people. During this academic journey, I have had my time with all these people curtailed. Thank you for not deserting me. To my extended family, and to my friends, especially Betty Heath, Jessie Beattie, Denise Christie, Gillian and Dennis Cheshire, thank-you for your support. A special thank you to Judy Connolly who aided me in many and varied ways and to Won Ju, Sung He, Nathan and Sarah Park who honoured me by adopting me as their Australian mother.

There have been many changes in my personal life during this journey. I have farewelled my precious youngest son, Anthony, an incomparable person. I have welcomed a wonderful daughter-in-law, Hanne, our first granddaughter, Astrid, and another grandson, Magnus, to love and enjoy. Our three grandsons, Thomas, Oliver and Sebastian are/on the way to being delightful young men. They have all been supportive as has my husband. Thank you, Alan, for your encouragement, patience, understanding and care.

My last acknowledgement must go to the three men who came into my life as vulnerable babies, my sons, David, Bernard and Anthony. Thank-you for your love and trust in me. While I was transforming you into independent adults, you transformed me from a rather self-centred, perfectionist, impatient girl, severely lacking in confidence, into a concerned, relatively patient and confident woman. The mothering journey has been the source of most of the wisdom I have, my eventual empowerment, and the power that created the depth of love, and understanding of others that I have gained. It is likewise the reason I have chosen the research that is basic to this book, which, itself has been a unique journey into scholarship and self-reflection.

On my mothering journey I have met so many caring, energetic, amazing mothers whom I deeply respect. I would like to see society give
them the respect they deserve. To those people who hinder this process, I trust you eventually see clearly that we need a genuine representation of all the population in all areas of society, including decision making. I hope this book encourages this movement and adds to respect for mothers and the work they do. To have the opportunity and time to do the research presented in this book was my privilege.
ABSTRACT

In this book I explore the experiences of a group of Australian women who became first-time mothers between 1950 and 1965. I interviewed twenty-four mothers, half of whom were selected as practising Roman Catholics. The other half was Anglican/Protestant by coincidence rather than selection. The data in this research have been collected via in-depth, unstructured interviews with the participants. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim, before the data were analysed.

I present a grounded theory of transformative power in motherwork that has emerged from the analysis of interviews. The mothers talked about what they did in their active mothering years. I argue that despite being constrained by the gender bias in the patriarchal context, these mothers were agents who developed skills that enabled them to resist or creatively deal with the constraints they faced. Their emphasis was on their agency and the power to nurture their children into responsible adults. Their awareness of the importance of their motherwork acted as a motivator in this development.

In this book I argue that the relationship between each mother and each of her children is a transformative power relationship in which both mother and child are transformed—the child into an independent adult and the mother into a skilled self-motivated agent through her motherwork. Any threat to this process resulted in the mother doing all she could to resist or counteract the constraint/s she was encountering. Transformative power expressed in motherwork can be recognised analytically by several characteristics. It empowers both parties in the mother–child duality. Complexity, diversity, fluidity, and responsiveness to the physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects of the relationship are all evident in transformative power relationships.

Through their own transformation, the mothers saw the falsity of the master narratives of motherhood, prevalent in society in the 1950s and 1960s, which they had believed as inexperienced girls. From their stories about motherwork, I reveal a counter narrative that was portrayed not only in their telling of their stories, but in their discursive/reflexive practices as mothers.
I told myself I wanted to write a book on motherhood because it was a crucial, still relatively unexplored area of feminist theory. But I did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen me (Rich 1986: 15).

Setting the scene

Adrienne Rich wrote the above words in her landmark book on mothering, *Of Woman Born*, in which her research is intermingled with her life experiences (Rich 1986). The book that she wrote could not have been written by any other person, nor written if Rich had not been a mother. This book has a similar history. My experiences in mothering have developed my personality, my intellect, my awareness, my emotional life, my understanding and empathy, my ideas and my ethics. While I will be academically rigorous in presenting this book, I need to acknowledge my choices and my own life experiences. In common with Rich, I believe that the area of motherhood is still under-researched. Through this research I have sought to address this need. I begin by stating my argument and acknowledging the life experiences that have shaped my choice of subject, methodology and my research.

The argument

In this book I argue that a group of Australian women, half of them Roman Catholic and half Anglican/Protestant, who had their first live birth between 1950 and 1965, developed a transformative power relationship with each of their children within the constraints that were present in that period. This relationship, evident in their motherwork, transformed both the mothers and the children as both developed over the years. In their motherwork with their children, the women were continually working, observing, thinking, discussing with peers, trialling,

---

1 I have used bold for emphasis throughout this book.
2 I will refer to ‘Roman Catholic’ as ‘Catholic’ subsequently.
3 I am using the term Anglican/Protestant because most of the Anglicans I spoke with could not say if their denomination belonged to Protestantism.
adapting and repeating processes. These practices, formally recognised as routine for skilled or professional workers, especially in the helping professions, attest to the skills the mothers gained and honed in their work (Maher 2004).

I argue that the motherwork in the mother-child relationship is an expression of the mother’s agency and that this relationship is a power relationship in which both the mother and the child are transformed. I refer to this power as ‘transformative power’. Transformative power, as an expression of power, has been recognised by feminist theorists in particular, who highlight that power for women is usually associated with connection/relationship (Ruddick 1989; Collins 1990; Elshtain 1992; Dalmiya and Alcoff 1993; Everingham 1994; Allen 1999; Horwitz 2004).

McMahon has argued that mothering experiences ‘produce [her italics] a gendered sense of self in women’ (McMahon 1995: 3). She argues that while ‘mothers produce children’, ‘children produce mothers’. That is to say that mothers develop a sense of self that aligns with many characteristics associated with women. Moreover, she claims that becoming a mother produces a self-transformation in women which is experienced as a ‘moral transformation’. I agree with McMahon, but argue that not only moral transformation occurs in the mothering relationship but that the transformative relationship is one of power which transforms both the child into an adult and the mother into a multi-skilled, capable woman in many essential areas of life.

Further I claim that the women’s level of satisfaction with their mothering is related to the freedom they had to develop their mother–child relationships. The mothers involved in this research who felt free to develop their nurturing relationships with each of their children as they thought fit were more satisfied with their motherwork than were the mothers who felt constrained for some reason. If constraints impinged on the mothers’ freedom to nurture, they saw their motherwork as pressured or impeded, according to their abilities to cope with the constraints. For example, Catholic mothers experienced greater constraints, and had a heavier workload overall, than did their ‘sisters’ in the Anglican/Protestant group and, consequently, most of them felt pressured.

The most constrained relationships were those in which the mother could not deal adequately with the contextual limitations she had to manage. The resulting constraints were a consequence of the patriarchal context in which they lived, the outcome of an institutional practice/s or the practice/s of an individual. The interviewees were taught to obey
authority wherever that authority came from—parents, doctors, teachers, priests or others carrying the power of societal institutions. That was ‘the way it was’ and, as females, the interviewees were confined by limited life-chances open to them, and by the expectations put on women. For example, where the husband did not give his wife a reasonable amount of his earnings, his actions were supported by the practice of the husband being the breadwinner, but the wife having no legal claim to his earnings.

Girls in this era were influenced by the social institutions, both secular and religious, and by the master narratives, to expect and to want to be mothers. Only one interviewee had not grown up with the idea that she would be a mother. While most of the interviewees accepted their mothering practices in practical consciousness at first, as the interviewees became experienced mothers and experienced constraints to their motherwork, their discursive consciousness developed and resulted in resistance to constraints that restricted their motherwork (Giddens 1984: 6–8).

The mothers coped with constraints in different ways both synchronically and diachronically. Some of the young women questioned a few motherwork practices and ideas before they became mothers. As young mothers, though, the majority of them accepted the limitations with little conscious thought. Some of them questioned some aspects of the status quo, but could not, or did not, change their situation. However, these challenges for the mothers were insignificant when compared with their reactions as experienced mothers. As their agentic skills developed mothers coped creatively with constraints or chose simply not to conform in some way. Their awareness of their responsibility for their motherwork acted as a motivator to overcome obstacles to nurturing. It grew largely from their determination to sustain their transformative power relationships with their children in mothering. The interviewees spoke about the high value that they placed on mothering whether it was their own motherwork or mothering in general. They saw mothering as an enrichment of their lives. To understand their positions, their choices and their reactions, it is necessary to understand the historical and the personal contexts, in which the mother did her motherwork. Even in this small study, considerable diversity of motherwork emerged as a result of such influences. I explore the historical and personal contexts and their influence upon the motherworkers. I focus on the social context in Chapter Three and the personal contexts at various stages in the book.
Importantly, however, this study has revealed that it is the transformative relationship between the mother and the child that is at the centre of their achievements. This transformative relationship was a transformative experience for both. Above all, the mothers spoke about the overall satisfaction and happiness that came, and comes still, from their relationships with their children. Listening to these women’s voices is to hear a counter narrative to the master narratives of the stay-at-home mother. This mothering style has largely gone; however, to examine different styles of mothering is helpful. Lowinsky highlights the importance of such knowledge in her discussion of the need for women to know what she refers to as ‘our motherline’ (Lowinsky 1992). She argues that women should know their motherline on three levels of experience—personal, cultural and archetypal (Lowinsky 1992). Such knowledge is enlightening because it shows women that there are diverse ways of mothering. The necessity of collecting this knowledge was one reason I chose to research mothering in this period. I outline my other reasons for this research below.

Why this research?

I chose this research area for both personal and academic reasons. I outline the personal reasons prior to the academic reasons, because, without the compelling personal experiences I have had, I would not be the same person I am now. As I acknowledged above, my life experiences have given me an abiding interest in mothering. The choice of a topic for my doctoral studies was influenced by my past and my circumstances at the time I undertook the research. My adult life had been dominated by two working situations—teaching and mothering. The desire to teach was my first love. I regretted the loss of my profession when I had to resign on marriage, but that was the regulation governing women in the Queensland Public Service in 1962. I missed my work. As was the accepted norm in the 1950s and early 60s, I had my family early in my marriage—three sons, the youngest of whom was severely disabled with significant health problems. While all my friends returned to their profession eventually, my commitment to my disabled son resulted in this possibility being discounted. By 1981, exhausted from motherwork, I sought a challenge away from it, and returned to my old love of study. I have been involved in academic work ever since.

I have given many years of consideration to mothering because when I was rearing Anthony, my disabled son, there were no patterns that I found acceptable for the mothering of a disabled child. While he had life
threatening health problems and severe physical disabilities, I was
determined he would have every opportunity to live, to achieve his
potential. I was forced to consider discursively what mothering the two
older boys entailed because I used my mothering of them as a template to
guide me in my mothering of my youngest son. This approach worked for
Anthony, for me and for the rest of the family. Because of Anthony’s
needs, my active mothering years have been both unusually long and
incredibly intense as well.4 While I chose this area of research, from which
this book emerged, for both academic and personal reasons, at every level
the book has emerged from the analysis of my conversations with
participants.

While my general understanding of the experiences the interviewees
were relating doubtlessly had an effect on the interviewing process, this
does not indicate any preconception of the emergent argument. My own
experiences and ideas sometimes blended with those of an interviewee, but
sometimes were quite contradictory. When I set out to explore mothering
in the era, for example, I expected to find that some women would talk
about oppression, or about dissatisfaction because of my own experiences
and reactions. Instead, I found that all but one interviewee were eager to
become mothers and identified themselves as wives/mothers. My
hypothesis that the interviewees would refer to their oppression and
possibly a sense of dissatisfaction proved to be wrong.

The reason I have woven the influence of the Catholic Church into the
research, also grew out of both personal and academic experiences. My
personal experiences of Catholicism began when, as an adult, I chose to
become a Catholic.5 I had few ideas about Mary beyond the iconic image,
but it was obvious that Mary was important to Catholic people. It was
clear that she was held up as a model mother, and that her portrayal was
idealistic and oppressive, and arose from a utopian view of mothering
rather than the realities of the work (Porter 1994). I had examined
representations of Mary as an ‘earthly’6 mother in my Honours year
(Porter 1994). I was curious to know how real mothers related to the
perfect, virginal, self-sacrificing representation of a mother. Hence my

---

4 Anthony died on the 5th December, 2000 with his family surrounding him.
5 I now find it impossible to accept some Catholic teachings. Nonetheless, I still
seek spiritual support from the Church at times.
6 By ‘earthly’ mother, I mean the representations of her actual mothering of her
son on earth.
doctoral project began as an analysis of the ideas and experiences of Catholic mothers, but changed for very good reasons.

I chose to examine the mothering experiences of a group of women who became mothers between 1950 and 1965 for several academic reasons. Firstly, motherhood/mothering affects every person, yet there is a dearth of academic work on this subject from women’s/mothers’ perspectives. We are all ‘of woman born’ as Rich brought to attention when she thus entitled her book (1986). For more than half of the human population, it is possible to become a mother. Most of this group will become mothers and, for those who do not do so, their lives will be influenced by this possibility. Motherhood/mothering should be at the centre of research, not lingering on the edges.

Secondly, mothering in 1950s, 60s is sometimes perceived as the ideal of mothering, or the way it was in a happier era, or as an iconic symbol of motherhood. Lopata noted that the 1950’s “perfect” family still influenced ideas of motherhood in United States of America in 1987 (Lopata 1987: 398). A similar situation still existed in Australia in the 1980s (Harper and Richards 1979; Wearing 1984). These perspectives are based on opinion rather than research, because the 1950s and 1960s have been strangely neglected in Australian research on mothering; the knowledge available is only anecdotal. My book aims to contribute to and strengthen knowledge about mothering in that era and to open a window for other researchers. In Australia, there is specific research on mothering from 1976 onwards (Wearing 1984; Gibson 1986; Crouch and Manderson 1993; Brown, Lumley et al. 1994; Everingham 1994; Adelaide 1996; Maushart 1997; Le Blanc 1999), but none on the mothering experiences of women in the 1950s.

In examining this era, it is apparent that it is not only research on mothering that has been neglected. General research is sketchy, too. This era was a time when Australian society was highly structured and conformity a strong feature. It was also a period of social stability and economic prosperity (Hillard 1997a). People of marriageable age had experienced the war period, while their parents had experienced both the First and Second World Wars and the Depression. The world had been perceived as an insecure place, with fears of communism and the atom

---

7 Limited information can be gleaned from Australian family research. See Brown, 1957; Bryson, 1975; Falding, 1957; Hillard, 1997a; Hillard, 1991; Aspin, 1982; Mercer, 1975; Patterson, 1972.
8 There is now renewed interest in the 1950s.
bomb strong amongst the population (Aitkin 2005: 16). This insecurity may explain, to a degree, the feeling that conformity was better than risk taking. Thurer refers to the period from the late 1940s to the 60s as the ‘long fifties’. Hillard also refers to the period from the end of the Second World War to around 1965 when Australian troops were committed to Vietnam period as the ‘long fifties’ (Hillard 1997a). The following years marked the beginning of the questioning of values and authorities by young people (Hillard 1997a).

I presumed that women who had become mothers in the ‘long fifties’ were unlikely to be caught up in the changes of the second half of the sixties. I anticipated that the most important and influential changes in these women’s lives would have resulted from their mothering. This assessment proved correct in the case of the participants in this study, some of whom commented on how they did not have time to be involved in social events and changes of the later period because their energies were focused on nurturing their children.

My third reason for choosing this era was that I saw a chance to preserve some of the history of the maternal line. If the histories from these mothers were not collected, in a few short years the opportunity to do so would be gone forever. Too much of women’s herstory has gone unrecorded already. As women, we need to know our herstory, the experiences of our foremothers. Lowinsky highlights the importance of this knowledge: she refers to our motherline, as ‘the embodied experience of the female mysteries’ (1992: 10). She argues that women should know their motherline on three levels of experience—personal, cultural and archetypal (1992: xiv). Such knowledge is difficult to obtain because our world does not reflect the fullness of female experiences (1992: 8). In conversing with women, I have become aware of how little knowledge some women have about the lives and experiences of their mothers and grandmothers. One day some of them will want to connect with their motherline. Looking at the experiences of a group of mothers in the Australian context in the 1950s and 60s will add to our knowledge of our motherline on the personal and cultural levels.

Fourthly, feminism and motherhood have had an ambivalent relationship. This ambivalence is at its height in the relationship of the early second–wave feminists with the generation of mothers preceding them—the generation from which the interviewees are drawn. Many mothers could not identify with the theories of mothering that were being put forth by the feminists of the time (Oakley 1981; Freely 1995; O’Reilly
feminism in the 1970s spoke in the daughter’s voice, not the mother’s voice. When early feminists have become mothers, some of them have realised that it was not possible for them to know the mother’s experience until it was their experience (McFarland and Watson-Rouslin 1997).

Finally, I observe present day mothering and I consider that young mothers are as caught up in the master narratives and the assumptions and expectations about mothering as was the case in the 1950s, 1960s. However, where motherwork in the 1950s and 1960s mothering style was not paid, it was recognised as legitimate work which occupied most women. At present, motherwork is treated as if it does not exist. Women who have just given birth are asked if they are working as if having a baby to feed and care for is not work. I have observed how upsetting this is for some mothers, especially when it is a first baby and the new mother is usually nervous and aware of how much she has to learn. As Pocock claims, there are ‘mother wars’ with mothers-at-home and mothers in paid work both part-time and full-time, and women becoming mothers in their late thirties or in their younger years and the endless arguments about which is better (2003: 7). It is obvious that despite the achievements of feminism mothering is still problematic for women (2003: 7).

As a woman who has both a wealth of ‘hands on’ experience and years of consideration of mothering, I feel I am qualified to contribute to the academic discussion. Mothers’ need to hear the voices of other mothers. As Boulous Walker argues in Philosophy and the Maternal Body, Western patriarchal philosophy has worked to silence women’s dialogue through a variety of strategies ‘such as exclusion, repression, denial and foreclosure’ (1998: 1). We have listened to the voices of people inexperienced in mothering for long enough. To listen to the women’s voices is important because, as the majority of mothers say, it is impossible to imagine what mothering is like. Gieve, after becoming a mother, and realising that mothering should be described as ‘work’, argues that it is essential that theory comes and is evaluated ‘from the inside’ so that maternal scholars ‘avoid the prescriptions which dominate thinking about parent/child relationships’ (1987: 39). In this research the voices of women who mothered in the 1950s and 1960s are heard giving their own version of their experiences as much as possible.

Initially I started my research with the intention of examining how the Catholic mothers coped with patriarchal representations of Mary as a mother. After analysing the first ten in-depth interviews, I broadened the
topic for the following ethical and methodological reasons: all of the interviewees wanted to talk about motherwork; the five Catholic interviewees whom I asked about Mary were happy to respond, but, they were more interested in motherwork; the mothers valued their motherwork highly, but felt devalued by the general society. I believed that ethically I needed to try to redress this situation by focusing equally on all ten interviewees and on the stories that they wanted to tell. My grounded theoretical method similarly required that the core category that emerged from these interviews—motherwork—be the focus of the book.

**Feminist motherhood literature**

I have used feminist motherhood literature in four ways in this book. Firstly, I used it to explore past academic research on motherhood and position my own research. Secondly, I found the literature helpful in the development of the questions related to areas of motherhood which I judged necessary to cover in the in-depth interviews. Thirdly, I used the literature to sensitise myself to the concepts which had emerged in academic research on motherhood both before and during the analysis. Finally, in comparing the outcome of my research with motherhood literature I have been able to validate my own results (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The work of four feminist maternal writers whose work I consider to be fundamental to maternal scholarship, has been particularly influential—Adrienne Rich, Anne Oakley, Sara Ruddick, and Patricia Hill Collins.

**Academic feminist mother mentors**

Rich’s book, from which the citation at the beginning of this Introduction was taken, was pivotal in the study of mothering. Rich drew on her own experiences to identify two aspects of mothering—the experience of motherhood (the mother’s relationship with her child) and the institution of motherhood (what society expected of mothers). Her theory of the two different demands on mothers proved fertile grounds for the exploration of motherhood/ mothering. In 2004 an edited book focusing on the impact of her ideas was released (O’Reilly, 2004). Both the experiences of mothering and the institutional pressures will be evident in this book, but the emphasis will be on the mother’s relationship with the child. The institutional pressures on mothers have been well-researched.
Five years after Rich’s book was published, Oakley published her *From Here to Maternity*—a groundbreaking first for those women who had given birth or were contemplating motherhood (1981). This book, published when my youngest son was eleven, was the first book I had read that presented the transition to mothering in a totally realistic way. It was seminal in highlighting what the experiential reality of becoming a mother was like, clearly exposing the differences between the ideals and the realities of motherhood. Its authenticity was beyond question for those women who had experienced this transition. Oakley let the voices of mothers tell their story. The combination of the voices of the individual interviewees and of the researcher produced an account that was authentic and interesting. In my own research I have listened carefully to the mothers’ voices and it is from these voices that I have developed my argument. As the researcher with access to all the data and the secondary literature, the argument is my responsibility, but the interviewees’ voices are my guide.

My third academic mother mentor in those years when I was both studying and actively mothering my youngest son was Ruddick. Her work had the most profound affect on me. She argues that mothering has three aims: to preserve, grow, and train up the young to be independent and socially adept members of the society in which they live (1989). She further argues these maternal practices of preserving, growing, and transforming life lead to a particular way of thinking that she refers to as maternal thinking. In doing this work, the mother monitors her practices and hones her skills as a result of her maternal thinking. Her ideas on what mothers do and how their actions lead to a particular way of thinking resonated with my own ideas and practices. I had a clear understanding of this process because Anthony, my youngest son, was a challenging child to mother. Ruddick’s work, like Oakley’s, had the authority of authenticity. Ruddick’s statement that follows echoes my experiences:

People who have not engaged in a practice or who have not lived closely with a practitioner have no right to criticize. Although any group may make this claim, the point is particularly apt for maternal thinkers. Mothers have been a powerless group whose thinking, when it has been

---

9 In 1989 Anthony was twenty and dependent in every area except the intellectual. Mothering had the added difficulty of Anthony’s determination to make his own decisions and be independent in his choices and ideas.

10 Ruddick’s work is also known for her claim that practice based in maternal thinking would lead to world peace.
acknowledged at all, has most often been recognized by people interested in interpreting and controlling rather than in listening (1989: 26).

Ruddick’s theory of maternal practices and thinking draws attention to the work that mothers do and how this work is the outcome of thought, discussion, and review rather than instinct or haphazard actions.\(^{11}\) Her work focused my attention on the interaction between ideas and practices, and how the interviewees’ ideas, thinking and practice changed as they became experienced in their motherwork. I will discuss later what I mean by motherwork.

During the rise of the Women’s Movement in the early 1970s, I was, in common with the interviewees, steeped in motherwork. It was great that changes were occurring, but I was immersed in the reality of motherwork and what I read about it was far from my reality. When I had the time to study the early second-wave feminist work on mothering/motherhood, I realized most of it was written in the daughter’s voice. Then, in the 1990s, a new approach to mothering started to emerge: a more productive and much richer perspective on mothering was provided by Afro-American maternal scholars. I have consistently found Afro-American theorizing on mothering, whether it is in fiction or academic work, to have provided a more realistic account of mothering (Harris 2000; O’Reilly 2004a).

Afro-American and Native American maternal scholars, in particular Collins, became my fourth mentor/s. These scholars argue that the most prevailing feminist theories, including theories on motherhood, were only the reflection of white middle class feminist scholars and did not reflect the experiences of mothers and mothering in the Afro-American community where class and race were a defining framework of their experiences.\(^{12}\) These scholars argue that mothering is a relationship of power wherein the mothers are agents who prepare the next generation to understand their culture and to be proud of who they are in a context in which having dark skin can still be a grave disadvantage (Collins 1990; Collins 1994).

The white middle class feminist scholars had not represented Afro-American mothering, but neither did they reflect my experiences. On the

\(^{11}\) For Ruddick, mothering does not have to be gender specific but the nurturer must be willing to commit to the long term nurturance of the child.

\(^{12}\) Race and class are present in the context of white middle class mothers as well. When I refer to ‘white middle class’ I am speaking very broadly. Class limits are fluid and important, but are another issue, not the focus of this thesis.
personal level, their approach made no sense of my own experiences of mothering a child with severe physical disabilities and health problems, which consumed the days and frequently most hours of the night while simultaneously all the family fought on the political front, trying to get recognition for the rights of these forgotten, needy people. If my son were to survive, I knew I had no acceptable choices.

Another facet of the Afro-American approach to mothering that I intuitively understood was that these feminist scholars did not see their mothers as oppressed to the point of powerlessness. Indeed, they saw just the reverse. They argued that their mothers, despite their oppression, even because of their oppression at times, were strong, capable women. They were determined to pass on their culture, dignity and ability to face problems to their children. The determination to empower their children empowered the mothers. Afro-American scholars went beyond the either/or arguments that had prevailed in feminists’ exploration of motherhood. White middle class scholarly debate revolved around the issue of whether the role of women as mothers was a social construct or whether woman’s experience of being a mother was ‘essentially’ a result of a biological urge to mother. The Afro-American scholars by-passed these arguments by situating their research within its social context.

This consideration of the social context allowed the Afro-American scholars more freedom in theorizing motherhood. For example, Collins argued that motherhood was not the same for everyone. There were many different ways of mothering, many different contexts in which mothers reared their children, many different advantages and disadvantages. While feminists, in common with critical theorists in general, realised that context, including the historical context, was important, Collins’s emphasis on exploring commonality across a broad range of different social contexts was an important understanding of the study of motherhood (Code 1988; Smith 1990; Code 1991; Collins 1994; McNay 2000).

Collins argues that to explore mothering the researcher must understand the commonality and differences within the overarching commonality of mothering. She advocates that theorizing motherhood requires ‘shifting the center to accommodate diversity’ (1994: 62). The commonality in mothering is that the next generation must live and grow

---

13 This strength is a result of coping with difficulties. I do not advocate or support this approach to strength, but I acknowledge it exists.
into socially adept adults or the society ceases to exist, at least in the form in which it had functioned. From the theories developed by the four feminist writers, I could understand my own story and the mothers’ stories much more clearly. The feminist framework must outline the social and personal contexts in which a mother did her motherwork because context can make a significant difference to her work and must be made visible. The combination of an awareness of the context, the influence of the institution of motherhood, the need to examine clearly personal experiences, and Ruddick’s idea of motherwork and maternal thought legitimated my own motherwork, and likewise helped me in my understanding and analysis of the interviewed mothers’ stories.

**Motherhood? Mothering? Motherwork?**

The core category to emerge from the analysis of the data was the work the interviewees did in their mothering of their children. They spoke about their aims and achievements, how they managed their nurturing, who supported them, their joys, sorrows, and satisfactions, their management skills, the many tasks that they did, how they changed from young innocent women to capable mothers. They were talking about the power they had to be active agents, what empowered them and what constrained their agency. This core category I conceptualised as ‘motherwork’ for reasons I will outline here.

The words ‘motherhood’, ‘mothering’, ‘motherwork’, are frequently used as if they were synonyms. In the academic study of mothering, however, the first word is reserved for the institution of ‘motherhood’—that part of mothering that is defined by patriarchy, and consists of the expectations of how women should mother, according to men (Rich 1986; O’Reilly 2004c: 2). ‘Mothering’ refers to the experiences of actually ‘doing mothering’ (O’Reilly 2004c: 2). I use ‘motherwork’ as an alternative word for mothering because it signifies that mothering is work (O’Reilly 2004a: 27–30). Although feminists have written about mothering as work and highlighted how mothering requires and develops skills just as happens in work, it is not recognised as work in any way that counts in the Western social system (Oakley 1976; Olson 1981; Cowan 1983; Gieve 1987; DeVault 1991; Pocock 2003; Home 2004; Maher 2004). This lack of recognition is to the detriment of those who do motherwork. When motherwork is done by the mother who stays at home

---

14 See also ‘Mothering and Work/Mothering as Work’, Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering, 6/2, Fall/Winter 2004.
with her child in its vulnerable years, her work goes unrecognized in ways that disadvantage her. With some exceptions, she will experience a gap in her paid work which will be reflected in her loss of social status, loss of training, loss of superannuation, sick pay and other advantages available to those who are in paid work. In the period under research, it was even worse for the mothers. When the interviewees were young mothers, they were deemed to be worth nothing legally. They had no legal claim on their husbands’ wages and, in Queensland, should the husband die, all contents of the home were claimed to have belonged to him and were valued for death duties. Because the word ‘work’ is reserved for those people who are in paid employment, mothers at home who were/are not in paid employment, did/do not work. To many mothers, paid work is easy in comparison with motherwork (Horin 1996). When I had to resign from teaching, I lost my work. When I began to mother, I considered mothering as my new work—work that was added onto and intermingled with housework and wifework. To say I was stunned by the amount of work I needed to do, the almost continuous lack of sleep over many years, the tedium of it all, is not putting it too strongly.

**Motherwork**

Motherwork, as it is used in this book, refers to all the unpaid work done by the mothers in the years they are actively mothering. Hence the scope of motherwork is very broad. Ruddick made a distinction between maternal practices and such practices as homemaking (1989). While I agree that there are differences in the tasks, and different motivations for doing the tasks, I do not distinguish between the different tasks the mothers did, because it is impossible to say which tasks were not part of the motherwork. In the interviews, for example, mothers clearly talked about studying nutrition so the children would be healthy, sewing because it gave them pleasure to see their children in the clothes the mother had designed and made, and cleaning because they did not want the children to be exposed to possible illnesses, or because a child was asthmatic. The mothers shopped, baked, sewed, comforted, nursed, played, listened, advised, explained, planned, refereed, budgeted, volunteered for children’s clubs, supported, and did any other work that they considered necessary for the good of their children. In doing their motherwork with its varied components, the mothers developed diverse and valuable skills, not the

---

15 I am indebted to Maushart (2001) for this word.
16 This list of tasks is not exhaustive.
least of which was the ability to handle responsibility, to self motivate, and to plan. Multi-skilling is not a new idea.

Motherwork is taken for granted, yet vitally important. The bearing and rearing of children is of basic significance to any society. Despite the vital necessity of this work done in bringing new life into the world, preserving and growing that life and training the child to become an acceptable citizen of whatever country s/he has been born into, mothering and those who mother, have low status.\textsuperscript{17} When I was seeking interviewees, getting people for the interviews was not difficult, but convincing them that they had anything to say that would be of value to a university study was. Yet all of the mothers in this research valued their work and thought mothering was, and is, of vital importance. They thought they had worked hard and, in the circumstances they were in, had done the best possible job. They also believed that mothering work was not valued by society. I had to convince many of them that what they had done, their experiences, values and opinions were important to me and for my research as well as to them.

The interviewees did not automatically know how to mother when they had given birth as the master narratives of motherhood implied. These skills had to be learned (Brophy 1975; Comer 1975; Ruddick 1989; DeVault 1991; Everingham 1994: 71–2; Pocock 2003; Maher 2004). Their desire to mother and to mother well was a response shared by all the interviewees. In this journey from young, innocent girl to experienced mother, the interviewees left behind the unrealistic ideas of motherhood. Motherwork empowered the women to live authentic lives within their limited social space. When they came up against constraints, they faced their limitations and tried to find a way around them. They were active agents who used and developed their agency to rear their children as well as possible. Their satisfaction with the work they had done was measured by the extent that they were able to develop their transformative relationship with their children and redress any constraints. It is pertinent to realise that the interviewees’ enrichment came both from the joys and trials of their work.

\textsuperscript{17} In saying ‘an acceptable citizen’, I recognise that the ‘acceptable citizen’ depends on the parents’ and society’s interpretation of ‘acceptable’.
**Power, equality, agency**

There are numerous works that focus on why/how patriarchal motherhood impacts negatively on mothers/mothering, but, to use O’Reilly’s words ‘no book, to my knowledge, considers how women may experience mothering as a site of empowerment and a location of social change’ (2004c: 3). In this book I argue that the mothers were empowered in and through their transformative relationship with their children. It was an empowerment that was constrained and controlled by patriarchal institutions, but, nonetheless, within their sphere of motherwork, which encompassed all the work that involved their children, these women were empowered. The potential of this expression of power is, as yet, unrecognised.

Motherwork is the expression of the nurturer’s agency. She, as agent, rears her children and has the power to make a difference. This power is embedded in the mother–child relationship which is a singular relationship. Though both mother and child are transformed in and through this singular relationship, the focal point for this enquiry is always the mothers, their ideas and experiences. The emphasis is on the mothers and their involvement in transformative power relationships with their children. Institutional pressures apparent in the socio-cultural contexts of their mothering will be addressed only to the extent that they impinge on the mothers’ agencies.

In sum, my research area was emergent from my personal experiences and my central argument, likewise, is emergent from the personal experiences of twenty-four mothers who so generously shared their memories of their mothering with me. These mothers became skilled workers who developed a transformative power relationship with each of their children. Hence while agency and reflexivity are intrinsic to human life, the specific focus of this book is maternal agency. Although I have used a sociological method, my book is interdisciplinary in that I have collected oral histories and have also drawn on oral history methods.

**The structure of the book**

In Chapter One I outline my perspective and detail the theoretical concepts I have used to support explication of the argument that the relationship between mother and child is a power relationship in which both mother and child are transformed. In particular, I explore the nature