

Conclusion: A call for maternal diversity

The women who responded to my questionnaire have been open, honest and indeed candid about the pleasures, frustrations and criticisms as they see them in relation to representations of motherhood on television and their views have offered the first real insight into this topic within the fields of television, media and gender studies. However, their voices have not only added significant original thought to the academic community, but must be seen to open up a dialogue with the wider entertainment arena. Although many women spoke of favourite maternal characters, preferred presenters and mothers on the small screen that they were invested in, there was a general consensus that they did not feel fairly or appropriately depicted on television. Women felt that there were very few mother figures that they could relate to and that those women who were regularly and routinely seen on screen were often rigid stereotypes and stock characters with only a narrow version of motherhood being presented.

With this in mind, my final question asked women to think about the depiction of motherhood in terms of the scope and breadth of maternal types represented, to which the overwhelming majority of respondents made the point that television did not provide a sufficiently broad range of maternal images. Participants routinely commented that minority groupings were dramatically under-represented on screen, be it in terms of fostering and adoption roles, lesbian mothers, disabled mothers or mothers with disabled children, non-white mothers, grandparents and mothers with older children, stay at home mothers and what was routinely termed 'normal' or 'ordinary' mothers. And it is with these comments that I wish to conclude the book and open up future discussion with academics, educators, public service providers and a wider range of commercial broadcasters.

Overlooked and unrepresented: Foster mums and adoptive parents

One commentator suggested that *'it is good that we are seeing more programmes about adoption on television'* and many would agree that we are indeed seeing increased instances of fostering and adoption on mainstream programming, and yet, *'more'* in this regard was still said to be very little, so much so that many mothers felt the need to comment on the under-representation of these maternal figures. Moreover, it was suggested that the limited depictions of foster and adoption are only seen when the subject is *'topical'* within the broader social and political environment or a deliberate *'plot device'* and thus not a subject that is seen across a range of programme titles or genres or with any regularity or consistency:

I've never seen a foster mum on television.

I don't believe adoptive/fostering are covered well.

Adoptive and foster parents are under-represented.

You seldom see adoptive or foster parents on television.

There is very little on television about fostering/adoption.

There is hardly any fostered or adopted children on soaps.

I don't think there is enough representation of adoptive and fostering roles.

I've been very interested in programmes about adoption – not that well represented.

Very few adoptive parents on TV. Those who are, their portrayal is far removed from the reality.

Fostering and adoption is only really represented in drama when it will lead to some disaster as part of the plot.

I can't think of any mothers on television with adoptive or fostering roles, which would be nice to see a lot more of.

There is not much around fostering and adoption, which is a shame as it might make more people come forward.

You really don't see much with regards to foster care or adoptive families, and what is portrayed is often negative and stereotypical in the sense that the child is always rebelling against them or harbours resentment.

Adoption and fostering are seldom seen on television and the suggestion here is that when these families are seen they tend to be presented as troubled or problematic. I am not suggesting that all foster parents or adoptive mothers are without family turmoil or tribulations, but if this is the ways in which mothers in the audience read these limited depictions then these depictions must be addressed. One mother makes the point that a lack of foster and adoptive parents on screen, and the focus on problematic representations within that limited number might actually have a real and worrying impact on people coming forward to care for children.

The NSPCC informs us that 'following a significant fall in the number of children in care over the past 30 years, numbers rose in the UK between 2008 and 2013 from 81,315 to 91,667' (Simkiss 2012). The number of children seeking foster homes and adoption families is increasing and the number of people coming forward is failing to keep up with demand. Recent research tells us that 'at least 9,000 new foster families will be needed in the UK ... to cope with the growing numbers of children in care' (Burns 2013). There is a record number of children in foster care and the Fostering Network tells us that it is struggling to recruit sufficient numbers of foster carers to replace the 13 per cent who leave the system each year, and this is before we consider that they need a diverse pool of carers 'to help fostering services find the right foster home for every child, first time' (ibid.). A Department for Education spokesman said 'foster carers are the unsung heroes of the care system. They make an invaluable difference to vulnerable children – offering them routine, stability and loving homes' and yet they are rarely if ever seen on our television screens, and even then, the family dynamics tends to be portrayed in a negative light. If one considers that it is 'important to

bust myths about who can apply to foster' (ibid.), to highlight 'the skills that foster carers need, and to be clear about where there are current gaps' (ibid.) then one might assume that public service programming would have a role to play in this regard.

Overlooked and unrepresented: Disability and impairment

The fostering network makes the point that 'across the UK there is currently a particular need to find people who can care for ... disabled children' (Burns 2013) and while fostering and adoption are rarely seen on television, so too, disabled mothers or mothers with disabled children were said to be rarely depicted. Mothers in the television audience commented that disability was '*hidden*' from television viewers and that notions of disability in the family home were rarely, if ever documented in factual programming or created in fictional titles. Maternal audiences were sympathetic to the representations of disabled children presented on hospital programming or community drive programmes, and spoke of the '*inspirational parents of children with terminal or life limiting conditions*' that they encountered during these shows, and yet, the overwhelming majority of respondents highlighted the paucity of physical disability or mental impairment on the small screen:

You don't see many disabled mothers on TV.

It's very rare to see a mum with disabilities on television.

Some mothers are under-represented – especially disabled.

Intelligent strong positive portrayals of ... the disabled ... missing from everywhere.

I think that ... disabled mothers and adoptive and fostering mothers are under-represented. I want to know their stories.

Probably not equally represented when it comes to disability, sexual preference or adoptive and fostering roles.

Depressed mothers seem to be under-represented ... they are not discussed or acknowledged in a positive way.

Disability is rarely shown on TV, neither is mental health unless there is a murder or other awful consequence for that character.

Parents of children with special needs aren't on TV much ... especially in incidental roles rather than documentaries that set out to dramatise their situation in some way.

I suffered from terrible postnatal anxiety and depression following many years of health problems and fears prior to conceiving. Therefore, if I am going to watch anyone, I would rather watch someone who has been through similar experiences ... but they are rarely if ever shown.

There isn't an even distribution. I would be interested in more of the cultural differences in how people deal with motherhood, I would be keen to know and understand more about adoptive/fostering situations too and mothers that have children with disabilities. I think these are more enlightening programmes that we can learn so much more from, about people and about ourselves.

Disabled Mums are ... really under-represented, and are probably the most under-represented group of all. I think the general public's view (as well as many establishments who help/deal with parents) seem to think that disabled people cannot cope and/or should not be allowed to parent just because they are disabled, (have read cases of this type in various newspapers and TV programmes), but this is not always the case. More representation of this group, and in particular, fair unbiased and positive representation is needed/would help in this area to help dispel this view.

According to the Department for Work and Pensions and the Office for Disability Issues 'there are over 11 million people with a limiting long term illness, impairment or disability' in the UK (GovUK 2014). In terms of mental health alone, postnatal depression affects one in ten women after having a baby while clinical depression affects one in ten of us at some point in our lives, irrespective of gender (NHS 2014e, 2014f). Mental health charities, government ministers and the ongoing national 'Time to Change' anti-stigma advertising campaign tell us that one in four people in

the UK will suffer a mental health problem at some point in their lives and yet there continues to be a stigma surrounding physical and even more so, mental disability. The fact that '82% of children with learning disabilities are bullied and 79% are scared to go out because they are frightened they might be bullied' (Lipsett 2007) means that more education is needed, and perhaps popular television alongside public health campaigns can play a role in depicting disability as a common and accepted experience amongst family units. And yet, representations of physical and mental disability on television are said to be conspicuous in their absence.

Disabilities might affect a minority of the television-watching audience, but these minority groups deserve recognition and respect in order to further challenge long-standing negative associations. Disabled children and parents alike are currently overlooked on television outside of those texts whereby the disability is crucial to the character or story development; what is needed of course is a variety of leading roles, secondary characters and peripheral figures who happen to be disabled rather than disability being the cornerstone of a particular dramatic arc. One mother, speaking about a *DIY SOS* (1999–) renovation project to help the family of a physically and mentally disabled young girl commented that '*I often can't watch as I find it so upsetting to think of children in these positions and the impact on the family*' but maybe what is missing here is the regular and routine depiction of disability as a part of family life rather than an experience to be singled out, problematised, pitied or 'solved'.

While disability was seldom seen as part of the family story, so too, infertility was said to be excluded from popular programming, and, much like representations of disability and fostering before it, the suggestion was that greater visibility could lead to greater societal understanding and in turn, greater social acceptance. After all 'one in seven couples may have difficulty conceiving' which equates to approximately 3.5 million people in the UK alone (NHS 2014a):

ICSI conceptions and high-risk pregnancies not represented.

I look up to mothers who have experienced similar difficulties to me physically and emotionally ... I wish we could see these stories.

As someone who tried for eight years to get pregnant, I find it very annoying when women my age are introduced to soaps the children they are shown to have are too old for them to have had them. Most women are portrayed as getting pregnant easily.

Infertility is a common experience among women within and beyond the UK, and yet this experience ‘is not usually discussed publicly’ (Striff 2005). Indeed, a woman’s infertility story is generally only witnessed by the medical profession, and as such, infertility continues to be shrouded in secrecy and shame for the woman in question (Feasey 2014a). The inclusion of infertility storylines in fictional programming and an acknowledgement of this disease (of the reproductive system) in more factual texts might go some way to exposing the commonality of this experience and the emotional, medical and financial support networks available (Sterling 2013).

Overlooked and unrepresented: Lesbian and other mothers

Lesbian mothers, be it by adoption, heterosexual sex or insemination are growing in number (Fisher 2010), yet they are rarely seen on television and when they are viewed, they are often challenged as ‘inappropriate’ for family audiences (Kuruville 2014). Mothers in the audience made it clear that not only were lesbian mothers ignored and overlooked on the small screen, but that this lack of visibility was disappointing for the wider society. They made the point that depictions of lesbian families would go some way towards educating adults and children alike about non-traditional domestic units, which in turn would be beneficial to those children who fail to see their domestic environment presented on screen or, for many, in the school environment. One lesbian parent mentions that ‘at the age of 14, my daughter had to decide when and to whom she would “come out” as the child of a gay parent. Sometimes she did not want to bring friends home in case they noticed. And she had to hear “that’s so gay” being used in place of “that’s so stupid” hundreds of times a week’ (Carille 2014). The

lack of lesbian mothers was mentioned by many women in the audience, with some suggesting that they had never seen such a figure on popular mainstream programming:

You don't see many gay mothers for example.

I have not seen many same sex parents ... on TV.

... I can't think of a gay or lesbian couple with children on television.

Very few same-sex couples or parents with disabilities are portrayed.

I think there should be more gay, minority, disabled etc. And I'm white middle class and married!

... my feeling is that the only way that under-represented groups, such as gay, lesbian etc. mothers, are played is either as deviant or funny.

I think there is representation for family mums, single mums, but less so on gay couples pro adoptive or fostering roles. I actually think these would be more inspiring cases.

Under-represented – lesbian mums, disabled mums, adoptive/fostering mums, mum's who choose to rear their children themselves but are not 'hippyish' or home educators, or on benefits.

I think the marital status of being in a heterosexual, married relationship is over-represented and given a disproportionately positive status on TV, especially to other maternal groups – in particular to being in a gay/lesbian relationship.

I do not think every potential 'type' of mother is represented on TV at all. I think more same sex parents, adoptive and foster parents would be beneficial for the general public to appreciate family life without the typical norm of mum and dad/single parent family.

Although 'Stonewall has been working to support schools and families to work constructively together and other activists and organisations have been creating a step-change in the visibility of families with LGBT parents' (Carille 2014) there is the suggestion by mothers in the audience that television could play a far greater role in bringing lesbian families in to the

mainstream in order to assist inclusivity and to address homophobic bullying within the education system.

Overlooked and unrepresented: Bumbling triers

Although they are not considered alternative or minority in the traditional sense of the word, many women felt that what they variously termed 'normal', 'ordinary', 'good enough', 'realistic' and 'real-ish' mothers were rarely seen on screen:

Realistic mother figures are under-represented in comedy and drama.

The ordinary caring do the best you can while juggling life is under-represented.

I think mothers who try and get on with it are overlooked on television, but I think that is partly the point.

It sometimes seems like normal mums are under-represented – you have to be different to get noticed.

... normal women for whom dieting and saying that everything is back to how it was before birth is not their main topic of conversation.

I think that the kind of mother that is good-enough, that doesn't always get it right, but tries, the 'real-ish' mother is lacking. Mothers on television are often either good (unrealistically patient and caring, hyper organised and efficient) or bad (unable/unwilling to care for the child, either physically or emotionally). It would be nice to see more of us bumbling triers.

Mothers as mothers are under-represented ... motherhood is something that is central to one's life, that takes up all one's time. TV mothers have children that go to bed, so they can sit up and have a glass of wine like an adult. TV mothers have children that go into another room to play so they can have a conversation or get something done. The centrality of child-rearing to the life of a mother is invisible.

Furthermore, stay at home mothers were said to be under-represented on screen:

There are not enough housewives.

Stay at home mothers aren't on much either.

Stay at home motherhood seems under-represented or explored.

I'm a stay at home mother and you don't see many of those on TV.

Most are television presenters who then do the 'working mum' thing ... I am a stay at home mum.

Stay at home mums. If we are on television, we're either lazy benefit claiming ones or the wealthy mummy who lunches. The normal everyday stay at home mum is a minority ... it seems and something to be ridiculed.

Stay at home mums seem to be represented less than women who work outside of the home – I feel that this puts pressure on women to feel they should be trying to do everything, when in fact being a mother is ultimately the hardest thing most women will ever do.

Not that many stay at home mums (I do work very part-time and am self employed so can choose my hours and only work when my husband is around to look after the children). Typically I think that mothers on TV are either working (to make ends meet or because they want a career) or they are single, on benefits and living a less than ideal lifestyle – often depicted in soap operas.

Recent research tells us that 2.04 million women are 'looking after family or home, a fall of almost 1 million since records began 20 years ago' (Peacock 2013). These figures are said to 'echo a long-term trend in which more mothers are returning to work after childcare' with 'one in three' working mothers now in the position of primary breadwinner for the family (ibid.). That said, the ideal of the traditional nuclear unit prevails as three out of four new mothers in a recent report have stated that they would 'stay at home to bring up their child if they could afford to ... six out of ten mothers who return to work after having a baby do so only to pay off debt or ease financial pressures. Just one in seven said they wanted to develop their

career' (Doughty 2012). Although politicians, civil servants and academics have all provided evidence to demonstrate benefits associated with working motherhood, prioritising subsidised childcare over and above child benefits for stay at home caregivers we are told that a 'traditional family – with a breadwinning father and a full-time mother – remains the ideal for the vast majority of women' (ibid.).

Both stay at home mothers who currently fail to see their lives reflected on screen and alternative family units who find pleasure, comfort or entertainment in the depiction of the traditional family unit point to the lack of the full-time mother on television, which is perhaps surprising given the history of the feminised domestic medium and the presumed televisual popularity of this domestic role. One mother applauded the character of Debra Barone/Patricia Heaton in *Everybody Loves Raymond* because '*she is the most "real" and funny mother character I've seen but mostly because it's more about her role and the dynamic in the whole family as a stay at home mother, rather than how she particularly relates to her children*'. Her position as a stay at home mother is crucial to her reception here but other mothers made it clear that she was a lone figure in the television landscape.

In terms of other notable mentions, representations of attachment parenting, breastfeeding mothers, funny mothers, non-white mothers, grandmothers, mothers with older children, older mothers and career women who have given up their professional role for full-time motherhood were said to be absent from our screens.

Too much attention and over-representation: Working class motherhood

There seems a commonality of viewing experience in terms of those mothers who were seen to be over-represented on the small screen, namely 'poor' struggling working class mothers and the ostensibly 'good' middle class 'yummy mummy'.

Those mothers that are marginalised and deemed unacceptable are said to dominate popular programming, with an emphasis on single, teen and working class maternal figures positioned in opposition to their more 'appropriate' middle class counterparts. While the struggling figures are routinely seen in the reality television genre, middle class mothers tend to be in fictional programming, the former encourages voyeurism and participant humiliation and the latter is said to be positioned as the more appropriate figure. Many mothers make it clear that television relies heavily on two particular maternal stereotypes, and that these figures stand in binary opposition in terms of acceptable and unacceptable motherwork thoughts and practices. However, what they have in common is that both groups are dominated by white, heterosexual, biological mothers. In terms of those struggling figures:

I think working class mothers in the UK are portrayed badly.

There has been a lot of poor underage and teen mothers lately.

Class variation is non-existent outside of reality television ... but I think that reality television ... is geared towards laughing at poor people.

Young mums, particularly young single mums (as well as single mums of all ages) are often portrayed extremely negatively which I think is most likely disproportionately unfair and helps to increase the unfair negative views of the public against these groups.

The few programmes that have been on the working class/poor, like the current TV reality show Benefits Street, show the family and the mums in a very negative light, which I think is very disproportionate to reality, helping to build up unrealistic negative views by and in the general public and totally not in comparison to the representations of the middle class currently on TV or from the recent past, the majority of whom are overly proportionately seen in a good light.

There seems to be much attention paid to teen/single/struggling pregnant women and young mothers in a range of long-running shows, one-off documentaries and special television schedule line-ups. I can understand the drama that stems from these representations, but there does seem to be a sense of over-representation here at the expense of less 'extreme' versions of mothering. The voyeurism that starts with Supernanny is

heightened in these shows, perhaps for a middle class audience who can feel removed and at a safe distance from these figures.

For every audience member who commented on the negative over-exposure of the working classes, there was another mother in the audience who spoke about the more favourable over-exposure of the more comfortable middle-class:

Generally the white, middle classes.

Middle class mothers are portrayed as 'yummy mummies'.

It's usually the typical white British 2.4 children school run mum.

These mothers speak of the over-representation of the 'yummy' middle class mother and make little mention of the fact that these women may or may not work outside of the home. Only two mothers included the notion of professional commitments in relation to this particular figure, foregrounding the potential narrative interest created around competing private and public worlds:

White middle class ... perhaps with the drama of a stressful job she has to arrange around the household chores. That is the only norm on the TV really, well the only one I seem to see.

Professional working mothers seems increasingly well represented, perhaps because of the obvious dramatic potential – in factual as well as drama programmes.

Another mother spoke with frustration at the ways in which mumsnet representatives are positioned in the media as if to speak for mothers within and outside of the parental website, the suggestion being that the mothers who established mumsnet and many of the women who read and contribute to the site are from the privileged middle classes, and therefore should not be presented as the maternal voice.

Mothers in the audience were quick to point out that they themselves were not stereotypes, did not fit into narrow or neat maternal categories and could not be easily classified in relation to working, domestic or familial practices. From this perspective, many of these women felt disappointment

and frustration at the limited stereotypes that they encountered on screen. Speaking of a desire for a more diverse presentation of the maternal role we were told that:

There is still a long way to go.

I want strong female characters, some of whom will be terrible mothers.

I do think it's important to see mothers – in all their variety – in different roles on television and to have their views represented.

There are way too many extremes either domestic goddesses that are perfect or complete louts on reality TV. Mothers are generally not well represented.

I think there is too much lazy stereotyping on television and not enough breadth and variety, also not enough acknowledgement of the grind of motherhood along with the joy.

Mothers who are portrayed for being a person whilst being a mum are under-represented ... most mothers are there for being a mother as a primary reason, not a secondary reason.

Programmes are rarely produced to go beyond stereotypes ... many Channel 4 programmes try to make too much of class and parenting and don't show the complexities of family life.

I mostly get annoyed by the stereotypes, the patronising tones, the fact that mums are either rich with nannies/cleaners/PAs etc., or poor and on benefits, and there is rarely the middle ground.

I love diversity and find many types of characters interesting, however many mothers are portrayed as either stay at home mothers or 'out of control' career women. I wish there was a lot more diversity on TV!

Need ... a broader spectrum of diversity – ones who do more than drink coffee and get their nails done in their downtime. For me – I run half marathons, I belong to a drumming group, I write, knit and read ... My friends run businesses, walk, climb mountains, do amazing art, are herbalists, run groups. We are part of a woodland owning co-operative.

I definitely think that the range of options for motherhood shown on television is limited. Most mothers are either celebrities, like pop stars and television presenters who's lives don't represent reality for most, or those on reality television or in the soaps who are

either at the top end of the wealth spectrum or considered 'working class' and portrayed probably unfavourably.

Minorities are under-represented across all roles but for me what is missing is non stereotypical roles. I'd like to see a Latina mother who doesn't talk loudly or an Asian mother who accepts the child as is, or the stay at home mom who doesn't watch soap operas and craft. I work in education and meet mothers who break all roles on a regular basis. What makes them good mothers is their care and love for their children. What makes them interesting people is their care and love for their own beings. I wish there were more non-gimmicky roles.

Many of those mothers who spoke of their enjoyment at watching factual and fictional maternal roles being played out on the small screen were the self-same mothers who spoke of frustrations at the lack of realistic representations and their desire for more diversity in relation to the maternal social types, stereotypes and archetypes that are currently viewed on popular programming. This is not a case of confusion, but rather, speaks of the complexity of entertainment, escapism and pleasure for those women in the audience. These women spoke of their disapproval of specific programmes, characters, personalities and very occasionally of their dislike or distrust of particular genres, formats or channels. What was clear, however, was that these women were casting blame at the programmes rather than the creative, management or marketing personnel behind the production. No one spoke with frustration against a particular writer, director, producer or editor, in part because the questions were worded so as to focus responses onto maternal figures rather than behind the scenes operatives, which leaves scope for future research concerning the creative and commercial decisions made concerning those maternal representations that we currently see on the small screen.

It is not my place here to tell audiences where specific instances of disability in the family may be seen or to point out that lesbian mothers are visible on mainstream programming, although both can be seen and extant research exists to account for such representations (Thomas 2007; Esterberg 2008). Rather, what I want to do here is, as I hope to have done throughout the volume, to give voice to the mother in the audience. If one of these women suggests that they rarely see representations of stay at

home motherhood or another suggests that too much attention is given to single teen mothers then this is valued and valuable findings. The fact that many of these women form a consensus in terms of those maternal figures that they see both under and over-represented on screen must then be taken more seriously as they speak to wider concerns in the television marketplace within and beyond public service broadcasting.

And finally: A few notable exceptions

Although women commented on the continued, predictable maternal stereotypes that they saw on television, with many suggesting that they would relish the opportunity to watch a more diverse, complex and character-driven range of mothers on screen, there were a small number of programmes that were said to be set apart from these rather narrow depictions. The factual documentary programme that follows the lives of 25 children born at the turn of the millennium, *Child of Our Time* (2000–) and the more recent reality pregnancy and childbirth production, *One Born Every Minute* (2010–) were commended for taking a more ‘realistic’ look at motherhood and parent–child relations removed from the more sensationalistic or salacious content of much televisual fare. So too, the scripted drama, *In the Club* (2014) was applauded for breaking away from sugar-coated and romanticised notions of pregnancy and new motherhood in favour of acknowledging a set of wider social and sexual concerns that impact on maternal efforts such as redundancy, family stability and continuing education. Irrespective of history or genre, these texts were all singled out for what was deemed their commitment to maternal diversity, little seen elsewhere in the schedules.

At the outset of the research I sought to gain socio-economic, ethnic and marital details from participants, assuming that such data would help me to order and interrogate maternal responses, but there was little obvious classification that could be drawn from these categories. It was not the case

that lesbian or single mothers were only asking to see their own lifestyle more frequently or positively depicted, or that stay at home or working mothers were interested solely in maternal depictions that resembled their lived experiences; rather, the ways in which women in the audience read and responded to depictions, or lack thereof, of motherhood on television could not be readily or easily accounted for due to either their domestic commitments, working practices or other social or cultural markers. These women were on occasion seen to form a consensus, but these were across classifications rather than restricted to them. My point here then is simply that in relation to maternal responses to popular contemporary television programming, motherhood could be read as both a unifying category and one that spans a multitude of maternal thoughts, beliefs and practices.

At the time of writing, several hundred mothers have looked at my questionnaire, and with this in mind, my hope is that these findings will encourage further academic and social research concerning both the representation of motherhood in the media and the reception of those images by women in the audience. I would encourage future research to consider the circuit of maternal image production, examining the relationship between representation, audiences, television producers and media owners in relation to the wider social, sexual, political and economic arena. And beyond that, I can but hope that independent creatives, prosumers and more mainstream entertainment providers respond to the call for greater maternal diversity on and beyond the small screen. My concern, however, is that representations of motherhood are on the decline rather than assent, as recent literature speaks of a new trope ... the absent mother, missing, presumed dead in popular media culture (Karlyn 2011; Aström 2015; Feasey 2015).

