

Introduction

The lived reality of motherhood has changed in recent generations, and, likewise, depictions of motherhood in the media have been seen to fluctuate and shift. Although research exists to account for the hypothetical or academic reading of such changing maternal depictions, little research exists to account for the ways in which maternal audiences respond to representations of motherhood in the media.

The social, political, self-help and entertainment marketplace present a rather unified and monolithic image of 'good' mothering, with the ideology of intensive motherhood being singled out as the only acceptable form of motherwork and maternal investment for expectant, new and more experienced mothers in the contemporary period. The ideology of intensive mothering, or what I shall refer to as the 'good' mother, demands that mothers are responsible for the social, cultural, creative, educational, emotional, physical, nutritional and cognitive development of their children. The figure in question is asked to uphold impeccable domestic standards while maintaining a slim appearance and serene demeanour. These stay at home caregivers should, according to the demands of intensive mothering, not only dedicate their entire waking hours to their children, but should find fulfilment and satisfaction in this nurturing role (Maushart 1999; Green 2004; Borisoff 2005; Douglas and Michaels 2005; Warner 2007).

Although the 'good' mother is presented as an ideal maternal figure, the reality is that very few women are able to, or would want to, devote their entire being to their children. Women who work outside of their domestic role are deemed inappropriate mothers due to their time away from their children (Borisoff 2005), and the reality of the stay at home mother is often at odds with the serene and satisfied 'good' mother due to the physical labour, emotional intensity and financial implications associated with this ideal (Held 1983). Andrea O'Reilly makes the point that the ideology of intensive mothering 'has become the official and only meaning

of motherhood, marginalizing and rendering illegitimate alternative practices of mothering. In so doing, this normative discourse of mothering polices *all* women's mothering and results in the pathologizing of those women who do not or can not practice intensive mothering' (O'Reilly 2004, italics in original). And the fact that many mothers are unable to mother within the appropriate ideology of intensive motherhood does not seem to lessen the power of this maternal model, rather, as I have suggested elsewhere, it simply means that many expecting, new and existing mothers struggle to uphold, yet continue to speak about, the value associated with this maternal ideal (Feasey 2012a).

A wide array of popular media texts are said to construct, circulate, conform to and thus confirm the appropriateness of the ideology of intensive mothering, with parenting manuals, mainstream film, news reports, advice columns, women's magazines, celebrity-led publications, and advertising being said to act as 'the major dispenser' of the ideals and norms surrounding motherhood (Douglas and Michaels 2005). And although it can be argued that television plays a part in upholding the 'good' mother myth, it has also been seen to present mothers as inept, ineffectual and fragile. Indeed, television appears committed to the depiction of single, sexual and scared mothers who are variously struggling with authority and finding little in the way of maternal satisfaction, which might go some way towards exposing the romanticised maternal ideal as precisely that, an ideal.

With this in mind, this book will draw on an online questionnaire in order to shed light and offer critical insight into the varied and diverse ways in which expectant, new and existing mothers of different ages, from different class and maternal backgrounds, make sense of popular representations of motherhood on television. The volume will examine the ways in which these women find pleasure, empowerment, escapist fantasy, displeasure and frustration within popular depictions of motherhood, considering the ways in which such responses inform their own maternal thoughts and practices. This research seeks to present the maternal voice of the audience and, as such, will take as its starting point those maternal depictions and motherwork representations that are highlighted by this demographic. Where appropriate, I have drawn attention to a range of secondary media texts such as news articles, reviews, interviews and the wider blogosphere

that both underpin and elaborate on such readings and consider the ways in which maternal responses can be understood in light of extant literature from within the fields of feminist motherhood studies, media theory and television criticism.

Each chapter will present a clear and comprehensive account of the ways in which maternal audiences respond to existing representations of motherhood and the maternal role in a number of television programmes, series and genres, with specific case studies being positioned in relation to a wider consideration of motherhood both on and off screen. In terms of structure, Chapter 1 explains why it is important to give voice to the maternal audience before introducing the reader to a range of media methods, each of which has its own stages of development, strengths and limitations, ethical considerations and specific demands on researcher and participants alike. The section foregrounds existing ethnographic work in the fields of feminist mothering, film, television and media studies in relation to harlequin romances, celebrity gossip magazines, female film stardom and soap opera before outlining the nature and scope of this research, paying particular attention to the role of the online questionnaire in gathering views, opinions and comments from mothers in the television audience.

Chapter 2 goes on to outline the maternal figures, tropes and archetypes that have proved popular with mothers in the audience, and yet despite being asked to consider a limitless range of programmes, genres, channels and schedules, audiences spoke favourably about a very small number of televisual presenters, performers and characters, demonstrating something of a maternal consensus, dependent on generation, in their routine viewing pleasures. Audiences have historically been said to invest and identify with particular characters based on a sense of community, commonality and shared experience and, as such, Chapter 3 introduces the reader to maternal comments regarding notions of identification and the ability to relate to representations of motherhood on the small screen, be it in terms of motherwork, domestic practices, lifestyle or sartorial choices. Again, a diverse maternal audience seemed to unite in their, this time, frustrated commentary as they tell us that they barely recognise the maternal roles that are played out in the television landscape, acknowledging the entertainment and escapist fantasies on offer in the medium while

simultaneously deriding the lack of believable, relatable figures. Chapter 4 draws attention to those representations of motherhood that audiences deem to be flawed, negative and problematic, considering why mothers choose to watch or avoid such 'bad' maternal figures. Although a number of women made the point that they would never judge another mother, the extremes of perfect motherhood and selfish parenting were simultaneously judged and found wanting by the majority of maternal viewers. In short, the research seeks to understand the ways in which certain depictions of motherhood are reviled while others revered, and the ways in which these distinctions can be seen to pick up on broader debates concerning the socially acceptable 'good' mother or the culturally inappropriate 'bad' mother. The conclusion draws attention to what is seen as a lack of maternal diversity on television. Respondents routinely and repeatedly commented on what they viewed to be predictable stock characters and limited maternal stereotypes, with minority maternal groups being said to be overlooked, and, on the rare occasion when they are given screen time, exploited. The maternal audience united to voice their concerns over the medium's continued commitment to maternal extremes, with an overwhelming outcry for a wider scope and breadth of mothering depictions.

The women who responded to my questionnaire have been open, honest and indeed candid about their viewing pleasures, frustrations and criticisms 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, they appeared to speak in agreement when they stated that they did not feel fairly or appropriately depicted on television. Women felt that there were very few characters that they could relate to and that those women who were regularly and routinely seen on screen played to narrow and divisive extremes of parenting.

There is clearly a burgeoning interest in feminist research on the institution of motherhood, ethnographic work that engages with maternal voices,

media research on representations of motherhood in popular culture and social and economic projects committed to the reality of motherwork practices, and I hope that this research can be seen to contribute in some small way to each of these fields of study and perhaps initiate a drive for more maternal diversity on and beyond the small screen, be it for public service purposes or commercial profit.

