

1 *Abstract*

2 This research aims to re-examine interpretations of data collected from second-time
3 mothers about their experiences of becoming a mother to a second child using lenses of
4 rhetoric of choice and choice feminism. The interpretations are reconsidered to identify
5 ways in which tensions between maternal status and researcher positionality have
6 influenced the ways they were reached. The paper describes two studies, each conducted
7 by one of the authors, and the interpretations of the data made at the time the research
8 was carried out. It discusses alternative interpretations and how they challenge both the
9 researcher role and theoretical explanations of gender inequity and attachment. The paper
10 concludes that feminist research can be strengthened by attending to the intersections
11 between maternal status, and positioning as feminist, woman and researcher.

12
13 *Key Words:* Researcher positionality, rhetoric of choice, maternal status

14
15 The constraints and limitations on choices available to women have long been recognised
16 within feminist research practice (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Rather than stepping into line with
17 assumptions and common sense understandings arising from cultural discourses, feminist
18 research practice aims to challenge taken for granted knowledge that arises from, or
19 perpetuates, oppressive practices towards women in everyday life and their life course. It
20 does this both by illuminating ways in which social structures, and members of the social and
21 political spaces inhabited by women, construct and reinforce knowledge and practices, and by
22 making explicit the assumptions and practices within the research process itself that further
23 (re)construct hierarchies and oppression. Particular care is taken to acknowledge the

24 influence of cultural and historical discourses in the accounts that women give of themselves
25 and of their relationships with the worlds they inhabit (e.g. Riessman, 1987), and careful
26 attention is paid to flattening the hierarchy between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ (e.g.
27 Haug, 1987). Additionally, acknowledging differences through awareness of the roles played
28 by secrecy and silence in feminist research processes enables questioning of both the process
29 of giving voice that feminist researchers set out to address and the moments of secrecy and
30 silence that accompany this (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2011), recognising that the emphasis on
31 ensuring that voices are heard can sometimes overlook the relevance of silences and obscure
32 their meanings for those seeking to survive as women in oppressive cultures. With feminist
33 approaches to researching oppression and the oppressed come ethical, practical,
34 epistemological and methodological concerns that can be addressed more fully by attending
35 to what is left unsaid both by researcher and by participant. Implications of decisions made
36 by researcher or participant to remain silent or to silence the other, must be considered with
37 reference to contexts that span societal oppression and individual choice. Whilst recognising
38 that participants may need to remain silent or secretive about experiences and beliefs,
39 researchers too must consider their own need or decisions whether to speak or not of their
40 own experiences and understandings. Their motivation and method for seeking out
41 knowledge from participants has to be explicit and they must reach careful decisions about
42 what to do with knowledge gained through research. It is the researcher’s responsibility not to
43 represent as commonplace that which is not, and to respect that there may be essential
44 reasons for secrecy and silence. For example, contemplating those who choose to remain
45 silent about their sexuality in restrictive societies in order to avoid victimisation (e.g. Parpart
46 and Thompson, 2011) reminds us that silence can be an important part of identity.

47

49 Illuminating the researcher role in maintaining or breaking silence and secrecy about
50 themselves or the research they are conducting provides valuable insight to the ways in which
51 researchers encounter the consequence of their decisions. Researcher positionality signifies
52 the ‘perspective shaped by the researcher’s unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality,
53 sexuality and other identities’ (Mullings, 1999: 337). Awareness of downplaying one’s
54 position in order to elicit information and avoid negative criticism (Ahmed, 2010) promotes
55 awareness of the dynamics of gaining and distributing knowledge as a researcher. Deciding
56 whether to, or when to, disclose personal status with regard to the topic under study informs
57 the direction and outcome of the research process and may serve to hinder, help or inhibit the
58 elicitation of data from participants.

59

60 This has been explored specifically in relation to mothers and non-mothers by Frost & Holt
61 (2014). By reflecting on the cultural discourses that place the status of ‘mother’ as central to
62 how women define themselves and other women (e.g. Phoenix et al., 1991), Frost and Holt
63 queried the impact of the questionable moral status attached to the position of (female)
64 childlessness, and of motherhood in our individual research with mothers, one author a
65 mother and the other not (see Frost, 2006 and Holt, 2010). Frost and Holt (2014) sought to
66 open up a dialogue about how ‘maternal status’, as an integral aspect of the status of woman,
67 shaped the research process when exploring a topic which inevitably foregrounded the
68 salience of this status, and explored the tensions which arose when their identities as mothers,
69 researchers, feminists and women conflicted in the pursuit of investigating experiences of
70 motherhood. Frost and Holt (2014) reflected back on their research diaries and analysed their

71 own and each other's extracts to consider how their maternal status shaped the research topic,
72 their selection of methods and their research practice.

73 They found that this shaping began with the formation of a research idea, as well as in the
74 practical implications for accessing participants that it involved. They found that they may
75 also have shaped the research method and analytic frameworks they employed because of
76 'positivist' concerns about 'researcher objectivity', or 'anti-positivist' concerns about
77 'experiential legitimacy' appearing to be the product of an epistemological anxiety produced
78 by the fear that a researcher's maternal status may damage the credibility of the research.
79 Frost and Holt's (2014) study showed that their maternal status produced particular conflicts
80 for each of them during their research practice so that they experienced tension between
81 wanting to perform both 'good motherhood' and 'good researcher-hood'. They were also
82 challenged to perform 'good feminism' by disclosing maternal status, and to perform 'good
83 feminist research' by hiding that they did not share the world of which our participants spoke.
84 They concluded that their awareness of the ways in which maternal identity and its
85 intersection with identities as researchers, women and feminists, became more or less salient
86 during the research process. It raised questions about whether the conflict between different
87 identities produced limits on what data they were able to elicit and what meanings they could
88 find within it. Frost and Holt (2014) queried whether in some cases, they had actually
89 hindered their (feminist) research goals by staying silent about our maternal status, or by
90 speaking of it.

91

92 *Women and Choice*

93 The perception and enactment of women's agency over their choices about motherhood is
94 determined by the cultural discourse within which they are constructed and construct

95 themselves. In Western society, pervasive discourses construct ‘motherhood’ as natural,
96 inevitable and an intrinsic aspect of femininity. In contrast, ‘non-motherhood’ is constructed
97 as unnatural, unwomanly and is characterised by deficiency and loss (Frost & Holt, 2014). In
98 her development of memorywork as a method of investigating women’s experience and
99 formation of identity, in 1987, Frigga Haug and colleagues (Andresen, Bünz-Elfferdin,
100 Hauser, Lang, Laudan, Lüdenabbbm Neur, Nemitz, Neihoff, Prinz, Räthzel, Scheu, and
101 Thomas) recognised that individuals are both part of powerful social structures in society and
102 active participants in them. With the generation and analysis of their own memories, this
103 collective of feminist researchers aimed to understand the parts played by women in
104 constructing their identities, including when this meant they were subordinate to men. Their
105 research explored women’s sexuality as a form of socialization. The experience of
106 subjugation shared by women was viewed as a strength and they sought to examine both
107 reason and emotion in the memories they generated (Haug, 1987). The memorywork method
108 recognised the social and political context of German Marxist philosophy in which the
109 women were living and sought to analyse the conflict between the powerful (male) and the
110 subjugated (female) members of the society by challenging the divide between the objective
111 researcher and the subjective researched. The method worked to gain understanding of how
112 women participated in the construction of, and inserted themselves into, the social structures
113 of their social and political world (see e.g. Frost, Eatough, Shaw, Weille, Baraitser, and
114 Tzemou, 2012 for more details of this method). However now, nearly three decades later, the
115 ‘rhetoric of choice’ allows another way of examining the construction of women in different
116 political worlds.

117

118 *Feminism and Choice*

119 The 'rhetoric of choice' works to suggest that women have agency to make private choices
120 but this focus on the individual works to subvert the larger neoliberal ideals and values by
121 diverting the focus from oppressive structures that challenge them (Castaneda and Isgro,
122 2013). McCarver (2011) argues that the closeness of association of the term 'choice' with
123 understandings of feminism has led to a dangerous conflation, in which the practice of choice
124 has come to be seen as the practice of feminism, so that "to enact choice means to enact
125 feminism" (McCarver, 2011: 21). This conflation has been encapsulated by Hirshman (2005)
126 in the term 'choice feminism' which suggests that as long as a woman has made the choice
127 (about pregnancy, work, family and so on) she is practising feminism. McCarver and others
128 (e.g. Ferguson, 2010) point out the inherent dangers of this in suggesting that feminism now
129 incorporates all choices made by women, regardless of whether they adhere to feminist
130 principles or not. It obscures the role and constraints imposed by social structures by
131 implying that choices are made in isolation by individuals regardless of the impact of social
132 structures. The term 'choice feminism' arguably serves to make feminism more palatable to a
133 wider range of women by distancing it from politics and practice seen as "potentially
134 judgemental, exclusionary or radical" (McCarver, 2011: 22).

135 McCarver points out that the dangers of this postfeminist 'choice feminism' is that it closes
136 down the need for a feminist agenda in fighting for changes and choices in practices and
137 politics. It draws criticism away from individuals so that all behaviours by women deflect
138 interrogation regardless of the role they play in perpetuating, reinforcing or introducing
139 practices that can render women subservient. She points to the role played by the rhetoric of
140 choice that on the one hand centres choice making within women's discourses as a means of
141 asserting themselves, and on the other hand implicitly draws on cultural discourses to inhibit
142 or prevent questioning of declarations of choice making by individuals because of the need to
143 show respect for individual autonomy (McCarver, 2011). Castaneda and Isgro (2013)

144 highlight the power of the ‘rhetoric of sacrifice’ in which sacrifice by mothers is expected
145 and lauded. They reinforce McCarver’s call to address issues of gender inequity concerning
146 family and work by turning the rhetoric of sacrifice on its head to provide alternatives to the
147 rhetoric of choice that prohibits the questioning of women’s choices as long as they have
148 made them themselves (Castaneda and Isgro, 2013; McCarver, 2011).

149

150 Feminist researchers play a vital role in challenging and reconstructing the rhetoric of choice
151 in their exploration of the experiences of women. As academics, we seek to explore ways in
152 which our research with mothers may have been inadvertently inhibited by us as feminist
153 researchers seeking to enable marginalised voices to be heard. We do this by revisiting two
154 studies that we have carried out to explore the transition to second-time motherhood, and to
155 use the critique of the ‘rhetoric of choice’ to look again at the interpretations we made at the
156 time of the studies. In particular, we wish to consider whether the interpretations were
157 inherently supportive or victimising of the mothers’ perceptions of the choices they faced
158 with regard to their motherhood of two or more children.

159 The first study, conducted by Frost, a mother, aimed to explore the transition to second-time
160 motherhood of professional middleclass women in London. The second study, conducted by
161 Rodriguez, not a mother, aimed to explore the transition to second-time motherhood by
162 mothers with a second child who had been born with a perceived disability. The study design
163 and the choice to employ a pluralistic approach to findings and meanings within the data was
164 an important aspect of both studies. Narrative analysis recognizes that people use stories to
165 make sense of their lives and to present themselves and their experiences to others (Sarbin,
166 1986). It recognises that it is particularly at times of incoherence in events and breaches in the
167 individual’s sense of identity that the stories are useful in making sense of changes in the

168 sense of self and in the individual's relationship with their surroundings (Bruner, 1987;
169 Emerson and Frosh, 2004; Riessman, 1993). It follows that narrative analysis is well suited to
170 the exploration of identity because it is 'particularly sensitive to subjective meaning-making,
171 social processes and the interpenetration of these in the construction of personal narratives
172 around breaches between individuals and their social contexts' (Emerson and Frosh, 2004: 9).

173

174 Our studies employed a pluralistic critical narrative analysis. This enabled us to combine
175 models of narrative analysis to consider the spoken word, the written text, and the micro- and
176 macro-structuring of both in the analysis process. Each model offered a theoretical lens
177 related to a field of research through which narratives can be examined. All of the models
178 adhere to the tenet underlying narrative analysis that one seeks understanding of how
179 individuals make sense of experiences through the study of the stories they tell. The model
180 developed by Labov (1972) allows the identification of 'event narratives' (Squire, 2005) from
181 a structural perspective. Stories are defined as temporally ordered with a 'beginning, middle
182 and end' and are identifiable by the sequence of phrases contained within them. The phrases
183 hold the audience's attention by eliciting and answering a succession of questions.

184 This model is useful as a starting point in analysis because it provides a means of reducing
185 stretches of text to identifiable narratives. Meanings within the story can then be investigated
186 using different models. Box 1 outlines one form of the model.

187

188 Box 1: Labov and Waletzky (1967) Model

Abstract:	<i>What was this about?</i>
Orientation:	<i>Who?, What?, When?, Where?</i>
Complicating Action:	<i>Then what happened?</i>
Evaluation:	<i>So what?</i>
Resolution:	<i>What finally happened?</i>
Coda:	<i>Return to present – end of story</i>

189

190 Gee's 'poetic model' (Gee, 1991) originates in the field of linguistics and provides a set of
191 rules for organizing text by emphasizing the prosodic and paralinguistic aspects of speech.
192 These might include the pitch and intonation with which the stories are narrated. The model
193 pays close attention to the rhythm of the narration and offers a way of systematically
194 deconstructing the narrative into groups of Lines, which in turn define Strophes, Stanzas and
195 Parts of a story. This is useful in identifying changes of topic within stretches of speech and
196 text. It presents the text as stanzas. This in turn enables the analyst to read it differently and to
197 pay attention to different possibilities of meanings (Becker, 1999).

198

199 The authors recognise that knowledge of the interaction within the interview setting provides
200 important information about the narration and highlights both the importance of the context
201 in which they are spoken and the context in which the narrator's knowledge has arisen.
202 Models that take account of the interaction between interviewer and narrator include the
203 critical narrative analysis model (Emerson and Frosh, 2004). This utilizes Gee's poetic model
204 but also actively considers the researcher's role throughout the research process. The
205 'research process' is regarded as inescapably including every aspect of the researcher
206 intervention, from the conduct of the interview to the presentation of the final write-up. The
207 researcher's role was examined at every stage to highlight its influence on the flow and
208 content of the interview through to the meanings it brought to the interpretation. This critical
209 approach sought to counteract the tendency for the researcher to draw on personal and
210 professional discourses to impose pre-given meaning on texts by foregrounding as many
211 assumptions and pre-existing knowledge brought to the research process by the researcher.
212 This was done through careful reflection on the framing of questions asked in the interview,
213 close examination of researcher interjections during the interview, holistic analysis of the

214 data gathered, and by paying close attention to the ideas and ‘feelings’ of the researcher in the
215 data interpretation. Thus the data analysis considered the researcher role whilst employing
216 different models of narrative analysis to identify and interrogate the content, form and
217 structure of the narratives (Frost, 2009).

218

219 We will begin by presenting details of each study and a key finding of each study as made at
220 the time of its conduct. We will then discuss these findings through lenses of ‘choice
221 feminism’ and the ‘rhetoric of choice’. Reflection from each researcher on their motivation
222 and interest in this research topic will be considered throughout.

223 *Study 1: The transition to second-time motherhood carried out by Nollaig Frost*

224 This study investigated the transition to second-time motherhood amongst British,
225 professional women living in London in the early 2000s. It asked ‘What does the narration of
226 women’s daily experiences tell us of their hopes, fears, expectations and realities of
227 becoming a mother to a second child?’ and ‘What do these narratives tell us of the ways in
228 which the women make sense of the perceived changes in their sense of self during and after
229 this transition?’ The study was conducted by Frost shortly after she had become a mother of
230 two children. The study had arisen out of curiosity about personal experience and so, to
231 enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, several steps were taken to ensure
232 this was taken into consideration throughout the research process. In addition to selecting
233 pluralistic critical narrative analysis to gather and analyse the data, the steps taken included
234 the keeping of a reflexive journal, peer consultation with other researchers and supervisory
235 discussions about the process of reaching the Findings.

236 Seven women in the second trimester of their second pregnancy and in stable relationships
237 with the father of both children were recruited for the study from parenting networks in North

238 London. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each woman at three monthly
239 intervals over the course of a year. The aim of the interviews was to enable each woman to
240 talk freely of the experiences and issues of most significance to her as she made the transition
241 to second-time motherhood.

242 A key finding to emerge, and the focus of this paper, is that all the women spoke of their
243 perceived lack of choice in providing primary care for their children. Primary care giving was
244 practised in ways that included the mothers taking extended maternity leave from their jobs
245 following the birth of the child and providing full-time care in the early months following
246 birth, being the (working) parent who got up in the night to a crying child, taking days off
247 work to stay at home to care for a sick child and employing professional childcare for the
248 older child in order to focus their time and emotions on the new baby. The mothers explained
249 their choices using a range of beliefs that included the lack of ability of men to be gentle, the
250 father earning more than the mother and so needing to be better rested for work, and no one
251 else being able to know the right type and level of care needed for their own children.

252

253 One mother, Anna, elegantly described several of these issues in her following words, which
254 are presented after analysis using Gee's model of narrative analysis (1991). This analytical
255 model seeks out linguistic form to gain insight to meaning within narratives:

256 **Stanza 34**

257 *But part of it is I know that Michael Mike's got a job you know he has to*

258 *go to the next day*

259 *And he's more highly paid than I am*

260 *So I sort of think I need to be the one to get up.*

261 **Stanza 35**

262 *But equally I'm sort of I don't feel happy with him getting up and changing the nappy*

263 *Because I know that he's not you know*

264 *That as a man he's not that gentle with her*

265 **Stanza 36**

266 *And that it's me*

267 *That I will do it better than him*

268 *That's what I believe anyway*

269 *And so I get up and do it*

270 **Stanza 37**

271 *And that was all my choice*

272 *But it didn't feel like a choice*

273 *Because you know I couldn't*

274 *It just broke my heart anyway*

275

276 *At the time this analysis was presented as:*

277

278 *“Anna describes Mike as being more highly paid than her (Stanza 34) and of not being that*

279 *gentle with the baby (Stanza 35). Anna explains her belief that this is because he is a man*

280 *and that because she will do it better than him she therefore has to be the one to get up to the*

281 *child in the night. Stanza 37 affirms that Anna feels that she has no choice about this. Using*

282 *Gee's model to focus on the text in this way adds a new layer of understanding to Stories 1*

283 *and 2. It provides insight as to why Anna is the parent to get up in the night by informing us*

284 *of her gendered beliefs about childcare and mothering, an insight not available using other*

285 *methods, such as Labov's model (1972) that examines only the structure of narratives.*

286

287 *It has brought texture to the story of getting up in the night and having to be the parent to*
288 *stay at home by telling me that Anna feels that she has no choice but to do this. This*
289 *information was not available in the Labov analysis and enriches the insight gained into one*
290 *way in which Anna makes sense of her experiences as a mother.” (Frost, 2009: 17)*

291

292 Now, using the lenses of ‘choice feminism’ and the ‘rhetoric of choice’ these findings and
293 their explanation can be considered another way. The investigation and portrayal of
294 motherhood in psychology and psychoanalysis is the source of many contemporary everyday
295 discourses about mothers. Notions of the ‘selfish’ mother, the ‘monster’ mother and the
296 ‘greedy’ mother are underlined by an adherence to attachment theory and a focus on the
297 quality of the relationship between mother and child (Alldred, 1999), and questioning about
298 whether they can successfully combine work with family without causing damage or distress
299 to the child. This norm is further perpetuated through the high proportion of research that is
300 carried out with white middle-class nuclear families, such as those featured in this study
301 (Frost, 2011).

302

303 The existence and acceptance of the discourses of the ‘ideal mother’ can inhibit women from
304 speaking freely about their experiences and feelings as mothers. This can lead to a ‘self-
305 policing’ of their thoughts and words as they seek to present themselves to others in ways
306 they think they should be seen (O’Grady, 2005). Whilst presenting herself to me (Frost) as a
307 ‘good mother’ who tended to her children both emotionally and practically, at personal
308 sacrifice of sleep or work, Anna can also be seen to be informing me that she does not have
309 autonomy or freedom over this. Her decision is not an agentic one but is expressed using the
310 rhetoric of choice, and also as one that is the ‘right choice’ – to care for her children. Anna is

311 demonstrating clearly that she does this, but her distress in narrating it is evident in her words
312 “*It just broke my heart anyway.*” Perhaps the importance of relaying to another professional
313 woman who is also a mother that she is a good mother overrode her desire to inform me that
314 she would choose another path if she felt able to.

315

316 The narrative analysis illuminates the frequent use of the word ‘choice’, in line with
317 McCarver’s proposal of a rhetoric of choice that draws attention to it. It serves to constrain
318 others from questioning the choice made, as I did, but Anna’s presentation of it as not being a
319 choice suggests to me now that her perception of choices available to her was one of
320 constraints. Anna further supports her portrayal by calling on the ‘gendered division of
321 labour’ discourse that regards women as better suited to caring for the family than men are –
322 an argument long used to exclude women from the public sphere of society, and thereby from
323 a range of political and civil rights, whilst also justifying their place within the home and as
324 primary caretaker of children (Okin, 1996). As McCarver describes “although choice denotes
325 individual autonomy and freedom, when it comes to raising children the concept of the
326 unselfish motherhood trumps individual needs and wants” (McCarver, 2011: 28).

327

328 It is important to reflect on why, as the researcher, I interpreted Anna’s accounts as a free
329 choice at the time of the study. Was I practising choice feminism and taking an easy path of
330 lack of interrogation that resulted in a lack of support for Anna’s plight?

331 As a relatively new mother of two children myself at the time of the interviews, and as a
332 researcher pursuing doctoral studies, my role as interviewer and data analyst presented
333 complex tensions between competing discourses of the role of ‘successful academic’ and
334 ‘good mother’ (Raddon, 2002). According to Raddon (2002), discourses of the successful

335 academic expect that all their time is utilised in academia (David et al., 1996; Goode, 2001),
336 in the career oriented, productive pursuit of success (Harris et al., 1998). Dominant
337 discourses of ‘good mothers’ expects them to be selfless and making the most of both worlds
338 (Raddon, 2002). They are expected to put mothering before everything else in order to
339 ensure the best development for their children. Whilst ways of negotiating these tensions in
340 everyday life are complex and varied, they are particularly apposite in the research process
341 when the research is about motherhood and conducted by a mother. As the salience of the
342 maternal status flexes with the research process, the researcher’s positionality enables or
343 limits the exercise of power and informs the social identities within it. Awareness of this
344 enables recognition and responses to the changing balance of power that pervades and
345 impacts on the research process (Lavis, 2010).

346

347 As a mother of two children researching new mothers of two children I felt positioned by the
348 participants as an ‘expert’ because I had children who were past the new baby stage that these
349 mothers were just entering. However, I did not feel expert as a new mother of two children.
350 Although, on occasions, I was provoked into wanting to take up a good mother position, as
351 when one participant’s child cried for prolonged periods during our interviews and I worked
352 to resist the urge to attend to the child, I more frequently strove to position myself as the
353 researcher, seeking to put aside my identity as a mother and focusing on eliciting data from
354 the participants. I felt frustration when a child interrupted the interview, or on one occasion
355 when the partner came into the room and remained in the background, to my mind inhibiting
356 what the participant felt able to speak about to me.

357

358 Despite this, when listening to the participants, I was often reminded of my own situation as a
359 mother; I agreed with some and disagreed with others of their practices of motherhood.

360 However, as a researcher I sought to remain open and non-judgemental to what was being
361 said to me, to develop and maintain rapport with the participants through an easy
362 conversational style but striving to ensure that the conversation remained about their
363 experiences and not mine. At the same time I aimed to maintain a reflexive stance that
364 considered why I was experiencing the interviews in the way that I was through reflection
365 during and after each interview.

366

367 It seems possible to me now that a possible negotiation of the conflict between wanting to be
368 a good researcher and wanting to be, and appear to be, a good mother, obscured some of the
369 other questions I could have asked of myself and of the data using this approach. Why were
370 the participants choosing to recount their experiences in terms of the unavailability of choice
371 to them? Were the gendered division of labour explanations alongside use of the word choice
372 sufficiently in accord with my own practices that I chose not to question them further with
373 these women? Was the fact that so many of the women I interviewed were so similar to me
374 in age, class, ethnicity and lifestyle that I was somehow wary of questioning their
375 explanations too closely for fear of realising something about myself? Perhaps I had
376 constrained my interpretation of the data precisely because the experiences being described to
377 me were both similar to my own and being told to me by people similar to me.

378

379 We now turn to the second study on second motherhood, conducted by Rodriguez. This study
380 recruits from a similar participant group and considers the data in relation to attachment
381 theory.

382

383 *Study 2: The transition to second-time motherhood by mothers with a second child identified*
384 *as having a disability carried out by Deborah Rodriguez.*

385 This study explored how mothers of a child without disability experienced the transition to
386 subsequently becoming a mother to a child with a disability, and retrospectively examined
387 what these experiences meant for the mothers' sense of self. In particular, this study
388 investigated how women who have already experienced motherhood to a non-disabled child
389 (re)negotiated their way through second-time motherhood with a disabled child, focusing on
390 how they (re)formulated themselves as mothers. The term 'disability' was self-defined by the
391 mothers, without any limitations placed by the researcher. The children who were identified
392 as having a disability were diagnosed with autism, autism with epilepsy, and Kleefstra
393 syndrome, and their ages ranged from 5 years to 18 years. five mothers living in Greater
394 London were recruited. One-off semi-structured interviews were carried out with each of the
395 women , which asked the mothers what it what it was like being a mother to one child, what
396 it then meant for them being a mother to a second child with a disability, and their thoughts
397 about their own future. Similarly to Study 1, which used a pluralistic narrative approach by
398 using Gee's (1991) model as well as Labov's (1972) model of narrative analysis, a pluralistic
399 narrative analysis was applied to the data of this study, employing Labov's (1972) model of
400 structural analysis, and a flexible thematic narrative analysis. The flexible thematic narrative
401 analysis drew on both Riessman's (2008) and Riley and Hawe's (2005) respective models.

402 This study was borne out of my own background, and the wish to understand these personal
403 circumstances further. As the eldest sibling with a younger sister with a disability, I had
404 always felt that attention was mainly paid to my sister because of her disability, and that I,
405 not having a disability, was expected to be self-sufficient and manage with limited attention. I
406 wondered what my reaction might be in discovering whether the mothers felt like they did
407 not have a choice in how they mothered their children with and without a disability (perhaps
408 a sense of relief it could not have been done any other way), or what my reaction might be in

409 discovering that the mothers felt like they did have a choice (perhaps a sense of dejection
410 because they could have chosen to mother differently).

411 Similarly to Study 1, a key finding in this study appeared to be that the mothers perceived a
412 lack of choice in providing primary care to their children, particularly towards their children
413 with a disability. In order to care for their child, the mothers did not return to their jobs
414 following the birth of their second child and stayed at home as the primary caregiver.
415 Although they had expected to find paid employment after having their second child, the
416 mothers were not able to do so for many years, until a time when the child with a disability
417 was a teenager. They suggested that the reason for this was due to the amount of attention and
418 care a child with a disability requires, especially during the early years, which meant that they
419 would not have time to work. The mothers also suggested that no one else but them would be
420 able to care for and meet the special needs of their children with a disability.

421 One of the outcomes of being the sole provider of intense primary care to their child with a
422 disability was that these mothers had to continually prioritise the second child's needs over
423 everyone else's, including other family members' as well as their own. One mother, Jane,
424 describes how everything revolves around her son with a disability, John. Stephen is her first
425 child. Jane's narrative is presented with the application of Labov's (1972) structural model
426 which focuses on how an event is organised and is told in a story context (Riessman, 2008):

427

Abstract:	Yes so it is about everything is about him
Orientation:	and I don't know, finding out as much as possible about his disability

because it manifests itself in lots of different ways

Complicating

Action:

where he just repeats the same question over
and I tell him the same thing
he will just ask the same question
over and over again.

Evaluation:

I think the main difference is that everything is about him
because it has to be that way,
whereas with Stephen we chose to make everything about
Stephen

Resolution:

but in this case, with John, it just has to be like that.

428

429 In this extract, Jane tells us the significance of informing herself as much as possible about
430 the many ways that John's disability may manifest, and describes an example where John
431 demands attention from her until she provides it. This leads Jane to explain that she has no
432 choice but to focus on John, whereas the amount of attention and focus she gave to Stephen
433 was a choice she made. Jane was able to decide how much of her attention to give her first
434 child without a disability; in contrast, Jane's ability to choose which child to focus on is not
435 available for her to make when she becomes a second-time mother to a child with a disability.
436 It seems as though this is an important point for Jane to stress in the interview, as without
437 prompting, she explained:

438 *“Do you know a lot about autism? Um everything is sort of, it revolves around him but in a*
439 *different way to how I described earlier with Stephen. With Stephen it didn’t have to be that*
440 *way because we just chose to do everything. With John it just has to, that is how it is.”*

441 The above analysis was presented at the time of conducting the study but now can be
442 considered in an alternative manner through the lenses of the ‘rhetoric of choice’ and
443 attachment theory to explain and challenge these initial interpretations on talk about choice.

444 The central notion of attachment theory is the ‘secure base,’ which is the internalisation of a
445 relationship during childhood with an attachment figure characterised by providing consistent
446 support and comfort in times of distress. This may result in the development of a secure
447 attachment style. Close attachment in childhood is necessary for a child to survive and thrive
448 – secure attachments to caregivers provide physical and emotional safety as well as a healthy
449 context for the development of the child. When children are not provided with attentive
450 caring during their early years, their development and capacity to relate to others suffers
451 damage (Bifulco and Thomas, 2013). According to the traditional and ethological view of
452 attachment theory, attachment to the mother is seen as being an innate biological need for
453 infants, and so regular non-maternal care and separation from the mother may have
454 disastrous implications for a child’s development and may disrupt the formation of a secure
455 attachment (e.g.: Clarke-Stewart, 1989; Vaughn et al., 1985; Rodriguez, 2014; Vicedo, 2013).
456 However, a number of concerns about the role of women and mothers have been raised as a
457 result of these conventional beliefs, which encompass several issues relating to this study.
458 The constructed range of cultural gender roles are limited and reinforced, and consequently
459 the construction of motherhood is delineated by the psychological discourses of children’s
460 needs and potential. The traditional view of attachment theory attempts to explain children’s
461 development as an evolutionary and biologically determined phenomenon, reinforcing the

462 dominant discourse regarding women's reproductive and child-rearing tasks, treating women
463 who choose not to mother as unnatural and not normal (Franzblau, 1999). This is in line with
464 McCarver's (2011) 'Family First' script, which intimates that although women have choices,
465 these choices should be valued and celebrated on the condition that she places her family
466 first. The Family First script offers insight into what is socially recognised and understood as
467 women's roles and responsibilities, and strongly indicates that there is an appropriate choice
468 to be made. However, women who choose otherwise are open to criticism of personal
469 ambition and selfishness (McCarver, 2011), and to notions of the monstrous mother who
470 produces monstrous children (Alldred, 1999). These views are further supported by academic
471 research findings that non-traditional families are perceived as offensive or problematic
472 (Alldred, 1999). Consequently, the 'rhetoric of choice' in line with the Family First script
473 provides an illusion of choice-making within a social actuality of limited choices (McCarver,
474 2011).

475

476 In this study, Jane describes that when she wants to do something other than mother, she has
477 to wait until John is away, such as at an after-school club. In this narrative, Jane is quick to
478 tell me that John likes going to the after-school club, which seems tangential to the point that
479 she is making about her restrictions until he is absent. I wondered why Jane felt the need to
480 add that and for whose benefit she mentioned it for. It may have been that she performing
481 'good motherhood,' possibly perceiving that I, or others, might judge her mothering choices.
482 I considered my positionality in relation to Jane – I am neither a mother of a child with a
483 disability, nor a mother at all, and so I had no direct tangible experience from which to
484 position myself from with regards to mothering a child with a disability. At this point I had
485 not disclosed to Jane, or to any of the participants, that I had a sibling with a disability as I

486 considered the possibility that this revelation may have imposed barriers on the stories the
487 mothers chose to recount about choice and the implications this had on their first non-
488 disabled child – they may have felt like they needed to further justify their decisions to me,
489 which I strove to avoid. Perhaps Jane thought that she needed to present her choices and
490 herself as a ‘good mother’ and to defend her perceived lack of choice in this story by telling
491 me that John likes going to the after-school club.

492 Challenging the traditional view of attachment theory, which positions mothers as the sole
493 source of attachment security and frame for healthy development for the child, is the
494 consideration of multiple attachments. Repeated contact with any caregiving person may
495 result in the formation of an attachment bond, and contemporary research into attachment
496 theory may indicate that not only do children form multiple attachments (Hazan and Shaver,
497 1994; Howes, 1999), but it is fundamentally adaptive for children to have various attachment
498 figures who fulfil different roles in different contexts (Howes et al., 1988). In her interview,
499 despite being explicitly asked about others that may be involved in providing care to her
500 children, Jane barely mentions her children’s father, and when she does, it is in brief
501 reference to the family moving to another house, to the father working full time, to their
502 marriage unravelling, and finally, to John seeing his father on occasion. During analysis, I
503 wondered what this lack of talk about the father meant with regard to the choices Jane made
504 while mothering her two children. McCarver (2011) describes the absence of additional
505 alternative scripts to the rhetoric of choice as being just as significant and revealing as the
506 choice scripts in women’s discourse, such as the lack of scripts which question the scarcity of
507 feasible and desirable alternative choices for mothers. In Jane’s narrative, there are no
508 comments about the father playing an active role in providing care for his children as a
509 possible alternative choice which would also permit her to do other than mother. Due to the
510 dominant discourses regarding the role of women and mothers such as the traditional and

511 earlier view of attachment theory, which provided a justification for gendered parental roles
512 by deterministically positioning mothers as being an innate biological need for their infants,
513 Jane may perceive that she has no choice other than to be the sole caregiver to her children,
514 and may not even consider that there may be other choices she can make.

515

516 *Conclusion*

517 Close re-examination of interpretations that we made of data collected in earlier studies has
518 highlighted the value of considering how the rhetoric of choice can serve to inhibit the
519 feminist researcher role in bringing new insight to the theoretical explanations of gender and
520 attachment as informing mothers' roles. Applying the 'rhetoric of choice' lens to second-
521 time mothers' talk about perceived lack of choice illuminates the dominant discourses about
522 constraints of choice that are imposed by societal expectations behind the 'rhetoric of
523 sacrifice' that expects mothers to prioritise their caring role over their own needs and wishes.
524 The pluralistic narrative analysis approach that we employed to analyse the data provided us
525 with a flexible structure with which both to apply systematic models of data analysis and to
526 explicitly incorporate consideration of our own feelings and positionalities as a mother, a
527 non-mother, women, researchers and feminists to meanings within the data. Careful
528 reflection on our role as researchers assisted in the reconsideration of the meaning in talk
529 about choice.

530

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