

**Mother love? Tugs, ties and tensions:
the making of men, the making of mothers
and grandmothers in everyday life.**

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Women's Studies

February 2023

ABSTRACT

Voices of grand/mothers and men-children are foregrounded in this thesis, which explores mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy with the aim of understanding more about the formation of (hetero)gender identities. Using an innovative approach, my research combines (feminist) autoethnography and mothers' and men-children's narratives to generate knowledge of psycho-social processes involved in shaping identities. It draws on a broad range of scholarly literature, and my own knowledge and experience as a (hetero)gendered mother of sons, grandmother of grandsons, and practising psychodynamic psychotherapist. Three interwoven concepts provide the analytic framework: narrative performativity, normative unconscious processes, and intersectional power. The thesis contributes to knowledge of ethical considerations in autoethnography, combined research methodologies, and (hetero)gendered meanings of (grand)mothering, and being a man-child, and the personal and social implications of psycho-social processes involved in identity formation. 11 mothers of adult sons and 10 'middle-aged' men participated, telling mundane stories of relationships between men-children and mothers, which I crafted into 'creative non-fiction' as the basis for my interpretive analysis. Key themes emerging include the centrality of emotions, familial power hierarchies, and the inter- and transgenerational effects of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy that perpetuate hegemonic masculinities and femininities. The thesis reveals how (hetero)gendered identities are embodied (dis)continuously through psycho-social normative processes. (Hetero)gender identities are shown to form within and against power hierarchies in everyday social and emotional practices. Although the stories show the possibility of countering normative (hetero)gendered discourses, the findings suggest that resistance produces intra- and interpersonal conflicts, which affect and constrain agency. Control, complicity, and compromises appear to be taken for granted in the enactment of both mothers' and men-children's (hetero)gender identities. Their stories reveal an ambiguous, ambivalent mutual 'love', which nonetheless offers a basis for trans- and intergenerational transformation, by creating conditions that encourage empathy, appreciation of shared vulnerabilities, and personal and social interdependence.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I want to thank my sons and grandsons, without whom this research wouldn't have happened. They are, and always will be, the most important part of my life, our relationship shaping my identity for over 50 years.

I must also give huge thanks to my partner and the friends who have supported me generously over the years it's taken to complete the thesis; their encouragement, interest and belief in my endeavour has meant so much to me.

My supervisors and Thesis Advisory Panel members changed several times over the course of my study, mostly because of retirement, but all their various contributions steered the direction of my work and expanded my knowledge and understanding. I'm grateful for their guidance, especially Emeritus Professor Victoria Robinson: her warmth and enthusiasm boosted my confidence from the beginning of the research. My thanks must also go to Dr. Rachel Alsop, whose support in supervision held fast till the end.

Lastly, but crucially, I want to thank everyone who participated in the research, telling their stories and sharing in the process of finding out more about what it means to be a grand/mother or a man-child and how our identities are shaped by that experience. It's been a privilege to be entrusted with their stories as the foundation for my project.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not been presented previously for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

CHAPTER 1. MOTHER LOVE? AN INTRODUCTION

“... we live those retrievals from childhood that coalesce and echo through our lives, the way shattered pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope reappear in new forms and are song-like in their refrains and rhymes, making up a single monologue” (Ondaatje, 2007, ch.1).

This chapter briefly introduces my project, outlining its aims, focus, and participants. It identifies the rationale for choosing a psycho-social approach in both the methodology and analysis of the data, discussed further in Chapters 3 (the literature review) and 4 (methodology and methods). I also indicate the range of extant literature that frames the theoretical approach for the project, developed further in the next chapter.

The genesis of my research began in my reflections on the changed relationship with my sons over the years. By the time my sons were 45 they had both married traditionally, with white weddings, flowers and fizz, their brides in virginal white dresses – a performance of conventional, (hetero)gendered masculinity and femininity. Within years, they had their own sons, and I’d become a grandmother as well as a mother.

How had this happened? What and who had shaped who they are? What part had I played in forming their identities? How has my own identity changed from knowing them all these years? How were our identities changing now they had sons, and what part would we all play in the formation of their identities? These questions piqued my curiosity and spurred me on to pursue this doctoral research.

The more I became aware of my identity changing as I became a grandmother, the more I reflected on my relationship with my sons, and on what I’d read or seen about mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy. I began to conceive my research topic and its methodologies and methods: to start from my own story, to involve both men’s and other mothers’ stories in my pursuit of knowing better how identities form and flex over the life course.

Focussed on mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy, the thesis is aimed at understanding more about the formation of (hetero)gender identities. As part of that enquiry, it also aims to investigate how (hetero)gendered mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy contributes to

the perpetuation of dominant identities, and to consider the part psycho-social processes play in the (re)production of dominant (hetero)gendered identities.

The project explores multiple accounts of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy: theoretical insights, personal stories (mine and others'), and cultural narratives, set within the contemporary social and political context of the U.K. Mothers' and men-children's everyday narratives are (re)presented as creative non-fiction: short stories crafted verbatim from focussed conversations with participants, with the intention of evoking the 'music behind the words' to involve readers in the participants' emotional world. The title of the thesis springs from most women participants framing their identities, first and foremost, as mothers, expressing their continuing sense of maternal responsibility for their adult sons, aware of its continued impact on their own lives; most men participating, however, began their narratives by describing their employment or social status rather than their identities as sons. Pen-sketches of the men and women who participated in the study are provided in Appendix 1, giving background to their circumstances.

From my position as a feminist researcher, mother of men, grandmother and U.K. registered psychotherapist, my research explores the private, often invisible and unheard dimensions of what it means to be a grand/mother of sons and what it means to be a man-child, with the hope, ultimately, of discerning the potential for more democratic family relationships, respectful and supportive of difference. The thesis interrogates mothers' and men-children's stories of the meaning of gender, heterosexuality, and family in their relational intimacy to shed light on everyday ways in which identities are formed and naturalised. Because my own story is a central reference point in the research, I am present reflexively throughout the thesis, with the aim of producing rich and complex knowledge. Aware of the partiality of my research and its consequent "provisionality and contingency" (Macleod and Morison, 2015: vii), my story is weaved in between others' stories and theories of identity formation. My voice, therefore, is audible throughout the thesis, as I analyse and interpret my own and others' lived experience at a particular point and in a specific (research) context. Informed by a broad range of theoretical perspectives, as well as my own perspectives as a grand/mother, psychotherapist, writer, and academic, the thesis is aimed at being accessible to an 'audience' of both academic and lay readers. Since most participants were keen to read the outcomes from the project, its accessible style and distinctly personal voice is aimed at honouring grand/mothers and adult sons whose voices are sometimes silenced, as my research shows. My hope is that readers will be engaged emotionally and reflexively in the thesis, to consider, as well as

my account, their own assumptions and personal knowledge of relationships between mothers and men-children.

Psycho-social approaches to researching identity formation and relational intimacy have been contested over the years: Frosh (2003), Clarke (2006), and Walkerdine (2008), among others, discuss the provenance of such approaches, and the tensions arising between the disciplinary fields of psychology and sociology, the former traditionally focussing on the individual self, with the latter concerned with social structures that shape identity and family relationships. Such debates have arisen partly because of epistemological differences, various understandings of the concept of the 'unconscious' and Freud's (1953) claim for psychoanalysis as a 'science' (Clarke, 2006) and "universally applicable" (Alsop et al., 2002: 62). Despite these academic conflicts, more recently psycho-social studies, which combine the two disciplines, have been argued as useful in relation to both research methodology and data analysis, bridging the gap between sociology and psychology, and can, in combination, avoid the dualism of research analysis and interpretation wholly concerned with the psyche or wholly with the social (Hollway, 2004). My own psycho-social approach draws on Clarke's (2006: 1154) argument that:

a psycho-social approach to research methodology informed by psychoanalytic sociology can give us clearer insight into the emotional construction of the research environment and the reflexivity of the researcher; the ability of research to give voice to the research subject rather than a dominant theoretical paradigm; and the role of the unconscious in transmitting our ethnic, gendered, and class identities.

Despite the controversies surrounding its historical development as a research tool, my decision to use a psycho-social approach is based on its relevance to one of the key aims of my research: to explore the interaction between the psyche and the social in the formation of identity within the context of mothers' and adult sons' relational intimacy. The crux of my project articulates my psycho-social view of subjectivity, consistent with Hollway's (2004: unpaginated) comments:

We are *psycho-social* because we are products of a unique biography of anxiety- and desire-provoking life events and the manner in which their meanings have been unconsciously transformed in internal reality. We are *psycho-social* because such defensive activities affect and are affected by discourses and also because the unconscious defences that we describe are intersubjective processes (that is, they affect and are affected by others). We are *psycho-social* because the real events in the external, social world are desirously and defensively, as well as discursively, appropriated (Hollway, 2004; original emphasis).

Moving beyond the boundaries of psychology and sociology, my psycho-social research methodology and analysis suggests that identity is formed through interaction with others in the social world and its effect on the psyche: neither innate nor originating inside our separate self, our identity and sense of self changes over time within social contexts. Since neither discipline tells the whole story of how the outside gets inside us, by combining both psychological and sociological perspectives, my project aims to offer fresh insights on relational intimacy within families and the psycho-social dynamics of (hetero)gender identity formation.

Discussed in Chapter 3, there is a vast body of literature concerning gender; heterosexuality; masculinities; grand/mothering; relational power; and family, all of which frame my theoretical approach, with many existing sociological, psychological, and anthropological studies focussed on mother-child intimacy and age/generation (such as Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Cooney and Uhlenberg, 1992; Dench and Ogg, 2002; Mueller and Elder Jr., 2003; Arber and Timonen, 2012), including cross-cultural studies (for example, Hareven, 1996; Carsten, 2000; Trommsdorff, 2006; Con et al., 2019). However, there is little research on the relational dynamics between mothers and adult sons, particularly in the context of Western Europe and the U.K. Extant family studies also neglect the specific perspective of paternal grandmothers, the effect on them of their relationship with their men-children, and the gendered psycho-social processes involved in shaping their identities. My project explores both paternal grand/mothers' and men-children's experiences, to consider how identities are formed psycho-socially: processes that have political implications for men and women at micro, meso, and macro levels.

The next chapter establishes the context of the research, reflecting on aspects of my own life and the cultural milieu that influences meaning-making, and signals theoretical concepts that inform my interpretive analysis. Chapter 3 provides the theoretical landscape for my analysis, while Chapter 4 describes the combined methodologies and methods, along with the constraints and opportunities encountered. Chapters 5 (Doing, Undoing, and Re-doing Mother and Man-child Intimacy); 6 (Where are the Men? Where are the Women? Gone to Families Everyone); 7 (What's Love Got to Do with It?); and 8 (Tongues of Fire: The Power and Politics of Mother Love) present mothers' and men-children's narratives, which I analyse and interpret. Mothers' and men-children's narratives are at the core of each of these chapters, building up layers from one to the next to give multiple views of their complicated everyday relational intimacy, which affects their identities. Chapter 9 reports on my conclusions and identifies areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2. KALEIDOSCOPIC PERSPECTIVES: MEANINGS IN MOTION

Kaleidoscope: An “optical device consisting of mirrors that reflect images of bits of coloured glass in a symmetrical geometric design through a viewer. The design may be changed endlessly by rotating the section containing the loose fragments” (Britannica, 2016).

Introduction

The definition of a kaleidoscope is intended to be a guiding metaphor throughout my investigation of how identities (re)form discontinuously over the life course, creating a sense of personal coherence, through interaction with other people, cultural and political contexts, and social structures. In this chapter I look at the contents of the kaleidoscope: theories, people and stories that appear as multi-coloured shards of glass forming patterns that produce meanings through their influence in our lives. At various points in life, the kaleidoscopic view, as observed and experienced by an individual or by others, changes into a different design. The fragments of glass take on a new design depending on who’s rotating the cylinder and who then ‘sees’ and interprets the picture, for themselves and others.

My aim in this chapter is to convey the conceptual framework for the research, and its internal logic, signalling its origin, rationale, and orientation (Burkholder et al., 2020), which inspired my enquiry, research design, and methodology (described in Chapter 4), and the theoretical foundations of my project (developed more fully in the next chapter). This chapter illustrates a multiplicity of perspectives, academic, social, cultural, and personal, that filter into our everyday understanding of what it means to be a mother or a man-child. Exemplifying how I (re)present data in the shape of small stories, this chapter includes creative accounts of episodes drawn from my own life to establish the backdrop to the research, and its motivation. It introduces three key concepts used in my interpretive analysis of the data: narrative performativity, normative unconscious processes, and intersectional power. By beginning to tell my own story in this chapter, I aim to “make transparent the values and beliefs that lie behind [my] interpretations and to let slip the cloak of authority” (Etherington, 2007: 600).

In my research, I look through the kaleidoscope to view, and analyse, how identities change at particular points in the life course. Whether through the lens of theories, culture, or a particular

woman¹ or man, for example, each view through the kaleidoscope can be read as a story that speaks of identities, in its telling and its hearing, co-created relationally, within prevailing cultural, social, and political contexts.

Ways of knowing: theoretical and cultural

The development of my research focus was informed by Jamieson's (1998) comment that various historical perspectives emphasise the significance of maternal intimacy because of its psychological and social effects. Similarly, Rich (1986) notes that "all human life on the planet is born of woman [...] and] that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*" (Rich, 1986: 11; original emphasis), while Rose (2018: 6) argues that mothers are "so often held accountable for the ills of the world [...] the cause of everything that doesn't work in who we are". Coupled with my professional training and practice in psychodynamic psychotherapy, my own knowledge of mothering men-children also steered the research focus, methods, and interpretive analysis. My therapeutic practice involves hearing personal stories in a reflexive process, and offering interpretations, which facilitates knowledge and meanings about the (relational) self and identity (McLeod, 1997), emerging through the un/conscious (McAdams, 1996). The theoretical basis of, and the skills required for, my therapeutic practice appeared transferable as a research method, suited to the enquiry, particularly in relation to the narrative construction of identity.

Exploring the part psycho-social processes play in the formation of identity, my project responds to the gap Connell notes regarding a "specific theory to understand how change [in identities] occurs" (Connell, 2002: 71). I build on the existing body of knowledge about gender (for example, Weeks, 1986; Denzin, 1989; Morgan, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Butler, 2000; Clarke, 2006; Segal, 2007) and intimacy (such as Mead, 1934; Jackson, 1982; Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Bauman, 2004; Gabb; 2008; Jamieson, 2011), seeking to know more about how the 'outside gets inside' and is 'naturalised' so that we 'take for granted' our sense of self and identity.

Although gender relations have been studied extensively (for example, Foucault, 1977; Eisenstein, 1984; Collins, 2000; Connell, 2002; Jackson, 2006; Beauvoir, 2011; Layton, 2020), there is much less

¹ For the purposes of the thesis, and respecting the terms used by research participants, I intentionally use 'woman' and 'man' and their plural forms, and she and he as pronouns, rather than non-binary terms.

data about gendered relational power between men and their mothers specifically and its impact on their identities (Hockey et al., 2007; Green, 2016). Moreover, older mothers' and adult sons' mundane intimate relationships are under-represented in research, except where their relationship deviates from social norms and expectations, as something 'out of the ordinary' (Parker, 1995; Hollway and Featherstone, 1997; Schroeder et al., 2010; Schoppe et al., 2021). Responding to Hockey et al.'s comment (2007) that studies of "dominant social identities – masculinity, able-bodiedness, whiteness [... that] mesh with heterosexuality" (Hockey et al., 2007: 1) remain limited, my research is located within the everyday lives of (hetero)gendered, heterosexual mothers and men-children.

The gaps in research pique my interest as a feminist, heterosexual, (hetero)gendered mother of men-children and grandsons because although "[t]here is no shortage of work that considers women's transition to motherhood, and mothering experiences during the early years of children's lives [...] our knowledge regarding the later phase of a mother's life course is extremely limited" (Green, 2016: 1). Although there are many sociological, psychological, and anthropological studies of maternal grand/mothers' relationship with their daughters, or their involvement with their families (Rambo, 2005), research neglects the specific perspective of paternal grandmothers, the effect on them of their relationship with their men-children, and the gendered psycho-social processes involved in shaping their identities. My project explores both paternal grand/mothers' and men-children's experiences, to consider how identities are formed psycho-socially: processes that have political implications for men and women at micro, meso, and macro levels.

Mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, however, does appear in literary fiction, such as "Sons and Lovers" (Lawrence, 1994) and Sutcliffe's "Whatever Makes You Happy" (2009). Heaney's poem, "Clearances" (2002), tells powerfully the story of his relationship with his mother, their intimacy expressed in everyday events, such as peeling potatoes together:

Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives

And in their folding linen taken from the washing line:

So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand

For a split second as if nothing had happened
For nothing had that had not always happened
Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,
Coming close again by holding back
In moves where I was x and she was o
Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks.

In the everyday chore of bringing in the washing, there is a sense of two lovers moving harmoniously and with an intimate familiarity between the bedsheets, fitting together as "x and [...] o".

At her death, Heaney writes:

The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

Heaney's words in the poem are sensual and hint at a tacit sexuality between mother and son: the closeness of their breath almost like a kiss, the image of the knives almost phallic, foreshadowing the penetration of the space her absence by death had created, her death now penetrating him, through the void in his life now, with the "High cries" suggestive of orgasm and its aftermath of significant change in their relationship.

Mavor's (2007) study of the ambiguity and ambivalence in mother and man-child intimacy investigates the relationship of five artists and writers (Barthes, Barrie, Lartigue, Proust and Winnicott) with their mothers. Mavor (2007) describes their relational intimacy as originating in some primal instinct, mostly outside of their consciousness seemingly. Despite the significance of the relationship with their mothers in their work, the tug of war between desire/attachment and loathing/separation is apparent. Perspectives emerging in creative work of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy are often invisible and inaudible in everyday narratives. Creative expression, such as art, drama, and literature, connects with the internal world of both artists and spectators through unconscious processes (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1985; Hertz, 1997; Wollheim,

1993; Galgut, 2010; Walters, 2020), and is implicated in identity formation. Serving as a way of distancing personal feelings and fantasies, creative expression allows us to recognise and relate to possibly disturbing emotions that are disavowed socially. Through unconscious displacement and projection onto others' self-expression, we can defend against unwanted socially prohibited desires, without overtly bearing responsibility for hidden feelings.

Narratives of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy are also popular in mass-market culture, such as Michell's (2003) film, "The Mother", in television series like "Bates Motel" (Gates et al., 2013-2017) and in social policy making, especially focussed on pathological or criminological concerns, such as the current U.K. Government's "Supporting Families" policy (U.K. Government, 2021a). The cultural attention paid to mothers' and men-children's intimacy indicates there is both a political interest and a curiosity in public discourses about this everyday experience.

Identities-in-the making: telling stories, making meanings

Connected to theories of the narrative construction of identity (Ricoeur, 1991, 2004; Plummer, 1995; Lawler, 2008, 2014, for example), storytelling in the project is used as a way of generating data for analysis, and to (re)present data. Mothers' and men-children's stories in the thesis are specific to time and place and are not intended to be representative of all women or all men. Other women and men, perhaps with a different racial, class, or cultural heritage, or from another historical period, would tell different stories of how their identities, as mothers, grandmothers, and sons, come to be embodied and experienced. The stories are glimpses of individual lives that indicate how identities are co-constituted relationally and meanings made, recalling Barad's argument (1996) that "science is movement between meanings and matter, word and world, interrogating and redefining boundaries, a dance not behind us, but in "the between", where knowledge and being meet" (Barad, 1996: 185).

Storytelling is a self-conscious act that has an ideological and socio-political context and position, including my own lack of neutrality in the research. My use of autoethnography and reflexive storytelling is informed by Lapadat's (2017: 594) argument that "all texts are partial and temporary inscriptions or performances", generated in a particular place and time. Asserting the validity and value of the contribution to knowledge offered by women's and men's participation in the research, my approach draws on Etherington's (2007) "philosophy of reality as socially constructed and of knowledge as situated and created within contexts and embedded within historical, cultural stories, beliefs, and practices". The partial performance and performativity of storytelling informs the

conceptual framework for my research, its methodology and methods. Providing a framework to investigate experience and “gain access to the complexity of human affairs” (Rooney et al., 2016: 147), storytelling is a key research method in my project (discussed in Chapter 4). Suited to investigating ‘beneath the surface’ of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy and the psycho-social processes involved in (hetero)gender identity formation, it is also the way of expressing what participants communicated and reflects the interactive process of constructing identities in a dynamic relationship with other people, upon which the project was conceived, and the problem explored.

Mothers’ and men-children’s everyday narratives retold in the thesis have been co-created in dialogue with participants, mingling “our individual history and our identity with that of others and their stories” (Venn, 2020: 56), in a process that resembles the co-construction of identity. In creating knowledge that has individual and social implications, as well as for future research, the mothers and men-children participating were agents in the co-production of knowledge during our research conversations². However, the responsibility for interpreting “‘the between’” (Barad, 1996: 185) ultimately lies with me as researcher, telling participants’ stories in ways that respect the contributions offered.

Recounting ‘real-life’ experiences of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy, participants’ narratives (and episodes in my own life) are (re)presented throughout the thesis as brief stories told in the first-person as ‘creative non-fiction’. These non-fiction stories are flagged by the deliberately ambiguous phrase: “Mother love?” – a question that problematises the idea of maternal and filial ‘love’. The stories have been crafted using fragments quoted verbatim from participants’ research conversations with me, stitched together with the aim of conveying the voice of the participant, their internal world, and the emotional content of the conversation. My own (mostly anonymised) stories are weaved around other participants’ stories. This creative approach is aimed at eliciting emotional or (un)conscious³, as well as cognitive, responses in readers. Fostering new ways of knowing, this creative approach reflects theories of the narrative construction of identity (Riceour, 1980, 1991, 1995, 2004a; Steedman, 1986; Plummer, 1995; Lawler, 2000, 2008, 2014; Venn, 2020,

² I use ‘conversation’ to describe my approach to ‘interviews’ with participants, intended to be an open dialogue between us, talking freely about experiences, rather than responses to pre-determined questions, reflecting the interpersonal/relational dimension of identity formation.

³ Definitions of ‘the unconscious’ differ radically (Layton, 2020). I use the term to describe memories, desires, motivations, and (dis)identifications, for example, outside everyday consciousness, which are neither “purely resistant to cultural demands [... nor] fully colonised by cultural demands” (Layton, 2020: xxiv), but which “hover uncomfortably in between” (Rose, 1986: 12).

for instance), performativity (such as Butler, 2000; Langellier, 2001), and unconscious communication (Klein, 1946; Layton, 2004; Thomas, 2007; Bollas, 2018, for example), discussed in Chapter 3.

From my own experience, particularly as a psychotherapist as well as a (grand)mother, the sharing of stories and their embodied performance, is a way of reflecting on our lives, making meaning from the 'messiness' of relational intimacy, and shaping our identities. The process involves stories we tell ourselves, those we tell others, and those we hear, in public and in private. In this way, the making of meaning through narratives contributes to the making of identities in a reciprocal collaborative process, so that as mothers 'make' their children so do children 'make' their mothers. This inherently psycho-social process enables us to construct a semblance of existential stability, embodied and enacted in everyday life, and contains the potential for (re)producing or disrupting social norms involved in gender relations, intersected, for example, by age/generation, class, and race divisions.

The stories generated in my research provide glimpses of endlessly changing identities being formed in relation to others' identities, narrated in order to make sense of the world: "of our relationship to that world and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves" (Lawler, 2014: 25). They reveal glimpses of different aspects of individual identities, interpreted and understood from myriad perspectives, theoretical and personal, to me and to the storytellers. We might glimpse our relationship with ourselves in the kaleidoscopic perspectives: our individual identities and sense of self being shaped (consciously and unconsciously) in and through everyday life. Through an exploration of dynamic unconscious processes interacting with the social world, I aim to add to existing knowledge about how identities (re)form as they shift during the life course, across and between generations within specific life stories, expressed through embodied everyday experience, including how the unconscious speaks through the body specific to time and space.

Forming everyday (hetero)gendered identities: social and psychic dimensions

My research focus is older women who are mothers, born in the 1940s or 1950s, with adult sons who they raised in the U.K. in the 1970s or 1980s, and men of similar age to their sons. Making no prior presumption of participants' self-identity regarding their gender or sexuality⁴, I investigate what, in their everyday lives, has led to their current sense of self, what it means to them and what

⁴ For the purposes of the thesis the term sexuality encompasses sexual orientation.

may have contributed to the making of their identities. Defining the research cohort so broadly runs the risk of (re)producing (hetero)gendered, heterosexual social and cultural norms. However, by recruiting participants based only on their self-identification as 'mothers of sons' or 'men', I hoped to avoid assumptions related to binary classifications of gender and sexuality, in particular perceptions of (hetero)gendered "heterosexuality as a homogeneous institution within which the agency of women and men appears not to exist, either theoretically or empirically" (Hockey et al., 2007: 32). The only participant who specifically mentioned their gender and sexual identity was the one who told me he was 'gay'; the rest appeared to presume that I would take it for granted that they identified as heterosexual, (hetero)gendered men or women. The assumption within the cohort of participants seemed to be that mother + child = family = heterosexuality. Even so, I remained mindful of Smart's (1996b: 170) assertion that "heterosexuality may be many things".

Historically, the locus of the family is almost synonymous with heterosexuality (Hockey et al., 2007), implying its function in producing and reproducing (hetero)gender identities. Hockey et al. (2007: 146) argue that "dilemmas arise for individuals when they fail to live up to heterosexual norms or transgress them in some way". Countering feminist theories that are "strangely repressed on a most important aspect of the lives of many women" (Hockey et al., 2007: 32), my research attempts to find "new ways of speaking about *heterosexualities*, and of appreciating differences of meaning and experiences" (Hockey et al., 2007: 32; original emphasis). Diverse experiences, for example, of older women's changing identities remain largely invisible within feminist discourse, or at least marginalised, and an aspect of intersecting age and gender divisions that appears to be ignored or unacknowledged. The embodied everyday experience of age, gender and sexuality has implications socially and psychically in ongoing identity formation. As Rose (2018: 36) states:

in relation to mothers, something about sexuality – its pleasures and dangers – is at play [...]. A mother is a woman whose sexual being must be invisible. She must save the world from her desire – thereby allowing the world to conceal the unmanageable nature of all human sexuality, and its own voraciousness, from itself (as if sexuality never exists outside the bounds of married life).

The ever-changing kaleidoscopic perspectives in my thesis reflect concepts of gender and sexuality that are "constituted within and across a number of dimensions of the social, requiring different modes of analysis" (Jackson, 2006: 108). Informing my research approach, Jackson categorises these dimensions in relation to structure, cultural and contextual meanings, everyday social practices, and social and subjective agency. Connell and Pearse (2015) also mapped the structure of gender

relations, distinguishing “four dimensions [...]: power, production, cathexis and symbolism” (Connell and Pearse, 2015: 75). Their framework is particularly relevant to my exploration of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy, recognising the significance of emotional relations, attachment and emotional commitment. Connell and Pearse (2015: 76) note the patterning of unconscious attachments to “images of other people”, drawing on Freud’s understanding of emotional commitments that may be “both loving and hostile at once” (Connell and Pearse, 2015: 80). Connell (1995: 74), exploring cathexis in relation to gender relations and power, defines sexual desire as “emotional energy being attached to an object”, where “the social relations of gender are experienced in the body (as sexual arousals and turn-offs, as muscular tensions and posture, as comfort and discomfort)” (Connell, 1995: 231).

Un/conscious processes may emerge through memories, limbic dreaming, and telling stories about ourselves in social situations, for example, in and through “practices of intimacy” (Jamieson, 2011). Lawler (2014: 30) notes that we recall memories and tell stories that fit with social and cultural discourses, citing Misztal’s comment:

Frames of meaning, or ways in which we view the past, are generated in the present and usually match the group’s common view of the world [...]. We rely on them to supply us with what we should remember and what is taboo, and therefore must be forgotten (Misztal, 2003: 82).

Using psychodynamic concepts, my research explores the part unconscious, as well as conscious, processes, involving emotions and affect, play in forming identities in everyday life. Throughout the thesis, I use the term ‘transference’ to refer to unconscious communication as “an aspect of the emotional contact” (Curtis, 2015: 109) between myself and participants in our conversations, while countertransference refers to my unconscious response to participants’ transference, which informs my interpretive analysis of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy. Similarly, I define projective identification (Klein, 1932, 1935) as another aspect of unconscious communication, brought into awareness through my reflexive research process. My application of theories related to unconscious communication in the project are discussed further in Chapter 3.

Starting with the perspective of a particular mother (myself), weaved around perspectives of other mothers and adult sons participating in the research, I foreground the dynamic and fluctuating relationship between mothers and men-children to illuminate what it means for each of them subjectively, set against a backdrop of significant social and political changes over the period in

which the men were growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. I focus the research on women who gave birth and raised their sons in the 1970s and early 1980s because of significant political shifts, such as the Equal Pay Act 1970, and the impact of laws enacted in 1967 relating to contraception and abortion (Oakley, 1972; Rowbotham, 1973), which began to change mundane gender power relations. Women and their sons lived through a particular historical transition simultaneously with their own personal transitions as mothers and men-children, which would continue throughout their lives as other transitions happened in parallel (marked, for example by sons getting married, becoming fathers, 'coming out', or mothers retiring from paid work, becoming grandmothers, reproducing or resisting dominant discourses).

For some women born in Britain in the 1950s and reaching supposed 'childbearing age' in the 1970s, changes in society, culturally, economically, and politically, placed them within a period of social transition that coincided with their personal transition to adulthood. Hockey et al. (2007: 84) note that "[w]hile data from the inter-war period describe boys pursuing passive and sexually ignorant girls, the 1970s bore witness to greater agency among women, along with more scope for exercising it as a result of increased freedom and mobility". For some men born in the 1970s, their adolescence in the 1980s may have been affected by individual, social and economic adjustments taking place amid this turning point in the gender order. From my experience, the loss of patriarchy's legitimacy (Connell, 1995) created uncertainty for some families in the U.K. about what it meant to be a man in everyday life. Such reactions were popularly framed as 'masculinity in crisis', culturally represented, for example, in 'lad culture' in the 1990s and social and economic anxieties about men's 'redundancy' (Gill, 2003; McDowell, 2003).

I was curious to find out whether this historical transition had affected mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, their identities, and their agency, and to bring my own experience under the research spotlight since my own sons were born in the 1970s.

Me-making/men-making: psycho-social positional

As the 'maker' myself of 'men' (in particular, my two sons and three grandsons), I situate myself as a central reference point and a source of data within the research, making myself visible, creating a narrative account of events that have happened to me, with me or in front of me. Inviting readers to access the emotional and interpersonal dynamics of my first-hand account, I expect that readers' assumptions and beliefs, created from their own experiences (about gender or about sexualities, for example) will affect their interpretations, and may differ from mine. Limiting as well as liberating, my

autoethnographic approach brought with it some challenges, not least that it depended on memories rising to the surface, not fully formed, or remembered differently depending on time and place, and the effect of current relationships. Mindful of the pain and pleasures of my embodied identity as a (grand)mother and its possible effect on my interpretive analysis, I return to the limitations and benefits of my immersion in the 'field' in Chapter 4.

Crucially, my investigations have been undertaken from a feminist perspective, drawing upon feminist understandings of gender and sexual identities, subjectivity, gender power relations, and the cultural and political contexts within which these concepts become enacted. Feminist research has moved from its historical broad premise of simply being by, for, and about women (Maynard and Purvis, 1994), to explore a range of political, ethical, and practical matters that affect gender and sexuality, intersected by, for example, age, class, or race (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Ferree, 2018; Layton, 2020). In my own research, I seek to connect the contradictions and challenges present in mothers' and men-children's mundane relational intimacy to broader socio-political issues, with the intention of contributing useful knowledge that may make a difference (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). From my own perspective as a feminist and a researcher, I ground my approach in a body of work that contains many of the themes of (feminist) research: ethical integrity; power, politics, and responsibility; maximizing sources of knowledge to address my inevitable partiality; problematizing validity within an inherently social and political process of interpretation (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). As a starting point, my feminist position means acknowledging that my research is situated in the history of my own life and my observations about it. I use my experience as the springboard for the research, as "part of the process of discovery and understanding [...], responsible for attempting to create change" (Kelly et al., 1994: 28) for both women and men, whose lives are complex and contain multiple sources of oppression; as such, my research is part of the tradition of feminist activism.

My interpretive analysis is thus framed by my experience as female, born in the 1950s, into a relatively financially comfortable family, educated in a girls' only secondary school, privileged by dint of ethnicity, and economic and social status. I was suddenly and unexpectedly launched into a profound political awareness of social injustice, by unplanned pregnancy at age eighteen, with an immediate sense of the lack of equality and opportunities for women generally. Having children and returning to education once both my sons were at school coincided with the 1970s Women's Movement and its impact on the everyday lives of many women in small towns and cities of the U.K., including women who at the time would not, if ever, self-identify as 'feminist'.

The awareness that grew alongside the birth of, and raising, my two sons has been fundamental to the decisions I made (including the 'mistaken' ones) regarding my career and my relationships. The reflexive, feminist approach of my research derives from personal experience and the continuous drive to make meaning from it for myself in my private life and in my work. My career choices and career path were influenced by working in so-called "loony left" (Smith, 2021) Labour-led local authority services in the 1970s and 1980s, in 'community education', implementing anti-racism, anti-sexism, and disability policies, for example, in community 'needs-led' practices such as issue-based youth work in 'girls only' settings and adult education 'women returners' groups. I internalised associated values related to equality and diversity, affected by political commitments to narrowing the gap between privilege and disadvantage, recognising the multiplier effect of co-existing social characteristics (such as race, gender, and class) on individuals and communities.

Using autoethnography and my subjective experiences of interacting with others and other people's stories in my research, memory-work has inevitably involved selectivity, in which, as Stanley (1992: 128) points out, "a defining feature of remembering is that most things are forgotten or exist half-submerged to be occasionally and unpredictably propelled to the mind's surface". The creation of stories from memories, my own and others', is also a process that does not end with the production of the text but remains active (and activist) in its reading by others who bring their own meaning to the stories, implying an ongoing potential for change, as individual or collective interpretations are made.

Kaleidoscopic theoretical and personal perspectives form different patterns of meaning, open to interpretations, contingent on their personal, historical, and geographical positionality. With each transition across theories or across life, another turn of the kaleidoscope shows a new design, different shards of glass differently arranged, modified in relation to each other, with new aspects to be viewed and interpreted within individual life stories.

Reflections on my 'self': partiality and privilege

To begin with my own stories: socially and culturally defined as a white, (hetero)gendered, heterosexual woman raised in a lower middle-class family, my mother's commitment to ensuring her daughters had access to education opportunities and career choices rather than an automatic assumption of marriage and motherhood as the main goal in life, endowed me with privileges that removed some of the impediments my gender alone might have brought. My position enabled me

to 'succeed' in not only raising two children (mostly as a single parent) but also to be employed in well-paid senior public sector roles. As a child growing up, I had, as I see it, unconsciously introjected, and embodied, my mother's values regarding education through which (as I interpret it) she enacted vicariously her unconscious (unrealisable) desire for her own achievement *through* her daughters. As a result of the intergenerational, psycho-social impact on me, I have been able to make choices and to resist, (un)consciously, other identifications that could affect my subjectivity and identity. For example, my whiteness and my relative material and economic security in childhood and adolescence, my lack of serious physical and mental impairments, along with the heteronormative social and cultural context of being a teenager in the 1960s (when the Women's Movement in the U.K. was opening up opportunities for women like me), empowered me sufficiently to resist prevailing normative discourses that made negative judgments about my being a school age pregnant mother.

My raced, classed, and heterosexual, (hetero)gendered position privileged me because of the collective idealisation of the capacities and attributes of those normative categories that met social expectations, but at the same time collectively devalued me as a (young) woman and a materially poor, teenage mother. These intersecting dimensions at that time had an effect on my identity and sense of self that was contradictory and confusing. As I matured, I became increasingly self-aware and politically aware of the tensions of everyday inequalities and injustice that I and others experienced. As a result of the privileges of my upbringing, however, I was able to take advantage of my relative position in the social hierarchy, even as a young single mother, to seek access to higher education, leading to material privileges and a raised social status, which then once more affected my identity through identifications with others from my changed social and cultural position.

The ways in which I was perceived during my early adulthood (idealised at times and devalued at others) and the impact on my sense of self, indicate the discontinuous change that unconsciously occurs, temporally and socially, to identities throughout our lives in interaction with others at micro, meso and macro levels. The collective identifications being formed between some women, through the Women's Movement in the 1970s, at the time I was a young mother in "the relational field" (Layton, 2020: 70) that I inhabited during that period, produced my subjective experience of discourses that countered those of my upbringing. My participation in women's groups raised my awareness (although not named as "consciousness raising" groups, located, as they were, in working class communities), my involvement in radical community theatre, as writer and performer, and reading English and French contemporary literature as part of my undergraduate degree, opened up

space for resistance, limited as it was, within which I could exercise agency and make choices about my life.

Through all these life transitions, my identity gradually shifted, becoming more coherent, less fragmented, as I internalised, embodied, and enacted my sense of 'self', sometimes as more 'stable' existentially⁵ as I became able to respond more freely and with less fear to new experiences, despite in many ways not conforming to social and cultural expectations. I was at this time, I think now, both resisting (unconsciously and consciously) oppressive social norms and simultaneously colluding with them (Layton, 2020), picking and choosing what 'felt right' to me at the time. This implies that the raced, classed, and gendered positions we occupy are not necessarily fixed forever, because of psycho-social processes interacting within particular social, cultural, and temporal environments, and offer space for counter-discourses through counter-identifications.

Up until the point I became pregnant and had to leave school, not permitted to continue to study for my four 'A' levels, I think I assumed I was 'middle-class' and relatively financially secure. I discovered, recently, that one perception of me at that time, at age 22 with two small children, by someone writing about me (without my knowledge) in his published memoir, was of:

a young married woman, with two infant sons [...] She was thin, pale, eye-catching but not good-looking, offered an air of some superiority, stern, haughty, outspoken, forthright, forbidding even. She would laugh, but not readily. A practising Catholic, a working class Sheffield lass [...] voraciously challenging in her sexuality, dissolving away from her marriage, seeking not to damage her sons, wishing to further her education, and hungry for life experience (Blackburn, 2013: 109).

The author is male, of working-class origins, a Cambridge University graduate, considerably older than me and a very significant influence on my life trajectory and my identity, at the time, but his memory of me illustrates the relational power dynamic in our friendship. A (hetero)gendered man ('hybrid' rather than typical in his masculine identity), white, older, heterosexual, educated, economically secure, his perception of me then is at complete variance with my own memories of myself and who I think I was then, despite my lengthy intimate attachment to him, and my awareness now of the deep and long-lasting effect our relationship had on my identity. The power dynamics of the relationship involved not just gender, but also had intersecting age, material, and

⁵ I use the term 'existential' in my thesis to refer to the meaning, purpose, and value of lived experience, implying that our sense of self and existence changes temporally and spatially, affecting and affected by processes that have interacting psychic and social dimensions, which have an impact individually and socially.

class dimensions. Since heterosexuality (a presumed shared identity in the relationship) is not itself a homogeneous category, differentially gendered relational power was evident and fluid, unstable, as a result perhaps of various previous life experiences and socially and culturally constituted expectations of 'being a man' and 'being a woman'. This was manifest in unconscious, as well as conscious, differing needs and wants, in our varied and changing motivations, in the fraught transactional arrangements of the relationship, and its potentialities, limitations and boundaries.

These aspects of our relationship appear to me now to have intersected with other aspects of identity, subtly affecting where the asymmetrical balance of power came to rest at any particular time, in any particular place, not always typically weighted towards the man. My story here suggests instability and unpredictability at the point of intersection between gender, age, sexuality, class and so on: the dynamic interaction between them as well as the absence of inevitable outcomes. Their mutability, in terms of social, cultural, and psychic meanings, reinforces the argument of there being the potential for transformation at micro, meso, and macro levels.

In contrast to this story, only a few years later in the 1980s, my work in community arts took me to Yorkshire coal-mining communities facing closures of mines, and significant loss of employment and the disintegration of livelihoods. Here I was viewed most certainly as middle-class, and I had to work hard to form alliances and build trust so that we could work collaboratively on writing and performing community theatre projects as part of arts political activism at that time. Again, this suggests the contextual mutability of identity, rooted in complex intersectional power relations, involving gender, sexuality, age, and perceived class privilege (for example, my accent that tends towards 'received pronunciation', and my appearance, signified by my clothing) that affected my sense of self and identity, and possibly challenged others' prejudices, but contained the potential for transformational identifications through close attachments forged in shared endeavours.

Life transitions: identity transitions

My research story starts from where I am now, as a grandmother, and of course still a mother, though not necessarily seen as that any longer, being required, it seems, to cede that identity to the mothers of my grandchildren and now no longer pursuing a career. Most recently I've worked as a psychotherapist and clinical supervisor, previously having my own consultancy business undertaking commissions for the U.K. Government, its agencies, and third sector organisations in aspects of community-based education, substance misuse, mental health, and offending policy and practice. This portfolio of roles followed ill-health retirement from full-time work as (lastly) Executive Director

of a large, complex, public-sector partnership organisation, supporting young people in transition to adulthood, initiated and sponsored by the then U.K. Government.

I describe my career outline briefly here as a context for my experience of becoming a grandmother thirteen years ago. When my eldest son's first son was born, my previous social identities (work-related; a financially, sexually, and socially independent woman; teenage mother and subsequently single parent; a 'high achiever', according to others) seemed in retrospect to fall away. I appeared to have even lost my name, being called "Grandmuv", coined by my eldest son and his wife on the birth of their first son, rather than mum or my given name, by my sons, their wives, and my grandsons. Expectations from within the family and outside the family (through popular cultural and socio-political narratives) appeared to deplete (and perhaps delete) my past. Driven by un/conscious relationship dynamics, I acquired a 'new' identity that appeared to involve discarding other 'outmoded' or redundant identities and found myself participating (unwittingly) in reproducing the (hetero)gendered model of normative family structures and roles. I even lost the status (and identity) of mother of my sons, to become a 'grandmother', expected to disappear into the background, except when called upon, in order to support a construct within a traditional patriarchal model of the family that I had been challenging since the days I gave birth and raised my sons while actively involved in the 1970s' and 1980s' Women's Movement. As far as I was concerned this was not an inevitability of my own birth-assigned gender and sexuality and one that didn't fit my sense of self, and that I noticed didn't fit other women with whom I had contact. I recognise that this is not all women's experience - it is my own, and I acknowledge that other grand/mothers have a different experience and subjective perspective.

Green (2016) notes the loss mothers experience when their children leave home, commenting that popular discourses about this transition prevent women speaking of their grief at this loss. Public narratives mostly consider young people's experience of the transition, trivialising the impact on mothers, minimising it as 'empty nest syndrome'. Many academic studies focus on the losses involved in *becoming* mothers, such as Laney et al. (2015) in relation to identity change when women become mothers, and Kanji and Cahusac (2015), regarding new mothers' loss of work identity. The loss of sense of self that I experienced, through the erasure of previous identities important to me, as an aspect of grand/mothering was shared by other mothers participating in my research. The absence of this aspect of women's lives in academic research is notable, especially in relation to its part in reproducing gendered social norms and normative family practices. Feelings of loss appear to be different for women who have sons rather than daughters, as observed from

mothers' perspectives in my research, who reported differences in mothering adult sons and mothering adult daughters. Mothers who have daughters as well as sons commented that they can't, or don't, have the companionship, loving solidarity, support, and shared interests with their men-children that they have with their adult daughters.

My project aims to shed light on the relational intimacy between mothers and men-children to offer possible explanations for this aspect of mothers' and men-children's experience that is often invisible, not permitted to be openly acknowledged, documented, or researched. Schwartzman (2006: 226), for example, notes the "often-neglected" subjectivity of the mother in mother-adult son relationships, while Butler (2004) discusses the prohibition on incest because of its function in guarding normative heterosexual kinship forms. The profound attachment between mothers and sons, which in infancy can be expressed sensually, perhaps sexually though not admitted as such, becomes a taboo as the child grows and matures, and mothers' sexuality is denied (Upstone, 2016). This commonly becomes a forbidden dimension of their ties and tensions in adulthood (Butler, 1995; 2004), although for some men-children and their mothers, the bond, expressed in different ways, prevails throughout life, as this story drawn from my own life demonstrates:

Mother love?

I observed their relationship over the years, seeing how it worked between them, very much on the sidelines when they were together; they sniped and snipped at each other, though she always had a slight smile glancing at me, seeming to convey her adoration of her son and inviting me to collude with her when she delivered an attempted put down, which he batted back equally meaningfully, though quite what the meaning was between them was well hidden underneath the apparent 'couldn't care less about you' superficial message.

There came a point when she could no longer manage to look after herself at home on her own; over the previous few years she had refused 'carers' at home to help, even with the slightest of tasks, though for a while she did accept someone to do some basic cleaning, but he always (because she wanted this, and so did he, I think) cleaned her bathroom and did her washing and ironing and a weekly supermarket shop for her. No-one else could do these tasks as well as him. He'd had a very serious health crisis about three years before she became so dependent, but as soon as he was able to drive the 45 minutes to her home, he resumed his filial duties, but reducing to once a week from twice weekly as before his illness. At each daily phone call to her, she told him how lonely she was.

Over a few weeks her health became much worse, and one day he arrived at her home in time to speak to her GP who was making a home visit. Despite her increasing immobility and health issues, she was still refusing any outside help and increasing her demands on her son. The GP told him she wasn't well enough to be left on her own at home but not ill enough to be admitted to hospital. He tried to persuade her to let him find a nursing home where she would be properly looked after, that he couldn't stay with her at home, that he was too unwell himself to visit her every day and look after her himself; he was decisive about this despite her unhappiness. He quickly found a place in a care home and told her that she would go there for a short while; she was extremely upset, at first refusing to go, but she really didn't have an option. Finally, he told her that she would be able to return home again when she was well enough, and she seemed to believe him (though I knew, and he knew, she would never go home again). She lived there less than a month; almost from the outset, once there, she realised he had lied to her, but he kept up the pretence and her demands on the care home staff grew quickly, refusing to sleep, refusing to eat, wanting her son. She was rejecting and resisting the letting go of her life, one that had been focussed on her only son and his achievements and difficulties. They were both caught up in the anticipation of mutual loss: of life, of mother love.

I witnessed the way this profound grief was expressed though through an overwhelming, and reciprocated, impotent anger, which in the final visit to the care home burst out into a destructive and hurtful row, ostensibly about his forcing her to go into the home against her will, his own illness that she said was a fabrication; his retaliation focussed on her stubbornness (a projection of his own trait), her lack of understanding of him and his needs, and so on and so on. He told her he was leaving, wouldn't stay when her behaviour towards him was so intolerable. She told him to go. He did. It was one of the worst experiences of my life, helplessly watching a mother and son tear at each other in their distress. It seemed to me she was declaring "I don't want to leave you" and he was declaring "I don't want you to leave me", but both unable to find the words.

There wasn't a loving reconciliation. A few days later he got a phone call to say his mother had been admitted as an emergency to the local hospital. On our visits over the next couple of days, it was clear she was dying, scarcely conscious and unaware it seemed that her son was there. On the last visit, he didn't want to stay long, wouldn't take off his coat, wouldn't

accept a cup of tea, wouldn't hold her hand, wouldn't say goodbye. As it became increasingly unbearable, he said he was going home, the nurse asked if they should phone him when she was nearer the end of her life (expected to be a matter of hours), he said "No" and leaned towards his mother, saying "See you later". We left and she died that night.

I wondered how much she'd unconsciously wanted her son as a replacement for her husband who had died some years before, whether her son too was unconsciously repressing his own desire for his mother (responding unconsciously perhaps to her unconscious desire for him as a 'husband'). The story illustrates an interaction between mother and son out of their awareness but possibly part of their desperate anger at each other, fearing the ultimate rejection and abandonment that death would bring for them both, which couldn't be expressed or articulated by either of them in any other way.

The next three stories: memories and reflections, shaped again from observations in my own life, offer glimpses into the beginnings of the dynamic relational intimacy between mothers and sons. The stories illustrate the profound complicated attachment between them, as they struggle to form independent identities, within a context of social and cultural demands and psychic forces:

Mother love?

They had all gathered at my home in that bit between Christmas and New Year, my son, two grandsons and daughter-in-law; dinner done, wine smoothing our way into the evening, the baby in bed at last and the three-year old allowed to stay up for a while till his brother was fast asleep. Mother and child snuggled together on the sofa, enfolded in each other's arms; she was stroking his hair and his ear (which he'd always loved); gradually they both drifted into a deep ecstasy, eyes half-closed, enraptured and separate in their union from the rest of us. Observing them, my son turned to me and murmured "They're both blissed out ... not sure who's enjoying it most".

Mother love?

She was telling him to listen to her; sitting in his highchair at the table, he knew he'd done something wrong and had displeased her. A follower of the Gina Ford⁶ method of child-rearing, she was determined to exert her power and control over her little son. She wasn't going to listen to him. Through his sobs, trying to catch his breath and find a space to be heard, he managed to plead "Let me say my words".

Mother love?

He was just 4 weeks old nearly, he and his parents were enjoying their first lunch at a restaurant since he was born. She took him from the pram to feed him; as usually happens, other diners looked at us to see the tiny baby. At the next table to ours, a young woman, her partner, and her grandfather were eating; she kept glancing over at the little child. Eventually she spoke, asking shyly whether my daughter-in-law missed having him inside her now he was born. My daughter-in-law poignantly answered "Yes", explaining briefly that it was indeed a loss, not being able to feel him moving inside her anymore, that she did indeed miss that now. She and I chatted about this later, about how unusual it is for people to recognise this 'loss' and how it's just one of many involved in being a mother.

These few fragments from the everyday lives of mothers and sons at both ends of the life course, which I witnessed and crafted into snapshots of lives, begin to indicate the complexities of intersecting gender and age dynamics within an intimate relationship that changes over the life course and affects mothers', grandmothers', and men-children's identities.

Summary

This chapter illustrates the conceptual framework of the project, situating the research in a kaleidoscope of theories, 'real-life' stories, and cultural narratives that inspired its inception, design, and methodology. Building on a foundation of studies related, particularly, to gender (for example, Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002, 2015; Jackson, 2006) and intimacy (Jamieson, 1998; 2011; Roseneil and Seymour, 1999; Gabb, 2008, 2010, for instance), my research concentrates on (hetero)gendered mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy to know more about the psycho-social processes involved in (re)producing (hetero)gender identities. The chapter demonstrates multiple, complex

⁶ Gina Ford's approach to parenting became popular in the 2000s in the U.K., through her website and book (2006), aimed at guiding mothers through the early years of raising their children.

perspectives, social, cultural, and personal, that filter into our everyday understanding of what it means to be a mother or a man-child. Positioning myself centrally within the thesis, I begin to tell my own partial story in this chapter, as a (grand)mother of (grand)sons and a psychodynamically-oriented psychotherapist.

Derived from theories regarding the narrative construction of identities (such as Plummer, 1995; Lawler, 2000, 2008) and my psychotherapy practice, the chapter introduces the way that mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy is analysed, interpreted, and (re)presented in the thesis. My research approach uses participants' stories to form the basis for my overall interpretive analysis. The stories are verbatim extracts from mothers' and men-children's narratives, crafted with the aim of conveying their emotional content and internal, as well as social, world. Inviting readers to become involved in making meaning for themselves (as in everyday life), by engaging emotionally, as well as cognitively, in the stories, the chapter illustrates storytelling as a key research method for exploring the formation of my own and other mothers' and men-children's everyday identities. The chapter includes creative accounts of episodes drawn from my own life: brief 'snapshots' that convey information about the meaning of my personal experiences that are factually accurate, as I remember them, written in a narrative, rather than conventionally academic, style. They establish the backdrop to the research, and its motivation, and begin to offer provisional interpretive analyses of experiences in my own life. My research aims to build on existing knowledge regarding (hetero)gender identity formation and to address gaps in understandings of the embodied experience of older women as mothers and grandmothers, and men as adult sons.

The chapter introduces some of the key theoretical perspectives that provide the basis of my tripartite analytic framework: narrative performativity (such as Plummer, 1995; McLeod, 1997; Butler, 2000; Lawler, 2000, 2008), normative unconscious processes (Klein, 1946; Layton, 2004, 2009, 2020; Curtis, 2015, Bollas, 2018, for instance), and intersectional power (informed by Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990, and, in particular, Connell, 2002, 2015; Ferree, 2018; and Layton, 2020). The way overlapping dimensions of these three key concepts intersect in identity formation and how they influence my thinking is developed throughout the coming chapters. The next chapter looks at the broad range of literature that informed my research strategy and contributed to its conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 3. THE KALEIDOSCOPE TURNS AGAIN AND AGAIN – THE THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE

Introduction

My research is informed by a wide range of theoretical perspectives that can be broadly marshalled into three cross-cutting concepts that comprise its analytic framework: normative unconscious processes; narrative performativity; and intersectional power, all interwoven with issues of gender and relational intimacy, considered primarily, though not exclusively, from a psycho-social perspective. This chapter explores bodies of literature that inform each strand of the tripartite framework and influence the project's methodology, methods, and interpretive analysis.

Consistent with Hammond's (2018) view of theorising, my research involves a personal commitment to solving a problem, which is both practical and theoretical: problematising mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy to understand more about (hetero)gender identity formation. My 'theorising' engages with academic literature and draws on personal/professional knowledge, in a process of "disciplined creativity in which the imagination is channelled into finding solutions that are compatible with observed data" (Hammond, 2018: 1). It is intended to contribute to theoretical debates, particularly in the areas of psycho-social processes involved in (hetero)gender identity formation, relational intimacy practices within families, and ethical issues involved in autoethnography.

The narratives generated in my research might be analysed and interpreted from any one of many theoretical perspectives. However, as this chapter demonstrates, my approach draws on a range of inter-related theories, reflecting the complexity of mothers' and men-children's everyday relational intimacy, which affects the (dis)continuous formation of their (hetero)gender identities. The chapter is organised around the three intersecting strands of the analytic framework – normative unconscious processes, narrative performativity, and intersectional power, with sub-sections related to associated theories. Nevertheless, theoretical perspectives in one section, and sub-section, overlap with those in another, and relate to all three overarching strands of the framework, mirroring the complicated narratives of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy. Taking an innovative approach, my research strives to bridge (some of) the gaps between different theoretical perspectives as well as illustrating multiple dimensions involved in (hetero)gender identity formation.

NORMATIVE UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSES

The relational dynamic between the psyche and the social

Layton's work (2004, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2014, 2020) through which she developed her "version of social psychoanalysis" (Layton, 2020, xxiv), coining the concept of "normative unconscious processes" (...), informs my research, acting as a golden thread throughout my interpretation and analysis of data in my project. It connects the conceptual and theoretical framing of the research and its conclusions. Layton's model of psychosocial subjectivity emphasises its relationality: a sense of self emerges from "relational experiences in which we are treated as objects and relational experiences in which we are treated as subjects". The ensuing conflict produces both psychic and social conflict, resulting in a vulnerability to being shamed or shaming through "power structures that establish norms of recognition". For Layton (2020), and significant in my understanding of the data in my own research, normative unconscious processes reproduce unequal power relations.

Building on research into intersectionality (for example, The Combahee River Collective, 1977, and Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983), Layton (2020) suggests that normative unconscious processes are embodied and enacted through "unequal power arrangements and dominant ideologies that split and differentially value straight from gay, rich from poor, masculine from feminine, white from black and brown" (Layton, 2020: xxxii). Normative unconscious processes involve splitting⁷ "human capacities and attributes" (Layton, 2020: 52) as part of collective and individual identification with dominant groups, idealising and rewarding certain subject positions while devaluing or punishing others (Layton, 2020). She argues that the resulting power asymmetry of "social processes such as gendering, racing, classing and sexing are at the very heart of subjectivity" (Layton, 2020: 52).

Social and historical structures shape and regulate the subjectivity of individuals living out the "[p]roper" performances of identity [consistent with] ideals of masculinity and femininity" (Layton 2020: xxxii), by identification with, and psychic introjection of, socially normative values. Importantly for my analysis of mothers' and men-children's narratives, Layton describes the constraints on capacity that result from binary identity classifications (such as gender and age). She also asserts, however, that there are possibilities for resistance, arising especially through relational experiences "that offer the kind of recognition that contests binary structures of the dominant culture" (Layton,

⁷ Klein (1932, 1935) introduced the concept of unconscious splitting, starting in infancy but continuing throughout life, "as part of our personality, of our normal and our psychotic development" (Mitchell, 1986: 21).

2020: xxxiii). Coupled with my psychotherapy training and practice orientation, founded on psychodynamic theories of splitting, projection, and projective identification (discussed below), Layton's (2020) insights into normative unconscious processes form the basis of my psycho-social research approach and analysis.

Layton argues that "subjectivity tends to resist subjection to oppressive social norms and simultaneously becomes complicit in sustaining them" (Layton, 2020: 52), resonating with Kristeva's observation (2005) that mothers obscure their passion for their children, which implies a collusion with existing restrictive social norms. Together, these theories are useful in my understanding of mothers who privately contemplate, or make, small acts of resistance but publicly comply with social and cultural expectations of them. Drawing on Layton's theoretical argument and Kleinian psychoanalytic concepts (Hinshelwood and Spillius, 2011), my analysis considers the process as occurring both consciously and unconsciously. Through identification with 'Others', identities are introjected and integrated into the psyche unconsciously. This results in 'naturalising' the subjective experience of identity, giving an illusion of stability.

According to Klein (1932, 1935), the psychic processes of introjection, projection, and identification in the internal world of an individual contributes to their "construction of an inner world of objects and self, which determines the individual's relation to themselves and to the external world" (Feldman, 2018: 990). Whereas this perspective implies that psychic processes *wholly* determine an individual's intra- and interpersonal relationships and their 'sense of self' or identity, my analysis leans on Layton's (2020) views that internal processes interact with social and cultural aspects of the external world to form and re-form identities over the life course. The internal process, from my analytic perspective, is mediated by the subjective, embodied, and emotional experience of "discursive practices" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2002, 2005) in the external world of the individual. My project builds on Layton's theory of normative unconscious processes by situating them within mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy to consider the formation of mundane (hetero)gender identities.

Psycho-social gendering processes

Mothers' and infant children's relationships have been documented from both sociological and psychological perspectives (Rich, 1986; Spillers, 1987; Ruddick, 1989; Chodorow, 1999; O'Reilly, 2004; Kristeva, 2005, for example). Some psychoanalytic approaches (for example, Deutsch, 1944; Horney, 1967; Kristeva, 1980; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1981; Benjamin, 1990; Segal, 1990; Frosh, 2002;

Baraitser, 2009; Adams, 2012) propose that adult (sexual) identities are formed from, and echo, pre-verbal sensual communication and physical experience, derived from the child's relationship with the emotional environment of its mother (Chodorow, 1999, for example). My project, however, addresses an apparent absence in knowledge about continuing psycho-social processes involved in relational intimacy between mothers and *men-children*, and the effect on (hetero)gendered identity formation, and the consequent impact on equality and agency. Mitchell (1974) explored unconscious aspects of gender inequalities, proposing that women unconsciously internalise an oppressive patriarchal culture, enacted through social relations. Rose (2005), however, contests Mitchell's (1974) and Chodorow's (1999) psychoanalytic assumptions, concluding that "[t]he unconscious constantly reveals the 'failure' of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is ever simply achieved" (Rose, 2005: 29). My analysis builds on this perspective, showing that psycho-social processes of (gender/sexual) identity formation involve an ongoing intra- and interpersonal relational dynamic throughout life. Neither gender nor sexuality precedes the other but are psycho-social interactions between the two, mediated by socio-cultural conditions, giving a sense of self/identity that appears coherent.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the unconscious motivation to create a sense of order/control in our lives through performative identity formation, derives from simultaneous (unconscious) tensions between a threat of psychic fragmentation and a libidinal desire for integration and survival/attachment to life (Kohut, 1977). In the external social world, this corresponds to a conscious fear of 'uncertainty' and a desire, usually conscious, for recognition by self and others of our selfhood. The ensuing ontological insecurity is defended unconsciously by 'death denial' or 'existential anxiety', which is not pre-determined nor static but rather continual, relational, and socially and culturally situated throughout the life course (Yalom, 2008). Clarke (2006) argues that self-reflection, as part of contemporary social and cultural practices of everyday life, enables individuals to integrate external experiences into an ongoing process of self-identity, and soothes uncertainties. These theoretical perspectives contribute to my understanding of the tensions in the mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, intersected by gender and age: divisions that are socially constructed but integrated unconsciously.

Wordless: un/conscious communication

The concept of unconscious communication has implications for both my interpretive analysis and my research methods. The theoretical basis for my use of aspects of unconscious communication, such as transference/countertransference, in my interpretive analysis is reviewed in this section. How my psycho-social research methodology and methods draw practically on the transference relationship is discussed further in Chapter 4, including the space afforded by “nonlinguistic “listening”” (Thomas, 2007: 543). My approach is premised on the perspective (Pile, 1991; Bondi, 2013; Bollas, 2018) that knowledge is not necessarily rational and is broader than cognition and language, drawing on Bollas’s concept of the “unthought known” (Bollas, 2018: xviii), suggesting that, through the experience, and interpretation, of transference and countertransference, previously unknown (unconscious) knows may become thoughts.

Transference has been explained as “an aspect of the emotional contact” (Curtis, 2015: 109) between two people, arguing that the concept describes ways of communicating “emotional needs, wishes and desires” (Curtis, 2015: 98). The emotional content communicated in mothers’ and men-children’s narratives can be analysed as potentially revealing their (un)conscious feelings about the other person, and themselves, shaped by socio-cultural, historical normative expectations of what it means to be a (hetero)gendered mother or adult son. My interpretations of mothers’ and men-children’s narratives are provisional, since the feelings communicated to and through me depend on my “capacity to think about what we register and work from within our emotional entanglement with others” (Bondi, 2013: 53). Countertransference (my embodied affective response) forms the basis for thinking about the meaning of my feelings about participants’ narratives, which enables me to offer interpretations of the manifest and latent content of the narratives and connect it with social and cultural discourses, as a way of “thinking the unthought known” (Bollas, 2018: 154).

Psychoanalytically, counter/transference involves projective identification, in which one person projects their unconscious feelings into another person who experiences those feelings (Bondi, 2013). Klein (1946) developed her theory of projective identification as “an unconscious communication whereby we transfer our thoughts, feelings and emotions to someone else” (Clarke, 2002: 174). Curtis (2015) suggests that projective identification is a means by which one person attempts to gain a sense of control, by discharging their own feelings that cannot be tolerated into another. Ogden (1990) similarly viewed projective identification as coercive and manipulative communication in which the projector transfers their experience of unwanted feelings into the recipient and changes the behaviour of both participants (Clarke, 2002: 181). Informed by these

perspectives, my research uses the concept as an analytic tool to interpret unconscious aspects of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, as well as considering possible unconscious communication between participants' and myself. Interpreting the conflicts and desires in relational intimacy practices between mothers and men-children, my research explores how psycho-social processes form their (hetero)gender identities and reinforce, disrupt, or complicate normative discourses.

Emotional 'becoming'

Building on Clarke's (2006) view that "the most important thing about psycho-social studies (informed by psychoanalytic sociology) is the emphasis on [...] the emotional life of both researcher and respondent" (Clarke, 2006: 1161), my analytic approach supports the argument that emotions "can be understood as a crucial bridge between the individual and the social, and are quintessentially psychosocial phenomena" (Sclater et al., 2009:1). My interpretive analysis of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy builds on both sociological and psychoanalytic perspectives of emotions as indicating both "the socio-structural determinants of a person's life and the way in which they impinge on the inner world of emotion and vice versa" (Clarke, 2006: 1162).

Developing previous work on the sociology of emotions (Duncomb and Marsden, 1993; Jackson, 1993; Williams and Bendelow, 1996; and Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, for example), Craib (1995) combined sociology and psychoanalysis to consider "social action, agency, gender and the embodiment of the emotions" (Clarke, 2006: 1160). Craib's (1995) research informs my thinking about the way emotions are embodied in mothers' and men-children's narratives, shaped by dominant social norms related to (hetero)gender identities that limit or privilege the expression of emotions and restrict or facilitate agency. Ahmed (2014) argued that "[t]he hierarchy between emotion and thought/reason gets displaced [...] into a hierarchy between emotions: some emotions are 'elevated' as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain 'lower' as signs of weakness" (Ahmed, 2014: 3). Exploring masculinities, bodies, and emotional life, Seidler (2007) similarly argues that emotions are "processes that are implicated within structural relations of power" (Seidler, 2007: 17). My interpretation of the feelings that arise for both mothers and men-children at transition points, such as when different family cultures (intersected by age and class, for example) merge on marriage or with the birth of children, for instance, is informed by theories such as Ahmed's (2014) and Seidler's (2007). Their insights regarding hierarchies of emotions related to power assist my analysis of the trans-and intergenerational perpetuation of (hetero)gender identities, in which gendered ambivalent feelings of love and hate are implicated.

Particularly relevant to my research, Connell and Pearse's (2015) formulation of gender relations identifies four dimensions: "power, production, cathexis and symbolism" (Connell and Pearse, 2015: 75), recognising patterning of unconscious attachments, emotional relations, and emotional commitments that may be "both loving and hostile at once" (Connell and Pearse, 2015: 80). This ambivalence within emotional attachments indicates the part they play in the social structuring of (gendered) emotional relations and social, cultural, and psychological dimensions within identity formation. Defined as "emotional energy being attached to an object" (Connell, 1995: 74), Connell notes that sexual desire is so often seen as natural that it is commonly excluded from social theory. Wedgwood (2009: 336) comments that "[t]his may be one reason why so few scholars have focused on cathexis in exploring the reproduction of gender power relations", arguing that feminists have neglected its part in the reproduction of the gender identities. My research attempts to address the link with emotion, including maternal/filial desires, by illustrating the extent to which mothers' and men-children's psycho-socially regulated emotional commitment shapes their identities and functions to (re)produce (hetero)gender relations.

Mothers' and men-children's (hetero)gendered relational intimacy

Both academic and popular interest in relational intimacy, describing people sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences, rather than merely physical intimacy, has grown over the past century (for example, Mead, 1934; Schutz, 1972; Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Belotti, 1975; Sharpe, 1976; Jackson, 1982; Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Sanger and Taylor, 2013). Gabb (2008) notes the historical research emphasis on sex and intimacy within families (such as Kinsey et al., 1948; and Masters and Johnson, 1966), which mostly analysed (heterosexual) adult relationships. This research trend developed to investigate adult relational intimacy outside the family norm (Golombok et al., 1983; Heilbrun, 1984; Harris and Turner, 1985; Schruers and Buunk, 1996). Research focussing on same sex families resulted in a shift away from the analysis of intimacy in heterosexual relationships, leading to "awareness of the factors such as equity, autonomy and emotional interdependence" (Gabb, 2008: 70), as features of the democratisation of intimate relationships.

Building on existing intimacy research to address an apparent lack of experiential research into relational intimacy between (hetero)gendered, heterosexual mothers and (hetero)gendered men-children, my project explores the (dis)continuous relational process of identity formation, and the constraints in countering self-perpetuating (hetero)gendered normative practices. Giddens (1992) developed a concept of the "pure relationship", proposed as one of sexual and emotional equality.

Although viewed as seminal in understanding narratives of self in personal relationships, his theory has been contested, particularly regarding autonomy and equality (Weeks et al., 2001; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Smart, 2007, for example). Jamieson (1998: 40) argues that Giddens (1992) understates “the roots of inequality by suggesting that a transformation of intimacy could undermine the ways in which the wider social context produces gender and power”. Jamieson (1998) proposes that personal relationships (between child and parent in particular) are the key mechanism for structuring and maintaining gender divisions: a perspective that underpins my analysis of (hetero)gendered mothers’ and men-children’s relationships. Since it is still largely mothers (and grandmothers) who undertake the practical and emotional labour of child-rearing within families, my analysis challenges Giddens’ (1992) concept of democratised intimacy and “pure love”, unaffected by intersecting gender, age, race, class, or economic divisions. My research explores a paradoxical mutual desire for autonomy and agency as well as dependency within ambivalent and ambiguous relational intimacy practices between mothers and men-children, affected by gendered power and control.

Resonating with my research, Craib (1994) suggests that engaging in self-examination in a search for intimacy is illusory, perpetuating a “myth of self-control” (Craib, 1994: 117). He argues that the ‘fragmented self’ attempts to protect itself through a process of self-construction doomed for failure, disappointment, and loss. His comment that “if we are really going to be in charge of our own lives, then we are going to need to manipulate others into giving us what we want from them” (Craib, 1994: 121) echoes Giddens’ (1991) notion of an “effort bargain” present in adult relationships. Craib’s comments influence my thinking about coercive practices as aspects of (hetero)gendered relational intimacy between mothers and men-children, which appear as an attempt to stabilise existential threat to (hetero)gender identity (and normative family structures). Situated in the family context, my interpretive analysis of mothers’ and men-children’s stories illustrates the everyday tensions of contradictory and conflicting interpersonal needs.

The formative effect of mother-infant intimacy on men-children’s identities has been marginalised in research (O’Reilly, 2001); as Backes (2000: 29) notes “[a]lthough this is one of life’s most permanent and powerful relationships, mothers and sons have not been much studied”. Where mothers and men-children’s relationships have been researched it is often within ‘pathological’ rather than mundane contexts (Barnett et al., 1992; Welldon, 1992, for example). Less studied are everyday “intimate, erotic, interpersonal experiences” (Gabb, 2008: 69) between mothers and infants, except from an attachment or psychoanalytic perspective in the early stages of the infant’s life (Chodorow,

1999; Gilligan, 2003; Dinnerstein, 2021, for example). There has been even less academic attention to the erotic maternal (and grandmaternal) transference relationship with adult children (or with their children), and its part in continuing to shape and regulate embodied adult subjectivities and (hetero)gender identities. My research addresses these gaps, working within the context of everyday (hetero)gendered family relationships, with the aim of uncovering the unthought known (Bollas, 2018) in the silence that surrounds this aspect of intimacy.

My interpretative analysis of the unconscious communication of erotic feelings in mothers' and men-children's stories is informed by both Chodorow's (1992) and Butler's (2004) explanation of the psychological taboo on parent-child incest, as well as Kristeva's (2005) insights regarding maternal passion. Chodorow (1992: 166) suggests that, because of gender differentiating psychic processes located within the "asymmetrical organization of parenting", incest taboos and heterosexuality are (re)produced outside and inside the family. Butler (2004) argues that the incest taboo legitimises heterosexual kinship arrangements as the norm, stating that the "primary incest taboo becomes the way in which sexual positions are occupied, masculine and feminine are differentiated, and heterosexuality is secured" (Butler, 2004: 152). She comments that "[t]he prohibitions that work to prohibit nonnormative sexual exchange also work to institute and patrol the norms of presumptively heterosexual kinship" (Butler, 2004: 157). These perspectives are important to my understanding of how (hetero)gendered, heterosexual identities are naturalised within (hetero)gendered mundane family life and perpetuated trans- and intergenerationally.

Layton (2020) suggests that the incest taboo is formed, within homophobic cultures, through an existing taboo against homoerotic desire. Layton sees this as a (psycho-social) process of splitting between sexual desire (desiring the 'other' parent) and identification (identifying with the 'same' parent), resulting in binary divisions, in "mutually exclusive relation" to each other (Layton, 2020: xxxi). In my research, Layton's and Butler's conceptual frameworks are useful in considering separation, (dis)identifications, and identity formation as gendered relational processes through which profound, sensual and erotic, enmeshed love experienced by some parents towards their infant, becomes accepted as forbidden when their children become adults, silenced through the normative heterosexual structures and strictures of everyday life.

Lorde argues (1984: 53) that the erotic, as a resource, is "rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling [... and] to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change".

Her perspective implies untapped potential for transgenerational change, for example, in the agency and voices of (paternal) grand/mothers participating in my research. Grand/mothers sharing their perspectives on how their relationship with their adult sons, and the wider family network, affects them all has implications for my analysis of the transgenerational impact of gendered relational power between mothers and men-children.

NARRATIVE PERFORMATIVITY: IDENTITIES IN-THE-MAKING

Identity and subjectivity

The concept of identity varies according to different research orientations (Lawler, 2014), and in everyday life, historically, culturally, and politically. Some sociological theories, for example, consider the influence of psychoanalysis, feminism, and Marxism in problematizing identity (such as Hall and Gay, 1996, and Baumann, 2004). Despite ongoing debates (for example, Spelman, 1988; Fuss, 1989; Kirkby, 1991; Howie, 2010), identity is now widely viewed as created through social relations, rather than as an innate trait. While academic studies emphasise fluidity and change, there remains an everyday popular view of gender and sexuality as relatively fixed, even though social roles may have become more flexible (Lawler, 2014).

‘Subjectivity’ is similarly theorised from various perspectives (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1961; Luhmann, 2006; Venn, 2006; 2020; Biehl et al., 2007; Wetherell, 2008; Lawler, 2014, for example). For some scholars (Foucault, 1978, 1988; Bourdieu, 1992; Butler, 1997, 2000; Jackson, 2006, 2010; McQueen, 2015, for instance) social dimensions, such as culture, politics, and power structures, are implicated in constituting subjectivity, while others focus on the emotional life of political subjects (Luhmann, 2006). Post-structural theorists (including feminist scholars, such as Cisoux et al., 1976; Kristeva, 1980; Wittig, 1980; Irigaray, 1985; Butler, 2000) emphasise multiple, contradictory subject positions, contesting unitary coherence, and viewing subjectivity as a “messy” process (Baker, 2021: 354), situated in power relationships that shape how we see ourselves as subjects.

Drawing on feminist post-structuralist perspectives of the ‘body’ as central to the constitution of subjectivity and theories of the psyche in terms of the “symbolic realm of language and representation” (Barrett, 1992: 214), my study problematises the everyday dynamic between the ‘external’ context and the ‘internal’ psyche communicated in mothers’ and men-children’s stories. It explores how the social becomes incorporated and naturalised, resulting in selfhood and identity. Viewing identity formation as a psycho-social process, my research approach suggests that it is

always in the making relationally, originating “not inside ourselves, but through interactions with others, [and] is continually modified over time” (Jackson, 2018: 147).

The term ‘identity’ is used in my research to denote *both* social identities by which we are identified, or perceived, by others, and by which we sometimes identify ourselves, *and* the subjective sense of self: how we feel and think about ourselves, related to how others perceive us. My use of identity as inclusive of subjectivity emphasises its formation as a psycho-social process of relationship, not existing without a social relational context, which affects our capacity for agency and autonomy. Situated within everyday identity stories, my approach also reflects the commonplace conflation of identity and subjectivity by participants in the study when telling stories about themselves and how their identities have been formed, expressing the taken for granted ‘self-in-making’ that often happens outside awareness.

Narrative construction of identity

The starting point for my thinking about the narrative construction of identity was influenced by Ricoeur’s (1995) comment that:

[i]f each of us receives a certain narrative identity from the stories which are told to him or her, or from those that we tell about ourselves, this identity is mingled with that of others in such a way as to engender second order stories which are themselves intersections between numerous stories. Thus, the story of my life is a segment of the story of your life; of the story of my parents, of my friends, of my enemies, and of countless strangers. We are literally ‘entangled in stories’ (Ricoeur, 1995: 6).

Theories of narrative (for example, Ricoeur, 1980, 1991, 1995, 2004; Steedman, 1986; Giddens, 1991; Berger, 1992; Somers and Gibson, 1994; Plummer, 1995; Haraway, 1997; Lawler, 1999, 2000, 2008; Czaniawska, 2008; Venn, 2020) suggest that individuals systematically organise external situations in a process of self-identity formation, which “has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens, 1991: 52). Plummer (1995), for example, argued that creating sexual identities involves sustained social dramas based on fictional narratives, the “*emplotment*” (Ricoeur, 1991; Plummer, 1995) of which takes place throughout life. Working from a symbolic interactionist perspective, Plummer’s (1995) narrative analysis of gender and sexual identity formation concludes that people accumulate “traces of their experiences into some form of coherence through a narrative form – as they live through it” (Plummer, 2001: 87). My research contributes to these theories by illustrating interactions between the external social context and the

internal world of individuals, reflecting on the stories we hear and those we tell others, and tell ourselves (in an 'internal monologue').

Lawler (2014: 24) suggests that identities are "creatively produced through [...] memories, understandings, experiences and interpretations", expressed through storytelling, which makes meaning of our lives as they are being lived. Jackson (2010) similarly views the narrated self as created reflexively:

Someone telling a story about herself, moreover, demonstrates the reflexivity of the self: as subject/narrator she tells of a past self, a self that is the object of her own self-reflection. She is also revealed in the act of ongoing self-construction, in self-making, through reconstructing her past in relation to the situated context of self-telling. The idea that the present re-shapes the past is thus fundamental to understanding the temporal, social and reflexive character of the self and of narratives of self (Jackson, 2010: 124).

Drawing on Plummer's (1995) and Jackson's (2010) perspectives, my project explores the self-constructing process of storytelling, contributing to the concept by considering narrative performativity within the specific context of (hetero)gendered mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy stories. My analysis considers its effect as an interpersonal identity-forming process, which offers potential but sometimes limited opportunities for agency, contingent on social and cultural expectations and practices.

Performative (hetero)gender identity formation

Various theories have focussed on performance as part of identity formation (Goffman, 1959; Weeks, 1986; Simon, 1996, for example), while the enactment of identity as performance has also been studied over decades (Baumann, 1977, 1986; Fine, 1984; Langellier, 2001, for instance). The concept of performativity, however, situates narrative within "institutionalized networks of power relations", such as the family (Langellier, 2001: 151). Butler states (2000: 136; original emphases) that "acts, gestures, enactment, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence and identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means". For Butler (2000: xv), the performativity of gender identity is "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual": a concept that informs my research methods and analysis.

Butler's theory (2000) suggests that 'self-identity' is experienced by individuals as 'natural' or innate, cohering with hegemonic discourses. The embodied consciousness of identity arises out of 'naturalised' cultural constructions within socially established meanings "that make the institution of normative heterosexuality seem inevitable" (Butler, 2000: 197). My research explores performativity as an embodied enactment (mundane storytelling, for example, and relational intimacy practices) that enables heterosexuality/(hetero)gender identity to be internalised as a norm. In aiming to contribute to broader theories of identity formation, my psycho-social theorising responds to Butler's (2000: xxv) comment that "performativity in terms of its social, psychic, corporeal, and temporal dimensions" still needs to be clarified.

The concept of narrative performativity is used in my research to analyse the ways people organise their stories of social life to validate individual identity and collective experience. However, I extend the idea to consider narrative performativity as a way of integrating identities-in-the-making psychically, which offers the (illusory) possibility of stabilising uncertainties in everyday life. In giving shape to the past and direction for the future, it reinforces a sense of continuity and stability individually and functions socially to regulate and recreate normative (hetero)gendered identities and control non-normative identities.

Gendered identities

Biologically based theories define gender as the 'naturally' determined physical and psychological differences between 'boys' and 'girls' as assigned at birth, with differentiation located within the body (Bem, 1993; Rudman and Glick, 2008; Park et al., 2015; Pinho and Gaunt, 2021). Social constructionist theories (McIntosh, 1968; Barrett and McIntosh 1982; Oakley, 1984, for example) emphasise the social and cultural aspects of gender categorisations (Robinson, 2015), while still assuming there are two distinct immutable biological sex characteristics within the classifications of male and female. Conclusions that sex is a constant, although gender is variable, is problematic from a contemporary perspective since they neglect diversity in meanings of sex and gender, mediated by the social, cultural, and historical context (Delphy, 1993).

In the 1970s, gendered social roles were theorised as being a means of control enacted through patriarchal structures, whilst, in the 1980s, research focussed on women's distinct positive qualities (Eisenstein, 1984). Historically, such universalising of women, defined in opposition to men as "Other" (Beauvoir, 2011) failed to address intersections such as race, class, age, or sexuality. Work by black feminists (hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins, 2000, for example)

contested arguments that imply that women's experience is universal, by analysing how a combination of multiple inequalities, such as race and class, for example, as well as gender, intersect in the formation of identities. Connell (1987) offered an analysis of a complex picture of gender relations within a social context, wherein structure and social practices constitute each other in a continuous process. More recent research, "embedded in a global economy of knowledge" (Messerschmidt et al., 2018: 340), has generated more nuanced understandings of culturally defined concepts of gender within a local and global political environment of neo-liberalism (Connell, 2016).

Butler (2015: 5) argues that gendered subjectivities are formed through norms and spatially and temporally contingent discourses, which pre-exist birth, "orchestrating" gender, race, and status identities. Resonating with Beauvoir's perspective (2011: 293) that "[n]o biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society", Butler (2000) proposes that sexual identities, for example, are configured "within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (Butler, 2000: 9). Lacan's emphasis (1978, 2005) on language and the symbolic in the formation of gendered subjectivities, has been variously challenged or developed by feminist writers (Cixous, 1980; Kristeva, 1980; Wittig, 1980 for instance). Irigaray (1985), for example, argued that women are positioned as the 'other', excluded from (Western) social and cultural discourses, including psychoanalytic and philosophical discourses. Feminist and queer research into the formation of sexual and gender identity (for example, Weeks, 1986; Morgan, 1990; Segal, 2007) has been influential in the academy, drawing on psychoanalysis as well as social and cultural theories. Gender identity theories continue to be contested, such as in the work of contemporary 'gender critical' academics "who emphasise the immutability and explanatory importance of sex" (Stock, 2021), reinforcing biologically based binary divisions. The cultural terrain of gender research forms the backdrop for mundane assumptions of (hetero)gender (and heterosexual) identity formation, which my research explores through participants' identity stories.

Heterosexuality taken for granted

Historically, research into institutionalised heterosexuality mostly concerned its part in the regulation of homosexuality and less about how "normative heterosexuality affects the lives of heterosexuals" (Jackson, 2006: 105). Lesbian, feminist, and queer studies (Friedan, 1963; Millet, 1970; Rich, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Anzaldúa, 1987; Wittig, 1992; Collins, 2000, for example) "significantly changed [...] both the critical perspectives on the object of sexuality and the potential status of straight critics in that discourse by rethinking the critique of sexuality as a project that is

generally directed “against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (Warner, 1993: xxvi)” (cited in Schlicter, 2007: 192). Some feminist scholars (Rich, 1981; Bunch, 1990; Wittig, 1992; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Ingraham, 1996, 1999; Jackson, 1999, for example) focussed on what happens within heterosexual relationships, suggesting that gender divisions depend on, and are confirmed by, normative heterosexuality (Jackson 2006). Others (for instance, Seidman, 2002, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Hockey et al., 2007) argue that diverse expressions of sexuality constitute and give normative social value to heterosexualities by differentiating “the normative from the deviant” (Jackson, 2006: 112), and establishing both a heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy and “hierarchies among heterosexualities” (Seidman, 2005: 40). Commenting that “[h]eteronormativity defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life” (Jackson, 2006: 107), Jackson argues that definitions of gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality are influenced by the social meanings attached to them, which change culturally and historically.

Although my research is directed towards the “normal” (Jackson, 2006: 107), everyday formation of *(hetero)gender* identities rather than *heterosexuality* specifically, all research participants, except one who identified himself as ‘gay’, took for granted that heterosexuality is part of their (self-identified) (hetero)gender identity, and assumed that I did too. Rather than challenge their (hetero)gendered assumptions, which might have distorted the focus of my research, predicated on hearing participant’s stories on their own terms, my project investigates how (conflated) heterosexual/(hetero)gender identity intersects in mothers’ and men-children’s relationships. Participants’ assumptions reflect Wilkinson and Kitzinger’s observation (1993: 3) that, for most people, heterosexuality is a “given”, “a silent term”, resonating with Hockey et al.’s (2007: 1) insight that “the power of a dominant category is in part tied up with not acknowledging its specificity – or [...] with not ‘realising’ it”. According to Jackson (2006: 113) “most of the population, most of the time, takes for granted the existence of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as given categories of people who ‘naturally’ form sexual liaisons with members of the ‘opposite’ gender”, a position borne out in mothers’ and men-children’s assumptions in my project. My analysis of participants’ stories chimes with Jackson’s comment that “institutionalized, normative heterosexuality regulates those kept within its boundaries as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them” (Jackson, 2006: 105).

Studies of heterosexuality remain limited (Hockey et al., 2007:1), particularly as it is experienced and embodied in older age. Hockey et al. (2007: 4) note that “[b]eing ‘everywhere and nowhere’, heterosexuality resists critical reflection, yet demands conformity, a point that which [sic] extends to

other 'invisible' or 'unmarked' identities". My project addresses the less researched aspects of how changing intergenerational relationships impact on paternal grandmothers, who are sometimes rendered 'invisible', affected by social expectations of them, which shapes their sense of self in older life. Responding to Lawler's view (2014) that excluding the part the unconscious plays in identity formation fails to make use of psychoanalysis in explaining and interpreting everyday life, my research informs broader theories about psycho-social processes involved in the making of (hetero)gendered identities, confirmed by heterosexuality.

Making masculinities

The development of masculinity studies created space for theorising about the historical and cultural contingency of masculinities and psychological, social, and cultural aspects of hegemonic masculinity (for instance, Cockburn, 1983; Weeks, 1986; Connell, 1987, 1995; Kimmel, 1987a; Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Messner, 1992; Klein, 1993; Collier, 1995; Mac an Ghail, 1996a). Social constructionist frameworks (such as Tolson, 1977; Staples, 1982; Messner, 1992; Messerschmidt, 1993; Mac an Ghail, 1996a) investigate institutional practices as sites that produce various kinds of masculinities, noting the part relational gender politics play. Connell (1987, 1995) emphasises the effect of patriarchal structures in her analysis of the structural framework of power and gender relations, in which she "acknowledge[s] the inherently political character of our knowledge of masculinity" (1995: 44). Seidler (2005) offers a more nuanced analysis, arguing that Connell's perspective is reductive, reinforcing dichotomies between the categories of men and women, implying their immutability. My research of everyday relational intimacy between men-children and mothers contextualises Seidler's (2005) conclusion that the "notion of 'hegemonic masculinities' works to silence [...] their ambivalent feelings towards inherited masculinities" (Seidler, 2005: 26). His perspective informs my analysis of the transgenerational effects of (hetero)gendered expectations of masculinities in everyday family practices, which sometimes silences men-children as well as their mothers.

The concept of "a hybridisation of masculinities" (Demetriou, 2001; Bridges and Pascoe, 2018) identified that varied aspects of diverse masculinities are appropriated in response to new historical contexts. According to Demetriou (2001: 348), this involves attempting to "articulate, appropriate, and incorporate rather than negate, marginalize and eliminate different or even apparently oppositional elements". Hybridisation has been contested as a "strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy" that sustains the subordination of women (Demetriou, 2001: 349), or conversely, as indicating the reduction of inequalities (Anderson and McCormack, 2018). Bridges and Pascoe (2018:

258) contend that there is “a patterned set of consequences associated with the processes of incorporating elements of the identities of various Others”. Although their research is focussed on hybrid *masculinities*, their argument is relevant to my research in considering transitions in family life when both mothers’ and men-children’s identities are (re)formed through ‘new’, additional interpersonal relationships. My interpretive analysis of mothers’ and men-children’s identity stories is informed by such diverse debates, illustrating the extent to which embodied masculine identities are affected by the wider network of diverse family cultural and social expectations and enacted within mundane (hetero)gendered normative practices.

Proposing that we are shaped by cultures and institutions such as family, religion, education, and the economy, Plummer argues (2003) that “men change (just like women) across time, space and contexts [...] they shift across the life space and cycle [...] enmeshed in all manner of power relations”. He suggests, however, that male hegemonic heterosexuality is:

buttressed by a series of scientific and cultural props pointing in the same direction and telling us what men are really like. Hegemony expresses the privileged positions of dominant groups and establishes “the fund of self-evident descriptions of social reality that normally go without saying” (Fraser, 1992: 179). Hegemonic male sexuality works to essentialize the male sexualities of some men into the sexualities of all whilst reinforcing assumptions about a bipolar feminine essential sexuality too (Plummer, 2003).

Masculinities research that addresses different aspects of men’s experiences such as life course stages (Richardson, 2010; Eck, 2014; Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2016) informs my understanding of the everyday experience of men-children, at particular transition points, intersected by age, gender, and class divisions, for example, in my research, which generate intra- and interpersonal conflicts.

The expression of some forms of masculinity is conceptualised as fragile or failing (for example, Munder Ross, 1986; Frosh, 2002; Floyd and Horlacher, 2017), constructed in opposition to the idealised mother. Frosh (2002: 32) suggests that masculine identity is “defined largely in terms of what it is not [...] not what the mother represents, it is anything but her”. Segal (2007) cites John Munder Ross’s explanation of men who are “afraid of intimacy with women”, because of the unavailability of their fathers (particularly emotionally), who are “entirely inhibited and ineffectual compared with a powerful mother [...] and create] their own exaggerated, artificial, brittle and aggressive version of manhood as a protection against their identification with the powerful mother” (Segal, 2007: 63). Acknowledging the diversity of masculinities, Segal concludes, however,

that it is “the site of any number of emotions of weakness and strength, pleasure and pain, anxiety, conflict, tension and struggle” (Segal, 2007: 215). Such perspectives are important for my research, which aims to avoid reinforcing stereotypes of (hetero)masculinities and (hetero)femininities through a nuanced psycho-social interpretation of the complicated relational dynamics between mothers and men-children. My analysis seeks to contribute to existing understandings of how the outside gets inside each of us, affecting identity formation shaped by dominant norms of masculinity and femininity. It explores the impact of social and cultural gender hierarchies, which naturalise and perpetuate privileged identities, such as (hetero)gendered/heterosexual masculinities, and make it difficult, though not impossible, for both men-children and mothers to counter inherited (hetero)gender norms.

(Re)forming normative grand/motherhood

Women participating in my project foregrounded the maternal aspect of their identities in contrast with men participating, who spoke more generally about themselves rather than as sons specifically. Consequently, my review of the literature on femininity, within which studies of the maternal are positioned, focusses on (grand)mothering⁸ as one aspect of (hetero)gendered femininity. Psycho-social studies of grandmothers’ identity formation appear to be scant, although there are numerous sociological, psychological, and anthropological studies of maternal grandmothers’ relationship with their daughters, their grandchildren, or their intergenerational involvement with their families (Rambo, 2005). Moreover, research appears to neglect the perspective of paternal grandmothers specifically, the effect on them of their relational intimacy with their men-children, and the gendered psycho-social processes involved in their identity formation. My project aims to address some of the gaps in existing literature to illuminate both paternal grand/mothers’ and men-children’s experiences and to contribute to thinking about how identities are formed psycho-socially: processes that have political implications at micro, meso, and macro levels.

Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis’s (2017: 356) study of “neoliberal femininities” argues that “Neoliberal governmentality [...] shapes feminine subjectivities to adhere to normative ideals”. They posit that young women are rewarded by neoliberal discourses when they “take advantage of educational and occupational opportunities, pursue successful careers, achieve economic independence, delay motherhood, and become full participants in consumer culture” (Gerodetti and

⁸ I use the term ‘mothering’ to convey all aspects of identifying/being identified as ‘mother’, implying fluid, complex and sometimes contradictory forms of identity, including grand/mothering and socio-culturally mediated relational practices involved in caring for children.

McNaught-Davis, 2017: 356). Their argument provides a springboard in my study for thinking about how neo-liberal discourses impact on grand/mothers and affect mothers' and men-children's relationships situated in normative family practices. My analysis of grand/mothers' stories suggests that their (feminine) identities continue to be shaped through gendered family practices that limit their agency and autonomy and perpetuate gendered neo-liberal discourses.

From the 1970s, feminist gender research regarding sex/gender distinctions, has recognised that "male or female bodies can display masculinity or femininity" differently (Lennon and Alsop, 2020: 30) and that gender norms vary culturally, historically, and geographically, intersected by race and class divisions, for example. The connection between "feminine appearance [and] the construction of a feminine identity" (Roseneil and Seymour, 1999: 85) has been argued to be part of a historical "civilising process" leading to "more controlled behavioural and emotional acts" (Roseneil and Seymour, 1999: 85). Shaping the cultural landscape within which grand/mothers related their stories in my research, pressure on women to conform to social (hetero)gender norms of heterosexual 'feminine' lifestyle, behaviour, and appearance, prevails (with age differentiated normative expectations). Hockey et al. (2007: 38) argue that despite "considerable change in the outward form of heterosexual relationships across the twentieth century" there is no indication of "corresponding internal shifts". Roseneil and Seymour (1999: 85), however, suggest that a transformational dynamic is characterised by (gendered) "internal pacification, rationalization, self-restraint and regulation" and informs my analysis of the intra- and interpersonal conflicts illustrated in my project.

The regulation of normative bodily forms shapes mothers' gender identities contingent on the socio-cultural context (Benson, 1997). In the U.K., for example, normative ideals of women's femininity and fecundity are symbolised, for example, in mundane pregnancy practices and restricted menopause-related care: their bodies a site of public intrusion (Weiss, 2021), routinely patrolled and socially managed through health and welfare services, which reinforce hierarchical norms of gender identities, including often assumed heterosexuality. Such arguments (Benson, 1997; Roseneil and Seymour, 1999; Weiss, 2021, for example) contribute to my thinking about how grand/mothers are positioned hierarchically, in their experience of restricted lifestyle choices intersected by age as well as gender, such as financial constraints because of loss of paid work, gender differentiated pension income and age differentiated health care, or expectations to provide grandchildcare, which (un)consciously regulates and perpetuates gender hierarchies, transmitted trans- and intergenerationally.

Connecting maternal subjectivities to the social context, Baraitser (2009: 19) argues that it is “not only what we bring to mothering from within and without, but also how the relational dynamics of mothering itself has transformational potential in terms of both the self and the social fabric”. Baraitser’s (2009) conclusion resonates perversely with Rose’s (2018) suggestion that mothers (and by implication grandmothers) are blamed for what they do or don’t do in relation to the wider social world: if grand/mothers’ relational capacity makes social transformation possible, then it also contains the obverse. Beauvoir (2011), for example, viewed mother love as compensating for the lack of love available from a man, giving mothers the opportunity to pass on abuse within the patriarchy, through identification and the capacity to dominate and control (Baraitser, 2009). I draw on these arguments in thinking about men-children’s and grand/mothers’ perspectives about wider family relationships to consider their combined impact across generations.

Rich (1986: 36-37) identified that “Motherhood is one part of the female process; it is not an identity for all time. The process of ‘letting go’—though we are charged with blame if we do not — is an act of revolt against the grain of patriarchal culture”. Drawing on Rich’s (1986) perspectives in my interpretive analysis, my project considers the extent to which grand/mothers relinquish responsibilities for their men-children or displace the feelings of responsibility through involvement with grandchildren. Seeking acts of resistance (however small) to this apparent tendency in grand/mothers’ narratives, my research considers what prevents them from ‘letting go’. The cultural requirement (O’Reilly, 2004) for mothers to ‘let go’, inevitably involves change and loss of identity, among other losses. Baraitser (2009) notes Furman’s comment (1982) that motherhood is a process of “being there to be left”, which “is the hardest and most psychologically threatening to women who mother, one that never ends” (Baraitser, 2009: 5). Stone (2013: 148) suggests that “mothering [...] is pervaded by loss [... and involves] a work of mourning”, concurring with Nicolson’s (1998) views that “Mothers are not permitted to grieve or mourn [as they are] with any other change” (Stone, 2013: 148). Stone asserts this is partly because of the traditional view of motherhood as fulfilment of women’s destiny, where they achieve “ultimate satisfaction and happiness” (Stone, 2013: 148). She suggests that “[i]n the context of modern disciplinary power, the good mother who only feels happiness is recast as the *normal* mother – even though that norm is an ideal that few if any mothers can realize” (2013: 149; original emphasis). These perspectives on maternal loss inform my analysis of the tugs, ties, and tensions between mothers and men-children, both being affected by the presence of (impending) loss as part of everyday life, even if they aren’t fully aware of it in their daily lives.

Investigating the loss involved, and its impact on mothers' identities, when children leave home, Green (2016) reported that women in her study experienced it as bereavement, arguing that mothers' changing identities are closely connected with their children's life course transitions. Many academic studies focus on the losses involved in the transition to motherhood, because of a change in social identity (Laney et al., 2015) or loss from unemployment (Kanji and Cahusac, 2015), for example. The absence of experiential data of losses involved in becoming a grandmother, however, is notable, suggesting that everyday meanings of grandmotherhood are implicated in the subtle reproduction and regulation of gender hierarchies and normative family practices, intersected by age. Attending to this gap in research, my project explores how grandmothers respond in various, sometimes contradictory and confusing, ways to the losses they experience, and whether the psycho-social effect on them and their men-children contributes to perpetuating normative (hetero)gender identities trans- and intergenerationally.

Kristeva (2005) claims that "by turning all our attention on the biological and social aspects of motherhood as well as on sexual freedom and equality, we have become the first civilization which *lacks a discourse on the complexity of motherhood*" (Kristeva, 2005; original emphasis). Psychoanalysis, according to Kristeva (2005), understates "the passionate violence of the maternal experience", whilst popular culture "overvalues pregnancy [...] to avoid questioning ourselves about this passion". Kristeva's (2005) concept of maternal passion influences my exploration of the complex desires that some grand/mothers feel towards not only their men-children but also towards their grandchildren, and the intra- and interpersonal conflicts that may be experienced as a result. Viewing maternal passion as "the prototype for the love relation", Kristeva argues that mothers obscure maternal passion, because of the risks and benefits it "holds for them, their children, the father and society at large" (Kristeva, 2005). Her argument informs my interpretation of ambivalence between mothers and their men-children, and the unsayable (unconsciously denied) erotic dimensions within their relational intimacy.

In her feminist analysis of the 'best-selling' novel "Fifty Shades of Grey" (E.L. James, 2011), Upstone (2016) suggests that the protagonists' relationship is founded entirely on "their experiences of being mothered and the complex resonances of this in their adult lives" (Upstone, 2016: 140). Reinforcing normative gender/heterosexual identities, the novel asserts that "[t]o become a true woman, one must succumb not only to heteronormative desires but also to motherhood" (Upstone, 2016: 144). Upstone (2016) argues that feminist analyses (such as Kristeva, 1985; Rich, 1986; Parker, 1995), which identify motherhood as "a socially reproduced discourse, a "single-minded" identity"

(Upstone, 2016: 140), fail to consider the ambiguities, ambivalence, and complexity of mothering. Hockey et al. (2007) suggest that 'home' (by inference, the (hetero)gendered family) is the location, in an embodied as well as symbolic sense, for the expression of the "passionate liaison of our bodies" where:

emotion, intimacy and the culturally specific routines of everyday life are constituted and naturalised within individual subjectivities. And, as a consequence, it would seem, hegemonic masculinity remains represented through the heterosexual act of penetrative intercourse, with hegemonic femininity similarly 'confirmed through motherhood' (Hockey et al., 2007: 147).

My interpretive analysis contributes to thinking about concepts of passion and erotic love as part of the complicated relational intimacy between mothers and men-children that are infrequently acknowledged either in academic research or in everyday lives and considers their part in psycho-social regulatory processes of identity formation that perpetuate (hetero)gendered norms of femininity and masculinity.

The concept of the 'good enough mother' who provides a "facilitating environment" (Winnicott, 1971, 1990) for her infant has been incorporated into idealised views of mothering in Western countries, as a way of regulating what it means to be a mother and a woman, providing a context of blame and shame for women who don't live up to the socially constructed standard (Smart, 1996a; Abeyasekera and Maracek, 2019). Bowlby (1982, 1998) among others (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Gillath et al., 2016, for example), suggests that early attachment experiences within a dyadic relationship have lifetime implications for individuals, extending the concept from mother/infant relationships to adult relationships generally. Such theories reinforce the socio-culturally constructed weight of grand/mothers' responsibility for current and future generations' successful social relationships, which moulds their identity and affects their agency. This 'accountability' is crystallised in contemporary parenting self-help guidance based on Bowlby's (1982, 1998) attachment theories (Duschinsky et al., 2015), and is similarly reflected in lay advice to grandparents, such as Gransnet (2022), an online forum for grandparenting discussions. These discourses provide the socio-cultural context within which grand/mothers participating in my project form their identities, potentially shaping their narratives as well as my own interpretive analysis, as a researcher/(grand)mother.

Arber and Timonen (2012) note the paucity of gender analyses of everyday grandparenting practices, although Ferguson et al.'s study (2004: 57) identified a "grandparenting hierarchy" in which grandmothers are ranked more highly than grandfathers and maternal grandparents take priority over paternal grandparents". Whilst the part grandparents play in families has been acknowledged in research (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1985; Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Chan and Elder, 2000; Mueller and Elder, 2003, for example), insufficient studies have theorised grandmothers' agency regarding their involvement with grandchildren (Arber and Timonen, 2012), and the effect of gender divisions. Grandmothers' function in freeing the state from supporting families with children has been explored, however, by Berkovitch and Manor (2022: 1) in their analysis of the "changing relations between familism, individualism and neoliberalism". Harman et al. (2022: 39) note that grandmothers, in particular, "provide valuable support to working mothers", acknowledging that gendered social norms result in grandmothers' rather than grandfathers' greater involvement. None of these recent sociological studies take account of the relational intimacy between (grand)mothers and their men-children and its psycho-social impact on identity formation, nor the impact of the wider family network and its implications trans- and intergenerationally. Contributing to this research, my project illustrates everyday gender divisions present in the hierarchy of grandmothering, suggesting that it assists in perpetuating the idealisation of the maternal via its shaping of grand/mothers' identities.

These perspectives situate my research narratives in a wider political and social context and contribute to my thinking about the 'naturalising' effect of psycho-social processes involved in (hetero)gender identity formation. Socio-cultural narratives reverberate through macro, meso, and micro levels, emerging practically, for example, in expectations for grand/mothers to provide unpaid labour to reduce childcare costs. My project explores the social expectations attached to grandmothering, which makes it difficult to resist norms of (hetero)gendered femininity intersected by age, as well as class, for example, and is a potential source of family friction.

INTERSECTIONAL POWER

Intersecting axes of power: age and gender

Providing insights into how gender and power operate both at structural and individual levels within a patriarchal structure, feminist research (Firestone, 1970; Mitchell, 1974; Delphy, 1977; Barrett and McIntosh, 1979; Walby, 1990, for example) laid the ground for the more nuanced concept of intersectionality. Intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990, for instance) analyses cross-

cutting divisions (and differentiated power) between gender and race, ethnicity, nation, age, ableness, faith, sexuality, economics, and class, for example, with some categories co-existing with one or multiple others. Intersectional analysis of axes of power suggests that participants in my study (mostly white European, heterosexual, (hetero)gender, and middle-class) are relatively privileged. For some, however, their privilege is complicated or undermined by intersecting age/generation and gender divisions. Layton (2020: 70) notes that “[i]ntersectionality is a complex concept, but is rendered even more complex if we think about the psychic costs entailed in inhabiting various collective identifications”. Her comments are intrinsic to my understanding of the intersection between gender and age in mothers’ and men-children’s narratives, particularly her argument that:

[w]e need to be mindful of how our identifications and disidentifications are intertwined with hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality, and nation – and how these are experienced psychologically in ways of being and loving that are differentially valued and are often lived via splitting and projection (Layton, 2020: 71).

Lorde (1984: 48) notes the “trappings of power”, where those who don’t fit into power holding norms identify one dimension as the source of oppression, forgetting other sites of power that they themselves inhabit. Complex social, psychological, and political processes taking place at the intersections result in (re)constituting individual identities and social categories, throughout the lifecourse (Layton, 2020). In my analysis, I focus on the “trappings of power” (Lorde, 1984: 48), where axes of gender and age/generation intersect, illustrating, for example, the incongruence between a person’s subjective sense of self (un/consciously denying their part, or complicity, in oppressive practices) and their social identity as a mother or a man-child, indicating their (introjected) identification with social categories that (re)produce existing power hierarchies.

My research is focussed on the (per)formative effect of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy at the micro and meso level, however, my analysis situates their relationship within the wider socio-cultural/political context, noting Ferree’s (2018: 14) argument that “the concept of intersectionality is weakened when it is treated primarily as operating at the meso or micro levels of group and identity formations”. My research illustrates psycho-social connections between the micro level formation of grand/mothers and men-children’s (hetero)gender identities, meso level family practices, such as unpaid (grand)childcare, and macro level institutionalised marriage laws or social care systems, for example. Seeking ultimately to understand the ‘feedback loop’ between the

levels that (re)produces normative identities, my research explores how interpersonal, structural, and cultural power is enacted in mothers' and men-children's relationships.

Gendered relational power

The relationship between gender and power has been the focus of attention in many sociological studies, demonstrating that gender is at the core of the way resources are distributed, locally and globally, which affect everyday lives through economics, governments, social institutions, and cultural environments (for example, Oakley, 1974; Hartmann, 1981; Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Cockburn, 1983; Eisenstein, 1984; Barrett, 1987; Wittig, 1992; Delphy, 2016). Post-structural research, highlighting the importance of language, subjectivity and meaning shifted towards understanding gender from a discursive framework that suggests that subjectivity is produced through "a whole range of discursive practices – economic, social and political – the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power" (Weedon, 1997: 21). This perspective informs my understanding of mothers' and men-children's subjective storytelling, where gender power relations appear as a central feature of their relational intimacy. Situated in a network of family practices and social institutions and processes that structure society, their narratives reflect a dynamic connection between individuals and the social contexts they inhabit (Weedon, 1997). From this perspective, power relations are implicated in historically and culturally contingent discourses that give meaning to intersecting gender, class, race, faith, and age categories, for example. Despite the potential for political change implied in this analytic position, where identity is viewed as neither innate nor fixed, the intersectional battle for resources (personal and social) contributes to limitations on individual agency and transformation.

Discussing cathexis in gender relations, not only as it affects individuals but also "inside an important social institution, the bourgeois family", Connell (2002: 59-62) argues that discourses impact "directly on people's bodies as 'discipline' as well as on their identities and sense of their place in the world". This argument underpins my interpretive analysis of the formative effect of gender power relations, including the division of labour, on grand/mothers' and men-children's (hetero)gender identities. Suggesting that crises in gender relations "in personal life and in intimate relationships" as well as on a global scale, can "drive change in a person's life trajectory" (Connell, 2002: 74), Connell concludes that gender identities are intrinsically unstable and "open to change" (Connell, 2002: 71). Exploring psycho-social processes involved in (hetero)gender identity formation, mediated by external forces at the macro level, conflicts at the meso level, and integrated at the micro level of individual subjectivities, my project responds to Connell's call for a "specific theory to understand

how change occurs” (Connell, 2002: 71). It contributes to knowledge of how shifts in (hetero)gender identity over a life course, at everyday turning points (Denzin, 2011), for example, are introjected psychically and enacted within gender power relations in family practices, implying that transformation, though possible, is often slow and discontinuous.

Connell (2002) identifies production and the gendered division of labour as another key strand in her model of gender and power, arguing that the economic system in Western societies is based on a definition of paid work as men’s work and unpaid domestic work as women’s work. Connell locates the gendered division of labour within the wider context of global economic growth systems, involving the “gendered accumulation process” that “tends to favour men, especially middle-class men” through, for example, income distribution (Connell, 2002: 60-63). Mothers’ and men-children’s identity narratives in my research are situated in the context of their current middle-class family lives, although most participants (both women and men) had moved from working-class roots via education and employment. Connell’s focus on the links between cathexis and gendered labour influences my analysis of grand/mothers’ involvement in providing childcare for their families, showing how emotional commitment is implicated in the perpetuation of gendered divisions of labour, reinforcing and (re)producing (hetero)gender identities.

Gammon (2017) connects theories of neoliberal political economics with individual identity formation affected by, but not confined to, economic imperatives. He argues that neoliberalism “fosters and is reinforced by narcissistic configurations that impede the attainment of a more stable sense of self” (Gammon, 2017: 510), resonating with Rose’s (2005) view that the unconscious reveals the failure of identity, in striving for, but never achieving, coherence. Gammon concludes that emotions “repress and confine” (Gammon, 2017: 512) neoliberal subjectivities. Alongside Connell’s argument that “[t]he neoliberal corporate economy rests on stark gender divisions of labor and gendered hierarchies of power” (Connell, 2018: 332), Gammon’s study (2017) is important to my intention of contributing to explanations of how the outside gets inside us, forming (hetero)gender identities that provide an illusion of stability and continuity. The significance of these perspectives for my project lies in their implication that interacting macro politics/structures, meso level family practices and micro level emotional experiences (re)produce (hetero)gender identities psycho-socially. However, it also implies that change at any one level may affect the others, although resistance and agency may be constrained by the conditions that motivate it in the first place, such as external or internal conflict.

Relational agency: potential for change

Although my analysis includes the unconscious as a formative dimension of (hetero)gender identities, it is not intended to signal, reductively, that individuals do not, or cannot, mobilise their own agency to disrupt or contest social and cultural expectations of them to create change (for themselves or collectively). As Hockey et al. (2007) point out,

[w]hen it comes to those aspects of subjectivity which seem to be associated with agency, such as motivation or resistance, we are engaging with the distinction which Jackson (1999) makes between practice and experience, between what we do and how we understand it. In other words, they are likely to concern aspects of a dynamic everyday environment which the individual - or someone associated with them – has given weight to and indeed reflected upon (Hockey et al., 2007: 92).

The structure/agency debate has been a central issue in sociology research over the years, attempting to make connections between the macro and the micro (Martin and Denis, 2010). Traditionally, in sociological studies, the concept of agency has been thought of as an individual phenomenon, reflecting views of individuals in Western culture as “autonomous, independent, capable, and constantly willing and able to make deliberative choices in their lives” (Burkitt, 2016: 329). Some theories of agency are predicated on reflexivity (for example, Giddens, 1979, 1984; Archer, 2003), emphasising it as a cognitive process, relegating the part played by emotions or the unconscious (Burkitt, 2016). Importantly for my thinking about the relational dimension of agency in (hetero)gender identity formation, Burkitt (2016) proposes that “the origin of agency is not conscious reflexivity, the latter being only a part of intentional action: action begins in those non-conscious areas of life, such as habituated activity, which only become subject to reflexive deliberation at certain points or under certain circumstances” (Burkitt, 2016: 329). In my interpretive analysis of the limitations and opportunities for agency, I lean on Burkitt’s argument that agency involves “people producing particular effects in the world and on each other through their relational connections and joint actions, whether or not those effects are reflexively produced (Burkitt, 2016: 323).

Evaluating solutions to the structure/agency problem suggested by Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1992), Crossley (2010) argues that they fail to address relationality adequately, since:

[a]ctors interact in purposive ways, bringing their desires, preferences, intelligence etc. to bear (agency) but they necessarily do so in a context of opportunities and constraints (structure) deriving from (1) their connection to and interdependency with others, in various

forms, and the further connection of their alters within a network, (2) the resources they have available to them and (3) the sedimented weight of the past, embodied in conventions, as it bears upon their present (Crossley, 2010: 124).

Crossley's (2010) perspective, like Burkitt's (2016), informs my thinking about the impact of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy on their capacity to resist normative practices that shape their (hetero)gendered identities, since they are interpersonally and impersonally embedded in (historical) social structures and networks of interdependencies (Burkitt, 2016), which affect their present motivations and desires, and offer or limit opportunities for agency.

Stern's work (1985, 2004), as well as others' (Mitchell, 2000; Fonagy, 2001; Lear, 2003, for example), progressed understandings of self as originating in 'attachment bonds' between individuals within social relationships, rooted in infancy. From this perspective, the complexities of the inner world of the unconscious interacts with the social environment, within which agency and motivations are created. Discussing motivation and agency in concepts of the self and intersubjectivity, Prager (2006: 283) concludes that "[f]or Stern, individuals are motivated to read the intentions and feelings of others so as to establish contact between self and other, and, through others, to help make contact with the self, "to define, maintain, or reestablish self-identity and self-cohesion" (Stern 1985, p. 107)". These various insights inform my thinking about the capacity and motivation for resisting or colluding with oppressive practices in which, for example, gender and age intersect. They have potential for explaining the motivation for grand/mothers to continue to undertake emotional labour (Clisby and Holdsworth, 2014) within the family, which contributes to the perpetuation of (hetero)gender identities formed within dominant discourses. As Layton (2020) proposes (and my research explores):

norms and practices transmit historically specific and split prescriptions for what affects, attributes, behaviors, thoughts and modes of attachment and agency are deemed "proper" to any given identity position, and all identities in a given social formation take up some relation – resistant, negotiated, conformist – to that society's dominant norms of class, race, sex and gender (Layton 2020: xxxii).

Having developed a theory where power is seen as central to gender, race and class identity categories, Connell (2002, 2005) introduced two related concepts: individual agency and discursive practices, making links between the individual level of embodied emotional experiences and the cultural, social, and institutional level. Ferree (2018) argues that it is at the "middle (meso) level of

practice [...] where structures – the macro-level material contradictions and transformations – become visible as situated agents grapple with the situations they face, as they perceive them” (Ferree, 2018: 15). My research takes account of Ferree’s argument (2018) that individual and collective agency (at the meso level of the family) gives “form to power” (Ferree, 2018: 15), producing interpersonal conflicts inhibited “by their separate and joint histories and enabled and informed by their ethical and political judgments” (Ferree: 2018: 15). Drawing on Butler’s (2000) concept of performativity as a theory of agency “that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility”, my project considers the constraints and opportunities for agency in mothers’ and men-children’s stories, mindful of Abeyasekera’s (2016: 3) observation that “[i]n making decisions, people continuously weigh the consequences of enacting what they feel as their inner desires against their sense of accountability to family and kin”.

Relational power within the family

McCarthy (2012: 69) warns that sociological studies of ‘the family’ (Wilson and Pahl, 1988; Morgan 1996, 2011; Jamieson, 1998; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Smart, 2007; Mason, 2008; Edwards et al., 2012, for example) that emphasise personal life, kinship, household, or intimacy obscure “the inequalities and power dynamics around the continuing ‘conventions’ of family, through a sociological over-emphasis on the ascendancy of reflexivity in personal lives” (Gilding, 2010, cited in McCarthy, 2012: 69). My storytelling approach aims to connect reflexivity with gender power relations to understand more about the effect of psycho-social processes on (hetero)gender identity formation. Bearing in mind dominant (hetero)gendered discourses that conflate heterosexuality and the family, reflected in participating mothers’ and men-children’s narratives, my research explores the family as a key site of gendered relational power in which identities are reflexively mediated, “embedded in relational structures that exist beyond individual knowledge” (Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008: 7).

Green argues (2016: 5) that “whilst individual biography is a process of change and becoming, in diverse ways we remain children, held throughout life, willingly or reluctantly, in the web of parent-child relations”. She notes that, although studies of mothers’ experiences with young children are plentiful, “our knowledge regarding the later phase of a mother’s life course is extremely limited” (Green, 2016: 1). My research addresses this gap, but also explores the impact on men-children too when their relational intimacy with their mothers alters. Developing the concept of “the embodied life course”, Marshall and Katz (2012: 222) propose that materially embodied “physical changes in age and time are culturally mediated”, while Giele and Elder’s (2013: 15) generational studies reveal

the “relativity and complexity of chronological age”, partly because of the historical period of the parenting years. My project illustrates the intricacies of mothers’ and men-children’s simultaneous ageing, each of them at different ‘stages’ in the life course, which affects them differently, physically and psychologically, mediated socio-culturally by gender power relations.

Among other studies of contemporary grandparenting (such as Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981; Tinsley and Parke, 1984; Dench and Ogg, 2002; Mueller and Elder Jr., 2003), Arber and Timonen’s research (2012) notes that the focus is mostly on the new mother and the maternal grandmother when a child is born, rather than the new father. Dench and Ogg (2002) report that mothers and maternal grandmothers usually agree about the way the children are raised, whereas paternal grandmothers’ position is “routinely delicate” (Dench and Ogg, 2002: 107). Other research (for example, Eisenberg, 1988; Creasey and Koblewski, 1991; Aldous, 1995; Uhlenburg and Hammill, 1998) confirms that “gender and lineage often act to produce a hierarchy with maternal grandmothers at the top and paternal grandfathers at the bottom” (Ferguson et al., 2004: 16). Dench and Ogg (2002: 60) note that “[p]aternal grandmothers [...] may be seen as competitors with maternal grandparents and might be excluded from contact with their grandchildren”. My investigation builds on these findings, exploring the impact of maternal drift on mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy and their identities, particularly regarding relational power within the wider family network.

Ambivalence is a feature of social relations, “created by the interface between social structure and individual agency” (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 559), reproduced and (re)negotiated throughout life interpersonally as individuals change. Connidis (2014) connects macro level social and cultural norms expressed through politics, the economy and globalisation and micro level interpersonal relationships with ‘the family’ as a social institution at the meso level (Connidis, 2014). Influencing my analysis of mothers’ and men-children’s narratives situated within a broader context, Connidis warns that “[w]hen we focus our research on the internal dynamics of family life without making explicit connections to larger social, economic and political processes, we feed a focus on individual responsibility as the sole solution to challenges that are socially created” (Connidis, 2014: 292).

Building on concepts of people as social infrastructure, Clisby and Holdsworth (2014) link gender inequalities and normative gendering processes to the “consequences [...] for women through the lifecourse”, including being “generally responsible for the reproduction and care of the current and next generation of the labour force” (Clisby and Holdsworth, 2014: 29). They argue that “broad and

abstract social orderings such as the state, citizenship, criminality, ethnicity and class play out concretely at the level of everyday practices, revealing how such relationships of power and hierarchy translate into palpable forms of physical and emotional harm” (Rodgers and O’Neill, 2012, cited in Clisby and Holdsworth, 2014: 10). Their research (among others’, such as Connell, 1987, 2002, 2018; Butler, 2000; Demetriou, 2001; Layton, 2010, 2020) focusses on the underlying social factors that perpetuate gender inequalities and informs my analysis of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy positioned within broader institutional power hierarchies, which function to regulate and control identity formation.

Various studies (Fromm, 1962; Altman, 2000; Hopper, 2002; Straker, 2006, for instance) investigate the individual and intergenerational psycho-social impact of social trauma, “enacted between different social groups within a society” (Layton, 2014: 1263). Feminist theories (Dobash and Dobash, 1980; Yllö and Bograd, 1988, for example) argue that harmful interpersonal control practices within families are maintained and perpetuated through gendered power hierarchies at the macro level (Crossman et al., 2016; Johnson, 2020). Shaw’s (2014) studies of relationality demonstrate that unconscious narcissistic processes subjugate recipients, resulting in everyday social trauma, through shaming-inducing coercive power practices and behaviours. These theoretical perspectives form a foundation for my analysis of the formative effect of subtle mutually oppressive practices apparent in mothers’ and men-children’s narratives of everyday relational intimacy. My research illustrates power and control within families, complicated by mothers’ and men-children’s emotional commitments, and the potential for trans- and intergenerational (re)production of social, and individual, trauma derived particularly from gender and age/generation power hierarchies.

Summary: kaleidoscopic perspectives

My theorising conceptualises identity as formed through the interaction of unconscious processes and contingent social structures, consciously interpreted by the individual as natural and performatively created through, for example, self-reflection and repeated storytelling. Narratives of (hetero)gender identity formation, contextualised within mothers’ and men-children’s complicated relational intimacy, are analysed and interpreted in my research from multiple, multi-dimensional vantage points. This chapter reviewed an array of scholarly studies that inform the project’s tripartite analytic framework: narrative performativity; normative unconscious processes; and intersectional power. Each of these analytic concepts is derived from overlapping theoretical perspectives, which inform my interpretative analysis of mothers’ and men-children’s narratives.

My use of 'narrative performativity' as an analytic concept takes account of theories that suggest that (hetero)identities are formed discontinuously and performatively throughout life, shaped by dominant norms of masculinity and femininity, and (re)produced through social, cultural, and intra- and interpersonal narratives (Plummer, 1995; Ricoeur, 1995; Lawler, 2008, 2014, for example). Connell's (2002, 2005, 2015) framework of gender relations, which bridges the gaps between social structures and emotion, and Layton's (2014, 2020) studies of normative unconscious processes are key in my understanding of mothers' and men-children's narratives. My approach applies theoretical perspectives (Rose, 2005; Clarke, 2006; Bollas, 2018, for instance) to explore the interaction between the psyche and the social: a process that involves unconscious communication, mediated by emotionally embodied discourses (Holland and Leander, 2004; Seidler, 2007; Ahmed, 2014), enacted within mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy. The concept of 'intersectional power' draws on theories of gender relations and agency (such as Butler, 2000; Crossley, 2010; Connidis, 2014) to analyse power dynamics between mothers and men-children. My project focusses on the intersections between gender and age/generation in mothers' and men-children's relationships, mindful, however, that they are further affected by intersections of class, sexuality, and ethnicity at the micro level, situated within broader meso and macro levels of (hetero)gendered power hierarchies (Ferree, 2015; Gammon, 2017).

Rooted in my experience of mothering sons and grandmothering their sons, my interpretive analysis is influenced by feminist perspectives, which start from the politics of the personal (such as Rich, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Barrett, 1992; Richardson, 1996), as well as psychoanalytic and sociological theories (Klein, 1946; Craib, 1995; Kristeva, 1980, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Hockey et al., 2007, for instance). Aimed at producing new ways of knowing, my approach is informed by post-structural feminist studies (such as Butler and Scott, 1992; Weedon, 1997; Butler, 2000;) that recognise a multiplicity of experience and meaning, and challenge concepts of objectivity, essentialism, and reason that is "partial [...] and limited" (Weedon, 1997: 173). My feminist perspective regarding mothers' and men-children's narratives draws on Butler's post-structural argument that gender is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its result" (Butler, 2000: 25). From this viewpoint, mothers and men-children are positioned, entangled, and invested in dominant discourses of relational power that constitute meaning, which obscures their mundane complicity in the (re)production of (hetero)gender identities. Combining multiple theoretical insights, my study of the tugs, ties, and tensions in mothers' and men-children's mundane relational intimacy explores formative psycho-social processes that perpetuate normative expression of (hetero)gender

identities, implying the potential for transformation at positive break points in the feedback loop at the individual or social level.

CHAPTER 4. THE RESEARCH KALEIDOSCOPE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction: the origin, focus and design decisions

This chapter discusses the research design shaped by the project's aims and conceptual framework (introduced in Chapter 2). I describe my use of intersecting qualitative methodologies (autoethnographic, feminist, narrative, and psycho-social), along with the methods used in the research (summarised as performative storytelling of aspects of my own and other grand/mothers' and men-children's lived experiences). I explore the process and ethical implications of generating and (re)presenting the data that informed my interpretive analysis and findings. Throughout the discussion, I reflect on the rationale and effect of my approaches, informed by previous studies, to consider the benefits and limitations afforded by my design decisions.

The broad aim of the study was to explore mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy to understand more about (hetero)gender identity formation. Several questions, however, arose from this overall aim: how social/cultural and personal narratives shape identities in the context of mother-adult son relationships; whether identities are co-created relationally; how identity is expressed and enacted within the family; whether normative psycho-social processes play a part in reproducing social and personal identities across generations; and whether mothers' and men-children's (hetero)gendered relational intimacy contributes to the perpetuation of dominant 'masculine' and 'feminine' identities. Three key aims were identified: to explore the formation of (hetero)gender identity in contemporary everyday man-making, mother-making, and grandmother-making narratives; to investigate how (hetero)gendered mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy contributes to the perpetuation of dominant identities; and to consider the part psycho-social processes play in (re)producing dominant (hetero)gendered identities.

The focus of my research sprang from my own life mostly in the North of England, as a heterosexual, (hetero)gendered mother of men-children, wondering over the years whether their identities have been affected, directly or indirectly, as mine has been, by the effect of social, cultural, and political changes, such as the various 'waves' of feminism happening in parallel with my sons' childhood and transition to adulthood. Raised in the 1970s and 1980s, their life trajectory was very different from my own, shaping our gender and sexual identities and decisions and choices. Rather than investigating specific historical shifts affecting men and women, however, my project developed as a contemporary exploration of the processes involved in (hetero)gender identity formation, focussing

on the relational intimacy between older women and their middle-aged sons living in the U.K. The methodology, methods, and material are situated within this research context.

An underpinning reference point throughout the research is my own life story, using memories of transitions in my life and my sons' lives, for example, that spoke of discontinuous changes in my relational intimacy with my sons (and grandsons), and events in their lives, situated in a wider network of relationships, which affected their identities and mine. Such turning points created change that sometimes I experienced consciously as it happened and sometimes through reflection in hindsight, as I became aware of previously unconscious aspects of the dynamic. Thinking and writing from my autobiographical experience as a (grand)mother of (grand)sons, my partial position inevitably informed my research. I wanted to write relationally: "to embed fondness, love, sensuality and desire in the words on the page" (Gabb, 2011: 142).

My practice as a qualified (psychodynamically oriented) psychotherapist over the past 16 years, listening to stories of everyday relational experiences, and *offering* (possible) interpretations, reflecting what I heard being communicated, developed my understanding of psycho-social interactions that produce a sense of self (identity) 'in the moment' of telling. My professional skills and awareness combined with my personal lived experience led to me to evaluate both narrative and psycho-social methodologies as congruent with the aims of my research. Mindful of the heterogeneity (and specificity) of women's and men's mundane embodied experiences, the project warranted an interdisciplinary approach in its design and execution, and to include men-children's and other mothers' first-hand accounts as well as my own, to explore how they intersect with academic theories and social, cultural, literary, and psychoanalytic discourses.

The study was conceived as multi-layered and multi-dimensional in its depth rather than breadth, fundamentally concerned with the formation of identities through interpersonal relationships set within individual life stories in a particular social, historical, and geographical context. The overall research methodology was located within an interpretive and subjective qualitative framework to reflect the complex, personal, and relational context of the project. The underpinning methodology uses an autoethnographic approach, informed by, and combined with, other methodological frameworks: feminist; interpretive; narrative; and psycho-social. The innovative research design deliberately drew upon eclectic perspectives, manifest in the methodological decisions taken, the theoretical arguments used, and the views expressed implicitly via the selected methods, reflecting

the “messiness” of data generated from “relational and everyday lives [... representing] life as it is lived” (Gabb, 2010: 476).

While each distinct methodology employed could produce its own ‘respected story’, presenting different ways of looking at a ‘problem’, combining them in this study supported the aim of producing potentially new knowledge, or ways of knowing, about the variety of factors (psychological, sociological, and cultural) that contribute to the making of identities that flex over a life course, viewed in my project within the praxis of (hetero)gendered family relationships. This integrated methodological approach was a design solution to the multifaceted research problem it sought to address, and arguably best suited to generate, (re)present, and explore data that can illustrate the ways in which different elements blend together to form an apparently coherent identity, ‘taken for granted’ in everyday life.

METHODOLOGIES: KALEIDOSCOPIC ‘KNOWINGS’

Conceptually the kaleidoscope is a metaphorical device that guided my research, intended to describe the methodological approach, the combination of research methods and the representation of data. It also indicates the ontology and epistemology that informed the study’s methodological foundations and choice of research methods. The project is rooted in an understanding of the social world in which meanings are co-created relationally and constituted socially and collectively: individuals interacting with other individuals in groups, such as ‘the family’ or institutions, such as the ‘U.K. Parliament’ or ‘the university’. From a psycho-social perspective, those meanings are partly derived from, and constituted out of, the part that unconscious forces (the ‘internal world’) play in constructing subjective ‘reality’, giving meaning to everyday life, in interaction with others in the social world. When an individual (or collective ‘body’) turns the kaleidoscope, what is perceived is a coherent pattern that is available for interpretation, arising from individually collated meanings of the world generated, internalised and inhabited from consciously and unconsciously experienced interdependent social relationships.

When I look through the metaphorical kaleidoscope now, I may ‘see’ a design in the shards of coloured glass and establish a meaning, through interpretation (putting my ‘self’ into the pattern and telling myself a story). When I turn it again, in a day or a month’s time, say, or a year’s, the arrangement will have changed and my interpretation may also change in light of the interacting psychic, social and cultural context and the insights and experiences I’ve had in the interim. The design of the shards at each turn of the kaleidoscope is never the same because the pattern (and its

meaning) is activated by the socially situated individual, and the interpretation of the perspective is constructed by their agency on a conscious social level. The cognitive processes involved and the unconscious influences, including affect and emotion, shape that individual's perception and motivation, and identity. Viewed in this way, an individual is both constructed and constructing: "a power-using subject which is also subject to power" (Frosh, 2003: 1546), reflecting psycho-social processes of identity formation that involve "*identification* within the subject's life history" (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 10; original emphasis).

Bearing in mind the study's aims, the methodological model needed to be congruent with the project's core ontological assumptions, mirroring my personal voyage towards new knowledge, influenced by my own internal motivations as well as external circumstances. It involved an approach which was incomplete, reflective, and reflexive, consistent with Haraway's claim that "[t]he knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original [...] always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, *to see together without claiming to be another*" (Haraway, 1988: 586; my emphasis). The research focus, methodological approaches, multi-method research practices and interpretive analyses inevitably reflect, and were motivated and founded upon, my own 'partial' knowledge of myself in the social world, what I brought with me (from life experience) to the study, what had already developed since conceiving the project and what altered over its course, through interaction with other people, and the materials used during its lifetime.

Situating myself within the scattered pieces of glass (sometimes at the periphery, not always the focal point, not always the primary data source, but always in relational communication with others) I was an active listener to mothers' and men-children's narratives and observer of their (and my own) performative performances, (re)creating identities relationally. Ultimately, as the overall author of the thesis, a story of stories, I was responsible for communicating one patterned perspective from many, affected by what I consciously 'know', from knowledge co-constructed with participants, but also limited by what I'm unable to access in my unconscious through lack of self-awareness. Aiming to offer further understandings of how identities are (re)formed dynamically with others in the social world, the project was rooted in the politics of mundane embodied relationships, with the aspiration of undertaking "research [that] would make things better for real people" (Robinson and Richardson, 2015: 92).

Autoethnography

As my reflections on being a (grand)mother of (grand)sons were the genesis of my research enquiry, using autoethnography seemed a coherent methodological strategy for undertaking a critique of man-making and grand/mother-making narratives. My approach reflects Lapadat's (2017) argument that:

[a]utoethnographers use a critical interpretive method drawing on the personal/biographical, political, and historical to perform and share painful experiences to make 'visible the oppressive structures of a culture' (Denzin, 2014, p. 139) and to point a way toward more socially just possibilities (Lapadat, 2017: 596).

The relationship between (my)self and 'other' was a continuous thread throughout the research process as well as being the knot to be unpicked at the centre of it. I started with me, my subjective experience, and perspectives: my view through the kaleidoscope at the point I first caught a glimpse, when a young woman, of the gendered relationships within my intimate social world that affected my identity. In my deliberate, conscious decision to take a closer, considered, and formalised look through the kaleidoscope of qualitative research to search for meaning in the patterns, I was always present and partial in relation to the data and the process. My experience, my subjectivity, had an impact on what I understood, what meanings I made, so being explicit about my part in the process involved ethical as well as scholarly, epistemological, and pragmatic considerations. Letherby's comments (2015) reflect my ethical position in the study:

Whether the stories we use are our own, or those of our informants, or those we cull from tables of statistically organized data, we remain story-tellers, narrators, making sense of the world as best we can [...]. We owe something [...] to our readers and the larger community to which we offer our work. Among the many things we owe them, is an honesty about ourselves: who we are as characters in our own stories and as actors in our own research (Letherby, 2015: 89).

Writing about the autobiographical form, and its use in feminist approaches, Stanley notes how it has been used to experiment with "ideas about the relationship between the autobiographical self and others" (Stanley, 1992: 13), which suggested its potential in my research into the impact of intra- and interpersonal relationships (self with self and self with others) on the formation of identities. My approach was inspired by "Landscape for a Good Woman" (Steedman, 1986) and "Taking It Like A Woman" (Oakley, 1984) - autobiographical studies that enable "exploration of the

sometimes subtle and sometimes gross changes in perspective over time, including those that take place between the generations as well as within the life of a single autobiographer” (Stanley, 1992: 14). Combining evocative and analytic autoethnography: a position that disrupts “accepted views [in scholarship] about silent authorship, where the researcher’s voice is not included in the presentation of findings” (Holt, 2003: 2), my autoethnographic approach challenges conventional auto/biographies by writing both the self and ‘beyond the self’ into my research.

Seeking to avoid the potential pitfalls of autoethnographies critiqued as being “self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized” (Wall, 2016: 2), my use of autoethnography has a distinct purpose other than telling my story. It connects my personal experience to wider social, cultural, and political issues, supported by analysis and theories, and considers and mitigates the ethical issues that arise. Oriented towards knowing about (hetero)gender identity formation more broadly, my research homes in on the specific social and cultural context of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy to illuminate the complexities of identity formation and in the hope of positive change in hierarchical gender power relations, intersected by age, as well as by class and race, for example.

Positioning myself as a central reference point in the research through my autoethnographic approach, I counterbalanced my own embodied experiences, however, with those of other grand/mothers’ and men-children’s narratives of relational intimacy. Weaving my stories around theirs, as well as around theories, the aim, and value, of this research strategy is to show how identity formation is socially constituted through psycho-social processes taking place through our connection with others and has “potential for building sociological knowledge by tapping into unique personal experiences to illuminate those small spaces where understanding has not yet reached” (Wall, 2016: 7).

Narrative enquiry

Using narrative as part of my methodological framework, and method, to recount, and reflect on, aspects of my own life story as well as others’ life stories offered the possibility of investigating, describing, and analysing the crux of the research problem: the relational processes involved in identity formation. My research explores narratives as process: psycho-social ways of making meaning for ourselves and each other and ways we understand ourselves and others, arguing that meaning-making is a relational, partial, fluid, continuous, subjective process. Stanley’s perspective (1992) resonated throughout my research endeavour:

[...] a single hand writes, but the self who inscribes, who is, is herself emeshed [sic] with other lives which gives her the meaning it has. And it is not just 'the author' who takes on an ontologically shaky character in these autobiographies, for so too do 'selves' in general. That is, these autobiographical selves are both whole or struggling to become so and deeply and irresolvably fractured (Stanley, 1992: 14).

The effect of storytelling as an ongoing 'becoming' and meaning-making (psycho-social) process for me and those participating (and potentially for others associated with them/me, through its ripple effect) has significant ethical implications, which shaped my engagement with the data and decisions regarding the (re)presentation of narratives (discussed further below).

As Stanley (1992: 93) argues, "social life consists of [...] the construction, presentation and negotiation of accounts or versions – everyday verbal 'texts', rather than behavioural events themselves". Storytelling, as everyday accounts of our psycho-socially shaped lives, is arguably central to our concept of social life and enactment of identity. Through storytelling, we create theories about ourselves, others, and our lives every day, and what we 'know' about our identities is intrinsically bound up with the social and cultural setting. My experience of generating, (re)producing, and interpreting mundane biographical narratives reflected Denzin's perspective "that writing a life involves creating the life as it is being written, concluding that the meanings of "the pieces" contained within these life stories "change as new patterns are found" (Denzin, 2011: 9). My narrative approach is informed by Letherby's inherently ethical assertion that "I do not believe that I am in a position to generate the 'true story' of any experience I research, but 'my story' can stand in opposition to, and as a criticism of, 'other stories' (both feminist and non-feminist, academic and lay)" (Letherby, 2015: 88).

My research problematises the (dis)continuous formation of fluid identities, posed as created primarily through dynamic interpersonal relationships, enacted within historical/cultural contexts. From this perspective, identities are reinforced or challenged via stories we tell ourselves and each other, communicating 'this is what I think and why; this is I/me, that is you/other', perceiving ourselves as self-created and as embodied 'autonomous' individuals. Use of the personal pronoun 'I' became important at a certain point in the research process for me, in (re)creating the data as stories, not only for its significance in confirming my own and other storytellers' existence relationally, but also, as a solution to ethical issues, as more than simply a signifier in the text.

Denzin's (2011) comments reflect my ethical position regarding personal responsibility and accountability in (re)creating the research stories:

[...] while any speaker or writer can use this empty sign, when it is used by the writer of a biographical or autobiographical text, its use signifies *this* person making *this* utterance, *this* claim, or *this* statement. Behind the person stands a named person – a person with a biography. When, as a writer and a speaker, this person appropriates these words and this pronoun (*I, you, he, she, me*), he or she brings the full weight of his or her personal biography to bear upon the utterance or statement in question [...]. The personal pronoun thus signifies this person making this utterance. It becomes a historical claim (Denzin, 2011: 8-9; original emphasis).

As well as the generation of empirical data, my initial research design included interpretive analysis of multiple forms of identity narratives, sourced from poetry, novels, visual art, or popular media, for example, to illustrate a variety of perspectives about the making of men, mothers, and grandmothers. Like Denzin's (2011) concept of an "epiphany" or "turning point" in life story writing, my narrative methodological approach discovered turning points within the research process, within the stories told, and in the (re)creation of stories from life as certain 'motifs' surfaced, resulting in certain emphases in my interpretive analysis, which required flexibility in my original research design. The constraints and challenges I encountered, and changes to my initial design, are discussed later in this chapter.

A feminist methodological gaze

The overarching aim of my research, its material, contents, and my core autoethnographic approach, which claims a partial privilege of 'situated knowledge', among a "multiplicity of [...] local knowledges" (Haraway: 1988: 579,) called out for a 'feminist gaze'. Inasmuch as my starting point in framing this study was located within a feminist politics of gender (and gendered) relations, Haraway's argument (1988) resonates:

Gender is a field of structured and structuring difference, in which the tones of extreme localization, of the intimately personal and individualized body, vibrate in the same field with global high-tension emissions. Feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning (Haraway, 1988: 586).

Haraway's statement helpfully challenges the implied homogeneity and oppositional gender binaries in my project's overall aim. Rather than illustrating determinist or reductive meanings of (hetero)gender identities, mothers' and men-children's narratives spoke of contingent, nuanced, subtle, fluid meanings, hard to pin down, in their ambiguities and uncertainties. Mothers' and men-children's everyday narratives, expressed within normative social structures and cultural demands (particularly in terms of 'conformity' to local social mores of the 'family'), simultaneously offered contradictory, stumbling explanations and sometimes uncomfortable accounts of the mundane formation of identities.

Mothers' and men-children's "local knowledges" (Haraway, 1988: 579) of (hetero)gender identity formation complicate stereotypical assumptions of gender. The part (hetero)gendered mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy plays in (re)producing dominant gender identities is usually invisible and unheard in everyday life, constrained perhaps by the impact of (hetero)gendered "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1981). Mothers' and men-children's narratives were highly individualised within the parameters of this project, consistent with Haraway's (1988: 589) argument that feminism "loves [...] sciences and politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood [...] which] is always interpretive, critical, and partial".

My combined feminist and narrative approach aimed to investigate "gender and power, [...] normative frameworks, and [...] notions of transformation and accountability" (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 141) within mothers' and men-children's mundane relational intimacy. Situated in interpersonal gendered practices, its aim of producing "knowledge that will be useful for effective transformation of gendered injustice and subordination" (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 141) makes it distinguishable as a feminist project. Reflexivity, reflection, and an intent to offer opportunities for transformation were at the heart of my research endeavour, specifically "the feminist project of changing the world because it is the focal point for bringing together theory, practical research methods, and the production of new knowledge" (Letherby, 2015: 90).

Psycho-social approaches

Using a psycho-social approach combined with narrative enquiry, my research explores the dynamic relationship between the external social environment and the affects, thoughts, and behaviours of the situated individual that has an impact on (hetero)gender identity formation. Thomas (2007) argues that "[n]arratives derived from interviewing [...] remain important sources of knowledge-building about how social differences get taken up through identification and spatialized identity

practices, yet the analysis of these remain primarily linguistic” (Thomas, 2007: 539). Thomas (2007) argues that psychoanalytic concepts are useful in studies of subjectivity and identity to explore unconscious as well as conscious identification. Moreover, to omit the part the unconscious plays in constituting identities, limits understanding of what constrains or enables us to have agency, imagine other ways of being, and create individual and collective transformations. In thinking both sociologically and psychoanalytically, it is possible to become more aware of, and articulate, the psycho-social processes that create structural and (inter)personal barriers to positive change. From this perspective, psycho-social processes of identity formation offer choices and opportunities, enabling agency, which can be easily deflected, however, when identities and an integrated sense of self are threatened by external social or intra-psychic forces, or a combination of both.

Describing psycho-social studies as bridging the gap between psychoanalytic and sociological research, Clarke (2006: 1154; original emphasis) argues that “[n]either sociology nor psychoanalysis provides a better explanation of the world than the other, but together they provide a deeper *understanding* of the social world”. Clarke (2006) suggests that a synthesised psycho-social approach to qualitative methodology and methods offers “a truly interdisciplinary perspective” (Clarke, 2006: 1160), which “gives it its explanatory power” (Clarke, 2006: 1160). Understanding the mediating relationship between the social and the psyche was central in interpreting the meaning of the ‘music behind the words’ in participants’ narratives, to consider the psychic, sociological, and cultural aspects of identity formation.

Clarke and Hoggett (2009: 2) posit that a psycho-social approach points towards “a distinct position, that of researching beneath the surface and beyond the purely discursive”. Making it particularly appropriate for my research endeavour, my psycho-social approach resonates with Clarke and Hoggett’s (2009) argument that:

unconscious communications, dynamics, and defences [...] exist in the research environment [... where] we are all participants in the process [... and involves] sustained self-reflection on our methods and practice, on our emotional involvement in the research, and on the affective relationship between ourselves and the researched (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 2).

The production and interpretive analysis of narratives in my research is informed by Clarke’s (2006) view of psycho-social methodology as “empirical qualitative research where the emotional life of researcher and respondent, interviewer and interviewed, are explored and analysed [through] sustained and critical self-reflection” (Clarke, 2006: 1167). Reflection and reflexivity were important

dimensions of mothers' and men-children's storytelling, my autoethnographic approach, and my interpretive analysis of the data. My approach chimes with Alexandrov's (2009) suggestion that reflexive psycho-social research:

acknowledges the emotional, as well as social and cultural, determinants of human activity, including the activity of interpreting the social world. [...] It attempts to interpret the interpretive activity of both the actors in the studied field and the researcher in the context of their interaction (Alexandrov, 2009: 46).

My interpretative analysis of my own stories and mothers' and men-children's narratives draws on psychoanalytic theories, upon which my knowledge and practice as a psychodynamic psychotherapist are based, to explore the psycho-social processes involved in identity formation. Alexandrov's argument (2009: 46) that "to make good interpretations, the researcher needs a well-developed theoretical frame of reference, encompassing the social, cultural and psychological dimensions of human condition" influenced my multi-dimensional research approach. He proposes that in attempting to shed light on human reality there are at least four theoretical domains to be considered: interpretive understandings of language and meaning; social theories; relative cultural meanings; and theories of the unconscious (Alexandrov, 2009).

Layton's work (2004, 2020) on normative unconscious processes, in which she develops psychoanalytic social theory to "[u]ncover the mediating links between social norms, family dynamics, and psychic life" (Layton 2004: 48) significantly influenced my research. Underpinning my interpretive analysis, Layton (2020) views subjectivity as psycho-social because it is "shaped, though not determined, by the social structures and histories in which it is embedded" (Layton, 2020: xxiii). Layton argues, however, that unconscious processes are "never fully colonize[d]" by cultural pressures (Layton, 2020: xxiv), allowing for agency and resistance that can counter normative processes. Combined with Clarke's (2006) view of the strengths of a psycho-social methodology, Layton's (2004, 2020) perspective forms the theoretical foundation of my psycho-social interpretative analysis of (hetero)gender identity formation, mindful of Layton's advice to avoid "either collapsing the psychic into the social or the social into the psychic" (Layton, 2020: xxiv) and her suggestion, drawing on Rose (1986), that "the task is to "hover uncomfortably in between"" (Layton, 2020: xxiv).

Focussing on mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, my psycho-social approach recognises "the situated, experiential and emotional context of participants' stories and the ways that past

experiences affect understandings and representations of self” (Gabb, 2008: 52). My aim is to understand more about *how* the ‘outside’ gets ‘inside’ us: how interacting conscious and unconscious processes become embodied and enacted within a broad, as well as individual, social and cultural context. Although this interpretive approach has been identified as problematic sociologically and epistemologically (Gabb, 2008, 2010), my interpretations of others’ stories do not claim to be other than provisional, tentative and partial knowledge. My psycho-social “interpretationist perspective” (Gabb, 2010: 463) of my own and participants’ narratives resulted in “multiple accounts [which] produce equally ‘valid realities’, framed through participants’ individual (social, biographical, generational, etc.) standpoints” (Gabb, 2010: 463). This interpretationist approach reflects, and theorises, the mundane practice of interpreting and making sense of others’ stories within everyday conversations, illustrated in the data.

Although integrating different methodological perspectives appears to risk conflicting or contradictory positions in terms of their individual distinct features and ontological and epistemological origins, they also have some overall common aspects: communication and interpretation; their political position regarding the researcher and researched; and a central interest in lived experience. Combined, they enhance one another and enhanced my project, producing nuanced insights into the many complex processes involved in identity formation. Moreover, the integration of different theoretical perspectives created space for interrogating the relationship between the psychic and the social, and resulted in interpretative analyses, which, in their texture and localised context, offer less predictable conclusions than contemporary lay assumptions of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy might suggest.

METHODS

Theoretical rationale

Drawing on grounded theory methods (Oktay, 2012), my approach builds upwards from data generated to compare, analyse, and interpret mothers’ and men-children’s experience of relational intimacy within the family. Because of the project’s premise that meanings (of identity) are interpersonally and relationally shaped, through shared narratives within specific social environments, the production of stories in ‘real-world’ settings is a key method, congruent with grounded theory methods of conducting research. My theorising emerges from the data (the narratives) created in collaboration with the participants, “dependent on time, place, and circumstance” (Oktay, 2012: 21). Epistemologically consistent with symbolic interactionist theory

(one of the founding models for grounded theory methods), my research emphasises identity formation as dynamic rather than static, and constantly changing as we make meaning through social interaction.

I use storytelling as a mundane performance of identity both as a theoretical concept to underpin the research methods and as a strategy for analysing and presenting the data. McDougall (1985) uses the metaphor of the theatre to describe the psychic reality of people in everyday life: “Whether we will it or not, our inner characters are constantly seeking a stage on which to play out their tragedies and comedies” (McDougall, 1985: 4). From a different perspective, Butler (2000: 136) argues that “acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence and identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means”. The stories generated in my research reveal the performativity and formative performance of (hetero)gender identities, (re)created in a discontinuous process that is culturally, socially, politically, and historically specific. I draw on both Butler’s concept of performativity and Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework regarding the ‘presentation of self’ and ‘impression management’ in social interactions, in combination with concepts of culturally and socially situated storytelling and performance.

Influential in the theoretical basis of my approach to the methods, Plummer (1995) proposed that storytelling is key to the creation of sexual identities, involving sustained social dramas based on fictional narratives, the emplotment (Ricoeur, 1991; Plummer, 1995) of which takes place throughout life as a continuous project. Studies of performativity, performance, and storytelling as a systematic organisation of experience support my research decisions, informing the concept of narrative performativity as one part of my project’s theoretical framework (discussed in Chapter 3). From this perspective, storytelling enables individuals to integrate external situations into the ongoing/repetitive process of recreating ‘self-identity’: a project that “has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens 1991: 52). Marrying interpretive narrative analysis with a (feminist) psycho-social approach, I draw on Thomas’s (2007: 543) argument that for “feminist research to be politically useful might require a loosened grip on the logical world and a consideration of the seemingly illogical, the unspeakable, the deniable, and the invisible connections between social action and psychic life”.

My original project plan involved an innovative approach to research methods, involving analysis of one to one ‘interviews’ with mothers and men-children ‘in the field’, autoethnographic evocation

and analysis of my personal experience of (grand)mothering (grand)sons, and analysing multiple data sources (for example, from popular culture, social policy, literature, and visual arts). Combining multi-dimensional and multi-layered perspectives, this (ambitious) approach was aimed at exploring the dynamic (psycho-social) interaction between macro, meso and micro levels of the social world that contributes to perpetuating dominant identities.

Recruitment and participation

From my initial target of recruiting ten women and ten men, I recruited 21 participants from my personal and professional network, asking colleagues/friends interested in my work to act as 'messengers' to pass on brief information about my research (its topic, aims, and timescale, and my contact details) to anyone meeting the criteria for the research. From that point, to ensure anonymity of participants, I shared no further information about participation with the messengers. The single criterion for participation was that potential contributors identified themselves as either a (middle-aged) man or a mother of adult sons willing to take part in the research. In the information sent to potential participants who contacted me, I deliberately didn't refer to gender identity, sexuality, or race to avoid any assumptions on my part of particular social identity categories, or to anticipate narratives or findings, and to be as inclusive as possible. Following initial expressions of interest from possible participants, I sent them more information and consent forms (exemplified in Appendix 2 and Appendix 4) to be completed prior to beginning the 'interview'. Eleven women came forward quickly, eager to tell their stories, which suggested they had something to say that they wanted to be heard. Although it took a little longer to recruit men, I had no significant difficulty, and achieved my target of ten.

Out of twelve potential women participants, one decided against participating but consented to my sharing her written reason anonymously, as it indicates the study's potential sensitivities and the complicated experience of mothering men-children:

I have been giving a lot of thought to the research [...] and my feelings about the subject. My story is not a good or happy one and I'm not sure that I want to "think" too much about the past or about my relationship with my sons [...] I think it would be too painful to look at family relationships and how things have turned out. I became aware of how difficult I found it to think about the subject and so I have decided not to take part.

I recruited nine men through the same process, though with one of them participation came through a chance meeting, when he talked to me about his relationship with his mother and his

wife, and then agreed to participate on hearing about my research. Although it took longer to recruit men, involving in some cases 'chasing' email replies, and confirming dates to meet, for example, there was less difficulty than I'd imagined. I had expected there would be difficulty in accessing men's stories of their relationship with their mothers, anticipating less awareness of the impact of it on their (changing) identities in adulthood. Unlike the women participants, most men appeared puzzled by the research enquiry, indicating perhaps their acceptance of identity as taken for granted, and their lack of perception of everyday gendered relational power, intersected, for instance, by age/generation divisions.

The 'tenth' man participating was one of my sons. Because of the autoethnographic basis of my research I hoped to have 'formal', research focussed conversations with my two adult sons to elicit their perspectives of the impact of our relational intimacy on their identities as adults. I discussed my research aims and methodologies with them, seeking their informed consent to my referring to them in my autoethnography. I provided a specific information sheet for family members (included in Appendix 3), in addition to the general one for non-family participants. This made explicit the implications for them, whether they were involved either directly (by participating in an 'interview' with me) or indirectly by referencing them in my life stories. The information sheets, both for family members and other participants, enabled me to achieve properly informed consent, addressing the legal and ethical issues, such as data protection, confidentiality and minimising the potential for hurt or distress. The information provided, for example, included online links to external information and support if needed. All participants confirmed their understanding that my interpretive analysis might differ from their own perspectives.

Discussing the information provided (prior to starting the research conversation) became the basis for the joint production of knowledge and assisted in flattening some of the inequalities inherent in the asymmetrical research relationship. I was particularly curious to discover any differences in the balance of researcher/participant power between myself and my sons, because of our relational intimacy and shared history, compared with other participants. I was aware, however, of gendered power dynamics affecting our relationships, mediated, for example, by the wider family network (importantly, those aspects that intersect generationally with age, class, social and economic status), which could result in unconscious resistance or 'acting-out' in our research conversations, or a more conscious reluctance to disclose at all.

Both my sons consented formally to my referring to them anonymously in my autoethnography, and, although one agreed to be involved directly and indirectly, the other decided against having a focussed conversation with me. As a result of this disparity and out of respect for his decision, I altered, for ethical reasons, my initial plan to write my autoethnographic narrative entirely in the first person, distinct from other participants' stories, planned to be written in the third person. As a creative strategy to address the dilemma of possible identifiability, I decided to write all narratives in the first person, selecting when and where to pseudonymise aspects of my own life, to protect my sons' identifiability, and my future relationship with them and their families. I treated my one son who agreed to a focussed conversation with me the same as other participants, pseudonymising his narrative, as I did the rest. Solutions to the ethical dilemmas presented by my research decisions are further discussed later in the chapter.

Conversations: (un)conscious communication

Gabb's (2010: 464) argument that "Psychosocial approaches are [...] proving particularly useful in the study of parenthood and family relationships" informed my approach to participants' stories that were co-constructed psycho-socially in the immediacy of the telling. Mostly meeting in 'secluded' public spaces, where confidentiality/privacy would be possible, the data-generating process took the form of 'open' conversations "with a purpose" (Gabb, 2010: 464). Drawing on my non-directive psychotherapy practice, I used "free association" (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013), so that participants shaped their narratives on their own terms, rather than having structured, or semi-structured 'interviews' with pre-determined questions. Before beginning the audio-recorded conversations (lasting between 60 and 90 minutes), I discussed with participants the information I'd provided prior to receiving their consent to participate, ensuring their understanding, and clarifying the purpose and 'ground rules' for our work together. Reminding them of the focus of the research resulted in either the participant taking an immediate lead in sharing experience or my asking an open question to initiate the conversation. To avoid skewing or contaminating the conversation, I didn't disclose my professional practice as a psychotherapist, but I emphasised the difference between our research conversations and 'therapy', my researcher role as 'active listener', and participants' role in leading the conversation from their perspective. If needed, I asked questions arising from what the participant said, prompting and probing to explore meanings, and making opportunities to pause or to stop, if there were distressing disclosures.

Two men participating had previously undertaken psychological therapy, which was evident in their ways of articulating thoughts and feelings, framing their thinking sometimes in counselling

terminology. These and other men and women commented that our conversations had been revealing to them, not realising beforehand the depth of their feelings about the topic. Most participants wept, or became tearful, at various points during the conversations, although there were also moments of laughter, particularly with the women, almost in disbelief at their experiences. I experienced the conversations as 'moving' in many cases, hearing both men's and women's perspectives, although the intensity of the lengthy interpretive data analysis process was more emotionally taxing for me, because of my embedded position as mother of men-children as well as researcher. Many participants were keen to access the outcomes from my research; women particularly wanted solutions to what they understood as complicated in their mother-son relational intimacy.

As a psychotherapist oriented towards psychodynamic theory, my psycho-social research practice is informed by psychoanalytic concepts and principles, including "attention to transference-countertransference dynamics in the research process" (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 2), "to deepen and enrich the practise of qualitative methods" (Pile, 1991; Bondi, 2013). Use of transference (an aspect of emotional contact) and countertransference (my affective response) in my research included exploring the interaction between my unconscious/unthought known (Bollas, 2018) and the social world in framing the research aims, in formal and informal conversations, in negotiating involvement as well as in generating data. From my experience of the working relationship with my academic supervisors, for example, and in sharing (or my avoidance of sharing) my research progress with friends and family, I considered the transference relationships present in those social environments. I used my understanding of the transference/countertransference dynamics present in the conversations with participants specifically to reflect on the unconscious, non-linguistic, communication between us, as a co-production of meaning, and "to make sense of at least some unconscious communications that occur in ordinary ways in and around research interviews" (Bondi, 2013: 46). Reflecting on this aspect of the data generated with participants, I analysed and interpreted what 'knowledge' it revealed, through projective identification (discussed in Chapter 3), for example, about hidden 'internal' worlds that interact with our external social worlds.

During the conversations, I drew on my therapy practice of using my 'internal supervisor' to "monitor, moment by moment, what is happening" (Casement, 2002: xviii). This had the multiple effect of producing data reflexively in relation to participants' narratives, noticing possible transference/countertransference between us, and safeguarding both participants' and my own welfare. I was careful to ensure not only the wellbeing of participants but also my own because of

the potential sensitivities in the material. From my training as a psychotherapist, however, I was able to manage my self-care successfully and ethically, ensuring I had in place my own support network if needed (such as my clinical supervisor used for my therapy practice).

I used my conscious 'self' as separate from, but attuned to, the content of participants' narratives, alert to the potential (unconscious) transference and countertransference communication between us, so that I attended to their story, without being distracted by my own. My psychotherapy training involved extensive personal therapy, so that I'm as aware as possible of my own psychic 'patterns', and origins, of affect and cognition, which informed my use of transference/countertransference in the research process. In analysing and interpreting participants' narratives I reflected on the manifest and possible latent communication in our conversation. Inevitably, the knowledge produced is provisional and contingent, but "when used alongside the explicit content of an interview, counter-transference experiences of this kind can be powerful ways in which we develop knowledge about another person's feelings" (Bondi, 2013: 52), producing rich and complex understandings (Macleod and Morison, 2015).

Autoethnography: autobiography

Having decided to use autoethnography as a central plank of my research, partly because of its appeal to me as both process and product and its fit with the research aims, I started to note aspects of my own experience as a (grand)mother of (grand)sons: fragments of my life that I might use as data. Sometimes stimulated by family photographs and my personal journals, as well as mobile phone messages and emails between my sons and me, I jotted down memories emerging 'half-forgotten', reflecting on the interpersonal dynamics between us, and the wider family network, and the meanings I perceived. I recorded (sometimes as voice notes on my phone, sometimes handwritten) memories of large and small everyday life 'events', such as the birth of my grandsons, or my sons' wedding days, family meals, visits to my home, or my visits to theirs, sometimes from the past and sometimes as they happened in the present. I explored where I 'stood' in the tangle of relational intimacies and family practices, politically, socially, and emotionally, resulting in a tapestry of research data that accumulated over time.

Because of my personal interest in (and sensibilities towards) literature and visual arts, I drew on what I recalled reading and seeing and what I newly discovered that stimulated, and informed, my thinking about my relational intimacy with my sons. I found that analysis and interpretation happened almost simultaneously as I noted mundane aspects of my life, leading me to 'colour code'

recurring 'motifs', which in time I used to compare with other participants' stories. I soon began to consider ways in which I could (re)present my experience in the research, which would respect family members who were part of my narrative, congruent with my personal ethics and as a researcher, but which would "create evocative representations of [... the] experience and to give [readers] a sense of how being there in the experience feels" (Adams et al., 2017: 3-4). I began to draft brief stories as snapshots of my life, mapping my interpretive analyses on to them. Resonating powerfully with my own experience of autoethnographic writing, Denshire (2014: 836) notes the challenge of finding "the balance between, first, telling versus showing – how much of ourselves do/should we include, and what should we leave out [... and] holding together the/a self and culture in a world that is constantly in flux".

Once embarked on the research conversations with other mothers and men, I began to consider at what point to stop intentionally gathering my own stories for the project, since data continued to be presented to me as a researcher 'immersed' in my ongoing everyday relational intimacy with my men-children. I resolved this dilemma by deciding to end collating new autoethnographic data at around the same time that I completed all the conversations with other participants, although 'thinking' about the relational intimacy with my sons continued, irrespective of the active presence or absence of my sons in my research process. As data emerged from other participants' narratives, I began to compare the motifs in my stories with theirs.

Analysis and interpretation

As soon as possible following the audio-recorded conversations with participants, I noted the transference relationship between us and reflections on the possible psychic content (identifying both spoken and unspoken affect or emotional dimensions). I recorded the material and circumstantial context that might have affected the conversation (such as the environment or time of day, and whether it took place online⁹ rather than in person). Next, manually transcribing the recordings verbatim, I marked hesitations, repetitions, pauses, omissions, slips of the tongue (such as where a mother referred to her grandson as her son, and then corrected herself). The names and identities of participants and anyone they mentioned were changed in the documents following transcription to ensure anonymity. My concurrent practice of documenting (in a side column on each page of the transcript) possible feelings and thought processes apparent in the conversation

⁹ The final three conversations were via 'secure/confidential' video conference, as required by the University, because of U.K. regulations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

produced rich data for analysis immediately. As part of my interpretative analysis, I included in the side notes possible defence/survival strategies, such as collusion, fear, or projection, which assisted in my understanding of what was possibly being communicated between us.

Following transcription, I analysed each one (manually), (re)reading them a number of times, collating the main aspects of the narratives at the end of each document. As the data built up across the transcripts and key features and recurrent themes emerged, I used a manual colour-coding system to compare the narratives. From this systematic analysis, I explored “the layers of subjectivity and meaning making in family relationships” (Gabb, 2010: 468). Over time, a picture built up of similarities and differences arising in mothers’ and men-children’s narratives. Mapping them manually onto a flipchart produced a graphic representation of the relationship between features (such as partners/spouses, unpaid labour), concerns (relational conflict, for example), and connected themes (for instance, ambivalence, loss, and gendered power). Alongside analysing the narratives, I kept a personal journal recording my reflections and emotional responses to the data and the process, which informed my interpretation.

Creative non-fiction: (re)presenting data

During the course of generating data with participants, I considered (re)presenting their narratives (and my own) in literary forms, such as prose poems that could communicate the tenor of the feelings expressed. As the process of analysing data continued, however, I began to craft stories using verbatim extracts from the transcripts as ‘creative non-fiction’. Having identified the key features in mothers’ and men-children’s narratives during the data processing phase, I drafted brief first-person stories (like glimpses in the kaleidoscope), stitching together verbatim quotes extracted from each participant’s transcript that represented facets of the main concerns that emerged from their overall narrative. These brief stories are the actual words spoken by participants, arranged with the aim of evoking the emotional and material content of their narratives. My own (mostly anonymised) stories are weaved around other participants’ stories, again in the form of creative non-fiction, which assisted in addressing ethical issues regarding, for example, the potential identifiability of family members. The start of each non-fiction story is signalled by the question ‘Mother love?’ to suggest the ambiguity and ambivalence present in participants’ accounts of the relational intimacy between mothers’ and men-children, drawing on a phrase used by several mothers, and a few men, participating, who reflected on their behaviour as resulting from “mother love”.

My creative approach to reporting the data supports my aim of conveying the authentic voice of the participant and their internal, as well as social world. It is also aimed at eliciting emotional or (un)conscious, as well as cognitive, responses in readers, making known the “unthought known” (Bollas, 2018), and to continue the process of shared meaning-making, upon which the research was predicated. The approach was beneficial too in maintaining the ethical narrative integrity of each distinct story/participant: each brief story is crafted verbatim from individual transcripts, with no amalgamation of data drawn from other narratives. Enabling me to distinguish as much as possible what was ‘mine’ and what was ‘theirs’, drafting individual brief stories as part of my interpretive analysis assisted in decoupling my assumptions of meanings. This reporting strategy drew on my non-research specific skills (that is, my psychotherapy practice of ‘case presentation’ in clinical supervision), resulting in a richer, more textured bank of knowledge. Fostering new ways of knowing, this creative approach is also congruent with theories related to the analytic framework of my research: the narrative construction of identity (Riceour, 1980, 1991, 1995, 2004a; Steedman, 1986; Plummer, 1995; Lawler, 2000, 2008, 2014; Venn, 2020, for instance), performativity (such as Butler, 2000; Langellier, 2001), and unconscious communication (Klein, 1946; Thomas, 2007; Layton, 2004, Bollas, 2018, for example) discussed in Chapter 3.

Selecting which stories to include in the thesis was one of the most challenging aspects in many ways, because of the volume and richness of the data, and because I wanted to be as inclusive as possible of all participants’ narrative perspectives. There wasn’t space regrettably to include all the many fascinating stories, but I resolved the dilemma by ensuring that all participants’ voices are represented, in commentary if not in the stories, and by selecting those stories that best respond to the research questions and illustrate the complex and sometimes contradictory findings.

The complicated material, methods, data, and methodologies chosen, congruent with the overarching aim and research questions, were challenging in execution. Corraling the layers, dimensions and ‘messiness’ of personal experiences reflected some of the confusions and contradictions of the (gendered) human condition. However, like the research endeavour itself, they offer the potential for being, seeing, and doing things differently. Knowing more about the elusiveness and fluidity of meaning-making in our lives, the chance of transformational change becomes possible and more hopeful, individually and collectively.

Ethical issues and solutions

Aiming from the start to establish a respectful working relationship with participants as a collaborative exploration and ethical means of co-producing data, I drew on the core Rogerian¹⁰ principles of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence, acknowledging differences in position, motivations, and structural inequalities (as valid in the research relationship as in 'person-centred' therapeutic counselling). This meant having a working agreement that embraced an ethical and non-hierarchical approach as a ground rule (as far as possible, bearing in mind the unconscious bias that may have been present). My strategy involved building a research alliance based on mutual empathy as a foundation for participation that in its principles starts from a "consequentialist-feminist ethics" (Gabb, 2010: 465) of care and concern for wellbeing.

As part of a process that I needed to be as 'open' as possible, I aimed to establish rapport and trust quickly from the outset with participants. For transparency, I expressed my personal involvement and investment in the project: emotionally, practically, socially, and politically, as a feminist researcher who is also a mother of men-children and grandmother. My personal values informed the research practice: aiming to support the fulfilment of individual potential, managing risk, safeguarding, and being open about (without pre-empting) possible sensitivities in the conversations, which could precipitate uncomfortable emotions and how to manage them. This included signposting to online or telephone support following our meeting, if issues surfaced that needed further airing with specialist 'listeners'. Because of potential sensitivities (for all participants) in the material, I have been very careful to ensure anonymity and all participants' names are pseudonyms. Anonymised participant profiles are included in Appendix 1.

Using other people's stories, my own stories, and my sons' stories, directly or indirectly, brought with it some ethical challenges, which required a flexible, creative, and innovative response. From an ethical standpoint of care and respect, in order to disguise which stories are my own, where they refer to family members, I sometimes introduced ambiguity, or used a pseudonym. At other times, when I judged they were unlikely to be harmful to anyone or damage relationships, I felt able to 'own' my stories overtly. I used first-person pronouns in all the creative non-fiction stories, again to blur potential identifiability. My creative solutions towards the ethics involved in generating and

¹⁰ Rogers (1992) developed a non-directive, empathic practice aimed at empowering and motivating a client as part of the psychotherapeutic process, moving away from the traditional model of the therapist as expert.

(re)presenting personal and private narratives contribute to knowledge about ethical research methodologies.

Along with the ethical tensions inherent in autoethnographic research that inevitably implicates others, the approach brought other challenges, such as possible charges of narcissistic self-indulgence, and validity. Using autoethnography presented a serious challenge particularly regarding interpretation: how to 'analyse' or interpret my own story; how much self-awareness I really have and how honest (with myself and readers) I can be. My multi-dimensional research strategies sought to address these tensions: weaving my own stories around other narratives was intended to produce a variety of kaleidoscopic viewings about the same research focus, in a process of moving backwards and forwards from 'me' to 'others', including academic studies. Importantly, though, using autoethnography provided a platform for sharing lived experiences, acknowledged by both men-children and mothers participating, in their assumption that, as a (grand)mother of (grand)sons, my knowledge/understanding provided a basis for openness between us. Analysing and interpreting my own stories alongside others' stories produced local knowledge within a social/cultural context about the formative impact of mothers and men-children's relational intimacy on their (hetero)gender identities.

My ethical position in using autoethnography and a psycho-social approach as key methodologies and methods to analyse, interpret and (re)present both my own and others' narratives, is summed up in Clarke and Hoggett's (2009) comment:

Ethically, this is about relationality: we have to recognise that we bring our own unconscious feelings around class, or ethnicity, for example, that we identify with people, indeed we have to in order to understand their affective states, meanings and experiences. However, on the other hand, we have to be careful that we do not merge part of our 'selves' with the Other (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 22).

The ethics involved in using a psycho-social approach highlights the importance of ensuring, as far as possible, that what was significant to participants is represented in good faith, mindful that "respondents have trusted us with their thoughts on some very contentious issues" (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 20). They note that such an approach is founded on a "different ontology of the self" that is relational and concerned with depth, contrasting this with a more traditional approach that concentrates on "the rational, constructed, conscious self" (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 20).

The connections between ontology, epistemology and ethics in my methodological approach are fundamental to the 'validity' of the findings. My metaphorical use of a kaleidoscope emphasises the ethics of knowledge congruent with Letherby's statement (2015: 88): "I do not believe that I am in a position to generate the 'true story' of any experience I research, but 'my story' can stand in opposition to, and as a criticism of, 'other stories' (both feminist and non-feminist, academic and lay)". Based on the concept of 'relational knowledge', which is "inherently communal: it emerges and flourishes in human environments, saturated with trust, authenticity, and mutuality" (Alexandrov, 2009: 37)', my approach involved participation in a reciprocal, interactional *process* of knowledge and meaning-making (Alexandrov, 2009). Alexandrov's argument (2009) reflects the ethical premise of my methodology and methods:

Reflective knowledge upholds the dignity of human beings as free and autonomous agents who can act effectively and responsibly on their own behalf in the context of their interdependent relationships [and that] knowledge is a process, rather than a substance, reflexive as well as reflective, since it consists of recurrent communicative and performative acts [...] reinforcing the unfolding spiral of co-evolving via understanding (Alexandrov, 2009: 37).

Constraints, challenges, and changes

Making use of my own story and locating myself as the springboard, central reference point and thread throughout and within the project, the research was restricted in the extent of my experience and 'identity' in the present, reflecting on the past. A key limitation concerns my current capacity to access diverse understandings of identities, as a white British, older, heterosexual, (hetero)gendered woman with some disabilities, privileged by dint of education and relative financial stability, brought about largely by class and ethnic status. Mothers' and men-children's participation was limited by the boundaries of my experience and opportunities at this point in my life to access 'different' stories. Actively seeking to include diverse data with the intention of exploring intersectionality, I had to confront and acknowledge my position, privileged as it is in many ways, which realistically restricts access to some social and cultural locations and psychic insights and understandings.

Nevertheless, intersecting dimensions that contribute to identity formation were apparent even within the limitations of the accessible data and formed part of my interpretative analysis. Recognition of intersectional dimensions (such as age and gender) in conversations with participants, for example, was a valuable source of data, and contributed to my interpretive analysis

of the gendered power dynamic between mothers and men-children. Moreover, the interacting psycho-social effects of 'othering' of my sense of self/identity by members of my family who embody and enact social identities different from mine also forms part of my analysis. Using a psycho-social approach brought other constraints, such as what I was aware of about myself at the start, what I became aware of about myself during the research, what participants were aware of and how much they were able to access aspects previously 'out of their awareness' and their willingness to disclose the meanings publicly. Such limitations, however, are incorporated into the interpretive analysis, including what participants seemed to resist in revealing, possibly meaningful in itself.

Since my enquiry aimed to interrogate the data in depth rather than breadth, not seeking to make any generalisable claims, I deliberately kept the number of participants relatively small. The lack of diversity, however, within the participant group must be acknowledged, since all participants, except one, identified (through their storytelling) as white British or European and all, except one, identified as (hetero)gendered and heterosexual, and none identified as disabled (although, as in my own case, some may have 'invisible' disabilities that weren't mentioned). Although I hoped to recruit participants from black, Asian, or other minority ethnic communities, it was apparent that, as I was using my professional and personal contacts, access to possible participants was very limited for me as a white, British, older woman, no longer living in an ethnically diverse community, and retired from work environments where I previously had a diverse network of friends and colleagues. I attempted to access a more diverse group by contacting community-based groups (special interest activities, for instance) but realised, by the lack of response, that my privileged position of whiteness, especially intersected by my age and gender, had perhaps created barriers. Psycho-social studies of mothers' and men-children's mundane relational intimacy that specifically consider race and ethnicity, and non-heterosexual/non-(hetero)gender identities, as intersecting dimensions of identity formation, is an important area for further research.

Since my project foregrounded the voices of older mothers and middle-aged men, it simultaneously precluded other voices, particularly middle-generation mothers/wives/partners/daughters-in-law who were referenced in most participants' narratives. Further research that brings in a 'third party' perspective to mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy (such as daughters-in-law) would uncover other stories of its impact on identity formation for themselves as well as for other family members. It is also important to acknowledge that my partial position and identity as a woman researching men-children may have limited my understanding of their ways of knowing. As an inside

outsider-researcher/mother of men-children, however, my position may have been beneficial in producing different knowledge from research undertaken, for example, by the same gender. As Sallee and Harris (2011: 426) note, “cross-gender interviews may lead to richer responses from men participating [... who may be] more introspective [...] with the female researcher, simply because they did not feel the need to live up to masculine expectations”. These aspects formed part of my interpretive analysis, particularly in considering the transference relationship and the power dynamics present in the conversations.

The personally most significant and disappointing change to my investigation involved excluding other sources of knowledge about mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy that would illuminate further its intricacies and the often-unspoken aspects that appear to be involved in the (re)production of (hetero)gendered identities. I planned to include data from literary and popular fiction and the arts: novels, poetry, drama and paintings, such as D.H. Lawrence, Phillip Larkin, Samuel Beckett, and L.S. Lowry, whose work was influenced by their relationship with their mothers (Salwak, 2018); sculptures of mothers and men-children such as “Pietà” (Michelangelo, 1499; Kollwitz, 1939); films such as “Ma Mère”, directed by Christophe Honoré, involving a mother’s sexual passion for her nearly adult son, or Léonor Serraille’s “Mother and Son (un petit frère)”, of a mother’s journey from Abidjan to live in Paris with her sons, as they grow to adulthood; and lyrics in popular music (such as in Loyle Carner’s “Not Waving, But Drowning”, in which he reflects on separation from his mother).

Initial research included interpretive analyses of some of these artful narratives to compare with the accounts of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy generated in the empirical data. Early findings suggested that the creative representation of taboos regarding mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy partly functions psychically to displace feelings and unconscious fantasies but still allow for (unconscious or conscious) recognition of affect and emotions, as a defence against unwanted, socially prohibited desires. Whilst it was agreed, in consultation, that including this approach strengthened my theorising, it was also agreed, because of the constraints of a doctoral thesis, that my empirical data should be the focus of the project, and I have therefore only referred briefly in the thesis to this dimension of (hetero)gender identity formation.

Reflections

Starting with my story as an exploratory method, my reflections, re-worked in the process of crafting stories, invoked further meanings of (grand)mothering for me, shaping my identity through the

research process. As they emerged, meanings were consciously expressed through the creative process, leading to new ways of understanding, and embodying, the identity of mother and grandmother. Over the course of my research, my social identity as mother and grandmother altered; a new grandson's been born, a new mother and father 'produced', and my sons, and other grandsons, are so much older now! All this, and my research, affected my relationship with both my sons in everyday life.

Because of the project's focus on potentially sensitive experiences that could be painful and emotional for other participants and for me, it was crucial to mitigate the risk of distress or emotional harm for mothers and men-children who participated in the project, and for myself as researcher (Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Bloor et al., 2010). For participants, this included, for example, monitoring affective and emotional aspects of our conversations, making space to pause, providing information about further support, ensuring participants were emotionally stable at the conclusion of our meeting by my ending the conversation with care, mindful of their immediate 're-entry' into daily life. For me, it meant having a support network in place and colleagues with whom I could talk about my experience of the research process, without breaking confidentiality.

Hearing other mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy stories was intriguing, fascinating, and often emotionally moving; writing my own stories was at times simultaneously stressful and strengthening. However, I found the hours of solitary transcribing, analysis, and interpretation more challenging, when, for example, I compared mothers' and men-children's experiences not only in relation to each other but also to my own. My awareness of ethical concerns throughout the research planning and development was part of my personal 'process' at every stage. In taking care of myself (and therefore indirectly participants too) my use of a reflexive journal in which I recorded my emotional responses was also a source of data. Representing the data in the form of brief stories, participants' and mine, enabled me to gain some (emotional) 'distance' from the information, which facilitated the interpretive analysis as well as being a 'protective factor' for me as an ethical researcher. Johnson and Clarke's study (2003) of the effect of researching sensitive data on the researcher resonates with my process reflections:

little attention has been directed to the ways in which researchers respond to and cope with research that is personally very demanding and challenging as well as being highly charged emotionally and ethically. Indeed, most of those who have written about their research experience focus on the impact and effects of the research on the researched or else confine themselves to questions of access or technical rigor (Johnson and Clarke, 2003: 423).

My research aims to add to existing knowledge of the “human condition in context [... using theory] to conceptually reinforce the interpretations of the researcher” (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009: 45), bearing in mind Denzin’s (2011) statement that:

The lived experience of interacting individuals are the proper subject matter of sociology. That is, sociologists must learn how to connect and join biographically meaningful experiences to society-at-hand and to the larger culture - and meaning-making institutions [...]. The meanings of these experiences are best given by the persons who experience them. A preoccupation with method, with the validity, reliability, generalizability, and theoretical relevance of the biographical method (Blumer, 1939 and 1979; Plummer, 1983; Kohli, 1981 and 1986; Helling, 1988) must be set aside in favor of a concern for meaning and interpretation (Denzin, 2011: 12).

The multiple methodologies and methods used in my research were intended to produce a rich and ‘meaning-full’ story that amplifies what we know about the part mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy plays in the formation of their identities. Each turn of the kaleidoscope produces another story according to the way the glass shards are newly arranged, interpreted by each storyteller. Knowledge is created in the action of turning, viewing, interpreting, and making meanings, shaped by social, cultural, and psychic experiences. My story of stories is ultimately my interpretation of the patterns looking into the kaleidoscope many times during the research project in the search for knowing more, knowing responsibly, and knowing it well (Gabb, 2010).

The next chapter is the first of four data chapters that build cumulatively from one to the next, illustrating various aspects of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy that contribute to the formation, and perpetuation, of (hetero)gender identities. Different patterns form in the kaleidoscope: new configurations, and new interpretations, of the shards of glass.

CHAPTER 5. DOING, UNDOING, AND RE-DOING MOTHER AND MAN-CHILD INTIMACY

Mother love stories: an introduction

Various everyday aspects of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy unfold over the next four chapters, emphasising different (sometimes subtle) nuances in their relationship and how it affects their identities. Rather than segmenting the chapters thematically, this cumulative approach to recounting mothers' and men-children's narratives mirrors the discontinuous, complicated process of identity formation, shaped by the past, experienced in the present, anticipating the future. My interpretive analysis considers how narratives of mundane experiences (personal, social, and cultural) form identities psycho-socially, and how (hetero)gendered identities are performed and performative in their embodied enactment, identifying where sites of agency or resistance can be found.

This chapter introduces the social and psychic environment within which (participating) mothers' and men-children's (hetero)gender identities are formed intra- and interpersonally, (re)created performatively in their storytelling. In this chapter I analyse and interpret participants' man-making, mother-making, and grandmother-making stories through the lens of narrative performativity primarily, while keeping in mind the other intertwined analytic dimensions of intersectional power and normative unconscious processes. The mothers' and men-children's stories are not intended to be universal or representative of all women or all men but exemplify specific contexts within which contemporary (hetero)gender identities are formed and perpetuated. Their accounts reflect Plummer's (1995: 172) argument that "we tell stories about ourselves in order to constitute our selves" and that "[s]ociety itself may be seen as a textured but seamless web of stories emerging everywhere through interaction" (Plummer, 1995: 5). The chapter explores ways in which mothers and men-children 'do', 'undo', and 're-do' their relationship, illustrating the ambiguities and ambivalence in their everyday intimacy practices. Mothers' and men-children's stories speak of "warm and supportive connections with others, but equally also of constraint, conflict, claustrophobia or isolation" (Mason, 2004: 167) that affects their agency and motivation to do their relationship differently. The chapter looks at how mothers and men-children sometimes 'undo' their relationship through practices that lead to friction and fracture, and how some 're-do' their relationship, more often becoming reconciled by adaptation, rather than through mutual reparation and reciprocal caring in which they are both attuned to their differing emotional and physical needs,

and communicate lovingly with compassion and trust, taking action to repair the emotional disruptions of everyday life.

The storytellers' perspectives (and identities) are created by the available cultural and social meanings of 'being' a grand/mother and 'being' a man, internalised, embodied, and enacted through processes affected by the capacity and opportunity for resistance or acceptance, and illustrate the restraining effect of normative discourses. Women who participated in my research described their identities primarily as mothers, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law, linking changes in their identity to the effect these social roles had on their relationships with their men-children in particular contexts, mostly 'the family'. Men participating in the project, on the other hand, appeared generally to be less cognisant than the mothers participating of the possible influence their adult intimacy with their mothers had on their sense of self, tending to describe their identities in more general, non-family terms, as 'men' rather than (adult) sons. Men's stories about their childhood or their work roles, for example, seemed key to their thinking about identity formation, suggesting that they assumed that their gender and sexual identity became 'fixed' during childhood, and any changes to their identity in adulthood concerned other social roles separate from the relationship with their mothers. Mothers' and men's stories in my research were noticeably situated in a wider network of relationships, providing the relational context for exploring the formation of identities and to consider how psycho-social processes become internalised so that they are taken for granted as innate and personal and serve to perpetuate (or resist) hegemonic gender identities.

The stories are drawn from my empirical data (including my own life), analysed and interpreted psycho-socially, offering insights based on my understanding, working as a psychodynamic psychotherapist. Participants' and my own stories are presented as creative non-fiction (explained in Chapter 4), with the aim of conveying the narrative voice and emotional content behind the words. These stories are the basis for my psychoanalytically informed interpretations of "unconscious processes, latent mental contents and internal conflicts" (Roseneil, 2009: 415). Although the stories are unique entities in themselves, they reveal overlapping, intersecting aspects of relational intimacy that contribute to (hetero)gender identity formation. The stories are grouped around particular experiences to simplify the communication of the textured dimensions of intra- and interpersonal fluid and dynamic processes, which are neither distinct nor separable. Complex intertwinings, the various experiences fold into each other, mirroring the ways identities are constituted relationally and introjected individually.

In many instances, the storytellers do not reflect on their identities directly, appearing to see them as mundane and ‘naturally’ occurring and, as far as their private, personal sense of self is concerned, relatively stable. Where participants commented on changes to their identity it was most often contextualised in their fluctuating social identities (affected by employment, or becoming a parent or grandparent, for example) or in reaction to crises or turning points, such as relationship conflicts. A sense of self often appears to be outside immediate awareness, as something not usually considered, viewed merely as contingent on social circumstances. However, I show, through psycho-social interpretive analysis of their stories, that certain aspects of the (un)conscious performativity of storytellers’ identities are revealed “in the emotionality of speech, its rhythm, speed, density, and tone, the silences, gaps, elisions, contradictions and avoidances, the jokes, moments of irony, the use of metaphor and understatement, where stories begin and end” (Roseneil, 2009: 414). As Lawler (2014) states:

identities [...] are not *expressions* of some inner nature; rather, they are performed in that they are constantly and repeatedly ‘done’, and they are performative in that they bring into effect what they name [... and] they are done within a matrix of social relations that authorizes their being done (Lawler, 2014: 129; original emphasis).

Narrative performativity, as I use it to analyse and interpret the data, involves interactive social and psychic processes, reminiscent (though conceptually differently formulated and expressed) of Venn’s (2020) development of Ricoeur’s (1992) proposition of temporal narrative identity, connecting “the “time of the soul” with the time of the world. In a sense, the “self” as a meaningful and meaning-making entity appears at the point of intersection of two kinds of reflection on our beingness or existence” (Venn, 2020: 45). Performative as they appear to be, the individual stories speak (obliquely) of the “point of intersection” (Venn, 2020: 45) as the storytellers reflect on the meaningfulness of their mother/son relational intimacy and what it means to them regarding their sense of self: an identity-creating process that is multi-layered, telling themselves a story at the same time as telling me, and you: an externalised/internalising/relational process that has social and psychic dimensions.

Complicated (hetero)gendered mothering

I’ve sometimes thought of my relationship with each of my sons as a dance: sometimes a tango (silent, angry, passionate, competitive in taking the lead, when our relative gendered power emerged in differences of opinion or if the boundaries of our relationships shifted, for example), sometimes a minuet (stylised, ceremonious, controlled, being careful of each other’s sensibilities and

sensitivities), 'putting on a show' and presenting "a unified, morally coherent collective "self" to others", Abeyasekera (2017: 443), and occasionally a waltz (harmonious, free-flowing within a familiar pattern, rotating around each other in space, when we were 'synchronised' in our shared history, attuned but acknowledging our separate selves). I wasn't ever confident I knew the steps, making them up or just freestyling, somehow gleaning knowledge from others or from observation of other cultural and social practices, improvising more often than opting out of the dance, finding a way through to a pause or to its end. At times, tacitly, or through compromise or more obviously shunning convention and conformity, activating personal agency, I resisted and refused to comply with social and cultural expectations, creating my own dance. As they both grew older, I found myself dancing less a 'pas de deux' with each of them, more usually choreographing a solo dance, moving away (socially and psychically), for example, from the 'intact' family unit, ostensibly to further my career and exert my independence and agency. In retrospect I see this race- and class-privileged decision partly involved a conscious act of defiance against a future constrained by my role as mother and 'wife' that conflicted with my sense of self and intolerable in my everyday circumstances.

My own experience of fluctuating relational intimacy with my sons (gendered as it was, and is, despite my conscious efforts to raise them, and relate to them, through 'gender neutral' practices) begins to illustrate the complex, dynamic effects that knowing and being with them, as a mother of infant boys and men-children, has had on my changing identity and sense of self, historically and autobiographically situated. My experience resonates with Hockey et al.'s (2007) view of the connection between experience, subjectivity and agency as part of a "contradictory, inevitably incomplete process of identity formation within which agency manifests itself" (Hockey et al., 2007: 54). The stories of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy in my research reflect Brah's framing of experience (1996: 116; original emphasis) "as a site of contestation: a discursive space where difference *and differential* subject positions and subjectivities are inscribed, reiterated, or repudiated [...]. To think of experience and subject formation as processes is to reformulate the question of 'agency'".

All the women participating in the project related mothering experiences that had caused them pain or anxiety as well as pleasure and joy. Angela's story (below) is discussed at length because it sets the scene for other mothers' stories. Angela reflects on the widespread difficulties between mothers and their men-children she's heard about from her friends and family, which are "marked by everyday cultural and political practices" (Brah, 1996: 116).

Mother love?

I know lots of women whose sons stayed at home so much longer than the daughters and who've had lots of issues with sons. Everybody of my age who's had sons has had issues with them. I could name five off pat: one girl - my best friend at school, all sorts of issues with her son. And it just seems to be the sons. I don't know what it is. I don't know if it's because a lot of us have been single parents, and they've grown up without a strong, stern, male influence. Though most women I know who've had issues with sons, their dads have been around – they haven't been absent. I don't know what it is. I don't know what's happened. Is it something to do with the internet, the way people lead their lives now, they're more introverted, they have more of a virtual life than an external life?

My sister's had so many issues with her son, much worse than I've had with mine. And she's been married to her childhood sweetheart for forty years: a stable home background. The daughter's absolutely fine, not brought up any differently. You just don't know what it is. Another friend, she's been married for donkey's years; they've got one son, he was completely mollycoddled; she mollycoddled him far more than I did my son. But he just went off and doesn't have a proper job, lives in a house that she's bought; she's facilitated everything; she's seen him through his degree. I didn't help Yiannis with his degree work at all. My other friend, she was a single parent, split up from her husband; and her son – brilliant, best pupil in school, went to uni, but ended up with all sorts of issues: self-harming, mental health problems, no proper job, lives in London now and his dad pays his rent. He works when he can get work. But it goes on and on. Someone else, her son's got mega mental health problems, lives at home.

Why is it? I don't know. I just don't know why it is!

Angela's bewilderment about the number of women she knows whose relationships with their sons have been problematic and the strength of desire for explanations for this position was replicated among most women participants. She had given the problem considerable thought, trying to locate reasons within social circumstances (lone parenting, unemployment, education, technological advances, for example) or health conditions, such as poor mental health. Her frustration at not finding an answer is manifest in this story, evident in the transference relationship (Curtis, 2015) that I experienced in the research conversation with Angela, as she communicated feelings of

helplessness and an emotion at times verging on despair, despite efforts to support her son as he separated from her in his transition to adulthood.

Over the years Angela had attempted different approaches to empower her son to make choices about his future, financially providing for him to visit his father in Europe, setting him up in a flat and paying bills, discussing his education and employment options thoroughly with him, supporting him in his own health and wellbeing issues and those of his partner, addressing his lifestyle choices with tolerance and compassion. My experience of her narrative was that she was telling me about the conflict she felt between her 'rational' cognition that involved thoughtful and intelligent care for her son and 'irrational' emotions, resulting in self-doubt. The incongruence between Angela's actions and decisions regarding her son's transition to adulthood and the emotional turmoil (the confusing co-existence of rational thought and irrational feelings) to which she couldn't give full expression, but were apparent in the unconscious communication, resonates with Craib's (1995) view that:

We can think through all sorts of situations with which most people must be familiar: experiencing feelings we cannot express to our satisfaction, having feelings that we can express but that others find difficult to understand, and most important, perhaps, the regular experiencing of contradictions between our thoughts and our feelings (Craib, 1995: 153).

Hearing her story and the 'music behind the words', I felt a profound sense of Angela's personal values and the importance to her (and her sense of self, apparent in the telling) of a positive, warm, close attachment to both her son and her daughter, although the relationship with her son had been more challenging. Angela revealed the different social expectations involved in raising sons (in comparison with daughters) that precede their birth, which have an impact on mothers, resulting in embodied psychic and physical experiences (Segal, 2007), and formatively affect their changing identities over the life course. The conflicts and contradictions that Angela's narrative seemed to express, unconsciously, appear bound up with an "institutionalized, normative heterosexuality [that] regulates those kept within its boundaries" (Jackson, 2006: 105), at odds with Angela's conscious resistance to gendered norms and practices ascribed to mothering generally in the U.K. Angela's narrative conflates heterosexual and (hetero)gendered identity, both her own and her son's implicitly, which results in perpetuating normative gender practices, such as continuing to 'mother' her son, in her practical care for, and attachment to, him, within the institution of the family. Her gendered story privileges heterosexuality as part of hegemonic (hetero)gender identity formation operating intergenerationally. However, the conflicts (regarding her relational 'self') she

communicates are consistent with Rose's (2005: 29) argument that "[t]he unconscious constantly reveals the 'failure' of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or men) which is ever simply achieved."

Angela's story appeared to chime with other mothers' and my own experiences: although it isn't possible to ever stop 'being' a mother, my identity flexes as I find ways of relating to the men who are my sons. Memories of them over previous years in other contexts, and memories of relationships with other men personally and professionally, further complicates our relational intimacy. As I construct the present (seeking coherence and agency) and an imagined future from the past, I am mindful of Stanley's (1992) observation:

When it comes to the past, memory actually withholds the key, for we inevitably remember selectively. Memory's lane is a narrow, twisting and discontinuous route back through the broad lanes of the past, leading to a self that by definition we can never remember but only construct through the limited and partial evidence available to us (Stanley, 1992: 62).

My identity will continue to change as my sons and I get older, when I may begin to see them as 'old men', as they may see me already as an 'old woman', all of us situated in social and cultural discourses of intersecting gender and age that create meaning. We carry the subtleties and intricacies of our individual and joint experiences of various relational intimacies over the years, which implicate us in the perpetuation of (hetero)gendered privilege. Affected by macro, meso and micro contingencies, our relational practices alter over the life course individually and collectively and have an impact on identity formation. Angela's story and my own suggest that identities are 'works in progress' located within normative everyday assumptions of (hetero)gendered heterosexuality, angled (unwittingly) towards the perpetuation of hegemonic heteronormativity, in the expression and practices of gendered relational intimacy institutionalised within the family.

To coin Winnicott's (1971) term, popular in contemporary cultural narratives, Angela's mothering practices certainly appeared to have been "good enough", since, in the candid way she presented herself, I perceived neither idealisation nor sentimentalisation in mothering her man-child. Although her son (as she expressed it) continued to be dependent on her, emotionally and financially, she spoke of the need to "cut the apron strings" for both their sakes and had employed various strategies to facilitate their separation. The relationship between Angela and her son didn't appear to be mutually fused or symbiotically dependent, nor, for her son (from Angela's perspective), one that

seemed likely to be “the prototype for all intense experiences throughout life [...] when the mother and child are totally enmeshed psychically in the experience” (Frosh, 2002: 26).

Pondering over her own identity in adulthood, Angela commented “I don’t really look at myself. I think women don’t always do that. Since I’ve retired, I’ve probably looked at myself a lot more. Before, working full time, and all the family life going on, not really much time for me. Now there’s more time to do things I want to do.” Despite framing her identity around the social role of mothering, Angela communicated a sense of independence and agency, contradicting normative, social, and cultural expectations of motherhood as self-sacrificing and single-minded. Nevertheless, Angela’s account of separation between herself and Yiannis, attempting to reconcile her care and love for her man-child with her desire for independence, resonates with the link Green (2016: 66) makes between “the emotional turmoil experienced [when children leave home and] the limitations of available models of motherhood”. Green (2016: 66) suggests that the “rupture” involved in this transition has a transformational impact on mothers, which affects their identity.

Angela reflected at length on the impact on her identity and sense of self that her marriage to an abusive man had had, remarking “I felt I had no other identity other than being the children’s mother - a bit like the scapegoat or the whipping post¹¹ for everything that went wrong. I was just a mam and a bit downtrodden”, which she thought was made more difficult by living overseas with him in a culture that was alien to her, despite enjoying some aspects. Her self-esteem improved, she said, when she moved back to England and established an independent life for herself and her children, while still attentive to ensuring that her children visited their father regularly. Angela’s ex-husband, because of the continuing relationship with their (now adult) children, is still very present in her life; she described how “you’re still in the middle, your role as a mother never changes; the Germans have got a saying “kleine kinder, kleine probleme; grosse kinder, grosse probleme”¹².

Reflecting on her intimacy with her son, Angela commented on her ex-husband’s opinion, saying he spoke of their son as “a mammy’s boy, a soft mammy’s boy”, remarking that “when we were on the cusp of splitting up, he used to say to me “You can handle him now when he’s ten, but just wait till he’s a teenager and a man. You won’t be able to manage that. You won’t!”” It appeared that this narrative formed a backdrop to her feelings about the intimacy she has with her son, aware of these comments as her son was growing up, careful to encourage his agency and decision-making. Proudly

¹¹ ‘Whipping’ post is retained here (despite being problematic in its racist etymology) as used by the storyteller to express how she perceived herself as a wife and mother.

¹² Little children, little problems; big children, big problems (my translation).

showing me photos of her son, she said “To some extent maybe he’s been right. Yiannis has given me a few worries over the years: not so much when he was little, he was such a loving little boy, always chatty, but I think I probably did mollycoddle him, to make his life easier I suppose. And maybe he just leaves it to me to do stuff, organise things.”

Current cultural tropes of the ‘smothering mother’, the ‘benign dictator’ or the ‘infantilising mother’ are contested by Angela’s narrative, which illustrates the intricacies of gendered relational intimacy between mother and man-child. Her story challenges contemporary characterisations in which mothers are omnipotent and men-children either absent or absented as if they have been “[e]aten by the mothers” (Frosh, 2002: 26). Nevertheless, despite Angela’s agency in resisting the abuse experienced in her marriage, and her attempts at sensitive separation from her son, her narrative reflects (hetero)gender and heterosexual performativity, and apparently unconscious reproduction of normative (hetero)gender identities co-created in the intimacy with Yiannis.

Motivation and agency: compliance and resistance

Angela’s narrative appeared superficially (hetero)performative, creating her (hetero)gendered identity formatively as she told her stories of her mothering practices. However, she also explored aspects of her resistance to normative expectations of her as a mother, which were relational and temporally and spatially contingent. Angela described leaving her abusive marriage, through a careful plan to avoid her husband ‘coming after’ her and her children, as he had previously, and how she returned to the U.K. where she established a successful professional career, retaining her independence and deciding to live with her new partner, rather than marrying again.

Angela’s nuanced story of agency and resistance on a personal level exemplifies nevertheless the tenacity of normative forms of femininity and masculinity, (re)created intergenerationally. Angela’s capacity for resistance is affected by pressures to conform, simultaneously enabling her son’s conformity. Ultimately historical limitations on the expression of femininities, such as mothering, may be argued as ‘future-proofed’ in their mundane contemporary performativity, thus sustaining existing gender relations, that are difficult, though not impossible, to alter. Angela’s motivation and agency appeared to be ‘relational’, “not simply enabled and constrained (as if it were a power separate from relations) but [...] constituted within relationships as they unfold across space and time” (Burkitt, 2016: 336) and forged perhaps, as Burkitt (2016: 329) suggests, through “non-conscious elements in our behaviour and thought [that] can have a crucial impact on our consciousness, reflexivity, and actions without us fully realizing this”.

Discussing motivation and agency, Prager (2006: 282) emphasises the importance of taking account of “the irrationality of thought, “the power of feelings” and its capacity to structure reality, and the devastating consequences [...] putative differences between individuals hold for social life”. Life transitions, for example, happen when what it means to be a mother or a man-child “can emerge powerfully and unexpectedly” (Green 2016), even though anticipated and rationalised as ‘natural’ life course progressions. A son leaving the family home, getting married, becoming a parent, or a mother becoming a grandmother, or a mother-in-law, for instance, may change the dynamics of a mother and son’s intimacy, particularly as they become part of an expanded network of relational intimacies, which affects their identities and agency, in terms of both social roles and their subjective experience of themselves.

I observed, for example, that the (hetero)gendered operational assumptions within my sons’ marriages were, and are, different from the family culture in which they were raised (by me), even during the times we lived together in a fairly conventional, middle-class, race-privileged family structure (white man, white woman, both working, and two non-disabled children). From my perspective, there were subtle but noticeable shifts in my sons’ identities when they ‘became’ husbands and fathers, resulting partly from their psychic integration of others’ psycho-socially constituted identities, involving not just their wives’ individual identities but also the culture of their wives’ family of origin, the extended family network, and the generational influences on the women themselves. My sons’ identities appeared to change, not just through their performative enactment and performance of new social roles and their relationship with their intimate partners, but also, as I interpret it, through a reconstruction of their relationship to themselves and to me through an unsteady, dynamic, multi-directional shifting of interpersonal power relationships between us all in the family network. Intersecting gender, class, economic, and generational dimensions affected our agency, motivation, and capacity to nourish our established relational intimacy. As time goes on, and circumstances change for all of us, the psycho-social process continues to (re)form our identities relationally, for my sons and for me.

Many grand/mothers participating described how they had come to terms with, and ‘incorporated’, changes to their identities by exercising relational agency, sometimes in small, private acts of resistance. Ann recounted a story of her son describing something his wife wanted to do that he didn’t want to do, but that his wife had “got her way”, and her son telling Ann that he’d then “realised he’d married his mother!” Ann commented to me: “I didn’t say, but what I thought was “No

you fucking haven't!" I just muttered something non-committal. I don't challenge very much now. I put my spoke in at the beginning, but I've adapted myself and I don't challenge". Ann had made a considered choice in order to maintain harmony and to ensure a continuing relationship with her son and grandsons. From my (psychodynamic) perspective, it appears there can be a simultaneous unconscious desire for stability, enacted within normative discourses, and an unconscious motivation to "resist subjection to oppressive social norms" (Layton, 2020: 52): states of mind held in tension that can produce intra- and interpersonal conflict. The sometimes consequent (unconscious) collusion in sustaining normative discourses arises because of our unconscious existential fears of psychic fragmentation and our attempts to create a sense of cohesion in our social lives. The capacity to tolerate uncertainty, conflicts, and contradictions in the internal world (through emotional resilience, for example) is enabled by agency in the external world that doesn't present individual or collective threat.

Transitions for women as they become grandmothers coincides with transitions for the new parents when a (grand)child is born, resulting in a parallel process of reshaping and redefining identities, sometimes precipitating uncertainty or conflict. Arber and Timonen (2012: 144) report that the key features of good grandparenting are "being involved" and "not interfering", although the line between these positions is unclear in many situations. Their study demonstrates the difficulty in negotiating these boundaries, concluding that:

in order to understand why "not interfering" is simultaneously so important and so difficult, it is important to acknowledge that grandparents are trying to *parent* and *grandparent* simultaneously. The norms attached to each are not always synonymous, which can result in considerable ambivalence (Arber and Timonen, 2012: 144; original emphasis).

Most men participating who are fathers tend to prioritise 'managing' the (sometimes conflictual) relationship between their wives and their mothers, rather than sustaining relational intimacy between themselves and their mothers. In contrast, the two men *without* children said their relationships with their mothers is generally positive, and, living at some distance, they see them infrequently, when it fits in with the rest of their lives. Both men have sisters with children who, they both commented, are closer emotionally and geographically to their mothers and spend more time with them, involving them as grandmothers. In the next story, Andy, whose "bond" with his mother, he said, has always been "very strong", describes how he negotiates and manages boundaries between his wife and his mother (who, Andy told me, had not approved of his choice of partner initially, because of her social/class status: primarily because of where she lived).

Mother love?

We're a team – me, my mum, and my wife. My mum has such an active role with the kids and my wife's extremely grateful for what my mum does. Every so often, though, my mum'll say something, and my wife will go "Why's she said that?" But my wife'll never say it to my mum. It goes through me - a bit like a mediator. I see other people, where their wife might say something or the husbands'll not say anything, but my wife knows that if my mum says ...

Aargh! I make it sound like a war zone! It's not. It really isn't ...

If my mum says something that pisses my wife off, my wife knows that she can tell me, and I can have a conversation with my mum, and say, "Mum, I think you were wrong." Equally, my wife knows that if I think that my wife was wrong, then I'll tell her that she's wrong.

Sometimes, I'll say to Trish, "Just leave it. It'll be fine." But there's things where I've had to go to my mum and say, "Mum, just back off a bit." Or "Mum, you're wrong there", because of what I see: some people just let it fester and then it all becomes just a bit backstabbing.

And there is a little bit of underlying ...

I do worry that my mum thinks my wife's not good enough for me.

Andy was very articulate in telling his stories; he told me he had received two periods of cognitive behaviour therapy¹³ as an adult, which appeared to shape the way he told his stories and how he reflected on his feelings and history within his family of origin, as if he had learned a script: performing a role of loving son, dutiful husband and caring father. He presented himself as in control of his everyday family relationships, expressing little (as I perceived it) emotional content or reflexivity, unlike the stories I heard from women. He used humour frequently, as well as grandiose rationalisation, which I interpreted as a defence against revealing hidden motivations, justifying himself to pre-empt possible negative evaluations, communicating (unconsciously) some uncertainty about himself and his life, indicating a lack of self-worth, despite his superficial confidence.

I was struck by the conventionally 'masculine' performativity of Andy's stories: not only did his narrative seem to constitute his own heterosexual and (hetero)gendered identity, but I also had a

¹³ "Cognitive behavioural therapy [...] is a talking therapy [...] based on the concept that your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions are interconnected, and that negative thoughts and feelings can result in a vicious cycle" (NHS, 2019).

sense (particularly since he viewed himself as the lynch pin in the triad) of the potential impact his identity has on others in his immediate family, contributing psycho-socially to the ongoing relational process of identity formation in his mother, his wife and their children. Andy's agency and motivation appeared to be strongly influenced by the dependency he and his wife have on his mother for childcare so that they can work full-time, since his mother-in-law was unable to help. It appeared to be a reasoned choice for Andy, to keep his mother close emotionally as well as practically, through his subtle coercion of 'managing' their relational intimacy, serving the best interests of his family, as he deemed it. Andy's story evokes a sense of performative hegemonic masculinity, realised and perpetuated through his parenting of the next generation, as the 'head of the household'. His apparent exploitation of his mother's goodwill, as part of the 'team', similarly indicated his normative expectations of "emphasised femininity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 848), which his mother demonstrated perhaps in her compliant willingness to help with her grandchildren, as Andy characterises it. Both generations of women with whom Andy has an intimate relationship appear to confirm (from Andy's perspective) their feminine identities through motherhood (Hockey et al., 2007), which simultaneously confirms and reinforces his own hegemonic masculine identity.

The last story in this section illustrates Julia's perspective: a woman who appeared to have steered through separation from her son successfully over the years. Despite personal challenges, she had retained a sense of agency, and a continuing warm intimacy with her son.

Mother love?

I'm a grandmother now for the first time, so that puts other things in the mix between us. My children had a very unstable life growing up: everything you shouldn't do. I felt I was doing all the wrong things, but I had to survive. I had no self-esteem then, it was a spiral downwards; in the end, I couldn't even boil an egg. But the children were the best thing, the reason to look for work, and they lived through these upheavals, moving from one country to another, and being children of a divorced single mum.

Now I define myself as a seemingly successful mother. I'm super proud of my children and shocked at what problems a lot of parents have with children. I think part of it was me, but part is just luck: a combination of things. I come from East Germany, and I never really let go of this communal thinking: what's our common goal? It's something very important for me, to not just function as an individual competing with others.

If I look at my son now, as a husband, he's everything I would've wished for. It's an achievement and it's like we did it all together. We made each other, who we all are. There is no other way to look at it. We're a very close unit, and you don't get that without some loss, that was always clear, but I wasn't cultivating that.

A lot of things that went well wasn't because we did them intentionally: it was a complex dynamic, but we've done something important. We've all had autonomy because of the circumstances, not quite living in the mainstream. We struggled through life together, we supported each other, and it's not that one of us knows what's right, and there's an equality in that. And there's an advantage because they've learned to adjust. We changed together. And I wouldn't be the person I am now without them. No way!

Many people see their children as their 'project': getting material things, that's seen as good parenting. So, in that sense I'm a terrible mother. But I'm used to being not as expected!

Julia had moved, with her children, between several countries, motivated by leaving an unhappy marriage, the need to seek work, and make a home in which to raise her children. Julia appeared to have internalised the social values of her early life of cooperative collectivism, enacted throughout her life and transmitted to her children, which, she said, formed the basis of her continuing relationship with them. Although she perceived formative changes in her identity in response to different social demands and contexts over the life course, Julia emphasised that it was rooted in her identification with the cultural values, and political ideology, of her country of birth and childhood in Eastern Europe (different from other storytellers in this chapter). Her memories of the past informed her reflections and understandings of the present.

Communicating a sense of relational autonomy and agency, Julia's narrative was qualitatively different from most other women participants who had grown up in the U.K. and had raised their children there. Julia's mothering approach appeared to be influenced by the collectivism of her childhood and early adulthood experiences, in contrast with a liberal political individualism associated with Anglophone countries (Lynch and Kalaitzake, 2020) within which most other participants' identities were formed. This difference exemplifies the effect of a dynamic psycho-social interaction between macro level cultural, social, and political ideologies, structures, and systems, meso level family practices, and micro level embodied identities. It illustrates how the outside becomes incorporated: the external world interacting with the internal world, producing a

contingent “self-concept, value structure, emotional state [...], motivational set, or reflective capacity” (Christman, 2004: 144).

Julia’s story exemplifies Jackson’s (2018: 147) argument that “selfhood [...] originates [...] through interactions with others, and, through such interactions, is continually modified over time”. Julia’s story involved a reflexive process “based on the human capacity to see ourselves as both subject and object, as “I” and “Me” and therefore to reflect back on ourselves and locate ourselves in relation to others” (Jackson, 2018: 147). However, as Crossley (2001: 149) points out, the “limits of our reflexivity are the limits of our social world and that what we are and can be for ourselves is shaped by what we are for others, what we are in the schemas and collective representations of our society”, which Julia’s narrative appears to confirm. Despite challenging and unconventional circumstances, Julia seems to have achieved a mutually successful separation from her son, resulting in respectful, familial interdependence. Julia’s narrative stands out from others in my data, in her open and flexible approach to life experience, in her apparent lack of need for power and control with which to defend against existential threat to her sense of self, and in her capacity to recognise and value interdependence within the family and in the wider political context. Her story resonates with Abeyasekera’s argument that co-constructed family narratives “enable families to present a unified, morally coherent collective “self” to others [and] maintain social order by providing a way to assimilate those who do not conform, thereby preventing irreparable damage to the web of social relations that hold families together” (Abeyasekera, 2017: 443).

Breaking bonds: separation and loss

A number of men participating described how they deal with conflict between their mothers and partners by choosing to limit communication, or by avoiding contact (themselves and their children) with their mothers. Current communication technologies such as mobile phones, texting, chat groups, video calls, and phone cameras have introduced a further complication in the dynamics of family relationships and mother and man-child relational intimacy. A number of women commented that, especially with a first grandchild, the ease of receiving photos of their grandchildren provided an immediacy of connection with the middle generation, enabling them to observe their grandchildren’s development. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as the children got older or siblings were born, the frequency of contact reduced. However, it was also apparent that, for some men-children, texting provided a means of keeping their mothers at a distance or of controlling frequency of contact between them, mediated sometimes by daughters-in-law. Beth’s story exemplifies this form of control:

Mother love?

The gap between us just grows. He spends a lot of time with his wife's family, who are really different from me and mine. Things he does now, he'd have scorned years ago. It's like he's absorbed their ways.

He doesn't phone me anymore. At Christmas I usually get a call - FaceTime now. There was a pattern to when he would phone - usually a Thursday evening, when his wife was out, and then it started being the same day, but when he was walking home from work.

Sometimes he'll text me, and I text him every so often to keep the door open. It got a bit uncomfortable a few years ago when I realised he wasn't just texting back a quick spontaneous reply: there'd always be a gap between him reading my text and replying, which coincided with his wife being at home, and I'm sure she was 'advising' him what to say, what he was allowed to say. I'm very careful now what I say in a text to him, how I say it: I suspect it'll be monitored by his wife.

There've been so many times when my attempts at improving our relationship have been badly received; that's not how it used to be between us, and on the rare occasion I'd see him on his own he'd be fine with me, though we're both quite careful with each other now.

I think he's been so brainwashed by his wife he can probably reply to texts without her assistance now. But it feels false; he's artificially polite.

I know I've made mistakes and sometimes I forget to be careful, but it's heart-breaking. He texts me updates on how the children are doing at school, which is lovely, and perhaps that's a mixture of his pride in their achievement, and his own as a dad, wanting to share that with me, and performing the dutiful son role. He keeps me at arms-length but just involved enough to keep me hanging on and hoping for something to change for the better.

We have a bit of a joke about his texts being written by a committee, as they're so obviously not coming from him alone; it's not the words he'd use, it doesn't sound like him ... it's stilted.

But he seems happy, as far as I know. And that matters.

From my perspective as a psychodynamic psychotherapist, Beth appears to reveal a deep hurt and sense of loss of something very important to her. It also suggests an adaptation in her (apparently hypervigilant) behaviour and expectations, as she adjusts to the limitations placed on her interaction and contact with her son, and the ways she copes with the loss. Beth makes a joke towards the end of her story (frequently deployed as a psychic defence) about the substance of the texts that she experiences as oppressive, conflictual, and exclusionary. Her son's power to withhold contact appears to have affected her identity, indicating that changes are formed relationally over time, contingent on broader relational dynamics within the family. There is a combination of apparent unconscious defensiveness and a 'stoical' optimism for positive change in Beth's narrative, which implies the continuing attachment she feels towards her son, problematic and constraining though the relationship seems to be. Commenting about changes to kinship structures and family practices, Mason (2004: 172) states that "[r]elationships [can] be destructive, [...] fraught with conflict, overt or otherwise" and that "people [struggle] to establish new patterns of relating with 'old', 'new' and 'ex' sets of kin", resonating with Beth's experience.

Beth's story describes nuanced relational practices that provide clues to the complexity of fracturing relational intimacy between mothers and men-children. Beth's story is consistent with Marx's (2011: 1209) argument that "[w]ith children, the husbands, like their wives, become more negative toward their mothers and closer to their mothers-in-law [and] in times of marital conflict, both husbands and wives believe that the husband's family is more likely to be the source of conflict than the wife's family". In adapting to changes in her relationship with her son, Beth, like Ann earlier, exercises agency, albeit limited, in reflecting on the situation and working out her position in the relational dynamic. Motivated by the desire perhaps to maintain the relationship with her son, though maybe not 'at any cost' to her 'self', Beth is careful about how she makes contact, resisting being drawn into further conflict.

As Beth's story illustrates, use of technologies within a relational context can amplify asymmetrical power, facilitating and reinforcing traditional social gender and age divisions, however, 'new' forms of interpersonal communication technologies also contain potential opportunities to enhance relational intimacy and maintain connections. John, for example (the only man who mentioned using technology to strengthen family bonds), commented:

technology changes society, and maybe restores the old values and family ties; I'm living in my hometown and my relatives live in other cities far away, and now we see each other

more often because of planes and good trains, but also the phones and Wi-Fi. We can do WeChat to video call all the time. Changes are taking place, at individual and structural level. I feel more attached to my family; we have the chat group on our phones, where we can put all our families on together, and when there's nothing going on, we all just say hello. And my mother does that too. Everyone's involved.

Most women participating said, often nostalgically, that overall they had positive relationships with their sons, although it also, in many cases, involved a personal cost (practically and emotionally). A few women said they sometimes feel supported by their daughters-in-law, in providing a conduit for contact with their sons, unlike Beth, for example, as in Sue's story next.

Mother love?

It's his wife that keeps in touch with me. Robert's hopeless! You text him and you might get a reply. That does annoy me. He knows that annoys me. That's just manners if somebody makes contact with you! He's just an idle boy. He knows she'll do it. So, he's got another mother, hasn't he? She'll sort it out. But believe you me, she takes issue with him about it. Sometimes, when he phones me, I'm pretty certain she's said, "I'm not doing that for you." I've said to him, "You know, you didn't marry Chrissie for her to be your personal secretary. You need to be the one to communicate with your sister and me. If Chrissie wants to, that's delightful but that's my relationship with Chrissie, that's not my relationship with you via Chrissie."

We've had those conversations, and it's "Oh, I'm very busy." He's always busy! None of the rest of us are! As if I'm just sitting here wondering what'll I do. I'm just not busy at all! There are more interesting things to do than text any of us back. But woe betide you if he texted you and you didn't text back! There's two sets of rules here.

I probably had most contact with him, when Ben was little, because he wanted me to see what the baby was doing, see how good he was with the baby. So, I was being sent photographs, and I still get a fair bit of that from Chrissie. Robert not so much. He doesn't take pictures of the children, Chrissie does. A lot of men don't think to lift the phone up and take a picture.

I'm very fortunate that I have a good relationship with Chrissie. I have this terrible thing to admit, but when my children cause me angst, and I'm not sure how to approach them about

something, or if there's an issue that's personal to me, it's probably Chrissie I'll talk to. She's one step removed, and I trust her.

Sue's story demonstrates a range of normative practices and gendered expectations, as well as showing her relational agency regarding her preference for her daughter-in-law as confidante and adviser. Her description of her adult son as a "boy" suggests an ongoing unconscious infantilisation of him. Despite Sue recognising the disparity between him always being busy and his apparent assumption of her availability as his mother, they both appear to accept and enact conventional (hetero)gender identities, although Sue chides him for using his wife as his "personal secretary" and for expecting Sue to wait around for him to make contact. The cognitive dissonance between Sue's scornful opinion of her son's lack of contact, his reliance on his wife to maintain contact, her assertion of the importance of courtesy and the tone in which she tells her story - almost comedic, light-hearted, and forgiving of her son's (gendered) behaviour, implies her performative compliance with existing conventional family identities.

As in other women's narratives, Sue's story illustrates men-children's apparent need to display their child to their mothers, indicating a desire for maternal reassurance. However, it also suggests their performative manifestation of (hetero)sexual maturity, separation, and independence as 'men' through fatherhood, confirming their hegemonic 'masculinity', which reinforces the 'otherness' of their mothers. Sue's ultimately (hetero)gendered performative compliance with social norms is complemented by Robert's performative behaviour, for example, in leaving the 'emotional work' and practical communication to his wife, as part of her kin-keeping role of maintaining bonds, which she appears to undertake mostly willingly. The behaviour of all of them in the way they 'do' gender and their lack of resistance to normative practices contributes to reproducing (hetero)gender identities trans- and intergenerationally.

Mothers' separation narratives in my research appeared to involve a psycho-social interaction with socially and culturally situated, public exhortations for mothers to sever attachments with their sons (and their daughters, though the demands, gendered in themselves, result in differential practices). Mothers' emotional distress suggests an existential unconscious fear, since our sense of being depends on knowing who we are in relation to others. If the expression of a mother's identity, embodied in everyday practices, is expected to involve severing ties, it is unsurprising perhaps that there is a sense of loss and confusion, while she adjusts towards a changing identity that, at least,

gives a sense of stability. In her study of mothers' experiences of adult children leaving home, Green (2016) notes that:

[t]he emotional disruption caused by separation from the adult child was articulated by many of my participants as evoking emotions akin to those of bereavement. Unlike bereavement however, my interviewees' feelings regarding children's leaving were not accorded legitimacy; instead many of the women had coped with their feelings alone. As such, their narratives highlighted the silence that surrounds this time in a mother's life course and to some extent her own perpetuation of that silence (Green, 2016: 153).

Green argues that "this is due to the naturalising and normalizing of the western child's culturally sanctioned quest for independence from the mother and the home" (2016: 153), and, although my research supports her conclusion, my analysis suggests additionally that it involves normative psycho-social processes that sustain the status quo of (hetero)gender identity formation. Appearing as complicit in everyday embodied (hetero)gendered practices, men-children's and mothers' narratives indicate that their collusion arises from relational power, intersected by age and gender divisions, which fluctuates asymmetrically over the life course, derived perhaps from socially approved self-interest or psychic survival, or a combination of both.

The silence that Green observed surrounding women's feelings of loss in her research also surrounded men in mine, although it was harder for them to articulate, since, as Seidler (2007) notes, men learn "to relate to particular emotions as signs of weakness and so as threats to their male identities" (Seidler, 2007: 9). Women participants too talked about other losses they'd experienced rather than explore directly the painful feelings involved in the loss of relational intimacy with their men-children, unconsciously revealing perhaps their anxieties about their age and life stage, being reminded of death's proximity through other bereavements. Angela's emphasis, for example, on the importance of managing the separation from her man-child appeared to be associated unconsciously with other losses. Weeping as she recalled her mother's death, Angela's narrative switched abruptly to her ex-husband's opinion of her relationship with her son as being 'too close' (implying that perhaps he was jealous of their relational intimacy). The loss of intimacy with her mother (and perhaps loss of her ex-husband) was unconsciously conflated with loss of intimacy with her son. Angela's psychic process, ostensibly reflecting on the loss of her mother (manifest in her tears), possibly unconsciously linked to the impending loss of her son, and the sudden memory of her ex-husband's judgments of her intimacy with her son perhaps suggested,

from my perspective, an unconscious denial of (erotic) desire in the intimacy with her son, because of its prohibition according to social norms. Angela's story, along with other mothers' narratives, illustrates Baraitser's (2009) argument that motherhood is a process of "being there to be left [... one] that is the hardest and most psychologically threatening to women who mother, one that never ends, that is repeated with each child and constantly stirs up early infantile experiences of separation from our own mothers" (Baraitser, 2009: 5).

Unlike women participants, men spoke less about memories of actual deaths (perhaps because of their age, and less exposure to death of people close to them), with the exception of James (who had served in conflict zones overseas in his job in military service, witnessing many fatalities). Most men's reflections on loss were expressed in terms of anticipating the loss of the relationship with their mother through death (which moved many to tears, hastily wiped away), or their mothers' future infirmity, or their own 'moving on' in their lives (as if a one-sided event). Men mostly appeared unaware of losses that are implicated in everyday life, whilst loss of, or changes in, the relational intimacy with their mothers was envisaged in practical terms, communicating an unconscious defence against the inevitability of death. For James, for instance, this included describing his plans for his mother's care in her 'old age', when she, as *he* planned, would live with, or near, him and his family, to be looked after till she died. His plan didn't seem to take account of what his mother's wishes for her future might be, nor that, as he told me, she rarely visited them now. James said that she finds trivial excuses (as he sees them) for not visiting, such as finding public transport too inconvenient and complicated (despite, as he said, with an expression of disbelief, her managing to travel independently to Australia to visit her other son). Scott wept silently when the idea of losing his mother arose in our conversation, his tears taking him by surprise, as if suddenly realising the possibility of her leaving him through her death. Petros had deliberately "crossed continents" to "break the bond" with his mother, who he said had "overprotected" him, confirmed in childhood when he was referred to a psychologist. However, Petros began to question the current stage in the life course for both of them and his geographical distance from his mother, saying:

Do I need her? I don't know. I don't feel I need her. But if she were suddenly to go away ... I'll probably say "Oh, I wish I'd spent more time with her". In all these years I've been away ... when you live away from your mother, what it seems is you don't have much time. And, for my mum, I'm always the child.

In his story Petros linked the anticipation of his mother's death with his mother's decision to burst the over-protective "bubble" (on the psychologist's advice) which had caused difficulties for him:

“the change from the bubble to independence wasn’t smooth ... it went from black to white”¹⁴. He expressed powerfully an underlying disappointment in the sudden loss, as he remembered it, of his mother’s interest in his achievements, which appeared to have remained with him in adulthood, tinged with feelings of shame and guilt. He stated that their relationship, when he was a young child, had been “Oedipal”, correcting himself when he said at first that it was an “Electra complex”¹⁵. He commented that their attachment now remains powerful, despite, for him, its ambiguity and ambivalence. Petros expressed his sense of responsibility for his mother, and regret that deciding to live overseas means he can’t participate in her care as his brother and sister do. These thoughts and feelings had surfaced around the birth of his first child, and then again with the imminent birth of his second, compounded by health worries for his wife. He explained what had changed for him, saying “You don’t realise what they go through and then you give more value in a way to your mother when you see what she’s going through to give you life. I understand more about her and understand why she put a bubble round me”. Petros’s association of birth with death reflects Beckett’s (1977: 90) statement: “Astride of a grave and a difficult birth”, and Rose’s (2018: 25) comments on motherhood’s “proximity to death”, asserting that “the fact of being born can act as an uncanny reminder that once upon a time you were not here, and one day you will be no more”.

A sense of loss pervaded most of the stories, without always explicit or conscious reference, suggesting that loss and separation affects both men and women, from ‘cradle to grave’, though differently in different circumstances. Women participants were generally more open about their sorrow or grief at losing their sons when they left home or married (with some comments about it also bringing relief in some cases, often glossed over, or accompanied by an embarrassed giggle, perhaps as a defence against any implication of transgressive mothering practice or thoughts). Some women took it for granted that, once their sons got married, their daughters-in-law took priority (for example, in making decisions about the frequency of contact). Many women made compromises, putting their plans, wants or needs to one side to maintain regular contact. Sue, for instance, commented “It’s a matter of learning to keep your mouth shut and it’s not easy”, emphatically adding, “But he’s a really lovely man. He’s good to spend time with. I don’t feel I get enough time

¹⁴ The term “black to white” is retained here, as used by the participant, despite its racist connotations.

¹⁵ The terms “Oedipal” and “Electra complex”, used by the participant, refer to the psychoanalytic concepts of the “Oedipus complex” introduced by Freud (1905; 1909), and the “Electra complex” developed by Jung (1). Both concepts concern theories of psychosexual development in childhood, the former relating to boys’ development and the latter to girls’, involving processes which, according to the original theories, are resolved by identification with the same-sex parent. Although the theories have been contested widely (Horney, 1924; Malinowski, 1929; Thompson, 1943; Erikson, 1950; Hoffman, 1975, for example), the terms are sometimes used in popular (non-specialist) public discourses describing an over-dependence on/attachment to the opposite-sex parent in adulthood.

with him. No! I know I don't! But that's life. He has a family." The men participating, for whom talking and thinking about separation from their mothers through death, provoked tears or caused them to quickly change the topic, or focussed on related practical issues, seemingly as a psychic defence, revealed, in their urge to disavow any distress, the conflict or contradiction between the internal world of their psyche and social and cultural expectations of what it means to be a man.

Conclusion

Presenting the psycho-social environment within which some mothers' and men-children's identities are formed, the stories in this chapter illustrate a discontinuous dynamic interaction between mothers and men-children as their relationship unfolds over time and in certain social and cultural circumstances. It shows how mothers' and men-children 'do' their relational intimacy in everyday (hetero)gendered practices of caring or withholding care, how it can be easily 'undone', partly because of normative expectations, and how mothers' and men-children's (hetero)gendered relational intimacy is (re)done and perpetuated in the performative practices that constitute their (hetero)gender identities in the first place. The chapter explored complex motivations experienced by grand/mothers and men-children that constrain agency, such as ambivalence, fears of loss and separation, intersecting age and gender divisions, asymmetrical power, the impact of transitions, the wider family, and social norms, which limit the potential for producing counter-discourses.

Demonstrating that identities are relationally constituted and change over the life course, stories of complicated 'mother love' in this chapter show how (hetero)gender identities are (re)created in the telling (Plummer, 1995), formed through the repetitive expression of what it means to be a mother or a man-child. Angela's story, for example, of her relational intimacy with her son, set within the context of other family relationships, demonstrates that "neither individual is a separate "unit"" (Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016: 148). Despite individual differences between men and individual differences between women in telling their stories (in the trajectory of the conversation, how familiar participants were with the material of their stories, or what was important for participants to be heard, for example), the emotional content of the narratives mostly varied along typical binary (hetero)gendered lines. Mothers' and men-children's stories imply a narrative performativity that (re)produces gendered social norms, contributing to explanations of the tenacity of mundane (hetero)gender identity formation, although expressed and embodied in different ways.

The narrative performativity of the stories suggests that both (hetero)gendered men, as 'husbands' and men-children, and (hetero)gendered women, as mothers and 'wives', and grand/mothers, are all

implicated in the (re)creation of hegemonic gender identities. Sue's story illustrates the performativity and complementarity of her (hetero)gendered relationship with her son, for instance, both colluding in the perpetuation of normative gender discourses that shape identities psycho-socially. Intra- and interpersonal conflicts and contradictions are sometimes produced during this psycho-social process, which has a limiting effect on their agency (such as for Beth, Ann, Angela, and Petros in this chapter), although the impact is mitigated for some by their position in the power hierarchy, intersected by age as well as gender.

Profound feelings of loss threaded throughout all the stories connected with separation because of life course transitions or exclusion from the family, for example. The process of separation between mothers and their men-children appears from the narratives to be complex, and complicated by wider family relationships, sometimes having a transactional quality, but usually involving a sense of loss, particularly articulated by mothers, not just of their sons' attachment to them but also a loss of identity. Women participating reflected more openly on their feelings and behaviour than men, as if reflexivity is 'built in' to their identities as mothers, suggesting (hetero)performativity in their storytelling. Men's narratives were superficially more 'controlled' or 'managed', with feelings revealed less readily, as if they were hidden (Seidler, 2007), or that the men were unaware of emotional dimensions in their stories, similarly performative in a (re)production of hegemonic 'masculine' identities.

The persistence of normative assumptions of (hetero)gender identity in everyday life is exemplified by the stories, and that "heteronormativity is the lens through which the world is viewed and, importantly, through which it is evaluated and judged" (Toorn et al., 2020: 160). Beth's story, for example, of restricted communication with her son, and Ann's story, in which she refutes her son's allegation of similarity between herself and his wife, illustrate their feelings of being judged by their sons, which has the effect of denigrating and marginalising their mothers, perhaps because of gender and age divisions. With a possible similar effect, James's unilateral decision-making for his mother's future spoke of his (hetero)gendered assumptions of his superior place in the gender hierarchy, upon which heterosexuality is founded (Jackson, 1996). Mothers' and men-children's narratives demonstrate that (hetero)gender identities, formed within the hegemony of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1976; Butler, 2000), are confirmed through parenthood, and transmitted intergenerationally, not because they are immutable or innate but because of the effect of normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2020). Their mundane stories reflect Hockey et al.'s comment (2007: 145) that "heterosexuality, as an institution, has provided an implicit organising

principle through which materially grounded links between self, the emotions, the 'other', body, home and the public sphere have been produced and/or negotiated over the last 80 years".

The chapter illustrated that (hetero)gender identity formation enmeshed with 'compulsory' heterosexuality appears to produce complexities for men-children who are fathers in sustaining relational intimacy with their mothers. Both Petros and Andy are affected by normative expectations of them as fathers and husbands of middle-generation mothers, which shapes their feelings about, and behaviour towards, their mothers. Both Ann's and Sue's stories show the impact on them of their son's normative (hetero)gendered, heterosexual identity, limiting their agency to the extent of having to adapt in order to sustain the relationship (and their own existential security). The conflation of (hetero)gender identity and compulsory heterosexuality appears to cross generations through normative (hetero)gendered heterosexual family models and practices. In Andy's story, for example, the intergenerational 'teamwork' within his family is led by Andy, with his wife and mother supporting his 'role', which he appears to have integrated into his sense of self, taking his (hetero)gendered heterosexual identity for granted. All 'team members' play their part in the perpetuation of (hetero)gender identity formation.

Motivation and agency appear in the stories as different and differential for mothers and men-children, contingent on circumstances. Small everyday resistances, rather than grand statements, are apparent in mothers' stories (such as Ann's), often motivated, in their limited enactment, by the desire to maintain family relationships. Women appeared to subscribe to social expectations of grand/mothering, weighing up their personal ethics and individual desires, often making compromises in the interest of perceived collective benefits (such as Julia's and Angela's decisions made in their own and their families' interests). Their (understandable) compromises, however, arguably contribute to the perpetuation of existing (hetero)gendered normative practices at the meso level of the family, congruent with macro institutional levels of family law and child welfare, for example, which legitimise, circumscribe, and reinforce gender norms. Both men and women (Angela and Petros, for example), appear to be motivated by an urge for existential coherence in their sense of self and social stability, even if at some potential personal cost. Some men seemed to exercise agency in ways that helped them avoid confronting the complexities of intimacy with their mothers (by actually 'running away', for example, like Petros, to live at a distance, or by displacing their psychological ambivalence by 'managing' contact with their mothers, like in Sue's, Beth's and Andy's stories), (re)constituting hegemonic masculinity through (hetero)performative practices of control.

As all the stories in this chapter show, relational intimacy contains dimensions of intersectional power, most obviously based on gender, but also on age, exemplifying everyday “unconscious enactments of unequal power relations” (Layton, 2020: xxxi). Where power appears as part of mother and man-child relationships, ways in which it was exercised and by whom fluctuated, so that, for example, within certain contexts either one might be perceived by the ‘other’ as an ally, as in Andy’s story of the benefits to the family of his mother’s involvement, or an intruder, exemplified in Beth’s story of the use of mobile phone texting. However, as Crossley (2001: 149) comments, there is always “a dialogical interplay of claim and counter-claim, position and counter-position” in forms of domination, which suggests that (hetero)gender identities are shaped dynamically by intersecting lines of privilege and oppression that overlap and flex temporally and spatially (Layton, 2020: xxxi). The narratives suggest that the practice and effect of asymmetrical gender power shifts over the life course in subtle intra- and interpersonal ways, linked to other intersecting dimensions, such as age and economic power, affected by the wider network of family relationships. This implies that normative relational practices, governing both heterosexuality and gender, are unstable but shored up by the interconnected micro, meso and macro boundaries of identity expression, which enables a collective illusion of ontological security, defined as having a stable cognitive and emotional sense of self/identity, confident in knowing who we are in relation to others, which gives a sense of order and continuity (Giddens, 1991).

The next chapter focusses on ‘the family’ as a key locus for the formation of grand/mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy, through which (hetero)gendered identities are shaped and perpetuated. Exploring the impact of the wider network of family relationships that affects mother and man-child intimacy, Chapter 6 considers generational influences and the effect of psycho-social dynamics between men-children and grand/mothers. I look at aspects of dependence, independence and inter-dependence that further complicate mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy, and, using the concept of unconscious normative processes, I examine how the tugs and ties of relational intimacy affect the formation of social identities and individual subjectivities through mundane family practices.

CHAPTER 6. WHERE ARE THE WOMEN? WHERE ARE THE MEN? GONE TO FAMILIES EVERYONE

Introduction

This chapter investigates the wider network of mundane family relationships within which mother and man-child intimacy is situated and identities (re)created. 'The family' is a key site in which mothers' and men-children's identities are reflexively mediated throughout the life course, and where individual narratives "are embedded in relational structures that exist beyond individual knowledge" (Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008: 7). Drawing on the psychodynamic approach used in my work as a psychotherapist as well as academic studies, I discuss the embodied emotional experience of intergenerational family relational intimacy, the psychic and physical spaces "it occupies and the spaces it abjects" (Hockey et al., 2007: 146) to explore psycho-social shifts in mothers' and men-children's identities, and their effect on agency.

Bearing in mind the tripartite analytic framework of my research: narrative performativity, intersectional power relations and unconscious normative social processes, in this chapter I build on Layton's development of psychoanalytic social theory to "[u]ncover the mediating links between social norms, family dynamics, and psychic life" (Layton, 2004: 48). Layton (2014: 1262) defines normative unconscious processes as "an effect of the workings of unequal power arrangements on identity formation and relational interactions". Using a psycho-social approach, I interpret mothers' and men-children's narratives, applying Layton's perspective to the dynamics of their relational intimacy within everyday family life, to consider the ways in which:

[i]dentities form in relation to other identities circulating in a culture and subculture [...] in part made up of sociohistorically specific ways of living emotions such as shame and guilt and psychological states such as dependency, vulnerability, and capacity for assertion (Layton, 2014: 1263).

Hockey et al.'s observation (2007: 146) that "family, heterosexuality and home have, in many respects, become elided", was reflected by mothers and most men-children in my research who appeared to assume that mother + child = family = heterosexuality. Hockey et al. (2007: 146) also point out that "dilemmas arise for individuals when they fail to live up to heterosexual norms or transgress them in some way", which suggests the function of 'the family' in (re)producing heteronormative identities, and the challenges involved in creating counter-narratives. My

interpretive analysis of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy within the family is underpinned by Jackson's argument that:

[h]eterosexuality is, by definition, a gender relationship, ordering not only sexual life but also domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources (Van Every, 1996; Ingraham, 1996). Thus heterosexuality, while depending on the exclusion or marginalization of other sexualities for its legitimacy, is not precisely coterminous with heterosexual sexuality. Heteronormativity defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life (Jackson, 2006: 107).

The chapter is divided into sub-sections for simplicity, however, the emotional and social content of each mother or man-child's story is interconnected with others, reflecting the complexity of intimate interpersonal relationships in everyday life. The stories demonstrate the challenges for relational agency, affected by the interaction of the storytellers' internal world with the social world of family life, institutionalised as it is by marriage and divorce laws, for example, and reinforced by cultural narratives. The first section situates participants' narratives in the contemporary heteronormative (white) culture of the U.K.

Cultural narratives: framing family dynamics

Personal narratives of mundane family life, with all its tugs, ties, and tensions, are embedded within a prevailing dominant socio-cultural discourse of familialism in the U.K. currently, which perpetuate norms derived from social hierarchies and intersectional power, related to class, gender, sexuality and race, for example. Popular cultural narratives inform various contemporary family discourses as well as "[n]orms and practices [... that] mandate what counts as a "proper" versus "improper" identity" (Layton, 2014: 1263). They provide opportunities to reflect on personal experiences at the micro level, as a social sounding board or metric for self-assessment, since "reflexivity stretches beyond the cultural and subjective, deeply rooted as it is in institutional social life" (Elliott, 2012: 351). The culture that surrounds daily lives shapes individual and collective identifications, psychically and socially, and affects family practices that impact on identity formation. We inherit (and internalise) ideas, values, and beliefs, which are then available to be embraced, rejected, or disavowed, potentially leading to intergenerational conflict through intra- and interpersonal relational processes. Aarseth et al.'s argument (2016) resonates: "the inculcation of the social can be fractured by family dynamics; both habitus and original habitat may be far from homogeneous and harmonious [and] such conflicts are mobilized by social change and transmitted intergenerationally" (Aarseth et al., 2016: 149).

In-laws and outlaws: fluctuating family identities

Stories in this chapter demonstrate that, for some mothers, becoming a grandmother complicates the relational intimacy between them and their men-children, since it usually involves becoming a 'mother-in-law' or some equivalent role. Mothers-in-law continue to be the misogynist target of many male comedians' 'jokes', historically represented by Les Dawson¹⁶, but still active currently, illustrated by the vast number of online sites that compile the "[f]unniest mother in law jokes that might bring the house down" (Sinkunas and Lyskoit, 2022), providing the cultural landscape for this shift in social role. Such popular narratives throw a spotlight on the triadic relationship between mother, son, and his (female) partner, which creates a context for changes in their individual and social identities, within the broader network of family members. When sons 'acquire' a partner, they bring a coterie of other people (whether actively present or not) into an existing relational intimacy, which has an impact on each person in the network.

A number of women participating in the project spoke about the intensity of their relationship with their sons, and its impact on them when navigating other family relationships, including their own partners/husbands. For example, Jean mentioned that their son wasn't really welcome in the family home by his father/her husband, so she has to keep her son and grandchildren "out of the way". To avoid conflict, she minimises the extent of her involvement in their care, its importance to her and how much she enjoys it. Pam revealed that her husband had told their son, without discussing it with her first, that they wouldn't help with childcare (which had "sort of disappointed" her, although she had never admitted it before our conversation, she said, and had never discussed her disappointment with her husband). Beth related that she no longer talks about her son to her partner "because it always ends unhappily" and now keeps her "worries and distress" to herself. Marie described how angry her son's stepfather was when her son stopped speaking to her and having contact with her grandchildren, causing problems between her and her husband. These mothers' stories suggest that they make somewhat reluctant compromises to seek personal satisfaction and maintain apparent family harmony. Managing the effects of gendered power on relational agency and motivation are evident in these accounts, resulting in limited capacity to exercise individual choice.

¹⁶ U.K. comedian, popular in the 1970s/1980s.

An apparent competitiveness between grand/mothers in the same family formed part of most women's narratives, illustrating the way in which gendered power dynamics operate and are navigated. Intersected by social differences among the network of family relationships, they show how, sometimes individually unsatisfactory, solutions are reached. All the women, even those without grandchildren, were sensitive to the possibility of competition. As paternal grandmothers, most had experienced it in relation to the maternal grandmother and were aware of their own lower position in the grandparent hierarchy. Sue's story below introduces themes of diversity in family cultures, as a potential source of conflict, with (tacit) judgments being made about mothering practices.

Mother love?

Chrissie's parents didn't live locally when Ben was born. But when he was six months old, they told Chrissie quite upfront "We're not having Granny Mitchell being the grandma on the spot, so we're moving to be near you." They'd lived in their old house half an hour away for 25 years, and where they moved to is just two streets up from Robert and Chrissie's.

When it was Ellie's second birthday, I told Chrissie I'd get Ellie a doll, which I did. Her mum found out I was buying Ellie her first doll, and I had to capitulate, because it doesn't matter to me; I'm not in competition with the woman. She's the 'primary granny' because it's her daughter. I couldn't give her the doll. Chrissie said, "I'm so sorry. Don't send that boy doll back. That can be her Christmas present." And that was what happened. I gave her something else for her birthday.

We're very different people, Chrissie's mum and me. She's quite competitive. She does get upset if the kids seem to prefer me. A couple of times I've had the children at my house and took them back home and the other gran's been there to take over; one time when I did that, Ellie wouldn't let go of me and was distraught and wouldn't go to her other gran and then she got upset as well! I said, "Ellie thought her mummy was going to be here, that's all. It's not about you. I'll just stay for a while, and we'll get her playing. She'll be fine." But it's very personal. Everybody's different, aren't they? Makes me laugh a bit. I think it says volumes about that person's own needs.

Once your children join other families, it makes a difference and there's a lot of comparisons made; you don't know it – nobody says it, but you feel it. Sometimes you feel you just don't

stack up, against these big intact, extended families. They have these mega family dos, like tribal events. If there's a child's birthday (which is nearly every week), there's a party and all the family goes – on the in-laws' side, I mean. We never did that and still don't now. It was only the three of us - me and my son and daughter. I think it gets a bit competitive.

That's the thing when grandchildren come along, with the other grandparents. Rob will say "Mum, just ignore Chrissie's mother. Just pay no attention to her." But there was a bit of a to-do one Christmas, when I'd been invited to go down in the morning, to have my lunch with them, and the other grandparents turned up out of the blue, and I couldn't believe what they'd turned up with. It was almost like Santa coming again! Rob made a point of saying to Ben "Show Grandma and Grandpa what Granny M's brought you." Note, they're Grandma and Grandpa! I'm just Granny M! And the next day my son said to me, "Wasn't that ridiculous - what they came with? It's too much. Chrissie tries to tell them." But I'm so used to it now, it is what it is; it doesn't bother me. I think Chrissie and Rob just close in on their own little family and that's what their focus is.

Sue appears to perceive the relational dynamics as originating in different family practices, family size, and hierarchies between maternal and paternal grandmothers, as well as a suggestion of the 'other' grandmother's emotional neediness. Sue presents herself superficially as rational, independent, competent, magnanimous, and less 'invested' emotionally in her role as grandmother. Yet Sue's preoccupation with the competition between both grandmothers and her emphatic disavowal of her part in it is incongruent, suggesting relationally produced internal conflicts for her, since what she appears to feel and what she says are misaligned. This (unconscious) position may have resulted in her making adjustments to her sense of self, through self-monitoring and continuing evaluation of the family context and where she fits within it.

Hierarchical structures and competitiveness between paternal and maternal grandparents have been identified in studies of grandparenting (Eisenberg, 1988; Creasey and Koblewski, 1991; Uhlenburg and Hammill, 1998; Ferguson et al., 2004). Aldous (1995) and Johnson (1998b) similarly "confirm that gender and lineage often act to produce a hierarchy with maternal grandmothers at the top and paternal grandfathers at the bottom" (Ferguson et al., 2004: 16). Ferguson et al. (2004: 57) formulated "a conception of a 'grandparenting hierarchy' in which grandmothers are ranked more highly than grandfathers and maternal grandmothers take priority over paternal grandparents". Dench and Ogg (2002) noted that paternal grandmothers may be seen as

competitors with maternal grandparents and might be excluded from contact with their grandchildren. From Sue's perspective in her story, it may be that her agency was motivated by a desire to keep her son and his family close. Avoiding the contradictions of differences between the families, and to diminish the awkwardness of family occasions, for example, Sue appeared to have decided to take a secondary position, simultaneously unconsciously reproducing normative practices of family relationships that shape (hetero)gender identity formation. Whereas it appears to be an understandable resolution to an uncomfortable situation, which her son, daughter-in-law, and Sue have 'managed' between them, Sue's final comment in the story indicates their subtle, tacit collusion in maintaining heteronormative family practices, as "a strategic and conscious adaptation rather than as a conflictually negotiated process" (Aarseth et al., 2016: 150).

The efforts made by women in navigating and negotiating family relationships were apparent in all the narratives: all either declared or implied their continuing attachment and sense of responsibility for their sons' welfare and happiness. Ultimately, they justified any implicit criticism of their men-children, or their partners, in terms of their 'lifelong' commitment to helping them, even to their own detriment for some women. It appeared, in almost all stories (except for the two men who didn't have children), that the middle-generation mother was the 'gatekeeper' and decision-maker for family arrangements, although the ways in which mothers-in-laws' access was permitted and monitored was neither the same in each case nor necessarily harmoniously achieved for everyone involved in the family. Marie, for example, reflecting on the limitations to seeing her grandchildren, thought that her older son's wife:

feels a bit intimidated. I've not a clue why she'd feel intimidated. Once I was at work and my son phoned and I asked him if I could see my grandchildren over the weekend, and I heard my daughter-in-law in the background saying, "Tell her she can see them when I say she can." I was really upset. My colleague could see I was upset afterwards and when I told her what I'd heard, she said that maybe my daughter-in-law feels threatened or intimidated by me. But I don't know why she'd feel like that.

In the next story, Marie appears to monitor herself, assessing her position, and the differences, in her sons' families, making comparisons between the two, and between each family and herself.

Mother love?

My two sons are like chalk and cheese, and so are their wives. Tessa's lovely, but she likes to be in control. If I say to Mark "Are you going to come over for tea?" or "Can I have the kids this weekend?", he'll say, "I'll sort it out with Tess." We've made arrangements before, me and him, and when he's got back home things have had to be changed: he'll phone me and say "Tessa says ...". She's very much in control. She always says, "We've got a very traditional relationship. Mark goes out and earns the money, I stay at home, look after the kids and clean the house." Not like me one bit.

Chris's wife, Paula, is one on her own. I can't see them staying together. Chris stays there for his kids. He's said as much. Paula's a teacher. If you said it's day, she'd say it's night. She's one of those that knows everything. She's got to have the last word. Doesn't listen. She's not like me either. Paula's very good at saying what she thinks you want to hear. Yet I know different because the grandkids tell me: "Are you alright?" "Yeah, we're fine. Grandma, I'm so pleased we're here this weekend." "Are you, sweetheart? Why's that?" And he says, "I'm fed up with my mum stopping in bed." That's because Paula goes to work; she's the main breadwinner and Chris works from home, so he takes the kids to school. He fetches them. He works freelance in between. So he still earns money, still contributes. But she tells everybody she's the breadwinner. It's like role reversal. And then she'll stay in bed till 4 o'clock at weekends, because she's been working all week. Recently Chris had to go abroad for a few days, and I phoned Paula, "Can I have the children for the weekend?" "Yes, yes, you can have them. Come and fetch them now." I said, "What's the matter, Paula?" She says, "They're getting on my nerves! I'm really struggling in the mornings, to get them to school, to get me to school." I think "Chris, how did you get in with this woman?"

Chris moans about her and I say, "Chris, she won't alter. You've got to learn to live with it otherwise you'll make yourself ill." He says, "Then I've got a problem." "You have got a problem," I say, "She hasn't got a problem with it. It's your problem!" Then he says, "You're saying I'm a problem?" I said, "No, I'm not saying that!"

And I think "How did this happen? Where did I go wrong?"

I don't think they'll stay together. And she'll go down south to where her mother lives. And I won't see my grandsons then. Her mother's an ad litem guardian, and knows all the solicitors and courts there. Chris wouldn't have a chance.

I love them all to bits. I'll always be there for them. Help out with the children. It's your family, isn't it? That's all you can be: there, to pick up the pieces if needs be, and be there for them.

Marie's narrative reveals the complex dimensions of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, different approaches to decision-making, and where dynamic power is located within the same family constellation of shifting relationships. This appears to affect Marie's agency, limiting her capacity to resist heteronormative family practices and ultimately contributing to their perpetuation. The intricacies of managing interpersonal, relational power, socially constructed and psychically embodied and enacted, is evident in Marie's story. Power is located in Mark's case with his wife, from Marie's perspective, and there is an implied criticism of her son for allowing his wife to decide access and of his wife for being 'traditional' (Marie had brought up her sons without their fathers' involvement and was proud of her independence and achievement). However, she is also critical of her other son's wife, and their less traditional circumstances. Paula also appears to exert power (and relational agency) by exploiting Marie's willingness to look after the children, which Marie then uses to reinforce Chris's dependence on her, taking back power. Marie's (unconscious) guilt, manifest in accepting responsibility still for her men-children's welfare, is reflected in the last sentence, asserting a simultaneous love for them, whilst also being critical of their choices, which she perceives as problematic. Marie's (apparently unconscious) awareness of the contrariness of her differential judgments leads her to soothe herself by expressing her deep love for them all, unconsciously protecting herself against feelings of shame.

From Marie's telling of her story, each of the women appear to be enacting different degrees of omnipotence¹⁷, each perhaps feeling entitled to "dictate the terms of other people's lives" (Shaw, 2014: xiv). This psycho-social (gendered) process may be a result of their vulnerability, suggesting a limited capacity for mutual recognition and empathy, denying the possibility of interdependence or solidarity. Such relational complications of shifting forms of enacted dominance and submission illustrate that "[i]dentities are fundamentally enmeshed in relations of power" (Roseneil and

¹⁷ The psychoanalytic concept of "omnipotence" is used in the thesis to describe a "defence against dependency and contact with any feelings of vulnerability" (Fitzgerald, 2009).

Seymour, 1999: 2). As Marie's story indicates, (hetero)gender identities form through circular, interactive, mutually reinforcing, relational psycho-social processes at the micro interpersonal level, reverberating through the meso level of the family (in Marie's willingness to provide free childcare, for instance), and through the macro institutional level of, for example, U.K. family law, which privileges normative family forms.

Although the women participating reported tensions in the triad of son, daughter-in-law and themselves, the men participating tended to generalise about what caused conflict, perhaps not noticing or unconsciously 'deaf' to the nuances of unspoken communication between their mothers and their partners, which were expressed often via specific family practices. Problems with present giving, for example, were a recurring theme in grandmothers' stories, with daughters-in-law appearing to be the arbiters for what presents are permissible. Beth described ruefully the effort she makes to ensure that any presents she's thinking of buying for her grandsons are "approved [by my daughter-in-law], preferably in writing, in an email, so I don't get it wrong", once she'd realised that some gifts "aren't acceptable". Beth explained:

I'd witnessed lots of times when presents that my ex-husband, my son's father, gave our grandchildren, were put down the cellar after he left their house and the children were in bed, never to be brought out again - because it was all plastic tat, as she called it. You could see the knowing looks they exchanged when the boys opened their presents from him. It was an 'in-joke' between her and my son, that they knew where that stuff would be going later.

In the next story the rejection of gifts seems to represent, from Ann's perspective, a symbolic rejection of her as a grandmother and her (historical and current) sense of self. It exemplifies the delicate and tense negotiations that takes place in family relationships, which pulsate throughout the relational intimacies with her son and grandsons and impacts on her identity.

Mother love?

My son initially developed a very close relationship with his in-laws, which I was very pleased about. They got married and nothing really changed at first. I got on well with Helen, but things changed quite a bit once they'd had a child. I mean, I like to stick my oar in a bit, because I think I know what I'm talking about when it comes to child-rearing; it's difficult not to when you've had training and experience working with lots of children. I think David takes

a backseat. I'm not sure why, but he takes a backseat with the children. His wife has much more influence.

Once, before Joe was born, we were all sitting in the back garden, and I suddenly got taken up short. Helen was chatting to David, and she said to him, "You know when you have a child, it's your mum's mum that really counts. Your dad's mum doesn't count for anything in a child's life." And I felt really enormously hurt by that. I didn't say anything for a bit, but then, because I bottled it up, it kind of splurged out when I did say something; I was very emotional. It didn't get properly resolved or explained. And it hurt. And that was that. And I thought "I'll show them it doesn't always work out like that, and that I'm a sort of grandmother that's valued because of what I'm able to offer".

When Joe was born, I was as helpful as I could be, but I was some distance away, and working. And things sort of chugged on, but then I found gradually that whatever I tried to do was kind of rebuffed. I don't know if I overstepped the mark, but I tried to buy various things for them. One of the things I did, when Joe was quite little, was bought a really nice copy of "We're Going On A Bear Hunt"; I sat him on my knee, reading it to him and sort of giving him a cuddle at the end, when the bear comes. And Helen took the book off me and said she didn't want me reading that because it was very frightening. I said "I think the point is that it is a bit frightening, but because you're sitting in a safe place, you're safe from it all. It's about learning to cope." She wouldn't have it. Later on, I foolishly bought "The Gruffalo" for him, and that was taken away, and he wasn't allowed to read that. Then, when he was a bit older, I thought he might like to read "Horrid Henry", because that's quite a moral story in that good always wins, and when he's naughty he doesn't get what he wants, but it's quite funny in the process. She didn't approve of that either, so that was taken away. He wasn't allowed to read that.

And from then on, I was at a bit of a loss as to what to do. I think the fourth book I bought was a really nice UNICEF book on the "Rights of the Child", which was beautifully produced, and Helen just took it away immediately, saying "I don't want him to read about people who have their fingers cut off." I said "It's not about that at all. It's about their rights and respecting one another." And she said, "No. Sorry." And took it away. After that I haven't really bought him any books because I didn't know what to do. Books are important to me and it's something I could have done with him.

I don't know where it goes from here. I've got a feeling it's going to get better the older the kids get because they do a bit of challenging as well now. And they seem to quite like me. I can have a bit of a laugh with them. And I'll fit in with them.

Ann reflects on the everyday dynamics within the triad of mother, son, and daughter-in-law, where her son seems to absent himself from active relational involvement, handing power to his wife to decide on the acceptability of gifts, constructing boundaries that left his mother with very little agency, which she exercised initially through respectful resistance and then tactical withdrawal and compromise. Although superficially Ann's story focusses on the rejection of her choice of books to give to her grandson, it indicates how the relational intimacy within her family, affecting her identity, changed over time, particularly with the advent of her first grandson. Ann's social identity, and her sense of self-esteem, formed partly through the respect she received in her career before retirement, appears undermined and threatened by her daughter-in-law's behaviour, in which she exerts her own agency, but in doing so constrains Ann's capacity to act.

Replete in its inference of emotional wounds, cultural differences, and psychic implications, Ann's story resonates with Johnson et al.'s argument (2004: 262) that "[s]ocial identities are an aspect of social relations, which always involve meaning, power and psychic or emotional dimensions". The gifts of books, in Ann's story, appears to hold very different meanings for both Ann and Helen, loaded with power, impacting psychically as well as socially. Helen's reaction to Ann's gifts, in which she exercised maternal power within the family, appeared to be part of normative unconscious processes (Layton, 2020), which involve the splitting and projection of unconscious anxieties about mothering as a psychic defence, the outcome of which is to "sustain rather than challenge social inequalities" (Layton, 2014: 1263).

The intersections of age and gender appear to have affected Ann's position in the family hierarchy, limiting Ann's "capacity for assertion" (Layton, 2014: 1263). The unconscious transference communication between Helen and Ann (implied in Ann's story) resulted in Ann doubting her own mothering practice. Ann's stated longstanding commitment to addressing social inequalities was an important part of her sense of self, so that Helen's repudiation of Ann's love of books, particularly where they deal with the emotional and practical impact of oppressive social relations, seemed an attack on her identity. Wanting to share this aspect of her identity with her grandchildren, its denial left Ann feeling disempowered and excluded from the family. Ann's vulnerability in the face of her

daughter-in-law's power reflects a socio-cultural idealisation of middle-generation mothers and denigration of older women.

Both Ann's and Marie's stories appear to express an unconscious omnipotence, in their partially disguised, polite combat with their daughters-in-law. It indicates their mundane narcissistic¹⁸ vulnerability, psycho-socially shaping their identities, changing over time "in a history of hegemonies, failed settlements, partial victories, oppositions and alternatives, unfinished business and remaining hopes" (Johnson et al., 2004: 262). Ann, adapting her behaviour to ensure continuation of the relationship in the longer term, perceived her grandsons' attachment to her to be intact. She appeared to be optimistic in her observations of her grandsons, who were beginning to challenge their mother, paradoxically perhaps simultaneously forming their own performative (hetero)gendered masculinities in adulthood, reproducing normative gender divisions, indicative of intergenerational transmission. Ann's story demonstrates the complexities of everyday intergenerational relational intimacy, with its shifting power dimensions resonating with Layton's (2014) argument that unequal power practices embodied through normative unconscious processes enables "social traumas¹⁹ of various kinds [to be] transmitted intergenerationally and enacted between different social groups within a society" (Layton, 2014: 1262).

Intruders or allies

Mothers of men-children are sometimes viewed as intruders or allies, fluctuating according to circumstances between the one position and the other, sometimes even appearing to hold both positions in tension at the same time, when providing grandchild care, for example, but also being (made) aware of the boundaries of their involvement, determined by their daughters-in-law and/or their sons. Grandmothers are sometimes perceived as allies, for instance, when helping practically and financially, or as a sounding board for their man-child when there are difficulties in the marriage, seen in Marie's story above, and Luke's later in this chapter. However, they can also be positioned as an intruder, and, for some women (as in Beth's next story, after babysitting her grandchildren), the way in which their intrusion is communicated comes as a surprise, perhaps

¹⁸ Drawing on Kohut's (1971) theories of narcissism, I use the concept to describe a non-pathological unconscious process to understand how it may disrupt relational intimacies contextualised in interlinked macro, meso and micro level gendered social practices, intersected by age and gender, for example.

¹⁹ I conceptualise 'social trauma' in the thesis as the effect of cumulative relational power used to subjugate individually and/or collectively, including, for example, "the whittling away over time of a sense of safety, security, and trust" (Layton, 2020: 196), and the psychic threat of "humiliation and rejection in social situations" (Bjornsson et al., 2020: 1).

signalling future tensions in the relationships, as shifting relational hierarchies are (re)established socially and psychically, which conform to normative expectations of gender and age.

Mother love?

As soon as they got in, I heard my daughter-in-law say to my son "See your mother across the road and back to her door": our surprised faces, his and mine, and our immediate compliance with her command, disempowering me by intervening in what'd been an equal and autonomous relationship with my son, I thought. It never would've occurred to either of us that I needed to be escorted back home. I've lived independently and travelled all over different countries! A direct parry, explicit to me, but perhaps not to her: a daughter-in-law's power tactic against mother-in-law, transmitting a message to both me and my son, telling us where we stood in relation to her and each other.

Her family background's very different from the one my sons were brought up in. Perhaps she thought it was the right thing to do but she was definitely getting rid of me and giving him instructions that he had to comply with.

A number of men's stories describe a contradictory perception of their mothers as both intruders and allies, particularly regarding the relationship between their wives/partners and their mothers, and its impact on their intimate relationship with their mothers once children arrive. When grandchildren are born, it appears that the middle generation mothers take precedence, as Beth discovered. Most men with children narrated difficulties between their mothers and wives, some describing how they deliberately 'managed' conflict to ensure their mothers' continued practical help with childcare, over time becoming able to identify sources of irritation for either their mother or partner, which they could choose to either ignore or diffuse. Luke's story next, however, (like Petros's in the previous chapter) shows how complicated the intimacy between a man-child and his mother can be.

Mother love?

I can tell my mum anything but it's tricky and gets emotional: I'm an emotional person.

I feel I have to support my wife. But I know I've said things to my mum about my wife that might not be fair on her. It's hard because there's things I probably shouldn't tell my mother, just to offload, and then that's made things more difficult. It gets more difficult then with my

wife because maybe she's lost trust in me and thinks I'm siding with my mum rather than with her.

I'm an emotional guy but I bottle things up and then, when it comes to the surface, I feel rubbish. And I feel quite lonely at times because there's things I can't say to either of them, and I'm more cautious about telling my mum anything that's troubling me, because I don't want the emotional impact it could have on any of us, and to my own wellbeing. It makes me realise it's down to me to deal with the issues between me and my wife. I think a lot about what's going on between me and my wife and my mother.

A big issue is that my wife's family don't want to be involved at all with us and the baby; they came to our wedding but that's all. Her mother didn't want to be at the birth, so my wife asked my mum to stay with us in the labour suite, which she did, till after he was born. My mum's provided all the emotional, practical and financial support all the way along, and I think that might be difficult for my wife, and for my mum, her being too closely involved, having no-one else to share that grandmother role. And difficult for me as well.

I've changed since becoming a dad. Now I just want to get home after work and be with my son. I think that's had the biggest impact on my identity.

My mum and me are really close. I'd been single for a long time, and she stayed with me a lot before I got married, so we'd had a lot of experiences together, good and bad, and know each other well. That might be difficult too for my wife. When I got married and then had my son, it was a massive change.

I phone my mum every day still. Even if we don't speak, we'll always text. I think I kind of want someone in my corner, a bit of reassurance that she's there.

The undercurrent of unease for Luke in his story, appearing to result from his continuing need for closeness to his mother and expectations of him as a husband and father, reflects Jackson's argument that "heteronormativity [defines] normative ways of life as well as normative sexuality" (Jackson, 2006: 117). Luke seems to express a sense of (him)self that conflicts with the social roles of husband, father, and son, shaping his (hetero)gendered heterosexual identity. His emphasis on being an "emotional guy" suggests that he thinks his 'masculinity' may not conform to normative

expectations of being a husband/father. Luke recognises the emotional impact of the family dynamics, potentially on all three of them, individually and perhaps collectively. His 'bottling up' of emotions reflects Gabb's comment (2008: 104) that "many men do struggle to express their emotions, but this does not mean that they are less feeling". Luke appears to feel unable to resolve the discomfort for himself, or, as he suspects, for the others, leaving him 'torn' between his attachment to both his mother and his wife. Layton's comment (2014: 1263) that "[i]n some social conditions [...] it is not "masculine" to be dependent" resonates in Luke's story (as well as other men-children's narratives in my research), particularly when men feel dependent on their mothers.

Luke's story contains various gendered norms and assumptions (conflicting with his experience), for example, the 'proper' person (his mother-in-law rather than his mother) to be present at the birth of his son, his understanding of what being married means, as well as becoming a parent. His narrative reflects the psychic and emotional cost of everyday contradictions between lived experience and culturally constituted gender binaries (man/woman, husband/wife, mother/son, for example), which "often require that we split off and project various ways of being human, ways of loving, ways of being in our bodies" (Layton, 2020: 70). Luke notes the impact on him of life transitions that appear to have created intra- and interpersonal conflict, as he attempts to come to terms with life, and identity, transitions. He perceives his mother as an important ally for himself and perhaps his wife, but also simultaneously as a potential intruder as different relational patterns and hierarchies emerge from the transitions, resonating with Aarseth et al.'s (2016: 151) argument that:

Subjectively experienced tensions in the habitus emerge not from gross structural conflicts and transitions alone, but also from the way any habitus is produced in interaction with others. [... The] family [...] is infused not only with conflicts between different forms of capital, but also, simultaneously, with intersubjective conflicts concerning different ways of being, relating and making emotional investments in the world.

Luke's experience of the involvement of his mother when his child was born, contrasts with the findings of academic studies in the U.K., U.S., and Europe (Tinsley and Parke, 1984; Cherlin and Furstenburg, 1985; Dench and Ogg, 2002; Mueller and Elder Jr, 2003; Ferguson et al., 2004; Arber and Timonen, 2012), which demonstrate that the focus is almost exclusively on the new mother and the maternal grandmother, marginalising the new father and the paternal grandparents. From his perspective, Luke appears to be carrying most of the emotional load for his immediate family, while his mother, rather than the maternal grandmother, seems to share at least some of the practical and emotional weight.

From my own experience, when my sons' children were born, the triadic relationship was complicated by my desire to support my men-children in their transition to fatherhood: to be both a mother and grandmother simultaneously, roles that are neither equivalent nor interchangeable. I attempted to be mindful of the needs of their wives, of knowing when and how to step in and when to step away, when offers of help might be viewed as intrusive. My well-meaning intentions were not always, if ever, successful or noticed! Sometimes, memories of mothering my own new-born sons echoed through, and confused, the negotiation of boundaries with my sons and their families, which had an impact on my identity and capacity for agency. I became more cautious over time, taking fewer risks, being 'quieter', and less likely to challenge the heteronormative conventions within the developing family matrix, at times at odds with my own less normative expectations of family practices.

Although all the men spoke about how they had created space (emotionally and sometimes physically) between themselves and their mothers, it appeared, for the two without children, from their perspectives, to have caused less conflict. Liam said that he wishes he could do more to "protect" his mother, since he thinks she is "lonely" since his father died, and wishes that he could support her financially, regretting that he only usually manages to see her about once every six weeks, when he goes to "do her hair" (an intimate practice itself), as he works as a hairdresser. Scott said, "I could always talk to my mum when I've had problems with relationships, but I wouldn't say I'm massively close. I probably call her every week, or every other week, and when I'm travelling around, I pop in and see her, every couple of months if I happen to be passing". Liam and Scott both spoke warmly of their mothers and their childhood, believing their identity had been shaped by their mothers. Scott noted that, although he recognised some ambivalence in his adult relationship with his mother, when he visits her it "revives feelings and anxieties about defending her against my dad, like I did in the past". Both men had partners (or had in the past), stating that there hadn't been any conflict between their partners and their mothers, despite socio-cultural differences; neither of them expected or needed financial assistance from their mothers, unlike most participating fathers, who had gained financial support directly or indirectly, through 'free' childcare, for example.

All the men who were fathers said there were difficulties, of varying degrees, between their own mothers and the mothers of their children. Neil said that there had been "a little bit" of tension between his wife and his mother:

until we had children and then it was much more difficult. Definitely. My mum's quite happy to let the kids get away with murder; she's very soft. Whereas Kate's attitude to discipline is rather more strict. When we were finding our feet as parents, that was quite difficult to manage. I did quite a bit of refereeing at times.

Recounting how he'd had psychotherapy, partly addressing his relationship with his mother, Matt commented:

I had to really distance myself from her. Cut off from her. To a point where, after doing the therapy work, going back and letting her back in, little by little, putting new boundaries in place. Then, naturally, she's thinking, "Who's he think he is?" Because there's this totally different me. I'd changed.

It seemed that Matt had begun to (re)shape his "narrative identity" (Ricoeur, 1991, 1992, 1995; Venn, 2020) to fit with his sense of self now and as he reflected (in therapy apparently, but also in our conversation) on the meaning of changing family relationships. Matt's re-framing of his identity resonates with Venn's comment (2020: 49) that "[t]he refiguration of identity depends on the conjunction of particular phenomena, involving action with others, and the retelling or re-plotment of the biographical elements of a previous identity". Through this "in-folding of an exterior" (Rose, 1996: 142), which, from my research perspective, involves the interaction of the psyche with the social, Matt is able to stabilise his sense of self and 'beingness', engaging his agency in relation to his internal monologue and external socio-cultural narratives.

(In)dependence and interdependence

Many mothers spoke of contemporary expectations that they would lead their own separate lives, disconnected from their men-children and their families. Mothers' stories reflected the contradictions and confusions involved in the paradoxical problem of desire for independence in their daily lives and a simultaneous emotional desire for dependency on their men-children, sometimes craving recognition of interdependence. As the stories show, the discontinuous process of separation involves a process in which their identities change, with positive, negative, or mixed consequences. From both men-children's and mothers' narratives, there appears to be a fine, and fragile, line between the desire in both for independence from each other and a continuing bond between them that keeps them tied into an (auto)biographically based but changed relationship as adults. Michelle's story, next, expresses her sense of loss, her agency in decision-making and its

repercussions, and the struggles she faces in wanting to help her son at the same time as creating a life for herself independent of her family.

Mother love?

They'd wanted me to go for Christmas. The time I was there before, they were going out because it was her birthday and wanted me to babysit their little girl.

That weekend, me and him went out shopping on our own. I couldn't hold it in anymore. I had to tell him what I could see going on with her, his partner.

Then lots of things happened so I think he knew really; he knew I was right. But he didn't do anything about it, and he almost begged for me to go at Christmas. I'd got a new job in retail, and have to work weekends, so it was a 'big no' from me. Specially near Christmas. I just said, "There's no way I can come down."

She made it known on Facebook that they'd had a dreadful Christmas and I thought "If that's supposed to make me feel guilty, you've failed, it hasn't made me feel guilty." It'd just been them and the little girl.

All along I'd been trying to keep it from exploding onto my son. All this between them had been going on in the background and he just hadn't said anything.

But he knows what he said to me when I split up from my last husband, and it cut me like a knife: "You're in that position because of the choices you've made in life." It really hurt me. He was never there to help me through the breakup. I've cried myself to sleep many times.

I thought I'll just have to let them get on with their lives. I'm left here. I'm on my own. I'll just have to get through it all.

As Michelle perceives it, her son took for granted her dependability and permanence in his life as a (grand)mother, conforming to contemporary social and cultural expectations. Michelle's narrative exemplifies, however, conflicts between being a grandmother, helping with her granddaughter and participating in annual celebrations, for example, and current social norms for her to work and live independently of her family. Michelle's performative mothering identity is expressed in her insights

into her son's family problems, which she wants to influence to protect him. However, Michelle also appears to view her son as her protector and is disappointed when he admonishes her and withdraws from her. Michelle's story communicated a sense of abandonment by him, and a discrepancy between her emotional needs for intimacy with him and his willingness to consider her needs. The disclosure of her crying herself to sleep at the loss of her son suggests her emotional investment in an idealised fulfilment of mothering. Michelle's story resonates with Green's (2016: 16) view that "nostalgia plays a part in family life histories, not least the yearning to return to the days of early childrearing". However, it also implies a possible unconscious fantasy of her son replacing her husband: she had identified elsewhere in our conversation, that her son, aged 14, became the "man of the house", when her first husband, his father, had left her. Her story illustrates the complexities of a lifetime of enmeshed relational intimacy between mothers and men-children, regulated by social norms that circumscribe its expression.

Michelle's narrative communicated a sense of her shame and being shamed historically by her son's seeming lack of empathy for her, in circumstances that she recognised as resembling his own now. Her emphatic denial that her son's partner's attempt to make her feel guilty had worked implied on the contrary that she did feel ashamed. Michelle's comments confirm that the use of social media is part of the performative practice of gendered family relations and arguably facilitates, and is complicit in, the trauma of conscious hurts and unconscious wounds, such as shame (Shaw, 2014), that affect identity and sense of self.

The use of current communication technologies has intersectional dimensions, such as age (as well as gender, class, and race) where older women may be less familiar with the cultural etiquette and semantics of social media, for example, and may be unable to navigate it easily (Ofcom, 2017). The meaning of interpersonal communications via social media or mobile text messaging may be misunderstood or missed, which provides opportunities to exploit, obfuscate, or oppress, reinforcing power hierarchies, intersected by age and gender, for example, that affect agency and decisions (Hermida, 2015; Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020; Meisner, 2021). Beth, for example, commented:

I'd prefer my son to call me, rather than text because texts are so impersonal, and it's hard to tell what's really going on. And I don't understand what some emojis mean, but I know when my son is trying to put me in my place! Somehow it's down to me to learn this new language.

Hermida (2015: 2) notes the need for research into how “the linguistic conventions, symbols, and objects of social media are deployed as expressions of power”, while Meisner (2021: 560) comments that social media is being used to express “antagonistic stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against older adults”. Much research into the ‘digital divide’ in relation to age focusses on health and social wellbeing (such as Makita et al., 2019, and Quinn, 2019), or in relation to gender differentiated access to, and use of, new communication media (Kim et al., 2017, for instance). Johanssen’s study (2022) suggests that “popular misogyny is [...] networked [through the ‘manosphere’] and makes effortless use of different social media” (Johanssen, 2022: 69). Both Munn’s (2020) study of “toxic communication online” (Munn, 2020: 1) and Barter and Koulu’s (2021) research into the complexities of gender-based violence and digital technologies highlight online communication as a potential “mechanism of oppression” (Barter and Koulu, 2021: 367). My research suggests that online communication can be used as a form of relational control, contributing to interpersonal conflict and grand/mothers’ marginalisation (illustrated in Beth’s and Sue’s stories, Chapter 5, as well as Michelle’s and Beth’s reflections here). The gendered use of online technologies involves “two sets of rules”, as Sue (Chapter 5) notes, which reinforce and reproduce normative gendered expectations of grand/mothers’ and men-children’s roles in the family.

In her story it appears that Michelle and her son are caught up in a dynamic in which both deny their vulnerability, chiming with Layton’s (2009: 105) view that “contemporary definitions of empathy normalize the repudiation of vulnerability and thereby foster an experience of empathy in which one can sustain a safe distance from the suffering other and not hold oneself accountable”. Despite ostensible resistance to the demands on her as a (grand)mother to conform, Michelle’s emotional suffering and vulnerability appears transformed psychically into a feeling of helplessness. Consciously justifying her decisions, her disavowed vulnerability results in deliberate separation from her son and his family: she takes up a position of self-sufficiency to avoid further hurt - and to make her feelings tolerable - rather than, as may be perceived superficially, as signifying individual agency. Neither Michelle nor her son appear able to admit their interdependence, shameful as it is, emotionally and psychically, according to the current neo-liberal political emphasis on self-reliance (Gammon, 2017). Their agency appears to be curtailed by a motivation for self-preservation (including, for Michelle, her mothering identity), which appears to lead to mutual but unconscious collusion in each other’s unhappiness, with the possible normative reproduction of dichotomous (hetero)gendered identities, in which the cultural ideals of “proper masculinity and femininity”,

embodied in family identities, are “bound up with a culture’s norms concerning whether or not it is shameful to be dependent” (Layton, 2020: 52).

As Michelle’s story confirms, the negotiation of grand/mothers’ involvement in the family appears neither wholly free of emotional, cultural, and social pressures nor transactional in terms of acknowledging what they might be giving up to provide childcare and the indirect, if not direct, material contribution they make to the family. Almost all the men who had children relied on their mothers to some extent for help with childcare. Most of the women commented on the financial help they give to their men-children: assistance in buying houses; buying clothes for grandchildren; paying for out-of-school activities. All those providing childcare did so at their own expense, involving travel costs, buying food for themselves and their grandchildren, paying for leisure activities, for example. None mentioned payment for their labour; it appeared to be assumed by both grandmothers and men-children that it came free. Jean’s story recounts the (unpaid) ‘work’ she’d done before meeting for the research conversation:

Mother love?

I was nearly late getting here. I got a call last night from my son. I’d only been gone an hour from looking after the grandchildren - I do that three days a week after school, so they don’t have to pay a childminder. “Can you do something for me, mum? I’ve got a blood test in the morning first thing, at the doctor’s. Can you take me?” He doesn’t like blood tests, but why his wife can’t take him, I don’t know; I always take him. And it’s the other side of the city; he’s never changed practice when they moved. I told him I’d got to get to a meeting.

Anyway, I take him, and wait for him. And then he says, “I need to get to work now. Can you drop me off?” It’s not even in this city: it’s 12 miles each way. But I take him, and while I’m driving, I suddenly think how’s he going to get back home after work? His car’s at his house. “How’re you going to get back tonight?” I said. “Oh,” he said, “Can you come back and fetch me?”

Jean explained how she, as well as her son, takes her availability to help for granted, without identifying it as work for which she doesn’t get paid. She realised that she’d be working that day as a (grand)mother/child minder and chauffeur/healthcare support, simply accepting it until she reflected aloud on what she’d already done, and what it means to, and for, her. Jean described how she regularly organises outings during school holidays and at weekends for the children. She noted,

with (seemingly unconsciously defensive) laughter, that she'd been given theatre tickets as a birthday present by her son and daughter-in-law, for herself and their small daughter. She'd accepted her gift with some disbelief that even then she'd be providing a "social experience" for their child, and not simply something for her to enjoy separate from her grandmothering role. Rather than an interdependent relationship, it seemed that her son, his wife, and their children were dependent on her, emotionally, practically, and financially for their wellbeing. This appeared to entail an unspoken bargain made between them so that Jean could uphold her (grand)mothering identification, which (confusingly for Jean, it seemed) necessitated a loss of self.

Pam describes, in this next story, the impact of decisions she made earlier in life on her current situation as she reflects on the separation from her men-children and her independence, which appears to be a valued part of her identity that she had wished to impart to her sons. She ponders her future though, with some anxiety, being left alone, unsupported by her sons.

Mother love?

They don't really ask me about my life. I think they know I'm an independent woman and I've never been in their pockets, expecting anything from them. I've always been self-sufficient really, never on at them much, like some women who are all over their sons and their family. I've never done that. I've let them have their independence. That's what parenting's all about really. I sit here and think, "They've got to have that independence." They've flown the nest. And we're here if they want us. Not phoning them up all the time: "How're you? What're you doing?". I think some mothers do that.

But I often wonder, if I got ill, if I was on my own, would they come round? You'd never know till it happened. I got a bit upset a couple of years ago. I'd had foot surgery, and I was on my own. They didn't come round. I managed alright. My sister dropped in, made sure I was okay. But I didn't see anything of my sons or their wives or the grandchildren.

Those little old ladies who've got a son, saying "I don't bother him. He's got his own life to lead." But is that right? Me and my sister sometimes say, "I wonder if they'll look after us when we're old?" I'm not sure my nephew would, but perhaps his wife would make sure we were alright. I don't know about any of mine!

They'll never forgive me for not doing the childminding! No, I don't do it for the grandchildren, but I did do everything bringing up my own children. I gave up everything, including the career ladder and everything else in those days, and now the pension income as well because of that: I'd have got more pension now if I'd got a more senior job with a bigger salary. But I'm not doing that now, giving everything up.

But do they hold it against me?

Pam appeared to feel hurt and angered by the physical and emotional absence of her sons, despite stoically continuing to adapt her identity, perhaps through a psychically defensive strategy of rationalisation, internalising distressing feelings to avoid the pain of loss (of hope perhaps) and disappointment. Her mothering identity appears to have shifted from a traditional role as nurturer and facilitator of her sons' independence to a desire for mutuality, interdependence and perhaps a return to merger present when her sons were new-born or infants, as well as her unformulated memories of being mothered herself (Baraitser, 2009). Pam told me that her own mother had died when she was sixteen, which may have unconsciously and consciously affected her identity in multiple ways, as she made sense of maternal loss, mortality, and the constraints that everyday life presents. This appeared to have left her vulnerable to loss and fears of abandonment, which perhaps contributed to shaping her identity. The contradictions within Pam's vocalised emphasis on independence, combined with a lack of recognition that interdependence might be possible, suggested paradoxically her unconscious deep desire for dependence.

Pam's story also illustrates how the exercise of gendered power changes over time, as her mothering identity, with power to influence her sons in childhood, shifts to being a grandmother. Resisting the traditional grandmothering role, she appears to have relinquished her own (possibly cherished) power to the middle generation of her sons and their families. Her identity has changed, it appears, through a series of transitions, involving gendered relational power differently embodied and enacted over the life course. Pam seems to experience this current period in her life as disorienting, having to adjust emotionally and behaviourally. She has had a career, raised her children to become independent adults, and now feels that some acknowledgment of her work is due, but she displaces that transactionally based expectation onto feelings of "guilt" at not taking care of her grandchildren, as social norms demand. Pam appears to have internalised social expectations of combining her identity as a mother and grandmother with a career, through which her psychic and social world has been constituted. This psycho-social process has led to her

exercising agency in the actions she's taken but which conflicts between her desire for independence and her desire for reciprocal love, enacted through relational intimacy with her sons. Pam's story exemplifies how normative unconscious processes operate psycho-socially, illustrating embodied intersecting age and gender divisions, which are historically and socially created and reproduced over time intergenerationally.

Echoing experiences shared, though differently embodied and enacted, by most mothers participating, Pam's story depicts transitions as men-children separate and ostensibly transfer their attachment towards another 'love-object'. Marie, for example, reflected that "it changed the relationship a lot with my son, because obviously he backs his wife more than me". Marie's comment arose from her story (below) of an argument with her son about arrangements that had been agreed and then disregarded by him and his wife, and encapsulates the tugs, ties, and tensions of mother and man-child intimacy set within a network of family power dynamics.

Mother love?

It was six months before he'd talk to me. And he blocked my calls. I didn't see his children for six months. I went down and knocked on their door. I tried all sorts. Perhaps I shouldn't have raised my voice, but I did.

In the end I thought I'm just making things worse. I'll just step back and when they want to get in touch, they will. I didn't cope very well with it. It really upset me. And I felt a bit guilty as well because I felt I caused it; I shouldn't have lost my temper. And of course, me and my husband had a row as well. It has a knock-on effect.

While some men acknowledged the support and reliance (and consequent dependence) they experience with their mothers regarding practical matters, their capacity for recognising and articulating the nuances of emotional (inter)dependency appeared to be constrained by psycho-social constructions of 'proper' expressions of 'masculinity', as seen in Luke's story. Both mothers' and men-children's narratives show that identification with (hetero)gender binary classifications of identities has both psychic and social implications intergenerationally. As Layton comments:

[r]ecognition (in the form of social approval, love, conditions for social belonging) is granted to "proper" performances of identity; the risk of meeting with indifference, humiliation, and shame discourages "improper" performances and encourages subjects to split off as "not-me" disapproved ways of being and relating. But norms are not lived unconflictually.

Because what is split off are human needs, capacities and longings, these do not disappear; rather they reappear in symptoms and in relational struggles (Layton, 2014: 1263).

Conclusion

The storied lives of mothers and men-children participating in this project were situated in their normative and performative assumptions of heterosexual (hetero)gendered family relational intimacies and illustrate that (hetero)gender identity formation is mediated by the wider family network of relationship practices. Commenting on the wider cultural landscape which shapes mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, the chapter considered how emotions are lived out against a background of social norms and expectations, reflected in many forms of popular media, regarding celebrity lives, for example, and intimate family life. The chapter illustrates how motivation and agency are constrained by complicated gender power hierarchies enacted through normative family practices, such as competition between family members (such as in Anne's story and Sue's) and use of communication technologies (seen in Beth's comments and Michelle's story). Mothers' and men-children's stories (such as Matt's) demonstrate that interpersonal psycho-social normative processes affect identity and uphold culturally created family practices.

The chapter confirms the family as a key site for the (re)production of (hetero)gender identities that establish and sustain "power structures [through] norms of recognition" (Layton, 2020: 52). Everyday conscious and unconscious enactments of unequal gendered, intergenerational power relations are evident in the stories in this chapter and affect identity formation, consistent with Roseneil and Seymour's (1999: 2) argument that "[a]ll identities are not equally available to all of us, and all identities are not equally culturally valued [... and that] [i]dentities are fundamentally enmeshed in relations of power". Most mothers' stories, such as Ann's and Jean's, illustrate Shaw's (2014) description of a relational system of everyday subjugation, transmitted intergenerationally and interpersonally, involving the objectification of one person in a relationship to enforce the dominance of the other. As paternal grandmothers, their stories spoke of sometimes feeling excluded or lower in the grandparenting hierarchy, illustrated by Sue's story and Beth's, both aware of the pre-eminence of the maternal family.

Some men-children (Neil and Matt, for example) suggested in their stories that, although aware of the effect of tensions between them and their mothers or between their partners and mothers, they (at least superficially) tend to manage the relationships to avoid conflict. Other men, like Petros and Luke, however, communicated the complexities for them, acknowledging the emotional turbulence

for their mothers too. Both mothers' and men-children's stories were suffused with a sense of loss in their relational intimacy, sometimes deflecting attention to it in order to obscure emotional distress. Mothers' stories (such as Marie's and Sue's, for example) suggest that they make compromises that affect their sense of self, for the sake of maintaining the relationship with their men-children, striving to navigate family cultures different from their own, because of their continuing commitment to their sons' wellbeing.

The stories illustrate that agency is challenged by the social boundaries that some individuals attempt, but fail, to subvert in introducing counter-narratives (of gender equality, for instance). Grand/mothers (Marie, for example, and Jean) who provide unpaid childcare so that their men-children and their (female) partners can both work in full-time employment, simultaneously enable men-children's reliance on them and perpetuate feminised patterns of care. Such practices sometimes unwittingly reinforce traditional gender norms of women as unpaid carers and assist in the neo-liberal project of dismantling social welfare responsibility for childcare, for example. From this perspective, grand/mothers and men-children, as well as other family members, are implicated intergenerationally, "with individuals invested in narratives of their own self-making and self-sufficiency, while advantages conferred by racial and gendered privilege are unrecognised" (Gammon, 2017: 526). In the contemporary political environment of neo-liberalism, mutual empathy and interdependence are less rewarded at the macro, meso and micro level (Layton, 2009; Gammon, 2017), reflected in mothers' and men-children's stories of unacknowledged/disavowed vulnerability and consequent emotional pain.

The stories of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy in this chapter (such as Michelle's, Beth's, Luke's and Matt's) illustrate how "split off capacities such as vulnerability, assertion, connection, and dependence are lived both intrapsychically and interpersonally" (Layton, 2020: 52). These psycho-social processes perpetuate hegemonic discourses within everyday contexts that are neither homogeneous nor harmless at an individual and structural level. The stories speak of profound attachment that affects separation and limits agency, complicated by loss, ambiguity, and ambivalence, and fluctuating asymmetrical power. They resonate with Ahmed's study (2010) of happiness, with "family as a happy object [...toward which] good feelings are directed" (Ahmed, 2010: 21), but which involves ambivalence and confusion (Ahmed, 2010: 6). In the stories, moral judgments are tied up with frustrations and anger, as well as anticipatory fears of rejection or abandonment (such as in Pam's, Jean's, and Michelle's stories). The narratives suggest that processes of separation, for example, in mother and man-child relational intimacy, and subsequent

shifts in mutual dependencies, are intersected by age and gender, resulting in a normative expression of identities formed according to broadly conventional social expectations and prohibitions.

The next chapter investigates desire within mother and man-child intimacy: the “dark underside of loving” (Rose, 2018: 123). I explore its transgressions, regulations, pleasures, and pride, many of which are proscribed or taboo in everyday relational practices between mothers and men-children. I analyse and interpret the stories to further consider normative discourses that affect the making of men-children’s and grand/mothers’ (hetero)gender identities. Using again the analytic concept of normative unconscious processes primarily, affected by intersectional power relations and narrative performativity, I look at love and affection between mothers and men-children and the psycho-social effect of their intimacy on their identities.

CHAPTER 7. WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? THE MAKING OF MOTHERS AND MEN-CHILDREN

Introduction

So far in the thesis I have explored a range of tugs, ties, and tensions in the intimate relationship between mothers and adult sons, especially as it is enacted within families, to consider psycho-social processes that contribute to the formation of identities. Threads weaving through participants' narratives include ambiguity and ambivalence, fluctuating asymmetrical power, and an interdependence and profound attachment that is sometimes disavowed or unrecognised, often permeated with a mutual sense of loss. This chapter problematises the 'loving' relationship within everyday mother and man-child intimacy, the dark side of which "[f]or the most part, the world [...] does not want to know about [...] instead projecting onto the minds and bodies of mothers a revulsion for the complexities of the human mind" (Rose, 2018: 123). I explore the part of love, affection, and passion between mothers and men-children, described by Kristeva (2005) as "the prototype of the love relation", in the formation of (hetero)gender identities. I consider how expressions of love are experienced as social identities alter and the life course unfolds, which, for some men-children includes intimate partnering with others or becoming fathers, and mothers becoming grandmothers.

Using the overarching analytic framework of unconscious normative processes, narrative performativity, and intersectional relational power, I re-tell mothers' and men-children's narratives of relational intimacy as creative non-fiction, as in previous chapters. Through the stories of men and mothers participating in the project, the chapter explores what allows, prohibits, or obfuscates the enactment and expression of mundane mother love, drawing on Kristeva's premise that "due to the complexity of this [maternal] passion even mothers participate, more or less unconsciously, in obscuring it" (Kristeva, 2005). Using interpretive analysis, informed by my practice as a psychotherapist and academic theories, I illuminate the difficulty in speaking about this aspect of everyday life, which silences mothers' and men-children's voices. Aiming to uncover opportunities for agency, resistance and counter-narratives, the chapter considers how such silencing functions to (re)produce normative (hetero)gender identities, (re)creating the illusion of psycho-social personal and social coherence.

Mother-son intimacy can be expressed across a spectrum of desire, such as adoration and intensity as well as emotional commitment. Sometimes experienced unconsciously, within socially proscribed parameters, mothers' and men-children's feelings towards each other are bound by socio-cultural

permissions and prohibitions (Chodorow, 1992; Frosh, 1997; Butler, 2004), which flex according to time and place, historically and geographically. Gabb (2008) notes the lack of research into the everyday “intimate, erotic, interpersonal experiences” (Gabb, 2008: 69) between mothers and infants. There has been even less academic attention to the erotic maternal (and grandmaternal) relationship with adult children (or with their children), and its part in continuing to shape and regulate embodied adult subjectivities and (hetero)gender identities. In my discussion of desire in mother-adult son relationships in this chapter, I expand contemporary everyday understandings of ‘eroticism’ as concerned only with sexuality, to define ‘the erotic’ more broadly in the thesis as including sensuality, vitality, lust for life, ‘love’, satisfaction, fulfilment, and power, drawing on Lorde’s (1984: 49-55) discussion of the erotic “as a considered source of power and information within our lives”.

As in the other data chapters, I analyse and interpret each story as a single ‘case’, from my perspective as a (grand)mother, psychotherapist, and researcher, rather than suggesting any generalisable patterns of mother-son intimacy, either within the specific relationship or more broadly. Over the course of the chapter the stories illuminate various aspects in the spectrum of desire, including non-sexual desire as well as sexuality and sexual tensions, that may be present in some mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy.

Pleasure and pride: aspects of mother love

The first story in this chapter illustrates Sue’s desire for love from her son, her eyes glittering with excitement as she related her tale: the pride and pleasure experienced in her son’s declaration of his love and admiration of her at his wedding, culturally a symbolic site of heteronormative practices, culminating in the public expression of conformity.

Mother love?

Robert was a wonderful, sunny little creature as a child, dementing but appealing to be with, but very stubborn, very like me in temperament. That’s why he and I clashed plenty, never major, but neither of us will back down with the other. We’re very fond of each other. That’s part of the relationship. He engages you. Even when you’re cross with him, he engages you.

He’s the person I’ve lived longest with in my entire life: he was 23 when he left my house, and we had good quality adult time together. Which was lovely.

I missed him when he left home and moved in with Chrissie. That left me in the family home without anyone - a big house with nobody else in it. It took a bit of adjustment. We both did a bit of adjusting.

At his wedding when he made his speech, he ended his speech by talking about the three of us there at the top table: me, him, and his sister. At the very end of his speech, he said, "My mother's the most amazing woman I know." I thought actually the most amazing woman he knows is his wife. Or should be now.

But at that point that was when he chose to nail his colours to the mast. And that'll do me. That'll do me. But that again is testament to the fact he knows, no matter what, if he needs, I'll come.

Imbued with sadness as well as pride, containing loss and love, Sue's story expresses profound attachment to her man-child, her longing for him, despite her rationalisation of being happy that he's settled with his own family, and her regret at the loss of the close involvement they'd had previously. Sue's gleeful vanity communicated to me the depth of the emotional impact for her of her son's public statement. I felt an uncomfortable jealousy regarding the affection that her son had expressed and astonishment at her son's attention, diverted as it was from his wife, as Sue experienced it. I wondered how his new wife had felt hearing that his mother was the most amazing woman he knows. Although Sue observed that it seemed inappropriate in the circumstances of his wedding day for him to focus on his mother rather than his new wife, she relished that he'd chosen to speak about her, not his wife, in such glowing terms. As she recounted this episode, Sue radiated a profound connection with her son, that she believed was mutual. I gleaned, from its slick 'performance', that it may be a 'rehearsed' story repeated to others perhaps or even just to herself, suggesting gender performativity in its probable repetition. Sue's need to tell it again emphasises the importance to her of his public display of adoration, as she perceived it.

Sue's story of a marriage celebration, with its cultural trappings of 'top table' (Sue disregarded the presence of his wife at the table) and wedding speeches, suggests an unconscious fantasy of her symbiotic relationship with her son, possibly reviving unconscious, strongly defended desires for merger with him: the "son who satisfies all the longings she had long ago, makes up for the father who was never there and the husband who has gone away" (Olivier, 1989: 42). Since bringing her fantasy into conscious enactment would be socially transgressive, it appears transformed psychically

into pride and joy for Robert's marriage 'match', his normative 'masculinity' and heterosexual identity ultimately confirmed by the birth of her grandchildren. From Sue's telling of the story, Robert's statement (and her response to it) folds into popular culture's interpretations of the 'Oedipus complex' (Freud, 1962; 1976), where a son is 'forced' to love "a woman other than his mother" (Butler, 2004: 152), suggesting that public and private narratives interact psycho-socially. Freud, notably, was silent concerning Jocasta (Olivier, 1989: 2), Oedipus's mother in the myth, and her desire for her son, consistent with socially proscribed taboos. Although cultural narratives are now often accessed via online content as well as printed material, Olivier's comment (1989: 45; original emphasis) still resonates as signifiers of womanhood: "what do women's magazines go on about, if not the 'really natural woman', 'the womanly woman', the 'woman that *is* a woman'". Implicated in the construction of boundaries around what is permissible and what is expected, they provide a socio-cultural context within which meanings of being a mother/woman (and a man as 'not-a-woman') are internalised as part of normative unconscious processes and perceived as natural, obscuring counter-narratives.

Memories of my own sons' weddings involve complex feelings of joy, and relief, that they had someone central in their lives other than their 'first' family (although retrospectively the 'otherness' of their legally sanctioned partnerships brings sometimes fraught relational complications). I felt pride in their achievement of a close and intimate attachment with another person, and a perverse sense of pride in my own achievement in a 'mothering job done well' in bringing my sons to this point. Despite my personal misgivings about the institution of marriage, which heteronormative practices mark as a public rite of maturity, I experienced a strange surprise and pleasure at their beauty and dignity in this ritualised performance. At the same time, I was aware of change and loss for me as they moved emotionally towards another person. I respected their decisions, but, because they'd had a less than conventional upbringing, I didn't understand their performative compliance with the conventions apparently required by their partners and their families, who expected and wanted traditional 'white weddings'. My naive misunderstandings of my role as the bridegroom's mother caused me (and undoubtedly my sons) some concern, as I attempted to bridge the gap between my own 'second wave' feminist-inspired thoughts about marriage, my history of 'unsuccessful' marriages, and other people's expectations of me as 'mother of the groom', reinforced by the wedding industry. I defensively displaced my antipathy at the time, turning it into humorous stories of wedding outfit dilemmas and social blunders, reconciling the limitations on my agency and choices by putting my feelings on one side, at least temporarily.

In the next story, although possibly sharing unconscious dimensions identified in Sue's narrative, Matt describes the impact on his mother of his relational intimacy with another woman. From Matt's perspective, his mother intruded on his choice of partners, leading to constraints on his agency.

Mother love?

My mother's very traditional really, but she'd never say that; she thought my ex should stop her training, stay at home and be a family, like she did.

She communicates in a really passive way; she'll have digs and make snide remarks. When she came to babysit because we were going out and my ex-partner looked all glam, I could see her looking her up and down. Lauren said to me, "Your mother doesn't like me, does she?" It was putting a strain on our relationship. I used to think to myself "My mother sees me as her partner, her husband; she doesn't want me to be with Lauren".

I'd been working in America, and we got together pretty quick, and I came back to the U.K. to make a life with Lauren. I got back to the U.K., and we went to my mother's house to introduce her; all the family were there, they'd made an effort, and it was "Hi Lauren, pleased to meet you".

We walked into the living room, and there's my mum in the corner, in her pyjamas and dressing gown, watching the telly.

Lauren came into the room; my mother didn't even acknowledge her. I sat on the sofa, trying to make conversation with my mother, and I thought "Oh my God, there's some dynamic going on here."

I didn't see what it was, but Lauren did. She said, "I feel I'm not wanted here. And she doesn't want me being with you."

I've realised that for a long time I'd get with girls, and I'd think "My mum's not going to like her", and I've got so far into the relationship and then I've broken off, because I felt they're not going to be accepted by my mother. Any girlfriend I've had, my mother's only accepted if they play into things the way she sees them. She liked one or two who were very

traditionalist, like she was. But not everyone's the same, and you need that insight; there's different cultures and she doesn't see that.

Matt's story demonstrates shifts in identity as he becomes aware over time of the interpersonal impact of his relational intimacy with his mother, affecting both of them psychically and socially. The tension between them is encapsulated in his mother's perception of a 'suitable' partner for her son, wanting (from Matt's perspective) someone who reflects her own internalised values and life choices, traditionally gendered as he sees them. According to Matt, his mother had limited his agency in the past (in her judgment of his girlfriends). As Matt attempts to navigate the introduction of Lauren to his family, he perceives the psycho-social dynamics within the triad of mother/son/partner on him and his partner. Matt was aware of the awkwardness of the situation, perhaps as an "unthought known" (Bollas, 2018), when his mother withdrew from engaging socially (appearing to 'act out' her unconscious envy and loss, as Matt remembered it) but it was Lauren who was able to articulate the affect she (and Matt) experienced. Lauren's observation suggests that Matt's confused reaction to his mother's behaviour in the high stakes social setting (introducing Lauren to his mother, from whom he sought approval) had resulted in feelings of humiliation, embarrassment, and rejection which 'paralysed' Matt's cognitive capacity. This lapse in Matt's cognition appears to signify the trauma in the encounter for him (because of the complicated intimacy with his mother over the life course). It also implies Matt's sense of his mother's embodied narcissistic vulnerability, leading her to (un)consciously designate Matt as her partner, viewing other women as a threat to her status as mother/'wife'. Lauren, who didn't experience the trauma of the situation as severely as Matt, was able to maintain some conscious emotional distance in the social situation to analyse and vocalise the effect of the triadic dynamic.

Beck and Weishaar (2011: 276) propose that "[t]he cognitive system deals with the way individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meanings to events [and] interacts with the other affective, motivational, and physiological systems to process information from the physical and social environments and to respond accordingly". Building on their perspective, which links behaviour, thoughts, and feelings in cognitive processing, Lauren and Matt's differentiated responses are mediated, arguably, by gender constructs in the (psycho-social) acquisition of cognitive capacities, resonating with Richardson et al.'s (1997: 88) comment that:

[a]t the interactional level, women and men (and girls and boys) are treated differently in ordinary everyday interactions, and they come to behave differently in return. At the individual level, women and men come to accept gender distinctions as part of the self-concept. They

ascribe to themselves the traits, behaviors, and roles that are the norm for people of their sex within their culture.

Like Matt's mother, most women participating in my project had raised their children on their own, and most of those reflected on whether the absence of a man's involvement in their sons' upbringing had led to difficulties, especially regarding their relationship with their men-children. Angela expressed her pride in her son, particularly the emotional and practical care he provides for his partner who has mental health difficulties. She said her son told her that he "couldn't have asked for a better parent ... because I was soft." Reflecting on this, Angela also observed that in the past young men had:

traditional male role models at work, even if they didn't have them at home, whereas now there seems to be loads of single mums, very young, bringing kids up in the same way they've been brought up, with no males around and now the NEETS²⁰ struggle to get up for a job interview, it could be to do with the mothers not necessarily having a dad there.

Angela's self-doubting reflections suggest that, from her perspective, the absence of a man in raising sons may have a negative effect on them as they reach adulthood. Other women participating expressed pride in their own achievement in raising their sons on their own, giving them great pleasure when their sons became adults, experiencing them as independent, separate, and interesting men.

Although the sensually erotic dimensions of mothering are 'permitted' in caring for infant sons, as they become 'men' its expression appears mostly to be socially unacceptable, and must be hidden, 'repressed', becoming 'unsayable', and possibly (as my research indicates) diverted towards others, such as grandchildren. Nevertheless, some women's stories in my project suggest that its ongoing presence may be revealed unconsciously and may contribute to the jealousy apparent between some mothers and their sons' partners (possibly without consciously realising the source of their antagonism). Liz, for example, expressed dismay at the excessive cost of two pairs of shoes that her son gave his partner for Christmas. Her anger about the gift of expensive high-heeled shoes communicated a longing for close connection with her son, thwarted by the attention he pays his partner rather than a concern for his mother, which Liz displaced onto a mutual concern for money., Resonating with Sue's and Liz's narratives, and Teresa's below, Lorde (1984) notes:

²⁰ NEETS is the acronym used by the U.K. Government to describe and calculate the numbers of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment, or training.

The erotic is a resource within each of us [...] firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives (Lorde, 1984: 49).

Consistent with the popular dominant narrative of grandparenthood, several women said that they enjoyed the relationship with their grandchildren more than they had their own children, because they had more resources now (time, money, maturity, for example). Teresa, for instance, had formed a close attachment with her eldest grandson, Kieran, and they had become confidantes for each other as adults, particularly regarding their similar mental health difficulties. Because her son's first wife died when their children were very young, Teresa had been closely involved in raising both her grandsons in her own home, commenting:

the bond with Kieran was visceral, almost instantaneous. Not exactly 'That's mine. I want him', but a physical reaction immediately. I could've taken him home. Maybe if there'd been another grandmother close by ... but she wasn't around. If I'd had to share him with someone, maybe I'd have been very 'That's mine!' but I didn't have to share and now I have a very close bond with him. We can talk to each other about anything - relationships, sex, including taking him to buy his first condoms. We support each other.

Teresa's willingness to provide childcare, like grand/mothers in other chapters, reinforces the feminisation of care work at the macro and meso level. However, Teresa's (hetero)gendered, heterosexualised narrative suggests that it may also be a way of sublimating repressed fantasies, turning them away from her son and towards her grandson. Teresa's unconscious erotic desire for completion, fulfilment and power may be 'satisfied' through the relationship with her grandson, unwittingly performatively contributing to the perpetuation of (hetero)gender identity formation in everyday life.

Although Teresa said she is part of her son's second family, the pride and pleasure with which she spoke of Kieran and his achievements seemed significantly greater than her feelings about her son, which she attributed to the difficulties in her marriage to her children's father from whom she was divorced. Teresa recounted how her son (before the divorce) had "tried to protect me; he would stand between us, or move me out of the way, or try to diffuse whatever was going on, and that must have had some impact on him and on his relationship with me and on his relationship with

other women". Teresa, while telling her story, confused her grandson with her son several times, and it was apparent that Kieran appeared to be an important *man*, more than as a grandson, in Teresa's life (she lives on her own). She said she spends a lot of time with him, sharing meals and going to music concerts, and depends on him to help with maintaining her house. For Teresa, it seemed that Kieran represented the absent father (who she spoke about), the absent husband (who had been abusive during their marriage), and an 'emotionally' absent son, who, she said, isn't empathic, in the way her daughter and her son's current wife are. Teresa concluded that it's perhaps a result of her own (hetero)gendered expectations of them, which affected their history, and their current relational intimacy, saying that her son "never hugs me, though his wife does and sometimes tells him to give me a hug. It might be something to do with what's a man's role and what's a female role, and the way I was brought up".

Teresa appeared to attribute changes in her identity over the years mostly to social and material circumstances (divorce and career limitations, for example), but she also spoke at length about the support Kieran gave her that helped her to cope with depression and anxiety and that she now has greater "self-worth". Teresa's narrative indicated a reparative transformation of maternal guilt and ambivalence experienced unconsciously towards her son through the interdependent relationship with her grandson. This seemed to have the effect of offering Teresa optimism for her 'self' and her future, implying flexibility in her identity, commenting:

For a long time, I grieved for the person I couldn't be. I lost my sense of self, my personality, I lost the person I was, and then, when Kieran began to open up to me a bit about his feelings, I began to open up about mine. I push myself to do some things I haven't done before. There's still a part of my old self there, but I'm not the same person now.

Bonds or bondage: ambivalent mother love

The next story illustrates the "dark underside of loving" (Rose, 2018: 123): the conflictual love and hate that often results in ambivalence (Connidis and McMullin, 2002). Relationally gendered blame and shame are generated in an encounter between a mother and her man-child, for whom reparation seemed unlikely. I recount Liz's story at length, analysing and interpreting it in some depth as it contains numerous dimensions related to narrative performativity, intersectional power dynamics and normative unconscious processes. As the story unfolds, not only are the relational dynamics within the dyad revealed, but also the complicated network of relationships in the background, which appears to (re)construct normative family structures and performative social

identities formed during simultaneous transitions to grandmotherhood and fatherhood for Liz and her son.

Mother love?

I'd made up my mind I was going to be as helpful as possible, and the opportunity came over Christmas: my son was ill, and they were hosting Christmas, so I took up the slack, and did all the things you'd expect mothers and grandmothers to do. I thought I'd done pretty well, and they'd thanked me for it.

But just before New Year, next time I saw Dan, he asked for some money that I owed him: "By the way, can we have this money back? We really need it." I was a little surprised, and me, being me, immediately thought maybe there's a problem. "Is there a problem?" I said. Dan looked at me indignantly: "What d'you mean? I'm just asking you for money back that you owe me." "Yes, of course," I said, "but the timing's a bit difficult. I've got a tax bill to pay. But I'm worried about you. Is everything alright?" "What d'you mean?" he said. "Well, is everything alright? How can I put this?" ... And I chose the wrong word: I said, "You've had a pretty lavish Christmas." He went ballistic: "What d'you mean - lavish?" I said, "You weren't seemingly short. Are you short of money?" I meant it in a caring way, saying "Is everything ok?" He went mad! That word, 'lavish', was obviously something he found offensive. It's not a nice word, but given the fact that he never stopped spending - his wife got two pairs of four-and-a-half-inch heeled designer shoes plus lots of other presents, and my grandson got loads of presents of course, I thought it was a reasonable question.

It quickly degenerated into his old script: I'm vile; his relationship with me has long been damaged; I've never really cared about him. A tirade of abuse. I stopped him. I said, "Look, I just don't want to do this. I can't do this anymore. I'm too old now. I don't want this nonsense." "That's right" he said, "You dismiss it. As always." So I said, "What have I done?" "You're abusive!" he says. By this time, I'd already been called "vile". Vile! What a word to use for your mother! How I never cared about him; I was always running him and his family down to everyone; how all my friends had told him how critical I was of him and his family. I said, "I'm sorry, I don't accept that." "Well, it's true!" he said. I said "Look, is everything ok?" But he kept trying to goad me. And I said "I'm not responding to this. This is nonsense. It's come out of nowhere. I apologise. I'm sorry if I've offended you. It was born out of care for

you.” “No,” he said, “it’s just your response to whenever I ask you for money or ask for anything!”

It took us to right back to what’s been a long-term issue, where he’s trying to make me feel guilty about something. Often when he feels he’s done something that isn’t kind or acceptable. I think he must’ve felt guilty about asking me for the money, but his reaction is one of getting in first, trying to make me feel I have something to apologise for.

For about two or three days after that, I felt devastated, and I just thought “It’s no good. I’m never going to get this right.” Learning to live with his message that our relationship has been damaged for many a year.

“You can never put it right. I don’t want you to see my children anymore.” That’s what he said. And I just said to him “Don’t be ridiculous. I care about you and your family. Jack’s not an easy child, you’ve told me that yourself; I’ve seen him at close quarters but of course I love him, he’s my grandson. And Chloe’s adorable.” He stood his ground: “You’re so critical of them all the time.” “It’s the last thing I’d do” I said, “I haven’t been critical of them at all.” Which I haven’t. The only thing I’ve been critical about, and I’ve been very careful not to say anything about this to him or her, was Claire’s refusal to wean the baby off the breast, knowing that she was going back to work, and knowing that he’d have to pick up the slack. And that’s been difficult.

I thought about it a lot: all through his adult life, he harbours blame somehow. And it’s about me not being what he perceives to be the traditional, normal family. I don’t match up to Claire’s parents, because they’re a normal family: a ‘2.5’ family, who have money, who’ve stayed together, who are really controlling. I’m none of those things. Claire’s parents have to be there all the time, and I feel there’s very little space for me. In the first year: very little space to get to know Jack; and the same happened with the baby, all through the summer she was born, her parents were there all the time. And I was always treated as if I was somehow an outsider and I’d joined this normal family that I’m not part of.

I end up feeling “Am I guilty, or not?” And I question myself. Yes, I used an unfortunate word – lavish: not to be abusive, but nonetheless, it triggered something, probably in both of us. Whatever it was, something was triggered, even after I’d bent over backwards, across the

whole Christmas and after, to do everything I possibly could. He'd got pleurisy after Christmas; Claire had taken the kids off to stay with her parents so there was nobody to look after him, and I was going round, looking after him, taking food and ministering. But all of that just goes. And this red rage comes over him. And I'm left thinking "What the hell was all that about?" What I do know is there's no way I can stop this anger surfacing and there's probably very little chance that I'm ever going to understand exactly where it comes from. It's so deep-rooted somewhere, this anger.

I think Dan blamed me for the fact that I separated from his father and then separated a second time from my daughter's father. So he lost two men in his life. If it'd been one, that might've been different, but two; two must mean that I'm to blame. Two means it's got to be you.

But I'm the first person he'll come to if he's got a problem. He'll come to me and ask for my help. He'll come to me and talk to me about his frustration with Claire, saying she does very little, and, I admit, that does appear to be the case. He'll raise that with me, and I have to be very careful. I'll sympathise with him, or support him, but I'm very, very careful not to overtly criticise Claire. He'll criticise her, but I can't, of course. I'm very aware of that.

I think Dan's a very good dad, but I think there's a deep anger in him, that he's been left literally holding two children. He adores them both, but he feels that the bulk of everything falls on him, because she works and says it's her job to provide the money and his to look after the children. He works too though.

And I just feel like the whipping post²¹.

Liz and her son both appear to feel guilt or shame for something in their past or current relationship, which seems to be unsayable. The word "lavish", for example, is admitted as triggering something, suggesting an unconscious communication between the two. Their mutually inflicted pain is expressed differently by each one, perhaps because of their (hetero)gendered identities, the conflict between social expectations and the immediacy of their fracturing intimacy. Liz, for example, had done "all the things [expected] of a mother and grandmother", while Dan's apparently aggressive

²¹ 'Whipping post' is retained here (despite its racist etymology) as it was the powerful term used by the participant, expressing how she felt physically beaten down by the relationship.

behaviour appears typically “masculine” in his attempts to exert power, leaving them both wounded. Their shared history rises to the surface, their intimacy being challenged in the heated exchange. They both seem to be projecting their anger and anxiety about a number of issues in their lives, from the past as well as the present, onto the other as an unconscious defence, which results in gaping fissures in their everyday relationship. Stern’s (1985: 107) comment resonates: “Interactions are of course surface phenomenon that can be described in great detail, but at the same time unfold as a result of the unconscious meanings and affects activated from the past that help give shape and meaning to the present moment”. Deeply held resentments as well as attachment to each other are apparent: the pleasures and pain of relational intimacy that may result in ambivalence for both seem to pre-date the event recounted, which, given the report of Dan’s conflicts within his own family, may have transgenerational impact in the future (Shaw, 2014).

Superficially, the trigger concerns money, which holds social and cultural symbolic meaning (Zelizer, 1989) regarding power, agency, personal hopes, and fears. The timing of the confrontation (Christmas and New Year) is also weighted with cultural meanings for families (McKechnie and Tynan, 2006): annual family focussed celebrations conjure memories of the past and hopes for the future, but also potentially evoke feelings of loss and disappointment (Mutz, 2016). In the relational conflicts both Liz and Dan experience, there appears to be an underlying threat of rejection, connected to their idealisation of the mother figure and the meaning of motherhood. Their helpless anger indicates their frustration at the impossibility of restoring their unconscious idealisation, resulting in all mothers in Liz’s story being denigrated: Liz is angry/helpless at herself, Claire, and the other (grand)mother, while Dan is angry/helpless at his mother and (perhaps) his wife (Welldon, 1992; Motz, 2009). Paradoxically, this combines with a socially prohibited, ambiguous mutual desire (their ‘spat’ resembling a culturally typical husband and wife argument). It also appears to result in mutual denigration and rage: Dan’s perception of his mother’s failure to protect him and make reparations for past wounds, and Liz’s grief at the perceived loss of her son (perhaps because of his wife now being his primary love object). The unconscious ‘splitting’ (Klein, 1946) seen in both Liz’s and Dan’s behaviour appears to have become a habitual (performative) gendered behaviour pattern where neither can tolerate the other’s imperfections.

Crossley (2001) argues that, as embodied beings, we are perceived by others, which, through a reflexive process, enables us to have a sense of self and identity. From Crossley’s perspective (2001: 131), “everything [people] perceive, think, feel or otherwise do emerges out of behaviours which follow a habituated pattern”. However, as he contends, acquiring the habit of reflection suggests the

potential for changing habits. Crossley (2001) emphasises people's capacity for choice and agency in the present, gained from past experiences, through which habits of reflection and reflexivity form identities inter-subjectively, and enable agency in the present. Liz's agency, however, appears jeopardised by the episode, with its inferences of intersecting gender, economic, and age divisions. Liz's reflections on her past and present relationship with Dan reveal habits of domination: both having been, at different times in their lives together, in the position of oppressor and of oppressed. Both Liz and her son appear, in different ways, to be 'performing' (hetero)gender identities, 'performative' in their (re)production of binary norms. Their performative representations of (hetero)gender identities reflect Butler's argument (2000: viii) that "categories of identity – the binary of sex, gender, and the body – can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable" and that power operates "in the production of that very binary frame for thinking about gender" (Butler, 2000: viii). Liz's story, however, illustrates the instability of power hierarchies over the life course, and contests cultural archetypes of mothers who have magical, benign authority and wisdom, who cherish and sustain life, and men-children as heroes and warriors, possessing strength and power.

Cultural narratives seep into social and personal meanings of grand/mothering, apparent in Liz's story in her 'decision' to remain available to her son, when he wants, or needs, her, despite his aggression, which had been a "problem for a long time", his rejection of her, and withholding his children from her. Liz's motivation for such a choice may involve fear of losing her son (and her grandchildren), as other women participants in similar circumstances said. Ann, for example, describing how her relationship with her son had changed over the years because of tensions with her daughter-in-law said:

My behaviour's changed since the first grandson was born twelve years ago. Definitely. I'm much more tentative, because in the end I don't want to lose the relationship with my son. That's more important to me than the relationship with his wife and the grandchildren.

Marie spoke about the fractious relationship with her son and his wife, and the hurt she'd felt when not allowed to see her first grandchild for two weeks (unlike the maternal grandmother who had visited a few hours after the birth):

It makes you bite your tongue. It makes you think you can't say anything. Because I don't want to not see my grandchildren. I want to be part of their lives. I want them to know me. I love them to bits. I'll be there for them. It's your family, isn't it? That's all you can be - there, to pick up the pieces if needs be, and be there for them.

Grand/mothers' stories in my project illustrate how the birth of a child alters the relationship between a man-child and his mother, as his identity changes through fatherhood, both affected by the supremacy of the middle-generation mother in the parenting hierarchy, as she assumes the kin-keeping role, which advances "the traditions and value system associated with their family of origin" (Marx et al., 2011: 1208). The 'new' mothers and their own mothers appear to collaborate to (re)create their mutual vision of family, reproducing a normative mothering identity, with 'new' fathers becoming more involved with their partner's family. As Marx (2011: 1209) notes, "[a] number of studies indicate that the relationship between married men and their mothers are "wife mediated" (Adams, 1968; Farrell & Rosenberg, 1981; Fischer, 1983a; Sweetser, 1983)" and that:

men appear to be caught in the middle of alternative family cultures with sometimes contrasting norms and values. It appears that husbands often side with or defer to their wives (the emerging kin-keepers). Typically, these decisions most often align with the maternal definitions of proper child-rearing practices (Marx, 2011: 1209).

From my data, the birth of grandchildren often appears to lead to conflict between mothers of men-children and daughters-in-law, resonating with Marx et al.'s (2011: 1208) argument that "[d]ecisions relating to children [...] appear to provide a battleground on which different family cultures are fought".

The compromises women participating had made resounded with my own experience when facing banishment from my son's family. I hadn't conformed to social expectations of grand/mothering, because of, as I perceive it, my daughter-in-law's different values and family culture, at odds with my sons' historical family background. The risk, however, of losing my son mostly, but also my grandsons, led me to make choices that felt like collusion in reinforcing normative gendered practices and power hierarchies, which subjugate, marginalise, and relegate older women, and elevate younger women. Like me, like Ann and Marie, Liz appeared to have only limited agency and choice, since "various forms of domination and the ways in which they enter into the habits, reflexive and otherwise [...] constitute us as social agents" (Crossley, 2001: 149). Mothers' stories, for example, illustrate their attempts to comply with social norms, having been judged adversely by their men-children and their wider family network of 'in-laws', leading to potential or actual exclusion from everyday family life. Their experiences reflect research that demonstrates the tendency for a 'drift' towards the maternal family when a grandchild arrives, rather than towards, or shared equally with, the paternal family (Dench and Ogg, 2002; Ferguson et al., 2004). Although

referring to mothers and infants, Rose's (2018) comments resonate with Liz's, Ann's, Marie's, and my own narratives:

Not being explosive will do nicely as a definition of what is mostly asked of mothers, although, as any mother will testify, explosive is what she, to her utter dismay, often feels: there is nobody in the world I love as much as my child, nobody in the world that makes me as angry. It is this demand – to be respectable and unexplosive – that I see as most likely to drive mothers, and by extension their infants, crazy (Rose, 2018: 125).

'Becoming' a grandmother, or parent, involves "intra-active" (Barad, 2007: 151) as well as interactive social, cultural, and psychic dimensions: "dynamic phenomena that are constituted by and through entangled and shifting forms of agency" (Doucet, 2013: 295). The concept of intra-action proposes that transitions in identity formation involve mutually co-constituting processes that emerge from within relationships with others (intra-actively), rather than formed by the actions of independent agents outside of the relationship, actions that interact with separate others. Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action emphasises shared responsibility for transformation; in the context of my research, it resonates with Layton's (2009) observation of our mutual involvement in each other's suffering. The loss and change that are part of life transitions, such as the birth of a first grand/child, sometimes destabilises the new grandmother, the new mother, and the new father. For grandmothers, identifying with others' vulnerabilities exposes their own, fearing generational separation, for example. This perhaps contributes to the tensions within families that ensue from the tendency for a new mother to seek support from her own mother (Arber and Timonen, 2012) rather than any of the other grandparents. From a psychodynamic perspective, this inclination may be interpreted as the middle-generation mother unconsciously returning to an infantile sense of insecurity in order to achieve stability at a very uncertain time, when the new mother experiences a bio-psychological threat to herself at the same time as needing to ensure the psychic and physical survival of her child. Similarly, the grandmother's sense of mortality is heightened, as her daughter or son moves into a position previously held by her, reminding her unconsciously of the proximity of her death. Some grand/mothers' stories in my research suggest that they defend against this existential threat by becoming involved in ways that serve to displace, and compensate for, the effect of their own anxieties, seeking 'life' through their grandchildren, for example. This particular psycho-social strategy resonates with Mollon's (2002) broader argument:

[I]n later life we tend to form organisations with a wide variety of linguistic, cultural, image-based and behavioural self-objects. These may include systems of knowledge and belief (political, scientific or religious systems, including psychoanalysis), tribal affiliations (including professional affiliations), daily routines (the obsessional and autistic phenomena of everyday

life), addictions of all kinds (behavioural and sexual as well as pharmacological) and all manner of compulsive seeking of stimulation. In all these diverse ways, we may attempt to organise our inner states of mind by linking these to external sources of stimulation, soothing and order (Mollon, 2002).

Desire and darkness: loving mothers

The next story is also recounted at some length to reveal the intricacies of men-children's and mothers' (hetero)gendered relational intimacy implicated in intra- and interpersonal processes of identity formation. The emotional integrity of Matt's frank disclosure reveals the potential for damage within intimate relationships, but also the possibility of recovery and agency, making changes, involving awareness, compassion, and resistance. Matt discloses his struggles in the relationship with his mother, which he describes as "toxic" and "narcissistic". He describes it as "mental paedophilia"²², historically located in his childhood experience of his mother's emotional violence, which had continued into adulthood, as well as his father's physical violence. He recounts how it had adversely affected his identity and subsequent intimate relationships with women.

Mother love?

My mother affected how I am on an intimate level with women, like my ex-partner.

There was love, but then there was, on a sexual level, this need, this desire to break from the norm, to break free, going against what the norm is. I thought it was giving me something in the initial stages: I'm getting something from this, even though I felt so fucking shit about myself. I was my partner's 'wingman' (that's what she called me - "The Wingman and Her": our usernames on the swingers' website). Because I was co-dependent, it was that feeling of power, where I felt more in control: "She's stunning but she's coming home with me!" I was getting worth from that because I knew she was desirable; in essence, it's begging. It's sick, when I think about it. I knew other men wanted her, but she chose to be with me, which then built me up.

²² This term was used by the participant to express his understanding of his relationship with his mother, based on his readings of various literature and work in therapy, as he explained, which did not involve inappropriate sexual contact but concerned his perception of his mother's lack of boundaries and her need for care and intimacy with him during his childhood and adolescence.

It is not a recognised clinical diagnosis but the term "emotional incest" (also known as "covert incest") is sometimes used to describe parents who are unable to maintain healthy boundaries with their children" (Grover, 2021).

She wanted an open relationship. But the intimacy between us started to change, drift away. I started thinking, "Fuck me! Have I been played? All I've been doing is providing the narcissistic supply". If I'm honest, I felt quite lonely and isolated, and the more I delved in, the more lonely and isolated I felt.

Looking back, some of the emotions I felt are very similar to how my mother made me feel. I'm thinking to myself "Why did I not say no?" Maybe because I was looking for something familiar to me and what's familiar in the subconscious is how my mother made me feel. Now I realise my ex-partner was my mum, in her behaviour, and I'd gone back to being a child. I'd been my mother's wingman too, not someone in my own right.

It's a repeat cycle. Thinking, "Shit! I need to break the cycle here, because I have a child myself, and if I keep behaving, using these parenting skills and traits, the same patterns will continue, even in my love relationships".

In therapy, it's very much looking inside and at the history of me and my mum, thinking "What part do I play in this?" In any relationship, it's two people, and even if you feel like you've been attacked you have to think "So what part do I play in that?" A lot of the time it was because I'd not put boundaries in, because I wasn't aware of boundaries. Topics that would get discussed when I was a kid, when my friends were there: "Your mum's hilarious." She'd talk about sexual things, and now, when I look back, if my daughter at that age was with her friends, would I be comfortable making remarks like that? No. So, I think my mum hasn't got insight into boundaries, because for her, she saw herself as one of the kids, one of the group. I mean being a parent, it's not being a friend, it's putting boundaries in, making sure that they're growing up to be healthy, regulated human beings.

I was brought up with the message for me to survive in this world and for me to feel safe, I need to be pleasing others: "That's a good boy, Matt. Look what you've done." For me, doing what my mother wanted me to do, act in a certain way, being the perfect son, there all the time, sacrificing what I want and being with my friends, literally at 11. That's like a narcissist/co-dependent relationship: where the co-dependent needs to feel that they're giving supply to get worth in the world; the narcissist is the driver, and the co-dependent serves. My mother would cry to me a lot about things going on with my father, where I feel

now a lot of adult topics were put onto a child, and I had to carry those, and as I grew up, I found I'd missed out, in terms of being in social circles with other lads, because I was "Yes, mam. No, mam. Are you feeling anxious? What do you need? Can I do this?" And if there was arguments in the house, keeping my brother and sisters at bay, keeping everybody back. It was quite anxiety provoking, but I never understood that was anxiety I was feeling, it was just normal to me.

I've lost a lot of life, because of my mother, what I thought and how I behaved, because I thought that was the right thing. My mother used to say something (still does and I've challenged her on it) that didn't make me feel comfortable; she says, "You'd make a great partner for somebody. If I wasn't your mother, I'd like to be with you." There was always that underlying feeling of uncomfot when she'd say things like that. "You're so great, you'd make such a great partner." And then I started to realise that emotion I felt, when she used to say that, intensified because I realised what it was, in terms of her seeing me as a partner and it was way overstepping the mark. I think it's toxic! It was like 'mental paedophilia', it's abuse: her living her life through me.

When I moved away, I got a whole different view of the world. I got into House music and that culture. When I moved back, she became interested in all of this and took that on. It was quite funny. At the time I thought nothing of it. But, as time went on, and I'm trying to move away again, she'd say "What d'you want to do that for?" She would challenge me having freedom and independence: "What do you want to go back and get a house with your friends for? What d'you want to do that for? We'll just stay together. We're in this together, Matt." My father and mother had split up. "We'll have to help each other and get through it." I was made to feel guilty for wanting what's normal in the world. I got pulled into that and I stayed, and I'd been at home for another seven years, until I was: "This isn't right."

She didn't like it when I was moving to the United States; she's saying, "I feel like you've died. I feel the family have lost you. You'll be so far away." I thought to myself, "Hold on a minute. I'm me. And if I want to go, I shouldn't be made to feel like the scapegoat". The emotional manipulation was: "You've left us. You've moved away. You've gone and got on with your own life and we're all here struggling."

She saw me as kind of a husband figure. When my father left it was "Now you're man of the house." I couldn't label it but for a long time there was this underlying feeling of something suppressed, but something not feeling healthy, not feeling real. But I felt trapped. I was playing her game: there to go and work and pay my board, because she didn't work: to look after her. So she was like a vulnerable narcissist, giving the sob story, keeping me feeling trapped.

She would always go for younger men, much younger men, when she was still with my dad, and I remember thinking "This is strange" and you can feel the tension and everything, and then, after they split, she meets somebody else, who's also way younger than the previous guy, and she's always saying "It's your life, get on with it. It's nothing to do with me." But there was still this underlying feeling of "This doesn't feel right. I don't know what it is." She used me for her emotional needs, as her partner, like a husband, and when I started thinking about it and connecting with it, then I started getting repulsed and sick. I'm thinking, "Fuck me, this is fucked up."

I couldn't label these feelings and emotions: "What's this emotion? What's that?" I had to learn it in therapy, me doing the work: emotional intelligence, emotional awareness, emotional self-regulation, because in the past I had quite a temper and when I was challenged, I couldn't process, and I was roaring angry.

Once I started labelling things and connecting and understanding emotions and communication, now I feel at peace. I'm not that person anymore and it was just a case of a lot of toxic, unhealthy messages given to me as a child, a lot of unhealthy experiences that I didn't know were unhealthy, didn't know what I was experiencing, because I didn't know otherwise. I've not been educated like that, putting boundaries in.

She's my mother and I do love her, because my father was quite heavy-handed with me and my mother was always the one that kept me safe, always saying "Matt, you can do it. You are worthy, you are good enough." I think if I hadn't had that my story would have been very, very different. She kept me on the straight and narrow. I could've gone off the rails a bit without that guidance. And naturally, when you've got somebody bullied at school, and put down by your father at home, you need that to keep you strong.

My relationship with my mother has been tight-knit like that. With my dad, it wasn't a smack, it was a punch or thrown across the room, it was physical abuse; my mum's was emotional abuse. My dad might have been heavy-handed with me, but I can deal with that, but it's the long-term effect of emotional abuse that's fucking horrible. It's as damaging as fuck. You have to work hard to understand what's right and what's not, learn to nurture yourself, accept it and not let it define who you are and then really think "I have got worth in the world. I have got a voice. I can have my opinion."

I feel free now and in control. I'm me. And I can be me and I'm not frightened of being the puppet. I'm not frightened of saying no anymore. I often will challenge my mother, and I can tell if she's miffed, but I can put that boundary in, and I have to be strong and I have to have that identity: I'm me and you're you; separate identities, because I've become aware that she sometimes saw her children as an extension of herself.

Matt wept silently at times during his painful narrative. He was insightful about the relational intimacy between his mother and himself, having accessed psychological therapy treatment for some time. He was articulate in reflecting on his understanding of the relationship with his mother and what it means to him, and the agency he'd been able to exercise once he'd become aware of its implications for him in his life. From his perspective, Matt appeared to have been exploited (perhaps unconsciously, since he implied a lack of self-awareness on her part) by his mother to fulfil her own emotional needs, leading to Matt's developmental trauma throughout childhood and into adulthood. Exposed to his mother's narcissistic, coercive need for his unconditional love (perhaps for her own psychic survival, as Matt's story suggests), Matt was subjected to a strategy whose "underlying purposes [...] are to induce shame and establish domination" (Shaw, 2014: 39).

Matt's 'love' for his mother formed part of his identity as an adult, which led to permitting his ex-partner to similarly dominate him, particularly in relation to their sexual intimacy. For Matt, love meant subjugating himself to the covertly communicated desires of another, where refusal to acquiesce to the other's demands may lead to feelings of guilt and shame (and a lack of "worth"). The confusing messages about heterosexuality and sexual practices Matt 'heard' as a young man were still 'live' for him, as he reflected on his tendency to stop himself from developing intimate relationships, and the caution he now exercises when becoming emotionally close to women. Despite his anger and hurt at the damage he'd experienced and his suicide attempts, there was a sense of self-compassion in his narrative. Matt appeared determined to make positive changes for

himself, and to improve the continuing relationship with his mother, and with other intimate relationships, including his own daughter, recognising the transgenerational implications of family dynamics involving narcissistic trauma. Resonating with Matt's narrative, Shaw (2014) comments, in relation to the effects of trauma, that reparative processes offer "hope and faith in the possibility that disruptions do not have to be catastrophic or terminal, but can be meaningfully repaired; and that one's badness, and the badness in others, can exist along with and not override and destroy goodness" (Shaw, 2014: 39).

Matt's efforts to understand unconscious processes and his unfolding sense of a changing identity indicate his attempts to subvert assumptions of hegemonic masculinity as innate. His story demonstrates awareness of the impact of complicated relational power on his masculine identity as it changed over time, and the heterosexualised gendered oppression perpetrated by both his ex-partner and his mother separately. Less inclined to cover up his emotional sensitivities than some other men who participated, and more open in sharing his experience of intimacy, Matt's story illustrates a psycho-social process of troubled resistance and repudiation of (hetero)gendered expectations of him. Nevertheless, he appears to have internalised a normative concept of intimacy, contributing to his own heterosexual identity, derived arguably from his mother's expression of love, itself situated (from Matt's narrative) within performative heterosexual and (hetero)gendered practices.

Bearing in mind that Matt was actively engaged in therapy²³ at the time of our research conversation, his narrative contains heteronormative assumptions and expectations of intimacy practices rooted in heterosexual, socially constructed attachment behaviours between men and women. His narrative confirms that socio-cultural dimensions of experience are internalised, having the potential to change throughout the life course. Matt's story problematises the meaning of a mother's love for her son and his love for her: mother love that appears to both originate in and establish heteronormative relational patterns. Exemplified in Matt's concerns about his own childhood and his daughter's experience, the patterns may be repeated intergenerationally where children, under prevailing heteronormative family practices, are exposed to an environment that (re)produces dominant (hetero)gender identities, often involving asymmetrical interpersonal power and control, rather than respect for diversity and agency.

²³ Psychotherapy has been critiqued historically as a normative gendered process, which may contribute to the (re)production of (hetero)gendered identities (Mitchell, 1974; Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1982; Showalter, 1987; Gilbert, 1999, for example).

Like others' narratives, Matt's story implies gender differentiated psychic processes located within the "asymmetrical organization of parenting" (Chodorow, 1992: 166) in his experience of maternal intimacy, which he experienced as transgressive. Matt described it as "mental paedophilia", hinting at emotionally incestuous feelings and sexual aspects of his mother's behaviour in front of his friends and himself, and in her being attracted to younger men. Butler (2004) argues that the incest taboo both prohibits and legitimises the norm of heterosexual kinship arrangements:

primary incest taboo becomes the way in which sexual positions are occupied, masculine and feminine are differentiated, and heterosexuality is secured [and the] prohibitions that work to prohibit nonnormative sexual exchange also work to institute and patrol the norms of presumptively heterosexual kinship (Butler, 2004: 157).

The ambiguity of his mother's love and the confusion this raised for Matt, regarding his heterosexuality and its expression, may involve disavowal and splitting of his own socially prohibited desires for her, resonating with Chodorow's argument that incest taboos and heterosexuality are (re)produced socially and psychically, stating that:

[f]or boys, superego formation and identification with their father, rewarded by the superiority of masculinity, maintain the taboo on incest with their mother, while heterosexual orientation continues from their earliest love relation with her. For girls, creating them as heterosexual in the first place maintains the taboo (Chodorow, 1992: 166).

Early experiences of mothering affects both men's and women's sexual identities differently throughout life (Olivier, 1989). Olivier notes the absence of Jocasta "and her desire, which drives her to sleep with her own son, flesh of her flesh" (Olivier, 1989: 1) in Freud's account of the Oedipus complex, a psychoanalytic concept which has entered contemporary popular narratives of men and their mothers. As Olivier (1989) notes, although mothers of sons may comment "'He's going through the Oedipal stage'; it never seems to occur to them to think to themselves [...] 'I'm going through my Jocasta stage'" (Olivier, 1989: 2). She argues that "Oedipal issues have become more and more bound up with the mother" (Olivier, 1989: 130), suggesting that responsibility for the behaviour of men has shifted culturally to the mother, which resonates with Rose's statement (2018: 6) that mothers are "often held accountable for the ills of the world [and] the cause of everything that doesn't work in who we are".

Matt's story illustrates the psycho-social complexities of ambivalent desire between a son and his mother, and his attempts to understand, and make bearable, his experience, recognising it as a

continuing intra- and interpersonal process of identity formation within a cultural and social context. Matt seems to have internalised the social prohibitions effectively, fulfilling their function in reproducing normative sexual and gender identities, despite emotional and psychic costs to himself. The gendering of desire, bound by heteronormative social taboos, at the micro level appears as a 'compulsory' dimension of ostensibly 'stable' family identities, which interacts with, and reinforces, institutionalised gender hierarchies at the macro level.

Most men participating in my research tended to avoid discussing any implied possibility of erotic dimensions, including sensuality or fulfilment of desires, in their feelings for their mothers, emphasising filial love for them, within the boundaries of social norms. Liam, the one gay man participating, expressed profound love and care for his mother, and his need to protect her, particularly after his father died. He said that he knows he is "loved even though [she] never says 'I love you'", and that neither his mother nor his father cuddled him or his siblings. Reflecting thoughtfully, Liam commented "I don't know if I wanted more. It's always been the way I've been brought up. I don't feel that intimate with her, but I do really love her, and she loves me as well. I feel really happy with mum. I just wish I could do more". Liam noted the contemporary norm of marriage for "gay" as well as "straight" couples, and the normative expectation that most married couples would want children. He had also considered the institutionalised security and advantages, legally and financially, of marriage. However, Liam was adamant that he doesn't want to marry or have children, and that his mother never put him under any pressure to conform to social expectations regarding his sexuality or gender. He remarked, "It's just never been me. Even now, with gay marriage and all that, I'm not bothered. I don't need a piece of paper to say we're together. The way I understand it is the money side of it, like if I'm with someone and they die. It's never been on my agenda".

Of all the empirical research stories, Matt's narrative came the closest to exploring feelings of passion within mother and man-child intimacy, arguably, because, as Frosh (1997: 39) states, "[t]oo much intensity, whether arising from love or hatred, may threaten both the stability of the individual and the social status quo". More often, there appeared to be an unspoken longing in some mothers' and some men-children's narratives, suggested by their steering away from the issue. Their feelings, however, about possible rejection or loss (whether of relational intimacy or some other loss) were revealed in tears (hastily wiped away, minimised, or defended against by jokes), as well as being expressed in the transference communication with me. Neil, for example, wept and talked at some length about the losses through death he had experienced (two close friends who died from suicide;

his daughter who lived for less than a day). However, he 'neatly' turned his feelings about his mother's death in the future into concerns about himself and how he'd support the surviving parent, saying, "How's that going to affect me in the uncertainty it'll bring? That's pretty terrifying to think about: how it's going to affect you, and how you'll be able to support the survivor is a worry. Definitely." He then exclaimed "Cheery topic!" before quickly moving on to talking about his children's relationship with him as he grows older.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the pain and pleasures of mother love, as well as the darker side of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy that affects the formation of their (hetero)gender identities. Interpretive analyses of the stories indicate that normative discourses perpetuate intersecting gender and age divisions intergenerationally, by silencing and regulating certain expressions of love. Although sensuality is enacted within certain parameters when sons are infants, the stories illustrate that the erotic dimensions of mundane mother love, as part of an embodied profound and enmeshed relationship, are psychically disavowed and socially precluded in man-child and mother relational intimacy. Ambiguous mother love, whether from men-children's perspective or mothers', according to their stories, forms part of identity formation that continues over the life course - each involved in 'making' the other, giving meaning psychically and socially to their sense of self, knowing what it means to be a grand/mother or a man-child.

The stories demonstrate that mothers' and men-children's experience of love, or its denial or distortion, is complicated by socially created normative assumptions that contribute to the psycho-social formation of (hetero)gendered identities. My analytic interpretation suggests that this involves unconsciously complicit (dis)identification with others, through 'normalising' processes that function to uphold prevailing intersectional identity binaries (mother/son; man/woman; young/old, for example), partly through performative family practices. Illustrating that the normative family culture within which mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy is situated (re)creates oppositional, binary gender identities through heterosexual identification within dominant forms of masculinity and femininity, the stories reflect Layton's (2007) argument that:

our identities are always built in relation to other identities circulating in our particular culture, and our own investments in gender, race, class and sex must be implicated in the investments of those we consider "other" [... implicating] us in each other's suffering" (Layton, 2007).

Far from popular idealised representations of 'cosy', tight-knit, multi-generational family units, some of the stories in this chapter illustrate that gender-based conflict rather than reparative interdependency is part of everyday family life. This complex dynamic reflects gendered social relations and structures beyond the dyad. By focussing on adult relationships, my research develops Minsky's perspective (1996), writing about infant sons, that "the experience of reparation and gratitude in relation to the mother may be more difficult to achieve for boys because of the cultural requirement for early separation from her in order to achieve the patriarchal version of 'masculinity'" (Minsky, 1996: 101). Mothers' and men-children's stories in this chapter show that, for some, this difficulty continues throughout the life course and affects identity, especially when relational intimacy is seriously fractured.

The challenges of countering normative discourses are revealed in this chapter. For mothers particularly, but also for men-children once they have partners and their own children, opportunities to exercise agency are limited and self-limiting because of gendered social expectations, and results in their being silenced. For many mothers participating, tensions between themselves and their sons' partners threatened their sense of self and constrained their agency. Most men-children were aware of this dimension and either 'managed' the (potential) conflict or ignored it. Both mothers' and men-children's agency appears to be affected partly by a fear of losing either their historical or their existing relational intimacy, experienced as a potentially destabilising force and existential threat. My research suggests that 'losing each other' is complicated by hierarchical power dynamics and intersecting, but fluctuating, gender and age divisions, which affect the separation process. In the illusory hope of sustaining personal and social coherence through compliance with normative expectations, mothers' and men-children sometimes unwittingly perpetuate potentially damaging (hetero)gendered practices. As the stories imply, performative processes of identity formation at the individual micro level are affected by broader cultural and social requirements for alterity, confirming what's 'not me'. These appear to interact through mutually reinforcing unconscious normative processes at macro and meso levels (such as marriage laws, weddings, and family practices) to sustain, reinforce, and stabilise (hetero)gendered dichotomous classifications of masculine and feminine identities.

The intimacy stories in this chapter demonstrate the complexities of normative expressions of embodied relational power that fluctuates asymmetrically over the life course at the micro level. They suggest that when new intimate relationships are formed, new intimates gain power and influence, and achieve authority within the overall network of relational intimacies, intersected by,

for example, differences in class, economic capital, gender, and age. The narratives demonstrate that the ascendancy of one 'authority' figure affects others in the family, leaving mothers, or sons, or their partners, more vulnerable in relation to them. As Curtis (2015: 100) notes, "It is this sense of them being the one to be in a position of strength and us in a position of relative weakness that evokes the desires and wishes that constitute the transference". The power balance shifts and identities change as members of the family adapt to their new position, which may involve envy or rationalisation as unconscious defence mechanisms. Accepted as part of mundane family life, grand/mothers and men-children may not be aware of its implications for themselves, their families, or their identities, nor that they are sometimes complicit. Mothers' and men-children's narratives indicate that everyday unconscious communication within families functions to (re)produce power hierarchies through its interaction with existing gendered social and political structures.

The following chapter explores in depth the enactment of intersectional power dynamics between mothers and men-children, embodied within family practices. Interrogating further mothers' and men-children's narratives of relational intimacy, the next chapter focusses on the impact of relational power on their identities to illuminate its contribution to (re)creating (hetero)gender identities, perpetuated at micro, meso and macro levels.

CHAPTER 8. TONGUES OF FIRE: THE POWER AND POLITICS OF MOTHER LOVE

Introduction

Interpersonal power and control within relational intimacy pervaded mothers' and men-children's stories, whether they were commenting directly on how it affects them, or as a less explicit dimension in their relational dynamics, or that involved others, such as their partners. For some, the feelings evoked by enacted power appeared to result in shame, guilt, jealousies, and ambivalence. Their stories speak of power being exercised sometimes through displays of disapproval, judgmental statements or actions, or through ambiguous acts of 'kindness' as less obvious, more sophisticated manipulative means of control, which disempowered its target.

This chapter explores how these dimensions are embodied and the impact on the identities of the men and women involved, seeking to discover the extent of any resistance, reparation, or agency. I consider how intersectional power manifests as part of normative processes involved in the formation of identities, illustrating how mechanisms of control are practised in (hetero)gendered mothers' and men-children's everyday relational intimacy that contribute to perpetuating gender and age divisions. Extracts from research conversations, presented as creative non-fiction, move dynamically from the perspectives of the storytellers to my own as a researcher, a mother of men-children, grandmother, and psychotherapist. I use interpretive analysis to consider how gender and age, for example, intersect to reproduce heterosexual, (hetero)gendered identities, embodied and enacted psycho-socially, becoming 'taken for granted' in everyday life. Using the tripartite analytic framework that includes narrative performativity and normative unconscious processes, this chapter foregrounds its third aspect of intersectional power, leading to a discussion of its impact on everyday practices of relational intimacy as a precursor to the final chapter.

Policing the boundaries: jealousies and judgments

Most of the women participating said they were very aware of being judged by others in the family network. They acknowledged that they also evaluated their sons' and their sons' partners' behaviour, stating (possibly defensively) that they are very careful to avoid communicating negative appraisals in an obvious way. Several women participants speculated on jealousies about, and competition within, other family relationships involving their sons, such as their daughters-in-law, their sons' siblings, or their own partners. Beth, for example, noted that her partner, who isn't her sons' father, has an ambiguous relationship with her sons, leading to tensions for her, her partner,

and her sons (who were adults when the relationship with her partner began). Beth believes that there is “some kind of jealousy or competition” for her attention between them all that she has to navigate to avoid potential conflict and to balance (or minimise) the time she spends with either her sons or her partner. Remarking that she isn’t always successful in achieving harmony, Beth thinks that it’s mostly because her partner is very different from her previous partners, stating that her eldest son is very judgmental about him, telling her that “he’s a pernicious influence in your life”. Beth commented:

My son's successful in his marriage, in his job and as a parent, but he disapproves of me, my lifestyle, my choices, including what I've put in my Will, my difficult relationship with my mother, even offering to broker a reconciliation with her. He thinks he knows better than me, and he patronises me.

Her other son, Beth noted, is:

not so judgmental; he’s more able to accept people’s imperfections. It’s like he doesn’t have that sense of entitlement the other one has. Maybe it’s something about the jobs they’ve got and their partners’ aspirations. The eldest is in a management role, while the other is in a fairly low skilled, but demanding, front line job. One moved to a leafy white suburb, the other lives in the multi-cultural inner city.

Marie also noted differences in her two sons’ relationships with her, saying she “often wondered if there was a little bit of jealousy there”. She commented that when she retired from paid work:

I started having Chris’s children and I didn’t have Mark and Tessa’s as much then. But I’d say to Mark, “They can come at the weekend.” “No,” he says, “you’ve had the other two during the week. It’s too much for you.” But that didn’t ring true to me. Mark once said, “You’re bringing them up. You shouldn’t be doing that.” He was quite critical, not so much about me, but about his brother letting me have them.

These brief examples demonstrate layered dimensions of social circumstances and individual attitudes that intersect to (re)create inequalities, privilege, and entitlement, which not only perpetuates systemic intersectional power but also has a psychic effect on identity formation, illustrating “our mutual implication in each other’s suffering” (Layton, 2020: 177). Participants’ comments speak of multi-directional, unspoken jealousy and envy that affects their own identity and others’. Jealousy and envy are commonly defined (Klein, 1975; Anderson, 2002; Church, 2008; Berke, 2012, for example) as two, often overlapping, sometimes interchangeable, but distinct,

emotional and affective responses to the perception of advantage or disadvantage. As Anderson (2002: 455) states, “[b]oth the threat of loss of advantage connoted by the word jealousy and the recognition of disadvantage connoted by the word envy pose a threat to the sense of self”, which suggests the potential effect on identity formation when jealousy (and/or envy) are aspects of intimate relationships.

Pam’s story is narrated at length as it demonstrates the intricate web of family relationships, and her feelings about her own position in the web, as well as judgments she makes and ones that she believes are made about her, leading her to consider jealousy as an aspect of the relational dynamics she perceives.

Mother love?

I always think what happened soured my relationship a little bit with one of my sons: we’d looked after my daughter’s first child quite a bit – but when we retired we downsized, bought another house and a narrowboat, and Bill told him we couldn’t commit to helping out with his children in the same way or really much at all. We said we couldn’t commit but we’ll help out when you’re stuck. He wasn’t pleased! But I’m glad Bill said that, because otherwise I’d end up a packhorse for that son, like some women are for their children and grandchildren. I know they enjoy it but they’re still a packhorse!

So, we go off on the boat. I don’t think they understand - because Rachel’s the ‘daughter-in-law’. To me, the problem with sons are the daughters-in-law, not so much the sons. Rachel can get a bit haughty. I’m sure her mother and father talk about us; I know they do: “Look at us having to do all this. Look at them! They’re not doing anything.” And it does affect the relationship. It does. I always feel a bit guilty. When I am with them, I always want to do more, but that doesn’t go down well. I don’t know if Rachel wants me to do more. I get the feeling if I ring up and say, “D’you want me to have the children, or can I have the children today?”, she’ll say no because I get the feeling she’s thinking: “Oh, she only wants to do this on her terms.” And that feels punishing. It does.

My other son: they moved back here when they had their first baby, because she wanted to be near her mother. Of course! So, her mother looks after this baby, a bit reluctantly, three days a week, and other times too. And this is another thing: because we’re not committed to this regularity, we don’t get asked to babysit at other times either when we could. I’m not

asked. It does feel a bit as if I'm being rejected. Her mother's looking after her sister's baby too, so they've dropped one day with Lucy now, so they're having to pay for childcare. If I hear that story again and how much it's costing them, I'll scream!

Here's another thing: my daughter was really poorly last year, and I went and stayed for two months, and now they're looking at that as well, like she's had a bigger slice of the cake, she's had much more of my time. They've not said that, but I know. I don't know how I know, but I know! I know! I think it's the daughter-in-law thing! It's them that talks about me. Bill doesn't see it; men don't, men can't see it; they haven't got the antennae!

Sometimes, I look at this model of our boat that Bill made, and I hate it. Because of all of this! I daren't tell my husband. That model means something more to me than a narrowboat!

One thing is: none of them come and visit us here, like I think they would if we were still in the family home. It was our retirement plan: sell the family home; buy this house; have a bit in the bank; buy the narrowboat. Which we did. But it's come with a bit of an emotional cost. I get on with my life. I don't mope about it. But, now and again, I just stop and think – what would've happened had we not? I would've had my boys around me much more. But then I might not have done.

I'd describe myself as a wife and mother first and foremost. But I'm also a grandmother. Although I don't see the grandchildren probably as much as I'd like, it's not important to me like it is for some women. Definitely. I see some women, like Rachel's mum: she dotes on them; I think they might not have fulfilled their maternal feelings, which is why they've become these grandmothers goggling at the grandchildren; they must have got some unrequited maternal feelings there that they need to pass on through their grandchildren. I haven't got those. I've done all that. I had four children in six years, and my husband was in and out of work, and we struggled. I did everything. For my children. On very little money. He was in 'Sales', so it was like feast or famine. I put my work round the children. I didn't put the children round work.

That's why I don't yearn for them. I did a bit with the first grandchild; I used to want to have a bit of an Oliver 'fix' but not in that gushing way. I do like to see them, but I don't put myself forward deliberately into the trauma of it all.

The daughters-in-law, though. Why is it? Maybe there's jealousy there, but it depends on the person. And I think these two daughters-in-law have got that type of personality. Whereas my eldest son's partner, I don't think is jealous of me at all. I think she likes me. It's different. Why is that? She likes me and she's told me she values my opinions. She likes the support I give her. The other two, I don't think they need me at all. Though Rachel's always wanting reassurance. She's always asking if the children are like Jonathan as a child. Lucy doesn't; she's not really interested.

Simon goes off happily on holiday with her family, but when we've asked them to come on holiday with us, they wouldn't come. She didn't want to come; just said they couldn't get time off work. It's the same with the other lot, they've been on holiday with her mum and dad. We're not that bothered. I can't think of anything worse, to be honest, to be in a holiday cottage with these kids. But that's not the point. It's the fact that my sons happily go off with their family, but their wives aren't happy to come with us.

Is it jealousy? I often wonder if it's jealousy of me. I've done more with my life than their mothers have. I wonder if they see me as a threat somehow. Or that I think they're not good enough for my sons. They're very aspiring, Rachel and Jonathan: everything's got to be 'done', not just making do. If she's comparing me as I am now, I don't think that's fair. It's very different now and I don't think they see that: they see me as I am now, with material goods and don't know how we got there.

One thing that might affect my relationship with my children is I tend to engage my mouth before I engage my brain. I'll say things sometimes, just off the cuff, and then I think, "Oh, God, I shouldn't have said that," and think they'll take that the wrong way. I always think I've said something if Lucy's funny with me. And I'll check with Bill: "Have I said something? I must have said something she didn't like."

You've got to watch what you do the whole time. I went to drop off some ironing earlier and picked up some more, and I said to Bill, "I'm going for my gongoozle!" A gongoozler on the canals is someone who stands and watches you, and admires, but doesn't do anything. Just observes. And that's what they want you to do: observe and admire them and the children. And if you don't, you're in trouble. I was in a rush, I didn't stay long, but after I'd gone, I

thought, "Oh, God, I kissed Joe goodbye, and I kissed Ellie goodbye, but I didn't kiss Alice". And if they noticed that, I'll be in trouble. With my son as well, not just my daughter-in-law!

Once I said to Lucy, "I hate it. I sometimes hate this being a grandmother thing." And Rachel's mum told me she hates it as well, because she hates trying to split herself between everybody. It's just that feeling you're not doing enough for one, or you're doing more for one and less for another. It feels like you can't do right for doing wrong!

In her story, Pam recounts the sibling jealousies she observes and the jealousy she perceives in her daughters-in-law towards herself, manifest in their rejection of Pam's offers of looking after her grandchildren when she is available. Lucy's acceptance of other work Pam is willing to do, such as the ironing, appears to be a calculated (possibly unconscious) assertion of her power to bestow or withhold contact, as well as a statement about Pam's social status in the family. Pam appears resigned to her (inferior) status, despite her private resistance, perhaps as a way of maintaining a presence. Pam speculates on the jealousies observed in her daughters-in-law, connecting it to her material and economic advantages now and the professional achievements she has in comparison with their own mothers (who, unlike Pam, she commented, work in low status jobs). Arguably, Pam's observations imply envy, rather than jealousy, on the part of her daughters-in-law, particularly aspirational Rachel, since envy occurs when "someone else possesses a quality which we prize, yet feel we lack" (Church, 2008: 3) and resonates with Ahmed's comment that "envy is a disposition that is attuned to the competitive logics of capitalism (or to be more accurate that capitalism encourages such an attunement)" (Ahmed, 2010: 281). Pam's story illustrates an undercurrent present in a number of participants' stories, where grandparents' greater access to financial and time resources simultaneously leaves them vulnerable to manipulation and control by the middle generation, complicating interpersonal and relational power dynamics.

The rejection Pam experiences suggests a fear of loss of connection to her sons as well as her grandchildren, indicating perhaps her own jealousy of the current relationship between her sons and their partners, despite her desire for a life of her own, independent of the childcare demands she observes imposed on other grandmothers. Resisting social expectations and normative assumptions of the grandmothering role, Pam, however, feels excluded and of little relational value. As Church (2008: 4) comments, "[w]hat provokes envy and jealousy is very much influenced by our cultural context. The qualities that inflame envy are also often those which are culturally prized". Since recognising and admitting such uncomfortable feelings, even to ourselves, let alone publicly, can

induce shame, guilt and embarrassment, Pam focussed on her observation of her sons' wives. Pam's complicated relationships with both of her daughters-in-law were reinforced by their gatekeeping role in the family, suggesting Pam's unconscious feelings of being displaced as a mother by her daughters-in-law, despite still being mother to her men-children. Pam may be projecting her own feelings onto her daughters-in-law, unconsciously recognising, in their behaviour, aspects of her own, without linking it to her feelings of loss and insecurity in relation to her sons.

Pam's final comment, "You can't do right for doing wrong", suggests that she feels trapped in a web of relationships, with her attempts to exert agency being thwarted. Pam's experience of disadvantage in her network of family relationships involves complex power dynamics, related to attitudes, (un)conscious assumptions, social and cultural expectations about age (both old and young) and gender, intersecting with class and economics (Pam notes her current comparative affluence). Pam's attention is on her daughters-in-law; her sons are absent in her story, as if she has absolved them from their part in the family dynamics. This reflects expectations of feminised care roles and responsibilities within (hetero)gendered family structures, indicating that everyone in the triads is implicated in (re)producing (hetero)gender identities. Pam's experience of family inequities and power disparities mirror cultural norms and macro level gendered social structures, suggesting that Pam's feelings relate to her experience as an older woman and impotence at her perceived exclusion from important relationships. Despite her resistance to pressures on her to conform to social expectations and her agency in forging a life less bound by (grand)maternal 'duties', she seems unable to resolve her feelings about the situation.

Pam notes that it was her husband who made the decision not to provide childcare, rather than herself or jointly. She implies that her relational intimacy with her sons may have been ameliorated by a different decision, resulting potentially in less emotional cost to her. The strength of Pam's response to complicated family relationships indicates the impact it has on her sense of self: she continuously monitors her own behaviour, seeking feedback and reassurance from her husband. Pam's steely bravado in her storytelling appears to mask her constant fear of loss. Anticipating another wound to her self-value appeared to be incorporated into her identity as a (grand)mother, believing she will be rejected by her family, which affected her satisfaction with life and capacity for agency.

The next story tells of strategies Carl used to exercise agency. The decisions he made to preserve or develop a sense of self conflicts with his parents' normative expectations of him. However, he relies

on them for help with his children, since he is the primary carer for his children, following separation from their mother. Although effective in meeting his practical needs, his dependence on them is complicated by the relational dynamic between Carl, his mother, and his father, arising from Carl's fused relationship with his mother when he was younger.

Mother love?

I rely on my mam, but the dynamics changed and then changed again.

When I was younger, I doted on my mam; my mam was always there for me; she did everything for me. My dad worked all the time and was never there for me. He'd say "You're hopeless; you're just a dosser; you'll not amount to anything". My mam was always there to stick up for us. Mam was a dinner lady at school, so I always saw her; she was my best friend; she was everything. I left 6th Form and worked in a care home, looking after old people and my mam was "Brilliant, son, you've got a job!" My dad was "That's a woman's job!"

Then I got a job in a wine bar in a big conference venue next to a Sports Club, and I loved it. I'd go home and I'd be, "I've done this tonight!" and she'd be, "Oh, brilliant, son. Brilliant!" She'd be over the moon, but I'd tell my dad and he wouldn't be bothered.

I got a transfer to run the bar at the Sports Club and got Assistant Manager there. Then Manager. My mam was always proud, and she'd tell everybody, "My son's Assistant Manager!" My dad: "It's a dead-end job. You'll not make any money from that".

I put a Business Plan together and the company signed the business over to me. I was in sole charge, and I thought, "My dad's just retired. I can give him a job and be his boss". He agreed because he was bored at home, though he wasn't sure about his son being his boss. I was kind of, "I told you I could do it! For all the times you told me I'm hopeless". I brought my mam in too to run the kitchen. Suddenly I was this big shot, with this business and I was owning my mother and father. I loved that. I absolutely loved that power.

It's a bit bloody sick of me. I didn't pay them, but the deal was they'll run it seven days a week and they can take all the profits from the kitchen. They were happy with that because they were making lots of money. I wasn't screwing them but I'm the kind of person if somebody tells me I can't do something, I'm going to make sure I do it.

I didn't need my mam anymore then. I was a big guy.

But I suppose I always needed my mam. And me and my mam, we lost it. I don't know why; I don't know when. I could've told my mam everything.

See - I'm crying now! That's opened a can of worms!

My nana played a big part in my life; my mam and my nana were everything. I was ridiculously close to my nana. I could've done anything, and she'd still say she loves us. I had that with my mam, but it just went. I think my mam changed when Nana died; they were inseparable. Then my mam didn't have time for me anymore.

I'd become a man, but I still needed my mam. I'd go to work and put on this hard face, and it was, "This needs doing! I'm the boss!" But I still wanted to phone my mam at the end of the day and tell her what I'd done. I think we just lost that. I don't know if it's because of me. It just went.

It all filters through the generations, I suppose. My grandda – he had an affair, had a child with someone else who didn't tell him about the child till years later, and my nana carried on as if nothing had happened, for the children – my mam. And my dad did it, though didn't have any other kids with this woman, but my mam stayed with him for me and my brother. My mam just followed suit, followed what her mam did.

I don't know if my dad was jealous of me and my mam. It's not too farfetched, is it? My mam stayed with him when he had an affair, and maybe he was, "Your mam stayed with me! She's mine. I don't want you having this relationship with your mam!" I really don't know. I'll never know.

When my dad dies, I'll be absolutely devastated, and if my dad went first, I don't know what'd happen with my mam. Harsh as it sounds, I might get that relationship back.

When I lose my mam, God knows what I'm going to do. I don't even want to think about it. But that's the impact loved ones have.

The power dynamics shift, and they've shifted left, right and centre with me and my parents. But dad always had power over mam's decisions. It always comes down to my dad. I don't know if that's how our relationship shifted. I can't remember when it changed, I just know it changed.

And when my dad goes, it'll change again, and we might get the relationship back. Is my dad the stumbling block?

Carl's story is replete with the emotional pain of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood as he fought to gain independence, resisting his parents' differing expectations of him. It exemplifies the intricacies of dynamic power shifting over a lifetime, impacting on his psyche in interaction with his social and cultural circumstances, which affects his identity. Aware of the implications of his enduring attachment to his mother on himself and his life, as well as on the relationship with his father, Carl's story reflects the complicating intersections of gender, age, class, and economic power. His father appeared to have exerted power within the family as a white, working-class man; his mother had power over Carl as her child, but, despite their attachment, she ostensibly heeded her husband's disparaging opinions about Carl, whilst privately encouraging him; his maternal grandfather and father both had "affairs" with other women, and their wives stayed with their husbands because of the children.

Carl apparently experienced a continuous (and potentially traumatising) threat of rejection, which challenged his sense of self. He responded by exercising agency, generated by a determination to resist his parents' traditional role-modelling of (hetero)gendered identities, transmitted intergenerationally. From Carl's perspective, his father's enacted envy of Carl's close maternal intimacy led to a diminished sense of self for Carl in childhood, although his (maternal) grandmother provided some counterbalance. His father gained simultaneously from his hierarchical power in the family, which enhanced his own sense of self. Their mutual envy reflects Anderson's comment (2002: 460) that envy involves "resentment [...] towards the other as well as a spiteful wish that the other be done out of the advantage", possibly motivating Carl to exert power over his father in adulthood, as he admitted. Carl is aware of the interpersonal jealousies and judgments of his father, suggesting rivalry between them, which Carl combats by demonstrating his own advantages (and power) brought about by money he earned, commenting "I bailed them out time and again, coming to me for money, putting a roof over their heads".

Carl's story demonstrates that envy and jealousy aren't generated solely by interpersonal relationships but are created and exist within a social and cultural context affected by structural power (complicated by intersecting gender, age, and economic dimensions, for example). Relational power, and the power to effect change, is contingent, slipping around and within family life. Carl's parents had differential gendered power over him in childhood, his mother having less power in relation to his father. As an adult, however, Carl has power to create personal and relational change, bestowed by social structures that benefit young, economically stable, physically, and psychologically able, heterosexual, white men. Carl's self-awareness, his self-appraisal, and his perception of the impact of relational power, coupled with structural privilege, support his efforts to transform his life and his capacity to create counter-discourses, indicating potentially different outcomes transgenerationally.

Carl's astute awareness of how power shifts along the life course, and between generations, was unusual among the men participating in my project. Consistent with Seidler's (2005) study of hegemonic masculinities, Carl's reflections on his complex ambivalence towards his mother were emotional: a confusion of wanting to feel separate and not dependent on her, but also, in the next breath, acknowledging that he still does need her love, and, moreover, his parents' practical help with childcare. As he commented, "I need them because they're babysitters for my boys. And if I didn't have my mam I'd be screwed. I wouldn't be able to work". His desire for transgenerational reparation added another complicating dimension to his ambivalence, encapsulated in contradictory statements coming close one after another. He stated, for example, "I don't know if you can call it a relationship: I'll see her name flash up on my mobile and I'll ignore it" but then almost immediately said:

I miss the relationship with my mam. The way my mam is with my kids is the way she was with me, when I was younger. Their mam's not around or their other grandparents, so it all filters onto my mam; she's the mother figure. I don't have that now, but my boys do, which is lovely because I remember how I felt when I was their age. I don't see my mam now how I used to see my mam. She's my mother, but I've got my own life. My mam and dad can still make me feel that small, but I'd never do that with my boys, never ever do anything to make them feel that small. I suppose that's correcting things that went wrong in my life.

Ambivalence and ambiguity in mother love

Ambivalence has been defined sociologically (Connidis and McMullin, 2002) as simultaneously held opposing feelings that are due partly to social expectations about how individuals should act.

Psychological ambivalence, primarily subjective, involves unconscious feelings of love and hate (Connidis and McMullin, 2002). My interpretive analysis builds on Connidis and McMullin's work (2002), positing ambivalence as created (psycho-socially) at the interface between social structure and individual agency.

Almost everyone participating in my research implied, directly or indirectly, ambivalence in their relational intimacy, although for some their ambivalent feelings were mostly revealed in contradictory statements or emotions communicated in their narratives. The only woman, Maureen, who didn't express any ambivalence towards her children didn't have the added dimension of grandchildren, though her sons had partners, and lived some distance from her. Maureen appeared to idealise her sons, exuberantly expressing her devotion to them, and speaking at length of her joy when they were small children. Any difficulties for her, Maureen explained, were resolved partly by returning to work soon after their birth, her husband taking full-time care of them. Maureen commented that, as her children became adults,

I matured, and now they know things I'll never know. I'm learning from them now. But that love bond, the love I felt for them as babies I couldn't have stopped being there. Something changed though when they got partners. When the partners weren't right for them, I couldn't say it, but it was obvious to me.

Maureen deflected discussion of any negativity in the relationship between her sons and herself, suggesting (from my perspective) that her idealisation of her sons and their intimacy with her may be an unconscious defence against unbearable feelings (Klein, 1946; Kohut, 1971; Perry, 2014; Leduc-Cummings et al., 2020). The other participant who didn't give any indication of ambivalence, Liam, similarly expressed only love for his mother, saying:

I feel kind of sad when I hear "I hate my mother; I hate my father; I hate my brothers and sisters" because I can't ever imagine that being possible for me. Now dad's passed away, I feel my need to protect mum. Because she's on her own. She's near retirement age and she hasn't got a job. I know she's been living off life savings, so now I feel I want to protect her, as she protected me.

Liam's love for his mother, unlike Maureen's for her sons, seemed to be based on a secure attachment, leading to his awareness of their interdependence, respectful of their differences and individual autonomy.

For a number of men participating, their ambivalence appeared to be affected by the importance to them of keeping their mothers close (emotionally and often geographically) because of their dependence on them for practical support, such as helping with childcare. For Neil, for example, ambivalence (although he didn't name it as such, merely seeing it as a 'natural' progression in the life course) had involved distancing himself, when he'd left home to pursue his career, from his family and the wider network of relatives (something he acknowledged as a disappointment for his mother). Once married with children, he moved back to be close geographically to his parents who provide help with their children. Any ambivalent feelings Scott (who doesn't have children) expressed about his mother were framed by the differences in their current class and economic status. He identified that his educational and professional achievements made shared reference points in their intimacy now more challenging, and his love for her appeared to be located firmly in memories of his childhood with her. Scott attempted to rationalise his irritation and disappointment in her lack of interest in his achievements, but expressed regret that he doesn't receive the recognition he wants from her and a yearning for her continuing love, saying:

I've just learned not to bother as much. I don't say much about a lot of things. I find it very ... I don't know ... I don't think I get sad or anything. I just kind of accept it. I probably felt let down occasionally because there's no acknowledgement. And maybe sometimes that hurts a bit.

What *could* I do that mum would go: "Well that's fantastic! I'm so proud."?

Arber and Timonen's (2012) study of intergenerational relationships notes that "individuals may experience ambivalence when they feel their ability to exercise agency in how they conduct their relationships is constrained by social structural arrangements" (Arber and Timonen, 2012: 141). Resonating with their research, most women participating expressed varying degrees of ambivalence towards their men-children, resulting sometimes in hostility and relationship breakdown, at least temporarily, whilst still sustaining a profound, although complicated, mutual love. They minimised or explained away negative feelings towards their men-children, sometimes blaming themselves, like Jean, for being too "soft, too lenient", and now she resents feeling "taken for granted". Marie examined her own ambivalent feelings, behaviour and decisions in handling a conflict with her daughter-in-law, as well as her son, saying:

I doubted myself. What had I done wrong? Where've I gone wrong? Should I have done anything different? Apart from keeping my mouth shut. Have I done anything wrong to Tessa? My sons spend all their time with their wives, so it's in their ear. And you don't know what's being said. It's very painful. It's heart-breaking. And you just let things go. You just let things go.

Remembering her unsuccessful attempt to heal the rift between them, Marie commented:

He said some horrible things. I just let him say what he'd got to say, then I said, "Have you done?" And he went, "Yeah." I said, "Well, I know where I stand now then, don't I?" He says, "Oh Mum, don't be like that." And I said, "No. I'm off!" And I just walked away. It took some doing. I thought, "You're not talking to me like that."

Marie's resistance and agency risked the loss of family relationships to which she is committed, resulting not only in interpersonal conflict but also intra-personal conflict for her. However, she remained open to the rehabilitation of their relationship, which resolved eventually. Marie noted her son's continuing dependence on her emotional support, telling me:

One night he phoned me: "Mum, me and Tessa's had a big argument. I don't know what to do. I know you can't do anything, but I just wanted to hear your voice." I remember feeling upset because he was upset, and I wanted to go and cuddle him. And I couldn't. I was concerned about him, but pleased that he'd phoned me, that he'd thought of his mum.

Beth's story, next, illustrates a range of interacting psycho-social dimensions within family relationships that contribute to her feelings of ambivalence. She recalls an experience, and its physical and psychic effects on her, with her adult son and his wife at Christmas (a time socially and culturally significant when families are 'expected' to come together) that left her feeling bereft and powerless.

Mother love?

I walked up to the playground, where we'd arranged to meet to give them their Christmas presents, my son and his wife and their little boys.

I could see her but no-one else; my heart started drumming, painful, my head suddenly throbbing. I didn't expect a warm welcome: there'd been an angry and hurt exchange of texts the night before, but I did expect to see him and my grandsons, like we'd agreed.

Sophie looked away from me. I went up to her, careful to smile: "Where is everyone?"

She spat out a look of pure hatred at me, telling me what I'd said in my reply to his text was "vile, vile". Once again, his wife had loaded the gun and handed it to him to fire at me.

He'd refused to come or allow me to see his children. He wouldn't accept my present; not for the first time: it'd happened before on his birthday once. Of course, there was no present for me.

She was the just the messenger, she said. She walked off triumphantly.

He's nearly 50, nearly half a century I've known him, loved him.

There was nothing I could say to make it better, or to turn back the last 24 hours. I'd loathed him as much as I loved him when he'd sent me dishonest texts with flawed and deliberately confusing logic, trying to gaslight me. I'd responded in the heat of the moment, but I hadn't been vile. I really wanted to take back whatever it was that got to him (and her) so much. But it couldn't be unsaid. Better to have kept silent. I'd challenged their sense of superiority, their entitlement ... always taking the moral high ground, treating me like a child, and I'd forgotten they could weaponise their children against me, like they did once before, and, even worse, take my son away from me again, using him to put me in my place, back in my box, silenced.

I sent him an apologetic text the next day, hoping we could talk and repair the hurts. He didn't reply. I don't think he even read it. I don't know.

That changed me, made me question who I am, who I've been, who I want to be and who I can be.

At first, I sank into despondency and grief, but now I've got some perspective and I'm resisting taking all the blame and all responsibility. It takes two, or, in this case, three, to

make or wreck a relationship. I miss him and I miss my grandsons, but I'm getting on with my life.

This encounter in the playground (a location itself that suggests families having everyday fun, rather than a site of 'warfare') appears to be an acting out of unconscious, as well as conscious, communication between Beth, her son, and her daughter-in-law. Beth's story reflects intergenerational, gendered relational power affected by social and cultural expectations of grand/parenting, and normative assumptions of what it means to be a woman or a man at different points in the life course. The women's apparent mutual antipathy suggests maternal ambivalence (Parker, 1995; Hollway and Featherstone, 1997; Takseva, 2017; Chapman and Gubi, 2019, for example), which they may have unconsciously perceived in each other. Both mothers, from different generations, perhaps experience unconscious ambivalence towards their (male) children, feeling hate while simultaneously feeling love, accompanied perhaps by shame and guilt. The apparently longstanding conflict within the triad is loaded with incipient feelings of grief, sorrow, and anger, as well as loss and separation. Love and affection are both offered and withheld in the relational intimacy between mother and son, whilst Beth's (self-constraining) desire for intimacy with her son remains part of her identity.

Her story also contains underlying feelings of jealousy or envy, differently generated and experienced because of Beth's relative power status and position in the family hierarchy. From her perspective, Beth believes that her daughter-in-law is instrumental in intervening in the relational intimacy between Beth's son and herself. Beth's view of her daughter-in-law's exercise of power is similar to other mothers' stories discussed previously who felt that their men-children collude with their wives, perhaps unconsciously, who 'enable' them to exploit power by controlling access as the family gatekeeper. Illustrating conflict between a younger woman and an older woman, and an older woman in conflict with a younger man (who is also her son), Beth's story exemplifies how asymmetrical age and gendered power can be enacted in the social framework of the family, through which identities are internalised and embodied.

The absence of Beth's son at the playground may indicate his own ambivalence, enacting a psychically regressive flight to avoid the pain of the power dynamic between the woman who gave birth to him and the woman who gave birth to his children. Possibly confused by, or confusing, his social role as a father and his social role as a son, he may be trying to manage his own ambivalence. From Beth's perspective of the event, it appears that, by absenting himself, he tries to exert control

over his (infantilised) mother. He has handed power to his wife as messenger, possibly communicating to his mother a symbolically paternal “No”, unconsciously attempting to restore boundaries, and disavowing their mutual love and hate. Traditionally, the function of the father figure, socially, culturally, and psychoanalytically, is one of prohibition, setting boundaries around embodied intimacy that is “allowed to exist only within the structures given to it by the outside” (Frosh, 1997: 39). Beth’s desire for relational intimacy with her son must take socially acceptable forms, in a social world structured around the prohibition on incest (Butler, 2004). Such prohibitions are internalised, essentialised and embodied through conventional family identities and enacted in kinship arrangements.

When psychological ambivalence is unmanageable it can become the source of great anxiety, resulting in a powerful desire to control by expelling and projecting contradictory feelings of love and hate, categorising external objects (as well as internal objects) into ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (Klein, 1946). Beth’s story suggests that the force of the younger woman’s hatred of the older one derives from unconscious recognition of her own ambivalence, reinforced by cultural representations of good and bad mothers and the meaning of motherhood, idealised, and fetishized in the social world. Beth’s story of being positioned as the ‘bad grand/mother’ illustrates the enactment of ambivalence, experienced subjectively within the social, political, and cultural context of the family, which mediates and (re)creates (hetero)gendered identities over time.

The power of love: coercive control

As previous stories have shown, intimacy between mothers and men-children involves relational power, operating within families that “work as an oppressive institution, especially for women and children” (Seidler, 2009: 5). However, the stories indicate that the exercise of power and control is more complicated and diffuse than dichotomous narratives of women’s subjugation by men suggest. The invisibility of oppressive family relationships, the silence that surrounds them, and acceptance of mundane oppression renders it almost imperceptible. The covert exercise of oppressive family practices is testament to the way relational power works and the difficulties in ‘naming’ its everyday presentation in families as coercive control.

The effect of the complexities in the exercise of power and control is evident in Ann’s comments, recounting how her son surrendered his involvement in his mother’s health emergency to her daughter-in-law. Ann recalled, “I’d suddenly lost my sight the morning they were all coming to stay, my son and his family”. Her daughter-in-law, Helen, immediately “took charge”, telling Ann’s son to

look after their children. Helen took Ann to the doctor, then on to the hospital, and back again to see a specialist the same day. Ann stated that she would have preferred her son (as he had proposed) to accompany her but Helen, appearing to act kindly towards Ann, disempowered both her and her son. Ann marks this period, during her long recovery, as a “turning point” in her relationship with Helen, which had been fraught for some time, saying:

Helen was definitely in control, telling David to go to the shops for me and everything, and I know he was very worried. But I’d always been independent. When I say things have got a bit better, I think I’m alluding to that. I did show myself as very, very vulnerable, and I was suddenly an old lady who couldn’t cope. Though I did! I carried on with things, but I think that was probably when it shifted a bit.

Ann is aware of an imbalance of power between Helen and herself that she felt was connected to her age and vulnerability. It involved her relinquishing her own power of independence and agency to her daughter-in-law, who then appeared to be less antagonistic towards Ann, and comfortable in her acquired position of authority over Ann and David. Ann perceived that her vulnerability had provided an opportunity for Helen to intervene in Ann’s and David’s relational intimacy, by exercising power and control over them both, limiting their autonomy. It is striking that, from her perspective, Ann thought that when the younger woman felt more dominant and Ann behaved more submissively (and her son didn’t intercede, since his agency too had been constrained), the relationship between Ann and her daughter-in-law became less conflictual.

In contrast, James’s narrative (recounted in Chapter 5) illustrates a more normatively gendered exercise of power and control, since it involves a man coercively ‘taking care’ of his mother’s future (a role reversal not unusual in older age, which removes a woman’s agency and places power with her man-child, as shown in Chapter 2). Effectively, in his advance plans for his mother, James was taking away any agency his mother might have, making assumptions about what would be right for her (and perhaps him). He appeared to believe he was acting in her best interests, asserting that he and his mother were “close”. From James’s perspective, she was dependent on him for “sorting out her life: the banking ... investing her money ... making sure mum knew how the direct debits and things like that worked ... I took over mental responsibility and all the financial responsibility in case mum gets dementia”.

Beth’s story below demonstrates the inaccuracy of mundane stereotypical assumptions that women don’t or can’t exercise power and control over men. Her story suggests that complicated power

relations, affected by intersecting age and gender divisions, for example, and its enacted practice of control, shift asymmetrically and multi-directionally:

Mother love?

There was this routine in the evenings at bath time for the little boys (just toddlers). I'd be invited into the bathroom to watch as they splashed, playing with their bath toys and singing nursery rhymes, seemingly to encourage them and to admire their parents' parenting prowess.

The first time this thing happened, I was taken by surprise, but over time I got used to the finale: me being edged out of the way, to stand in the doorway, my son and his wife performing the last scene - lifting the boys into their towels, all four of them on the floor; then the climax of the performance - quietly at first, rising in volume for the rousing collective cheer of "oh, oh, OH, Team Thomson!", all holding hands in a circle, all raising their hands above their heads at the crescendo. Then the family group hug, while I stood on the edge beaming broadly.

My first reaction was pleasure at the happy family scene, witnessing their 'bonding'. It was only later I realised that, as well as being a genuinely, and, I imagine, initially spontaneous, fun thing, it had transformed into a ritual that I experienced as excluding, as I became more aware of the power dynamic between us. I'd been pushed to the margins, literally to the threshold of the bathroom, permitted to watch the performance of 'perfect' parenting, which contrasted, in that small, repeated display, with my own 'less than perfect' parenting that I'd always been candid about. Demarcation lines had been drawn around the family unit. And I wasn't to be part of that. I felt shocked at the physical as well as emotional aspects of this experience: what being moved out of the circle, physically and emotionally, meant for me.

Another time I arrived as the little boys were getting dressed, their choice of clothes being guided by their mum, who was wearing a blue and white striped top. The T-shirts the boys 'selected' were also blue and white striped, and my son was encouraged by his wife to change the top he was wearing to a blue and white striped one before we went out for lunch. Which he did. I made no comment, but I was surprised that my son's autonomy even over his clothing had been taken away.

Boundaries being reinforced, I thought, designed perhaps to exclude others not deemed part of their family, taking the form of donning the 'family uniform', the 'team kit'. I only noticed it a few times, but I think it shows how important creating the family identity was to my daughter-in-law (maybe to my son too, since he did nothing to oppose the idea of wearing what he'd been 'advised' to wear).

Beth describes her experience of being moved to the threshold of the bathroom, a liminal²⁴ place where she is neither 'in' nor 'out': a psychically confusing space in its ambiguity and disorienting effect. From Beth's perspective, she was encouraged to be involved but then literally marginalised within the family, as an observer only, leaving her, she said, with doubts about the accuracy of her perceptions and her identity as a mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law. For Beth, this represented the manipulative control her daughter-in-law exerted not only towards her but also towards her son and his children, ostensibly offering choice and agency about their clothes, for example, but coercively leading them all to a decision she'd already made. As banal as Beth's story of bath time and clothing appears, her narrative challenges contemporary popular dominant discourses of coercive control as confined to, and categorised as, domestic violence.

During her narrative overall, Beth described how, after attempting to bring the increasing tensions between her daughter-in-law and herself "out into the open, to clear the air", her son refused to have contact with her and stopped her from seeing her grandchildren (for whom she'd provided regular childcare for four years to enable both parents to work), until "I'd met him and his wife separately so they could tell me how bad I make them feel". Beth stated, "After I'd begun to get over their attack and the shock of them using their children to hurt me, I agreed to their ultimatum". According to Beth, her son began by saying tearfully that she had always had a "profound effect" on him. He recited a catalogue of her faults and poor parenting of him over the years, including the impact on him of her inability to "regulate her emotions". Beth commented:

I didn't know whether having a profound effect on him was a good thing or a really bad thing. I was unhappy a lot of the time when he was growing up and had periods of depression. But we'd always been very close and used to joke that we were telepathic. Until his wife came along. It'd been fine with his first partner, and they'd set up home together too but didn't marry, didn't have children. We all got on well. But with his wife it's different. Maybe my frankness about my

²⁴ The term "liminal" is used to describe the physical place Beth occupied at the threshold of the bathroom, her social liminality in being distanced from her son and grandsons, and the transition experienced in shifting psychologically and culturally from being a mother to being a grandmother and mother-in-law.

parenting shortfalls, made me more vulnerable in her eyes and gave her an opportunity to abuse me, or at least show she was in control.

When Beth had her meeting with his wife, her son attended as well, “not to say anything but to be there to support his wife”. Her daughter-in-law accused Beth of intimidating her and undermining her. Beth commented that being summoned to be “told off” twice followed a number of years, “since the children were born”, of:

microaggressions from my daughter-in-law, leaving me totally confused about what was going on. Sometimes I said really stupid things, and I’d see her smirk, hear her snigger, as if I really was stupid. It was like there was a hidden agenda, waiting for me to trip up or fall into a trap. I honestly felt I’d been gaslighted in the end. I still don’t see them much, and when I do, I’m walking on eggshells in case I do or say something wrong. It’s like his wife has isolated him from me and the rest of his family.

Beth’s comments indicate how disempowered she felt in the triangular relationship between herself, her son, and his wife. As in Ann’s story, the weight of relational power appears to rest with her daughter-in-law, enacted in ways that drew her son into the practice of control. As she perceived it, Beth’s daughter-in-law’s coercive behaviour was aimed at excluding her and establishing the younger mother’s maternal superiority and entitlement, which took precedence over the older woman’s well-being, and perhaps her son’s too. Situated within everyday family life, my *psycho-social* interpretive analysis of Beth’s, Ann’s, and James’s stories, develops Sweet’s (2019) sociological study of ‘gaslighting’ within domestic violence. Sweet argues:

Engaging in abusive mental manipulation certainly involves psychological dynamics, but scholars have thus far disregarded the *social* characteristics that actually give gaslighting its power. Specifically, gaslighting is effective when it is rooted in social inequalities, especially gender and sexuality, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships (Sweet, 2019: 852; original emphasis).

Drawing on Sweet’s (2019) insights regarding gaslighting, the stories in my study suggest that inequalities intersected by age and gender make the conditions for familial coercive control possible. My project suggests that manipulative, non-physical coercive control is more embedded in mundane interpersonal relationships within families than is recognised. It is ‘unsayable’ because many of us are implicated in the ways we relate to others in everyday life. Its presence in everyday relational intimacy is nebulous and ‘slow burning’, accumulating over time, and experienced emotionally,

rather than in the visible wounds of physical domestic violence. Institutionalised by the legal system, coercive control is positioned within the realm solely of domestic violence. It fails to take account of the prevalence of coercive control across a broad spectrum of everyday experience: practices in school playgrounds, for example, in workplaces, and in mundane family life, as my research shows, where it is perpetrated by various family members at various times, supported by fluctuating gender power hierarchies, and implicates all of us, as mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters.

At certain points in the life course, in certain circumstances, it may be possible to resist socially structured disadvantages. A woman, for example, encouraged perhaps by the newly acquired status available, at least temporarily, through motherhood, may acquire power and control. Normative motherhood is idealised and elevated culturally, and its effects internalised psychically, simultaneously diminishing or marginalising the power and status of both the father/man-child and the grand/mother (especially the paternal grand/mother). These structural and psychic dimensions facilitate oppressive interpersonal practices and affect mothers' and men-children's identities and relational intimacy.

Jean's story, following, depicts emotional manipulation and coercive control exercised, from Jean's viewpoint, by her daughter-in-law via her son. It leads Jean to limit her agency and decisions and raises self-doubt about her identity as a mother. Her story exemplifies the intricacies of mother and man-child intimacy within the broad network of family relationships, as well as the complexity of interdependence, illustrating Jean's and her son's tacit mutual emotional dependence, intertwined with her son's (and his family's) dependence on her practical assistance.

Mother love?

There'd been all this fuss about my daughter-in-law wanting to go to the theatre and getting tickets, and I'd said, "Don't count on me to babysit because we might be away. You need to find somebody else." He said, "We don't like finding somebody to look after them. We don't trust them with anybody else". And I'm thinking, "No, perhaps not: you'd have to pay!" And it feels like emotional blackmail²⁵. Anyway, he says: "Alright, we'll get somebody else."

So first her brother's wife agreed, but then I got a text from him: "Mum, you're not away now. D'you think you could have the boys on Saturday? Sarah's got something else on now. She can take Anna with her but can't manage three of them." So, I said, "Oh. OK." Anyway,

²⁵ The term 'blackmail' is kept, despite its racist connotation, as it was used by the participant.

about two days before, I got another text from Richard: "D'you think you could have Anna as well, because Sarah's changed her plans?" And I'm thinking "What?!"

I've never let them down. I've let them down only once, and that was when I was so ill, I couldn't get out of bed. And I've rearranged things. If that'd been me, I'd have rearranged things, made some effort. I'd have worked round it. She didn't.

I called at their house a couple of days later and I said, "It's a pity about that. What happened?" Perhaps Louise detected a bit of a tone, because the next text I got from Richard was: "Louise decided she's going to take her mum to the theatre, so I can stay with the children, but I'll still come over to yours and we'll go out somewhere."

And that's what happened. And I cooked tea for them.

I don't know whether it was my reaction that was a bit out of the norm for me. I'd said to Richard, "It looks like I'm having all the children now at the weekend after all," and he said, "Well, you've not seen them for a few days."

It's this idea that I want to have them, and I do want them, but it's like they're doing me a favour.

I know that some grandparents, who don't see the children very regularly, they come along and have loads of fun: they're special, have treats, and do fun things with them. But because I'm so involved with mine, I'm more of a mother to them and I've got to do the disciplining, and sort the chaos out, rather than having the fun part, like these grannies. You see it on Facebook too: "When you come to granny's, you can do whatever you want", whispering like it's a secret between them. I don't have that, I have them so often.

I don't mind really. I know they've both got to work, and their jobs are important for her as well as him.

But it's just down to me. My husband doesn't do the grandparenting thing.

I always thought Richard might have been a bit left out sometimes when he was little and perhaps I over-compensated a bit for that. But it's still carrying on with the grandchildren! I should be able to say, "No, Richard. No. Don't! I've had enough." But then I just feel I'm letting myself down.

Jean's identity as grandmother and mother are clearly important to her, but her story also suggests a dissatisfaction and a tension between the bonds that tie her to her family and a desire for agency and some recognition of her identity as separate and independent, shown in her (thwarted) attempt at a counter-normative stance. It appears that there was a conflict for Jean in the emotional and practical investment she makes and its effect on her daily life. She simultaneously enjoys and resents the extent of their dependence on her, indicating her ambivalence and the limitations on her agency. Jean's agency is relational and contingent on her willingness to disrupt the normative (and performative) gendered habits established in, and with, her son's family. Jean, however, recognises the intergenerational impact of her previous behaviours and her repetition of 'old' ways of relating to her son. Her capacity to resist such repetitions may have been hindered by the process of forming her own identity as it changed throughout the life course in relation to others' identities "circulating in a culture and subculture [where] [t]he capacity to resist such repetitions [...] springs from multiple sources, especially relational experiences" (Layton, 2020: xxxiii).

Jean's story implies that she feels she is being manipulated by her son and wife to work for them, providing childcare or as 'cook', appearing to condescend to allow her to spend time with their children (an aspect which was similarly noted by other women participants). However, Jean appears complicit, perhaps because of fear of exclusion from the family²⁶. Although Jean felt manipulated by her son and his wife, she then blamed herself for over-compensating her son and continuing that tendency in her relationship with her grandchildren. She takes responsibility for the harm done to her (limiting her agency and choice) by her son and daughter-in-law. Arguably, from a psychodynamic perspective, Jean, and perhaps Beth and Ann, may be projecting unconsciously feelings of shame about their own use of power and oppressive practices. This would account for their past and current feelings, believing they are entitled to a role in the family as a grand/mother. Their conflictual relationships with their daughters-in-law also potentially suggest an unconscious displaced resistance to their own experiences of historical gendered oppressions (through identification with their daughters-in-law). Similarly, an awareness of, and identification with, their

²⁶ Research shows that isolation from family and friends is a feature of coercive control (Stark, 2007).

sons' oppression by their daughters-in-law may revive painful historical psychic wounds inflicted on themselves.

Like others in this chapter, Jean's narrative illustrates exploitation, power and control within families, "that we routinely cultivate and accept" (Taylor, 2012: 213) in everyday relational intimacy. The stories reveal widespread interpersonal manipulation within families with which both men and women collude, in an attempt perhaps to ward off psychic existential threats and social fragmentation, sustaining normative expectations. Implicated in this 'fantasy', grand/mothers and men-children contribute to the (re)production of heteronormative structures and (hetero)gendered identities, which perhaps illuminates the challenges of deploying resistance and exercising agency.

Both mothers' and men-children's stories suggest that monitoring and supervision of family power practices are diverse, scattered and subtle, fluctuating amidst the network of relationships over the life course. They illustrate far more complex relational power dynamics operating in families than suggested by studies that, reductively, situate the father as having sole sovereign power to regulate the family (for example, Foucault, 1977; 1978). Other research (for instance, Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989; Green, 2004; O'Reilly, 2004) has suggested that motherhood can emancipate women from oppressive patriarchal practices, using empowering, overt, and subversive strategies of resistance (Green, 2004). Taylor's argument (2012: 201), however, resonates with narratives of (un)conscious collusion in this chapter, implicated as we may be in (re)creating heteronormative oppressions through the family:

Approaching the family genealogically, rather than seeking a single model of power that can explain it, shows that far from this institution being a quasi-natural formation or a bedrock of unassailable values, it is in fact a continually contested fiction that masks its own histories of becoming (Taylor, 2012: 201).

Connell notes that gender is "often interwoven with power and the division of labour (for example, in the figures of the father and the mother) [...which operates] intimately and diffusely [... and] impacts directly on people's bodies as 'discipline' as well as on their identities and sense of their place in the world" (Connell, 2002: 59). Mothers' and men-children's stories suggest that relational intimacy embodied and enacted within families is often the site of nuanced, but powerful, (hetero)gendered practices, where mothers, men-children, and grandmothers 'make' each other in 'making' a family. The emotional and material investment involved in such psycho-social interpersonal 'making' processes continues throughout the life course and contributes to the

(re)making of (hetero)gendered identities, assisting (unwittingly perhaps) in the macro level regulation of sexual and gender identities.

Conclusion and discussion

Mothers' and men-children's narratives throughout my research recounted multiple experiences of power and control exercised interpersonally within family networks. Almost all the stories tell of jealousy, envy, and judgments; ambivalence and ambiguity; and practices of control. This chapter foregrounded these interwoven threads to illustrate these important aspects of mothers' love of their men-children and men-children's love of their mothers. The perceptions of love in the other by the other and what mutual love comes to mean for each of them are explored in stories of the mundane enactment of power within relational intimacy practices, intersected by age and gender particularly. The stories show how power and control manifest to function as part of psycho-social processes of identity formation and the (re)production of dominant heteronormative discourses.

Many studies have explored family jealousies and sibling rivalries (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn and McGuire, 1994; Mitchell, 2003; Hart et al., 2004; Vivona, 2007; Edward, 2013), while research into jealousy in other intimate relationships has typically focussed on adult romantic or sexual relationships (Aune and Comstock, 2001; Sheets and Wolfe, 2001; Bevan and Hale, 2006; Ritchie and Barker, 2006; Quinn et al., 2018). This chapter considered jealousy and envy in mothers' and men-children's relationships, contextualised within, and affected by, the wider network of relational intimacies. Both mothers and men-children communicated jealousy and envious feelings, resulting in judgmental, sometimes exclusionary practices, and surveillance of behaviours. Mutual jealousy and envy were shown to be implicated in (hetero)gender identity formation, potentially resulting in damaging conflict and trauma that reinforces intergenerational divisions, intersected by age and gender, as well as class and economic power. The stories illustrate ways of constructing, regulating, and reinforcing boundaries around mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, which affected men's and women's sense of self and identities.

The ambivalence some mothers and men-children experience towards each other is an aspect of everyday life that often appears to be unmentionable in everyday lives. However, stories in this chapter, and elsewhere in the thesis, suggest that ambivalence is part of (hetero)gendered mothers' and adult sons' everyday relational intimacy, which affects their identities, though this aspect is rarely acknowledged between them or even admitted to themselves. Maternal ambivalence towards infants and between mothers and daughters has been the subject of both sociological and

psychoanalytic research over the years (Hollway and Featherstone, 1997, for example), but much less attention has been paid to fathers' ambivalence (Pillemer et al., 2012), men-children's ambivalence regarding their mothers, or the contribution of the wider family network to ambivalence between mothers and men-children. The stories in this chapter reveal gendered assumptions about relational intimacies between mothers and men-children and the culturally 'unsayable' forms and effects of ambivalence within families, because of its implication in transgressing intergenerational ties that may undermine heteronormative discourses of mother love. However, ambivalence appears to become a dimension of family conflict particularly when grandchildren come along, demonstrating that intergenerational ambivalence is part of mundane relational intimacies within families.

Identifying that "ambivalences abound in the lives of grandparents", Arber and Timonen (2012) note that research into ambivalence "complicates normative views of family as expressing *either* solidarity *or* conflict, and/or positive *or* negative emotions, because it establishes that these sentiments are frequently concurrent" (Arber and Timonen, 2012: 141; original emphasis). The stories in this chapter illustrate the embodied experience of ambivalence, where grand/mothers simultaneously expressed love as well as hate as part of relational intimacy with their men-children. Most men participating, however, did not speak directly about their ambivalence towards their mothers. It's possible that they didn't experience ambivalent feelings, or were unable to name them, or because of their identification with dominant masculine identities, since "[as] the bearers of power men could not [...] also suffer emotionally" (Seidler, 2007: 10). However, men-children's stories frequently contained indirect or implied expressions of ambivalence. Scott, for example, rationalised and reconciled his resentful feelings towards his mother by identifying gaps in their personal interests that made it difficult for them to interact meaningfully, though he wept at the thought of his mother's inevitable death. In contrast, mothers participating observed and commented on their perception of men-children's ambivalence towards them, knowledge of which appeared in some cases to be routed through their daughters-in-law, who were implicated in the intricacies of mother/man-child intimacy.

The stories in this chapter complicate concepts of hierarchical power and identity formation, illustrating how power manifests in everyday relational practices that go unnoticed and unnamed as coercive control. The stories suggest, for example, that coercive control takes place in various practices through patterns of behaviour "inside an important social institution, the bourgeois family" (Connell, 2002: 62). As the stories show, and from my perspective as a (hetero)gendered (grand)mother, and psychotherapist, mundane coercive control is extremely difficult to challenge,

especially when we are the target of exploitation by dint of being grand/mothers, complicit as we are in its perpetuation as a mundane means of 'controlling' our environment, to create a semblance of existential security.

Mothers' and men-children's narratives in this chapter (as in other chapters) suggest that there is a continuum of everyday non-physical coercive control, exercised by both men and women. Various forms of control and manipulation are illustrated in the stories, sometimes involving others in the family. Grand/children are sometimes weaponised to isolate family members, by withdrawing, or threatening to limit, grandmothers' access, for example, particularly when they are perceived as non-compliant to family norms. Grand/mothers are sometimes coerced into accepting responsibilities, providing labour such as childcare, for instance, which limits their agency.

Some stories speak of men as the target of non-physical coercive control, either directly by their mothers (as Matt perceives it, for example, in Chapter 6) or their wives (for instance, David's recruitment by his wife, from Ann's perspective, in this chapter). Mothers' stories in this chapter recount experiences of being the target of controlling practices by their men-children or their daughters-in-law or a combination of both, where it appeared that their sons' control of their mothers came via their partners. In one case, however, in James's story, it appeared that he wasn't aware that his actions in limiting his mother's agency could be interpreted as controlling, consistent with current views of coercive control as being gendered along traditional intersecting axes of power, with men as the more likely perpetrators (Stark, 2007). Stark argues (2007: 384), for example, that constraints presented in coercive control are "implicit in the normative enactment of gender roles". My research suggests a more complex, dispersed, and nuanced experience of (potentially damaging) non-physical coercive control in the narratives of both men and women. In some of their everyday stories, the man-child, for instance, rather than being dominant and oppressive, is manipulated by (or drawn into) his partner's or his mother's controlling behaviours enacted 'behind closed doors', cloaked in respectability. Although none of the mothers participating spoke openly about their own controlling behaviours towards their sons or their sons' partners, a number of their narratives imply grand/mothers' power to offer or withhold expressions of love and/or labour, and their ambivalence towards their families, which contains a potential for control.

The contemporary working assumption of coercive control as a gender-based phenomenon, for instance, in Stark's research (2007; Stark and Hester, 2019) into domestic violence, carried out mostly by men towards women, has the effect of obscuring the everyday harm experienced by men and

other family members who don't fit the (normative) gender profile of victims. Without intending to devalue the importance to women (and men who are targets of abuse) of the expansion in understanding coercive and controlling behaviours as part of domestic violence, recently enacted in new legal powers²⁷, my research suggests that mundane non-physical coercive control in families is practised by both women and men. The stories illustrate a range of control practices, from 'low level' manipulation to more obvious attempts to disempower or damage. This tendency appears to be motivated by the need to gain advantage, perhaps because of micro level psychic/emotional insecurities and existential anxieties interacting with social and cultural power hierarchies at meso and macro levels. Such psycho-social processes 'normalise' and reproduce everyday power struggles within families, reinforced by ubiquitous popular representations of mostly (hetero)gendered family life in soap operas, for example, and 'reality television', functioning, as part of the cultural landscape, to (re)produce heteronormative gender identity formation.

Mothers' and men-children's stories indicate that it is too facile, and perhaps reductive, to view relational power within families as primarily exercised by white, middle-aged, heterosexual, (hetero)gendered men. Power shifts and slips around in intimate relationships, sometimes exercised by older or younger women, sometimes by men. Mothers' and men-children's stories of family relationships suggest that power relations produce dynamic, psycho-social normative effects, experienced, embodied and made real at micro, meso and macro levels. The (hetero)gendered performativity of the stories demonstrates "the reiteration of social conventions, [which] plays a key role in normalising neoliberal selfhood, [... and] provides a basis for regulating and expressing emotions" (Gammon, 2017, 529), illustrated by most mothers' and men-children's difficulties in communicating their complicated feelings about power dynamics within the family. A circular interaction exists, arguably, between macro level neoliberalism (institutionalised in the U.K. currently, such as in social welfare policies), which reinforces traditional gendered family roles (Layton, 2014; Gammon, 2017), meso level childcare practices, for example, and micro level (hetero)gender identity formation that loops back to the macro level. My research illustrates that the implications and demands of these psycho-social normative processes can result in damage to self and others, invested as we are emotionally, making it very challenging to acknowledge our interdependence and vulnerability and to counter the negative consequences of neoliberalism. Mothers' and men-children's narratives throughout my research demonstrated intersectional dimensions of relational power, particularly age, gender, and economic status. There hasn't been space within this study, however, to address in detail the additional intersections of class and

²⁷ The U.K. Domestic Abuse Act (U.K. Government, 2021b).

education, nor the opportunity (discussed in Chapter 4) to explore race as a significant intersecting dimension in mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy. Although perspectives from non-white people are mostly absent in my research, this chapter concludes with a story from John, who is Chinese, having always lived in China. Without its inclusion implying any universalism or essentialism, John's observations of intergenerational relational power share some of the nuances and complexities of other participants' stories:

Mother love?

They all want to control, the grandmother and the daughter-in-law; the mother wants to control her son, and the wife wants to control her husband. We have many problems when there are three generations living together. It happens a lot, because of old traditions. The grandparents, especially the grandmother, she will have a big problem with her daughter-in-law. That's the puzzle we will never solve.

Now we aren't living in the same apartment as my mother, but very close: just five minutes, and my mother helps take care of my two sons and we spend lots of time together because of the young boys. My mother and my wife, they still don't get on together. It's their personalities. My mother, she's very direct, when she sees you. You have a dress on that doesn't fit you very well, she will be very direct; she'll say something not tactful. And my wife is the same personality. And they don't fit with each other.

First, when we moved back to my hometown, we all lived together, and it was really bad - they quarrelled and fought.

One or two years later we decided to move out. Now it's quite good.

CHAPTER 9. THE HIDDEN PRESENCE OF OTHERS: FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Rather than focussing on the relational bond between mothers and *infants* to consider its part in identity formation, as other studies have (Irigaray, 1985; Rich, 1986; Chodorow, 1999; O'Reilly, 2004; Stone, 2013, for example), my research problematises relational intimacy between mothers and *men-children* to know more about how it affects their identities. The aims of my research were to explore (hetero)gender identity formation in contemporary man-making, mother-making, and grandmother-making narratives; to investigate how (hetero)gendered mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy contributes to perpetuating (hetero)gender identities; and to consider the part psycho-social processes play in the (re)production of (hetero)gender identities.

This final chapter brings together insights from my psycho-social interpretive analysis of mothers' and men-children's narratives of their relational intimacy, showing its effect on the formation of their identities in adulthood. Commenting on the contribution my research offers to academic and non-academic debates, the chapter identifies the main findings and particular threads running through mothers' and men-children's stories, which form the basis of my conclusions and constitute the single narrative of the thesis.

The chapter is divided into three main sections, followed by a fourth section that reflects on the everyday implications of my project's findings and scope for future research. The first section summarises the main findings, locating them within existing literature, and identifying their contribution to knowledge. In the second section, I discuss the methodological approach and research methods used. The third part - "Complicated similarities and differences", divides into sub-sections, exemplifying recurring motifs in participants' stories: transitions; emotions; and power and control. The final main section connects the findings from participants' personal stories to broader social issues that would benefit from further research.

Summary of key findings and contribution to knowledge

The key findings from my research contribute to knowledge of the formation of (hetero)gender identities, intergenerational family dynamics and everyday coercive control. Specifically, the thesis makes an original contribution to family studies by revealing complicated, conflictual, and changing relational power dynamics in families, between adult sons' partners and paternal grand/mothers, for

example, and within the extended family network, most notable when grandchildren are born. It offers original insights on fluctuating intimate relationships in middle class families, specifically companionate marriage, nuclear families, and extended families in the U.K. context. The findings expand knowledge of gender and generational hierarchies, showing how transitions, such as marriage and fatherhood for men, and becoming a grandmother for women reconfigure power hierarchies in families. It makes a significant contribution to understanding more about the relational intimacy between mothers and adult sons as it changes at important transitions in the life course, and the ways in which dominant marriage ideals create friction and competition between women trans-generationally, between, for example, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and between maternal and paternal grandmothers.

My findings contribute to scholarly literature, in particular amplifying Layton's work (2004, 2007, 2014, 2020), by offering insights into how changing power hierarchies within families shape grand/mothers' and men-children's intimacy, relational dynamics, and their identities, perpetuating (hetero)gender norms trans- and intergenerationally. Expanding on Layton's theories (2014, 2020) of normative unconscious processes, my findings offer further knowledge of psycho-social processes involved in heteronormative identity formation in the context of idealised family life in middle class England. My research also contributes to narrative identity studies by illustrating the part of storytelling in shaping (hetero)gender identities within interpersonal relationships, and offers innovative methodologies and methods for empirical studies involving sensitive, 'private' family relationships. Contributing to debates about psycho-social analysis, and grandparenting research and interdisciplinary family studies, my findings are informed by a wide range of theoretical perspectives, marshalled into three cross-cutting concepts (normative unconscious processes, acting as the 'golden thread' throughout the thesis; narrative performativity; and intersectional power), and are combined with my personal and professional knowledge as a mother of adult sons and psychotherapist.

Responding to the need Connell (2002) identifies for a specific theory to understand more about how identities change, my findings indicate that (hetero)gender identities are formed relationally through psycho-social normative processes (Layton, 2014, 2020). In developing knowledge of (hetero)gender identity formation, my findings add to the existing body of literature regarding gender (for example, Butler, 2000; Connell, 2002, 2016; Jackson, 2006) and intimacy (Jamieson, 1998, 2011; Roseneil and Seymour, 1999; Gabb, 2008, 2010, for instance) by demonstrating the impact of grand/mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy on their changing identities. My

project contributes to ongoing gender identity debates by illustrating the (limited) extent to which theoretical shifts in gender research have filtered through into everyday relational intimacy practices between (hetero)gendered mothers and men-children. Mothers and men-children participating in my project, for example, assumed that their gender and sexual identities are innate. However, paradoxically, their stories speak of (dis)continuous, sometimes nuanced, changes in the way they perceive themselves and are perceived by others (albeit within the bounds of their self- and socially assigned gender identities).

Noting Lawler's view (2014) that identity research may benefit from a psychoanalytic dimension, my findings add to theories related to both the narrative construction of identity (Ricoeur, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Plummer, 1995; Haraway, 1997, for instance) and psycho-social processes, drawing specifically on Layton's (2004, 2014, 2020) theory of normative unconscious processes. Theorising identity as formed through the interaction of unconscious processes and contingent social structures and practices, my findings suggest that these processes are interpreted by the individual as naturally occurring, being performatively (re)created through self-reflection and repetitive storytelling in the social world. As part of contemporary social and cultural practices of everyday life, performative storytelling enables individuals to integrate external experiences into an ongoing process of self-identity (Clarke, 2006). Illustrating mothers' and men-children's everyday storytelling as an embodied performative enactment of their internalised gender identity, my conclusions respond to Butler's (2000) appeal for clarification of social, psychic, corporeal, and temporal dimensions of performativity. My findings suggest that normative psycho-social processes reinforce an (illusory) sense of individual and collective continuity and stability, functioning socially to regulate and recreate (hetero)gender identities and control non-normative identity formation.

There are numerous sociological, psychological, and anthropological studies of maternal grandmothers and their daughters (Cherlin and Furstenburg, 1985; Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Chan and Elder, 2000; Mueller and Elder, 2003), and grandmothers' involvement with their families (Ferguson et al., 2004; Rambo, 2005; Arber and Timonen, 2012). (Psycho-social) studies of mothers' everyday relationship with their men-children, however, are scarce and the specific perspectives of paternal grand/mothers are underrepresented in research. By focussing on paternal grand/mothers' experience as well as men-children's, my findings show the interpersonal and intergenerational effect of age and gender divisions on (hetero)gender identity formation. My findings illustrate, for example, that paternal grand/mothers' identities are shaped through gendered family practices and power hierarchies that constrain their agency and perpetuate normative (hetero)gender discourses.

My findings suggest that embodied (hetero)gendered power relations, involving intersecting age and gender divisions, are central to mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy. Arguably, other intersections such as class, race, sexuality, and ableness are also implicated (Layton, 2020), although these were not the focus of my research. Mothers' and men-children's stories demonstrate complex, fluctuating, and nuanced practices of asymmetrical power and control in which they are complicit. Their performative narratives indicate an un/conscious collusion in the perpetuation of (hetero)gendered power hierarchies, although mothers' and men-children's oppressive relational practices were not necessarily acknowledged as patronising or exploitative, or potentially damaging, and were sometimes rationalised as 'loving' or 'helpful' attentiveness.

Often appearing to be denied or rationalised, the impact of interpersonal power, exemplified in mothers' and men-children's narratives, is problematic, sometimes involving, for instance, mutual shame and shaming, used as a means of social control. Michelle's story (Chapter 6), for instance, shows how shame is connected to the enactment of (hetero)gender identities in mundane family power practices. Illustrating how (gendered) hierarchies of emotion (Seidler, 2005; Ahmed, 2014) are mediated by normative psycho-social processes, unconscious omnipotence emerged in mothers' and men-children's stories in confused and confusing feelings of jealousy, envy, guilt, anger, ambivalence, and sometimes vexed love, which Beth's story (Chapter 8), for example, conveys. Some mothers' and men-children's denied but deeply felt conflicts were converted into traditionally (hetero)gendered social patterns, exemplified in Jean's compliance (Chapter 6) with gendered demands, Scott's uncomfortable, possibly reluctant, adherence to social norms (Chapter 5), and Luke's attempts (Chapter 6) to reconcile his own experience of normative expectations. Illustrating control practices within families, complicated by emotional commitments, my findings show the potential for trans- and intergenerational trauma, both individually and socially, derived particularly by age/generation power hierarchies (Layton, 2014; Shaw, 2014; Crossman et al., 2016; Johnson, 2020).

The formative effect on sons of their relational intimacy with their mothers in both infancy and adulthood has also been marginalised in research (Backes, 2000; O'Reilly, 2001). Where mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy has been researched it is often within 'pathological' rather than mundane contexts (Barnett et al., 1992; Welldon, 1992, for example). Usually focussed on the early stages of the infant's life (Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 2003; Dinnerstein, 2021, for example), studies of mother-child relationships mostly take an attachment or psychoanalytic perspective, while

studies of mothers in later life are limited (Green, 2016). By looking specifically at the everyday experience of paternal grand/mothers and adult sons, my research adds new dimensions of understanding of what it means to be a (hetero)gendered grand/mother or man-child.

Gabb (2008) notes the lack of research into the everyday “intimate, erotic, interpersonal experiences” (Gabb, 2008: 69) between mothers and infants. There has been even less academic attention to the erotic maternal (and grandmaternal) relationship with adult children (or with their children), and its part in continuing to shape and regulate embodied adult subjectivities and (hetero)gender identities. My research suggests that the silence surrounding mothers’ and men-children’s intimacy both naturalises heterosexual/(hetero)gender identities and kinship, and also secures (and perpetuates) normative family forms. Building on existing intimacy research (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; Weeks et al., 2001; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Smart, 2007; Gabb, 2008, for example), my findings contribute further knowledge of the ongoing relational process of identity formation, and the constraints for (paternal) grand/mothers and men-children in countering self-perpetuating (hetero)gendered normative family practices.

Complicated by other family relationships, the expression of mothers’ and men-children’s relational intimacy is circumscribed by social and cultural boundaries and prohibitions. Some mothers and some men-children participating in my project had attempted (sometimes small or unconscious) acts of resistance to gendered family norms and practices, however, most complied with normative expectations. Beth (Chapter 8) and Pam (Chapter 6), for instance, reflected on the personal costs entailed in going against the grain. Although participants’ narratives show that it’s not impossible to counter everyday normative (hetero)gendered practices, my findings suggest that resistance can produce intra- and interpersonal conflicts (such as for Matt, in Chapter 7), affected by (hetero)gendered family power hierarchies, in which, for example, gender and age intersect, constraining agency.

My findings illustrate that fluctuations in mothers’ and men-children’s identity are connected to the fluctuations in their relationship, affected by the wider network of family relations, gendered expectations and social norms. For instance, Liz’s story in Chapter 7, illustrates how identities are shaped in part by changes in intimate family relationships. My findings suggest that participants’ identification with, and ‘attachment’ to, ‘stable’ dominant gender binaries is motivated by an (unconscious) need to reduce existential anxiety (Kohut, 1977; Yalom, 2008), which interacts with a conscious fear of ‘uncertainty’ in the external social world, and for recognition by self and others of

our selfhood. This psycho-social process results in a tendency towards conformity: knowing who I am in relation to others who accept me. Although Jean (Chapter 6), for example, had mixed feelings about her identity as a (grand)mother, she colludes with her family's gendered expectations of her involvement in their lives, which has the simultaneous effect of stabilising her sense of self and perpetuating social norms of family life.

The drift towards the maternal (Marx et al., 2011; Arber and Timonen, 2012) when grandchildren come into the family was confirmed in my research, illustrated in Sue's and Ann's stories (Chapter 6) of being paternal grandmothers. My findings show that paternal grandmothers often experience conflict with their sons and the wider family network as a result of family hierarchies that rank the maternal grandmother as superior to the paternal grandmother. Grand/mothers, like Beth, in Chapter 8, and Liz, in Chapter 7, who questioned or rejected normative expectations of them, risked being ostracised or excluded from their sons and their families. This resulted in feelings of loss of an important relational intimacy and a desire for recognition of interdependence for grand/mothers and to a lesser extent for men-children. Many academic studies focus on the losses involved in transitions to motherhood (Laney et al., 2015; Kanji and Cahusac, 2015), but there is a paucity of experiential data regarding the losses involved in becoming a grandmother, which, in its absence, arguably reinforces and perpetuates age and gender divisions. The findings from my research suggest that paternal grandmothers respond in ambiguous ways to feelings of losing their men-children, sometimes displacing (and reconciling) maternal losses through involvement in grandchild care.

Grand/mothers' (sometimes unwitting) contribution to reproducing normative (hetero)gendered family practices (of caregiving, for example) has a complicating impact on the relational intimacy with their men-children and on their identities, with trans- and intergenerational implications. As my findings reveal, some grandmothers are coerced, sometimes by very subtle means, by their grandchildren's mothers and fathers, into providing childcare (admitted by Carl, for example, in Chapter 8) or contributing financially, directly or indirectly. In the contemporary political context of the U.K., where collective responsibilities for social well-being have been transferred to the individual (Lynch and Kalaitzake, 2020), my research shows that at least some of the psychic, social and economic costs of raising the next generation are borne by grandmothers. These costs are mostly taken for granted by grandmothers (as well as their men-children and their families) in my project, leaving them exposed to being blamed or shamed for anything that goes wrong in family life (Rose, 2018). Some grand/mothers (like Jean and Pam, Chapter 6) spoke of their sons' and their

sons' partners' view that they were 'doing them a favour' by allowing the grandmothers to have a relationship with, and provide childcare for, their children, although other grandmothers believed that they were 'entitled' to a relationship with their grandchildren, on account of their grandmother status.

Recent research (Berkovitch and Manor, 2022; Harman et al., 2022) shows that grandmothers' role in providing 'free' childcare releases the state (as well as the parents) from providing financial support to families with children. Requiring both middle-generation mothers and fathers to be in paid work at the same time as raising their children, contemporary economic policies rely on grandmothers like Marie and Jean (Chapter 6), for example, to bridge the gap in state sponsored childcare. Gendered relational power evident between mothers and men-children was reflected in gendered practices within the wider family, masking normative macro level political discourses, which promote self-sufficiency and exploit relational bonds, such as in Andy's story (Chapter 5). Intergenerational collaboration facilitates the operation of a (coercive) neo-liberal market economy (as in the U.K. currently), which is dependent on gender-segmented labour markets and the feminisation of care.

Drawing on Layton's (2014, 2020) formulation of normative unconscious processes, my project illustrates how psychic processes interact with social structures and cultural discourses to create a mutually reinforcing vicious cycle. Acting as a feedback loop through macro, meso and micro levels, together they have the effect of perpetuating dominant identity categories that privilege the privileged, repudiating shared vulnerabilities, empathy, and interdependence (Layton, 2009; Shaw, 2014; Gammon, 2017). The outcomes from these 'naturalising' psycho-social processes, in the shape of embodied identity, are 'unremarkable' and 'unremarked' in everyday life where (hetero)gendered identities are taken for granted, shown in mothers' and men-children's narratives in my research.

Methodology and methods

Using an interdisciplinary methodology, my research contributes innovative ways of approaching research that involves sensitive, 'private' family relationships, offering possible solutions to associated ethical concerns. Since the study was conceived as multi-layered and multi-dimensional, my research design deliberately drew upon eclectic sources of existing knowledge to encompass the intricacies of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy. Predicated on my central position in the project as a heterosexual, (hetero)gendered mother of men-children, grandmother of grandsons, psychotherapist, and researcher, the methodology combined autoethnography and

storytelling (both my own and others' narratives), informed by feminist, interpretive, narrative, and psycho-social perspectives.

Mirroring the mix of methodologies, the methods were designed to elicit polyphonic, textured data that could respond to the aims of my investigation, which "both attends to and works against dominant inequalities" (Bell and Pahl, 2018: 105). Created from my internal dialogue as I reflected on memories of episodes with my family that affected my identity, I weaved my own stories in between other grand/mothers' and men-children's stories. Through focussed, but unstructured, (audio-recorded) conversations with eleven women and ten men, narratives of their experience of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy were generated with the aim of creating new knowledge. Starting from a feminist research perspective of producing knowledge collaboratively (Maguire, 2001; Letherby, 2015; Lenette et al., 2019), mothers' and men-children's identity stories were co-created through the open dialogue between us, resembling psycho-social processes (such as unconscious communication) implicated in identity formation that my project explores.

I crafted stories extracted verbatim from transcriptions of the conversations, using a psycho-social approach to analyse and interpret individual narratives (including my own autobiographical stories). My interpretative analysis was informed by academic theories, my own knowledge and experience of mothering men-children, and my psychotherapy practice. Mothers' and men-children's narratives were retold as creative non-fiction, quoting verbatim from the conversations, but not necessarily sequentially, to convey their emotional content. My own stories, sometimes identifying them as mine and sometimes using a pseudonym, were narrated alongside others' stories. This strategy enabled me to address ethics of care and respect, and to uphold my ethical responsibilities as an 'embedded' researcher, heeding the potential identifiability of members of my family when using autoethnography. As well as safeguarding family members from being identifiable, it also was a means of 'protecting' myself, mindful of the importance of self-care when using autoethnography, especially regarding sensitive and highly personal data.

I recruited participants from my personal and professional network, the only criteria being that they were either a "middle-aged" man or a mother of adult sons. I deliberately didn't specify sexuality, race, or gender identity, with the intent of being as inclusive as possible. I hoped to generate a diversity of experience of identity formation, and to avoid assumptions of a pre-existing reality/certainty of meaning in any specific identity category. Potential participants were informed of the broad research aim of finding out about identity formation through a study of the relationship

between mothers and men-children. Women came forward quickly, eager to tell their stories. Although it took a little longer to recruit men, I had no significant difficulty. Regrettably my recruiting strategy resulted in a less diverse cohort of participants than hoped (discussed in Chapter 4). Except for one, all participants self-identified as heterosexual, (hetero)gendered, and were all white European (apart from one), and were mostly middle-class, some having moved from working-class childhoods into more middle-class lifestyles during the life course. While this resulted in limited perspectives, the validity of their experiences stands, in providing knowledge about, for example, how their identities formed within a specific context of fluctuating, but enduring, asymmetrical power practices, related to age and gender, transmitted trans- and intergenerationally.

I discussed my research aims and methodology with my adult sons, seeking their agreement to have a focussed conversation with me in which we could co-produce data that might give different perspectives on our shared lives, and to get their consent to my referring to them in my autoethnographic approach. Both consented formally to my including them in my research, but one decided against having a focussed conversation with me, though the other agreed to both aspects. As a result of this disparity, and out of respect for their decisions, I altered my initial plan to write my story entirely in the first person, with other participants' stories in the third person. Instead, I used the first person pronoun for all stories to assist in disguising mine, selecting when and where to pseudonymise my own, to protect my sons' identifiability and my future relationship with them and their families. Ultimately, I decided that for ethical reasons and consistency with other participants' narratives, stories created from my son's focussed conversation are recounted from his perspective only, rather than drawing on our different perspectives, but of course analysed and interpreted from my position. The analytic interpretation of my own stories, whether pseudonymised or not, are entirely from my perspective.

Because of potential sensitivities in the data, I have been very careful to ensure anonymity and all participants' names are pseudonyms. I provided information to participants to enable them to access support following our meeting, if issues surfaced that needed further airing with specialist 'listeners'. I emphasised the difference between our research conversations and 'therapy', my researcher role as 'active listener', and the participants' role in leading the conversation from the perspective of their identity as a son or a grand/mother. If needed, I prompted and probed to achieve depth, making opportunities for 'time out' or to stop, if disclosures became distressing for participants. Although most men and women wept at some point in our conversation, sometimes pausing for a while, nobody wanted or needed to stop altogether. A number of mothers commented

that it had been a cathartic experience, while several men said that they'd never thought before about some of the issues that surfaced for them.

From the skills and experience I've acquired from practising as a psychotherapist, I was able to separate my own feelings and experience and the participants', using my "internal supervisor" (Casement, 1985) to monitor myself and the un/conscious content of the conversations. This strategy enabled me to keep focussed on the participants' narrative during the conversations, as I would when providing therapy. More emotionally taxing for me were the periods of isolation, analysing and interpreting participants' and my own narratives, although my customary practice of writing a reflexive journal in relation to my therapeutic practice provided space for exploring feelings spawned by the research. Although I didn't need to make use of it, I had also put in place opportunities for confidential peer supervision with psychotherapist/counsellor colleagues to safeguard my mental health.

The creative and experiential aspects of my methodology and methods may assist researchers seeking ethical ways of working up from first-hand knowledge of sensitive topics, situating it within academic studies. My research design takes an innovative approach, not only in encompassing interdisciplinary perspectives, but also by closely connecting the material of the thesis (the content and meaning of stories) with elements of the research problem (narrative identity formation). Applying a psycho-social approach to generating data, I then also combine psychodynamic and social understandings to the interpretive analysis of data, using my knowledge as a practising psychotherapist, in addition to academic literature, to propose 'provisional' insights. Acknowledging participants' partial perspectives and my own as a (grand)mother of men-children, "other interpretations, other meanings and understandings, are imaginable" (Peshkin, 2000: 9) from others' (partial) perspectives.

Complicated similarities and differences

Threads of emotions, conflict, and control were entangled in mothers' and men-children's narratives, sometimes becoming enacted at times of transition or crisis points, often just accepted as everyday life. This section addresses each major strand but acknowledges the messiness of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy: speaking of conflict, for example, involves speaking of emotions, and power practices, as well as other enmeshed complications of identity formation, such as loss (of self-worth, of family relationships, of love, for instance) evident in both mothers' and men-children's stories.

Although there were common concerns in participants' stories, there were differences in each of the stories because of the unique circumstances of each participant, and the storyteller's 'position', including their gender, sexuality, and age. However, both mothers' and men-children's stories were located within a discourse of (hetero)gendered/heterosexual family life. (Hetero)gendered assumptions of normative 'heterosexual' relational practices as 'taken for granted' were manifest in performative behaviours, thoughts, and emotions. Liam, who defined himself as gay, also framed his narrative around a heterosexual 'model' of family relationships, despite stating clearly that he didn't "want kids" and would only marry for the sake of possible financial benefits.

Women participating in the project described their identities mostly as mothers, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law, linking changes in their identity to the effect these social roles had on their relationships with their men-children in particular contexts, mostly 'the family'. Most men ostensibly focussed less on the relational intimacy with their mothers in thinking about their identities and more on their identities as 'men', rather than sons. They emphasised their work roles as part of their identities, in contrast with the women participating (although all the women had worked, some in very senior roles). Men mostly viewed their gender/sexual identities as becoming 'fixed' in childhood, rather than recognising their altered identity as an 'adult son', and what it meant relationally to themselves or their mothers. Grand/mothers reflected more than men on changes to their identities, perhaps because of their experiences as mothers and grandmothers, through which they mostly saw themselves. For some men, changes to their identity were connected to other social roles, such as becoming parents themselves. Both women and men appeared to (re)create intersecting gender divisions along broadly heteronormative lines, building their identity stories around their relationships with others, particularly their families.

Perpetuating (hetero)gender identities: transitions and generational transmissions

According to my findings, transitions, such as marriage and childbirth, appear to reinforce assumptions of (hetero)gendered heterosexuality as the bedrock of social structures, perpetuating existing gender hierarchies. The thread of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1981) crosses generations, with both middle generation 'men', as (hetero)gendered husbands/fathers and sons, and 'women', as (hetero)gendered wives/mothers and daughters-in-law, being implicated in the (re)production of heteronormative gender and sexual identities through family practices. Grand/mothers are also implicated in their avoidance of unsettling family traditions and values passed on through middle-generation mothers' adherence to their parents' approval of

(hetero)gendered social structures. Many grand/mothers (such as Ann, Marie, and Beth, for example), proud of having raised their children on their own, described the compromises they now made as (paternal) grandmothers to avoid losing their adult sons, or exclusion from their men-children's more traditional family cultures.

Transitions simultaneously but differently experienced by both mothers and men-children disrupted relational intimacy and prior relational power, suggesting that their changed relationships were influenced by gendered social patterns, for example, the birth of a child or marriage. The intervening effect of the wider family network on mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy, and its impact on their identities was common to all stories where there were grandchildren. Transitions inevitably involve loss and change, and mothers' stories suggested that the meaning of their mothering identity was disturbed as part of their response to losses experienced in family life. For some it undermined their confidence, as they adapted their sense of purpose to provide coherence in their changed identity (like Pam, Michelle, Beth, and Ann, for example). For men-children, embarking on the transition to fathering, loss seemed less clear, more generalised, though it pulsed throughout most stories, such as in Neil's, Petros's, and Luke's (Chapters 7, 5 and 6). Transitions appeared to provoke ambivalence and conflict, as part of accommodating changed relationships as both mothers and men-children worked out their sense of themselves in relation to each other, and the meaning of their intimacy's altered social circumstances (Marris, 1974).

The asymmetrical balance of power between mothers and sons appears to change as they age together separately. Liz's story of an argument superficially about money (Chapter 7), for instance, illustrates how age, gender, and power intersect. Liz's later stage transition has social, cultural, and economic implications for her, potentially including fears of social exclusion and marginalisation, reinforced by the behaviour of her son. The economic, social, and cultural capital that Liz may have had earlier in her life may be dwindling, while her son's may be increasing. The gendered power that his mother had in the relationship when he was a child, appears now to have shifted towards his greater, socially authorised power and control over his mother, acquired through his social identity as a (hetero)gendered man and a father, now integrated into his sense of self.

The parenting hierarchy also shifts as the middle-generation mother assumes the kin-keeping role, having the effect of promoting her family of origin's beliefs and attitudes to family practices (Marx et al., 2011). Ann's narrative exemplifies many participants' stories that suggest that the birth of a child alters the relationship between a man-child and his mother, as his identity changes through

fatherhood. Ann recounts (Chapter 6) how her daughter-in-law drew tight boundaries around her family, excluding Ann. The middle-generation mothers and their own mothers appear to collaborate in (re)creating their mutual vision of 'family', seen in Liz's story, Sue's (Chapter 6) and Pam's (Chapter 8). This tendency (Dench and Ogg, 2002) reproduces a heteronormative mothering identity, performative in its repetitive process trans- and intergenerationally. My findings show 'new' fathers become more involved with their partner's family, and less with their own family of origin, which consequently involves "incorporating elements of the identities of various Others" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2018) as a psycho-social process that has an impact on paternal grandmothers' identities.

The clash of different family cultures coming together at transition points is reflected in mothers' and men-children's narratives where the birth of grandchildren leads to conflict between mothers and daughters-in-law, partly because of feminised patterns of care across generations, and because of fractures created in the relational intimacy between mothers and men-children. In Marie's, Liz's, and Ann's narratives (Chapter 7), for example, conflicting cultural expectations of grandmothering resulted in threats of, or actual, ostracization of the paternal grandmother. Sue's story (Chapter 6) illustrates differentiated cultural practices in relation to paternal and maternal grandmothers, in which, for instance, the family nomenclature for distinguishing the grandmothers was hierarchical in Sue's view, with the maternal grandmother expected to be given preference generally over the paternal grandmother. Ann's story (Chapter 6), and Sue's and Beth's stories (Chapter 5) illustrate how their daughters-in-law assumed greater authority because of their newly acquired status as mothers, consistent with studies (Marx et al., 2011) that conclude that wives/partners mediate the relationship between mothers and men-children.

Most of the men participating who are fathers (such as Neil and Andy) prioritised 'managing' the (sometimes conflictual) relationship between their wives and their mothers, rather than sustaining relational intimacy between themselves and their mothers. In contrast, Luke's story (Chapter 6) of his relational intimacy with his mother and his wife differs in his attempts to reconcile his own feelings about their three-way relationship. Matt's decision to work through his experiences of his relationship with his mother (Chapter 7) in 'therapy' demonstrates the possibility of countering the trans- and intergenerational transmission of (hetero)gender identity formation. The two men without children (Liam and Scott) acknowledged their feelings of loss as they reflected on their relational intimacy with their mothers, noting that they see them infrequently, which was rationalised as mostly concerning geographical distance, commenting that their sisters who have children have a closer emotional relationship (complying with gender norms of 'relationship work').

The turbulence in mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy at the birth of a (grand)child appeared to be connected to the confirmation of 'active', heterosexual masculinity (fulfilled in its tangible outcome of penetrative sex, for example, in fatherhood) and similarly confirmed heterosexual femininity represented in the 'youthful' fecundity of middle-generation motherhood. This contrasted with grand/mothers, whose age, reproductive capacities, and gender intersected, resulting in diminished power (like Liz, Pam, Beth, for example). Unconscious confusion for both grand/mothers and men-children was then acted out between mother, daughter-in-law, and man-child, with the older woman adjusting to being a mother and a grandmother simultaneously, and the man, still his mother's child, adapting to being a father and husband/partner (such as in Ann's narrative). Some grandmothers (like Jean and Teresa) appeared to subvert their erotic energy to the care of grandchildren, containing it within acceptable social boundaries, illustrating the trans- and intergenerational implications of dominant (hetero)gendered, compulsory heterosexuality.

Enacting embodied emotions: the (re)making of grand/mothers and men-children

Emotions bridge the psyche and the social, since their meaning and significance for an individual is contingent on the social world in which they are produced (Sclater et al., 2009). Confirming Richardson et al.'s (1997) argument that (hetero)gendered women are raised to be attuned to emotional nuances in ways that men are not, participants' stories reveal the part emotions play in shaping femininities and masculinities. Most participants expressed their feelings in line with hegemonic masculinity and femininity: women expressed their feelings openly whereas men often attempted to hide their feelings, adhering to gendered (performative) scripts in their displays of emotion.

Many mothers participating appeared to find relief in voicing their feelings, having given some thought to their relationship with their men-children, and the wider family network, both privately in preparation for our conversation, and, as they commented, sometimes informally (and cautiously) with close friends. A few men who had thought about their relationship with their mother before we met, either in anticipation of our conversation or, in the case of two, because they had discussed their emotions in therapy, were open about their feelings about themselves and their mothers. Other men defensively displaced seemingly powerful emotions that surfaced unexpectedly. They 'leaked' their feelings by changing direction in their stories abruptly, diverting their comments towards 'safer' aspects of their social identity. Sometimes, men revealed an emotional reaction in lengthy pauses, silent facial expressions, or their bodies sagging, sometimes appearing surprised at

themselves when tears sprang (Neil and Scott, for instance), unsettling perhaps their self-perception of masculinity and its meanings. Women participants, however, appeared eager to express anger, hurt or confusion, and love of their men-children, motivated to tell their stories of how the complicated relational intimacy with their men-children affects them emotionally.

Gendered emotional responses to external social environments (people, places, or events) in a context of relational power arguably shape the psyche as well as the body, being introjected (and embodied) as part of (hetero)gender identity formation. Beth's story (Chapter 8), for example, illustrates how her fears of rejection were expressed bodily: her heart "drumming" and her head "throbbing", which she interpreted immediately as a threat to her mothering role and relationship with her son, and an attack on her identity. As Beth commented, the behaviour of her son and daughter-in-law changed her perception of herself, implying that her identity had changed, and would continue to change, because of the event.

Mothers' and men-children's narratives illustrate a hierarchy of 'good' emotions (feelings that can be controlled) and 'bad' (uncontrollable feelings) that relate to normative enactments of masculine and feminine identities (Ahmed, 2014). Liz's account of her son's rage (Chapter 7), for example, and her reaction of despair, guilt and anger illustrate gendered expressions of emotions, implicated in the "securing of social hierarchy" (Ahmed, 2014: 4). Similarly, Beth's son's subordination of her emotions (Chapter 8) reinforced her subordination as a woman (and a grand/mother) (Ahmed, 2014). Beth's comment (Chapter 8) that her son accused her of being unable to regulate her emotions, despite being tearful himself, is consistent with Seidler's (2005: 8) argument that "Women can still feel obliged to carry emotions that men cannot acknowledge in themselves. In traditional heterosexual relationships she is to be blamed for his desire and even his unhappiness".

Profound love, sometimes complicated by co-existing feelings of hate, was revealed often in a fear of loss of 'self' as relationships changed, for men-children as well as mothers. Carl (Chapter 8), for instance, revealed his fears of the anticipated impact on him of his mother's death, disclosing his fantasy of restoration of his previous relational intimacy with her if his father dies first. Neither men-children nor mothers spoke directly of the losses experienced in complying with social expectations to sever their attachments during the transition to adulthood. They appeared to take it for granted (such as Neil, Teresa, and Angela), tacitly accepting any (potential) distress involved in this move towards independence, despite the implication in many stories of a hidden desire for interdependence. My findings suggest that, for men, reparation and gratitude towards their mothers

may be complicated by normative configurations of masculinity (Minsky, 1996). Liz, for instance, in Chapter 7, recounts her perception of her son's ingratitude, who instead resorts to anger, blaming her for whatever internal struggles he's experiencing, which he appears unable to articulate, and finally rejects her. Men's apparent reluctance to admit openly to feelings of loss or vulnerability (for example, Scott, in Chapter 5, denied his need for his mother, despite weeping as he reflected on the gulf between them) suggests that self-control is part of their identification with hegemonic masculinity, consistent with Seidler's (2007) argument that men equate certain emotions with weakness, which threatens their masculine identity.

Mothers' and men-children's stories (such as Sue's, and Matt's, in Chapter 7, Michelle's in Chapter 6, and Carl's, Chapter 8) illustrate how the regulation of certain expressions of love functions to sustain normative (hetero)gendered practices, in which age and gender intersect. Their narratives exemplify identification with what is socially permitted between mothers and men-children, confirming Layton's (2020) argument that normative psycho-social processes encourage disidentification with socially undesirable identities. Erotic power (Lorde, 1984b), arguably present in participants' embodied hegemonic masculine and feminine identities, is apparent in many of their stories (for example, Sue's story, in Chapter 7, of her thrill at her son's comments at his wedding), but is rationalised and essentialised psycho-socially through public endorsement of traditional heterosexual relationships, particularly those resulting in marriage and children, reinforced by normative family practices, such as (gendered) caregiving.

Some grandmothers' narratives (such as Teresa's, Chapter 7) suggest that sensual, thwarted mothering practices may be diverted towards other objects of desire, such as grandchildren. Jean (Chapter 6), for instance, felt she was like a mother to her grandchildren, while Pam (Chapter 8) observed that some grandmothers resolve their maternal feelings through their grandchildren. Many mothers' stories revealed their longing for closeness unconsciously through, for example, slips of the tongue or bafflement about the dynamic between mothers and their men-children (shown in Angela's remarks in Chapter 5). The repression of their unconscious desire arguably contributes to the jealousy apparent between some older generation mothers and their daughters-in-law (exemplified in Marie's story in Chapter 7, and Beth's and Pam's stories in Chapter 8), mediated by the socially authorised gatekeeping role of the middle-generation mothers and gendered divisions of (domestic) labour, including relationship work. The resulting trauma of conflict and mistrust contributes to the power dynamic between them, reinforcing divisions intersected by age. Many mothers' stories illustrate how they strive to find ways of retaining agency and power (by, for

example, withholding or offering free labour, such as Pam, Chapter 8, and Marie, Chapter 7), often to their emotional cost and potential trauma resulting from exclusion and loss.

Adaptation to change and loss appeared in many stories to involve rationalising its emotional impact, as a means of enduring psychic and social uncertainties. Ann's adjustment to the changed relationship with her son (Chapter 6), for example, involved (reluctant) acceptance of its unexpected fracture, enabling her to tolerate an undesirable situation and returning a sense of (coherent) identity in relation to her son and his family. Sue, similarly, rationalised her disappointment at the loss of contact with her son by explaining that he's busy with work and family (Chapter 5). Petros's story (Chapter 5) illustrates how he has adapted to the (historical and current) loss of relational intimacy with his mother. Revealing his ambivalent feelings about his mother, Petros rationalised the need to live in another country because of work and family life, which made frequent travel to see his mother very difficult, despite his apparent longing for restitution of their mutual love and interdependence.

Mothers' and men-children's stories resonate with the concept of unconscious 'splitting' into good and bad objects (Klein, 1975; Rycroft, 1995): projecting unbearable feelings onto a bad object by whom they feel mistreated or who are perceived as 'other'. This psycho-social process reflects 'othering' in hegemonic binary constructions of identity: man/woman, mother/son, for example, further complicated by intersecting divisions across categories, such as black/white, poor/rich, old/young, onto all of whom socially unacceptable destructive feelings can be projected (Bion, 1948; Douglas, 1995; Behr, 2018; Kent, 2021). Revealed in mothers' and men-children's narratives, these processes sustain social power hierarchies, which may result in abusive interpersonal practices. Threats to exclude, or 'scapegoat', paternal grandmothers who have 'low' social value (for instance, Beth, Chapter 5, and Liz, Chapter 7, who confront family expectations), interact with and (re)produce socially oppressive discourses at the macro level (such as institutionalised misogyny or racism, for example). These discourses connect with the subjugation of grand/mothers, partly through gendering of (emotional) responses to oppressive family hierarchies (Leary, 2015). At the same time, they also limit men's capacity to recognise and freely express vulnerabilities and their need for interdependence.

Most men-children and mothers 'stoically' denied emotional interdependence, conveying, however, a sense of emptiness at the lack of connection, in moments of quiet reflection or silent tears shed. The associated repudiation of vulnerabilities, essential in ideologies (such as neo-liberalism) that

promote self-sufficiency and independence (Shaw, 2014; Gammon, 2017) appears to lead to an absence of empathic recognition of interdependence. Illustrated in many mothers' and men-children's stories (Michelle and Marie, Chapter 6, and Carl, Chapter 8, for example), the trauma of perceived rejection may be linked to a normative denial of interdependence, as part of an exclusionary and self-excluding process that (re)produces existing identity binaries (of gender and age, for instance). Mothers' and men-children's relational conflict resulting from fluctuating power disparities appears to be connected to the fine and fragile line between the ambiguous desire in both mothers and men-children for independence from each other and their discontinuous dependence that keeps them tied to an (auto)biographically based but changed relationship as adults. Michelle (Chapter 6) and her son, for example, are caught up in a denial of their attachment and interdependence, resulting in a dynamic of mutual shame and shaming. Norms of "proper masculinity and femininity" (Layton, 2020: 52) are linked to contemporary notions of dependency as shameful and interdependence viewed with suspicion and less rewarded at the macro and meso level.

My findings suggest that mundane (hetero)gendered identities are shaped in part by the contemporary socio-political context of neo-liberalism, which fosters and regulates gender-based forms of narcissism, characterised by a sense of entitlement, lack of empathy, and aggression, directed towards the self as well as towards others (Gammon, 2017). Endorsing autonomy and self-reliance, neo-liberal ideologies produce an illusion of ontological security, and a fantasy of continuity, personal coherence, and stability. Many participants' narratives (such as Liz's, Beth's, Marie's, and Carl's stories) suggest that behaviour patterns related to (non-pathological) narcissistic disturbance play a part in the experience of relational intimacies between mothers and men-children, perpetuating interpersonal and social power hierarchies.

Embodied and enacted relational power: conflict, and control

Mothers' and men-children's stories illustrate a complex and nuanced picture of fluctuating mundane power practices in families. Differences between individual men were rooted in class, economic or educational differences, while variations among individual women were mostly related to the extent of their desire for involvement with, and threat of rejection by, their sons. However, differences between the group of men and the group of women appeared mostly to result from asymmetrical power-based gender and age/generation divisions. Confirming that relational power is central to identity formation (Roseneil and Seymour, 1999), my research asserts that unequal power relations and control practices are un/consciously embodied and enacted in mundane intimate

relationships within families. However, my findings contest over-simplified gendered assumptions of women's subjugation by men, showing how multi-directional practices of power and control are subtle, dynamic, and often hidden within (hetero)gendered norms of everyday family life.

Contributing to knowledge about mothers' familial power (Rich, 1986; Welldon, 1992; Kristeva, 2005, for example), my research shows how power is enacted differently in different circumstances, partly because of social and cultural assumptions and expectations of age. Confirming Arber and Timonen's (2012: 10) view of "matrilineal advantage", Ann's and Beth's stories (Chapter 6), for example, relate the disempowering effect on them and their men-children of their daughters-in-laws' oppressive practices. Their narratives illustrate how middle-generation mothers gain power, when their children are born, using it to take precedence over (paternal) grand/mothers and the fathers of their children. Most grandmothers noted their sons' drift towards the maternal side of the family, often leaving them feeling excluded or in competition with maternal grandmothers, which reinforced family power hierarchies.

My findings suggest that (hetero)gendered mothers and (hetero)gendered men-children are not only invested, emotionally and practically, but also complicit (often unwittingly) in sustaining the (hetero)gendered status quo of family life. The cultural idealisation of (middle-generation) mothers of young children creates space for them to 'negotiate' interpersonal power (Schipper, 2007) with the fathers of their children and with other women (such as paternal grandmothers), whilst simultaneously masking their relational power. As grand/mothers' stories (such as Liz's, Pam's, Marie's, and Beth's) suggest, middle-generation mothers' power is sometimes used to oppress the fathers of their children, as well as older women, as a function of heteronormative ideologies: they remain elevated (if they represent 'good' mothering practices as determined by normative values) so that their idealised position is sustainable. However, as my findings illustrate, this power 'opportunity' can no longer be exerted in the same way once they become mothers of *men-children*, and grandmothers. At this point, their power, arguably, is converted (psycho-socially) into alternative ways of reinforcing heteronormative ideologies, exemplified, in the hierarchy of grandparents' involvement (Marx et al., 2011; Arber and Timonen, 2012), where maternal grandparents function to reinforce maternal idealisation through the continuation of (hetero)gendered family identities, relegating paternal grandparents to the margins.

In my research, paternal grand/mothers' stories, however, illustrate their power to withhold or bestow emotional and practical support. They demonstrate the subtle ways in which both older and

younger women mobilise their power, for example, through the monitoring, surveillance, and supervision of family practices. For some grand/mothers (such as Marie, Ann, and Beth), their attempts to exercise agency were not always successful, being thwarted sometimes by the middle-generation mothers' power to influence their husbands/partners. My findings indicate that sometimes women's subversive self-empowering strategies may paradoxically contribute unconsciously to the (re)production of social power hierarchies, upholding fictions of happy family relationships institutionalised and masked by conventional models of the family (seen, for example, in Sue's stories and Marie's).

Most mothers identified various degrees of conflict with their men-children that caused them emotional suffering. Women (such as Marie, Angela, and Beth) sometimes also recognised the pain of relational conflict for their sons too, which they felt was incumbent on them (as mothers) to ameliorate, unwittingly supporting and reinforcing configurations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Navigating relationship practices to avoid further conflict, however, limited mothers' agency and autonomy. In contrast, for most men, when they acknowledged conflict, or potential conflict, it was perceived as less about their own capacity for relationship-building and more about the dynamics between their partners and their mothers (as in Neil's case), or the dynamics between themselves and their fathers (such as in Carl's story). Mothers too identified the negative effect of their sons' partners on their relational intimacy with their sons, but most also reflected on their part in the power dynamic within the triangle of relational intimacies.

Men-children's narratives also illustrate that contextual factors affect the balance of power in families. Carl's story (Chapter 8), for example, relates how he became primary carer for his sons, following separation from their mother in difficult circumstances. He then became dependent on his mother to provide childcare to enable him to work, showing how the power balance shifts in families, but still operates within models of (unpaid or low paid) caregiving, for instance, that reinforce gendered divisions of labour in a market driven economy. The everyday assumption that grandmothers will/want to provide childcare conforms to the cultural narrative of them as self-sacrificing for their grand/children; however, my research illustrates that grandmothers are often subtly coerced into providing free labour. Both mothers' and men-children's stories challenge 'multi-generational happy family' tropes, in which grand/mothers, for example, willingly relinquish their own wants and needs in the service of the middle generation. Such popular beliefs function to deflect complications of negotiation, conflict and power asymmetries, and secure social structures, which make it difficult to name the exercise of mundane intergenerational, (hetero)gendered

relational power in families as coercive control. Few grand/mothers or men appeared aware of mundane coercive control or its impact (trans- and intergenerationally), whether as the target or the perpetrator, or that it's possible to be both.

The characteristic psychic and emotional dimensions of coercive control enacted between family members, such as manipulation and humiliation, relate to unconscious narcissistic processes of (often disavowed) objectification (Shaw, 2014). Inducing shame in the target (object) as a means of subjugation, diminishes the object and simultaneously inflates the agent's position, to defend against (un)conscious existential threats, exemplified in Carl's story (Chapter 8) of the power struggles in his family. Beth's stories (Chapter 8) illustrate narcissistic omnipotence, and a sense of entitlement, in the coercive control exercised by her daughter-in-law and son, connecting her perception of their behaviour to her low value to them as a 'non-compliant' grand/mother. Liz's, Marie's, and Ann's stories (Chapters 5 and 6) similarly reflect their perception of having low relational value for their families at various times. Ann's attempts (Chapter 6), for instance, to share her interest in books with her grandsons are shunned contemptuously by her daughter-in-law, illustrating belittling and humiliating aspects of everyday intergenerational relational intimacy, and shifting power relations. Their emotional responses (such as anger, jealousy, loneliness, shame, and guilt) to actual or anticipated interpersonal rejection correlates to their value and hierarchical position within their families, reinforced by (socially sanctioned) omnipotent entitlement that mundane narcissistic privilege (intersected by age and gender) evokes.

Mothers' and men-children's narratives show how control becomes accepted as part of the ebb and flow of relational intimacy between mothers and men-children, and the wider family network. Matt's stories (Chapter 7), for example, recount his perceptions of how his mother and his partner (independently) exercised coercive control by making demands on him associated with their normative femininity and their (hetero)gendered expectations of his complementary masculinity. The imperceptibility and the lack of recognition, for instance, of the harm coercive control can cause individuals, like Matt, psychically and physically, demonstrates how mundane relational power works. Shown in their stories, paternal grand/mothers' lower-ranked position in the family hierarchy makes challenging oppressive family practices more difficult for them, leading to many making compromises or justifying their sons' behaviour when threatened with rejection. Most men-children, on the other hand, found ways to resist oppression through their privileged (hetero)gendered status, such as in their paid employment, or through therapy, or denial of its damage.

The everyday acceptance of coercive control in family life is reflected operationally at the macro level of political ideologies, nationally and globally, which obscure or defend the exercise of power and control and have a psycho-social impact at meso and micro levels. My research contributes to understanding psycho-social processes involved in (hetero)gender identity formation in the wider context of neo-liberal narcissistic demands and costs (Gammon, 2017), while the emotional and psychic effects of mothers' and men-children's relational intimacy practices on their identities are key in considering interlinked micro, meso and macro discourses, including contemporary U.K. neo-liberalism, which perpetuate power hierarchies intersected by age and gender, as well as, for example, class, race and ableness.

Everyday implications; and implications for future research

Challenging reductive assumptions of identity as innate, or solely psychically formed, or solely socially formed, my research demonstrates that identities are created relationally, not existing separately from the psycho-social environment within which they are formed. My research illustrates (parts of) a continuous vicious cycle, revolving performatively through macro political ideologies that reproduce (hetero)gendered binaries (required by a gendered labour market, for example), through to the meso family level (where dominant gender identity practices are enacted, such as feminised childcare), through to the micro individual level of embodied (hetero)gender identities. The social, political, and economic context of social and cultural power constitutes and legitimises (hetero)gender identities, transmitted trans- and intergenerationally through normalising family discourses and relational power hierarchies.

Mothers' and men-children's stories in my project suggest there is a psycho-social, dynamic impulse towards conformity that functions as a defence against psychic and social existential anxieties. As the stories demonstrate, conforming to normative expectations of (hetero)gender identities may come with benefits and/or costs at the micro level, mirrored by trans- and intergenerational benefits and costs at meso and macro levels. Conformity, evident in the narrative performativity of mothers' and men-children's accounts, creates an illusion of certainty, reproducing social norms that contribute to the tenacity of dominant (hetero)gender identities. Some grand/mothers who tried to forge a different, less conventional path post-retirement were judged by normative standards for it. Their resistance to normative expectations from family members often resulted in intra- and interpersonal conflict, and their fears of exclusion led to compromises on their part, constraining their agency. The reliance on grandmothers to fill the gap in state-funded childcare is shown in my project to have intergenerational implications for both women and men, reinforcing (hetero)gendered family

practices. Studies that compare the U.K., which depends on grandparents' contribution to childcare, with countries where childcare arrangements are state-funded (in the Scandinavian approach or France's system of *L'école maternelle*²⁸, for example) may reveal differences in relational, intergenerational power practices and different psycho-social outcomes in identity formation.

The multi-layered complexity of mothers' and men-children's (hetero)gendered relational intimacy, illustrated in their stories, appears to obscure or rationalise the public and private silencing of older women and the silence of men who disavow the emotional turmoil of their closeness. Foregrounding the voices of older mothers and middle-aged men, my research inevitably precluded others' voices, particularly middle-generation mothers' who were referenced in most of the narratives. Hearing from these women, as wives/partners/'daughters-in-law', in further research, would uncover other perspectives regarding the effect on them of the relational dynamics between grand/mothers and men-children, as well as its part in (hetero)gendered identity formation. Studies of relationships between mothers and men-children where there are no grandchildren (such as Scott, who referred to his mother's expectation of his having children) or comparative studies of mothers with adult daughters and adult sons, or those whose relational intimacy is not configured through (hetero)gendered binaries (such as Liam's in my project, whose narrative reflected a non-conflictual relational intimacy with his mother), would also contribute greater understandings of psycho-social processes involved in identity formation.

Mothers' and men-children's narratives interpreted in my project demonstrate intersectional dimensions within family relationships, particularly age, gender, and economic status (for example, some of the stories referred to grandmothers' capacity to support the middle-generation family, through unpaid labour or access to financial resources). There wasn't space within this study, however, to address in detail the additional intersections of class and education status, nor the opportunity (discussed in Chapter 4) to explore the impact of race on the relational intimacy between mothers and men-children. Research into their relationship within non-white or dual/multi-heritage dyads would reveal more about the intersections of race, ethnicity, faith, and culture, for instance, and their effect on mothers' and men-children's identities.

My psycho-social approach to (re)presenting, analysing and interpreting mothers' and men-children's narratives contributes innovative ways of thinking about (hetero)gendered men's and women's complicity in sustaining discourses of power and control and its effect on (hetero)gender identity

²⁸ Pre-school (my translation) for children from age 3.

formation. Shown in mothers' and men-children's stories, (hetero)gendered coercive control, cloaked in respectability, is taken for granted, in mundane narratives of relational intimacy within families. My research reveals a diffuse, complicated, and subtle experience of (potentially traumatising) non-physical coercive control that occurs along a continuum of severity in various family practices that form patterns of behaviour and a patterning of relationships. Contemporary public narratives of coercive control within the realm solely of domestic violence, caricatured simplistically as perpetrated by men against women and girls, fail to take account of the prevalence of coercive control within everyday family life. Men, for example, rather than being dominant and oppressive, may be drawn into their partner's or mother's controlling behaviours, as shown in my research. Although none of the mothers spoke openly about their own controlling behaviours towards their sons or their sons' partners, most of their stories imply their power to offer or withhold expressions of love and/or labour, and their ambivalence towards their families, which contains a potential for control. Psycho-social research that examines '(un)acceptable' behaviour in everyday family practices would reveal more about the motivation to gain advantage, resist oppression, or exert agency, because of psychic/emotional insecurities interacting with social and cultural power hierarchies. Further studies that investigate class and economic dimensions, in addition to gender and age, in everyday coercive control, may produce greater knowledge of, for example, the façade of middle-class privilege that masks its history and practices.

Illustrated in my research, everyday 'low level' manipulation (such as the use of social media and communication technologies), as well as more obvious attempts to disempower or damage, demonstrates the need for more understanding of the complex psycho-social conditions within which domestic violence discourses prevail. There is a need, moreover, to know more about the practice of 'normalised' coercive control, decoupled from criminal domestic violence, in everyday contexts, and its connection with school bullying and workplace harassment, for example, that has an inter- and transgenerational psycho-social impact. The invisibility and lack of knowledge generally about men's experience of coercive control by intimate partners, needs to be investigated to understand more about women (and men) who target and abuse their partners, and its impact on other family members and wider society. Studies of the links between misogyny (and misandry) and 'non-pathological' traumatising practices at micro, meso, and macro levels would be beneficial in exposing the collusion by both men and women in narcissistic discourses, which perpetuate power hierarchies, intersected, for example, by age and gender.

Evoking the possibility of reparative processes, most men-children and mothers participating in the project commented positively about the chance to think about their relational intimacy and its effect on their identities, welcoming the opportunity to share their stories. Mothers' and men-children's stories reveal the ways they behaved, and modified their behaviour, mindful of possible disapproval, in order to validate their relationship, indicating its importance to them. Despite the complications of their relational intimacy, all mothers and men-children spoke (even if indirectly) about a need for mutual love, recognition, and connectedness, within which lies their disposition for conformity. The motivation of love, combined with ethical awareness of the potential damage conformity can inflict on others as well as self, offers the potential to create space for counter-normative discourses that reintegrate the parts of our (unconscious) selves split off because of gendered social norms.

From my perspective, as an 'embedded' researcher/(grand)mother of men-children and grandsons, looking through the kaleidoscope at ever-changing patterns, there have been challenges in my 'living the research' every day. Giving voice, however, to the tugs, ties and tensions of relational intimacy present in my own and others' stories has revealed the potential for more democratic and genuinely empathic relational practices, resisting damaging discourses to turn the vicious circle revolving through micro, meso and macro levels into a virtuous one. My research suggests that, by recognising frailties in the self and the other, it is possible to build with hope towards "a community founded not on mastery or domination, but rather a shared recognition of our vulnerability" (Rose, in an interview with Liu, 2021). Seeing ourselves in others and knowing that identities are shaped relationally implies that we have the capacity to influence others positively as well as being influenced by them, to counter the thoughtlessness of everyday mutual harm and work towards acknowledgement of our interdependence.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Participants were intentionally not asked to complete a questionnaire to collect demographic data, the profile therefore is what was possible to gather through the interview conversation.

Andy presented as male, heterosexual, aged late-thirties, and lower middle-class; he is white British, state educated, qualified to Level 6. He is self-employed in the business sector, in middle management roles, with a middle income. He practises Roman Catholicism and is married with two sons and one daughter. His parents' marriage is intact.

John presented as male, heterosexual, aged late-thirties, married with two sons. He is Chinese and has lived in China his whole life, never travelling outside the country. He is state educated to graduate level. He works in the travel/tourist sector, with a low income.

Luke presented as male, heterosexual, aged mid-forties; he is white British, working class, working in a manual job for the public sector, state educated and qualified to Level 2. He has a low income, is married and his parents are divorced. He has one son.

Scott presented as male, heterosexual, white British, aged fifty, married with no children. He presented as middle class, with a middle income, working in the professional business/IT sector, state educated to a Level 6 qualification. His parents' marriage is intact.

Neil presented as male, heterosexual, and white British, aged mid-forties. He is upper middle class, privately educated and qualified to Level 6. He is retired from military service and is self-employed in a mix of professional public and private sector work, with a high income. He is married with three daughters. His parents' marriage is intact.

Petros presented as male, heterosexual, aged mid-forties, he is white European, living in the U.K., and is married with one daughter and was expecting another child within months. He works in the professional public sector, following teaching and research roles in Higher Education; he has a middle income and was state educated, in both Europe and the U.K., qualified to Level 8. His parents' marriage was intact.

Liam presented as male, gay²⁹, aged early-forties; he is white British, working class, and works in the private service sector, state educated and qualified to Level 1/2. He has a low income and is single, with no children. His parents' marriage was intact.

Carl presented as male, heterosexual, and white British, aged early-forties and is single (divorced) and the primary carer for his two sons. He works in the private service sector, and is lower middle class, state educated and qualified to Level 2. His parents' marriage is intact.

Matt presented as male, heterosexual, and white British, aged mid-thirties. He was state educated and qualified to Level 5/6. He has a middle income, is lower middle class and works in the professional private business sector. He is single with one daughter. His parents are divorced.

James presented as male, heterosexual, and white British, aged late-forties/early-fifties, state educated, qualified to Level 6. He is retired from military service, upper middle class, with a high income and works in the professional private sector. He is married with three daughters. His parents are divorced.

Michelle presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, working class, aged late-fifties. She works in the retail sector, is state educated and qualified to Level 1. She has a low income and is single (divorced). She has two sons, two daughters and three grandchildren.

Marie presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, aged over sixty and lower middle class. She was state educated, qualified to Level 6, taking up education/training opportunities at a later stage in her career. She is retired from working in the public sector (young adults' services), has a middle income, and is married (following divorce from her two sons' father). She has four grandchildren.

Jean presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, lower middle class, aged over sixty. She is retired from teaching in state schools, was state educated to Level 6, and has a middle income. She is married with one son and one daughter, and three grandchildren. She practises Roman Catholicism.

²⁹ The term 'gay' is used here as used by the participant himself to describe his identity; the 'heterosexual' identity of all other participants was implied in the content of the interview, as discussed in the thesis.

Maureen presented as female, heterosexual, and white European, living in the U.K. She is middle class, aged over sixty. She was state educated, qualified to Level 6/7, and retired from working in the public sector in the Health Service and then Law. She has a middle to high income and is married with two sons and a daughter, and no grandchildren. She was raised as a Roman Catholic. She has always been involved with socialist and feminist politics.

Liz presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, aged over seventy, middle class, retired from teaching in higher education, now working on a self-employed part-time basis, with a middle income. She was state educated, qualified to Level 6. She is single, divorced from her children's fathers (she remarried but her husband has died); she has one son and one daughter, and four grandchildren.

Sue presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, middle class, with a middle income, aged over seventy, retired from work in Social Care Services, state educated to Level 5. She is single, divorced from her children's father. She has a son and a daughter, and three grandchildren. She is a practising Anglican.

Beth presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, aged over sixty, middle class, with a middle income. She was state educated, qualified to Level 7, retired from senior management roles in the state education sector, and works occasionally in health services. She is divorced from her children's father and lives with her partner. She has two sons and three grandchildren.

Angela presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, aged over sixty, middle class with a middle income, having retired from work in further education and community cohesion. She was state educated, qualified to Level 6. She lives with her partner, having divorced from her children's father. She has one son and one daughter, and no grandchildren.

Ann presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, aged over seventy. She is middle class, state educated, qualified to Level 6, retired from work in the state education sector at senior management levels. She has a middle income and is divorced, having one son and one daughter, with four grandchildren. She has always been active in socialist and feminist politics.

Pam presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, lower middle class, aged over sixty. She is retired from work as a senior nurse in the state sector and works now part-time as a quality

assurance assessor for the Health Service, having a middle income. She was state educated to Level 6. She is married with three sons, one daughter and six grandchildren. She was raised as a Roman Catholic.

Julia presented as female, heterosexual, and white European, aged over sixty, middle class with a middle income. She was state educated in Europe, qualified to Level 8. She works in Higher Education/research, living in Europe. She remarried after divorce from her children's father and has a son and a daughter, and one grandchild.

Teresa presented as female, heterosexual, and white British, aged over seventy, middle class, with a low/middle income. She was state educated, qualified to Level 3, retired from Nursing in the state sector. She is single, having divorced her children's father. She has one son and one daughter, and three grandchildren.

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Participant Information Sheet

Background

My name is Bernadine King and I'm a PhD student at the University of York. I would like to invite you to take part in the following research project, designed specifically for my doctoral research:

'The making of men; the making of mothers and grandmothers: everyday stories of lived experience'

Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let me know if anything is unclear or you would like further information (bmk512@york.ac.uk; 07792 292552).

What is the purpose of the study?

The study is designed to investigate how people form their identities (the way they see themselves) over their lifetime, in particular their family identities.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You've been invited to take part because the research needs to gather the everyday stories of men's and women's lives and views about any shifts in their identity over time and how any changes came about.

What is involved in taking part?

I'd like to have a 60-minute audio-recorded interview with you about your life story. If you agree to the interview, I need you to read and sign a consent form before we do the interview and meet with me somewhere suitable and convenient to you. I will transcribe the recording later and then give you a copy of the transcript to make sure you agree with it. Being involved is entirely voluntary and unpaid, but I will travel to you to avoid any expenses for you. If you don't want me to audio-record the interview, you can still participate and I will make notes of our meeting instead.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to complete the consent form. If you change your mind at any point during the study, you'll be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason.

On what basis will you process my data?

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the University has to identify a legal basis for processing personal data and, where appropriate, an additional condition for processing special category data.

In line with the University of York's charter, which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, the University processes personal data for research purposes under Article 6 (1) (e) of the GDPR:

Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest

Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j):

Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes

Research will only be undertaken where ethical approval has been obtained, where there is a clear public interest and where appropriate safeguards have been put in place to protect data.

In line with ethical expectations and in order to comply with common law duty of confidentiality, we will seek your consent to participate where appropriate. This consent will not, however, be our legal basis for processing your data under the GDPR.

How will you use my data?

Data will be processed for the purposes outlined above as part of my doctoral research and any subsequent publications.

Will you share my data with 3rd parties?

No. Data will only be accessible to myself, Bernadine King, as the researcher.

How will you keep my data secure?

The University will put in place appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect your personal data and/or special category data. For the purposes of this project I am fully responsible for ensuring personal data is properly protected and will store data securely by making sure files are password-protected, encrypted and backed up using the University's cloud storage, accessible only to myself.

Information will be treated confidentially and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. In addition, I will anonymise or pseudonymise data wherever possible.

Will I be identified in any research outputs?

Data relating to participants will be anonymised and pseudonyms used in research outputs so that they will not be identifiable.

Because of the life story approach being used, it may be possible to identify members of my family in research outputs (even where information is anonymised and pseudonyms used) if they are accessed by someone who has prior knowledge of my particular family context; however, data reporting strategies will be used to minimise this possibility.

How long will you keep my data?

Data will be retained in line with legal requirements or where there is a business need. Retention timeframes will be determined in line with the University's Records Retention Schedule.

What rights do I have in relation to my data?

Under the GDPR, you have a general right of access to your data, a right to rectification, erasure, restriction, objection or portability. You also have a right to withdrawal. Please note, not all rights apply where data is processed purely for research purposes. For further information see, <https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/general-dataprotectionregulation/individualsrights/>

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions about this participant information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please contact Bernadine King (bmk512@york.ac.uk; tel: 07792 292552), as researcher, in the first instance. Concerns may also be raised with Professor Victoria Robinson (email: vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk). If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Acting Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk.

Right to complain

If you are unhappy with the way in which the University has handled your personal data, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting a concern to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

Online resources and information

<https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-family-life-and-parenting/family-counselling>

<https://www.standalone.org.uk/about/>

<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help-you/contact-us/what-speak-us-about>

<https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/site-help.html>

APPENDIX 3: FAMILY PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

INFORMATION FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

WHAT IS AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND HOW MIGHT IT AFFECT YOU?

What's your research about?

I'm investigating how we become the people we are today - how identities change over a lifetime, so I'm interested in how you see yourself as an adult and how that came about (e.g. how you were brought up, family roles and relationships then/now, the media, politics, the communities we live in). Do you think of yourself now as the same as when you were younger? What's changed and how/why? What's it like being a son as an adult; how has that changed over the years?

How are you going to do it?

A main part of the information will come from my own life experience and the story I tell will be from my own perspective (though the project will also include other people's stories that I collect during the project). Inevitably, because I'm telling my life story from my own viewpoint, writing about myself and my life and changes to my own identity over the years, it's likely that I will be thinking and writing about you and family life as I've experienced it, and, therefore, what I say may differ from how you see things about the past and the present, and that's really important too, and will be helpful in my analysis of findings from the research. That's why I'd like your views about the topic – your stories about yourself and your identity over the years. However, although you won't be named (nor will I include details such as where you live or work), it does mean that it may be possible for people who read the finished thesis, and know me, to identify you.

It's important that other men's and women's experiences too, as well as my own (and yours if you agree), are included in research about contemporary life, so I'm collecting information from other people and looking at novels, poetry, films, TV, visual art etc. as well to explore what else has been suggested about the topic. But, of course, you play a special part in my life experience that no-one else has.

The way I'll be using my own life story as a core part of the research is termed 'autoethnography', which differs in some ways from autobiography.

What is autoethnography?

It's a study, based on a life story, of social interactions, behaviours and perceptions occurring in groups (e.g. in this case, of my family relationships over my life span and how they have a bearing on how identities change), and involves analysis and interpretation of meanings and functions, with descriptions and explanations. It connects a personal life story with the wider culture and social context in which that life is experienced.

How is it different from autobiography?

An autobiography is an account of a person's life written by the person. It's not a study, not necessarily analysed, not usually offering explanations for social phenomena occurring in that life, and not commenting analytically on those social phenomena.

How will you present the findings?

My research will be written up as a thesis to be examined in order to award me a PhD, if it meets the criteria.

Once I've collected and processed the information, I will look for common themes and any differences in what I find, and will use various academic theories about, for example, gender, interpersonal

dynamics, everyday storytelling and performance, cultural and social construction of identities to suggest possible explanations for the information I've gathered.

While I may include some completely anonymised information as 'quotes' from interviews (examples to demonstrate a point), I also plan to 'obscure' some information (partly to reduce the potential for anyone to be identified) in creative ways such as in 'fragments' or 'vignettes' that tell composite or fictionalised stories of what I've discovered (about myself or others), or in prose poems that evoke the 'music behind the words' of the stories, where it can best demonstrate a point being made. While such a style of presentation is not what is often thought of generally as 'academic', it is becoming increasingly used to express ideas, feelings and perceptions that contribute to what we know about human experience, and to challenge notions of 'objective truth'.

Will my experiences or perspectives be included?

You can participate directly by giving me an 'interview' (audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymised and given back to you to check you're happy with it) or, for example, writing something for me (that would be anonymised) about your life and identity over the years. Indirect involvement would be if you didn't want to contribute something yourself but were happy for me to write about my life experience as a mother, which therefore may refer to you indirectly; though, to emphasize again, you wouldn't be named.

I'd like to be able to include your perspectives and in this way we, together, would be adding to what is known about how identities change and develop throughout life; we would be co-creating knowledge by the act of your being involved. Your views would be important and very relevant to the research, as well as interesting, finding out (and including) how your perceptions of our life experiences together (as well as separately) differ or coincide with mine. And would provide a useful counterbalance to what I alone perceive or create just by myself, as well as offering you the chance to 'give your side of the story'. What's included would be your stories as well as my stories, or indeed, ultimately, 'our' stories.

If you give your consent, I plan to reduce the possibility of you being identifiable in the thesis, using creative writing/presentation styles (as outlined above), but I can't promise that you won't be able to be identified by someone somehow. So I do need to know if you are willing for me to go ahead with this approach to my PhD research (whether or not you choose to contribute directly). If you are willing, then I need you to sign the 'informed consent form'; if you decide to sign it, then, over the course of my research, I will regularly ask if you're still willing to be involved, and update my records accordingly.

Contact details – Bernadine King (researcher): bmk512@york.ac.uk; Victoria Robinson (Director of Centre for Women's Studies & co-supervisor): vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk; Rachel Alsop (co-supervisor): rachel.alsop@york.ac.uk; Tony Royle (Chair of ELMPS Ethics Committee): tony.royle@york.ac.uk.

APPENDIX 4: PARTICIPANT (GENERAL) CONSENT FORM

Research project: The making of men; the making of mothers (and grandmothers)

Researcher: Bernadine King (PhD student, University of York)

Consent form for participants

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the project. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please contact Bernadine on bmk512@york.ac.uk or 07792 292 552.

The signed consent form will be stored securely and destroyed after project completion, with a copy provided to consenting participants.

Any concerns may be raised with Professor Victoria Robinson (email: vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk)

All information is held in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the project? Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the project? Yes No

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held confidentially by the researcher? Yes No

Do you understand that you may withdraw from taking part up to an agreed date? Yes No

Do you agree to take part in the project? Yes No

If yes, do you agree to your interview being recorded?
(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this.) Yes No

Your name (in BLOCK letters): _____

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

Please return to **Bernadine King: email (bmk512@york.ac.uk) or by post (The Old Police Station, Aiskew Bank, Bedale DL8 1AS).**

Electronic signature is acceptable if returning by email.

APPENDIX 5: FAMILY CONSENT FORM

Research project: The making of men; the making of mothers (and grandmothers)

Researcher: Bernadine King (PhD student, University of York)

Consent form for family participants

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the project. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please contact Bernadine on bm512@york.ac.uk or 07792 292 552.

The signed consent form will be stored securely and destroyed after project completion, with a copy provided to consenting participants.

Any concerns may be raised with Professor Victoria Robinson (email: vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk)

All information is held in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the project? Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the project? Yes No

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held confidentially by the researcher? Yes No

Do you understand that you may withdraw from taking part up to an agreed date? Yes No

Do you agree to take part in the project? Yes No

If yes, do you agree to your interview being recorded?
(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this.) Yes No

Your name (in BLOCK letters): _____

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

Please return to **Bernadine King: email (bm512@york.ac.uk) or by post (The Old Police Station, Aiskew Bank, Bedale DL8 1AS).**

Electronic signature is acceptable if returning by email.

LIST OF REFERENCES

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