

## **The invisibility of maternal dyads**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This discussion paper argues that whilst maternal dyads (two mothers to the same child(ren)) are relatively common they are rarely talked about or acknowledged as a relational form. Consequently as nurses and other health and social professionals working with children and families we are likely to work with families where there are two mothers, but unlikely to recognise the fact. The failure to work with both mothers means that we are in danger of excluding an important family member and failing to honour family/whanau relationships. My experience informs me that when the presence of a second mother is recognised health and social professionals are often uncomfortable with the relationship and unsure about how to relate to both mothers. The resolution of the discomfort can result in exclusion of one of the mothers and thus a failure on the part of the professional to work with the family authentically and even cause harm.

In this paper I establish that there are a number of family forms where there are at least two mothers and challenge the assumed legitimacy of the dominant 'one mother' discourse. Research on open adoption relationships (Greenwood, 2011; 2012) suggests that naming of the two mothers is particularly difficult for all concerned. The difficulty in naming points to the problem which is that of the unitary signifier. To have more than one maternal subject carrying the name 'mother' in relation to a specific child disrupts the dominant discourse of family; the bedrock of our society.

The form that is recognisable within our culture as a family is constituted predominantly by legal and sociological discourses. In Anglo-American cultures such as New Zealand we have inherited a legal system that is premised on the notion of exclusive parenthood (Bartlett, 1984; Griffiths, 1997; Modell, 1994; Polikoff, 1990), one father and one mother caring for and making all decisions for their children. In most cases the parents' rights in relation to the child are considered inviolate. The parents are blood relatives in this imaginary.

Drucilla Cornell (1998), tracing its history back to Hegel, shows the patriarchal roots of family law to be embedded in women's legal identity as closely bound to her "duties to the state as wife and mother within the traditional heterosexual family" (p.102). In her analysis of adoption practices for example, Cornell suggests that the language of adoption has been one of war, using the language of custody 'battles', and 'surrender' of the child. The same language has been used in cases where children are removed by the state and settled with a foster mother and the birth mother contests the removal. The contests for legitimacy of the rightful mother, Cornell argued, "challenge one of our deepest fantasies-that there can only be one mother and, therefore we have to pick the 'real' mother" (p.96).

Historically, in Britain, North America and British colonies there have been other family members who shared maternal functions such as spinster sisters or aunts, wet nurses and nannies and

governesses. However, it was the primary dimensions of kinship on the husband-wife axis and the parents-children axis that remained central (Moxnes, 2005). This was the kinship structure of Victorian Britain. Yet, in other cultures different patterns were evident. In New Zealand, Maori societies were organised along whanau, hapu, iwi lines with the children's identity being dependant on those relationships rather than their bond to one set of parents (Law Commission, 1999; 2004). The practice of whangai in Maori culture where children were often cared for within the wider whanau privileged the kinship connections of whanau, hapu, iwi (Gillard-Glass & England, 2002; Metge, 1995; Mikaere, 1994) rather than the more limited husband-wife/parent-child axes.

### **Open adoption**

The influence of whangai in New Zealand may be responsible for the early move towards openness here. Yet, openness remains a contentious aspect of contemporary adoption (Triseliotis & Hill, 1990). Discernible discourses within the public discussions around open adoption have been predominantly legal and psychological. Nevertheless despite legal control and its ramifications adoption is also a social arrangement (Else, 1991) of the most fundamental human relationship:

The mothers that are made in this process are not simply given in the biological connection of mother to child or made as 'a code of conduct' in the legal family. Rather they are created, over time, in the evolving relations between mothers (of various kinds) in "legal" families and the "other" mothers who in relinquishing their children have unsettled this family in the very act of making it 'whole'. (Yngvesson, 1997, p.76)

### **Blended families**

Whilst adoption practices have declined in New Zealand the formation of blended families has increased significantly. These are families that health and social professionals are much more likely to encounter. 'Blended families' or stepfamilies are increasingly common due to the large numbers of families established through remarriage, or re-partnering, after divorce or separation. Jewell and Blackmore (2004) describe the blended family as "one or both partners having children from a former relationship living with them" (p.137). Some authorities refer to blended families as relationships where there are both children from previous relationships and children born of that union living together. The New Zealand census attempts to clarify this by saying that stepfamilies are those where there is a stepchild and there may or may not also be birth children of that relationship, whereas blended families contain both (Statistics New Zealand 2009).

In such reconstituted families children often have relationships with two maternal figures, one of them a biological mother and the other a social mother, as well as, perhaps, two fathers. Children may live predominantly with their birth mother but spend varying amounts of time with their stepmother or vice versa. Unfortunately, the stepmother myth continues to exert a strong influence on the constructions of blended families and serves to position stepmothers negatively (Jewell & Blackmore, 2004; Orshan, 2008).

However, Helton and Smith (2004) suggested that this myth has been challenged somewhat through popular media representations of happy blended families such as *Eight Is Enough*. In blended family situations women often take responsibility for the children and are likely to be present together in various circumstances such as schools, hospitals, and family events such as birthdays. Recognising the reality of their shared relationships, many women may resist the stereotypical positioning and form meaningful relationships with each other for the benefit of their shared children, and each other (Waterman, 2003).

### **Lesbian mothers**

Lesbian mothers are not a new phenomenon but their visibility as co-parents is relatively new. In the 2001 New Zealand census (the first time same-sex couple were able to identify themselves) 1356 couples classified themselves this way (Law Commission, 2004). There is much greater social acceptance of lesbian identity, although this acceptance is not without constraints. Whilst various forms of legislation that support the human rights of lesbians and other previously marginalised groups have been passed over the last few years, Erwin (2007) contends that “many lesbian and gay people will continue to remain hidden regardless of the legal rights bestowed on them” (p.103). A policy of non-discrimination, competes with other ideological frames that continue to construct members of previously marginalised groups as incomplete subjects (Butler, 1997a; Cornell, 1998). When discriminatory attitudes are suppressed, aversive or subtle discrimination occurs (Hodson, Davidio, & Gaertner, 2004) which makes identifying the discrimination more difficult.

Caroline Bree’s (2003) New Zealand study, which found that lesbian women perceived midwives to be more lesbian friendly than previously reported, also found that all of the women she interviewed had experienced heterosexism in the past from health professionals. The most common form of discrimination in Bree’s study, also reflected in Gatrell, et al (2000) research, was the refusal of the health care provider to acknowledge the co-mother’s parenting role. More recently Australian researchers Hayman, Wilkes, Halcomb, and Jackson (2013) found continuing discrimination and exclusion of the non -birth mother.

### **Surrogacy**

Charis Cussins (1998), in her provocatively titled chapter, “Quit sniveling, cryo-baby. We’ll work out which one’s your mama”, discusses the forms of assisted reproduction available and the questions they raise about kinship. In particular she says that while identifying the ‘real’ father is unproblematic, the ‘real’ mother remains at question in terms of whether genetic material or gestational function determines the mother. In other words, is it the provision of an egg to be fertilized or the carrying and nurturing of a child in one’s uterus, both biological functions, that signifies the ‘real’ mother. This becomes even more complicated when neither of these women is the one who performs the maternal functions after birth (Bowlby, 2007).

When examining the legal and social responses to surrogacy in different contexts it appears that in grappling with new and emerging notions of kinship the prevailing discourses significantly inform those responses. In Cussins’ (1998), and van Zyl’s (2000) research women used different strategies for delineating who was the ‘real’ mother. The maternal doubles Cussins followed through the process of IVF and gestational surrogacy tolerated varying degrees of ambiguity around the designation of motherhood with some requiring higher levels of transparency in their negotiations of position than others. There has been little research conducted around the relationship between the surrogate and adopting mother, although preliminary studies conducted in Britain (Blyth, 1995) suggest that, not surprisingly, difficulties may arise.

Which is the ‘real’ mother as determined in law varies between countries. In New Zealand the legal mother is the one who has gestated and given birth to the baby regardless of the origins of the egg (Law Commission, 2000). In North America it is the commissioning mother who is the legal guardian, though she still has to adopt the baby even if it was her ovum and her husband’s sperm that were used to form the implanted embryo. In the few US cases when gestational surrogates have contested custody the law has usually supported the genetic mother (Cussins, 1998).

### **Fostering**

In the Australian foster service Blythe, Halcomb, Wilkes, & Jackson (2013) found that long term foster carers see themselves as mothers not paid carers but feel as though this identity is denied to them. There is always an (other mother who has the singular title. Goodearle (2002) makes it clear in her book on fostering that foster and birth mothers feel opposed at times. They have to manage their feelings about each other in the interests of the child whose loyalty is said to be towards the birth mother even in situation where the birth mother was neglectful or harmful. Goodearle (2002) says:

Most of the time foster parents, including myself, are very unforgiving of our foster children's birth parents. We see any growth or improvements they have been able to accomplish as never being enough to deserve their child back. We compare them to ourselves and they can never quite measure up to us. In our opinion, their child has a much better chance in life growing up in our family. We view our foster children as worse off with their biological parents. (p.54)

### **New discourses**

The Care of Children Act 2004, which came into force mid-2005, placed more emphasis on the rights of the children involved in adoption and blended families, and encouraged co-parenting responsibilities of the parents as guardians whether they live together or not (Ministry of Justice, 2004). The act also facilitated a third party becoming a guardian if that person is involved in the day-to-day care of the child. In this model the legal relationship is between mother and father in most cases, but in the case of a child living with its stepmother she may be appointed as a third guardian if the birth mother is in agreement. In such a case the mothers' relationship becomes a legally ratified one in that both mothers and the father have shared responsibilities to the child. This move marks a shift in thinking about family constitution which is potentially enabling for dual mother relationships.

The view that maternal doubles are able to negotiate their relationship is supported by earlier research on open adoption (Raynor, 1980; Sachdev, 1991) which showed that despite fears that contact with the birth mother would be problematic both mothers tended to respect each other's privacy and boundaries. Recent longitudinal research (Siegel, 2013) explored the effects of contact between the birth mother and the adoptive mother and has shown that in most cases it has been positive. A significant benefit, possibly the most unexpected in most of the research on the mothers' relationship, is that adoptive mothers feel they develop stronger attachment to their child through contact with the birth mother (Dominick, 1988; Fratter, 1989; 1991; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988, Siegal). The discourses instantiated by such research remain marginal as yet but do provide women with a place to stand in their commitment to openness. At the same time, because the discourses have not yet been taken up widely in society they may not inform the meanings of other people in the mothers' spheres. In that case the mothers' stand may be eroded, especially if the relationship between them is difficult to negotiate.

### **Discursive positioning of the mothers**

Institutional discourses are utilised in the construction of subjectivity and the ability that subjects have to position themselves within them will impact on the degree to which life is liveable (Butler, 1997a). There are multiple discourses at work in the issue of maternal doubles, which overlap and converge upon each other. Since identity is never secured and can shift or be undone at any moment, multiple mothers engaged in constructing themselves as legitimate are negotiating paths through prevailing discourses which have the potential to flip them from good to bad mother instantaneously.

In a society where the maternal is unitary, and where attachment of a child to one woman is seen to be optimal for the child's future personhood (Bowlby, 1951), two mothers will inevitably be positioned as competing for the position (Cornell, 1998). Such competition, if it exists, is exacerbated by the prevailing discourse of monotropy which insists on there being one mother for the child's best interests. Yet, to achieve this end and be recognised as working towards the child's best interests the two women, each with a potential maternal claim to the same child, will often negotiate their relationship to maintain a careful balance so as to stay in relationship (Cussins, 1998; van Zyl, 2000). The challenge to health and social practice professionals is to find ways to understand the relationships between maternal dyads and to find ways of authentically supporting them.

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