Gender essentialism: a conceptual and empirical exploration of notions of maternal essence as a framework for explaining gender difference

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my two sons Raul and Carlos who provided me with the opportunity to experience and to construct my individual and social identity as a mother within my particular historical and social circumstances.

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Abstract

The study sought to explore gender essentialism conceptually and empirically, and to specifically examine the concept of maternal essence as a framework for explaining gender difference. Gender, gender difference, gender essentialism, mothering and motherhood are individual fields of study however this thesis provides a sociological exploration of the intersections between these different fields.

A selection was made of gender theorists: Simone de Beauvoir (1972), Shulamith Firestone (1970), Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1989, 1994) and Sara Ruddick (1989). I characterise these theorists as essentialist and analysed their contributions to explore their notions of gender difference. All four theorists commonly located gender difference in a maternal essence residing in individual women and their experiences. This essence was characterised as being biological, social or psychological.

I came to the conclusion that women's maternity was seen to be determined and reduced to biological essence (reproductive functions) or psychological essence (emotional drives and cognitive attributes) or social essence (mothering activity). All four theorists also read off micro social structural formations (family) from either individual biology or individual practice or individual psyche. In the writings of these theorists individuals are conceived of as discrete objects separated from the macro social structural context in which they exist.

The study took the view that conceptions of gender can only be held to be true based on their power to represent social reality. To this end the study explored the extent to which the selected theorists' notions of gender essentialism illuminate the social reality of individual men and women. Their essentialist conceptions of gender difference were subjected to empirical and/ or discursive examination against the

maternal realities of women in South Africa. The study used data from already existing studies and policy, legislation and programmes from South Africa which report on findings and reflect notions of gender differences which are located in mothering and defined in women's reproduction, mothering capacity and maternal practice/thinking.

The empirical and discursive evidence examined in this study showed that the four theorists' essentialist characterisation of gender difference is useful as it draws our attention to the significance of maternity for women's individual experiences and identity as well as for society in general. However, the empirical and discursive evidence also revealed that external macro social structures, institutions and state discourse and practices influence the significance of maternity for women and society in general. The study therefore points to both the limits and the possibilities of essentialist notions, specifically maternal essence as an individual attribute, in explaining gender difference. This leads me to the view that there is a need for an approach that takes into account the complex, dialectical interaction between individual mothers and their social context to explain mothers' experiences, behaviour, actions, capacities, attitudes, thinking, desires and activities.

This study provides examples of how secondary empirical studies and policy discourse can be used to explore the usefulness of essentialist notions of gender difference. It offers a way in which the power of essentialist accounts of gender difference can be tested conceptually and empirically. It also provides evidence which can be used to extend investigations on essentialist notions of gender difference.

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List of Acronyms

COSATU   Congress of South African Trade Union

CSG   Child Support Grant

DOH   Department of Health

DOW   Department of Welfare

ECD   Early Childhood Development

FWCW   Fourth World Conference on Women

ICPD   International Conference on Population Development

IUD   Intra-Uterine Device

PCG   Primary Care Giver

RDP   Reconstruction & Development Programme

SACCAWU   South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union

SADHS   South African Demographic and Health Survey

SAHRC   South African Human Rights Commission

SASSA   South African Social Security Agency

STATSSA   Statistics South Africa

SMG   State Maintenance Grant

TFR   Total Fertility Rates

WPSW   White Paper on Social Welfare

Chapter 1

Introduction

As an "essential" condition of being a man or a woman, can gender explain gender difference? Feminist theory has generated various conceptions of men and women in an endeavour to enable an understanding of their natures. Underlying these conceptions are certain ontological and epistemological assumptions about men and women. Holmstrom (1998:281) argues that the debate about women's nature is both over the existence of certain cognitive, emotional and moral capacities as well as the source of these capacities and whether they can be changed. Gender essentialism refers to the claim that women and men have certain distinctive capacities and traits (Holmstrom 1998:281).

Government policy, legislation and programmes are variously premised on underlying assumptions about gender difference, be they about differences in characteristics, attributes, personalities, capacities and behaviour. These invariably are linked to a perception of a maternal essence in women which allegedly resides in women's biology, psychology or social practices. From these notions of gender difference various policy interventions have arisen which enable or constrain women's participation in society to varying degrees.

Gender, gender difference, gender essentialism and mothering and motherhood have been theorised in various disciplines including sociology, psychology, philosophy, feminist studies, literary studies and cultural studies among others. Each brings a different viewpoint to the problem that is captured in a vast body of literature which conceptualises and theorises gender, gender difference, gender essentialism and mothering. It is not the intention of this thesis to cover this vast landscape of literature and ideas; rather, the purpose here is to explore notions of gender essentialism as articulated by four theorists juxtaposed against the available, albeit limited, empirical data that relates to the arguments they articulate.

1.1. Gender and gender differences

When sociology emerged as a discipline, it was initially dominated by concerns about men. Feminist concerns were marginal to the discipline and gender was not seen as an important social organiser (Ritzer 1998:290).

Theorists who did discuss women, portrayed them in a conventional and uncritical way. The classical 'founding fathers' of sociology (Auguste Comte 1974, Emile Durkheim 1964, and Talcott Parsons 1970) subscribed to biological conceptions of what it meant to be a man or woman. They assumed that gender differences were innate and that these differences manifested themselves in different intellectual, emotional and moral capacities (Chafetz 1999:4).

From the late 19th Century, and even prior to this, feminists have contested these ideas, contending that not only are men and women differently located and have different experiences of society, but also that women are unequal to men in terms of resources and responsibilities and rights in society. Some held that the different location of men and women went even further to spawn an asymmetry of power between men and women, to the extent that men oppressed women. In the more contemporary world the sociology of gender has emerged as a sub disciplinary field engaging with the multiple aspects of what it means to be male and female and to live gendered lives in society.

Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002) suggest that there are three distinct approaches to theorising gender which include the naturalising approaches which are reliant on biology and psychology, the psychoanalytic approaches and social constructionist approaches. The last category is divided into those who prioritise material relations and also those who prioritise language and discourse in their explanations of gender (Alsop et al 2002:6).

Haraway (1991:131) argues that:

> *"Despite important differences, all the modern feminist meanings of gender have their roots in Simone de Beauvoir's claim that 'one is not born a woman' (de Beauvoir, 1952, p. 249) and in the post-Second World War social conditions that have enabled constructions of women as a collective historical subject-in-process."*

Haraway (1991:131) further points out that:

> *"Gender is a concept developed to contest the naturalisation of sexual difference in multiple arenas of struggle."*

Lastly Haraway (1991:131) concludes that:

> *"Feminist theory and practice around gender seek to explain and change historical systems of sexual difference, whereby 'men' and 'women' are socially constituted and positioned in relations of hierarchy and antagonism."*

Eisenstein (1980:xv) has argued that the theme of "difference" has been a preoccupation of modern feminist thought triggered by de Beauvoir's (1949) publication and the subsequent re-birth of the women's movement in the late 1960s. Since then theorists have engaged gender difference in a variety of ways. Some deny its existence while others have sought to minimise the importance of gender difference, still others tried to eliminate gender difference. They have done this by arguing that either gender difference is socially constructed or biologically determined.

There have also been theorists who have celebrated and valorised gender difference. They go so far as to argue that difference between men and women should be appropriated by all in society because women are seen to be better than men. They explain such differences as either biologically rooted in the psyche or socioculturally rooted in an individual's social role (Jardine 1980:xxv-xxvi). What is important in this argument is that for the most part, the implication of such differences not

withstanding, they all reduce difference to a 'natural' pregiven essence – biology and psyche.

Ritzer (1998:294) argues that the central theme of the literature on gender difference is that it is women's inner psychic life which is different to that of men in terms of their values and interests, their mode of making value judgements, and/or in the overall configuration of women's relationships and social reality. Women differ from men in terms of their consciousness and life experience.

Ontologically theories of gender and gender difference can largely be categorised as social constructionist and essentialist. Social constructionists explain phenomena as being created by and contingent on social factors such as language and culture. They seek to uncover the ways in which individuals or groups create their social reality. They seek to explain how people create and institutionalise social phenomena. By contrast essentialists view social phenomena as having inherent fixed essences which are independent of social or individual human. Thus language and culture are epiphenomenal and reflective of something that is held to be an essential quality or condition (Colebrook 2004:14-17). However, some have argued that social constructionism can itself become a form of essentialism (Sayer 1997).

What becomes evident with these conceptualisations is that gender relations involve both notions of inequality and difference and the extent to which each is prioritised varies (Felski 1997 and Fraser 1997 cited in Walby 2009:254).

1.2. Gender essentialism

In order to understand gender essentialism it is necessary to first look at essentialism itself. Speake (1979) gives three separate philosophical positions on essentialism. The most important of these is:

> "*a metaphysical view dating back to Aristotle, certain aspects of which are currently much discussed. It maintains that some objects - no matter how*

described – have essences; that is, they have, essentially or necessarily, certain
properties, without which they could not exist or be the things they are… there is
also a related essentialist view, presented originally by Locke, that objects must
have a 'real - though as yet unknown – 'essence,' which (causally) explains their
more readily observable properties (or 'nominal essence')" (1979:112).

Essentialism is the view that objects possess certain essential properties that
distinguish one from another.

Fuss (1989) argues:

"Essentialism is classically defined as a belief in true essence - that which is
most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or
thing. This definition represents the traditional Aristotelian understanding of
essence, the definition with the greatest amount of currency in the history of
Western metaphysics" (Fuss 1989:2).

For Fuss (1983:3) essentialist arguments take recourse in a stable and coherent,
unchangeable, predictable ontology that stands outside the sphere of cultural
influence and historical change. She argues that essentialist arguments are not
necessarily a-historical, but frequently theorise history as an unbroken continuum
that transports categories such as "man" and "woman" across cultures and through
time.

Fuss (1989:4) uses Locke's (1690) distinctions between real and nominal essences to
explain essentialism. Real essences are linked to the Aristotelian concept of essence
(Aristotle 1925) namely that which is most irreducible and unchanging about a thing.
Nominal essence, for Locke is merely a classificatory fiction, something that is used
to categorise and to label in order to understand the difference between real and
nominal essence. Locke (1690) argued that real essences are discovered by close
empirical observation whereas nominal essences are not 'discovered' so much as
assigned or produced, especially by language (Fuss 1989:5). Fuss argues that this

distinction between the two types of essences corresponds to the broad oppositional categories of essentialism and constructionism.

An essentialist assumes that innate or given essences sort objects naturally into species or kinds, whereas a constructionist assumes that it is language; the names arbitrarily affixed to objects, which establishes their existence in the mind. But Fuss suggests that despite this apparent difference, both share a common classification as essence. She argues further that it has often been said that biological determinism and social determinism are two sides of the same coin – both posit an utterly passive subject subordinated to the shaping influence of either nature or culture, and both disregard the unsettling effects of the psyche (Fuss1989:6).

In a similar vein Colebrook (2004:82) argues that implicit in essentialist thinking is a form of reductionism that seeks to answer the question of how essences are formed and the forms they take. For her, the debate in gender theory is reduced to a concern about just what counted as real. Are there really two sexes or is this perception just an effect of language and social construction? Are the differences of language and culture the only reality we have? These are ontological questions that underlie essentialist characterisations of gender difference.

The explanatory uses of essences serve varying purposes:

> *"One purpose is to identify the essence of an object in terms of properties which supposedly determine – or are indispensable for – what it can and cannot do; these are its 'generative' properties…The other purpose is to refer to those features of an object which enable us to distinguish it from other kinds of objects; these are its distinguishing or identifying properties"* (Sayer 1997:458).

Essentialist conceptions that are deployed in explanations of gender difference refer to a belief that the difference between women and men resides in an essence. Thus Schor argues that:

> *"Essentialism in the specific context of feminism consists in the belief that woman has an essence, that woman can be specified by one or a number of inborn attributes that define across cultures and throughout history her unchanging*

being and in the absence of which she ceases to be categorized as a woman. In less abstract, more practical terms an essentialist, in the context of feminism, is one who instead of carefully holding apart the poles of sex and gender maps the feminine onto femaleness, one for whom the body, the female body, that is , remains, in however complex and problematic a way, the rock of feminism" (Schor 1994:59-60).

Essentialism is underpinned by a modernist epistemology that assumes a Cartesian subject, a subject that is defined by an essential core, a universal human essence, a rational and agentic subject and the source of all knowledge and actions (Hekman 1999:18-19). Modernists explain the locus of gendered subjectivity as residing in the physical or internal attributes and capacities of individuals. Descartes' (1968:54) famous dictum *"I think, therefore I am"* is based on things that can be known, the self as experienced by the self.

Oakley (2000:76) argues that Descartes' epistemological position of what constitutes knowledge embodies a 'scientific revolution.' It articulated a belief in the power of human reason and an appeal to experience of the world as the only valid basis of all knowledge (Oakley 2000: 80). It gave rise to the pursuit of knowledge which sought to discover the 'laws' of the social world, and which later led to the birth of social science (Oakley 2000: 80). It represented a deterministic reductionist view of human nature, where human beings and their experiences are construed as products of internal and external stimuli and it operated through dualism.

Thus the body is segregated from the mind and is hierarchically ordered:
"I thereby concluded that I was a substance of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking ... so that this 'I', that it is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body" (Descartes 1968:54).

Similarly this dualism is extended to gender difference. It created a conception in society of a cultural division of labour whereby masculine nature is linked to reason and juxtaposed to feminine nature which is linked to emotions. Men and women are

seen as different; with men associated with rationality which is also seen as the standard for all that is human, while women are associated with the body and emotions. Men are characterised as the agentic 'One' and women as the passive 'Other.' Oakley (2000:87) argues that central to the Cartesian schema is the argument that human beings are made of two distinct substances – one thinking, the other 'corporeal,' where thought is independent of the body and the body is basically a machine.

Like Colebrook (2004:82) and Fuss (1989), Sayer (1997:464) argues that essentialist explanations of human behaviour are characterised by reductionism and determinism. Reductionism entails explaining human behaviour by reading it off from just one of their characteristics (Sayer 1997:464), while determinist explanations make a claim that there are regular relationships between cause-event and effect-event (Sayer 1997: 470-471).

Cartesian essentialist explanations of gender difference are countered by constructionism and postmodernism. As Velody and Williams (1998:13) maintain, constructionist and postmodernist explanations argue that there is no essence, no foundation, no overarching definition and no universal essence. Constructionist thinking is associated with cultural studies, deconstructionism and postmodernism. Social constructionism relates to sociology of knowledge approaches which distinguish the causal role of social factors from biological or natural factors (Shakespeare cited in Velody and Williams 1998:168).

1.3. Types of gender essentialism

Essentialist notions of gender difference that are used in feminist theory ultimately fall back on biological differences between men and women. Marshall (1994:104) identifies three types of essentialism within feminist theory: biological essentialism as in Firestone (1970), Daly (1978) and Rich (1977), philosophical essentialism as in de Beauvoir (1972) and O'Brien (1981) and historical reification as in Chodorow

(1978), Dinnerstein (1976) and Ortner (1974). She argues that common to all is the connection they make between the female body and reproduction of the species. This connection is made even though each type of essentialism rests on different sorts of arguments about how biological difference is transformed into subjective difference.

Castell's (1997:196-197) account of feminist essentialism adds other social dimensions to essentialist notions of difference between women and men. He points to the uniqueness of women's experience rooted not only in biology but also in history. He also talks of the moral and cultural superiority of womanhood as a way of life. He cites the work of Luce Irigaray (1985) as an example of this superior conception of womanhood and of women reclaiming their identity from patriarchal order.

Essentialist arguments are often associated with naturalist, biologist and universalist characterisations of human nature. However, for essentialists the essence of an object does not necessarily have to be biological. Even though it is often counterposed to social constructionism, social constructionism can also be construed in essentialist notions of institutions and language. As Alsop et al (2002:65) argue, biological essentialist explanations assume that a binary division into men and women is requisite of biology and that these different biological features of men and women are explanations for their common psychological and behavioural features. However, they also argue that:

> *"Essences do not have to be biological essences, however. Social essentialists would accept that all women, for example, share characteristics as the consequence of adopting the same social role, being placed within the same kind of social structures or being subject to the same symbolic order…"* (Alsop et al 2002:65).

They argue further that:

> *"It is moreover, the case that many social constructionist accounts rely on a residual biological essentialism. Accounts of gender which focus on the ways in which men and women learn to be masculine or feminine assume* a priori *that the*

human species is unproblematically divided biologically into men and women"
(Alsop et al 2002:65).

So female 'essence' has historically been variously construed by a body of theorists as being either biologically, socially or symbolically given – where the unity of women can arise from biology, structural location or discursive construction. Biological essentialist arguments locate men and women's essence in their biological features while arguments claiming social and symbolic essences explain this essence as arising out of the shared characteristics that derive from similar roles and social structures or from, or being subject to the same symbolic order (Alsop et al 2002).

These varied locations of gender essences are also suggested by Grosz (1995) who argues that:

> *"Women's essence is assumed to be given and universal and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's biology and "natural" characteristics. Essentialism usually entails biologism and naturalism, but there are cases in which women's essence is seen to reside not in nature or biology but in certain given psychological characteristics – nurturance, empathy, support, non-competitiveness, and the like. Or women's essence may be attributed to certain activities and procedures (which may or may not be dictated by biology) observable in social practices – intuitiveness, emotional responses, concern and commitment to helping others, etc. Essentialism entails the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times…"* (Grosz 1995:47).

The important contribution that Grosz (1995) makes to the characterisation of gender essences is that she adds social activities and practices as markers of gender essence.

1.4. Sociological underpinnings for gender essentialism

The approach of this study on gender essentialism is specifically sociological as it provides a framework within which to explain human behaviour from both an

interpretive and material perspective. C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* succinctly captures a key understanding of what the sociological perspective might be. To wit:

"The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter the framework of modern society is sought and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated" (Mills 1970:11).

What this means in practice is that:

"The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills 1970:12).

According to Mills (1970:13), social analysts consistently ask three sorts of questions:

1. What is the structure of this particular society as a whole?

2. Where does this society stand in human history and what are the mechanics by which it is changing?

3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? What kinds of 'human nature' are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society, in this period?

The focus of this study is Mill's third question – namely to explore gender differences and men and women's nature in South African society at a particular 'moment' in time.

Giddens (1979:59) argues that theories which primarily focus on the human agent/individual mainly conceive of the individual as a purposeful, reasoning/intentional actor who understands the conditions of his/her own actions. This perspective stresses how individuals and groups 'produce' society. It allows a

view of people as having agency, being active and wanting and doing things. So action or human behaviour is seen to reside in an individual's personality, traits or emotions as well as their ability to think and reason. Phenomenology, existential phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and Max Weber's (1949) social action theory are all inclined towards an interpretive epistemology in sociology.

This interpretive approach can be further characterised as micro-interpretive, social psychological or a social-action perspective in sociology which focuses on the mind part of Cartesian duality to explain an individuals' existence. In explaining human behaviour as psychologically informed actions, this perspective emphasises variables connected to individuals' internal subjective states such as intentions, motivations, desires, emotions, consciousness, and understandings (Goldenberg 1997: 8).

Social structural accounts of human behaviour look at the extent of institutional/external influences on men and women's behaviour. These include race, class, sex, education, spatial location, rules and sanctions from social institutions and social relations. Although structural variables are external to the individuals, they shape and determine individual behaviour by setting the parameters of action and agency (Goldenberg 1997:8) and this influence could apply equally to micro sociological variables. They point to the local, contingent and variable characteristics of men and women's behaviour.

Within sociology, structuration theory seeks to synthesize the duality of structure and agency (Giddens 1976). Giddens argues that structure is not external to human action and solely identified with constraint but is both a medium and outcome of human activities, which it also organises (Giddens 1976:61). The structural properties of institutions and society as a whole are sustained and perpetuated by the individual actions of members of society.

The dualism of structure and agency is also evident in essentialist theories of gender, where some theorists incline towards agency as determinant while others incline towards structure. Different policy implications also arise from these social action

and structural perspectives. From a social action perspective the individual is where the action is and therefore policy should be addressed at the level of individuals. From a structuralist perspective, society, its systems and institutions as well as social structural scaffolding should be the focus. Sometimes both of these perspectives are incorporated in public policy.

Ultimately conceptions of gender can only be held to be true based on their power to represent social reality. As we know social reality is not a stand- alone fact waiting to be found, but, rather, one that is filled with interpretation. In looking for an essential core of women's experience, gender theories try to locate it in characteristics that are held to represent gender difference. The question that must be asked is the extent to which the notions of   gender essentialism illuminate social reality in a way that is meaningful to women and men and the societies in which they live?

1.5. The choice of the four theorists

For this study I have selected four theorists whom I have identified as essentialist for a detailed conceptual analysis of gender essentialism using Grosz's (1995) definition of gender essence. I have selected these theorists because they all commonly identify the centrality of maternity in women's identities and gender difference and because of the prevailing primary association of women's identity with that of maternity in South African policy, legislation and programmes.

Feminist theorising on motherhood has ranged from either seeing motherhood as a limiting women's agency and source of women's oppression to conceptualising it as a experience that is a source of power and agency. Grosz (1995) sees women's essence as residing in biology (reproductive capacities) or certain given psychological characteristics (maternal thinking and feelings) or social practices (mothering). Biological essence would be seen to reside in reproductive capacities, a social essence in the social practice of mothering activities or a psychological essence in the unconscious emotional drives and maternal thinking.

The first theorist examined in the thesis is Simone de Beauvoir who was a pre-eminent French existentialist philosopher writing extensively on ethics, feminism, fiction and politics (Mussett 2003). She was born in 1908 and was the first child of a white middle class Catholic family in Paris who supported the development of her intellectual talents as she was growing up (Oakely 1986, Evans 1996). Her approach drew on a diverse range of philosophical ideas which included the works of Descartes, phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidgegger, the historical materialism of Karl Marx and Frederich Engels and the idealism of Immanuel Kant and G.W. F. Hegel (Mussett 2003). She studied philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne where she met Jean-Paul Sartre the famous existentialist philosopher (Okely 1986). Sartre played a most influential role in her intellectual, emotional and spiritual life (Evans 1996). They were both the founders of French existentialism and were also jointly involved in radical left wing politics in France at the time. De Beauvoir's book the *The Second Sex (1949)* is regarded as her most influential contribution to philosophy. It marked a feminist revolution in her times and established her as a very influential feminist thinker (Mussett 2003). The book explored the implications of the historical dominant view of defining women as "other" and passive, and men as the 'one' and as active agents (Raymond 1991). The central claim of the *The Second Sex – "one is not born a woman but becomes one"* is seen as an application of Sartre's ideas to interpersonal relationships (Raymond 1991). In the book de Beauvoir argued that womanhood was a social construction. (Shneir 1994). The fundamental existential belief that each individual should be encouraged to define himself or herself and take individual responsibility for their existence is strongly asserted in the writings (Mussett 2003). Although the book was embraced by feminists and intellectuals in her time it was also attacked by both feminists and people against feminism. Feminists criticised de Beauvoir's negative conceptions of the female body. However, *The Second Sex* remains an important text in the investigations of women's oppression and liberation today (Mussett 2003). De Beauvoir embraced the feminist movement in the 1970s by participation in feminist struggles and declared herself a feminist in 1972 (Schneir 1994).

The second theorist analysed in the thesis is Shulamith Firestone who was born in 1945 to orthodox Jewish parents in Canada and studied fine art at the Art Institute in Chicago (Schneir 1994). She was one of the founders of the earliest women's liberation collective in Chicago in the 1960s. After moving to New York after this she started the New York Radical Redstockings and the New York Radical Feminist groups (Schneir 1994). In 1970 she published *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution.* Scott (2007) stated that it was one of the most influential of feminist writings standing alongside Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Firestone (1970) dedicated her book to Simone de Beauvoir. In the book she argued that women's subordination was fundamental to other forms of oppression (Benewick and Green 1998). Firestone (1970) stated that all other phenomena such as race and class could be explained in terms of the subordination of women. She claimed the basis of women's subordination was ultimately biological (Benewick and Green 1998). Firestone (1970) also saw the family as the key institution of oppression of women and children (Schneir 1994). She integrated the ideas of Marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis in her explanation of gender inequality (Scott 2007). Firestone's ideas were never popular among grass-roots feminists at the time for various reasons which included her perception that women's biology was inferior to men's, her negative views of childbirth and lactation and her confidence in the liberatory potential of technology (Benewick and Green 1998). Contemporary feminist theorists have rejected her views as biological determinist, and essentialist, transcultural and transhistorical (Benewick and Green 1998). Despite these criticisms her work is historically significant as it sought to make women's subordination visible. It is argued that she may have also been the first feminist in the 20th century to explore the significance of women's distinctive roles in procreation (Benewick and Green 1998).

The third theorist whose ideas are conceptually interrogated in the thesis is Nancy Chodorow who is a feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst. She was born in 1944 in New York City. She studied anthropology at Radcliff College and later received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in sociology at Brandeis University (Salerno

2004:188). She also later trained as a psychoanalyst. She was professor in the departments of sociology and clinical psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, for many years (Chesler, Rothblum and Cole 1996:141). Through the publication of her first book *The Reproduction of Mothering* in 1979, she played a central role in constructing a feminist psychoanalytic. In this book she reinterprets Freud's psychoanalytical theory of the self and identity and draws on object relations theory to explain how mothering is reproduced through the unconscious in females, generation after generation (Giles-Sims 1979: 437). Her analysis of gender draws on several theoretical streams which do not only include psychoanalysis but also Marxism and feminism (Marshall 1994:80). In her book Chodorow suggests that the root of gender difference between men and women lay in the process of socialisation experienced by children in their early childhood and infancy when gender roles and personal identity are developed (Schneir 1994:428-429). She has been criticised by several feminists for universalising both women's experiences of motherhood and the family structure (Rich 1980, Flax 1981, Lorber et al 1981). However, others have argued that her distinctive contribution to the theorisation of gender is her use of Freudian theory to suggest that some aspects of gender difference is unconscious (Salerno 2004: 189).

The last theorist analysed in the thesis is Sara Ruddick. She was born in 1935 and trained as a philosopher at Harvard University (O'Reilly 2010). Ruddick taught philosophy for many years at Eugene Lang College: The New School of Liberal Arts, until retiring in 1999 (O'Reilly 2010). She devoted almost a decade of her life to her philosophical analysis of mothering before writing the book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* in 1989 (Bailey 1995:162). The book is her attempt to show the virtues of maternal work and the belief that it is the basis for a politics of peace (Snitow 1992:40). She engages with differences of sex and gender to make this argument. At the time of her writing the book, she was part of a group of feminist theorists (Carol Gilligan (1982), Jean Bethke Elshtain (1981) and Ann Ferguson (1989))whose theoretical contributions were concerned with what women actually do, their understandings and their experiences (Snitow 1992:39). These women's writings also represented a shift in feminist thinking about female

experiences, specifically motherhood, from humanist accounts that devalued this experience to a gynocentric one. Their contributions validated the experiences of motherhood as something superior to those represented in the values of traditional male institutions (Young 1990, Eisenstein 1984). This shift in conceptualisation was also accompanied by methodological and epistemological shifts. Women as mothers were now studied from the standpoint of their own discourse rather than the perspective of "others" (Kaplan 1992:3). Within this view women were conceived of as active subjects who consciously constructed their identity and actions (Ritzer 1998:312). Ruddick's valorising of women's experiences and actions and her celebration of their difference to men has been both theoretically and empirically criticised by some theorists such as Spelman (1988), Butler (1989), Bordo (1992) and Haraway (1991) who have all pointed out the limitations of explaining gender difference as a consequence of individual action located in the private sphere. They suggest that such an argument perpetuates oppressive gender stereotypes and excludes an analysis of the cultural, political and social constructions of gender difference.

1.6. Structure of the thesis

The chapters of the thesis are divided into three parts. Each part comprises of an exploration of a distinctive view of gender difference. Within each part there are two chapters; one conceptual and the other empirical and discursive. Chapters two, four and six conceptually and theoretically explore the distinct ideas of gender difference of Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Nancy Chodorow and Sara Ruddick.

Chapters three, five and seven explore the essentialist conceptions of gender difference of the four theorists empirically and/or discursively in order to see how robustly they are able to explain gender realities and discourse in South Africa. These realities have been variously described in other studies and also captured in policy documents developed to address gender difference and gender inequality. In the last chapter I conclude by drawing together the commonalities between the six

chapters in addressing the research question on the conceptual power of maternal essence in explaining gender difference.

Part I - Gender as biological essence

Biological conceptions of gender are often characterised as a form of essentialism; more specifically as biological essentialism. The gender theorists who have been identified in feminist literature employing this conception of gender are Shulamith Firestone (1970), Mary Daly (1978) and Adrienne Rich (1977) as noted in Marshall (1994:104). These theorists are considered to be biological essentialists because they reduce the source or cause of gender difference to the female body. They regard the female body as connected to reproduction of the species, to be the primary basis for women's consciousness and behaviour (Marshall 1994:104). These feminists have variously conceptualised the female body as a focus of political action. In the late 1960s and 1970s their ideas on gender were part of an era in feminist theorising popularly known as second wave feminism, when analysis of the private sphere became the focus of feminist theorising. It was characterised by the realisation that formal political equality which characterised the struggles of First Wave Feminism had not brought about social and cultural equality (Brooker 2002: 99-100). The slogan 'the personal is the political' was popularised by Second Wave feminists to emphasise the unacceptable distinctive spheres that men and women occupied. For men it was the public sphere but for women it was the private sphere (Brooker 2002: 100).

Essentialist explanations of gender difference have also often been associated with the terms; naturalism, universalism and biologism (Grosz 1989). Biologism, as a form of essentialism, ties women's essence to their biological capacities which are specifically rooted in women's childbearing capacity and links female biology to notions of motherhood (Grosz 1989). Analytic importance is given to women's biology, where men and women are divided into different categories on the basis of their biological difference and biology. The body is seen to determine action (Connell 1991). Some of these gender theorists view female biology positively while others see it as a constraint and limitation to practice. In the former the body is seen

to privilege women's consciousness over men's and in the latter to be the source of women's oppression by men. The concept of patriarchy is often used in biological conceptions of gender to explain gender oppression. Patriarchy is understood as a system of domination where men as a group dominate women as a group to the sole benefit of the former who are seen as appropriating women's bodies and their sexuality (Walby 1990:3).

Several criticisms have been levelled at biological and patriarchal conceptions of gender; the most pertinent being that this form of analysis tends towards essentialism, biological reductionism, and universalism (Walby 1990:3). Segal (1987) also criticised biological conceptions for being trans-historical. By simply analysing women's oppression as the product of a single cause, namely, male domination over women's bodies, the different structures and experiences of women's oppression in different societies, historical periods and social classes are excluded (Barrett 1980:4).

Andersen (1997) and Lowe (1982) also argue that by attributing differences between the sexes to biological origins theorists imply that nature determines social positions and identities, and indeed the whole social structure of society. By contrast, while women's role in biological reproduction and the bearing and nurturing of children is self evident. Oestergaard (1992:5) argues that it would be a false stereotype to presume from such biological capacity that women be confined to domestic roles in the household. Rather, to understand where women are in society requires an analysis of the social and historical roots of gender relations where the gender division of labour is regarded as part of wider social divisions of labour that are reinforced culturally, institutionally and ideologically. This view argues that men's and women's lives are shaped by the interrelationship between different forces in society. In this regard, Holmstrom (1998:286) has argued that whether men and women have distinct biological natures depends not only on their intrinsic properties but also on the importance accorded to these properties. This perspective resonates with Shilling's (1993:20) contention that the body is treated differently in different social systems, and therefore can be enabling or constraining.

This said, I have chosen to analyse Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1972) and Shulamith Firestone's The *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) as examples of biological essentialist conceptions of gender difference and inequality and to explore the extent to which they resonate with women's real lived conditions in a particular society. Firestone is cited in feminist writings as a radical feminist who uses the concept of patriarchy and women's bodily differences to explain gender oppression. I propose to tease out and critically review Firestone's assumptions and methods and then set these against available empirical evidence.

Chapter 2

Framing gender through the prism of biology: the theory

2.1. Simone de Beauvoir

To understand Shulamith Firestone it is necessary to begin with Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* (1972) since it was the template for much of the feminist theory that followed. In the opening pages of her book she poses two questions: "what is a woman?" and "how does one become one?". De Beauvoir located gender difference and gender inequality as arising from maternal experience, a maternal essence which she argued had to be erased in order for women to become truly 'human' and equal to men. De Beauvoir also saw the specificities of the female body (menstruation, pregnancy and maternity, lactation, and so on) as limiting women's access to the rights and privileges which are accorded to men in patriarchal society. Several analyses of de Beauvoir's conceptions of gender have been undertaken for example, Mackenzie (1986), Butler (1990), Moi (1994), Heinamaa (1996), Hekman (1999), Bergoffen (2000), Kruks (2001) and Arnfred (2002). Some of these analyses are used in this thesis.

Her book was written in a specific historical context in which European middle-class women were largely dependent on husbands and/or fathers for economic support because of (as she describes it) women's enslavement to their procreative capacities. During this period modernity bore the promise of waged work and contraception for women, a promise that conceptually was to be translated into an idea of emancipation; women asserting their control over procreation and gaining economic independence (Arnfred 2002:4). There is a long history of struggle for access to contraception and work which has been documented; Gordon (1976) is an example of this.

In Book One of *The Second Sex,* de Beauvoir synthesises gender explanations from a biological determinist, psychoanalytical and historical materialist perspective. She thereby creates a cultural framework to account for society's conception of women as 'Other.' Men are conceived of as 'the One' positively construed in relation to the 'Other' and men are also conceived of as a neutral standard which defines what it is to be human. The 'Other' is conceptualised by lack and negativity. In Book Two she describes woman's subjective experiences in order to fully comprehend the world in which women are confined. She does this in order not to produce eternal truths, but rather *"to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence"* (1972:31).

She argues that in order for gender difference to be overcome and gender equality to be achieved between men and women, the primary difference between men and women – maternity (biologically conceived) needs to be erased to allow women's status of 'Other' to be overcome. Although she uses the contributions of psychoanalysis and historical materialism, by her own account she draws primarily on an existentialist perspective as elaborated especially by Jean Paul Sartre (1956). Existentialism is a philosophical attitude that argues that 'being' is revealed to individuals in their subjective reflections of their own unique concrete existence in specific historical and social contexts (Flew 1979:115). Further, existentialism subscribes to the belief that individuals are self aware and understand their own existence in terms of their individual experiences of situations (Flew 1979:115). For Sartre people are free; they are responsible for everything they do; their fate is in their own hands. Even though Sartre acknowledged the significance of social structures in people's lives, he emphasised the human ability to transcend these and to make choices freely (Ritzer 1998:361). For existentialists the focus is on the actor and his thoughts and actions within social settings. 'Being' takes precedence over knowledge and 'being' cannot be objectively investigated, but is rather revealed to the individual through reflecting on his existence:

> *"Existence is basic: it is the fact of the individual's presence and participation in a changing and potentially dangerous world. Each self-aware individual understands his own existence in terms of his experience of himself and of his*

situation. The self of which he is aware is a thinking being which has beliefs, hopes, fears, desires, the need to find a purpose, and a will that can determine his actions. The problem of existence can have no significance if viewed impartially or in abstraction; it can only be seen in terms of the impact that experiences make on a particular existent. No individual has a predetermined place or function within a rational system and no one can deduce his supposed duty through reasoning; everyone is compelled to assume responsibility of making choices" (Speake 1979:115-116).

This approach is in sharp contrast to rationalist and empiricist doctrines which view the universe as an ordered system governed by natural laws that can be explained through the power of reason or through observation (Speake 1979:115).

De Beauvoir's analysis of gender difference more specifically employs an existential phenomenological approach. Phenomenology also starts with the direct lived experience of humans where behaviour is seen as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external objective and physically described reality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000:23). The main features of phenomenology are that it gives primacy to subjective consciousness and understands consciousness as active and meaning bestowing (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000:23). Phenomenology is a variant of a subjectivist/interpretive sociology.

In examining the question "what is woman?" de Beauvoir employs the concepts of One and Other. She argues that these are the basic categories of human thought. She asserts that "*The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself*" (De Beauvoir 1972:16). She argues that in the most primitive societies and ancient mythologies one finds the expression of duality (De Beauvoir 1972:16). However, she continues by explaining that this duality was not in the first instance attached to the division of the sexes and was not dependent on any empirical facts but rather derived from human thought processes:

"Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group even sets itself up as the One without at once setting the Other over against itself" (p:17).

She clarifies these conceptions by using Hegel's explanation which she argues asserts that:

" we find in consciousness itself there is a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object" (p:17).

This interpretation of subjectivity proposes that the experience of selfhood would not be possible without this oppositional duality. In this way De Beauvoir explains that individuals engage in a process of defining who they are (the self) and what it is to be in relation to another (object).

In the rest of her book De Beauvoir (1972) proceeds to illustrate how history and humanity have conceived of the human female – the Other - (how woman becomes) and how these conceptions negatively view women's biology. For the ancients, she states that a typical view was that *"Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature"* (p.16). She cites Aristotle (1925) as having said that '*The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities, we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness*' (p.16-17).

From this basic dualism she generalises the place of men and women in society. She argues that culturally men are defined as 'One' (subject), being positive and active in relation to the negative passive 'Other' (object), being women (ibid:15). But men are also represented in society as the neutral standard that defines humanness in general in terms of rationality, freedom and autonomy. Those qualities typify all that is supposed to be human. Thus, there is a difference between the 'One's' self whose subjectivity arises in active opposition to the category of the passive 'Other' whose

subjectivity is located in the body. Women are always conceived of as 'Other' to men who represent the norm of rationality, freedom and autonomy – all that is supposed to be human.

De Beauvoir's conceptualisation of gender difference emerged within the social and cultural context of a dominant dualist/Cartesian modernist epistemology (Hekman 1999: 18-20). Her ideas were part of the Enlightenment thinkers' view of human subjects being essentially autonomous and rational (Ashe in Ashe, Finlayson, Lloyd, MacKenzie, Martin and O'Neill 1999:108).This kind of thinking viewed terms such as man/women, mind/body, reason/emotion and culture/nature in opposition, contradictory and hierarchical in relation to each other (Lloyd in Ashe et al 1999:112).

De Beauvoir argues that this dualism extends to society's association of women with the body and nature, and men with the mind. Under these conditions, the body is responsible for women being unable to attain active self formation:

"The enslavement of the female to the species and the limitations of her various powers are extremely important facts; the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world" (1972:69).

Although she also argues that:

"the body is not enough to define her as women; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of society" (1972:69).

De Beauvoir also argues that women are complicit in the maintenance of their status of 'Other':

"If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change…They have gained what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received. The reason for this is that women lack concrete means of organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit…. They live dispersed

among males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – father or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women…The division of the bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. Male and female stand opposed within a primordial Mitsein[1] and woman has not broken it" (De Beauvoir 1972:19-20).

The reason she gives for their complicity is that women derive advantages from their status:

"To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be party to the deal- this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste" (p.21).

The essence of what makes a woman 'woman' is her bodily existence; she experiences her body as 'other,' negative and 'lacking' because of historical, cultural conceptions of her reproductive biological functions in relation to that of 'man.' De Beauvoir thus introduces the notion of a relational and social definition of gender difference; a woman is defined by society and she experiences herself in relation to men who are deemed to be the norm of what is rational and human. The physical reality of the female body (reproductive capacities) and its material functions are the source of the definition of what it is to be a woman/other. Gender difference conceptualised by De Beauvoir (1972) sees women's bodies as negative.

Not only does she engage with how society interprets women's bodies but she also describes how women themselves experience their bodies as limiting, circumscribing and imprisoning. In the chapter *The Data of Biology* she contends that women are subjected to their biology from puberty to menopause:

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[1] Mitsein is a German expression which means 'being with' (Bauer 2001:129).

"Crises of puberty and menopause, monthly 'curse,' long and often difficult pregnancy, painful and sometimes dangerous childbirth, illnesses, unexpected symptoms and complications – these are characteristics of the human female" (De Beauvoir 1972: 64).

For her, the consequence of these biological functions on women are multiple. To wit menstruation causes "*alienation*", "*psychic disturbances*", high blood pressure, impaired hearing and eyesight, abdominal pains, constipation and diarrhoea (De Beauvoir 1972:61). Pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding further undermine women's health as they are viewed as "*painful and dangerous*" and "*endows the feminine body with a disturbing frailty*" and "*Nursing is also an exhausting obligation... The nursing mother feeds the newborn at the expense of her own strength*" (De Beauvoir 1972: 62-63). Thus there are physical consequences of biology (pain, loss of iron, calcium, lower blood pressure) as well as psychological effects (alienation, emotionalism).

Women are condemned by their bodies and she in turn condemns the female body and its functions as an obstacle towards self actualisation. Serially pregnant, she claims, women are like:

"fertile organisms, like fowl with high egg-production. And they seek eagerly to sacrifice their liberty of action to the function of the flesh: it seems to them that their existence is tranquillity justified in the passive fecundity of their bodies" (De Beauvoir 1972:513).

De Beauvoir's famous statement; "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*" alludes to and is often used in social constructionist explanations of gender, where gender is argued as being socially determined. Although often identified by this statement her negative conception of the female body in relation to maternity and as a source of gender difference and her solution for the erasure of this difference all suggest an insurmountable biological determinism. This contradiction has been noted by for example, Firestone (1970:7) and Marshall (1994) and Arnfred (2002:6-7). It is rather in the context of the existential phenomenological approach that she uses in

her analysis, that she sees women becoming women through their subjective consciousness giving this meaning as a reflection of the lived experiences of their bodies within historical and cultural contexts.

Marshall (1994:107) also suggests that de Beauvoir makes the claim of an essential gendered subjectivity and that this consciousness privileges the 'One' over the 'Other.' She holds that de Beauvoir's analysis is underpinned by a conception of gender difference that arises from a primordial consciousness explained as a basic category of human thought that is organised by *a priori* categories of 'One' and 'Other.' This contention, I would argue overstates the problem, since de Beauvoir in her book does include an account of the biological as well as historical circumstances that have pushed the class 'women' into the category of 'Otherness.'

De Beauvoir's theoretical approach to women's bodies has been described as conceiving it as that of a 'lived body' where the physical body acts and experiences itself within a specific socio-cultural context or situation (Kruks 2001). This conception of the body is underpinned by the framework of existential phenomenology in which the physical body acts and is experienced within a specific socio-cultural context (Young 2002:415). She interrogates the functioning of women's bodies in order to explore women's existence and individual experiences of their bodies as well. De Beauvoir's argument is that women's experiences of their bodies are negative and a burden and they are experienced as man's 'Other.' These experiences are a reflection of responses from family and society.

Marshall (1994:106) argues that de Beauvoir's analysis of women is characterised by a philosophical essentialism rooted in women's bodily existence. Marshal argues that de Beauvoir uses the Hegelian notion of transcendence to explain how women are bound by their reproductive capacities which traps their consciousness and prevents them from transcending their bodies and achieving full autonomy (Marshall 1994: 106). Man is seen as the subject, the model body that has transcended nature and is fully human. But the female body is never seen as a source of pleasure or pride only a handicap that can only be overcome by minimising it's difference to men's

(Arnfred 2002:6). These conceptions led de Beauvoir to ultimately reject the female body and call for women to transcend it as it was seen as an obstacle to the development of women's full human faculties. For her, this is to be fully rational and able to take a place in the public and intellectual world. De Beauvoir call for transcendence implies that women can by individual choice, take control of their maternity and transcend their body.

What de Beauvoir defines as 'real', what could be known, the essence as defined in the Lockean tradition (1975), is a woman's body, the object which generates perception and produces social relations. Thus de Beauvoir locates in women's bodies an essential gendered subjectivity which needs to be transcended. This interpretation is supported by Marshall (1994:106) who describes de Beauvoir's theory as feminist essentialism. This is a type of philosophical essentialism in turn ultimately takes the form of biological essentialism because she situates the female body and its connection to the reproduction of the species at the foundation of gender difference. In de Beauvoir's explanation, women 'become' women and experience themselves as women in relation to society's and men's definition of them as 'Other' - a definition which is rooted in their bodily existence. Her analysis introduces an important relational and cultural aspect to the concept of gender, by arguing that the creation of subjectivity arises out of relations with others within a cultural context. Women's consciousness is entrapped by their reproductive capacities; their sense of self becomes located in their negatively conceived 'Other' status.

For de Beauvoir, men are conceived of as the subject, the model body that has transcended nature and who are fully human (Arnfred 2002:10). By contrast, for her the female body is never seen as a source of pleasure or pride merely a handicap that can be overcome only by minimising its difference to men's (Arnfred 2002:6). The materiality of the body is the source for ascribing to women the Hegelian concept of 'Other' (a fundamental category of human thought). In this way she brings both idealist and materialist conceptions to her explanation of gender difference. The logic of this understanding leads de Beauvoir to reject the female body and to call for

women to transcend their bodies in order to be fully rational and take their place in the public and intellectual world like men.

This position leads her to propose solutions for gender equality, where she calls on women to make individual choices to voluntarily control their maternity and if maternity is a choice made by women then she argues that institutional change needs to take place whereby women do not bear the sole responsibility for children.

To this end she begins the section on "The Mother" with a long discussion on abortion and concludes that *"contraception and legal abortion (which) would permit woman to undertake her maternities in freedom"* (de Beauvior 1972:510). In this way the role of motherhood would be freely chosen as women's reproductive bodily functions would be brought under voluntary control. She also calls for children to be *"largely taken in charge by the community"* (p.540) so that women as mothers would be free to pursue a career. Such actions are necessary for women to transcend their bodies (reproductive capacities) and achieve freedom, autonomy and full human rational consciousness.

Thus de Beauvoir concludes that women's liberation can only be possible if women seek to transcend the limits of their maternal essence as located in their biology to become full social beings equal to men. However, in the concluding chapter of her book what de Beauvoir presents is also an existentialist strand to her solution that takes a very different direction, indeed it has nothing to do with overcoming the physical limits of female reproduction:

> *"The quarrel [between men and women] will go on as long as men and women fail to recognize each other as equals; that is to say, as long as femininity is perpetuated as such"* (p.727-728).

And further that men and women must both recognise each other as subjects then
> *"each will remain for the Other an 'Other'"* (p.740).
and

> *"when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, then the 'division' of*
> *humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find*
> *its true form ….To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary for one thing,*
> *that by and through their natural differentiation men and women*
> *unequivocally affirm their full subjectivity*" (p.741).

De Beauvoir's solution to gender difference and the inequality between men and women lies in overcoming the physiological limitations of the female body and the social roles that stem from these through external social solutions. She however, also argues for women to transcend their bodies (in the Hegelian notion of transcendence) and thereby experience their full humanity by making choices and living authentically through reflection on their circumstances and experiences (Marshall 1994). This transcendence requires that women individually and through their own autonomous agency abandon their status of 'Other' and through their own subjectivity assume the status of 'One' in relation to the 'Other' status which men should assume. Both men and women should alternate the status of 'One' and 'Other' for both men and women to attain full subjectivity and recognise each other as equal.

There are several problems with both the assumptions and the logic of de Beauvoir's analysis that require reflection. De Beauvoir's (1972) theorising of gender difference in *The Second Sex* displays an ambiguity between the biological and social determinations of gender. While she describes at length how society and history have negatively conceived of womanhood she also provides a detailed account of how the female body and its capacities are a handicap. For the later analysis she draws on an existentialist phenomenological approach to explain the embodied existence and lived experience of women.

Some critiques argue that de Beauvoir conceives of males as the category 'One' who is the subject, the universal, human, superior and the norm while female is conceived of as the 'Other' who is inferior, biologically handicapped and lacking. De Beauvoir proposes that men and women will only be equal and have full subjectivity if they

mutually recognise each other as subjects where men and women reciprocate One/Other statuses. Hekman (1999:4-5) questions whether this alternation would work by pointing out that there would be little incentive for men to assume the status of 'Other' as de Beauvoir paints only a negative picture of 'Otherness.' Hekman adds that women would have to deny her feminine qualities and embrace masculine qualities. Hekman (1999:4-5) argues that the difficulties with realising these solutions are related to the notion that de Beauvoir's category of 'One' is inherently masculine and the 'Other' is inherently feminine. She also proposes that only by erasing reproductive maternal differences will men and women be equal. Hekman (1999:11) argues that this solution to gender inequality leads to a contradiction in de Beauvoirs subjectivity argument and points out that if there were no longer difference then how would subjectivity be defined.

De Beauvoir also proposes that the act of transcending women's biological limitation requires the application of technology for example contraception and social reorganisation such as collective child care as well as an individual existentialist act of transcendence. Her recourse to technology to regulate and control reproduction to eliminate the effects of women's biology is also questionable. Technology, itself, is a product of, and mediates, social relations affecting individual choice and agency. Having argued that cultural processes are responsible for the negative conceptualisation of women, what she proposes, calling on women to individually transcend their bodies as an act of will, is an acultural individual subjective solution.

Within this existential logic, women, as individuals, have the agency to transcend their bodies and to freely make choices as individuals because it is as individuals that they experience themselves and their situation. This view presupposes an autonomous acting subject which was the dominant conception of humans during modernity. This position implies that the limits of a generalised 'incapacitated' physiology or indeed of structural relations like class, colour or power have no bearing on individual actions, choices or consciousness.

She also fails to problematise the relationship between men's bodies and their bodies' relation to their social capacity. On what grounds does she claim that men alone are conceived of as positive, the 'One' and the norm for society in general? Do men's bodies *ipso facto* make men active, fully human subjects at all times in all societies? And if the logic of her argument were to be realised, and maternity and the female body overcome, what about male subjectivity? Would men want to become the 'Other'? De Beauvoir's analysis of gender is informed by the modernist tradition of her times where the dominant pattern of Western thought was a dualist epistemology which was both gendered and hierarchical (Hekman 1999:6). Several feminist writers criticise her modernist Western conception of women as 'Other' as devalued (Mohanty 1984/1987, Amadiume 1987/1997, Sudarskasa 1987, Oweyumi 1997/2000 and Butler 1990/1991). African feminists like Oweyumi (1997/2000) and Amaiume (1987/1997) have characterised her conceptions of women as ethnocentric and phallocentric.

Using the base of this understanding of de Beauvoir's intellectual claims and their limitations it is now possible to turn to Shulamith Firestone, who argued that de Beauvoir's work represented the first attempt to ground feminism in its historical base (Firestone 1970:7). However, Firestone claimed that the weakness of de Beauvoir's analysis lay in her existentialist interpretation of feminism which Firestone argues is a cultural interpretation which like all cultural systems, are determined by sex dualism. She explains that de Beauvoir bases her explanation on difference by using the Hegelian concept of 'Otherness' yet documents at length the historical and biological conditions that have pushed women into this category. Firestone (1970:8) therefore posits that the dualism; *a priori* categories of 'Otherness' and 'One' sprang from sex itself. She proceeded to take de Beauvoir's essentialising contention that women were defined by their biological capacity to bear and raise children to radical conclusions.

2.2. Shulamith Firestone

Shulamith Firestone (1970) sets out her understanding of gender inequality in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution.* For her, sexual difference is embodied in the role of women in childbearing, specifically in maternity, which she considers to be at the root of female oppression in a system of sex-class.

Firestone argues that the weakness of de Beauvoir's analysis of gender was that her primary frame of analysis was existentialism which explained concrete historical developments using *a priori* categories of thought (Firestone 1970:6). She points out that within this framework of analysis de Beauvoir chooses to employ the Hegelian concept of 'Otherness' to explain gender difference (Firestone 1970:6). However, Firestone argues that de Beauvoir's existentialism and in fact all cultural systems are themselves determined by the sex dualism (Firestone 1970:7). In light of this observation Firestone uses an historical materialist analytic approach to explain gender difference. She explains that this approach was developed by Karl Marx (1967) and Frederich Engels (1932) to explain class antagonisms in capitalist society. Historical materialism links the development of economic classes to organic historical conditions and thereby provides a material base for causation (Firestone 1970:3-4). In other words, economic classes arise out of material conditions in particular historical contexts that create the conditions for action and therefore change. The ultimate aim of Marx and Engel's approaches was to provide an understanding of the world that allows it to be transformed. Firestone explains that Marx's historical materialism attempted to explain 'knowing' by 'being' as opposed to the existentialist view which explains 'being' by 'knowing' (Firestone 1970:6).

Firestone uses these ideas from historical materialism to provide the framework and tools to uncover the historical and material bases for gender difference and oppression. However, she departs from historical materialism by locating the basis of social organisation in sexual differences between men and women rather than in class differences. For her, the relations of biological reproduction rather than economic production are the constitutive base of society. She argues that biology itself, and specifically procreation, is the origin of dualism (1970:8). She writes,

"Unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equally privileged".

Firestone argues that in order to understand inequality in society it is necessary to include what she calls the biological division of the sexes for the purposes of sex class reproduction. Paraphrasing Engels' (1932) definition of historical materialism in *Socialism: Utopian or Scientific* she presents *"a materialist view of history based on sex itself"* (p.5):

"Historical materialism is that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause of the great moving power of all historic events in the dialectic of sex: the division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction, and the struggles of these classes with one another; in the changes in the modes of marriage, reproduction and childcare; in the related development of other physically-differentiated classes[castes]; and in the first division of labor based on sex which developed into the [economic]class system (p.13).

Thus, the materialism of her analysis is her identification of sex differences as the material, real objective basis (cause) for gender oppression. The historical aspect of her analysis is her claim that the sexual division of labour is the single ultimate driving force which accounts for all other divisions and developments in society.

For Firestone the essence of men and women and gender difference lies in their functional reproductive capacities:

"The heart of women's oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it; what they become as adults and the sorts of relationships they are able to form determines the society they will ultimately build" (p. 81).

She goes further to contend that *"Pregnancy is barbaric"*, temporarily deforming the body of the individual (women) for the sake of the species and that women do 'damage' to their children in their childrearing practices (p.226).

Firestone's argument is that both the source of difference between men and women and the source of women's oppression is women's biological capacity to reproduce, a natural physiological difference. Women's essence is thus located in their reproductive and childrearing capacity, which defines them. It is this sex based biological difference which gives rise to an unequal division of labour in society that in turn leads to the dominance of men over women (patriarchy). In other words, this is the base that determines the superstructure in society.

Following the logic of this argument, Firestone contends that the *"sexual imbalance of power is biologically based"* and that the basic reproductive unit of male/female/infant has dictated a form of social organisation called the biological family. She identifies key characteristics that she believes are fundamental to this unit even across varying forms of social organisation:

- *That women throughout history, before the advent of birth control were at the continual mercy of their biology – menstruation, menopause, and "female ills", painful childbirth, wetnursing and care of infants, all of which made them dependent on males (whether brother, father, husband, lover, or clan, government, community-at-large) for physical survival.*

- *That human infants take an even longer time to grow up than animals, thus are helpless and for a short period at least, dependent on adults for physical survival.*

- *That the basic mother/child interdependency has existed in some form in every society, past or present, and thus shaped the psychology of every mature female and every infant.*

- *That the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labour based on sex, which is at the origin of all further division into economic and cultural classes and is possibly even at the root of all caste (discrimination based on sex and other biologically determined characteristics such as race, age, etc.)* (Firestone 1970:8-9).

Firestone holds that these imputed biological features of the family have necessitated certain social relationships for the survival of women and children, where women depend on men and infants on adults, primarily women for their physical survival. Although she recognises that social institutions interact with biological factors to reinforce male dominance, the ultimate source of difference is women's biology.

The consequence of women's biological essence is to be found in their behaviour and role in society. Arguing that childbirth and childrearing are seen to be physically constraining of women's full and equal participation in the family and society, Firestone writes:

> *"Nature produced the fundamental inequality – half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them – which was later consolidated, institutionalised, in the interests of men. Reproduction of the species cost women dearly, not only emotionally, psychologically, culturally but even in strictly material (physical) terms: before recent methods of contraception, continuous childbirth led to constant "female trouble", early aging and death. Women were the slave class that maintained the species in order to free the other half for the business of the world – admittedly often its drudge aspects, but certainly all its creative aspects as well"* (p.232).

In this way not only are women biologically distinguished from men but they are also culturally distinguished from what it is to be 'human'. In turn, this natural division of labour leads to the production of two different psyches – in men rationalism and aggression and in women to emotionalism and passivity (p.233).

The biological family is therefore seen by Firestone as enforcing power, repression, privilege and sexual repression to the detriment of women's physical and psychological well-being. She attributes the persistence of this institution to biology, in that women are physically weaker than men as a result of their reproductive physiology and infants are physically helpless relative to adults. It is these biological relationships which necessitate certain social relationships for female and infant survival.

While Firestone locates the basis of women's subordination in the facts of human reproductive biology, she believes that biological imperatives are used by social institutions to reinforce male domination. Physiological differences, in themselves, do not directly determine masculine and feminine personalities; rather they are determined by social power. This said, she argues that social institutions like the family ultimately derive their power from the material conditions of men and women's biological structure. The characteristics of men and women are generated by the patriarchal family which rests on the pre-given biological attributes of men, women and children. In this way the anatomy of women determines their destiny. However, she does argue that we are no longer animals and that nature can be transformed:

> *"(T)he 'natural' is not necessarily a 'human' value. Humanity has begun to outgrow nature: we can no longer justify the maintenance of a discriminatory sex class system on the grounds of its origin in Nature."* (p.10).

In the final chapter in her book Firestone proposes four structural imperatives necessary to erode the functions of the family, which is primarily organised around reproductive differences between men and women, and is the essential source of gender difference and oppression. Firestone's solutions to gender difference and oppression pre-date much of the current developments in reproductive technology and in many instances are projections of a possible future for women. Construed within the optimism and promise of modernity where individuals make rational and enlightened choices in a context of growth, progress and development, she believes that technological developments will offer humans the potential for advancement.

Her logic of an essential physiology that predetermines sociological differences leads Firestone to argue that the development of the option of artificial reproduction to replace natural childbirth and modern technology to aid human labour has created the necessary preconditions for her first demand for an alternative society:

> *" The freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by*
> *every means available, and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing*
> *role to the whole of society as a whole, men as well as women"* (p.233*).*

She argues that biology will be conquered through reliable contraceptive technology
and extra-uterine gestation, popularly known as test tube babies. In this way artificial
reproduction can be expected to transform procreation, rendering genital distinctions
between the sexes culturally irrelevant. Firestone sees that the freeing of women
from their biology would in turn transform social institutions "*that is organised*
around biological reproduction and the subjection of women to their biological
destiny, the family" (p. 234). Like de Beauvoir, she turns to technology as a solution
to erase gender difference – human made technical answers – as if these, in
themselves, exist outside of social relations.

At the same time, Firestone (1970:11) is aware that by eliminating the biological
basis of women's oppression by using reproductive technology that women and
children might not be free, and that it may well have an opposite effect.
> "*Though the sex class system may have originated in fundamental biological*
> *conditions, this does not guarantee once the biological basis of their*
> *oppression has been swept away that women and children will be freed. On*
> *the contrary, the new technology, especially fertility control, may be used*
> *against them to reinforce the entrenched system of exploitation.*"

This insight leads her to argue for an underclass, female revolution:
> "*to assure the elimination of the sexual classes requires the revolt of the*
> *underclass (women) and the seizure of control of reproduction: the restoration to*
> *women of ownership of their bodies; as well as feminine control of human*
> *fertility, including both the new technology and all the social institutions of*
> *childbearing and childrearing"*(Firestone 1970:11).

Her second demand proposes a further destabilisation of the family, but this time of
its function as an economic unit that subjugated women. She therefore called for

"The full self-determination, including economic independence, of both women and children" (Firestone 1970:11). However, she argues that their proper integration will only be secured if there is a fundamental change in the social and economic structure, thus arguing for a feminist socialism. Firestone argues that under capitalism women's integration into the labour force can only exist at the level of tokenism, as she points out that women have increasingly been integrated into the capitalist labour force but only as useful and cheap paid labour and as unpaid labour in households supporting the economic functioning of society.

Even though Firestone claims that by attacking the biological reproductive basis and economic basis of the organisation of the family, it would be destroyed – she called for a third demand to further eliminate it. Firestone demands *"The total integration of women and children into all aspects of larger society"* (p.236). She however, restates that these three demands could only be realised in the context of a feminist revolution which was based on advanced technology.

Lastly she demands "*The freedom of all women and children to do whatever they wish to do sexually"* (p.236). She argued that she called for this demand in the context of her contention that the full sexuality of women was restricted to reproductive purposes by religious and cultural institutions, where she saw that the sexual freedom of women would question the fatherhood of children and threaten patrimony.

2.3. Biological essentialism: understanding the limits of the theory

De Beauvoir and Firestone present very similar variants of biological essentialism. Both portray maternity as a negative experience for women with negative long lasting social consequences. They locate women's oppression in their reproductive capacities; the only material basis which impacts negatively on women's lives and experiences. The female body and its functions, menstruation, pregnancy, maternity and lactation are seen to place limits on women's capacity for equality and

transcendence in society. They both also allude to social factors which use biological differences to subjugate women. For de Beauvoir it is culture and history's definition of women as 'Other' and for Firestone it is the institution of the family. The social and historical context of the female body is also seen as influencing how it is conceived. However, both emphasise biological constraints which both believe can only be overcome by technology.

They both believe that reproductive technology could help women regulate and control their biology in so far as the female body is viewed as an impediment to intellectual and cultural achievement. Women's social, economic and political participation, indeed equality itself, is technology dependent. Male bodies are not seen as inadequate but rather are seen by them as the standard for humanity and superior consciousness. The individual body and technology are abstracted from social relations. The body sets the parameters for women's subjectivity. The views of de Beauvoir and Firestone preclude the possibility of there being any interrelationship between individuals, their biology and social structures and relationships

Firestone's approach can be seen as falling within a biosocial perspective; namely, that the objective and observable 'real' distinctions between males and female are rooted in human physiology, anatomy and/or genetics (Wharton 2005:22). Women's reproductive biology is conceived of as the 'real essence'. The underlying substratum from which gender distinctions, 'nominal' essences emerge are constructed between men and women in society. A unidirectional relationship is assumed between biological/sex differences and individual behaviour; where biology acts as the determinant of subjectivity and agency.

Epistemologically Firestone's materialist explanation fits into a positivist view of human behaviour which argues that knowledge of human behaviour can be objectively acquired (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000:6). Sex/biology is seen by Firestone as being an objective, material and identifiable real distinction between men and women, a difference which is rooted in human physiology and anatomy.

These sex distinctions act as the 'raw material from which gender is constructed' and are held to be powerful organisers of human capabilities and behaviour. Thus gender difference is rooted in a real objective reality located in women's essential sexual difference which imposes itself on and structures the social relations between men and women. It is this material biological difference in itself and the social relations of power and domination within the family that acts to constrain women's agency in the world.

In other words, the cause of difference lies in human biology, or at least in those aspects that define apparent physiological difference. Barrett (1980:12) argues that these types of explanations do not account for 'why' or 'how' men acquire control of women's bodies. She argues that this type of analysis is a form of biologism which philosophically tends towards reductionism, because it reduces complex social and historical phenomena to one causal category – namely, biology. Such reductionism is problematic for several reasons. For Connell (1991:78) it makes biology the determinant of practice instead of seeing practice as being socially determined. For Birke (1986:7), because this argument is dependent on isolating a causal factor which is explained as a prior cause to an event, observed events are accounted for by arguing backwards from the event. The complexity of social processes is reduced to one essential component from which everything else emanates.

Jagger (1983:112) argues that Firestone fails to see how women's biology is also determined by their subordination. This failure is somewhat paradoxical given Firestone's claim to presenting a dialectical materialist analysis of sex (reproduction), without pointing to the structural, systemic or even subjective contradictions that, as Therborn (2007:76) notes are intrinsic to a Marxian analysis of modernity.

A biological view of difference also implies that social arrangements are 'natural' and therefore fixed and immutable. Walby (1990:16) argues that the main problem with 'natural' conceptions of gender is that they embody ahistorical and trans-cultural notions and utilise a simple base-superstructure model of causal relations.

This problem in turn, limits the theory's ability to account for variation and change. Alsop et al (2002:297) argue that feminists who have a naturalistic conception of the body view it as fixed and given and a constraint to the possibility of action. Rather, they suggest, it is not the body that prevents action but rather that action is prevented by the meaning and significance that is attached to the body by society. As Grosz (1994:19) puts it, bodies are not inert, passive, non-cultural and ahistorical but, in fact, are a site of contestation in varied economic, political and sexual struggles. Bodies exist as racial and classed bodies as well.

Biological determinism as argued for by Firestone (and de Beauvoir) presents a specific, scientistic model to explain or justify the existence of social hierarchy and social inequality (Lowe 1982:108). It is a particular way of viewing the causes of social structures, where observed social differences are accounted for in the biological nature of humans. This kind of theorising also tends to generalise and homogenise the experiences of all women.

Firestone has also been criticised for universalising the position of women across time and place. Barrett (1980) and others (Segal 1987; Rowbotham 1981) have argued that in construing all men as exploiters of all women, radical feminists imply that the categories men and women can only be biological. Connell (1991:55) holds a similar view and argues that where men and women are treated as general categories and the relation between the two is of direct domination, this can only be biological explanations. As Scott (1988:34) argues, physical difference conceptualised in this way takes on a universal and unchanging character which is problematic because it rests on a single variable of physical difference outside of the historical context. It attributes a consistent, inherent and universal meaning to the human body outside of the social or cultural experience and therefore cannot take account of the fact that, for example, menstruation, childbirth or breastfeeding practices differ across time and place and are influenced by social and technological changes that alter social relations.

Subjectively, Gordon (cited in Gimenez 1983:297) suggests that in spite of the problematic aspects of reproduction, at least some women regard it as a creative and rewarding experience that provides them with a source of meaning and comfort that compensates for the alienating features of work. Rich (1977), a radical feminist, goes further to argue that rather than being burdensome and dehumanising, motherhood and bearing children are a source of joy to women and contends that the problem for women is patriarchy rather than bearing and rearing children.

By reducing the differences between men and women to their reproductive functionality, Firestone reifies relations of sex, placing them outside of the plural and multifaceted human interactions that constitute society. Firestone's recourse to technology to regulate and control reproduction in order to eliminate the constraining effects of women's biology is also questionable. Inherent in her solution is the belief that biology predetermines social differences and it is therefore biology that needs to be altered through technology. But technology, itself, is a product of and mediates social relations affecting individual choice and agency (Walby 1990:66; Rose and Hanmer 1976).

Thus although the availability of reproductive technology has the potential to modify reproductive behaviour, it is not sufficient in itself to trigger drastic changes in reproductive patterns for invariably non-technological, that is social, reasons. Gimenez (1983:292) argues that Firestone overestimates the power of technology to give women control over their reproductive lives and underestimates the power of social and psychological factors in influencing women's behaviour, the structural basis of sexism. She further argues that individual decisions always have social content. Gordon (cited in Giminez 1983:296) argues that reproductive freedom is an important dimension of human freedom but is similarly affected by all other institutions which act to curtail that freedom. She argues that reproduction affects women differently; specifically creating more difficulty for women who, whether employed outside the home or not, have sole responsibility for children.

Lastly there is the question of Firestone's solutions to gender oppression. In an age of cloning, genetic engineering and significant family restructuring, her ideas that sexual reproductive differences or the biological family can be eradicated and that together, they will end gender oppression are scenarios that may sound plausible to the contemporary ear. But, like her other contentions, they need to be tested empirically to see what truth, if any, they have in specific contexts, times and places. I now turn to this task of empirically exploring and testing the theory.

Chapter 3

Framing gender through the prism of biology: the empirical evidence

3.1. Introduction

While the theoretical limitations of biological essentialism as articulated by de Beauvoir and Firestone are apparent, it is equally, if not more important to consider the usefulness of their arguments by "testing" their claims empirically. More specifically I want to examine Firestone's hopes for women's use of reproductive technology and alternative family formations. Using contemporary South African data I propose to look at women's reproductive behaviour in the form of fertility and contraceptive use, in the context of the household structures in which they live and their economic circumstances. For this purpose I draw on the South African Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS) 1998, a national survey of a statistically representative sample of women in South Africa, that is conducted every 5 years by the Department of Health (1998). The SADHS was developed in response to the changed health policy environment brought about by democratic transition. For my purposes here I will use data from the first SADHS that was conducted in 1998[2].

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[2] A second survey was conducted in 2003 but, at the time of writing, only the preliminary report of the SADHS 2003 was available.

Contemporary South African health policies that deal with reproductive health focus on the provision of adequate reproductive information and facilities to empower women, and to a lesser extent men, to make informed choices about sexual relations, pregnancy and childbearing (Department of Health 1998:3). In 1994, the Department of Health (DOH) adopted Primary Health Care as its core philosophical and structural approach to health care (Cooper et al 2004:72), emphasising human rights, equitable and expanded access, decentralisation of services and preventive health care provision. The introduction of free primary-level health services for women and children under the age of six within this strategy is a key intervention designed to redress the past neglect of the health needs of poor black women.

Cooper et al (2004:72) point out that several laws, policies and programmes addressing gender inequality were introduced in South Africa from 1994 onwards. Of particular importance is The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act (Act 92 of 1996), the Sterilisation Act (Act 44 of 1998) and the creation of a directorate of Mother, Child and Women's Health in the Department of Health in 1995 – all of which aim to increase women's access to appropriate health services, ensure health services increase gender equality and by providing services to men and women to achieve optimal reproductive and sexual health (Cooper 2004:73). National reproductive health policy reform has also been influenced by international developments; (the International Conference on Population Development (ICPD) in 1994 in Cairo and the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995) where women globally have drawn links between women's reproductive health, women's rights and general socio-economic development which in turn has given rise to a call for a broader definition of reproductive health (Cooper 2004:71).

This context gave rise to the Department of Health (DOH) undertaking the South African Demographic and Health Survey (DOH 1998:4). Its purpose is to provide up-to-date information for the National Health Information System on several key areas of relevance to policy makers and health practitioners, namely:

- basic demographic details, particularly fertility rates and childhood mortality levels,

- awareness and use of contraceptive methods,
- breastfeeding practices,
- maternal and child health indicators,
- awareness of HIV/AIDS,
- chronic health conditions among adults,
- lifestyles that affect the health status of adults, and
- anthropometric indicators.

In 1998 the survey comprised three questionnaires: a Household Questionnaire, an Adult Health Questionnaire and a Women's Questionnaire. A total of 12,247 households were interviewed throughout the country, in which 11,735 women (95% of those were identified as eligible to respond[3]) completed the Women's Questionnaire. I have used the data from the last mentioned questionnaire because of its focus on women's background characteristics such as age, education, race, pregnancy history, knowledge and use of contraceptive methods, antenatal and delivery care, breastfeeding and weaning practices, child health and immunisation, marriage and recent sexual activity, fertility preferences, violence against women, knowledge of HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality, husband's background and the nature of the respondent's work. Together, the findings on these issues, speak to the ideas articulated by Firestone.

3.2. The sociology of fertility and women's contraceptive use

In this section I will specifically examine Firestone's arguments on the promise of reproductive technology to free women from the constraints of their reproductive biology against the realities of women's fertility rates and contraceptive behaviour in contemporary South Africa as reported in the SADHS 1998.

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[3] An age criterion (being 15-49) was set for women's inclusion in the Women's Questionnaire

3.2.1. Fertility levels and trends

Fertility rates are an observable aspect of women's reproductive behaviour and an observable indicator of the relationship they have to their reproductive propensity and the controls which they can exert over their bodies. Sociologically, it is possible to explain this relationship in terms of women's individual desires and the structural and institutional context that influences their relation to their bodies. Firestone (1970:8) argues that "*women throughout history before the advent of birth control were at the continual mercy of their biology*". Constant painful childbirth was cited as an affliction and one of the conditions which made women dependent on males for physical survival. However, she argued that contraception and reproductive technology such as modern embryology and artificial reproduction would allow women to control and free themselves from their reproductive biology capacities which, in turn, would free them from the reproductive imperatives of their bodies. What might the data say about the strength and breadth of her contention?

The Total Fertility Rates (TFR) is the number of births the average woman would have had by the end of her childbearing years if she followed age specific fertility rates. Fertility indicators in the SADHS study were obtained from answers provided by women about their reproductive histories. The SADHS data (DOH 1998:33), reporting on fertility for the three year period prior to the survey, shows a TFR of 2.9. This figure is lower than the 3.3 TFR reported in the 1996 Population Census data (Central Statistical Services 1998), suggesting that in contemporary South African society women are having fewer children.

However, the survey also finds that this decline in fertility rates is not the same for all women in South Africa. Women's social, economic and cultural location also influences their reproductive behaviour. Whether they bear children or not, the number of children they have and the intervals between their births are all influenced by both socio-economic as well as subjective factors.

This finding suggests that the place of bio-physical reproductive capacity in women's oppression is not driven by any iron law of biology, but rather is also significantly influenced by several non-biological factors. As the SADHS shows, women's actual fertility is influenced by their residence, age, race and education levels as well as being influenced by social and economic opportunities.

Table 1 shows that child bearing practices are significantly influenced by locality, where urban women have fewer children (TFR 2.3) than their rural counterparts (TFR 3.9). And this lower rate of child birth is evident across all ages, even though child bearing peaks at the same age (20-34 years) in both urban and rural South Africa.

Table 1: Current fertility rates

Age-specific and cumulative fertility rates and the crude birth rate for the three years preceding the survey, by urban-non-urban residence, South Africa 1998

Age group	Urban	Non-urban	Total
15-19	56	99	76
20-24	113	178	139
25-29	123	174	143
30-34	88	149	109
35-39	53	111	74
40-44	18	50	29
45-49	1	24	9
TFR women 15-49	2.25	3.92	2.90
TFR women 15-44	2.25	3.80	2.85
General fertility rate	79	133	100
Crude birth rate	19.2	25.4	21.9

Note: Rates are for the period 1-36 months preceding the survey. Rates for age group 45-49 may be slightly biased due to truncation. Total fertility rate expressed per woman. General fertility rate (births divided by number of women 15-49), expressed per 1,000 women. Crude birth rate expressed per 1,000 population.

Source: (DOH 1998: 33)

Equally, there is a linear association between education and fertility rates. The survey shows a clear decline in fertility as the level of women's education increases. Thus, whereas the TFR for women without education is 4.5 that for women with completed secondary education drops to 2.2 falling even further to 1.9 for women with higher education. O'Gara and Robey (1998:181) argue that women's level of education marks not only their status in society but also their social and economic standing in the home. Educated women have more power in the home, more control over their own and their husbands' income and more control over their reproductive choices and, it would seem, are able to better negotiate their standing with spouses. Similarly, there are racial differences in child bearing practices, with African women having a total fertility rate of 3.1 compared to 1.9 for white women. However, locality remains the single largest differential; with African rural women have a TFR of 4.0 compared to a TFR of 2.4 for their urban African counterparts and 1.9 for urban white women. Given these variations in women's childbearing rates, the evidence suggests that social inequalities rather than biology determine the childbearing practices. Studies on fertility rates from most other countries show that the key factors known to influence lower fertility rates in urban areas compared to rural settings are greater contraceptive use, a higher age of marriage and the greater availability of abortion. (O'Gara and Robey 1998:181). In addition, urban women are more likely to have greater access to education, information and jobs in the economy and this increases their ability to make informed choices about their reproductive health. This said, in South Africa, the SADHS findings show that there are substantial and growing numbers of urban and rural women who are able to control their biology by using contraceptives in the way envisaged by de Beauvoir and Firestone.

However, differences in residential location also influence the age at first birth, as Table 2 below shows.

Table 2: Median age at first birth by background characteristics

Median age at first birth among women 25-49, by current age and selected background
characteristics, South Africa 1998

Background characteristic	Current age					Women age 25-49
	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
Residence						
Urban	21.9	20.9	21.2	21.3	21.0	21.3
Non-urban	20.0	19.5	20.0	20.6	21.0	20.1
Province						
Western Cape	23.4	21.4	21.9	21.2	21.9	21.8
Eastern Cape	20.8	20.5	20.9	21.5	21.9	21.1
Northern Cape	20.7	20.5	20.8	21.9	20.0	20.8
Free State	21.0	20.1	20.5	21.4	20.6	20.7
KwaZulu-Natal	20.6	20.5	20.7	21.1	22.2	20.9
North West	20.8	20.1	21.3	20.9	19.7	20.7
Gauteng	21.7	20.2	21.3	21.0	20.6	21.0
Mpumalanga	19.7	19.0	20.0	19.3	19.2	19.5
Northern	19.6	19.2	19.3	20.2	20.8	19.7
Education						
No education	19.5	18.6	19.8	20.3	20.3	19.8
Sub A - Std 3	19.5	18.9	19.8	20.2	20.8	19.8
Std 4 - Std 5	19.0	19.3	19.9	20.2	20.0	19.7
Std 6 - Std 9	20.5	20.1	20.5	20.9	20.6	20.5
Std 10	23.2	22.1	22.6	23.2	24.2	22.7
Higher	a	25.8	24.5	24.9	24.8	24.9
Population group						
African	20.6	19.8	20.3	20.6	20.5	20.3
Afr. urban	21.2	20.1	20.6	20.8	19.9	20.6
Afr. non-urban	19.9	19.4	19.9	20.5	21.1	20.0
Coloured	22.0	21.0	21.5	20.8	20.5	21.2
White	24.4	24.7	24.0	23.5	22.8	23.8
Asian	24.2	21.7	20.9	22.2	22.6	22.3
Total	20.9	20.2	20.7	21.0	21.0	20.8

Note: The medians for cohorts 15-19 and 20-24 could not be determined because half of the women
had not had a birth before reaching the lowest age of the age group.
a = Omitted because less than 50 percent in the age group had given birth by age 20

Source: (DOH 1998:42)

The median age for first birth is higher for women in urban areas than rural areas
(p.42). Age and education levels act in association with one another to influence
women's fertility; with the age of first birth increasing with the level of education.
There is a five year differential on average between women without a formal
education who have their first birth at around age 19,8 years, compared to 24.9 years
for women with higher education.

Even the data on teenage pregnancy reflects social rather than biological influences on young women's reproductive behaviours. The rate of teen pregnancy is high in South Africa with 35 percent of all teenagers being pregnant or having a baby by the age of 19 years (DOH 1998). However, as with adult fertility the data shows considerable variation in adolescent fertility by region, education and population group. Rural adolescents tend to start childbearing earlier than urban adolescents (21 percent compared to 13 percent of teenage childbearing). And there are racial differences, with teenage pregnancies greatest among coloured girls (19 percent) and African girls (18 percent) compared to Asian (4 percent) or white (2 percent). The data also shows that there is a strong negative association between education and teenage pregnancy.

That women's reproductive biology may limit their access to the public social sphere, as Firestone (1970) argued, is perhaps not in dispute. However, what this data on South Africa suggests is that socio- economic factors rather than biology determine the extent to which such access is constrained or leveraged. Not all women are able to control their fertility in the same way and that regulation of their fertility is not solely dependent on the provision and availability of reproductive technology. This is the case even given the existence of women-controlled contraception (the pill or injection versus the condom). The SADHS data show that fertility rates have dropped, however, the extent and contours of this change is determined by social factors such as education, physical location and age.

SADHS data on fertility also show that even when women do control their reproduction, other divisions in society continue to persist and influence women's lives and circumstances. This in turn puts paid to the notion that women's oppression can be resolved simply by fertility regulating technologies. Several known direct and indirect influences on fertility have been identified in other studies (O'Gara and Robey 1998). Direct influences include the use of contraceptives, women's age of first marriage, breastfeeding and lactational amenorrhea or sexual abstinence following childbirth and induced abortion (O'Gara and Robey, 1998:178). Underlying social, cultural, political and economic factors also influence fertility

indirectly through one or more of the direct determinants. As in South Africa, these include education levels, place of residence, access to information and socio-economic status. And even though contraceptive use is identified as the strongest direct determinant of fertility (O'Gara and Robey, 1998: 183), its effect is influenced by indirect social, political, economic and cultural factors as well as subjective desire, as the next section will show.

3.2.2. Contraceptive use

The data on contraceptive use in the SADHS study (DOH 1998) is presented for all women (11735), currently married women (5077) and all sexually active women (2074). The study looks at the interface between technology, social structural and institutional factors and individual agency, and approach that is embedded in the questions asked. The SADHS findings show that contraception is being widely used by women (61%) and does offer women partial respite from the exigencies of their reproductive biology. However, the uptake of and the types of contraceptives used is conditional on women's social context, making the promise of technological control over childbirth a goal that has still to be attained.

Historically in South Africa, apartheid created social divisions between people according to a system of racial classification through which the state distributed access to goods, services and welfare unevenly. Although under the new democratic order, the government has attempted to redress these imbalances the past has left a racially patterned legacy of provision and access to health care where geographical location still affects the quality and access to social services provided by the state. The legacy of apartheid skewed the provision and distribution of these services resulting in rural areas, with a mainly African population, being more disadvantaged than urban areas and other population groups.

Given that the majority of women use public health care facilities, the methods of contraception provided in state health institutions plays an important role in defining whether the use of contraceptive methods is controlled by women or health

providers. The SADHS (DOH 1998) data on the source of supply of modern contraceptive methods used by women show how gender inequality is socially constructed through institutions. Table 3 below shows that the majority of women using contraception (84 percent) obtain their contraceptives from the public sector. Government hospitals are the most common public source (38 percent) for obtaining contraceptives, which is followed by day hospitals/clinics (20 percent) and family planning clinics (20 percent). Only a handful (6%) access contraception through mobile clinics and a very small number of women do so from community health workers which might refer to a community based distribution pilot project available at limited sites in six provinces.

Table 3: Source of contraceptive method

Percent distribution of current users of modern contraceptive methods by most recent source of supply, according to specific methods, South Africa 1998

Source of supply	Pill	IUD	Inject-ables	Con-dom	Female sterili-sation	Male sterili-sation	All modern methods
Public	73.2	53.1	93.0	77.1	76.4	30.9	83.6
Government hospital	24.1	22.1	32.9	26.1	72.0	26.9	37.5
Day hospital/clinic	18.2	10.0	27.3	17.1	4.3	4.0	20.3
Family planning clinic	24.9	19.3	24.2	26.3	0.2	0.0	19.6
Mobile clinic	5.9	1.7	8.5	7.0	0.0	0.0	6.1
Community health worker	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Other public	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Private medical	24.8	46.3	6.3	7.4	22.2	48.1	14.4
Private hospital/clinic	1.4	5.9	0.6	0.0	21.4	47.1	5.4
Pharmacy	7.3	0.8	0.5	7.4	0.0	0.0	2.0
Private doctor/gynecologist	16.1	37.9	5.1	0.0	0.8	1.0	7.0
Other private	0.0	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other private	1.5	0.0	0.2	13.3	0.0	0.0	0.9
Shop	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.2	0.0	0.0	0.2
Friend/relative	0.2	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.1
Other	1.3	0.0	0.2	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.6
Missing	0.5	0.7	0.5	2.2	1.4	20.9	1.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	1,096	143	3,199	224	1,020	108	5,790

Source: (DOH 1998:56)

Fourteen percent of women get their contraceptives from the private sector, half doing so from their doctors or gynaecologists, while the remainder use a private hospital (5%) or pharmacy (2%).

Although only 14 in a 100 women use the private sector to access contraception, this sector provides for almost half (46 percent) of IUD users and a quarter of pill users (25 percent). Half of all male sterilisations (48 percent) are also performed in the private sector. By contrast the public sector supplies (73 percent) of pill users, almost all (93 percent) injectable users, just over half (53 percent) of IUD users and over three quarters (77 percent) of condom users.

Most women in the SADHS are therefore dependent on state provision of contraception and thus rely on the state to be able to control their reproductive capacities. Therefore their use of contraceptives is influenced by the kinds of reproductive technology provided by the state health provider.

As Firestone (1970:11) contends, sweeping away the biological basis of women's oppression is in itself insufficient to free women and children from their oppression. What women have to do is also seize control of the new technology and all the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing. The SADHS findings show that this has yet to happen.

Over half of all women in the SADHS are using a method of contraception with the injection (27 percent) being the most widely used method, followed by the pill and female sterilisation (9 percent each). The IUD, condom and male sterilisation are used by less than two percent of all women. Contraceptive use is higher amongst married women (56 percent) than all women and is highest (62 percent) among

women who are sexually active[4] (DOH 1998:48). Despite the high use of contraceptives the SADHS findings conclude that 10 percent of all women and 15 percent of married women reported unmet family planning needs. The greatest need is experienced by young women under 25 years and those between 45 and 49 years of age (DOH 1998: 269). Geographical location also impacts on unmet needs and is highest in rural areas. Social status also influences unmet needs and is higher among women with no formal education.

What is also evident from the findings is that the provision and use of the various types of contraceptives are differentially influenced by both institutional and structural factors. This finding means that technology itself is not neutral because it exists in, and reflects, social relations.

The male condom, the pill and injectable contraceptives are the most widely available means of fertility regulation in public health facilities. The female condom is only available on a limited basis and (at the time of the survey) at great cost in South Africa. The IUD can no longer be accessed in most government clinics, because there are not enough trained staff to fit the device. The diaphragm is also no longer available in either public or private services (DOH 1998:43).

The provision of contraceptives, in this instance including sterilisation, shows an institutional bias within the state that favours some rather than other methods. What the data suggest is that a combination of reasons, including a shortage of skills, certainty of efficacy and cost, militate against contraceptive methods that afford women more control over their fertility. Health care providers' (primary care nurses) opinions and practices do play a role in influencing contraceptive choice and use (Cooper et al 2004:74).

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[4] They were asked if they had been sexually active in the four weeks before the survey (DOH: 1998:48).

At the same time, women rather than men are the primary targets of state health providers of contraceptive information and contraceptive techniques (Das Gupta and Adetunji 1998:152). This point is evident in the SADHS findings as well with regard to the types of contraceptives provided at state institutions. The use of some contraceptives by women is practically problematic given that some techniques (the male condom and male sterilisation) require male agreement while others (female sterilisation and the pill) are often used only after women have obtained male consent. The state's primary provision of contraceptives that can only be used by women is also conceptually problematic because it essentialises women's reproductive biology and implies women's responsibility for childbearing.

There is also the influence of social context on contraceptive use. A direct consequence of the political geography of apartheid is evident in differing patterns of current contraceptive use. According to the SADHS, whereas some two-thirds (67 percent) of women in the urban areas use one or another method of contraception, only a little over half (54 percent) of women in rural (non-urban) areas do. And rural women are somewhat more likely to use injectables (33% compared to 28%). By contrast, the pill and female and male sterilisation are more common in urban areas. These differences can be explained in part by institutional practice. In part, they reflect cultural acceptability and service and skill availability as well as the way rural, African or poor women are politically constructed. This suggests that social determinants are as powerful as biological ones in shaping behaviour, which means that Firestone's (1970:14) idea of a sexual reproductive base determining an economic, juridical and political superstructure is less than accurate.

The SADHS (1998) findings also point to the race of recipients as a factor influencing the extent of contraceptive use, the type of contraception used and the choices offered women. Thus, while a large majority of white (76%) and Asian (80%) women regulate their fertility, the proportion of African and Coloured women who do so is much lower (59% and 69% respectively). In terms of methods, injectables are the most frequently used form of contraception for African women (35 percent), followed by the pill (12 percent) and female sterilisation (8 percent).

Coloured women are also high users of injectables (27 percent). By contrast, Asian women have the highest levels of use of the pill and female sterilisation (34 and 32 percent, respectively) and only a very small proportion use the injection (4 percent). The data is similar for white women where the pill and sterilisation are the most popular methods of fertility regulation (20 and 27 percent, respectively). Interestingly, male sterilisation (15 percent) in partners is highest among the partners of white women, with some incidences occurring among those of Coloured and Asian women but none are reported by African women.

Some of this difference in use and method can be accounted for by locality and education since the use of contraception is lower among less educated, rural African women when compared to their urban, more educated counterparts. Similarly these factors and specific apartheid policies also partly account for method 'preferences' – given explicit efforts to encourage sterilisation in the Coloured population and to promote injectables among Coloured and African users on the assumption that they could not be relied upon to use the pill and other self-controlled devices responsibly (Brown 1987:264).

Firestone's understanding of race is worth noting. In keeping with her quest to essentialise, she argues that (1970:122) race, like sex, is a physiological distinction which becomes important culturally due to power inequalities. Racism, she believes, is sexism extended. As an essentially sexual phenomenon, it can only be understood in terms of the power hierarchies of the family and racist power psychology. This understanding is refuted by an overwhelming body of evidence that shows that racial divisions, race thinking and racism have no biological foundation (Blaunt 1992:290). Rather they derive from structural social relations that influence social behaviour, shape technology and its uses, and construct subjective understanding. The evidence provided by the SADHS (DOH 1998) confirms the latter explanation as pertinent in South Africa. This finding is not surprising given the centuries of colonialism in this country's past, and especially the half-century of apartheid during which time high level systemic racism was institutionalised.

One possible route out of biological subjugation for women is education, since education is believed to influence women's choices in society quite significantly. The SADHS (DOH 1998:49) findings, in fact, point to education as a key influencing factor on contraceptive use. While a little over a third (35 percent) of women who have not attended school use some form of birth control, nearly four in five women (79 percent) with four years of secondary education (Standard 9) or more do so.

At the same time, the data relating to education confirm Firestone's (1970) insight into the constraining effects of women's reproductive biology on their life chances. Falling pregnant (17.2%) ranks with an inability to pay fees (17,4%) as the leading reasons for not completing primary school. As the table below (Table 4) shows, this ratio swings in favour of pregnancy until women have completed secondary education, when economic pressures and the cost of further education become the overwhelming reasons for their not continuing with their education.

Table 4: Reasons for leaving school

Percent distribution of women age 15-24 who had ever attended school by reason for leaving school, according to highest level of education completed, South Africa 1998

Reason stopped attending school	Highest level of education					
	Primary incomplete	Primary complete	Secondary incomplete	Secondary complete	Higher	Total
Currently attending	38.2	61.0	71.3	28.7	47.5	58.3
Got pregnant	17.2	12.3	10.4	5.4	2.4	9.8
Got married	4.3	3.8	2.0	1.3	0.0	2.1
Take care of children	0.9	1.8	0.8	0.7	0.2	0.8
Family need help	1.2	0.1	0.3	0.8	0.0	0.5
Could not pay school fees	17.4	8.1	4.3	20.8	5.1	8.8
Need to earn money	2.6	2.7	2.1	11.6	2.1	3.9
Graduated. enough	0.1	0.3	0.3	21.5	35.5	6.2
Did not pass exams	0.6	0.5	0.9	1.5	0.0	0.9
Did not like school	4.3	3.1	2.1	0.2	0.5	2.0
School not accessible	1.1	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.3
Other	9.4	5.7	3.3	4.5	2.6	4.3
Missing	2.7	0.7	1.9	2.6	4.2	2.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	396	349	2 503	759	264	4,271

Source: (DOH 1998:22)

The findings on teenage and scholar pregnancy also point to the way social relations constrain the promise of technology. Thus, in spite of technological know-how about controlling reproduction, a substantial minority of young women continue to have unplanned pregnancies because of external structural and institutional as well as subjective conditions. The barriers to accessing family planning services especially for young women include lack of privacy, inconvenient clinic opening times, and discouragement by clinic staff who disapprove of youth being sexually active (Cooper et al 2004:74).

What of Firestone's contention that the biological differences between women and men give rise to a dominant oppressive power psychology in men and the development of a patriarchal mentality (1970:222). The 1998 SADHS shows, as do studies elsewhere for example (O'Gara and Robey 1998), that women's fertility regulation choices are influenced by the dynamics of their interpersonal relations. Over two-thirds of married, non-sterilised women (67 percent) report that they and their husbands approve of family planning. In couples where there is no consensus between partners, in nearly all cases it is the husband who disapproves (17 percent) of family planning rather than the wife (DOH 1998:64). The fact is that where there is opposition to fertility regulation, it comes from men rather than women, irrespective of age, race and education as well as location. This finding suggests that support or opposition to fertility regulation operates as a form of patriarchy influencing women's use of technology.

At the same time the SADHS findings also show that the dissention between women and men over the use of contraception is weakest for educated, urban based women and strongest among rural women with no education. Among the latter, whereas nearly four fifths (79 %) of the women approve of family planning only 47 percent of their partners agree with them to control their fertility.

If support for or opposition to fertility regulation is a sufficient proxy for patriarchy, then clearly the data suggests that although gendered assertions over women's

reproductive capacity give rise to patriarchy, such power is tempered by place and educational (as well as social) status.

Women's relationship to their reproductive biology is also influenced by their fertility desires. Both de Beauvoir's (1972) and Firestone's (1970) negative characterisation fail to consider the importance of desire or the possibility that women derive pleasure in and from their reproductive capacity. For many women motherhood is integral to their sense of themselves as women. In this, they are influenced by societal expectations, where bearing children is closely connected to their social acceptance and status within the family as well as to the economic well being of their families. Children are a source of labour in the home or support in old age as well as being the vehicle for intergenerational perpetuation (O'Gara and Robey 1998).

The SADHS (1998) findings on women's subjective preferences reflect their sense of agency as well as on structural and institutional possibilities. The main reason women give for not using any form of contraception is their desire to have children (23.8%), a reason which is at its strongest amongst women under 30 years of age (47%), who have yet to have children or who have only one child. Table 5 gives the reasons women gave for not using contraception.

At the same time, as Table 6 shows, women also desire to discontinue childbearing, a desire that increases in strength with the number of living children. Such preferences are likely to be explained by economic and pragmatic factors, differential notions of ideal family size and, as Firestone correctly argues, because of the responsibilities of childrearing that largely befall women (1970:81).

Table 5: Reasons for not intending to use contraception

Percent distribution of currently married women who are not using a contraceptive method and who do not intend to use in the future, by main reason for not intending to use, according to age, South Africa 1998

Reason for not intending to use contraception	Age		
	<30	30-49	Total
Infrequent sex	3.7	4.5	4.4
Menopausal, hysterectomy	0.0	17.1	14.9
Subfecund, infecund	0.9	9.5	8.4
Wants more children	47.0	20.2	23.8
Respondent opposed	11.3	7.9	8.4
Husband opposed	5.9	4.7	4.9
Religious prohibition	4.5	4.1	4.2
Knows no method	0.4	1.8	1.6
Knows no source	0.0	0.7	0.7
Health concerns	17.6	17.1	17.2
Fear side effects	3.5	2.1	2.3
Inconvenient to use	0.6	0.4	0.5
Interferes with body	3.6	1.9	2.2
Other	0.2	5.8	5.0
Don't know	0.0	0.8	0.7
Missing	0.9	1.0	1.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	137	899	1,036

Source: (DOH 1998:60)

The fact that the SADHS findings also point to the influences of age, education, location and race on women's desire to reproduce suggests that social conditions and structural relations rather than biology per se shape their behaviour, desire and reproductive choice.

Table 6: Fertility preferences by number of living children

Percent distribution of currently married women by desire for more children, according to number of living children, South Africa 1998

Desire for children	Number of living children[1]							Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6+	
Have another soon[2]	57.4	33.8	13.5	8.0	5.4	1.5	0.7	15.8
Have another later[3]	13.6	26.3	13.5	10.8	6.2	4.9	2.0	12.4
Have another, undecided when	3.3	4.0	2.1	1.0	1.2	1.5	0.6	2.0
Undecided	7.2	7.2	5.1	3.7	3.2	3.7	1.4	4.6
Want no more	5.7	21.9	45.0	48.7	53.5	61.4	70.4	43.6
Sterilised	2.0	3.5	17.3	25.5	28.5	23.9	21.0	17.9
Declared infecund	10.4	2.9	1.8	1.4	0.7	1.5	3.2	2.5
Missing	0.3	0.4	1.7	0.9	1.3	1.5	0.7	1.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of women	378	818	1,349	1,021	703	394	414	5,077

[1] Includes current pregnancy
[2] Want next birth within two years
[3] Want to delay next birth for two or more years

Source: (DOH 1998:67)

This observation is not intended to dismiss the constraining or disruptive effects on women of their physiological capacity to reproduce. Evidence for this is clear in the SADHS (1998), which explores the strength and effects of fertility planning. Forty six percent of women report that their pregnancies in the five years prior to the study were wanted and on time. However, more than a third (36%) of women consider their pregnancies to be mistimed, a sentiment that is particularly widespread among teen (65.8% of <20 years old) and young adult (44% of 20-24 years old) respondents. A full 17% describe their pregnancies as unwanted with the proportion of unwanted births increasing significantly with age.

Table 7 shows the planning status for women according to birth order and mothers age at birth.

Table 7: Fertility planning status

Percent distribution of births in the three years preceding the survey (and current pregnancies) by fertility planning status, according to birth order and mother's age at birth, South Africa 1998

| Birth order and mother's age at birth | Planning status at conception | | | | | Number of births[1] |
	Wanted then	Wanted later	Not wanted	Missing	Total	
Birth order						
1	38.6	51.8	8.3	1.3	100.0	1,794
2	53.6	31.7	13.5	1.2	100.0	1,336
3	54.6	27.4	16.9	1.1	100.0	843
4+	42.1	23.5	32.5	1.9	100.0	1,430
Age at birth						
<20	20.2	65.8	12.5	1.6	100.0	900
20-24	42.9	44.2	11.7	1.2	100.0	1,410
25-29	57.4	28.4	12.9	1.3	100.0	1,279
30-34	57.2	21.5	20.2	1.1	100.0	988
35-39	49.4	14.1	35.2	1.3	100.0	612
40-44	38.9	20.4	35.4	5.3	100.0	187
45-49	37.7	19.3	43.0	0.0	100.0	28
Total	45.7	35.5	17.3	1.4	100.0	5,404

[1] Includes current pregnancies

Source: (DOH 1998: 74)

The SADHS (1998) also shows that the demand for family planning is still strong, given the reported differences between desired and actual fertility as Table 8 below shows. Actual fertility rates (2.9) are higher than preferred rates (2.3) and this is the case despite the availability and provision of contraception (Table 8).

Table 8: Wanted fertility rates

Total wanted fertility rates and total fertility rates for the three years preceding the survey, by selected background characteristics, South Africa 1998

Background characteristic	Total wanted fertility rate	Total fertility rate
Residence		
Urban	1.8	2.3
Non-urban	2.9	3.9
Province		
Western Cape	1.9	2.3
Eastern Cape	2.5	3.5
Northern Cape	2.1	2.7
Free Statet	1.8	2.2
KwaZulu-Natal	2.5	3.3
North West	1.9	2.3
Gauteng	1.9	2.4
Mpumalanga	2.4	3.1
Northern	3.0	3.9
Education		
No education	3.3	4.5
Sub A - Std 3	3.2	3.9
Std 4 - Std 5	2.6	3.5
Std 6 - Std 9	2.1	2.7
Std 10	1.9	2.2
Higher	1.7	1.9
Population group		
African	2.4	3.1
Afr. urban	1.9	2.3
Afr. non-urban	3.0	4.0
Coloured	2.1	2.5
White	1.5	1.9
Total	2.3	2.9

Note: Rates are based on births to women 15-49 in the period 1-36 months preceding the survey.

Source: (DOH 1998:75)

3.3. The sociology of women's biology: reflecting on the evidence in regard to fertility trends and contraceptive use

Health policies in South Africa seek to increase women's access to appropriate health services, ensure that health services increase gender equality and that they provide services to women and more recently, men, in order to achieve optimal reproductive and sexual health. The empirical evidence shows that fertility rates are decreasing and contraceptive use by women is widespread, albeit uneven. Women are choosing to have fewer children and they are doing so with the assistance of the reproductive regulatory technologies available to them. With greater or lesser success, they also try to use contraception to control their fertility in order to regulate the timing and spacing of their pregnancies. But they do not use it to obliterate the possibility of reproduction altogether. At the same time, the existent policy framework and the extensive availability of key methods of fertility control do not free women from their biology in and of itself. The question that needs to be asked is whether such an objective has meaning to women in any given specific society?

If, as in contemporary South African society, many women find themselves 'liberated' from the tyranny of their biological capacity to reproduce by using available technology, the degree of their liberation is constrained by socially determined structural, institutional and subjective relations. Empirically, the evidence shows that Firestone's faith in the promise of technology to end women's oppression is misplaced because both technology and oppression are socially rather than biologically determined.

Firestone misconstrues the problem because she fails to account for the human desire to reproduce. In South Africa (and most other societies) women desire to have children. As Giminez (1983:297) puts it: *"Women 'fall into motherhood' for, in spite of its problematic aspects, it is also a source of meaning and comfort that*

compensates for the alienating features of the work to which most women are relegated."

Indeed the decision to become mothers might not only be driven by social pressures but may also arise as a subjective rational act of individual choice, not least of all because child bearing and motherhood means different things to different women (Ziehl 1993:30).

Firestone is also naïve in her confidence in the inherent progressive nature of science and technology. As Ziehl (1993:33) points out, technology like most social products is neither the salvation nor the curse of women but a 'double edged sword' that solves some problems at the same time as it creates others.

Firestone argues that women's control of their biology would lead to the transformation of the institution of the family which was also necessary to free women (make them less dependent on men). What do the SADHS findings reveal about the current structure and composition of the family where women are using contraceptives and what is their economic status?

3.4. Fertility decline, contraceptive use and the family

Firestone (1970:8-9) contends that the reproduction of gender takes place under the '*tyranny of the biological family*'. Arguing that social structure is biologically determined she says that biological differences produce the biological family: a form of social organisation that has universal generalisable features. These features are that "*before the advent of birth control women were at the continual mercy of their biology*" which made them dependent on men for physical survival; that human infants also are dependent on adults for physical survival for a long time; that mother-child interdependency is universal and shapes the psychology of both mature

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women and children; and that the natural reproductive differences between the sexes is the source of all other economic and cultural divisions. Together, these basic characteristics create psychosexual distortions of the human personality.

Following on from this logic, it is possible to anticipate that women's ability to control their fertility significantly influences the core characteristics of the biological family. It is worthwhile considering empirically current family structure, the extent to which women depend on men for physical survival, the persistence or not of mother/child interdependency and the influences that the family has on women's psychology. While the SADHS (1998) is insufficient to adequately answer all these queries it does provide a part of the answer. Table 9 provides data about the composition of households.

Table 9 shows that the average household[5] at the time the survey was conducted comprised of 4.2 persons, being somewhat larger in rural (4.7) compared to urban areas (3.9). It also shows that a significant proportion of households (42 percent) are headed by women, especially in rural areas (50%). The propensity of rural families to be headed by women can be attributed historically to the migrant labour system and more recently to migrancy generated by high rates of rural poverty and unemployment. By contrast, Castells (1997) cites figures of cross county studies which include Sub-Saharan Africa to argue that the reason behind the formation of female headed urban families lies elsewhere – in women's economic independence, in the breakdown of social and economic ties and responsibilities, and in the disintegration of both traditional and modern marriage systems. Whatever the

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[5] The SADHS (1998) uses the notion of household, rather than family, although not in the sense of Firestone (1970), i.e. of unrelated people who are loosely or even unconnected through blood or marriage.

reasons behind this family form, what is clear is that it has little to do with fertility regulation and contraceptive technology. At the same time, it can be expected to influence the way gendered psychosexual personalities are formed albeit in possibly contradictory ways.

Table 9: Household composition

Percent distribution of households by sex of head of household, household size, and presence of foster children, according to residence, South Africa 1998

Characteristic	Urban	Non-urban	Total
Household headship			
Male	63.8	50.0	58.1
Female	36.2	50.0	41.9
Number of usual members			
1	12.9	10.7	12.0
2	17.4	12.1	15.2
3	17.9	13.8	16.2
4	18.4	14.9	16.9
5	13.4	13.9	13.6
6	7.9	12.2	9.7
7	5.0	8.3	6.4
8	2.9	5.2	3.9
9+	4.2	8.8	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean size	3.9	4.7	4.2
Percent with foster children [1]	16.6	34.3	23.9

Note: Table is based on de jure members; i.e., usual residents.
[1] *Foster children* are children under age 15 living in households with neither their mother nor their father present.

Source: (DOH 1998:10)

The SADHS (1998) also shows that nearly a quarter of all households in the study (24%) contain foster children[6], with the proportion rising to 34 percent of families in rural areas. This does not necessarily mean that all these households are linked by ties other than blood or marriage. Rather, it suggests that the care of children has been entrusted by their parents to others, more often than not grandmothers and aunts.

Nor do these changes in household composition suggest that the conditions for "*the traditional dependencies and resulting power relations*" (Firestone 1970: 262) have been eradicated or that they pave the way for the end of gender oppression. Table 10 gives data on household structures.

On the contrary, Table 10 (below) confirms that women remain central to the care of children. Only about one third of children live with both their parents while 37.4% live with only one parent, invariably their mothers. As for the 25% of children who live with neither of their parents, most are raised by their grandmothers, aunts or other family members, in keeping with traditional practices where the older generation of women is expected to bring up the children of unmarried daughters or sons.

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[6] Children under 15 years of age whose natural parents do not live in the household.

Table 10: Household structure

Percent distribution of de jure children under age 15 by survival of parents and child's living arrangements, according to child's age, sex, residence, and province, South Africa 1998

Background characteristic	Living with both parents	Living with mother but not father		Living with father but not mother		Not living with either parent				Missing infor-mation on father/ mother	Total	Number of children
		Father alive	Father dead	Mother alive	Mother dead	Both alive	Father only alive	Mother only alive	Both dead			
Age												
<2	33.3	45.4	2.4	1.7	0.1	12.1	0.4	0.5	0.2	3.8	100.0	3,269
3-5	34.1	33.7	3.8	1.9	0.2	19.5	0.8	2.0	0.4	3.6	100.0	3,529
6-9	32.9	27.4	5.0	2.6	0.3	23.1	1.0	2.7	0.6	4.4	100.0	5,539
10-14	32.0	21.9	6.6	3.1	0.7	23.0	1.4	3.9	1.3	6.1	100.0	7,366
Sex												
Male	33.0	29.3	4.9	2.8	0.4	20.1	1.0	2.9	0.8	4.8	100.0	9,748
Female	32.6	29.7	5.0	2.3	0.4	21.0	1.0	2.4	0.7	4.8	100.0	9,923
Residence												
Urban	42.0	25.1	4.9	2.6	0.6	15.1	1.1	2.3	0.8	5.5	100.0	8,993
Non-urban	25.1	33.1	5.0	2.4	0.2	25.2	1.0	2.9	0.8	4.2	100.0	10,710
Province												
Western Cape	51.8	22.8	4.8	2.0	1.3	9.0	0.7	1.3	0.8	5.4	100.0	1,518
Eastern Cape	22.0	28.7	5.6	2.5	0.4	31.5	1.1	3.9	1.1	3.3	100.0	3,534
Northern Cape	39.3	29.3	4.1	2.0	0.4	17.0	1.3	2.6	0.5	3.4	100.0	374
Free State	39.0	23.6	5.2	1.9	0.7	22.1	1.3	2.1	0.7	3.3	100.0	1,146
KwaZulu-Natal	30.6	28.6	5.5	4.0	0.3	20.6	1.4	3.0	1.0	5.1	100.0	4,457
North West	35.4	28.1	4.5	1.9	0.2	21.0	0.6	1.6	1.0	5.8	100.0	1,540
Gauteng	45.6	24.7	4.4	2.2	0.3	12.3	0.9	2.1	0.3	7.2	100.0	2,899
Mpumalanga	30.5	31.9	2.6	2.3	0.6	24.8	1.4	2.0	0.8	3.3	100.0	1,388
Northern	23.0	42.2	5.3	1.6	0.0	19.4	0.6	2.9	0.5	4.4	100.0	2,849
Total	32.8	29.5	5.0	2.5	0.4	20.6	1.0	2.7	0.8	4.8	100.0	19,703

Note: By convention, *foster children* are those who are not living with either biological parent. This includes *orphans*, i.e., children with both parents dead.

Source: (DOH 1998:11)

The SADHS suggests that the interdependency between mothers and children still holds, notwithstanding women's efforts to control their fertility or the fact that this interdependency is moderated by cultural and social practices across generations. And it is an interdependence that remains gendered.

Discussion and conclusion: it's not about fertility regulation per se

The SADHS findings show that a high rate of contraceptive use and low fertility rates are taking place in a context of unmarried, single parent, single motherhood and

female headed households. These findings seem to indicate that the use of reproductive technology and decisions on fertility may also be influenced by economic and pragmatic considerations – where women increasingly find themselves raising children alone and having to sustain themselves and their children without the support of males.

In this regard, South African trends are similar to those found elsewhere. Castells (1997:149-151), for example, shows that between the early 1970s and mid to late 1980s, in developed countries there was an overall upward growth in the proportion of single-parents, invariably female headed households with dependent children This general trend challenges the assumptions of traditional family forms of patriarchal domination with wives and children clustering around husbands (Castells 1997:156). Castells goes on to argue that in combination, declining fertility rates, low marriage rates and changes in household structure are a consequence of the crisis of the patriarchal family and reflect the end of patriarchy, a conclusion similar to Firestone's (1970). Whether, in fact, this is the outcome in South Africa at this point is doubtful, although patriarchy as we know it is coming under considerable multiple pressures. Firestone construes the family as a natural, biological and functional instrument of society. The SADHS (1998) findings suggest otherwise, that it is rather something that is socially constructed in time and place.

Barrett (1980:188) has critically considered Firestone's conceptualisations of the family and others that give primacy to it, as an institution that locates women in society. Barrett (1980) argues that many sociologists, Marxist and feminist alike consider the family to be a natural unit, where the nuclear family form is seen as either a cause or an effect of broader social formations. To this end, Talcott Parsons (1970) provided the classic functionalist account of how the family fits into society, describing it as the site of reproduction, of labour power where the physical and emotional needs of workers are met, and children are socialised and economic consumption and care for dependents takes place. By this account, the family is a

consequence of external factors, a view echoed in Marxist accounts which see the family as an effect of relations of production.

The evidence from South Africa challenges such functionalist assumptions and claims about the family. Rather, the complexity of family formation, the fact that a large proportion of families are femi-centric, inter-generational and not organised around the institution of marriage calls into question family formation as a condition of systemic functionality.

Barrett (1980:195) also engages Firestone's (1970) contention that patriarchy is the outcome of the divisions of men and women in the family, where the family is seen as a determinant of social processes and psychological being. This view implies that there is an *"essential family whose internal structure may vary and whose relations to the system of production may vary, but which nevertheless persists across these historical transformations."* (Barrett 1980:195). In other words, Barrett (1980) refers to Rayna Rappa's (1978) argument which states that the family thus conceived implies a pre-given natural unit to which human arrangements must adapt.

Historically and taking into account cultural variation, 'the facts' suggest otherwise. Not only does childbirth vary in its degrees of disruption over time and space, as do the degrees of child dependency on adults, but even the link between mothers and children is far from universal as the evidence from the SADHS (1998) shows in respect of child rearing practices in South Africa. In short, it is only possible to concur with Barrett (1980) about the limits in accuracy and usefulness of Firestone's idea of 'the biological family'. It is underpinned by a naturalistic assumption where

> *"women are defined in terms of their anatomy and hence assumed to be 'naturally' dependent upon men. 'The family', however, does not exist other than as an ideological construct, since the structure of the household, definition of kinship, and the ideology of 'the family' itself, have all varied enormously in different types of society."* (Barrett 1980:199)

Firestone can't be separated from the period in which she was writing when the terms of sexual regulation were being transformed by female controlled contraception and economic independence. The value of her contribution to gender theorising is that she provides a radical critique of reproduction and the taken for granted nature of parental roles, raising motherhood as a possible option and not a prescriptive, indeed compulsory role (Giminez 1983:298-299). Her analysis and emphasis on sex also drew attention to the need for a fuller recognition of *'the body as a material and physical phenomenon'* (Shilling 1997:81), which is implicated in action.

The above contribution notwithstanding, Firestone's ideas are both theoretically and empirically flawed. From the available empirical evidence it would seem that Firestone overestimates the power of contraceptive technology to alter patriarchy even as it gives women greater control over their reproductive lives because she underestimates the influence of social structural, institutional and interpersonal factors that shape gender inequality and women's oppression. It is also clear that the limits and possibilities of biology are socially mediated at all times, even in the absence of effective fertility regulation technologies.

Firestone's account of gender difference located in the biological body is a naturalistic view of the body; where the body is seen as pre-social and one on which the social (self and society) is constructed. Not only does this understanding locate the source of women's inequality in the weakness of their bodies, but it also reduces the complexities of social relationships and inequalities to an unchanging pre-social body. At the same time it is this body which must be the generator of social action (Shilling 1993:37). As Connell (1987:87) argues "*in the reality of practice the body is never outside of history, and history never free of bodily presence and effects on the body.*" He argues that the construction of the categories 'men' and 'women' as only being biologically based fails to account for the different experiences of bodies within these categories. Connell (1987:78) contends that body is given social

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determination or practical relevance through practice which comes from social sources.

At the heart of Firestone's (1970) analysis of gender is her conception of the female body as a reproductive functionally constraining body. Grosz (1994:18) argues that in theorising gender, feminists have evoked the body as a social and discursive object that is linked to desire, signification and power. Firestone precludes the complexity of these possibilities, especially that the body can be a source of pleasure and desire. For her sexuality is inextricably linked to sex and for reproduction as well.

Like de Beauvoir (1972) and many other modernist feminists, Firestone's (1970) ideas are informed by a Cartesian logic, that in separating the body from the mind, she associates women with the body and men with the mind (Grosz 1994: 8-9). In arguing for women to assert control over their fertility and overcome the limiting constraints of women's reproductive biology, she infers that the only way for women to occupy "mind" status is to become equal to men.

Control over reproductive decisions (through the availability of contraceptives) in terms of frequency and timing or birth does not automatically free women from gender inequality and oppression in society. Further, reproductive policies and programmes that mainly target women are underpinned by essentialist assumptions about women as bearers and carers of children in society. The availability, and promotion by health providers, of contraceptive methods that target mostly women promotes the view that reproductive decision making is a 'woman's matter'. The fact is clearly evident in the SADHS (1998).

In short, essentialising gender difference to reproductive biology cannot account for the complexity of social reality, just as overcoming the constraints of reproductive biology does not *ipso facto* lead to an end of gender oppression, patriarchy or inequality in general.

Part II - Gender as psychological essence

Gender difference has been conceptualised and theorised by some gender theorists as a maternal essence which is a psychological attribute reflected in mothering practices in women. Psychoanalysis has been embraced by both sociologists and feminists who have attempted to use and also revise Freud's (1917) psychoanalytical theory to explain gendered subjectivity, through examining early childhood relationships and attachments. The sociological theories influenced by psychoanalysis include the functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1970), the Marxism of the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer (1947) and Marcuse (1955) and psychoanalytic feminism of Juliet Mitchell (1974) and Nancy Chodorow (1978).

The distinctive features of a psychoanalytically influenced sociology is that it focuses on the relationship between "unconscious mental processes and the organisation of conscious social life" (Rabow, Platt, and Goldman 1987: ix) as well as characterising the individual as an active subject as opposed to being a passive victim of external social forces. Psychoanalytic theories emphasise women's oppression in terms of psycho social interfacing and in terms of men's innate need to subjugate women for psychological reasons (Ritzer 1998:324). The appeal of psychoanalysis to sociologists and feminists engaged in theorising gender, lies in its emphasis on human subjectivity where gender is located at the level of the subject and individual psyche and domination is explained as being reproduced through individuals as opposed to an emphasis on social structures. Walker (1995:426) has argued that the use of the concept of social identity in studying motherhood focuses on women as agents and she opens up the way for a connection to be made between individual and collective processes in the construction of subjectivity and determination of behaviour.

Marshall (1994:28) argues that the sociological theorisation of gender is underpinned by modernisation theory which regards social life as differentiated and separated into spheres - the public and the private. In this context, women are seen predominantly to occupy the private sphere where they specialise in reproductive work which functions to serve the needs of society. Marshall (1994:107) identifies Chodorow (1978), Dinnerstein (1976) and Ortner (1974) as feminists who all characterise human activity as being universally divided into two spheres – the 'public' and the 'private'. Women and children are confined to the private sphere where women's work is organised around mothering children and this activity is seen as pivotal to the development of gender identity. Women's lower status in society is is explained by their mothering activities in the private sphere which is valued less in society than the human activity performed by men, who are located in the public sphere.

Marshall (1994:107) also argues that "most socialist feminist theory tends toward essentialism based on an historical reification of women's experience and a corresponding reification of 'gender identity'. She contends that the reason for this is that socialist feminist theories draw on Marxist theory that locates subjectivity and consciousness in human activity as it is organised under capitalism. Ritzer (1998:305) argues that the psychoanalytic feminists, Chodorow (1978) and Dinnerstein (1976), also employ the concept of patriarchy to describe women's oppression, where patriarchy is seen as a system where men universally subjugate women.

Psychoanalytical feminists explain the reason and persistence for male domination (patriarchy) as men's and women's differential, early gendered, childhood emotional development. The reason for men developing similar psyches to other men and women developing similar psyches and personalities to other women is related to the similar socio-emotional environment in which their psyches develop (Ritzer 1998: 304). However, Chodorow (1978) argues that the reproduction of patterns of

domination is also embedded in their personality development. Men and women do not only develop different roles but different psyches which makes them unequal. Psychoanalytic explanations of gender focus on the unconscious processes through which different gender identities are transmitted and the importance of early childhood interactions within the family as the basis of gender identities.

The main criticisms that have been levelled at the psychoanalytical theories of gender is that they assume an ahistorical, universal and transcultural kinship structure to be at the root of women's oppression (Marshall 1994: 81). Marshall further argues that the assumption that women universally 'mother' denies all the other contradictory and complex social relations in which women's oppression takes place. Spelman (1988:85) points out that apart from male dominance, there are other forms of dominance which include racism and classism, which characterise most societies. However, Spelman (1988) maintains that the usefulness of Chodorow's theoretical account is her emphasis on the socially specific contexts that give rise to the gender identity which she describes. Several other theorists have tried to test the usefulness of her theory of the acquisition of gender identity in other social and historically specific contexts. Segura and Pierce (1993:66) argue that several social scientists maintain that the limitations of a psychoanalytic sociological approach lie in it being too 'psychological', 'individualistic' and 'nonfalsifiable'.

To better understand the way psychonanalytic feminist theory uses gender personality to explain gender differences I have chosen to examine Chodorow's 1978 work *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. In the next chapter, I will analyse the conceptual and theoretical ideas that underpin Chodorow's model of the reproduction of gender and in the next (chapter five) I will test these against the empirically specific social context of mothering as reflected in Social Welfare Policy in South Africa and the Child Support Grant (CSG) programme in South Africa.

Chapter 4

The psychological reproduction of gender: the theory

4.1. Nancy Chodorow

Theories and conceptions are historically and culturally specific. Chodorow's 1978 work, *The Reproduction of Mothering,* was written in the late 1970s, the early period of the contemporary feminist movement when most social theorists were searching for a grand theory - that is, a single dominant cause for inequality (Chodorow 1989:1). Chodorow herself has argued that her writing was a reaction to Freud's prevailing theory of personality where there was an emphasis on the father and Oedipus complex. She wrote the book to challenge the pervasive biological determinist explanations of social scientists, feminists and people opposed to feminism who claimed a natural connection between women's childbearing and lactation capacities and their responsibility for childcare. For Chodorow the activity of women's mothering was socially and psychologically constituted rather than biologically. Nicholson (1994:93) points out, that Chodorow's ideas were a part of Second Wave feminism of the '70s and '80s that started developing theories to explain the similarities between women and their difference to men.

Unlike Firestone (1970), Chodorow (1999) does not focus on mothering as defined by women's biological functions of pregnancy, childbearing or lactation. Rather, she focuses on the childrearing aspects of mothering which she argues are not necessarily tied to the biological capacities of women. Chodorow is classified in feminist theory as a social constructionist rather than a biological determinist because her explanation of gender difference emphasises the social practice of mothering. Grosz (1994:16-17) however, argues that even social constructionist gender theories

conceive of the body as being biologically determined, fixed and ahistorical in that they see the body as providing the raw material for ideology and cultural production. They, together with biological determinist theorists, also seek to eliminate/neutralise the body to achieve gender equality. However, unlike Firestone (1970), who proposed the use of medical technology to do this, Chodorow proposes the equalisation of the sexes through the reorganisation of childrearing which would then lead to the psychological re-socialisation of children.

In the new preface to her 1978 book Chodorow (1999:xv) states that she developed her theory at a moment in time when full-time mothering was the ideological (albeit not the empirical) norm, a norm that did not acknowledge the other parts of women's lives and identity. She argues that with the development of capitalism and industrialisation, the structure of the family and women's lives changed (1978:4). She held that the 'Western family' – a married couple with children – had been nuclear "for centuries" creating an exclusive parent-child realm with the family mainly responsible for the rearing of children. The family came to represent the personal and private sphere of society where women's role was defined in terms of taking care of children and men. This caring role was not just physical but was also relational and personal. And even as women's productive and reproductive roles and the form of the family changed, due to women's increased participation in paid work, fluctuating marriage and fertility rates, organised childcare and schooling outside the home, women continued to take the primary responsibility for children.

Following criticism of her universalising and historically questionable assumptions about the family, in a 1999 revised preface to her original work Chodorow contends that despite these limitations and the changes in women's lives, her analysis is still significant in understanding gender:

> "the enduring contribution of the book, I believe, is in its understanding of important aspects of female development and dynamics of the female psyche" (1999: vii).

While recognising that family forms are culturally specific she maintains that certain psychic capacities and processes, namely development of the self and of gender identity through attachments and identifications with primary figures – are universal to all human beings. In so doing she maintains her original position that men and women develop essential gendered identities in the process of self identity formation.

Chodorow has been very influential in psychoanalytical theories of gender. Her distinctive contribution to the theorisation of gender is her use of Freudian theory to suggest that some aspects of gender difference derive from unconscious psychological processes. She argues that although other theorists (e.g. Frederick Engels 1932, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman 1898) have recognised the family, and mothering in particular, as a central feature of women's oppression, what they have failed to understand is how women themselves are produced and how they come to find themselves in a particular economic and social location Chodorow (1978:13).

In developing her explanation of gendered personalities, Chodorow's (1978) analysis also draws on several theoretical streams – psychoanalytic, Marxist and feminist. Marshall (1994:80) characterises Chodorow's (1978) work as a sociological account that relates social reproduction to both societal and psychological factors. Chodorow's conception of mothering include elements of Gayle Rubin's (1975) notion that every society is organised by a 'sex/gender system' as much as by a particular organisation of production and that this sex-gender system of any society is located in family and kinship organisation which reproduce socially organised gender and sexuality. For Rubin (1975) all sex-gender systems have organised society around two genders, where the sexual division of labour has women mothering in heterosexual marriage. This 'sex/gender system' plays a significant role in determining the constitutive elements of society, in much the same way that the dominant mode of production does. It creates a set of arrangements whereby biological sex and procreation are shaped and satisfied by human and social intervention. In taking up this idea, Chodorow (1978:8) argues that a sex-gender

system can be sexually egalitarian even though they are and have always been, male-dominated.

The other feminist ideas influencing Chodorow's theoretical formulations were those articulated by Michelle Rosaldo (1974) and Sherry Ortner (1974). These authors contend that in distinguishing between the domestic and public aspects of social organisation, all societies locate mothers and children primarily in the private sphere whereas men are primarily assigned to that of the public.

Although her theory is classified as a psychoanalytic theory of gender, Chodorow (1978:47) argues that her explanation of the development of gendered personalities draws specifically on object-relations theory, a more social psychological approach (Fairbairn 1952; Winnicott 1958) than classical Freudian sexual instinctual determinism. She emphasises relationships and issues of intimacy and separation rather than sexuality as important to psychological development. Object-relations theory is used by her to explain the reproduction of mothering and the reproduction of sex, gender and family organisation. Chodorow emphasises the importance of pre-Oedipal experiences rather than the Oedipal in the creation of gender. For her, gender differences emerge in object-relational experiences which have differential effects on the constitution of the mental structures and psychic lives of men and women.

Whereas Freudian psychoanalysis assumes a biological and instinctual basis for the sexual division of labour, gender personality and heterosexuality, the argument that Chodorow makes is that the psyches of men and women emerge out of specific social relations between men and women and children within a particular kind of family structure. She (1978:49) focuses on the ways that family structure and the asymmetrical organisation of the family affect unconscious psychic structure and processes. In this she gives a materialist account of human gendered development, locating subjectivity and consciousness in human activity (Marshall 1994:107). For

Chodorow, gender identity is located in mothering and rooted in the sexual division of labour:

> "*Elements of social structure, especially as transmitted through the organisation of parenting as well as features of individual families, are appropriated and transformed internally through unconscious processes and come to influence affective life and psychic structure*" (Chodorow 1978:50).

This internalisation is not a direct transmission into the unconscious experience of self-in-relationship to what the child experiences objectively in the social world. For the child, these social experiences have varied psychological meanings depending on how they are internalised, be it as distortions, defences and transformations. In fact, the meaning and resonance of the experience depends, among other things, on the quality and settings of relationships and the physiological arena of relationships and the child's maturational stage. In other words consciousness emerges out of a particular set of social relations and material reality; it emerges out of a context. The social context that she refers to is a particular set of social relations within the family; that of mother-child, child-absent working father. The psychological characteristics which emerge from this specific set of relations is the same gendered psyches for all men and women. In engaging the genesis of gender difference, Chodorow moves away from a purely structural account to one that situates difference in the relations that are reproduced by parents and children through their individual psyches.

Psychoanalysis seeks to understand the relationship between mental life and behaviour by interpreting people's words, where words act as a means of accessing the content of their unconscious processes and structure (Chodorow 1978:52). For her (1978: 53), psychoanalysis provides an explanation of how social forms and practices affect the individual.

She uses this approach to try to understand the persistence of mothering by women, who continue to take primary responsibility for socialising and nurturing children

despite their changing economic, social and political circumstances. For Chodorow, as in much psychoanalytic theory, considerable importance is attached to infant relations with their mothers. Psychoanalytic theorists hold that because this is an experience that is emotionally meaningful, it shapes their unconscious. In addition, for her, early childhood development is important because it is where children form emotional attachments with same sex-parents or adults through identification. She argues that in all societies infants and children experience their earliest childhood development in close relationship with women, as it is women who ubiquitously take primary responsibility for them. The universal fact that it is women who mother, she argues, is something that is culturally rather than biologically prescribed. It is something that becomes integrated into women's psyche:

> "*Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself. By contrast, women as mothers (and men as not- mothers) produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed. This prepares men for their less affective later family role and for their primary participation in the impersonal, extra familial world of work and public life. The sexual and familial division of labor in which women mother and are more involved in interpersonal, affective relationships than men, produces in daughters and sons a division of psychological capacities which leads them to reproduce this sexual and familial division of labor....Women have primary responsibility for childcare in families and outside them; women by and large want to mother, and get gratification from their mothering; and with all the conflicts and contradictions, women have succeeded at mothering*" (p.7).

And just as women's psyches are prepared for mothering, so the psyche of men are prepared *"for their less affective later family role, and for primary participation in the impersonal extra-familial world of work and public life"* (p.7). For her, the family structure is the key to the "sex/gender system", where women's mothering is

the basis of gender differences in respect of sexuality and personality as well as family and public life.

Her explanation of gender difference centres on the social activity or practices of mothering and its psychological reproduction. She argues that mothering is central to the social organisation of gender including the construction and reproduction of male dominance. Chodorow states that men are primarily located in the public sphere and that public institutions define and provide rules for and rank domestic units and men's relations to each other separate from the domestic sphere. Since men are located here they have the power to enforce institutions of social and political control in the public sphere as well as the domestic sphere. Men's primary location in the public sphere then renders society as masculine (Chodorow 1978:9). In turn, *"women's mothering determines women's primary location in the domestic sphere and creates the basis for the structural differentiation of domestic and public spheres"* (p.10).

How then do boys and girls develop gendered psyches? A tenet of psychoanalytic theory is that the early relationship of infants to caretakers is very important for their mental and physical survival and that their very survival even depends on this social environment and relationship (Chodorow 1978:57). This in turn, means that constant care and a certain quality of care is necessary for personality development. In other words infant development always happens in relation to another person, although, as Chodorow notes, this care giver does not necessarily have to be the biological mother just as long as the person who substitutes fulfils the physiological and psychological needs of the child. And it is the early mother-infant relationship that is responsible for creating different parenting capacities in children of both genders (Chodorow 1978: 90). Notwithstanding the fact that the character and relationship of the mother-child relationship is historically and socially context specific, she holds that the relationship between mothers and infants in Western industrial society *"reveals the conscious and unconscious attitudes and expectations that all people – male and*

female – have of their mothers in particular, and of women in general" (p.91), and
therefore has universal relevance.

Chodorow then proceeds to elaborate on the differential relationship that boys and
girls have to their mother in the earliest (pre-Oedipal) period of their development.
For her, mothering and nurturing qualities develop in girls and not in boys as a
consequence of object relational experiences, where sons' nurturant capacities and
needs are repressed while those of daughters are encouraged.

By exploring both sides of the mother-infant relationship, Chodorow tries to account
for why women mother. She does this also from a psychological perspective. In this
way she accounts for how the different psyches are therefore constituted mutually in
the family and reproduced by parents and the child in their psyche. Meanings are
assigned unconsciously by boys and girls to men and women as object relations. By
so doing Chodorow introduces the concept of individual agency (albeit an
unconscious process) into her discussion of men and women's behaviour.

For Chodorow the pre-Oedipal experiences of boys and girls differ because of the
asymmetrical organisation of parenting in family structures.
>   *"Because mothers are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls,*
>   *mothers of daughters tend not to experience their infant daughters as separate*
>   *from them as they do with their infant sons"* (p.109).

Mothers experience a sense of oneness and continuity with both sexes; but with their
daughters they experience them as more like themselves, seeing girls as extensions of
themselves. But for children, while both sexes identify with their mothers, girl
children do so for longer, developing a sense of separation later than boys. The long
term consequence of this differentiated identification process is that, even though
women develop a separate sense of self (ego), their sense of identity develops in
relation to other people and by empathising with other people. Chodorow argues that:

"As long as women mother, we can expect that a girl's pre-oedipal period will be longer than that of a boy and that women, more than men, will be more open to and preoccupied with those very relational issues that go into mothering-feelings of primary identification, lack of separateness or differentiation, ego and body, ego boundary issues and primary love not under sway of the reality principle" (p.110).

While maintaining mothers as the primary object relation of girls , they shift their attachment to their fathers and men in general, in order to attain a heterosexual orientation (ibid:192-3). Fathers and men become primary erotic objects to women when girls emerge from their Oedipus complex. According to Chodorow, this shift in the object and the nature of their focus (from mothers to fathers, from emotions to eros) means that women have to look elsewhere and not to their mothers for love and emotional gratification:

"One way that women fulfil these needs is through the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women…However, deep affective relationships to women are hard to come by on a routine, daily, ongoing basis for many women…There is a second alternative…Given the triangular situation and emotional asymmetry of her own parenting, a woman's relation to a man requires on the level of psychic structure a third person, since it was originally established in a triangle… Then, a child completes the relational triangle for a woman" (p.201).

Men respond differently to children;

"For men, by contrast, the heterosexual relationship alone recreates the early bond to their mother; a child interrupts it. Men moreover do not define themselves in relationships, and have come to suppress relational capacities and repress relational needs. This prepares them to participate in the affect-denying world of alienated work, but not to fulfil women's needs for intimacy and primary relationships" (p.207).

Mothers also respond to their sons very differently. As their masculine opposite, women push boys away allowing them to separate themselves from their mothers earlier on in their development. This act of active separation denies them the experience of primary love and empathy from their mothers. While boys retain their mothers as their main love object, in boyhood they learn to repress their attachment to their mothers in order to resolve their Oedipal complex. As adults, however, they seek this primary relationship with someone like their mother.

Chodorow goes on to argue that boys and girls resolve their Oedipal complex differently Whereas girls continue to be attached to their mothers even though they try to separate from them and form attachments to their fathers, the oedipal love of boys for their mothers is more overwhelming and threatening to their egos and sense of (masculine) independence, and hence it is repressed. This difference gives rise to a gendered difference in people's *"relational potential"* where men develop a sense of self by repudiating relations and connections while women derive their sense of themselves by asserting their relations to others (1978:166).

Chodorow does not attribute any value judgements to male and female personalities. She argues that the sum total of girls and boys psychological development is that girls are endowed with a greater potential for participation in relational spheres than boys (Chodorow 1978:169). Men experience a constant need to prove their masculinity by defining themselves as separate from their mothers (repressing identification with their mother). Thus, boys are ambivalent towards women, seeking both emotional attachment and a distinct separateness which is expressed as domination. By contrast, girls are preoccupied with relational issues, fulfilling their emotional needs by becoming mothers and having babies while meeting their erotic/physical needs by having relationships with men. Chodorow explains that:

> *"Women's mothering then produces psychological self-definition and capacities appropriate for mothering in women, and curtails and inhibits these capacities and this self definition in men."* (p.208).

One of the consequences of women's mothering is the reproduction of their location and responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Their mothering interest produces and reproduces their social roles and positions in the family and in society.

"The reproduction of women's mothering is the basis for the reproduction of women's location and responsibilities in the domestic sphere. This mothering, and its generalization to women's structural location in the domestic sphere, links the contemporary social organisation of gender and social organization of production and contributes to the reproduction of each. That women mother is a fundamental organizational feature of the sex-gender system: It is basic to the sexual division of labor and generates a psychology about women's capacities and nature. Women, as wives and mothers, contribute as well to the daily and generational reproduction, both physical and psychological, of male workers and thus the reproduction of capitalist production" (p.208).

Furthermore:

"Institutionalised features of family structure and the social relations of reproduction reproduce themselves. A psychoanalytic investigation shows that women's mothering capacities and commitments, and general psychological capacities and wants which are the basis of women's work, are built developmentally into feminine personality. Because women are themselves mothered by women, they grow up with the relational capacities and needs, and psychological definition of self-in-relationship, which commit them to mothering. Men, because they are mothered by women do not. Women mother daughters who, when they become mothers, mother" (p.209).

For Chodorow, a consequence of this differential development is that boys grow up to be achievement-oriented and emotionally closed to others while girls grow up to be emotionally open to and even dependent on the approval of others. Thus they are produced by the sexual division of labour in childrearing which both perpetuates and

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reproduces a gendered psychology and gender inequality. Women's mothering produces women who are good at relationships and bad at autonomy.

Chodorow argues that *"the structure of production and reproduction requires and presupposes those specific relational modes"* (p. 190). The masculine personality happens in the family context of fathers who are uninvolved in child care and in a societal context of sexual inequality and an ideology of masculine superiority. The absence and inaccessibility of fathers in the family leads to them being idealised by mothers and children. In the process they acquire an ideological superiority. The consequence of all this is that *"the social organisation of parenting produces sexual inequality, not simply role differentiation"* (p. 214).

In brief, Chodorow argues that the 'essential' difference between men and women lies in their psyches, which are constituted and reproduced in a particular kind of family structure through the activity of mothering, which in turn, gives rise to object-relations between parents and children. This mothering activity produces different experiences of object relations for both sexes and therefore different psychical capacities and characteristics for men and women. While Chodorow's emphasis is on female subjectivity, she incorporates ideas of social and cultural reproduction (through the family) of a male dominant sex-gender system.

Chodorow concludes by suggesting that since parenting qualities are created in women through specific social and psychological processes, they could also be created in men. Given that psychological development in children requires warmth, contact and reliable care as much as physical care, it is possible that it can be provided by men – fathers and others. The current organisation of parenting separates children and men, however, children could be dependent from the outset on people of both genders and establish an individuated sense of self in relation to both. In this way masculinity would not be tied to the denial of male dependence and devaluation of women. Chodorow proposes shared parenting as a means of addressing gender

difference and inequality, a solution that requires the social reorganisation of parenting to transform gendered psyches.

Two decades after developing these ideas, Chodorow accepted the criticisms of her characterisation of family structure and her search for a single cause to account for gender inequality. However, she still maintains the importance of psychoanalytic theory in explaining social and cultural specificity.

In a new preface (1999) to her book, she reflects on and has revised her own understanding, pointing out a tension in her own logic. For her, if her main contribution is an account of the psychological reproduction of mothering, where psychological subjectivity is central to a meaningful life, the argument for equal parenting based on legislating for political equality (from without) ignores the very subjectivity, centrality and distinctiveness of the mother-child bond. By acknowledging the centrality of mothering for women, she is arguing that mothers produce and reproduce women who mother because they also gain meaning, satisfaction and gratification from this activity and do not mother simply because of the requirements and demands of society. She ends the preface by arguing that *"I am now more respectful of the ways in which individuals do in fact create their emotional reality and sense of personal meaning and less absolute about how they ought to create it"* (1999: xvii).

This understanding developed in the process of her later writings *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989) and *The Power of Feelings* (1994) which refined and advanced her original thesis in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). In *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989:5) she argues that there is no single factor to explain male dominance but rather it arises from a web of social, psychological and cultural relations. She argues that it is not possible to privilege psychology, psyche or culture. Also, a multiplex conception of gender relations and sexuality, while encompassing sexual inequality, does not necessarily view gender negatively, in

terms of hierarchy, domination, inequality and patriarchy. Gender and sexuality can include benefits to women (ibid: 5). If, in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989) she acknowledges that in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979) she implied that women's mothering was the main cause of male dominance, she contends that her focus on the mother and pre-Oedipal stage of development was her historical and contextual reaction to the exclusive Freudian focus on fathers and the Oedipal complex. This said, she continues to maintain its relevance as a social and cultural fact, given that we are still mothered by women, and that in all societies women rather than men have primary parenting responsibilities. Thus, despite acknowledging the multiplex nature of gender and its causes, she holds that:

> *"Women's inequality may be multiply caused and situated, but I have yet to find a convincing explanation for the virulence of masculine anger, fear, and resentment of women, or of aggression toward them, that bypasses – even if it does not rest with – the psychoanalytic account, first suggested with Horney, that men resent and fear women because they experience them as powerful mothers"* (1989:6).

She accepts that gender is experienced in a variety of ways around varied axes of power and this makes it possible to both valorise women's qualities and see them as a product of inequality. She also argues (ibid:7) that she would not, as she did in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979), give determinist primacy to social relations which generate psychological patterns, because *"psychology itself is equally important to, constitutive and determinative of human life."* She argues that the formation of psyche, self and identity is universal and psychoanalysis provides a method and theory to investigate how these are constructed.

Chodorow (1978: 100) suggests that:

> *"gender difference is not absolute, abstract or irreducible; it does not involve an essence of gender. Gender differences, and the experience of difference, like differences among women, are socially and psychologically created and situated.*

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In addition I want to suggest a relational notion of difference. Difference and gender difference do not exist as things in themselves; they are created relationally, that is, in relationship. We cannot understand difference apart from this relational construction."

Lastly, Chodorow explicitly distances herself from essentialist conceptions of the feminine, which argue that men and women are fundamentally different and these differences must recognised. However, together with other critics, I argue that her theory is essentialist in that she reduces gender to universal psychological processes which emerge from a universal practice by women – mothering – that arises within a universal social structure – the family.

4.2. The limits of gender difference as psyche/personality

Chodorow's (1989:18) writing is reflective of her own work, theoretically categorising her explanation of gender at the same time as she considers some of the criticisms that have been levelled against her:

> *"I am a self defined 'interpretive,' or even 'humanistic,' 'psychoanalytic sociologist and psychoanalytic feminist.' I have been criticized by sociologists for being ungrounded empirically and individualistic theoretically, for not understanding societal determinism, and for underestimating the force of social reality. At the same time, I have been criticized by Lacanian psychoanalytic feminists for the opposite, for being empiricist and socially determinist and for seeing the unconscious as a sociological phenomenon rather than an analytically irreducible and unique register of being and level of analysis."*

This said, the theoretical, epistemological and methodological limitations in Chodorow's psychological conception of gender that a reading of her work gives rise to, are worth considering in this exploration of gender essentialism. Theoretically, seen through Chodorow's lens, gender can be understood as an individual,

unconscious attribute which develops psychologically and resides in people's personalities. She reduces the essential gender difference between men and women to their personalities or psyches which arise from the activity of women's mothering. According to Chodorow it is women's primary mothering role which results in their primary location in the private sphere and it is this activity, combined with their location in the private sphere, which makes them dependent on men. This is Chodorow's explanation for the cause of women being devalued by the bearing and rearing of children, by society and their oppression by men.

As she states above Chodorow has been criticised by sociologists for being theoretically individualistic and for not accounting sufficiently for the power of social forces in determining behaviour. Wharton (2005:31) classifies Chodorow's conception of gender as an individualist psychological approach which sees gender as being produced through a process of socialisation, where biological sex is transformed into gendered personalities through unconscious psychological processes. Wharton argues that individualist approaches to gender locate the primary sociological action at the level of individuals. Gender is seen as an individual characteristic and, as conceptualised by Chodorow, is an internalised attribute or characteristic trait that men and women possess. The unit of analysis for investigation is individuals. Parker, Mars, Ransome and Stanworth (2003:111) argue that methodological individualists are incorrect in their analysis in that *the capacity to act depends not on one's humanity, but on the powers one has by virtue of one's relation to collectivities and institutions. No one would deny that one's position in hierarchies of power affects what one can do."*

Notwithstanding Chodorow's individualist emphasis, she does look at social structural influences, particularly the way that the structure of families gives rise to gendered personalities. In this her conceptualisation could be interpreted as social psychological, although the way she uses social context – that is how family structure creates particular gendered personalities which act as motivations for

socially appropriate behaviour – suggests that in explaining gender she is more inclined to individualist theories that favour internalised psychological motivation rather than social relations. Young (1983:142) argues that this view reduces social structures to products of individual personalities.

Somewhat contradictorily, Chodorow turns to the social context in her search for a solution to the gender differences and inequality. For her, the answer lies in shared parenting which she believes will transform individual gendered personalities and address gender inequality. Shared parenting would allow girls and women to participate in the public sphere while it would transform boys and men into carers who value women. Lorber et al (1981:483) believes that there is a problem of directionality and causation which arises from Chodorow's individualistic psychoanalytical bias, where personality rather than social structure acts as the link between individuals and social institutions and where social institutions respond to and are determined by personalities rather than vice versa. She also argues that Chodorow's solution to gender difference and inequality remains individualistic, in that she wants to change men and women by changing individual parenting arrangements, rather than by changing the social structures that produce parenting arrangements. For Lorber et al (1981:486) changing the social structures that produce parenting arrangements would entail giving both men and women opportunities to earn equal incomes and therefore would make it too costly for women to mother full time. Lorber et al (1981:485) also engages with the logic of Chodorow's solution of shared parenting by arguing that, if both men and women parent, then children will acquire both affective and instrumental capacities. As individuals with both these capacities, the necessity for biological men and biological women to parent falls away, as the same job could be done by single parents or same sex parents or non-biological parents. However, she argues that this changed form of parenting would then have very different implications for pre-Oedipal and Oedipal relationships for children and the same would be the case for children in divorced and step-parented families.

Young (1983:141) argues that Chodorow assumes that individuals are the unit of institutions, rather than focussing on the interactions among individuals, and that therefore she mistakenly reads the structure of the institutions "off from the structure of individual personalities".

This said, these critics also recognise that Chodorow's individualism is tempered by the inclusion of elements of a more holistic approach because she situates the individual in a family context and in relationships that influence individual behaviour. Fay (1996:70) cites Gidden's structuration theory (1991) where he argues for the importance of both agency and structure in shaping human behaviour as an attempt to combine these approaches.

Linked to criticism of her being too theoretically individualistic, are concerns about her use of socialisation theory – more specifically, identification theory in psychoanalysis - to explain how gendered personalities are acquired. Socialisation theory has been criticised for treating men and women as homogenous groups that experience the same kind of early childhood development (Gerson 1985:192). It construes gender as a characteristic that is a stable part of an individual's personality. Wilson and Weir (1986:168) argue that psychoanalytic feminism seems to restate a 'psychic law and order' that merely describes and fixes the process of the production and reproduction of women's oppression. While Andersen (1997:49) maintains that socialisation does not occur in a vacuum. Gender differences acquired by individuals have an institutional basis and social structural origins.

Chodorow has also been criticised from a microstructural perspective. Risman argues that:

> "*Material conditions, situational constraints, opportunity structures, socially organised interactional expectations and actors' positions within social networks*

all operated to create and sustain cultural definitions of gender over and above
gender-typed training and personality development" (1987:8).

Because gender is located at the level of the individual, individualist approaches to gender usually seek solutions to gender through the transformation of individuals. By contrast, Chodorow (1978) proposed shared parenting as a way of transforming gendered personalities. Risman (1987:28) however writes that:

"Only when situational contexts change, will parenting behaviour among
men become more similar to parenting behaviour of women".

For all their specificity, the above criticisms generally articulate a social structural understanding of gender where gendered behaviour and social practices within the family are constituted by the structures and practices of organisations and social institution (Wharton 2005: 8). Relations within the family do not exist in isolation from other social relations within other social institutions in society. For example, the unequal power and participation of men and women in the workplace also impacts significantly on their behaviour, roles and status within the family. Young (1983 cited in Trebilcot 1983:135) criticises Chodorow for using gendered psychological dispositions to explain social inequality and difference, the split between private and public spheres, relations of hierarchy in institutions etc. She is especially critical of Chodorow's argument that male domination is caused by gender differentiation, and she sees her as overpsychologising a social phenomenon that is materially and socially structured in and by society. Ritzer (1998:315) contends that women's roles cannot be compartmentalised in separate institutions. Rather, there is a constant interaction and merging of their roles in the several institutions they occupy at various times.

Di Leonardo and Lancaster's (1996: 47-48) critique focuses on the way Chodorow (1978) has conceptualised gender as women's reproductive labour linked to their reproductive capacities and their universal caring or mothering role. They (Di Leonardo and Lancaster 1996: 49) point out that not only does Chodorow's logic

lead to a mistaken conclusion that it is mothering that causes children to devalue women, but her understanding of women's place in society as the domestic sphere of childbirth, childcare, cooking and housework is ahistorical and acultural. Di Leonardo and Lancaster point out that the idea of a 'woman's sphere' is a Western historical construct which came into its own in the Victorian era. In reality, women's labour differs across time and space and that even the division between 'public' and 'private' spheres is neither universal nor uniform.

Although Chodorow (1980) criticises essentialist notions of gender difference, her theory can be characterised as a form of gender essentialism because she reduces gender difference to universal gendered personalities spawned by a universal type of human activity in women – mothering – which arises from a universal type of social organisation – the family. It is this mothering activity/practice which creates universal personality differences in male and female children who then reproduce these differences as adults. Marshall (1994:104) argues that what is common to all gender essentialist explanations is that they hinge on the specificity of the female body and its connection to reproduction of the species. Each essentialist argument remains a form of biological essentialism. Although Chodorow's focus is on the link between mothering and the gendering of individual psyche, why women assume this responsibility in the first instance presupposes a biological essence.

Nicholson (1994:94) argues that although Chodorow appears to build on a cultural explanation, her ideas are in fact founded in biology. Her attempt to account theoretically for children's development across cultures

> *"rests on the assumption that the possession of certain kinds of genitals conveys a common meaning across this range of cultures to make possible the postulation of a fundamentally homogenous set of stories about child development."*

Nicholson and other commentators observe that a 'feminism of difference' is really a 'feminism of uniformity' because when feminists characterise women's nature they

describe some kind of essence, even if they contend that this essence is socially constructed. Chodorow's characterisation of women's personalities is based on generalisations underpinned by assumptions about the body in relation to character.

Marshall (1994:81) states that to view women universally as 'mothers' excludes the complex and contradictory web of social relations in which women's oppression can be situated. While Chodorow (1978) does not ignore the role of social structure in her account of gender, her theory could be seen as a mere explanation of how people accommodate an already existing sexual division of labour, without explaining how it is produced in the first place.

Chodorow's theory of gendered personality development linked to mothering has been criticised because it seeks to generalise to all women possibly typical mothering experiences of North American and European middle class white women generated by an historically specific heterosexual family structure. Several empirical studies have tested the usefulness of this claim in different social contexts. Studies by Segura and Pierce (1993) show that the particularistic features of Chicana/o families with multiple mothering figures has different implications for gender identity development in children The ideas of motherhood from Africa, Finland, Sweden and the African Diaspora are examined in *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, Issue 4, 2002 and Issue 5, 2003. All point to the ways in which experiences of motherhood are tied to sociohistorical and cultural contexts. Other feminists (Rich 1980, Flax 1981, Joseph 1981, Lorber et al 1981, and Spelman 1988) also specifically criticise Chodorow's typology of family structure. For Lorber (1981:483), Chodorow's explanation of the centrality of mothering for women is based on a certain kind of mothering in an isolated nuclear family. From her (Chodorow 1978: 485) research this type of family is not necessarily typical of the varying relationships of American working class families and the values they instil in their children. Spelman (1988:85) has also specifically argued that race, ethnicity and class identity cannot be separated from gender identity.

Magwaza (2003) argues that mothering practices of South African women are influenced by their socio-cultural and political histories, where mothering is often a communal shared practice. In similar vein, Oyewumi from Nigeria (2000:1097) criticises Chodorow's 'nuclear motherhood' which sees the meaning of motherhood tied to her identity as the patriarch's wife and to relationships within a nuclear family. African constructions of motherhood are different. There are many mothers, many fathers and many 'husbands' in African households and therefore the mother – child relationship is different. She also contends that dominant Western feminist accounts of motherhood see it as a gender category where women are perceived as subordinated and oppressed and males as privileged. This interpretation patriarchalises motherhood in a way that reduces it to a powerless condition without agency. By defining mothering as primarily nurturing, she claims that Chodorow portrays mothers as trapped in the role of caregiving, whereas African conceptions of motherhood see it as a revered role that is imbued with power and social status. Alsop et al (2002:61) also argue that Chodorow's work is not as relevant in the context of changing household structures even in white middle class North American and European societies.

Chodorow's conception of gendered personalities is also criticised for not looking at the role of social interaction and social relations in the production of gender. Through this lens an explanation of gender would analyse social expectations, social categorisation and classification by others and the environment as important influences on gendered behaviour and personalities. From this perspective male domination and power relations between men and women in relation to the sexual division of labour in the family plays an equally important role in the development of individual gendered personality and the roles of men and women in the family. For Alsop et al (2002:61) Chodorow's depiction of how men's psyche unconsciously develops in terms of rejecting their feminine attributes, fails to show how men benefit from social arrangements in households and display active agency in violence

against women. Chodorow's explanation rests on an absent father rather than the pervasiveness of male power in society and the family.

Young (1983:136) also argues that by locating the source of male domination and men and women's differential emotional development in patriarchy alone, her psychological conception does not account for the actual material sources of patriarchy within the family, ideology, institutional arrangements and practices; the organisation of production, distribution and allocation of resources and the rules according to which all of these are organised. Chodorow also does not look at male power or the power of the father in the development of gender personalities (Young 1983:137). Just as she generalises about mothering, Chodorow also makes universal claims about male domination without the empirical evidence about its historical and cultural specificity.

Epistemologically, Chodorow subscribes to paradigms that have variously been termed social action[7], interpretive[8], or philosophical romanticism[9]. These

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[7] An Action is 'social' if the acting individual takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course (Weber 1949).

[8] Interpretive social science is related to various research strategies, theories and approaches in sociology and philosophy; hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, Freudian psychology, semiology, linguistics, phenomenological sociology, symbolic interaction and existentialism (Rosenau 1988:427; Johnson, Dandeker, Ashworth 1984; Berger and Luckman 1967; Weber 1974/1981; Andersen, Hughes and Sharrock 1986).

[9] Runes (1942) explains that "The philosophical point of departure for romanticism is the Kantian philosophy, and romanticism shares with all German Idealism both the fundamental purpose of extending knowledge to the realm of noumena, and the fundamental doctrine that all reality is ultimately spiritual, derivative from a living spirit and so knowable by the human spirit. The essence of philosophical romanticism as expressed by Schelling, that which differentiates it from other types of Idealism, resides in its conception of Spirit; upon this depend its metaphysical account of nature and man, and its epistemological doctrine of the proper method for investigating and understanding reality. Romanticism holds that Spirit, or the Absolute, is essentially creative; the ultimate ground of all things is primarily an urge to self-expression, and all that it has brought into being is but a means to its fuller self-realization".

approaches reject positivism, which looks to external, deterministic, causal social factors to explain human behaviour and social phenomena, emphasising rather the importance of subjectivity and human consciousness in shaping meaningful human activity. While some may criticise her use of these paradigms to explain gender difference, far more serious are criticisms of Chodorow's evidential basis for her claims.

Lorber (1981:483) points out, that psychoanalytic theory is based on evidence from clinical case histories. These are patients' accounts and their interpretation by psychoanalysts is specific and particular and as such cannot be generalised to society or people in general (Lorber 1981: 483). Chodorow does not develop or test her theory on the basis of data or evidence from the social context of the experiences of mother and child. Furthermore, as Young (1983:141) points out, such evidence is complex since, the context of actions and interactions, as much as the actions and interactions of individuals determine institutions and social practices.

Many of the criticisms that have been levelled at Chodorow are valid. As indicated earlier she especially acknowledges those that point to the social and cultural limits of her assumptions about family structure and social life. Equally, however, she continues to argue for the salience of human psyche in the formation of gender difference. *In Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989:4) she explains:

> *"People everywhere have emotions that they care about, connections to others, sexual feelings and senses of self, self-esteem, and gender. People everywhere form a psyche, self and identity. These are everywhere profoundly affected by unconscious fantasies as well as by conscious perceptions that begin as early as infancy. Psychoanalysis is the method and theory directed toward the investigation and understanding of how we develop and experience these unconscious fantasies and of how we construct and reconstruct our felt past in the present".*

She goes further:

> *Historically, this method and theory [psychoanalysis] have not often been applied in a socially or culturally specific manner, but there is not a basic antagonism between psychoanalytic thinking and social specificity... As factors of race, class, culture, or history either into a labelled (conscious or unconscious) identity, or as they shape particular early experienced object relational and family patterns and forms of subjectivity, psychoanalytic tools should be able to analyse these"* (Chodorow 1989:4).

Several studies have attempted to empirically examine the usefulness of Chodorow's theory of gender by applying it to specific social contexts. Segura and Pierce (1993), for example, explored the implications of Chodorow's theory of mothering and gendered personalities within the social context of Chicano families in the United States. Castells (1997:221-235) has used it in his analysis of the implications of the demise of the patriarchal family and the crisis of patriarchy.

Following in this tradition, and in response to Chodorow's continued assertion of the value of her ideas, in the next chapter I propose to explore her theory of the production and reproduction of mothering and gendered personality development in children through an examination of discourse around these ideas in the specific social context of Social Welfare Policy, Legislation and Programmes in South Africa. The following section seeks to explore assumptions about gender difference which are embedded in public policy discourse. The intention is to find out whether Chodorow's theory has resonance in the discursive construction of gender in welfare policy.

Chapter 5

Chodorow's theory and the discourse of caring/mothering and gender difference in South African Social Welfare Policy, Legislation and Programmes

5.1. Introduction

In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Chodorow provided a psychoanalytical model for the reproduction of gender difference. For her (1978:191-209) women's mothering of children is central. She defines mothering not only as a biological but also as a social and psychological phenomenon. Boys' and girls' gendered personalities develop within particular family relations through the practice of women's mothering. Feminists and sociologists critical of Chodorow's theory have argued against her emphasis on the unconscious psychological constitution of gender identity and difference. Rather, they have explained the production and reproduction of gender differences in society by emphasising relational, institutional, structural and ideological influences. Criticism has also been levelled against her essentialist notions of gender difference and for locating this difference in women's mothering capacity. Methodologically, criticisms have been raised against her psychoanalytical account of gender identity formation, in that it is difficult to verify or test her theory empirically (Wharton 2005:38).

In light of these methodological criticisms, the analysis which follows does not seek to find or verify her ideas about the internal unconscious psychological processes of identity formation in women and children. Rather, I propose to analyse the discourse of gender/mothering/caring in welfare policy, legislation and programmes in South

Africa in terms of Chodorow's view on the significance of mothering in gender formation. The purpose here is to see whether or not her assumptions have any resonance in welfare policy discourse in South Africa and if this discourse itself is a constitutive force in the production and reproduction of mothering practice and gendered identities, difference and inequality in society. The analysis specifically focuses on exploring the discourse of caring and this caring discourse's links to the discourse of gender in three key texts and to these texts as practices, namely, the White Paper on Social Welfare (WPSW) (Department of Welfare 1997), the Social Assistance Act No.59, 1992 (Department of Welfare 1992) and the Child Support Grant (CSG) programme (South African Government Services 2010).

The White Paper on Social Welfare provides the policy framework for state provision of care for the vulnerable in society. The Social Assistance Act and the Child Support Grant programme are the legislative and programmatic statements that operationalise these ideas of the framework. These texts have been specifically chosen for analysis because they embody contemporary institutional discourse on mothering and care for children in vulnerable households. The chapter also looks at how policy and programme discourse on mothering/caring impacts on the actual practice of caring for vulnerable children through an analysis of the findings from secondary studies on the uptake of the child support grant. The findings on the practice of caring in the CSG programme are also weighed against the arguments made by Chodorow (1978) that it is women who mainly mother and want to mother as well as the implications of Chodorow's (1978) model of object relations between children and their parents within CSG household structures.

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999:156) state that a discourse is "broad patterns of talk – systems of statements – that are taken up in particular speeches and conversations." However, discourse has been defined as ideological practice (Fairclough 1995; Thompson 1984) where discourse as ideology is embedded in the language used by individuals, groups or institutions to construct meanings, values,

social relations and social practices in society. Viewed from this perspective discourse does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it and the way in which people act and behave in the world. Their actions serve to reproduce dominant discourses and relational patterns. Discourse analysis as a research tool is employed to interrogate the assumptions and statements embedded in the language of texts or speech acts: "(d)iscourse analysis can be defined as the act of showing how certain discourses are deployed to achieve particular effects in specific contexts" (Terre Blanche and Durrheim 1999:154). Terre Blanche and Durrheim (199:155-156) suggest that discourse analysis is not necessarily one thing. Legitimately, it can be about the identification of the 'discourses' in a text, or it can focus on the kinds of effects that the text achieves, or it can explain the context in which the text emerges and operates in. I propose to use discourse analysis to identify the discourse around women, children, men and their relations to each other.

Daly and Rake (2003:40) argue that social policies are both ideological and normative and reinforce appropriate behaviour for men and women. They argue that the state, as an institution in society, through policy, can reaffirm and valorise existing social roles in society and, in this way, act to produce and reproduce them. Conceptions of gender and caring within the family, as they are reflected in policy and programmes, can also accord or deny women their agency in other areas in society. In a study of programmatic interventions on child care Marcus (2004:27), for example, demonstrates how programme activities are influenced by ideas of family, community, institutions and policies.

Marshall (1994:127-8) argues that the state constitutes and regulates gender in particular ways through its various activities. State institutions underpin certain dominant discourses and ideologies about gender. These are reflected in policies and programmes that intentionally or otherwise produce and reproduce gender differences and inequalities in society. In this way institutions act as conduits for certain values, norms and roles in society as well as for the allocation of resources.

Several writers (Gouws 2005, Sevenhuijsen et al 2006, Hochfeld and Bassadien 2007, Schram 1993, Fraser 1989, Razavi and Hassim 2006, and Kabeer 2004) have analysed how gendered discourses of state institutions and their policies have generally negative consequences for women's political agency in society. One of their arguments is that as policy allocates caring responsibilities to women within families so it impacts on women's full citizenship. Schram (1993:250) argues that welfare policy operates as a cultural force and reinforces certain family structures at the expense of others. Daly and Rake (2003:17) argue that in the context of welfare states, their programmes shape the lives of women and men by contributing to rather than determining social relations.

The social construction of motherhood has been used by feminists to compare welfare states and to examine how policies have constructed women as mothers and have endorsed maternalism as an ideology (Rake 2003:19). Official documents are the means through which certain ideas and discourses are perpetuated in society. In this view, policies, legislation and programmes can have intended and unintended consequences for the production and reproduction of gender difference in society. In their examination of Welfare States, Daly and Rake (2003: 40) argue that these consequences are ideological and the content of social programmes are normative and can be powerful in creating and reinforcing appropriate behaviour in men and women where social roles can be affirmed and valorised. Social roles can be reflected and continually reconstituted through social policy (Rake 2003:40).

5.2. *The construction of women, children and men*

5.2.1. The texts

The White Paper on Social Welfare (WPSW) was issued by the Ministry for Welfare and Population Development in February 1997 in South Africa. It construes women

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and children as part of the vulnerable in society, making them potential targets for social development and potential recipients of social welfare policy and programmes.

The goals of both development and welfare are to attend to the needs of those living in poverty, the vulnerable and those with special needs:

> *"…The goal of developmental social welfare is a humane, peaceful, just and caring society which will uphold welfare rights, facilitate the meeting of basic human needs, release people's creative energies, help them achieve their aspirations, build human capacity and self reliance, and participate fully in all spheres of social, economic and political life"* (Department of Welfare 1997: preamble).

The first chapter of the White Paper on Social Welfare (hereafter WPSW) outlines a broad economic and social context from which the discourse on the need for social development and social welfare in South African society emerges. This context is characterised as one where there is an historical lack of economic growth, unequal income distribution, poverty, unemployment and unequal access to social services and welfare. In this, there are race, gender, geographical and sectoral disparities, inadequate information systems, a fragmented welfare system, a lack of participation of citizens in policy decision making, a lack of sustainable financing and a lack of equal status amongst partners involved in the delivery of social security (p.1-3). Together these substantiate historical injustices and economic underdevelopment as well as shortcomings in institutional administrative practices and citizen participation. And they lay the foundation for the discourse on caring, which construes women, children and men as subjects in need of government services to develop their capacity to support themselves or others.

The WPSW then goes on to 'discuss' the policy framework (Part 1) for the delivery of developmental social welfare in South Africa. In Part 1 the WPSW covers national strategies, institutional arrangements, human resource development, legislation and

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financial and budgeting arrangements, in which the emphasis is on technical and administrative responses to the problem as it has been constructed. In Part II, the WPSW narrows down to focus on the restructuring of the delivery system. Here, programmes and guidelines for action are specified and elaborated upon for the various categories of (mostly) people that have been identified as vulnerable, namely, children, youth, aged, women, people with disabilities, people with special needs and families.

The State's understanding of what it is to be a (vulnerable) man, woman or child and the relationships they are said to have with one another and society in general can also be read off the Child Support Grant (CSG), one of the key programmatic interventions that emanates from the White Paper and its legislative framework, the Social Assistance Act 59 of 1992. Analysis of the CSG and the Act show that programmatic and legislative criteria for state support for caring within CSG households is circumscribed by certain assumptions and conceptions of care givers and caring.

The Child Support Grant (CSG) was introduced by the Department of Social Welfare in 1998. At the recommendation of the Lund Committee (Department of Welfare 1996:88) it was designed to replace the existing State Maintenance Grant (SMG) that was given to White, Coloured and Indian children and a separate amount, to mothers without partners to support themselves and their children. Paid via a "primary care giver" (PCG) who has passed a means test, the CSG aimed to protect the poorest children (irrespective of race) in their most vulnerable years (Department of Welfare 1996). In other words, poor and vulnerable children are the primary target, albeit through the mechanism of a person (of unspecified gender) deemed to be the child's primary care giver.

Considerable research has been conducted on the CSG, its conceptualisation, history, implementation and its impact on children and poverty. Key studies are, amongst

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others, listed in Hunter's *"Annotated Bibliography of Recent Research on the Impact of Social Security Grants"* (2002), in the work of The Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town, and the Centre for Actuarial Research and by Lund herself. Lund's (2007) book "*Changing Social Policy: The Child Support Grant in South Africa* documents the CSG in the transition to democracy in South Africa.

In looking at the policy, legal and programmatic texts, I propose to consider the way the State conceptualises women, children and men and the meaning the state gives to gender difference in the light of Chodorow's (1978) theory of gender difference, (women as mothers and women as having a primary caring and socialising function of children).

5.2.2. The discourse on women

In the WPSW (Department of Welfare: 1997) women are mainly referred to as poverty stricken, economically vulnerable, unequal, excluded, discriminated against and as lacking rights and access services and resources. Their subject position in society is accounted for in terms of past historical disadvantages, lack of economic development, discriminatory economic practices in customary marriages, lack of access to State services and programmes, their reproductive functions and their care giving roles in society. Defined as being subject to or victims of certain constraints and circumstances, women are therefore identified as having certain needs which can be attended to by the State, through institutional and administrative solutions designed to promote women's agency in particular spheres of their lives and help them to overcome structural barriers. In particular, the state proposes to do this through policy and legislative reforms, capacity building programmes, securing women's rights and creating employment opportunities and access to resources and skills.

The WPSW (Department of Welfare 1997) characterises South Africa as being a society of extreme poverty and also extreme wealth. Poverty is understood to be unevenly distributed, making some segments of the population more vulnerable than others, with some women being among them. In general, reference is made variously to rural women, rural women who are household heads, women who are household heads, unemployed women, African women. To wit,

> "African households, households in rural areas, especially those headed by women in rural areas, are the most affected" (p.1).
> "Unemployment has been more severe among women, especially those in rural areas" (p.1).
> "While poverty is widespread throughout South Africa, African people are most affected. Women and children (particularly in female-headed households), people with special needs and those living in rural areas, informal settlements and on farms are the most at risk and will be assisted" (p.7).

In this account, women's vulnerability is primarily construed in specific geo-economic terms, namely, whether they are wage workers or not, whether they are rural or urban, and whether they are 'heads of households' or in female-headed households or not. The consequences for all in poverty are generally dire – family disintegration, substance abuse, low levels of literacy, lack of capacity to access resources, hunger and malnutrition (p.7) the last being especially linked to women's vulnerability (p.8).

These initial articulations about the vulnerability of some women are elaborated in a specific section entitled 'Women'. Here women's position is juxtaposed relative to that of men in society as well as in terms of their responsibilities to children. Thus,

> "Illiteracy and poverty are major obstacles to women's advancement. Female unemployment is higher than male unemployment. Women account for only 45% of those employed in the formal sector. Moreover, women tend to be employed at lower levels than men and therefore earn less than men do. Women are in the

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majority in informal sector employment where wages are generally lower and there are no social benefits. Research indicates that households headed by women are significantly poorer. Working women are faced with increasing pressures in reconciling parenthood with work responsibilities. Early childhood development programmes to meet the needs of working women are insufficient. Female-headed households are also financially vulnerable as fathers do not always pay for the maintenance of their children" (p.51).

As vulnerable economic subjects women are then fashioned as being in need of government assisted development not only to overcome their inherited disadvantages but also to assist them in their parenting responsibilities. In this discourse, there is an implicit normative assumption that it is women who have primary responsibility towards children. The only association made between working men and child care responsibilities is their failure to provide economic support. But also, perhaps more insidiously, that women's economic rights are only justified because they are the carers of children.

This idea of women's primary social role as providers of care in society is widely emphasised in the WPSW (Department of Welfare: 1997).

> *"In the main, women are the key providers of unacknowledged social care to the sick, the physically and mentally disabled, the young and the elderly. In addition to their roles in the family, women in communities contribute voluntary time to social and development programmes"* (p.51).

Given that women are conceived of as unequal and discriminated against by society both in terms of resource distribution and exclusion from services and programmes and they are also cast as the primary providers of care, it is not surprising that these concerns are explicitly reiterated in the principles developed to guide the policy norms and practices.

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The principle on equity, thus states that developmental social welfare policies and programmes are intended to address gender, racial, urban/rural and sectoral disparities (p.5).

The principle on non-discrimination seeks to address the exclusion of vulnerable groups of people from services and programmes. Here discrimination against women in general is linked to:

> "*children, the physically disabled and mentally disabled, people with HIV/AIDS, the elderly, and the people with homosexual or bisexual orientations*" (p.5/6).

At the same time, women are said to be specifically discriminated against both through the lack of equal opportunities and societal values:

> "*Discrimination against women continues to prevail in all spheres of life and women do not enjoy equal opportunities. The principle of shared responsibility and partnership between men and women is not accepted in society as the basis for achieving equity and equality*" (p.51).

Women's vulnerable subject position is also reflected in their position as victims of violence, which in turn translates into them being in need of care themselves:

> "*Violence against women undermines the psychological and physical health of women and girls*" (p.51).

Thus, at one and the same time, women are characterised as being both providers of care and in need of care provision.

The discourse then introduces a biological dimension by focusing on women's reproductive functions as the bearers of children, and linking this capacity to the fact that not only do they take primary responsibility for contraception (p.51) but they also take primary responsibility for the care of children. Here too issues of vulnerability and personal and social irresponsibility are raised in the discourse

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around teen pregnancy and the failure of young women especially to use contraception.

The discourse on women as vulnerable subjects and responsible carers continues in the section on people with chronic illnesses. Here they are identified as being especially at risk of HIV infection and AIDS. The document refers to the use of survey data from antenatal clinic attendees for infection rates for women. This context reflects a concern for the implications of the disease for women's health as well as for their responsibilities to their unborn children (p.64). While the gendered causes for greater vulnerability to HIV infection or the gendered consequences of an earlier greater incidence of AIDS and premature death among women are not considered. Rather obscurely, the text focuses on customary marriages and the breakdown of rural networks as factors fuelling the epidemic, notably among rural women and children, even though rural/urban infection rates are not significantly different. Women's vulnerability is played out, according to this discourse, because women's rights and access to livelihoods are compromised by the lack of State intervention in traditional institutional practices that deprive them of rights to property, inheritance and access to land, or alternatively because they are made financially vulnerable when the family patriarch dies (p.65 see also p.52).

Having identified women's vulnerability mainly in terms of social and economic disadvantage, what is evident from the situational analysis, approach, guidelines and strategies that inform the delivery systems set out in Part 11 of the WPSW, is that for the most part, women are not targeted in their own right. Rather, they only feature in the document when they fall into other categories of vulnerability – as disabled, being elderly or as unsupported parents of children:

> "*Social assistance – non-contributory and income-tested benefits provided by the State to groups such as people with disabilities, elderly people and unsupported parents and children who are unable to provide for their own minimum needs*" (p.31).

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Alternatively, they are specified in the discourse where their needs and vulnerability are believed to impact on their caregiving role. Thus,

> *"Women can claim support for themselves and their children through the law courts...There is a high rate of defaulting by fathers. Where the judicial system fails, mothers may apply for State maintenance grants"* (p.32).

Implicit in this provision is the assumption that men are or ought to be the usual providers for women and children. And while some concession is made to the need to enhance women's economic development independently of their relationship to men, it is articulated in terms of a concern to sustain the family in order to meet the needs of children.

> *"The approach underlying the way forward is a broad commitment to the preservation of the family as a unit in which children are raised to healthy adulthood, including the promotion of policies to fully integrated into the economy"* (p.35).

There is some specific attention paid to women as women. Women are held to be in need of support by the State in their own right within a discourse of being positioned in subject positions and suffering certain conditions – *"violence"*, *"poverty"*, *"discrimination in customary marriages",* a lack of *"gender-sensitivity"* from welfare services and legislation and as having needs as *'care givers'* and lacking *'capacity'*. This support is also deemed necessary by the State, if it is to achieve its goals of equality between men and women in social, economic and civic areas of life (p.52). The focus on women as women, however, is undermined almost by sleight of hand, by the strategy of 'partnership between men and women':

> *"Policies and programmes will also promote the partnership between women and men in domestic, parental, family and reproductive health programmes"* (p.52).

The guidelines for strategies by the state to promote women's social integration (given their vulnerability) mainly suggest administrative, advocacy, technical, legislative, and institutional solutions. Implicit in all the discourses on strategic intervention, be they related to violence against women, poverty, women as care givers, gender-sensitive welfare services, capacity-building and legislative reform is the view that vulnerability, inequality and discrimination against women are caused by failures within welfare services. In turn, these failures are believed to relate to the functioning and orientation of these institutions, the lack of awareness of women's rights in society, the lack of economic capacity in women, and their lack of access to resources (p.52).

So, for example, in order to address violence against women the document construes women as victims in need of care, support and protection. Posing the problem in this way gives rise to a discursive solution, namely, consciousness raising, human rights and administrative, legislative and institutional reform. Thus, the WPSW seeks to '*counteract*' women's subject position through creating a '*national consciousness*', '*give assistance*', '*promote personal safety*', provide education on '*women's rights*', support women through '*legal proceedings, improved policing and legislative procedural reform*' and retrain criminal justice personnel in the '*management of violence against women*' (p.52). Absent among these strategies is a discourse on the perpetrators of violence against women or the gender, age and social status dimensions of the relations that give rise to violence .

The discourse of the WPSW moves back and forth between a position of supporting women as women, and one of supporting them in their responsibilities to others – the care of children, survival of the family, male/female partnerships etc:

> "*Welfare personnel will advise business and unions on the needs of women and families in order to ensure that the rights of women to job security, health, safety and child care are secured*" (p.52).

In fact, the discourse of women as providers of care in society is ubiquitous: "*Community and home-programmes will take into account the social and economic needs of women who are most often the primary care-givers of family members who have special needs. Women's contribution in this regard has not previously been acknowledged. Options such as employment opportunities and financial support should be fully explored*" (Department of Welfare 1997:52). Rather than problematising the disproportionate burden of care that falls on women, even following their own arguments regarding partnerships, it is taken as natural and is used to justify state support to them.

When it comes to who or what is responsible for women's vulnerability, the discourse also swings back and forth between state institutions and women themselves. On the one hand, it is attributed to a lack of gender sensitivity among welfare services personnel, programmes and practice, which leads to the solution to '*train*' personnel on '*gender issues*', do '*research*' (get the facts, so to speak) and '*integrate*' gender issues in programmes. On the other hand, it is attributed to women's own lack of capacity, especially where their (undefined) '*special problems*' are concerned. Here the proposed solution is somewhat more abstract, lying as is suggested, in the overarching legal framework - the Constitution – and grand scheme programmatic interventions that promote equality, like the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP).

Overall, the discourse on women (sometimes in general, sometimes in particular subsets) in the WPSW is that of multiple vulnerability. In this, however, women are generally construed as being the primary carers of children, and it is this understanding that resonates with Chodorow's (1978) view that it is women who are responsible for and are providers of children's care. Women are also construed as unequal and different to men in terms of their social and economic positions in society, but whereas the WPSW ascribes these differences mainly to structural obstacles, particularly economic inequality, and to a lesser extent, to subjective

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factors such as consciousness, Chodorow sees women's inequality emerging from internal psychological processes that arise from their primary mothering role within families.

Where the WPSW specifically addresses women as women, it articulates a solution of partnerships between men and women in private sphere responsibilities. At one level this notion resonates with Chodorow's idea of co-parenting as a solution to transforming gender difference and inequality. However, she goes much further, calling for changes in the structure of parenting arrangements in order to de-gender individual psyche, while the WPSW's idea of 'partnership' aims to transform external arrangements. This and other solutions in the WPSW discourse focus on transforming wider political institutional practices and legislation to address women's inequality, whereas Chodorow concentrates on the need to change men and women's psyche. And while the idea of women as care givers pervades the WPSW as a normative assumption, for Chodorow it is a part of the psyche of women that is produced in the course of their mothering.

If the WPSW constructs women through the specificity of one or another type of disadvantage, or more specifically through their care taker relationship to children, an examination of the legislative and programmatic interventions that followed from the WPSW reveals a different conception of who the carers of children can be and are.

In this section I turn to The Social Assistance Act 59 of 1992 and the Child Support Grant Programme (CSG) which gives effect to the state's commitment to children in vulnerable households in the broader context of relieving poverty amongst the most vulnerable people in South Africa.

The CSG is targeted at poor children. It is awarded to children through beneficiaries who are denoted as the 'primary care giver' and who receive the monthly payment on their behalf.

At the time of writing, in order to be eligible for a grant:

- *the primary care giver must be over the age of 16 and a South African citizen or permanent resident;*
- *both the applicant and child must reside in South Africa;*
- *the applicant must be the primary care giver of the child/children concerned;*
- *the child/children must have been born after 31 December 1993;*
- *the applicant must not earn more than R30000 per year if single and not more than R60000 combined income if married;*
- *the applicant may only apply for support for up to six non-biological children;*
- *The Child/Children cannot be cared for in a state institution*

(South African Government Services 2010)

The Social Assistance Act, 1992 Section 4 (Department of Welfare 1992) uses the term 'primary care giver' which *'means a person older than 16 years, whether or not related to a child, who takes primary responsibility for meeting the daily care needs of that child.'*

This definition is broader and not gender or biologically specific and reflects a subtle change in thinking about who is or should be responsible for child care or the care of other vulnerable people in society, while the main thrust of the WPSW's discourse was that it is mainly women, or mothers, who are the care givers. The Act and the CSG sought to take into account the complex household structure and caring patterns in poor households in South Africa (Lund 2007). Lund (2007) states that while making room for men conceptually, the authors of the interventions always anticipated that it would be largely women who would be the primary care giver.

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While conceptually the Act and the CSG created a more open, ungendered understanding of primary care giver, it does not make provision for primary care givers who are under the age of 16 years old. This eligibility criterion contains an implicit normative conception about the age characteristic of a mother. Rosa, Leatt and Hall (2005:12) have pointed out that children who are under 16 but who are primary care givers are not eligible for the grant, because they are not entitled to hold an identity document. This is not only problematic in the context of a generalised HIV/AIDS epidemic where an increasing number of AIDS orphans also come to be the primary care givers of other children, their age not withstanding (Burman 2004:75), but it is also anomalous because it supports a discourse on childhood which often contradicts children's real lived experiences, their actual capacities, and their juridical standing in terms of contraventions of the law.

By limiting the number of children any one individual primary care giver may support to six, there is an implicit bias against familial responses to the care of children in times of need. There is qualitative evidence of grandmothers and other care givers who routinely care for more than six children at any one time (Marcus 2002; Marcus 2004).

Equally, as Haarmann (1998:108) has argued, the income threshold discriminates against larger family structures where the care giver has more dependents or if the care giver has more children (not only biological) who are vulnerable living in the household.

Inevitably, as the focus becomes more practical and technical, there are other shifts in the discourse. The *Procedural Manual for Grants Administration* for the CSG (Department of Social Development 2003) for example, stipulates the kinds of proofs of eligibility required for the CSG. These could include any of the following:

- a marriage certificate (if applicable);
- if you are divorced, a court order saying you have custody of the child ;
- written confirmation of persons supporting the child and/or Primary Care Giver (PCG) financially or otherwise;
- proof of personal income of PCG and his or her spouse;
- the identity document of PCG;
- the birth certificate of child; and
- proof of occupation (ie. residential address)

(South African Government Services 2010).

What is evident from the above is the implicit normative bias towards the institution of marriage as the (preferred) basis for family making or child care giving. What of partner income in the absence of marriage, for example, or of care givers who are and are likely to remain unmarried.

Similarly, the procedural requirement of 'proof of income' shifts the discourse on class, reflecting an implicit upward social bias, given the particular difficulty that the poor, and women in general, have in obtaining such evidence as they are concentrated amongst the unemployed, the poorly paid unorganised segments of the labour force or the bottom end of the marginal and self employed (Rosa, Leatt and Hall 2005: 25-26).

In implementation, the discourse on care giving becomes categorically instrumental, focusing as it does on the care and well being of vulnerable children. Section 4 (Social Assistance Act 59 of 1992) states that the primary care giver of the child receives the grant on behalf of the child. And they do so subject to special conditions (South African Social Security Agency 2010):

> *"(a) he or she shall continue to be the primary care-giver of the child concerned for the duration of the grant;*

(b) the child shall have accommodation, be properly fed and clothed;

(c) he or she shall allow the Director-General reasonable access to the child and the dwelling in which the child resides;

(d) he or she shall ensure that the child concerned receives immunisation and other health services where such services are available, without charge; and

(e) he or she shall carry out any instructions regarding the use of the grant issued by an authorised person appointed in terms of section 8 of the Act."

Thus, women (and men), as care givers, are construed as mere conduits to the end goal – the child – a policy shift away from the earlier practice of at least providing support to mothers in need as well. This then reinforces and the unpaid nature of care work and its devaluation in society.

The needs of care givers – particularly of women – are made secondary and subordinate to those of the children in their care. Given the WPSW's albeit limited narrative of concern for women's vulnerability in their own right, or the fact that the State anticipated that women (and especially vulnerable women) would be the majority of 'primary care givers', or the absence of any other kind of grant for the poor below the age of 60 years (as of 2008). This narrowing of the discourse on the meaning of child welfare has significant implications for both children and women in society. Daly and Rake (2003:67) in their comparative study of Welfare States and their policies, argue that care provision fails to affirm women in the role of carers in several ways, one of them being in instances where the care givers' needs are not taken into account by policy and may be overshadowed by those of the care receiver who may be regarded as more vulnerable.

That this shift in focus is not unintended is evidenced by the size of the grant (R100/ child aged 0-7 in 1998; R200/child aged 0-14 in 2007; R250/child aged below 18 years January 2010). By its scale it is clearly only intended to cover the barest of a child's needs and certainly not those of the care giver. The social security system has

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removed recognition and compensation for women's caring work, making it more invisible and taken for granted (Goldblatt and Liebenberg 2004:46). In so doing it has transformed care givers, especially women, into the most neglected category of vulnerable people (Burman 2004:65).

That the State targets the poor, especially women, as CSG care givers is evident from the income thresholds set by the State as its means test. Using a monetary measure of poverty to determine care givers deserving of state support, in 2010 the following were the qualifying income levels:

- If the care giver is a single person and earns less than R30 000 per annum
- If the care giver is in a spousal relationship and jointly their income is less than R60 000 per annum (South African Government Services website 2010).

As Burman (2004:66) argues, by qualifying to provide care to children, the needs of care givers are precluded, even though they themselves have insufficient income to attend to themselves. This approach is inappropriate to the intention of the CSG – the provision of proper and effective care to vulnerable children – and especially it goes against the sub-discourse of the WPSW, namely that women are themselves vulnerable and in need of support.

Taylor (2004:27) and other feminist theorists have argued that the right to full citizenship for all South African women and men, as enshrined in the South African Constitution, cannot be realised for women in the context of primary childcare responsibilities. The finding that the discourse on women's needs is subordinated to their responsibilities as care givers in the WPSW, and then eradicated in the subsequent legal framework and programmatic intervention, resonates with Chodorow's (1978) understanding of the position of women in relation to children in society. For her, women are devalued by society and children because of their primary location in the private sphere and caring role. The absence of direct support

to vulnerable and poor mothers in the CSG programme has effectively reduced the standing of child care and at the same time consolidated this burden in the private sphere.

By nuancing the means test to take account of various rural and urban conditions, the State's discourse on qualified support is however an acknowledgement of the specific broader social contexts of care and that the experiences and burdens of rural and urban primary care givers are different. Although this resonates with Chodorow's theory, where mothering is understood to happen in specific social contexts, it differs in that Chodorow refers to the micro level of social relations within the family and not the broader macro social context and other structures in society. However, to really understand this, it needs to be explored empirically which would make a topic for further research.

5.2.3. The discourse on children and family

In the WPSW (Department of Welfare 1997) children are identified as one of the vulnerable groups in South Africa and therefore a target of social welfare programmes. The discourse on children's vulnerability talks in terms of their being victims of and affected by a litany of external structural and systemic forces. These include historical injustices, poverty, living in vulnerable female headed households, discrimination, the absence of financial support from fathers, being orphaned by HIV/AIDS, violence in communities, natural disasters, disability, chronic illnesses, child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, malnutrition and nutritional deprivation.

As "*(o)ver half (54%) of all South Africa's children live in poverty*" (p.1) they are held to be particularly vulnerable to a condition that should and can be addressed through social welfare policies and programmes. Just as in its discourse on women, the WPSW's discourse on children's vulnerability to poverty is nested in other social relations. Thus,

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"While poverty is widespread throughout South Africa, African people are most affected. Women and children (particularly in female-headed households), people with special needs and those living in rural areas, informal settlements and on farms" (p.7).

Overall an indelible link is drawn between childhood poverty and growing up in female-headed households – the experience most common to children in South Africa. Not only does this combination carry with it negative physiological and nutritional consequences for children, but it also makes them vulnerable to negative social consequences, particularly contravention of the law (p.7). Clearly, addressing children's poverty is of highest priority and it needs is to be done

"by enabling impoverished households to provide adequate care for their members, especially children and those who are in vulnerable households" (p.2).

'Enabling households' means helping women take care of their families, particularly the children in their care. These ideas are spelt out in '*The Family and the Life-Cycle: Families, Children, Youth and Ageing*' a special section that specifically elaborates on social security strategies for the social integration of vulnerable children.

Thus, while vulnerability among all children is conceived of as a denial of their basic human rights which impairs their growth and development (p.39), some categories of children are identified as being more vulnerable and more in need of care and State support. Amongst others, these include those suffering from chronic illness, children suffering from abuse and neglect, children living on the street because of poverty, children involved in child labour, children involved in substance abuse, children of divorced parents and nutritionally vulnerable children (p.39-41). In the process, from a discourse of general vulnerability a hierarchy of need allows for the creation of a hierarchy of interventions.

In the process of considering children's vulnerability, children themselves are cast as passive subjects in need of care and dependent upon others. Consequently, the discourse singles out 'the family' as the key institution of care, and care within the family is assigned as the responsibility of parents. For its part, the State sees its role as indirect – to support and facilitate the parenting of children through various social security mechanisms. The logic of this understanding of needs and responsibilities leads 'naturally' to the inclusion of children among other vulnerable categories in the social security system. Thus, people entitled to non-contributory, means-tested benefits from the state are:

> *"groups such as people with disabilities, elderly people and unsupported parents and children who are unable to provide for their own minimum needs"* (p.31).

Children, it appears, acquire their vulnerable status through their fathers' failures – in that it is the absence of their financial support that renders children eligible for a state grant (p.32). In the WPSW the only relationship that is deemed of relevance to the system between fathers and children and indeed fathers and mothers, is that of financial provider.

HIV/AIDS adds another dimension to the discourse on children's vulnerability and their need for care. Children's vulnerability is not directly associated with the impact of the disease on their own health, but rather arises from the consequences of chronic illness and death of primary care givers on childcare. As the loss of parents deprives children of care and homes, so they become eligible for State intervention to assist with foster and adoptive care as a result of being homeless (pp.33, 35, 65).

Throughout the WPSW the dominant discourse on the family characterises the institution in an essentialist and functionalist way – as largely integrated, undifferentiated and functional for the care for children.

"The approach underlying the way forward is a broad commitment to the preservation of the family as a unit in which children are raised to healthy adulthood..."(p.35).

The family, as a nurturing, caring and socialising institution according to the WPSW therefore functions as an integrative social institution that serves all its members.

"The family, ideally, seeks to care for, nurture and socialise its members. These members differ in terms of gender, age, stage of development, and physical and mental abilities. Children and young people, persons with chronic illnesses, physical and mental disabilities, the elderly and those individuals who are not functioning optimally and have special needs are normally members of a family. Their needs should be addressed in the context of the family life-cycle approach. Policies and programmes to strengthen and support families must be developed by Government and civil society" (p.37).

In this account children are cast as having special needs.

The family's caring responsibilities are linked to the idea of the human life-cycle which is imbued with both biological and social content. Thus,

"As far as is appropriate, the life-cycle approach should guide and inform programming. This approach refers to the interaction between family members, the wider social environment and social support networks. Programmes must make provision for the needs of families in accordance with the different stages in the life cycle. These stages are: early childhood and childhood development phase (including the preparation and child-bearing phase); the school-going and adolescent years; the launching of young adults; middle age; and retirement and old age" (p. 37).

Although all 'stages' are listed, in fact the state does not see itself or the family as an institution having the same level of obligation to each. Rather, it is the understanding of the family as a site of physical and social reproduction that directs the State's

various social security provisions for the care of children into family structures; be they biological or surrogate. Daly and Rake (2003:23) in their studies on the Welfare State and gender point out that social policies define the onset of childhood, adulthood and later life, and influence the conditions under which people pass through the life phases.

> *"The environment best suited to meeting the primary needs of children is the family. Maintenance and foster grants are key forms of community care provision. Adoption allowances to enable less wealthy families to adopt, and possible assistance to families who are prepared to adopt children with disabilities will be fully explored, bearing the best interest of the child in mind"* (p.35).

There are various sub-discourses in the WPSW on the family. One refers to its diversity of form and structure.

> *"Children grow up in a wide range of family forms and structures, with different needs, role divisions, functions and values"* (p. 39).

In this sub-discourse, paternalism and the subordination of women and children is acknowledged as issues, albeit ones that can be dealt with.

> *"Significant efforts need to be made to transform family relationships which currently contribute to the subordination of women and children"* (p.41).

Another sub-discourse points to family problems, which are listed as, alcohol and drug abuse, marital conflict, family violence, and family breakdown. These too can be dealt with.

> *"Family-based policies and programmes should reflect the changing nature and structure of families. Programmes should be devised to strengthen families, and reconcile family and work responsibilities"* (p.41).

Generally speaking these sub-discourses, diverse family form and structure and family problems, have little bearing on the dominant essentialist view of the institution or its primacy in dealing with the array of vulnerable children's needs.

"The well-being of children depends on the ability of families to function effectively. Because children are vulnerable they need to grow up in a nurturing secure family that can ensure their survival, development, protection and participation in family and social life. Not only do families give their members a sense of belonging, they are also responsible for imparting values and life skills. Families create security; they set limits on behaviour; and together with the spiritual foundation they provide, instil notions of discipline. All these factors are essential for the healthy development of the family and of any society" (p. 39).

Overall, in the WPSW the institution is cast as a panacea for most social problems as well as being the provider of multiple social, physical, spiritual, moral and emotional needs of individuals in society and especially children. So it can be asked, why then is there a need for State intervention? As the WPSW puts it, the need for State intervention in the family arises because of the family's inability to fulfil its parenting and social support functions.

"As a result of the increasing pressure on families, they are often unable to fulfil their parenting and social support roles effectively without the active support of the community, the State and the private sector" (p.39).

The WPSW continues:

"*Special attention must be given to families who are vulnerable and at risk, and who are poor and involved in child-rearing and caring for their members at unacceptable social cost to themselves*" (p.41).

Under these conditions, the State has an explicit purpose:

"The aim of family and child welfare services is to preserve and strengthen families so that they can provide a suitable environment for the physical, emotional and social development of all its members" (p.41).

In other words, it seeks to assist to restore functionality to the family, reassert its normalcy and restore it to an ideal – a dual parent, nuclear or extended site of human and social reproduction, preferably within marriage.

Thus, while reference is made to strategies such as adoption, foster care, residential care, maintenance grants as possible measures that can help address the needs of vulnerable children (p.43), the discourse gives preference to surrogate family care as the best alternative to the absent or failed biological family.

For the most part, the WPSW refers to the family as the aggregate responsible for the care of children. At times, for example in the chapter on 'Social Security' or the section on 'Women', the discourse becomes specific and gendered. Here women are described as the main care givers of children.
    It is they who are said to
"… have had to join the labour market for economic reasons and have had to rely on childcare outside the home" (p.39).

 And they who
    "…can claim support for their children through the law courts" (p.31).

5.2.4. The discourse on men

What is notable in all three narratives is that there is sparse reference to men. When men are mentioned it is mostly with reference to their actual or idealised roles as breadwinners and providers of financial support within families or as role defaulters, who fail to provide financially for the care of their children in life:

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"There is a high rate of defaulting by fathers. Where the judicial system fails, mothers may apply for State maintenance grants" (p.32).

Or for their wives and children in death:
 "Women are also disadvantaged in terms of customary law regarding property, inheritance and access to land. This disadvantage increases the financial vulnerability of the household when the father dies" (p.65).

The discourse on men in the WPSW implies that men are economically privileged, that they are not faced with pressures of parenthood and that they behave responsibly to their children when they are in families and that their presence in women's lives reduces women's and children's vulnerability.

This essentially ideal typical construction of men translates directly into the legal and programmatic discourse of the Social Assistance Act and the CSG programme into an inclusive and open approach – hence the terminology 'primary care giver' and the right and entitlement of men to apply for the CSG grant.

5.2.5. The material practice of caregiving in the CSG Programme

Having considered South Africa's policy, legislative and programmatic discourse of gender and caring, it is now necessary to look briefly at actual practice at least in terms of CSG grant holders. An analysis of existing studies of the CSG provides a snapshot understanding of who primary care givers are as well as the familial relations in which children are living and being cared for.

The research on CSG programmatic support shows that poor children in South Africa are cared for, almost exclusively (98.59%), by women (Leatt 2004). Only 1, 4% of CSG claimants are men (Budlender et.al. 2005). The overwhelming majority of primary care givers receiving grants (92%) claim the grant for their own children

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(Budlender et.al. 2005). And the majority of CSG recipients live in rural areas (66%) where poverty is deeper and more widespread (Leatt 2004).

In Umkhanyakude district, Hlabisa in the northern part of KwaZulu-Natal, a deep rural area, Case, Hosegood, and Lund's (2003) study of the reach of the Child Support Grant in 11,178 households found that 87 percent of primary care givers receiving the grant are resident mothers, 10 percent are grandmothers and one percent is an aunt of the child. Fathers comprise only 0.2 percent of the primary care givers. For over half of the children receiving the grant (52%) the status of the father was unknown, whereas 'missing' mothers were relatively rare. Their study also found that children who did not live with their parents, in particular with their mothers, were significantly less likely to have a grant application made on their behalf, a finding consistent with earlier research that children living apart from mothers face particular risks and that household expenditure on child-related goods is lower when a child's birth mother is absent (Case et.al.2000).

An early study of the CSG programme by Kola et.al. (2000), found that in a sample of 999 beneficiaries, nearly all the primary care givers (99%) were women. At the time of their research, 89% were the biological mothers of the child beneficiaries and the majority of biological parents were single parents. The average age of the women was 33 years. In terms of household structure, 69 percent of children in the study lived in single parent households, these being more prevalent in formal urban areas than formal rural areas. In terms of care giving patterns in CSG households, the study found that 57% of primary care givers looked after the child beneficiary while 9% were looked after by the maternal grandmother of the PCG. That only 25% of the children were found to attend school or day care for either the whole or a part of the day is likely to be an artefact of when this study was conducted, as the CSG was confined to support for 0-7 year old children at that time.

The available evidence shows that, in practice, the CSG programme channels its support to children primarily through women, who, in turn, are mostly their biological mothers. A large proportion of these women live in rural areas.

In the discussion below and by way of conclusion I will look at what this means for degendered notions like "primary care giver", the discourse and practice of support that circumvents women as carers in need of care themselves, and Chodorow's (1978) theory on women who mother and want to mother and the role of their mothering in the creation of gendered identities in children.

5.3. Discussion and conclusion

An analysis of the discourse of the WPSW shows that it conceptualises and positions women as vulnerable subjects and providers of care in society whereas men are mainly conceptualised as absent breadwinners and financial providers for women and children's needs. Children are identified as structurally vulnerable and in need of care mainly through the family; which is a normative familial model. The needs of men, women and children are framed and interpreted mainly through a discourse which is underpinned by gendered assumptions.

The interpretation of this discourse is in the practice of welfare through the Social Assistance Act and CSG programme. In the CSG programme social assistance is provided for the care of children through the degendered notion of 'primary care giver' who lives in an economically vulnerable household. Whereas the WPSW recognises and essentialises the primary role played by women in childcare and identifies their vulnerability both economically and also in terms of their caring responsibilities, the provision of support for childcare through social assistance negates this recognition. The numerous qualifying criteria stipulated for 'primary care givers' to receive benefits position the providers of care as petitioners of the

State and beneficiaries whose needs are administratively and institutionally defined by the State.

The findings from CSG studies however, show that women are the main individual claimants/clients/beneficiaries of the CSG who qualify as 'primary care givers'. They are also in most instances the biological mothers of the children and they are also mostly resident in the households of the children. These primary care givers are mostly unmarried and unemployed. These findings also reveal that fathers are mostly absent from households and that males comprise a very small percentage of primary care givers. The implications of the degendered notion of 'primary care givers' in the Act and CSG programme is a failure by the State to recognise that it is women who are mainly the primary care givers and to provide support to women for this function through relief or compensation. It also implies a failure to acknowledge that welfare is also provided by largely women's unpaid domestic care-work (Walby 2009:144).

Sainsbury (1996) argues that the State through its welfare systems may treat women as wives or mothers or workers, in the case of the WPSW the women are primarily located within a discourse of care as mothers and care is located within the discourse of familial ideology. In so doing the State policy fails to account for and provide for the social structural problems experienced by women as a consequence of their care giving roles as well as to provide the conditions for women to assert their agency to meet their own productive needs. Walby (2009:113) argues that the provision of State facilities for childcare is very important in facilitating the employment of mothers who in the absence of such provision may choose to look after their children in a domestic setting. Further, she (ibid) argues that the greater the extent of State childcare, the higher and more rapidly the rate of female employment rises. She (ibid) does however, also acknowledge that high levels of female employment do also occur without State support but mainly in households that can afford to privately purchase these services from the market. Daly and Rake (2003:69) argue that the

provision for care by the State is heavily implicated in gender inequality and patterns of individual and family well being and associated with variations in the situation between men and women.

Fraser (1989:149) argues that welfare policies position women and interpret women's needs as subjects in a particular way rather than dealing with women as women:

> *"Of course, the welfare system does not deal with women on women's terms. On the contrary, it has its own characteristic ways of interpreting women's needs and positioning them as subjects"*

She further argues:

> *"Clearly, this system creates a double bind for women raising children without a male breadwinner. By failing to offer these women day care for their children, job training, a job that pays a "family wage," or some combination of these, it constructs them exclusively as mothers. As a consequence, it interprets their needs as maternal needs and their sphere of activity as that of "the family." Now, according to the ideology of separate spheres, this should be an honoured social identity. Yet the system does not honour these women. On the contrary, instead of providing them a guaranteed income equivalent to a family wage as a matter of right, it stigmatizes, humiliates, and harasses them. In effect, it decrees simultaneously that these women must be and yet cannot be normative mothers"* (ibid:153).

Hassim (1999:16) cites Lister (1994) as arguing that state social security grant recipients are positioned as dependent clients on the state rather than as full citizens.

With regard to Chodorow's claim that it is mainly women who mother in society and want to mother, the findings from the CSG studies confirm that it is women who are mainly caring for children in families. These findings have resonance with

Chodorow's argument that women continue to play the role of primary caretakers of infants in society. Chodorow argues that the basis for women's predominantly mothering role is linked to their pre-Oedipal experiences of being mothered by women, where they develop mothering capacities which become part of their unconscious psyche, however she also argues that women mother because they derive meaning from this identity.

Walker (1995:437) argues that women invest in motherhood and family not simply as a product of socialisation or patriarchal ideology but because of their own experience of this role. She (ibid) argues that woman want to mother and that the contribution of Chodorow's theory is her recognition of women's agency, an agency that stems from unconscious drives. The finding that it is women who predominantly claim the CSG, can be interpreted as women consciously constructing and claiming their mothering role and identity in society. Women's recognition of themselves as 'primary care givers' by mostly applying for the grant, can be viewed as a reflection of women asserting their agency as mothers in a consciously reflective way.

Peattie and Rein (1983) have developed a claims-related perspective in order to introduce an agency perspective on the relationship between the welfare state and gender and for purposes of describing political economy at the level of the individual and the household and to connect the individual with the household. However, women's agency as expressed in claiming the CSG can also be seen as a response to the recognition of the stark reality that they are economically vulnerable, unable to provide for their own children's needs and that men are absent as fathers and breadwinners in households. Peattie and Rein (1983: 20) argue that claims originate in particular sets of norms and values and are interpreted through prevailing social conventions and legal and customary entitlements.

However the findings of the predominance of mothers who are 'primary care givers' can also be seen as a reflection of the discourse of caring embedded within policy

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and practices of social institutions. Here the choices, desires, motivations and behaviour (including mothering) of women in the family and society are constructed through discourses of mothering and gender in policy by political institutions. This institutional and policy discourse can be seen as perpetuating their role as 'primary care giver' and fulfilling a 'reproductive function' in society which relegates them to the private sphere. Hakim (1996:5) argues that the position of women in society is determined 'both by their access to, role and status in paid employment, and the status accorded to their reproductive and domestic role.' From a social interactionist perspective the women mothering (interaction with children) can also been seen as a reaction to the features of their particular social context (family) where they are expected to be and are categorised by others and themselves as nurturers. Schram (1993:251) argues that:

> "…value gets created when discursive structures are stabilised sufficiently to serve as the basis for enabling people to value some identities and interests over others. Identities emerge out of textually constructed differences."

With regard to the theory of object relations to which Chodorow subscribes, the social practice of mothering by individual women produces gender personalities in children. Children's identification with same sex parents provides them with the experiences to learn the meanings of maleness and femaleness and is significant to their emotional development. She also argues that women and children relate to men as providers and breadwinners engaged in the public sphere. In the CSG households, women and children do not relate to men as providers of the family as they are absent but rather depend on the State to provide financial support for children. Children do not develop an inner psyche of triangular object relations of son/mother/daughter or daughter/mother/father. Mothers' continued presence in CSG households does allow for both girls and boys to form primary attachments to their mothers or grandmothers and for girls to identify with femaleness.

However, if you apply Chodorow's model of identity formation to boys in CSG households – boys would also experience difficulties in male gender identity formation not because fathers are absent breadwinners but rather because fathers are mostly absent in any form at all. Chant (1997 cited in Visvanathan, Duggan, Nisnoff and Wiegersma (1997:158) suggests that boys become confused about their identity in households where fathers are absent. She argues that their experiences of insecurity could lead to them to demonstrating exaggerated masculinity later in life. However, she also (ibid:161) argues that in female-headed units children experience the absence of violence and this gives children greater psychological security and this could also act to reduce *machismo* and hostility between men and women.

In contrast to Chodorow's model which implies that women are devalued in society because of their primary mothering role and location in the private sphere, the fact that women are the main primary care givers who receive the CSG to provide for children's material needs, could positively impact on women's status within the family; as it could increase their value and status with children as they become the primary providers for their well being in the absence of fathers.

Chodorow's theory on gender difference holds the view that the social organisation of the family with women mothering is the cause of gender difference within an individual's psyche, she therefore proposes shared parenting as a solution to change the psychology of children in order to transform gendered psyches – rather than the transformation of social institutions and practices which reproduces gender differences and inequalities within the family. Her solution is however, consistent with her explanation that because the cause of gender difference and inequality resides in an individual's psyche which arises from a particular social organisation of parenting, transformation of gender difference requires a change in the social organisation and practice of parenting within families. Woollett (1991) also argues that 'psychological constructions of motherhood are underpinned by wider social constructions of motherhood.' Chodorow's views on shared parenting has resonance

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with the WPSW proposal for partnership between men and women in domestic activities to overcome their vulnerability and the CSG also implies gender neutral care through the "primary care giver". But the overall discourse and provisions of the State with regard to care belie these intentions. The implications of the discourse and practice of support by the State for women is that they are mainly provided for in their role as carers and their needs which arise from their social structural vulnerability are not accounted for or provided for.

Part III - Gender as maternal practice and maternal thinking

The preceding chapters have analysed theoretical explanations of gender difference and inequality as maternal essence which is located either in women's biological or psychological experiences of mothering. There are however other feminist theorists, including Carol Gilligan (1982), Sara Ruddick (1989), Jean Bethke Elshtain (1981), and Ann Ferguson (1989) who also explain gender difference and maternal essence but who focus on mothering as work, practice and/or activities. For them, gender differences emerge from the common activities of mothering such as nurturing, protecting, and caring and it is these practices that give rise to and is influenced by distinctive cognitive capacities, attitude and values. Here human practice forms the basis of subjectivity and consciousness. Mothering activities are demanded by children according to their basic needs. For these theorists, rather than mothering being a source of oppression, the sexual division of labour – where women mother – produces attributes in women which are deemed valuable and should be celebrated by all in society. This is especially because maternal experiences transform women's consciousness to a more progressive political and feminist consciousness. If there is a problem, they argue, it lies in masculinist culture, which values instrumentalism and rationality and devalues feminine virtues and values and consciousness.

This approach to mothering and male/female difference arises from what Eisenstein (1984: p.xviii-xix) observed as a shift in the 1970s in the feminist movement away from the erasure of difference to an emphasis on women's difference to men, where women's difference came to be regarded as a source of enrichment rather than as a tool of oppression. Briefly, in this changed conceptual framework, Eisenteisn (1984: pxviii-xix) cites Jean Baker Miller (1976), as arguing that women have learnt to develop certain psychological qualities such as nurturing qualities, affiliative and cooperative qualities which were not only strengths but could be seen as more truly

human qualities than those in which men were socialised. She also argues that this shift was also evident in conceptions of women's bodies; while reproduction, motherhood and female physiology were formerly construed as oppressive by Firestone (1970), they now came to be regarded by Rich (1976) as a source of strength rather than a constraint. For Eisenstein (1984), Rich made an important distinction between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood with the latter being linked to patriarchy. She pointed out that Rich viewed the female body as something that allowed women a "richness of experience that might extend potentially to new human possibility" (ibid: xix). In identifying and validating women's difference, these theorists argued that 'female' virtues should counter and replace aggression and competitiveness and should be spread throughout society.

In a similar vein, Young (1990:74) has characterised the shift in accounts of women's oppression as a move away from humanist feminism, which is seen as typical of the 19th & 20th century and early Second Wave feminism, to gynocentric feminism. She describes gynocentric feminism as defining *"women's oppression as the devaluation and repression of women's experience by masculinist culture that exalts violence and individualism"* (ibid: 73). Like Eisenstein (1984), she contends that gynocentric feminists claim that the values of traditional female experiences are superior to the values of traditional male institutions.

In the African context Oyewumi (2000) also emphasises the importance of motherhood as a self identity of African women, while Amadiume (1997) argues that in the African system of matriarchy motherhood represents women's empowerment. This shift in the conceptualisation of gender difference was accompanied by methodological and epistemological shifts. The point of enquiry became the study of women's actual experiences, with women being active subjects consciously and purposively constructing their identity, behaviour and world as opposed to them being the objects or passive subjects of external, structural forces (Ritzer 1998:312). As Kaplan (1992:3) explains, whereas mothers have always been studied from the

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perspective of 'others' or as a function of patriarchy, few studies have tried to understand their 'positioning or social role from inside the mother's discourse'. Epistemologically these feminist theorists view the standpoint of the subject, in this case mothers, as an equally valid explanation of behaviour. In sociology this explanation of behaviour falls within the ambit of social interactional, microstructural and social action perspectives where humans are viewed as purposive actors orientating their actions to other individuals (Ritzer 1998: 316-8).

Not surprisingly, theories built on the celebration of women's difference from men and which focus on women's experiences and activities as an explanation of gender differences have been extensively critiqued. Numerous writers (Spelman 1988, Fuss 1989, Fraser and Nicholson 1990, Flax 1990, Butler 1989, Bordo 1992, and Haraway 1991) point to the theoretical limits of this approach. The emphasis on and the celebration of women's individual mothering activities excludes a social constructionist explanation of mothering, how it is linked to the public sphere and how it perpetuates the assignation of women to the private sphere. It does not engage with the problem of a gendered private/public dichotomy and the implications this has for women, oppression or mothering. Hekman (1999:21) citing Teresa Ebert (1996:16) argues that experience, like all other cultural and political practice, is socially constructed and relational.

The valorisation of women's lives is also criticised for generalising, universalising and essentialising women's mothering activities as well as children's demands. Di Leonardo and Lancaster (2002:53) argue that Western popular culture is guilty of fetishizing motherhood and claiming a female consciousness that exists across time and space. The criticism points to a reifying of women's activities, 'women's work', and their identities and that it does so in an ethnocentric way.

In terms of sociological theorising, the social action, social interactionist paradigms which underpin theorists who celebrate women's mothering activities, are also

criticised for their neglect of the power of social structural and institutional external forces in shaping behaviour. Epistemologically, the naturalistic and interpretive approach underlying this position on mothering has been criticised from a more positivist approach for its relativist, particularistic viewpoint.

Sara Ruddick, the next author I propose to consider, falls among those gender theorists who, while not seeking to minimise women's differences from men, have argued for the re-evaluation of women's difference in society. In her book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989) she holds that there are distinctive maternal practices/work/activities which emerge in response to children's demands and that these practices are informed by a distinctive kind of maternal thinking. Maternal practices are not restricted to women but can be done by others, including men, if they have the interests of nurturing and preserving children. For her, maternal thinking provides a platform for anti-militaristic values, which can contribute towards the promotion of peace.

Chapter 6

The reproduction of gender through practice: the theory

6.1. Sara Ruddick

For both Ruddick (1989) and Chodorow (1978) mothering experiences are linked to the creation of gender difference. However, whereas Chodorow focuses on the practice of mothering and its unconscious gendered effect on the gender identities of children, Ruddick focuses on the practice of mothering and the gender difference it gives rise to in women's thinking through their conscious reflection of their mothering practice. In her own reflections on maternal practice and thinking Ruddick argues that she draws heavily on the works of the *Women's Ways of Knowing* collective, namely Jean Baker Miller and especially Carol Gilligan, whose 'different-voice' theory examines women's work and experiences and articulates the ideals of an alternative epistemology and moral reasoning (p.95).

Ruddick (in Bassin, Honey and Kaplan 1994:37) attributes her approach to what she regards as the then prevailing contempt of Western philosophers for bodies and matter as well as the need to validate experiential subjective ways of knowing in a world dominated by a belief in scientific objectivity. She criticises abstract thinking as being a form of masculine thinking that creates false dichotomies such as one/other, mind/body, male/female, and she rejects masculinist reasoning. For her, the best approach is a subjectivist analysis of behaviour.

Ruddick (1989:9) disconnects birthgiving from mothering. For her, the work of mothering is central to women's practice and it is this practice that gives rise to maternal thinking. She argues that maternal practice begins in response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world.

Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989), the text which is under consideration here, is divided into three parts: *Thinking About Mothers Thinking*, *Protection, Nurturance and Training* and *Maternal Thinking and Peace Politics*. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on the first two parts, as they set out her conceptions of the thinking and practices of mothering and are central to the focus of my thesis. Part III, which looks at the positive implications of her characterisation of mothering for political, non-violent activism takes up issues of politics and political practice. As these are not germane to this dissertation, this section of her book will not be considered further here.

Ruddick attributes the genesis of her own experiences and ideas about maternal practice and thinking to her initial 'love affair' with Reason, defined by Western philosophers as detached, impersonal, rationality. This notion of Reason, articulated by Descartes as being the 'correct method' (Ruddick 1989:7) entails having self-control, objectivity and detachment. Not surprisingly it is embodied in men and lacking in women. By acting through Reason, subjectively she was able intellectually to move away from social responsibility and subjectivity.

However, as a wife, mother and citizen Ruddick gradually became disillusioned with this kind of Reason because not only was it used to justify domination, violence, oppression and privilege, but it also implied being detached, impersonal and irreverent to affections and loyalties (Ruddick 1989:.8). Ruddick found herself questioning and redefining the social and sexual politics of Cartesian Reason. For Ruddick (1989) the human good in reason lay elsewhere and needed to be differently understood. For her, reason was defined as learning, experimenting, imagining, discovery, designing, inventiveness, steady judgement, self-reflectiveness, clear speech and attentive listening. And this form of reason, with its feminine attributes, was found in women.

What Ruddick theorised was an alternative conception of reason that ideally is linked to the more appropriate attributes of responsibility and love, which arise from the perspective of the work and experiences of mothering.

Drawing on the ideas of Wittgenstein (1975/1980), Winch (1952) and Habermas (1972), Ruddick argues that "*All thinking ...arises from and is shaped by the practices in which people engage*" (p.9). In the first chapter of the book she develops her ideas on maternal thinking by focussing on the relationship between thinking and practice in the abstract and then applying these ideas to her own and others maternal practice and maternal thinking. She describes maternal work as demands to which workers respond. *"These demands shape, and are in turn shaped by, the metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities, and identification of virtues that make up maternal thinking"* (p.11). Drawing from her own and others' experiences of mothering, she suggests that maternal thinking emerges from the practice of mothering as a social interaction between mother and child.

Her ideas have been described philosophically as a 'practicalist' conception of 'truth' or as 'practicalism.' It is an approach that holds that *"ways of knowing and criteria of truth arise out of practices"* (p.13) rather than there being foundational notions of truth and metanarrative.

According to this philosophical approach "*thinking arises from and is tested against practices*" (p.13), and practices are *"collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on the practitioners committed to those aims"* (p.13-14). In other words human action or practice is defined by aims and goals that are directed at meeting demands, while the thinking that practice generates is both social and solitary in character. Thinking is social in so far as concepts have shared meanings in language and, therefore, the aims and the means as well as the rules to achieve the aims are shared. But it is also a solitary endeavour in that thinking about actions happens at an individual level. From this

logic, there is no one way of thinking that can transcend its social origins, making truth

> *"perspectival, relative to the practices in which it is made …The practicalist's point is that the criteria for truth and falsity, the nature of evidence, and the role of faith will vary with the practice, whether the practice be religious, scientific, critical – or maternal"* (p.16).

Applying this philosophical perspective to the specific practice of mothering, Ruddick (1989) argues that:

> *"Maternal practice begins with a response to the reality of a biological child in a particular social world. To be a "mother" is to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life"* (p.17).

She also points out that, apart from maternal practice, mothers do engage in various other activities and as individuals are not only defined by their work. She argues that mothers are also all very different from one another as they are also shaped by their social contexts. However, Ruddick's definition of a mother is specifically in relation to women's commitment to meeting the demands made by their children and the social world which is constituted in maternal work (ibid).

Ruddick suggests that there are three demands made on mothers – *"preservation, growth and social acceptability"* and these, in turn, generate three kinds of maternal work *"preservative love, nurturance, and training"*. She holds that the preservation and growth of children is a truth and achieving this end is the goal. I now turn to examining each of these demands.

6.1.1. Children's demands and maternal work

For Ruddick, preservation is the most important maternal demand, because human children are physically fragile and have a longer dependency on adults for their safety and well-being and, therefore, require protective care. She argues that although the cause and type of dependency and protection might vary, this is a universal need in children which creates a category of human work. Even though the perception of the need for care and the actual rendering of care is optional, as they are both subject to social interpretation, the aim of maternal practice is to preserve the lives of children. Commitment to achieving that aim defines the maternal act.

The second demand made on mothers by children, emotional and intellectual growth generates the maternal practice of nurturing this growth, albeit in historically and culturally specific ways (p.19). Despite their varied contexts, all children require nurturance and this work is typically done by mothers (p.20).

The third demand defining maternal practice is a demand that is not made by children but by the social group of the mother. It is a demand that relates to the socialisation of individuals according to the norms and values of a particular social group and these norms and values may vary among groups and cultures (p.21). Ruddick calls this a demand for the 'acceptability' of children within the groups to which they belong. This demand to 'fit in' or to train children to be socially acceptable is not variable and it involves several strategies, namely, "*persuasion, manipulation, education, abuse, seduction or respectability*" (ibid.21). The social group of the mother sets the standards of acceptability and she is also responsible for training children to be acceptable. Ruddick argues that mothers are usually woman and have varying degrees of power in relation to men in their groups.

While maternal work also involves other, additional demands, Ruddick argues that it is these three demands that are essentially constitutive of maternal practice (p.22).

She does also concede that mothers and children may be differently defined in other cultures. However, since mother and child are relational concepts, maternal practice will exist wherever cultures recognise children as demanding protection, nurturance and training. The fact that maternal commitment is voluntary and that there are culturally varied and subjective choices on whether or not to respond to demands to protect, nurture and train children, the demands themselves require mothers to reflect on their responses. It is this act of reflection that generates maternal thinking.

6.1.2. Maternal thinking

Maternal thinking is the distinctive discipline that arises from thoughtfulness over maternal practice. Ruddick describes maternal thinking as *"the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgements she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, and the values she affirms"* (p.24). For her this discipline is like any other discipline. It entails asking questions about the aims of her work and evaluating the relevance of her answers, establishing criteria for this evaluation, setting priorities and identifying appropriate virtues. Maternal thinking also requires disciplined reflection on identifying questions, methods and aims. In itself it is not virtuous, however, but rather requires an assessment of the possible content of the virtues of maternal thinking (p.25). She claims that the thinking that mothers engage in arises in and is tested through their practice and, therefore, can only be evaluated by those who practice maternal work or who live "*closely and sympathetically with those who do*" (p.26). In other words, she contends that criticism of maternal thinking and practices cannot be made by those who are not involved in maternal work. This does not mean that self criticism or interpractice criticism is not possible, but rather that there is no one discipline that can be used as a standard to judge all other practices (p.27). She is here once again referring to her rejection of metanarrative explanations and arguing for the recognition of multiple perspectives.

Ruddick gives a detailed account of maternal thinking – the specific metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities and virtues which arise from mothering in the second part of her book.

Methodologically, she describes her approach as *"making it up"* (p.61), in other words that she developed her conceptualisation of maternal practices and mothering by making sense of her own reflections on her experiences and practices. By intuitively recognising that mothering was a type of work and then linking this insight to the epistemological claim that labour or practice forms consciousness, she developed her theory that distinctive kinds of maternal thinking arise from the demands of maternal work (p.62). By her own account, only retrospectively did she discover that this approach was used by theorists in a range of disciplines (sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology) and from a variety of perspectives. Especially, she found her ideas resonated with strands of feminism, and these, in turn, have come to shape and influence her own distinctive ideas.

By analysing what she holds to be the three essential demands children make on mothering and maternal thinking, she explores the conflictual nature of the attitudes that the experience gives rise to and the need for mothers to continuously struggle to think and act maternally.

6.1.3. Maternal practice and maternal thinking

In this section I turn to maternal practice and maternal thinking, in the form of maternal work as it is influenced by children's demands.

6.1.3.1. Preservative Love

The first demand that a mother responds to from her child is the demand for protection with preservative love. As maternal thinking is imbued with feelings and cannot be separated from them, for Ruddick, protective thinking is closely linked to a

mother's passionate feelings for her child. But 'mother-love' is intermixed with hate, sorrow, impatience, resentment, and despair so ambivalence becomes a distinctive feature of mothering. She writes:

> *"In protecting her child, a mother is besieged by feeling, her own and her children's. She is dependent on these feelings to interpret the world. The world that mothers and children see and name, separately and together, is constructed by feeling"* (p.68).

Protective love is structured by feelings as feelings provide the instruments for thought. Mothers reflect on their feelings in their thinking about mothering. This reflection leads to action and more reflection. Thus,

> *"feelings demand reflection, which is in turn tested by action, which is in turn tested by the feelings it provokes"* (p.70).

In their protection of children from outside forces, from mothers themselves or from children, Ruddick argues, mothers develop a mental habit or cognitive style called "*scrutinizing*" where mothers look out for dangers before they appear (p.72). At the same time, she suggests, this attribute of scrutiny is tempered by humility, an attribute that enables mothers to acknowledge the limits of their actions and the unpredictable nature of the consequences of maternal practice. Humility is a virtue for mothers who see that they cannot control everything to keep their children safe.

Humility is a metaphysical attitude that is not typical in Western scientific thinking, as it entails seeing children as subjects who are also purposive agents, rather than as objects that can be controlled (p.73). For Ruddick, humility does not mean that mothers become so passive as to give up all efforts to control. Rather than relinquishing control, they come to think of it in a particular way without domination. From this perspective, successful care means ensuring the safety of someone whose will cannot be controlled. At the same time, mothers are also

tempted to be passive by relying on the judgement and advice of experts. In the process, they give control up to them in their thinking and practice.

"Cheerfulness" or the preservation of control in an uncontrollable world as well as the securing of self against one's own impatience, anxiety, fatigue and self-preoccupation is another virtuous attribute that Ruddick believes mothers develop. She argues that to be "cheerful" means to *"respect chance, limit and imperfection"* (p.74) and still endeavour to keep children safe. By identifying cheerfulness as a virtue of mothering, she is not claiming however, that mothers all possess it, but rather she is seeking to highlight the struggle that maternal work is for women.

Ruddick goes on to argue that, in the process of doing protective work, mothers also acquire a particular conception of *"nature"*, which is an attitude that accepts the physical being of their children, their bodies, its physicality, chemistry, emotions, vulnerability (p.75-76). This does not mean that they do not try and protect them against 'nature' but rather that a mother appreciates the *"workings of nature within herself and those she loves …like the Ghandian non-violent activist"*(p.77).

"Holding" is another characteristic of protectiveness that mothers develop in their efforts to protect their children. Through it they seek to *"minimize risk and reconcile differences"* by trying to maintain harmony, material resources and skills for their children's safety (p.79). While at its best, it is virtuous, Ruddick suggests that "holding" could degenerate into *"holding too closely, too timidly, too materially"* and "holding" together relationships which children depend on but which are harmful to them (p.79).

She celebrates these cognitive attitudes and virtues of preservative love – scrutiny, cheerfulness and holding – which are widely found in powerless people but points out that they are often used by the powerful to oppress them. However, Ruddick's valuing of these capacities leads her to claim that they can be used effectively in

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political struggle. Lastly, she argues that maternal care (protection) of their children extends beyond keeping the home safe for children and into keeping the neighbourhood, community and nation safe (p.80-81).

6.1.3.2. Fostering growth

The second demand made by children on mothers is that of fostering growth in children and mothers respond to this demand through nurturance. Ruddick argues that "*to foster growth is to nurture a child's developing spirit – whatever in a child is lively, purposive, and responsive*" (p.82). She argues that mothers' reflect on how to foster growth, and in so doing recognise children's complexity and the difficulties of responding confidently to them. She also claims that mothers' nurturance of children assumes that nature is their ally. They cooperate with it in the belief that for the most part it 'moves them toward health and integrity' (p.84).

For Ruddick, 'nurturance' means identifying children's behaviour and feelings as 'natural', that is, as appropriate to their age and circumstances. She argues that children need sympathetic attention from adults to cope with intense emotions, abuse, fears, and passions otherwise they will be damaged intellectually (p.84). At the same time, confronted with daily questions from helpers, experts, fathers, friends, grandparents etc., mothers have to make decisions about their children's various activities (such as play, reading, school) as they carry out administrative tasks for example organising times and places for toddlers to socialise, for learning, for friendship, central to fostering growth (p.85, 87). This means that conditions of growth are established in different ways by different mothers in different circumstances (p.86).

A further metaphysical attitude of fostering growth in children that Ruddick identifies is the ability of a nurturing mother to hold her children close and at the same time "*welcome change*" in her children. It is a metaphysical attitude where "*those who change with change and welcome its challenges acquire a special kind of*

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learning" according to Miller (1976:90), and it is this maternal experience that helps women understand the changing natures of all peoples and communities. Like other attributes she identifies, Ruddick regards the ability of mothers to change, to their children's changes, as a maternal ideal, rather than a universal reality.

For a mother to understand her child, Ruddick argues, she needs to assume the existence of a conscious mind that is not separate from the body but which interacts with it, where thoughts express themselves physically and the physical is mentally interpreted (1989:91). In this she conceptualises the mind as being inseparable from and continuous with feelings in children, so that their thoughts and perceptions as well as their understanding of the world is shown to them through their own and others' fears and desires. By seeing the continuity of mind and feeling and action, mothers come to understand their children as constructive agents of their lives and worlds. They constantly ask what their children think in order to protect them effectively. Ruddick argues that this approach to mothering corrects distortions and inhibitions but also allows children the privacy to develop spirit, albeit in connection with others. Because mothers want to understand, they make themselves trustworthy listeners (p.93).

Drawing from Carol Gilligan (1982) and the *Women's Ways of Knowing* collective, Ruddick argues that the widely held belief that women have a cognitive style distinctly more concrete than men's that arises from their experiences of mothering, as 'fostering growth' which creates and enables their cognitive capacity for *"concrete thinking"* as they practice understanding of children's minds (p. 95). Saying that mothering elicits a markedly more concrete style she however maintains that this is not to say that women are unable to think abstractly (p.97).

Ruddick argues that mothers refine their concrete cognitive style through maternal conversations or stories, which in turn become important instruments of confidence building. Through storytelling with other mothers, mothers share, elaborate and

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reflect on observations about their children's particularities. They also make up stories for themselves and their children about their children's lives where both develop a common understanding of shared experiences. For Ruddick, the key virtues of maternal stories are "*realism, compassion and delight*" (p.98).

6.1.3.3. Training

The third demand children make on mothers is for 'social acceptability' which they respond to through 'training' children. Ruddick suggests that the view that children need 'training' seems universal. But there are cultural and individual differences in what 'training' entails. This arises from variations in understanding what human nature is. What moral values are and who should be responsible for this training in children. By assuming that children's nature is hospitable to goodness and maternal work is potentially a work of conscience for Ruddick, 'training' is the drawing out of this goodness through conscience and educative maternal control of children (p.103).

The central challenge of 'training' as maternal practice is the task of making a child acceptable to the community and one whom mothers can appreciate (p.104). In 'training', as mothers reflect on their own values and moral principles, they try to judge children tenderly but with confidence (p.108). 'Training' is also about being aware of the contradictions of maternal power as it entails both intervention and control for example deciding on what behaviour to allow, to ignore or to insist upon. Mothers express their power through the choices they make and techniques they use (p.109). This, in turn, means that 'training' is also challenging, confusing and fraught with self doubt. In part, this is because the power of mothers to make decisions is circumscribed by 'the gaze of others' – where other people, policies, institutions and the natural happenings around them contradict their values and strategies (p.110). In part, their power is limited by children's wills as well as their own feelings. In the process mothers become confused and powerless. They often experience a sense of loss of self and abdicate maternal authority to the judgement of others, which Ruddick contends, leads them to thinking 'inauthentically' (p.113).

This results, she says, in a deformation of 'training', as mothers work against their own and their children's 'natural' impulses, act inauthentically and domineeringly and with Reason alone, rather than with nurturance and preservative love (p.114).

Ruddick invokes 'nature' by depicting 'training' as *"the trainer's ability to judge 'natural' tastes, desires, and behaviours… Such natures are educated, that is, they are "led out of" temptation into virtues "naturally" awaiting them"* (p.116). From this perspective, when a mother demands *"the education of a responsive nature rather than the domination of a hostile one"(ibid)* she is training for acceptability. Training is also about fostering and protecting conscientiousness in children, where mothers, through their ability to identify, reflect on, and respect the demands of conscience must judge against dominant values so that their children learn that they cannot count on their or other people's authority.

The attribute of 'conscientiousness' requires taking responsibility for judgements of trust while maintaining a respectful independence from authorities judged trustworthy. Thus the conscientiousness of mothers becomes a model for that of their children (p. 117). Ruddick also makes reference to *"training with a conscience"*, which is about building trust and trustworthiness by mothering without being manipulative or mean spirited and by not seeing their children as such (p.119).

Ruddick adds to the discipline of mothering and maternal thinking, the notion of 'attentive love' which is part of 'training.' For this concept she draws extensively on the philosophy of Simone Weil (1952) as well as it is elaborated by Iris Murdoch (1985). Where attention is simultaneously an act of knowing and an act of love, where 'attentive love' combines – the cognitive capacity of attention with the virtue of love (p.120). It is similar to empathy and it lets differences emerge in children and others. In so doing 'attentive love' respects the truthfulness of the reality of others. 'Attentive love' is to 'really look.' Ruddick argues that through 'attentive love' mothers train themselves in the task of attention, learning to trust and love a

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real and trustworthy child. In the process they also learn to bracket their own desires, to look with a patient loving eye, imagine, and then to accept what is different (p. 123), which may give rise to another danger, as by their 'attentive love' actions and thoughts they can become vulnerable to 'self-denial' and 'self-sacrifice' (ibid). Ruddick argues that attentive love is a discipline and maternal thinking is a discipline in attentive love and through the discipline of attentive love mothers make themselves trustworthy.

In sum, Ruddick argues that women's engagement in maternal practice leads to maternal thinking, which is a distinct kind of reasoning that is different from Reason typical of men and mainstream thinking. This distinctiveness is seen by Ruddick as an asset in society rather than something to be devalued or eradicated or replaced.

6.2. Understanding gender difference as maternal practice and thinking – limits and possibilities

While distinctive, Ruddick's ideas are neither epistemologically nor theoretically unique. Epistemologically, she falls within the interpretive paradigm in social science where people are viewed as intentional actors who actively construct and interpret their social worlds and there are multiple interpretations of events and situations (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000:21-22). Methodologically, interpretivism seeks to explain behaviour through individual interpretations of behaviour, drawing directly from their experiences (ibid: 23). A typical exemplar in Ruddick, is her idea of maternal thinking as the disciplined reflection of maternal practice (1989:24), which is not dissimilar to Gidden's (1991:52) notion of reflexivity as applied to the construction of identity. Ruddick's specific emphasis and valuing of women's experiences, voice and activities was developed into a distinctly feminist epistemological perspective; identified as a feminist standpoint perspective by Nancy Hartstock (1983), Dorothy Smith (1990), Sandra Harding (1991). Feminist

standpoint theory argues that knowledge is situated and must be derived from the perspective of the actor.

Sociologically, Ruddick's practicalist view resonates with George Herbert Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism and Max Weber's (1949) social action theory. Each theorises the internal meanings of human action as arising from subjectivity, action and social interaction. From an interactionist perspective and in a similar vein to Ruddick, Wharton for example, has argued that *"doing household work and caring for children are not merely activities one performs; rather, these activities help to create people's gendered sense of themselves"* (2005:150). Risman (1987:9), using micostructural or micro-interpretive theory, has argued that most differences between women and men arise from different experiences, opportunities and access to social networks.

Various epistemological and theoretical criticisms have been levelled against the underlying micro theoretical approach of Ruddick's ideas of mothering. The relativism of the interpretive paradigm has been criticised by Giddens (1976 cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000:27):

> *"No specific person can possess detailed knowledge of anything more than the particular sector of society in which he participates, so that there still remains the task of making into an explicit and comprehensive body of knowledge that which is only known in a partial way by lay actors themselves."*

Sociologically Ruddick has been criticised by some theorists for swinging the pendulum in the structure – agency debate too far towards agency – to the power of the subject which results in her theory (and similar ones) failing to explain the oppressive aspects of women's lives (Young 1990: 88). Ruddick claims that mothering itself is not oppressive and that mothering is a gratifying, rewarding, affirming and pleasurable experience even in trying circumstances. Unlike other work, mothers are able to assert a great deal of control over the details of maternal

work (1989:30). Ruddick's claim that women can potentially choose to experience the pleasurable aspects of mothering practice, assumes the power of agency in women which gives them the ability to extract positive experiences out of oppressive practice and ideology.

Sevenhuijsen (1998:22) argues that:

"… care can be seen as a mode of acting in which participants perceive and interpret care needs and act upon these needs. How their interpretation and acting proceeds varies according to the situation and social and institutional contexts, and depends on a variety of factors, such as norms and rules about good caring and the relational dynamics between the actors concerned."

Many theorists, from a social structural perspective, have argued that the emphasis on individual action and subjectivity in ascribing, determining and experiencing mothering activities, reasoning and attitudes is something positive. They maintain that this should also include an analysis of the relationship of mothering experiences to the practices, values, ideologies and discourses of external institutions, organisations and social groups which also shape individual action and meanings. Some theorists have specifically noted the difficulty in separating out individual meaning from the context in which individuals operate within. Kaplan (1992:4) argues that the discourse of motherhood is reflected in the values and norms about 'the Good Mother' and is embedded in society and social groups. The ideas and notions of developmental psychology around childrearing are embedded in the policy discourse and practices of what constitutes children's needs and should be a mother's response to this. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) suggest that expert theories on appropriate childrearing can act as a source of oppression to women. Kaplan (1992:4) elaborates that it would be difficult for mothers to disentangle what they think, desire and value from the dominant patriarchal discourse imposed on them and argues that women both resist and comply with dominant discourses on motherhood.

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Ann Ferguson in Holmstrom (2002:135) argues that the amount of control and agency of individuals in parenting exchanges is variable and contingent on economic, political, legal and cultural constraints. Walker (1995:429) has argued that the actual practices, demands and the social identity of motherhood in South Africa were different in different historical, political and economic periods and insists that this difference would have impacted on the meanings mothers attached to their work and self image.

While these criticisms are of general interest I am specifically interested in the problems of essentialism inherent in Ruddick's conception of maternal practice and thinking. I believe that the key essentialising concept in her theory is that it is women who are mostly mothers and their identities are constituted by their mothering practices which emerge from a distinctive form of feminine reasoning. Mothers' agency is located primarily in their response to children. Social constructionist feminists have criticised Ruddick for defining all children as having essentially common demands and all mothers as defined by their same response to children's demands. They argue that gender is socially and variously determined rather than biologically. Even though Ruddick makes claims to being aperspectival and a pluralist her work reflects a distinctive essentialist interpretation of mothering practice and reason.

DiQuinzio (1993:6) argues that feminist essentialist theories assume attributes of the subject which exist prior to any social construction and that there exists a stable coherent gender experience and mothering identity, a core self. DiQuinzio (ibid:10) argues that also underlying these essentialist notions of mothering practice are universalising tendencies which claim a transhistorical, cross-cultural and normalising maternal subjectivity. He (ibid) points to Ruddick's analysis of mothering as a practice accompanied by ways of thinking and goals and virtues as evidence of these tendencies. Another criticism made against gynocentric feminism which Young (1990) identifies Ruddick as being a part of, is that their valuing of

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maternity and devaluing of patriarchal culture from a maternal standpoint can be seen as essentialising maternity in women (Young 1990:87). Young (ibid) argues that *"By 'essentialism' I mean an account that theorises women as a category with a set of essential attributes."* Young (ibid) argues that similar to patriarchal ideology which essentialises women's biology and mothering activity in efforts that devalue these characteristics, gynocentric feminism falls into the same trap even though these attributes are now valued.

Turning now specifically to Ruddick's claims of what constitutes mothering practices and the demands of children, evidence of her essentialist notions will be discussed. Firstly from the above summary of her theory she identifies three key demands which children make; for *preservation, growth and social acceptability* (1989:17-23) as universal and that these needs are constitutive of maternal practice (p.22). In viewing maternal practice as relational and existing only in response to demands made by children, Ruddick precludes an examination of how relations to others in the form of the presence or absence of other children, the father or other adults can influence mothering practice and cognitive attitudes. Here human needs as experienced by children are seen to exist separate from their varying cultural contexts and other discourses in society. Lawler (2000:126) argues that by asserting that children have needs and mothering involves responding to these needs is to ignore that needs are socially constituted. She (ibid) argues that this kind of argument also assumes that children's needs are fixed and objectively knowable. Lawler (ibid:127) specifically levels this criticism at Ruddick's views on maternal thinking; she argues that her ideas are based on a notion of a *"universal category of maternal work which exists in relation to a fixed and universal set of children's 'needs'."* Lawler (ibid: 134-5) also cites Fraser (1989) as arguing that needs are foregrounded by social mechanisms and the interpretations and definitions of needs is political and discursive.

Ruddick argues that although most mothers have been and are women, mothering is potentially work for men and women, but maintains that mothers are the primary caretakers of children.

> *"Although maternal work can, in principal, be performed by any responsible adult, throughout the world women not only have borne but have also disproportionately cared for children. Since most of the people who have taken up the work of mothering have had female bodies, mothers, taken as a class, have experienced the vulnerabilities and exploitation as well as the pleasures of being female in the ways of their culture. Although some individual mothers may be men, the practices and cultural representations of mothering are strongly affected by, and often taken to epitomize, prevailing norms of femininity"* (1989:41).

Here Ruddick describes as fact that women are primarily involved in maternal work and it is this experience which renders this work as gendered. She endorses the traditional dominant institutional discourse on mothering which exists in society which equates women with maternity. Her use of the term 'maternal' for care work of children can be viewed as perpetuating essentialist notions of mothering as the word 'maternal' is associated with women and opposite to "paternal".

Her theory presupposes a series of appropriate responses by mothers to children's demands which involves mothers' reflecting on their practices through maternal thinking and acting with *preservative love, nurturance and training* (p.65-123). Mothering experiences are seen to exist prior to their social construction where maternal subjectivity is conceived of as a coherent, unified response; an attribute which mothers possess in relation to children's needs. In this way Ruddick essentialises mothering by suggesting that women engage in distinctive practices which are traditionally feminine and also explains what mothering entails. In so doing she normalises and universalises the claims that women are essentially mothers.

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Black feminists have criticised theories of motherhood as being ethnocentric. Di Leonardo and Lancaster (2002:49) also argue that theorists who focus on maternity as an area of analysis in gender theorising have a transhistorical and unchanging view of women's work and the separation of spheres of human activity into different spheres is in itself a Western historical construction. In criticising universal notions of women's activities they also cite the criticism of Kathy Pollitt's (1995) essay on Sara Ruddick and Carol Gilligan and Deborah Tannen:

> *"But the biggest problem with all these accounts of gender is that they credit the differences they find to universal features of male and female development rather than to the economic and social positions men and women hold, or to the actual power differences between individual men and women."*

Mothers' *preservative love* (Ruddick 1989:65-81) endeavours to protect children from outside forces, mothers themselves and from themselves. Ruddick explains that children's need for preservation elicits certain cognitive attitudes in mothers; 'scrutinizing' for dangers, showing 'humility' in recognising that children have their own will that cannot be controlled, showing 'cheerfulness' even in the face of uncontrollable circumstances, accepting children's 'nature' as physical beings and lastly 'holding' which is an attitude of minimising risks and reconciling differences. Essentialist notions of maternal work and reasoning resonate in these conceptions of mothering; as these attitudes are conceived of as appropriate responses which mothers possess independent of their varying social contexts. Usually social contexts will act to circumscribe individual reflections on maternal practices and also maternal practice itself. Ruddick's description of the maternal protection of children derives from an essentialist notion of maternal cognitive attitudes; as these attitudes and responses are contingent on very specific meanings and interpretations of what constitutes – a danger to children, children's will, uncontrollable circumstances and risks to children. These practices and thinking seem to exist *apriori* to the demands placed on mothers by children. Ruddick seems to suggest that the protection of

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children is built into maternal identity and this precludes instances where mothers forego this responsibility or relinquish it to other people.

The second maternal practice "*nurturance*" is described by Ruddick as a response to children's demand for their growth to be fostered and spirit to be developed. The maternal attitude assumed in this practice is that children are naturally inclined to 'health and integrity' (p.84) that children's natures are constantly changing and that children are active subjects who consciously interpret their world (p.91). Mothers also organise various activities to foster learning, socialising and friendships in their children. Fostering growth in children leads mothers to having a more concrete style of thinking because their mothering practice leads to attitudes which try to understand children (p.95). These maternal attitudes that mothers develop towards their children's growth makes very specific assumptions about children's needs and nature; that children are naturally healthy and good and that their growth requires fostering in a very specific manner. Their response is seen as recognition of children's need for nurturance and understanding of children's nature. Mothers' nurturing response to children is seen as them having the ability to recognise that children need fostering and that mothers are capable of, able to and want to meet this demand – implying that they possess the essential attributes and agency necessary for fostering children's growth despite their varying social circumstances.

Lastly, Ruddick identifies 'training' as a maternal practice which responds to children's demand for social acceptability. She argues that children's and mothers' nature are mainly good and training entails a recognition and trust of these natural characteristics (p.103, p.116). Mothering practice therefore naturally tends towards "good" maternal practice and children too tend towards 'good' behaviour. There is a core attribute in both mothers and children which is naturally good. Ruddick's reliance on the concept of an essential goodness in both mothers and children for training for social acceptability excludes notions of mothers who are neglectful and abusive towards children or children who are socially deviant. The differing social

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contexts in which mothers and children exist, such as poverty, affluence etc is not accounted for in her account of mothers' or children's nature. Even though Ruddick describes mothering as an activity, there are several instances in the book where she evokes nature in her description of maternal practice and in this way ties the attributes and practices of mothers to women's essential biology (p. 78, 31, 51, 96).

Di Leonardo and Lancaster (2002:49) cite Pollit's work which argues that Ruddick's claim about maternal practice is not based on a real description of what women do but are rather prescriptive notions of what they ought to do.

In sum then despite Ruddick's attempts to defend herself against maternal essentialism and universalising tendencies, there is evidence in her book of these tendencies. Her theory excludes an explanation of the impact of social influences on the construction of maternal practice and children's demands and therefore creates notions of an essential character to maternal practices and children's demands. Her emphasis on the subjective voluntaristic construction of meaning and action means that she excludes the force of discourse and ideology in individual constitution of meanings. In so doing her theory is too narrowly micro sociological. By constructing maternal practice around affective demands she reinforces patriarchal notions of women's belonging in the private sphere. The interpretive methodology relies on subjective explanations of meaning of events and intentions and behaviour – the validity of such accounts is often raised by critics of interpretive perspectives. Young (1985:89) has also cautioned that by emphasising women's superior maternal values and practices, celebratory feminists accommodate women to dominant patriarchal ideology and practices. For Young (ibid), the unintended consequences of valuing women's maternal experiences are the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and the notion that the appropriate place for women is in a separate private sphere (ibid).

The usefulness of Ruddick's theory on gender difference as located in maternal practice, maternal thinking and children's demands has been explored in different

ways in several studies both locally and internationally (Ribbens 1994). In South Africa several empirical studies have explored the deployment of maternal identity and subjectivity in political struggles for instance Hassim (1993), Fester (2005), and Walker (1995), while others have investigated mothers' perceptions, experiences and meanings of motherhood in the journal Jenda issue number 4 and 5. I want to explore the usefulness of Ruddick's notions of the mothering experience by looking at empirical evidence which either reflects or challenges her essentialist conception that the interests of maternal practice and thinking happens invariantly and unchangeably in response to only children's demands.

Chapter 7

Maternal practice and maternal thinking in contemporary society

7.1. Introduction

In *Maternal Thinking Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989) Ruddick employs a practicalist explanation to explain gender difference. This view holds that all thinking arises from and is shaped by the practices people engage in (p.9). In applying this perspective to women she argues that for many women, their practice is centrally defined by mothering, where mothering is construed as a form of work and a practice that demands a distinctive form of reasoning or thinking (p.17). Ruddick describes mothering as a response to three basic demands that all children present to mothers: *preservation, growth and social acceptability*. The mother meets these demands through the work of *preservative love, nurturance and training* for social acceptance. Ruddick defines a mother as someone who responds to these three main demands which essentially define maternal work. She considers preservation to be a paramount demand, as it is a universal need that creates, defines and is constitutive of the category of maternal work. Responding to children's demands through maternal practice involves mothers having to think about strategies in the form of disciplined reflection that entails intellectual capacities, judgements, and metaphysical attitudes (p.23-24). Implicit in Ruddick's view of maternal practice and children's demands is the assumption that children need to be 'brought up' as opposed to simply just 'growing up' (Lazarre 1987:163).

As discussed in the previous chapter, critics of Ruddick have pointed out that she essentialises mothering practice and thinking as well as children's demands. The

essentialism of her argument rests on her notion that maternal practice is primarily driven and constituted by a set of universal demands made by children; preservation, growth and social acceptability. In other words, children's vulnerability and dependence evoke in mothers a distinctive form of maternal thinking and practice. The maternal practices are universal because they are responses to a 'biological child in a social world' (Ruddick 1989:17); the social worlds vary but the biological child is invariant. It is this 'necessity' that determines mothers' perceptions of the need for care in children. Ruddick assumes that children are able to assert agency in demanding care from mothers. The social relation between mothers and children is conceptualised as being driven and constructed around some innate, natural properties in children.

Critics argue that this notion of maternal practice does not account for the way in which maternal practice is socially constructed by race and class for example (Patricia Collins 1994). Lawler (2000:126), for example, argues that children's needs are not derived from any intrinsic quality of children but rather from the social cultural context in which adults define children's nature. Their needs are socially constituted and thus carry with them power implications that are historically variable and politically contestable. Frazer and Lacey (1993:17) argue that human action and practices related to care are bound to and interpreted within various social, economic, cultural and institutional discourses and contexts. As much as these practices and discourses exist independently of social subjects, human action and practices also constantly constitute them. This means that social practices do not have intrinsic purposes or aims in themselves, but rather that these are made by people in particular social, economic and political contexts.

Ruddick's notion of maternal practice is also described as a micro-interpretive, social/symbolic interaction perspective which does not take into account the power of external, macro social structural influences on social behaviour. Critics query the usefulness of an emphasis on individual subjective meanings, intentions,

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experiences, actions and interpretations in formulating general explanations (Giddens 1976).

While acknowledging that there is political and social variation among children and those who care for them:

> *"Despite the variations among children and those who care for them, these demands, I claimed define, essentially, a kind of work"* (Ruddick 1989:51).

Ruddick still maintains that mothers are naturally compelled to protect their children:

> *"I do expect sufficient commonality in the demands made by our children to enable us to compare, which also means to contrast the requirements of our work."* (p. 53).

Despite claiming the existence of a general mode of maternal thinking and practice she does state that her own experience and social position, which are the source of her claims, affects here conceptions of maternal thinking and work:

> *"I write out of a middle-class, technocratic, property-oriented culture ambivalently obsessed with bonds of biology. ... I make claims about all children and I believe them. But I make those claims out of a particular intellectual training and Protestant heritage that taught me to look for human needs and desires underlying the divisions between women and men and between cultures"* (p. 54-55).

While recognising the diversity of mothering and the specificity of her own mothering she does not however explore other different maternal practices and her claims therefore remain universalist and essentialist.

Her scientifically rather dubious claim, notwithstanding, the essentialist underpinnings of mothering leads her to make several assumptions about mothers'

behaviour: that they know how to respond to children's demands, that they respond to these demands in an invariant and unchangeable way, that they engage in reasoning and intellectual activity when responding to children's demands, that their practice reflects their thinking and that what they do is primarily driven by children's demands. It is difficult to empirically test all these assumptions, not least of all because they have been the starting point of much existing research in South Africa. Several qualitative studies of mothering (Phoenix and Woollett 1991, Scarr and Dunn 1987, Sanger 1999, Amadiume 1987, Magwaza 2003, Sudarkasa 2004, Jeannes and Shefer 2004, McMahon 1995, Pillay 2007) show how social, economic, cultural, historical and political factors influence mothering. Ribbens (1990a, 1990b, 1993, 1994) has also conducted international studies on childrearing which has given an 'insider's perspective' of women's position and experiences of being a mother.

However, there also exist studies which describe the status of children in society, as well as related institutional policies and programmes on children that can be used to reflect on maternal practices, meanings and institutional discourse of mothering and children's needs. I propose, therefore, to use some of this available secondary evidence to consider Ruddick's notions of mothering practice and children's demands.

7.2. Maternal practice: the evidence

7.2.1. Protection

According to Ruddick the first demand that children make on mothers is for protection and mothers respond to this demand with preservative love. She argues that this need in children primarily constitutes maternal practice, where the commitment to meeting children's demands for preservation means seeing their vulnerability and responding with care rather than abuse, indifference or flight

(Ruddick 1989:19). The central constitutive aim and interest of maternal practice becomes the protection of children's lives informed by the cognitive capacities and attitude of scrutiny, humility and cheerfulness (p.71-75). These capacities and attitudes are accompanied by respect for nature and what is natural in their children as well (p.75-78).

Research in South Africa and elsewhere in the world shows that children's need for protection is variously met and the nature of a mother's preservative love is often determined by political, social, economic and cultural circumstances of both child and mother. In other words, rather than there being an innate universal preservative response, protective mothering is determined by the social, economic and cultural resources at the disposal of carers. These variable social conditions also point to differences in the nature and extent of children's vulnerability and dependence as well. The kind of relationship and expectations between mothers and children that Ruddick describes is also implied in the institutional discourses and practices in society on children's needs and mothering practices.

7.2.1.1 The situation of mothering in South Africa (time use study)

Ruddick's claim that it is mostly women who are engaged in maternal practice is evident in South Africa since it is women who mostly mother, spending (significantly) more time than men on childcare activities (Chobokoane and Budlender 2002:77).Women spend an average of 87 minutes a day on active childcare compared to seven minutes a day spent by men. They also spend more time than men in household maintenance, management and household shopping (ibid:74), all this being part of the work that Ruddick holds women do to protect their children (1989: 80).

South African men spend more time than women in work establishments but both men and women spend the same amount of time involved in primary production not for establishments and producing other goods and services (Chobokoane and

Budlender 2002:77). Men spend more time than women on leisure activities (ibid.). All childcare activities, except for the supervision of adults and children needing care, are usually done on their own rather than simultaneously with other activities (ibid:85). This is evidence that South African women are attentive to children's needs and respond more than men to children's demands for care. In other words, they squeeze time into mothering even though they also spend time in productive work and they also engage in mothering in the absence of men.

Even under varying social situations women perform more childcare activities than men. Both men and women seem to respond to childcare according to whether they have children, whether these children live with them and the age of the child. However, when confronted with this same reality of children in the home, on average, women spend more time per day on childcare than men (p.78). Women also spend more time on childcare activities than men, even in the presence or absence of other adults in households and whether children live in households or not (p.79). A detailed breakdown of child care activities – physical care of household children, teaching and training of household children, accompanying household children, supervising children/adults, caring for non-household children – reveals that for all these activities most men were less likely to mention and also performed less of these activities than women. Most women mentioned childcare activities unprompted and also performed more of these activities (Budlender et al 2001:69).

In South Africa the conditions exist for children's demand for protection to be met with preservative love by adults. Most children in South Africa are living with adults; either both parents, only their mothers or only with their fathers or with relatives (Budlender and Meintjies 2004). The majority of orphans are also cared for by their relatives and live in their homes when their parents die. This is attributed to the non-nuclear nature of South African households where children are cared for by a range of adults in the households (Meintjies, Budlender, Giese and Johnson 2003). However, there are gender differences in the care arrangements of paternal and

maternal orphans where most of the former live with their mothers, while only a small number of the latter live with their fathers and the rest mainly stay with other relatives (Budlender and Meintjies 2004). Contrary to frequent assertions, only a small number of orphaned children are living on the streets or in child headed households as a consequence of HIV/AIDS (Budlender and Meintjies 2004). Even in poverty conditions, in general, children are cared for by their mothers, as best as they can (World Health Organisation 2002).

7.2.1.2 Child fosterage and household structure

The protection of children takes different forms in different social, economic and cultural contexts. In South Africa, children and especially children living in poverty are not cared for constantly by both or either one of their biological parents. A significant number of children grow up in households with either one or both parents absent and in most cases it is the father who is absent (Posel and Devey 2006; Wilson cited in Alfers 2006). There is a significant number of single mothers and female headed households in South Africa which is a legacy of the forced oscillating migrant labour system (Posel and Devey 2006; Denis and Ntsimane 2006). Women in South Africa tend to occupy low paying jobs and jobs with little protection (Casale and Posel 2002:157). Female-headed households are amongst the poorest in the country (Budlender 2002). Single mothers have to provide care and financial support for their children which means they have to juggle work and childcare commitments (Lund 2005). This has implications for the quality of care children receive (ibid).

However, children who are orphaned and those who are not, live with a range of 'social' parents for some periods of their lives, in many cases without paternal figures or in different households to their biological siblings (Giese, Meintjies, Croke and Chamberlain 2003). Most people in South Africa live in extended family structures (Amoateng et. al. 2004). Mothering is considered a communal practice in many South African families, and is shared amongst many people (Magwaza 2003). This communal form of mothering challenges the mother/child dyad which defines

the mothering relationship which Ruddick describes in her book. For Ruddick the survival of the child is intertwined with an individual mother and she therefore only provides examples of family structures which reflect this type of relationship. Fostered and orphaned African children are overwhelmingly cared for in households headed by a grandparent or a great-grandparent (61–86%), and almost all others in a household headed by another relative (Anderson and Phillip 2006).

South Africa has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world. More than 35 percent of South African adolescent girls become pregnant before the age of 20 and more than 30 percent have given birth at least once by that age (Department of Health 1998). Family members are frequently available to provide childcare and the children of adolescent mothers are usually absorbed into the mother's (or grandmothers) household and given the protection of her ancestors (Jewkes et al. 2001; Kaufman, de Wet and Staedler 2001; Tanga and Uys 1996). Some researchers have noted that adolescent childbearing has become institutionalised and is a 'fairly typical stage in the domestic lifecycle of families' (Jewkes et al. 2001). Children of adolescent mothers are sent away to live with grandparents to improve the life chances of teenage mothers who often return to school (Kaufman et al 2001). Historically at least, the cultural and political context in South Africa sees teenage mothers able to mobilise extended family resources for the care of their children which also allows them to pursue their own futures (Preston-Whyte 1991; Preston-Whyte and Louw 1986; Preston-Whyte & Zondi 1989, 1991, 1992) Explanations for these social care giving arrangements range from parents trying to provide better schooling opportunities for children, to the promotion of moral development. Other factors are the challenge of migrant labour and cultural expectations, (Bledsoe 1994, Kaufmann, Maharaj and Richter 1998; Levine et al 1994; McDaniel and Zulu 1996).

Mothering practices are also historically and politically bound. In South Africa they were and continue to be affected by race, socio-economic circumstances and the legacy of apartheid (Magwaza 2003), which created differential opportunities for

black families and white families. As a consequence, the protection of children assumed different forms (ibid). In black communities, the practice of mothering children who are not biological offspring is a response to impoverished conditions (ibid). Economically better off black families often put their relatives' children through education or provide them with basic needs (ibid). In white families the practice of 'adopting' the children of others is less common.

Magwaza (2003) also argues that within the context of AIDS deaths, which are most common in black communities, 'informal adoptions' are on the increase. In these circumstances, informal adoptions and care of neglected children by individuals who are not kin is becoming quite extensive, although the nature and length of this type of care arrangement of children is a factor of social and economic circumstances as well as the individual and family's sense of civic responsibility (Marcus 2001).

There are incidences of abandonment of children in South Africa, and it is mothers who are mostly responsible for this practice. But even then, in most cases children are abandoned to the care of grandparents or family members by their 'failed' mothers. Less frequently, they are left at other places, including child welfare offices, children's home, clinics, hospitals, friends, neighbours, with strangers, on the street, at a taxi rank, in deserted areas or with the biological father (Giese et al 2003). Most babies are abandoned as a result of HIV and poverty (Berry and Guthrie 2003). This suggests that even when mothers feel they have no choice but to abandon their children because of health or economic incapacity, they invariably still seek alternative sources of protection for their children and in so doing demonstrate their persistent efforts to continue to protect their children. Whether these mothers' actions to care for their children are caused by innate biological instinct, socio-cultural expectations, or institutional discourse or individual motivation is difficult to discern from available evidence. However, what each or any combination of these suggest is that there is preservative love, and that their actions contain the elements of protection and recognition of children's vulnerability and dependence. The

estrangement of mothers from their children is (often) caused by poverty experienced by mothers (Scheper-Hughes 1985:310 citing Piers 1978: 37).

7.2.1.3 Economic position of mothers and protection of children

Poverty and employment are implicated in the quality of protection that children receive from the people entrusted with their care by working mothers. It has been found that the health, standard of care and physical safety of children is compromised in children of working class women who work long hours and who use younger and older relatives to care for their children (Lund 2005 citing Sekhamane). Young care givers tend to be neglectful, distracted and often eat the food of the children in their care. In some instances grandmothers too are considered to be poor care givers, as they are unable to ensure the children's safety (Moller 1990).

7.2.1.4 Socio-cultural influences

Socio-cultural expectations of mothering and patriarchal ideologies also influence the definitions, perceptions, thinking and practices of mothers. Ruddick has argued that although maternal work can be performed by men, women or any responsible adult she maintains that the practices and cultural representations of mothering are influenced by prevailing norms of femininity (Ruddick 1989:41). Mothers often experience a contradiction between societal expectations and what they, as mothers, are able to do. Historically, in African societies, women are made into mothers through cultural rather than biological practices, by being assigned the status of 'mothers' and being 'given' the role of protectors or mothers of children other than their own (Sudarkasa 2004). Under these conditions, motherhood is not 'natural' but rather the outcome of a culturally defined kinship role (ibid). Different family structures (nuclear, extended and conjugal) and living arrangements (compounds and separate isolated households) present various constraints and supports to mothering practices (ibid). In extended families children's demands and responsibilities may be shared by many mothers, where this is not the case in nuclear families. Communal living arrangements in rural areas allow African mothers living within compounds to

have access to a range of support from other women (ibid).Women are able to share information on the upbringing of children and have access to a range of willing childcare providers (usually other women). Mothering becomes a communal practice. This involves both scrutiny and social rewards, including confirmation, gratitude and pride from other mothers as described by Ruddick (1989:29-30). Even where women don't live communally, the social definition of women as mothers is informed culturally by the ideology of *ubuntu (humanness)* which embodies notions of caring for, worrying about and offering other people help (Magwaza 2003).

There are also commonalities in cultural expectations of mothering practice. In both black and white South African communities the welfare of children is perceived by society as the primary responsibility of women. Working mothers within black communities are especially held responsible for their children's welfare, successes and failures (Magwaza 2003). Unlike men, most of these women find that mothering constitutes a large part of their lives and they think of their children most of the time. The same is true for white women, who also see their children's needs as primary. Generally, by contrast, there are minimal parenting expectations of fathers in both white and black families in South African society (ibid).

White middle class mothers perceive themselves as primary care givers because of what they consider to be an inherent biological motivation, whereas they regard parenting responses in men as a choice, albeit a positive and virtuous one (Jeannes and Schafer 2004). In this sense, they echo Ruddick's notion of the naturalness of protective love and of maternal practice as being driven by children's demands and needs. Cast in the frame of the primary care giver, they express themselves as selfless mothers who are driven by their children's demands and needs to be good enough for them (ibid), living in the long shadow of what Ruddick says is the *"idealized figure of the 'Good Mother' "* (Ruddick 1989: 31).

7.2.1.5 Institutional discourse and programme practices

Maternal practice is not simply a private domestic experience. It is also regulated by an institutional discourse on nurturing practices which is best characterised as 'naturalist', namely, that mothering is seen to be biological and instinctive (Marshall 1991). This naturalist view is implicit in Ruddick's claims as well and she also argues that mothering is shaped by social and economic policies (Ruddick 1989: 45).

As articulated in Social Development policies and programmes in South Africa, State discourse and practices generally make underlying assumptions about mothers' and children's needs, vulnerability and dependence. As the analysis of the White Paper on Social Welfare in South Africa (chapter 6 above) shows that these particular areas of policy discourse in South Africa conceptualise and positions women as both vulnerable subjects and as providers of care in society, whereas men are mainly construed as absent breadwinners and financial providers for women and children's needs. Children are also identified as structurally vulnerable and in need of care, mainly through a normative familial model. Women's needs are therefore framed and interpreted through gendered assumptions about mother-child relations, where children have needs to which mothers 'naturally' want to attend, thereby making the category mother inseparable from the category of child.

This said, there are important nuances in the documents which have been taken into account. The Child Support Grant (CSG) programme prioritises children in the mother-child dyad, by positioning care givers (mainly woman) as conduits for children's needs. The Social Assistance Act (2004, Chapter 2 point 6) casts care givers in gender neutral terms. To wit, *"A person is, subject to section 5, eligible for child support grant if he or she is the primary care giver of that child"*. By so doing, it uncouples gender from mothering and suggests that the acts of mothering are, or can be, socially learnt (by men), even though, it is women who in fact are, or who are anticipated to be, the primary care givers (Lund 2006). Indeed, that the 'primary care giver' is construed in gender neutral terms, reflects an attempt to take into account

complex household structures and caring patterns in poor households in South Africa (Lund 2006).

Like Ruddick, both the CSG programme and the Social Assistance Act view children as in need of care and not as giving care. As a consequence, children under the age of 16 do not qualify as primary care givers (Rosa, Leatt and Hall 2005:12). This assumption can be practically problematic given the context of a generalised HIV/AIDS epidemic where an increasing number of AIDS orphans also come to be the primary care givers of other children (Burman 2004:75). It is also anomalous, because it supports a discourse on childhood which often contradicts children's real lived experiences, their actual capacities, and their juridical standing. Its notional weakness lies in the fact that in Africa and elsewhere, girls and boys often enact many mothering functions for their siblings, practices that are often intensified by calamities such as being orphaned.

Ruddick makes her claims about children's needs and children's demands from the assumption that the women who mother are married and live in a nuclear family. In South Africa, to qualify for the CSG the eligibility criteria for primary care givers can include either a marriage certificate, a divorce order, and/or proof of spousal income (Department of Social Development 2003). As with Ruddick, inclusion of these documents seem to imply a normative bias towards the institution of marriage as the (preferred) basis for family making or child care practices, although these too are bureaucratic measures designed to prevent misuse of state resources.

The findings of various studies into the CSG (Kola et al 2000; Case, Hosegood, and Lund 2003; Leatt 2004; Budlender et al 2005) all point to women as being the people who mainly care for children in families, resonating with Ruddick's contention that it is mainly women who mother. They are suggestive also of another of Ruddick's insights that women, through their mothering activities, consciously reflect on and strategise to meet their children's demands. In claiming the benefits of the CSG for

their own survival, mothers can be said to be acting in the best way to protect their children. The institutional discourse and the practices resonate with Ruddick's maternal essentialism where, in mothering, primacy is given to children's demands and the mother-child relationship is 'naturally' constituted around the care needs of children. In this way women's role as primarily that of care giver to children and of fulfilling a 'reproductive function' in society, is reinforced and perpetuated.

7.2.2. Fostering growth

Ruddick argues that even though the demand to foster children's growth is part of maternal practice and is historically and culturally specific, unlike the demand for preservation, it is not primarily a cultural creation but rather is universally true (1989:20-21). She argues that fostering growth in children entails being aware that children have a need for nurturance of their complex emotional and intellectual development and as such, is something mothers' assume primary responsibility for. In terms of fostering growth, the prevailing institutional discourse and practices in South Africa put women and families centre stage. Equally, studies have shown that women are overwhelming responsible for childcare arrangements, including the protection of and fostering growth in children, although practices vary according to socio-economic conditions, with significant implications for the quality of the emotional and intellectual development children receive.

7.2.2.1 Fostering growth and childcare in South Africa

In South Africa women do what Ruddick says they do to nurture emotional and intellectual growth in their children (1989:87). They spend more time than men on childcare activities such as informal teaching and training, accompanying children to places such as school, sports lessons, and so on. (Budlender 2001:69). They take primary responsibility for childrearing, household reproduction, childcare arrangements and often financial support for the household, without significant assistance from the state, workplace or men (Goldblatt 2005:118-119).

Ruddick's observation that the varying locations and economic status of mothers establish different conditions of growth (1989:86) also holds true in South Africa, where mothers' responses to children's need for emotional and intellectual growth are contingent on their varying socio-economic circumstances and influences both their control over and the quality of childcare. South Africa has a high rate of adult illiteracy (Chisholm, Motola and Vally 1999:8). The rate of unemployment amongst women is high (Hassim 2005) and when women are employed, the majority work in low paying jobs with limited or no work related benefits (Goldblatt 2005: 119). Also, they generally have a low participation rate in the workforce, which can, in part, be attributed to child care demands (Biersteker and Kvalsig 2007:159).

Given the above, do parents have the necessary means and knowhow to foster growth in children in the way that Ruddick (1989) assumes? Richter (2004) argues that they don't, as women who are hungry and economically insecure are also less likely to provide children with adequate emotional care. To adequately foster growth, they need State support.

7.2.2.2. Socio-economic context and fostering growth in children

In South Africa, whether women are employed, unemployed or not economically active, they spend more time than men in unpaid work, which includes childcare (Budlender 2001: 39). However, their ability to do so is being seriously eroded especially by the AIDS epidemic, as breadwinners and caregivers lose their jobs, cannot work at home, are overburdened with caring for sick people, or they themselves become ill and die (Richter, Manegold & Pather 2004). As already indicated, the role of fathers in childcare is minimal for all working women (Department of Health 1998).

At the same time, in varying proportions, mothers often assign childcare responsibilities to other people (mainly other women) or childcare institutions. The higher their levels of education the more likely they are to employ private domestic

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help and use child care institutions for the care of their children (Department of Health 1998). And where they are economically active, many jobs require that women leave their children elsewhere. Some occupations such as street vending allow mothers to care for their children while they work (albeit under constrained conditions), (Goldblatt 2005:119). Even unemployed mothers need and use alternative childcare arrangements, while they look for jobs or go about daily activities that take them away from their homes and the children in their care (Budlender 1997:26; Goldblatt 2005:119).

Ruddick's contention that the main task of fostering growth is administrative is generally evident in South Africa. While there are some mothers or carers who make no arrangements at all, leaving children without care (Goldblatt 2005:119), most mothers organise some kind of childcare arrangement when they are unable to care for their children themselves. Their options are significantly influenced by social and economic circumstances, ranging from state, private and charitable crèches to home care by paid childminders to care by other household members, relatives and neighbours or other unrelated families.

Thus, economically advantaged white and black women are able to transfer the responsibility of childcare onto domestic workers who are employed in over one million households in South Africa and who make up 18 percent of total female employment (Mills 2002). In this, they continue a practice of racial privileging designed to benefit the white minority that was historically established.

By making alternative childcare arrangements, mothers are doing Ruddick's 'administrative tasks' to foster their children's growth. They are also demonstrating agency. However, in so doing they often find themselves with little control over the kind of emotional and intellectual climate for growth that their children are placed in. In other words, these and other care arrangements often barely meet Ruddick's idea of fostering growth by stimulating cognitive development and creating sociability

based on mothering judgements and guidance such as whether to intervene in children's feelings and behaviour, whether to change or to control or wait or listen or to trust, what to permit or not (1989: 84, 85). While Ruddick argues that mothers need to know what their children are up to in order to nurture their developing spirits (p.93), child care arrangements that are extra-mother, as it were, can't and do not do this in most cases.

Working mothers, who rely on paid or unpaid kinship networks for the care of their children, often express concerns about the lack of mental stimulation provided by their childcare arrangements (Moller 1990). Generally, they are dissatisfied with these (COSATU/Naledi 2005:12) and would prefer quality, institutionalised childcare facilities to appropriately meet the cognitive development needs of their children.

7.2.2.3 Institutional discourse and practice on fostering growth in children – the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) Policy

Trade union organisations are a key site where working women and men articulate their desires, expectations and the challenges they face of meeting the growth needs of their children. Their interests are reflected in the demand for parental rights and the negotiated agreements they have attained through collective bargaining. They are also reflected in background and policy documents that inform these demands and practices. The South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) publication, *Sharing the Load: The struggle for gender equality, parental rights and childcare* (1991), and particularly the chapter entitled *For love of our Children* exemplifies organised workers' thinking as it presents both their experiences of and discourses around childcare.

Their views of childcare echo Ruddick in that children need protection and nurturance.

"Childcare does not stop when a baby is 12 months old – children need to be cared for until they are of school-going age and, even after that, provision has to be made for after-school care. The kind of care that young children are given is vitally important. They have needs that go beyond being clothed and fed - they also require love and stimulation. Children need to be educated as well as cared for. A work that is becoming popular which expresses this need is educare" (1991:39).

Like Ruddick, SACCAWU (1991) also argue for the need to foster growth through care that educates.

"The idea of educare arises from the well-known fact that the first six years of a child's life are the most important time for learning. These early learning experiences help children prepare for school, but equally important, they help prepare children for life by teaching them values and skills that will help them to be better people" (1991:39).

However, unlike Ruddick, SACCAWU (1991) expects that these needs can and should be met institutionally rather than simply within the family and within the interpersonal mother-child dyad. The problem for them is construed as an absence of pre-school facilities to cater for the care and educational needs of working class children. This legacy, they argue has its roots in the political and economic relations that characterised apartheid.

This understanding of where and how to address children's needs to foster growth is underscored by COSATU initiated campaigns and policies around maternal and parental rights to meet children's needs for emotional and intellectual growth. For example, in their 'National Campaign for Childcare' COSATU encouraged workers to take their children to work in an attempt to get workers, employers and government to accept that childcare was a social responsibility (p.48-50).

The emphasis on the need for institutional responses to foster growth and care for children does not preclude ideas about the part that mothers and fathers can and should play in these tasks. What they contend is that it is not enough to shift this burden onto women and especially not into the private domain, not least of all because of its implications for women's employment. COSATU argues that:

> *"Women also face hardship in accessing and sustaining participation in the labour market. The majority of women have to juggle careers, domestic responsibilities such as cooking and caring of children. The shortage of childcare facilities and the sexual division of labour in the home impose serious burdens on women. Maternity leave and pay provision are also inadequate, and in some cases even the legislated minimum is not complied with"* (COSATU 2003).

As with Ruddick's observations about most cultures (1989: 41), in South Africa, women and mothering are conceptually and politically linked. And like her, women in South Africa demand the restructuring of the work place to better attend to the fostering of growth in children, implying both women's responsibility for mothering and the unfair burden it places on them, to the economic and professional advantage of men (p.45).

To address these issues COSATU developed a Parental Rights campaign,

> "*to enable women and men in waged work to combine career with full time family life, while infants are given all the care and attention required. The benefits of such a campaign are that it will deliver concrete benefits for working women, it will play an important role in challenging and addressing women's oppression, it will contribute towards the proper care and early childhood development of infants and children, and it will enable women to be more active as unionists*" (COSATU 2003).

Some of the core demands of COSATU's Parental Rights campaign which are highlighted in their Gender Policy around *Parental Rights and Childcare* are:

- *Paid maternity leave.*
- *Paid and unpaid parental leave.*
- *Childcare leave.*
- *Flexible working time.*
- *Provision of childcare.*
- *Breaks and facilities for breastfeeding mothers.*
- *Job security and health and safety for pregnant mothers* (COSATU 2003).

These demands neatly capture COSATU's assumptions about the need for both institutional and personal responsibility for the care of children. Closer analysis of these demands points to two things. The first is that the gender neutral call for parental leave, child care leave and child care facilities suggests that organised workers as simultaneously claiming space in child care for fathers at the same time as they shift the burden away from mothers. The second is that some demands such as maternity leave, breaks and facilities for breastfeeding mothers, job security and health and safety for pregnant mothers specifically refer to women, as they are intended to enable them to perform mothering functions, protect the health of their unborn children and prevent pregnancy and child birth from prejudicing them in the workplace.

In this, they speak in a similar vein to Ruddick, who too distinguishes conceptually between the demands of birthing labour and mothering. (1989:49-50). For her birthing labour is essentially female and performed by one woman but also demands certain maternal attitudes for example taking care of the foetus by caring for herself. While birthing labour culminates in the act of giving birth, mothering is "*an ongoing, organised set of activities that require discipline and active attention*" (p.50). Ruddick also argues that, unlike birthing labour which is confined to women, mothering is work that can potentially be done by men or women or several people

(p.40-50), and that there is no biological based reason for men not to be capable of maternal work (p.41).

However, COSATU's (2003) discourse differs in one important aspect from Ruddick. While it presents childcare as a parental responsibility, Ruddick insists on conceptualising care work related to meeting children's demands as 'maternal' work rather than 'parental' work (p.46). For her, although caring labour is a general category which includes many aspects of mothering work, and like mothering, is not tied to female bodies, she prefers the maternal idiom for intellectual and practical reasons. She argues that her retention of 'maternal' is based on the fact that it is women who mostly care for children and that the practices and cultural representations reflect normative assumptions of femininity (p.41). Mothering therefore becomes inseparable from being female. Understanding mothers then means understanding women's way of knowing (p.41-42).

Her reasoning is that different kinds of caring cannot be combined because caring work in general entails different activities related to different people and not only activities related to the care of children (p.47). Maternal work does not encompass all of caring work. And since each of the types of caring activities give rise to distinctive thinking, they need to be individually described in terms of both their connections and differences. Her insistence on characterising care work related to children as maternal work reflects the essentialising notion that underpins maternal work for her. The discourse in COSATU policy challenges this essential view.

7.2.2.4. State Policy on Early Childhood Development

State legislation and policies also respond to the demand for fostering growth in children as a way of meeting their needs. As I have argued earlier (chapter 4, above) the WPSW (1997) is underpinned by assumptions about the care needs of children for emotional and social development locating their "survival, development, and protection" within a "nurturing and secure" family (p.39).

At the same time and notwithstanding its normative preference for 'the family', the discourse also points to inherent shortcomings in the institution that have a direct bearing on its ability to meet children's care and growth needs. Amongst others, the WPSW points to alcohol and drug abuse, communication and relationship problems, marital conflict and breakdown, parenting problems, family violence, and poor inter and intra- familial networks (p.39).

> *"The aim of family and child welfare services is to preserve and strengthen families so that they can provide a suitable environment for the physical, emotional and social development of all its members"* (p.41).

And it has to do this, in part, by overcoming the institutional dysfunction in the process.

The discourse of the WPSW is not able to confine itself to attending to arguably structural and functional constrains of the family, since like Ruddick, it situates women at the centre of child care and development. It also engages with the influence of work on women who are mothers:

> *"Increasingly women have had to join the labour market for economic reasons and have had to rely on childcare outside the home"* (p.39).

> And

> *"Working women are faced with increasing pressures in reconciling parenthood with work responsibilities. Early childhood development programmes to meet the needs of working women are insufficient"* (p.51).

By implication it is women who need to mother their children in order to foster growth and the problem is that economic activity, especially work, competes with child care for their time and attention. And even though early childhood programmes are seen as a way in which children's demands for child care can be met, the WPSW

discourse points to their inadequacy in doing the job. This is exactly Ruddick's contention.

Ruddick's ideas of what fostering growth means and who should be doing it resonates even more deeply with those articulated by the State. While all children may be vulnerable and in need of care, the State's discourse on the matter points to early childhood development as being especially formative for children ,and therefore a time when they especially need care.

> *"Children from birth to nine years of age have special needs, which, will be met to foster their physical, mental, emotional, moral and social development"* (WPSW 1997:42).

These ideas are more fully articulated through the State's Department of Education White Paper, where the problem is both explicitly defined,

> *"Early childhood development….. refers to a comprehensive approach to policies and programmes for children from birth to nine years of age with the active participation of their parents and care-givers. Its purpose is to protect the child's rights to develop his or her full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential"* (Department of Education 2001:14-15).

... and explained,

- *South Africa is committed in terms of section 28 of the Constitution as well as the World Declaration on Survival, Protection and Development of Children to the advancement of the rights of children;*
- *The early years of a child's life are critical for the development of the potential of the human being, and the first seven years are characterised by the rapid development of the physical, emotional, intellectual, social and moral character of the child.*

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- *Unless conditions of poverty under which many children grow up are addressed, some 40% of South Africa's children face the prospect of irreversible brain damage and stunted physical growth* (Department of Education 2001:12-13).

Generally, the State and COSATU concur with Ruddick on the importance of fostering growth in children, and they disagree to varying degrees with her in respect of who can or should be responsible for these tasks citing numerous sources which include child care institutions, families, parents and/or mothers themselves.

However, to all intents and purposes the problem remains unaddressed in practice, as neither mothers nor any of the respective institutions meet the challenge adequately.

Thus, for example, of six million children in the age cohort 0-6 years, a little over a million were registered in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres (Department of Education 2001:18). A large number of these ECD centres have poor facilities and they generally employ unqualified personnel (Coetzee and Streak 2004:260-261). An audit of ECD facilities showed that the sites serving African children were of lower quality than those serving the rest of the population (Biersteker and Kvalsvig 2007:163). And as Richter (2004) points out, institutionalised care cannot offer children, especially very young children, the emotional warmth of a primary care giver.

7.2.3. Training

For Ruddick 'training' is the third demand on which maternal practice is based. Unlike the previous two demands, it is not defined by children's need but rather by the social groups to which mothers belong (1989:21). Training demands that mothers shape children's behaviour to be morally 'acceptable' to their social group. Ruddick argues that although the norms of socially acceptable behaviour vary culturally, the

need for children's behaviour to be acceptable does not vary and is not naturally developed in children (ibid).

Ruddick sees 'training' as an active task which mothers engage in with their children using a mixture of strategies which may include being "*persuasive, manipulative, educative, abusive, or respectful*" (ibid). Underpinning a mother's training of her children is her own conscience, which she uses to identify, question and reflect on in her endeavours to discipline and guide her children in acceptable social behaviour. In her reflections on her training of children a mother faces many challenges. She has to consider what acceptable behaviour is, as it varies between and within society. Also, there may be contradictions between her own values and that of society (Ruddick 1989: 105-109). Mothers have to learn when to show sympathy and when to show self-control. Ruddick maintains that in order not to submit completely to the judgement of others and to relinquish their authority, values and their children's natural moral values, mothers try to act authentically. To do this, mothers make reflective judgements on whether to act against or comply with dominant values and in this way they also become models for their children (Ruddick 1989: 116-117).

Societal expectations regarding the moral development of children are often seen as the responsibility of mothers (Hardyment in Phoenix and Woollett 1991; Magwaza 2003). Mothers are often blamed when their children behave in socially unacceptable ways, because as Ruddick argues, they live in the *"Good Mother's shadow"* (Ruddick 1989: 31). However, Ruddick argues that mothers' real power to make and implement decisions about their children is often undermined by other people, policies, or institutions that contradict their values and disciplinary strategies (p.109-110).

One of the difficulties that confronts any effort to engage Ruddick's notion of training in an empirically informed way, is the fact that she speaks of children in generic and timeless terms, as if age, and with it their changing needs and capacities,

have no bearing on them or their mothers' capacity to influence them. In other words, she constructs the challenges of training in a way that is unable to address the significance of competing influences and types of training that other people and institutions can have on children's demands and maternal practice at different stages of their development.

7.2.3.1. Mothers' 'training' and social deviance

In South Africa most mothers do their 'training' of children in material circumstances of want and poverty, socially disrupted relations and family and community breakdown. Children often do behave in socially acceptable ways. But some children resort to behaviour that generally albeit not always locally is considered to be socially unacceptable. Such behaviour includes committing crimes, being violent and aggressive, abusing drugs and alcohol, not attending school, running away from home and living on the street. While socially acceptable behaviour and socially deviant behaviour in children may or may not be directly attributed to maternal training, the fact is little discursive or empirical evidence exists that might help us understand just how maternal training is working. Without this kind of evidence it becomes difficult to explore the distinctive kind of maternal thinking which Ruddick claims arises out of the maternal practice of training.

This said, a range of studies carried out by advocacy groups which monitor children's rights through assessing the status of children in South Africa: the Child Health Policy Institute, the Children's Institute, the Child Justice Institute, the Children's Justice Alliance and the Institute for Security Studies provide a weak and speculative but potentially relevant starting point to begin to consider the issue. Especially important are studies that look at socially deviant behaviour in children, like running away from home and living on the street, violence, substance abuse, truancy, or crime and gangsterism. These children are identified as being vulnerable and in need of special care and protection, and although they make no specific reference to the significance and impact of maternal training on children's social

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behaviour, its absence, lack or limited influence may be implicit in their explanations of socially deviant behaviour in children. Alternatively, in identifying influences and conditions which cause socially unacceptable behaviour, these studies also indirectly point to necessary factors which promote behaviour in children that is socially acceptable. Similarly, state policies and programmes articulate a discourse that emphasises the need for and importance of moral training for social acceptability in children. What follows is an attempt to understand the pertinence of Ruddick's arguments on training through some examples of social deviance in children as well as the policy discourses which highlight the need for moral training in children.

7.2.3.2. Child criminals

Criminal behaviour in children is a form of socially unacceptable behaviour which can be construed as exemplifying the consequence of the lack of training for social acceptability in children. In South Africa some 1703 children under 18 years of age were reported to be in detention and of these only 3 were under 14 years of age (Department of Correctional Services 2008). Whether this number is high or low depends on the perspective from which the problem is considered. Although the number is large, it represents just a fraction of the population of children in South Africa, and suggests that few children are engaged in socially deviant criminal activity that ends up in them being held in detention. Alternatively, it could be read to suggest that most children in South Africa are behaving in socially acceptable ways and that their need for training is being met in some way, more or less. That significantly more adolescent children are involved in socially unacceptable behaviour than younger children, also could imply that as children get older the influence of maternal practice competes with other social influences, peers, school and so on, and influences what they do and how they behave.

Children involved in criminal activity give a range of reasons for their involvement in crime. Overwhelmingly they point to factors at home which cause them to commit

crimes, including poverty in families, parenting and care of children, and (poor) family relationships (Frank 2006:15). These responses support Ruddick's view that the family and parental training within the home are important factors that shape the making of socially acceptable behaviour in children and that an absence of this training within the home has a negative impact on them. But there are additional factors that children attribute their criminal behaviour to, including peer pressure, drug and alcohol use and the influence of gangs (Frank 2006:15-16, Giese et al 2003, Leoschut and Burton 2006). These are influences that are external to the mother-child dyad, and as Ruddick points out, they often challenge maternal training, perhaps ever more so as children get older and are exposed to more influences outside the home. And then there is the matter of individual agency. These children say they commit crimes without coercion from adults and act on their own volition based on their environment and personal circumstances (Frank 2005:18). In other words, they confirm Ruddick's other claim that mothers' effectiveness in training is limited by children themselves, who are by nature unpredictable and have independent wills (1989:110).

At the same time, the idea that children can behave criminally, even if such behaviour may be more the exception than the rule, challenges Ruddick's naturalist assumption that children are intrinsically hospitable and good (p.103) and suggests that they are influenced in their behaviour by social factors as much as by free will.

7.2.3.3. Street children

Another example perhaps of the 'failure' of maternal training is where children run away from home and live on the streets. In South Africa there are more than 10,000 children living on the streets (Street-wise 2008, Giese et al 2003). Once again while these numbers are cause for concern, they also indicate that children living on the street is not a generalised phenomena. Among the combination of macro social and micro relational factors that drive children to leave home and live on the street are

problems in family life, abuse and neglect, which point to the importance of training in the home.

7.2.3.4. School violence

When children go to school, maternal authority is handed over to others and both children and mothers have to 'submit' to the authority and training of the teachers, principal and school authorities as well as other children. Sometimes the training and disciplinary measures employed there may contradict those of maternal training as children come under the moral influences of others in the community and the school (Ruddick 1989: 108-111). Sometime maternal training may be violated or subverted.

Violence perpetrated by children in school can be seen as an example of maternal training that doesn't always hold or endure. In South Africa, acts of violence occur in the schooling context at many schools across the country. Violent acts are perpetrated by some learners against their fellow learners, by some educators against learners, by some learners against educators and by some external persons against both learners and educators (South African Human Rights Commision [SAHRC] 2006). This violence takes many forms including bullying, gender-based violence, accidental violence, discrimination and violence, sexual violence and harassment, physical violence and psychological violence. The report suggests that although violence previously occurred in schools, they believe that learners are increasingly more willing and able to employ physically aggressive methods to resolve conflict using knives and handguns, which appear to be more readily available than in the past (ibid).

Factors in both the school environment and communities have been identified as contributing to school-based violence (SAHRC 2006). These include poverty, gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse, the social de-sensitisation of youth to violence (ibid) and especially violence in the home. It is an established fact that learners who grow up with violence in the home are more likely to display violent behaviour in

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school (ibid), pointing to the importance of Ruddick's contention that training within the home influences socially acceptable behaviour at school. At the same time, factors within the school that have been identified as contributing to school violence relate to the models of discipline employed in schools, unclear management roles, unattractive school environments and educators' misconceptions with regard to the human rights of learners (ibid) – none of which directly or indirectly relate to maternal training.

Generally, these examples, suggest that there is social deviance among South African children. Depending on how it is defined, it is a problem, although not necessarily on a scale that can be generalised to all children, or all children of a particular age. In fact, the numbers suggest that it is more of an exception than the rule, thereby suggesting that maternal training is going on and is working, albeit not as robustly as Ruddick and others would hope. Although the studies do not show the workings of maternal training specifically, they do point to the family home environment (the absence of parental care, parental abuse of drugs and alcohol and parental violence) as being an important contributing factor to social deviance in children, confirming Ruddick's view of the importance of maternal training (which can be done by either mothers or fathers) in ensuring children's need for social acceptability. But as pointed out earlier on in this chapter protection of children and childcare in South Africa is primarily done by women and mothers.

7.2.3.5 Institutional discourse on moral training of children
Turning to institutional policy, we find a discourse in the WPSW (1997) that resonates closely with Ruddick's views on the importance of family based/maternal training for social acceptability in children. The White Paper explicitly states that the demands for protection, nurturance as well as the moral training of vulnerable children should be met by their care givers.

> *"The well-being of children depends on the ability of families to function*
> *effectively. Because children are vulnerable they need to grow up in a nurturing*

secure family that can ensure their survival, development, protection and
participation in family and social life. Not only do families give their members a
sense of belonging, they are also responsible for imparting values and life skills.
Families create security; they set limits on behaviour; and together with the
spiritual foundation they provide, instil notions of discipline. All these factors are
essential for the healthy development of the family and of any society" (p. 39).

Among the children identified by the White Paper (1997) as especially vulnerable,
are those who are socially deviant, who live on the streets and who abuse substance.
(p.40-41). The WPSW also raises concerns about an increase in child and youth
crime, about "*... delinquency, crime ... and violence*" (Department of Welfare
1997:47,59) that once again is attributed to poverty and social instability. Here the
discourse emphasises the influence of structural factors as impacting negatively on
the family and thus increasing women and children's vulnerability to socially deviant
behaviour. These, in turn, generate adverse family conditions which not only create
vulnerability for women and children, but which also, by inference, imply weak,
poor or absent training.

Yet despite identifying women as structurally vulnerable, and the family as being
adversely affected by poverty and inequality, the discourse still charges the family
(read women) with primary responsibility for meeting most of the needs of children,
including their moral development. To wit,

> *"The Government is committed to giving the highest priority to the promotion*
> *of family life, and to the survival, protection and development of all South*
> *Africa's children"* (p.41).

This emphasis on the family (and women) underpins the principles which guide
strategies dealing with children committing crimes and repeat offenders:

> *"Children and juveniles are always in some way connected to their family or*
> *support network, community or culture. Those ties will be strengthened, and the*

capacity of such families and communities to provide support and care will be promoted" (p. 60) [and] ..."*the involvement of parents and communities in efforts to prevent the re-commitment of offences"* (p. 61).

Another example of the recognition of the need for training in children is the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education 1995) which regards parents or guardians as being primarily responsible for the education of their children. The chapter on *Values and Principles of Education and Training Policy*, while recognising the external challenges faced by most families, articulates a discourse which puts families (especially mothers) as the repository of care of young children:

> *"Since countless South African families are fragmented by such factors as past unjust laws, migratory labour practices, and marital breakdown, and handicapped by illiteracy from participating fully in the education of their children, the state has an obligation to provide advice and counselling on education services by all practicable means, and render or support appropriate care and educational services for parents, especially mothers, and young children within the community."*

This thread continues in the Education White Paper 5: Early Childhood Education (Department of Education 2001:12-13) which articulates a discourse on the importance of moral training in children in which parents and care givers are active, even central players.

> *"The early years of a child's life are critical for the development of the potential of the human being, and the first seven years are characterised by the rapid development of the physical, emotional, intellectual, social and moral character of the child."*

Generally, Ruddick's emphasis on children's need for training in social acceptability and the importance of maternal practice in meeting this need is echoed widely in

institutional policy discourse where primary emphasis is placed on the family, and its role in the social, emotional and moral development of children. This holds true despite the recognition of constraining influences of poverty on the family's ability to train children.

7.3. Discussion and conclusion

What this chapter has shown is that both empirically and in terms of institutional discourse, there is fairly strong concurrence with Ruddick's notion of maternal practice - some of the empirical evidence and institutional discourse shows this more clearly than others. Mothers are primarily involved in protecting their children in South Africa, and they do respond to children's needs, albeit within the constraints and opportunities of their varied socio-economic contexts. Mothers also engage in other types of work but still assume primary responsibility for the protection of their children. Maternal practice as a response to children's needs in South Africa happens within the context of the social, economic and cultural resources available to mothers. People act on the basis of resources available to them, such as *"money, influence, expertise, competence and knowledge where access to these resources is determined by social relations and power processes of social, economic and political nature"* (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 23).

Even though children are raised in diverse family and kin relationships – the extended family, single mother households, non biological households – their need for protection is responded to by women, even though they might not be their biological mothers. Mothering practice happens in the context of different relationships and not only in a dyadic relationship of mother to children. Household structure, history, politics, economics and socio-cultural factors all influence the nature and form of maternal protection of children, but for all that, mothering practices remain central.

However, institutional discourse and programme practice position women as providers of care and children as vulnerable and in need of care. They resonate with Ruddick's conceptions of the importance of children's needs for protection, emotional, intellectual and moral development and the family as the best means to meet this need. The fixing of the mother/family- child relationship in Ruddick's claims and the institutional discourse follows a pattern which prioritises children over their mothers or care givers.

In South Africa women are also mainly responsible for nurturing the emotional and intellectual development in children by spending more time than men on activities such as informal teaching and training and taking them to schools or sports lessons (Budlender 2001). However, as with protection and preservative love, the varying social and economic locations establish different conditions under which the demand for emotional and intellectual growth is met by mothers. Childcare responsibilities are mainly taken up by women who are not necessarily biological mothers of the children no matter what their socio-economic status. Both these findings confirm Ruddick's observations about the historical and cultural variability of mothers' responses to this demand. The poor socio-economic status of most women in South Africa also shows that women are poorly equipped to meet foster growth in children in the manner in which Ruddick assumes they do.

The institutional discourse and practices of fostering growth in children in the trade union organisation (COSATU), where working men and women articulate their expectations and demands, also resonates with Ruddick's notion that children need protection and nurturance. However, unlike Ruddick they expect these needs to also be met institutionally in pre-school facilities and not simply within the family by the mother only. Emphasis is on shifting the burden of care of children away from women alone and the private domain, in an attempt to remove the economic disadvantage childcare responsibilities places upon them. An articulation of their

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understanding of the need for nurturing emotional and intellectual growth in children is evident in COSATU policy and campaigns around maternal and paternal rights and childcare. The discourse on childcare within COSATU is gender neutral and talks of parental work and differs from Ruddick's insistence on retaining the conceptual term 'maternal' rather than 'care work' for children. However, some demands are made by COSATU which specifically relate to women and the demands of birthing and here they speak of maternity, which is in a similar vein to Ruddick's conceptual distinction between birthing labour and mothering.

State legislation and policies also respond to the demand for fostering growth in children. The discourse of the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) argues a normative preference for 'the family' in meeting these needs and places women at the centre of childcare and children's development. The State's discourse points to early childhood development as being especially important to children's development and this is articulated through the State's Department of Education policies and programmes on early childhood development. Although state policy and discourse concur with Ruddick on the importance of fostering growth in children, they disagree in some ways about who can or should be responsible for meeting these demands eg: child care institutions, families, parents and/or mothers. However, what is evident in practice is that neither mothers nor institutions can adequately meet the challenge of fostering growth in children in the manner Ruddick intends.

For Ruddick the demand for training of children is driven by social groups to which mothers belong. In South Africa mothers train their children for social acceptability in conditions of poverty, socially disrupted family and community relations. Children do behave in the main in socially acceptable ways but some do resort to socially deviant behaviour such as criminal behaviour, running away from home and living on the street, violence, substance abuse and truancy. In South Africa only a minority of children are reported to be involved in criminal activities and this would seem to indicate that training in children is happening. The main reasons given by children

who do commit crime were factors related to the home and this seems to supports Ruddick's view of the importance of family and parental training for children's social acceptability. Several other factors such as drug and alcohol use, peer pressure and gangs are also cited, which Ruddick also alludes to in claiming that often other peoples' values challenge maternal training. But these child criminals have also stated that they act out of their own volition which confirms Ruddick's claim that children have independent wills and are unpredictable which can limit the effectiveness of mothers' training. However, criminal behaviour in children also challenges Ruddick's notion that children are intrinsically good.

Street children may be seen as a 'failure' in their training by parents. However, a range of factors; poverty, neglect, abuse, breakdown in family are all reasons for their running away from home which does include a lack of maternal training as well.

Lastly, school violence is an indication of maternal training not enduring outside the home. Violence is being committed by learners in some schools and is caused by several factors within the school, in the home and in the community.

Generally all these examples of social deviance in children are not the norm and would seem to indicate that there is some measure of success in respect to the training of children for social acceptability. Although several factors are implicated in social deviance in children, the studies do show the importance of the home environment for socially acceptable behaviour in children. This supports Ruddick's view of the importance of maternal training for the children's need for social acceptability.

Institutional policy discourse in the WPSW (1997) and the Education White Paper 5 (2001) all also emphasise the importance of the family's role in meeting the social, emotional and moral developmental needs of children. This discourse on the needs of

children's growth, protection and training appear to assume a scientific universal validity. But it raises the question as to what counts as moral development, growth and protection. Gilligan (1982) presented a critique of the gendered terms used in traditional theories of children's moral development which she argues define the goals of this development in masculinist terms. Woodhead (1990) also provided an analysis of the varied ways in which the concept 'need' is used and the value judgements inherent in them.

It is difficult to say from the evidence provided whether maternal demands are child driven or driven by instincts or culture or institutional discourse or ideology. It is also difficult to directly read off maternal thinking from their practice or maternal motivations from mothering experiences. As Frazer and Lacey (1993:17) in Sevenjuhuisen (1998: 21) argue, human action is socially organised. Studies on women's practice, meanings and narratives of motherhood point to their varied social positions and how this influences their mothering practices. Women's agency with regard to mothering is shaped by their different locations. Caring is conceived of as a form of action where actors firstly perceive and interpret needs and then act on them where the interpretation and action varies in terms of the prevailing norms as well as the private and social context of the actors (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 22). She (ibid) argues that Ruddick's notion of care and maternal thinking is really a notion of good caring as Ruddick views it; it is a view which is normative and prescriptive.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

The conceptual power of maternal essence as the marker of gender difference

"For nearly two centuries at least, the most powerful justifications of women's exclusion from full participation in public life and our standing in a dependent relation to men have appealed to women's unique role as mothers. The requirements of mothering, moreover, have often operated as a real constraint on the possibilities for individual women to work outside the home, acquire education, and engage in leisure activities and countless other possibilities for self-development that many men take for granted. Women's connection to mothering thus has operated and continues to operate as an important ideological and material source of our inequality" Young (1990:37).

What does this study say about using maternal essence as a framework to explain gender difference? I have tried to address this question by exploring the various views of gender essentialism conceptually, theoretically, empirically and discursively. In this chapter I draw together the commonalities between the discussions in all six chapters in addressing this question and point out some of the differences and similarities in the arguments. The conclusions in this chapter are set against the conceptual underpinnings spelt out in the introduction to this thesis. This conceptual framework presented the interface between gender, essentialism, gender essentialism and sociological thinking.

Sayer (1997: 456) argues that in philosophy "essentialism is generally taken to be the doctrine that objects have certain essential properties which make them one kind of thing rather than any other." Philosophical understandings of essences argue that they are what distinguish objects from each other and they are necessary for specific behaviours or outcomes. For a group of people to have a common essence it has to be a shared attribute. Essentialism also implies that objects have eternal and unchanging characteristics and that they are discrete and only externally related to one another, rather than seeing phenomena as internally and externally related and not determined. These underlying essences define what makes something what it is. Essentialism also tries to show how fixed properties deterministically produce fixed and uniform outcomes. Essentialism can be biological, social or discursive. Essentialist explanations reduce or read off the behaviour of objects to one of its constituents. The traditional Aristotelean (1925) notion of an essence sees the essence as the most irreducible, unchanging and constitutive property of a person or thing which defines the existence of an object and makes it be the thing it is. It is the single base which defines and explains all other characteristics of an object.

The Lockean (1856) essentialist view presents another conception of essences. It divides essences into real and nominal essences, where real essences, linked to the Aristotelian conception cause and explain the observable properties which are nominal. A nominal essence is something that is used to classify and categorise and label things. Real essences need to be discovered through empirical observation. Fuss (1998) argues that constructionism refers to nominal essences and essentialism to real essences.

Essentialist thinking assumes that by reducing the difference between men and women to an 'essence' we would be able to explain and understand what they can and cannot do in terms of their consciousness, relations, capacities and experiences. Essentialist explanations of gender differences seek to reduce men and women's

nature to an 'essence,' a single cause/base, a crucial property, which would then account for all aspects of their lives.

The essentialist theorists examined in this study, de Beauvoir (1972), Firestone (1970), Chodorow (1978/1989/1994/1999) and Ruddick (1989,) all commonly identify gender difference between men and women as residing in an essence – maternal essence. For them maternal essence is a biological essence of reproductive functioning, a psychological essence of emotional drives and cognitive capacities, and/ or a social essence of mothering.

8.1. Biological essentialism: Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone

De Beauvoir and Firestone can be characterised as biological essentialists because they argue that it is the intrinsic properties of women's reproductive bodies which distinguish women from men. These properties are also the substratum, the base which accounts for the differences between men's and women's psyches, relations and experiences. For them women's reproductive biology causes the social organisation of family to be an institution with women dependent on men, children dependent on adults, and women mainly caring for children. Women's reproductive biology determines their individual consciousness, social behaviour and their social identity. Conceptually they use women's reproductive biology as a maternal essence in the Aristotelian (1925) tradition and with regard to Lockean (1856) notions of 'real' essence way. De Beauvoir and Firestone both look to the material body as the essence to explain gender differences because of the theoretical approaches they employ. For de Beauvoir the explanation lies in existential phenomenology where existence and consciousness is determined by the lived body and for Firestone it is historical materialism which looks to material explanations for social phenomena which includes the material body and material social relations. It is the material base that gives rise to women's mothering role within households and the sexual division

of labour. Women's individual biological characteristics lead to the social structuring of relations within the family. Bodies and social relations are separate. The social institution of the family is created because of biology. And for Firestone, women's childbearing and childrearing roles lie at the heart of women's gender oppression and difference. Woman's reproductive functions are the point of origin, a first cause of gender difference and inequality. The logic of both of their explanations leads them to propose the use of reproductive technology by individual women to overcome/transcend the constraints of their reproductive bodies in order to become active subjects like men.

De Beauvoir's and Firestone's biological essentialist explanations of gender differences are useful because they draw our attention to the reproductive body as a distinguishing characteristic between men and women. A woman's capacity to reproduce is an essential capacity and the focus of these theorists on a woman's reproductive body also shows that it is materially implicated in women's different experiences and behaviour. Further they suggest that a woman's material reproductive body may influence what women can and cannot do.

Connell (1987:77) argues that the body is implicated in the processes of gender as it is involved in all kinds of social practices which can sometimes exaggerate, deny, mythologize or complicate biological differences. He argues that the body is also experienced in various ways in terms of pain, pleasure, aging and birth. The empirical evidence examined in this study points to gendered experiences of the body. Features of women's biology do mean that women's needs are different to those of men. The evidence also shows that women's reproductive function does give rise to specific needs, such as maternity leave and access for nursing babies in the work place in the contemporary world.

However, there are several things which de Beauvoir's and Firestone's biological essentialism cannot explain. The evidence shows that biological reproductive

functions of women's bodies do not directly determine women's consciousness, experiences and social relations. What women can and cannot do and what they experience with regard to their biological capacities is mediated by social, economic and historical factors and is socially constructed. The evidence shows that the fact that women assume primary responsibility for mothering within families is as much a factor of external social conditions as it is a factor of their biological capacity to reproduce children.

The use of contraceptives controlled by women does not degender the social relations of caring within the family. Female controlled contraceptives do offer women the opportunity to decide on how they will regulate their fertility in terms of the timing and frequency of child bearing but this regulation does not mean that their desire to bear and mother children is overcome. Social and psychological factors influence women's behaviour and therefore gender differences cannot be simply read off sexual relations and neither do cultural patterns simply 'express' bodily difference. Connell (2002:47) argues that bodies have agency and bodies are socially constructed such that it is not possible to separate the biological and social analysis and reduce the one to the other where the body is conceived of as a machine. Bodies are connected through social practices and social practices are connected by bodies; they are both objects and agents. They are also transformed by social practices. The evidence points to the connections between women's bodies and the practice of institutions. Technology itself is a product of social practices and is mediated by social relations. It creates the possibility to regulate or overcome reproductive functioning implying that biology is not fixed. However, it is not sufficient in and of itself to overcome gender oppression or inequality in general.

Another factor which mediates women's biological capacities is the discourse around it. Ways of seeing and accounting for gender difference act to challenge or entrench certain conceptions. The discourse in the social policies, legislation and programmes cited in this study, namely the WPSW (1997), COSATU (2003), SACCAWU (1991),

Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development (2001), Procedural Manual for Grants Administration (2003) and The Social Assistance Acts (1992 & 2004), construe women's identity and behaviour as tied to their reproductive biological capacities and childrearing capacities. Post structuralist and postmodern approaches argue that behaviour and identity are also constituted discursively and can become objectified in practice through institutions. As is evident in this study, childbearing involves more than having the biological powers to do so. It is influenced by individual internal micro interpretive factors as well as external macro social structural and discursive factors.

The evidence shows that the reproductive arena is contingent and not pre-determined and fixed by reproductive capacities but is activated by different internal and external factors which are context dependent. This challenges the discrete divisions of Cartesian dualism between body and mind and between biological and socio-cultural phenomena. Butler (1993:66-7) and Grosz (1995:210) argue that there are no clear boundaries that divide the materiality of the body from cultural interpretations of it.

8.2. Psychic essentialism and social essentialism: Nancy Chodorow and Sara Ruddick

In contrast to De Beauvoir (1972) and Firestone (1970), Chodorow (1978) argues that behavioural dispositions and capacities for mothering are not produced by women's reproductive biology but by intrapsychic structures developed in girls through women's social activity of mothering children. She argues that men and women, girls and boys unconsciously develop different relational capacities and gender identities through the sexual division of labour in which women, not men, mother. In turn this division of labour reproduces in boys and girls different psychological characteristics. Chodorow uses connectedness and differentiation in a mother-child dyad to explore gender differences.

For Chodorow, the sexual division of labour within the family in which women mother and men don't is the consequence of differential emotional identification drives that are part of unconscious psychological processes which men and women develop as children. For her women's mothering directly produces distinctly gendered personalities in men and women where women are unconsciously driven to seek attachments with other people for gratification, while men are driven to seek separation from others. These unconscious drives reproduce the sexual division of labour. Through these processes of gender identification children learn what it is to be male and female and their primary definition of self is implicated in their gender identity.

Chodorow argues that women's childhood experiences give rise to an essentially caring and compassionate subjectivity, concerned with the needs of others (Grosz 1995). She employs psychoanalysis, specifically object relations theory, to explain the development of gender differences. This approach leads her to focus on subject, subjectivity, internal unconscious processes, desires, the psyche and object relations to explain gender difference. Object relations theory places the mother-infant relationship at the centre of psychological development. The emphasis is on the importance of gender difference and its social origins as well as the mother-daughter relationship as the site of the internalisation of women's oppression. The logic of her argument leads her to propose shared parenting as the way to transform the social/object relations within the family and to degender the psyches of children.

Her argument is essentialist because it identifies women's mothering and specifically psychological attributes as the common gender difference which all women share. Chodorow essentialises family formation, the social experiences of women as well as their identity and attributes when she attributes common features to all families and all women. Consciousness and subjectivity are located in this fixed human activity which produces a fixed gender identity. However, her notion of maternal essentialism is not the same as the biological essentialism articulated by de Beauvoir

and Firestone as she uses a Lockean nominal essence when she characterises gender difference with the activity of women mothering. The 'real essence' in her explanation lies in the different psychological drives and attributes which boys and girls develop. Chodorow's notion of essentialism is also multi-dimensional. Her characterisation of mothering can also be seen as having a 'generative property' vis a vis Sayer's (1997) definition of essences which is something that primarily determines what an object can and cannot do. The activity of mothering can also be characterised as having a social essence (Alsop et al 2002) in that all women share characteristics as a consequence of adoption of the same social role. Chodorow also points to a psychic essentialism and claims of common, shared psychological characteristics, such as empathy and nurturing, that distinguish women from men (Grosz 1994).

Chodorow's psychic essentialism is useful particularly because it shifts the analysis of gender difference away from social, economic, political and legal as well as biological constraints to women's social experiences as mothers, daughters and childrearers in the constructions of their subjectivity. She turns our attention to women's inner subjective experiences and women's biography in the formation of gender identity. Her characterisation and explanation of gendered subjectivity derives from a modernist Cartesian (1968) epistemology which holds the body and mind apart. She also emphasises the formation of gendered subjectivity within the micro social context of the family. From the available empirical evidence, it is evident that women are distinguished from men by women's primary involvement in childcare activities and mothering experiences. Women are the primary people engaged in childcare activities that nurture and protect and train children. They sometimes can also be seen to consciously claim their identity as mothers. The evidence also shows that men are mostly absent from households and if they are present they engage in very few childrearing activities.

This said, Chodorow draws a direct unmediated causal link between women's social experiences as mothers and the individual psyche, and between individual psyches and their social experience of mothering. For her the subject is locked into a deterministic relationship between the activity of mothering and gendered personalities – the causal relationship between the psyche and social relations are tightly drawn. Children's gender identities are fixed in individual personalities and experiences, determined by and reduced to their experiences of being mothered by women. The gendered personalities of men and women are directly read off from their childhood experiences of being mothered by women. Mothering is in turn read off individual personalities, and social relations are read off psychic characteristics. Because Chodorow's psychic essentialist account of gender difference views subjectivity as stable and fixed and constituted by individuals it is unable to explain the variable and shifting nature of mothering experiences and their social constitution. The evidence shows that childcare happens in different kinds of family formations. Childcare also happens in different social, economic and cultural contexts which has implications for the form and quality of mothering. Mothering practice cannot therefore be reduced to a universal practice or set of social experiences. By privileging mothering in the acquisition of gendered subjectivity Chodorow makes all other processes through which subjectivity is constituted subordinate to this primary structuring and the gender inequality to which it gives rise.

The empirical evidence shows that external social influences also constitute women's subjectivity, making the character of women's attachments to children local, contingent and variable rather than fixed. Descartes (1968) argued that subjectivity can be constituted socially and the mind is not separate from the external world as argued. Social relations between men and women also affect women's mothering activities. In addition men's relation to women is one of a balance of power and domination and not only that of absence.

Men's and women's relation to children and each other and functions of the family can also be constituted and essentialised discursively. Post structuralists argue that language is implicated centrally in the construction of men and women, that is, individual subjectivity is also constituted in language. This study shows that the discourse on women in State social policies constructs women as being best placed to care for children. Men are constructed as the economic providers for children, or as defaulters of financial support. The family is represented as a functional unit responsible for the care of children, implying that mainly women will be the care-givers within the family. Gendered discourses can be translated into institutional practices and provisions which then affect what men and women can and can't do and legitimise certain practices. Subjectivity then is discursively constituted through macro institutional structures. However, men and women can also accomplish mothering through their individual agency and repeated acts of mothering. The evidence reflects the individual micro level performance and the macro institutional accomplishment of gender differences.

Chodorow's theory points us to the individual female subject and her experiences within the family and social relations. However her explanation does not include the importance of external macro structural forces in constituting women and men's subjectivity, as in discourse, other relations /social structures and power, ideology which renders the personalities of men and women unstable, variable and historical. By rooting gender oppression and personality formation in the mother-daughter relationship she implies that blame rests with mothers for women's oppression and excludes an analysis of the power relations which privilege male domination. Her analysis fails to dialectically connect psychic structures within the individual with macro social structures in the construction of subjectivities and the constitution of desire. Mothers' psychic experiences are viewed as separate from and are abstracted out of external social influences. Although Chodorow identifies the link between mothering and individual psyche as the reason for women assuming primary responsibility for this, in fact she presupposes a biological essence. Her theory rests

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on the assumption that children form attachments and identify with same sex parents in developing a sense of self and gender identity where the only observable difference that children can make between mothers and fathers are physical biological differences.

She proposes shared parenting to transform gendered mothering and also to revalue mothering activity. In so doing social factors which give rise to women mainly mothering remain. They are not part of her solution largely because of her essentialist notions of gender difference. This is so despite the evidence that points to social and discursive influences which structure parenting arrangements. These influences lie outside the private sphere of the family and the individual.

Turning to Ruddick, like de Beauvoir, Firestone and Chodorow, Ruddick sees gender subjectivity as also residing in individual attributes and characteristics of women. However, unlike de Beauvoir and Firestone's contention that women's bodies are the determinant of their psychological characteristics and behaviours, Ruddick and Chodorow attribute gendered psyches and cognitive attributes to the social activity of mothering. While de Beauvoir argues that women lack the rational consciousness which men have because of the trap of their biological bodies, Ruddick celebrates women's 'practical consciousness' (Wittgenstein 1980) as something positively different from the theoretical rational consciousness attributed to men. For Ruddick certain maternal virtues, ideals and cognitive capacities arise and are developed in the practice of mothering which she argues can be used to develop a politics of peace for humanity. Like Chodorow, Ruddick identifies specific valued maternal attributes which emerge from women's mothering interactions and practices with children. These maternal attributes are preservative love, nurturance and conscientiousness. However, unlike Chodorow, she argues that these capacities and attributes in women emerge as the product of conscious reflections by women on their mothering practice rather than as the product of unconscious emotional drives. For Ruddick it is women's conscious reflections on their interactions with children and their demands

that generate a distinctive kind of maternal thinking which consists of intellectual capacities, judgements and metaphysical attitudes and values.

Ruddick's turn to focus on the practice and actions of women to account for gender difference, arises from the theoretical frameworks that underpin her ideas. These are a combination of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and a social action perspective. All these frameworks focus on the individual, either his or her identity, consciousness, social action and/or subjectivity. Epistemologically the social action perspective and interpretive paradigms underpin Ruddick's theoretical approach. Within this framework, behaviour is explained as individual intentional actions in which meanings are bestowed on humans. The actions of individuals are perceived as aligned to the actions of those of others. The focus is on the activities taking place between people and the nature of the interactions. Actions are explained in terms of the meanings actors give to these interactions through language. These meanings are revised and processed through an interpretive process that individuals use to deal with the signs each encounters. In the context of Ruddick's argument the signs encountered by women are received from the demands made by children on them. Language mediates the meanings and interpretations of the practical interests created through human interactions. Ruddick therefore defines a mother as one whose work is responding to the basic demands that all children present; preservation, nurturing growth and training for social responsibility. Fathers' roles are seen by her as tied more to cultural values than the core needs of children.

De Beauvoir also focuses on consciousness and subjectivity because, like Ruddick, she includes a phenomenological approach which is part of the interpretive paradigm to her existential explanation of gender difference. Ruddick specifically uses the ideas of Wittengenstein (1975/1980), Winch (1952) and Habermas (1972) in her explanation of maternal thinking and practice. Like these theorists she also assumes that thinking and ways of knowing arise from, and are shaped by the practices in which people engage. For these theorists and for Ruddick reasonable practice is

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defined by the aims and goals of the practices which are directed at meeting certain demands.

Ruddick's characterisation of mothering practice and thinking and children's demands is essentialist because she identifies a fixed set of key demands which all children universally make and these demands are constitutive of a universal fixed type of maternal thinking and practice in mothers. In so doing maternal thinking is directly read off maternal practice which is in turn directly read off children's demands. This tight fit between mother's actions and children's demands precludes the impact of other people and other social and discursive influences on the actions of mothers and the demands children make.

The cognitive attitudes she describes as those mothers display in response to children's demands for preservation are seen by Ruddick as the appropriate responses that all women seem to possess apriori and universally rather than contingently. Similarly Ruddick's characterisation of the maternal attitudes of fostering growth in children also assumes that children have very specific needs and natures and that mothers can recognise these needs and are capable of and able to meet these demands. She also argues that children's and women's nature are mainly/essentially good and that the training of children requires a recognition and trust of these natural characteristics.

The possibilities introduced by Ruddick's interactionist and micro - interpretive perspective lie in her focus on micro social interactions between individual mothers and children. Unlike Firestone and de Beauvoir she does not link these interactions to the constitution of social relations within the institution of the family. She rather focuses on micro interpretive processes and shows how they constitute gendered thinking and feelings. Individual behaviour, thoughts and feelings are seen by Ruddick to occur in response to the external demands from another individual (read children). Her conceptions of gender difference give significance to the social

relations between mothers and children and to individual agency in mothers and to conscious reflections on their actions.

The evidence on maternal practice does show that it is mainly women who are responsible for protecting children, for nurturing their emotional and intellectual growth while most men do not engage in these activities. It is also evident from the responses from child criminals that they themselves attribute their deviant behaviour to a lack of family and parental training. This implies recognition by children of the importance of their need for social acceptability and the importance of parental training for social acceptability. These maternal activities of protection, fostering growth and training for social acceptability are evident in the studies and distinguish women from men. The evidence also shows that these maternal actions and thinking take place within the constraints and opportunities of women's varied socio-economic contexts. Mothers' actions towards their children are circumscribed by their access to resources and the nature and the form of maternal responses is contingent on other relationships, household structure, history and politics. It is also evident that women do act as active subjects who engage in conscious reflections on their mothering practice in making administrative decisions about how to care for their children.

However the nature of children's demands and maternal practice cannot be attributed solely to the single cause of maternal thinking. The social and individual constitution of children's demands, and maternal thinking and practice, is not emphasised by Ruddick. Mother and child are seen to exist separately from their cultural context. Mothering practice and experiences is thus seen as existing prior to its social construction. By also characterising the work of caring for children as maternal work specifically, she essentialises mothering as something that is tied to women. Individual conscious reflections on and interpretation of children's demands and their practice are not the only source of women's behaviour, feelings and thinking. The evidence shows that the interpretations and meanings women give to their

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maternal practice is influenced by their social context, be it other people or institutional discourse and practices and/or culture.

The studies cited in this study show that the socio-economic conditions in which women live influence the form and content of their maternal practices, be it how children are trained, how they are protected or how they are nurtured. With regard to the training of children, the evidence shows that the 'training' of children as characterised by Ruddick is in fact taking place, as in the main in South Africa children are behaving in socially acceptable ways as only a minority of children are seen as socially deviant. However, the studies also show that this maternal training happens in conditions of poverty, in socially disrupted families and situations of fractured community relations. However, child criminals also speak of committing crimes of their own volition and also because of the influence of peers and other people. The danger with the interactionist and interpretive explanations of mothering is that the individual is detached from the outside world. It is too narrowly micro-interpretive and cannot account for the way in which external macro social structures and institutional discourse and practices also influence and constitute maternal practice.

Such an approach does not account for the contested nature of the meanings and interpretations of mothering practice, nor does it take into account power. The discourse in the government policy documents and legislation cited in this study prescribe normative forms of maternal practice and thinking and also fix a set of children's demands. In the process it positions women and 'the family' as best suited to meet these demands. Childcare occurs within an already gendered world. However, alternative conceptions of mothering are also proposed in state policy discourse where social and institutional responsibility for childcare is argued for. Policy documents relating to working mothers and fathers call for parental work, as opposed to maternal work, and in so doing recognise mothering as a shared responsibility and a degendered type of work. Working women and men through

their organisations and policy documents also demand social responsibility for childcare as opposed to individual responsibility. Thus mothers are subject to, and also influence discourses which either challenge or confirm or prescribe their maternal practices and thinking. Children's demands are also constituted through discourse and by their mother's interactions and are not fixed or stable. Ruddick's essentialist notions of mothering, while drawing attention to mothering experiences and attitudes from the standpoint of women, deny the variability and contingent nature of mothering and children's demands.

8.3. In conclusion

Collectively all the four theorists which I have analysed in this study locate gender difference in an essence of maternity that distinguishes men from women, a feature that they hold responsible for women's experiences, actions, behaviour, attributes, attitudes and capacities. Hekman (1999:9) has also pointed out that many feminist theorists commonly identify sexual difference between men and women as embodied in an essence of maternity.

Similar to the various conceptions of gender essence, maternal essence has also been variously characterised either as biological reproduction, mothering activities or maternal psychological capacities and attributes. Crowley and Himmelweit (1992) argue that motherhood has always been a problem for feminism in terms of theorising it either as an institution which posed an obstacle and limitation to women's self realisation in society or as an experience which is a resource and strength to women. Several systematic reviews on motherhood (Snitow 1992, Ross 1995, and Arendell 2000) have been published which have attempted to analyse different conceptions and theories of motherhood and maternity, historically and conceptually. They have identified different definitions and conceptions of motherhood located within different historical periods.

Snitow (1992) identifies three distinct periods along a time-line and found that the writings about motherhood in the 1960s and 1970s questioned motherhood as a destiny and saw it as a oppressive and as a constraint to gender equality. The influence of the ideas of de Beauvoir resonates largely in this period and Firestone's (1970) text *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* was also published in this period. The second half of the 1970's saw feminists exploring women's actual experiences of motherhood and began to theorise the social and psychological meanings and implications of this experience. In this period mothers' own descriptions of mothering were investigated. In this period feminists speak of women having a 'different voice.' Nancy Chodorow's (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering* is one of the influential books published in this period. Sara Ruddick' (1980) book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* appears in the third period 1980-1990 which sees a reaffirmation and celebration of motherhood. Ross (1995) argues that the writings in this period looked at the details of mothers' work and their feelings about their children.

What is common to the various theories of maternity and motherhood over the different historical periods is their emphasis on the significance of maternity in women's lives and gender difference – be it as constraint or as valued attribute. Marshall (1994:104) argues that although gender essentialist theories identify different types of gender difference, what is common to all is the connection they make between the female body and the reproduction of the species. This connection is made even though each type of essentialism rests on different sorts of arguments about how biological difference is transformed into subjective difference.

Essentialist notions are criticised for ignoring the "relational, diverse, positional and shifting character" of gender (Sayer 1997:460). Sayer (1997) and Walby (1990) raise several key points about the concept of essentialism which the findings of this thesis supports. Sayer (1997: 461) argues that essentialism extrapolates phenomena from

particular social locations and in so doing marginalises and suppresses other differences. Walby (1990:14) argues that the weakness of grand theories of patriarchy is that they use a simple base-superstructure model of causal relations, where one causal element is specifically used to explain patriarchy. Walby (2009: 255) argues that the problem with theories which identify one key element as the cause of gender inequality is that they are unable to theorise variations and changes in gender relations.

Other authors raise important points that also bear on the finding of this thesis. Segal (1987) and Spelman (1988) criticise essentialist approaches to gender as reductionist. While Mohanty (1991) and Mirza (1997) argue that essentialist approaches to gender have difficulty theorising the differences between women and the intersection of gender with other inequalities. The vantage point from which all four theorists in this study explain the cause of gender difference is specifically a maternal essence located in individuals; their reproductive biology, unconscious psychic drives and emotions or conscious motivations and intentions or their activities. This maternal essence, like essentialists' notions in general, is a vantage point which only offers a partial understanding to the complexity of experiences and human behaviour.

Despite their various characterisations of this maternal essence, either as biology or practice or psyche, epistemologically all four theorists focus on individual men and women and micro social relations between men and women and/or women and children to explain gender differences. Their essentialist notions of gender lead them to all read off micro social structural formations (family) from either women's biological essence or women's psychic or social essence. Individuals are conceived of as discrete objects separate from the macro social structural context in which they exist. These conceptions run contrary to Mills' (1970:12) ideas of the sociological perspective, that "*The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two **within** society.*" (my bold).

Having explored the conceptions of gender essentialism of the four theorists in relation to empirical studies and policy discourse and practice, I conclude that what is useful about their essentialist characterisation of gender difference is that it draws our attention to the significance of maternity for women's individual experiences and identity as well as for society in general. However, the study has also shed light on how external macro social structures, institutions and state discourse and practices influence this significance of maternity for women and for society in general. The study therefore points to both the strengths and the weaknesses of essentialist notions, specifically maternal essence in explaining gender differences. It confirms the need for an approach that takes into account the complexity of the experiences and the activities of mothering and the need to take into account the historical, constructed and dialectical approach in analysing the interaction between individual mothers and their social contexts in order to explain women's experiences, behaviour, actions, capacities, attitudes, thinking, desires and activities.

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