

THE MEANING AND LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MATERNAL GUILT

by

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B.A., McGill University, 1991

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education)

WE ACCEPT THIS THESIS AS CONFORMING

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September 1999

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Date Sept 27 / 99

Abstract

A qualitative, phenomenological methodology was used to explore and describe the experience and meaning of maternal guilt. Eight women between the ages of 32 and 42 years of age with one or more preadolescent children were interviewed about their experiences of maternal guilt. Using Colaizzi's (1978) approach to phenomenological data analysis the following seven common themes regarding these women's experiences of maternal guilt emerged: a sense of complete responsibility, a sense of depletion, a sense of inadequacy, fear that their children might come to harm, a strong desire to have a positive impact on their children, a sense of profound connection, and a sense of loss. The first six themes were common to all the women while the last one, a sense of loss, was common to all but one participant. A follow up interview with each of the women served to confirm or clarify the findings generated from the initial interview. These results provide a greater understanding of the experience and meaning of maternal guilt for these eight women. Recommendations for counsellors and for future research are provided.

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Acknowledgments

Throughout the process of this research study many people guided, encouraged, inspired, and challenged me. I believe I am a better person because of their generous contributions and, undoubtedly, this thesis is the better for their assistance.

To begin my acknowledgements I wish to thank my husband who, in his ever-patient, gentle, and very clever ways, helped me far more than he knows. Andrew, I am thankful and humbled by the way you continue to teach me the meaning of partnership, support, and love.

I also wish to thank Dr. Judith Daniluk, my thesis supervisor, who fosters great meaning in her relationships with students and who gives of her wisdom so freely. Judith, thank you for respecting and believing in who I am and what I am capable of, for your dedication and encouragement when I struggled, and for modeling how to reach for more.

I extend my thanks to Dr. Marla Arvay and Elaine Carty, who gave me reasons to dig deeper and ponder important questions so that I am a better researcher and a more thoughtful person. Thank you for your interest, enthusiasm, and support.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the eight women who participated in this study. Thank you for so generously sharing of your time, yourselves, and your experiences. You made this research process enjoyable and your contributions were invaluable.

Chapter One

Introduction

Over the past five years I have been introduced to an extremely intriguing concept that seemingly has not received the professional attention that I believe it deserves. In my work as a family therapist in training, parenting group leader, life skills instructor, and volunteer crisis counsellor mothers have repeatedly and with exasperation shared with me their experience of maternal guilt. While facilitating a parent education course mothers voiced doubt about the choices they had made, or were about to make. "Was it all right that they had decided to put their child into day care rather than hire a nanny?"; "Was it okay that they stopped the cotton diaper service and were now using disposables?"; "Would the children be harmed if they decided to start or stop work?" Each week they wanted confirmation that they were 'good mothers.' Each week they came in with a cloud of guilt hanging over their heads. This cloud made them question each parenting choice they considered, big or small, and seldom did they know how to make this cloud dissipate.

On one occasion at the crisis center a mother called in great despair at not being able to afford a birthday gift for her child. Despite her having hand painted a birthday card and written a poem expressing her love for her child she berated herself for not being able to afford more. This mother is only one of hundreds that have called the crisis center in distress, in part due to their perceived inability to live up to their expectations of what a 'good mother' should be able to do, even when it seemed apparent to me that they were doing a very thoughtful and good job. Several mothers would even express guilt over situations in which they had little or no control. Somehow their title as Mother was synonymous with complete responsibility and blame for their children's and family's

wellbeing. The guilt that the women over the years have expressed to me is unlike any guilt I have yet experienced. Their guilt stems from their role as mothers and I, not yet a mother, am struck by the pervasive and tedious manner by which it haunts them.

The idea of exploring and understanding the nature and implications of this 'beast' that reportedly discourages the incredible efforts of women trying to be the best mothers they can be compelled me. I also felt practically recruited to tackle this topic by colleagues, clients and friends (particularly those who are mothers) who responded so emphatically when I mentioned the words 'maternal guilt.' While I am not yet personally aware of the full meaning of these words, because I am not yet a mother, it is evident that each mother to whom they have been mentioned has given me a knowing look and asked whether she could be a part of the research. Each mother seemed to have a personal experience and understanding of 'maternal guilt' and that was what I intended to investigate, make some sense of, and hopefully contribute to the professional literature.

Many terms and phrases have been used to describe guilt. While *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* does not list a definition for maternal guilt it does provide definitions for each part of this construct. It defines maternal as an adjective that is "of or like a mother, motherly, or related through the mother" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1995, p. 840). It defines guilt as "culpability, of feelings of culpability" (p. 605). There are many elements that form the complex emotions, thoughts, values and judgment, which create guilt (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987). Many of the feelings and thoughts that make up our conscience and influence our experience of guilt were formed in childhood (Baruch et al.). Research suggests that women experience more guilt than men and that guilt in females increases from childhood to adolescence, and into adulthood (Baruch, 1988; Hoffman, 1975; Gilligan, 1982). Due to socialization, as girls age and enter

adulthood, they may be struggling with the internal and external expectations to live up to the image of the ideal mother (Rich, 1986; deVaus, 1992).

From a social role perspective, women have traditionally been socialized to take responsibility for the well-being of others (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987). Women attempt to balance their own needs with their perceived responsibility for others. Whatever exacerbates this dilemma, heightens the possibility of, and vulnerability to, guilt (Gilligan, 1993; Shaw & Burns, 1993).

Women are primarily responsible for their children. The dilemma that women face is the struggle to balance self, spousal, and motherhood roles. Endless parental advice comes from multiple sources (TV, radio, magazines, family members, and parent guide books to name a few) and a woman's supposed priority, no matter what her personal choices may be, are dictated to her in both subtle and indiscriminate ways (Eyer, 1996; Gregg, 1993). When she chooses to work or participate in extra-familial activities she may well suffer from guilt about not fulfilling her role as mother. When she chooses to be a stay-at-home mother she may feel guilty if she is bored or unfulfilled by this role.

Since there is an abundance of books, magazines and research that debate, advocate and dictate components of proper parenting I assumed that the literature would also delineate the multi-layered experience of the guilt experienced by women who mother. Moreover, since I have found that every mother has a personal experience of maternal guilt it seemed natural to assume that I would find this issue researched in the literature for professionals and mothers alike. However, I was mistaken. While the existence of maternal guilt riddles feature articles in North American parenting and women's magazines (*Parents*, *Parenting*, *Chatelaine*, and *Canadian Living*) and is acknowledged in professional journals (*Ontario Psychologist*, *Child and Adolescent*

Social Work, British Journal of Psychiatry) any knowledge of its essence, etiology, or implications is noticeably absent in the clinical or empirical literature. The majority of the available literature focuses more on children's needs, and women's parenting skills, and less on the actual experience of motherhood, not to mention the experience of maternal guilt or how to deal with it.

It should be noted, however, that maternal and parental guilt is acknowledged and somewhat described for specific populations of parents. Pregnant women are reported to experience maternal guilt when making nutritional and health choices (Chapple, May & Campion, 1995; Gregg, 1993), and when deciding on prenatal diagnostic procedures (Chapple et al., 1995; Oakley, 1992). Mothers who require obstetrical interventions during labour appear to experience guilt for not being 'good enough mothers' because they are unable to have a 'natural' birth (Bergum, 1989; Couch & Manderson, 1993; Oakley, 1992). Several studies demonstrate that parents of handicapped children often reportedly suffer feelings of guilt. Michaels and Goldberg (1988), Friedlander (1980), and Nixon and Singer (1993) suggest that parents whose babies are born with a handicap often feel guilty because they feel "responsible for the condition" (Michaels & Goldberg, p. 183). Furthermore, feelings of ambivalence and anger towards their babies often arise which, in turn, seem to induce additional feelings of guilt (Michaels & Goldberg; Friedlander; Nixon & Singer). Other studies concur with these findings while adding that parents' feelings of guilt seem to remain even when they are clearly not responsible, or at fault for, their child's handicap (Chapple et al., 1995; Genevie & Margolies, 1987; Laborde & Seligman, 1983).

Other researched populations of parents and/or mothers that experience guilt include parents of adopted children who exhibit behavioural or personality problems

(Stewart, 1990), parents of boys who show effeminate behaviour (Zuger, 1980), parents of babies that die of SIDS (Schwartz, 1988), and parents of children who commit suicide (Al-Mabuk & Downs, 1996). In addition, mothers who choose to work (Kimball, 1973; Lubin, 1987) and mothers who choose some form of child care (DeSalvo, 1993; Lubin, 1987; Ventura, 1987) are reported to experience, and make choices to alleviate, maternal guilt.

While the above mentioned populations of parents present a legitimate ground to explore the experience of maternal guilt I was struck by the absence of literature that focuses on 'average' mothers of 'everyday, run of the mill' children. There are some anecdotal accounts of mothers and their feelings including those of guilt. *The Mother Dance, How Children Change Your Life* (Lerner, 1998), *Laughter and Tears* (Bing & Coleman, 1997), and *The Growth and Development of Mothers* (McBride, 1973) are examples of books that attempt to provide their readers with a first hand realistic account of what motherhood involves. Segments of women's stories, including the authors' personal experiences, describe various motherhood behaviours and feelings. Here again, the presence of maternal guilt is acknowledged, considered natural and almost to be expected. Each of the authors attempt to share how and when mothers feel guilty and offer some advice on how to alleviate this burdensome experience. These personally inspired books are commendable efforts that demonstrate the beginning of understanding the lived realities of mothers, and to a lesser extent, the nature of maternal guilt. However, the accounts are anecdotal and personal and address this experience only peripherally.

One attempt to directly address maternal guilt is the work of Diane Eyer. In *Motherguilt* (1996), a review of popular, professional, and political literature, Eyer

examines and explains how American society holds all mothers responsible for the healthy raising of their children leaving them with an overwhelming sense of maternal guilt. In the following chapter I outline in more detail the origins of maternal guilt as she describes them. However, it is important to note here that her review of the sociopolitical origins of 'motherguilt,' and the need for American culture to start supporting mothers, overshadows any attention given to the nature or experience of motherguilt. This shortcoming helped justify the need for this study.

Exploring and describing the nature of maternal guilt is the foundation to understanding one of motherhood's important emotional experiences. I have found that mothers simply do not have an avenue for anticipating this unique guilt much less an avenue where they can express or deal with their guilt in a supportive or productive way. With a better understanding of maternal guilt, professionals will be better equipped to help women develop ways of coping and handling this emotional experience and its consequences for the mothers themselves, and for their children and families. As a counsellor and a woman who hopes one day to have children, it seemed timely and prudent to explore an issue that presented itself as prevalent, and as pressing as this one did.

Purpose of the Study

Given the numerous demands of motherhood and the limited available literature on this important topic, I was interested in gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon of maternal guilt. The purpose of this study was to understand, using a phenomenological approach (Colaizzi, 1978; van Manen, 1984) the lived experience of maternal guilt. Because teenage children are more independent and autonomous, and they are dealing with developmentally different issues (Erikson, 1980), this study focused

on the experience of women who are mothering pre-adolescent children. The research question that guided this study was: **What is the meaning and lived experience of maternal guilt for women with preadolescent children?**

This topic was important to study because it seemed to resonate with the experiences of many mothers. It was important because relatively little attention had been paid to the experience and consequences of maternal guilt for women. I knew it was important because mothers told me that it was important. They told me that they wanted to know about the experience of other mothers and how they coped with their feelings of guilt and inadequacy. They told me they wanted to learn how to alleviate their sense of guilt. Their requests, and my own interest in this phenomenon, led me to investigate the nature and experience of maternal guilt.

There are several ways in which this research may be of value. First, while some of the current mothering literature makes reference to its presence, there is a dearth of research into the experience of maternal guilt. This was a void that needed to be addressed. Second, though the present study was an attempt at applied research, it does have implications for theoretical development. In addition to contributing to the current knowledge of mother's experiences, this study may inspire other researchers to delve further into the area of maternal guilt. Third, women deserve the opportunity to voice their experience of a seemingly everyday feeling, which for them has significant emotional impact and consequences. Finally, by exploring maternal guilt this study may provide helpful and needed information for professionals working with mothers or women who are making the transition to motherhood. How better to inform social service providers than through the words and experiences of real people? This study brings together the voices of eight women and provides a new understanding of the

experience of maternal guilt. It gives mothers a foundation for being better understood and supported by the mental health professionals to whom they turn for assistance.

For the thousands of mothers who read parenting books and magazines so that they might better anticipate, understand and respond to the challenges of motherhood, it seemed to me that there should be more than just a focus on providing instructions on how to be a 'good parent'. Attention to the multiple and often taxing emotional demands of motherhood, from which maternal guilt may stem, is of value, not only to women, but also to their families and communities.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

What do we know about maternal guilt? Which mothers experience it? When does it begin? What triggers it? In this chapter I will attempt to answer these questions and others by reviewing the popular, professional and research literature. It would appear the existence of maternal guilt seems to be a given. However, knowledge of its essence or true nature seems noticeably absent in the research literature. The reader should note that the literature often refers to both maternal guilt and parental guilt interchangeably. This review will endeavour to maintain a focus on the mother's experience without neglecting the information reported about parents in general.

Having introduced the studies on maternal guilt which focus mainly on parents or children with special mental or physical health characteristics in the first chapter, I will begin this review with the remaining empirical literature that examines mothers' feelings of guilt. Following this, I will outline the effects of parent education, specifically the advice given to women on their roles as mothers and its relationship to mothers' experiences of maternal guilt. Next, I will present the literature that addresses the challenges career mothers tackle and what is known of their feelings of maternal guilt. In the following segment I will turn to popular parenting and women's magazines that regularly publish articles on women's parenting dilemmas and the guilt many feel as a "less than adequate mother." Thereafter, I will review the empirical and professional literature that outlines the relationship between the culturally bound myths of motherhood and mothers' experiences, including those of guilt. To conclude, I will review the professional and anecdotal literature that focuses on the emotional experiences of mothers as some authors consider maternal guilt an emotional experience. In keeping

with the topic of this study I will highlight the references that describe women's experiences of maternal guilt.

Early Experiences of Maternal Guilt

Maternal guilt is said to begin even before the child is born. Gregg (1993) interviewed thirty-one women, between the ages of 30 and 40, concerning their experiences of pregnancy. The women described many choices they made in the attempt to take control of their procreative processes and to act responsibly. He found that the women were very conscious of ways their behaviours might influence their fetus. The women reported feeling bombarded with recommendations about nutrition, medications and prenatal medical test options in a way that led them to feel guilty about possibly acting irresponsibly. Mothers reported feeling guilty if they took a Tylenol during their pregnancy. One mother was afraid that she would be blamed if anything went wrong with her pregnancy or baby. When given the option of prenatal diagnosis, such as amniocentesis, another mother reported how guilty and selfish she felt by invading the baby's life with "this horrible, outside influence" (p.67).

Chapple, May, and Campion (1995) found similar results in a qualitative study of 30 families that sought genetic counselling in England. Several mothers interviewed reportedly raised the issue of feeling guilty for the type of self care they maintained during pregnancy including feeling guilty for having chosen to smoke throughout the pregnancy.

Oakley (1992) completed a qualitative narrative study of four women's transition to motherhood. Her findings concur with those of Gregg (1993) and Chapple et al. (1995). Each of the women described their prenatal choices as double-edged swords because they discovered social and internal pressures, and feelings of guilt accompanied

them. These mothers reported feeling guilty for “moving furniture,” undergoing “prenatal tests” (p. 200), and for “not wanting the baby” (p.207) during their pregnancies.

While it would appear that maternal guilt is experienced during pregnancy, the process of birth itself is also reported to instigate feelings of guilt. For example, Couch and Manderson (1993) performed multiple interviews with 93 Australian women starting during pregnancy and ending up to six months postpartum. They found that achieving a natural birth was a priority for these women since births that required drugs, forceps, or obstetric assistance, such as a Cesarean section, were perceived by the women as “bad” or as “a failure.” The women who required obstetric interventions felt “guilty that their bodies had not worked right” (p.61). Other authors such as Bergum (1989) and Oakley (1992) have also documented that women who experience long and difficult labours often feel guilty that they have not managed well, and are left unsure of themselves and their mothering abilities.

Advice to Mothers

From the beginning of pregnancy onwards many mothers receive parenting advice and information from numerous sources. Some reputable researchers and authors identify and try to make some sense of the experience of maternal guilt and how it relates to the advice mothers are given. Sheila Kitzinger, author of *Women as Mothers* (1978), expresses respectful views on mothers’ experiences gained from her past research, literature reviews, and work experience. Kitzinger’s “antidote to the ‘how to’ books” (p.5) offers her insights only as information from which she hopes to instill self-confidence in the reader so that he or she (potential mothers and fathers) “may make their own informed choices in terms of the reality they face” (p.5). She claims that motherhood is full of both positive and negative emotions that parenting guide books

simply don't address in any helpful way. In fact, she believes that "too often professionals impose a style of mothering, which of its essence, is culture-bound, ephemeral, and reflects preoccupations which are linked to fashions in child-rearing" (p.7). Based on her many years of experience as a midwife and health educator, Kitzinger claims that it is the very instruction of such child-rearing methods, whose fashions are constantly changing, that is a source of guilt for women. Mothers often worry that they have inflicted irreversible harm on their children because of the things they did earlier, without the knowledge of the current perspectives and advice.

Arnup (1994) concurs with this view, and adds her own perspective as to how parent education has left some mothers feeling inadequate. In *Education for Motherhood* (1994), Arnup provides a thorough review of Canadian maternal advice literature from 1900 to 1960, situated in its historical and social context. She discusses the effects this literature has had on mothers. Arnup turned to three sources to determine the experiences of mothers in response to the child care advice they had received: the records of the health care professionals (mostly nurses and parenting group leaders); letters written to child-rearing experts; and interviews with mothers. While she found an overwhelming amount of evidence that demonstrated mothers' gratitude for the child rearing advice they received, she notes that these accounts were most likely limited to women who had positive outcomes. In response to this, Arnup suggests that mothers who did not have a successful outcome to their pregnancy, or whose children died early in life, would have been unlikely to bring such information or any gratitude to the attention of child-rearing experts.

Advice literature laid responsibility for children's health and well-being squarely in mother's laps. If something went wrong, the literature stressed, mothers had

only themselves to blame. It would seem unlikely that such mothers would voluntarily come forward to admit their failure (p.134).

Arnup argues that the letters mothers wrote in response to the advice they had received that she was able to review were probably only a portion of those actually written. She believes that these letters were selected from a larger body of letters (that contained more negative responses) and retained by social service industries, such as the Canadian Council on Child and Family Welfare, so that both positive public image and financial funding were well maintained. Based on only a few negative letters that remain on file, she states that expert child advice left some women feeling inadequate, a feeling that often is followed by guilt as discussed earlier.

Jane Price, a feminist psychiatrist, combined a review of the literature with her professional experience with women to explore how modern culture treats mothers. She speaks about the double edged sword of maternal education in *Motherhood: What it Does to Your Mind* (Price, 1988). For example, on the issue of breast-feeding, she maintains that while babies are innately programmed to emotionally withstand the sometimes bumpy road to proper feeding, mothers are not. Often mothers' emotions are undermined by the teachings they receive. "Fingers of guilt about being a bad mother" are entwined in the teachings as a right and wrong way to breast feed are asserted to mothers (p. 55). The observations of Price are related to those of Arnup (1994), and Kitzinger (1978). The implications of these non-empirical observations are noteworthy as they suggest the need for current research on women's experiences and needs as mothers. Furthermore, these observations may indicate that some of the women in the current study may suggest that the parenting information and education that they have received is one source from which their feelings of maternal guilt stem.

Career Mothers

Another specific research area that researchers have begun to investigate is the presence of maternal guilt for career mothers. Kimball (1973) provides a review of literature for the 1950's and 1960's concerning working mothers and guilt. She reports that "across a large number of studies" (p. 38) mothers of young children reportedly felt guilty for doing paid work outside of the home, especially if they enjoyed their work rather than doing it out of financial necessity.

In a more recent qualitative ethnographic study of five working women from New York, aged 32 to 37 years, Lubin (1987) suggests the contrary. These five mothers of young children felt happy, as they saw their work as an opportunity for self-realization. They reported that their abilities to balance time and energy between careers and children made them better mothers. Interestingly, rather than the career itself, it was the type of childcare arrangement they employed that seemed to influence their feelings of maternal guilt. All five mothers in Lubin's study were able to afford housekeepers and reported that this was the one arrangement that enabled them to ward off guilty feelings.

Ventura (1987) and DeSalvo (1993) agree with these findings. Sixty couples expecting their first child participated in Ventura's study that investigated parenthood stresses. The men and women completed one questionnaire during pregnancy and one two months after the birth of their child. Fifty-eight mothers and fifty-four fathers reported that the role conflict between working and providing childcare was a primary source of stress. Ventura defined stress as a situation that was difficult or troubling because it took effort to deal with and/or because it made the parents feel deficient. While the experience of guilt was not directly indicated, this study is worth noting as the

definition of stress used may be seen as closely related to the feelings that have been found to accompany guilt.

In her quantitative questionnaire study of 118 employed mothers with preschool-age children who attended day care DeSalvo (1993) examined the stressors and rewards experienced by mothers. She reports that 18% of these employed mothers experienced conflict and guilt over their efforts to balance employment with adequate child care. These feelings of conflict and guilt were the third reported major stressor after time constraints (37% reported as a major stressor) and coordinating scheduling (23% reported as a major stressor). Though these studies acknowledge the presence of maternal guilt and identify some of the sources of this experience, they do not provide insight into the experience of guilt per se. While maternal guilt is ranked by these authors as a primary stressor for parents, it is not examined or described in a manner that helps us better understand the nature and implications of the phenomenon for women.

The Motherhood Experience, Myth, and Maternal guilt

I will now turn to the literature that addresses maternal guilt as experienced by mothers and children with no particular special needs or circumstances. Popular parenting and women's magazines address maternal guilt quite regularly. I will briefly review some of these pieces. Beyond this, there is a scattering of research studies and anecdotal accounts that more broadly address the experience of motherhood, of which the experience of guilt appears to be a part, for many mothers, irrespective of the physical and psychological health of their children. These will also be reviewed.

Parent's magazine, a popular parenting magazine in North America, has published three articles on motherhood and guilt in the last five years (Kline, 1991; Levine, 1992; Samalin, 1994). Though the authors' information is not based on research,

it would seem that they are addressing an assumed need or at least, a topic of interest for their readers. These articles suggest three triggers of maternal guilt with which their readers can presumably identify. Some maternal guilt is said to be brought on gratuitously by others: “ You’re not going back to the office after the baby, are you?” Or “A bottle? Don’t you know breast-feeding is best?” (Kline, p.101). Secondly, guilt is said to be instigated by the mothers themselves, often as result of internalized cultural expectations. That is, mothers tend to imagine the ‘ideal mother’ and feel guilty that they can’t live up to their own expectations. Finally, it is suggested that maternal guilt can stem from unintentional errors. She neglects to provide an example of such and chooses instead to emphasize the importance of using mistakes for positive and realistic role modeling. Levine (1992) lists the “top ten guilt trips” (p. 58) experienced by an unspecified sample of working mothers. The top three on the list include a mother’s inability to pick up her child after school, a mother’s inability to attend class plays or participate on class trips, and mothers feelings of guilt about going out at night without their child. Samalin (1994) suggests that parents even experience guilt when they believe they cause their child to feel unhappy.

Parenting (Satran, 1997), *American Baby* (Eberlin, 1997), and *Canadian Living* (Ovenell-Carter, 1995) have also featured articles presenting accounts from various women on guilt associated with motherhood. Eberlin suggests that the decisions mothers make, such as whether to breast feed or bottle feed infants, lead mothers to question their ability to make the right choices. This, in turn, results in feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Ovenell-Carter provides a second hand account of maternal guilt. She interviewed day care employees who said that part of their job is to try to alleviate the guilt mothers feel as they drop off their children. While this is perhaps little more than a humorous article,

it still speaks to an all too well known experience some readers can and obviously do relate to. In the end, these anecdotal accounts appear to be based on the interests and experiences of these writers and their readers. Their annual presence perhaps suggests a need for more formal research attention on this phenomenon.

Could the anecdotal claims in these magazines have merit? Some professional literature would suggest so. Mothers feel a great sense of responsibility for the well being of their children and often try to live up to excessively high parenting expectations (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979; McMahon, 1995). Rich (1986) and deVaus (1992) suggest that Motherhood is so idealized by our culture that most mothers experience feelings of guilt at some time because most believe they have failed to live up to this ideal in one way, or at one time or another. Thurer (1994) and Gregg (1993) blame these high expectations, in part, on the media blitz (TV programs, magazines, parenting books, videos) that constantly tells mothers what to do. "Parents have been and still are confronted and intimidated by child-rearing fads which are often serially contradictory and are packaged for them by an assortment of experts who make a handsome living out of parental vulnerabilities" (Ambert, 1992, p. 10). As a result, mothers feel guilty about what they do and what they say (McMahon), and may feel responsible for everything that they perceive goes wrong with their child (Thurer).

From her experience treating mothers with depression, deVaus (1992) has observed what she believes to be two types of maternal guilt: true and false. She suggests that true guilt occurs when a mother has the intent of hurting others. False guilt, on the other hand, she suggests is the result of circumstances that make a mother feel responsible for a perceived negative outcome for her child. deVaus considers feelings of guilt, whether true or false, an "inevitable accompaniment of motherhood" (p. 37).

There is some research on the experience of motherhood that has identified maternal guilt as one of its components. In a qualitative interview study of 59 Toronto women, McMahon (1995) explored how motherhood transformed these women's lives. All the women, of whom almost exactly half were considered working class and the other half were considered middle class, reported increased feelings of responsibility and worry when they became mothers. Half of the mothers expressed concerns about their parenting behaviour and more than a third of the mothers were especially concerned about their ability to handle issues of discipline. Circumstances that instigated feelings of maternal guilt were briefly addressed. For example, one woman described her frustration: "You always feel bad after, you know, if you yell at them and you shouldn't have" (p.210). This may come across to others as a feeling of remorse or guilt for having done something a woman wished she had not. One of the implications of this study is an apparent need to continue research into the experience of motherhood, as it is a seemingly transformative experience in women's lives.

Thurer (1994), author of the book, *The Myths of Motherhood*, traces the evolution of ideals, or myths, of motherhood created by our culture. From her review of the literature and her clinical experience, she believes that the myths that delineate what constitutes a 'good' or a 'bad' mother influence mothers. Thurer suggests that mothers form their ideas and expectations of themselves as a mother according to the unrealistic ideals of the myth. The myth of motherhood has three components. The first is 'maternal instinct', which she defines as the biological drive that every woman is supposed to have, to nurture and love her infant, and also the built-in knowledge of how to care for her child. The second is 'mother love' which signifies endless patience, self-sacrifice and endless attention to the child's needs. The third is 'maternal fulfillment'

which refers to the feelings of being continuously happy and satisfied by one's ability to be mother to a child. These myths are often internally incorporated by young mothers and as such Thurer postulates that women are likely to have feelings of guilt as they often fail to live up to these expectations of motherhood. For example, while a mother is expected to feel completely fulfilled in her maternal role she may feel guilty if she wants to look outside her mother role for additional fulfillment.

According to Kitzinger (1978), a social anthropologist, childbirth educator, and midwife, many women may start to resent their child for being "sucked into serving the child's needs" (p.39). Her clinical experience leads her to suggest that mothers will often have feelings of guilt in response to these feelings of resentment and for seemingly not living up to the myth that a mother has only feelings of love for her child.

The experience of childbirth and early motherhood is the focus of the book *Laughter and Tears* (Bing & Coleman, 1997). Eighty years of combined experience working with parents as childbirth educator and psychologist culminates in this book written for women describing 'the emotional life of motherhood.' Over a five year period an unspecified number of mothers (biological, adoptive, single and partnered) responded to a questionnaire that asked them how they felt in the early weeks and months after having a baby. Bing and Coleman took great care to preserve the words and meanings expressed by mothers. In doing so they provide an enlightening and sensitive account of the spectrum of emotions experienced by new mothers. While guilt was not a prominent theme, it did present itself as one of the emotions experienced. The authors claim that one of the most sensitive issues for any new mother is the anger and guilt she may feel toward her newborn. The ambivalence in early motherhood can be so intense

that a mother can “feel as though one part of herself is at war with another” (p.174). One woman wrote:

For a while I really resented my baby for making me feel tied down. Then I realized that it is not him, it's me. It isn't his fault. I am frustrated, but now I understand that the anger I feel is at my situation, not at my baby. I did have guilt. I felt like being a mother is such a special gift, to have any kind of negative feelings was wrong (p. 174).

Similar to Kitzinger (1978), Bing and Coleman (1997) state that it is not uncommon for a mother to feel that her new child has taken over her life and for her to feel guilty and selfish for wishing things could be different. The implications of this portrayal of both the positive and negative emotional experiences of mothers is perhaps the beginning of debunking the myths that have led women to question their ability to be good mothers.

The Motherhood Report (Genevie & Margolies, 1987), an American based research study, lends support to the above findings with the results of a survey that aimed to learn how women feel about their children and about being mothers. A nationally representative sample of 1100 mothers between the ages of eighteen and eighty reported guilt to be one of many maternal emotions they experienced. An unspecified number of women said that the experience of guilt was the most difficult thing to accept about motherhood. These women were often mothers who felt that they had failed their child in some way as they “knew that they should have done many things differently” (Genevie & Margolies, p. 27). The reasons and situations that provoked a sense of guilt for these women varied. The inability to deal with the multiple demands of motherhood successfully and patiently, the lack of attention given to their children, being too strict or not strict enough, and having feelings of dislike for their children or for motherhood

appeared to elicit mothers' feelings of guilt. One mother offered the following statement that depicts the paralysis of 'I should but I can't' that accounts for seemingly unproductive feelings of guilt:

I wish I could set the clock back and correct all the errors I made in the past. I have not been the mother I thought I would be. I don't always like myself as a mother. I think about how often I fail my children in their training and how inadequate I really am as a mother. I feel I should be able to do better, but I don't know what to do differently (p.30).

This study demonstrates seemingly unnecessary negative self-judgments and sorrow that a mother can feel when she believes she does not live up to the ideals of motherhood.

The implications point towards the need to inform women of the cultural influences that they may have internalized about motherhood, and to help women set more personal and realistic expectations of themselves as new mothers.

Block (1990) reported similar findings which suggest that women often experience guilt as a result of feeling inadequate as mothers or as a consequence of any negative feelings they may have about being a mother, or towards their children. In *Motherhood as Metamorphosis* (1990), Block, a social psychologist, combined the results from a case study of 15 mothers (all middle class and living with the father of the child) with her professional experience with clients. She describes women's experiences of change and of continuity, as they become mothers. Several women had feelings of guilt and considered these feelings a new experience. Again, mothers who felt angry towards their children were reported to then feel guilty. They believed "they should be understanding and sympathetic" (p.220). Block believes that the dominant reason mothers feel guilt is that they feel unable to live up to the image of the 'good mother.'

Consistent with Thurer (1994), she claims that 'the good mother' concept was conceived at the beginning of the twentieth century, and defines the ideal mother as "self-sacrificing and nurturing, her selfless devotion to her family [is] her greatest source of fulfillment" (p.156).

It would appear then, that many women feel inadequate in their role as mothers. However, it is important to note that not all research support these findings. Kaplan (1992) presents a thoroughly detailed account of her case studies in which she examined 12 women's experiences of motherhood. These are documented in her book *Mother's Images of Motherhood*. It is interesting, given the research previously cited, and the recognition Kaplan gives to the influence the sociocultural idealization of the 'good mother' on many women, that the interviews with these first time mothers did not elicit any accounts of feelings of guilt. What she found instead was that these middle class women, who ranged in age from 25 to 44, wanted to resist the typical motherhood messages they had received while growing up during the height of the 'feminine mystique.' These women were found to present images of motherhood that are considered at odds with the myths, as previously outlined in this chapter by Thurer (1994). For example, these women reportedly chose to avoid maternal self-sacrifice and instead, to recognize their own needs in addition to those of their child's (Kaplan). These findings imply that women may be influenced differently by sociocultural messages which in turn, suggests that the experience of being a mother is unique, and the experience of maternal guilt may not be considered universal.

Similarly, Boulton (1983) conducted a study of British women's experiences as mothers in which guilt was scarcely evident. Fifty English mothers, ranging in age from 22 to 34, over two, two-hour interviews, individually shared their stories of their daily

experiences as mothers with children ranging from 11 months to 12 years of age. The body of the study includes numerous quotes of the mothers' responses to the interview questions, none of which include the experience of guilt. However, in her concluding discussion, *On Being a Mother* (1983), Boulton states that one third of the "women felt guilt and anxiety as a consequence of the conflict between their responsibilities as mothers and as housewives" (p. 205). How Boulton came to this conclusion is not evident. This discrepancy may be explained, in part, by the manner in which Boulton sought out these women's experiences of motherhood. While she claimed the objective of the study was to gain an understanding of the multiplicity of feelings involved with being a mother, the questions the women answered asked how they felt about looking after their children. While caring for children may be considered an experience associated with motherhood it does not describe the whole experience. It would have been interesting, and perhaps more in line with the goal of the study, to hear about the women's feelings towards being a mother rather than their feelings towards their children. Furthermore, with this focus it would have been interesting to see if maternal guilt may have been reported as part of the respondent's experiences.

The research findings of Kaplan (1992) and Boulton (1983) may suggest that not all mothers experience maternal guilt. However, they may also indicate the importance of using methodological approaches that invite the discussion of a sensitive topic that mothers may find difficult to reveal or explore freely. As such, in this study I endeavoured to develop a non-judgmental rapport and a comfortable environment that invited the women to address their experience of maternal guilt. While all of the mothers in this study shared this particular maternal experience no generalizations may be made to women who did not participate.

Vangie Bergum, author of *Woman to Mother* (1989) and more recently, *A Child on Her Mind* (1997) provides her understanding of the experience of motherhood from a number of phenomenological studies and professional experience working primarily with mothers with children under the age of five. Like Kitzinger (1978) she values the words of mothers as she believes their narratives are what uncover the lived experience and meaning of becoming a mother. Several mothers in her studies mention feeling guilty for a variety of reasons. For example, one woman felt guilty for not maintaining an appropriate nutritional regimen during pregnancy. Another felt profoundly guilty because she pricked her baby with a diaper pin. Yet another felt guilty for having been angry with her child (Bergum, 1997). For one woman, named Katherine, motherhood was full of guilt. "You feel guilty about a whole bunch of things – you are responsible for so many things and it is impossible to be one hundred percent on top of them all." (p.139). Bergum suggests that many women experience the same feelings of guilt that Katherine expressed, because mothers are made to feel responsible for everything that happens to their child. This includes circumstances over which the mother has no control. Despite these insights, Bergum argues that it is the tension between the mothers' "need to be for the self" and "the need to be for the child" that results in "the accusation of guilt" (p.139). She recommends that mothers explore and articulate their particular experiences in order to gain better balance between their identities as mothers with their identities as women with children, to counter feelings of guilt. Furthermore, in her empowering manner, Bergum encourages mothers to regard their experiences of self-doubt and self-questioning as a positive impulse that guides a more reflective process of living with a child rather than as a cue for experiencing guilt.

The subject of maternal guilt, however, is not at the core of Bergum's (1997) findings. In fact, guilt is not one of the central mothering themes she identifies. Instead, the themes include "the lifelong presence and absence of the child," "the intense feelings of love, pain, and fear associated with birth, placements, adoption, and the care of the child," and "the responsibility of having a child in one's life for a long time" (p. 135). The experience of maternal guilt was acknowledged as a component of these themes, however, Bergum does not explore or describe the nature of this experience in any real depth. She readily supports and invites further research that attempts to understand women's experiences of motherhood. Her phenomenological approach and her findings support the intent, methodology, and purpose of this study.

In *The Mother Dance* (1998) Harriet Lerner addresses the subject of guilt by devoting an entire chapter to this topic. Her view on the inevitable guilt mothers will feel is told through anecdotal accounts from friends, clients, and her own experience as a mother. Lerner describes, in a very accessible but empirically unsupported way, many of the sources of guilt that have been previously outlined. She asserts that mothers need to keep a reign on the amount of guilt they feel as it prevents them "from becoming effective agents of personal and social change" (p.75). She believes guilt is an essential human emotion that can help clarify values and keep behaviours in line with them. However, Lerner suggests that the continued experience of guilt can exhaust the positive aspect of having guilt feelings and can prevent mothers from being productive. Lerner provides a summary of some of the scenarios that provoke maternal guilt and she is adept in normalizing this experience as one that is encountered by most women. She even lists a number of reassuring but somewhat vague suggestions for women to consider if they are beset with guilt. For example, Lerner encourages mothers to avoid self-blame by

replacing it with a process of reflection and self-evaluation, as the latter process is more productive and self-loving. *The Mother Dance* provides a well-intended introductory exploration of guilt but, overall, this work lacks a rich understanding of the lived experience and meaning that the experience of guilt has for mothers.

Angela McBride is another author that gives heed to exploring maternal emotions. In *The Growth and Development of Mothers* (1973), McBride combines a literature review with a personal and anecdotal account of the experience of motherhood. McBride believes that the most important job a new mother has is adapting to the emotional confusion that encompasses having a baby. Anger, depression and guilt are an emotional triumvirate that "plague all mothers" (McBride, p.xv). The anger-depression-guilt merry-go-round is explained as an intensification of normal feelings due to the demands of motherhood. The level to which these feelings may arise is considered within the realm of "normal-crazy" emotions to be expected and accepted by mothers without self-punishment (p. 39). The author suggests that women feel angry over little things that can be named whereas depression arises with larger issues that seem overwhelming. Guilt is said to follow these feelings when a mother perceives herself unable to live up to society's, or her own expectations. Consistent with the sentiments of other authors reviewed in this chapter (Block, 1990; Genevie & Margolies, 1987; Lerner, 1998), McBride concludes from her own experience as a mother that guilt is a feeling that results from feeling maternally inadequate. A poignant excerpt that expresses her sense of responsibility and inadequacy follows:

I can't stand it when my children are sick. I feel responsible for every germ or virus that sneaks into the home. How dare they conspire to make me look

bad! Did I give my children bad genes – weak muscles, infected tonsils, flat feet, sensitive ears, allergies? I beg their mercy for my failings. Why do I always have to feel like a failure? (p.47).

McBride's work attempts to normalize and explain these feelings of guilt and anger that she presumes many women are overwhelmed with. She asserts that mothers may benefit from anticipating and perhaps accepting the potential that they will experience heightened emotions that are often confusing and uncomfortable but are none the less considered normal as many mothers experience the same.

Psychologist Diane Eyer provides an angry account of how society treats mothers in her recent book, *Motherguilt* (1996). In this extensive and critical review of popular parenting literature, child care education, American legislation, and psychological research she blames American culture for the guilt she asserts mothers experience. While her title leads one to expect a description or understanding of maternal guilt her agenda is more politically oriented. Eyer is "concerned with the political and subjective spins that scientific research is given when beliefs about maternal instinct and the ideology of motherhood are questioned" (Stuttaford, 1996, p.57). She analyses the literature and research that address issues such as working mothers, types of child care, mother-child attachment, divorced mothers, single mothers, mothers in poverty, and teen mothers. Eyer is convinced that most mothers have feelings of guilt as a result of studies that incorrectly claim that women may be harming their children by the choices they make. For example, she states that mothers are led to feel guilty for using childcare facilities as they are encouraged to stay at home with their children. Eyer cites studies of "home-reared" versus "child-care-reared" children that rest on the assumption that "young children's separation from their mothers interrupts the attachment process and

that 'child-care-reared' children will be less secure" (p. 113). She attempts to defend women's child care choices and deflate the integrity of these findings by saying: "in these comparisons the quality of the child's attachment to her mother continues to be defined as *the* essential characteristic of emotional development in spite of the fact that no consistent pattern of attachment differences between home reared and child-care-reared groups has emerged" (p. 113).

Eyer (1996) is convinced that the pseudo-scientific concept of the maternal 'bond' is one way child rearing strategies have been revised to deter women from looking outside the home for economic gains and personal fulfillment. Hence, she takes a stand against the "three gurus" of child raising as she feels they have undermined and demoralized mothers (p. 4). She argues that the 'expert advice' of Benjamin Spock, Penelope Leach, and T. Berry Brazelton has been a source of 'motherguilt' as women have been instructed to remain at home during times when economics and the changing face of the family demand that they seek paid employment outside of the home. Furthermore, she claims that American society incorrectly places blame on mothers for several social ills such as poverty and immorality. Eyer suggests that this 'motherblame' becomes converted into 'motherguilt'. Rather than a depiction of mothers' experiences and feelings, *Motherguilt* is a spirited attempt at getting America to recognize the need for public support of families through substantial tax cuts, paid parental leave, and regulated, subsidized day care.

Summary

In summary, the literature reviewed acknowledges the experience of maternal guilt from the time women are pregnant and throughout their lives as mothers, with an emphasis on the early years as mothers. Research literature shows that pregnant women

(Chapple, May, & Campion, 1995; Gregg, 1993; Oakley, 1992) and mothers who require obstetrical interventions during labour (Bergum, 1989; Couch & Manderson, 1993; Oakley, 1992) have been shown to experience feelings of guilt. Furthermore, mothers who choose to work (Kimball, 1973; Lubin, 1987), and mothers who choose some form of child care (DeSalvo, 1993; Lubin, 1987; Ventura, 1987) appear to experience maternal guilt.

While most of the research literature on maternal guilt has focused on special populations of parents and children, popular and some professional literature presumes that most mothers experience guilt, in large part due to the way motherhood has been constructed over the last century. The literature suggests that most women in the 1900's have grown up socialized to the myths of motherhood (Rich, 1986; deVaus, 1992; Thurer, 1994) and struggle in their efforts to live up to the image of the ideal mother, leaving many of them with feelings of inadequacy and guilt (Block, 1990; McMahon, 1995; Kitzinger, 1978). Some mothers appear to be making choices that defy the myths of motherhood and report no feelings of guilt (Kaplan, 1992), however, these appear to be in the minority.

The current reality is that women are primarily responsible for their children and often struggle to balance self, spousal, and motherhood roles. Endless parental advice comes from multiple anecdotal and professional sources. The abundance of books, magazines, and research that debates, advocates and dictates components of proper parenting have been linked to mothers' feelings of guilt (Eyer, 1996; Arnup, 1994; Kitzinger, 1978). Articles on the guilt mothers experience regularly fill the pages in parenting and women's magazines which would suggest that the readership of these magazines can relate to this topic. In the last few years there has been a slight increase in

the professional and anecdotal accounts of mothers and their maternal feelings including that of guilt (Bing & Coleman, 1997; Lerner, 1998; McBride, 1973). These works acknowledge the guilt felt by women, consider it a natural feeling and one that is almost to be expected by mothers.

Despite this slight shift in emphasis in the current literature there remains much to be learned, and even more to be understood about the experience of maternal guilt. To date, there have been no studies found that solely concentrate on women's lived experience of maternal guilt. There is little knowledge of its etiology, or implications, much less a description of women's lived experiences of maternal guilt and the meanings they derive from this experience. The intent of this study, in an effort to begin to address this void, was to focus on the experience of maternal guilt and attempt to describe its essence and meanings.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Method Selection

The methodology selected for a study depends on the nature of the question being asked (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Rogers, 1985) and should match the skill level and general interest and orientation of the researcher (Osborne; Rogers). As the purpose of this study was to illuminate the essence of 'maternal guilt,' a phenomenon about which little is known, the use of a qualitative phenomenological approach was particularly appropriate (Colaizzi; Giorgi, 1985; Osborne; van Manen, 1984). A phenomenological inquiry endeavours to answer the question: "What is the structure and essence of this phenomenon for these people?" (Quinn-Patton, 1990, p.69). The participants in this study answered this question as they shared their experiences of maternal guilt. The meaning and nature of the phenomenon emerged as each mother imparted her unique thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions.

This methodology is well suited to my training in counselling psychology and my comfort and preference for a natural science orientation to research (Osborne, 1990; Rogers, 1985). The phenomenological process by which data is collected, interpreted and verified is closely related to the counselling process. I value the counselling process and agree with Rogers that it has a valuable role in qualitative studies and a legitimate contribution to make to the professional literature. In addition, my counselling ability and genuine presence allowed me to establish the level of rapport and trust with the participants that was essential to gaining authentic descriptions of participants' experiences.

A phenomenological approach encourages the researcher to engage with the participants (also known as co-researchers) in negotiating meanings. Researchers should “attempt as far as possible to feel their way into the internal frame of reference of their interviewees” (Pope & Denicolo, 1986, p.155). This attempt is best served if the researcher recognizes the benefit of an interactive and collaborative research process. Given these guidelines I aimed “to remove as many demand characteristics from the research situation as possible and replace them with a relationship of empathic understanding and trust so that genuine experience [was] conveyed” (Osborne, 1990, p. 82).

Employing semi-structured individual interviews was believed to best reflect the unique experience of maternal guilt in its full richness. This is one of the methods commonly used in phenomenological studies to gather data on lived experiences. Quinn-Patton (1990) explains the rationale for using interviews in research:

The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind...we interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe...we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions...we cannot observe the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective (p. 278).

He further defines the semi-structured interview as one that allows the interviewer to use predetermined questions and to “remain free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style” (p. 284). These guidelines were observed and a list of questions was developed (see Appendix D) and used only to deepen the exploration of topics raised by the participants.

During the interviews, I was committed to creating a non-threatening, accepting environment so that the participants felt invited and comfortable to explore and describe their experiences of maternal guilt. In summary, this study followed the phenomenological research approach as outlined by Colaizzi (1978), Osborne (1990), and van Manen (1984) and used a relatively unstructured individual interview format.

Bracketing

In keeping with the phenomenological qualitative research perspectives of Colaizzi (1978), Tapan (1990), and Quinn-Paton (1990) I agree that the researcher is as woven into the experience and outcome of the study as are the participants. I could not completely separate my personal beliefs and assumptions from the process of this study. My personal involvement in the research invariably influenced the process of the study from the originating question to interpreting the data (Osborne, 1990). Therefore, it became not only necessary for me to be aware of my related personal beliefs and assumptions but also to provide the reader with this awareness. Bracketing is the method that informs the reader of a researcher's beliefs, assumptions and biases that influence her approach to, and process of, gathering data on the phenomenon in question. This is my effort to account for my personal perspectives that I attempted to put aside as much as possible but which, nonetheless, could have influenced the process and content of this study and my interpretation of the findings.

As a little girl I imagined that I would one day, like most people, have children. At that time I did not think that there was anything really complicated about having a family or being a mother. It simply seemed like a natural and happy thing to do. Over the last ten years this perspective has lost some of its idyllic qualities, as I have become more aware of the complexities of mothering and parenting. My volunteer work with

young offenders, on a suicide and distress line, and within a family therapy agency has concretely informed me that while having children can be wonderful, it is often one of life's most difficult tasks.

I once thought that the natural biological ability to get pregnant gave every woman the right to have a child. Now aware of the prevalence of child neglect and abuse, the destructive effects of drugs and alcohol on fetuses and families, and the increasing challenges of parenthood in today's society, I am no longer of the same mind. Deciding to have a child is one of the most important decisions of one's lifetime. Creating a new life changes one's own life forever. I have not found, either in my work or in the literature, substantive evidence that shows people give adequate consideration to this decision. More often than not they seem to first have a child and *then* be surprised by the changes in their lives and the lives of those close to them. Too often women give birth and *then* they are overwhelmed as they find out being a mother is a 24-hour job. Many couples have a baby and *then* wonder what they are doing. Mothers have often said to me that they had no idea that there were such a multitude of decisions, questions, uncertainties and feelings that ensued after conception. Several mothers I know wonder aloud "Why didn't anyone tell me it was like this?" I believe that many individuals who have children are not adequately prepared to be parents and that their lives and the lives of their children often suffer as a result. While the challenges these parents experience may provide an opportunity for growth and learning I think that they are often too overwhelmed or physically and emotionally drained to choose to profit from the opportunity. I also believe that potential mothers and fathers need not be so uninformed about the nature of parenthood. I assume that individuals who are considering parenthood would make a more informed decision if they knew more about the

parenthood experience. Some may give more consideration to the timing of starting a family. Others may chose to educate and prepare themselves by enrolling in a parenting course or volunteering to care for their friend's children for a period of time. Still others may elect not to have children. Some people may argue that this is a big assumption given the pressures many husbands and wives feel to parent. However, the societal and familial pressures to parent do not have to compromise the informed decision making process of a prospective parent. An informed decision may make new parents more aware of, able to accept, or more prepared for the personal, emotional, physical, and financial life changes that accompany having a child. This is not to say that individuals can ever be completely prepared for the experience of parenthood. However, I wish that more people gave greater consideration to this tremendous life change and made the effort to be better prepared.

One bias of mine may not be directly linked to maternal guilt, but should be made clear because it is tied to my views of motherhood in general. I no longer believe that every woman has a right to have children. Men and women's biological ability to conceive and deliver a child does not guarantee that he and/or have the wherewithal to take care of the physical, emotional, psychological, and developmental needs of that child. Humans are not simply mammals, like whales, that need to procreate at every opportunity to keep the species from becoming extinct. Instead, humans are a very complex and evolved species that have developed an even more complex world to live in. Our countries, governments, and cities, despite their efforts, do not provide automatically, easily, or completely for each child that enters this world. As such there is tremendous responsibility put on the shoulders of those that have children to provide and care for, nurture, and raise their children. Some women and men are not able to do this. For

instance, drug addicted or HIV infected women are often not able to prevent their babies from acquiring their infection or addiction. Hence, their children are born into this world with severe disadvantages. They face challenges that often require the support and resources that their mothers can not provide. I do not believe these women have the right to have children. I am aware of the strength of these words and that they imply judgement. It is not my intention to ridicule, nor deny support and assistance to those women who already have children and are having great difficulty is raising them. Instead, my desire is to take advantage of opportunities to learn how I may support, educate, and inform communities and men and women “at risk” about the responsibilities, challenges, and difficulties of having children. I believe “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

I believe that each child deserves to be born to a parent that can provide (or secure through another individual) a physically, emotionally, and psychologically healthy, safe, and loving relationship(s) and environment. I acknowledge that it is very difficult to identify what this exactly entails, and I know of no perfect scenario that exists. However, I feel very strongly that each woman and man must give much thought and consideration as to whether they can provide these essential resources and qualities before a baby is conceived and brought into this world. Given the phenomena under study I anticipated that some of the women might express guilt about not being able to provide for their children in a certain way. While my intent was to obtain a deep understanding of the nature of maternal guilt I had to recognize that I had limited knowledge of these women’s lives. I had no right, nor desire, nor ability to judge their maternal competencies. I remained aware of my biases over the course of the study and

the mothers did not present me with any information that was difficult to accept or that challenged my views.

I wish to acknowledge that I have and will continue to make every effort to remain mindful of this bias. Moreover, I do not feel that it is my right to impose my judgements on any person who chooses to have children. I remain, instead, interested in making the best informed personal decision I can about becoming a parent. Furthermore, I am dedicated to learning what I may do to help children, individuals, parents, and families in finding solutions to whatever questions and concerns they have.

I would like to be a mother some day. Over the last four years I have been reflecting on the decision making process of becoming a parent. Part of this process has been a desire to understand more about the multi-layered challenges of being a mother and it's potential impact on my roles as an individual, and as a wife. I believe that all mothers experience some level of guilt as a result of wanting to be, and questioning, whether they are good mothers. It is my view that maternal guilt not only challenges them in their roles as mothers but also in their other roles as individuals, career women, and spouses. I think that society has conjured up and maintains an impossible vision of the 'ideal mother' that causes women to feel both inadequate as women and as mothers, resulting in the experience of maternal guilt. Furthermore, one consequence of maternal guilt may be that women choose to sacrifice or compromise personal or career desires that they feel, or are led to believe, are incompatible with their motherhood demands.

Regardless of the maternal choices or actions taken, it seems that mothers are judged by society for their actions and are seldom held in high esteem. A working woman who chooses to take a day off to be with her sick child is often misunderstood as non-goal oriented or non-professional by her colleagues. Yet if she were to choose to

hire a baby-sitter to care for her sick child so that she may attend to business, some (including family members) may accuse her of not being a good mother. Mothers seem to be caught in a "double-bind" where they feel unable to do the "right" thing. I believe women find it difficult to ascertain and maintain a daily routine whereby they live as responsible individuals and as 'good enough mothers.'

Early on I was taught, and I assume other women were as well, that a woman is not a complete woman unless she has a child. Since men are biologically unable to bear children this task has become almost synonymous with the meaning of womanhood. I think women believe this just as much as men. For example, as a childless friend of mine recovered in hospital from a complete hysterectomy due to cancer, a visitor (a mother) came to her bedside. Her first words to my friend were "So, do you still feel like a complete woman?"

Along with being socialized and expected to have children I concur with Eyer's (1996) suggestion that women are conditioned to believe they are the best persons capable of nurturing and rearing children. This attitude seems to be changing somewhat but statistics show that women still tend to be the primary caregivers and feel responsible for the welfare and development of their children. While I hope to be a caring and nurturing mother I do believe that my husband has the same capability and responsibility to share the rearing of any children we may have. I think that women carry the socialized but unnecessary burden of believing that they are the sole providers for their children and that they are responsible for every decision that may benefit or harm their child(ren). In sum, I believe that maternal guilt may be a result of this conditioning and that neither mothers nor children benefit from it.

It was important for me to consider the impact of my non-parental status on my ability to conduct a phenomenological study on a maternal experience. It was suggested that I might have difficulty in truly understanding, and then depicting, the experience of maternal guilt, as I had not experienced these feelings myself. However, Colaizzi (1978), Osborne (1990), and van Manen (1984) do not specify that the primary researcher's personal experience of the phenomenon under study is a prerequisite. Additionally, I believe that there may have been some advantages to my motherless status. I found that I felt able to fully accept the thoughts and feelings that the mothers expressed, as I did not have my own experiences of mothering with which to compare. Furthermore, during the interviews I was able to present myself as somewhat of a "blank slate" upon which the mothers were invited to, and could, describe their own experience of maternal guilt without having to worry about my having a different experience. They did not look to me for validation of their own judgments and seemed to feel comfortable in exploring and describing their feelings and perceptions. The mothers and I acknowledged that I was not, nor was any other person, going to completely understand the experience of guilt until I, or she, became a mother. However, some of the mothers reported thinking that I was more objective because of my motherless status. Thus, they felt more open to explore and express their guilt because they felt I was less able to be judgmental of their maternal experiences.

While bracketing is often completed prior to a study and is left once the research is underway I was encouraged by my research committee to continue the process of bracketing throughout the study. Thinking this might be an interesting and valuable self-reflective process that could help me keep aware of my biases I maintained a journal throughout the course of the study. My journal enabled me to keep track of my ideas,

judgements, biases, and observations and hopefully aided me in suspending them adequately so that I was able to study the nature of maternal guilt as presented by the eight participants. This journal is not included as part of this study. However, some of the topics that I reflected upon, questioned, and explored included: How I maintained and/or debunked the Myths of Motherhood personally and professionally; how I spoke to my sisters-in-law about their maternal roles and choices; the language and the manner in which I interviewed the participants; the difference between listening and hearing and how each are related to a sense of validation; and the pros and cons of not being a mother as I conducted this study.

My desire, in this study, was not only to explore and collect information in a responsible manner but also to offer something to the mothers in return. I believe that the interviews provided the mothers a supportive and informative environment that enabled them to learn more about themselves and their experiences of maternal guilt while contributing to this study.

In sum, I believe that the experience of motherhood, and in particular, maternal guilt, has not been fully understood, much less shared with mothers, or represented in the literature. Since millions of women become mothers it would seem important to inform them about this experience. In part, this study endeavoured to explore and convey this one important aspect of motherhood. My assumption is that women who are considering having children and new mothers would appreciate having an understanding of maternal guilt. It may let them know what, in part, they may expect. It may inform them of some of the options that have been tried by experienced mothers to assuage their guilt. It may reassure them that their own experience of maternal guilt is not irregular. I had no presuppositions about what this study would find other than that a phenomenon that is

named 'maternal guilt' was an experience that mothers have in common. I did not know what it was all about. The meaning attributed to this experience was shared and described. I believe the mothers who tell me that their maternal guilt is important to talk about, and I think it is important to be understood. This study was an attempt to begin to develop this dialogue and understanding.

Participants

Colaizzi (1978) and Rogers (1985) suggest that participants in a qualitative study are not subjects but instead collaborative and contributing members on par with the primary researcher. That is, each member is considered a participant *in* research rather than a subject *of* research. My role as primary researcher was that of an interview facilitator to promote a sense of equality and trust and that of an observer to record and accurately portray the experiences and meanings of the participants.

For inclusion in the study the co-researchers had to have met the following criteria. The participants had to be willing to volunteer and commit to two interviews that would take a total of approximately two and one-half hours of their time. The participants had to be women who were mothers who were parenting with a partner. While single mothers may experience maternal guilt it was assumed that there might be some elements of experience and meaning of this phenomenon that may have differed from that of a partnered mother.

The participants had to be mothers of one or more children who were between the ages of two and twelve years of age. Phenomenological research requires that the participants have experienced the phenomenon under investigation for a sufficient length of time so that they are able to reflect back upon their experience (Colaizzi, 1978). Women who had mothered for at least two years were considered most likely to have

experienced and/or be in the process of experiencing maternal guilt. Likewise, mothers of preadolescent children may have similar experiences as their children are of roughly the same developmental period (Erikson, 1980). That is, mothers of adolescent children may have experiences of maternal guilt discrepant from those of mothers of preadolescent children, as there may be unique demands, challenges, rewards and responsibilities for women who have mothered more than a decade and whose children are older and face new developmental issues.

The mothers also were required to have experienced maternal guilt without being debilitated by their experiences. For example, one mother who responded to the recruitment notice was not included in the study because she reported that her experience of maternal guilt was overwhelming. She was seeing a family therapist at the time and I encouraged her to continue to address her concerns about maternal guilt with her counsellor.

Finally, following Colaizzi's (1978) assertion that a basic requirement of a phenomenological study is the co-researcher's ability to articulate the experience, each mother was required to be willing and able to convey her experience of maternal guilt to the researcher.

As phenomenological research focuses on the richness of information (Colaizzi, 1978) rather than quantity of facts, a relatively small number of women were recruited to participate in this study. The first eight women who met all of the criteria were selected to participate. Eight participants were selected because it seemed as the interviews progressed that this number was adequate to "illuminate the phenomenon" and obtain "empathic generalizability" (Osborne, 1990, p.83). Empathic generalizability was

established, as the themes identified in one woman's experience were generalizable to most or all other participants.

Procedure

Participants for the study were sought through word of mouth and through notices posted in Vancouver community settings frequented by mothers. I invited colleagues and friends to inform mothers they perceived to be suitable for the study to contact me by telephone for information. The notices were placed at Vancouver community centers, elementary schools, the Granville Island Market, Family Services of Greater Vancouver, the Adlerian Psychological Association, the YWCA, and Information Children (permission was granted by these organizations) (see Appendix A). Family Services of Greater Vancouver and the Adlerian Psychological Association are organizations that offer parenting workshops year round. It was through these organizations that I was introduced to mothers who were experiencing maternal guilt and this is why these seemed like suitable locations to place recruitment information. 'Information Children' also offers parenting workshops. In addition, it serves as a parenting resource center that provides a telephone help-line to discuss child-rearing concerns and provides guidance, information and referrals.

The response to the initial recruitment was tremendous. I received approximately seventy-five calls over a two-month period. Individuals who responded were interviewed briefly over the phone to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria. The majority of the women who called did not meet all of the criteria. Some of the women lived out of town, many were grandmothers who reported that they still felt maternal guilt, and many more of the women were either single mothers or mothers of children under the age of two who reported having difficulty with their new motherhood roles. I provided these

women with referrals to family community resources that could help them further address their concerns (see Appendix E).

Any questions that the respondents had about the study were answered, and each was informed of the time commitment, issues of confidentiality, and her right to refuse to participate in the study at any time. While explaining the rationale for the study and the interview format I endeavoured to develop rapport. Finally, I imparted the importance and value of the co-researcher's experiential knowledge and personal story to the study's process and outcome.

From this telephone interview I determined the final suitability of each of the individuals. Each participant met each of the inclusion criteria and demonstrated an intent to articulate her experiences of the phenomenon in an individual interview with me. Eight participants were selected to participate and a waitlist of four women was established to ensure a sufficient number of co-researchers was recruited. One of the original eight participants was unable to schedule a time for the interview and was replaced by the first woman on the waitlist that was available and still interested in participating.

The Interview

The initial interview was scheduled at a time and location convenient for each of the eight participants. Some of the mothers met me at the offices of Family Services of Greater Vancouver while others had me come to their homes or places of work. I introduced myself and then reviewed the purpose and nature of the study. All participants were reminded that their participation was fully voluntary and issues about confidentiality were discussed. I endeavoured to answer any questions or concerns they

had at that time. Each participant was then asked to read and sign two copies of the ethical consent form (see Appendix B), and to retain one for their own records.

The following general orienting statement was used to begin each interview and to bring the focus and discussion to the topic of study: **The hope of this research is to understand more fully the experience of maternal guilt as lived and felt by women. Much of what is written today in magazines, newspapers, and books focuses on the needs of children and parent education rather than the experiences of mothers. Some parenting magazines suggest that mothers feel guilty because they don't feel they can live up to the image of 'the good mother' that society has created. You are here because you have a personal understanding of what maternal guilt means to you. Today I would like you to explore and describe your experience of maternal guilt and its meaning in your life.**

The interviews were relatively unstructured so that the participants were comfortable and felt encouraged to contribute and speak for themselves (Giorgi, 1985). My role was that of interview facilitator and that of participant observer. I facilitated the interview process by using basic interviewing skills (such as reflection, immediacy, open-ended questions, and summarization), so that each participant felt invited and comfortable in expressing her thoughts and feelings with regard to her experience of maternal guilt. Basic counselling skills and active listening techniques were used in an effort to promote a deep and rich exploration of each of the participant's beliefs, thoughts and feelings (Corey & Corey, 1987) related to maternal guilt. I sought to enter the worlds of the participants, and to some degree, regarded myself as a vessel or vehicle through which each of the women might have made known an intricate story or a 'slice' of their

lives (Harris, 1990). I guided the direction of discussion to keep on topics related to maternal guilt, its lived experience, and its meaning.

In addition to audiotaping (for transcription purposes only) the interviews, I kept a few process notes to record subtle innuendoes, and non-verbal communications. At times, I referred to a prepared list of questions (see Appendix D) if the participant seemed to lose focus or if they requested a question to use as a “springboard” for describing their thoughts and feelings of maternal guilt. The interviews continued until each mother felt comfortable that she had described all that she knew and understood about her experiences of maternal guilt. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes.

Data Analysis

Each of the interviews was transcribed and the resulting texts were organized and analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) framework of descriptive research. The transcripts were read several times so that I familiarized myself with the content and story of each of the co-researchers. Then, with further analysis of each of the participant’s descriptions (also known as protocols), significant statements that pertained to the topic of maternal guilt were extracted. While each mother had contributed her own experience these experiences could be woven into a collective experience and the line between individual and collective experiences and meaning of maternal guilt became blurred. Given this, I extracted significant statements that represented the common themes of maternal guilt.

I then tried to delineate the meaning of the significant statements for the participants. I had become acquainted with each of the co-researchers and I combined my insight from the interview processes with the words of the participants to give meaning to these words. This is a process of phenomenological analysis that is referred to a “insightful invention, discovery or disclosure” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). From the

meanings formulated, themes were generated from the co-researcher's descriptions of their thoughts, feelings and perceptions of their experiences of maternal guilt. I presented to my supervisor, who is experienced in phenomenological research methodology, the themes generated up to this point in the analytic process. Together, my supervisor and I synthesized, integrated and organized the themes into clusters that were common for all of the co-researchers.

Following Colaizzi's (1978) framework the results from the thematic analysis were "integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic" and an effort was made to "formulate a statement of identification of its fundamental structure" (p. 61). Validation occurred through a final meeting with each of the participants. The participants were given a copy of the themes to read prior to the follow up validation interview. During the follow up interviews, the participants were asked to remark upon the validity of the themes generated. That is, each participant was encouraged to verify the accuracy of the descriptive results relative to their personal experiences of maternal guilt. They were asked what aspects of their experiences might have been omitted or inaccurately reported. All but one of the women felt the themes were valid reflections of their experiences of maternal guilt. During the follow up interview with one participant it became clear that she had not read the themes. She appeared to struggle in her efforts to respond to them. In addition, the context in which the interview took place was somewhat chaotic and seemed to distract her attention from the purpose of the meeting. Initially, this woman said that none of the themes seemed to represent her experience of maternal guilt. However, when I brought her attention to several quotes in the themes that had been taken from her first interview she reviewed them and responded that they did, in fact, fit with her experience. Additionally, after this interview I went back to the

original transcript of the first meeting with this mother and reviewed how I had extracted each theme from her descriptions. Indeed, all of the themes were represented in her account of her experiences of maternal guilt.

Any relevant new data that emerged from the follow up meetings was taken into consideration in the final product of the research (Colaizzi, 1978). This final meeting in which the co-researchers reviewed the findings was a fundamental and necessary step towards ensuring the internal validity of the findings (Colaizzi; Osborne, 1990).

In addition, these last meetings served as an opportunity for the participants to leave the study with some personal closure. Many of the women shared what they had personally gained from their self-exploration concerning their experiences of maternal guilt as well as from reading the themes that were generated from all of the women's experiences. I was prepared to respond to any women who required "continued attention in order to resolve any personal difficulties which may have become more conscious as a result of the data collection" (Osborne, 1990, p.84). I gave them additional time to clarify any of their further needs and each of the participants received a list of community resources that provided counselling and support services to women, mothers, and families (see Appendix E).

Chapter Four

Results

I begin this chapter with a brief biographical sketch of each participant. These sketches were generated and reviewed by the women so that the reader may have insight into the unique lives of the women that inform the experiences they explored and described in this study. These sketches provide a context for the study's findings. Following this segment, descriptions of the common themes generated from the analysis of these eight women's experiences of maternal guilt are presented.

The Participants

Emma

Emma is a 41-year-old Caucasian woman who has lived in Vancouver all of her life. She grew up with her younger brother under the care of both her parents until she was seventeen when her father died. At that time, her mother, who had only worked outside of the home on an infrequent and seasonal basis, felt pressured to work full time to support herself and her two children. Emma married her husband fifteen years ago. They have a six-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter. Emma has worked full-time but currently works part-time outside of the home as a community health nurse and a prenatal educator. She is more comfortable with her part-time working status as she feels it allows her to spend more time with her young children. Emma's husband works full time and together they provide financially for the family's needs. Emma describes her family's economic status as "having what they need, but still worrying about money." Rather than purchasing a large home in a more affordable district Emma and her husband made the choice to live in a smaller apartment in one of Vancouver's most central, family oriented, and expensive neighbourhoods. She expresses a desire to own a home one day

where her children would have a yard to play in. Her son is active in various sports and creative activities and her daughter is attending her first music playgroup. Emma and her husband are both active at their son's school that relies on parent participation.

Emma describes guilt as a fluid that is contained inside of her by a very thin membrane that bursts or ruptures in times of stress. These include times when she feels emotionally or physically exhausted or when she sees her children "acting out." When the membrane bursts then the guilt "fluid" makes her feel very tense and she experiences a constricting feeling around her heart.

Isabelle

Isabelle is a thirty five-year-old Caucasian woman who describes herself as a WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant). She lives outside of Vancouver in the lower mainland. She grew up as an only child with her mother. Her father died when she was two years of age. Her mother remained single and worked outside of the home as an accountant from the time Isabelle was six weeks old. Isabelle's maternal grandmother was unable to help care for her as she passed away when Isabelle was only three years old. Instead, Isabelle was taken care of by nannies and helpful neighbours. Isabelle has been married four years and has a two-year old son. She commutes two hours each day to and from her work in downtown Vancouver. Isabelle returned to work as an advertising executive six months after her son was born. Since that time she and her son commute to Vancouver together where he is enrolled in a downtown day care facility five days a week. To enable her to spend more time interacting with her son and less time commuting Isabelle would like to live in Vancouver. However, the family's financial resources prohibit this move at the present time. Isabelle earns a higher income than her husband who also works full time. While she considers becoming a stay at home mother

almost every week, she feels unable to make the transition at present as she provides most of the financial security for the family. Isabelle remembers wishing that her mother had been more present and interactive in her life. She fears her son may experience similar feelings if she continues to work outside of the home full time. Isabelle did not provide a metaphor as part of her discussion and description of her experiences of maternal guilt.

Pearl

Pearl is a 37-year-old Caucasian woman who returned to Vancouver two years ago from Bermuda where she had lived for three years. She is originally from Montreal where she grew up with one older and one younger sister. Pearl's parents separated when she was nine years old. Her father moved out of province leaving her mother to raise her and her two sisters as a "single mother." Pearl's mother had worked outside of the home prior to the marital separation, however, once she was on her own she felt forced to work full time to support herself and her three children. Currently, Pearl is a theology student at a local college. She has been married fifteen years to her husband who has been the sole financial provider for their family of five. At present, he is unemployed and looking for a new job. Pearl and her husband currently take care of their three children together. They have two girls aged seven and eleven and one son who is six years old. Pearl is very active in their school programs and encourages her children to participate in many extracurricular activities. Her daughters are involved in Girl Guides as well as many sports teams and arts activities. In the past Pearl has worked as an educational consultant for schools in foreign countries but now remains at home with her children and attends college. Pearl did not provide a metaphor as part of her discussion and description of her experiences of maternal guilt.

Micol

Micol is a 32-year-old Caucasian woman who was born in Vancouver and whose cultural roots are Celtic. She was adopted at the age of three by her only known mother and father. Micol grew up in Vancouver with three older brothers who are the biological sons of her adoptive parents. Her mother never worked outside of the home. Her parents celebrate their 53rd wedding anniversary this year. Micol has been married to her husband for eight years and they have two children, a two-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son. Her husband works in the film industry and is away from home approximately fourteen hours a day, five days a week. He is the sole income earner and Micol considers their economic status as lower-middle class. After several years of attending university part-time, Micol has just completed a degree in photography and film art. She considers many of her mothering choices to be "alternative." Since the birth of her first child she has maintained a family bed and has let each of her children decide when they wanted to stop breast-feeding. Presently, Micol continues to breast-feed her daughter. Micol believes that her feelings of guilt are layered and spiraled. As an entity, she feels that maternal guilt is linked to her family memories and to all of her other feelings. She describes maternal guilt as an experience that escalates and unravels in times of family stress.

Leigh

Leigh is a 36-year-old Caucasian South African woman who has lived in Vancouver for the past seven years. Each year she tries to visit her parents and her younger brother who remain in South Africa. Leigh and her brother were raised by their mother who stayed at their semi-country home while their father worked in the city. Leigh married her English husband eleven years ago and now has a five-year-old son and

a two-year-old daughter. Leigh considers herself an “older mother” as she chose to develop her career before starting a family. She is dedicated to her full time position as a specialist at a Vancouver hospital. When Leigh decided to start a family, she and her husband had difficulty conceiving. Hence, they turned to medical fertility methods to conceive their two children. Their son is at preschool and day care and a nanny cares for their daughter while Leigh and her husband work full time outside of the home. They maintain a family bed and Leigh is still currently breast-feeding her daughter. Leigh considers the family’s economic status to be “privileged” as they are able to satisfy all the material necessities and desires. Leigh describes maternal guilt as a subtle entity that lurks around and which presents itself to her quickly and intensely during times of stress.

Celia

Celia is a 41-year-old Caucasian woman who was born in Montreal and moved with her family to Vancouver at the age of nine. She is the only daughter and the middle child of three. Her parents and her younger brother moved back to live in Eastern Canada when Celia was in university. Her older brother remains in Vancouver. Celia has been married to her husband for twelve years. They have a ten-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter. Celia calls herself a “stay at home Mom” and considers her family as an “average, middle class, one income family.” Like her mother, Celia has never worked outside of the home but spends many hours each week volunteering. She is an active volunteer at her children’s school and is very involved in a cat and dog rescue organization. Celia and her family have rescued two dogs and three cats that are now well loved family pets. At any given time, however, Celia may have up to four additional dogs or cats in her home while she tries to find good permanent homes for abused or

abandoned animals. She is an avid gardener and enjoys walking her dogs in the forest near to her home.

Celia experiences maternal guilt as a black bird that is perched on her shoulder at all times. This bird is constantly evaluating her choices and performances as a mother and is always telling her to attend to something. Celia finds that if she takes a long walk she is able to gain a larger perspective and feel good about her family life. This enables the bird to fly off her shoulder and to stop “nattering and yelling” at her for a short time.

Jamie

Jamie is a 31-year-old Caucasian woman who has lived in or close to Vancouver all of her life. She is the middle child of five. She has both an elder and a younger brother and sister. Her mother was at home full time until Jamie was about sixteen years old when her mother then worked part-time outside of the home. When Jamie was eighteen her parents divorced and she and her younger siblings continued to live with their mother. Jamie was brought up in the Catholic religion and continues to attend church regularly with her husband of ten years and their three children. Her two sons are two and six years old. Her daughter is nine years old. All of her children attend a Catholic school and are active in extracurricular activities. Jamie and her husband try to attend all their children’s events and soccer games. While she works part time as a health record administrator at a Vancouver hospital, her youngest son is in day care. Her husband works full time outside of the home and is considered an active parent when at home. Jamie and her husband share the household chores. Jamie’s parents live close by and are welcome and frequent caregivers to her children. She considers her family to be middle class. Jamie describes maternal guilt as a deeply internal feeling or emotion that she tries to prevent from surfacing by anticipating her mothering responsibilities.

Sometimes she feels that she is able to “outrun” the guilt. However, she says that her church and religion are the strongest influences that are able to decrease her feelings of guilt because they dictate and help reinforce her personal and family value systems.

Sophie

Sophie is a 42-year-old Canadian woman of Japanese descent. She is the eldest of two daughters. Sophie’s parents remain married and live in Vancouver. Her mother never worked outside of the home, however, she was an avid sewer and occasionally did some small projects for people from her workroom. Sophie has been married for fourteen years and has three daughters aged nine, eleven, and twelve. She happily considers herself a “stay at home Mom.” Her husband financially supports the family by working full time. Sophie describes her family’s economic status as “comfortable” and “upper-middle class.” She is an active volunteer at her children’s school and teaches figure skating part time during the winter months. She enjoys running, skating, and other outdoor pursuits. Celia also values proper etiquette and good manners. She encourages her daughters to participate in many extracurricular activities.

Celia describes maternal guilt as a pair of eyes that are constantly watching over her and evaluating her as a mother. They “make sure” she is doing a good job. These “eyes” are described as especially vigilant when Celia and her family members are outside of their home.

Common Themes

Seven themes emerged from the analysis of the of the participants’ lived experiences of maternal guilt. Six of the themes were based on the commonalties found in the experiences of all eight women. The seventh and last theme presented was based

on the commonalties found in all but one of the participants. The themes that emerged were:

- A sense of complete responsibility
- A strong desire to have a positive impact on their children
- A sense of profound connection
- A fear their children may come to harm
- A sense of depletion
- A sense of loss
- A sense of inadequacy

The seven themes attempt to describe and give shape to the common aspects of the lived experience of maternal guilt for the women in this study. They are not presented in any specific order as they were all interrelated and part of the experience of maternal guilt for these eight women.

A Sense of Complete Responsibility

An unrelenting sense of responsibility for the health, welfare, and development of their children was a pervasive and overarching theme woven throughout the interviews for all participants. This feeling of “complete” and “total” responsibility seemed to be comprised of several components. For all of the mothers in this study their sense of responsibility spanned the entire spectrum of caring for their children. That is, the mothers reported feeling responsible for knowing, anticipating, providing for, and maintaining the overall health, wellness, and development of their children. Some of the mothers reported that this sense of complete responsibility started once they were aware they were pregnant while others talked about it starting immediately at the birth of their child. It seems that for each of these women the origin of the experience of responsibility

coincided with the first time they “really felt like a mother.” It was described as an ever-present feeling that continued to take on new dimensions as their children grew and developed. Some of the mothers even anticipated that this sense of complete responsibility would remain a component of their mothering experience for the rest of their lives.

There were both internal and external factors that reportedly influenced and contributed to each mother’s sense of responsibility. The primary internal factor was the mother’s desire to have a positive impact on her children, another component of her experience of maternal guilt that is fully explored as a theme of its own in the section to follow. The external factors that the women felt contributed to their sense of responsibility included the social context and communities in which they lived, and their marital relationships. In this segment I endeavour to describe the breadth and essence of this sense of complete responsibility. However, it should be noted that the sense of responsibility these mothers felt towards their children seemed to inform, and was inextricably woven through all the other feelings and experiences that are described in the subsequent themes. It appears to be an essential component underlying their experience of maternal guilt.

“Total Mum! Total Mum. It’s from the minute I wake up and even as I’m sleeping. I dream and I wake up at night - it’s just total Mum because I feel just totally responsible.” While these are the words of one mother they reflect the intense 24-hour a day feeling of responsibility shared by all of the participants. Although many of the mothers in this study considered themselves responsible women prior to having children, the experience of responsibility changed with motherhood because as one participant

described, “having a child took the responsibility from [being] a choice to [being] responsible with or without a choice.”

The feeling of being “totally responsible” for their children seemed to include practically all the possible components of their children’s care and welfare. To begin with, the mothers’ felt the need and desire to be present with, and for, their children. “I should be there for [him/her]” was a common sentiment expressed as each of the mothers considered their role in their children’s lives as more central, important, and necessary than that of any other person. For example, one mother described how she had come to understand her primary role in her children’s lives:

I have a strong sense of ownership for my children. Yeah, *they’re mine*. And in some ways I really believe they’re mine more than anybody else’s. They’re [even] mine more than my husband’s.

Given the central nature of their role in terms of their children’s welfare and development, all of the women stated that it was very important for them to be present with their children, often times more than they were able to be. One mother described this underlying need in the following way:

It’s that *responsibility*! It’s almost as if I’m saying nobody can do it better! *I am his mom*, and *I* need to take him and be there and be part of his experience of living and growing up. And so it’s that notion of parenting that you have internally that you’re going to be the only one that’s going to be able to do that, to do it properly, and to do it the way you want. Even dad can’t do [it] because dad does it differently to you.

The idea of having another individual care for their children, whether for an evening or for the working hours of the week, sent shivers of guilt through many of these mothers.

They believed that this was not “being present” for their children, and hence, they were not being responsible. Having placed her child in day care one working mother eloquently articulated:

I felt really, really guilty *leaving him*. I think that everyday I went to work for the first year I was just about in tears until mid-morning...just that leaving, *that* was essentially guilt. It wasn't that I was missing him or doubting the kind of care, it was that *I* should be giving that care and I wasn't.

This example, that is representative of the other mothers' experiences, shows how feeling irresponsible for not being with her child instigated this mother's feelings of guilt.

While the desire to be present for their children was stronger for the participants who worked outside of the home it was also experienced by all but one of the stay at home mothers. For example, one stay at home mother carried a cellular phone with her so that her children could reach her at a moment's notice if they needed her at any time during the day. This was her way of showing them that she was “there for them” all of the time. Others prepared notes or treats for their children when they had to leave for a period of time because they believed that this would enable the children to feel their presence even while they were apart. For these mothers, having their presence felt in their absence, or believing they were able to “mother in abstentia” allowed them to feel more responsible thereby reducing their feelings of guilt. One mother explained her desire to exert control and care over her children's activities with others because she:

...wonders ‘Are they okay?’, ‘Are they happy?’, ‘Are they having fun?’ I probably think about that too much. I do feel like I have to be in control of [how they are doing] because nobody else will be. If I can anticipate and get in there

and organize it beforehand then I feel reassured that they're taken care of and then I'm feeling okay as Mum.

As with the other mothers in this study, the ability for this mother to "feel okay as mum" was influenced by her feeling capable of acting as a responsible mother and it served to alleviate feelings of maternal guilt.

Other participants echoed the feeling of responsibility for maintaining their children's happiness even in their absence and the guilt that ensued when they felt they failed to meet their children's needs. For example, one mother spoke about her feelings of guilt for not having better orchestrated one of her son's social interactions:

He had one experience at a friend's house where it wasn't so good because there was another friend who he didn't know. They didn't interact as well [as the other two did] so there was a bit of guilt that I didn't set up the situation well enough.

So the next time I tried to make it better to ensure that he would be happier in that situation.

The extent of responsibility felt by this woman, and the other mothers, was at times so encompassing that they even felt it was their duty to ensure their children's comfort and happiness outside of their care, in their interactions with their young peers.

The tentacles of responsibility these mothers felt extended to many different areas of child and family care. The mothers reported feeling responsible for the genetic makeup and personality development of their children, for providing a nurturing and safe environment, for ensuring good nutrition and health, for maintaining their children's sense of comfort and happiness, for providing adequate life protection and preparation, and for understanding and responding to all the needs of their children. This responsibility, for some, began prior to the birth of their child(ren). For example, one

mother, who had taken an antihistamine around the time that her first child was conceived, felt responsible for her child's cleft palette, and for "not handling the labour right." She believed these problems subsequently created a "traumatic" series of experiences for her son during his early years in his contact with several medical specialists. In her words:

I was responsible...I must have done something that created this problem for the child...I had this guilt from the beginning and then it grew. The guilt became enormous once he was born.

Another mother, aware of a genetic predisposition in her family to allergies, felt terrible that she had passed this trait on to her child:

I'm responsible for every cell of his little body. The feeding issue created a lot of feelings of guilt for me when he went from mother's milk to nothing basically. He had food but he didn't have anything that was milk because he couldn't have cow's milk, he couldn't have soy milk and so on and so on. And through the years that's created all sorts of issues around enjoying food because he can't have the stuff that we have to eat. When he goes to a birthday party he can't have the cake so I feel each and every time that he has that experience - I feel responsible.

Feeling responsible for having deprived or contributed to the disappointments their children had or would experience in the future was a familiar sentiment for all of the participants, which fueled their sense of guilt. If possible, each would have waved a magic wand to erase the perceived hardship or disappointment they felt they caused for their children, correspondingly diminishing their own feelings of guilt.

While some women reported that this overwhelming experience of responsibility for the welfare of their children originated as soon as they knew they had conceived, for

the majority of the mothers in this study, their sense of responsibility began immediately and intensely with the birth of their first child. "When my first babe was first born, I had a sense of overwhelming responsibility. *Overwhelming responsibility* and it was really too much, very daunting." Several of the mothers also expressed that an enhanced sense of personal commitment to "being a good mother" occurred at the same time and, as such, they were not prepared to let "anybody else take over responsibility" for their children. For instance, some of the mothers who had expected to return to work once their baby was several months old, were surprised by the almost "organic" or "spiritual" connection they felt to their child. Given this "bond" that they felt responsible to maintain and further strengthen, these mothers were no longer prepared to return to work. As the sense of complete responsibility began and developed for these women early on in motherhood, so too did their experience of maternal guilt. The mothers in this study suggested that their feelings of maternal guilt corresponded to the degree to which they felt they were acting as responsible mothers who had their children's best interests and happiness at the forefront of their minds.

Certainly, each woman reported how entering motherhood was a life changing event, as they no longer considered their lives to be their own. As one mother stated:

When you have baby it's like 'Boom! Here's this life and you're responsible for it!' Your life is never really your own again. This baby *is yours* and so your life is forever changed because, well, I always feel ultimately responsible for my child's happiness and wellbeing.

Interestingly, while many reported that they anticipated having a strong sense of responsibility once they became a mother, few felt that they had been prepared for the enormity or intensity of the experience. Furthermore, several considered the experience

as “part of the [motherhood] package.” One mother expressed her sense of responsibility, and its relationship to maternal guilt, almost as if she were listing a job description:

I mean, you have a kid, you know *it* (guilt) *comes with* the hormones, you breast feed, you diaper your child, and you feel guilt. I think because you feel *so responsible all the time* for this child, this child's life, for its feelings, for all its needs. I think you try as hard as you can to figure out what they need and give it to them but there's sometimes when you think ‘Should I have done that or should I have done something else?’

Most of the other mothers expressed similar sentiments suggesting that their sense of responsibility was reinforced when they experienced maternal guilt or felt inadequate as mothers, and their sense of guilt was reinforced when they didn't feel they were living up to their responsibilities as mothers – almost like a “vicious cycle.”

Despite the interplay between their feelings of responsibility, guilt, and inadequacy most of the mothers conveyed that their sense of responsibility was more closely related to positive feelings associated with motherhood which they felt made their feelings of guilt and inadequacy more bearable. The following is an example of how these mothers attempted to make sense of the interplay between their feelings of guilt and responsibility. As one mother explained:

There's *nothing* in comparison to the joy and *the absolute wonder* of being a mom. And I think it is that sense of total unconditional love that you have for this being that brings up the other emotions. I think it's because you feel *so responsible* and because *you love so deeply* that these other more negative emotions come. I always joke and say I would never get run over by a bus for my

husband but there's no question that I would do it for my child. And that's the difference. In a way, with the guilt I'm saying 'That child is so important, and so precious that I am prepared to get in front of the bus for that child.'

This one mother's powerful and personal account reflects how the majority of the participants made sense of the intensity of their feelings of responsibility and guilt in relation to the other, more positive feelings that accompanied motherhood. These mothers suggested that their capacity to feel such an overwhelming sense of responsibility and maternal guilt was a reflection of the depth and breadth of their love and affection for their children. Almost like a barometer of the depth of their love, several of the mothers speculated that if they did not experience maternal guilt or have a sense of responsibility then that would suggest they did not "care" about their children. Many of the mothers, while exploring this area during the interview, stated that they felt more positively than they had before, for having feelings of maternal guilt as they believed they had just learned that it demonstrated their love and care for their children. Thus, at times, the feelings of guilt served as a reminder of their efforts towards being responsible mothers, while at other times, it served as a reminder that stimulated their sense of responsibility.

The sense of responsibility felt by these women covered not only the areas of child care but also all the domains that these mothers considered to be "duties" within their mother role, including maintaining the home and the family life. For instance, while one mother hired a nanny to allow her more "one on one" time with her children, she did not let the nanny take on many household chores because she saw these as part of her motherhood responsibilities. She expressed the need for balance between delegating chores and following through on her sense of responsibility:

I don't let her do anything other than the laundry and she does the looking after my daughter, but she does *nothing else* because I have this guilt about 'that's *not her role*.' *My role* is to be the mother, *I need* to do the cooking and make sure they get good food and their lunches made and those kinds of thing. So I will almost push myself to set limits because that is what I deem as my job and my role and I won't give them up very easily...because that's my role as a mother and a wife.

In addition to maintaining the household many mothers in this study felt responsible for keeping up with the literature, seminars, and television programs that address parent education and child development issues. As one mother explained it:

I feel [parenting books are] about the only thing I ever read anymore! (laughter)
I'm reading parenting books or [I'm] on the Internet. My husband is on the Internet all the time looking at different things. And *I'm* looking at parenting all the time (laughter) - not that he's not interested, because he is. I guess I just worry more about it. I'm more consumed by it than he is. He's more laid back about it. I'm more intense about doing the right things and being the right kind of mother for my children.

This drive to learn seemed to be motivated by the perception that a "responsible" and "good" mother would keep herself abreast of, and open to, new insights into child rearing and family issues. In addition, as will be further discussed in a separate section, the frequent perusal, consisting almost exclusively of parenting materials and information, was one method that many of the women used to assuage their sense of inadequacy and uncertainty as a mother.

Ironically, the same media that they sought out to help them feel better equipped as mothers and which they felt helped to reduce their feelings of guilt also, at times, became overwhelming, and left them feeling “not cut out for [the] job” of motherhood, thereby actually heightening their feelings of maternal guilt. The two external factors that influenced the participants’ sense of responsibility included the barrage of parenting information they reported receiving from various media sources and from the people in their communities. Each of the mothers reported that not only were they inundated with parenting information and advice from the very beginning, but they also felt observed and judged by society as to whether or not they were “measuring up” or “doing the best for [their] children.” They stated that they had been told by friends, family members, parent educators, medical doctors, and even strangers a multitude of contradictory mothering “shoulds.” For most of the mothers, at times the “advice” or information was sought out while at other times it was unsolicited. In either case, the information seemed to feed their sense of responsibility towards their children. One mother described her exasperation and a decreased sense of self-confidence in trusting her own wisdom as a mother due to the continuous onslaught of messages she received:

There's always something new that tells you why you should do this or that. And my image of mothering becomes, ‘because this scientific fact has discovered that kids who do music are really being integrative in a whole different way’ – then I feel the *obligation to do something about that*. But we live in a world where you're getting a million messages like that! (exasperated). I mean, you think about watching TV for a couple of hours and how many messages you're bombarded with! And so trying to do something with that in terms of ‘Okay, these are the messages but *who am I* in all this?’, and [finding] that point of

contact where I disregard [something] and go 'trash' and/or where I can go and say 'mine.'

Many other mothers in the study expressed similar sentiments as they felt pressured to live up to the standards "society" dictated as appropriate for children. One mother explained this pressure and the decreased trust she felt in her knowledge and wisdom of herself as mother:

It's also the observation of the culture because we live in a time where the expectation is 'being a good parent' means you give your kid all these opportunities. So they're in whatever it is - figure skating, hockey, gymnastics, I mean it's an endless list - the things that they could be doing! There's this sense of what it means to be a good parent and so *you feel obligated to do these things for your children*. And it's not like you ever really have the opportunity to say, 'Just wait now, is this what we want for our children?' You actually have to step back from it because you're so immersed in your own culture that you think 'well, *this is the way*.' You get caught up in that pressure...the whole thing! It's just that kind of world and if you don't have that kind of money or desire or (laughter) or whatever it is *there's still that pressure to conform* to whatever that ideal is. And at the same time it's hard to hold onto - 'Just wait now, *why are we* doing this?'

For these women the growing difficulty in hearing their own voices above those of society and of the parenting "experts" left them feeling less certain about their maternal abilities. They thought that a responsible and capable mother was supposed to be able to remain both grounded on her internal sense of what was right and wrong for her children,

and secure enough to sift through the external parenting advice without adding to their sense of inadequacy, or guilt.

When the mothers in this study felt their own views conflicted with societal messages, several of them reported feeling trapped and uncertain. They said that it was difficult at times to make decisions based on their internal sense of what was best for their children, because it often conflicted with what they felt they were actually able to do, or what a family member or child expert suggested they should be doing. For instance, one mother experienced feelings of guilt because she felt responsible for having eaten something that eventually came through her breast milk and had given her child an allergy. Despite cutting an endless list of items out of her diet, to her own nutritional detriment, her child's allergy persisted. Though she wanted to discontinue breast-feeding so that her child's allergies might lessen, she felt her doctor gave her mixed messages as to what she "should do:"

I felt I wasn't being responsible towards him. Totally. I wasn't doing everything that needs to be done for a baby. I was trapped! I felt really trapped...there was no alternative as far as I saw. But I kept having this sort of 'When can I stop? When can I stop?' and so we went and saw an allergy specialist when he was one year old and she said 'Well you can't stop because he's not getting enough nutrients from other sources' so I kept on going. When he was two we went back and saw her again and she said, 'You're being ridiculous! Stop.' And then it took me three months before I could.

This woman's account of her experience is just one example of how many of the mothers often felt a lack of trust in their own abilities to make the right decisions regarding their children's welfare. Even when they sought out professional advice, the mothers

sometimes felt confused and unsure of what to do. For these women, their feelings of uncertainty did not fit with their images of responsible mothers. Despite their intentions and efforts to know and make the best possible decisions for their children, and despite the external “expert” sources they turned to who claimed to “know best,” these mothers sometimes felt unsure of themselves as mothers. Consequently, this fueled their feelings of maternal guilt because they were not fulfilling roles as “responsible mothers.”

Many mothers reported that another external reinforcement of this sense of responsibility arose from the perception that almost all the people they interacted with considered them to be the primary caregivers simply because they were women. Regardless of whether they believed they had a shared responsibility for raising their children with their husbands, these women felt that “society” treated them as if they were the only people capable to raise, and responsible for, their children. As one mother explained:

The mom is the one everybody interacts with. If it's the school or the pre-school or the doctor's office or whoever, they talk to the mom about it. It's the mother they expect to make the difference, to show up at the appointments, to be the comforting one, to be the one who goes on field trips you know, da da da [the list goes on], so the world reinforces that sense of responsibility.

Like the other mothers in this study, this woman felt that most of the people she interacted with on a regular basis in her community assumed, and expected her to be the parent primarily responsible for the care and welfare of her children. Many participants expressed resentment that more was expected from them than from their husbands. Many women disliked feeling that others were imposing their expectations on them. However, these external pressures to take full responsibility for their children led many of these

women to feel that they were being observed and judged in their roles as mothers. This reportedly added to their feelings of guilt as they started to doubt or question themselves as responsible parents.

Although several of these women had chosen the role as the primary caregiver in their family and had willingly taken on a great deal of the responsibility, they resented the fact that “society” assumed or expected they should do so, while holding different standards for their husbands. These women often felt “taken for granted” and “unappreciated” for the vast array of tasks, issues, and concerns they addressed as mothers each and every day. Most of the mothers talked about the double standard for the recognition given to mothers versus fathers, especially in public places. Some of these mothers expressed that they had felt discouraged when they had observed fathers receiving “special recognition” or positive acknowledgements for simply doing something with their children while they rarely received the same “rewards” for doing the same tasks. One participant stated that she observed the double standard so frequently that she often felt “invisible” as a mother and angry when she saw men receiving acknowledgment for their parenting efforts. Other mothers felt ashamed that they had caught themselves contributing to the double standard by admiring fathers that were involved with their children. Though it made them angry, some participants reportedly found it easier to admire a man, for example, that volunteered at the pre school, than to admire themselves or any of the other mothers who participated in the same way in the lives and education of their children. These mothers had, to a degree, internalized the cultural messages to a point where they recognized that they undervalued themselves as mothers. In doing so, these occasions became times when they looked inwards for personal shortcomings rather than looking outwards at the problematic cultural standards

that not only expected so much of them but also overlooked their efforts to fulfill those expectations.

There were numerous sources of outside influences that reportedly contributed to the participants' sense of complete responsibility. Ironically, while the social messages may have, in fact, often paralleled the mothers' internal sense of responsibility, they did not seem to validate their motherhood choices or experiences. Rather than feeling positively reinforced, these women often felt more "pressured" or "obligated" to meet the social expectations regarding their motherhood "duties." In addition, the messages often felt like judgements that then led these mothers to question whether they were "measuring up." Feeling observed and judged, several of these women experienced a heightened sense of inadequacy leading to maternal guilt which tended to motivate them to do more and, concomitantly, to increase their sense of overall and complete responsibility.

Several mothers expressed their perceptions that their husbands also reinforced their sense of complete responsibility. Despite their claims that they shared the responsibility for their children equally with their husbands, several mothers admitted that more times than not, and for several reasons, they found themselves feeling and acting more responsible for their children. One reason given was that some recognized that the same media and societal messages that they themselves had experienced also influenced their husbands. To a large extent they felt these cultural messages presumed and supported the idea that mothers were "naturally" a better caregiver and therefore must carry more responsibility. These mothers believed that both they, and their husbands, had probably internalized some of these cultural messages. One mother

described how this translated into her family life and how it heightened her sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of her children, the family, and for her marriage:

He adds to [the guilt] too because, in a sense, he's saying 'Well, this is wrong with the kids, *you gotta* find a solution. *You gotta* do something.' He'll express his frustration with it not being all happy and so then I have this other expectation [put on me]. And again I still feel very much at fault, [and that it's] *on me to fix it*. So there are some times I'll say to him, 'Well, I've done everything I can think of doing and this is just the way it is!' But I have said to him occasionally, 'I feel this *tremendous burden* to carry.' I feel like *I carry the happiness of my children and their future happiness* and I also feel like *I carry his too* because he's not happy with [something]. So some times I'll say, 'I feel like I'm carrying *all these things*. *All* the happiness of so many people and so many creatures in the family.'

This example illustrates how much this mother felt the disparity between the responsibility that she alone carried for ensuring the health and happiness of all members of her family. Her husband's expectations added to her sense of responsibility and fueled her sense of maternal guilt when she couldn't live up to all these demands. While not all of the mothers reported feeling the same degree of disparity, all acknowledged some differentiation between the sense of responsibility they felt they carried compared to that of their husbands. Most agreed that their husbands contributed in some way to their own sense of responsibility for their children, and ultimately to their feelings of guilt when they didn't feel they were fully meeting these responsibilities to everyone's satisfaction.

Some of the women in the study also felt their husbands shirked, sometimes unknowingly, their active participation in their children's lives, leaving these mothers with a greater sense of responsibility. For example, in response to her husband's

declaration that they had a shared responsibility for the children, one mother provided an example that was often echoed by the other mothers:

He doesn't understand my experience of responsibility and guilt, no. Because *he's not* home all day. *He doesn't* see the ins and outs and I'll say to him, 'You just don't understand!' and he says, 'Of course I do.' and I say, '*You don't understand. I'm here, I'm* all by my lonesome doing this by myself and he says, 'No we're a partnership. You know we're partners!' And I say, 'Yes, but no, *it's not like that.* We're a partnership but *I have* the responsibility!'

The other participants also reported their perceptions that their husbands didn't fully understand their feelings of complete responsibility or of guilt, regardless of their efforts to explain these feelings to their partners. These mothers, while they often admired and desired a partnership in the parenting roles and responsibilities for their children, found that the daily family routine simply did not adhere to the tenants of this vision. Instead, the mothers found themselves, more often than not, taking care of most of the "nitty-gritty" tasks and challenges of family life. Taking on more of the daily tasks fed their sense of responsibility and left them feeling more vulnerable to maternal guilt because they perceived they had more opportunity for doing something "wrong."

Interestingly, some mothers readily admitted that this increased sense of responsibility was not entirely due to their husband's behaviours and expectations. Rather, they acknowledged that they "took" or assumed more responsibility because of their desire and belief that they should be the ones to make sure that their children's needs were met "in a way that only Mom can." Whether internally or externally motivated, these mothers perceived their role as more central to the welfare of their

children. One woman explained how she understood the centrality of her role compared to others in her children's lives:

It's that responsibility...as if I'm saying nobody can do it better! It's that notion of parenting that you have internally that you're going to be able to be the only one that's going to be able to do it properly...even dad can't do it 'cause dad does it differently than you.

Perhaps surprisingly, these mothers still claimed that they wanted to believe that they had a shared sense of responsibility with their husbands. However, the reality was that they often took on more responsibility, because of their own internal pressures and expectations of themselves as good mothers.

For these mothers, no matter how strong or overwhelming their sense of complete responsibility, or how much it contributed to their sense of inadequacy, or fed their sense of maternal guilt, many anticipated that it would likely remain part of their mothering experience for the rest of their lives. Many believed that they would always feel responsible for their children in some way. As one mother explained, "I don't care how old he gets I will still feel in some way responsible for his happiness."

Others suspected that their sense of responsibility would remain a part of their mothering experience because they felt their own mothers "still hadn't let go."

Another woman explained that she would probably follow in her mothers footsteps because she felt reassured by her own mother's ongoing presence: "She's always my mum, always there to tell me [things], I don't mind. She's always there." One mother strongly agreed with this sentiment and clearly stated that her experience of her own mother informed how she expected herself to be for her children:

I see my mother as still *totally responsible* [for me]...When the going gets tough I would go to *my mom*! I was thinking about that...it's like Yup! I expect her to be there and to be perfect in the same ways I expect myself to be here and perfect.

For the women in this study, the feelings of responsibility and maternal guilt are so interrelated that it appears likely that they would both remain a part of these women's lives as long as they are mothers.

Desire to Have a Positive Impact on their Children

In the midst of their reflections on the multifaceted nature of their experience of maternal guilt all of the mothers interviewed found it important to convey that they carried a profound love and affection for their children that outlasted and outweighed the more negative feelings associated with maternal guilt. Related to their sense of responsibility for their children, these women expressed a strong and genuine desire to influence, guide, raise, encourage, nurture, and care for their children in such a way that would enable them to grow into responsible, healthy, happy, capable, respectful individuals. Their desire to have a positive impact on their children spanned the spectrum of child and family issues and often originated in these women's visions or personal understandings of the kind of mothers they desired to be. For these women, the multiple expectations they had set for themselves, largely due to their desire to have a positive impact on their children, often exceeded their abilities leaving them feeling disappointed in themselves. The occasions when they had perceived that they had failed to meet their self-expectations or believed they had "let their children down" gave them a heightened sense of maternal guilt.

For the participants in this study, while their desire to have a positive impact on their children was anticipated to be a life long experience it was also a time sensitive

issue. There were time constraints within which each mother felt she would be able to maximize her positive impact. These mothers believed that if they were able to positively influence their sons or daughters during their early development, their children would have the potential to grow up to live lives full of opportunities and challenges, and that they would be well prepared to meet and benefit from what life threw their way.

For one mother of two, her desire to have a strong impact on the growth and development of her children started at conception:

When I became pregnant with my first child, I mean, my immediate response was 'I want to do everything right!' And I tried to tailor everything in my pregnancy to what I knew was the right thing to do for the baby in terms of producing a healthy child. So with this wish to do everything right...I probably immediately started to feel some guilt for the things that I fell down with...but there were more feelings of hopefulness.

After pregnancy and during her children's early years, this participant, like the others, expressed a sense of urgency concerning the perceived limited time frame within which she could have a maximum positive effect on her child:

We only have about seven years [to shape our children] and that's our product (laughter) ...and so it's like, 'Oh, no!' Like I knew we only had 18 months at the beginning and then we had about three years 'til we get all the verbal stuff in and it's like you hear these milestones and you feel the pressure of time. You have to be perfect at that time because it's really critical for the rest of your child's life -- what you do in that short time.

Another participant who was employed full time and had her two-year-old son in a day care five days a week wished she didn't have to work and that she could have more time

with her son. She reflected on how, without the demands of her job outside the home she could show her interest and pride, impart her values, and teach her child what she believed would help prepare him for his later years. She too, felt she was losing the race with time:

I mean time is running short! He's two and he'll be in school soon...*now* is the time to be able to work towards spending more time with him. I want him to feel my interest in his life...[my mother] was never really encouraging to me...so I'm afraid that is going to happen to me (nervous laughter) and my son will feel like he's not really encouraged to participate in things.

These two mothers' examples reflect the experiences of the others interviewed. Within the early childhood years all of the mothers viewed their presence and role in their children's development as "essential" and "fundamental" to positive health and development in life. If they made a conscious effort to live up to their expectations of themselves as mothers and acted in their children's "best interests" they could assuage potential guilt.

Some mothers had a socially or professionally informed idea of what they thought would help them make a positive impact on their children. One mother described her belief that she should "be totally available to [her] children...easing the way for [her] children, teaching [her] children." This notion echoed the other mothers' urges to be present for their children if they were going to be "responsible parents." Some mothers acknowledged that these "perceptions come from a social or cultural image. Some of it is from family or origin." However, regardless of the source of these beliefs, these women, could not escape the power and urgency of this pressure to positively shape the lives and development of their children.

Adding to this pressure for many of the women was the “advice” gleaned from parenting “experts.” For example, one mother prided herself of being “a pretty good researcher” when it came to parenting and child development issues. She read professional journals, explored the Internet, attended seminars, and interviewed doctors and holistic health care providers. As a result of her research, she had breast fed her children to the age of two and had maintained a family bed for four years. These are only two of the many choices she made in order to foster the healthy development of her children. She believed her children felt comforted, had a sense of security, were very social and had a healthy attachment bond as a result. Like the other women in the study, she felt that these qualities were essential for their children’s abilities to forge healthy relationships while they were young, and more importantly, later in life.

Another participant had a strong idea of how she wanted to nurture her children in their formative years, based on her medical training:

For instance, I’m a very tactile, intuitive, more sensitive type of person so that’s the kind of mothering I want to do...my daughter sleeps with us...and I still nurse her at night and if I don’t sleep – well, that’s too bad, her feelings are paramount to me...I have to do everything for this babe. I’ve got to make sure that I raise her to be a competent person in this world.

This mother, like the others, explained that her vision of motherhood led her to make choices that were in the best interests of her children, despite the consequences it may have had for herself. By giving priority to their children’s needs for a positive and healthy development, these mothers believed they were fulfilling their expectations of being good mothers and, in so doing felt a diminished sense of maternal guilt.

These women were also aware of, and motivated by, their desire to protect and prepare their children for the darker aspects of life when they were still young. In the words of one mother:

Knowing that there are bad things out there...I want to protect them from bad things but in a sense I want to be there now to teach them [how] to deal with the bad things...Our son is the brightest little cookie around and so we are able to talk to him about all sorts of things. So he knows about drugs and those kinds of things. I want to be there for him now to teach him about those things ...I want to be there for my children in the protection, the informing, in the nurturing, and loving and this whole sort of 'encaging' my children.

One of the stay at home mothers also talked about how she strongly desired to impart tools to her growing children that they could carry with them as they started to reach out further from the home into a world that would inevitably present them with new challenges:

As they get older their needs become much more complex because you have so much psychological, emotional stuff that kids go through as they go out in the world, as they meet different friends and teachers and then they come home and this didn't work and that didn't work out and I think, 'Okay, how can I help them right now for the future?' So there is this perpetual quest, I think, to make sure that my children's lives are as good as they can be...Again, it's a sense of urgency I think when your children are little because it's so important in their formative years that *you get it right* so that they are the most complete or well equipped as you can make them when they actually go out into the world on their own...they can still come back to you [later] but there's less that you can do for them.

These mothers also spoke about the early years as being an important and special time in which they had the opportunity to lay the groundwork for the religious, spiritual and family value structures that they hoped would guide their children well later in life. As one mother said:

We have our children in a Catholic school and they're being raised that way. We talk [to our children] about having a sense of value as a person, a general philosophy about life, instilling a sense of being okay with oneself, being loved and supported and at peace with oneself and within the family. Sort of the morals that we hold close in our family, how we behave, how we look at life, how we treat other people, the whole package is important to get across now while they are young...we think we are doing a pretty good job in that role.

The examples above are representative of the many issues the mothers in this study presented as important for them to address with their children during their early, and formative years. By making the effort to teach and nurture the personal qualities and abilities of their children, and by providing them with strong value structures, these women believed they were having a positive impact on their children. Concurrently, they recognized that they were able to respond to their self-expectations and good intentions for their children, which then decreased their potential for having feelings of guilt.

While the desire for having a positive impact on their children, like their sense of complete responsibility, was ever present, the participants reported that they didn't always feel like they had been successful in realizing these hopes and desires. For example, one stay at home mother felt she had set very high standards for herself and her children. She said she took on the role of guiding and 'growing her children up' very

seriously. However, she did not always feel like she was able to meet her own expectations of what constituted “good parenting:”

I don't think a lot of people take [raising a child] serious enough. I feel just totally responsible for bringing up decent human beings into this world...I teach them right from wrong...how to get things done...to be perceptive...to be respectful. And if I neglect any part of that, if something goes wrong – it's my fault. I'm always thinking about what I can do to make life easier, to make life better, to make them more responsible, to make sure they stay on the right track. But then again, if I didn't think about it I'd be negligent as a parent. I think if I didn't feel this way then maybe I wouldn't be a good parent.

To summarize, the participants in this study felt a deep and genuine desire to have a positive impact on their children. The mothers had a desire to facilitate and shape the ‘growing up’ process of their children and believed that their ability and availability to teach, guide and nurture was critical during the early years of their children's development. They wanted to be present, active, and contributive during these formative years in an effort to help their children gain the self-resources for continued positive growth when their kids ventured into the world beyond their reach. This desire paralleled and informed their ongoing sense of responsibility. That is, their strong internal desire, combined with their sense of profound connection to their children, fed their feelings of “having to be responsible” and, in doing so, led them to be more vulnerable to feelings of maternal guilt when they perceived that they were falling short of their expectations. The mothers reported that their desire to have a positive impact on their children, like their feelings of responsibility, were strong and ever-present, however, they were not perceived to be as easily influenced by external factors.

For these women, the desire to positively nurture and influence their children was perceived as being rooted primarily in their love for their children and in their expectations of themselves as mothers. By responding to the love they felt for their children, and fulfilling some of the expectations they held of themselves as mothers they believed they were able to positively impact on their children's development. While it was often difficult to live up to their self-expectations, having the intentions and making the effort were reportedly some of the most effective ways these mothers felt able to calm their feelings of maternal guilt. By attending attentively to their children's development during the critical early years these mothers were able to assuage their feelings of maternal guilt during that time. Furthermore, these mothers felt that their early positive impact on their children would also allay the future guilt they would have expected to feel had they not paid special attention during the early years.

Sense of Profound Connection

The mothers in this study expressed that at the core of their maternal experience was a deep and profound connection to their children. This connection was described as one of the strongest and most positive maternal feelings that these women experienced. Whether these mothers called it a "bond" or a "connection," each explained it as a deeply felt experience that was rooted in their own sense of biological, hormonal, spiritual, or emotional connection to their child. Their profound connection to their children reportedly started during pregnancy, dramatically deepened and solidified during childbirth and, for some, through breast feeding, continued as their children developed, and was anticipated to remain an everlasting positive component of their motherhood experience. These women's feelings of connection seemed to enrich and deepen their love for their children. In return, their feelings of love for their children nourished their

feelings of connection. The mothers described their connections to their children as symbiotic in nature and, at times, the identities of the mothers and their children seemed fused. The mothers felt that their children had a “direct connection” to their heart, which could often stimulate and influence their feelings. As such, when the women felt they violated the emotional bond that existed between them and their children they experienced maternal guilt. At times, the pleading words of their children were enough to make them cringe internally with feelings of guilt because they felt they had disappointed their children. For many of the mothers, their children’s needs became their own as they viewed their children as “extensions of themselves.” They reportedly believed that their children’s behaviours were direct reflections of themselves as mothers. Hence, when their children “misbehaved” they would experience feelings of maternal guilt because they felt that their maternal inadequacies were exposed. Additionally, the sense of profound connection that these mothers felt to their children increased their feelings of responsibility, feelings of fear that their children might come to harm, and their desire to have a positive impact on their children. In so doing, this sense of connection was related to the intensity of their feelings of maternal guilt. This segment endeavours to portray the nature of this sense of connection, however, it is important to note that the mothers expressed this deeply felt experience more emphatically and genuinely through the tone of their voices, the movements of their bodies, and their facial expressions, than they did through their words.

The women in this study considered their sense of profound connection to their children to be “internally wired.” The fact that each had “grown” their children inside of their bodies, and had contributed to their genetic makeup and prenatal environments, was at the root of this experience for these mothers. Breast feeding and caring for their young

babies was also reported as part of the “growing” process that strengthened the bonds they felt to their children. For example, having just weaned her child off breast milk, one mother described her feelings of guilt when her child asked for her milk; leaving her feeling like she had somehow violated their physical bond:

He came up to me and he said, ‘Can I have some milk?’ I was like, ‘Aaahhhh!’ (sounding exasperated and torn). I was ready to go back, *his words just cut right through me*. I guess I felt it in my heart and in my thoughts, it was like ‘Ooooooh, *my baby*’...I wanted to be able to give to him because this child is...he’s *mine!* I think it is very much a maternal thing that you feel all that. All those little cells developed inside of you, that it’s *part of you*...forever. He [was] *inside me!* It’s probably not totally related to the biology of it but it sort of takes that shape in my mind.

Another mother stated that her children “belonged to [her] body in a bonded way, a positive way.”

Undergoing the process of childbirth and caring for a baby were described as the building blocks for the sense of connection these women felt to their children. One mother described how she, like many of the mothers, viewed her children as an “extension” of herself:

Especially when they are little babies - they’re just so *completely dependent on you*. But it’s a marvelous relationship because I mean *you are virtually the source of their life* and they love you to bits. And of course you adore them and you get *all those hormones* and it’s like ‘Ooooooh, *my baby!*’

Whether the mothers believed that the connection they felt was a result of hormones, biology, maternal “instinct,” or emotional bonding it was of such strength that each

seemed to perceive that their children were “part of them,” especially during the early stages of caretaking. This deeply felt connection increased the mothers’ sense of complete responsibility, and their desire to have a positive impact on their children. One mother said:

I have a strong sense of ownership for my children...they’re mine. I really believe they’re more mine than anyone else’s, they’re more mine than my husband’s.

The emotional closeness the mothers felt towards their children enhanced their sense of complete responsibility for their children’s proper care and guidance. However, at times, these mothers felt unable to fulfill the multiple maternal “duties” in a manner that allowed them to feel like competent, responsible mothers, which then increased their feelings of guilt. In addition, when their busy schedules took their attention away from their children they believed they were neglecting the opportunities in which they could make a positive impact upon them, which also heightened their feelings of maternal guilt. Therefore, while it seemed that the close bonds they shared with their children felt primarily like a positive experience it often led the mothers to feel an increased sense of inadequacy for not living up to their “good mother” expectations.

Related to the profound connections these women felt to their children were the experiences of their children’s power and ability to affect how they felt about themselves as mothers. For example, one mother clearly articulated how she understood the manner in which her children affected her sense of self as a mother and the resulting emotions, especially those of maternal guilt:

To have them look at you right in the eye - and you know ‘this is *my child*’- and them to go, ‘I hate you mommy!’ There's something about *that* that *just grips*

you! And even though intellectually you know she's just angry because she didn't hear what she wanted... You can do all that [rationalizing] and *still* there's a part of you that goes, 'My kid hates me, I'm the bitch from hell mother!' (Holding clenched hand to her heart) And it's *right here!* [Guilt is] hard, it's physical, it's like a part of you that wants to weep. Whatever part of you tunes into weeping, emotional, it might even be hormonal, who knows? But that whole side that is far more fluid, intuitive, that's where you're harmonizing to this, it's almost vibrations... My children have a direct connection to my heart in a whole different way [than others do]! And part of that for me was birthing, I mean the actual process of as I say 'passing a watermelon,' I mean doing *that* (hands making movements outwards from between her legs miming the birth process) - there's something about *that* that makes a connection that's forever. They're *always my* children. There's always 'I gave birth to this and something in my connection with them connects me to God, in a whole other way.' So even though I can separate [guilt] out [rationally], emotionally there's still that part where I am just gripped by it – now, you can be gripped by joy, I mean there's a range of emotions out there, but every now and then [the] big guilt one gets you!

Like this mother, the women in this study felt such a deep connection to their children that it felt like a direct "emotional link" by which their children often affected their feelings. These mothers wanted their children to grow up with happy childhood memories and to believe they had a good mother-child relationship. Feeling like they had disappointed their children or that their children disliked them increased their feelings of maternal guilt. Often, the mothers were reminded that they were not fulfilling the numerous desires of their children, which also heightened their sense of guilt. Many of

the women stated that they would often have feelings of guilt even when they did not feel culpable for any maternal “wrongdoing.” Interestingly, and somewhat surprisingly to the mothers themselves, the sheer presence and intensity of the connection to their children fueled their feelings of guilt for fear that they could possibly do something that may negatively impact upon their children or upon the “innocence, purity, and strength” of their bonded relationship. As has been described in many of other themes in this chapter, it seemed that a sense of connection was an experience that could be a “double-edged sword” for these mothers. That is, their feelings of connection enhanced the love and strength of the their mother-child relationship while it also set them up to experience great emotional pain, doubt in their maternal abilities, and a heightened sense of maternal guilt.

Associated with their sense of profound connection to their children and their perceptions that their children were “extensions” of themselves, were the women’s beliefs that their children’s behaviours were a direct reflection of their maternal abilities. For some mothers, their children’s “positive” behaviours were an indication that they were “succeeding” as mothers. For example, one mother stated:

I’m generally happy, comfortable with the situation, with what we’re doing. And it’s probably mostly because I can see how the kids are growing up and we’re happy with how they are. And we get comments from the schools that they’re doing all right at school and they’re doing well at the babysitter. So that gives me confidence that whatever we’re doing we’re doing right, for the most part. It does reflect on us because they are good kids and I’m proud of who they are becoming and who they are.

Another mother agreed:

When the kids [are] sitting on the couch and the older one is reading the younger one a book and all snuggled up together and I think, 'Where's my camera? I have to take a picture!' And that's rewarding 'cause I think 'Oh! Here they are getting along and they're two nice happy looking kids.' And I think, 'Okay, I feel good.'

That's a reward but it doesn't come that often.

While their children's successes left many of the mothers feeling good about their contributions to their children, it seemed that most of the mothers more frequently and readily attributed the "negative" behaviours of their children to their maternal inadequacies. For example, one mother expressed how she viewed her children's negative behaviours in particular as a direct reflection of her mothering skills, which often increased her sense of guilt:

I think my kids are a reflection of how I'm doing in a sense. And I go through periods, and I guess it's when things aren't going well for them or they seem to just be misbehaving that I just think, *'I am just not doing a good job.'* So the guilt factor just...it just builds up and I've said to my husband, *'I'm not doing very well here and I am not a good mum! I should not be doing this!'*

Regardless of whether their children acted "appropriately" or "unacceptably" the mothers in this study felt that their children's behaviours were a direct indication of their mothering skills. The women believed this because they considered their children as "extensions of themselves," felt so closely connected to them, and had invested so much of themselves in their children's overall growth and development. Sometimes they felt "rewarded" for having done "well" as a mother when their children exhibited positive behaviour. However, the mothers seemed to be more aware of the conflicts and difficulties in their children's lives, which led them to feel responsible, inadequate, and

guilty for not having been able to prepare, guide, and teach their children to better handle life and its challenges.

The profound connection these mothers felt to their children, and the concomitant feelings of guilt, were anticipated to remain a prominent and valued part of their motherhood experience. As one mother explained:

There was a sense of being connected with my child to eternity. This *real long sense of commitment* in terms of this relationship...just fully understanding that *no matter what happened*, whether [my husband and I] separated, or whether I died, whatever happened - I had this connection that felt spiritual with this child.

This example is representative of the other mothers who anticipated that their feelings of connection to their child would remain an ever present experience that would impact on their maternal feelings, including that of maternal guilt while enhancing their mother-child relationships, and shaping their maternal roles.

Having such a profound and lifelong sense of connection was expressed primarily as an intensely positive experience that fueled these mothers' feelings of unconditional love for their children. However, it also increased their feelings of maternal guilt if these women perceived their children were unhappy or disliked them. Additionally, a sense of profound connection to their children heightened their feelings of complete responsibility and their desires to have a positive impact on their children and protect them from harm. Feeling uncertain or feeling unable to live up to the multiple demands and tasks that a "responsible" and "good" mother "should" be capable of, fueled their feelings of maternal guilt. In essence, having a profound sense of connection to their children was, like many other maternal experiences, very much a "double-edged sword." It had the

power to positively enhance their maternal self-image while, at the same time, it also had the potential to increase their feelings of inadequacy and maternal guilt.

Fear their Children Might Come to Harm

Amidst the diverse range of emotions that accompany motherhood the women in this study reported having experienced a sense of fear that their children might come in harm's way. That is, each expressed a fear that their children might suffer from some psychological, emotional, or physical harm through circumstances both within and outside of their control. The feelings of fear stemmed from beliefs that their parenting choices, despite their good intentions, may have adverse effects on their children. Additionally, this fear of harm was reportedly rooted in these women's anticipation that the world outside of their control would cause their children pain or misfortune. The mothers often felt they had not "done enough" or made "the right choice" in order to prevent their children from all levels of harm. Perceiving that their children had already suffered or would suffer in the future to the extent that they would incur, for example, some sort of "psychological scar" dramatically increased these women's feelings of maternal guilt. As with several of the other themes and components of maternal guilt, the fear that their children might come to harm reportedly persisted as their children developed. These concerns led the women to constantly evaluate themselves as mothers as they tried to anticipate and prevent potential hardships or dangers that their children might encounter. They lived with feelings of worry and guilt, even for situations outside of their control. The sense of fear that harm may come to their children, and the corresponding feelings of guilt, were described by the women as being related to their desires to have a positive impact on their children and by the parenting and child development information they were exposed to.

“Tied up in maternal guilt is, definitely, a fear. A fear of what’s going to happen, how much we can do for [our children], [how much we can] protect them.” For the mothers in this study, this fear that harm might come to their children began early on. For some it started during pregnancy. Many described the measures they took in efforts to ensure the healthy development of their fetus, including proper nutrition, increased fitness levels, and the halting of medications that potentially would have ill effects on their fetuses. One mother described how her fear informed her experience of pregnancy:

I think that you go through pregnancy just really hinged on this idea that all these bad things happen. But *if I do all the right stuff* nothing bad will happen to me. [I did] these little incantations like, ‘Everything will be all right.’ ‘I know bad things happen but everything will be all right.’ And then, it wasn’t...they took the baby away, rather than the baby come up on to my chest...All I saw was this little blue body being floated away...and I immediately said to my husband, ‘Go find out what’s wrong!’...the nurse stopped him and grabbed hold of us and said, ‘Your son was born with a cleft lip and palette.’ It was just a total shock.

This mother was initially devastated and felt responsible for having done something during her pregnancy to have caused her son’s condition. She had, like many of the mothers, feared the “worst” while hoping, and taking precautions, for the “best.” She expressed that she experienced a tremendous amount of maternal guilt as she felt culpable for having “harmed” the physical, and later the psychological and emotional development, of her child. Although the other mothers did not report that their children had been born with any physical “disabilities,” they did report feeling the same worry, fear, and guilt that they may have inadvertently done something that might have caused

some harm to their baby. For instance, some women felt worried that they had taken a mild pain reliever, or had consumed too much caffeine, or had not quit smoking early enough. Each of the little “errors” that they perceived themselves as having made instigated feelings of fear for the welfare of their babies and triggered feelings of maternal guilt.

The women interviewed recognized both the importance and power of their roles in their children’s lives. Just as they had the “power to do good” they believed they had the “power to do bad,” which often left them feeling fearful that they could, inadvertently, cause their children harm. Several mothers cited examples in which they felt responsible for “breaking” the development of their children, which instigated feelings of guilt. They feared that their child would suffer some physical or psychological scar. For example, one mother described how her feelings of guilt “spoke” to her regarding the family’s move to the city and the perceived adverse effect it had on her daughter, who was not participating in the extracurricular activities she used to:

There's that little piece that says ‘A full year has gone by and she hasn't played tennis since July!’ And somehow *I'm responsible* for this break in her development. That if I was able to make her a happy, healthy, well adjusted girl then she'd be involved in those things already. She'd be flourishing. There's that constant struggle between ‘I'm a mother doing the best I can with what I'm given’ with this *ideal thing* that runs around in your head - that just rears it's little head and goes, ‘But good mothers *do this!*’ And it's not a constant voice, it's just every now and then and you have that feeling of ‘She's probably going to hate me forever’ or ‘She's going to need therapy when she's 20 and she's going to be blaming you, Mom.’ That kind of stuff.

Another mother feared that she was “stunting” her child’s growth by waking him up early everyday so that she could get to work and have him to day care on time. She wondered, “Is he short because I wake him up?” She calculated the amount of sleep that he had every day because she worried about harming his physical development. Like these two mothers, the others experienced fears that they were causing harm to their children’s development, which, in turn, increased their feelings of maternal guilt. All of the women endeavoured to facilitate the positive growth and development of their children as they believed all “good mothers should.” However, feeling uncertain as to whether they had, or would be able to live up to the numerous expectations they had for themselves as “good mothers,” led to feelings of maternal guilt.

One experience common to all the women in this study was the fear that in disappointing their children they caused them to bear psychological “scars.” Several participants spoke about occasions when they had not been able to attend an event that was important to their children such as a field trip, a performance, or a sports game. Beyond their own feelings of disappointment for not being available they felt they were falling short of the kind of mother they wanted to be, which increased their feelings of maternal guilt. These feelings of guilt were exacerbated when they witnessed their children’s disappointment and wondered about the adverse effect it might have on their development. As one mother said:

I think there's times when fear and guilt can be right in your face - in times of stress. If your kid was sick or had an important soccer match or something happening at school, it's those kinds of things. For instance, [my son] had a field trip that I had volunteered to go on and then all hell broke loose and I had to cancel. And I felt *so terrible* and, I'm sure it's a normal thing, but it was a sense

that I had *let him down*. And *that* was just, *I felt so guilty and so bad* about that!

I should have been there for him...he was disappointed.

For the mothers in this study having the sense that they had let their children down was an experience that carried with it, almost without exception, heavy feelings of maternal guilt. The mothers were completely dedicated to nurturing and raising their children in the “best” and “right” ways they thought possible. However, all reported experiencing fear that their parenting choices would cause emotional or psychological “scars.” The examples of such choices included disciplining methods, the repeating of their own mother’s “parenting mistakes,” their physical absence from their children’s lives, and situations that caused their children to feel disappointment. Even the perception that the possibility existed that they had made a “wrong” choice, which may have caused their children harm, exacerbated their feelings of maternal guilt.

In efforts to be the best mothers they could, and in response to their sense of complete responsibility for their children combined with the fear that they could, even unintentionally, harm their children, the mothers in this study felt compelled to keep abreast of the current parenting information. However, as has been discussed in the previous theme of “responsibility,” this “expert” advice often only contributed to the fear and guilt the mothers experienced in heightening their sense of inadequacy as “good” mothers. For example, one mother had attended a seminar that addressed the effects of early childhood trauma on child development. She came away from the seminar with increased knowledge and new ideas for her future mothering role. However, she also came away with an increased fear of the future for her child, as well as a heightened sense of guilt for not having known the information when her child was an infant. As a result of this information she began to equate the surgical procedures that her child had

undergone with “early childhood trauma.” This link between parenting “advice” and guilt was well articulated by another woman who felt torn by her need to work outside the home:

All the news coverage of how children develop. [They say] the problem with our society is that people aren't at home with their kids. And it makes me mad...

(crying) I feel blamed that *my child that I love so much* is somehow going to be harmed if I'm not there!... (crying/emotional)... It makes me feel mad because there are *all these reports* and I don't know who's doing them - the government or whatever - but they keep releasing *all these studies* but then they don't do anything to help people! They don't support...(crying/emotional) They don't support stay at home moms and I'd love to [not have to work and] stay at home.

All of the women sought out, or remained open to, parenting information in their efforts to enhance their mothering skills and to do the best for their children. The unfortunate consequence of this, however, was that this information often seemed to increase their sense of culpability for their children's past negative experiences and to heighten their fears that harm would come to their children. Hence, these mothers felt greater degrees of maternal guilt as a result of the overwhelming amount of information that they perceived to highlight and blame them for their maternal inadequacies and the harm they may be causing their children.

The mothers also felt the need to protect their children from situations outside of the home that they feared could cause emotional, psychological, and physical harm to their children. For example, one mother explained how she understood the relationship between her feelings of maternal guilt and her feelings of fear that her children will come to harm:

[Feelings of guilt] come with the anticipation of things not going *great* [for my children.] I guess it's me imagining the different possibilities of what's going to happen and hoping for the best, but considering the worst. And then I think if really bad things happen then it's really going to make me feel guilty. So I'll try and *do anything* I can to make sure that bad things don't happen and things go really well. And so they arise from a place that's trying to protect and accommodate my children.

Another mother explained how her sense of fear and the resulting feelings of guilt shaped her mothering role, "I would say most of my feelings of guilt in relation to [my son] deal with protecting him, helping him find his way in the world, safe from harm's way."

Many times the mothers did not articulate what specific harm they anticipated or were afraid of. Rather, they expressed a general sense that the world beyond their reach had many possible ways of negatively affecting their children. One mother described her feelings of fear in the following way:

The wonderment [of having children] and to see these *little gifts*, I just look at them that way - but there's *so much tied in with the fear of it*. I mean, *I'm totally fearful*. I'm fearful of the future, maybe more than some moms. I feel I have a lot of angst about the whole thing. I think as a parent it's always there. All I keep thinking of are fearful, nervous, underlying...like, '*My God! What if...? What if...?*' ... 'What if something bad happens?' If something happened to them how would I live with that?

This mother's experience reflects that of all the participants. These mothers, in addition to being concerned about their own capabilities and of inadvertently harming their children, feared that the world beyond their reach would inflict some lasting harm on

their children for whom they only wanted good health and happiness. Concerned that they could not protect their children from all the “evils” they might encounter left the women feeling fearful and with an increased sense of guilt for having brought children into the world who they could not protect.

Sense of Depletion

The women in this study described motherhood as an experience full of wonder, joy, love, and many other positive feelings. However, motherhood was not described as an entirely positive experience. These women reported that their maternal experiences also incorporated negative feelings, including those of exhaustion, anger, frustration, and resentment, all of which were related to their experience of maternal guilt. Quite simply, the multitude of family and household demands, combined with their sense of complete responsibility for, and desire to positively impact upon the health and welfare of their children, taxed their resources to their fullest, often leaving these mothers with a sense of depletion. For these women, feeling anger, resentment and despair, or feeling exhausted and depleted, was incongruous with how they wanted to be as mothers. A common sentiment was that “good” mothers would be capable of fulfilling all of the demands placed upon them while maintaining a positive demeanor, both inwardly and outwardly, and would have self-sustaining energy levels. However, they recurrently found themselves either physically exhausted from the multitude of tasks they felt compelled or pressured to attend to or emotionally drained from their efforts to be “everything to everybody” in their household. Regardless of whether they felt physically or emotionally “worn out” they often felt their “maternal wells” had been emptied. As a consequence of feeling exhausted and depleted, many times these mothers believed that they fell short of living up to their image of what a “good mother” should be. Additionally, their recurrent

feelings of being “drained and unable to give” often led them to feel resentment towards their children or to respond to them in anger, which increased their sense of inadequacy and heightened their feelings of maternal guilt.

While all of the women in this study had anticipated that their new roles as mothers would be fraught with a multitude of tasks and duties many expressed that they were simply not prepared for the exhaustion or negative emotions that often accompanied their efforts in meeting these demands. One mother humorously, but heatedly, explained why she believed she had not been adequately prepared for the demands of motherhood:

Well for me, it's the Cinderella story gone wrong again. Here's an area of maternal guilt for me. ‘They all lived happily ever after’ - that line, that's the biggest lie. And every single one of us got fed that bullshit lie! I'm sorry I'm a little angry about it, but *I am* angry! Because if you watched Disney and grew up in that kind of illusion...Prince Charming always comes in and sweeps her off her feet ...they usually take her out of drudgery and misery and all kinds of nastiness and then she goes on to this lovely little life. But *they never* tell you that she's going to have to work her ass off to make that good! They don't tell you how much work is involved! So you get all that, ‘Isn't this baby lovely?’ And yes, the baby *is lovely*, and ‘Isn't it a gift from God?’ Yes, *it is a* gift from God. *But my God!* I'm working hard and it's 3 o'clock in the morning and my boobs are sore and I'm looking at this kid going ‘*Why didn't anyone tell me this?*’ (laughter) Because I would have just said, ‘No!’ It would have been like smoking - just say no! If you really knew what work was in it you'd say, ‘Forget it, I don't want to do that.’

Whether or not the other mothers believed, like this woman, that they had been fed an unrealistic ideal of motherhood, all claimed that they had anticipated a challenging but joyous experience. However, they reportedly had not been prepared for the intensity of the demands, the extent of the negative emotions, and the sense of depletion that accompanied motherhood. Catching themselves feeling like they didn't want the responsibilities or feeling like they couldn't cope with the pressures and demands of motherhood, these women were riddled with guilt which often led to self deprecation because this led them to believe that maybe they weren't, as one woman said, "cut out to be a mother."

It was during the transition to motherhood and with the responsibility of caring for their own children, that the participants often began to feel "so tired" that they "could hardly do anything." Several mothers reported feeling "depleted" or "worn out by the demands of [their] kids." One stay at home mother poignantly described her exhaustion:

There is something about motherhood with all these demands ... You have to really draw on your own resources and you have to have a good enough sense of yourself that you can give out all the time. Because sometimes it feels like [you're being sucked by] this giant vacuum. All the stuff is always going out ...there are some days you think it's never ending.

This mother, like others, often felt like she was the sole provider for her children and the main foundation that supported the family and household. With this burden came feelings of guilt, when she felt too exhausted or emotionally depleted to meet the endless demands and needs of the members of her family. Another mother who also worked out of the home, concurred and explained how she believed society shaped her motherhood role:

It's very, very difficult...*so many* things have to happen at home in terms of life.

There are so many things to anticipate...I think society has just martyred women into saying, 'Well, that's a woman's role' - You know, the woman's role is to clean up the dishes, wash and da da da [an endless list], and you do that!

Like this woman, the participants in this study made tremendous efforts to accomplish all of the tasks they believed were their job as "mothers," which often left them feeling physically and emotionally depleted - empty of any personal resources. The consequences of this were increased feelings of maternal guilt because they were not able to be the kind of mothers they desired and felt pressured to be.

The endless demands of caring for their young children often required so much attention, energy, and care that the women expressed having feelings of resentment towards their kids. For one mother, describing her experience of caring for her young child was difficult, as it evoked both past and present feelings of depletion, and maternal guilt:

At the end of the day...I would *have to leave* the house because I was *just so tense and tired* from the crying...it was hard for me (crying) to get him to fall asleep, and then when he did have a nap as soon as I put him down he would wake up and cry all over again. So I virtually spent the first four months with him attached to me. I felt bad...(crying)...guilty about resenting it at that time... sometimes I still feel guilty because he's into the terrible 2's... Sometimes I just can't handle it...I get cranky really easily and now with him I just sometimes have to get up and walk away because I don't want to yell at him. I feel guilty for getting frustrated with him.

This example illustrates the relationship between emotional and physical depletion and feelings of maternal guilt for the women in this study. Feeling tired or exhausted reportedly fueled other negative emotions, such as frustration, resentment, anger, and inadequacy, which in turn heightened their feelings of guilt.

All of the mothers spoke about having felt resentment and frustration in response to feeling like their “mothering wells” were empty from their children’s endless demands for care, nourishment, and attention. Many of these women talked about their resentment because they seemed to have no time or energy left for themselves. For example, one mother reported that it was sometimes the smallest request that her children could make of her that left her feeling completely depleted:

You just get tired...worn out by the demands of your kids, and then you don't do as good a job as you would like. It gets so piled up and so you say...[to the child] ‘You're screaming at me [that] you can't find Barbie's pink halter-top and I'm sorry! [I can't do it right now.]’ There are times when you just want to say, ‘Stop! I just want a little space for myself, for my own sanity. ‘Don't ask me anything, just leave me alone for 15 minutes!’ But the demands are always there! They're *always* there. So sometimes I try to find some room for myself just to do something...whether it's reading a book, or going for a walk...otherwise I'd just be a screaming wreck all the time because I'd feel so oppressed.

Another mother’s experience exemplifies how a sense of depletion informed the experiences of maternal guilt for all of these mothers. This mother shared how her feelings of guilt developed from her feelings of resentment and anger which stemmed from being torn between her self expectations of being responsible for her children’s welfare and her desire to have some reprieve from those pressures:

I often have *tremendous resentment* against my children sometimes for putting me through this. And sometimes they just seem like they're being *so difficult*! Almost on purpose they're being difficult and yet I always have to carry this - whatever it is they're going through that I'm somehow responsible for it or for working through it. And there are times when I don't want to carry that burden, it's like 'Just leave me alone!' So I carry the guilt of being angry and for feeling incredible resentment towards my children...and sometimes wishing I didn't...I mean I *love my children to bits* ...just to bits, but there are times I think I wonder what my life would have been like if I'd never had kids.

While this participant articulated that she occasionally experienced some ambivalence about having become a mother, most of the other women, while not disagreeing, seemed uncomfortable in clearly conveying the same sentiment. It seemed that verbalizing their ambivalence would have further heightened their feelings of guilt. For them, this would have meant admitting to not enjoying being mothers, rather than being a legitimate denouncement of the endless demands that encompass the mothering role; a sentiment that was inconsistent with their images of the "good mother."

Further highlighting the vicious nature of this cycle, the women in this study recognized their need for self-replenishment and yet all, to some degree, reported that it was very hard to take time to attend to their own needs because a heightened sense of guilt was the result of choosing to do so. As one mother explained, "Trying to take care of myself means taking time away from my children...I try to take care of myself but I always feel the guilt." Another described her desire to replenish herself, "All I want to do is read and do something other than be with them...and then I feel guilt." One mother

found it difficult to claim time for herself even when her children were supposed to be in bed:

I like everybody to be in bed by 9 o'clock and I tell them 'This is my time because *I need* the time.' (nervous laughter) Sometimes I really have to enforce that, 'No, I'm leaving.' And they'll call 'Mum!, Mum!' It's like (exasperated) 'Okay, it's no more mum and dad time!' So I do feel kind of bad, guilty for rejecting them. They pull me back as long as they can (laughter) they're always doing that, holding on to me, (laughter) try to make deals with me. Sometimes it's frustration, sometimes it's tiring.

These women were clearly torn between claiming time for themselves and remaining present for their children, even if depleted. Taking time for themselves was perceived by these women as a "selfish" act that a "good mother" would not consider or even feel the need to do. The cost for taking time way to replenish themselves, was increased feelings of maternal guilt.

The mothers in this study reported that when they felt depleted they were apt to respond to their children in ways that increased their feelings of maternal guilt. For one mother, recognizing when she spoke to her children in the same authoritarian or disrespectful manner that her own parents had spoken to her, was one indicator that she had tested the bounds of her stamina. When she had "run out of steam" or during times of conflict in the family she "fell back on" many of the practices that she had "sworn not to use" and she felt like she had let her children and herself down. Like this mother, the rest of the women reported that they experienced feelings of guilt if they thought they had repeated the "same mistakes" as their parents.

When tired, some of these mothers reported a tendency to respond in anger to the situation or to their children. This tendency was considered inappropriate by these mothers and therefore increased their feelings of guilt. For instance, as one mother said after claiming that she was more likely to raise her voice when she was tired:

I think, 'Oh God, what kind of parent am I for bawling my kid out?' Now they feel bad and now I feel bad and then I feel guilt because I think 'oh gee, if I was that perfect mother I wouldn't lose it with my kids.' So I think I carry probably very high standards of what a good parent should be. And being human, getting tired, I think I fall short more often than I would like.

Like this woman, all the mothers felt unable to respond in as calm a manner in all situations with their children as they would have liked. Expressing themselves angrily or simply having feelings of anger towards their children was often enough to fuel their sense of maternal guilt. One mother explained how she had come to understand and better handle the relationship between feelings of anger and resentment towards her children and this guilt:

That first year I *just felt awful* all the time. I felt resentment or anger towards the child. I go through that step of feeling guilty about feeling resentful. Feeling like the ideal mother *never* feels angry at her children. Like part of demystifying the myth of motherhood is coming to terms with: Mothers get angry, mothers say when they're angry - and that's all right! Whereas in the beginning [before taking the ideal apart, you feel] you're never supposed to have an angry thought or if you do you're definitely not supposed to express it.

Not all of the women in this study believed that anger was as normal and acceptable a feeling associated with motherhood as this mother had come to understand. For most of

the participants, their feelings of anger remained, to varying degrees, inconsistent with their perceptions of being a good mother. As a consequence, when they were so depleted by the demands of motherhood, and responded in anger to their children they experienced feelings of maternal guilt.

For the mothers in this study, responding to the multi-layered demands of their children, family, and household claimed all of their inner resources, often leaving them with a sense of physical and emotional depletion. Each mother's sense of depletion both directly and indirectly triggered feelings of maternal guilt. Feelings of depletion fueled these mothers' feelings of frustration with, and resentment and anger towards, their children, which in turn heightened their feelings of guilt. Each believed that in experiencing these and other negative emotions towards their children, or towards their motherhood roles, that they were not being good mothers.

Sense of Loss

One theme that was repeatedly presented as related to the feelings of maternal guilt for all but one of the women in this study was a sense of loss. While the feelings of loss were greater for the three women in this study who worked outside of the home full-time, it was also experienced by the women who worked or went to school part-time, and by two of the three stay at home mothers. This segment will explore and describe the nature of this sense of loss, and its relationship to the feelings of maternal guilt experienced by these seven participants.

Seven mothers stated that they often felt a loss of time, connection, and relationship experiences with their children. When busy schedules or demands outside the home took the mothers away from their children they often felt that they missed the experiences of their growing children which could never be recreated or recaptured. In

particular, the three mothers that worked outside of the home full-time, and had placed their children in day care facilities, expressed a profound sense of loss. They felt they were missing their children's development on a daily basis. These mothers also reported feeling a great deal of sadness as they often felt secondary to the day care attendants or the nanny who spent more time than them with their children. Being absent from their children's first discoveries and developmental milestones not only left these women with feelings of loss but also with the perception that they were not living up to their maternal self-expectations. They felt they were not being responsible mothers because they were not fully present in their children's lives. Their sense of failure exacerbated their feelings of maternal guilt. Moreover, because the mothers felt that they were the best people to provide the necessary care and guidance for their children, by "allowing" other individuals, including professionals, family, or friends, to care for their children they believed they were allowing their children to receive "second-rate" care. This increased their feelings of maternal guilt because as "good mothers" they wanted their children to receive only the best of care. All seven of the mothers believed that their presence in their children's lives was critical, and wished that they could be more readily available to their children than they found possible. These women, regardless of whether they worked outside of the home or not, often experienced a heightened sense of maternal guilt when they attended to matters that took them away from their children. Being "present" included being both psychologically and physically present for their children. The mothers reported feelings of loss and guilt as a result of being "distracted" from their children by other issues and demands. Similar feelings were expressed for the times when the women were physically absent. By arranging for a sitter, or having a family member or friend care for their children, the mothers often felt like they were "passing

their children off” and neglecting their mothering duties. This stimulated feelings of inadequacy and guilt for not making their children their priority. These mothers reported that they felt a loss of time, relationship, and meaningful interaction with their children.

The mothers in this study felt both a desire and a need to be present in the lives of their children, based on their feelings of profound love and connection with their children, their sense of complete responsibility, their desires to have a positive impact on their children, and their fears that their children may come to harm. Additionally, the unconditional love they felt for their children instilled a desire to be with their children more than these mothers were often able to be. In particular, the mothers who worked outside of the home reported experiencing a great sense of loss as a result of being away from their children most weekdays. They reported feeling like “secondary” figures in their children’s lives – second to the hired caregivers who spent more time with their children and were the first to guide their children through new and meaningful experiences. For example, one mother who worked full time outside of the home, became very sad as she described her feelings of loss, and subsequent feelings of guilt, that she experienced most days she left her child at a day care facility:

He'll say things like, 'No mommy, stay now.' And that *really tugs* at my feelings of guilt. And then most times he gets settled, he's all involved with playing or reading a book or doing whatever, the activity they have for the day. But *I miss that*. I know what (crying)...I know what he does all day because they write it all down for us but there's a lot of things that (crying)...there's a lot of things that I miss. His first experience going to a zoo or going on the train at Stanley Park. To be able to see his response to things. It's always, *I'm always the second one* to see those things. We try to repeat the activity but I don't think it's ever the same

(crying)...*it's like somebody else is raising my child!* (crying) They spend more time with him than I do! There's always a first time for everything and he can't repeat the first time.

Another working mother shared similar sentiments:

I remember very vividly with my son, I went back to work when he was three months old, and he went to day care and *I didn't give him his first solid food!* I nursed him *but his very first* solid foods were given by his primary care giver at the day care and I was mortified for days. It was one of those milestones and he's *my baby and I just never gave him his first solid food* and I was just - I waged battle with that and I thought 'Why am I doing what I'm doing?'...I mean there's times when I just want to cry. You know I just feel *so guilty* that I just...*I just want to be there* and I just bawl my eyes out about it!...I can honestly say they're just *things* that make me feel guilty. I mean there will be things happening at the daycare that, they'll be planting seeds and I'm thinking if we were at home *we'd* be doing that. And that experience is being shared with *somebody else and I should be doing this with my child!* I know I could do it better!

The women in this study who worked full time felt terribly for having "given up" their children to other caregivers, who were often not mothers themselves, as they truly enjoyed their children and wanted to be with them. They felt that as a consequence of working full time, they were "missing out" on the "highs and lows" of their children's development, including the major milestones, which caused them a great deal of sadness and loss. These mothers often felt the loss of being able to bear witness to the important events in their children's lives. They felt a loss for not being available to contribute to their children's meaningful memories or activities on a daily basis. The loss these mothers felt

dramatically heightened their feelings of maternal guilt as it relentlessly reminded them that they were not living up to their expectations of themselves as “good mothers.”

All but one of the mothers who did not work outside of the home also experienced a sense of loss related to their mother-child relationships. Despite their primary focus on their families, these mothers also had commitments and circumstances that took them away from their mothering “duties.” Consequently, they reported feeling a loss of connection with their children during these times and subsequent feelings of guilt for not being ever present with their children. For example, one mother felt that her part time studies limited the amount of quality time she had with her children:

Well my main guilt is that I'm not with them enough and that I don't play with them enough and I don't read to them enough because of my school...I have a lot of guilt around that actually, about that loss of time and bringing them to other people's homes and leaving them there.

Some mothers spoke about the “good mother” tightrope they walked as they tried to attend to the diverse range of motherhood demands and pressures. Often they experienced a “no-win” situation, because while they felt they were meeting their responsibilities on one level, they also felt they were falling short of their responsibilities on another. For instance, like the following stay at home mother, many viewed the household chores as part of their responsibilities as “good mothers” and yet attending to those chores often meant being psychologically unavailable to their children:

The other part [of guilt] is when I don't have much time for my son. Days will go by when I haven't had any meaningful interaction with him because I'll be busy and he'll be busy. Or [when] other people are interacting with him

and reading to him and all the things that I value but *I'm* not doing. So I feel guilty about that because I'm the ultimate person to do those things for him.

While these mothers did not report feeling as heightened a sense of loss as the mothers who worked outside of the home, they did express dismay for the lost time and experiences with their children. Many reported that simply having heard stories of their children's daily activities that they had missed instilled feelings of loss and guilt. Their loss was described as one of time, of interaction, of bearing witness to their children's developmental milestones, and that of a sense of connection to the growth of their children. They believed that there were events that they "should" have been a part of and their loss was one of knowing that the event could never be re-experienced or recreated. Their sense of loss triggered their feelings of maternal guilt as they felt reminded that they were falling short of the "good mother" standards that dictated that a responsible and caring mother "should" be present for, and positively contributive towards, the healthy and happy development of their children. Their physical or psychological absence led these mothers to feel as though they were "neglecting" or "turning their children away," which fueled their feelings of inadequacy and maternal guilt. In addition, the women believed that they were the "best" persons able to help, guide, and nurture their children. Hence, because they were not ensuring the "best" care for their children when they allowed another individual to "take their place," they experienced feelings of maternal guilt.

In efforts to feel better about their maternal roles these women developed ways, for those times that they were apart from their children, to alleviate and cope with their sense of loss and feelings of guilt. The mothers claimed that they felt less guilt when they were able to incorporate their maternal experience into their working day or into the

events that took them away from the household and their children. For example, one mother who worked outside of the home explained that by talking to work colleagues about her children she was able to feel like she had not ignored her mothering role:

I have colleagues who have similar age children so I can always compare and share stories. So in a way I'm still being 'Mom' when I'm with these women. There's this common bond that I have with other moms that I can still be part of the [motherhood] club without having my kids there. And so that alleviates that sense of loss because I talk about them, and show pictures of them...I'm still being 'Mom' and so, in a sense, I don't feel quite as guilty.

The mothers agreed that, apart from simply enjoying speaking about their children, they spoke to other women about their children in an effort to feel as though they were fulfilling their motherhood duties even when they were apart from their children. In effect, they were able to feel "motherly," which helped to diminish their sense of loss and their feelings of maternal guilt.

Another method that these women used to diminish their sense of loss and guilt was to ensure that their children felt their presence when they were apart. For example, one stay at home mother said:

When I did get out [of the home] *I'd feel so guilty*. I'd miss the kids and I'd feel like I neglected them...so I've always got my cell phone and saying, '*Call me if you need me!*' That way I know, at least I hope, that I won't miss out on anything important.

Another mother said that she left notes in her children's lunches so that "they always know mom is thinking of them." These are only two of the examples of the methods the mothers used to maintain contact and presence with their children in hopes of

diminishing their feelings of loss of connection, time, and relationship with their children. While the mothers claimed that these efforts diminished their feelings of loss and maternal guilt, and were worth the extra energy, they did not serve to completely eliminate these feelings. They suggested that even when they spent time with their children they felt sad and guilty for the times they had missed and felt they could never recapture.

In summary, seven of the eight mothers in this study claimed to feel a great sense of loss, inadequacy, and maternal guilt for the times they were not able to be with their children or were involved in meeting other family or household demands. They felt a great loss for not being available to witness their children's developmental milestones and for not being a constant part of their daily growing experiences. These mothers felt that they were not living up to their expectations of themselves as "good mothers" if they were working full time outside the home or involved in things that took their time and/or attention away from their children. Hence, they reportedly experienced a great deal of maternal guilt along with their feelings of loss. Additionally, their sense of loss was related to the other themes described in this chapter. Their feelings of loss decreased their feelings of being responsible mothers, lowered their perceptions of maintaining a sense of connection with their children, and curtailed the opportunities in which they felt they could have a positive impact on their children. As a result, their feelings of loss stimulated a series of other experiences that also triggered their feelings of maternal guilt.

Sense of Inadequacy

One of the most prominent components of the women's experience of maternal guilt was a sense of inadequacy. When asked how their feelings of maternal guilt were related to their sense of themselves as mothers they used words such as "less able,"

“incapable,” and “inadequate” to describe their perceptions of themselves as mothers. Each of the women had an image of a “good mother” that they tried to live up to. This image evolved from their experiences with their own parents; their observations of parents in their communities; their internalization of motherly images as portrayed in television and film; their reading and viewing of parenting information; and from to their internal “instinct” or “voice.” These women regularly evaluated their maternal abilities and frequently felt that they fell short of their own expectations of “good mothers.” Most of the mothers felt that they simply were not able to “ever do enough” or to complete tasks or handle matters in the “right way” despite their best intentions and endless efforts to fulfill the multiple demands of motherhood. Their feelings of inadequacy were related to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and guilt for not fulfilling all of their motherly “duties” in the way they wanted. In addition to their own self scrutiny, the women felt their parenting choices and behaviours were continuously judged by family, community members, health professionals, and other parents. They felt “put down” by other people’s judgements of them or felt “blamed” for not being a better mother. This external evaluation of their abilities heightened their sense of inadequacy and thereby fueled their feelings of guilt. A sense of inadequacy is an underlying component of most of the other themes in this chapter that describe the participant’s efforts and struggles to be “good mothers.” The women in the study endeavoured to be, as six of the eight women said, “perfect” mothers but often they felt the pressures and challenges of motherhood exceeded their abilities, leaving them with feelings of inadequacy which triggered their feelings of maternal guilt.

For the women in this study their sense of inadequacy was the result of feeling unable to live up to the maternal standards they had set for themselves. Each desired to

be a “good mother” that was able to anticipate and fulfill the vast array of maternal “duties” in the “right way.” The components that made up a “good mother” varied slightly among the women, however, all agreed upon the numerous sources that had influenced the standards by which they endeavoured to live. One mother explained:

Well it comes from your own parents because I do think you tend to parent as you yourself were parented...I think a lot of it comes from that but I think a lot comes from reading, I think in our generation there are more ‘how-to-parent’ books out there and I’ve read them *all*. And I think you automatically look to how other people are parenting. I think you internalize that - how they deal with their kids. And I’m sure there’s a certain amount of television fantasy in there too where you have Hollywood movies, ‘Leave It To Beaver,’ those kinds of influences. But then, I think our lives are quite different from our mother’s. Our lives are so different that a lot of it is breaking new ground so you don’t know if you’re doing the right thing. But you just have to go with your gut instinct – ‘Okay, this is what I should be doing now.’

This example reflects the five sources that most of the mothers described as having influenced their ideas and standards of what they felt they had to do to be “good mothers.” Their recollection of how their mother had parented was a primary source of influence reported by all of the women. They learned from their mothers many behaviours and attitudes that they wanted to either incorporate, or banish from, their own maternal repertoires. The women’s observations and evaluations of other mothers in their communities also contributed to their assessments of their own maternal competencies as did the idealized portrayals of mothers and motherhood on television and in movies. Many of the women claimed that they had “bought into the fairy tale” of

motherhood and, as one woman said, “had romanticized it.” Furthermore, each of the women had attended parenting courses or workshops, watched parenting videos, and had read parenting books, magazines, and internet articles, which informed their standards of what it meant to be a “good mother.” The women felt both compelled and pressured by the motherhood and parenting norms delineated by the various media, and often found themselves falling short of these ideals, which increased their feelings of maternal guilt.

All of the women had set very high standards by which they wanted to parent their children. However, they often felt unable to live up to the “perfect” or “ideal” mother image they constantly evaluated themselves against. One mother clearly articulated her experience of the discrepancy between her “ideal mother” expectations and her actual mothering capabilities:

I had this new role called ‘Mother.’ In my mind I had my own idea of what the ideal mother was...sort of the archetype, when we think ‘the great mother.’ I really knew that I had one. And the reason that I knew was because I automatically started comparing myself to this ideal because now *I was the mother*...all of a sudden I was communing with this ideal mother and it was the beginning of not living up in whatever way. For example, if you don't spend time with your kids you'll automatically have this imbalance between this ideal mother versus you as a real mother. You have your real experience of mothering, positive, negative, and you have this running conversation with your own ideal mother, or what society expects of you - how it defines motherhood, or with your own relationship with your mother. All those things spill in because you have this role called ‘mother.’ And so you're doing this comparison thing of where you measure up, and where you don't measure up. And it's in all the areas *where you*

don't measure up that there's that feeling of "Ahhh! *If only!*" You feel inadequate. Because you've got all those images in the back of your mind of what women are supposed to be. That's it! That's why the guilt is almost inevitable because unless you can look at the image and go, 'I know you're not real, I know you're just a creation of my experience and that you don't really exist. Whereas for me I'm real and I'm having this experience.' Unless you can lower the impact of that thing in your life you still have that point of comparison where you just feel, 'I'm not doing enough,' 'I'm somehow *not living up to my role.*'

The other mothers in this study shared similar sentiments. They claimed that despite their enormous expenditures of energy they did not have the resources or the abilities to measure up to all of the expectations that both they and society held for "good mothers." While knowing that their standards were perhaps set beyond their reach they still felt compelled to meet them. Furthermore, if they let their standards "slip" or if they were perceived as misaligned with the current mothering norms then they often felt judged and pressured to do better. This, however, was not an easy task as the mothers claimed to be confused at times as to what the "right" thing was to do. As a result their sense of inadequacy and feelings of maternal guilt were so recurrent that most of the women could not fathom motherhood without them. Ironically, as will be further explored later, many of the women felt that the persistent sense of inadequacy, and the concomitant feelings of maternal guilt, were unique to them. Believing they were the only women to experience these feelings this experience further heightened their sense of inadequacy.

These mothers believed that they often fell short of being a "good mother." Some felt that their personal resources were drained leaving them emotionally strained and irritable towards their children. Some believed their physical absence was their

greatest “failure” as mothers. Others were disappointed in themselves because they believed that “motherhood just didn’t come naturally” to them. For example, one mother explained that her feelings of inadequacy commenced when her birthplan for her first child went awry.

My body wasn't behaving the way that I wanted it to behave. I didn't dilate, and after 19 hours of labour I was [only] three centimetres dilated and it was just like, ‘I can't take it anymore! I'm not able to do this!’ So I had an epidural which *I never ever wanted*. You know, all those things...(sigh)...its like your expectations are knocked down one by one. I was feeling inadequate...[after his birth] I was unable to protect him, I was unable to breast feed him directly. My image as a mother was just crumbling...

Nothing fit into that picture I saw in those two days around the birth.

All of the mothers gave examples of instances in which they did not feel they were being the kind of mother they had planned or hoped to be. Interestingly, it was not only the larger parenting behaviours, choices, and decisions such as type of education or childcare, that apparently resulted in negative self appraisals. Small, everyday issues such as the type and amount of food their children ate, the amount of sleep their children had, and the type of diapers the mothers selected were also cause for maternal evaluation. The mothers wondered how long they should breast-feed their children, whether they were helping or hindering their children’s development by dressing them in gender neutral clothes, and whether the extracurricular activities they had selected nurtured the right qualities in their children. One woman described how her sense of inadequacy and feelings of guilt based on her ability to meet all the needs of all the members of her family:

I think to myself 'God, I didn't handle that well, I should have seen it coming earlier on and done something else to diffuse the situation.' That's a source of guilt, you have a sense of inadequacy that people [in the family] seem to be upset, the situation doesn't seem to get any better, everybody is angry. And I think as a mother and as women we're so socialized to take care of all of those connections between people. In part because I'm a *woman*, like 'I should know!' and I feel like it is my job to take care of this. And when you fall short and everything is not running smooth you've got this expectation that your job is to make it run smooth for other people...[Guilt] yells at me in my head, 'Something is wrong here! You should fix this!'... If there's something wrong it's my fault! *It all comes down to mum* all the time. As hard as I try I still have people telling me 'You're doing a lousy job because this isn't right!' And in my head it tells me that too, 'This is *my* fault.' So I tend to beat up on myself because I carry in my mind what it should be.

Like this mother, the women in this study often felt that they were unable to live up to the expectations they had set for themselves as mothers or that it seemed their family members had asked of them. Hence, many sometimes felt that they had not only failed themselves but their family as well. Their feelings of maternal guilt arose from not being able to "do enough," or the "right" thing when they believed they "should," and "ought" to be able to.

When the mothers were asked how their feelings of maternal guilt were related to their sense of themselves as mothers each of them described the interplay between their feelings of guilt and sense of inadequacy. As one mother responded:

I think the guilt can bring out inadequacies...feelings of inadequacy where you're feeling so guilty about not being able to do something that you think, 'Oh well, I can't do it anyway. A sense of being less than perfect, just being *less than*, just not meeting your personal mark.

Another mother talked about how these feelings often left her feeling miserable about herself as a mother:

At times I have felt really hopeless, it may be for a day at a time, where it's almost like a clinical depression, like you just feel totally swamped by the feelings of 'There's no way out of this.' You feel really negative. I felt really negative about myself, negative about my child, and that hopeless kind of, 'There's nothing to do, like no matter what I do I don't do it right.' No matter what I do. So I think the guilt feelings reinforce that feeling of total responsibility and they cast down on my abilities. My own feelings of guilt make me feel less able as a person, as a mother, so I constantly undermine myself...and I think I undermine the child as well. You tend to do things that don't fit with all the stuff that you may have learned or believe is better, you just react. So sometimes the feelings of guilt keep me trying and sometimes it goes over the top and makes me feel inadequate and really rotten.

Many of the women's sense of inadequacy and feelings of maternal guilt, though distinct experiences, seemed to fuel one another creating a "vicious cycle" that made each experience increasingly difficult to cope with. Another woman explained how her feelings of guilt led her to question her maternal abilities and a greater sense of inadequacy:

I guess I question, '*Should I be leaving them? Is this the right thing to do?* Is it going to temporarily damage them? I wonder, 'Am I fulfilling their needs?' and 'Am I doing what a mother ought to do?'

Yet another mother shared how her feelings of guilt could further deter her from feeling able to be the kind of mother she wanted to be.

Well I think [feelings of guilt] try [to] debilitate me. They hinder my abilities because I'm so busy trying to figure out what's *right* and what's *wrong* and what I *should do* that I'm just in this double bind! I'm not productive enough, *not doing anything right*. You know, I'm constantly focussed on what *I should be doing* and I never really get to the nitty gritty of parenting!

The mothers perceived this pervasive sense of inadequacy and their feelings of guilt as a negative and unavoidable part of the motherhood experience. Some perceived low levels of inadequacy and maternal guilt as being tolerable and even helpful in motivating them to do "better." However, the majority of the time the intensity of their sense of inadequacy and the depth of their related feelings of guilt were sufficient enough to engender a sense of "hopelessness," - that they "could never ever do enough," or that they were "not competent to look after [their] kids."

The mothers reflected on how the pressures and judgements they felt from prevailing social norms, professionals that work with families, and other mothers contributed to their own sense of inadequacy and increased their feelings of maternal guilt. While they often felt confident enough about their parenting skills to make choices that were sometimes outside of society's norms, they still felt judged by community members, which would trigger feelings of self-doubt. For example, one woman felt that the mothers she encountered regularly in her community were

comparing and evaluating her parenting skills. To keep from feeling challenged and having to defend her “alternative” parenting views and choices, and to reduce possible feelings of self-doubt, this mother chose not to discuss serious parenting issues with other mothers. Another mother gave an example of how she experienced society’s impact on her motherhood views:

I do think that there are norms in society that say if you're not doing ‘that’ you're not a good mom and I don't think that's true. But if you don't fit into those norms they still [even when you don't agree with them] make you feel...for instance, breast-feeding is a society norm...We're in a society where it's a choice and there's this whole thing if you don't breast feed the baby [then] you aren't doing the best thing for your baby. But if you do breast feed your baby and you breast-feed your baby for 3 years, ‘Ooh! That's terrible!’ I made a choice - I'm going to breast feed my child. As long as my child needs me I will breast feed, too bad with what society says. But when my baby gets to 2 [years old] and he's still nursing I kind of hide because society is still looking at me and judging me on that. Whether or not I say, ‘Well too bad about society’ there's still that part of me that questions whether...I'm still influenced by what society has deemed as the norm.

Some mothers felt pressured and judged by the family professionals in their lives. For example, rather than encouraging her efforts, one mother felt that the leader and the content of a parenting workshop highlighted her inadequacies which then fueled her feelings of maternal guilt. Another mother felt pressured by her pediatrician - who suggested that she wasn't nourishing her child properly - to improve her child's feeding regime without giving clear guidelines for her to follow. This, in turn, increased her sense of inadequacy for apparently not knowing how to properly nourish her child. Yet

another mother described how difficult it was for her to ask the caregivers at her son's day care facility for some parenting suggestions:

The hard part is having some sort of parenting question that I don't know the answer to and asking *them* for advice. I feel stupid when I do because they're really good and sometimes they kind of look at me like, 'Shouldn't you know that?' But they spend more time with kids than I do, so I consider them the experts half the time. And to consider someone *who doesn't have children* an expert and *who is barely out of high school can be humiliating!* I don't want to admit that I don't know those things!

The parenting advice and information received through the television, newsmagazines, and documentary programs had both positive and negative repercussions for the women in this study. They were interested in, and felt positive about, gaining new "expert" information to improve their parenting skills. However, sometimes the information would lead them to believe that they had not made, or were not making, the best possible choices for the healthy development of their children. As one mother who had to work outside the home for economic reasons explained:

Recently all the news coverage of how children develop - and the problem with our society is that people aren't at home with their kids - that the parents are out working full time...and it makes me mad (crying). I feel blamed that my child that I love so much is somehow going to be harmed if I'm not there!

Separate from feeling that the outside world was looking in and evaluating their maternal skills the mothers in this study also reported comparing themselves against other mothers. Their self-comparisons would sometimes leave them feeling positive about their parenting methods and the choices they made. At other times they would perceive

their own abilities as lagging behind those of other mothers. Many recollected how, at times, other mothers seemed “more together” and more “knowing” or “natural” in terms of maternal “wisdom” and ability. This increased their sense of inadequacy, as they believed that they “should” and “ought” to do as well as the mothers they observed. For example, one woman said that her self-image as a mother was shaken somewhat when she noticed other mothers didn’t seem to appear to struggle with motherhood in the same way she did:

I see other parents especially when they're ... all in shape and they've gone to Fitness world ...they've got their nice little jogging strollers and there's me, you know - slightly over-weight, not working out at all, not eating that well, smoking. God forbid drinking on weekends. And then totally not taking care of myself like they do. When I see these women - I guess I'm more judgmental of women - I see them and they don't look like they've ever had kids! ...and I think, ‘Oh, but they're healthier inside, they probably have all this energy because they are so healthy and that's my problem.’ I see the mainstream and I look around and I think ‘God, they seem so normal!’ I mean this has just been blowing me away this whole parenting thing!

Other women described how their sense of inadequacy and feelings of maternal guilt were triggered when they visited friends’ homes - who were also mothers - that appeared to be “better organized and cleaner which made [them] feel horrible that [they] couldn’t do the same.” At times the comparisons and evaluations highlighted their maternal shortfalls which heightened their sense of inadequacy and fueled their feelings of maternal guilt.

It bears noting at this time that most of the women expressed a certain degree of shame about talking with others about sense of inadequacy and feelings of maternal guilt. It seemed that the mothers believed that if they spoke about these feelings it felt like they were “admitting” to not being a “good mother.” They perceived that these experiences were unique to them. For example, one mother was astonished that this research study would attract enough participants, as she couldn’t imagine that any mothers, besides herself, experienced a sense of inadequacy or feelings of maternal guilt. Another mother also wondered whether she was the only one to struggle with these types of feelings:

The feeling of guilt makes me feel like I’m falling short somehow...I think if I was a better mother I wouldn’t feel guilty. And I wonder how other mothers do it...You know? What is it about me that singles me out? It makes me feel guilty for sending my child to daycare every day and how do others manage that? To do that without having the same feelings as I do? Do we all feel like this? And if we all feel like this what can we do about it and how are our children going to grow up?

Indeed, many of the mothers felt that part of being a “good mother” was never expressing any of their negative feelings about motherhood. One mother stated that in her early years as a mother she followed the guideline, “When anyone asks you how you are – everything is fine, everything is fine.” Several women believed that other mothers felt these feelings but were unsure that they were of the same magnitude as theirs. However, they said that they seldom spoke about these feelings with other mothers, mostly in jest. As one mother explained:

I mean nobody even talks about this thing about maternal guilt...Whether it is something that is truly a personal feeling or whether it is something that society

has in a sense forced us to feel, one doesn't know. We all kind of joke and laugh about it but I think it is a real issue... Women will acknowledge their maternal guilt but they're always down playing it or dismissing it.

This "down playing" was apparently a method that the mothers used so they could feel that their experience was validated without having to seriously acknowledge their maternal guilt. Each expressed that the extent to which they did share these feelings with other mothers made them feel "more positive and normal." As one mother said about having one close friend with whom she spoke about her feelings of maternal guilt:

When I hear that she has similar feelings it makes me feel better...I'm not as inadequate as I feel...yeah, that you can be a good person and still have those feelings.

Many of the women that shared their experience to some degree with other mothers felt "validated" and "refreshed" to know that others struggled with their maternal roles as they did. Unfortunately, none of the mothers reported experiences in which the parenting information or the parent educators addressed these women's sense of inadequacy or feelings of guilt in any meaningful or helpful way.

Chapter Five

Discussion

In this study I endeavoured to explore and describe the experience and meaning of maternal guilt. The question that guided this research was: **What is the meaning and lived experience of maternal guilt for women with preadolescent children?** In this chapter I will discuss the results as they compare to the current literature followed by a discussion of the implications for counselling, and recommendations for future research. I will conclude by presenting the limitations of the study and a summary of my experience of conducting this research project.

Comparison to the Literature

Since the beginning of humanity most women have become mothers and many more will likely undergo this transformative experience for centuries to come. Research into the experience of motherhood is limited and has recently become the focus of study (Bergum, 1989; Kitzinger, 1978; McMahon, 1995; Oakley, 1992). Even fewer studies have focused on the emotional experiences of mothers (Bing & Coleman, 1997; Block, 1990; Genevie & Margolies, 1987). In this study I endeavoured to explore the lived experience of maternal guilt, only one of the many facets that make up the complex experience of motherhood. Prior to this study, the character or nature of maternal guilt has not been the focus of research. Consequently, little has been known about the nature and experiences of this phenomenon. What I learned was that the eight women in this study articulated their experiences of maternal guilt far beyond what has been reported in the empirical or professional literature. The women described maternal guilt as a deeply felt complex emotional experience that sometimes motivated and encouraged, frequently discouraged, sometimes overwhelmed, and always informed them in evaluating their

mothering roles. Maternal guilt was experienced to varying degrees of intensity and at different times and frequencies according to the concerns or circumstances that the mothers felt gave them cause to evaluate or doubt their mothering abilities. It became evident that to understand these women's feelings of maternal guilt it was critical to also understand how the paradoxical nature of the myths of motherhood (Thurer, 1994) informed their efforts to raise their children in the best possible manner. Furthermore, recognizing the relationship between the power and nature of the mother-child bond and the women's experiences of maternal guilt enriches our knowledge of this phenomenon.

The women reported that their feelings of guilt commenced as soon as they felt like mothers. For most this occurred very early in their first pregnancy while for others their feelings of motherhood and maternal guilt became more concrete at the time of their first child's birth. These findings are consistent with those in the empirical literature that suggest that women's feelings of guilt often commence during pregnancy (Chapple, May, & Champion, 1995; Gregg, 1983; Oakley 1992) or are triggered during the labour and birth of their child (Couch & Manderson, 1993; Bergum, 1989; Oakley, 1992). Despite the differences in time of onset all the mothers in this study agreed that their feelings of guilt had continued to persist to varying degrees of intensity and frequency as their children grew and developed. Furthermore, they anticipated that maternal guilt would remain a part of their mothering experience for the rest of their lives. This is a finding consistent with deVaus (1992), Lerner (1998), and McBride's (1973) contentions that maternal guilt is an "inevitable accompaniment of motherhood" (deVaus, p. 37). While neither this nor other studies can comment on the prevalence of this phenomenon there is sufficient evidence to suggest that it is an experience common to most mothers. As such,

this maternal experience merits further attention by researchers and professionals who work with women, couples, and families.

Seven themes emerged from the women's descriptions of this phenomenon. A sense of complete responsibility for their children and a sense of inadequacy as a mother were the two themes that seemed to have the most frequent and greatest relationship to the mother's feelings of guilt. These two findings are consistent with the work of Hare-Mustin and Broderick (1979), McBride (1973), and McMahon (1995). While these authors focused primarily on the transition to, and the myths of, motherhood they suggest that mothers feel a great sense of responsibility for the well being of their children and often try to live up to excessively high parenting expectations. Bergum (1997), in her studies of women experiencing the transition to motherhood, asserts that there is a relationship between a mother's sense of responsibility and her feelings of maternal guilt. The findings of this study corroborate her assertion. However, they do not support Bergum's other contention that mothers experience guilt as a result of the tension and identity conflict between the mothers' "needing to be for the self" and "the need to be for the child" (p. 139). Instead, the majority of the women in this study claimed that their children's needs had become their needs. None of the participants voiced that their feelings of maternal guilt stemmed from any perceived imbalance of identity between their roles as mothers and as women. The discrepancy between the findings in this study and those of Bergum's research may be attributable to the fact that her participants were in the midst of their transition to motherhood while the women in this study had been mothers for a minimum of two years. Bergum's participants may have been experiencing a new and more profound change in identity compared to the women in this study. Interestingly, the differences in the findings may suggest the dynamic nature of maternal

guilt. That is, perhaps women's experiences of maternal guilt change as they move from being women to mothers and as they develop, adapt, and respond to the perceived changes in their role definitions and to the multiple demands of motherhood. Certainly, the mothers in this study that had older children claimed that their feelings of maternal guilt had changed over the years as they had "settled" into motherhood.

All of the themes that emerged in this study seemed to stem from the women's desires to be the best mothers they could be for their children and yet, paradoxically, all were related to their feelings of maternal guilt. In other words, good intentions often led to exceedingly high and never-ending self-expectations that were frequently unattainable. Their perceived "failings" led the women to question their maternal abilities and to experience feelings of inadequacy and maternal guilt. The "double-bind" or "double-edged sword" nature of maternal guilt, as experienced by the mothers in this study, is an important finding and supports the literature that focuses on the myths of motherhood (Rich, 1986; Thurer, 1994). This particular characteristic will be discussed later in this chapter where I discuss the relationship between the myths of motherhood and the experience of maternal guilt in further depth. To begin, however, it is important to recognize that the "double-edged sword" nature of maternal guilt is one facet that facilitates a better understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Another significant finding of this study was that the themes that emerged often influenced one another, which further heightened the mothers' feelings of guilt. This denotes the insidious and cyclical nature of this experience. For example, the women's desires to have a positive impact on their children heightened their sense of complete responsibility for their children. Reciprocally, their sense of complete responsibility fed the mothers' desires to have a positive impact on their children. Consequently, each

element had a direct relationship to the women's feelings of maternal guilt as well as a cyclical and cumulative impact that heightened, and sometimes exacerbated their feelings of guilt. This is an important finding as it sheds light on the nature of maternal guilt. Unfortunately, this quality is scarcely reported in the literature. This may not be surprising given that five of the themes that emerged, including a desire to have a positive impact, a profound sense of connection, a sense of depletion, a fear that their children may come to harm, and a sense of loss, have not been linked to women's experiences of maternal guilt in the limited literature that focuses on the experience of motherhood. McBride (1973), in her literature review of the emotional experiences of mothers, does contend, however, that women's feelings of anger, depression, and guilt are interrelated and cyclical in nature. While the findings of this study do not support her assertion that this particular emotional triumvirate is common to all mothers' experiences, the cyclical nature she describes is similar to the findings in this study. This may suggest that while the emotional experiences of mothers may vary, perhaps many aspects of these experiences are self-perpetuating and interrelated. Nevertheless, the finding of this study is important as it helps us understand the cyclical nature of maternal guilt. It suggests that women may have difficulty in dealing with, or diminishing, their feelings of maternal guilt and may be better able to cope with, and handle, these feelings if they were aware of this characteristic and how to create a break in the cycle.

All of the themes that emerged in this study were connected to the women's desires and commitments to raise their children in the best possible manner. Additionally, each theme was related to how the women evaluated themselves vis-à-vis their standards of the "good mother." Many authors suggest that the myths of motherhood that were generated decades ago have had a profound impact on women's

notions about the nature of mother love, maternal instincts, and maternal fulfillment (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979; Thurer, 1994). Block (1990), who studied the transition to motherhood, Arnup (1994), who reviewed the impact of parent education on mothers, and Rich (1986), who looked at the experience and institution of motherhood, all posit that the myths have idealized motherhood. Furthermore, they contend that the myths inform the cultural norms that are yet another source that guides and pressures women to be “good mothers.” These authors consider the “good mother” standards as unrealistic and elevated to the extent that too often mothers feel inadequate, as they perceive they are falling short of the ideal. The experiences of the women in this study appear to support these assertions. All the women wanted to be “good mothers.” They claimed that they had internalized standards of what a “good mother” was from five primary sources, including their experiences of their own mothers, the observation of other mothers in their communities, the idealized portrayals of mothers and motherhood in the media, parenting information gained through courses, videos, magazines, books and the internet, and the predominant parenting norms. These women had varying degrees of awareness concerning the myths of motherhood and related different understandings of how these myths had permeated the sources that informed their images of a “good mother.” The similarities between the experiences of these women and what has been suggested in the literature imply that the myths of motherhood still pervade the social culture and are shaping women’s perceptions of their mothering roles, responsibilities, and abilities to varying degrees, regardless of their level of awareness concerning their motherhood roles.

While several authors acknowledge the link between the motherhood myths, norms, “good mother” standards, feelings of inadequacy, and the resulting feelings of

maternal guilt (Arnup, 1994; Block, 1990; Genevie & Margolies, 1987; Rich, 1986; Thurer, 1994), few articulate the nature of this relationship as the mothers in this study were able to do. The findings of this study suggest that the quest to be "good mothers" was both an important and valued part of the mothers' roles, as well as a hindrance to their sense of maternal self-efficacy. That is, the women felt better for striving to reach the ideal but then often experienced feelings of despair and maternal guilt when they perceived that they were not able to attain these ideals. This highlights the paradoxical nature of the myths of motherhood and the relationship it has to women's experiences of maternal guilt. The myths, almost by definition, can never be attained and yet the mothers felt compelled to pursue them. In fact, to do less than striving to be the "best" and to do all the "right" things was believed to be unacceptable and was associated with feelings of maternal guilt for the women in this study. In essence, the mothers were caught in a "double bind." If they did not strive toward the ideal of a "good mother" then they experienced feelings of guilt. However, even when they endeavoured to attain the "good mother" image they still experienced feelings of guilt, as they often perceived that they failed to be "good enough" mothers. Clearly, an understanding of the powerful and paradoxical nature of the myths of motherhood and the social context within which women are informed of their mothering roles is critical to understanding women's experiences of maternal guilt.

Interestingly, even if one were able to eradicate the myths of motherhood and the cultural norms that impact upon mothers, the findings suggest that the women in this study would still experience feelings of maternal guilt. Beyond the myths and the social context there remained an element that informed all of the women's desires, efforts, and profound commitment to being "good mothers." The women expressed a very basic, yet

very powerful connection or bond to their children, which compelled them to be the best mothers they could be. Feelings of guilt often resulted when their children were unhappy, disappointed, hurt, or ill. Contrary to Eyer's (1996) contention that the maternal 'bond' is a pseudo-scientific concept that was generated to deter women from leaving their children and to work outside of the home, the mothers in this study reported feeling a bond with their children that they perceived to be very real, very strong, and intensely personal.

Several authors comment on, variously name, and describe this experience albeit without addressing its relationship to women's experiences of maternal guilt. Kitzinger (1978) refers to the mothers' sense of connection as "bonding" and claims that it begins during child labour when the woman's body is "physically and emotionally ripe to become a mother." She suggests that bonding enables the mother to "respond to her baby in an appropriate manner" (p. 167). Bing and Coleman (1997) and Bergum (1997) contend, however, that "motherlove" (Bing & Coleman, p. 13), or the "connection" (Bergum, p. 79) mothers feel towards their baby, is not necessarily biological in origin. Some adoptive mothers express having the same experience while some biological mothers do not. The findings of this study support the position of many authors that the connection many women feel towards their children is a strong and intimate experience that keeps them involved with, and committed to, caring for their children (Bergum 1997; Bing & Coleman; Kitzinger, 1978; Rich, 1986).

Regardless of the origin or the purpose, the connection the mothers in this study felt to their children was described as unique and unlike any other they had experienced. Similar to Bergum's (1997) findings in her research of the transition to motherhood, the mothers in this study claimed that their sense of connection gave them a sense of

ownership over, and responsibility for their children. For the women in this study, it was also related to a sense of complete responsibility for their children, an intense desire to have a positive impact on their development, and a determination to protect their children from all harm. Indeed, many of these women conveyed that they would sacrifice their lives for their children's safety – a sentiment they did not express for other loved ones in their lives. The connection the women felt to their children was described as so strong that it led them to believe that they were the most important people in their children's lives, just as their children appeared to be the most important people in their lives. They felt they had a tremendous sense of power in the development of their children. For the most part the women welcomed this feeling of power as it was, as Bergum and Bing and Coleman (1997) suggest, accompanied by intense feelings of love for their children. However, they were also frequently unnerved by their sense of power because it often led them to doubt their maternal abilities and fear that they might inadvertently harm their children. Their high maternal expectations stemmed, in part, from their profound feelings of love and connection to their children. When they believed that they had not met their personal standards the women were disappointed in themselves, questioned their maternal abilities, and experienced feelings of maternal guilt. This is one aspect of the profound sense of connection that has not been explored, or commented upon, in the literature. This finding is important as it suggests that to understand maternal guilt one must also understand the transformative experience of motherhood. Motherhood seemingly presents women, in part, with a new relational connection that has the potential to both enrich their loving feelings and give rise to their feelings of maternal guilt regardless of the social context in which they live.

Implications for Counselling Practice

The results of this study provide many insights for those who work with women, mothers, and families. One insight pertains to the finding that the women in this study believed that their feelings of guilt were not only informed by their internal standards but also by the judgements and pressures that they felt from many sources within society. This included the individuals and professionals from whom they sought help for family issues. These women felt evaluated and pressured to live up to the maternal social norms that they experienced as ever changing and all demanding, and which they often felt unable to live up to. Their perceived shortfalls left them with several different feelings, including feelings of fear, inadequacy, and maternal guilt. This is a very important factor for counsellors to be aware of and take into account, as we are often placed in a position of trust and authority. As such, counsellors' biases, attitudes, vocabulary, and counselling process could, without awareness or intent, heighten their clients' feelings of maternal guilt.

Assuming that counsellors would prefer not to exacerbate women's feelings of guilt there are some considerations for counsellors and for their counselling practice. As part of the process of personal and professional growth it would be prudent for professionals to ask themselves how they might contribute to, or maintain, the "myths of motherhood" in their everyday personal and professional lives. Some questions for self reflection and processing might include: What and how did I learn about the role of mothers? Do I believe that women and men have different parenting responsibilities and different parenting strengths? Do I feel any differently when I see a father with his children in public than I do when I see a mother with her children? How do I keep abreast of and make sense of the latest child development research and parent education

information? How do I pass this information on in a helpful and non-judgmental manner to my clients? How do I feel about mothers who ask questions to which I think they should know the answers? How do I respond to these sort of questions and how could my responses affect these women's perceptions of themselves? There are many more questions that could be pondered in counsellors' efforts to realize how and to what extent they maintain the "myths of motherhood" that still inform women of their motherhood roles. With greater self-knowledge, counsellors can be aware of how their biases, vocabulary, and counselling methods either counter or support the myths that contribute to their clients' negative self-evaluations and feelings of guilt. In addition, with greater insight counsellors can make more informed choices about the approaches and methods they use in their practice. Moreover, they can be careful not to reinforce the myths of motherhood and thereby reduce the potential of stimulating their clients' feelings of maternal guilt.

One of the benefits that the mothers reported receiving while participating in this study was a great sense of validation concerning their feelings of guilt. The mothers said that they felt relieved and better about themselves because their experiences had been normalized. Many felt personally validated by having an interested and non-judgmental listener with whom to share these feelings that had previously remained hidden. They also felt validated when they had the chance to read the findings, which included many quotes from all of the women. While the purpose or goal of counselling is often far beyond serving as a validation process, most counsellors would not deny the importance of this experience for their clients. Therefore, it is important for counsellors to be able to approach, discuss, and normalize this seemingly persistent and common phenomenon for women. Furthermore, it is important to take a professional position that questions and

debunks the myths of motherhood, while at the same time one that does not strip women of their mothering “power.” That is, it is important that counsellors do not invalidate women’s maternal roles as most have an incredible desire and ability to shape, guide, nurture, and raise their children. Attention to normalizing women’s experiences of maternal guilt combined with an emphasis on a women’s own sense of mothering, in efforts to “free themselves up” from the social norms or myths of motherhood, could validate the meaningful experience of motherhood while reducing the pressures to live up to outside expectations.

The findings of this study suggest that the feelings of shame and embarrassment that accompany the inadequacy that fuels maternal guilt often prevent women from sharing their experiences. Many of the women in this study thought that they would be able to better cope with their feelings of guilt if they had the opportunity to talk about them without fear that they would be judged. Several indicated that their sense of isolation, in relationship to this phenomenon, heightened their feelings of guilt because they felt they were unique in experiencing maternal guilt. These mothers wanted to hear about other women’s experiences and appreciated having the opportunity to voice their own. Counsellors need to take into account the isolating nature of maternal guilt and take care to develop a trustworthy relationship and environment that invites women to discuss these feelings. Indeed, if a client were to address issues of motherhood and did not feel comfortable in expressing the diversity of her maternal feelings, including those of inadequacy and guilt, then she might continue to feel alone in her experience. This may lead her to further doubt her abilities as a mother, which would then add to her feelings of guilt.

In addition to addressing motherhood concerns, including feelings of maternal guilt through individual counselling, a group format may provide a richer sense of validation and support for women. It would be important for the group leader to introduce the topic in an approachable manner and to maintain a safe and trusting environment where the women would not feel that their maternal abilities were being evaluated. Each of the women in this study felt validated and connected to the other participants simply by reading the overall findings that included quotes from each mother's experiences. This gave the mothers a diminished sense of isolation and some relief. These findings would suggest that a safe group environment that addresses feelings of maternal self-doubt, self-evaluation, inadequacy, and guilt may provide women with a greater sense of validation and an avenue by which they can explore methods of dealing with such feelings.

It seemed evident that the women in this study had varying degrees of awareness as to how their mothering ideas and standards were informed by, or separate from, the pressures and myths that dictate their roles as women and mothers. It might be prudent for counsellors to explore with their clients who are experiencing feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, maternal guilt or who are addressing motherhood issues. The findings of this study suggest that it would be very important for counsellors to facilitate their clients' understanding of the social context that surrounds and invariably informs them to some degree as mothers. Even clients who are cognizant of, but may not intellectually embrace, the current and predominant myths and norms of motherhood may not be aware of how they are nevertheless affected by them. Exploration of this avenue may help women better understand and appreciate themselves as mothers. It may also allow them to make parental choices without a persistent sense of self-evaluation and, consequently,

may diminish their feelings of maternal guilt. Furthermore, although many women experience maternal guilt it is by no means an individual issue. There is merit for counsellors to address this phenomenon and the social context that informs it in couples counselling, and in couples group work. This might encourage both men and women to collaborate and explore how and what they believe about gender roles and the division of responsibilities. Perhaps together they could then make more informed decisions and choices as partners, and as parents, concerning the responsibilities of responding to the multiple demands of parenthood, the upkeep of a household, and the maintenance the family relationships.

Another consideration for counsellors concerns the cyclical nature of maternal guilt and its components. For the mothers in this study, their feelings of maternal guilt often generated more feelings of maternal guilt. For example, experiencing feelings of guilt was believed to be a signal that they were not being “good mothers.” This led many of the mothers to feel inadequate, which then triggered additional feelings of guilt. In addition, the themes that emerged were interwoven and had both a direct and indirect relationship to the mothers’ experiences of guilt. For example, the women’s sense of depletion directly heightened their feelings of guilt because they did not feel they had the resources within them to respond to their children, as they believed a “good mother” should. Their sense of depletion also indirectly heightened their feelings of guilt as it often fueled their sense of inadequacy and lessened their perceived ability to have a positive impact on their children. The implication of this is that counsellors may wish to help their clients to identify the cyclical nature of their experiences and feelings. Breaking down the periodically overwhelming experience of maternal guilt into its components and understanding the self-perpetuating and interrelated nature of their

feelings might help women to better cope with, and address their concerns. For instance, counsellors could help their clients clarify and focus on the central concern (perhaps their profound desire to be a “good mother”) and subsequently help them to delineate, and gain meaning from, their feelings that stem from this central goal or concern (such as responsibility, inadequacy, fear, and depletion).

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that the experience of maternal guilt is not always negative. Some of the mothers in this study found that a certain level of maternal guilt was important as it motivated them to be vigilant in their mothering roles. Low levels of maternal guilt were experienced as reassuring to the mothers who believed their feelings of guilt indicated that they cared enough to want to do “the best” for their children and families. As such, the goal of counselling may not be to eradicate clients’ feelings of guilt. Instead, the counsellor might facilitate the client’s understanding of what their feelings of guilt mean to them in their mothering roles.

The preceding recommendations are well suited for counsellors, however, many would be appropriate for professionals who work with women in other capacities. Parent educators, midwives, nurses, doctors, and social workers are but a few of the professionals that could benefit from having a greater awareness of the experience of maternal guilt. Women seek out professional advice because of their intent and desire to make the best parental choices and decisions. Therefore, every professional to whom a woman poses a parenting question, or presents a maternal concern, could be of greater assistance, if as part of their response, and if appropriate, they were able to acknowledge the challenges and demands of mothering, and the requisite struggles that result when women attempt to live up to these demands.

Recommendations for Future Research

Most women choose to become mothers and it is unlikely that this fact will change. As the transition to, and the experience and practice of, parenthood may be one of life's greatest challenges, it merits continued research. Research on the experience of motherhood, let alone on any of its complex components including that of maternal guilt, is relatively scarce. This study attempted to address this void, however, more research is needed to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of maternal guilt. The findings of this study are limited to the eight women who participated. Ongoing research will enable more women to share their experiences and more researchers to analyze and sharpen their awareness towards the development of a more complete understanding and representation of this experience (Quinn Patton, 1990). Because this study was based on a small number of women, replication studies could further explore and refine the picture of maternal guilt that emerged here. Also, while the focus of this study was on women, the intent was not to negate the importance of understanding the experience of fathers. Indeed, men's experiences of fatherhood and paternal guilt it is a topic worthy of research and understanding.

To further develop an understanding of maternal guilt it would be useful to conduct further studies that explore the experience and meaning of maternal guilt for specialized populations. During the recruitment phase of this study there was an overwhelming response from single mothers. There were also numerous inquiries from women with teenage and adult children. The experience of guilt is apparently not limited to mothers of preadolescent children. It would be interesting to learn whether the themes that emerged in this study are common to other populations of women. Such studies may give insight into any unique components of the experience of maternal guilt for these

women and provide comment on the validity of the current findings for other mothers. They would also provide useful information for other mothers and for professionals in their work with women and families. Additionally, longitudinal research may provide interesting and useful findings as the women of this study suggested that they anticipated their feelings of maternal guilt to remain a part of their motherhood experience. It may be beneficial to determine whether and/or how women experience maternal guilt as they age and as their children grow into adults. Findings from such studies may provide useful information for women in their early years of mothering, as they may feel better able to anticipate, cope with, or prepare for their later years.

The mothers in this study reported feeling a significant amount of maternal guilt. It is not possible to comment on how representative the degree and frequency of these mothers' experiences are of the degree and frequency of guilt felt by other mothers. Indeed, and as suggested by Kaplan (1992) and Boulton (1983), there may be some mothers who do not report experiencing maternal guilt. However, it is evident that many do (Bergum, 1997; Genevie & Margolies, 1987; Lerner, 1998; McBride, 1973). Hence, there is a need for future research, with a larger population of women, to begin to address the following questions: What percentage of mothers experience maternal guilt? To what degree and frequency do women experience these feelings? Do the feelings of connection, depletion, fear, responsibility, inadequacy, loss, and desire to have a positive impact on their children inform the experiences of maternal guilt for other mothers? These are examples of questions that merit consideration in future studies. Qualitative studies could help develop a deeper and fuller understanding of maternal guilt, highlight the implications that these feelings of guilt have on women's sense of identity, and make suggestions for practical strategies by which mothers could better deal, and cope with,

their experiences of guilt. Quantitative studies would be helpful as they would have the capacity to reach a very large and diverse population of mothers and could provide useful information on the prevalence and frequency of women's experiences of maternal guilt.

Another recommendation for future research concerns the analysis of additional factors that may influence women's experiences of maternal guilt. For example, family of origin seemed to play a role in the women's experiences as mothers and informed the nature and degree of their maternal guilt. The women in this study claimed that their relationships with their own mothers were one of the primary sources that taught them how they wanted to parent. Some of the participants had mothers who worked outside of the home and some of the participants had stay at home mums. Some participants were raised solely by their mothers while others were raised by both parents. Some were only children while others had many siblings. A closer look into family of origin issues and their relationships to woman's experiences of mothering and maternal guilt, deserves more attention. Additional factors that may influence the experience and meaning of maternal guilt may include a woman's level of self-esteem, the nature of a woman's marital relationship, and the presence or absence of extended family members during a woman's transition to motherhood. These are factors the participants in this study commented on in some manner but which remain relatively unexplored.

The process of interviewing the participants and the findings of this study suggest that there are some considerations that future researchers may benefit from pondering and implementing when approaching this topic of study. The women in this study were extremely interested but also equally cautious about participating. Most of the women had not talked to anyone but their husbands about their feelings of guilt. Talking out loud about their feelings of guilt seemed to many like a confession that made their perceived

maternal inadequacies more real. Most of the women were more interested in knowing about the experiences of other mothers than they were about discussing their own. My efforts to develop rapport and a non-judgmental approach, the strict maintenance of confidentiality, and the women's desires to learn about their own and other women's feelings of guilt, seemed to be the components that allowed these mothers to overcome any feelings of embarrassment or shame in order to participate. Because of the element of shame associated with maternal guilt, and the tendency for women to keep this experience to themselves, it may be useful for future researchers to reframe the phenomena so that a diverse and large number of mothers feel encouraged to respond and participate. For example, qualitative studies may consider introducing their focus to women as 'the challenges of motherhood,' 'the emotional consequences of trying to be a good mother,' or 'the emotional experiences of motherhood.' Furthermore, quantitative studies could consider using anonymous questionnaires in addition to providing the overall findings of the study with the participants. This may encourage many women to participate and to respond willingly and honestly to a broad array of questions concerning their experiences of maternal guilt.

Limitations of the Study

This study reflects the meaning and experience of maternal guilt as lived and experienced by eight Canadian mothers of preadolescent children. Generalizations may not be made to the experiences of mothers who did not participate in the study or to mothers of children in other age groups. However, this study provides the first attempt to gain and portray a deep descriptive understanding of the experience of maternal guilt. This may stimulate further research on the prevalence of maternal guilt or its implications for families or the community. Generalizations are not achieved by one study but by

ongoing research that enables more and more women to share their experiences and more researchers to analyze, synthesize, debate, and sharpen their awareness towards a more faithful presentation of the experience (Quinn Patton, 1990).

While recognizing the subjective experience of fathers and the importance of researching their experience, this study was limited to the experience of mothers and did not attempt to explore the experience of fatherhood or paternal guilt.

Since the data was based on self-report, the results are limited to what the co-researchers were willing to report and to the extent that they were able to articulate their experiences. It was my intent to guide the interviews so that the unique and individual story of each participant had the opportunity to be told and heard fully, with respect and support.

Finally, the manner with which I approached this topic, detailed the procedure, facilitated the interviews, organized, interpreted and gave meaning to the data, is at the core of this study. The qualitative phenomenological approach recognizes that a researcher cannot extricate her person from the process or content of the study.

Therefore it was imperative that I detailed the process, made known my personal beliefs and biases, and described the process of data analysis through which the common themes emerged. For the validity and integrity of this study I had every intention, and made every effort to do so.

Final Remarks

It was with both great excitement and fear that I commenced this research project just over one year ago. I was very interested in the subject of maternal guilt, as it seemed to be such an important issue to many women. I was positive that I would benefit both professionally and personally from learning about this phenomenon first hand. Despite

my enthusiasm about the topic, however, the research process, the writing in particular, was a daunting undertaking. In fact, I was often struck with fear, as I had never taken on a project as large and as demanding as I envisioned this one would be. I really wondered how I would ever be able to write so much? Nevertheless, with a great topic in hand, an enthusiastic research advisory committee, and a terrific support network in place I forged ahead and became delighted with the process that unfolded before me.

The tremendous response I received from the recruitment notices was one of the first confirmations that I had picked a topic that really struck a chord with women. Not only did I receive calls from close to eighty potential participants, I received calls from counsellors who wanted to give me encouragement because they felt this topic was so worthy of research. The interviews of the eight women who participated were a pleasure for me to conduct, and reportedly, a valued and surprisingly relieving experience for the women. There is no simple way to summarize what I have learned from these women who so generously shared their experiences, understandings, and meanings of their feelings of maternal guilt. Referring to the presuppositions I made at the beginning of this study, I believe many were supported by the study's findings and I still hold them to be true. There is evidence that women remain the primary caregivers for their children, in part because of the social norms that still hold mothers more responsible than fathers for their children. Additionally, maternal guilt was a very real part of the motherhood experience for these eight mothers. I suspect it is for many other women as well. What the women and I learned during the process of the interview was that the meaning taken from their experiences of maternal guilt was not all negative. Some women came to better appreciate their mothering efforts and struggles as a result of having explored their feelings more fully. I am more intrigued by this topic than I was at the outset. My

interest has grown because with each new insight into the experience came many new questions that begged to be answered but remained beyond the scope of this study. Undoubtedly, there remain many avenues to explore the experience and meaning of maternal guilt, perhaps an undertaking I'll reserve for my doctoral dissertation.

The organization, the planning, the advisory meetings, and the interviews were all very welcomed and felt somewhat easy in comparison to the very real challenges I experienced when having to account for the research process, findings, and results on paper. I felt a great desire and responsibility to represent the women's experiences in a way that respectfully honoured and truly portrayed their feelings of maternal guilt. Many times I felt uncertain of, and struggled with, the writing process. However, with some support and persistence, I managed to complete this challenge that I now view as a valuable and worthwhile process. Needless to say, in my professional learning and personal growth I face many intriguing and challenging years ahead. I welcome them with the same degree of excitement, and now, with a diminished sense of fear.

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APPENDIX C

Interview Orienting Statement

The following general orienting statement will be used to bring the individual interview focus and discussion to the topic of study:

The hope of this research is to understand more fully the experience of maternal guilt as lived and felt by women. Much of what is written today in magazines, newspapers, and books focuses on the needs of children and parent education rather than the experiences of mothers. Some parenting magazines suggest that mothers feel guilty because they don't feel they can live up to the image of 'the good mother' that society has created. You are here because you have a personal understanding of what maternal guilt means to you. Today I would like you to explore and describe your experience of maternal guilt and its meaning in your life.

APPENDIX D

Sample Interview Questions

General Research Question:

What is the meaning and experience of maternal guilt for women with preadolescent children?

Sample Interview Questions:

- How would you describe your experience of maternal guilt?
- How do these feelings of guilt affect your sense of yourself as a mother?
- What is your understanding of what causes or triggers these feelings for you?
- How do you understand where these feelings of guilt come from?
- What is the meaning you give to, or derive from having the experience of maternal guilt?
- What is the significance of maternal guilt to your experience of mothering?
- Have you spoken to anyone about this experience? Would it / does it help?
- If you were to come up with a metaphor to describe this experience, what would that metaphor be?

APPENDIX E

List of Family Resource Referrals

- | | |
|--|----------|
| Information Children | 291-3548 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -answers questions related to child behaviour & rearing practices -free parenting workshops -information and referrals on parenting resources across lower mainland | |
| B.C. Council for the Family | 660-0675 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -clearing house for information about family programs and resources -produces program material, brochures and manuals on family and parenting matters. | |
| B.C. Association of Marriage & Family Therapists | 687-6131 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -referrals for all registered marriage & family therapists | |
| Women's Resource Center, 1144 Robson | 482-8585 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -UBC run, free general and career counselling for men and women | |
| Adlerian Psychological Association of BC | 874-4614 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -parent study groups for tots to teens -couples enrichment groups | |
| Family Services of Greater Vancouver | 731-4951 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -marriage, family and individual counselling -play therapy for children -psychoeducational workshops for women and men – anger, self-esteem, relationship enhancement. -parenting workshops | |
| Nobody's Perfect Program | 879-8208 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -adult focused education & support group for parents of preschool children -topics such as child care, health and safety issues, parenting and child development are covered. | |
| BC Parents in Crisis | 299-0521 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -support groups that deal with parental stress and prevention of child abuse -for parents of children under 13 years of age | |
| Parents Together Program | 588-5432 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -support and education for parents experiencing problems with their teenagers | |