

Family is a significant source and determinant of human wellbeing, and is a focus for researchers who believe that mothers are central to wellbeing. Some families are believed to fare better than others. Families led by mothers, motherled households, are constructed in research, public discourse and policy, as perilous places. Women and children in motherled households are depicted as suffering social isolation and material poverty. In this study I explore wellbeing in motherled households. My lived experience as nurse specialising in maternal, child and family health, and as a single mother, informs me, according to Judi Marshall's (1999) "life lived as inquiry". My thesis is a quest to story a version of those in motherled households which is rich and hopeful, contrasting with the monolithic, simplified and limited (and limiting) accounts of our humanity - versions of wellbeing and family displayed in research, policy and conversation. In contrast, women story wellbeing in unique, individual, and evolving ways. They value their families as sites of purpose, wellbeing and intentionality, versions of family and wellbeing not told elsewhere.

She watches over her household

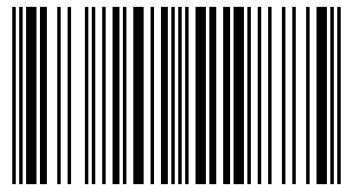


Dr Rachel Lamdin-Hunter

# She watches over her household

Wellbeing of mothers and children in motherled households

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## **Abstract**

Wellbeing is a term used in everyday conversation, and by health professionals, policy writers and analysts, economists and others, to sum up one's ability to flourish and live a rewarding, fruitful life. Family is deemed a significant source and determinant of wellbeing. Here, people may expect to receive the love, nurturance, and belonging all humans need to thrive, as well as the most basic needs for food, shelter and warmth. The many forms of family in societies such as New Zealand are of interest to those who posit that the conduct and wellbeing of mothers in families, is central to the flourishing of all within.

Some families are believed to hold better promise of wellbeing than others. Families with mothers at the helm, motherled households, are constructed in research and public discourse, and enacted in policy, as sites of social and economic peril. Studies abound in which women and children in motherled households are depicted as suffering social isolation, lacking moral support, and experiencing material poverty.

In this study I explore wellbeing in motherled households. My lived experience as nurse specialising in maternal, child and family health, and as a single mother for some time, is pertinent. Using Judi Marshall's (1999) notion of life lived as the basis for inquiry, I grounded my study in a subjective, storied frame in which I troubled notions of wellbeing in families – notions which I had read in research, enacted in policy and practice, and questioned.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) theorised that what is understood as true or real, is a result of socially-fabricated claims to truth; that is, they posit the social construction of reality. I explore the conditions under which truths about families and motherhood are constructed, bolstered by research, enacted in and enacting institutionalised policy.

Institutionalised constructions of wellbeing and families constitute narratives writ large in research, policy and everyday conversation. I posit these as an example of the petrified grand narratives brought to my attention in the work of Boje (2008a). I read them now as monolithic, simplified and ultimately limited (and limiting) accounts of our humanity. The generation of living stories and their attendant many-voiced ante-narratives are seen as “bets on the future” (Boje, 2001), stories along the way to narrative. Antenarratives may interrupt or endorse a grand narrative. My thesis is a quest to story a version of those in motherled households which is rich and hopeful.

My noticing of contradictions in these grand narratives led me to seek conversations with mothers, and to share their stories in a reconstructed conversation. These mothers understood wellbeing in their motherled household as a deeply entwined and connected process. Women storied wellbeing in unique, individual, and evolving ways. These women valued their families as sites of purpose, wellbeing and intentionality, a version of family and wellbeing not told elsewhere.

Storytelling contributes to versions of mothering in which women and children flourish, foregrounding activist hopes for research about families. Reflexive storytelling approaches challenge those concerned with making a difference through research and policy formation, through individual practices and everyday conversation.



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To Mum and Dad, thank you for encouraging me to do whatever I want – look, I have – and assuring me that I could succeed in what I chose. Mum, so much of me is a bit of your legacy in action – stitching, gardening, cups of tea, breaking into song; this study has a special dedication to you as the mother who began my inquiry.

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“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause” (Isaiah 1:17)

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	vi
Chapter One .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Prologue .....	1
Opening statements .....	2
Mothering as institution .....	5
Mothering in narration .....	6
Purpose of this research .....	8
Mothering and social construction .....	9
Mothering in critique and conversation .....	11
Critique and contradiction .....	13
Motherhood and myself .....	15
Overview of chapters .....	16
Researcher positioning .....	16
Methodological orientations .....	17
Grand narratives of wellbeing .....	19
Grand narratives of family .....	20
Wellbeing in motherled households .....	21
Living stories in constructed conversation .....	22
Storytelling in constructed vignette .....	24
Generating implications beyond this thesis .....	25

Chapter summary .....	26
Chapter Two.....	28
Positioning research and researcher .....	28
Introduction .....	28
Positivist beginnings: What it means to know .....	31
Recognising the limits of positivism.....	33
The social construction of reality.....	34
Positioning of research inquiry .....	36
Knowledge and power.....	37
Researcher involvement in research.....	38
Introducing my story .....	40
Nursing practice: Making a difference: Teleological considerations .....	41
Action-oriented research methodologies.....	42
Action research and feminist ideas .....	44
Encountering motherhood from ‘outside’ .....	46
Troubling the ‘experts’: who is to know? .....	47
Academia.....	49
Encountering motherhood from ‘inside’ .....	50
Engaging with feminist theory .....	51
Radical feminist thought .....	52
Married with children.....	53
My real-world research: <i>Living Life as Inquiry</i> .....	54
Positioning myself inside an inquiry.....	55
Insider research and autoethnography.....	58
Reflexive researcher positioning.....	62

Chapter summary .....	63
Chapter Three.....	66
Methodological orientations.....	66
Introduction .....	66
Research as social construction.....	68
Organisational studies .....	69
Critical organisational studies.....	70
Storytelling and organisation(s) .....	72
Grand narrative.....	75
Living stories.....	77
Antenarrative.....	79
Storytelling research methods to suit participants.....	80
Participant engagement and selection .....	81
Criteria for participation.....	81
Method: Researcher journal .....	86
Method: Storytelling conversations .....	87
Method: Online engagement: Social and online opportunities.....	87
Method: Focus groups.....	89
An unexpected methodical turn .....	90
Method: Re-constructed conversation.....	91
Story-writing .....	93
Ethical matters.....	94
Evaluating research quality and validity.....	95
Chapter summary .....	98
Chapter Four .....	100

Wellbeing .....	103
Introduction .....	100
Wellbeing in construction .....	102
Wellbeing, health, wellness and welfare .....	103
Research about wellbeing: Measured quantity or subjective experience? .....	105
Wellbeing in policy: Wellbeing as governmental pursuit .....	106
Aotearoa New Zealand: The <i>Growing up in New Zealand</i> studies .....	110
Wellbeing as a human right .....	111
Wellbeing as an individual matter .....	112
Investing in wellbeing? Monitoring children .....	114
Wellbeing in recent research history .....	117
Subjective wellbeing and scientific method .....	121
Measuring wellbeing: Scales and indicators .....	122
Limitations in measuring subjective wellbeing .....	123
Child wellbeing and surveillance .....	124
Children as research informants .....	127
Resilience and strength in child research .....	128
Attachment and child wellbeing .....	129
Mothers and child wellbeing .....	130
Linking child and maternal wellbeing .....	130
Maternal wellbeing .....	131
Individualism among interconnected relationships of wellbeing .....	133
Chapter summary .....	135
Chapter Five .....	137
Narratives of family, mothers, and children .....	137

Introduction.....	137
Positioning patriarchy in women’s lives.....	138
The social construction of childhood.....	141
The social construction of mothering.....	143
The Industrial Revolution.....	145
Early women’s movements.....	147
The (paid) work of women.....	148
Motherhood, science and nation-building.....	150
The rise of the nuclear family.....	152
Households led by mothers.....	153
20 <sup>th</sup> -century mothers.....	155
Changes to marriage.....	159
Changes at home?.....	160
Work-life balance, conflict, stress.....	161
Feminism and mothering.....	165
Shifting mothering styles.....	165
Chapter summary.....	167
Chapter Six.....	170
Narratives of wellbeing in motherled households.....	170
Introduction.....	170
Shifting, emerging, motherled households.....	171
Families: For the good of the children?.....	174
Categorisations of women in relation to family and marriage.....	175
Lone mothers, motherled households and stereotypes.....	176
Wellbeing and family forms.....	182

Motherled households and children’s wellbeing.....	183
Economic wellbeing and motherled households.....	185
A woman’s choice? .....	187
Chapter summary .....	192
Chapter Seven .....	194
Living Stories .....	194
Introduction .....	194
The process: Conversation positioning and construction.....	196
Checking back with participants .....	198
Introducing the mothers .....	198
Identity and construction.....	201
Stereotypes and alternatives.....	203
Economic wellbeing and sufficiency.....	206
Support and shared responsibility.....	209
Work life balance, management, or conflict? .....	213
Caring for self .....	216
Connection and entwinement.....	218
Choice, intention and freedom? .....	220
Chapter Summary.....	224
Chapter Eight .....	228
Constructed vignettes .....	228
Introduction .....	228
Situating antenarrative methods of storytelling .....	230
Forming narratives: Constructed vignettes .....	231
Setting the scene: Aotearoa New Zealand .....	235



Constructed vignette in three scenes .....	238
Scene One: Shelley .....	238
Analysis: Shelley’s story.....	243
Scene two: Jeff.....	244
Analysis: Jeff’s story.....	247
Scene three: Mirna .....	252
Analysis: Mirna’s story .....	254
Evaluation of constructed vignette.....	257
Chapter summary .....	258
Chapter Nine .....	261
Discussion and implications.....	261
Introduction.....	261
Recalling the origin of the thesis: A living inquiry.....	262
Recalling fieldwork design and method.....	266
Limitations of this inquiry.....	269
Reflections on validity as meaning-full and generative.....	269
Conversation reconstruction .....	270
Self-inclusion .....	271
Participant inclusion.....	272
Implications of this inquiry .....	272
Implications for research inquiry: Positivism and social construction .....	273
Categorising humanity: Implications for people in families, in research and policy.....	275
Comparison: Cautions for those in research and policy .....	278
Storytelling research.....	281

Emerging inquiry in/on social media .....	284
Feminist inquiry .....	284
Implications for mothers .....	286
Research diversity and culture .....	287
Implications for policy for those in motherled households.....	288
Troubling individualistic thinking.....	289
Individualism and neoliberalist values.....	290
Implications for me .....	294
Chapter summary: The closing of this book - but the work unfinished.....	296
Epilogue .....	298
References .....	300
Appendix one. ....	347
1. Identify the project. ....	347
2. Describe the research. ....	348
3. Obtain participants' informed consent, without coercion.....	351
4. Minimise deception.....	353
5. Respect privacy and confidentiality .....	354
6. Minimise risk to participants.....	355
7. Exercise social and cultural sensitivity. ....	357
8. Final personal statement from researcher. ....	359
Appendix two: Information sheet for participants .....	360
Appendix three: Consent form for participants.....	362

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### Prologue

*I struggle awake. What time is it? The telephone is ringing. My hand clambers over the bedside table, grabbing for my phone. I just miss the call. I shake my head and try to prise my eyes open. Who was that calling? The digital clock says 12:20am. Who was ringing? I sit up and switch on the lamp, a droplet of worry trickling down my back. I find my glasses and put them on. Check the calls. Auntie Jeanne? Puzzled, I call her. She answers immediately. "Oh Rachel. I'm so sorry!" She's crying. "It's Granddad! They found him in the water. He's dead."*

*My mind goes into a whirl. My father in law has died. His son, my husband, is a long way away, serving overseas, for several months. How will I contact him? How will I tell him his father is dead? What will he do? What about the girls? How will I tell them? The call ends. Another call: this time it's my mother in law, divorced but still friends with her ex-husband. We speak for 30 minutes. No chance of going back to sleep now, I message John. "Please call me asap. It's important." Three hours later, fresh off a plane and having been awake and working for 40 hours straight, he gets my message. I tell him over Skype. We hang up. I switch the light off and lie back down, my mind ticking.*

*This is another one I must handle on my own. It's now after 4am. I have to be up at 6am. I have to teach at 8am. There won't be anyone else to take my class at that time. If I tell the kids Granddad has died, they'll be a mess, I'll be a mess, and there'll be no school or work or teaching, and certainly no PhD writing. Panic climbs up within me. I make an uneasy decision not to tell the girls until after school. Who among us hasn't had to pretend normality for the children's sake, once in a while? Will it show on my face that I have been up all night with terrible news? Can I keep my mind off it until after class is over, get through work just like an adult, make everything appear normal, smooth, coherent, for just a bit longer? Pick everyone up from school as though nothing has happened, and get the kids home to sit them down and tell them?*

*Annabel Crabb says that the mission of every mother nowadays is to “work as if one didn’t have children, and parent as if one didn’t have a job”. I’m on my own here. Nobody else will sort this stuff out. Work must continue, life as an adult must continue, and, AND, life as a mother about to break bad news to her three daughters, must also continue. My responsibility as a mother, to support my children through this rite of passage, death and grieving, is a privilege and an opportunity not always given. To do it well, to make this time as safe and memorable as possible, and to prepare them for a life of losses, great and small, is rightly my task. I wouldn’t want it any other way. Yet the enormity of the first act, the juggling, pretending, lone-adulthood act weighs heavily on me. I wonder, how will I do it? How will I get through today? How many hours ‘til bedtime?*

## **Opening statements**

Motherhood and mothering are terms which roll smoothly off the tongue in everyday conversation. They are terms whose meanings may be taken for granted in a particular place at any given point in time. The relationships of motherhood and mothering may be expressed through a variety of words – each carrying with them the responsibilities and entitlements assigned to the mother and her dependents. No matter the diverse lexicons of motherhood and mothering, the majority of women across the world will become pregnant and encounter some or many facets of mothering – conceiving, bearing children, raising and caring for them. Even those women who do not become - or identify - as mothers in conventional senses (whether by choice or circumstance), will be influenced by the given and shared meanings dominant at their time and place. In turn, the subsequently embedded meanings inform the social constructions of mothering which attain dominance in their communities and by the centrality of motherhood and mothering, influence theories of womanhood. Established conceptualisations of mothers also influence the constructions of wider gender and family identities, and thus the identity formation all people. According to Oakley (1981) and Rich (1976), identification as mother is central to a gendered experience of

life. In the kinds of communities affected by the strengthening influence of western-neo-liberal market driven logics, recognition and even expectation that one may become a mother, or acknowledgement of socially or personally defined responsibilities of mothering, affects employment and career-progression opportunities. Being intentionally or unintentionally childless also brings its own confrontations. Every person in the world has or had a mother. Mothers and mothering, are fundamental in their significance, to all interpretations of humanity and existence.

Just what it means to be a mother beyond the biological act of birth has varied significantly over time, across different geographic locations and in diverse cultural contexts. Mothers have been depicted as incubators (Firestone, 1971), moral guardians (Dally, 1982), activist warriors (O'Reilly, 2007) and angels (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). Mothering - beyond the biological event - is a social construct. This thesis concerns the meanings vested in concept and construction of 'mother'. In particular, the power dynamics that come into play when a woman is identified as a mother, and the consequences of the ways in which mothering is taken for granted and challenged in the spheres of research inquiry and everyday conversation, are of interest. I situate my interest in mothering as an institution, an opportunity for empowerment, a subject of storytelling in different modes, and a complex process of contradictions and socially-agreed-upon or defied constructions. I put myself in the picture as a mother, deeply aware of the shaping of many forces upon me over many years. I do this to make sense of the meanings vested in motherhood for me and for others, including my own children who might one day be mothers.

Maternal feminist Adrienne Rich contended that only through motherhood has women's power been recognisable, and that even then "this aspect... has been wrenched and manipulated to male control" (Rich, 1976, p.67). Rich envisioned motherhood as a patriarchal institution, an institution like no other, with no buildings or façades distinguishing it. She wrote:

*“When we think of motherhood, we are supposed to think of Renoir’s blooming women with rosy children at their knees, Raphael’s ecstatic madonnas, some Jewish mother lighting the candles in a scrubbed kitchen on Shabbos, her braided loaf lying beneath a freshly ironed napkin. We are not supposed to think of a woman lying in a Brooklyn hospital with ice packs on her aching breasts because she has been convinced she could not nurse her child; of a woman in Africa equally convinced by the producers of U.S. commercial infant formula that her ample breast-milk is inadequate nourishment; of a girl in her teens, pregnant by her father; of a Vietnamese mother gang-raped while working in the fields with her baby at her side; of two women who love each other struggling to keep custody of their children against the hostility of ex-husbands and courts. We are not supposed to think of a woman trying to conceal her pregnancy so she can go on working as long as possible, because when her condition is discovered she will be fired without disability insurance; or of the women whose children have gone un nourished because they had to hire themselves out as wet-nurses; of the slave who, severed from her own child, has rocked and tended the children of her master’s; of the woman who passes for “childless”, who remembers giving birth to a baby she was not allowed to touch and hold because she might love it and wish to keep it. We are not supposed to think of what infanticide feels like, or day after wintry day spent alone in the house with ailing children, or of months spent in sweatshop, prison, or someone else’s kitchen, in anxiety for children left at home with an older child, or alone. Men have spoken, often, in abstractions, of our “joys and pains”. We have, in our long history, accepted the stresses of the institution as if they were a law of nature”. (p. 275-276)*

## **Mothering as institution.**

Rich (1976) posed motherhood as a reified, institutionalised collection of ideas - as an institution, a production of ideas formed by what had become naturalised laws of nature, presented as unarguable, unargued, positivist facts. This collection of shared, mutual habits, interactions, choices, drives and meanings is visible to me as a fabrication. Institutionalisation of motherhood results in limited, habituated versions; overly simplified, homogenised, and binary in the juxtaposition of joy and pain. These constructions are also the results of women's positioning generated through the dynamics of patriarchy as a governing institution. Patriarchy is articulated by Lerner (1986) as the consolidation of male supremacy and power on a civilisational basis. Patriarchal dynamics are given attention in this thesis as an institution in which economic and social power are governed by and attributed to men. The institutions of motherhood, and of patriarchy, constitute reified productions. Such institutions are made manifest through the policies directing human organisation at a given time and place, in my environs, through the work conducted in tangible institutions such as social service providers including hospitals or welfare offices. In this thesis, I aspire to nuanced views of women's lives, views not visible when told by others who "speak in abstractions" or who "accept the stresses of the institution as if they were a law of nature" (Rich, 1976, p. 275-276). I seek to make sense of the institution of motherhood as it shapes women's lives. I ask: what alternative shapes can be formed; what are the possibilities – by, for, and about mothers?

Motherhood is conversed, observed, and experienced among mothers themselves, in places of work and leisure - in communities, at the well or water cooler, in the market, in schools, bars, churches, and social media. The world from which I speak comprises a late-industrial, early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, western democracy. In 'my world', such ways and such experiences occupy novels, self-help books, television plots, films, blogs and websites, ostensibly in the interests of improving mothering and with the ideal of making society a better place in which to raise children, but always with the effect of shaping mothering. I live that experience. I hear it in the stories of my friends and

family members, and the nurses, educators and students with whom I work. I see my daughters absorb – more or less consciously – what mothering might mean in my relationship with them – and in their imaginations of their future selves.

## **Mothering in narration**

The end products of narratives of mothering, are storied in powerful versions of truth upheld in large studies of wellbeing and research about families. Such versions of story are deemed grand narratives by eminent organisational storyteller David Boje. A story told about ‘good mothering’, witnessed by others in sources which repeat the story through various meaning-making and controlling media, is coined as a grand narrative. As a universally-applied version of a particular, homogenised view of mothering which carries with it a “centering force of control and order” (Boje, 2008b, p.1) in women’s lives, this grand narrative life-version constructs a family of people who are well adjusted, productive citizens, who embody particular gendered role expectations and individual characteristics including healthy diet and exercise and stress management among other facets of wellness. In doing so, we are told, the family ensures the safe continuance of societal values, as the epitome of wellbeing. This is a family all are supposed to aspire to, and a social fabrication, an icon, against which all are judged. The wellbeing of mothers and those in their care is a subject of concern to those mandated with responsibility to match the ideal in practice. In ‘my world’ those made so responsible include health professionals, policy writers and analysts, economists, social agency case workers, church leaders, educators, families, and ultimately mothers themselves. These people charged with responsibility, express diverse opinion about mothers’ ability to flourish and live rewarding, fruitful lives. Those among them in positions of authority, wield significant influence on what is deemed ‘good mothering’ through the manifestation of their ideas in policy, practice, and the monitoring of mothers not only for the sake of the mothers and their children – but in the interests of an ordered, orderly and stable society.



The family context in which mothering takes place is deemed both source and determinant of wellbeing for all inhabitants. Here, the grand narratives declare, we (ought to) receive the love, nurturance, and belonging needed to thrive, as well as the meeting of the most basic needs for food, shelter and warmth. “Good parenting is crucial”, according to the OECD (2011, p. 15). My noticing of this unfolds in Aotearoa New Zealand, a jurisdiction part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), taking some pride in the emancipation of women, and nostalgically termed ‘a great place to bring up children’. Aotearoa is also known globally for the rapid, voluntary, and radical uptake of neo-liberal ideals in social and economic policy from the 1990s (Kelsey, 1997). This was the era in which I became an adult, a nurse, a nurse educator, and a wife and mother. For some time I was separated from the father of my children. This radical change to the form of my family brought repercussions in many ways, some alarming to me. The forms or types of family in contexts such as contemporary New Zealand, in similar OECD nations, and in nations under pressure to comply with neo-liberal ideals, are made a concern by those who posit that the conduct of mothers is central to the flourishing of those within the family and by extension, society writ large (OECD, 2011). Some family forms are presented by researchers and statisticians, government policy-makers and the wider public, as more promising of wellbeing than others.

Families with single parents, most of whom have mothers at the helm, are presented as less capable and willing to assure wellbeing, than the commonly-preferred or normalised two-parent or ‘nuclear’ family model, particularly in jurisdictions monitored by the OECD. These mother-led families are increasing in number and proportion among all forms of family. Yet they are attributed with social and economic peril and are highlighted as special risks. UNICEF (2007) reports that “there is evidence to associate growing up in single-parent families with greater risk to well-being – including a greater risk of dropping out of school, of leaving home early, of poorer health, of low skills, and of low pay” (p. 23). Proof of such risk is storied to lie in many studies in which women and children in mother-led families fare worse than their two-parent-family counterparts in psychological and economic terms, suffering stigmas

attendant with isolation, material poverty, lack of moral support, and failure to achieve potential. Single-parent families are more likely to be trapped in poverty, according to the OECD (2011). Family researcher Paul Amato (2005) warns of a number of studies that “link inept parenting by resident single parents with a variety of negative outcomes among children, including poor academic achievement, emotional problems, conduct problems, low self-esteem, and problems forming and maintaining relationships” (p. 83). One- and two-parent families are commonly presented as starkly-contrasted with each other. Two-parent families are described as “complete” (Narbutė, 2012), “whole” (Demirbilek & Otrar, 2014), and “intact” (Cecen-Erogul, Rezan & Dinigiltepe, 2012) beside lone-parent families, which are by definition incomplete, lacking, inadequate, undone, and (in the words of Demirbilek and Otrar (2014)) “broken”. Ryan, Claessens and Markowitz (2015) report a rise in single parent homes as “precipitous” and continuing “unabated”, as if single parent families ought to be abated. In news media reportage, the perils of life in a lone-mother household are depicted by headlines titled “The mysterious and alarming rise of single parenthood in America” (Mathur, Fu & Hansen, 2013) and “Solo mum’s life is ‘lonely, scary, sad’ (2015). These grand narratives are naturalised to an extent that women and children in single-mother households are chosen for attention by such authoritative agencies as the United Nations, United Nations International Children’s Education Fund (UNICEF), and other, powerful university-based centres, government-funded research arms, and non-government organisations at local, national and global levels, who conduct research into families and society.

## **Purpose of this research**

It is alongside the grand narratives of motherhood that I investigate antenarratives – pieces of “living story” not yet woven into a grand narrative and “bets on the future” of what might yet be told, as described by Boje (2001, 2008b, 2014) and as derived in conversation with mothers. The formation of many kinds of narratives, according to

Boje, occurs through different storytelling practices. In these practices, communities construct and make sense of themselves, even while being shaped by outside forces. To Boje, the telling of stories is how we come to exist, whether by the coherent beginning-middle-end tales formulated as grand narratives by those in powerful positions and those who retell them uncritically, or the fragments of narrative that may interrupt that dominant telling. Both take place as we live day to day. These living stories do not appear connected to anything great, but hold potential for the telling of new stories, for antenarratives to emerge for greater attention, bringing new possibilities toward us. Such stories hold transformative potential in the lives of those about whom stories have been told. When people tell their stories in ways which are not caught up into hegemonic vistas of grand narrative, potential exists for new narratives more satisfying and just than has been possible previously. The potential is created for a new telling of motherhood which uses developing stories about of families, wellbeing, and motherhood to transform wellbeing and family-related custom in new ways. My intent in this research is to investigate and re-story narratives of (and by) mothers in motherled households. In this thesis, I ask: how do socially constructed narratives depict and shape mothers' wellbeing, and that of their children? I investigate how women in motherled households are subjected to the shaping effects of constructed 'truths' (constructions) about mothering. Then I ask: what might it mean to shape other ways of being to be normalised in everyday life and in research inquiry?

## **Mothering and social construction**

For new/transformative stories to be generated, a recognition of processes that shape the social world around us is required. I make use in this thesis, of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) positing of what is perceived as reality occurs through the processes of social construction. Berger and Luckmann propose that what we think of as reality is a result of social forces impacting the social construction of identities and relationships - among which routinised habitualisations, normalised and naturalised, take place over time. These constructions, always in action, fabricate the world which

we arrive into and which we take for granted. A telling of the world as outcome of these complex processes of social construction, challenges the paradigm of fixed or inevitable reality. Berger and Luckmann make use of the symbolic universe, including those social fabrications deeply entwined in the definition and positioning of women, particularly women as mothers. Attention is drawn to a symbolic universe as a constantly under-construction iteration. Reality is posited not as an external set of data to be observed, recorded and measured, but as a crafted way of being, a crafting in which all are always engaged – consciously or unconsciously, actively or passively, wielding power, seeking influence, negotiating preferences or conceding subjugation (Gergen, 2015).

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) 'sociology of knowledge' as they put it, is a useful instrument in the study of organisation(s) of humanity. The noticing of discourses of motherhood enables the constitution of mothers and children through language and processes of representation which in this thesis I argue as institutionalisation. Production of such discourses is a multi-layered and subjective process made visible in social constructionist thought (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). Discourse is described by Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995) as an accepted term in social constructionist thought, wherein the noticing and analysis of discursive words and actions can be seen as a device for an interrogation of 'takes on' discussions of family and motherhood. This invites a reading and interpretation of what Lamdin Hunter and Dey (2016b) describe as "a way of thinking or societal background voice that, over time, becomes taken-for-granted and naturalised, commonly going unnoticed and unquestioned, with effects unintended and uncontested by those whose lives are shaped by the discourse" (p. 43).

Particular constructions of mothers are informed by political, social and economic discourses, which extrude available constructions of lone women in families, sometimes as survivors, sometimes as victims, but mostly underpinned by views of women in terms which are binary and normative in relation to an autonomous single

male adult individual lauded in post-Enlightenment discourse, beside which mothers are either invisible or deemed inadequate.

Professor of family studies Paul Amato (2005) believes that “many single parents find it difficult to function effectively as parents” (p. 83), being “less emotionally supportive of their children” as they “have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, are more inconsistent in dispensing discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children” (p. 83). His sentiments are borne out by statements made by policy advisors such as Ron Haskins (2015) who argues for economic, social and tax policies to “reverse the *collapse* of the two-parent family” (italics added) which he uses to account for a rising poverty rate, upon which, he states, single-parent families have a “malign impact” (p. 134). Lone parents are blamed for “increased income inequality, and, through both of these mechanisms – as well as the depressing effect on child development associated with single parenting and father absence – increased spending on social programs. We have dug a very deep hole”, Haskins warns (2015, p. 147). These complaints of mothering and lone parenting emote, with terms like “malign” (p. 134), “collapse” (p. 134) and “depressing” (p. 134). The discourses of disease, disaster, and dystopia are underlined by his lamentation that “we must face the fact that we are likely to always have millions of female-headed families” (p. 134). Haskins (2015) expresses a concern that motherled households and lone parents are hazardous, and a problem to be solved or managed, if not actually prevented or eradicated.

## **Mothering in critique and conversation**

My intent to trouble and overturn problematic narratives is embedded in my social-justice-oriented recognition of the potential for justice and emancipation in research inquiry highlighted by Paulo Freire (2015). His struggle against oppression among large groups of people was made possible by working with groups to improve literacy (literally and figuratively) and challenge powerful societal forces. Freire’s quest

continues, as he intimated, perpetually unfinished and incomplete (2015). Freire's (2015) premise of continued consciousness-raising or conscientization (conscientização), the necessity of critical pedagogy and the requirement to 'make a fuss' in order to challenge exploitation and suffering, makes sense to me. Boje's (2014) positioning of many types of narrative including living stories, together with Freire's example of emancipation, provokes an inquiry intended to privilege stories told in conversation with me, by mothers whose stories appear in this research report.

A small group of six mothers, shared stories of their lives with me. The one-on-one conversations lent an intimacy not many other research processes allow for. Some participants were known to me prior to the study beginning, and some were introduced by acquaintances who had heard of, or who shared, my fascination with mothering and wellbeing. My resistance to the dominant narratives told about life in motherled families almost led me to abandon a focus upon single mothers and investigate mothering experiences in many family forms; I came to believe that the commonalities and individualities of women's lives would carry across form and structure, and truly no single group of mothers could represent those in all single mother-led families. I concluded that whatever the insights or implications of my research, no study could ever fully capture the vast, rich, technicoloured, multi-voiced choir of maternal experiences.

Conversations with women who lead their families alone or with varied support from others, enables a construction in stories told of mothering, stories as antenarratives, rarely if ever, reflected in research or news reportage. Multi-voiced antenarratives trouble and reposition grand narratives, enabling a construction of families and mothers which is rich, hopeful and transformative, and in which normative concerns such as one's marital status are incidental. Boje's (2014) valuing of unfinished living stories corresponds with Freire's (2015) positioning of emancipation as incomplete. Together they resonate with the unfinished lives of those with whom I worked in this study. The stories of the mothers who shared their lives with me are not concluded, even though they now appear bound into finite form in this thesis; rather, their lives continue

evolving, shaping and shaped by narratives of themselves as mothers, long after my inquiry ends.

## **Critique and contradiction**

For a focus on the processes of social construction to be considered credible in research inquiry, one must be alert to a world in which contradictions are noticed in those discourses that purport to hold something as true while conflicting alternatives and inequalities in power appear simultaneously. I seek a deepened understanding of power expressed as the imposition of meaning where power conditions are unequal and achieve hegemonic influence. Boje (2001) articulates hegemony as the subtle, unnoticed extension of privilege of stories in ways which go unnoticed; the implicit organisation of silence.

Among the critical feminists who examine the conditions under which mothering has come to be known, and mothering in single parent families is marginalised, I consider the work of Adrienne Rich (1976), Carol Gilligan (1982), Ann Oakley (1981, 2015a) and more latterly, Andrea O'Reilly (2007, 2012). Their work supports my orientation toward discussions of mothering in context (in my world as social arrangements based on democratic and market oriented freedoms) as central to notions of a symbolic universe depicted by Berger and Luckmann (1966). Investigations of the stories that contribute to the fabrication of such a symbolic universe are valuable in the search for understanding and justice. Feminist thought contributes perspectives to mothering which see women's biology centralised (and essentialised), and the sociology of motherhood critiqued for power, agency and paradox. These authors concur that all women, including mothers, have been constructed in certain ways including limited variation but little challenge to hegemonic patriarchy.

Organisational theorists Seo and Creed (2002) articulate hegemony as a condition under which the exercise of power can go unnoticed. Using their orientation to power

applied to my research, I speculate that women perhaps comply, compromise and engage with oppressive systems – sometimes unwittingly - to enact motherhood in currently-available (yet unsatisfactory) forms. Seo and Creed (2002) posit organisational change as being constrained by contexts in which agency is embedded within the very system seeking to maintain the status quo. This paradox is like trying to make a bed while you lie in it, or repair a car while driving it. Noticing and exposing paradoxes and contradictions, and remembering “no hegemony is ever water-tight” (Humphries & Verbos, 2014, p. 141) encourages my search for and engagement with narratives that may change the future of humanity. This is the work of this thesis.

Using the notion of paradox and contradiction highlighted by Seo and Creed (2002), I problematise the notion of the liberated, self-sufficient and competitive individual who reaps the rewards of a meritocracy. This articulation of the human being has been central to the prevailing neoliberal orientation to democracy and markets, dominating in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1990s. Mothers and babies are unavoidably and necessarily connected with one another. Mothers and children are socially defined as interdependent. Mothers therefore, do not fit the definition of the human being as formulated for a free market society.

In ethical terms my desire for transformation offers the opportunity to make use of the ‘ethical gaze’ espoused by Bauman and Donskis (2013). These authors state that taken-for-granted institutional practices have harmful effects when we ‘turn away’ from injustices noticed therein, or place what we witness outside of a moral value system. Their theorising of the noticing of discomfort in relation to situations of injustice is an important factor in attending ethically to situations which undermine people’s humanity and welfare. Bauman and Donskis (2013) highlight a world order in which people’s dispossession and marginalisation can be explained away, and positioned outside moral responsibility under a refusal to engage with or even notice such dispossession. In this thesis, the stories of mothers and children witnessed with offhand neutrality by frontline case workers there to support them, are highlighted. I hold that



the persistent disadvantages which women and children in mothered households are purported to experience, are borne in part, by ethical blindness.

## **Motherhood and myself**

The conversations I had with mothers took place alongside my own journey as a mother, including a period of time in which I was alone as a parent. Reflecting upon research inquiry as an aspect of the construction of my world offered me ways forward to view and enact my life in ways that were different from the depictions I was so much exposed to. As a useful, if mechanistic instrument, constructionist reasoning enabled me to examine the policies and practices of the hands (and eyes and minds) of humans creating those spoken of in research inquiry, and to compare these constructions with my own experiences and desires. My intent to renegotiate mothering identity follows my own sense of subjugation and injustice, abjection even, as a mother, when I found myself a lone mother of three young children, informed by discourses of inadequacy and risk about people in single parent families. In my own life I came face to face with the ways in which I was being constructed by ways of thinking about families, women and marriage. I lived, uncomfortably, with prevailing ideas about single mothers and the hazards they and their children faced. I heard that we were at risk, that my parenting would inevitably be inadequate for my children's needs, and that they would suffer. The shaping of my life by persistent contradictions about what mattered, was a source of dissatisfaction and increasing discomfort to me in personal and professional spheres. My desire for justice, to not be shoehorned into a particular persona, nor be subject to sexist and oppressive views of myself and my children, along with my historical desire for justice in the lives of mothers and children – all women and children, indeed all people - prompted me to this inquiry.

Being clear that the focus of this research is in part a result of my lived experience as a mother and nurse, I included myself in the study. A reflexive, autoethnographic strand to the inquiry enabled me to make sense of my experience and to join with

participants in ways I intended to be fruitful to our discussions. My education as a nurse taught me to acknowledge and work thoughtfully with what I bring, and who I am, rather than attempt to stand apart from the research. This positioning potentially enriched the work I carry out with participants, offering benefits to both if conducted sensitively and carefully. In crafting this research, I believe I have a contribution to make beyond, and rejecting, that of a detached observer.

I intend this study to contribute to research, policy, and everyday conversation shaping stories about mothers and families. The depictions of mothers troubled in this thesis, appear in research inquiry across social, economic and political fields, and in theories which are used to educate future workers including professionals who will work with mothers. Aspects of mothering theory and practice are evident in economic research and policy, political policy, health and social practice, and education. This thesis signifies my offering to each of these areas.

## **Overview of chapters**

### **Researcher positioning**

My own story of how I came to be interested in mothering, wellbeing and families, is outlined in Chapter Two of this research report. There, I discuss my experiences of nursing education and the emphasis placed upon cultural safety, self-awareness, and reflexive practices that characterised my learning. I recount my work in child health in the acute hospital setting, in which the centrality of mothers to the welfare of their sick children and families, became clearer. The importance of caring for mothers as a conduit to the health of those in families was evident. Recalling my own emerging journey as a mother, and then a single mother, I recount the challenges I faced and the unexpected rewards, rewards which were not evident in writings about “fatherless families” or “solo mums” but which were becoming more readily available in blog sites and social media pages set up by and for those in single parent families, arguably of

authority in their own lives. Knowing that my life experience necessarily shaped the type and subjects of research in which I would be interested, I sought to capture my experiences in journal format. Journal excerpts are placed throughout this thesis as a counterpoint to the stories told by others in literature and fieldwork.

Denzin and Lincoln (2013), Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) and Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) are among those who acknowledge the centrality of the researcher as person, to the research conducted, countering the previously-dominant (and still evident) view that research is a necessarily-scientific pursuit in which researchers must stand apart and detach themselves from participants, questions and findings, in the interests of quality, credibility and usefulness. In Chapter Two I highlight the centrality and expected benefits of a self-reflexive researcher positioning.

### **Methodological orientations**

In Chapter Three I position theoretical orientations with research methodologies and methods to suit my questions and researcher positioning. My discussion of ways of knowing, and of what can be counted as reliable or significant to research contributions, led me to employ the storytelling methods of organisational scholars David Boje (2001, 2008b, 2014) and Margaret Vickers (2011, 2012), whose inquiries into living story methods and antenarrative were pertinent. The field of organisational studies provides the context for inquiry into the ways in which human life can be understood to characterise wellbeing or oppression, and the ways in which people's lives become framed according to discourses about their families and society or the worlds in which they live. Scholars such as Boje, adopting a critical stance, acknowledge the power inequalities in the lives of those they conduct research with, and the necessity to critique structures of power, leaders of which tolerate or even demand oppression in order to continue. Such structures and the normative and hegemonic discourses of family, society, women, wellbeing and other (reified) constructs which abound, are of interest to Boje, Vickers, and to Seo and Creed (2002). Seo and Creed's (2002)

positioning of hegemony as an encompassing world within which contradictory effects abide, leads me to see emancipation, which I argue is necessary for flourishing, as subject to existing constructs resisting change. The contradictions I faced undermined my sense of myself as a mother but their transformational opportunities are spoken to by the possibilities enabled by Seo and Creed's (2002) theorising of organisational change.

Living story and antenarrative research methodology allowed me to make use of stories without concrete beginning, middle or end, as descriptions of women's lives in motherled households. Thus it was possible to hear and imagine new stories of wellbeing in motherled households. Boje's (2014) discussions of organisational storytelling, focus upon the petrifying effects of 'grand narrative'. This is the solidified account promulgated by those in power who contribute to the telling of a singular beginning-middle-end narrative. Seo and Creed (2002) take up their understanding of institutional ways of being, viewed by those in power as a coherent institutional story which is not easily open to change or transformation. However, according to Seo and Creed (2002), this monolith hides many goings-on inside, which include areas of conflict, diversity and difference. Seo and Creed (2002) say that "as a result of these tears in the institutional fabric, potential change agents arise" (p. 240). Boje's (2014) posing of antenarratives, chime with Seo and Creed's (2002) ideas about institutional change, as the authors each employ organisational perspectives in which change for emancipation or empowerment is valued. Boje's (2014) use of antenarratives and living stories, are recognisable to me as a rendition of Seo and Creed's "multilevel, mutually incompatible institutional processes" (2002, p. 225).

The somewhat unconventional order of chapters in this thesis deserves explanation. Firstly, discussions in Chapter Three, of methodological positioning in activist/action research, feminist thought and conversational methods, follow the foregrounding of my self-disclosure in Chapter Two. The methods chosen in this thesis are a direct follow-on from my reflexive autoethnographic stance. Secondly, Chapters Two and Three centralise an orientation to research methods that imply their contribution to the social

construction of reality, such as that which is presented in Chapters Four, Five and Six, as ‘real’ and ‘true’ in the realms of understandings of wellbeing, mothering and families. It is important to secure this lens over the literature which is investigated in the literature review chapters following Chapter Three, in order to be faithful to a constructionist perspective.

### **Grand narratives of wellbeing**

In Chapter Four I position wellbeing as a central construct in discussions of family and flourishing. A review of literature concerning wellbeing in many forms, conceptualisations and historical contexts, makes sense of the emergence of wellbeing as a concept applied to humans, by the activities of measurement, assessment, monitoring and improvement. As a reified concept, wellbeing is a fairly recent (early 20<sup>th</sup> century) human aspiration, developed in part from historical events including war and industrialisation which resulted in societal changes which have shaped people’s existences in particular ways. Academic and social researchers, focused upon those who were subject to such change in their lives, coined and interpreted wellbeing to be of interest to lawmakers, world leaders, those in helping professions and eventually, health and social science researchers. The rise of the individual psychology movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was pivotal in discussions of human economic and social success in industrialised societies. Principles of individual psychology and the economic theories which underpinned industrialisation are by-products of post-Enlightenment discourses privileging autonomy, individuality, self-responsibility and progress. Theories intended to free (some) humans from shackling and limiting ideas about themselves and the world around them, worked to create perspectives of wellbeing which are ironically unavailable to many they purport to concern – those for whom life is not a matter of individuality, autonomy, competitiveness, self-responsibility or economic self-sufficiency. Mothers and children are those people. Grand narratives of wellbeing privilege particular people in particular families, most often men, or those in two-parent families. In particular, research about wellbeing

tends to view humans as discrete, rational autonomous individuals. This construction reflects particular post-Enlightenment western philosophies of humanity which are problematic in studies of mothers, children and families, wherein people's needs are intricately intertwined, complex, situation-specific, and interdependent. In the conversations I had with mothers, the limited usefulness of the research (including statistics and longitudinal studies) became even more glaring. The research literature told a blunt, lopsided and limited (and limiting) narrative of women's lives in motherled households.

### **Grand narratives of family**

Chapter Five orients a social history of families as a grand narrative readily available in research, statistics and popular media. The changing, context-driven purported realities of family life are expressed, not as timeless truths about what families are or should be, but as constructions in time and space, in ways which solidify dominant ideals about family. Stemming from constructions, particular opportunities and requirements become imperative to those in families, particularly to mothers. The construction of mothers and children according to contexts in which women are deemed responsible for their children, or in which children thrive, become attached to mothers, survive, or die, is central when considering the ways in which mothers are judged to have performed. The purpose of providing a socially-situated historical account of motherhood in my thesis was to demonstrate how what we take for granted in 2017 versions of mothering, ideas gathered under terms such as 'the new Momism' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) and 'intensive mothering' (Hayes, 1996) among others, are constructed societal norms and values which change over time, and which are culturally specific and unable to be universalised.

Detailing this social history, I encountered women's positions over time in early societies, to make sense of the emergence of women as main or lone caregivers, frequently with relative economic and social vulnerability. The evolving features of

family life across time took shape as responses to changes in society such as urbanisation and industrialisation. Mothering theory in modern feminism, connected with the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, saw feminists being concerned with caring for small children alone at home, while a ‘public’ world of men carried on without them, mind-less of their lives and concerns.

The feminist movement fuelled Adrienne Rich (1976, 2007) and others such as Oakley (1981, 2015), Belenky (1986) and Gilligan (1982) to write and act. More recently, responses by Kinser (2012) and O’Reilly (2012) have extended the contributions of these authors and activists. Typically, two responses are formulated. One, associated with scholarship and policy solutions aligned with liberal feminism, urged women to pursue access to employment, take on lives outside their families, work, and enter the worlds of public life, where men had already adopted the persona of competitive individual most convincingly. Access to universities, workplaces and political arenas, latterly under arrangements loosely termed as Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), was prioritised to equalise the discrepancies between men and women which were seen to disempower women. This position, adopted by many over the last forty years, has been found, and remains, wanting. A more radical (a ‘getting at the root of’) response, wherein women might embrace versions of mothering cognisant of mothers and children, friendly to them, and not under prescriptive expert-driven instructions, articulated women’s aspiration to agency and recognition of their work, largely unacknowledged by others.

### **Wellbeing in motherled households**

Drawing Chapters Four and Five together in Chapter Six, I conduct a review of literature surrounding families, motherled households, single parents, and wellbeing. A preponderance of research based upon what is deemed ‘best’ for families – that is, to reside in a two-parent, heterosexual, nuclear-type household with ‘father’ and ‘mother’ raising a small number of biologically-related children, is noticeable here.

The ways in which families of one parent are posed as disadvantaged or dysfunctional, are critiqued. This literature review dovetails aspects of wellbeing research, contextualised by the normalisation of two-parent nuclear families. As such Chapter Six rounds off Chapters Four and Five, preparing a space for those in motherled households to story their version in Chapter Seven.

### **Living stories in constructed conversation**

Participants whose stories are shared in Chapter Seven of this study are lone mothers caring for their children, often while working and assuming other family responsibilities, and often with little outside help. The stories told in conversation by Rene, Bindi, Pam, Irina, Laine and Kathie (all pseudonyms) in Chapter Seven, are verbatim excerpts from conversations about their lives, which each woman shared with me in person. Each story coexists beside others without clear beginning or conclusion. Stories depict aspects of life in each woman's family as she experiences mothering in the context of a motherled household. Each is as an example of what is meaningful in each woman's life, featuring aspects which chime or contrast with the grand narratives made possible in Chapters Four and Five, and reviewed in Chapter Six. The temptation in conveying people's stories of their lives is to contribute toward a new grand narrative version of mothering, which given time and the petrifying effects of many stories bringing a coherent smoothing of distinct experiences, might become a new norm. In this storytelling method however, I preferred to make sense of many little stories as antenarratives. I intend them to continue powerfully beside one another in a many-voiced counterpoint response to the hegemonic grand narratives which continue to shape mothers.

Several realisations became apparent to me during the conversation process which took place over many weeks. There were refrains of phenomena from the literature reviews I had carried out. These refrains concerned financial insufficiency and lack of social support. Participants shared experiences not found in research about the wellbeing of



mothers in mother-led-households, experiences silenced within longitudinal studies, facts and figures and statistics on families, women, marriage, and wellbeing. The mothers voiced powerlessness and emancipation in turn. They expressed uncertainty for their lives and decisions, and exasperation at a lack of support toward social and economic sufficiency beyond trite “I wonder how she does it all” commentary. Several women spoke of financial lack and of a constant shortage of the money necessary to pay utility and food bills or to provide what their children needed in terms of clothing, school needs or other necessities. Each woman described being frugal with their money and resources. Each spoke of their need - also reflected by women in two-parent families - for more support from others as they cared for their families. The mothers identified a desire for help to care for their children, help managing the many home-and-work-related tasks which conflicted with each other in mothers’ lives, and help with constant pressure of being too busy to do activities which they felt improved their wellbeing, such as leisure, exercise, or simply being alone.

Stories told by participants but not reflected in the literature, included the spoken advantages and strengths of those within a motherled household, and women’s intentionality and purpose to generate, foster, and enhance, their wellbeing. Women’s stories contrasted with what was said about them in research. The six women who shared their stories in these conversations disavowed stereotypes wrought by the construction of maternal identity according to marital status, income level and other socio-political apparatus. In Chapter Seven, their stories were aired as living responses to the grand narratives so plainly in view in much policy and research, narratives which arguably worsen one’s wellbeing by their enactment in everyday conversation, and perhaps by the very act of reading them. Mothers resisted versions of themselves as deficient, holding pragmatic perspectives about their children’s welfare and their own wellbeing. Depictions of mothers in research and policy via their marital status, were not how mothers defined themselves. One informant even said “I don’t see myself as a single mother” even though in all aspects of family life as counted by others, she was certainly single, and certainly a mother. Women’s stories of their families told alternate

versions of the dominant narratives of mothers' lives which had been informed by available research and policy.

### **Storytelling in constructed vignette**

In Chapter Eight I extend the storytelling mode to a semi-fictional antenarrative story as a constructed vignette with three scenes. I share aspects of many stories gathered and woven together. The story of a fictional character named Shelley, and her experience seeking assistance at a government welfare agency, highlights the rich story behind the needs of those whose plight is becoming increasingly taken-for-granted and simultaneously problematic in public discourse in New Zealand. Shelley's interaction with a case worker, Jeff, is given two distinct expressions, wherein transformative possibilities, small but meaningful, are given expression in the second scene. In the third scene, the story becomes that of Mirna, an older woman reflecting on her experience as a younger single mother, and now offering support to Shelley. I include accounts shared by study participants, plus many small fragments of stories told to me by others in my life, mostly women, from past and present. Their stories are embellished, adapted and reimagined in order to contribute to the creation of a new antenarrative with potential to forge a new future for those in the story and beyond (Vickers, 2011). Over many years I had heard segments of story which had inspired and shocked me in turn; these fragments of narrative could be woven into a story without divulging people's identities, using a fabricated framework in which each piece of story was rich, meaningful, and full of potential. The construction of semi-fictional stories, is a method of antenarrative storytelling which creates the potential for new characters, subplots, episodes, chapters and events to emerge in the story, and for new futures or chapters to be drafted in the lives of actors, futures with potential for transformative action and shifts in positioning (Boje, 2014). Constructed vignettes allow many people's stories, shared in small pieces and unable to be used in entirety, but contributive to a textured landscape of experience, to be used.

Shelley's story provides an opportunity to revisit the social context of life for mothers and children in New Zealand, a nation with a rich history of welfare provision and a more recent history of systematised removal of social safety nets designed ostensibly to help some, among them women and children, avoid economic and social diminishment of wellbeing. My emerging concerns for women such as Shelley, participants, and others besides, are flagged as developing implications which will continue after this study ends, implications which follow in Chapter Nine.

### **Generating implications beyond this thesis**

In Chapter Nine I underline my emerging claim that research into women's lives can be used to produce very different versions of truth and knowledge, depending on processes of construction, positioning by powerful actors, and contingent intents and values. The implications for this thesis, are that there are and should remain possibilities for living stories to be told and valued, and to contribute to policy, everyday conversation, and research inquiry. Possibilities can also be realised by those who work with mothers -the case workers, early childhood teachers, workmates and managers, health and social professionals, banks, tax departments, governments, police, and policy- and lawmakers. Not every story might be told or heard, but an awareness of storying as construction of reality can be a powerful informant to those who work with mothers.

Stories can inform the writing of policies, protocols for dealing with families, governance of workplace law such as leave policies, flexible workplace policies and family law. Tax, loan, and retirement policies which unfairly burden women economically can be addressed. Conversations in the wider sphere of social media and news media can embrace storytelling methods to hear mother's stories of their families and respond in ways which resist the grand narrative portrayals of families as unproblematic, and mothers as either blanket-good or blanket-bad. The infusion of

little stories into the public realm, including social media and blog sites, can interrupt hegemonic grand narratives and create new spaces for alternative conversations.

I propose a cultural shift wherein women enter into relationships with the capacity and confidence in their ability to manage relationship change or end with dignity and capacity.

Methodologically, the inspiration afforded to me in this study enables me to postulate that interpretive, reflexive methodologies are useful to trouble the symbolic universe as a robust contribution to our understanding of ourselves in the world. I hold that there are powerful ways to work in the world to tell stories which differ from taken-for-granted grand narratives.

## **Chapter summary**

Having foregrounded my interest in mother-led households, and having highlighted the significance of wellbeing as it is conceptualised and posited in scholarly research, policy and everyday life, I establish my interest in wellbeing of people in families, in my own experience as a mother, and for some time, as a lone mother. I posit that grand narratives of wellbeing, of family, and of mother-led households produced by (and producing) research outcomes, policy formation, and public discourse surrounding families has limited potential for wellbeing of women and children in all types of family arrangements and their seemingly incumbent responsibilities and entitlements.

As I demonstrate in the next Chapter, claims to knowledge, truth and fact are far more complex, specific, situated and potentially problematic than they might first appear. My recount of some of these bases for formal scholarly knowledge as they take shape in positivist forms enables me to propose an alignment with approaches in which constructionist paradigms trouble subjective realities deemed fixed, universal, or proven. Constructionist ways of knowing enable different perspectives to be entertained, perspectives in which the involvement and commitment of researchers

seeking to make a difference to themselves and others by including oneself as a measure of believability and rigor, can be considered beneficial to participants, inquiry and researcher. An explicitly self-reflexive approach provides opportunities for inquiry with deep, rich understandings of wellbeing; yet it carries potential cautions and hindrances. In Chapter Two, I move to foreground and embed the bases for this research in worlds of knowledge creation, and in relation to my own scholarly and personal life.

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## Chapter Two

### Positioning research and researcher

#### Introduction

The opening to Chapter One began with a glimpse into my life as a mother. In this Chapter I explain how and why I write myself into the story that unfolds as my thesis. I do so in conscious reflection on myself as researcher, mother, nurse, educator, and human being. I engage with an explicit form of noticing of self in and on the research process as advocated for by Behar (1996), Ellis and Bochner (2000), and Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2013), and as demonstrated in the work of Allbon (2012). I explain the weaving-in of my own life stories as I reflect on my evolving relationship with research traditions which have influenced my theoretical orientations toward inquiry. Two scholarly traditions influence my work: i) positivism, entwined and taken for granted in higher learning and scholarly research, and ii) social constructionist orientations to which I was introduced in my studies as a nurse and academic lecturer. The connecting threads between these scholarly orientations, my researcher values, and my broader life experience, are intricately woven together in my choice of project and method of undertaking. I begin this Chapter by reviewing the positivist modes of research embedded in many projections of what might be understood as knowledge. I outline the challenges directed at this form of knowledge-making when applied to social organisation and human wellbeing. I discuss theories of social construction generated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and the ways their ideas are developed by Gergen and Gergen (2004, 2015), Burr (2015) and others, theories which advance the basis for social constructionist perspectives and related methodological considerations. Social constructionists trouble the often taken-for-granted ideas about what it means to 'know' or 'find out' in research. I explore why and how their perspectives fit with my intentions for this study.

My methodological orientation draws me to the work of organisational theorist Judi Marshall (1999) whose research journey is summed up in her seminal work *Living Life*

as *Inquiry* (1999). She makes explicit her intention to ensure research work resonates with life outside of paid work, organisational goals, and life in all its fluidity and fragmentation, amongst many commitments and relationships. I see this commitment to the intentional expression of personal values as a form of action research in which the potential for research inquiry to transform and improve the conditions of human life and to 'make a difference' is valuable and valued. Marshall writes: "One implication of this approach to living is that I adopt the self-reflective and action-oriented 'research' approaches I employ in my 'work' in any area of my life which seems appropriate" (1999, p.2).

My intent to make a difference is visible in the value I place upon action-oriented principles for research inquiry, wherein the project is expected to produce potential benefits for participants, readers, and others - including myself. Activist research is discussed in this Chapter as a conduit to and from the many forms of activism evident in feminist research designed to make sense of and potentiate justice and transformation in the lives of women. I do not imagine that I can, or should, separate my 'self' from this research, or appear removed and able to observe or report objectively my impressions of the lives of others, a common expectation in positivist inquiry. Rather, I acknowledge my deliberate shaping of this study concerned with mothers, according to values which underpin my life, work, and research interests – as a nurse and mother. I demonstrate how the embodiment of my values has invoked the shaping of my study, selection of methods, and the crafting of an engaged research process for my work with participants.

An engaged research process is one in which I initially imagined myself situated as an insider. This positions me as a member of a group of mothers whose experiences are storied and valued, and one whose insider researcher positioning adopts aspects of an autoethnographically-principled inquiry in which sensitive self-inclusion contributes to the depth and usefulness of the research. In order to clarify my involvement in the research project, I introduce and share, perhaps unconventionally, my background in mothering and nursing. I make sense of the relevance of these, previewing a

forthcoming realisation about the limitations of accepting the normalisation of categorisation and the 'in or out' decisions that come with this. I signal prominent values which have influenced the shaping of the thesis, in particular my intent to appreciate and invigorate women and children's wellbeing. My depiction of the insights generated in this thesis carries implications not only for the scholarly work of myself and others, but also in my development as a researcher, mother, nurse, educator, and human being. My use of a researcher journal, included in excerpts throughout the thesis, is explained in this and the next Chapter. In one journal entry, I write:

***Researcher journal: Wednesday 2 September, 2015***

*My research began years ago by my noticing over several years how intricate the practices of mothering are; it doesn't just come naturally or fall out of us, but is learned and shaped by what we are faced with and all of the permutations and combinations which we work out around ourselves. How our journey unfolds and what we learn or decide, happens according to what we (think we) experience and how we interpret it. I started to notice how courageous and thoughtful and fascinating I believe we are in our particular stories. I am struck by how complex and bewildering mothering is sometimes. An investigation of mothers has seemed to me to be entirely necessary for me to work out my own complicated journey.*

Remaining mindful of my own potential to invoke or silence aspects of research phenomena means being alert to phenomena, language, and experiences which are noticeable and of interest to me. Reflexivity is revealed as a way to manage this noticing, and to connect my interpretations to requirements for rigor, demonstrating forms of validity, veracity, believability, and trustworthiness in my research. These markers of quality are discussed in Chapter Three. A reflexive approach affords me the benefit of interpretation of that which I read, hear, say, and witness, and which, through self-awareness, reflection, and use of a researcher journal, I can learn from and orientate my inquiry towards (Griffith, 1998). Journal-writing provides insight into my experience of (myself in) the research process, and progression through participant selection, relationship, writing and thesis presentation, helping me articulate a



developing understanding of stories which crystallised during conversations with participants. Journaling also presents a channel to express my experiences in my own motherled family, as an outlet to a deeper, nuanced understanding of mothering alongside that which I might hear in conversation or read in the literature. Reflexive practices also present an opportunity to demonstrate awareness, respect and care, for those who I care about, including my own family, whose privacy and feelings I have sought to remain mindful of.

### **Positivist beginnings: What it means to know**

The linking of research and academic traditions to bedrock beliefs about reality, ways of seeing the world or understandings of what constitutes ‘knowledge’, generate epistemological orientations which are not always immediately obvious to emerging researchers. Epistemology is described by Crotty (1998) as the study of what can be known, or ways of knowing, according to paradigms which address what can be accepted as reasonable or valid, in order to justify a form of knowledge *as* reliable knowledge. The contributions of philosophy and religion to the standpoints which people adopt, and which become woven throughout political and social viewpoints exemplified in law, research and policy, are understood to inevitably influence what is possible in thought and action, according to Gergen (2015). The epoch characterised as the [western] ‘Enlightenment’ has become known as a period of dynamic shifts in power between the Church and philosophers or ‘scientists’ in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe (Dally, 1982) and the rise of particular philosophies of thought (Taylor, 1999). The pursuit of knowledge was characterised by values in accordance with a de-animated world recorded under observation, in conditions which came to be understood as positivism and objectivism, as noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2013) among many others. The ritual observation and measurement of an apparently external, factual, neutral world of objects, beings and events, has been applied to natural sciences in the study of such phenomena as if from the outside. The belief that research material lay in objective existence awaiting discovery and documentation, invited an approach

which was thought to be free of human value biases, even though the selection of some phenomena (and not others) and certain pursuits of them (and not others) in reasoning, came to be argued, by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Gergen (2015).

In philosophical debates which came to form the basis for researchers to work by, the avoidance of researcher influence or bias upon research findings was intended to reflect a reality which was external to the person experiencing it. Such reality awaited discovery and measurement (Porter, 1996; Taylor, 1999). Maintaining research rigor required a detached approach to inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Within dominant positivist paradigms, the distancing of researcher from research was a founding principle and would ostensibly improve the replicability and validity of data gathered, and the generalisability (and hence quality) of the research (Crotty, 1998). The belief that research must be conducted by persons who could elude influence of or personal involvement with a study has been supported by researchers who believe that research results, termed as ‘findings’, must remain untouched by the vagaries of human emotion, values or any form of researcher bias in the interests of scientific objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Merton (1972) provides one example of research which attempts to counter “the ‘corrupting influence of group loyalties on human understandings’” (p. 12) in social research. Studies conducted under these attempts, and their implications, are explored in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis.

According to positivist research principles as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000), researchers are required to think of themselves as interchangeable and anonymous. It is assumed the most rigorous, valid and believable research must be replicable by anyone under the same conditions, and research results must never be reliant upon the person of the researcher, or their ideas, values and preferences. Such isolation has been considered necessary to produce a solid, credible piece of research, such as in studies by Hart (1940, cited in Angner, 2011). Yet, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note, rigid, isolative procedures are problematic when universally applied to phenomena which are deeply connected to shifting, subjective human experiences, and certainly not purely mechanical processes. Positivist research

paradigms, in which observable proof or measurable cause/effect relationships are required in order to sustain belief, are of limited use in studies of human experience, or research wherein intangible, complex or immeasurable phenomena are under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Empiricist mechanisms of classifying, generalising or reducing data into parts of assumed wholes, take poor or no heed of variable circumstances, values, and other human elements attributed to social life (Oakley, 2000).

### **Recognising the limits of positivism**

Researchers who speak for and about less politically and socially powerful groups including women and people of colour, hold that traditional requirements for particular forms of research have historically minimised or excluded personal or less quantifiable research phenomena (Hood, Mayall & Oliver, 1999; Oakley, 2000). The traditional bias of academic researchers has been critiqued by many, including Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2013), Griffith (1998), Oakley (2000), and Reinhartz (1992). Civil rights and women's rights movements emerging during the decade between 1960 and 1970 corresponded with an increased noticing of the social and political needs and priorities of groups of people whose voices might not have previously been considered significant or distinct in social research (Gilligan, 1982). Those people included women, indigenous groups, and others considered marginalised (Belenky, 1986). Results of academic research, not necessarily beneficial to such groups, had historically reflected the views of researchers who were for the most part white/European men claiming a mandate to study people's lives without a lived knowledge or personal experience of participants' realities (Gilligan, 1982). Access to the knowledge resources of academia was, and is, a priority for underrepresented groups, according to Adams et al. (2013), and Smith (1987). A growing moral and political priority surrounded researchers seeking to visibly reflect the views of marginalised groups in order to generate findings which were congruent with their lived experiences (Griffith, 1998), while acknowledging the requirement for research to attend to quality and rigor

in appropriate ways. Some of these inquirers found the articulation of reality and truth in research and indeed in the world around them, to be worth scrutinising. Berger and Luckmann, whose treatise *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) became a seminal discussion of how social interactions and our relationships with people and objects around us, are among those who have contributed to what is perceived as true or real.

## **The social construction of reality**

In their book *The Social Construction of Reality* Berger and Luckmann (1966) provide an exposition of the manufacture of and belief about what comes to be perceived of as social reality and truth by a person or people, at a given time and place. They argue that the construction of a perceived social reality takes place as a process over time and between people as a shared negotiation of perception-informed ideas which harden into seemingly unchanging and timeless qualities presented as facts. Such perceptions are not easily unsettled or disputed. Berger and Luckmann (1966) pose a sense of objective and subjective reality as productions of thought, time, place and shared meaning, entailing processes of habituation and institutionalisation. They offer the notion of a ‘symbolic universe’ – a concept in which all thought and representations of reality can be encompassed and framed and from which, in a symbiotic process, actions of reality maintenance or transformation may be generated.

To explore a given symbolic universe, the assumed objects of its projected reality require some scrutiny. It makes sense to say that a tangible, literally visible entity such as ‘Mount Pirongia’, exists. However, the further investment of meaning into this entity of land, perhaps to be understood as ‘a sacred energy’, a ‘tourist attraction’, a ‘conservation park’ or ‘a source of gold to be mined and sold’ is an act of human creativity. Meanings so invested, become internalised by people of a given community, who act on that meaning as if it were real and thereby solidify a human value or conceptual framework as *reality*. For all intents and purposes, the socially vested meaning is made real. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), our social

interactions and ways of being in the world lay down a foundation of experience upon which to form interpretations, which become consolidated into something we think we know and regard as real. What is considered real or true, may be more usefully reflected on as a set of constructions conceived, enacted and embedded before our engagement with them solidifies their sense of truth. Among the reified conceptual phenomena experienced as reality which I notice, ‘motherhood’, ‘family’ and ‘wellbeing’ – and the established symbolic universe through which they are given their sense and validity, are notable. Women who are mothers, and people combined in social groups called families can be observed to exist just as Mount Pirongia can be observed to exist. These phenomena are real in some sense. The meanings vested in these women and in the constellation of people known as families however, become manifestations of complex values, responsibilities and entitlements. Thus ‘mothers’ and ‘families’ are socially fabricated entities – notions not constant in time and space – but sufficiently so in order for the words to have meaning and to enable individuals and communities to act accordingly. Once embedded in a wider social context, ‘mothers’ and ‘families’ notions of ‘wellbeing’ and of ‘motherhood’ can be embellished, encouraged and disciplined.

According to Burr (2015), whose work has spanned several decades focused upon social constructionist thought, what becomes known and accepted as ‘true’ is consolidated via a set of circumstances and values attributed to the phenomenon according to the time and place in which the phenomenon is experienced or viewed. Engaging with a constructionist viewpoint requires me to understand that notions of ‘truth’ are constructed within social and historical contexts (Gergen, 2015). Truth claims are believable according to the epistemological strengths of already-established discourses. Such discourses are nourished by the bedrock beliefs manifest at a time, in a place and associated with the culture through which a given community makes sense of their lives (Burr, 2015). “Our culture brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and by the same token, leads us to ignore other things” (Crotty, 1998). The process of making sense of truth within a time-and situation-specific context

enabled me to wonder how so many versions of understanding be arrived at, and to what effect.

Many influences upon understanding provide possibilities for understanding. Among such influencing variables, researcher and research process are situated. Accordingly, those who adopt the paradigm of social constructionism affirm that the influence of researcher upon the study cannot be avoided (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Gergen, 1999; Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Social constructionist researchers are among those who understand that the researcher inevitably influences their work in some way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). No two researchers approach a study, even a question or a verbal or facial expression with informants, let alone a writing process or a design process, with exactly the same approach, nor do they deduct the same interpretation. That researcher identity influences the shape their research (whether they intend to or not), has become an accepted premise, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000). Moreover, those who ignore their inevitable shaping of research questions, processes and findings are unable to successfully manage or mitigate, let alone make wise use of, their influence (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Visiting (even well-intended) values upon participants has been shown to skew the research process in ways which might breach ethical principles for research to “do no harm” and which affect perceptions of the outcomes of research and the use to which they may be put (Olesen, 2000).

## **Positioning of research inquiry**

Contemporary social constructionists, such as Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2004, 2012, 2015) and Vivien Burr (2015), challenge bedrock assumptions about knowledge and even human existence underpinning positivist paradigms of thought and inquiry. A constructionist viewpoint enables the acceptance of some level of subjectivity, questioning and ultimate rejection of a single, observable context-free truth (Gergen, 2015). Multiple versions of apparently same phenomena may be potentially legitimate. Research material such as relevant practices, texts and conversations can be engaged

with in a multiplicity of ways, with differing effects upon the phenomena and the persons involved, in examples by Ellis and Bochner (2000). Researchers in constructionist paradigms recognise phenomena described by nouns such as ‘motherhood’, ‘wellbeing’ or ‘family’ as notions set in frames of reasoning populated by predefined entities and equally proscribed attributes of such entities (Burr, 2015). Pertinent to my interests would be ‘good’ mothers, women made responsible for genetically related people in a preordained notion of who is to be held accountable for an equally pre-ordained notion of wellbeing. Human relationships, experiences, and our responses to these, invite researchers to seek deeper, nuanced but as-yet-[empirically] unproven suppositions, according to Gillis and Jackson (2002) in their discussion of research methods used by nurses such as myself. Researchers are mindful that apparently factual and self-evident phenomena have been constructed to appear in particular ways, and with particular effects upon the persons and places shaped by it (Gergen, 2015). Understanding this, constructionist researchers have at their disposal an awareness of themselves as subjective investigators whose mindfulness of their contribution to research questions is shaped by time- and space-determined elements which are meaningful for them in contexts of what is thought worth investigating and able to be known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This awareness necessarily influences the type of inquiry deemed useful (Gillis & Jackson, 2002).

### **Knowledge and power**

The notion that those who claim to “know” or have knowledge about a particular event, phenomena or experience, those who are positioned as experts, are sometimes in a position to influence or even marginalise others who are deemed not to know, is troubled by research in social constructionist domains, according to Reinharz (1992) and Hood, Mayall and Oliver (1999). The positioning of knowledge in the exercise of power, deems knowledge as a commodity or tangible quantity of something valued, scarce and sacred rather than a shared, constructed and ephemeral thing. The noticing of this positioning is central to my inclusion of study participants to value what they

bring to the stories of their experiences shared with me. Yanow's (2004) study of forms of understanding coined as 'local knowledge' charges researchers with the task of highlighting or making space to hear what is known by participants. Yanow (2004) advocates for researchers to resist silencing those who use their local knowledge to develop workable solutions to their quest to flourish in a mother-led household. In this study I needed to be open to hearing stories told by women who shared their situated local knowledge.

### **Researcher involvement in research**

The belief that the presence of a particular researcher influences the construction of research questions, topics, findings and discussions, necessarily swaying research in certain directions, is detailed by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000). Robust awareness and management of researcher influence requires particular methods of researcher reflexivity, including self-awareness, in order to project a justifiable research process and method which is safe for participants to engage with, and credible to readers and examiners.

This research project was planned to rest upon the unavoidability, and even benefit, of the influence of my values and thoughts in interactions with participants, plans, and presentation of findings, a stance endorsed by Denshire (2013) and Ellis and Bochner (2000). I chose to enact my values about the world in the inquiry in order to successfully engage in a process in which these standpoints would be truthfully and sensitively acknowledged (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My practices, beliefs and assumptions would influence the selection of participants, the shaping of questions and conversations, and the focusing of my analysis. Seeking to monitor this aspect of my research, I thought it necessary to carry out a continual self-inquiry in the study. This is evident in my exercising of ethical principles outlined in the next Chapter of this thesis. My use of a reflexive researcher journal was intended as a means of self-analysis in keeping with reflexive practice principles, also detailed



later in this chapter, and endorsed by Epp (2008). Journaling also offered the potential to include aspects of autoethnography, whereby I might meaningfully include my own relevant experiences in the development of research questions findings. The process of including oneself is explored by Behar (1996), Ellis & Bochner (2000), and Reed-Danahay (1997). I proposed to appropriately contribute my own unfolding experience in a mother-led household, and recognised that some level of mutual influence of myself and participants was inevitable.

Valuing the time and contribution of participants, I didn't wish to over-ride their contribution. Research studies in which researchers and participants interact in listening and sharing, offer rich findings which reflect the depth and fruitfulness of participants' lives, with meaning created together rather than uncovered. Vanguard management scholar David Boje (2001, 2008b, 2014) is one such researcher. Boje's investigation of organisations, and reach into research methods used to make sense of living with chronic illness, such as the work done by organisational researcher Margaret Vickers (2011, 2012), illuminates meaning constructed in organisations which posit reality in particular ways. In Boje's (2014) theorising, storying is a transformative process tool for both partners, offering meaning and embodying transformative possibilities. Positive transformations and "making a difference" are important values to me in my research practice.

Believing my values, experiences and interests to be salient in this study, I deemed particular areas of investigation worthy of interest. However, my interests do not automatically translate into research which others would find valuable. A deep reflection on the confluence of my values and interests with work already in the public forum was one way of checking. Investments of funding, scholarly resources, and institutional student support costs were at stake for the university who accepted my enrolment. Investments of time, energy and emotional effort were at stake for participants who chose to work with me. My supervisors, my employer and study participants needed to believe that this research was worth conducting.

My belief in this study as a worthy pursuit was prompted by my sense that what I noticed to be significant in my life might also be noticeable to others – in particular, mothers, women and researchers in overlapping areas of interest (Griffith, 1998). I saw and lived the effects of particular forms of thought and belief, about families, mothers, children and wellbeing in my practice as a mother and nurse, beliefs which I discuss later in this Chapter. I recognised troubling assertions about families in my interactions with students and health practitioners, as well as in media reports. I witnessed the effects of the promotion of certain viewpoints about families and women in the lives of my friends and contemporaries, as well as in my own life. Believing that the premises for some family policies were faulty, I imagined how damaging they might be to people in families, and calculated that damaged families may well struggle to provide optimum love and life conditions for their children. My interest in the wellbeing of families which constitute single mothers and their children was inextricably linked to my stories of caring for my own children, including during periods of time when I was a single parent. My own stories of family and wellbeing were embedded in the life processes which I describe below.

### **Introducing my story**

For this study, my experience of mothering along with anecdotes from other women at similar stages of life invoked a number of questions with implications for the safety and wellbeing of women and their children. These questions are situated here in the outline of my life – my living life as inquiry – as the energy from which my PhD focus is generated. The stories which I tell of my life prior to the formulation of my research are resonant with ways of seeing the world recognised in particular orientations of thinking such as feminist theory and conscientization. These ways are introduced in this Chapter and are followed in the next Chapter as foundations for particular research methodologies and emerging methods. Having embedded social construction as a standpoint from which to view the world and my dwelling in it, I position my own life

story as an autoethnographic contribution as well as a place from which to articulate theoretical traditions.

I committed to being honest and insightful about who I was and how my sense of self might be positively engaged in the shaping the research study. Researcher reflexivity in this study included an understanding of ‘insider research’ practices, and the implementation of particular researcher methods and self-monitoring, both of which are discussed later in this Chapter.

### **Nursing practice: Making a difference: Teleological considerations**

Understanding that wherever I worked once qualified as a nurse, I might make a positive difference in someone’s life, I was struck by the story of a small boy walking along a beach strewn with dying starfish, picking up as many as possible and throwing them into the waves. The boy is told by an onlooker that he cannot possibly make a difference to so many dying starfish. He replies that “at least it made a difference to that one”, as he throws each starfish back into the water. The possibility of making the world a better place, even on a microcosmic basis, has always guided my nursing practice and later, my research intent. The realisation that research endeavour, as well as the more openly-lauded endeavours such as nursing or mothering could be life-changing, inspired me.

The legacy of consciousness-raising, ‘conscientization’, resistance and education possible through research endeavour, values generated by Paulo Freire (1994, 1998, 2015) offers direction for researchers who seek to challenge existing social and political structures such as government ministries, employment, policy and other structures which have vested interests in particular ways of constructing the lives of women and children. I became interested in research explicitly focused upon the improvement of wellbeing and hopefulness among participants, and if possible, other readers. As such, my research characterises action research.

## **Action-oriented research methodologies**

According to Olesen (2000), valuable research must not only report upon, but also transform, human wellbeing, making a noticeable difference to participants and other ‘stakeholders’ who are the focus of the researcher. Such improvements or transformations may take the form of a more hopeful approach to one’s pursuits, a renewed sense of purpose or courage, and other shifts in capacity and flourishing (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Being interested in research explicitly focused upon the improvement of wellbeing and hopefulness among participants, and if possible, other readers, my research characterises action research. Investigating action research methodologies allows me to make use of theories which contribute to transformative research methods.

While my project did not completely constitute some definitions or modes of action research, I demonstrated action-oriented ways of thinking to inform myself and offer benefit to the project and participants (Maguire, 2001). In particular, my beliefs about the socially-constructed nature of (what passes for) knowledge, ideals relating to empowerment and emancipation of participants, and a desire to situate my research in the lived worlds of participants’ daily lives, led me to consider the contributions that action research can make toward my research (Reason & Marshall, 2008). Action research is generated out of epistemological positions in which knowledge is positioned as ‘under construction’ and open to critique in the context of social and historical forces, according to Reason and Bradbury (2001). Thus action-oriented methods sat well with my epistemological leanings influenced by social constructionist thought. Reason and Bradbury (2001) argue that action research ought to embrace “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview” (p. 1). My intention was to reflect upon stories shared by participants, which highlight the “worthwhile human purposes” inherent in our lives. This was in keeping with my

desire to “seek to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 1). According to Maguire (2001), action researchers base their learning upon lived lives and everyday experiences rather than abstract concepts or theories. Reason and Bradbury (2008) posit that action research methods enable researchers to offer creative responses to real-life pressures, some of which are of central importance to a life well lived in the context of one’s community, family or other organisational structure.

The deliberate troubling of traditionally clear boundary lines between researcher and participant, or attempts to erase barriers between researcher and participant, are characteristics of action-oriented projects wherein relationships are rewritten as co-participant and co-researcher (Maguire, 2001). Unsettling power relations by disrupting old ways of perspectivising viewpoints might enable my views to potentially shift. This quest, couched in the context of feminist inquiry, appealed to my desire for power-levelling practices in my research practice (Atweh, Kemmis & Weeks, 1998).

I needed to be willing to collaborate with participants in order for those issues which were most pressing for them to become visible. My demonstration of such willingness to collaborate would rest upon an explicit level of openness between myself and participants, risking complications of attempting to negotiate meanings and issues articulated by participants, in order to arrive at more profound understandings of research phenomena (Vickers, 2011). I resolved to be clear about my intent to ‘empower’ others, by articulating and reflexively revisiting my own position (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

### **Action research and feminist ideas**

Worldviews claimed by action researchers often overlap with the positions held by researchers in critical theory, feminist theory, and other theoretical positions or methods understood to be qualitative (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The shared “mandate for social justice” (p. xxiv) of such ideas, enables the judicious use of several bodies of theory which are explicated in this chapter. Marshall and Reason (2008) exercise an interest in gender studies and power relations informed by, and informing, the researcher’s own experience of life beside what they might wish to potentiate or transform in the world via action-oriented discovery. The authors posit that action research can be seen as a political process when used to challenge power structures which harbour inequality or suffering. Action research and feminist theory are commonly focused upon human experience, in particular those experiences in need of challenge or transformation, including disadvantage, oppression, or issues to do with women’s experiences of being devalued or exploited (Marshall & Reason, 2008). Conditions of life in which difficulty can be voiced, among them disability, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation create webs of social positioning in which oppression can be experienced (Hood, Mayall & Oliver, 1999). Feminist and action researchers commonly carry a will to highlight and trouble the networks of power relations, dynamics and structures in society that contribute to the ongoing subjugation of women and others (Maguire, 2001). Maguire also identifies core feminist threads of refrains including gender, identity, power, everyday experience, and oppressive elements which weave in and out of one another, as significant in both action-oriented and feminist research methodologies. The shared focus of interested researchers upon lived experiences of life or that which begins, according to feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1992) “in the actualities of women’s experience” (p. 8) provides a methodological common-ground. Diversity within definitions and methodological frameworks of feminist inquiry, along with plural definitions and applications of action research, provide space for action research and feminist theories to be used conjunctively in research. Liz Stanley (2012) posits feminism as the will to change (and not merely describe or observe) the world. Her sentiments echo Atweh, Kemmis and Weeks (1998) in their action-oriented quests for social justice, and for

transformation along social, structural, and even personal lines. Others in this vein include Greenwood and Levin (1998), and Lather (1991).

In studies of women's lives, discussions of gender take place in the form of making sense of sex role stereotypes (Kinser, 2012), gendered identities (O'Reilly, 2012), sexual division of labour (Green, 2012), ideas about what is to be considered 'appropriately' masculine/feminine (O'Reilly, 2012), and feminist critiques of binary/dichotomous views of motherhood (O'Reilly, 2012). Similarly, action research has been used to destabilise taken-for-granted 'assumptions and binaries' of gendered identities (Marshall & Reason, 2008), thus useful for change in organisations.

Research into women's lives commonly draws on feminist thought articulated by such writers as Reinharz (1992) and Cotterill (1992), who defend feminist research as the outcome of researcher intention to make sense of human personal experiences, to forge research topics and relationship with participants, including experiences of pregnancy, motherhood, illness, and family roles (1992). Ann Oakley's (1981, 2000, 2015) work over many years with women, including within the context of childbearing and rearing, exemplifies the work of researchers who forge relationships based on aspects of commonality with participants. Cotterill (1992), Oakley (1981), and Reinharz (1992), resonate with the insights offered by feminist contributors Belenky (1986) and Gilligan (1982). Each has made significant contributions to feminist research in terms of research conducted by, for, and about women, demonstrated for example, in women interviewing other women (Oakley, 1981), and seeking to be accepted and disclosed to, on the basis of a form of assumed shared identity as women (Reinharz, 1992). In my research practice, my gendered identity as a woman, while not a universal experience among women, was central to my telling of my life in work and personal spheres. Such centrality would rest upon my experience of gender made clear in my nursing career, motherhood and research, a sentiment highlighted by Gatenby & Humphries (2000).

## Encountering motherhood from ‘outside’

In my third year of undergraduate nursing education, while working in a children’s medical ward, I realised that my desire to ‘make a difference’ might be potentiated by working with children and their families. I was struck by *First Call for Children* (1990a), a position statement published by UNICEF, wherein children are located as those who are physically and socially vulnerable during a period of rapid cognitive, emotional and physical development. The document posits that children and young people should be the first to benefit from society’s benefits, and the last to suffer the costs of societal (policy and legal) decisions. Working with children would provide me with a human face of work immediately valuable in many ways. Caring for sick children and their families showed me that one of the best facilitators of healing and wellbeing for children was the support given by nurses and others, to the families of sick children, as family is deemed the context in which child wellbeing can best be realised (UNICEF, 2007). Most often the child’s family in hospital consisted of the mother, as resident caregiver and conduit to the child (Darbyshire, 2015). The social and political positioning of children within the context of their family is discussed further in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis. When mothers were supported in ways such as the provision of meals or moral support, I noticed they were more confident and effective in caring for their children. This noticing is supported in research by Carpenter and Austin (2007) and Darbyshire (2015) in studies of the mother-child dyad in healthcare. Moreover, mothers who cared for their children in the stressful and foreign hospital environment, constructed by hospital workers as ‘good mothers’, were those who could successfully negotiate the disruptive and changeable hospital setting, a finding noticed by Darbyshire (1994, 2015). Constructions of mothers as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ occurred among staff judgements made about observable mothering behaviour, the (sometimes unpredictable) outcomes of their children, and other chance phenomena. Such positions have been highlighted by Silva (1996) in her collected edition examining the economic and social positioning of single parent families and the mothers who lead them, based on policy and socio-political discourse from the 1990s. In my practice, I noted many mothers of sick children continuing somehow to



manage the needs of other children and family members, along with paid work and other multiple commitments. I noticed many doing so as single parents, fulfilling the needs of their children with little to no outside support. Well mothers were crucial to their children's wellbeing.

### **Troubling the 'experts': who is to know?**

In my practice, the experiences of mothers as they tended to their children were of interest in keeping with my interest in mother-child relationships and their potential to recover and flourish, interest mirrored in studies by Carpenter and Austin (2007) and Darbyshire (2015). Seeking feedback from the families I cared for regarding their health beliefs, illness experience, and levels of pain and comfort, I observed that the inherent and underlying local knowledge about what mothers needed for themselves or their children, commonly ran counter to the institutional understandings regarding those mothers. As such, I reasoned, it constituted a type of knowing termed 'local knowledge' (Yanow, 2004). Organisational theorist Dvora Yanow (2004), in a study of how knowledge becomes valued within organisations, theorises local knowledge as "the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience" (p. S12). I considered such local knowledges embedded in the acts of mothering, to be pivotal and worth investigating, and I sought to optimise the potential for women to story themselves as knowledgeable and able. Many women have been encouraged to believe they lack any advanced understanding of what is beneficial to them and should trust the "experts" – nurses (including myself) and others, acting on institutional logic. Dally (1982) and Ehrenreich and English (1979) document this emergence of medical expertise and its effect upon mothers' diminishing sense of confidence and competence during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I observed the positioning of such women taking place in the discursive behaviours of mothers themselves, other family members, and even well-meaning health workers, a noticing documented by Bryder (2003). This corresponds with a large body of research in which medical and psychological researchers claim an

understanding of how to keep families well, which is sometimes at odds with mothers' knowledge (Dally, 1982; Ehrenreich & English, 1979). The positioning in social literature of institutional (including health professionals' (including myself)) knowledge as 'expert' contrasts with less-understood, 'unscientific' understandings of mothers, understandings which were hinted at but rarely given expression in research literature. In my nursing practice, nursing and medical documentation such as assessment or care planning forms made little mention of maternal involvement or knowing in care.

The juxtaposition of expert and local or personal knowledge was a source of dissonance for me which would provoke particular questions in my research conversations. Such dissonances are examined by critical organisational scholars Seo and Creed (2002), whose discussion of institutional paradoxes begins with the contradictions exposed as institutional members seek agency and emancipation, whilst being constituted within hegemonic logic "firmly rooted in taken-for-granted rules, norms, and routines" (p. 222). Seo and Creed (2002) propose an awareness of institutional contradictions as pointers toward change, as practitioners become aware of "various ruptures and inconsistencies both among and within the established social arrangements" (p. 225). In accordance with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) positing of a symbolic universe, ruptures and inconsistencies coined by Seo and Creed (2002) as "contradictory reality", otherwise gathered into a hegemonic whole, could be noticed and used to formulate a shift in "consciousness and action" to "change the present order" (p. 225). Seo and Creed's (2002) discussion of the paradox of embedded institutional hegemonic ways of being among which seams of change or subversion, such as the voices of mothers, can be noted, offers ways to view the paradox such as that between the views of those in professional bodies devoted to care of families, and the families themselves.

Yanow's (2004) emphasis upon local knowledges is not without caution: the prospect that mothers will act in accordance with others' expectations of their assumed intuition or notions of 'mothering instinct' to inform their actions, is understood by authors such as counselling psychologist Kaethe Weingarten (1994), to silence women when they

feel uncertain or bewildered at the mothering situations they experience. I believed the tentative holding of a not-yet-knowing stance to be an acceptable position, at times, for all co-inquirers. In my research inquiry I pursued methods which would enable participants and myself to identify our existing knowledge and to contribute to research methodology literatures with insights from our experience. I hoped that such a facilitation of meaning-making would be powerful for women in the study to enhance their capacity to make decisions which would be fruitful and generative (Reinharz, 1992). Believing that people's level of optimism influences levels of courage, health and resilience, all life-giving elements for families, I also believed that some level of wisdom, knowledge and hope resided within mothers, each a potentially powerful agent of change and emancipation, even amongst challenging circumstances in which uncertainty – even bewilderment - coexisted beside knowledge.

## **Academia**

My move into teaching practice with undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing students, including women and men, older and younger, some mothers, but many not, harboured questions posed by students, inviting philosophical discussion of the health, wellbeing and safety of children and the families of which they were part. The responsibilities for wellbeing of children and their families are typically laid squarely and often solely at the feet of mothers, according to Dally (1982), Kinser (2010), and Nathanson and Tuley (2016). Personal and media accounts of troubled families in sensational news stories support the view that if only mothers would organise themselves, children would be well, and families protected from harm (Hamilton & Hamilton Wilson, 2009). Examples in my purview included the case of Lindy Chamberlain, falsely convicted of murdering her own baby (*For the term of her natural life*, 1984). Fleeting news headlines highlighted mothers who left babies alone in cars to die while they gambled or took drugs. One mother in New Zealand was convicted of manslaughter, after leaving her young daughter in the care of family members who tortured and beat the child to death while the mother worked twelve-hour shifts in another town (*Murdered*

*toddler Nia Glassie's killer mother back in prison*, 2016). A more nuanced view highlights the impossibility of being a 'perfect' or even 'good' mother, even outside of sensationalised events such as these. I sought an engagement with ideas about mothers as subjugated people, whilst being moral, spiritual and economic guardians of their families. In New Zealand, registered nurses are expected to understand and make use of 'evidence-based practice', by which they judge the research which is used to base practice decisions upon, according to its supposed rigor in terms of use of positivist scientific method.

### **Encountering motherhood from 'inside'**

Having worked as a children's nurse, having investigated research about families, and now believing I had robust knowledge of babies, families and mothers including myself, I was shocked to find mothering my own three young children, born within three and a half years of each other, to be the most difficult work I had yet encountered. Managing, often alone, the sometimes-unpredictable and demanding needs and behaviours of infants and toddlers on an unending 24-hour-a-day basis, was an unexpectedly tiring and lonely experience. I wondered why nobody had told me it was so difficult – or had they, and I was unable to 'hear' it? I came to understand the struggle to be a 'good mother' – happy, fulfilled, positive, energetic – through the critical lens procured by Adrienne Rich: "What woman, in the solitary confinement of a life at home enclosed with young children, or in the struggle to mother them while providing for them single-handedly, or in the conflict of weighing her own personhood against the dogma that she is a mother, first, last, and always – what woman has not dreamed of 'going over the edge', of simply letting go..." (1976, p. 279). In becoming a mother, I realised for myself that "something which was considered central to the lives of women, fulfilling even in its sorrows, a key to the meaning of life" (p. 15) was, in Rich's words again, dominated by "anxiety, physical weariness, anger, self-blame, boredom, and division within myself: a division made more acute by the moments of passionate love, delight in my children's spirited bodies and minds, amazement at how

they went on loving me in spite of my failures to love them wholly and selflessly” (p. 15). I reflected on my own relationship with my mother, and what she might have experienced during the 1960s and 1970s, becoming a mother. I thought back to my grandmothers who I had hardly known, but who had raised their children during the Second World War, with limited food and support. I wondered how the deep, conflicted experience of mothering, felt in all tones and shades by so many people in the world, could have remained so invisible and unquestioned to me, even as I worked with mothers and children. From my location in female-dominated professions – nursing, social practice academia, and arrival ‘on the other side’ as in becoming a mother - feminist theories of the world in which women’s lives were given new, deep and resonant telling by those such as Rich, were important.

### **Engaging with feminist theory**

Feminist expressions guiding beliefs about the location of the subjugation, oppression and exploitation of women, are diverse, according to feminist organisational scholars Calas and Smircich (1996, 2006), encompassing liberal, radical, postcolonial and Marxist locations. Calas and Smircich posit feminist thought as a result of the illumination of inequities experienced by women across economic, political and social spheres. A common feature of feminist critique includes intellectual and activist intent to highlight and contest the devaluing of women’s experiences across political, economic and social domains, which flow into literature, media and everyday conversation, according to Maguire (2001). Stanley (2012) argues that feminist theories have congealed into a compelling orientation to meaning-making, in which women are deemed to occupy particular modes of existence in the world which are disempowering to them.

### **Radical feminist thought**

Radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Mary Daly (1973) locate a moment of disempowerment in the biological reality/necessity/fact of becoming a mother. Among the range of feminist theories, those radical theorists identified or identifying as maternal theorists, locate women's disempowerment in the biological necessity of having a baby, and the social construction of the mother. These scholars include Adrienne Rich (1976), Ann Oakley (1981, 2000, 2015) and more latterly, Andrea O'Reilly (2007, 2012). They argue that biological sex, and motherhood in particular, signals the root of women's oppression. Rich (1976) posited motherhood in dual ways: as an oppressive, patriarchal institution governing women's practices with their children, and as a potentially empowering practice in which women defy the demands of the institutions they find themselves within.

Institutional demands upon mothers became more visible to me in the midst of my own mothering world. Shadowed by a background as a family and children's nurse, and now a teacher of antenatal/childbirth and new parenting classes, I became re-familiarised with now deeply-personalised discourses in which mothers were positively and negatively stereotyped – in research text, media snapshots, and conversations. Inconsistent societal judgements about 'good' and 'bad' mothers, mothers who worked or those who stayed home, those who spent 'quality time' with their children, 'dysfunctional' families, and 'normal' family life, became visible to me as not-inevitable constructions. In spite of my growing awareness of construction of mothers, my assessment of myself and other mothers, was echoed. I was unsettled but still being involuntarily shaped by these discourses in my assessments of other families. Understanding the disciplinary effects of these contested guides (as implied truth), I also recognised that while all meanings may be thought to be contestable in theory, commonly-held constructions of mothers are inherited and imposed, and rarely contested as they become institutionalised. I saw potential in a troubling contestation of meaning, with implications for mothering practice, my own and others'. The contradictions between prevailing images of mothers in soft-focus advertisements and messages about mothering as a sacred calling, beside the mundane, sometimes profane, and frustrating experiences I and my friends shared, experiences which limited our

meaning-making interpretations of our lives as mothers as well as our beliefs about ourselves as worthwhile people, were evident to me. The limitations extended by construction contributed to a silencing of mothers, which inhibited our wellbeing, and by association, our children's wellbeing also.

Finding voice is a common quest in feminist theory, according to Belenky (1986), Gilligan (1982), and Maguire (2001), speaking as feminists urging women to find ways to speak from and about one's own experience. These and other women researchers interrupt the soft-focus discourses of family life, following the feminist traditions set out by Beauvoir and Friedan in second-wave feminist movements whereby women's dissatisfaction at their casting as only-mothers, found voice. I wondered what new meanings could be forged from our experiences, that might reframe our experiences and enhance our mothering. I became interested in what could be said, by whom, and in what context, and what (and how) particular ideas are limited in popular forums and in literature.

### **Married with children**

When I became the lone caregiver of my three young children after separating from my husband, my continued navigation of mothering, now alone, along with the challenges of fulltime employment and the desire to undertake further post-graduate study involved continual negotiation, and sometimes conflict, of each person's wellbeing, along with social expectations of how we would exist 'as a family'. The conflict between individuals' needs and the welfare of everyone was a constant theme. Balancing each child's needs with my own, with varying external supports and financial constraints, was an exhausting juggling act, fluently documented in academic research by Scott, Dex and Joshi (2008). It is also documented in popular books by Crabb (2014), Douglas and Michaels (2004), and Hochschild (2003). Surprisingly however, I noticed that mostly, we were thriving, more than I had been led to believe

that lone mothers and their children did. This insight was not visible in research literature about one-parent households, such as studies by Amato (2000) or Chapple (2009). I marvelled at the number of women I met who (with much less support and financial wellbeing than I) survived and thrived even while struggling, along with their families, in the midst of social and economic constraints and a persistent stigma attached to ‘fatherless families’ and ‘solo mums’.

A confluence of personal circumstances, professional experiences and academic interests, the “living life as inquiry” coined by Judi Marshall (1999) led to my proposal to study wellbeing of mothers and children in this thesis. In keeping with my intent to make a difference, and my understanding of the gaps in the literature that a study of mothering in an autoethnographic vein might add to current knowledge of families and wellbeing, I sought to explore mothers’ lives. I carried the intent to encourage their wellbeing on an ongoing basis as a result of the research project, and to offer inspiration to other mothers who may happen across the study and participants.

### **My real-world research: *Living Life as Inquiry***

Marshall (1999) applies “notions of inquiry as method to many...professional and personal activities” (p. 2), not just those thought to align themselves with formal, professional research pursuits. Proposing that even apparently non-research-related phenomena are valuable and worthy of notice in the lives of researchers, Marshall posits any and all of life’s interesting questions, dilemmas and formative experiences as potential research topics, not only those lofty, ‘pure’ (as opposed to applied) topics of research, which traditionally remained unsullied by the messy, complex vagaries of our ‘real’ lives. According to Marshall (1999), research ideas can be “generated and tested throughout (one’s) life space” (p. 2), a process which I had previously undertaken in my thinking about myself as a mother, and continue in this study: “being inquisitive, curious and open to testing self and others” (p. 2). A loosening of the traditional boundary between research and the rest of life, is potentially immeasurably



“enriching” (Marshall, 1999, p. 4) for one’s personal and professional wellbeing, and provides a basis for this thesis. Together with Reason (2008), Marshall validates the reflection of researchers’ own “lives and themes” and “personal process” (p. 2) in their areas of study.

### **Positioning myself inside an inquiry**

In keeping with the personal and professional influences which had combined to form a study centred on motherhood, I crafted an investigation which resonated personally with me. My thesis was what some would deem ‘insider’ research; that is, carried out by a person who identifies with research phenomena and/or participants on a personal level. Researchers who believe they have “insider knowledge” of the experiences divulged by participants, by virtue of their own social positioning or life experience, may wish to work with people with whom they feel they have an affinity or belonging.

Yakushko, Badiee, Mallory and Wang (2011) describe their research orientation toward being of use and assistance to their communities of origin. They report noticing the changes in themselves occurring as a result of their moving away from communities of origin, or changes in their education levels and material privilege. These shifts potentially change or diminish their sense of belonging in the community, yet the researchers express the wish to be useful and transformative: “None of us are doing this work because we are forced into it, and a realisation that we are part of something bigger than ourselves through our communities is rewarding. Learning along the way through our challenges seems only to add to our resolve to keep increasing our awareness, self-understanding, and courage.” (Yakushko et al., 2011, p. 290). While valuing the potential for research to make a difference in people’s lives, these writers caution researchers against simply believing they belong in a group without noticing the differences in power, knowledge or intentions, between researcher and participant. Rappaport (2000) describes storying methods as “tools” used in community participatory research to “turn tales of terror into tales of joy” (p. 7) in community

organisations. Rappaport writes that the knowledge shared between researchers and participants “unite(s) writer, text and reader in a participatory enterprise” (p. 11), blurring the boundaries between researcher and participant. However, this shared enterprise with participants was not to be confused with the expectation that our stories would necessarily coalesce. Focusing upon women’s everyday experiences, Gatenby & Humphries (2000), Lather (1991) and Oakley (1979, 2000) posit that women express many variations and conflicts within the stories of their experiences. Oakley (2015) advocates for solidarity and alliances among women based upon these differences rather than attempting to appear homogenous. Mutual sharing of our experiences would need to take place with the space for stories to diverge and vary.

According to Reinharz (1992), researchers who bring insider knowledge of the worlds of study participants have much to offer in contributing to useful findings. Personal experiences, manifested as a “need to know”, enable researchers to draw on an “epistemology of insiderness” in which the writer makes use of the interrelatedness of the research process and personal experiences, experiences previously deemed unresearchable in academic research, a finding echoed by Oakley (2000). My interest in the wellbeing of people in families constituted by single mothers and their children was inextricably linked to my stories of caring as a nurse, and for my own children and myself as a parent and sole parent. I found I could relate to the research experiences of Corbin Dwyer & Buckle (2009): “Perhaps the issue of being an insider or outsider conducting research with parents has to do with the emotional aspect of parenting. Parenting is pervasive, affecting (almost) every decision I make” (p. 56-57).

Writers such as Corbin Dwyer & Buckle (2009), discussing their research into aspects of parenting, position themselves “firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it. The stories of participants are immediate and real to us... We cannot retreat to a distant researcher role. Just as our personhood affects the analysis, so, too, the analysis affects our personhood.” (p. 61)

Reinharz (1992) and Oakley (2000) caution against researchers conveying themselves in either/or terms as “inside” or “outside” roles beside participants. These dualistic terms, they say, risk obscuring significant dynamics of researcher/participant partnerships including differences in power, knowledge, resources and intent. Labelling myself as an insider, I was in danger of failing to recognise the ways in which participants’ lives might be dissimilar to mine. Griffith (1998) explores research in which the researcher might partially belong ‘in’ the group, but lack some understanding if not all of participants’ characteristics, holding that this is a valid position when acknowledged reflexively. Ergun and Erdimir (2010) posit that a researcher’s identity is transformed “along (the) continuum between insiderness and outsiderness” (p. 16). The authors quote Kusow (2003) who states that one cannot be simply an insider or outsider, and that the boundary between such is fluid and shifting. Such shifts might occur according to time, perspective, performances of duties or work, or titles. Differences and shifts such as these would provide insight explored through this thesis and made clear in my research findings.

Kanuha (2000) identifies the tension between insider and outsider, depicted as the “hyphen of insider-outsider” (p. 443). Corbin Dwyer & Buckle (2009) explore this “space between” “not as a path but as a dwelling place for people” (p. 60) – so that insider and outsider are not disparate destinations, but a space occupied by the researcher. Being in this space, the writers say, is complex – one can never be fully inside or fully outside; the researcher adopts a near-to inside or near-to outside position, according to the variance of commonalities and differences. They say: “We posit that the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one’s research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience” (p. 59). Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) claim that the possibilities for occupying this space between insider and outsider go beyond traditionally-distant researcher roles, to offer the potential of “a deeper appreciation of the present moment” for the researcher” (p. 59). Drawing from their insight, I perceived the risks of insider-positioning to include my own “heightened sense of vulnerability” (p. 61), a sense which I hoped would remind

me to tread carefully in the research process, and behave in a way which would not only meet University ethical requirements but would keep myself and participants safe on an emotional and psychological level, now and after the study finished. Ethical requirements are discussed in the context of methodological choices in Chapter Three.

### **Insider research and autoethnography**

Along with insider positioning, autoethnographic inquiry provides a means for researcher to join with participants and to include findings from their own life in research interests (Grant, 2009). By locating myself inside a study of mothers, I adopted a level of commonality with respondents as women, mothers and single mothers. I believed I would relate to the experiences and stories I expected to hear through the study. Rather than attempting to remain outside of the research material generated by women, I sought a personal, potentially life-changing connection with the process and with participants. Corbin Dwyer & Buckle (2009) led me to Sidebotham (2003) a paediatrician and social science researcher, whose “personal and professional roles added to his research (into parenting), and through his research he learned what he might never have through his personal and professional experience” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.61). Sidebotham (2003) describes how his identity as a parent is affected by his extensive medical knowledge, and vice versa. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle discuss their experiences of conducting research as insider mothers: “I develop knowledge that will not only enhance understanding of the experience but also will assist me personally and help my children as it could help me become a better parent” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 56).

Including myself as a participant allowed me to entertain the potential for my story to contribute to the study. In addition to conducting an inquiry among participants whom I believed I had much in common with, I proposed to appropriately contribute my own unfolding experience in a mother-led household. This was an experience shaded by nursing experience, mothering experience, and an emerging understanding of social

processes which made our subjective reality appear in certain hues only. My choice of auto-ethnographic framing in a study with participants is exemplified by Harrison (2009), in a study about the development of doctoral identity in postgraduate students, including herself as one student. Grant (2009) uses her own experience as a mental health service user to analyse mental health nursing practice. My interest in the wellbeing of families which constitute single mothers and their children was inextricably linked to my mothering stories of caring for my own children, as well as to stories shared among my friends, acquaintances and contemporaries who were also mothers. I intended the research process to provide opportunities for me to deepen my own understanding of life in my family and motherled household.

In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar (1996) legitimises the self in writing. Inclusion of narrative from her life and history validated my intent to include threads from my life in the research project. Behar's articulation of remembering chimed with my hopes for the research. Her consideration of the lives of families – and in places, mothers – for example, where she says that “women think back through their mothers...” (p. 94) resonated. Autoethnographic intentions correspond with my stated ethic that research should be transformative, useful, and life-changing in some way, for me perhaps, as well as for participants or readers (Grant, 2009). I hoped for new developments or challenges for participants. According to Behar (1996) and Harrison (2009), the inclusion of researcher stories amplifies the stories told by participants. Nuance is added to the implications of the study. The interaction between participant and researcher, or co-participant, can produce new insight for both (Harrison, 2009). Participants might be challenged or helped by hearing the researcher say something they had thought but could not say, breaking the silence on an experience of some sort. Grant (2009) demonstrates how, rather than appearing impervious to the movements and tragedies encountered in research inquiry, the autoethnographic researcher instead reflects vulnerability in appropriate ways allowing the reader - or participant - to see themselves reflected in the thesis. Autoethnographic researchers must be robustly reflexive, self-aware and careful about disclosing in ways which might challenge or threaten participants. My intention to pursue self-inclusive methods signalled my

offering of myself as a starting or punctuating point to encourage open dialogue for others. Embodying an autoethnographic thread to the study also encouraged my hope for transformative possibilities in my own life, including a hope for a deepened understanding of myself and my family. Extending my own understanding of the subject topic, I entertained the possibility that my own life and worldview may change or develop.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) provide a thorough explication of ways in which the researcher's story can be told or included, including terms such as personal narratives, critical autobiography, confessional tales or ethnobiography to differentiate among methods of inquiry in which the researcher is positioned as participant in the research. Articulating the differences among such terms, Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2013, p. 23) describe the differentiation of each term as "a complex and uncertain activity". These authors stipulate that autoethnographic researchers must purposefully use their experiences to foster critique and comment upon cultural phenomenon such as and cultural practices, "interrogating the nuances" of cultural practice (p. 22). Moreover, including a focus upon oneself is only worth doing if it proves foundational to the thesis or argument, "not a decorative flourish" nor disclosure for the sake of it (Adams et al., 2013). Behar (1996) also believes that the research must provide a path or insight that would not otherwise be possible: "the exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to" (p. 14). The researcher must convincingly link their own experience to the research study. This requires a rigorous comprehension of what drives the researcher: "What aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world, and more particular the topic being studied" (p. 14). Adams et al. (2013) posit that the researcher's account must contribute to research, going beyond storytelling for the sake of it, to reflect a continuing scholarly understanding of such cultural practices. They warn that writers who share their own experience expose themselves to criticism or charges of "self-indulgence or narcissism" (Adams et al., 2013, p. 24). This correlates with Behar's claim to researcher vulnerability, in which she views the autoethnographic writer as "more vulnerable and situated" (p. 29) than under previously-adopted researcher

stances, a stance corresponding with Grant (2009). Behar writes that she wants “to know where (the authors) are coming from. What is at stake for them in their critiques?” (p. 169). A vulnerable writer or observer, Behar thinks, requires skill and “willingness to flow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea” (p. 13), producing a vulnerable response in the reader. Such responses cannot be entirely forecasted by the researcher, unable to fully know in advance what will open up or happen, or where the work will take the researcher/participant. Judi Marshall writes: “I do not, however, want to tell ‘confessional tales’ to no purpose (but they may sometimes be to valuable purposes) or to make myself or others vulnerable. This is an edge which needs awareness, and when we write from inquiry it requires appropriate signalling” (1999, p. 4). Adams et al. (2013) urge autoethnographers to forge mutual relationships of listening and sharing with their readers. The authors intend that others will respond and relate to what they write, and that audience members will be called into a relationship with the writer “as part of an ongoing conversation with the work” (Adams et al., 2013, p. 25). Behar (1996) writes that autoethnographic methods of inquiry are not universally-applicable, but if adopted they must be done well, risking more problems if poorly implemented than a poorly executed positivistic style. “Efforts at self-revelation flop, not because the personal voice has not been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinised the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed” (p. 14). In order to scrutinise such connections, it is necessary for the author to clarify where they are writing from and why they believe they have a stake in the work they are writing about. I reflected this intent in the following journal entry:

***Researcher journal: Wednesday May 20, 2015 (Happy birthday to me)***

*I have such a dilemma about how to posit my study with my own experience of being/not being a single parent or motherled household. Some in single parent communities of friends, workmates, Facebook communities or interest pages, might deny my place in a lone parent community or as an insider. I am unsettled at how my circumstances contribute to my categoriness and my representation in the thesis and beyond. Do I lack credibility to write about motherled households and single parent families? Upon*

*what do I base my legitimacy as an insider? The 'criteria' for single parents/motherled households is so contested and the terrain so variable (custody, income, parenting arrangements, support, to name but a few). This uncomfortable position and no-man's-land is part of my orientation to the whole thesis – an early puzzle of the irresistible power of 'categories' and classifications and categorisation – allowing someone (else) to measure... predict... control... the whole purpose of positivist research... the lifeblood of politicians and policymakers...*

## **Reflexive researcher positioning**

Linda Finlay's (2002) description of the "explicit, self-aware analysis of (the researcher's) own role" (p. 532) reflects her intention to expose the researcher who may shy away from reflexive practices if they prove uncomfortably confronting. Finlay (2002) writes of research in health professions in which, she says, qualitative inquiry is found to be trustworthy and of 'integrity' when researcher reflexivity is used to direct the analysis of research; in particular, the "explicit, self-aware meta-analysis of the research process" (p. 531) enabling this. Suggesting a process which includes assessing "the impact of the position, perspective and presence of the researcher" (p. 532), Finlay (2002) includes the researcher's responses to participants and research material as worthy of scrutiny. For me, "thoughtful, conscious self-awareness" (Finlay, 2002, p. 532) observances such as those described by Finlay required frequent reiteration in my thinking and writing; however, the regular assessment of my responses and thoughts, interactions with participants and the project, were a necessary ethical element. Reminding myself that in this project, I was not merely collecting data, I would be helping to actually shape it and construct it as I went, cautioned me against becoming complacent. In keeping with Heidegger's (1962, cited in Finlay, 2002, p. 534) argument that "each person will perceive the same phenomenon in a different way; each person brings to bear his or her lived experience, specific understandings, and historical background" I realised that the "cultural baggage" described by nursing scholars Foster, McAllister and O'Brien (2005, p. 2), which I brought, inevitably



shaped the questions and outcomes of my research. This notion of cultural baggage had been made clear to me by Ramsden (2016), and by Wepa (2016) in their belief that all researchers, practitioners and others, are bearers of culture in their actions, writings and research directions, and that such baggage must be thoughtfully packed, unpacked, and carried.

My taking pains to demonstrate reflexivity in my unfolding inquiry was based upon my intent for goodwill in the lives of participants. Yet my concern extended also to my family as I realised that I would produce a research document in which my life experiences would be outlined, and this would include events which had affected my loved ones, principally my children and husband. I had been through a marriage breakup and had struggled at times to care for myself and my children. Over time I was rebuilding a relationship with my husband. There was plenty of potential for me to be upset or even derailed by what I read and discussed with participants. It was the real stuff of my life, and not an abstract research topic. Things unknown to my children or partner would be exposed in my thesis, and this might also provoke a response from them or me. I did not seek to suppress this but hoped that an ensuing carefulness in my writing and thinking would pave the way for sensitive topics to be managed in ways that respected their feelings and experiences.

## **Chapter summary**

In this Chapter I have posited the theoretical notion of social construction as a paradigm which makes the study of particular ways of knowing possible. In contrast with tenets of logical positivism, social constructionist thought is based on understandings that what is believed by people to be true, and understood as reality, is a narration of shared and collective processes of construction and meaning-making between people. These meanings inform understandings of reality, and influence human interactions and experiences through the stories about people which become normalised and taken for granted as truth (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Such stories may be more or less

consciously conveyed or absorbed. They may be a site of conscious [re]negotiation of meaning. These interactions and experiences may shape perceptions which reinforce certain subjective and objective realities which then come to shape people and situations in a reciprocal way. My inclusion of my own storied research journey included an account of how I came to find social construction a useful paradigm, and my recognition of the beneficial potential in a process of living life as inquiry (Marshall, 1999). I have come to position this research project as a product of many experiences and influences which have shaped my world as researcher, mother, nurse and scholar. I have interspersed significant aspects and events of my life, to include my nursing and postgraduate education, nursing practice, my journey as a mother in a motherled household, and my deep desire to make a difference in all of these pursuits. I understand 'making a difference' in the context of this research project to include shifts in thinking, practice and relationships, mine and others', which stories, understood to be in construction, might contribute to. My intent to make a difference characterises an action-oriented research project with deeply meaningful and transformative potential, for me and for others who take part in or who read this thesis, a project informed by the writing of Marshall and Reason (2008). Inclusion of my own story has led me to make use of autoethnographic principles of self-storying such as those developed by Behar (1996), Ellis (2000), Grant (2009), Harrison (2009) and Adams et al. (2013). Exploring the cultural values and landscape of events significant in my life, which shape how I live and the inquiry I have undertaken for in this thesis. My concern for the wellbeing of mothers and children has drawn me toward established feminist writers such as Oakley (2000), Rich (1976) and O'Reilly (2007). Their centralising of the experiences of mothers informs me in the development of methods of inquiry which resonate with the experiences of mothers in this project.

In the next Chapter, my selection and defence of research methodologies oriented toward action-oriented, transformative intents, autoethnographic principles including reflexivity, and feminist orientations, is developed into interpretive methods of knowing (as meaning-making). Conversations in which women shared their stories with me, women whose experiences of wellbeing in their motherled household hold

my interest, are foregrounded, along with the presentation of stories as constructed conversations between women, and a semi-fictional constructed vignette told by me. My own continued reflection on my own experience, evident in my shaping of the constructed conversation, is also revealed in the journal entries throughout each Chapter, signposting my continuing research journey.

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## Chapter Three

### Methodological orientations

#### Introduction

The epistemological paradigms informing my theoretical orientation for this research are articulated in Chapter Two. In this Chapter, I introduce paradigm-specific methodological discussions that allow for research methods consistent with my values in research and life. As stated, my values have been infused with activist and feminist intent, which I intend to contribute to enhanced wellbeing in motherled families. I foreground organisational studies as a field of work where my inquiry can be situated. This enables me to make sense of the organisation of human life; in particular, the lives of people in families and their relationships with those in the communities and organisations where construction of mothers, families and wellbeing, takes place.

Organisational studies attracts the interest of a range of scholars informed by diverse theoretical and methodological orientations. David Boje (2001, 2008b, 2014) and Margaret Vickers (2005, 2011, 2012) are among those organisational theorists for whom storytelling offers creative opportunities for critique and change. Boje (2014) draws attention to the construction of organisational reality through the promulgation of narratives that he says create, entrench, normalise, and over time, naturalise phenomena to form grand narratives envisioned as coherent ‘beginning-middle-end’ (BME) accounts of the lives of people and the organisations in which they are situated. Boje articulates what happens in organisations, to those who form and contribute to these narratives, those who contest them, and those who hear such stories being repeated and refined to the point of what he terms petrification. Such petrifying processes have particular effects, among which the marginalisation, assimilation and silencing of particular stories or fragments of story, takes place. Boje theorises that living stories provide antenarrative choices, alternatives to grand narratives as both a “bet on the future” (2014, p. xxi) and as a “before narrative” (2014, p. xxi) to position stories as a means to counter grand narratives.

Pertinent to my research inquiry are those ideas based on the suggestion that humans create processes for cohabitation, survival, power, and control. We organise accordingly. Research vision, process, and reporting are examples of such creativity through story telling. Denzin (2003) discusses the valuing of “in-depth, intimate stories of problematic everyday life, lived up close” (p. 464), stories which evoke moral responses and contribute to compassionate, intelligent problem solving at civic levels. Such stories promote consciousness-raising, meaningful active responses, by creating “a form of textuality that turns citizens into readers and readers into persons who take democratic action in the world” (p. 465). Denzin (2003) argues writing is a form of action-oriented research. Denzin (2003) along with Richardson and St. Pierre (2003) recommends eschewing the categories of fiction/nonfiction, which Denzin says are classifications which can be “used to police certain transgressive writing forms” (p. 461). Boje offers opportunities to explore alternatives to petrification. These can be promising in the lives of those in families shaped to support grand narrative effects that are often unhelpful and diminishing to their wellbeing. I seek research methods to disrupt the particular grand narratives that contribute to the naturalisation, solidification, and petrification of particular narratives of wellbeing, and of families including motherled families.

I am drawn to the work of those authors who contribute to my choice to engage with the dynamics of wellbeing in the lives of women and children. Storytelling conversations, at the time of the conversations and again in the writing, provide opportunities to examine the resilience, relationships, and many other aspects of wellbeing articulated by participants. I further exercise their stories as influential antenarratives by constructing a vignette in three scenes. Participants’ stories are situated in fabricated accounts such as those used by Vickers (2011, 2012) to provide fresh perspectives and opportunities for analysis. Understanding how the construction of narratives and stories told in research, in everyday conversation, and in this thesis underpins my research, I describe my research methods as constructed conversations

and vignettes drawn from my conversations with participants. I considered other methods of meaning-making; namely focus groups and online discussions, ultimately finding these ways of participating too limiting for participants, and difficult for us to engage in usefully. In conversations with participants, one on one, I encountered living stories, stories that could be read as antenarratives, stories responding to grand narratives concerning families, mothers, and wellbeing, more or less consciously. Re-invigorating the conversation pieces as constructed conversations offered me an opportunity for antenarratives to be noticed, encouraged, retold, and even reshaped.

My use of constructed conversations and semi-fictional writing practices, as well as my conversational relationships with participants, require me to be careful of how stories are told, how women's experiences are positioned, and to stay alert to the ethical implications for such creative methods of research. To this end, I have devoted a section in this Chapter to ethical commitments and signposts of research quality, relevant in research inquiry loosely termed as qualitative.

## **Research as social construction**

Conversational and storytelling research methods are founded upon the assumption that an externally existent set of positivist phenomena does not lie 'out there' awaiting discovery and documentation. Rather, what we come to know as reality, what we see and otherwise perceive around us as real 'things' is not merely a world of objects waiting to be described by researchers. Many such phenomena are the (not inevitable) subjectively-experienced constructions and seeming materialisations of values and processes which come to be agreed upon or imposed on a population at a given time and place. Berger and Luckmann (1966), Gergen (2015), and Burr (2015) are among those authors who draw attention to those who label and present such constructions real, and thus knowable and true. Crotty states "meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (1998, p. 42). In the generation of research generated from such a perspective, I seek not to uncover facts lying in wait "out there" for me describe. Every

aspect of my inquiry including the choice of literature to inform the shaping of my topic and the research process itself, was subject to constructive processes.

## **Organisational studies**

I have elected to focus my attention on contemporary organisational studies as my field of reference. Researchers with this orientation attempt to explain and influence the ways people organise themselves. Inquiries are generated from diverse paradigms of social, political, mystical, artistic, and economic thought. Many researchers are overt in their recognition that their engagement in such enquiries is not merely informative, but may also be *affectual*. I draw on the work of such authors who challenge the dominance of western liberal ideas deeply ingrained in the realms of my environs and articulated as neo-liberalism, now selectively embedded. Critiques of this entrenched set of values and interests as the most fruitful, just, or even the only mode of human organisation to be endorsed in the prevailing grand narrative are gaining traction among those seeking radical changes to ways to live. Family is where I choose to place the focus of work in this regard.

Researchers interested in developing the field now known as organisational studies seek to inform understandings of the organisation of people including those in workplaces, businesses, schools, communities, and families. While a cursory reading of organisational studies reveals a focus on management of profit-making companies and workplaces, such as David Boje's examples of analyses of McDonalds (Boje, 2008b) and Nike (Boje, 2001), and Boje, Hayley and Saylor's (2016) example of marketing tactics employed by Burger King, my attraction to organisational studies is oriented to a broader interpretation of human organisation(s). These studies are pertinent however, in so much as marketing tactics are among the more overt attempts to embed specific human behaviours. With this embedding, specific forms of (market driven) neoliberal normality is petrified – despite dire consequences on the lives of people and planet.

Situating my research with organisational scholars requires me to be explicit about my understanding of the key ideas influential authors are concerned with; in particular, the many ways to examine and understand (an) organisation. The many paradigms in this field are each significant, carrying implications of what might be possible to value, think and do within and across communities of understanding. The articulation of organisation of agreed values, practices, and actions, routinised and formalised to appear as a tangible or identifiable entity or body (of people, buildings) is most common. The organisation(s) of people and their commitments (through establishing or maintaining legitimacy) are given form as company, church, union, not-for-profit or charitable organisation - as a tangible entity able to be integrated into a world of other similar 'things'. Such things, apparently quite solid are, at their genesis, figments of the human imagination made seemingly material, given metaphorical character (as a mechanical or organic entity) and thus subject to mechanical or organic laws (Dyer, Humphries, Fitzgibbons & Hurd, 2014). The intangible structure of ideas, values, media representations, identities and belongings or preferences appear to materialise as notions of family, tribe, club and so forth. Motherhood, and motherled households can only be viewed as a subgroup of human beings, when the notion and values of the link between biological mother and child have been given a specific context and symbolic and material manifestation (Rich, 1976). The solidification of one form of the organisation of this relationship over another may be done, for example, through storytelling, nursery rhymes, public policy and community action such as dramatic plays.

### **Critical organisational studies**

From a general orientation to organisation studies, those authors whose thinking is generated from schools of thought attributed to the Frankfurt School includes such authors as Dyer, Humphries, Fitzgibbons and Hurd (2014). Making use of the term



'critical organisational studies', these authors are concerned with emancipatory human interests, the promotion of ways of being and organising which nurture and promote social justice in practice and thought, in order to put right what particular ways of organising have arguably harmed. Their preferred methods are scholarly analyses of uses of power to question taken-for-granted ideas as institutional logics defined as "the 'taken-for-granted' beliefs that guide behaviour through legitimated identities, organisational forms and strategic behaviours" (p. 4). The legitimisation of particular forms and identities, according to the authors, serves to subjugate people, even garnering the support of those who themselves are quietly subjugated, as a form of hegemony, a dynamic noticed by Humphries and Verbos (2014). Dyer et al. (2014) utilise the work of those critical theorists whose concern is an understanding of hegemonic power relations with a view to exposing and transforming such relations, following on from the work of Seo and Creed (2002). Researchers in critical organisational studies aim to observe and make sense of what happens when political and relational dynamics abound. Included in such research are studies of establishment and maintenance of a given order through management and leadership, wider negotiation or imposition of legitimacy.

Critical management studies scholars such as Vickers (2011, 2012) evaluate organisational responses to human experiences which can be made to appear legitimate, yet which are problematic in some way to the supposed smooth running of the institution and to the wellbeing of those therein. Vickers studies chronic illness. Her critical perspective is expressed in issues of social justice including problems caused by structural power inequalities, power-laden relationships, and marginalisation of individuals within or as a result of organisational structures. Vickers (2011, 2012), along with Boje (2001, 2014), Rosile, Boje, Carlon, Downs and Saylor (2013), and Boje et al. (2016), are concerned with the promotion of emancipation and human wellbeing in organisations, by the use of storytelling methods to critique power in organisations.

## **Storytelling and organisation(s)**

Across many fields of research, in particular those based on interpretive or constructive worldviews and/or those adopting methods clustered broadly under the heading of research understood to be ‘qualitative’ in the adoption and treatment of understandings about qualities and experiences, narrative formations offer meaning-making opportunities which parallel storying methods in organisational research. Salient examples are those by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Denzin and Lincoln (2013). In the field of sociology, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) articulate storying within narrative inquiry as a means of opening up possibilities in events, wherein unpredicted and untold perspectives can be shared. Conversations, as well as the reflections which can follow on from these conversations in the minds of conversants, provide analytical opportunities to imagine rich perspectives and alternative endings or key events. Telling stories offers unique opportunities for different perspectives to be shared and new insights developed, insights and perspectives which can leave both participants thinking, reflecting, and reconsidering the conversation and their lives in relation to it. In the many branches of management theory, Boje (2008b, 2014) theorises the ‘grand narrative’, a petrified series of solidified stories which comes to be represented by a single narrative. Grand narratives are the result of naturalised and taken-for-granted understandings of phenomena concerning mothering, children, and families, understood by Boje as ‘petrification’ (2008b). Boje (2014) responds to grand narratives with storytelling which is, he says, everywhere in organisations, and conducted by everyone in an organisation.

In terms of storytelling in organisational studies, Rosile et al. (2013) and Boje describe narrative storytelling as “the sensemaking currency of organisations” (Boje, 2008b, p. 4). Forming and using stories is a way in which these authors make sense of what happens in the world. Boje posits that storytelling, “the primary sensemaking way of communication in organisations” (2014, p. 4) occurs through such activities as listening, understanding, interpreting, knowing, producing and telling. These are

subjective, iterative processes. He argues that identity - of those in organisations, as well as the organisation itself - is created and enlivened through storytelling (p. 557) and promotes understandings of context in storytelling, and therefore its relevant meaning, a finding supported by Rosile et al. (2013).

Boje (2014) understands the telling of stories as an ancient pastime “bound up with the very pragmatic functioning of every society, community, family and organization, as well as your self-identity. When that storytelling changes (when people change the story or the characters or the positioning of such) it is something to notice, to write about” (p. xvix). Boje’s (2014) statement highlights the ways in which stories which privilege particular persons or legitimise certain ways of being, are then promulgated, ways of being which do not necessarily serve the interests of some in the organisation. I note the opportunity in storytelling to tell other(ed) narratives, those narratives harboured but perhaps not shared by those who have traditionally been silenced or ridiculed, among them the marginalised, among them women and children. Boje’s (2014) desire to ‘set the record straight’ should not be seen as an insistence upon one story over another; rather, an opportunity to problematise grand narratives with limiting effects upon persons.

Boje’s (2014) interest in the as-yet-untold story is exemplified in his depiction of a retold British legend, the legend of St. George, who rescues a princess and slays a dragon who has had her in captivity and terrorised the kingdom. St. George restores the kingdom to some form of what becomes storied as peace. The story as Boje recounts it in the preface of his book *Storytelling Organizational Practices: Managing in the Quantum Age* (2014), describes the dragon aiding the town by ridding it of monsters and overgrown rats. Once that is complete, the dragon is disposed of by the town leaders in a pragmatic move. Boje’s (2014) demonstration of the telling and retelling of the story demonstrates mythologising of the institutional order and the petrifying of conclusive, beginning-middle-end narratives, never to be troubled or looked behind or beyond to consider the context in which the dragon had come to assume such power. Boje’s (2014) recrafting of the story, a dominant single plot, characterisation and theme

solidified into a Beginning-Middle-End narrative, is given expression: “Then somehow the living story of the dragon broke through this dead shell to reanimate the pagan dragon as a hero, a caring sort of character”, “hatching” new possibilities for the dragon and townspeople (Boje, 2014, p. xxiv). In this example Boje addresses a widely taken-for-granted account which has served a pragmatic purpose – ensuring the smooth functioning of the town. His analysis demonstrates a shift in perspective, and creative potential of storytelling methods, for the dragon, a contributing member of the community, who comes to be seen as an expensive drain on town resources, and then a hero. Boje’s statement that organisations “live and die by the narratives and stories they tell” (2008, p. 4) includes his assurance that if “[I]t is not always the story you want told”, that “there are ways to change, and restory that story.” (p. 4). Human creativity, control, and expressions of power can be placed in the context of a wider understanding of the processes of human organisation to broadly encompass the depiction and policing of families. Stories told about particular families and women or children in those families by those who claim to ‘know’ might NOT be the story which those in the families might like to tell or hear told about them. A retelling is long overdue.

The complex and subjective question of which stories will become the institutionalised, told, story, who will decide, who will tell it, whose voice it will proclaim, and how the story will be told, raises contestable variables to be chosen and exercised by storytellers. Those telling the story, even as they aim to deconstruct power imbalances, can promote, adapt, petrify and silence one story or another - characterising “a collective performance of retrospective and prospective sensemaking in a dance of omitted living stories, BME narratives, and the antenarrative process...” (Boje, 2014, p. 4). Such storytellers can include health and social workers, researchers, authors and writers or enactors of policy affecting women and children in motherled households.

As a deeply subjective and constructive process, storytelling attracts critiques by scholars and activists who are cautious about the authenticity, rigor, quality and reliability of conversation and storytelling methods. These critiques are addressed by

Richardson and St. Pierre (2003) in their exposition of the transgressive elements of storytelling as inquiry. As a verb most often applied in everyday discourse to the worlds of children, storytelling risks an image of being overly fabricated, unable to be tested, and childish. These charges are evaluated later in this chapter in a discussion of quality, validity and reliability in research. According to Whiteman and Phillips (2008), use of storytelling in research aimed at understanding organisations, is becoming more widespread. Richardson and St. Pierre (2003), and Whiteman and Phillips (2008), defend methods including fiction, semi-fiction and non-fiction, depending on use of 'make believe', fictional tales, or stories embedded in tangible, experienced reality as non-fiction.

### **Grand narrative**

Many varieties of narrative and storytelling methods are visible in research inquiry. One such formation of story concerns the construction of grand narratives. These, according to Boje (2014) and Czarniawska (2004) are the big stories, derived from official accounts of phenomena covering a vast range of people, places and experiences. These prominent and widely accessible stories are often presented with beginning, middle, and end sections, coining them as BME narratives, which are presented as smooth, coherent narratives with nothing significant to interrupt the story. Grand narratives are formed, rehearsed and settled upon by such storytellers who occupy positions of power or who are depicted in business literature as 'key stakeholders', by others in powerful positions. Grand narratives can be combined with other, less dominant stories which are made to 'fit' or cohere, to make the grand narrative appear coherent and appropriately structured (Boje, 2014). In response to grand narrative, alternative stories can sometimes be told, under particular conditions which enable responses, including those which counter, grand narratives. Each narrative comes from somewhere, and is situated by teller, context, setting, and history. Each narrative demonstrates the views of particular persons or parties, and takes on particular values and the intents of those who control the telling, intents which may be

secret, unconscious, unspoken or explicit (Boje, 2014). The formation and performance of a grand narrative comprises a power-full action. Such power can be detrimental to those in certain positions in or outside of the story. The method and context of storytelling is important in positioning who is telling the story. Placement of storying capacity in the hands of the more powerful, undermines the existing power of other acting characters, centralising and consolidating power through the promulgation of a single beginning-middle-end narrative.

Boje is one among researchers who resist using the terms 'story' and 'narrative' synonymously, preferring to differentiate narrative, built up to encompass retrospective, linear, reassembled, unchanging plots, from storytelling, which he holds as "many pasts, nows and futures" (2008, p.1). Rosile et al. (2013) refer to the work of Czarniawska (2004), in particular the account of 'petrifying narrative' beside which the "more collective inclusive process of dialogic story" is contrasted (Rosile et al., p.558). Rosile et al. (2013) posit "incommensurable opposition between narrative and living story" (p. 558). Singular storytelling is understood by Boje (2014), Rosile et al. (2013), and Vickers (2011), to silence aspects of stories which do not cohere or side with the narrative, thereby marginalising and silencing people and contributing to the subjugation of those whose stories cannot be aired. Boje theorises that narrative has become a "centering force of control and order" (2008b, p. 1), seeing the potential for a different mode of storytelling as a possibility for "constituting a decentering force of diversity and disorder" (2008b, p. 1). I take this to include the aspects of diversity and disorder among which mothering is characterised. Where narratives are understood to shape our past events into experience using coherence to achieve believability, Boje posits that alternatives exist, where stories can be told which concern fragments of events in the present or anticipated to be achievable in the future. These narrative-coherence and story-dispersion processes interact so that meaning changes among people, as their events, identities, and strategies get re-sorted in each meeting, publication, and drama. Theorising different types of story, constructed differently and used to differing effects, storytelling efforts need not be limited to a singular, coherent account with clear beginning, middle and ending (Boje, 2014).

## Living stories

Among the many methods of storytelling which have transformative possibilities, living story is situated with the potential to increase understanding beyond the telling of a singular narrative. Living stories include the many layers of fragments of story, commonly utilised by those in power, to contribute to a grand narrative. Care-full treatment enables “different antes” to be generated (Boje 2014, p. xxiv). Importantly, storytelling methods do not involve “just listening to and interpreting what is happening” but rely upon “an ethical questioning of the dominant BME narrative that has cohered” (Boje 2014, p. xxiv). Rosile et al. (2013) position living story alongside researcher intents through the use of insider/participant observer abilities to “seek connections with personal experience (perhaps through autoethnography) and lived experiences of others. Seeking differentiation, an array of possibilities and the ‘road not taken’” (p. 561) offers transformative potential, such as that which I seek for participants and myself. Boje (2008b, 2014) refers to Bakhtin (1981), a Russian philosopher whose positing of storytelling in dialogised methods, is useful to Boje. According to Bakhtin (1981), each story relies upon a listener and is an active, emergent dialogical form of communication, one which includes the possibility for many-voices. Polyphonic, storytelling is “...dialogised with multi-stylistic expression, diverse chronotopicities, and the architectonics of interanimating societal discourses, including cognitive, aesthetics, and ethics. It is a rare and endangered species. Out of the polypi of dialogisms, wells up emergence” (Boje, 2008b, p.3). The possibilities for stories imagined to be under threat, stories which are unusual and difficult to find, is the opportunity of those engaging with living stories, to find and use. Boje’s work, using the tentative, yet-to-be-told accounts, echoes the work of Freire (1994, 1998, 2015), whose commitment to emancipation, a process as yet unfinished and yet continuing, relies upon such living stories being brought to air.

Boje (2008b, p.2) describes 'polypi' as the use of many voices (polyphonic dialogism), styles (stylistic dialogism), time-space conceptions (chronoptic dialogism) and discourses shaping ethics and aesthetics (architectonic dialogism). These, he says, enable a more open "exploration of complexity, collective memory, strategy, and organizational change" (p. 2). Ultimately, Boje (2008b) hopes, storytelling can break down petrified grand narratives and make ways for living stories to pass. Living story methodologies allow the researcher to position themselves, participant storytellers and others in particular ways which I sought for this study, in particular for the heterogeneity of responses which I encountered. Storytelling allows a dynamic to be engaged with, "between grand narratives that are often stereotypes... resisted by living stories" which Boje (personal communication) says, are "sometimes more polyvocal". To Boje, the presence of grand narratives is a "centering force of control and order" (personal communication) nurtured by (even well-intended) policy analysts, academic researchers, and health or social professionals such as medical doctors and psychiatrists, politicians, clergy and social commentators, forces which have served to maintain control and order over people's lives. In the lives of women as mothers, this can be imagined to include the proscribed movements of women in and out of relationships of subjugation, work, and mothering. Rosile et al. (2013) posit storytelling as an 'intraplay of grand (master) narratives (epistemic or empiric) with living stories. Thus they differentiate between grand narratives (the 'elite narratives which permeate organisations', those stories espoused or promoted perhaps by more powerful players) and living stories, which Rosile et al. (2013) describe as 'hidden stories'. An intraplay between stories and narrative, where one does not set out to promote story over narrative, or one type of story over another, is yet possible, and can be used to demonstrate that 'retrospective, now, prospective, transcendental, and reflexivity are in interplay creating dynamic forces of change and transformation of an organisation with its environment. To treat what is 'different' as 'the same', blinds us to dynamics, with important implications for how these multiple ways of sensemaking dance together. It is this dance among sensemaking differences that gives us new understanding of complexity, strategy, organisational change, and methodology" (Boje, 2008b, p. 5). I hoped for some new insights to be gained, for a positive process



of sharing and ideas to take place, and to leave conversations with new insights about women's lives, while leaving participants better in terms of feeling validated and supported in their lives as a result of their conversation with me.

In my hopes for myself as a transformative practitioner, I value Boje's (2008b, 2014) demonstrations through his theory that he is troubled, as am I, about the subjugating effects of grand narratives which drown out living stories, which wash away the particularities of people's lives and realities and drown out their voices, in the name of organisational success, and with a pragmatic disregard for nuances in our experiences of wellbeing. Between traditional narrative philosophies (including BME grand narratives) and living stories, antenarrative processes exist, which 'operate between storytelling paradigms'. Boje posits that "fragile antenarratives, like the butterfly, are sometimes able to change the future, to set changes and transformations in motion that have impact on the big picture. More accurately, antenarratives seem to bring about a future that would not otherwise be" (2008b, p.9), via modes of analysis which can include types of deconstructive analysis of grand narratives.

### **Antenarrative**

Antenarrative research methodologies are termed to describe the various relationships between different narratives and the grand narratives to which they might be shaped to contribute. The word 'antenarrative' carries a double meaning as stated by Boje (2014), summing up a figurative bridge between grand narratives and the many smaller living stories which become bound together in formation of a grand narrative. Antenarrative is a term which refers firstly to a 'bet' on where a particular story will be directed to go and eventually to be concluded. Secondly, antenarrative refers to a process which occurs before a particular narrative can be formed, a process which might potentially bring a particular ending toward us (Boje, 2001, 2008b, 2014). In other words, antenarrative occurs before a narrative is formed or solidified, as Czarniawska (2004) words it, 'petrified', also providing a speculative 'bet on the future' or a possibility for a new ending.

Rosile et al.(2013) describe antenarrativist processes as ‘in-between processes’ which offer a path between grand narratives and living stories and which highlight the ways in which living stories become assimilated into grand narratives. Antenarrative accounts can be used to attend to stories which are marginalised or forgotten. According to Rosile et al. (2013), antenarrative storytelling enables researchers to promulgate transformational potential in the form of writing or talking a new future into being, including many possibilities, some new and untested. Such prospective or ‘future ways’ (Boje, 2008b, p.5) sensemaking, betting on the future, engenders a process of ‘non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted and pre-narrative speculation’ (Boje 2001, p.1). The derivation of antenarratives in storytelling processes promises to be a messy, unclear and uncertain process of storytelling, in which the structure and coherence which is often preferred in academic discourse, is eschewed.

### **Storytelling research methods to suit participants**

In interview-based and conversational inquiry, storying methods position researcher and participants in ways contrasted with positivist stances by positioning each party as co-conversants in potentially (more) equal ways. In a shared conversation both participants must offer themselves into the mix and respond to each other. Both ask questions, share ideas, challenge each other and take part in directing the conversation in ways which are not just to the researcher’s liking but which are interesting to participant also. In saying this, the researcher attends to participant ideas and thoughts, as the researcher presents the work as their own, ultimately. In Chapter Two I explored my epistemological grounding from which my choice of subjective forms of inquiry grew. In such an epistemological location reality and truth are not fixed, staple items giving rise to facts and findings waiting to be found, but are to be shared, troubled and negotiated between conversants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Storytelling conversations provide a place from which to explore previously-unexplored ideas and come up with new insights and possibilities, unique contributions to research (Richardson & St.

Pierre, 2003). My intent to carry out inquiry in ways empowering, emancipatory and transformative for participants, was entirely in keeping with my intention toward action-oriented research (Maguire, 2001). I hoped to discover storytelling research as an enabling method with transformative possibilities and thus posit my study as a form of action-oriented research.

At this stage of my research report writing, it might be expected that I outline the particular storytelling methods of data collection, prior to discussing the participants who shared their stories with me. Such a description however, would not be accurate or authentic to this work. I did, could not and *should* not have a clear method in mind before I began my field work. Several researchers describe the use of the opportunity to adapt research methods to the qualities and needs of the group with whom they work, among them, Gatenby and Humphries (2000), Hood, Mayall and Oliver (1999), Oakley (2000), and Reason and Bradbury (2001). When working with particular groups of participants, certain needs and priorities become apparent. Particular methods of information gathering can be or become inconvenient or disadvantageous to participants. In research aimed at improving wellbeing (including the wellbeing of participants) I wanted to be sensitive to the [perhaps changing] needs, priorities and experiences of each participant. In order to illustrate this more fully, I next discuss the women who were invited, and agreed, to participate, before examining the ways in which they might best share their stories.

## **Participant engagement and selection.**

### **Criteria for participation**

In this thesis, the term ‘mothers’ refers to the women caring for and assuming responsibility (in large or whole part) for others who are their children or dependents related by biological or social obligation. I define motherhood as the collection of acts as well as the overarching experience of caring for such family or community members,

most often one's own children (Silva, 1996). Mothers eligible for invitation to join me in this research were deemed to be those in sole charge of organising and/or providing day to day care of their children, although others, including partners and/or ex-partners, might be involved to some extent. 'Children' would include offspring, living at home and/or in some way significantly dependent upon the mother. Even with these criteria before me, I agonised about who I could invite to join the study. As I reflect in my research journal early in the work:

***Researcher journal: Monday 19 November, 2012***

*I began this project mindful that many of the stories that I and others told as single mothers, had also been told to me by women with partners who they considered supportive and involved. My examples of how the single women who I knew in motherled households coped with juggling sick children and work, or with competing demands of children, or with not enough money to get groceries and petrol for the remaining five days until pay day, were relevant for many of my partnered and married friends. Women with partners often believed they did the lion's share of decision-making, juggling and managing. Some women would say (crestfallen at times) that their husband 'tried' but they were in no doubt who had the reins at home, while being expected to be in paid work as well. From the outside, women who had partners looked as though they had it easier. Fewer people would offer help to a struggling family when there was a 'provider' there. A married friend who managed her household, four children, part time work and the demands of a fairly traditional and dogmatic husband who works, studies and travels frequently overseas for work, was admitted to hospital yearly for several years, with exhaustion. Only then did friends offer the support of meals and help in the house. The husband was not expected to manage the children and his job simultaneously – but she was expected to. It seemed to me that a husband provided a sort of smokescreen which obfuscated the work of the woman. It was difficult to have this conversation with my partnered friends – they did not want to appear disloyal to their partners, and so were reluctant to count his shortcomings. (All partners were men in this case). Women who were on their own were far more candid about their lives. Occasionally a married friend would confide that her husband did*

*little at home, expected to satisfy more of his own interests, and seemed to have less responsibility and a better deal than she – but this conversation carried none of the openness or celebration with which single women shared their lives, abilities, and struggles. How could I make sense of the many motherled households which were not strictly led by lone mothers? As my chief supervisor reminded me, there were many women who when away from home, at work, conference, or in hospital, continued to ‘manage’ the household, making sure everything was done before they left, leaving lists and telephone numbers, doing extra cooking, and issuing instructions knowing that the adults who stepped in for them would need extra help and would not just manage as they did.*

The question of who to include in my study was an early indicator of how uncomfortable I found the categorisation of women in families. I struggled to construct or adhere to particular criteria. I wanted to hear any and all stories of mothering and was reluctant to limit inclusion to obviously-single mothers as I felt there were so many variations and commonalities between and among mothers with all kinds of living and relationship situations. Anecdotal evidence from conversations which I had had over many years with mothers in many different situations – married, divorced, single, remarried – had shown me that our issues went far beyond marital states.

I decided to approach women who considered themselves a ‘motherled household’ and who were willing to talk with me and who lived in or within driving distance of the town in which I lived. As well as being a mother carrying (largely) sole or majority responsibility for her family, I sought potential participants who would be willing to commit to some in depth thinking, conversation and self-disclosure. Potential participants would need to be clearly aware of this before agreeing to participate. They needed cautioning that they may be invited to consider the extent to which they may seek to observe or act on attempts to change some facet of their lives, and to story these with the researcher, other participants or relevant others.

I contacted friends and acquaintances by email and text, informing them of my intent to begin the field work of my study, and inviting these women, who considered themselves single parents or leaders of a motherled household, to consider participating in the research in a variety of ways including possible interviews, focus groups and online participation. Some mothers had already expressed an interest in informal conversations with me. Four women agreed to participate. One participant also introduced me to a friend who offered to tell me her story. I also requested friends and acquaintances let other women in their social and professional networks who may be eligible or interested, know of my study, offering to send information sheets to interested women (see Appendix one: Information sheet) and to meet with them to give more verbal and written information, and a consent form to consider (see Appendix three: Consent form).

I emailed three local agencies, Parentline, Birthright, and Link House, in Hamilton, where I lived. These are organisations whose mission is to provide various forms of support to women, families, and single parent families. I made appointments to visit two of the agencies who responded to my email (the third did not respond). Meeting the reception and management staff or CEO of each organisation, I explained my study and hopes for the study. I gave information sheets for them to peruse and with their permission, posted up information flyers on the noticeboards of the two agencies. Each flyer included tear-off tags with my name, the study name and my telephone number. From these flyers I received one enquiry from a prospective participant who invited me to her house to give her more verbal and written information, and who offered to participate. I also posted information notices with tear-off tags around the University, on noticeboards outside lecture theatres and the library. From these notices I received no enquiries.

My recruitment and selection of participants can be described as a type of purposive sampling method, wherein potential participants are contacted, who may be eligible and available to participate (Olesen, 2000; Oakley, 1981). It was important to me that potential participants would not feel hounded or pressured to participate, and I

imagined that many potential participants would not see themselves as having the time or interest to participate, so this step needed to be taken carefully in keeping with the ethical advice given by Hood, Mayall and Oliver (1999). Given the significance of these criteria for participation, I planned to have an in depth conversation with potential participants and from these, invite a small number to participate. If the invited person agreed to join the research, she would be asked to sign a prepared ethical consent form to set out clearly the levels of participation anticipated – with appropriate scope set out for participant influence on the re-design of the process as the desire for such reshaping might become apparent.

I initially planned to include stories from around ten women. My study began with six participants (and myself as a seventh participant due to my inclusion of autoethnographic material). This group of participants might have appeared comparatively small. Being unsure whether this would turn out to be the case, I remained open to the possibility of further participants being gathered while I conducted the initial conversations, transcribed and wrote field notes. I decided to canvas my local contacts for more participants if I felt I needed to after the conversations were compiled. My intent to work with a small number of participants was in keeping with my valuing of closely-focused, detailed relationships with participants, where stories could be told in depth, mothers could choose the focus of their narratives, and the researcher-participant relationship could be more intimate and open than might be enabled in studies with bigger numbers of participants and less detailed data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). In my ethics application I had canvassed the possibility of in-depth conversations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and an online forum in which participants could engage with one another and with me on a deep and thoughtful level. I hoped to enable a focused analysis, in keeping with Vickers' (2012) valuing of storytelling opportunities. Considering the many ways in which a story can be told, encompassing verbal, written, shared and individual methods, I considered several options, each of which was outlined in my ethics application as a possibility to be more carefully considered once participants were familiar with me and with my intentions. The options I considered included one-on-

one conversations, focus groups, and online conversations, each of which is examined below. I also encountered possibilities for my own inclusion in the form of a researcher journal and reflective insights, discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. I turn to these methods of inquiry as they unfolded, beginning with my own commitment to include and record my experience, as researcher and co-participant.

### **Method: Researcher journal**

In keeping with my intents for this study, in terms of theoretical orientations, methodological priorities and my attraction toward action-research and feminist-oriented inquiries, it was appropriate for me to include aspects of my own lived experience as research material (Behar, 1996). Proposing to keep a journal in which I would record entries on a regular basis, I focused in my journal upon the day-to-day experience of events unfolding in my mother-led household. I included discussions of those relationships, incidents and experiences which relate somehow to my journey, as well as reflections upon events at home or those outside of home which I held relevant to my story of myself as a single parent, or our mother-led household. The use of reflective journals has been documented by Epp (2008) as a way for learners to make sense of and organise their thoughts, practices and decisions as they develop new understandings and skills in areas of learning such as nursing practice. Janesick (1999) promotes the use of journals for researchers, particularly those involved in emotionally-laden 'qualitative' studies. I held that a reflective journal potentially contributes to my wellbeing in a mother-led household, an expectation supported by Burt (1994), who examined the content and results of diary-writing among young people, concluded that reflective writing practices constituted a coping strategy to assist with the stress accompanying (among other things) home and family relationships. The insight potentially gained from the journaling process was intended to benefit my relationships with those around me including my children, such gains constituting some improvement in the wellbeing of my children. Writer Nel Noddings (2003), focusing upon constructions of happiness, particularly in the worlds of children, analyses the



ways people understand happiness. Noddings (2003) critiques such claims to happiness made using concepts as 'subjective wellbeing', noting Aristotle's emphasis upon contemplative thought as a means of attaining happiness or 'human flourishing' as it is translated by the author. Noddings (2003) engages with Hume's theories of interdependent relationships of 'supportive human interaction' as a primary source of happiness. The enlarged understanding of one's situation which is engendered by regular reflection and thought is understood to nourish supportive relationships with others such as one's children. I anticipated sharing pieces of my journal writing with participants or others as circumstances indicated.

### **Method: Storytelling conversations**

Gray (2007) states that to "assist organisational members to engage with the experiences of those in need (at work) ... various creative texts have been designed to engender enhanced understanding, thought, and reflection while also offering a means of producing meaningful, critical insights into the problem at hand" (p. 496). The critical insights I sought, would unfold in one-on-one conversations with each woman in which they would tell those stories of their lives which they felt were relevant and which summed up, questioned, corresponded with or even negated their sense of wellbeing in their family. I hoped that a reciprocal process of conversing would build our awareness together, enhance my insight as a researcher, and provide me with material to make use of.

### **Method: Online engagement: Social and online opportunities**

In addition to conversations and a possible focus group to constitute my field work, I intended to create an online forum in which participants could share their experiences on a regular, perhaps day-to-day or weekly basis, with others from the group. This was intended to be a central information-gathering tool, and to provide a site for reflective

writing and sharing among participants. Online groups are of increasing interest in social research, according to Wilson, Gosling and Graham (2012). Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are sources of much conversation material among people with assumed (or stated) shared interests. People's interactions with one another are observable and assume growing importance in research potential over time (Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012). At the time, I was not a user of popular social media. I was mindful of complications and dangers regarding people's varying understandings of privacy and good conduct (Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012).

As a student I had used Moodle as an online source of academic information including discussion via forums in which students could converse with each other and tutors. Our shared ideas had been of constant use and appreciation to me and others. As a common meeting-ground for small groups of like-minded thinkers, Moodle usage was limited to those enrolled in particular papers or courses, so was not a public space. We governed ourselves with unofficial rules about respectful engagement through writing, treating our shared space as a professional one in which details of others' lives were not divulged outside of the group nor made fun of in the group.

I designed an online discussion forum which would offer participants the same benefits which I had experienced, being interested in the 'rich data' which would be provided by written interactions which would remain on record until the course was terminated when the study finished. I enjoyed sharing my experiences on written forums and expressing my thoughts via keyboard, and I expected participants would also find this beneficial. I hoped they would engage with the collegial aspects of online group membership and grow to take part and support each other in ways which would be supportive and enlivening to them. I was mindful that participants were likely to be busy women with limited time for repeated interview or face-to-face interactions. I thought an online interface would be convenient, enabling mothers to enter the forum at any time during the week and write or respond for short or long periods of time, steered by time availability and interest. With the benefit of an early pilot trial of a Moodle site for the first two study participants, it became clear to me, and to them, that

for these mothers, an ongoing online conversation was not engaging or convenient. I became aware that the long-term benefits of the Moodle interactions I had witnessed would take longer to establish than the study was expected to continue for, and would likely not eventuate. The atmosphere of support, camaraderie and collegiality I was seeking, might require one or more face-to-face group conversations in the form of focus groups.

### **Method: Focus groups**

I also hoped to hold a small number, perhaps two or three, focus group conversations to which all participants would be invited. Having available spaces provided by the University, I planned for participants to join the group, enjoy refreshments, meet other participants and take part in a recorded discussion with a broad topic opening provided by me or agreed upon by group members, as suggested by Liamputtong (2011). My hopes were that participants would meet and participate by conversing with others in the group. I hoped that members' contributions would prompt each other to respond, and generate openness and respect in shared thoughts, as well as an atmosphere of support which would be a source of encouragement and enhanced wellbeing for each participant (Liamputtong, 2011). In my confirmed proposal for PhD enrolment I suggested three focus groups, at the beginning, mid-way through, and end of the study (or when data-gathering with participants was coming to a close as I prepared to collate and write up resulting information). As I met and canvassed prospective participants, the complexities of this arrangement became clear to participants and to me. Participants in the study included women who I had known previously, before the outset of the study. I knew that some participants would recognise each other, and I did not know whether they had divulged or discussed their participation with one another in their own conversations. The interpersonal complexities of working with women who know the researcher or each other, are discussed by Cotterill (1992). I grappled with the possibility that a real conversation might engender an atmosphere – to be avoided and mitigated by myself, but still a faint possibility – of blame, guilt or

judgement among participants. The potential existed for a participant with a particular set of circumstances or struggles to judge herself or others in ways which were harsh, or be unable to divulge personal stories of struggle in a group with others whose experiences she might perceive as more challenging or deprived or where she might not feel totally safe and private. This possibility chimed with tense group dynamics canvassed by Liamputtong (2011).

Based on my understanding of the lives of many mothers in motherled households, informed by my own experiences, and supported by copious literature highlighting the busy-ness of such women (Hays, 1996; Scott, Dex & Joshi, 2008), I concluded it would not be feasible to gather the participants together. I understood that their circumstances for babysitters – having an available babysitter and being able/willing to pay for her/his services - were limited. I sought to avoid contributing to the challenges these mothers already experienced in terms of time, finance and family logistics. With the number of participants now at six, and with deep conversations having taken place with each person, I was equipped with a large amount of conversation data in recorded, transcribed form.

### **An unexpected methodical turn**

Following the conversations which I had and recorded with each woman, six in total, I reflected in writing upon the conversation. I myself transcribed and listened back to each conversation. My desire to meaningfully understand the words and feelings which had so openly been shared with me, the personal stories and the prominent themes highlighted by each mother, led me to print in colour, cut into sections and quite literally, play around with the stories on paper. This tactile method of engagement with data analysis is recommended by Boje (2008b) in living story research. When I came to carry out some interpretations of the stories of each woman, and answer my emerging ‘so what?’ questions about the narratives they shared, reading them beside each other seemed to reveal each woman’s voice in turn. I could imagine mothers

sharing, listening, taking turns and responding to one another as if in conversation together. The excerpts unfolded next to one another as if the women were in a focus group conversation. Posing each person's responses in a particular area as conversation snippets with one another, the responses became a virtual, reconstructed conversation between participants and myself.

### **Method: Re-constructed conversation**

Weaving together story fragments as an imagined conversation, I imagined a discussion taking place between friends, our mothering lives shared over coffee, while our young children play together. This had been a formative experience during my early mothering years which I described in Chapter Two. Formative everyday conversations were noticeable to me in developing a research interest. I had initially sought a focus group, and online conversation. The sharing and caring which I had experienced in 'coffee groups' when my children were young, appeared once again on the page, this time in an imagined setting, a "constructed coffee group". The informal, shared timbre of the constructed conversation piece arrangements, revealed aspects of the collegiality and camaraderie I had sought in focus groups, online, and face to face inquiry methods. Collegiality and camaraderie are terms seemingly at odds with currently-dominant views of the competitive individual human espoused in wellbeing research, as I will show in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The creation of a shared, collective conversation seemed a small, yet powerful response to the experiences of isolation documented in research and expressed by the women who shared with me. In reading the supposed conversations, each voice resonated with me, and with the others beside it. Considering the text in pieces, it seemed as if each mother was sharing something with the others in her responses and stories. I was reminded of Oakley's (2000) encouragement to enliven participant voices, and not merely impose my voice about participants.

Objections might be raised to such a fictive, conversational construction. Critique

might be focused upon the authenticity, truth and believability of the conversation data (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2003). To address the possibility of these objections, I returned to my intentions for the positioning of my study in a paradigm of thought and worldview in which what is understood as reality is acknowledged to be a production of constructions taking place over time, such acknowledgements the focus of Berger and Luckmann (1966). My preparedness to argue that what someone decides in conjunction with their surroundings and with those around them is real, would stand me in good stead in these methodological terms. Subjective reality as we experience it, is what we respond to, whether tangible or not. Deeming reality as a set and result of constructions, along with Berger and Luckmann (1966), Burr (2015), Gergen (1985) and Gergen and Gergen (2004, 2012) means that my presentation of such data as rigorous and real has uses, and effects, worthy of exploration. By telling stories which were in some ways semi-fictional, I made use of a hybrid storytelling fashion, which, according to Whiteman and Phillips (2008) remains unusual and novel in research, yet offers ways to contribute creatively, including using the pieces of conversation to build a scene in which conversants share. Whiteman and Phillips (2008) also articulate the use of story to develop each character, going inside the character to make sense of what they are thinking and experiencing in their subjective point of view. While fictional aspects are included, the plot must be convincing and believable. Whiteman and Phillips (2008) state that “[S]emi fiction thus may work well as a qualitative method for exploring empirical reality and pulling together fragments from fieldwork” (p. 296).

The potential unwanted effects of positioning stories as reconstructed conversations cautioned me. Each woman’s narrative needed to be recognised by her as authentic, and featured in such a way that her distinct voice could be heard in the way she might intend. I was careful not to change the text of each person’s utterances, beyond small grammatical shifts to allow the conversation to flow on paper. As I positioned each utterance beside others, I had choices to make about what this placement would do to each person’s voice; would I set them up in opposition to each other? Would one excerpt drown out the next or previous excerpt? My commitment to honour the intent, espoused by Boje (2014), for many-voices, polyvocality, without creating chaos or

cacophony, is a challenge identified by Ybema (2009, p. 8). Careful placement and reflexive interpretive analysis was necessary.

## **Story-writing**

Richardson and St. Pierre (2003) speak of writing as a method of inquiry, writing a world into existence by the activity of writing. I was reminded that not only the telling of stories would be important, but my reissuing of them in written form, in journal entries, in vignettes which appear in Chapters One, Eight and Nine, and in the written stories of participants in Chapter Seven. Richardson and St. Pierre (2003) state that writing can be useful as a “research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves, and others” (p. 500). They value forms of writing which are evocative and creative, including autoethnographic writing, and seeking not to be limited to a formula. For writers, Richardson and St. Pierre (2003) recommend criteria for assessment of the value of the writing process to include aesthetic qualities which draw in the reader and carry an impact upon reading it. Richardson and St. Pierre also validate writing to contribute to improving a reader’s understanding, a reflexive writing style, and writing which expresses a lived reality. The stories I was aiming to convey held prospects that each excerpt might enliven and impassion the others around it. In so collecting and revisioning, I intended to lend weight to the fashioning of hopeful insights, and even solutions and new futures for each woman. I recognised my own concern for the privacy and anonymity of each woman in a locality in which I knew some participants might recognise others (Cotterill, 1992). My associated concern that this might caution them against being totally open in the conversation, I realised that the anonymity of each woman could remain safe in this method of depiction. This concern characterised a pragmatic mix of ethical vigilance for the wellbeing of participants, balanced with a pragmatic interest as a single-mother-researcher, who needed a workable method of information-gathering or ‘data collection’, achievable in my research life (Denzin & Lincoln, 1997). In the next section I outline the principles

which directed me to think and act in a way which was mindful of participants and my ethical duty toward them.

## **Ethical matters**

Studies of ethics surround concerns regarding the potential for research studies such as mine, to be harmful to participants. Ethical concerns for the welfare of participants commonly include the researcher's responsibility to fully explain the study and ensure the participant gives full and free consent before the inquiry commences (Hood, Mayall & Oliver, 1999). The notion that research ought to benefit or avoid harming those who are involved in research, underpins ethical frameworks such as that which contributed to this thesis (University of Waikato, 2017). In my case, institutional ethical requirements prescribed by the University, together with my recognition of the importance of remaining cognisant of universal ethical tenets of privacy or anonymity, security of information, informed consent (including the risks and benefits of participation in the study), participants' rights to withdraw at any time from the research with no fear of negative repercussions, and truth-telling on my part, comprised the institutional ethical framework to which I adhered (see Appendix one).

Understanding that personal details might be shared, including some which may be painful to remember for participants or myself, my ethical engagement extended beyond these essentials. I was concerned that women who were probably very busy and who led full lives with many commitments and pulls in different directions might be too busy to spend time talking with me unless they believed there might be felt benefits for themselves (Hood, Mayall & Oliver, 1999). I did not want to make already pressured lives even more full unless it was in a cause from which participants might see a benefit. Such benefits from taking part in research have been expressed in studies by Silva (1996), and by Olesen (2000). Paybacks might include gaining new and encouraging insights about one's life and relationships (Gatenby & Humphries, 1999; Olesen, 2000), having an opportunity to express oneself honestly and feel heard by others (Silva, 1996), and gaining an appreciation of one's own qualities and strengths



(Hood, Mayall & Oliver, 1999) reflected in the stories told and responses garnered by researcher and perhaps other participants.

In my information sheet (see Appendix two), I outlined the study's aims, and possible benefits of participation for mothers. My professional history of working with mothers and my reflections on my own mothering journey were reminders to me that women often do not realise, let alone acknowledge, how hard they work, nor take time to appreciate or congratulate themselves for the demanding emotional, mental, and physical effort which they expend in caring for others. I hoped that this would be an opportunity for this appreciation to emerge. I understood that our discussions might be personal and possibly painful for participants or for me. The risks of taking part in research of a personal nature are outlined by Olesen (2000), and by Hood et al. (1999), who comment on the propensity for research inquiry to potentially cost or disadvantage, even damage, participants. Such costs can be the inconvenience of time spent participating, time which for mothers is already scarce in many situations, and the costs of finding childcare in order to participate in conversations or interviews. My intention to make the process as easy as possible for women, indicated an online engagement would be preferable; yet the inconvenience of learning the site, logging on and spending time thinking and contributing regularly, was less convenient for women in this case, and one-on-one conversations between researcher and participant were preferable. The possibility of emotional responses to the discussions held, moved me to arrange support in the form of discounted counselling for participants through a local not-for-profit agency. I elected to arrange this on a case-by-case basis, yet this was not requested by any of the participants.

## **Evaluating research quality and validity**

The notion of quality in research pertains to confidence in the process and results of research, and an appreciation for how and whether research inquiry is useful and believable (Long & Johnson, 2000). In 1995, Kvale posited validity in research inquiry

as a social construct to be recognised in time and place according to particular (but not universal) values. Traditional measures of validity, according to Kvale (1995), included aspects of research quality such as replicability, generalisability and representation. Criteria were embedded in studies in which particular, positivist research characteristics featured. Positivist research is deemed legitimate when participant (sample) numbers are large enough to 'represent' a population and strict research conditions (such as those within a controlled laboratory environment or managing control of other variables such as age of participant) are adhered to (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Such research is used to laud 'generalisability' – the notion that what was learned from the research must apply to others outside of the research, or even to all people (Porter, 1996). Evidence of replication, representativeness and generalisability signifies research validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Studies which position truth as externally-located, timeless and value-free, depict the results of research as findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The promulgation of such fixed rules for the assessment of research quality or validity is not only impossible in this study, but at odds with the research values espoused in qualitative, focused inquiries like this one (Long & Johnson, 2000). In accordance with Kvale (1995), characteristics of reliability, validity and generalisability, require the adoption of beliefs in research quality which are at odds with the values I have claimed and conferred in this and the previous Chapter of this thesis.

According to Denzin (1997), certainty in qualitative inquiry is of questionable value. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) hold that the existence of uncertainty and the dependence of variable factors such as researcher, participants, time and place, are reminders to researchers to be careful, tentative, intentional and reflexive in their intentions and representations. In this study, the generation of strictly replicable findings was unlikely, given my open and legitimate personal interest in the study and in the process of meaning-making in particular stories told in Chapters Seven and Eight of this thesis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). As I held that meaning is constructed and shaped by people rather than discovered (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), I posited that replicability of results is not a rigorous intention in this study. Qualitative responses to these principles

emphasise the impossibility of representing an entire group or population, even with a very large group of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1997). As my study will show, generalisability of results to other studies or those undertaken by another researcher or including other participants, is an inadequate expectation for a study in which detailed focus upon unique stories and construction of meanings from these interactions, is a declared feature. Understanding that no two researchers perform the same inquiry in the same way recognises the impossibility of truly replicating research, particularly that which pertains to the complexities of human life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

The evaluation of research quality in this study relies upon constructive and subjective measures of validity, appropriateness, fitness for intent, and ethical rigor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Kvale, 1995). The measures I took to be faithful to participants in the generation of stories and implications from this study were gathered in the generation of stories contributing to action-oriented outcomes useful for making a difference in the lives of mothers. The propensity for this research to achieve such noble outcomes would be open to evaluation by the women who participated in the study, to judge whether it was a worthwhile inclusion for them. Stories and sections from this thesis were made available to participants for reading and comment. Some level of generated, shifted or reconsidered thought on their part, regarding their wellbeing and family, would validate my work here; such evaluations are included in the final Chapter of the thesis. I remained open to changing or even dismantling the constructed conversation at women's requests. On my part, such a shift or development in my thinking about wellbeing or family would indicate that this inquiry had been a valuable pursuit. My developing thinking is included throughout this document, in the form of journal entries indicating shifts in my thinking, a process supported by Epp (2008) and by Long and Johnson (2000).

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) assess validity through credibility of storying, wherein a version of the subjective world of participants is believable and useful for generating credible implications. This assessment of validity is especially important in this study where pieces of verbal expression are woven together with others, to create

a conversation which did not take place 'in real life'. My process for this construction of conversations is detailed earlier in this Chapter. In a study focused upon the experiences of people such as mothers, who are argued by scholars such as Kinser (2010), O'Reilly (2007) and Rich (1976), to have struggled for power over their own lives, congruency of study objectives with methodological preferences was in keeping with researcher attempts toward power-sharing and negotiation of meaning, visible in the shared meaning-making between myself and conversants.

Rinehart (1998) states that storytelling methods in which fiction or construction are featured, as the stories in this thesis feature, must be believable and credible to the reader in order to be useful research methods, a sentiment echoed by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2013). Rinehart (1998) also supports wording phrases and responses in ways which capture an authentic voice, making expressions credible to the reader. To assist me with this, I invited a trusted scholarly colleague to read and comment on the stories I was telling in Chapters Seven and Eight, being open to feedback. The successful contribution of myself and another writing colleague to a published collection where semi-fabricated stories were part of the scholarly content of our work also affirmed that my storytelling efforts were effective and robust (Lamdin Hunter & Dey, 2016a).

## **Chapter summary**

In this Chapter I have drawn from the seminal ideas of Berger and Luckmann (1966) concerning the social construction of subjective reality introduced in Chapter Two. These ideas are supported and extended by Burr (2015), and Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2004, 2015), toward an emerging orientation to narrative methodologies; in particular, living stories in organisational storytelling. Situating organisational theory embellished my inquiry with potential methods of story construction, using the work of Boje (2008b, 2014), Vickers (2011, 2012), Rinehart (1997), and Richardson and St. Pierre (2003). The abilities of these authors to convey authentic and compelling narratives resonated with me. The careful positioning of stories with authentic, believable, and fabricated elements in ways which are faithful to participants' contributions is central

to validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1997). Such stories contrast with the telling of coherent, beginning-middle-end grand narratives (Boje, 2014). I intended to generate a study in which women's wellbeing would be discussed, and in particular, actively fostered in their telling of and reflection upon their stories. This was entirely in keeping with my intent toward action-oriented and feminist research, wherein participants' concerns were central on my agenda.

I now move in the next two Chapters, to identify and contextualise features in literature which features women, mothers, families, and their wellbeing. Deep reviews of literature identify and make sense of the grand narratives of wellbeing, mothers and families, told of in research and policy literature, in order to contextualise the stories told by women in Chapters Seven and Eight. I intended to paint a rich backdrop of the grand narratives of wellbeing, and of families, which inform and shape public opinion, and which constrain and enable mothers in their everyday lives. The social, political and philosophical origins of research, reports, and policies which construct mothers in particular ways, are significant in their contribution to the social construction of motherhood and life in motherled families.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Wellbeing**

#### **Introduction**

I have positioned my inquiry in relation to broad and deep issues of what it might mean to live (ontology), know (epistemology) and inquire (methodology). In Chapter Two I situated my ontological and epistemological values in a social constructionist paradigm, preparing to align my inquiry with methodologies which are subjective and interpretive rather than positivist or objective. Social constructionist thought levered an understanding of contextual locations from which to make sense of wellbeing and motherhood. In Chapter Three I clarified my intent to use storytelling in an organisational storytelling vein, to share women's stories of wellbeing in motherled households. I designed this to unfold alongside my own development as researcher, subject and participant.

I now advance the storytelling inquiry by exploring social histories of those aspects of human life in construction, which relate to my thesis. I highlight aspects of thought and inquiry expressed through research and policy, which historical perspectives illuminate. This leads into an investigation of historically-located versions of mothers and their families through the human-directed and -mediated machinations of social construction. Versions of mothering in families are fabricated over time, in situated time- and context-specific ways evidenced in research and public policy. Narratives of wellbeing, a reified concept given status as a subjective reality for many, have gained much traction in social-, health-, and family-related research during the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Wellbeing has become an aspiration towards which much policy and thought is directed.

This Chapter unfolds as a review of research generated among and reflective of various conceptualisations of wellbeing. To situate stories generated in conversation with

women, living stories as pathways to antenarrative later to be explicated in Chapter Seven, I begin by overviewing everyday-expressions of wellbeing, sometimes understood as definitions according to researchers and practitioners in health, social practice, and economics, from the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century onwards. At this time, according to Dally (1982) and Shorter (1976), shifts in human life occurring as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation, and developments in health-related knowledge, took place. These shifts, according to Angner (2011), foregrounded an emergent research focus upon wellbeing. I notice particular focus upon subgroups such as child, or subjective, wellbeing, subfields which remain evident a century later, entwined and difficult to separate from one another, and yet distinctive in their own historic and contextual features. The organisation of subfields of wellbeing requires a deft weaving of richly-textured issues. This complexity has led me to defer a chronological recount of wellbeing research in favour of a focus upon subfields of wellbeing paralleled across time. Throughout some fields such as subjective wellbeing, the limitations of inquiry include the dominance of quantified, measured data in relation to subjective experience. Another noticeable constraint upon wellbeing inquiry concerns the sustained positioning of people, including mothers and their children, as isolated individuals with little or no effect upon others, let alone entwined, interconnected relationships which profoundly influence each other. These constraints, I argue, shade and shape the narratives presented in research and policy, about how women and children might thrive, survive and be sustained in motherled households. I notice the interaction between maternal wellbeing and child wellbeing in the motherled household, positioned as distinct and separate, and the implications for wellbeing when their wellbeing is deemed an individual, competing concern. I am interested in how particular realities are constructed, and others are not.

My noticing of the individualist focus upon human wellbeing, and of the dominant narrative of counting and quantifying such a complex construct and experience such as wellbeing, leads me to argue in this thesis, for a centralising of researcher reflexivity, where researchers who claim an interest in the intensely complex, personal and subjective aspects of wellbeing in families might challenge themselves to notice their

own guiding principles and personal values, making these explicit in the inquiries they conduct. The significance of a reflexive analysis corresponds with Dally's (1982) noticing of historical influences upon the positioning of researchers of families, and their propensity to shape their studies with particular implicit values. Guiding values could include a propensity to rely upon positivist precepts, including the notion of quantification as an adequate method to assess subjective reality including wellbeing. Guiding values might also include an unquestioned construction of humans as independent rational actors, a construction which I argue in this thesis, fails mothers and children. The omission of reflexivity in wellbeing-related research, undermines research rigor, limits what might be understood about wellbeing, and destabilises the very wellbeing of those people whose lives are under study and at stake. I conclude this chapter with questions about the value of contemporary wellbeing research given the limitations of researcher positioning and positivist influences upon social research.

As stated in Chapter Two, my focus upon wellbeing in this thesis follows on from my background in health and wellbeing, where, as a nurse, I encountered people's constructed and enacted beliefs about what keeps them well, as I cared for children and families. My work revealed the importance of many variable factors, not merely those under the scrutiny of nurses and doctors, which enabled people to flourish. Wellbeing carried broadly-sketched notions of positive life conditions when compared with 'health', although the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Wellbeing extends beyond ideas of health, to attend to wider conditions which make a difference in people's lives. My interest in wellbeing took another turn as raising my three children became, and remains, one of my primary concerns in life. I begin from a position in which a sense of wellbeing improves people's perceptions of their life, as well as improving the potential for enhanced conditions.



## **Wellbeing in construction**

Among researchers, policy-writers and government interests, wellbeing is a term used to refer to overarching health status of individuals and groups of people, to incorporate aspects of the satisfaction of necessities of human life in social, emotional, physical and material contexts. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social construction is the process on the way to subjective, social reality, in which wellbeing can be understood as a product of such constructions - intangible, subjective - yet real in the lives of those discussing it. Explications of wellbeing take many forms and relate in literature, research, and popular contexts such as everyday conversation, to health, happiness and the satisfaction of human needs and wants (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2000; Sointu, 2005). The term is often used in research to articulate concern for a group of people, such as children (Aldgate, 2010; Ben-Arieh, 2010; Chapple, 2009) or mothers (Cook, 2012; Giallo, Rose, & Vittorino, 2011; Mitchell & Hauser-Cram, 2008), or upon aspects such as subjective wellbeing (Angner, 2011; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005), and economic or material wellbeing (Aassve, Betti, Mazzucco & Mencarini, 2007; Easton, 2016). Social policy/science research journals, health and family researchers, and organisational and economic researchers, generate and hold these discussions, in examples by Sudden (2016), Troup (2011), UNICEF (2013) and Wang, Parker and Taylor (2013).

## **Wellbeing, health, wellness and welfare**

Wellbeing is a term sometimes alternated with titles such as health, welfare, and wellness (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2000; Worth & McMillan, 2004). Use of a term such as 'health' invites a focus upon disease-related aspects of wellbeing, with a narrower, more medically-focused construction focused upon illness and medically-mediated recovery such as in studies by Beck (2002) and by Garbarski and Witt (2012). The relationship of health with wellbeing cannot be avoided or overstated. As stated, I intend in this thesis to highlight the voices of mothers, rather than others whose views might contest or over-ride their voices. The enormity of health-related research available for review, and the limitations of this term, leads me to focus upon wellbeing,

wellness and in some cases, welfare. 'Welfare' is used sparingly and with caution in this study, due to the increasing association of the word with discussions of state assistance or government benefits (Sudden, 2016). Economist Brian Easton, in a 2016 commentary on economic wellbeing, uses 'wellbeing' and 'happiness' interchangeably, though this is not common. Wellness is a term made available by writers such as Prilleltensky and Nelson (2000), as a descriptor for the satisfaction of material, physical, affective, and psychological needs in ways which are synonymous with wellbeing.

As the literature in this Chapter will reveal, wellbeing can be understood as a reified social fabrication, an intangible, taken-for-granted and variously understood construction which carries many meanings, some in conflict with others, some more-or-less assumed to agree with one another. The term 'wellbeing' can be reified. A reification of a word might be figuratively likened to a Trojan horse, which, in Greek legend, was deemed a gift, welcomed, yet accompanied by hidden problematic or harmful, contents, able to wreak harm on unsuspecting people. Along with other reified constructs in this thesis, such as 'family' or 'society', wellbeing is a term requiring cautious qualification with a careful analysis and discursive deconstruction in order to make rigorous sense of how wellbeing is understood in research inquiry, policy, and everyday conversation. My analysis leads me to avoid bestowing a one-time definition of wellbeing for the purpose of my inquiry. I am reluctant to state what wellbeing 'is'. Instead, I outline wellbeing as a socially-constructed fabrication in research and policy on local, national and global levels as it has been noticed in policy by Aldgate (2010) and in research by Cook (2012). I discuss the idea of wellbeing as it might be coined as a measurable quantity which people need or have, in varying amounts as evaluated by Eckersley (2009 and as compared country-to-country by UNICEF (2007; 2013). I frame wellbeing according to literature in which wellbeing appears as an individually-pursued outcome (Aldgate, 2010; Johnson, 2009) and an offshoot of human-rights-policy enactment (UNCRC, 1990). I make sense of historical understandings of wellbeing as investigated by Angner (2011), and by Bang Nes & Roysamb (2015). I argue that current conceptualisations of wellbeing in academic inquiry and policy

(examples are the OECD, 2013, and MSD, 2016) are grounded by these historical foundations.

### **Research about wellbeing: Measured quantity or subjective experience?**

Researcher interest in wellbeing has as its central aim the direct or indirect improvement of human health and happiness in literature reviews carried out by Pollard & Lee (2002) and Angner (2011) and in reports gathered under the auspices of the United Nations (UNICEF, 2007, 2013). Understandings of certain aspects of wellbeing can be used to produce information relating to specific social and health-oriented outcomes which are commonly thought to relate to the improvement of conditions for happy, healthy lives. According to Prilleltensky and Nelson (2000), human wellbeing is an ecological concept, wherein individuals are impacted upon by societal, familial and community wellness. According to Bang Nes and Roysamb (2015), little research focused upon wellbeing as a concept was available prior to the 1950s. Studies in eupathics or happiness were the precursors to those studies naming wellbeing as a topic (Bang Nes & Roysamb, 2015). Early researchers such as those whose studies feature later in this Chapter (Bernreuter, Terman, Bittenweiser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson, 1938, cited in Pinsof & Lebow, 2005; Brotemarkle & Porter, 1933; Hart, 1940, cited in Angner, 2011, p. 23; Myerson, 1917) were embedded in research traditions in which a high value was placed upon objective, empirically-measured phenomena, by their utilisation of inventories and scales. In influential documents such as those produced by the OECD (2013) and by the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2007, 2013), wellbeing is portrayed as a state of being which is constantly scrutinised using measurement and comparison, by the use of scales and gradations. Many measurements focus upon meeting basic human needs such as shelter or food (UNICEF, 2007; 2013). Wellbeing has also been investigated as a subjectively-felt experience which varies from person to person in terms of what they believe fosters, engenders and protects, or diminishes wellbeing, in studies by Cook (2012), Currie (2004), and Fisher (2008). Subjective representations of wellbeing are available in

large studies such as those produced by UNICEF in Report Cards, periodically issued to discuss the wellbeing of overall populations (2007, 2013). The relationships between objective, measurable data and subjective experience, highlight an important philosophical question of representation and researcher intent. The espoused reasons for studying wellbeing, and the direction and utilisation of research findings, determine the questions to be asked and the theoretical, ontological, and epistemological assumptions underlying them. In this thesis I am interested in what researches claim understandings of wellbeing, and what benefits or constraints these confer. In other words, how are people constructed by particular versions of wellbeing as issued by researchers and policymakers, and to what effect?

### **Wellbeing in policy: Wellbeing as governmental pursuit**

Those aspects of human existence which are deemed universally beneficial such as material sufficiency of provision, positive relationships with other people, or the absence of disease (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2000), are made the focus of graphic and numerical measurements which contribute to comparisons with other social and geographical areas, and which are published online by such organisations as the OECD (2011) and by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2012). Local and national government bodies, and international and global authorities (UNICEF, 2007, 2013) locate the wellbeing of citizens within monitored and reported judgements of national success in economic, governmental and social terms. Success is made visible in the realisation of certain policies, regulations and laws, according to Aldgate (2010) and Rablen (2012). Government and nongovernment research, and arguably policy, is influenced by the judgements made within these reports, which use researcher-determined scales to measure satisfaction of human need and basic human rights. In places where many needs are apparently met, wellbeing is deemed evident and compared with other places (Rablen, 2012).

Since the Second World War, the United Nations has monitored many aspects of

people's lives in economic, social, educational and political terms. In particular, UNICEF, originally charged with resettling and taking care of children whose lives were destabilised during World War Two, now monitors children's wellbeing through regular 'Report Cards', of which two, No. 7, produced in 2007, and No. 11, produced in 2013, are included in reviews of child wellbeing in this thesis. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was originally charged with contributing to the reconstruction of Europe in 1948, through particular economic programs and aid directed through its members, of which New Zealand is one. Of interest is the OECD's *How's Life* series, produced in 2011 and 2015 as part of the 'Better life initiative', focused upon the measurement of human population wellbeing in material and wider social terms. In addition, international organisations focused upon wellbeing (particularly children's), non-governmental and charity organisations also appear as monitors; among them, Oxfam, Red Cross, and Save the Children. Humanitarian organisations respond with reporting and campaigns aimed at relief toward alleviating poverty and rebuilding communities following political or natural events which undermine people's wellbeing.

The reliance upon wellbeing as an indicator of national success in economic, political and social spheres, follows understandings that the success and prosperity of an economy and country is supported by, and indicative of, certain levels of wellbeing. Wellbeing is commonly seen, such as in studies by Aldgate (2010) and Cook (2012) as something to which value or quantity can be added to with the conscious intent of individual persons, families and governments, to increase their levels of wellbeing. According to Aldgate (2010), human wellbeing and in particular the wellbeing of children, upon which a large body of inquiry is focused, is understood to improve with the initiation of government policies, regulations and laws. Cook (2012) notices wellbeing as positioned in government policy and health-focused research as the shared responsibility of government agencies, local community groups including local councils, families, and individual citizens. This shared responsibility ideal is visible in documentation such as the Ministry of Social Development's 2008 publication of child wellbeing indicators, and more recently, their Family Wellbeing Guidelines (2016).

At local government level, New Zealand's Local Government Act (LGA) (2002) makes provision for local bodies including city councils, to operate and manage services and infrastructure in a way which contributes to the wellbeing of those in their communities. The Act initially outlined social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing. Kessaram (2013) notes with concern, the amendments made to the LGA in 2012 which removed this stipulation due to their "unrealistic" status.

The attainment of wellbeing-related outcomes expressed as figures which depict states of health and income, is deemed an indirect result of economic policies which stimulate economic activity or growth, with the aim of prosperity in measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Resulting effects known as trickle-down effects of robust GDP, are thought to include higher incomes and greater wellbeing for all, according to Hayward (2012) who writes about children in the context of New Zealand policy.

Esping-Anderson (1999, 2009) compares national policies which influence wellbeing and families, along a figurative scale, with welfare-state democracies including those in the Nordic countries at one end, and neoliberally-situated, commonly Anglophone, democracies including Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, at the other. She notes that in parts of northern Europe including the Nordic countries, welfare-type states prevail which provide widely-accessible government financial support in the form of benefits or state-funded services such as healthcare and housing, which they purport to correlate with greater wellbeing. UNICEF reports (2007, 2013) support this claim. In OECD countries which favour increasingly neoliberal policy such as New Zealand, wellbeing is increasingly positioned as a private, individual pursuit, one in which citizens who experience and embody wellbeing can be portrayed as independent consumers of a product – wellbeing. Sointu (2005), Scholte (2005) and VandenBeld Giles (2014) concur that when people seek access to such 'products', they are assumed in market rhetoric to behave as rational economic actors. This depiction evokes the language of choice and agency for such consumers. VandenBeld Giles (2014), Scholte (2005) and Breton (2014) critique the construction of people as consumers within an

impersonal marketplace where they are depicted as “self-optimising subjects within a market economy based on competition” (VandenBeld Giles, 2014, p. 16). In OECD countries, according to VandenBeld Giles (2014), neoliberal reasoning has gradually replaced earlier 20<sup>th</sup>-century theories based in Keynesian thought in which social democratic values held sway in welfare states. In New Zealand, this shift in economic reasoning behind policy, discussed by Jane Kelsey in her books *Rolling Back the State* (1993), and *The New Zealand Experiment* (1997), has been evident since the late 1980s. The market reasoning, noticeable in (sometimes rapid) changes in economic and social policy, continues now, most recently seen in a series of changes to welfare provision for those in families of one parent (Ministry of Social Development, 2013). Shifts in welfare policy affect those in motherled households more than many others, according to Anderson and Moore (2014). This is evident in ways which will be discussed in the following two Chapters.

In 1988, Marilyn Waring published *Counting for Nothing* (in the US, released as *If Women Counted*). Waring critiqued measures of success and progress in use by OECD countries, concerned at their effects upon, and shaping of, the lives of women and children. Central to her writing about the work done by women across the world, was the labour ignored by and invisible to those determining economic policy. Waring (1988) critiqued policies which had been coined in and for specific times and contexts (in particular, during World War Two), since applied commonly in spite of looming limitations in the ways in which human labour, humans themselves, and their surrounding environments, could then be valued and taken care of. Waring’s work became a touchstone of critique of policies which construct all endeavours including human labour as significant only if they have direct monetary implications. The narrative of worth uncovered by Waring, continues to have direct, sometimes grave, effects upon people’s lives and wellbeing, effects visible in human lives across the globe. Continuing and recent reviews of Waring’s (1988) ideas abound, regarding the unsatisfactory use of national figures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to narrate so-called ‘progress’ in a nation. Waring’s (1988) ideas about ways in which human labour and productivity including work done by women might be acknowledged,

claimed to offer benefits for women and mothers and for the planet on which we are dependent and situated. A volume edited by Bjornholdt and McKay (2014) critiques the outcomes of Waring's ideas; yet the authors exemplify ways and places in which Waring's (1988) analysis has been helpfully utilised in countries including those aligned with UN and OECD programs.

In New Zealand, discussions of government and citizen responsibilities for the improvement of people's wellbeing have more recently focused upon the welfare of children living in poverty, in work documented by Bryan Bruce (2011), and a reports produced by non-government organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) (Dale, O'Brien & St. John, 2011). Government focus upon wellbeing of children is evident in coverage by the MSD (2014), for whom economic reforms carried out since the early 1990s are argued by Dale, O'Brien and St. John (2011) to have been unsuccessful in engendering or improving wellbeing. Their findings are supported in reportage by St. John, MacLennan, Anderson and Fountain (2014), concerning child poverty in New Zealand. An increasingly-noticeable tension between government and individual responsibility for improvements in wellbeing is noticeable in their critique. The limitations of an individually-located focus upon wellbeing are most visible in child wellbeing, which is of particular focus later in this Chapter.

### **Aotearoa New Zealand: The *Growing up in New Zealand* studies.**

One particular large, longitudinal body of research of interest to me in the context of New Zealand research and policy generation, is the *Growing Up in New Zealand* series, which includes approximately 7000 New Zealand children born in 2005, and their families, recruited before the birth of their child (Growing up in New Zealand, n.d). This study varies from many longitudinal projects such as the earlier *Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study* which began in 1972 in New Zealand, and studies overseas such as the *Fragile Families Study* in the United States.



*Growing up in New Zealand*, unlike others, includes data collected from before the baby's birth, where most such studies recruit families after the birth of the baby. Also included are fathers or partners of mothers, in interviews. The ethnic diversity of the sample is judged by the authors to be representative of the ethnic profile of New Zealand's population. In terms of research aimed at particular levels of academic rigour, *Growing Up in New Zealand* meets particular scientific requirements for validity, requirements which I critique elsewhere in this thesis, and which are embedded in scientific, positivist expectations of rigor. Regular interviews, face-to-face and via telephone, and observations of the recruited babies and their families, result in regular generation of reports, five between 2010 and 2015 (*Growing up in New Zealand*, n.d). Reports so far have focused upon early childhood development, aspects of vulnerability, resilience, and housing. The study has generated peer-reviewed articles, chapters and presentations contributing to understandings of child wellbeing in New Zealand. Among these, publications by Bartholomew, Morton, Atatoa-Carr, Bandara and Grant (2015), Morton, Grant, Wall, Atatoa-Carr, Bandara, Schmidt and Camargo Jr. (2014), and Waldie, Peterson, D'Souza, Underwood, Pryor, Atatoa-Carr and Morton (2015), feature. One important aspect of *Growing up in New Zealand*, presented on the webpage, is a link inviting readers to "meet our families" by clicking on a short video clip telling the story of a child whose family is among those interviewed. The focus upon small, personal and personable presentations of the lives of those whose stories are being added together to make large, quantified statements, adds a richness of texture not visible in the presentation of other large studies such as the *Fragile Families Study* based in Princeton University. The wording of *Growing up in New Zealand* beside *Fragile Families*, is also noticeable in its positive focus upon growth and activity, as opposed to emphasising fragility.

### **Wellbeing as a human right**

The focused attention of the United Nations in the form of regular monitoring and reporting in countries among which Aotearoa New Zealand is included, demonstrates

concern for human flourishing and wellbeing. The positioning of safe and productive living is seen by these agencies as an enactment of human rights which is followed in Periodic Reviews conducted by UN-appointed monitors of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016). The rights of children to particular levels of healthcare and social provision, shelter, safety and peace, as well as individually-experienced rights to dignity, freedom of expression and religion, and privacy, all aspects of human wellbeing (according to Dale et al., 2011), are enshrined in human rights-based legislation and policy. The United Nations (UNICEF, 2007) definition of child wellbeing, includes 'their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialisation, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born' (p. 4). The focus in many of these documents such as those by UNICEF, and by OECD in the document *How's Life?* (2013) is upon people, even children, as discrete individuals. Children's human rights are coupled with their wellbeing in the 1990 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC), a discourse taken up by CPAG in their positioning of children's rights as demonstrated through the provision of necessities of life to/within poor families.

### **Wellbeing as an individual matter**

The construction of wellbeing as an individual matter, pursuant to the enactment of individual human rights, is critiqued in studies where the complex relationships between wellbeing and environment, and between people as shapers of each other's wellbeing, is given expression, such as studies of mothers of children with special needs (Carpenter & Austin, 2007) and families of one parent (Chapple, 2009). The rights and responsibilities of individuals enshrined in current policies holding sway in New Zealand, have been underpinned by neoliberal views in which individuality and individualism are presumed. When wellbeing is considered as the business of private individuals, it is assumed to improve with the implementation of specific family actions

such as parenting courses as described in a study by Johnson (2009), or strategies to induce or ensure wellbeing of parents with young children (De Castro Ribas & Bornstein, 2005). Hamilton and Hamilton Wilson (2009) laud the value of regular family mealtimes including those eaten by families together around a table. Leisure activities including exercise are also believed to boost wellbeing (Currie, 2004), certain pastimes packaged and presented as 'quality time' by Douglas and Michaels (2004).

Wellbeing as a private individual matter is also argued to improve using levels of advice and support offered by individually-mediated or -referred agencies to promote family wellbeing, in British research by Aldgate (2010), and Aldgate and MacIntosh (2006). McNaughton (2011) typifies the problematic question of societal and individual responsibility for factors influencing wellbeing. McNaughton (2011) critiques maternal responsibility in a study of children who are obese, and whose mothers are deemed responsible and blamed for this, through (lack of) particular parenting practices which include prenatal and even pre-conceptual self-care. McNaughton (2011) calls attention to society-wide factors and environmental influences including socio-economic constraints which predispose some children to obesity, factors often ignored in advice given to families concerned about their children's wellbeing. Kinser (2012) questions the simplistic positioning of mothers as the lone agents of change and improvement in family wellbeing. She critiques the improvements which can apparently be wrought by cooking and presenting the 'right' food in a particular western way, around the table, wherein, Kinser argues, many solutions to issues of wellbeing are blithely understood to rest. Lamdin Hunter and Dey (2016b) critique individualised marketing and nutritional advice campaigns aimed at mothers in New Zealand. The narrative of the unwell or unhealthy child as so because of their mother's failings is a common narrative in research by Carpenter and Austin (2007), and in feminist critique of popular 'mother-blaming' culture in everyday conversation and media, addressed by Douglas and Michaels (2004) and Green (2012), following on from studies by Hayes (1996), and Thurer (1994). For mothers, being held responsible for their child's state of being without the concomitant resources to better their circumstances is a fraught experience wrought by feelings of

disempowerment, disillusionment and even rage, depicted by Collins (2007), Kinser (2010), and Carpenter and Austin (2007).

### **Investing in wellbeing? Monitoring children**

Examples of national and international gazes upon wellbeing are readily available in studies focused upon particular conditions in people's lives, conditions which are thought to influence wellbeing, particularly during certain stages of human development. New Zealand-based developmental constructionists Drewery and Claiborne (2014) understand childhood as a stage when persons are likely to be regarded as vulnerable, and a time when wellbeing is crucial to successful development into healthy, productive adults. The health and welfare of children and young people in the context of family life is central in this thesis. Since the Enlightenment, it has been increasingly accepted by church and community leaders, and by those caring for children, that concern for children's wellbeing carries promise for the future betterment of society writ large (Drewery & Claiborne, 2014; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998).

Currently, UNICEF is explicit regarding the link between the wellbeing of children and the decency of the society in which children are situated, captured in their reckoning that "The true measure of a nations' standing is how well it attends to its children" (UNICEF, 2007, p. 1). Concomitantly, UNICEF conducts and reports large regular captures of figures they relate to the wellbeing of children and young people from the Innocenti Research Centre, using data gathered about many thousands of children and young people. As evidenced in the child wellbeing data utilised by UNICEF (2007, 2013), large bodies of collected data, encompassing so many people in so many places with so many variables at work in their lives, rather 'blunt' tools of analysis are necessarily utilised. These tools are of limited use in policy definition for specific jurisdictions. However, UNICEF (2007) comments that the comparison between countries is useful as a measuring instrument with an indirect potential to guide or ask

governments to account in countries whose statistics feature at the 'worse' end of wellbeing.

Regular reports of OECD governments to the United Nations in the form of reportage to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, were most recently carried out in 2016 and reported upon by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) as well as non-government organisations including Action for Children and Youth, Aotearoa (ACYA) and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). The reporting mechanism provides opportunities for governments to receive feedback on the effectiveness of their policy for those such as children. Non-government groups advocate for policy changes indicated by exacerbating problems in society such as poverty and inequality, which are understood to diminish wellbeing in the short- and long-term (Drewery & Claiborne, 2014).

Children's welfare is also a worthy research pursuit as it is understood to be an indicator of wellbeing in other, wider spheres of society and the communities in which children feature (UNICEF, 2007). For these reasons, children have become an increasing focus of social and humanitarian research amid a globalised context of monitored human life (Aldgate, 2010, OECD, 2011). Childhood and youth are understood in publications by Drewery and Claiborne (2014), Fawcett, Featherstone and Goddard (2004), James, Jenks, and Prout (1998), and Prout (2000) as social constructions which develop across time, becoming visible in such times and places from which many New Zealanders have descended. Social construction and positioning of children shapes researcher and adult understanding of them in the world (Fawcett, Featherstone & Goddard, 2004). The characterisation of children in discourses of childhood, such as those in which the innocence and future potential of children is highlighted (Dally, 1982; Heywood, 2001), is significant in the positioning of children in discussions of wellbeing in families (OECD, 2013). In Chapter Five I discuss these narrative constructions of childhood.

A growing belief among health and social practitioners, increasingly seen as ‘experts’ of humanity and health in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Nathanson & Tulley, 2016), has been that the wellbeing of society is predicated upon, and predicted by, the livelihood of its children, a view evident above in UNICEF’s child wellbeing reports (2007; 2012). Interest in child wellbeing corresponds with a view that for children, an immediate investment of society’s resources will bear fruit once children reach adulthood, resulting in their fuller contribution to society and less need for increasingly scarce social and economic resources to support individuals (McAuley & Rose, 2010). Child wellbeing is recorded and measured with an emerging economic value granted by policy-makers who recognise that unwell children are costly to the economy both in the short term (for instance, in lost work days by parents/caregivers, health system costs, less or poorer early childhood education, or behavioural/cognitive problems in individual children) and in the long term (such as in the presence of chronic illnesses originating in childhood, lost workdays, and diminished opportunities for education/employment) (Chapple, 2009). The view of children as future adults, supported by the term ‘well-becoming’ as an alternative to wellbeing posited by Ben-Arieh (2010), highlights the narrative of children as citizens-in-waiting, for whom the reward of society’s economic and social investment now is not realised until adulthood is reached. The perspective of children as a worthy investment now for a long term payoff to society as well as individual, is a commonly-held one, of interest to governments, noticed by researchers such as Aldgate (2010) and recorded by social historians including Fawcett, Featherstone & Goddard (2004), and in New Zealand, Bryder (2003). The ‘future adults’ perspective of children’s wellbeing contrasts with the views of those who see wellbeing as one of a child’s many human rights of paramount importance now and for their own sake, and not merely because of any social or economic benefits to be garnered in the future (Prout, 2000).

The articulation by UN delegates in 1990, of *First Call for Children*, proposed an ideal under which children are supposed to be the first to benefit from society’s benefits, and the last to pay the ‘costs’ of society’s decisions or ‘mistakes’ such as war, or policy on local and national levels. Authors, researchers and NGO representatives, including

children's advocacy interest groups such as (in New Zealand), the Children's Social Health Monitor (Craig, Jackson, & Han, 2012) focus their investigation of childhood wellbeing upon the structural factors which impinge on children's lives, including housing, parental income and access to healthcare. The influence of structural factors upon child wellbeing discussed in *The Missing Side of the Triangle* by Jack and Gill (2003), wherein child wellbeing appears inextricably linked, in part at least, to material factors such as poverty or low income. Six dimensions are covered, five of which, including material wellbeing, health and safety, educational wellbeing, family and peer relationships, and behaviours and risks, are externally-measured by the researchers. Subjective wellbeing is the sixth dimension, in which the child's perception is sought.

The origins of contemporary research, policy and everyday conversations about wellbeing take up these constructions of wellbeing as individual pursuit, measured quantity, and human right. In order to trace the geneses of these constructions, it is useful to locate them among the contextualising backgrounds of human social history, in order to understand how wellbeing became a researchable interest.

## **Wellbeing in recent research history**

According to sociologists and historians including Giddens (2006), Laslett (1970) and Rosner (2010), human life before the 20<sup>th</sup> century was commonly characterised by variable, but generally short, life expectancy for most people, as well as poor nutrition and widespread agriculturally-based subsistence living for much of the world. Against this backdrop and together with prevailing philosophical and religious beliefs of the day, human happiness or satisfaction with life and its conditions, and a humanistic focus upon such happiness, appeared a minor pursuit. Bang Nes & Roysamb (2015) claim little inquiry focused on wellbeing is recoverable before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The period of time known as the Enlightenment, has become understood as an epoch characterised by many developing changes in human life (Dally, 1982). In particular,

shifts in human understanding leading people to focus on human progress and betterment, went alongside changes positioned as advances over several hundred years, in science, technology, and religious philosophy (Taylor, 1999). Philosophies concerning human ability to self-regulate and improve the conditions of one's life, were strengthened (Taylor, 1999). The development of theories of human experience and feelings became visible in Europe and Britain in the form of human psycho-analysis, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, critiqued from a feminist perspective by Tong (2009). Taking the form of theories of the human psyche, or consciousness, psychoanalysts and medical doctors such as Sigmund Freud carried out analytical work with patients, among them children and adult women, work which formed the basis of ideas about human consciousness (Tong, 2009). Freud's curiosity in the human psyche, developing a disciplinary identity as psychology, gained momentum during and after the First World War, according to Roper (2016). Researchers began to focus upon people's wellbeing, which they understood to be seriously affected in many parts of the world by the ongoing experience of traumas witnessed and experienced during and after the War, on a never-before-seen scale (Bourke, 2014). Traumas such as shellshock (now understood as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD), the effects of mustard gas poisoning, and disfiguring physical injuries were among the afflictions which affected individuals and the orderly running of society far and wide (Bourke, 2014).

A confluence of information-gathering of large populations detailed by Porter (1986, 1996) and post-war research interest, became channelled into a new and growing concern for the welfare of children, noted by historian Michael Roper (2016). He traces the emerging research interest in child wellbeing, to emotional and behavioural problems, such as night terrors, bedwetting, stuttering, fits, hair-pulling and other problematic behaviours, experienced by the children of war veteran soldiers and nurses. These were men and women whose horrific wartime experiences were not discussed with children, but which made themselves evident nonetheless (Roper, 2016). The noticing and attempted control of challenging childhood behaviours, became the focus of behavioural practitioners such as John B. Watson, and in New Zealand, Frederick Truby King, who had founded the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society in 1907



(Bryder, 2003; Dally, 1982). Watson and King's respective work is described in more detail in Chapter Five. People's connections of wellbeing in literature exploring intergenerational trauma experienced by such people as those under persecution or colonisation, are in their early stages in research (Roper, 2016). However, intergenerational interconnections of wellbeing among people, deemed and treated as individuals and yet deeply connected with one another, are now being documented in studies such as that by Madigan, Wade, Plamondon, Maguire, and Jenkins (2017), connecting maternal adverse childhood experiences with the health of the infant.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in places such as America and Britain, where formal academic research became rooted as a pursuit, was characterised by newly-adopted methods of monitoring and documentation of such variables as household income, access to nutrition, and life expectancy, in populations which were increasingly urban in location (Dally, 1982; Porter, 1996). Eric Angner (2011) provides the fullest account of early studies of eupathics – the study of the 'science of happiness' as an early synonym for wellbeing. He outlines early studies into happiness, satisfaction and human potential to learn and succeed in various social aspects of life – not initially expressed as wellbeing, but as satisfaction, happiness, or success. Variables thought to contribute to these aspects, became examples of measurable indicators of wellbeing as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed (Porter, 1986). Angner's (2011) work is cited by others including Bang Nes and Roysamb (2015) in spite of the secondary nature of the sources he utilises. Many of the studies Angner discusses are now difficult to access in primary form, yet have been referred to by many authors since, such as Bang Nes and Roysamb (2015).

Early-20<sup>th</sup> century wellbeing research coincided with a movement of inquiry into practices now coined as social science, attempting to mirror the values of inquiry employed in natural science (Angner, 2011). For example, supposed objectivity of data-collection methods and findings, as well as separation of researcher from findings and participants, were seen as necessary elements of research into wellbeing. The dominance and effects of positivist valuing, as discussed in Chapter Two, shaped the

ways in which subjective experiences were to be expressed and understood. Studies into happiness and life satisfaction as a function of wellbeing, including those reviewed by Angner (2011), focused upon the interplay between a person's happiness, personality, and physical health. Researchers attempted to determine who was happiest, why, and what could be done to improve wellbeing (Angner, 2011; Bang Nes & Roysamb, 2015). 'Mental hygiene' as another synonym for wellbeing, was studied by Myerson, in 1917. A study by Davis (1929, cited in Angner, 2011, p. 6) investigated marital satisfaction. Others researched satisfaction in higher education (Watson, 1930, cited in Angner, 2011, p. 7). Hart (1940, cited in Angner, 2011) focused upon happiness, determining a 'chart for happiness' which was aimed at measuring happiness, with the ultimate goal of using logical positivism to produce a "happier, and therefore better, world" (1940, p. v., cited in Angner 2011, p.23). Hart hoped that scientific instruments would assist people to "live joyously within a menacing world... in spite of threats and pressures of war, of economic disaster, of our own incurable physical handicaps and past emotional wounds..." (Hart, 1940, p. 6., cited in Angner 2011, p.23). Hart and Goldings (1954, cited in Angner, 2011, p. 23) articulated the hope that such scientific research might, by interpretation, improve people's lives.

Angner's (2011) review contextualises the emerging field of wellbeing which documented the human effects of large-scale turmoil described by others such as Dally (1982). Events such as the Great Depression and the Second World War can be seen as influential. The massive displacement of people during and after the Depression and World War Two, and the widespread human suffering documented as a result, heightened the gaze of governing bodies and their advisors upon the plight of people, and in particular, children (Bowlby, 1952). Children who had been displaced or suffered such upheaval as imprisonment in concentration camps, being orphaned, injured, or sent from their homes and families to shelter (Bretherton, 1997) were of concern. Increasing global surveillance of human life by emerging world authorities on humanity, such as the newly-formed United Nations, together with the effects of burgeoning technology in transport and communication, made the measurement and

monitoring, as well as the desire to improve aspects of human wellbeing, possible (Angner, 2011).

### **Subjective wellbeing and scientific method**

Bang Nes and Roysamb (2015) note the complexity of studying wellbeing, when caught between objective and subjective interpretations of data. They note the tension between research values which underpin supposedly objective measurement of research data under positivism, deemed necessary by science researchers, and the aspects of wellbeing which are understood to be subjective by researchers or respondents (Bang Nes & Roysamb, 2015). The relationship between felt and observed reality and espoused objectivity is significant under the claim made by Denzin and Lincoln (2013) that objectivity is impossible to achieve in human-focused research. Understanding that subjective experiences and feelings such as joy or grief, are complex to make sense of in ways that were acceptable to researchers, some researchers attempted to demonstrate research rigor by quantifying value statements such as “Do you consider your life on the whole (to be) happy/unhappy?” along numbered scales such as that produced by Terman, (1938, cited in Angner, 2011, p. 6). Enabling research replicability and generalisability of scales and findings, even among large survey populations, was a priority for social science researchers (Porter, 1996). Human experiences were deemed impossible to reliably define with any degree of the scientific rigor popular at the time, without quantifying and measuring subjective wellbeing, according to Bang Nes and Roysamb (2015). A key task for researchers became one of making data useable. This, Porter (1996) argues, required translation of subjective experiences into believable statements along scales or with numbers to compensate for the potential insufficiencies of human researchers (Porter, 1996).

A prevailing ethos of measurement and scientific validation dominated inquiry and shape findings, demonstrated by Gurin (1957, cited in Angner, 2011). Social indicators as wellbeing indicators were posed by Bradburn & Caplovitz (1965). They focused

upon mental health of participants, demonstrating an increasing focus upon social indicators of wellbeing including psychological goals. Gurin, Veroff and Shield, from 1960 (cited in Angner, 2011) canvassed mental health clients and others on how happy they were, seeking to explore a range of measures of human wellbeing. Studies went on to include those carried out by Andrews (1976, cited in Angner, 2011) articulating the “[E]xcruciating problems of definition and management” (Angner, 2011, p. 27) and persistent difficulty of translating scientific measures of wellbeing into subjectively expressed statements, an insight echoed by Campbell (1976). The reduction of feelings to numbers threatened to render meaningless, people’s own words about their wellbeing, Campbell (1976) claimed. A persistent focus upon making wellbeing conceptually palatable to scientists – making data appear rigorous, reliable, able to be replicated and hence credible order to be enacted in policy and law, reinforced the measurement of aspects of wellbeing in inquiry, and contributed to the construction of wellbeing as well as those under study in particular, limited ways.

### **Measuring wellbeing: Scales and indicators**

Diener and Seligman (2004) are among those who promote sets of indicators of wellbeing, to measure wellbeing across time in people’s lives and provide more than a one-off snapshot of happiness. However, the measurement of data in social science inquiry, economist Brian Easton states, leads to a favouring of assumptions regarding how much wellbeing people are deemed to have, in which “more means better” (p. 99). Along these lines, measurements such as Gross National Income (GNI) early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from the 1970s, have been deemed useful instruments in couching or predicting wellbeing in different countries. Easton (2016) has noted the coupling of economic wealth with human happiness as comparisons between countries carried “the assumption that a higher GDP per capita meant higher welfare – more means better” (p. 101). He, along with Hayden and Wilson (2016) echoes the critiques of Murray (2015) and Swift et al. (2014) regarding the reflection of income or wealth with happiness and wellbeing. Particularly in OECD

countries where most people have most basic needs met, increases in income do not result in improved senses of wellbeing, Easton argues, a belief stated by Eckersley (2009) in a review of measurements of population wellbeing. Hayden and Wilson (2016) critique measures of wellbeing in financial terms, arguing for alternative indicators including socio-economic indicators including assessments of sustainability and equity. They note the problems of valuing economic growth in traditional indicators such as GDP. These authors admit the difficulty of improving wellbeing without some aspect of measurement and evaluation on a population-wide level.

### **Limitations in measuring subjective wellbeing**

Eckersley (2009) reports that current population measures of wellbeing overstate positives and understate negatives in human experience. He notes that individual human subjectivity is still viewed sceptically in some cultures which favour collective values, meaning that the value attributed to subjective wellbeing varies across cultural contexts. Eckersley states that among highly individualistic societies, people value individual subjective wellbeing more, yet in more collective societies such as China, individual subjective wellbeing is valued differently or less. He, along with Bang Nes and Roysamb (2015) posits that subjective wellbeing is more or less dependent on intricate, moment-to-moment variables affecting people's responses when asked about their wellbeing. When such fluid responses are collated, meaning is accorded to wellbeing which is not as continuous or 'reliable' in scientific terms, as researchers might wish to believe, and should be differentiated from remembered evaluations. Eckersley (2009) argues that interest in subjective wellbeing has resulted in large surveys featuring sometimes contradictory questions, producing skewed or limited results. Contradictions can be minimised, or some answers rejected if they disagree with others (Bang Nes & Roysamb, 2015). Contradictory responses might also indicate complexity in people's experience, changeability, and contingent aspects of wellbeing, or a failure of participants to understand questions as researchers word them. In Pollard and Lee's (2002) review of child wellbeing research, the authors claim that

measurements of wellbeing risk reducing wellbeing to a set of components, fragmenting wellbeing into a checklist of disparate factors not explicitly related to one another.

Eckersley (2009) comments on the link between financial wealth and wellbeing, noticeable in western countries in particular. He notes, agreeing with Easton (2016), that despite increased wealth and massive social change in the last fifty years, levels of wellbeing have not shifted appreciably. Eckersley's analysis (2009, p. 5) of the shifting trends, and standards, in what is deemed wellbeing, such as in figures reporting mortality rates in certain age groups such as youth, indicates that such figures can and have been used to make uncorroborated conclusions. Regarding youth and mortality, Eckersley (2009) reports, psychological stress and mental illness is reported to be far worse now than in previous decades (affecting 20-30% of youth in one study situated in Australia), yet this is not acknowledged in research proclaiming better wellbeing among people in this cohort. Self-reports of wellbeing in which informants can chart themselves on a scale or table, can project differences in meaning between researcher and participant which may cloud results. A term such as 'very happy', or 'unsatisfied', can mean very different things to different readers. The sharing of terms and definitions characterises a source of tension among researchers, in spite of the popularity and taken-for-grantedness of the terms 'happiness' and 'satisfaction' in subjective measures of wellbeing (Angner, 2011). My noticing of the focus, perhaps necessary in some quarters, upon counting and measuring in much wellbeing research taking place in OECD countries, is given expression in many studies focused upon the wellbeing of children, in which indicators and numerical representations dominate.

## **Child wellbeing and surveillance**

The views of child wellbeing initiated by the United Nations (1990b) in its Convention of the Rights of the Child, views holding that health and wellbeing are universal human rights, are characterised by the itemisation of such things as education, care, recreation,

culture, social behaviour and health. The definitions of wellbeing such as that espoused by the United Nations (2007) names “health and safety... material security... education and socialization, and (their) sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born” (UNICEF, 2007, p. 4) as essential to children’s wellbeing. In this, as with other itemised checklists of the factors of wellbeing, aspects are presented as separate variables in ‘silos’ seen as distinct from one another. Pollard and Lee’s (2002) review of child wellbeing research echoes the widespread limitations of wellbeing inquiry wherein multiple separate indicators of wellbeing attempt to construct a whole picture of wellbeing, frequently missing significant aspects of wellbeing. Pollard and Lee’s (2002) critique is echoed by Eckersley (2009). Reducing large bodies of complex areas of information about the wellbeing of many people across several countries, to a few sentences and tables, reduces wellbeing to blunted points erased of the nuances of human experience via a reductionist approach to the management of large quantities of information.

In UNICEF’s (2007) on Report Card No.7, the fourth dimension of wellbeing, ‘relationships’, assesses wellbeing using objective data as well as subjective answers given by children. Eating the main meal of the day with parents more than once a week, reporting that parents “spend time just talking” (p.23) with them, and reporting that peers are “kind and helpful” (p. 25), are indicators of relationship wellbeing. In this dimension, family structures, that is, the percentage of children living in a single-parent family or stepfamily, are externally measured as an indicator of wellbeing. In particular, UNICEF draws attention to concern for children living in single parent homes and the associated negative effects upon their wellbeing. These writers acknowledge the appearance of this depiction of single parent households as “unfair and insensitive” (p. 23) due to the difficulties which can be similarly experienced in two-parent families, and the examples of the many children thriving in mothered, single-parent families. Yet, the writers insist at a “statistical level” (p. 23) upon the “evidence to associate growing up in single-parent families and stepfamilies with greater risk to wellbeing – including a greater risk of dropping out of school, of leaving home early, of poorer health, of low skills and low pay” (p. 23).

A reliance upon measures such as these to calculate human wellbeing, while pragmatic and in some ways unavoidable, risks reducing wellbeing to sets of components or checklists of disparate factors such as those noticed by Pollard and Lee (2002), resulting in a person or nation scoring high for most measures but low in another, yet being deemed 'well' overall. Methodologically speaking, Grant (2007), in an appreciative inquiry of school governance, expresses her dissatisfaction at "tick-the-boxes" data-gathering methods, which "overlook the values and beliefs which contribute to processes within a community" (p. 271). Grant's quote echoes the danger of rendering 'gospel' the simple, functional, measured representations of subjective wellbeing, and the problems inherent in judging wellbeing based on the crafting of a set of numbers. Subjective wellbeing data, in order to be useful to researchers and to honour participants, should be understood in its entirety and not reduced to quantities or scales which represent such numbers as if they fully sum up the informant's own view. Participants might answer predetermined questions but literature is absent in which participants' own construction of definitions and circumstances of wellbeing are central. Scales valued by researchers have been those upon which participants might plot numbers in response to particular questions about their level of happiness, income, opportunity, or hopefulness. The numbers might be translated to percentages or other numerical representations, with no suggestion or evidence of shared meaning between researcher and participants, or between participants, or between researchers and those policy makers whose work is used to direct government action intended for the good of people. I note the use of researcher-generated terms to express wellbeing by decisions regarding which questions to ask, what to 'count' as wellbeing, and what is important in the counting.

New Zealand researchers such as Dale, O'Brien and St. John (2011), and Craig, Jackson and Han (2012), utilise measured child health statistics as a means to draw attention to the situation of some of New Zealand's most vulnerable children, and also to weave this concern into a wider critique of the growing gap between rich and poor, particularly as they and others claim that children are over-represented among the poor



(Bruce, 2010; Craig et al., 2011). Their approach is consistent with and strengthened by global recognition that information regarding the conditions experienced by children in any society can be used as an indicator for broader social circumstances, a finding in keeping with work carried out by Jack and Gill (2003), and by UNICEF (2007). The critique made available by the use of such quantitative methods of research, can galvanise work to highlight the plight of vulnerable children. However I am also interested in what might be obscured by such statistics. Understanding the facts produced and revealed by such study findings to be constructions, albeit grounded in accredited research, I hold that the construction of particular families or social issues is enabled by such blunt statistical and quantitative measurements. More recent large UN-based studies demonstrate the lack of significant pieces of information from New Zealand, in Report Cards from 2013 and 2017. Significant indicators of wellbeing among New Zealand children are absent, due to less than 75% of the data required to assess wellbeing being made available to reporters.

### **Children as research informants**

The inclusion of children's views regarding their own health, school life, and personal wellbeing (including life satisfaction) is a developing trend in wellbeing research, based upon the belief that children's rights and children's voices are an integral part of understanding their wellbeing. In research conducted by Ben-Arieh (2005), a child-centred approach to wellbeing features child informants identifying such factors as sleep, productive activities including schoolwork, hobbies, jobs or care carried out at home, other community activities, spiritual activities, travel time, personal care, social interaction, and leisure/recreation as important indicators of their own wellbeing. Ben-Arieh's study (2005) focuses upon children's views of their lives, supporting the belief that people themselves are valuable informants regarding their lives, particularly satisfaction of emotional and social needs. The influence of significant others, primarily adults, upon the wellbeing of children and young people, seems to work in concert with the agency which children are able to promote over their own lives.

According to McAuley, Morgan and Rose (2010) in an explanation of children's rights in relation to wellbeing, children's own views of their wellbeing are useful for authors who prefer to see children as agentic 'social actors' (Sinclair, 2004). They, along with James, Jenks and Prout (1998) view children as those who interact purposefully with their environment rather than being passive recipients of an adult-focused world. McAuley et al. (2010) promote children as active "subjects with unique perspectives rather than objects of interest" to adults (p. 39).

Children's perspectives in discussions of their wellbeing add authenticity and challenge to adult gazes upon children's lives, while supporting the human rights of children to have their views heard. There is a clear move in child-focused research toward the prioritising of subjective wellbeing, both to acknowledge and record the voices of children, and to understand the needs of children as they are authentically expressed by children themselves (McAuley, Morgan & Rose, 2010). Inviting children to participate is a challenge. Child-inclusive research may sometimes involve a token gesture of inviting opinions or responses to limited, pre-ordained adult-researcher-generated issues, limiting children's agency to articulate their wishes (Aldgate, 2010). Adults are likely to hear children's responses through their own 'adult' ears and formulate answers which appear to fit with the adult's perspective. Gaining access to children to inquire about their perspectives is fraught with challenges including supervision of other adults, deemed appropriate but which might shape children's conduct and propensity to be honest. Consent must be obtained by adults whose concern for children (and perhaps, themselves) might override their willingness to allow such research to include their child (Aldgate, 2010). Once involved, the unequal power relationships which exist between children and adults, and between researchers and participants, make honest, candid engagement a challenge (Aldgate, 2010).

### **Resilience and strength in child research**

The term 'resilience' has been coined to make sense of children's ability, in lives characterised with tremendous or unusual stress, to go on to particular measures of

success (economic and social) (Claiborne & Drewery, 2014). Schochet, Hoge and Wurfl (2007, p. 22) understand resilience as the propensity to avoid “the negative trajectories associated with exposure to risk factors” such as war or natural disaster. A focus upon people’s strengths, aspects of their resilience and recovery from trauma or difficult situations is a key aspect of understanding wellbeing, particularly in children, according to Lorion (2000) and Schaffer (1996). Research into resilience and recovery from trauma or difficulty is essential to understandings of wellbeing, according to Aldgate (2010) and Pollard and Lee (2002). The entwinement of resilience with wellbeing has been investigated by Rutter (1985), who outlined protective factors in relation to psychiatric disorders, including aspects of confidence, self-esteem, self-belief in the ability to deal with change, and problem solving abilities. Where literature tends to focus upon deficits or ‘what is missing’ from a child’s life, Pollard and Lee (2002) and Aldgate (2010) recognise the value of assessing wellbeing according to strengths-focused definitions rather than deficit or lack.

### **Attachment and child wellbeing**

Attachment theory originated in the work of Bowlby (1952) during and after World War Two, joined in 1950 by Mary Ainsworth. Their work is chronicled by Inge Bretherton (1992, 1997), and is of continued interest in child-focused wellbeing research. Bowlby understood attachment as deeply related to wellbeing, via supportive relationships between children and those people who provide physical and emotional care. Regular presence and an emotional investment in the child are aspects of relationship provided by caregivers, teachers, extended and other family members and other close adults, which contribute to the child’s inner working model of attachment (Bowlby, 1952; Howes, 1999). A network of supportive relationships, some varying in context or content from others, is argued to contribute to the child’s wellbeing (Howes, 1999; McAuley et al., 2010).

## **Mothers and child wellbeing**

In much research and public speak, the focus upon the individual wellbeing of children in their families is deemed to be the responsibility of mothers, who are most commonly deemed the primary caregiver of children (Kinser, 2010). Despite changes in the public, employment and educational status of women, and widespread changes of structure and roles in families over the last thirty years (OECD, 2011), changes which are explored in depth in the next two chapters, the question of whose responsibility it is to take care of and plan for the needs of children, continues to favour one answer: the biological mother. A mounting critique centres on the continuing debate regarding the justice, and effect, of having one individual (the biological mother) or couple assume near total responsibility for all aspects of the wellbeing of children (Fisher, 2008). The persistent call to mothers to remain the only (or best) caretaker of their children, is decried as the ‘ultimate responsibility’ by Weingarten (1994) and characterised by Douglas and Michaels (2004) as ‘the new Momism’.

## **Linking child and maternal wellbeing**

Child-focused research indicates that for children to be well, their caregivers must be well also. Amato (2000, 2005) reports that children whose mothers have reduced or limited wellbeing, are reported to experience poorer levels of wellbeing themselves. In studies of indicators of child wellbeing, a direct link is made to the lives, actions, habits, behaviours, skills, potential and economic income of parents or caregivers in the familial context in which children grow up (Frech & Kimbro, 2011; Garbarski & Witt, 2012). Understandings of the construction of wellbeing of those who care for children, commonly their biological mother, are necessary to those interested in children’s wellbeing. For this reason, a review of literature pertaining to the wellbeing of mothers, follows.

## **Maternal wellbeing**

Maternal wellbeing literature focuses upon the state or level of wellness of women who are mothers. Many studies focus upon the wellbeing of women during the perinatal period; particularly the transition to motherhood, often for the first time (Beck, 2002; McConachie, Hammal, Welsh, Keane, Waterston, Parker & Cooks, 2008). Researchers investigate women's experiences of negotiating rapidly changing (and sometimes erratic) life with infants and toddlers (Leahy-Warren, McCarthy & Corcoran, 2012; Redshaw & Henderson, 2013; Webster et al, 2011). Interest in mothers' health often is also focused upon reproductive milestones such as pregnancy and childbirth (Rowlands & Redshaw, 2012), maternal mental health (Beck, 2002), and breastfeeding (Borra, Iacovou & Sevilla, 2012). Studies focused upon maternal wellbeing at this life stage also follow economic and social shifts which have implications for women's lives, including return to paid work (Chatterji, Markowitz and Brooks-Gunn, 2011). Shifts in women's lives are understood to impact on the lives of men, children, and others in society in areas of life framed in economic and social terms, in studies by the PEW Research Center (Wang, Parker & Taylor, 2013). In my thesis, maternal wellbeing refers to the wellness and health of the mother of resident or dependent children of any age.

Mothers remain overwhelmingly more likely than others to be primary caregivers of children despite changes in the public, employment and educational status of women, and widespread changes of structure and roles in families over the last thirty years, changes researched by Crompton and Lyonette (2005) Esping-Anderson (2009) and by OECD researchers (2011). According to Demo & Acock (1996), in a study of family structure and maternal wellbeing, wellness in children and their mothers is predicated upon one another, a finding later supported in 2007 by Redshaw & Van den Akker, in an editorial piece discussing the effects of maternal illness upon women and their surrounding family. In a study by Ngai and Chan (2011), children whose mothers experienced postnatal depression, scored lower in terms of emotional and cognitive wellbeing, and were more prone to behavioural and social problems as well as specific

health issues. Studies into maternal wellbeing, particularly mental and emotional health, raise the critique regarding the justice and effects upon women and children, of having one person assume near total responsibility for the wellbeing of the individual child. Women's wellbeing is understood to suffer when they have children (McConachie et al., 2008). The many reasons for this relate to hormonal and physical adaptations which are stressful. McNaughton's (2011) inquiry into the social construction of maternal responsibility for their children's wellbeing (in this case, through the example of childhood obesity) has been identified as part of a cultural context of mother-blaming, which is given expression in more depth in the following Chapter. The stress which contributes to poor maternal mental health undoubtedly has an effect upon children and child health (Ngai & Chan, 2011). The burden of responsibility placed upon individual women by particular societal expectations wrought in construction, clearly augments such stress.

Interest in maternal wellbeing in research also surrounds the effects of specific health issues experienced by one's children. Many studies of mothers of children with health issues or conditions such as Autism, Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome (Aassve, Betti, Mazzuco & Mencarini, 2007; Smith, Seltzer, Tager-Flusberg, Greenberg & Carter, 2008), juvenile arthritis (Barlow, Wright, Shaw, Luqmani & Wyness, 2002), cerebral palsy (Skok, Harvey & Reddihough, 2006) and sleep problems (Gelman & King, 2011; Giallo, Rose & Vittorino, 2011) discuss women's wellbeing experiences of caring for their special infants and children. Mitchell and Hauser-Cram's (2008) exploration of the effects of living with a child with Attention Deficit Disorder included the effect upon wellbeing of maternal satisfaction with the care received by health professionals, also documented by Fisher (2008) in an exploration of parents' experiences of empowerment and recognition as recipients of care with their complex-care babies. Particular stress is added to the lives of mothers, with associated effects upon wellbeing, when children receive professional medical or educative input (Carpenter & Austin, 2007). Even so, many mothers articulate a variety of resilient behaviours which they use to improve their wellbeing over time (Darbyshire, 2015; Smith, Selzer, Tager-Flusberg et al., 2008), although many researchers exclude this

focus. Social support provided to mothers, including community follow-up and provision of professional social support, and partner or family support, has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve self-esteem and emotional stability (Emmanuel, Creedy, St. John, & Brown, 2009; Leahy-Warren et al, 2012; Rao, Apte & Subbakrishna, 2003; Skok et al, 2006; Webster, Nicholas, Velacott, Cridland & Fawcett, 2011).

## **Individualism among interconnected relationships of wellbeing**

Children's interactions with those people who provide physical and emotional care, a regular presence and an emotional investment in the child, are increasingly recognised to include fathers, siblings, extended family, paid caregivers, teachers, and other close adults, all of whom contribute to the child's inner working model of attachment (Bengtson, 2010; Howes, 1999; Yoshida, 2012). This network of supportive relationships is understood to contribute positively to the child's wellbeing, an understanding agreed upon by McAuley et al. (2010). Despite this growing acceptance of the interconnectedness of humans, in particular children and their mothers or other caregivers, most research discussions of wellbeing continue to conceptualise people, including dependent children and their mothers or connected family members, as discrete, self-contained actors (Sointu, 2005). Views of people as intimately-connected or even inter-connected beings are commented on as a research finding, but, according to Fisher (2008) not commonly acknowledged as a reality from which to begin research. The discourse of a self-responsible, self-contained individual which dominates western thought and which is highlighted by Giddens (2006), resonates with the ideals of 20<sup>th</sup> century individual psychology, in which people, including children were seen as discrete individuals, according to the views of the time (James, Jenks & Prout, 2000). Such views of children, and all people, are visible to me as a result of social construction of those in families with which I am concerned in this thesis.

Advice given to parents in 1928 by behavioural psychologist John B. Watson, vehemently discouraged demonstrations of affection such as hugs or kisses. In a review

of his work by Bigelow and Morris (2001), he advises parents to inculcate independence and staunch self-sufficiency, even in young children. The growing preference of a narrative of humans, even young and dependent ones, as self-sufficient individuals, became evident in early-20<sup>th</sup> century hospital policies which separated children from their parents and families, at great (but often repressed) trauma, for long periods of time (sometimes months on end) save short visits once a week (Bowlby, 1952). Such perspectives are now understood with the benefit of more recent research including the United Kingdom's 1959 Platt Report in Britain, to be damaging to children, according to Darbyshire (2015). At the time these were deemed logical and rigorous, their proponents (scientific and medical experts) not to be questioned (Bigelow & Morris, 2001; Ehrenreich & English, 1979).

In contemporary studies of wellbeing, the individual focus of one person as separate and self-contained beside another, becomes a problem when the wellbeing of one individual such as a child, might be seen as a competing interest, at odds or comparison with the wellbeing of another family member such as their mother or caregiver, such as in a study by Amato (2000). O'Reilly (2012) points out that individualised perspectives of people, especially those in families, are opposed to the interconnected aspects of family relationships. The understanding of families as connected, complex relationship, is unimagined by the scientific reduction of determinants of wellbeing into silos, and the experience of wellbeing into a discrete experience in which human beings appear as a series of fragmented individuals (McNaughton, 2011). For researchers contemplating the deep inter-relationship between maternal and child wellbeing, both as a research phenomenon and as a determinant of wellbeing, individualised measures of wellbeing are limited in their understanding and analysis of relationships and shared wellbeing.

My considerations of wellbeing as a particularly-informed construct, rather than a timeless, factual, measurable reality, developed as a result of deep reading from many studies in whose title and subject terms 'wellbeing' appeared. In my journal, I wrote:



***Researcher journal: Thursday 16 January, 2014***

*What have I learned about wellbeing? That it is a western individualistic concept which is not even relevant in other parts of the world where collective rules or personal satisfaction are not even to be an issue of reality, let alone concern, let alone research inquiry. Also, there are many ways of measuring 'subjective wellbeing' but they are in essence dictated by the lists, questions and therefore values or interests of the researcher or creator of the scale or measure which is used. Even when subjective terms are used they are still measured or rated (by the participant) in order to be useful and comparable (to the researcher). The final judgement is made by the researcher.*

Studies of children and mothers inevitably involve some discussion of the family contexts in which they live and relate. The range of family forms and structures which characterise contemporary social life is of prime interest in research about family wellbeing, as some researchers have identified particular family forms as more likely to suffer detriment than others. Among these forms, single parent, single mother, and lone mother families are highlighted, forms which I restore as motherled households. Wellbeing of those in families is an aspect of inquiry to which I move in Chapter Six, following my explication of families under social construction in the next Chapter.

**Chapter summary**

In this Chapter I have investigated a range of research studies focused upon wellbeing, studies based on depictions of wellbeing as measurable quantity and individually-mediated human right, in order to make sense of these situated constructions in the context of academic origins of research interest into wellbeing. Inquiry of the sort expected to contribute to policies focused on improvements in human wellbeing, is documented in formal academic contexts from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, human interest in wellbeing began to be focused upon personal, subjective, individual issues,

and upon wellbeing of children, mothers and families as discrete units, often without a proper examination of the power relationships and gendered constructions of those under study. Early researchers schooled in positivist theory required understandings of wellbeing to be measured and quantified in order to be thought rigorous and credible for inquiry. Measurements of wellbeing became significant as countries were compared with others under the gaze of global agencies such as the United Nations. Child wellbeing became an interest for governments who believed the state of children to be a long term indicator for societal wellbeing. Since then, wellbeing has increasingly become positioned as a concern for individuals and families to bear privately. Much wellbeing research focuses on either children or mothers, but not both, nor the complex play of intertwining relationships between them. In order to make sense of wellbeing between those so connected in motherled households, it is necessary to investigate the constructed possibilities for the lives of mothers and children, via an historicised look at sense-making constructions of families. My investigation of families and the constructions and experiences of mothers and children, is where I turn next. I reveal a similarly-constructed social history of human phenomena grouped under the term 'family'. I focus in particular upon mothers and motherhood. Dominant discourses and assumptions based upon constructions of women and the supposed characteristics of mothers deemed good or bad, make sense to me as malleable, time- and culture-specific constructions. Historical accounts of mothering are discussed in order to make sense of similarly-malleable social constructions of children and childhood which illustrate the involvement of each with the other, and which contribute to the insights of mothering and family to be highlighted in later Chapters.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Narratives of family, mothers, and children**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous Chapter, I explored narratives of wellbeing visible in my reviews of literature as individual pursuit, measurable quantity, human right, and subjectively-felt experience. I situated wellbeing as a key entry point for this research in my story of living (my) life as inquiry, seeking to understand how versions of wellbeing make sense to those who scrutinise wellbeing of children and their mothers, and the families in which they are located. In this Chapter I explore constructions of mothers, children, and the families in which they are situated in the context of research literature, policy discourse, and everyday conversation. I make sense of constructed narratives about mothers, children, and families, again through a historical lens. I do this to make sense of the symbolic universe in which I find myself as a mother and researcher, a universe in which I propose we and our children are shaped in ways which influence our thoughts, actions and very wellbeing. These constructions are not inevitable or indelible (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A social history of families in their formation and function includes ways in which marriage, work, housing, and caregiving have been under construction over time. This history is relevant for those families in parts of the world which have contributed to the current cultural, social, political and economic milieu in New Zealand. The many forms of family which have pertained to places among which New Zealand is now counted as an OECD member, are located among theories of humanity and reason promulgated by Enlightenment thinkers situated in patriarchal societies, according to New Zealand women's researcher Barbara Brookes (2016), and medical historian Ann Dally (1982). Enlightenment theory has also propagated theories about women, mothers, and children, highlighted in this chapter and critiqued in their historical rendering by Rich (1976). In my examination of the social construction of mothering, I discuss the attributes and expectations conferred upon mothers in societies in which women were and still are

expected to perform the majority of care work, unpaid, with children and other family members (VandenBeld Giles, 2014). Weaving a social history of mothers, with threads of work, family structure and function, and the presence and needs of children, is a complicated process. The interwoven, distinct and related layers of women's lives, incorporating subjective, reified conceptualisations of family, children, home and work, is a challenge to present in a cogent way. These threads are entwined here much as they are in the subjective realities of mothers such as those who shared their stories with me in Chapters Seven and Eight. The threads weave in and out of each other, overlap and encroach, run alongside and crossways, sharing and jostling for space and priority on the page, in a similar way to the aspects of life in women's stories. In the section which follows, I examine societal contexts in which mothering ideologies in relation to children, family and women became prevalent, beginning with the earliest constructions of gender or sex, women, and mothers which informed people. Mothering is recognisable to me as a series of biological human processes and as the product of social construction. The biological acts of carrying, giving birth, and caring for children have great social meaning attached to them, heavily shaped by shifting social processes which are not always obvious.

### **Positioning patriarchy in women's lives**

Discussions of historical views of women's lives through a constructionist lens, necessitates recognition of certain civilisational forces shaping mothers' lives. Several authors are prominent; among them, Gerder Lerner (1986) and Adrienne Rich (1976). Rich provided an account in her book *Of Woman Born* (1976), of patriarchal forces which came to dominate humanity (and some would argue, our surroundings as well) as a result of change in human understanding and adaptation to environmental influences. Rich's feminist perspective can be understood as radical, in terms of her positing of the biological forces at work upon and within women's bodies, as the basis for the subjugation experienced by women. Constructing such a history of humanity in terms of patriarchy is not easy, according to Rich, who posited women's lives over

millennia, as a “great silence” (1976, p. 84), in which women are hardly visible, despite being half of humanity in proportional terms. Rich (1976) accorded two paths which have been taken in historicising mothers’ lives; firstly, to document oppressions against women; and secondly, to record those accounts of women defying subjugation. Rich contended that looking back to a supposed time when patriarchy wasn’t instrumental or hegemonic, validates those interested in emancipating women, saying that “If women were powerful once, a precedent exists; if female biology was ever once a source of power, it need not remain what it has since become: a root of powerlessness” (1976, p. 85). My recount of history supports my stance wherein the challenges faced by women across time and place are not inevitable, timeless or irrevocable; nor are they the only stories of women’s lives; yet their dominance in history portends a version of women’s lives in which particular themes have come to dominate the construction of mothers in particular ways. This perspective is given weight by Lerner (1986). I argue for an understanding of patriarchal values which have circumscribed the lives of all, including mothers and children.

Patriarchy is a term used to describe a dominant male power structure evident in societies where male power and female subordination is the norm across most layers of lived experience and political structure (Lerner, 1986). For most of documented history, human civilisations have featured power relations of patriarchal rule, literally translated as “the power of the fathers” (Rich, 1976, p. 57). Authors of feminist writings on motherhood such as Lerner (1986), Rich (2007) and O’Reilly (2007), feminist theologians such as Mary Daly (1973), and historians including Merlin Stone (1976) and Elinor Gadon (1989) have speculated, with available artefacts including archaeological finds and ancient documents, on the lives of women in early human societies. Rich (2007), Stone (1976) and Gadon (1989) draw on pre-patriarchal alternatives such as prehistoric Goddess-worship and sacrifice to ‘the great mother’, matrilineal social structures, and localities where women were revered, for example, in early, collective societies prior to settlement and agriculture. When humans hunted and gathered, those who collected and distributed food held power over survival, keeping their families alive (Rich, 1976). By giving birth they ensured the viability of

one's family and community; such life-givers were accorded respect (Gadon, 1989). Prior to farming animals, the link between sex (the man's contribution) and having babies (giving birth) was perhaps unknown, according to Gadon (1989) and Lerner (1986), and certainly unclear, conferring women alone with the power of reproduction. Rich (1976) postulated that prepatriarchal men "must have felt something of an outsider" (p.126), surmising that they responded over time, by generating "out of a mixture of sexual and affective frustration, blind need, physical force, ignorance, and intelligence split from its emotional grounding, a system which turned against woman her own organic nature, the source of her awe and her original powers" (p. 126-127). A series of changes in human life is documented by writers whose analyses adopt varying perspectives. Joseph Campbell (cited in Rich, 1976, p. 115), contends that a shift in regard for women occurred when gathering food became seen as less valuable than hunting, carried out by men who were unfettered by young children, and able to run faster and throw weapons further. Engels (cited in Rich, 1976, p. 121) argues that farming and consequent 'ownership' of land and property, animals and people, made it easier to reposition formerly valuable people such as women, as chattels under the control or governance of those with the physical power to gain control. Some women would have been seen as valuable bargaining tools for the promotion of individual wealth (Lerner, 1986). The onset of patriarchal religions in which leaders differentiated their beliefs from those of Goddess worshipers featured a lone male God overpowering and succeeding the Goddess (Gadon, 1989). The strengthening of monotheistic religions which became Judaism, Christianity and Islam was galvanised by seizure of land under warfare, and subsequent control of those within. According to Rich (1976) and to Gadon (1989), shifts in political control contributed to the empowerment of men under a supreme (now male) God, religions in which the vast majority of leaders were males, and the stories told, stories of men's achievements. Patriarchal rule had religious/spiritual, political, economic (agricultural) and then social (as these trickled out) aspects, becoming all but entrenched and naturalised over centuries (Lerner, 1986). In Judeo-Christian societies including (eventually) Aotearoa New Zealand, constructions of women embodied images of one of two women exemplified in the Bible and promoted historically by those in powerful positions, among them clergy and

political leaders, detailed by Levesque (1986). Dualistic constructions of women focused upon simple binary discourses of good and bad women, contrasting Eve, the foolish woman in the book of Genesis, who eats the forbidden fruit and allows sin into the world; with Mary, the mother of Jesus, the pure and noble virgin who bears the son of God, (Daly, 1973; Stone, 1976; Summers, 1994). In this universe, women are necessarily one or other. Rich (1976), and Lerner (1986), contributed to documented histories of mothers' lives, going some way to explain the persistent disadvantages and subjugations experienced by women globally.

### **The social construction of childhood**

In human history in the part of the world now known by writers and philosophers as the west, a geographical and political area understood to incorporate Northern and Southern Europe and England, time has been commonly separated into epochs punctuated by a period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, known as the Age of Enlightenment (Ariès, 1962). Family and social life prior to this era of change, has been documented by Dally (1982) and by Shorter (1976). Ehrenreich and English (1978) note the status which became attached to a new version of humanity - the self-made man – an independent (male) figure who competed in the world of commerce and philosophy with other men. Enlightenment thinking, ostensibly favouring human power and agency, ironically excluded those less powerful, among them women, children and people of colour, from the equation of what it meant to be liberated and to hold potential for change, progress and improvement (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). However, changing views of (male) children emerged in ways made visible in philosophy and art, historically and up to the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, by French writer Philippe Ariès (1962). His views on the social construction of childhood and children are an example of social constructionist thought making particular versions of humans available.

According to Ariès (1962), displays in art, literature and public documentation such as town records, had, prior to the Enlightenment, portrayed children as miniature adults. Apart from a few allowances made for their small stature, few sanctions were made in law or education for (what is now believed to be) the limited cognitive and social capacities of children. Children were mostly integrated into families as small and weak members who were expected to contribute to the survival and wellbeing of their family as soon as they could walk and talk, and who carried responsibility for caring for younger family members, protecting themselves and finding food, from a young age (Dally, 1982). Children could be sent to work, or left to their own devices, according to the seasonal timetable of the pre-industrial household (Colón & Colón, 2001; Heywood, 2001). Ariès (1962) has been criticised for a supposed lack of historical evidence in his commentary, and his inability to definitively describe children's lives in retrospect and from limited records which left most children's lives unexamined, has been critiqued by some.

Reviewing Ariès' work, Heywood (2001) points to the huge variety of experiences of people in differing classes. Acknowledging wide variances in class and location, children appear to have been alternately and varyingly treated; revered or ignored, neglected, cared for, deemed precious, expected to assume responsibility along with adults, tended lovingly in the home, or sent away to be trained and raised among strangers at a parent's whim or by necessity, according to historians Badinter (1981), Zelizer (1994), and Colón and Colón (2001).

Zelizer (1994) and Heywood (2001), are among those who agree that children's lives were, as they are now, largely subject to the propensity of adults to judge them according to adult standards and priorities, in which children's voices are inevitably mediated through adult-constructed lenses. The relevance of location of every mediating commentator, however well-meaning, is of central importance in the construction of people and certainly those people who were primarily responsible for them.



## **The social construction of mothering**

In coupling the fates of children and their mothers, French writer Elizabeth Badinter in her seminal work *The Myth of Motherhood* (1981), understands mothering through time, insofar as historic portrayals of motherhood might be understood through a current lens. Badinter (1981) critiques the notion of maternal instinct – the natural, untaught knowledge of babies and mothering which all women are supposed to have, revisioning this as a construct. She troubles the contemporary perception of the emotionally involved, attentive mother caring selflessly for her children, a woman whose sole or main focus is their wellbeing. Positing maternal involvement as a production of current social imagination, Badinter (1981) and Dally (1982) each counter the idea of mothers as historically-universal, timeless maternal figure. Ann Dally posits motherhood as an ‘invention’ (1982), and Badinter labels motherhood as a ‘myth’ (1981). Badinter cites many stories of women in pre- and early industrial France, Europe and England, in families whose infants were sent to be raised in ‘baby farms’ or left in the extended (and sometimes dubious) care of wet-nurses, without contact of any sort, sometimes with dire consequences for the child’s life or wellbeing. Sending children away often related to parents’ inability to take care of large numbers of children, or being too poor to feed them, or having to leave children unattended for work (Badinter, 1981). Dally (1982) indicates that wealthier women responded to social pressure to leave mothering and breastfeeding to lower-class women, which reinforced a classist view of caring for children as common and peasant-like. Heywood (2001) indicates this as the reason that women in high social positions were especially likely to be separated from their children. Badinter (1981) and Zelizer (1994) each uncover historical accounts featuring parents demonstrating a casual lack of concern for the (sometimes miserable) lives and deaths of their children. These responses might, in contemporary settings, be regarded as callous. Badinter (1981) contrasts this with narratives of families celebrating and loving their children, and grieving their early death, to indicate that the place of mothers and children and their relationships to one another has varied.

The purpose and existence of women and children was problematic in Enlightenment theorising about humanity, although children received attention from such philosophers as John Locke, and Jacques Rousseau. According to early childhood historians May (1997), and Heywood (2001), Locke and Rousseau demonstrated variations on an emerging theme of humanitarianism in the existence of people, particularly children. Locke, writing in 17<sup>th</sup> century England, embraced a view of humanity, including children, as self-contained individuals, and children as ‘blank slates’ upon which the input of education and reason would become fruitful and productive in adulthood. Locke posited that well-intended adults could make a difference in children’s lives (Heywood, 2001). Rousseau, writing from 18<sup>th</sup> century France, depicted children as inherently pure individuals in need of education and protection from adult concerns in order to develop their own goodness and reason (May, 1997). Perspectives of children as valuable individuals shifted attention on to their care and welfare, a job which Locke and Rousseau both conferred upon mothers as their most important duty in life. A paradox can be seen between Locke’s remit for adults to input teaching into children’s lives, with Rousseau seeking to keep children sequestered from adult worlds (Dally, 1982).

Developing perspectives of human beings as unique, potential-filled persons, were limited to the lives of boys and men. Both Rousseau and Locke founded their theories on the basis of men’s lives, theories considered irrelevant for women and girls (Tong, 2009). Women’s destiny, to care for others, remained unchallenged during and after Enlightenment theorising, save the isolated voices of those such as Mary Wollstonecraft in her 1792 treatise *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Tong, 2009). Differences in the physical characteristics of men and women underlined the dominant view of women as exempt from progress and potential, save their destiny as vigilant mothers, training children as they grew (Dally, 1982). Women’s biological capacity to bear and feed infants positioned them, according to (male) leaders of the day, close to nature, governed by instinct rather than cognitive reason, less intelligent than men, and innately destined to care for others (Tong, 2009). These are perceptions

which have persisted in theories of biological determinism later informed by theories of evolution in natural science, ideas critiqued by early feminist leaders such as Wollstonecraft, and more recently by Gloria Steinem and Nancy Chodorow, whose work is critiqued by Tong (2009). While the Enlightenment ostensibly marked the emergence of theories of human rights, these theories typically excluded women, along with people of colour, and children (Chodorow, 1978, Tong, 2009).

Rich's (1976) analysis of women's lives through history, continues in her use of examples from histories of childbirth such as the emergence of invasive surgical birth interventions used on birthing women from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries onward, by male midwives and barber surgeons. Her description of the narrowing of the political and social regard for female midwives and healers during the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is told in her account of women being forced to give birth in particular ways – for example, lying supine rather than squatting or kneeling, and being attended by male doctors rather than midwives or lay healers. These, Rich (1976) argues, characterise reissuing developments in patriarchal power, power which adopts different forms but does not appear to have abated in spite of successive women's movements. The power of men to succeed traditional woman healers was aided in part, according to Rich (1976), by the scarcity of woman healers, many of whom had been eradicated during witch trials of the previous three centuries.

## **The Industrial Revolution.**

The portrayal of children as vulnerable, precious and in need of constant attention and discipline, gained traction during the Industrial Revolution, when urbanised human labour took on demanding, constant (rather than seasonal) and dangerous, crowded proportions. Changes in work shifted the locus of work and production of food and necessary goods, from home, formerly a sort of microcosm of society, to public places such as mills, shops and factories (Lerner, 1979). Over time, according to Rich (1976) and Dally (1982), home attained an image of a refuge, for men, from the perils of the

public world and work, and a private sphere in which caring for children, the work of women, was conducted away from public access. This would result in home being cast as a place away from work, rather than a place of work, positioning the tasks carried out at home as something other than work (Tong, 2009). This would also limit women's access to the public arena (Lerner, 1979).

Children's limited physical capacity was visibly problematic in arduous workplaces, leading eventually (in Britain) to legislation such as the 1840 child labour laws designed to protect children from death or injury by removing them from workplaces (Fyfe, 2005). The rise of industrial workplace labour made the care and supervision of children at home a deliberate, necessary and separate occupation from other adult work conducted outside of home, according to Colón and Colón (2001). Accordingly, children's participation in adult public realms was curtailed, along with the participation of those who by necessity must care for them. Industrialisation is claimed by Fyfe (2005) to coincide with the introduction of mandatory schooling, partly as a way to circumvent child labour. In Europe, Britain and America, widespread compulsory schooling was introduced during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, changing the day-to-day lives of most children, and their caregivers along with them. Fyfe (2005) also links industrialisation with falling childhood death rates and later on, birth rates.

The disappearance of economic survival and family income from home industry and rural life, and into the public sphere during and after the Industrial Revolution coincided with an emphasis upon paid employment, from which women with the economic means were excluded (Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Lerner, 1979; Tong, 2009). Middle- and upper-class women were encouraged to focus their occupation solidly upon the survival and wellbeing of their children, particularly those who were too young for school (Dally, 1982; Heywood, 2001). As mothers became more clearly confined and defined, by their children, by limited work opportunities and limited socio-economic positioning, their sphere of influence dwindled to more isolated and individualised domestic pursuits (Dally, 1982).

Caring for children as a full time occupation became a middle-class phenomenon to be later critiqued by feminists such as Rich (1976), Chodorow (1978), and Ehrenreich and English (1979), and latterly, by Kinser (2012) and O'Reilly (2007, 2012). Evolving patterns of mothering were being constructed in response to, while simultaneously contributing to, emerging constructions of children (Dally, 1982). These newly-recognised, vulnerable, valuable, creative and potential-ridden Enlightenment individuals, might, with the 'right' teaching and opportunity, attain an adult life of social and economic achievement which until recently had been ruled out for all but the most privileged people (Colón and Colón, 2001).

## **Early women's movements**

Shifts in the social positioning of women and children wrought changes to the construction of motherhood to now be seen as a 'calling' of noble and moral significance for some, rather than a means of family survival (Dally, 1982). Kinser (2010) notes the justification of the position of middle-class women shielded, or excluded, from the public world, largely confined to domestic duties in the 'private sphere' of home and family. Mothers became the epitome of such privately-valued, gentle qualities in a world where children were now "emotionally priceless but economically worthless", in the words of Zelizer (1994, p. 3). Gendered analyses by DiQuinzio (1999), Levesque (1986), and by Rich (1976), based on culture and society in England and Europe, have been useful for me to understand the lives of those women who came to Aotearoa New Zealand during colonisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their varied histories are taken up by Brookes (2016) and by MacDonald (1993).

Women, who came to Aotearoa during colonisation and had children, lived in many different settings. Harsh conditions of life for many, during the Victorian era and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, required many poorer and working class urban women to work for wages (Johnson and Lloyd, 2004). For middle class mothers, the expectation of a life centred upon domestic matters and attention to children in the household, became

instrumentalised in a 'first wave' women's movement which emerged in Britain, America and New Zealand among other places (Brookes, 2016). Activists known as suffragists, concerned with women's rights, made use of the construction of women as mothers, to demonstrate women's inherent moral worth (Dally, 1982). Their campaign to laud the domestic ideal and romantic mother of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been described by Kinser (2010) as part of a so-called Cult of Domesticity. This was a construction of women borne by a collection of images of mothers as morally pure and utterly devoted to keeping a pious home for their husbands and children, also detailed by Dally (1982).

Mothers responded to the gradual and complicated severing of public and private life and an evolving reinforcement to focus solely upon home and children, in various ways (Dally, 1982). Ehrenreich and English (1979), and Chodorow (1978) mention middle-class women seeking professional psychiatric help for the sense of isolation, coined as neurosis, which they alluded to. Some women engaged with emerging quests to attain political visibility and emancipation in the form of suffrage and voting rights in many countries. Calling upon public belief in their moral superiority summed up by the constructed media image of the 'angel in the house' (Dally, 1982), available constructions of motherhood as noble and pure in an ugly industrial world, became a lever for some women to visibilise their worth, even if it required upholding the domestic ideal wrought by the Cult of Domesticity (Kinser, 2010). Women in New Zealand were among the first in the world to cast votes in general elections, voting initially in 1893 (Brookes, 2016).

### **The (paid) work of women**

Women's paid employment in urban areas was generally confined to various low-paid or segregated jobs which men were unwilling to do and which women were in demand for, including laundry, sex work or domestic service, according to Johnson and Lloyd (2004). The continued feminisation of lowly-paid and poorly-regarded work is the

subject of research by many recent authors, including Dwyer (2010), and in New Zealand, Hyman (2004, 2015), who points out persisting contemporary inequalities in paid work, in terms of type and remuneration. Women's care of children has often taken place alongside home-based work such as piece-work or laundry, but formal childcare was historically scarce for those working outside the home in domestic service or industry (Brookes, 2016).

For women for whom paid work was a fact of life, making arrangements has generally been regarded as the domain of mothers to negotiate (May, 1997; O'Reilly, 2012). Friends, family members such as grandparents or older children, or neighbours, have all been relied upon to care for pre-school children according to private and reciprocal arrangements (Brookes, 2016). Rich (1976) wrote: "Without free, universal, child care, any woman who has ever had to contrive and improvise in order to leave her children daily and earn a living can imagine the weight of anxiety, guilt, uncertainty, the financial burden, the actual emergencies... The image of the mother in the home, however unrealistic, has haunted and reproached the lives of wage-earning mothers" (p. 52).

Rich (1976) made clear that the issues faced by 'working' mothers share many commonalities across time and place. If family were unavailable (often the case as families became more isolated in urban centres) and children could not be left unattended, they might be sent away to stay with other non-working family members (Badinter, 1982). Meanwhile, life at home for lower and working class women, was marked by drudgery, garnering little respect and poor social standing (Brookes, 2016). The privacy and invisibility of the domestic lives of mothers, meant that the challenges they faced alone could remain unknown to everybody outside the home (Tong, 2009).

The life of the full time mother and home-maker of all classes was increasingly problematic as other trappings of women's home-work including caring for sick loved ones, educating children, and production of food and clothing, became relegated to the commercial and public world outside of home (Tong, 2009). The setting for the care of

dependent others has gone from an initially tangible home-life context, to an increasingly subjective fabrication commonly taken for granted and naturalised as the Market (Dyer, Humphries, Fitzgibbons & Hurd, 2014). Centring one's life upon children, even without the stresses of paid work, could be tiresome and exasperating. The response of early feminist writers from the late 1800s to such an issue, over and above gaining political voice, was a choice of two stances, both detailed in the next section; these stances are not unfamiliar to more recent feminists.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, reviewed by DiQuinzio (1999), sought to shift the problems of motherhood (along with work, education and later, healthcare) into the public realm, her writing outlining the tedium and toil of domestic life and contrasting it with opportunities for work and intellectual challenge which awaited those outside the home if only such opportunities would become available and other ways of meeting the needs of households such as commercial kitchens or communal childcare were initiated (Dally, 1982). Gilman, writing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was argued by some, among them Swedish feminist Ellen Key (cited in DiQuinzio, 1999), to have persuaded people to see mothering as a hapless set of dreary tasks. Key was among those who lauded the cause of domesticity and motherhood with its central purpose a high moral calling, to raise honourable and productive children. Key would have recompensed mothers financially for the valuable work they carried out, while Gilman's agenda was one in which outsourcing such banal work was a priority (Dally, 1982). A continuing contrast takes the appearance of a battle between mothers of different stripes, called 'the Mommy wars' and documented by Hayes (1996) and then by Douglas and Michaels (2004), a depiction to which I turn later.

## **Motherhood, science and nation-building**

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in industrialising, urbanising (and colonising, in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand) nations, mothers were encouraged to focus their existence upon home and family (Brookes, 2016). Outside jobs for women were poorly paid and



regarded (Brookes, 2016). Women's social and political standing remained tethered to motherhood as a high calling to the improvement and progress of society, according to Bryder (2003) and May (1997). Leaders such as Frederick Truby King, psychiatrist and founder of the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society, urged women to reproduce as a patriotic act, in one campaign declaring that "the race marches forward on the feet of little children" (Bryder, 2003, p. 3). According to Bryder (2003), the dominance, visible in colonies such as New Zealand, of pronatal approaches to family planning was characterised by some women being encouraged to have many babies to improve the intellectual and productive potential of society as a whole, a field of study called eugenics (Dally, 1982). Populating the colony in a particular way was a priority to national leaders in the shadow of the First World War, which had killed many, and the high rates of maternal and perinatal mortality which were evident in New Zealand, according to Olssen (1981).

Truby King adopted a military-influenced take on caring (Bryder, 2003), wherein mothers were expected to instil in their children regular habits of eating, eliminating, sleeping and behaviour, imitating military efficiency (Dally, 1982). The rising 'experts' of child behaviour and wellbeing, including King, and in the United States, John B. Watson, advised mothers not to show any physical or emotional affection to their children, as they believed that strength and independence was best instilled in children with a business-like and emotionally distant parenting style (Olssen, 1981). Under the influence of such experts including doctors, psychiatrists, and scientists, documented and critiqued by Ehrenreich and English (1979), men who were charged with special intellectual and rational knowledge, parenting and motherhood were becoming perceived as mysterious, natural and slightly suspect. Dally (1982) and Oakley (2000) note the rise of professionalisation of those intending to help or govern others, such as health practitioners including doctors and psychiatrists. The advice of the day positioned mothers as uneducated, ignorant, and ill-prepared for the grave responsibility of raising future leaders and soldiers, in the emergence of a scientific movement in which scientific mothering was emerging as a trend (Dally, 1982; Green, 2012). Maternal practices, according to Ehrenreich and English (1979), characterised

bearing and raising children as an application of scientific principles favouring uniform regularity among all mothers and children, rigid techniques of care, and an avoidance of intuition, emotion or anything to do with 'nature'. In many cases, mothers were grateful for advice, especially where urbanisation and migration had left them less likely to raise children in communities where the moral and practical support of other community members and older women, taken for granted in pre-industrial societies, was available (Bryder, 2003). Over time, such experts came to include (as they do now) family medical practitioners and practice nurses.

### **The rise of the nuclear family**

Shifts in social life during the Industrial Revolution are associated with changes in family structure between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, among them Dally (1982), Laslett (1970) and Lynch (2003). Changes relate to shrinking households with fewer generations within, and a rise in nuclear-type families (Pool, Dharmalingam & Sceats, 2007; Laslett, 1970). Pool, Dharmalingam and Sceats report that Victorian and pre-industrial families had been large, often with eight or more surviving children. Laslett (1970) reports that groupings of people, including servants and workers, grandparents and adult siblings and their families often resided together in a household, historically. Shifts in common family structures and size which occurred following widespread social changes wrought by centuries of industrialisation and urbanisation, had contributed to shrinking family units residing together and the distancing of extended family members geographically and philosophically, (Pool et al., (2007).

Over time, smaller household sizes, together with movements of people between countries and away from families of origin, came to settle upon the nuclear family as a typical form (Dally, 1982; Shorter, 1976). In such families, one pair of adults resided with their biological children and few if any other people (Dally, 1982). Women were expected to submit to the authority instated by a patriarchal male husband, their (different and unequal) roles thought to mirror their biological capacities and natures.

Women were ideally (according to the new experts of psychology and medicine such as those mentioned above) best grounded in home and family, whether working outside the home as many working-class women did, or focused solely upon their household (Dally, 1982).

As the early 20<sup>th</sup> century emerged, when as stated in Chapter Four, wellbeing was becoming a researchable interest, the normative family form in industrialised nations and across many social classes featured a two parent, male-headed household with an earning male, a domestically-based woman, and one generation of children, with few, if any, other family-members residing within (Dally, 1982). Urbanisation contributed to a shrinkage in the numbers of people in a household during the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in times of economic difficulty such as the Great Depression during the late 1920s and into the 1930s when people married later (Pool, Dharmalingam & Sceats, 2007). The lives of mothers were absorbed in tiring household and child-caring work as well as whatever paid work might be available or necessary. Mothers also became disconnected, literally through urbanisation, and figuratively through shifting family structures (Shorter, 1976).

## **Households led by mothers**

Much has been written about the experience of nuclear family structures for women and children, by feminist writers such as Friedan, Rich (1976), Green (2012) and O'Reilly (2012). The current dominance of the nuclear, heterosexual two parent family in literature, belies the historical incidence of motherled households, who, far from being a recent and unusual phenomenon, have existed throughout time, in various ways, caring for their families alone, often by necessity (Strange, 2015) and more recently, by conscious choice (Hertz, 2006; Nolan, 2000). Households headed by mothers have always existed in some guise and are not a new phenomenon, contrary to

the image now popularised in family discourse, of a timeless, traditional family headed by a husband or father.

Strange (2015) writes that historically, large families had often experienced the absences of male adults including fathers and husbands. Leaving home for extended periods of time to find work or fight in wars was commonplace (Strange, 2015). Short life expectancies until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in most parts of the world precipitated woman-managed households of family, stock and property, as well as family businesses and trading (Laslett, 1970). Where fathers or other adult family members died, mothers continued to care for children and others in the household. Women (and men) who were widowed commonly sought to remarry in order to secure the economic and social safety afforded by marriage (Hochschild, 2003; Johnson & Lloyd, 2004). Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and after suffrage was gained, women's lives continued to be circumscribed by social and economic sanctions which limited their independence and agency beyond the confines of home and family (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004).

Households led by women had been subject across time and in most places, to economic and political vulnerability due to the long-held restrictions upon women's lives in terms of work and public access (Dally, 1982). During men's absences, such as both World Wars, women's lives changed to incorporate aspects of life formerly assigned only to men, such as paid work (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004). During wartime, the numbers of women in external employment increased sharply, while many continued without entering paid, external employment, to care for their homes and families. Household management relied in part upon the support of and sharing with other similarly-situated families (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004). Women, who took care of their families while working in jobs vacated by soldiers, were seen to be doing their patriotic duty, and the expectations upon women encompassed public contributions to war efficiency as well as private obligations to family (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004). In some parts of the United States, following the 1940 Lanham Act reviewed and critiqued by Herbst (2013), facilities were created for universal childcare, household food preparation, laundry service and other support to motherled households, such services

subsidised by government in order to ensure the smooth-running of society while motherled households were so prevalent and legitimised.

## **20<sup>th</sup>-century mothers**

Douglas and Michaels (2004) and Johnson and Lloyd (2004) document the rapid change in societal expectations of women, signalled by the end of the Second World War. Women were now urged to return home and vacate the paid jobs now determined for men returning home (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004). They were urged to focus upon the needs of their returning husbands. Technological advances such as electricity, and newly-developed washing machines and carpet sweepers, were supposed to circumvent many of the most arduous household tasks; women were expected to make a full time life as a housewife and to renew their sole focus upon the welfare of their family (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004). Depictions of women in wartime posters from the 1940s, among them the example of 'Rosie the Riveter' are startlingly different from portrayals of women's lives in 1950's advertising, featuring demure housewives in wasp-waisted full skirts and crisp aprons (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). The purported benefits of nuclear families in terms of clear role definition and separation, household economic supply, and mother-centred care of children were espoused as a way to order society and maintain wellbeing, according to Johnson and Lloyd (2004). The increased expression given to the positioning of scientific knowledge in psychology and health, coined as expertise, was chronicled by Ehrenreich and English (1979) and made the subject of feminist critique of nuclear-type family formations.

The renewal of home as the focus of women's lives and the optimal setting for their young children, was bolstered by emerging post-war theories of child development and health, based on the work done by United Nations representative and researcher John Bowlby (1952), a medical doctor who among others, advocated that the best interests of the developing young child were met by the dependable presence of one primary caregiver (Dally, 1982). Bowlby's theory of attachment was developed further by

Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992) and formed the basis for styles of care giving in which the main carer is constantly available (in every sense) to the infant or young child. Bowlby used examples he had witnessed, of children cared for in large, under-resourced orphanages during wartime, to demonstrate the emotional damage which resulted among children who lacked a sensitive, intimately connected carer (Bowlby, 1952; Dally, 1982). The theory quickly became harnessed as a reinstatement of the necessity of devoted, selfless, full-time mothering, the implication becoming that only mothers could provide such vigilant care in shrinking urban households, and the accompanying message following, that emotionally deprived children would be socially and emotionally stunted as adults as a result of poor mothering (Bretherton, 1992; Dally, 1982). Bowlby's theory became reinforced by the parenting doctrines of theorists such as Dr Spock, in his books on baby and child care available from 1946, republished nine times. He presented mothers with his instructions to care responsively, affectionately, and whole-heartedly for their children, leaving husbands and other adults to paid work and social involvement in adult worlds. Spock's work gave expression to nurturing approaches in caring, contrasting sharply with the disciplined regimes instigated by Truby King and John B. Watson (Dally, 1982).

In spite of the narrative of mothering as a high moral calling, being at home and caring for infants and young children was for many women a puzzling and sometimes disappointing experience (Brookes, 2016, Dally, 1982). Much has been written about women's experience of isolation from the public world, at home all day and with little adult company or stimulation (Johnson & Lloyd, 2004). Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, written in 1965, detailed 'the problem that has no name', a problem to which many mothers could relate, in view of shifts from wartime work and reliance, to the private isolation of home with small children. Feminist writers who came to be included in the term 'second wave', including Friedan and Simone De Beauvoir, questioned the risks and benefits of mothers channelling all of their hopes, dreams and intellectual capabilities into child bearing and rearing. Johnson and Lloyd (2004) sum up Friedan's work as a constitution of a particular interpretation of life at home, rather than the depiction of a universally-held experience. However, the authors do not deny

the power of the image of the ideal housewife and devoted homemaker, particularly during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Anne Else (1991) writes that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women who became pregnant outside of marriage were likely to have their children removed from them at birth, for adoption, unless they were able and permitted to marry the baby's father. There were few single mothers apart from those who were widows or deserted, doing so amongst straitened economic and social conditions (Else, 1991). Keeping women domesticated, Else posits, included controlling their sexual behaviour and sanctioning against sexual involvement outside of marriage (Else, 1991). In the 1960's, the availability of the contraceptive pill, while originally intended only for married women, contributed to the easing of social sanctions upon sexual relations and parenting outside of strict marriage arrangements (Brookes, 2016). Social mores began to shift in the late 1960s in places, to partially tolerate the presence of unmarried mothers as well as those mothers whose marriages had ended (Brookes, 2016).

As with earlier women's movements including campaigns for suffrage, the welfare of others, in particular children, was the vehicle for women seeking to change and improve their circumstances during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Rich, 1976). In this case, the actualising of women's hopes and ambitions outside the (increasingly) narrow world of home and assumption that all would become mothers and eschew other aspects of potential, became a focus, and problematised by Simone de Beauvoir, Gloria Steinem (1984) and Germaine Greer (1970), seeking to trouble concrete (male) expectations of feminine destiny. Many women who were mothers reasoned that in order to be successful mothers who contributed to their children's wellbeing, they must themselves be intellectually stimulated and emotionally well (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 2007). A changing version of an ideal(ised) mother began to be instrumental in campaigns by some mothers to enlarge their horizons to adopt paid work as a means of self-fulfilment and by association, betterment of their homes and families. This shifted the view of paid work as purely a matter of economic necessity (Brookes, 2016).

Changes to family and matrimonial law and additions to available benefit by the welfare system in New Zealand occurred during the 1970s, with the advent of the Family Benefit (paid to mothers for each of their children) in 1973, and in 1976 with the introduction of the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) for lone mothers with dependent children (Brookes, 2016). Along with the heightened awareness of sexual harassment and blatant discrimination against women in the workplace, women could be seen as workers who (might one day) have equal rights and entitlements beside their male workmates (Brookes, 2016). However, women remained constrained or enabled by the availability of opportunities for their socially assigned responsibilities such as caring for children/elders and doing housework (Brookes, 2016). In New Zealand little formal childcare was publicly available up until the 1990's, save government-funded kindergartens running short daily sessions (couched as beneficial for children), playcentres (which required the presence of the mother or caregiver) or in rare cases, crèches or private kindergartens (Brookes, 2016; May, 1997).

The emergence of early childhood education, which became more widespread during post-war New Zealand, was predicated on the welfare and education of young children, following studies in which children with some form of early childhood education were believed to fared better cognitively and emotionally at school (May, 1997). In these centres the emphasis was upon supplementing the learning provided at home by mothers, to teach and socialise young children and prepare them for schooling at age five or six (May, 1997). The timetables of such centres was based upon the understanding that mothers of young children were at home most of the time, with no outside work commitments for which care for longer than a weekday morning or short afternoon might be required. Douglas and Michaels (2004) indicate that some mothers have always worked, showing that numbers of women returning to paid work after the birth of a child increased steadily from the 1980s, along with the hours worked by women, according to Scott, Dex & Joshi (2008).

Informal arrangements utilising the support of grandparents, neighbours or friends were a significant contributor to the capacity for women to work outside the home (Nolan, 2000). A sustained preference for two-parent families was evident in policies



of childcare, government financial support of families, and the availability of work continued throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, according to Nolan (2000). Two-parent families relied upon each parent working 'tag team' style if shift work was involved and parents could replace each other and avoid expensive, inadequately available formal childcare (Hochschild, 2003). By the 1990's global economic conditions such as costs of living, and the prioritising of a consumer-led society in keeping with widespread economic and social policy restructuring in many countries, meant that a 'second income' was a necessity for many families (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Families where both parents worked outside the home became more common in OECD countries including New Zealand, where neo-liberalist values increasing the cost of living and reductions in welfare system support, were becoming entrenched (Esping-Andersen, 1999). The satisfaction of paid work was also documented in studies depicting work as a predictor of improved wellbeing levels for women, noted in studies by Chatterji, Markowitz and Brooks-Gunn (2011) and Cook (2012). Those who might once have acquiesced or preferred to stay at home after marriage now continued working or returned to work earlier and for longer hours after children were born (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, Hochschild, 2003).

## **Changes to marriage**

Unequal power relations in marriage and family in which women's needs were secondary to the espoused needs of the family, namely men and sometimes children, became more noticeable and less satisfactory for some women, during the latter part of the twentieth century (Brookes, 2016; Hochschild, 1997). Such dynamics, which accompanied the increase of women into paid work, along with changes in marital law in 1980 introducing no-fault divorce, made the option to leave a disturbed, dangerous or miserable situation and attain emotional wellbeing and safety for themselves and their children a new and real possibility for some women, even though economic uncertainty and social ostracism remained (Brookes, 2016; Else, 1991). Unsatisfactory family circumstances including marital conflict, alcohol or violence, formerly taken for

granted as an unfortunate but private and unavoidable component of some marriages became less tolerated (Brookes, 2016). Some women became troubled by, and more resistant to, assumed patriarchal power differentials which accompanied traditional marriage. Between 1967 and 1982, when divorce rates in New Zealand peaked following a law change to allow for 'irreconcilable differences' between partners, divorce rates increased steadily from 4 per 1000 people, to 17 per 1000, then settling to approximately 13 per 1000 where they remained through the 1990s (Statistics New Zealand, 2012).

### **Changes at home?**

The second wave of the women's movement, which took place in OECD countries during the 1960s and 1970s, is credited with having improved women's access to paid work, higher education and no-fault divorce or single parenthood (Brookes, 2016). Access is notable as a liberalising of attitudes whereby equality with men became the touchstone of liberal feminism, critiqued by Calas and Smircich (2006). Equalising access to work and career opportunities seen in equal employment opportunity (EEO) campaigns, providing access to contraception aimed at preventing pregnancy and enabling women to be sexually emancipated, and provision of arrangements for care of children and home enabling women to work, have been the benefits of this form of feminist action (Calas & Smircich, 2006). By contrast is a lack of any noticeable concurrent benefit or change taking place in women's lives at home (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Between 1960 and 2010, increasing proportions of mothers, with children of all ages included, returned to the paid work force after the birth of their children. In her book *The Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild (2003) represents the varied experiences of working women in her study of working parents, to show that the financial requirement for women to work is only one of many reasons why mothers seek paid employment. Hochschild (2003) postulates that personal fulfilment, satisfaction and mental stimulation as well as respect from others, make paid work favourable to mothers. Hochschild reports small decreases in the amount of housework done by working

women, and increases in the availability of childcare during the 1980s and since. These have not completely offset the 'second shift' she speaks of, when she refers to many working mothers returning home from work to another six to eight hours of unpaid work including childcare. Hochschild counts this as an extra month of unpaid work per year in comparison with their husbands. Scott, Dex and Joshi (2008), concur, citing studies in which women do the vast majority of the unpaid work of home, regardless of their work circumstances. Lewis (2012) calls for an increase in others, namely men, to contribute to household care-taking: "...fathers need to be encouraged to pick up more of the unpaid work of care" (p. 222), a sentiment echoed by Scott and Plagnol (2012) in their cross-national analysis of work family conflict and wellbeing of men and women.

### **Work-life balance, conflict, stress**

The term 'work life balance' and more recently 'work life conflict' reflects a growing awareness in social and organisational literature, of the relationships between work and home, which are still broadly positioned as privately-managed issues to be separated and compartmentalised, even in the lives of women straddling both. Scott, Dex and Joshi (2008) have compiled the results of several research studies investigating women and employment. According to the authors, while women have overtaken men in higher education, and the numbers of women in professional vocations such as law, accountancy and medicine, are similar to men at graduation, mothers are disadvantaged in their career prospects, status and income, when they have children. The combination of work and motherhood is for most women no longer a question of whether, but how, to do both (Scott, Dex, & Joshi, 2008). The performance of both is of interest to most mothers in New Zealand, whether returning to the workforce full time, part time or not at all.

A well-established body of research and policy concerns women and paid employment, in particular women's over-representation in jobs which are poorly paid, regarded and remunerated, according to Hyman (2004, 2015a), Butler (2015), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2016). After having children, women commonly experience a downgrading of their occupational opportunities, reviewed by Scott, Crompton and Lyonette (2010), Crabb (2014), Hyman (2015b) and the ILO (2016). Such constraints upon women's earning and career landscapes are evident on personal, interpersonal, organisational and structural levels. Women are sometimes directed into, or choose careers, which 'fit' with the future prospect of having children, one in which women can work shifts around another working parent, work part time or casual, and have school holidays off (O'Reilly and O'Brien Hallstein, 2012). Sacrifices of income, seniority, promotion or other opportunities, and status are required, according to O'Reilly and O'Brien Hallstein (2012), Bukodi, Dex & Joshi (2012), and the ILO (2016). Opportunities for promotion and remuneration are far less for mothers in paid work, than for many of the jobs in which men (or childless women) excel or dominate numerically.

Mothers are more likely than fathers to reduce work hours to part time, flexible or casual hours once children are born (Lewis, 2012; ILO, 2016). In dual income heterosexual partnerships where both partners work full time, women still do the vast majority of the housework and care taking of dependent children. According to Lewis (2012) there is a clear tension between the commonly-espoused needs of children in the first year of life (favouring the care provided by one caregiver over a variety of carers) and the return to work of this caregiver, usually their mother. Lewis (2012) along with Crabb (2014) notes that most of the change/adaptation of parents to new babies is made by mothers, whereas fathers make few, if any changes to their paid work. Policymakers who write about 'work life balance' reinforce by their focus upon women, the notion that such issues exist in the lives of mothers and not fathers, and that such tension is for mothers in all types of households, to negotiate. According to Australian broadcaster and writer Annabel Crabb (2014) and in the US, Douglas and Michaels (2004), few newspaper articles or policy statements refer to men having to

'juggle work and home' in order to 'have it all'. Arguments about work life balance appear tailored solely for women (Kinser, 2010; Crabb, 2014). Conversely, according to Scott, Dex and Plagnol (2012), policy rhetoric about work life balance in the United Kingdom is 'deliberately gender neutral', failing to reflect the weight of such discussion in the lives of women more than men.

As work conditions, pay rates, and responsibilities vary hugely from one person or job to another, the propensity for mothers to be available to children and home varies also. The contribution of globalisation to changes in work, heralding flexibility (on the part of the worker) and intensification of work practices, along with job insecurity and a casualisation of the workforce, have increased tensions of time and commitment between work and home, according to Scott et al. (2012) who discuss work life conflict and wellbeing, finding that mothers in paid employment do most of the unpaid work at home. These authors find, along with Hochschild (1997), that "while housework can be outsourced to some extent, caring implies an ongoing presence and emotional relationship that makes paid care different to family care" (Scott et al., 2012, p. 174). Any increase in paid employment of housekeepers or child-minders only partly offsets the diminished capacity of a committed, involved caregiver. Along with Lewis (2012), Scott et al. (2012) question how children can be effectively cared for in homes where such tensions are present; they particularly note the difficulties of stretched commitments which they say are faced by lone mothers.

Studies into the work-life conflicts experienced by mothers include those by Gershuny, Bittman and Brice (2005), Lyonette and Crompton (2008), Kinser (2010), Scott, Dex, & Plagnol (2012), and Crabb (2014). In their studies, women report that the multiple requirements of their workplace, family, children and other commitments require constant juggling of many conflicting priorities and requirements for time. A poor fit between the requirements and timetables of children, the expectation that mothers alone should meet or make arrangements for such requirements, and the parallel responsibilities of work (or in other words, everything-which-is-not-child) leaves women feeling stressed and tired.

Popular wellbeing-focused books including titles by Boyd (2004) and Weaver (2012), address adult women's stories of stress and exhaustion, with warnings about the long-term health risks of "rushing woman syndrome", chronic stress leading to chronic illnesses, which these authors argue is growing worse for many women. Lyonette and Crompton (2008), along with Easton (2015) note that the image of the full time worker continues to depict an adult male – 'rational economic man' (p. 100) - with no family responsibilities other than the provision of financial income. This is exemplified in the pragmatic lack of fit between the lives of children and the lives of their full time-working mothers. For example, the school day in New Zealand goes from 9am until 3pm, approximately forty weeks a year, in comparison with 'business hours' which for many workers, including mothers, go from 8am until 4.30 or 5pm, forty-eight weeks per year. For shift workers, formal childcare outside of 'business hours' adopted by most childcare centres (6am until 6pm, Monday to Friday, and usually a two week break over the Christmas/New Year period) is not available.

Women respond in various ways to the squeeze on time and energy presented by multiple commitments. Some resign from work or adopt casual employment with lower remuneration and fewer opportunities for progression and promotion (Hyman, 2015b; O'Reilly & O'Brien Hallstein, 2012). Some women stop paid work, particularly while children are younger. When they eventually return, they face disadvantages in terms of pay and promotion, compared with those women who have continued working throughout (Hyman, 2015b). In New Zealand, formal arrangements during school holidays consist mainly of out of school care and recreation (holiday) programs (known as OSCAR programs), the costs of which (approximately \$150 per child per week) are means tested and subsidised, and highly variable in availability and accessibility, according to location and demand. In rural areas and smaller towns, fewer options are available for care of children.

## **Feminism and mothering**

Feminist theory and action is yet to successfully address conflicting demands of mothering, family and work. In spite of documented gains in employment, public access and higher education, O'Brien Hallstein (2010) argues, the women's movements have not realised concomitant shifts in women's home lives. O'Reilly and O'Brien Hallstein (2012) attribute this partly to the difficulty mothers have in articulating the difficulties they experience without potentially hurting loved ones such as children or invalidating the rewarding and transformative aspects of mothering, and partly to the entrenched views of those in society who see mothers as mainly responsible for household work and childcare. Douglas and Michaels (2004) disagree however; stating that motherhood and the possibilities for working, raising children, childcare, whether and when and how often to have children, are visible in many issues of women's magazines from the 1950s onward. Some articles in Time and Life magazines, Douglas and Michaels (2004) point out, even addressed marriage contracts including housework to be done by husbands. They and Hayes (1996) posit that a shifting construction of women as super-women coined by their phrase "the New Momism", focused increased pressure upon mothers.

## **Shifting mothering styles**

An increasing focus in popular media, news and advertising concerns children's safety and supervision, noted by Douglas and Michaels (2004), indicates an increasing media focus upon children's safety. Douglas and Michaels couple this with a widespread lack of institutional supports for mothers, such as subsidised, standardised childcare, positing these as issues which augment the pressure upon mothers to meet multiple and conflicting expectations. The intensifying layers of multiple demands made upon mothers to manage work, children and home, are noticed by Douglas and Michaels (2004) and Hays (1996), the analyses of whom highlight the media positioning of mothers in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century includes a critique of the lack of affordable,

accessible childcare in many OECD countries where mothers are increasingly required to work and to organise childcare with little outside support of any sort (OECD, 2011). These authors critique the widening of neoliberalist influences in which governments provide less support of any type to families, and in which human needs are deemed private matters. Douglas and Michaels (2004) also point to amplifying media attention given to mothers following a period during the 1990s, when ‘celebrity mothers’ became popular. Actors and models who expressed glamorous, effortless images of mothering, including time with children, work and leisure, raised the spectre of mothers who meet an increasingly pressured remit to have perfect careers, looks, lifestyles and children in spite of the pressures discussed in this thesis.

Shifts in expectation of mothers within the last two decades, had been noticed during the 1990s, by Thurer (1994) and Hays (1996). Douglas and Michaels (2004) report that mothers spend more leisure time, now depicted as ‘quality time’, with their children, than mothers in the 1960s and 1970s, ironically when mothers were less likely to be in full time paid work. This insight is also made by Crabb (2014). Douglas and Michaels (2004) report increasing media attention focused on children’s needs; ostensibly, to be with their mothers and under their (and only their) watchful eye. Hays (1996) discusses the paradox of the committed, involved mother who also manages a demanding career, as a constructed result of ‘intensive mothering’, which is echoed by the ‘new Momism’ described by Douglas and Michaels (2004). The time which mothers now use for leisure with their children in quality time, has replaced time which in previous generations, mothers might have had to themselves. Time without children, Douglas and Michaels (2004) say, has been couched as ‘me-time’, and women are encouraged to prioritise themselves with exercise, meditation and hobbies; ironically with no replacement for themselves at home or work. Ironically, as women have become more outwardly successful in many areas of economic and social emancipation since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mothers now face a combination of pressure and expectation which is arguably limiting to their wellbeing (Crabb, 2014).



Reinforcement of mothers as central in the lives of children, to the exclusion of most others, has not resulted in commensurate support for mothering. In this way, I propose that contemporary forms of mothering mimic Rich's (1976, 2007) positing of motherhood, as an oppressive institution in which women are shaped and governed by patriarchal directives evident in particular family structures which reinforce women's isolation and subjugation. Isolation and subjugation are evident in the worlds of mothers working and taking care of their homes and people within. Many changes across time, are evident in shifts in all aspects of life, aspects which ensure survival and perhaps, allow people to flourish. Yet many facets of the lives of women and children remain under subjugating directives in shifting forms.

## **Chapter summary**

I have posed mothers, families, and children, as socially-fabricated constructions, the meanings of which have been subject to shifts across time and place. Shifting forces in political, economic, geographical, biological, social, religious and philosophical realms, underpinned by patriarchal values and social compositions purportedly civilising humanity, have made particular versions of people recognisable. The influence of theories about 'the world', or 'reality (with their normalised and even naturalised composite reified social categories with imputed values) coined by influential thinkers during and after the Enlightenment, contributed to the rising dominance of a version of humanity in which the ideal person was to be(come) the competitive, self-interested individual, a construction given expression in industrialised, individualised perspectives of people (see Schwanen & Ziegler, 2011), at odds with the everyday realities of life for women and children, necessarily interdependent and connected.

Mothering is meaning-making, shaped by forces political, social, geographical and other. Meaning-making is influenced by biological determinism and the individual psychology movement, and underpinning patriarchal social structures including

gendered Biblical constructions of womanhood. The shifting constructs of families and the contemporary context of family, including work, school, and those within the families, is central to this thesis. The groupings of men, women and children in certain ways, to be known as families with imputed responsibilities and entitlements, varies. Mothers with children are situated among these groupings. Mothers are understood, using the constructionist lens, to have embodied shifting expectations rather than an eternal, maternal instinct of single-minded focus upon their children, a focus which is all but taken for granted now in mothering literature and public depictions.

For much of the recent past in New Zealand, as with other OECD jurisdictions, mothers have faced a combination of intensifying pressure, wrought by increases in paid work and the prioritising of career; increases in expectation of an intensive, involved mothering style, and shifting dynamics of marriage. Yet the assumed importance of biologically-related mothers has remained central in the lives of mothers and children. Some women have noticed and addressed intensifying demands by having fewer (or no) children, or by starting families later. Others have responded by attempting to fit employment, children and other commitments around one another, with varying success. Still others have opt out of paid work to focus upon their home and children, again with variable effects for themselves and those in their families. The many choices which are supposed to now abound in the lives of women as they adopt careers or paid work, and have families, and hear that they can 'have it all' as mothers, can appear as a maze of difficult situations with decisions carrying costs (economic, social, and familial) to themselves and their families. Currently-available versions of motherhood impinge on the abilities of mothers to take care of the many responsibilities with which they are now faced, some alone.

Depictions of mothers in shifting forms in this Chapter, and the shifts which have characterised changes in mothering, families and the place of children, are a precursor to the next Chapter in which I focus upon wellbeing in some of these contemporary families, among which those in motherled households, are shaped also.

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## **Chapter Six**

### **Narratives of wellbeing in motherled households**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter Four, my critique of narratives of wellbeing led to my proposal that much research and policy aimed at wellbeing is individualistic, based on a view of people as discrete, isolated individuals, and that this construction implicates mothers and children who are deeply connected, and in no way discrete or isolated. Our necessary interdependence - entwined, connected and dependent - remains unacknowledged within this grand narrative. In my study, mothers and children who dwell in motherled households are not well served by research in which their needs are deemed separate, where the needs of only one party are made sense of, and in which the connections between them are neither noticed nor adequately heeded.

In Chapter Five, I examined depictions of mothering and childhood in historical literature. The construction of the ideal(ised) mother has shifted over time, to make sense of the many and shifting forms of work women have performed, and the espoused needs of children. The current view of the best mother as an endlessly available and devoted caregiver who single-handedly manages her children and others while fulfilling the Enlightenment dream of the ideal worker, is a view critiqued by Hays (1996), Douglas and Michaels (2004), and Crabb (2014). This construction is recent and culturally-specific; yet, I argue, it carries the residual effects of patriarchy. This is not a timeless nor universal model of mothering. It is a model which proscribes and limits the wellbeing of those in the mothering relationship.

The dominant perspective of children in which they are vulnerable, powerless, and in need of constant minding, is also time- and culture- specific. The currently-dominant model of good families in which they are self-sufficient, private, and economically self-sustaining, has, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, glorified two-parent, nuclearised

households of two parents and a small number of children. It is a recent development in history and again, specific to times and places. When family groupings are critiqued from a radical feminist perspective mindful of patriarchal structures, nuclear families harbour particular risks and disadvantages for women and children. These risks are highlighted by feminist thinkers and writers, including Friedan (1965), Ehrenreich and English (1979), Rich (1976), Douglas and Michaels (2004), DiQuinzio (1999), and O'Reilly (2007, 2010, 2012).

In this Chapter, I gather these constructions of wellbeing and family as they have become visible as grand narratives. I review literature about wellbeing in families, as I argue such literature has become constructive of motherled households. My interest in motherled households is situated as a research interest borne of my own professional and personal journey, and as an area of interest in family-related literature, as rising numbers of such families are apparent in New Zealand, as elsewhere. I discuss the narratives by which motherled households have been shaped. I make sense of the dynamics mothers in such families face. I review literature in which those in motherled households are believed to be worse off than their counterparts in two-parent-families. I critique constructions of mothers, which harbour and reinforce categorisations of women, and families, according to patriarchal and Biblical definitions of what is significant in women's lives. Increases in the numbers of motherled households, families in which women source income and provide care in clearly-lone fashion, are of interest in the consideration of wellbeing in families like these.

### **Shifting, emerging, motherled households**

The reasons women and children find themselves in a motherled household vary, although it is more likely now than in previous generations, to involve marital breakdown rather than death or desertion (Brookes, 2016; Hertz, 2006; Nolan, 2000). For contemporary families who are involved in military or other occupations requiring

travel, these absences of fathers continue, with effects upon those in the family. These motherled families are outside of the scope of my thesis. I am interested in those families in which women are indefinitely situated as leaders and sole caregivers of their dependent children in their household. Mothers can be situated in families as people who are variously subject to patriarchal forces in which their opportunities and needs have long been governed and proscribed by the needs and demands of men and children.

Shifts in social mores have freed some women from some of the more odious of patriarchal familial expectations. Else and Noonan (1993) and Brown (2011) report a rise in separation and divorce rates along with other opportunities for women developing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Previously, lone mothers were more likely to be widows or to have been deserted than to be divorced, never married or separated. In the last 25 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, motherled households have become households more likely to be led by lone mothers for whom the father of their children is alive and residing elsewhere due to separation or divorce (Nolan, 2000). Many more mothers now have the means to support a family alone, if under limited circumstances, and avoid some of the more dire economic deprivation, and social stigma, taken for granted in previous generations (Hertz, 2006).

Shifts in public perception have been evident in the terms used to describe lone mothers and the families which they lead, which have also varied. During the 1970s, the term 'solo mothers' was commonly used, often derisively or pityingly, to describe mothers in motherled households (MacDonald, 1993; Nolan, 2000). Women in motherled households might still be termed sole mothers, lone mothers, or single parents (including small numbers of fathers). They and their children in such families might be termed single-parent families; however, in one study which I found (Baker, 2009), the term 'motherled households' is used, a term which I have adopted for the purpose of this thesis.

For lone mothers in paid work, workplaces continue to cater variously for the needs of children or other dependants. As stated in Chapter Five, mothers report juggling work and family to keep their personal lives ‘invisible’ to employers, while seeking to meet the needs and wants of their children, sometimes as though they were not working (OECD, 2011). Australian broadcaster and writer Annabel Crabb (2014, p. 11) depicts the impossible task of working mothers, to “work as if one did not have a family, and parent as if one did not have a job”. The increase in levels and hours of paid employment worked by mothers while raising children alone reflects growing social and political pressure upon women to sustain paid employment while maintaining “ultimate responsibility” for the wellbeing of their family, a term coined by Kathy Weingarten (1994) in her work with mothers.

In New Zealand, recent government-led policy restructuring has heralded the requirement for lone mothers receiving government assistance to enter paid work while raising children in the interest of “getting people off welfare and into work” (Ministry of Social Development, 2012) and reducing family dependence upon benefits (Campbell, Thomson, Fenton & Gibson, 2016). The social pressure mothers feel, to be seen to be making particular economic contributions in visible paid work is also underlined by evidence that those in mothered households who are not in paid employment, are more likely to be living in material, financial poverty than those living within any other family structure (Craig et al., 2012). In all families including those of one and two earning adults, rising costs of living make it increasingly difficult for families to survive financially, let alone thrive, on the income of only one earner.

Lone mothers face pressure of a lack of time and necessary resource to do all of what is deemed increasingly necessary, for all women. Authors including Thurer (1994) and Kinser (2012) comment that mothers, even those who are alone in their adult responsibilities to family and work, are commonly expected to work full time in a rewarding, progressive career, to be unendingly available to one’s children, to be happy and fulfilled in their mothering activities, and to have sufficient time and money to fulfil their own, individual needs for rest, leisure, and exercise. Douglas and Michaels

(2004), coining “the new Momism” as a media- and politically-fuelled construction, critique the commonly-assumed view that “no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids... remain(s) the best primary caretakers of their children, and... devote(s) her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (p. xi).

### **Families: For the good of the children?**

Rising rates of separation, divorce, and remarriage, and increases in motherled households in places including New Zealand, have been studied by many researchers of all political, philosophical, theological, sociological and economic stripes over the last three decades. Some researchers have approached this shift in family form with concern, among them Haskins (2015), Ribar (2015), and Schroeder, Osgood and Oghia (2010). Some books, written by authors adopting particular conservative and/or Christian perspectives, have warned separating couples of the spiritual harm they cause to their children by breaking a ‘covenant’ such as that which heterosexual marriage is seen as, by some. Census data from 2013 indicates that nearly 41% of people in New Zealand report that Christianity and other organised religions such as Islam and Judaism, which also discourage divorce and by definition motherled households, are no longer consciously organising principles on which to base their important, long-term life decisions (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

For many people, the emergence of motherled households is not consciously problematic or worthy of protest. Yet a married, heterosexual, nuclear family is still posited as an optimum environment in which to raise children (Amato, 2000, 2005, Haskins, 2015, Narbut, 2012). The continued assumption of two-parent families as necessary for human wellbeing, exemplifies the symbolic universe as posited by Berger and Luckmann (1966). The basis for New Zealand (and other western) societies upon founding principles of family and societal organisation and law, upon forms of Christianity and aspects of Biblical rule, remains a symbolic universe in which inquiry



into wellbeing including laws, policies, academic research, and everyday assumptions about people, are constructed.

## **Categorisations of women in relation to family and marriage**

The classification of women (and by association their households) as married, single, divorced or separated is also worthy of note in this symbolic universe. Researchers including Demo and Acock (1996), Schwarz and Walper (2009), and Wise (2003), all demonstrate a persistent interest in the classification of mothers according to marital states: single, divorced, never married and de facto. Putting mothers into categories is also common in statistical gatherings of information and data collection at all levels of women's lives. The rationale behind such categorisation remains implicit; that in spite of the many ways of living in families, having relationships and children, or organising one's adult life, underlying and ultimately contestable beliefs about the meaning of each title regarding women and her family remain relevant. Within each category there is a wide range of lived experiences and variations of income, opportunity and experience, according to Hutt (2012). Across and between categories there may be multiple similarities in experience, such as those investigated by Hochschild in her studies of how families manage work and home life (1997, 2003).

I propose that taking the categorised states of women and children in which wellbeing is depicted, to an extreme, might involve many classifications and categorisations of families. We might log the numbers, ages, age gaps and genders of children in the household, or individual histories and preferences of each family member, personal histories or salient events such as hospitalisation or trauma, family members' dietary requirements, and personal or cultural tastes. We could arguably categorise according to geographical location, type or quality of housing, presence of particular cultural or religious practices, and many others. Yet, mostly we do not. All of these alternative aspects of family organisation, and the associated relevance for wellbeing, may in time be found to be as relevant as universal classifications of maternal marital status or

monetary income, even though they are currently of negligible focus in studies of maternal and child wellbeing. A wealth of research literature claims that the wellbeing of mothers and children in families is worse in motherled households than in two-parent households. In the next section, I review some of this research.

## **Lone mothers, motherled households and stereotypes**

In Chapter Five, I encountered a form of family which has attained dominance in public conversation, media portrayal, advertising, research studies, and government-generated literature in OECD countries during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of the relative recency of nuclear family forms, and the many limitations for wellbeing, particularly for women and children, which might accompany life in nuclear families, it retains dominance. Families who structure themselves differently, such as those in motherled households, de facto multi-generational households, same-sex partnerships or rainbow families, or families of grandparents raising grandchildren, are othered in much literature, including academic research and policy.

Discourses of brokenness, incompleteness, devastation and damage are common themes in studies discussed in this Chapter. The coupling of marriage with stability, security and safety, terms deemed preferable for the sustenance of a stable, ordered society and the wellbeing of those within society and within each family, are themes evident in many studies. Various forms of risk to those in motherled households are reported by authors such as Haskins (2015), Ribar (2015) and Schroeder, Osgood and Oghia (2010). These and other authors, including drug and alcohol use, delinquent behaviour in children, and poverty (Gahler & Garriga, 2012). Children in motherled households are reported to be at greater risk of many forms of difficulty, exposure to parental conflict, and the prospect of themselves having difficult relationships once older (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001). Motherled households are positioned in comparison with families of two parents in studies by Amato (2000), Schroeder, Osgood and Oghia (2010). Two-parent households are deemed “whole” (Demirbilek & Otrar, 2014) and

“complete” (Narbute, 2012). In Schroeder, Osgood and Oghia’s research (2010), motherled households are termed “non-intact” and “broken homes” beside two-parent homes who are said to be “intact”. A study by Haskins (2014) terms motherled households ‘unstable’. In terms of the wellbeing of children, a simple database search of terms such as ‘delinquency’, ‘two-parent family’ and ‘single-parent family’ reveals thinly-veiled attribution of problems to the structures of lone-parent families for difficulties experienced by children and young people, typified in a study by Maginnis (1997) entitled *Single Parent Families Cause Juvenile Crime*.

Researchers of families and wellbeing demonstrate a visible preference for the supposed safety and wellbeing of those living in two parent families. Maginnis’ (1997) title above, casts a negative slant upon motherled households. The wording, discussion and ‘findings’ of studies such as one by Gahler and Garriga entitled *Has the Association between Parental Divorce and Young Adults’ Psychological Problems Changed Over Time?* (2012), and Baker’s *The Quintessential Problem Debtor? Mother-led Households in Economic Hard Times* (2009) project a negative view. In light of such titles, people in motherled households are likely to be viewed as poor, struggling and disadvantaged, in spite of whatever benefits those in such families believe and claim. Until motherled households can be seen by researchers and the popular public (including mothers themselves) as an intentional, resilient embodiment rather than an aberration, the normative belief in the two-parent nuclear household as superior to other form marginalises motherled households.

A published collection of articles focused upon lone-mother-led families to which I contributed in 2016 included my critique of a large body of studies from the United States, in which the visibility of the naturalisation of nuclear families in academic research was problematic to me (Lamdin Hunter, 2016). The *Fragile Families* data collection, initiated in the United States in 1998, is one such example of a body of research whose very title and espoused directions, shines a negative light upon families who exist outside the heterosexual nuclear family model. Studies generated by use of this pool of data, gathered by periodic interviews with parents who are unmarried to

each other at the time of their child's birth, have been published in many research studies and working papers, including those by McLanahan, Garfinkel, Reichman and Teitler (2004), Osborne and Knab (2007), and Harknett and Hartnett (2011). The project and process is founded upon the premise of the authors that those outside of so-called 'traditional' marriage structures are at much higher risk of all poor social outcomes including poverty, poor education and income levels, and higher propensity to instability and risk including crime and sickness. The terminology of certain families as fragile, denotes a less-than-resilient and deficit-burdened family; many such families may object to a classification which couples marital status with vulnerability and powerlessness.

Of particular interest in the *Fragile Families* studies, is a lack of concern or critique regarding the ethical presuppositions which are necessarily in place for such a study of 'fragility' to proceed. Involved families may or may not understand that they have been chosen and invited to participate because researchers suspect them to be riskier and less stable than others. The potential for this to undermine the self-concept and wellbeing of participants by virtue of consent to participate in the study, has not been raised in any critique which I could find. The undermining potential of researchers in the lives of mothers, has been discussed by researchers such as Carpenter and Austin (2007) and by Fisher (2008). I propose that the ethic of constructions of families as fragile, a term synonymous with flimsy and insubstantial, is questionable. Even where participants do not view the fragile label as disadvantageous themselves, researchers ought still to question the persistence of social attitudes which marginalise unmarried (including unpartnered) families (particularly women, and among those, women with children) by the construct of 'fragility'.

The *Fragile Families* studies have produced copious results expressed through smaller studies of health and wellbeing. Their positing of social indicators in which fragile families are compared with other (presumably 'strong' married) families present single or unmarried parents as less-than or poorer-than across a range of indicators. No study

topics or outcomes of the *Fragile Families* studies laud or highlight the capabilities or possible advantages and strengths of people in such families. The authors' recruitment of study participants who they (the authors) decide deserve the fragile label reinforces a time-specific and culture-specific social ritual (marriage) which is, according to increasing numbers of people reported by Parker (2005) and by Chapple (2009), of diminishing social value and occurrence in a dynamic and multicultural social context (Chapple, 2009).

The recommendations arising from studies such as the *Fragile Families* study are also of interest; the researchers seem to believe that, for families to enjoy more robust wellbeing, parents ought to marry and remain together. Yet overarching national and international comparisons of wellbeing indicate that improvements in wellbeing (in blunt, economic and subjective measurements such as those gathered by OECD instruments which I have critiqued) lie with addressing the inequalities of income and social resource which are experienced by citizens positioned as inferior or lower-class, rather than the individual behaviours of such citizens (Craig et al., 2012; Rashbrooke, 2013). Research purporting to show that those in non-nuclear households experience worse wellbeing than those in two parent families, obfuscates an assumption that remaining married and in a nuclear family formation, is a path to improvements in wellbeing, and to a better life. The dominance of the grand narrative of nuclear families holding unique potential for wellbeing, is naturalised enough as to be largely invisible to the many researchers involved in this study, ethics committees, and prospective participants themselves. Child-focused research into health and social problems such as the difficulties experienced by young people and labelled as 'delinquency' is smoothly coupled with single parent family structures rather than difficulties or inequities experienced in two parent families, where such problems might be more easily attributed to individual or organic factors, and not to challenges such as power-imbalances or oppressive factors experienced in some two-parent families.

The conflation in public conversation and report media, of single parenthood with unplanned or teen pregnancy is notable. In New Zealand a majority of single parent households are headed by wage-earning middle-aged middle-class mothers. However, Hutt (2012) reports a persistent portrayal by news media of lone mothers as never-married youths who are dependent upon the state and therefore an economic and social problem. In the United States, several Pew Research Centre papers including a report by Wang, Parker and Taylor (2013) reports public discomfort with increasing proportions of households whose main (or sole) earner is a mother, even though the “breadwinner moms” label covers families (of one and two parents) within a wide range of circumstances. An editorial essay (2013) found in *The Atlantic* (September 3, 2013) entitled “The mysterious and alarming rise of single parenthood in America” touts lone mother households as part of “a huge problem without any easy explanation”. The article concludes by saying “...we need to do all that we can to ensure that for these families single parenting is in fact a dream, and not the enormous challenge that it currently is today”.

Family-oriented research about life in mother-led or lone mother households in particular, focuses mainly upon deficit or ‘survival’ (never thriving) in spite of many hazards and disadvantages. A common refrain in research pertaining to wellbeing in the context of family life, is the stress and discrimination faced by women who report experiencing poverty and economic disadvantage while raising their children. Women and children in motherled households are over-represented in groups of people living below the poverty line in New Zealand, as elsewhere (Chapple, 2009). Belle and Doucet (2003) claim that even mothers who successfully create support networks for themselves and use every available resource are inclined to see themselves as failures or even ‘bad mothers’ when they are unable to single-handedly meet all of their and their children’s needs.

During my reviews of literature for this thesis, and while living in a motherled household, I encountered a situation in my own household in which I saw for myself

the possibilities for people in two-parent households, possibilities which might never be noticed in literature favouring nuclear family forms. I wrote in my journal:

***Researcher Journal: Friday 8 June, 2012***

*After a loud confrontation between my daughter, aged nine, and her father (my husband, from whom I am separated) at my house, I began to realise why I think it is that motherled households might attract a particular problem-focused gaze.*

*At the height of the shouting between them, I intervened and spoke firmly to both of them, stating that the arguing had to stop and somebody needed to leave. The father replied crossly "well, that would have to be me, wouldn't it?" and stamped angrily out of the room. As I later said in an email to my sister, I could see what might happen for this child had the two-parent family continued un-separated: "Well, the "family" would be "intact" and so would not come under the gaze of researchers looking at single parent families (and the incidence of poor outcomes, lower income, chronic parenting issues, conflict, poor education and social outcomes for children which are believed to be connected to single-parent-family status). However, there would be a child who after repeated clashes with one of the parents would have become the scapegoat who, one day, might become a "poor outcome" of their own, as an individual. Yet because they would have come from an "intact family" (of two parents) they wouldn't attract the gaze of researchers because their 'outcomes' would be attributed to individual choice or circumstances, so nobody would be questioned as to why this child had 'gone off the rails'. Also because the other children might have observed such clashes and learned to be quiet and behave acceptably in front of the parent, there would be no question of the family's 'intactness' or wellbeing as the objectionable behaviour/poor outcome would not be reflected in the other children's 'outcomes'". Later, I thought that if I tolerated this I would be coming under the disciplinary control of the patriarchal subjugation I wish to trouble, in my implicit expectation of my other two daughters to 'toe the line' for their father, not question him, and behave acceptably for him, rather than troubling a perceived injustice as this 'troublesome' child did!"*

In order to recognise the limitations upon wellbeing, of nuclear family structures, I have adopted a perspective in which the needs of women and children are problematised by the patriarchal prioritising of men's interests in families. Prioritising is made visible in literature including books, magazine articles, websites and courses in which mothers have been advised to adopt certain behaviours, dress and habits in order to please "the man of the house", habits including modifying the behaviour of children to appear more agreeable. In reflexively noticing this situation, I became aware of possibilities for wellbeing which sat outside the purview of many researchers.

### **Wellbeing and family forms**

The marginalisation which I argue occurs for those in motherled households, is framed in the language of comparison and categorisation of households and those within them. The requirement to monitor and report, in simple measuring terms, wellbeing of people including children, has often been accompanied by mechanisms which are used to classify and compare those in families of different forms. There are many studies in which comparisons of wellbeing between married/partnered mothers, and lone mothers, and between children of lone parents and children of married parents, are established. The United Nation's Report Card No. 7 (2007) focused on child wellbeing, features the fourth dimension of child wellbeing, 'relationships', to include family structures (namely, the percentage of children living in a single-parent family or stepfamily) as an external (negative) indicator of wellbeing. Writers acknowledge that this approach appears "unfair and insensitive" (p. 23) due to the difficulties which can be similarly experienced in two-parent families as well as the examples of the many children thriving in single-parent families. Yet, they insist at a "statistical level" upon the "evidence to associate growing up in single-parent families and stepfamilies with greater risk to wellbeing – including a greater risk of dropping out of school, of leaving home early, of poorer health, of low skills and low pay" (p. 23).



Studies by Chapple (2009), Kamp Dush & Amato (2005), Perry-Jenkins & Gillman (2000), and United Nations (2007) compare wellbeing of mothers in motherled households with those currently in two-parent households. Shifts in wellbeing such as improvements or deteriorations as people have shifted from one family type to another, including shifts for those in motherled households who have come from an impoverished or stressful two-parent household are not included in such research. I propose that the wellbeing status of those in motherled households is incompletely understood owing to a lack of meaningful comparison with their sense of wellbeing in their previous two-parent household. Research which articulates wellbeing among women who compare their now mother-led household with their previous (married) situation is scant.

Measured assessments of wellbeing in families of different forms, tend to capture current moments in time for participants rather than the longer-term ebbs and flows of subjective experience over periods of time. Research has generally failed to adequately make sense of participants' own accounts of longer-term shifts in wellbeing between different household forms and circumstances for families. In other words, many people shift from motherled households to two-parent households and vice versa, sometimes several times, according to Pool, Dharmalingam and Sceats (2007); yet wellbeing measurements are taken as one-time snapshots which fail to convey the shifting, long term aspects of people's life journeys in which wellbeing is noticed in different ways at different times.

## **Motherled households and children's wellbeing**

Amato and Sobolewski (2001) claim that divorce has detrimental effects upon children's wellbeing into adulthood, according to measured socio-economic 'achievement', relationship skills and quality of parent/adult child relations. The

authors quote data from the 1980s and 1990s to report lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness, poorer self-control and higher use of mental health services as an adult, compared with adults whose parents never divorced. Attempts have been made by UNICEF (2007) and others, to capture long term effects of family form upon children's wellbeing in their measurement and continued monitoring of children's educational and cognitive academic performance. Yet it is unclear which aspects of life in mothered households might contribute most to poor performance. Issues such as financial insufficiency, presence of family or marital conflict, lack of social support or poor housing, are understood to be experienced disproportionately by many children in poorer two-parent families. UNICEF researchers are unable to control for any of these factors in children's lives in their data gathering, so the mothered household, and by definition, the mother is held culpable.

Amato and Booth (1997), Hanson (1999) and Jekielek (1998) point out that high levels of intra-familial conflict can carry negative effects along with divorce, even when children remain in the two parent household. Conflict (including conflict which does not result in divorce) has negative effects on children's long-term wellbeing. It can be difficult to separate the effects of intra-familial conflict, divorce and single-parent family life from one another, according to Riggio (2004), who suggests that research which has espoused the negative effects of one upon child wellbeing, is easily conflated with the effects of another, an insight echoed by Amato (2005) and by Davis (2005). Amato and Sobolewski (2001) propose that rather than trying to keep families 'married' to avoid such challenges, couples should have robust access to conflict resolution, post-divorce support and close involvement of both parents with their children.

### **Economic wellbeing and motherled households**

Some studies describe the effects of divorce upon women, in terms of economic and social wellbeing. In a study by Aassve, Betti, Mazzuco and Mencarini (2007) the authors report that women's financial wellbeing is markedly diminished following a marriage breakup (whereas men's tends to improve or stay the same), acknowledging a variety of experiences according to the nature of policies regarding welfare and government support, a finding supported by Esping-Andersen (2009). These authors all acknowledge the difficulty of determining economic wellbeing outside of a simple measure of household income, in which very blunt dichotomies between families arbitrarily deemed poor or non-poor, can easily be drawn with little deep analysis of associated wellbeing. The financial costs of raising children along with reduced income opportunities while parenting are rarely compensated for following separation, women facing a disproportionate burden of costs, resulting in worse financial circumstances. Heflin and Butler's (2012) examination of why women enter and leave material hardship, includes maternal health as well as income, and 'household composition' as indicators of material hardship, demonstrating that material hardship for women is commonly linked to separation and lone parenthood.

In New Zealand as with other OECD countries, public and governmental responses to increasing numbers of motherled households have ranged across a spectrum designed at one end to support families under such pressure, and at the other end to discourage women from entering and living within a motherled household or finding themselves insufficient or dependent once there (VandenBeld Giles, 2014). State-sponsored support of motherled households includes in some places, financial benefits or income transfer or tax credit offered to supplement their income, and subsidies in childcare or costs of living, enabling women to work and their children to be cared for by someone else. The benefits in economic and social terms of having women in paid work, are promoted by government ministries such as the Ministry of Social Development (2012). Their policies have been critiqued by Worth and McMillan (2004) and by Campbell, Thomson, Fenton and Gibson (2016), along with Welfare Justice, report-writers representing the Child Poverty Action Group including Dale, O'Brien and St.

John (2011), and others including St John, MacLennan, Anderson and Fountain (2014) and Sudden (2016).

In the United States, the economic issues presented by rising numbers of motherled households within statistics for poverty and hardship have been addressed by policies and initiatives discouraging families from separating. Examples include government-sponsored marital counselling, trialled as a method of getting couples to stay together (Haskins, 2015). These measures were intended to avoid the common shift of mothers and children into worsening financial positions via leaving a two-parent household, and concomitant effects upon their access to resources necessary for wellbeing. In Chapter Eight, I tell a story of a mother seeking assistance and being discouraged by the punitive, obstructive attitudes of those whose job it is to assist her. Some women report that it is easier to try to survive than to ask for help from invasive and inefficient officials at government agencies (Sudden, 2016). Moreover, the difficulties some mothers face in managing competing work and family requirements, has an effect upon their own wellbeing: Cook (2012) reports that the growing expectation, couched in social and economic terms, of mothers to enter paid work, seen in 'welfare to work' requirements of many countries including Canada and New Zealand, actually diminish women's wellbeing, concurring with findings by Troup (2011).

In motherled households, women who lack necessary support have been noted to struggle to work and take care of their families when coerced into available, often low-paying jobs by government department case workers acting upon welfare reform policies, documented in a study by Sudden (2016). Expectations to engage in paid employment while parenting (lone or not), affect all mothers and can be seen in conversations and public debates about the many costs or benefits, across many layers of family, economic and social life, of staying home with children or working and using childcare for children. Participation in paid work has been shown to improve wellbeing both for women (Gordon, Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, Murphy & Rose, 2012; Sahu & Rath, 2003) and children (Secret & Peck Heath, 2004). For mothers who do work, the availability of support and flexible leave and conditions have been shown by Troup

(2011) to improve their wellness and outlook on life. Studies by Baker, Gruber and Milligan (2008) underline beliefs that the children of working mothers are damaged emotionally and cognitively by unsatisfactory care or early childhood education situations, damage which in work by Douglas and Michaels, has been laid at the feet of individual mothers, in a social and political research context of individualising human experience.

### **A woman's choice?**

A paucity of appreciative/strengths-focused research into wellbeing in mothered households is notable to me. In one narrative essay by Ahmad (2011) the author describes her experience of being empowered by a need to overcome her fear of raising her children alone, and embrace the significance of her task in her children's lives. Ahmad (2011) claims that her ability to tell her story of her mothering experience signifies "control of the meaning of one's own life" (p. 142) – that is, having control by being able to tell the story. The author, in empowering herself by telling her own story, makes sense of personal strength, invigorating herself in a way which would not be visible in discussions of income or support. Fielding (2013) uses a study in Africa to state that women's empowerment and equality improve wellbeing of women and children in male dominated societies, as women's bargaining power can be used to advance child education and health. In this study, the author considers wellbeing to include an absence of depression, pain or anxiety, and the ability to make decisions at home unhindered by one's partner or husband. Stewart and Cornell (2003) report a study in which women were seen to demonstrate both positive and negative affect in relation to separation and single parenthood, particularly with the benefit of support. The propensity for an unhappy home life and marriage to afflict partnered women with poorer wellbeing than their lone-mother counterparts, is not made clear in research literature which I could find. It is not my goal to investigate unhappy marriages in this thesis; yet it remains pertinent to make sense of women's variable experiences in two-

parent households as part of the context of choosing and/or remaining in, a motherled household.

Demo and Acock (1996) note negative effects upon women who remain in inequitable marriages. The authors report lower levels of wellbeing (including personal happiness, self-esteem and the absence of depression), and identify personal happiness, self-esteem and the absence of depression as factors of wellbeing among study participants. In studies by Putnam (2000), and by Cook (2012), lone mothers reported lower levels of wellbeing than married women, although this was offset by the benefits of satisfying work which offered meaning, satisfaction and a sense of personal control over one's life. Demo and Acock (1996) posit that mothers' *preference* of their current circumstances compared with alternatives – that is, those who would not choose to change their situation or return to a difficult partnership – is itself a factor which contributes to wellbeing among mothers. This is relevant for women contemplating their wellbeing in a motherled household, women who have left marriages and who might now be expected to perhaps regret their decision and return to a supposedly advantageous situation in which their wellbeing might appear better. For such women, returning to face unhappiness and disempowerment in a two-adult household is not an option. I was unable to find studies in which women in motherled households regretted forming a motherled household; in other words, even with less money and variable social support, few if any women appear to regret leaving.

According to Amato and Previti (2003), women are more likely than men to initiate separation, citing difficulties such as lack of support, abuse, and financial problems among their main reasons for leaving. My noticing of these wellbeing-diminishing problems in the lives of women in two-parent households, leads me to conclude, along with Demo and Acock (1996), that for some women now experiencing financial difficulty and isolation in their motherled household, these problems were already manifested in similar degrees of social and emotional difficulty during marriage. Bradbury and Norris (2005) note an income gradient for marital separation, wherein they report poorer families and those reliant upon benefits being more likely than

families with higher incomes, to separate and become motherled households. Proposing a correlation among low income, marriage difficulties and separation, and poorer wellbeing, I suggest that some motherled households with supposedly poorer levels of wellbeing are those who previously had poorer wellbeing while in two-parent households. These families are obscured in comparisons where the presence of higher income two-parent households obscures poorer families until such time as those households shift, and become visible in figures for motherled households.

The ideals and aspirations to which women look when they forge a motherled household, are increasingly visible in online, usually informal narratives. Here, mothers describe their sense of freedom, hopefulness, empowerment, resilience and single-minded connection with their children, which they report in their motherled household. Such sentiments are evident in online blogs, Facebook pages and conversation feeds, and websites designed for lone mothers. I found several, including *Mssinglemama.com*, *About.com Single Parents*, and a blog entitled *Wealthy Single Mommy*. In these and other online and social media spaces for single and separating mothers, women describe gaining problem-solving skills and coming to value oneself in order to care for one's children. Mothers also have a place to safely ask others, including other lone parents, for help and advice. Correspondents tell of their strengths and demonstrate aspects of emancipation which are not given voice in formal research which I could find.

Stories in social media and other online communities and conversations, are yet to be robustly examined in academically-approved, peer-reviewed, ethically-governed inquiry. The "off-the-cuff", informal, spontaneous stories shared among mothers are rarely accessible in ethical, organised terms, a point of contention for feminist researchers and for me. The privileging of particular forms of research inquiry and findings therein, due to long-held research requirements in academe outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2013), dismisses the experiences of particular women when they are self-expressed or positioned as anecdotes in other(ed) forms of inquiry. Ethics committees and formal academic peer review boards continue to require adherence to particular

methods of data collection, in the interests of long-held conceptualisations of rigor or the authenticity of findings. Anonymous and informally-gathered anecdotes representing women's experiences and gleaned from such places social media groups or online blogs are not considered appropriate by many; the evidence from these sources is seldom featured in research findings. The ethical responsibilities of researchers to safeguard the identity of participants who contribute to their findings and to gain consent to use people's words, also complicates the use of online and informal comment as material, a complication noted by Wilson, Gosling & Graham (2012). The many conversations I witnessed in social media and blog comments, are unavailable in detail, in this literature review. Yet the essences of them are made somewhat visible in the semi-fictional stories told in Chapter Eight. I suggest that the safe, respectful use of opinions and comments made in such sites deserves further clarification as the articulation of mothers' experiences is worthy to supplement as well as challenge formal outcomes.

I propose that researchers hold an ethical duty to acknowledge the effect which their research has upon the lives and wellbeing of participants, and especially those participants whose wellbeing they purport to value. Hood, Mayall and Oliver (1999) claim that research is morally bound to improve or even transform conditions of human life and wellbeing. I propose that the effects of current and long-term trends in wellbeing research will remain visible forces in the reproduction of an evaluation of those in motherled households as ultimately deficient, a discourse which is readily available in family research, not only reflecting, but constituting, further challenges to wellbeing in lone mother families. My concern at the wellbeing-shaping forces of research, is voiced in my following journal entry:

***Researcher journal: Thursday 3 April, 2014***

*It may be that the one-parent households with poorer levels of wellbeing were the previous two parent households with the poorest levels of health back then. Perhaps in the 'two-parent-household' figures, the more moneyed higher class two parent*



families are 'swallowing up' the poorer two parent households, and masking their current two parent (poorer) levels of wellbeing.

*If low income/beneficiary families are more likely to divorce and these are also the families who are more likely to have (pre-existing) social/health issues and problems, then some of those children in motherled households were already more likely to be living with some level of wellbeing-diminishing disadvantage. Those children are over-represented in child wellbeing figures. When children in struggling or low-income families become children in motherled households, they improve the appearance of two-parent family children merely by shifting out of two-parent families.*

*We still use these antiquarian models of family, and blunt measurements of wellbeing with individualistic focus, to try to make sense of things that have changed, like families, work, and childhood. It's like asking an orchestra to play 'rap' music and wondering why it sounds so weird – we question the quality of the music rather than its means of transmission – the orchestra – which is designed for different music in a different time and setting. The symbolic universe in which we find ourselves has only made some constructions grow. We are limited by these constructions in the research and policies, the grand narratives, which we can use to address wellbeing. The MSD's welfare reform program in which lone mothers are penalised if they don't get jobs, is held up by literature which appears to show that women with more money and paid work have better wellbeing and so do their children. Does better wellbeing bring about the capacity to work which improves health, rather than just pressing women into employment to magically improve wellbeing? It seems like the Minister of Health finding a study which says that marathon runners live longer, and then saying to all New Zealanders 'Great! Next week you will all run a marathon and improve life expectancy in New Zealand!' when in fact, the ability to run marathons led to marathon running which led to longer lives, but in the meantime, being expected to run a marathon is a ridiculous request for most of us.*

## Chapter summary

The persistent preference in research literature, for two-parent households over and above many other family forms, in order for wellbeing to be judged sufficient, is where I have situated my inquiry in this Chapter. My interest in the families of mothers and children who constitute motherled households led me to take an interest in the conditions of their lives which contribute to their thriving and struggling. I made sense of families as relationships in which those within, might flourish. Flourishing depends in part upon the construction of factors which determine how wellbeing is understood in stories narrated by those who claim to know about families, among them researchers like myself. The narratives which are noticeable to researchers and made visible to others, depend in part, upon the space in which the story is told, depicted here as Berger and Luckmann's (1966) symbolic universe. They depend upon the weight given to those who tell, such as researchers, commentators and religious or political leaders of different types, or mothers themselves. The voices of women and children have been muted and even silenced due to their subjugated social positioning in patriarchal structures evident in the construction of knowledge, and forms of inquiry, explicated in Chapter Five. While historically, women have always managed households of people including children and others, and have always conducted productive work, the belief continues that for people in a household to thrive, a man must be present. Portrayals of risk, insufficiency of support and money, and struggle, abound in the literature which I reviewed. Reflecting upon my own experience as a parent and single parent, I am interested in local, immediate stories of wellbeing which might deepen my understanding of the ways in which wellbeing, and families, are under construction. My curiosity about the juxtaposition of my own wonderings with alarming research, was expressed in the following journal entry:

***Researcher journal: Thursday 16 January, 2014***

*The idea that perhaps some families, women and children are better off as/in single parent families is untested and unavailable in the literature I have found, unless women*

*and children are in abject, obvious, serious bodily danger in a two parent household. The literature on wellbeing of women OR children is of limited value, firstly because wellbeing is such a faulty and limited notion to begin with, then it is limited further by its mangling by researchers. How does it compare with what women in single mother families say?*

In the next Chapter, I invite the mothers who conversed with me, to contribute. I share the stories of those in motherled households as told to me. Listening for remnants of narrative reflected in the literature reviewed in the last three Chapters, I make space for antenarratives which are not yet told of in literature, reflected in the stories told by mothers. Having conversations with mothers who identify as single parents in motherled households, and who are willing to share their stories, I use storying methods in antenarrative formation and living story, to exercise a form of narrative which might contribute to new possibilities for telling, and living, wellbeing for mothers and children.

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## Chapter Seven

### Living Stories

#### Introduction

In Chapter Two, I outlined my intent in this thesis to situate my inquiry in paradigms of knowledge grounded in social construction. I expressed my interest in conducting research inquiries which can “penetrate(s) and share(s) the essence of the human experience” (Vickers, 2012, p. 175) even whilst under construction, such as the construction of living stories in conversation. Inclusion of my own story foregrounded my growing awareness that there is far more to the consideration of the lives of women made responsible for various dependents than marital status, income, deprivation, and isolation as so vividly depicted in stories and images of single mothers. In such a paradigm, research “findings” are not intended to be generalised; rather, outcomes are forged in conversation by researcher and participant.

In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I highlighted the landscape of literature in health, social practice, sociology and management where broad, coherent, grand narratives which concern how wellbeing is constructed about and for people in single parent families, are wrought. Particular narratives become institutionalised under construction as the norm, then becoming expectations for all. Much of this research designated as truth and fact is based in positivist paradigms of knowledge, and highlights narratives of socio-economic struggle, social isolation and angst made evident through the use of measurement and comparison. In this Chapter, I utilise my focus within a small group of mothers, to envision a different, antenarrative version of motherled households, a version holding depth and nuance, to reconstruct wellbeing in single mother households. Such versions I have observed to be lacking in the literature I reviewed.

In this and the next Chapter I explore my interest in stories, in the words of Vickers (2012) as “representations of social reality... legitimately treated as unbounded, fragmented and uncertain” (p. 175). My determination to pay attention to participants’

“lived, subjective experience” (p. 175) and be open to many-voiced stories in many pieces and layers rather than one, smooth version of narrative, are realised in this Chapter. I aim to generate future possibilities for participants and others, possibilities which are not harnessed to women’s adherence to particular versions of womanhood or mothering. My decision to arrange stories into a constructed conversation, and to risk a multiple, fragmented and potentially in-coherent assemblage, accompanied my noticing of resonance and texture among the stories which were shared with me in one-on-one conversation. As described in Chapter Three, each woman who shared her story with me is given voice, and her own words are used here in the form of conversation excerpts which have been woven beside those of other participants, as a constructed conversation. For pragmatic reasons, focus groups were not conducted in this research; such groups might have garnered the type of interaction which is depicted here and which became a feature of this storytelling inquiry. Storytelling methods in the vein of antenarrative and living stories, demonstrate that stories are many and multiple in plot, retro/ prospective/ current, and can be transformational in the antenarrative vein. I hoped that some aspects of transformation and emancipation would be evident in generating particular positioning of excerpts.

I reviewed my conversations with each of six women, reflecting upon and in each conversation, transcribing, listening back, highlighting and printing conversation pieces, and arranging them beside and around one another. In so doing, I became more familiar with each woman’s stories, and I relived the conversations in my memory and reflection upon the expressions, verbal and other, as well as the words uttered. As I considered how to analyse the conversations I had with participants I was mindful of the ways in which antenarrative, living story, and Beginning-Middle-End narratives may be constructed. Boje (2008b, 2014) demonstrated the different ways which narratives can be constructed. In living story methodologies, the researcher resists the linear, rational directive to frame a story, give it a beginning, a body/middle and an ending (a BME narrative) which becomes the official, formal, recognized, and, as Boje puts it, petrified grand narrative. Living stories can include messy, incoherent fragments, and tales told without beginning or end or moral or lesson. Holding that the

process of generating and attending to each conversation is itself a developing process which can garner particular outcomes, I now turn to the process of generation, positioning and analysis of each conversation in which I took part.

### **The process: Conversation positioning and construction**

After each conversation, I made notes of the main points as I remembered them and what I noticed about the conversation, and my responses as I remembered them, reflecting in writing on what was significant to me in content of each conversation. I underwent this process of reflection as soon as possible after each conversation, sometimes in the car before I arrived home, or as soon as possible after the conversation ended. Journaling my reflection upon each conversation, and upon what I was learning from conversation to conversation, I tracked my own journey of what I was finding meaningful to me as the conversations unfolded (Epp, 2008). By transcribing the conversations myself, I was able to listen again, to experience the conversation another time, capturing and hearing the words as I wrote them out. I printed and read each conversation transcript. As I read the conversation transcripts, I listened to the recordings, reliving the vocal tone and content and noticing what was meaningful to each participant. I highlighted in colour, what had been meaningful to me as the conversation unfolded, either due to its importance in the conversation. I highlighted what echoed or contrasted with what other women had said, also highlighting what had seemed central or significant to the woman as we had spoken, hearing and remembering our conversation and her tone of voice or emphasis in my mind as I read along. Each woman in conversation was assigned a pseudonym, and her excerpts were given a different pen colour so that I came to associate each coloured passage with the woman who had said it, creating a multi-coloured mixture of contributions from each participant throughout the passages of conversation which appear in this Chapter.

I played with the printed, highlighted transcripts, literally cutting printed pieces of each conversation and shifting them around, placing them beside each other according to

themes which resonated with the literature or themes which chimed between conversations. I remembered Boje's words, that "I still prefer highlighting a transcript (or document), and then making margin notes how various words and phrases, and sometimes a story, are intertextual to other texts and other stories" (2008a, p. 207), preferring a textured, kinaesthetic activity to the possibilities offered by use of analytic programs such as NVivo. A sensory, tactile process helped me make sense of each piece of text, as well as understanding the turns taken between each piece and remembering the expressions given with each statement and conversation. By positioning cut up excerpts beside one another, it seemed as if the women were actually talking and responding to one another. I found that a constructed conversation appeared by positioning the excerpts one after another and reading them as if each woman was responding to the previous excerpt. I noticed the conversation resembling some of the conversations I might have participated in in mothers' group or coffee group or informal group situations with women at other points in my life, conversations which were generative, productive, fruitful and contributive to my wellbeing, conversations including laughter, tears, jokes or hugs. In my journal, I wrote:

***Researcher Journal: Friday 7 March, 2014***

*I wonder whether the stories which women are telling about their wellbeing, are constitutive of their wellbeing. The stories mothers tell are determining, constructing their wellbeing in the telling, and not merely reporting pre-existing aspects of wellbeing. All the participant accounts tell different things and focus on variant aspects which are disparate from one another, and each one doesn't just report what has happened but it becomes the stem from which future wellbeing flowers. Over time wellbeing is reproduced over and over by the stories which grow, drop seeds and grow again. This is a constructionist notion, of wellbeing is a narrative construct.*

*I am interested in both the story that is told, and the telling of the story. What will honour the storytellers? The TELLING of the story and the actual STORY production. The telling of the story becomes the activist act of action research, the demonstration, the transformative moment in which the change happens and life is transformed and wellbeing is enhanced.*

## **Checking back with participants**

I decided to invite participants to read and comment on this positioning of their stories beside other stories of women who they had not met nor agreed to converse with. I emailed or gave these rearranged conversation pieces to each participant and asked for their feedback, including whether they thought this was appropriate assemblage of our conversation data, given our one-on-one conversations and the possibility that I was rearranging the data as it had not originally been intended. Two mothers out of six did not respond and I wondered if perhaps they had changed their email or were not active on this email. Follow-up emails to each person were not answered. Four mothers gave positive feedback, two by email, one in person and one using handwritten notes in the margins of a printed copy of the conversation. I remained tentative and open to the possibility that this method of presentation might not be considered a legitimate method of presentation of stories. To me, the conversations as they were constructed, resonated strongly. They fit the theoretical orientations of a socially constructed reality as experienced by those who told their stories. Yet I also wanted feedback from an academic peer or potential reviewer, regarding whether this constructed conversation, something I had not seen before, could be understood to be legitimate, ethical and reliable in terms of the criteria for quality which I clarified in Chapter Three. Arranging to meet a colleague who had edited a book chapter I had recently contributed in a collected volume, I sent the printed passages of conversation to her to read. When we met, she expressed her interest in the constructed conversations as an evocative, creative and fresh way to include conversation excerpts.

## **Introducing the mothers**

Conversations with six women, given the pseudonyms Bindi, Pam, Irina, Rene, Kathie, and Laine, unfold in the sections which follow. The questions I faced in deciding who



to select and invite to participate, and on what basis, are discussed in Chapter Three. The women who agreed to participate are all women who consider themselves single mothers in motherled households. Each embodies a variety of circumstances in terms of the features of their lives, circumstances which influence their sense of wellbeing. Conversations with participants provided me with a tempting invitation to classify each mother's experience according to externally-visible factors such as the number, ages and age gaps, and genders, of the children in her care, or the length of time which she had been parenting alone for, or the circumstances of her adopting a motherled household. I refused to make use of such 'data' in the stories told. I have deliberately chosen to avoid describing each woman in detail, in terms of the characteristics of her life such as the details of her family of history, outside of those details which she shares in the conversation. There were many specifics which are undoubtedly relevant to each person's situation, and multiple ways for women to understand the many factors which contribute to sense-making about themselves and each other. Many aspects of women's lives can be compared, measured and contrasted beside others as an attempt to assess people's circumstances. Such details might include descriptions of each woman's income, perceived levels of social support available, type and location of housing, hours worked each week, education and qualification level, number of children, ages and genders and age gaps of children, personalities or unique, relevant characteristics of each child, medical conditions or complicating factors for each child or family, length of time in a motherled household, mother's family history of income, education, relationship situation, and many more options. These descriptors would add layers of meaning to each person's account. Yet it would be meaning bestowed by me, the researcher, and unavoidably reflective of grand narratives of women in relation to externally-categorised features of those factors deemed significant and bestowed with meaning in literature. As I posit in Chapters Four and Six, and as the conversations in this Chapter show, wellbeing cannot meaningfully be calculated like an equation with factors such as those above multiplying or subtracting to produce a useful end figure. Many unique characteristics in each family contribute to women's sense of their wellbeing and that of their children, and many judgements can be made, as one participant, Irina says: "in the eye of the beholder".

Whatever “I the researcher” say about each participant is the result of an interpretive decision, a judgment of them by me. In describing participants according to factors which seem relevant to me, I risk reinstating the judgements of what is significant already made in research about mother’s lives. I wrote:

***Journal: Wednesday 16 April, 2014***

*I set out to work with the categories obvious to me at the start. I then amended them because I found their limitations and constraints, and created a new one – the “motherled household” which I thought would be more positively received. I became aware of the flaws inherent in categorising. I noticed that to the participants, they took exception to the word solo mother or single mum. They felt categorised and judged. I thought the literature was quite judgey too, in quite sad or bad ways – the mothers under review were hapless victims or evil welfare vultures – a little like the very old fashioned dichotomy of women as whores or virgins from my study about prostitution and sex work! I set out to change that but I guess even in my very positive spin on single parenthood I had long ago bought into the good mother/bad mother discourse, only I positioned them all as good mothers. It now seems to me, as the mothers say, that the question of whether they are single or married, or who lives at home, is just another one of life’s intricacies, along with which child is sick this week, when school holidays are, how much shopping we have to do before Christmas, when the car registration is due, et cetera. It just becomes part of the fabric of life, and women do it all even though they do not really notice themselves doing it. Participants are mostly quite matter of fact about it, even the stressful or outraging bits. It gets a bit awkward congratulating someone for doing something which, while hard or nigh impossible sometimes, is part of life. For many women, the motherled household is infinitely preferable to being unhappily or unsafely partnered. Women report again and again that their status in a motherled household is not a be all and end all but is a part of life for now, rather than a sentence or an identity. It’s not an identity. Being a mother or a woman stays with us for life no matter what happens – but being a single mother comes and goes for many women. Then what happens? DO they become different people because they partner up? No, they just change some of what they do...*

In the conversation which follows, each woman begins with only her first name known by us or other participants. As the story goes, six mothers have converged and are meeting together in a focus group which I have arranged. The conversation is about to begin. I settle myself back into the chair in the circle of women. I look around, feeling a little hesitant and yet excited too, to have organised this group for us. We have made introductions and each person is looking expectantly at me.

### **Identity and construction**

I begin. "We came here to talk about wellbeing, and I am interested in your experiences as single mothers. We all hear things about "sole parents". What do you think?"

Kathie speaks. "I feel like that title - makes me something different, makes me a solo mother, and actually that reminds me of when I first met my really close friend. The first thing he said to me was "I've got a friend who's on her own with a child; I should introduce you because you'd have lots in common... and it's possible to have nothing in common with someone but you're assumed to have something in common because you have a child and you're on your own."

Kathie has touched on how mothers see themselves being noticed by others. Being under construction by forces which are dictated outside of herself is a discomfoting experience.

Laine looks around at the other mothers, shrugs and then speaks. "I don't really consider myself a sole parent. I can't complain - I'm so much luckier than other mothers; I don't often call myself a single mum even though I'm the day to day (person). I don't do justice to those women who do much more on their own... I feel like a bit of a fake".

The others nod. Laine resists identifying with commonly-held and recognised versions of what a single mother is supposed by others, to be like. In her description, lone mothers are seen as unlucky, lonely, and have plenty to complain or be unhappy about; it is a largely negative persona. She sees herself as happy, lucky, and believes she has it 'easy'.

I clarify with Kathie. "So you'd prefer not to be identified or... classified by that." "In a negative way... and I think that is all linked in to the kind of blame embedded within the social welfare system... I opt largely not to engage with social service agencies... because... they reinforce all of that stuff that you have to be viewed with suspicion like you're trying to rip someone off, or, just the kind of questions they ask and the requirements that they have in terms of disclosing information and things is almost like you don't have the same rights as everyone else. So even though I probably could get some, like subsidy, I opt not to..."

Kathie is made so uncomfortable by the suspicion of others, made possible via the negative stereotyping of single mothers, that she would rather avoid legitimate financial assistance than engage with the agencies designed to help her. In engaging with these agencies, Kathie feels she would subject herself to judgement of her, and suspicion that she might be defrauding the agency and government by utilising their services. Kathie objects to the questions which are asked, and the requirements for her information which she sees as invasive and threatening to her rights to privacy and respect. I think back to my journal:

***Journal: Wednesday 16 April, 2014***

*The material effects of the categorisation are what we see and rankle against when we go to WINZ or telephone IRD, yet we live with issues such as poorer income, no help at home or useful contribution from other connected adults, poor relationships between our children and their fathers, and the negative stereotypes produced by media, politicians and social commentators including statisticians who purport to report findings and statistics but whose work imparts a sense of incompleteness and*

*incompetence or struggle to the lives of women and children. How can we be honest and say “Yes, sometimes it’s hard”, acknowledge the struggle and special challenges that mothers face when they parent alone, and call attention to the justifiable needs which women have in managing work, home, family and other commitments, and yet not speak such phenomena over families like a curse or finger-pointing expectation of difficulty and failure?*

The women in this study reject externally-bestowed categories like “single mum”. They don’t see themselves as single mothers in the way that they find the term to be used as an explanation or derisive term used in statements describing their disadvantage, peril or pity. They resist and reject the categories, finding that the application and use of a category like “single parent” damages their sense of purpose and worth, engendering pity and disapproval from others.

### **Stereotypes and alternatives**

I want to go further in understanding negative stereotypes, asking the group “When you hear really conservative groups talking about how kids need their fathers, like, what do you say to that?”

Rene speaks. “Well, I say in a western sense that’s probably true, but not in a Māori sense. Where does that view come from? ‘Need their fathers’... That whole ideal comes from western society because in a Māori communal sense, every male is a father figure – like my brother, my dad, are my children’s father figures, and my father, my grandfather... that’s where the difference lies in your way of thinking.” She laughs. “Assuming there’s only one man in this baby’s life and it’s the biological father and when he goes...”

I sit up. “In all the readings I’ve never seen that – I’ve never noticed that. That the idea of a child being without a father is only relevant if you think that the father is the only male in that child’s life.”

Rene shakes her head. “No – that’s Western ideology as well again, the whole idea of ‘single parent’. Like, I do everything day to day on my own, but I do know I have the support of my family - extended family – then I wouldn’t be considered single.”

I feel like a light has been switched on. In my literature reviews I felt constantly butted by an insistence by researchers, upon the assumed superiority of nuclear family structures – mum, dad, and children – among ways to structure families in households. In such a structure, the absence of an adult and the leaving of one adult to care for others, assumes different meaning. Rene’s family includes non-nuclear family members not often considered in studies of family. Rene identifies herself and her children as Māori, having descended from indigenous peoples who settled in Aotearoa New Zealand well before European colonists arrived. Among the many cultural ways of being deemed significant in indigenous Māori culture by scholars such as Durie (1998) and Wepa (2016), a wide, collective web of meaningful contact, relationship and reciprocity is normalised in discussions of family and wellbeing. Relationships extend to subtribal groups known as hapū and large tribal affiliations called iwi.

In Māori cultures, connections between people occur through birth and blood or marriage relationships, as well as shared connections to place (such as land), shared history, and relationships of reciprocity and exchange. For Rene, this web provides so much more than a singular male adult partner would. In her situatedness within collective whanau structure, structure made invisible in most OECD and other studies of family wellbeing deemed significant, Rene draws strength from the presence, figuratively and sometimes literally, of many male whanau-members including her father. Rene does not view the lack of a biological father in her children’s life as a loss, due to the presence of many other family members, including males. An insistence

upon fathers remaining in the household for people to thrive, might be constituted by families of Māori and other collective-valuing descent, as a product of cultural bias and domination. Rene's worldview also makes sense of relationships with ancestors who have passed on, a feature of her wellbeing which appears later in the conversation. As Rene explains her position, I become aware of feeling a sense of envy for the collective whanau, hapū and iwi relationships which sustain herself and her children. At the same time, I am mindful of the many harms – social, physical, environmental, psychic, economic and political - wrought to Rene's ancestors and eventually to herself and her children, beginning with the arrival of colonisers in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and since.

Our conversation continues, having evolved through resisting stereotypes woven into grand narratives of single mothers, to rejecting the beliefs that go along with the title, beliefs such as being unlucky, unsupported and lonely. It seems to me that identifying with a title is seen as an invitation for people to categorise you in relation to the visible aspects of your situation. Before the conversation unfolded, I identified such visible aspects of situation which are classed by others, aspects such as number, ages, genders and characteristics of one's children, and which make categorisation, accompanied by judgements, of mothers and their children, possible. Kathie has identified how such stereotypes have discouraged her from seeking help that she is legitimately entitled to, constraining her economic and psychological wellbeing.

I ask the group what kinds of categories they identify being put in, or identifying with, which set them apart or gather them in with, other mothers. Bindi and Irina both identify the associations which are erroneously made regarding mothers with one child – that one child is deemed easier to care for, or that parents who only have one child are 'selfish' for not having more children.

Irina speaks up. "For mothers, single mothers having boys, I think that's a totally different story once again..." Irina identifies how faulty it can be to deem a person in need of more or less help based upon what is visible to others, about their situation.

I think out loud. “So being an only child with a lone mother is one thing, but being an only boy child is different again.” Murmurs of agreement come from the group. I continue: “So you even more can’t compare anything with anything else because it’s just so different. The whole comparison thing is just so blunt and faulty, you can’t make a statement about how wellbeing is in these families compared with those families. So everything we hear and read about families is just so blunt and homogenised it’s practically meaningless!”

The notion that the many ways we have of constituting people, in groups and categories according to particular characteristics, are all faulty, all flawed, threatens to dissolve all I think I ‘know’ about people. I begin to wonder how I can carry forth a study about lone mothers when there no longer seem to be any solid characteristics of lone mothers.

Rene speaks again. “I have the saying that I take – like don’t stress the small stuff – you just don’t go ‘I’m a single parent and I’m hard done by’.” The issue of being, as Rene puts it, ‘hard done by’, directs me to raise the question of money or lack of it, as a factor in determining our wellbeing which is given great weight in wellbeing family literature.

### **Economic wellbeing and sufficiency**

The most prominent of the grand narratives of wellbeing - financial wellbeing – is where I turn next, asking the group: “Does it all come down to money?” Rene is the first to respond. As a fulltime student with young children, she knows first-hand the harshest monetary challenges which low-income full-time student parents face, even to get their most basic needs sufficiently met.

Rene speaks authoritatively. “At the moment it’s the only real burden – because my children are happy and I’m happy – so that’s what is noticeable. Of course the first



thing to look at is the health and wellbeing of the family, as a whole, and then you go into what's going on and then you look financially, whatever eases off that burden financially, it's going to make the household happier..." She trails off. Everybody waits intently. Rene shakes her head and goes on. "I don't even know how I breathe at the moment; it's so suffocating, going from the training incentive to nothing... So basically how I live, week to week and day to day, what bills I owe one week I put off the next, to pay food and petrol, and pay them the next, so that... it keeps... "Keeps them at bay?" I suggest.

Rene's statement is a succinct example of why this inquiry is so important to me. Her articulation that (lack of) money is the "only real burden" carries conflicting implications which are variously visible in literature. Her words demonstrate how important money can be, to a sense of sufficiency and wellbeing. Perhaps this is why economic wellbeing is flagged as such an important determinant of wellbeing. On the other hand, Rene's statement that finance is the only thing about which she is worried in the context of her family, suggests that otherwise, Rene does not view her wellbeing as a problem, a finding some authors would find puzzling or even take issue with. The co-existence of contested stories in Rene's situation defines complex storytelling in the multiple layers spoken of by Boje (2008b). Rene looks to her children's happiness as evidence of their wellbeing, even while acknowledging the acute stress of money worries lingering over her from week to week. Rene tells a multi-layered story which cannot be represented by a number on a table, a dot on a graph, or tick on a chart.

Rene shares again: "I had a boarder for three months, and that helped, and then I had a boarder for a month again last year. So I made sure that the little bit of money I had I spread it out so it helped me breathe throughout the whole year. Although it was very minimal it did do that for me. So I didn't have to do the 'pay this week for later'. The year before I think I got scholarships to help through, so that helped tide me over for the whole year. I made it stretch it out over the whole year. Any little things that came my way I utilised it in a meaningful way."

Rene's careful, strategic directing of her limited finance to particular areas at certain times, can be understood as a strategy of resourcefulness employed by people on limited incomes. Sometimes termed as "robbing Peter to pay Paul" in a more derogatory storying, this constant prioritising of spending keeps Rene able to function financially. In public discourse, the term 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' is sometimes accompanied with an overlay of derision and blame, as though it is a thoughtless, futile strategy, rather than one which enables mothers to continue meeting their family's needs. Rene's description of prioritising and shifting funds to remain on top of her expenses, displays how taxing this is for Rene, and its temporary benefits are certainly apparent to her.

Rene glances across at Laine, who has a well-paid job and owns her own home, paying a mortgage on her single income. Laine earlier confided in our introductions that she does 'gulp' at the electricity bill. For Laine, the grand narratives of wellbeing as a feature of life which is dependent upon the presence of money, are resonant in her life, even with a secure and adequate personal income. The contrast in circumstances between Laine and Rene, together with the shared aspects of stress and worry which are apparent for each woman, demonstrate to me that lived realities of wellbeing are far more complex than the simplified relationships sketched between money and purchasing power for material goods like food, or services like child care. I wonder aloud whether the stigmas faced by lone mothers are issues primarily of income, or whether they are more to do with identities of single parents.

Rene offers an insightful example from her own life. "For me, I've always been a single parent, and I've had jobs where I was getting more than two-people incomes, but for a lot of families I know that doesn't exist. Where I'm from it doesn't exist; one income, it's all low, all benefits..."

Irina looks at Rene and nods. Then she shrugs and adds "I find that people my age, owning a house, at least they have that security; if they need 2000, \$3000 for a car they just put it on the mortgage. I have to go to the bank and beg for that money. I've got

three loans... If you get your children into some sport or playing an instrument that would be an extra cost and again it's up to you how you make up for that. Another \$100 or even \$20... I very often stay home on the Saturday and Sunday because I won't have the petrol money for Monday and Tuesday to go to work.”

Murmurs of sympathy come from others in the group. In Irina's statement she embodies the similar, thoughtful, strategising described by Rene. Making money last longer, saving bits here and there to get through to the next pay, is a critical necessity. Managing debt and large expenses over the longer term is another matter, however. The opportunities which are afforded to some children and not others, opportunities for participation in sport, music or dance, are increasingly becoming opportunities based on income, and noticeable in discussions of income inequality.

The narrative of material wellbeing as synonymous with improved wellbeing is visible in this conversation. Income buys housing and nutritious food, yet it does not equate to the many tiny aspects of peace, agency, a sense of freedom, which are important factors in living healthful, satisfying lives. The pressure of paid employment and lone mothering needs redress, according to Rene, and in accordance with many others as stated in Chapter Six. Yet, later in the conversation, the choices women exercise over how to use their money, perhaps not in the way they might with an earning partner in their life, will generate living stories about an aspect of economic agency, in spite of reductions in real finances. The future this mother brings toward her in this antenarrative might be one in which she makes financial decisions for herself and her family with a different set of priorities and choices.

### **Support and shared responsibility**

Bindi sighs and her shoulders slump a little. “It's not just a single mother thing. It's being not part of a partnership. It's like, a couple, they do things together, they support each other - and I know that's not perfect - but it's totally different from a single

person's perspective. Someone who has a husband who is supportive and is on board with the family, they are rich, and sometimes I feel poor... not in a financial sense although that's part of it, but... an emotional deprivation, having someone on your team, on your side who understands, who loves your kids as much as you do, who's batting for their support too... It's having someone there on your level."

Bindi's statements chime with grand narratives of isolation and loneliness which are flagged in many studies of maternal wellbeing. The difficulties which parenting bring, managing the needs of children, sometimes unpredictable and demanding, are more intense when experienced alone. Yet I think back to my own situation, where I wrote:

***Journal: Wednesday 2 September, 2015***

*I discovered alternatives to grand narratives about the lack of support and money experienced by single mother households when I separated from my husband and willingly became a sole parent. I felt empowered and better off in terms of my mental health, hopes for the future, determination and motivation, and support, in many ways, than I had been in an increasingly tense domestic situation. For example, people who might have hovered in the background such as my family or church friends, those not wanting to invade our privacy or risk offending us by offering possibly unwanted help, were more open about offering assistance when I was visibly alone and evidently doing the emotional and mental work of raising children alone. Others offered help such as babysitting, helping us move house, shift furniture or do the odd handy task which would not have been offered with a partner. Colleagues and work supervisors showed understanding and willingness to be flexible when sometimes I worked at home or had to leave work early. Not everyone is so lucky.*

Irina chips in: "If it's only just you; it's you who has to say no then, all the time."

Bindi nods in her direction and continues. "I ask my Dad for financial help if I really really need it... My sisters, I'll ask them to come and help me, mainly Anna, but I hardly ever do that... She's so far away, and they've got their lives, Anna is in another

town and Stacey is in a different town, so they've got their own lives and jobs and children, so I just try and manage..."

Bindi is able to identify others who care about her family and who might provide support in an emergency, being present, providing a listening ear and moral support as Bindi navigates life with her adolescent daughter, and perhaps loaning her money. Her extended family, father and sisters, care about her, yet are mostly unable in tangible terms, to contribute on a day-to-day basis.

I lean forward and 'prod' a bit further. "So even though there's quite a few single parent families, there's still an expectation that people will... like, even though you could ask for help if you felt it was warranted, the prevailing pressure is not to ask for help, just to manage."

My clarification here draws attention to the commonality of Bindi's experience among many women, even though each person's experience of aloneness is so unique. In individualised societies including New Zealand, where neoliberal imperatives prevail, widespread social issues experienced by many, are constructed and presented as individual problems to be solved by individual mothers and families as if they alone have the problem.

Bindi says: "It's that resentment I live with sometimes every day, and I can feel it building up inside me, and then I'll talk to my sister and she'll say, "Look Bindi, that feeling is there for a reason and it's telling you something's not right and you need to change something about whatever it is, and so I'll, 'right, that's it. No, that's enough'. Means something needs to change, whatever it is."

Bindi expects herself to continue coping with an overload of commitments including home, family and work. Her sister's noticing of how overworked she is helps Bindi to realise "something needs to change". This is a central issue to which I can relate, and one which is assuming increasing clamour in the lives of many women, single, mother,

and otherwise. The individualised construction of people leaves no legitimate solution for the intensifying problems of overwork. Bindi cannot leave her job. She cannot leave her daughter. She is stuck as if on a too-fast treadmill, having to continue running. In all my reading, I have found no solution to Bindi's problem. Small tweaks of the treadmill such as outsourcing parts of household work including food preparation or cleaning, getting older children to help with household chores, or bringing work home to do during evenings or weekends, ameliorate the immediate challenge but fail to address the ongoing, underlying problem of too little time for too many tasks.

I wonder if Bindi senses a solution. I ask, "Yes, but I wonder what could change in such a situation?" At this, Kathie speaks again. "Some kind of family support, not even family. Just some kind of group of people to help me raise the children." I clarify. "Someone else's eyes on the children?" "Yeah, but not just for them. I'm incredibly isolated. I feel incredibly isolated as working full time. Another resource for them."

Kathie runs her hands through her hair a couple of times and speaks. "And then, like, I've got friends but I think we're all so compartmentalised so you don't kind of share in each other's life. I mean to a degree, I also like privacy, but there's this very almost kind of transactional nature to friendship. I guess it's a kind of a western thing? There's this real kind of politeness. Once every couple of months, I might meet them somewhere for coffee but it doesn't mean that they're actually there on a Friday afternoon when everything turns to shit at home, and I just need someone to talk to. Which is not to say that I couldn't ring any of them, but I'd feel really uncomfortable doing so."

This sounds so familiar to me. "A real boundary," I say. Kathie nods. "And it suddenly comes when you've got kids. Or around that time. Like teenage years, early twenties, there's that kind of intensity to friendships where they almost are your family. And then you get your own family and you're expected to kind of be this unit on your own, which is generally okay when you've got a husband. But when you're suddenly on

your own and everyone else is still off doing their individual unit stuff... it's just awkward and different.”

Laine nods slowly as she thinks about her situation. Her shoulders hunch a little. “Luckily I have amazing support in the rest of my life other people in my life because I do need help, after school sometimes, support to hold down my job; I do have to travel with my job... Last week the boys stayed with Mum and Dad who live about 15km in the country, from here.”

Laine also tells us that she has a neighbour, Bea, living over the road from her house. Bea took an interest in the family as a ‘surrogate grandmother’ when Laine moved to the area, and she is now a friend who makes herself available to care for the children, meaning that Laine is sometimes able to travel for work. Laine says emphatically, “Everybody needs a Bea!”

Kathie sighs. “We need adequate mental health support! And I don’t know what that looks like, because I certainly don’t think it’s within the current bounds and I don’t know enough about the area... Because I certainly think that I have propensity toward feeling anxious and depressed anyway, but, I definitely think that the kind of stress and pressure on women in general would be difficult for anyone to take.”

Kathie continues: “It’s not about not coping, it’s about some actual support of actual mother’s mental health. Like, actually what else are you supposed to be feeling, when these are the circumstances that you are immersed in? And I think some of that comes with having flexible employment and support for the kids...there needs to be a holistic approach to supporting single parent families”

### **Work life balance, management, or conflict?**

Kathie continues. “Some flexibility with work to come and go, to work at home, to have the option of dropping down hours. One of the interesting things I found working in such a woman-dominated place, is the culture is still that kind of traditional work culture where it’s about the physical hours that you’re here... and those that decide to drop down (their hours), they’re clearly seen as part time staff who are... almost a sign of weakness that you can’t do it.”

Rene turns to Kathie, and says “I look at the bigger picture; I think to myself don’t stress the small stuff; although money is a huge factor, its value is really little in our lives because we have very little of it... For me, as a Māori, from the communal background, it’s a lot easier to look at the big picture; you’re not looking at the small family, the immediate family, it’s always the extended and the bigger, and the bigger, and the bigger, so you’re able to look at things bigger?”

I nod, thinking out loud, about my family, steeped in English culture: “Because we (in my family) don’t really think much or talk about history and ancestry and the continuing-ness of family and time, whether we just don’t have the broad context because we can only see this” (I gesture around me at everyone) and never pay attention to that...” “Yeah, how can you see the bigger picture if you’re only focused on... Also, a lot of westerners don’t have that holistic approach which encompasses that which is unknown and unseen... if you don’t have that sort of inkling type of mannerism then you don’t see the whole picture. It’s good too because it allows me to see that another day is another day. It’s not going to be this day tomorrow; you know? Because we connect things quite personally, like my grandparents who I was raised with, I find that their memories are still alive in me, so I feel quite close to what they went through?” Rene sees wellbeing in her family as part of a wider context of life in which she stays mindful of what is important on a big scale, yet is given expression in seemingly little things.

Bindi nods in agreement. “I think – well I’m doing the best that I can and, I’m entitled to the same things that everyone else is, and my situation is not because of anything



that I've done wrong, you know, it's just how it is... and so I'm entitled to exactly the same blessings... I might not get them right now but that's okay... becoming more aware that I'm still valued, I'm still valuable, I'm still loved, and have a voice and be a bit more nice to myself I think."

Taking steps to care for oneself, termed as self-care or 'me time' is a popular theme in blog sites, social media sites and popular mothering literature. The availability and enjoyment of time to engage in leisure, hobby and self-care activities such as exercise, crafts, and social activities is described in these places as well as some research, as a strategy intended for mothers to engage in and by doing so, more successfully manage their many commitments including children's needs, household labour, and paid work, by spending some time consciously away from such commitments.

Mothers in motherled households are described by Goodin (2011) as the most 'time-poor' of all people, with less time for leisure than other work-age adults, depending largely upon paid work and the balance, or conflict, with care of their children; such activities often overlap with each other depending on parenting agreements, the availability and relationship with ex-partner/co-parent, and the ages and routines of their children. Some single mothers with day-to-day care of their children (whose children live with them), have every second weekend without their children, a common arrangement for separated families, when children stay with the other parent. For three of the women in this study, they enjoy the time they have with no children to care for.

Laine finds her life as a single mother provides more freedom than she had while married, to choose how to use her child-free time every second weekend. She has several craft projects on the go, and gets maintenance jobs done around the house when the children are with their father. Laine also trains for marathons and triathlon events. In our conversation, Laine emphasises that, as she puts it: "You should be able to tap into whatever it is for you that keeps you going."

At this, I remember writing in my journal:

**Researcher journal: Wednesday, 27 March, 2013**

*In current views of (western) humanity, mothers and children are at odds with each other when they have competing needs. Women talk of needing 'time out' from their children, yet attachment theorists posit that mothers must be available to their children wherever and whenever. If we see humans as (competitive) individuals, the rights of the two individuals in the mother-child dyad are pitted against each other. What if the wellbeing of the mother requires a situation which negates or (arguably) diminishes the wellbeing of the child? For example, the mother needs to go out to exercise, but the child needs the mother (e.g. a single mother with no options for child minding). Commentators use 'balance' discourse to describe how mothers must negotiate their needs beside those of their children; in reality it might be considered more of a tug-of-war as the tension between what is understood to be needed by each person grows. One person (perhaps the mother) needs space; the other (usually the child) needs contact, and in single parent families there are usually fewer (if any) people other than the mother to provide it. When the wellbeing or needs of mothers are positioned in this way as competing against the wellbeing/needs of the child, a common metaphor is that of the airplane oxygen supply. In the event of an emergency, parents are instructed to put on their own oxygen mask first before attending to those of their children. The rationale is obvious; in order to help the child, the mother must be able, meaning she must attend first to her own need for oxygen. If she doesn't, then both she and child will perish. However, if she takes too long, she secures her own oxygen but in the intervening time, the child perishes... What then for the mother?*

**Caring for self**

At this, Pam, who has recently taken up jogging, elbows her in the side, throws her head back and laughs, saying “I feel these endorphins after I run - fantastic – oh my god what a difference!” Pam then becomes more serious, and thoughtfully says “I’m

actually starting to enjoy having a break a day a week to get time for me, and I'm a better mum when they come back."

Kathie nods, saying "And having the small times that I do off, so the - every second weekend, that's a triumphant... When I was with (ex-husband) and he did so little with the kids that I didn't actually have any real time for myself, now at least I get a weekend a fortnight."

Rene shakes her head: "I think that it's lacking - a bit of the me time - I'm really grateful when I do have some, but I very rarely do, but like I say, the kids are happy I'm happy. But often if I do have me time I have to make sure the kids are all right, I've still got them on my mind, so..."

I ask Rene: "When is your 'me time'?" "It's late at night, after I've done the morning routine, done the studying, when we get home we've done dinner and bath, and bed, and then washing, and then cleaning and tidying up, then maybe some more study, and then maybe some me time..."

Laine and Rene make a perspective possible, which varies from the focus upon individualism wherein mothers seek to be away from their children in order to be refreshed. Laine chooses purposefully to prioritise her children when she is with them. She sees long-term benefits for herself in doing this. "I can't complain too much. Mostly I feel like I'm the lucky one, I'm the one that gets to have the kids with me, I do view it as he's quite selfless in doing that, so different people view that differently. I choose to take that positively, he's selfless in letting me be the primary relationship, because for the rest of their lives if they get hurt it's me they call out for."

Laine feels like the children's father is missing out as she believes they will focus more upon her than him as they grow older. She expresses satisfaction in putting her energy into her children even when it means working and earning less. She believes that in

comparison with other separated women she has so much; she feels lucky, as she says, “able to handle what comes along - I’ve tipped my life upside down willingly”.

### **Connection and entwinement**

Rene’s sense of her own wellbeing, is connected with her enjoyment in being present with her children. “A key to having a healthy wellbeing is to be happy and to enjoy every day, don’t stress the little things, and that to me has a huge impact on my wellbeing. So for me and my children I try to keep a balance between studies and my personal life; with the kids I try and give them a good amount of quality time, we’re often doing activities, going away, together, to create happiness, just to see the smiles and laughter.”

The contradiction between advice given to mothers to prioritise time away from their families to have ‘me time’, and the unavailability of this time, due to the busyness of work, caring for their families and other commitments, is noticeable to me. The sustained focus in parenting discourse discussed by Douglas and Michaels (2004), where mothers are presented as the only carers for their children, seems to carry a ‘double whammy’, in the resulting isolation mothers feel which leads to needing time away, a sentiment characterised by Pam, myself and Kathie, and at the same time, an absence of any other person to care for children in order for mothers to have this time, making it an impossibility for many who need it. The ‘new Momism’ discourse involves maintaining a youthful appearance and levels of energy, somehow appearing to put oneself first sometimes and prioritise the self, whilst remaining utterly available to one’s children in the absence of others (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Doing both is an impossibility. Many women, including several in this conversation, would like more leisure time, including periods of time with their children cared for by someone else. In my journal, I wrote:

***Researcher journal: Monday 1 June, 2015***

*Somewhere I read that being a mother is like being a supermarket, where your children are like the customers who constantly empty your shelves and demand your service. They pay for the stock in their smiles and in love, but never restock your shelves. Any supermarket with empty shelves goes out of business, which is not an option for mothers! Yet their customers (children) are not the ones to restock shelves – it's up to the supermarket to do this. Mothers 'restock their shelves' when they fill up their emotional tanks and replenish their energy. For me this happens when I have time on my own, to some extent when I am at work, and when I have treats like a massage or coffee out, and when I rest or have a hot bath.*

The varying ways in which mothers meet their need for time away from their families to replenish their energy, or find wellbeing as an entwined phenomenon emerging in time spent with their children, is noticeable to me.

Pam notices the interrelationship of her wellbeing with her sense of how her children are. "I think our concern for our children and our relationships with them is one of the driving factors. When I talk to Sara at night, have a chat at the end of the bed, she is very positive about feeling the love from the family... We talk about what's positive, we're going to find a house, you're my flatmates and you can help me choose... and she chips in – and we've got our family, and she really feels that sense of family now which is good, strong for her... I think our relationship's got better... we've bonded... I'm just making time for her now... I should have done it a long time ago..."

Irina resonates with the idea of entwined wellbeing, articulating the time she spends with her son. "I think we've found a really good way in how we manage daily, how we know we can look after one another... Tomas says 'can you come out' when we get home – get dinner ready, he might turn the TV on for half an hour, we have dinner; then he says 'can you come out and do a bit of weeding?' He just wants me to be around. He just wants me to be out there regardless of what we do. I don't have to watch him all the time... he just wants me to be around him."

Irina is also aware of prioritising time with her son in a deliberate way: “I think we consciously make more time for each other. He’s eleven, to say of him that he consciously... but you know, he does want me around...” I agree, seeing Irina’s son, who I have met, in my mind’s eye. “Yes, he’s mindful of you – he seems to see you – they seem to see us in a way that we might just think they take parents for granted otherwise.” Irina goes on: “The older I become the more I appreciate little times. You don’t have to take your children to big things to give them a sense that they... to know they are not alone and they can rely on you and can trust what they have. It’s sometimes just ten minutes sitting next to each other. Tomas does his reading and I do my reading. Just sitting on the bed, just that; that is so nourishing. Gives you time to breathe out.”

Irina’s entwinement of her wellbeing with her son’s, is given further expression by Laine, who with her children, socialises with other families around physical activities such as cycling and athletics.

The connection of mothers’ wellbeing with a bigger picture which includes strategies in which they consider their children’s needs, is given scant expression in wellbeing literature, where lone mothers are depicted as lonely and isolated individuals, individuals in competition with their children for scarce resources of wellbeing, and individuals constantly reacting to circumstances happening to them.

### **Choice, intention and freedom?**

Kathie’s deliberate choice to leave an unsatisfactory living situation, sets the tone for the conversation for the next few minutes. She says “I started being able to sleep at night the day that I moved out... having a space of my own was huge, some control over your environment...” Making a choice to get out in the first place; realising I can live on my own...”

Irina nods vigorously: “You can actually do it on your own... It’s not that it hasn’t been done before, there’s been women before us in the wars, they’ve done it by themselves, they didn’t die from that!” Irina’s words reflect the wealth of life experience she has had and also her own research journey which she has taken into aspects of resilience.

Bindi nods and laughs, describing her ex-partner as “no use at all”. I’m not picking up after a third person all the time... I shouldn’t have had to do everything when there was another adult in the house...” Pam nudges Bindi and grins: “I figure workload-wise I’m just the same as before... I was doing it all mostly anyway...” They both laugh wryly.

**Researcher journal: Thursday 3 April, 2014**

*In the literature I reviewed, women and children in lone mother or motherled households are in a far more precarious state in terms of their wellbeing than their partnered/two parented counterparts. Their wellbeing is worse, at risk, and they suffer more in terms of all counts of wellbeing including economic and subjective wellbeing. When I had conversations with women, they told me that yes, their wellbeing is precarious insofar as it is predicated on economic income, and income is a determinant of health; however, they enjoy a level of hope, and their children a level of resilience, and the family has a level of togetherness and connection which is more noticeable and remarkable now, than they had in a two parent situation. So they feel like their wellbeing is better now, and they are conscious of it more, than they would have been in their two parent situation. Aside from the economic question which is, for each woman, more difficult with only one earning adult than it would be with two, they agree that the lack of support provided by a (supportive) partner is a challenge, and can see that (supported) partnered women have benefits that they don’t have. However, the comparison between currently partnered and currently single women seems irrelevant and like a faulty comparison. So the literature that states that women in single parent households are less well than two parent women, doesn't fit with women’s stories. Studies comparing one- and two-parent households with eachother should perhaps*

*instead focus upon households now as one parent, with what it was like when they were two parent households.*

The documented benefits of being in a two parent household, having another adult and supposedly support in the household, is not resonant for these women. Caring for a family alone, feeling a lifting away of pressure in order to choose the circumstances, can be advantageous, as Kathie explains.

“There is a huge sense of freedom, you know it’s not a decision that anyone makes lightly, so there’s got to at least be somewhere where they were feeling trapped and like there was nowhere else to go and so to make the decision that they were going to leave that behind... And even with the kids, not having to worry all that stuff like, if I want to let them eat on the couch, muck around, go outside, get themselves dirty and not worry that he’s going to worry that they’re dirty inside the house... I can decide suddenly, you know at five o clock on Friday let’s run out to Raglan for fish and chips on the beach and not have him kind of stressing about that.”

Kathie’s satisfaction at the choices, big and small, she sees in front of her, are echoed by Pam. “I think at the end of this I’m going to be better off, I know that already? I can see it, if I can picture myself in a little warm house with happy kids... I think I’ll be better off. I’m already feeling relief that I don’t have to look over my shoulder, I’m not living with mistrust, I can rely on myself... I’ve got peace and it’s going to be worth it and I’m having control.”

For these mothers, control and choice, even small choices, are viewed with a sense of excitement and agency, coined by Kathie again. “We laugh more. I think my relationship with them is probably almost better. I think it’s more kind of real, our relationship, like I am just kind of myself rather than trying to be this kind of uber-mum.... Zack actually said to me. He said I seem much happier.”



Kathie's sense of space and freedom gives her a sense of defiance, as though she and her children are: "Almost like a little kind of... pocket of rebels. That sounds really weird! Like a little kind of unit where we kind of... there's something for me already, about breaking society's rules... And so now, anything's a possibility! Not that I have the means to, but now it's like, we could pack up and go, you know, gypsying around Europe!"

Kathie's words, and the accompanying sentiment of freedom remind me of Adrienne Rich's (1976) tale in *Of Woman Born*. Rich recounts a summer vacation with her three young sons during which they rejected typical day-to-day routines in favour of relaxed mealtimes, staying up late and sleeping late, feeling "wide awake, elated; we had broken together all the rules of bedtime, the night rules, rules I myself thought I had to observe in the city or become "a bad mother"" (1976, p. 194). Rich demonstrates the constraints imposed by adhering to constructed versions of mothering, going on to say: "We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood; I felt enormously in charge of my life" (1976, p. 194). In her life as a sole mother focused upon her children's delight and rhythms, Rich could recognise, and escape (even if briefly), the institutionalising forces of motherhood.

Kathie comments on her ex's involvement after separation: "When he was 50% involved, he also had so much say over everything whereas now, he's made the decision to remove himself from the situation which carries with it a whole lot of hideous stuff but it also means we can go... Our lives are our own, we can do what's right for us as a little family. We don't need anyone's permission!"

Household management such as a relaxed performance of household routines strikes a chord with Laine, who appreciates being able to prepare an easy simple meal in the evening – "Sausages, pasta and carrot sticks instead of a full meal; the children are happy."

Here, Laine's work strikes a chord with me. In two publications co-written with a colleague, I discussed the emerging narrative of concern about children's nutrition, a concern I identified in the monitoring of the United Nations (2007) focus upon the numbers of times parents and children eat together weekly as an indicator of wellbeing, and other research by Kinser (2012), and by Hamilton and Hamilton-Wilson (2009), emphasising the supposed benefits of family dinners eaten together around a dinner table. In Lamdin Hunter and Dey (2016a), I questioned the benefit of dinners staged as a production, requiring effort from mothers to produce an experience enjoyed by some at considerable personal cost to women. In her book *The Christmas Imperative* (1992), Leslie Bella echoes this experience entailed by women, to concoct a scene of soft-focus family warmth, with little effort from others. Each of the women in this conversation can relate to the expectation of performing a full day's work and coming home to tie on an apron and magic up a healthy, convenient, organic, 'from-scratch', local, inexpensive meal for one's family.

The conversation dwindles, each woman lost in her thoughts. We have handled the 'big stories' about life in the motherled household, and found them incomplete. We have generated stories not aired in research literature, and our stories have contributed to each other's stories. There is more to discuss, but for now we pause.

## **Chapter Summary**

When I began this inquiry, I noticed, alongside my own experience in a motherled household, a predominance of narrative about mothers and children in motherled households. These were grand narratives of peril, risk, struggle, and poverty. My critique of the literature used to inform practice and policy with lone mothers and their families included critiques of individualism, research which quantifies selective phenomena and blunts insights. The literature that privileges nuclear families, caused me to question the limitations of such research and the everyday conversations which normalise these depictions in a loop of construction articulated by Berger and

Luckmann (1966). The clashing of the grand narrative with my own living story, a clash which became more pronounced with the investigation of research and policy literature in Chapters Four and Five, prompted me to invite other mothers into conversation with me. Here, the stories told by participants in conversation with me have been woven into a constructed conversation making room for the many, varied stories told. Living stories offered so much depth which was not available in existing research, stories nuanced, colourful, and variegated. I witnessed a critical need for responses to women's stories in which new possibilities should be extended into literature, research, policy, and everyday conversation, in ways supportive of economic and social factors.

Conversations with mother's depicted difficulty and challenge as part of life's ups and downs such as the experiences evidenced in literature and made visible by me in the previous chapter. Financial struggle, material insufficiency, and shortage of time, along with social isolation and lack of support, are included in stories told. These were initially made noticeable to me in my reading of the literature; then made pervasive in public perceptions as grand narratives of motherled households. The dominance of these two refrains in policy, research and common conversation, has impacted the eventual 'taken-for-granted', normalised and even naturalised stories about mothers. This takes place in spite of any flaws in methodology or intent which I might perceive.

Women's sense of aloneness in their families and in the care they carry out for their children, was noticeable to them in the context of values placed upon individuality and independence in the worlds they live in. They spoke from places where people are understood to have adopted 'western' post-Enlightenment constructions of the ideal human as a self-sufficient, atomised individual. Here, the ideal family has come to be seen as an equally self-sufficient, discrete group of such individuals, most commonly expected to take the form of a nuclear family of two parents and a small number of children, with no significant others residing or providing constant support. In this grouping, those families with one adult – statistically most often a mother – providing care, are deemed disadvantaged and sometimes, deviant. Women in conversation

shared some aspects of this loneliness, not lacking a partner, but lacking a community in which the absence of a partner would be less noticeable or disadvantageous. A marked contrast to this noticing was offered by the mother who drew on her indigenous knowing about the valuing of all people within families.

When a single adult provides all of the needs of the household, including care, income for material provision and shelter, and love, worklife balance becomes an issue. Women have less time to meet their own needs, and the concept of the individual reigns here as well, in accounts of “Me Time” – a concept adopted by wellbeing writers in popular domains, and familiar to these women in conversation. The mothers demonstrated a deep-seated drive and purpose and a commitment to live according to their best efforts to be well, in spite of the difficulties with which they were presented. Negotiating conflicts of time and commitment between work and family, feeding and providing for their families, keeping themselves well, and demonstrating a spirit of strength and grace in setting an example for their children to emulate, were important for these mothers, and were carried out with determination.

The women recognised what their alternatives had been, or might be otherwise, in two-parent household conditions. Each of the women demonstrated in varying ways, their firmly held belief that they were engendering wellbeing in a mother-led household. The stress of financial constraints and patchy levels of support notwithstanding, each woman was reluctant to imagine life back in their former household, or in an unsatisfactory partnership. Some expressed fears they might now be dead or 'in a mental institution' had they not moved out of their stressful, sometimes dangerous or degrading marital situations.

Conversations revealed mothers engaging in some ways with the grand narratives of isolation, risk and insufficiency; yet they expressed a nuanced storying of agentic choice, resilience, and celebration of their circumstances. The living stories of women's lives, positioned together as a constructed conversation, demonstrated the value of constructed, layered storying, in which wellbeing was woven in a polyvocal, complex way.

The stories told by the women who participated in this research sound out another refrain, spoken of in detail, which I had searched for and been unable to find in research literature. The women who shared their stories with me spoke of their sense of purpose - intentional choice, agency, defiance, strength, self-belief in their sense of resilience, and sense of rightness about how they were living their motherled household.

The many ways in which mothers enrich and appreciate (as in improving the value of, not merely being thankful for) aspects of their life, holding no regret for their refusal of narrow constructions of the good mother, were shared. In some stories women spoke back to the enduring and oppressive constructions of mothers which impose meaning on women at large. Some reminded me of the transformative possibilities inherent in motherled households. The possibilities available using living stories presented as antenarratives, veering women's lives in particular directions not encompassed in grand narratives, offer to nudge new possibilities into lives characterised by busy-ness and pressure, as spoken of by the women.

The diversity of the stories told by mothers indicated to me that the comparisons being made between single and two parent families were in many ways arbitrary and limited constructions. The many ways to compare women's situations, even the small number of women in this study, similar in many categorised ways in terms of, for example, class and educational background, would be classed in the same group in literature about single parent families, were so diverse in their situations due to the many factors which distinguished each woman from the others.

In the next Chapter, I bring forward a story told in conversation in a way which exercises storytelling, this time in constructed vignette, comprising three perspectives. In the series of stories which follow, the grand narratives of financial insufficiency, lack of support, and struggle, are rewritten in new ways which make small, yet significant shifts in storying, possible, in ways which can be imagined and which again, steer the story in new directions.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Constructed vignettes**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapters Two and Three, I outlined my intention to conduct and reflect upon conversations I had with mothers I refer to as leading households –often seemingly much alone much of the time. Our conversations were guided by an interest in their wellbeing. My investigation of what had been said about mothers such as these led me to recognise grand narratives in research literature and policy, the prevailing narratives told about lone mothers and their children, in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

In Chapter Seven I constructed a conversation using shared stories from my conversations with participants. The mothers who shared their stories with me described situations which were troubling, joyful, satisfying and challenging, in their lives in motherled households. Their stories resonated with parts of the grand narratives in the literature, about wellbeing in motherled households; namely, that economic sufficiency, recognition and social support (evident in policy, research, media and everyday conversation) might be more difficult to maintain, the insufficiency of which can diminish their wellbeing. Yet the mothers also generated antenarratives composed of many living stories about their strength, choice, purpose and intentionality, their satisfaction in their families and their confidence as mothers, stories which exemplified their wellbeing, and in the telling, worked to enhance wellbeing.

Inspired by the work of Vickers (2011, 2012), whose creative storytelling work I explored in Chapter Three, I now make use of stories told to me in these conversations. I tell other tales shared with me by many women over many years, to “capture the essence of lived experience” (Vickers, 2011, p. 51) in the form of a constructed vignette revealed in three scenes. I explore the situated experience of a woman, Shelley, through three stories to do with her wellbeing, centred upon her seeking assistance at a government-run welfare agency office. In constructing such a story, I hold several

hopes. I hope that my creative representations of women's stories will provoke interest for the reader, and foreground methods of storytelling which bring nearer to readers and researchers, the heartfelt experiences of many whose voices might otherwise remain silent. I hope also to 'contribute to scholarship' (Vickers, 2011, p. 51), foregrounding methods of storytelling which tinker with different nuanced events, expressions, conversations, to "shine a light" on more "possible realities and perspectives" and create opportunities for different choices and outcomes (Vickers, 2011, p. 61) by exploring shifts in experience and meaning. I am interested in how researchers can use antenarrative storytelling to address and make sense of situations in which people face difficulty and subjugation, challenges which can be minimised by those who have the opportunity, and responsibility, to address these challenges, a sentiment echoed by Vickers (2011) in her urging of organisational members to reflect upon their words and actions. Those people can include frontline workers, practitioners, supporters and researchers.

In this story, Shelley's wellbeing, storied subjectively by her, is central. As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, wellbeing is commonly represented in literature as a measurable entity, using grand narratives of measurements of economic sufficiency expressed through household income levels and expenses, and by ostensibly objective assessments of social wellbeing evaluated by researchers. In the previous Chapter, personal stances expressed by participants defied the normative construction of single mothers as deficient and weak, expounding on a perspective of wellbeing which pertained to agency, choice and strength in the eyes of the women who shared their lives.

Narratives from three storytellers, Shelley, Jeff, and Mirna, are presented in this Chapter. Each tells a story through which I employ a creative approach to meaning-making. Shelley is a woman whose story is based upon anecdotes shared with me by several conversants in the study, and by women from other parts of my life. Features of her story and the accounts of my imagined characters Jeff and Mirna, include wisps of events from my life, and insights from stories told to me over years by women of different ages and backgrounds to invigorate nuances of thought and interpretation. In

the words of Vickers (2011), “semi-fictional texts gave license to play with the details of the accounts, perhaps mixing around the details of the stories reported” (p. 51) and adapting characters or events or features or outcomes, potentially opening possibilities for new events, futures, or episodes, according to the potential for transformation offered by use of Boje’s antenarrative theory reviewed in Chapter Three.

### **Situating antenarrative methods of storytelling**

In her focus on people living with multiple sclerosis, Vickers (2012) addresses her interest in critical management studies, in particular the contribution of these studies to the redress of inequalities, the balancing of power, and progression of universal emancipation. According to Vickers, antenarrative storytelling enables the researcher to include “fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, pre-narrative and speculative texts that sometimes manifest during the telling of lives...” (2012, p. 174). Stories which are not necessarily coherent or conventionally structured, but are “fragmented or polyphonic” (2012, p. 172) can be revealed and made use of by participant and researcher. Vickers’ intention is to highlight these stories in order to provoke a helpful response in others who are in positions to help the storyteller. Her work with healthcare professionals (2012) and narratives of managers working with employees living with disabilities (2011) exemplifies this attraction to constructed storytelling. Vickers posits that “multiplicity and fragmentation” are inherent and unavoidable, and as such, ought not to be evaded in research inquiry. Reflecting on and retelling a story from multiple vantage points, a researcher can experiment with new possibilities, enabling a story to be shaped in different ways.

Vicker’s work demonstrates and extends Boje’s (2001, 2008b, 2014) theorising of antenarrative storytelling. Stories are used to make sense of the challenges which people face, the responses of others to their circumstances, and the possibilities for such responses to be helpful and encouraging, or unsupportive, damaging, and oppressive of the subject(s). Vickers aims to ‘facilitate management learning’ in storytelling



methods, including the use of reflective journal entries and constructed reflexive dialogue, demonstrated in her 2011 and 2012 writing. Demonstrating how antenarrative storytelling enables the writer to foreground aspects of stories that come “before the narrative” told of someone’s life (Vickers 2012, p. 175), antenarratives reveal a wager, or bet, on how a future may unfold to construct new possibilities from the telling of a story in particular ways. Such new possibilities might include potentially transformative situations for women, resulting from the construction of “alternative responses, understandings and meanings” (Vickers, 2011, p. 53), where new possibilities might be sorely needed, such as in the interactions between women and the agencies who (claim to) (want to) assist and support them.

Vickers invites a new conversation in which silent, or silenced, aspects of people’s experience can be reflected on and voiced, toward “compassionate and workable solutions” (2011, p. 51). I was interested in voicing aspects of experience which had been under silence in the big stories told about families requesting assistance from publicly-funded social welfare organisations, such as, in New Zealand, Work and Income (WINZ). Carpenter and Austin (2007) report that mothers experience silence imposed by others in power, and sometimes choose to remain silent in order to avoid discipline. Gatenby and Humphries (1996) also highlight the silence imposed on, or chosen by, women.

### **Forming narratives: Constructed vignettes**

Storytellers such as Vickers (2011, 2012) employ their experience of hearing particular kinds of stories over and over again, reading, and engaging with research and other literature, to deliberately construct a fictional, yet believable and partly true story. Creative storytelling is also utilised by authors such as Caulley (2008) who describes writing research reports with creative non-fiction stories interwoven in ways which draw in and absorb the reader, keeping them engaged and taking them on a journey in which the experience of the actor is brought nearer to the reader. The heightened

significance of a story with depth, detail, and captivating focus has possibilities for engaging those who might otherwise remain aloof from people's lives. Such possibilities might include a preparedness to hear more such stories and to act upon them in ways which are hopeful for those who shared, and for others (Vickers, 2011).

Here, my focus is on individuals within organisations purporting to support mothers as well as the mothers themselves. In my work, pieces of stories shared – stories I present as antenarratives – include fragments of conversation from participants as well as anecdotes shared with me by participants and other interested conversants I have met along the way. Writing and using constructed vignettes, I could develop a story told in person to me, by adding details which chimed with the experiences of others, or myself. Creating a story and then embellishing, thickening and altering aspects of it, I share and reflect on deeply personal things told to me, including anecdotes from several participants, structured in a narrative which is not utterly factual for one person but which includes pieces of true story from many women. As I bring to life patches of story which filter through but do not coalesce with bigger themes including those influential grand narratives, I respond to such hegemonic constructions of women which have been informed by stereotypes in which they appear as poverty-ridden, isolated and helpless victims, a repeated refrain which is hinted at and yet which I wish to trouble in this vignette.

Those who critique hegemonic oppression of women and children often hold responsible various systemic failures for shaping individuals to position people in certain ways. Later in this Chapter, I described the experiences of women dealing with social service agencies including those funded by the public and provided by the government. In earlier Chapters I have detailed how women find such agencies difficult to deal with, inconsistent, punitive, degrading and demeaning, findings expressed by others in the New Zealand context and elsewhere. Here, I continue the story told by women, of how officials in such organisations have been found in research to demonstrate limited capacity to care, or to understand, let alone adapt to or redress, wider social and political issues affecting individual families. They commonly fail to

recognise or address power dynamics demonstrated in their interactions with mothers such as those in my study. In their behaviour such case workers evidence beliefs in particular well-worn stereotypes about beneficiaries, of whom lone mothers make up a visible proportion. Such frontline workers are the contact point of mothers with organisations purporting to help families in need, a group in which motherled households might be included.

In part one of my vignette Shelley tells a story which was shared with me in conversation by a participant who divulged her experience at a Work and Income office when a case worker joked about women eventually having to pay back the benefits they were receiving in times of need. The woman momentarily believed the case worker to be serious. The stress and humiliation of the experience stayed with her. Shelley's account characterises shame, confusion and struggle conveyed in other conversations in my study. This vignette is certainly 'factual'.

In part two of this three-part story, I develop a scene in which one such worker's capacity to engage helpfully and constructively within professional, ministerial bounds of such a system, potentiates alternatives to ways of being with so-called "beneficiaries". I play with the possibilities of what might happen if the appointment at the government welfare office had gone differently for Shelley, introducing shifts in the behaviour and attitude of the caseworker, Jeff. I think about what it might take for frontline officials, perhaps well-intentioned, perhaps poorly-informed or supported, to make a difference. They may feel limited in their capacity to help. They may feel threatened by the needs of those who call on them in discomforting, sensitive, emotionally-charged situations. How can a new future be cast? The opportunities for those such as the benefit case-worker Jeff, cast in this story might "enable them to move towards more compassionate and considered responses by vivifying and exposing potential conflicts, stereotypes, uninformed reaction and flawed assumptions" (Vickers, 2011, p. 57). Jeff's ability and willingness to reflect, and engage reflexively, weaves antenarrative strands of a new future for Shelley and others with whom Jeff

interacts such as his co-workers, events or new turns which carry hope and belief in the possibility of transformative action.

Part three of this vignette, told by Mirna, extends the “bet on the future” of those who offer support to women such as Shelley. Mirna represents one visible, focused aspect of a reality in which women are blithely urged by well-meaning others to ‘just ask for help if you need it’, while simultaneously embedded in and disciplined by, a culture of self-reliance in which those who ‘pull themselves up by their own bootstraps’ are lauded. A counterpoint to the grand narrative of self-sufficiency is sometimes used by those who wish to offer help to others, but who struggle to position appropriate opportunities to explore helping. Some people wonder, and ask, ‘What can I do to help?’ This vignette weaves a thread between one who would have help and one who would help.

Early in my consideration of this inquiry, I had written:

***Researcher journal: Thursday 9 August, 2012***

*The problem I have found is a lack of fit between people offering help "If there's ever anything I can do to help, just let me know" or "Love to help, if you ever need it" and being in a position to have/accept help.*

*A rhetorical message goes like: "You just have to ask" or "Ask and it will be given to you" but asking, or needing help, is so counterintuitive (today? in NZ? in all Western countries? for some people and not others? for women who "think they have to do it all"? for everyone?) and perhaps the grand narrative of self-sufficiency is so powerful, that it is just about impossible to ask. This is until a life or death situation incurs the absolute desperate NECESSITY to ask so that it is too uncomfortable not to, or there really seems to be no option; then people do ask for help. We might say "no man is an island"... then why do people never get, or get to give the help they (genuinely seem to) offer? Why am I unable to have help?*

Shelley's story takes place in modern day New Zealand. To situate her narrative, I next contextualise the social and economic environment in which women such as Shelley navigate themselves and their families.

### **Setting the scene: Aotearoa New Zealand**

Aotearoa New Zealand is a democratic, Commonwealth nation in the South Pacific, part of the OECD, and with a current human population of approximately four million. According to historian Claudia Orange (2007), Aotearoa has a peopled history beginning with the arrival of Polynesian explorers, settling from around 1000AD. European explorers such as with Abel Tasman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and then James Cook in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, heralded the arrival of colonial interests in commercial and religious expansion. In 1840, a Treaty between the chiefs of the many Māori tribes (iwi) in Aotearoa, and representatives of the British Crown, namely Queen Victoria, was signed. The Māori and English versions of the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi differ, though each party was assured rights to self-govern and self-determine (Orange, 2015). The Māori version, deemed the authentic version under the principle of *Contra Proferentem*, conferred continuing sovereignty upon Māori chiefs (rangatira) (Orange, 2015). However, the next several decades were characterised by what some, such as Māori scholar Moana Jackson (2016), call a genocidal attack, including near total confiscation of Māori land and property, imprisonment and execution of Māori leaders, and great loss of Māori populations to introduced diseases, culminating with concerted degradation of indigenous Māori populations at the hands of the Crown and then the New Zealand settler government instated by the Crown in 1852 (Orange, 2015). While the traumatic early events of colonisation were taking place, New Zealand was developing economically and socially as a colony of Great Britain, with citizens taking part in the First World War and then Second World War, and experiencing the effects of the Great Depression from the 1920's and into the 1930's.

The effects of the Depression contributed to the creation of a welfare state under Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage, in the 1930s. Welfare state provisions included state-provided education, healthcare, and income benefits for unemployed and non-earning families, and provision of subsidised housing (Condliffe, 1959). Following economic downturns of the 1970s and early 1980s in 'developed' (OECD) countries including Aotearoa New Zealand, a series of adjustments was undertaken by successive governments from 1984 (Kelsey, 1997). These adjustments included a withdrawal of government support for unemployed people and those living with government assistance such as those unable to work due to illness or to the demands of raising children.

Over the 1980s and 1990s, the "rolling back of the state" as law professor and scholar Jane Kelsey (1997) has termed it, included cuts to benefits, reductions in government spending in health and social provision (including, for a brief period, charging people to stay in hospital overnight), deregulation of financial and trade markets, and privatisation of state-controlled and owned assets. Increasing rates of unemployment and stories of hardship and inequality were noticed in New Zealanders as in other places where a neo-liberal regime espousing market models of private ownership and service supply, and individual wealth generation, was becoming established. These other places included the United States of America and the United Kingdom. According to Gauld (2009), the momentum for these widespread social and economic reforms has been fuelled in part by rapid and constant change in government organisation structures, responsibilities and titles, including several incarnations of government social support agency in New Zealand, beginning with the Social Security Department, then Department of Social Welfare, the Income Support Service and now, Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ).

Frequent changes to specific arms of social support such as Child, Youth and Family have endured constant restructuring, with unsettling effects upon staff and citizens who are in need of the services provided. The disruptive effects of constant organisational change are documented by Robin Gauld (2009) in a detailed account of the myriad

shifts in healthcare structure and provision in New Zealand, from the late 1980s since. In social provision similarly, confusion and inconsistency exists regarding the features of entitlements such as benefits, inconsistency which is deepened by a lack of available information for those requesting it. According to research results published by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) since 2002, and by the Alternative Welfare Working Group since 2010, depicting stories like the one told by film director Ken Loach in his recent production “I, Daniel Blake” (2016), the treatment of social service users in countries including New Zealand, is at times inhumane and degrading. Many accounts of unhelpful staff, incorrect and inconsistent information, and unreasonable barriers to assistance are also candidly visible on social media sites including the ‘Closing the Gaps’ Facebook pages, and several social media sites inviting Work and Income clients who need advocacy support to make use of the services to which they are entitled and in need of. A majority of those citizens needing economic assistance, citizens now depicted as market customers by economist Ann Pettifor in a 2016 radio interview (Pettifor, 2016), are women with dependent children or grandchildren, such as the mother in this story, Shelley.

Of note also, is the rising public intolerance of people who require assistance, discussed by Louise Humpage (2015), who writes that in countries where neoliberal regimes are more embedded, treatment of citizens in need is increasingly likely to be punitive, and the help provided, less likely to meet even basic felt needs for the basics of life such as food and shelter. Correspondingly, according to Humpage (2015), people appear more tolerant of visible human suffering or poverty. In New Zealand, a recent social media campaign initiated by Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP) has highlighted the problems faced by lone mothers applying for benefit assistance and who refuse (for many reasons including their personal safety) to name the father(s) of their dependent children, who may have benefits reduced or cut in accordance with the Social Security Act (1964), currently being reviewed (Community Law, 2016; Auckland Action Against Poverty, 2016). Mothers who miss appointments at Work and Income, or who refuse certain job offers, such as the heavily pregnant woman who declined a job offer as a beekeeper three weeks before the due date of her baby’s birth (Sudden, 2016) are

punished by loss of their support and sometimes, a stand-down period of time before benefit can be reinstated.

In Shelley's story, I sought to trouble two of the issues faced by mothers. I firstly elucidate the isolation felt by mothers, evident in a lack of support, disapproval, and unawareness or indifference towards of others in public worlds such as a church community, such as that in which Shelley meets older woman Mirna. Secondly, I illustrate the distant, hostile and punitive treatment depicted in the case worker, Jeff, whose disinterest and casual lack of concern for Shelley and her child in the first scene, is a theme in mounting evidence, anecdotal, informal and now researched (Sudden, 2016). I sought to write a new story in which Shelley would be more generously and reasonably met by those in positions to support her in some way, economically and socially. In the second scene, I shared an alternative perspective and altered Jeff's responses to reflect this. In the third part of the vignette, I added Mirna's perspective, not immediately apparent to Shelley, but which comes to be part of an enriched texture of situation, history and possible futures for Shelley and Mirna, in ways which are invigorating for aspects of their wellbeing.

Across the three scenes, I consciously avoided changing Shelley's behaviour and demeanour. My critique of the symbolic universe in which Shelley finds herself, as I did, is intended to support women not to shape themselves to adhere to the constraining demands of others. It was important to me that Shelley would not have to be the one to constantly adapt her persona, language or action. The pressure she, like many, live with, is enough, and now the time comes for others to respond.

## **Constructed vignette in three scenes**

### **Scene One: Shelley**

*I square my shoulders and stare through the double automatic doors of the WINZ office as they hum open. I hate coming here. This is the third time I've had to come to Work*



*and Income in three months. After being on a benefit on and off for ten years to raise my daughter, I got a job! Amazingly, it was even a job which actually fitted around school hours and my having to be home for Bella before and after school. I know she is now twelve and is actually okay on her own for short periods, but it's not like she has another parent or family member here with her and I know she gets lonely and a bit scared by herself – and I would too.*

*Now that we live a bit out of town there is no after-care program that she could go to, even if she would go. It's the same in the holidays... all her friends go to their other parent's house (which she can't) or to camp, which we can't afford. I tried camp, but she came home so sick and tired she missed a week of school when it started back, and then I spent all term patching her up to keep her well, as well as trying to catch up on money. Bella's one of those kids who hates going away from her mum. Probably a result of us just having each other for all of these years. It's a bonus actually; we have a really close relationship and I know that is so important these days when we all go on about bonding and attachment and open communication with your kids... and now she's about to hit teenage years (gulp) it must be good for us to have that relationship. But... it does make it difficult when I need some time out for myself or like now, when I am getting so much pressure to get a job – any job with any hours in any part of town as long as it's A JOB – and the money sure makes a huge difference as well.*

*I think Bella feels the pressure I am under to jump through all of these hoops the system puts up for me. I read somewhere about someone – Gloria Steinem was it? Talking about the State being like a giant husband checking under your bed for other men's shoes... thinking they can tell you what to do and limit your income and rule your life just like my husband used to! (Canvas March 31 2016).*

*Anyway, back to my visit to Work and Income. The second time I came here about six weeks ago, my job had finished. It turned out to be only a casual position but I had said no to several shifts, so they sacked me. Well, not sacked but it was strongly indicated to me that they would not be offering me any more hours unless I said yes to whatever*

*shifts they offered me. I realise that some workers get offered the plum shifts during school hours – maybe they've been there longer or they are friends with the coordinator or something – but I can't just drop everything and drive an hour for a six hour shift on minimum wage with no care for my daughter. I just can't. I've got no money to pay a babysitter (even if I had a babysitter which I don't) and we haven't heard from Bella's dad since he went to Brisbane nearly five years ago. For all I know he's on Christmas Island! (Now there's a thought lol!)*

*So in my second visit to Work and Income the case worker, a nice-ish older lady but still quite scary, told me that because I had "refused work" (when technically she said, work was available – yeah right) there would now be a stand down for my benefit to start again. She said in the meantime I could apply for the emergency benefit, which I did – only it's ¾ of the other benefit which was already not enough to live on!*

*So here I am at my third visit to the office, to ask for help. I hate asking for help! Anyone who calls WINZ clients 'bludgers' has obviously never had to go in there for anything, because it is so horrible and you feel so small and stupid and gross, even when they are nice to you, which isn't that often...*

*A lady from church, Mirna, an older lady – nice enough but a bit guarded – brought me here today. Not that my car doesn't work, it just has no gas until pay day. I hate asking for help! Everyone says "Oh just sing out if you need anything" but really, do they mean it? When I asked Mirna on Sunday at church, if she could possibly help me this week, she and her husband Mike exchanged looks before she smiled and replied "Of course!" But it felt so fake. Honestly, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't necessary, but I am desperate. She's a nice lady but I'm sure she looks down her nose at me. She can't have ever been through anything like this! But I know that I won't get to my appointment in time if I have to take the bus in the morning, and WINZ are totally inflexible about your appointment. And if you don't show then they can suspend your benefit. I'm so uncomfortable about the whole needing help thing. On one hand, asking for help is normal they reckon – no person is an island – and yet everyone else just*

*seems to puddle along without needing anything from anyone, and I hate asking for help!*

*The young lady at the front desk is polite enough, but quite guarded. I know they cop some abuse at these offices – there was even a shooting at one last year, so there's now a security guard lurking at the door. (Lately though I've seen this one rounding up all the supermarket trolleys for the Countdown right next door. I guess he gets really bored!)*

*I sit and wait, for nearly twenty minutes this time. Mirna is sitting beside me. I wonder if she is feeling annoyed or bored. The office is now open plan which is probably supposed to be a good thing or save space or something – in fact it just makes it even more difficult to talk about things – personal things like money, and family, openly, especially when you start crying like I did last time! Maybe it keeps people from getting openly aggro at the case workers... yeah, that's it, "Safety". Huh. I certainly do not feel like having a deep and meaningful conversation with Mirna here. I see her looking around. I wonder what she is thinking.*

*Finally, a young man – he honestly must be a school leaver he's so young – calls me over to his desk. Takes my paperwork that I filled out (AGAIN) and studies it so long that I began to wonder if I've filled it out wrong, even though I've done these forms a trillion times. My stomach starts churning. Then he says "So, what can I do for you this time?" I hesitate, but when I remember that empty fridge and the accusing look on Bella's face (I swear some girls could unblock drains or shrink tumours with one glare!) I lift my chin, gaze him in the eye and say "I've come to ask for an emergency grant. I got laid off from my job and my benefit got cut and I'm now really behind. We've got no food – it's me and my daughter – and I want to apply for a food package or something just to tide us over till my next payment". I breathe out and wait.*

*The young man's name is "Jeff". It says so on his name badge. The second name is covered over with a sticker to prevent people looking him up and harassing him I guess.*

*He stares boredly past me and then focuses back on me and said “You know you’ll have to pay back whatever I give you today. How will you do that?” My stomach drops and I stare. I feel hot tears prickle behind my eyes. “I can’t pay it back. Well, I mean it’d take a long time. I guess you’d have to take it out of my benefit. But I’m already not getting enough to cover the basics. When would I have to start?” I’m babbling. I take a deep breath and hold it. Then he grins. “Just joking. It’s okay, we won’t make you pay it back. I was just having you on.”*

*Some of the tears tumble down my cheeks. Relief? Anger? My face flushes red and I sigh. What kind of dumb joke is that? Not even funny. Just cruel. A lame attempt at humour in a grim dark place of dependence and desperation – and many are more desperate than me! What I did to deserve this, I wonder. Having to beg and ask for basics to feed my girl. She’s a kid. None of this is her fault. I thought everyone reckoned children were the future. Some investment, society. Thanks for that. I sigh again and look at the desk of papers all about me, waiting for whatever comes next. Does he do this with every ‘customer’? What if they (like me) believed him, and he made them pay it back but it went into his own account? What’s to stop that happening? I hate these people.*

*That thought - “How did I end up like this” - keeps me awake sometimes. I shouldn’t have ended up in this stupid powerless dependent position; I’m sure I did everything the right way according to society and parents and teachers and school and counsellors. Finished school, got a degree and a decent job, married. I had a great career lined up before Bella was born and the wheels fell off the marriage! I couldn’t have stayed any longer in that toxic relationship – in fact I should have left years earlier. I remember my mum telling me how after she had my older brother in 1967, an aunt had patted her on the hand and resignedly said to her “Any man is better than none, dear”. Maybe that’s still true. Maybe the only thing standing between women and poverty is a husband, even now we are supposed to have child support and a safety net of welfare, the ol’ hand up, not hand out, and even now women have jobs, degrees and all that. So why am I to blame and living with these consequences? How can this*

*be the best solution for families? It's not like I have great job opportunities and can realistically work my way out of it any time soon.*

*Jeff is still tapping into his computer; then he turns away slightly as the printer behind him buzzes. He gets up to fetch the paper coming from it, returns and hands it to me. "Here you go", he says, already looking past me to the next person. "The money will be in your account tonight. Okay?" He turns away.*

*Okay? I think. Is that it? Okay? All that stress and drama and adrenaline and it's done? Is any of this okay?*

*I get up and walk over to Mirna, waiting for me.*

### **Analysis: Shelley's story**

Government policy, and recent welfare reforms in New Zealand, based upon neo-liberal values in which all adults are self-sufficient and nobody is supposed to ask for outside help, invite us to believe that moving into work is the only way for Shelley to quit worrying about her welfare or her daughter's future. Paid employment is openly enshrined as the dominant story of success for families living with the aid of state welfare, yet the dominant-narrative ending is elusive for many single mothers while they have children to care for and are limited by the job opportunities and income available to them as lone parents.

Those whose stories are entwined in Shelley's narrative might recognise themselves in the story. Including "bits and pieces, snapshots, grabs and glimpses of respondent lived experiences" (Vickers, 2012, p. 173-174), these bits and pieces can be shifted and adapted to construct a story, bringing together many layers and pieces of "empirical fieldwork, participant recorded experiences... exploration of the relevant literature, and my own experiences..." (Vickers 2011, p. 53). When writing these stories, I could imagine thoughts, responses and memories told by some of the women whose accounts

I inserted here and there, insertions which, woven into the story, contribute to the power of the story to magnify mother's voices.

## **Scene two: Jeff**

*I look up as a woman approaches the desk and stand up to greet her. "Hi. I'm Jeff, I'm one of the case workers. You are..." (I check the forms she hands me.) "Shelley." We both speak at once. I grin. "Take a seat. What brings you here?" Shelley hesitates. "I've come to ask for an emergency grant. I got laid off from my job and my benefit got cut and I'm now really behind? We've got no food – it's me and my daughter – and I want to apply for a food package or something just to tide us over till my next payment." She breathes out like she had been holding in air for a long time. That's not an uncommon occurrence around here – people hold on and on for as long as possible. By the time they pluck up the courage or hunger to come to this office, make an appointment, fill out the many forms, return and sit in the waiting area for eternity and then face the ogre at the front desk, they usually needed help weeks ago but were too uncomfortable to ask – and I don't blame them. Asking for help is so not cool these days. I think back to the lecture we had about the old Welfare State – the pictures of Michael Joseph Savage on people's kitchen walls like he was a Pope or a saviour – my mum's cousin was even named after him. Getting help was cool then... or at least a fact of life. It was nothing to be ashamed of. They didn't blame people for their desperation. Was it because it was so prevalent after The Great Depression? Nobody was in a position to judge. Back then, everybody knew they were only a step away from need. Not like now...or... just like now...but less obviously so?*

*Ooops! My mind has wandered and she's looking at me, waiting, wondering 'what the...!' I've been warned about that, thinking too deeply in my job! I think the branch manager would prefer me to be a bit more cut and dried about stuff but I'm so fascinated by the situation we are in in this country – and we are not alone. The whole conversation about inequality just plays right into my thinking when I see people who*

are forced to come here and more or less beg – and they are tax-paying citizens I remind myself. My mum always says “Show some respect to those benefit folk. They are paying your wages remember!” Well she would know. She raised me on a benefit when my parents separated. Dad couldn’t have known what it was like for her or he would have paid more than the minimum child support, surely.

*I focus and return my gaze to Shelley –*

“What’s the situation with your job?” I ask Shelley. She explains that it was a casual position and she was told she might as well remove her name from the workers’ pool list, though nothing’s in writing – and I know this is common as well. With a pool of ‘flexible’ (read ‘desperate’) employees, it’s pretty cutthroat at some of those agencies. But it means that on paper she’s resigned and lost her entitlement to her full benefit, so she’s getting by (or not) on an emergency benefit. Every time she needs to fill out forms and come into the office it’s costing her, and turns out it’s costing the Ministry as well. Not efficient!

I scroll through her entitlements and spot that she’s not getting an accommodation supplement nor some of her other entitlements. Her review date’s two weeks from now, but... “If you like, we can do your benefit review right now” I suggest to Shelley. “Maybe your money can increase from today seeing as you’ve come in to get the food grant.” She looks uncertainly at me. “Really? I was told over the phone that there was no flexibility and I’d have to wait.” That sounds right. Things change so often around here that we are always telling people different versions of what they can and can’t have. That, and the judgements of some of the case workers who think they are God and can wave fate over people’s lives like a magic blimmin’ wand and themselves decide what folk are entitled to according to the judgements of the case workers... no wonder people hate Work and Income. No wonder they look sick, tired and desperate when they get here – no matter what else they have been through, we seem to make it worse sometimes... “It’s at our discretion to be flexible, as long as the manager

approves it,” I explain. “And the new manager is pretty cool even though she runs everything by the book.”

The branch manager had developed a list of some of outcomes which she had interpreted out of her job description. She used terms like “quality” and “improvement of service” in ways which are truly extraordinary in this office! She’s started to hold weekly meetings in which we can share some of the triumphs our customers tell us about, like getting a decent house or a better job, or a new grandchild, or starting the kids at a new school and it going really well for everyone. We are now starting to share stories – little ones – where we see little chinks of making a difference in our work and even how we imagine those “Kiwi mums and dads” (John Key lol) we’re there to be looking after! A few of us have started having shared lunch together on a Wednesday, and something about eating together – it was making others look at us but now one or two older workers are now asking to join Team Kai, as we call ourselves. Eating together is supposed to be good for building relationships, I’ve heard (though that’s not the case at my dinner table at home yet lol!). I feel the culture at work shifting ever so slightly, just in our office.

I put Shelley’s forms in front of me and begin entering. This way I save a meeting next week and demonstrate a bit of efficiency too – that looks good on the spreadsheet. Glancing up at Shelley, I see the relief on her face. Her eyes well up with tears. “What a business this is,” she says apologetically. “I never thought I would end up so desperate like this.” I stop typing. “A study I read in our tearoom actually says that most of us are just three pay cheques away from right where you are now”, I reply. Or was that three months? Oh well – no matter. It doesn’t take long, nor many unfortunate events which can happen to anyone, for people to need help or even wind up homeless. In fact, the whole blasted societal thing of being independent is pretty faulty – even I know that – a privileged white male with an office job! I print off the statement for her records. “Here you go. The money will be in your account tonight, and I’ve returned your benefit to the earlier entitlement, so you hopefully won’t need to go through this rigmarole again.”



*The gratitude on Shelley's face is evident, yet it makes me uncomfortable. I'm only doing my job. If she were a customer in a shop or a bank she would rightly expect this service and not even thank me for it, but we now have a system in which people – customers - are expected somehow to feel unworthy and to beg for the necessities of life, as if we don't have Bills of Rights, mission statements and policies which enshrine human dignity and welfare, even when we couch it as customer service or quality improvement or some other hokey managerial term...*

*I watch Shelley leave and walk over to an older woman, waiting for her, smiling encouragingly. As I push my chair away from the desk to stand up, I catch the smirk and eye-roll on another case worker's face. I smile blandly in return. If I'm not going to get hardened by this system, I think, if I'm going to keep making a difference, I'll have to keep noticing, nudging, finding ways to interrupt... what was that word? Hegemony?*

### **Analysis: Jeff's story**

In the second scene in this vignette, Jeff's response to Shelley is adapted to one which is encouraging and demonstrative of respect. The scene offers hints at transformative possibilities, pointers toward new ways of working with mothers such as Shelley. I have intentionally shifted small aspects of the story, by telling scenes one and two from two different perspectives. Such apparently small details as Jeff's looking over Shelley's shoulder, is open to construction and different meanings, either boredom and inattention, or wondering and deep thinking.

The change in words spoken by Jeff to Shelley, are demonstrations of different possibilities for the interaction. Jeff's words to Shelley change between the first and second take, going from disinterest and vague disapproval such as that which women speak of in studies reviewed, to a relational, respectful engagement

In the first scene, Shelley's positioning is solidified by Jeff's words and demeanour, which reflect disinterest and the moral blindness which Bauman and Donskis (2013) discuss, wherein the problem of a hungry, struggling family, is framed as a problem which sits outside anybody's responsibility to notice or act to change the unfolding situation. In the second telling, Jeff's willingness to engage with Shelley's predicament, is a demonstration of recognition, respect and validation, even without necessarily changing the hegemonic system, enabling a shift in for Shelley.

The differing depictions of what each person is thinking in scenes one and two, and the variances in Jeff's responses to Shelley, are a demonstration of the varying ways in which the story can be constructed with similar events and even words, with quite different meanings and opportunities for Shelley. These differently-woven stories offer an improved way to imagine Shelley's challenging circumstance with some new strands of possible story. Between Shelley's and Jeff's narratives, a new thread has been woven, wherein Jeff's demeanour toward Shelley undergoes a shift from disapproval and disinterest, to respect and approachability.

Between scenes one and two, Shelley's explanation of her situation remains the same, and so does the outcome, where Jeff approves the food grant and hands Shelley the paper. Yet the storying of the words and actions change in visible ways, demonstrating shifts to new possibilities for people such as Jeff, for workplace culture, different interactions with people such as Shelley, different immediate outcomes for Shelley and her daughter now able to buy food, and different longer-term outcomes for other families. A range of different actions, words and futures, some small and some much more visible, wide and influential, can carry transformative possibilities.

Different outcomes to the story of Shelley's appointment are possible across a spectrum of influences, beginning with tiny actions perceptible to only one person, such as Jeff in his staring over Shelley's shoulder, be it with disinterest (in scene one) or imagination and wondering (in scene two). For Shelley, a different response from Jeff in scene two, generates different feelings in her, feelings which go on to colour how

she sees herself and her situation, and how she is able to conduct herself with a sense of positivity and strength, mirrored in Jeff's willingness to help. His willingness does not require a new welfare system or government department or even a new policy, to be created. Existing small interactions can be conducted differently with Jeff's knowledge, reflexivity in action, and mindful practice in his work. These differences in action are constructed as improvements in efficiency and are connected to improved outcomes on an institutional level. A wider influence of antenarrative possibility might include the interaction between Shelley and Jeff wherein each shares their experience in a relatable way. Shelley confides how uncomfortable she is with coming to ask for help. Jeff counters this with an understanding of how common it is for people to need help, and how close interdependence is for many people.

Widening the circle of influence in which new antenarratives can be generated, Jeff's demeanour toward Shelley becomes visible in scene two, to his co-workers also. A colleague witnesses the interaction and directs a knowing glance at Jeff. His blank look demonstrates his refusal to engage with the grand narrative of disapproval and derision which the colleague engenders in their expression. As a fragment of new story, the split-second interaction between the two case-workers creates a new antenarrative possibility of further exchanges between the two, perhaps focused in future conversations or shared tea-breaks or off-the-cuff comments, on micro-transformations in the ways staff work with and respond to clients. Small transformations might result in different experiences for service users such as Shelley, as they interact with staff and office structures, moving from interactions which contribute to diminishment of their struggles, toward those which recognise service users as worthy citizens whose wellbeing has effects for others in society.

The influence of the new welfare office branch manager, described only briefly in scene two, a person who, while focused on business-oriented outcomes and productivity, sees users of the service as customers who require respect and deserve a high level of service, shifts possibilities for the interactions which Shelley, and others, face when attending appointments. The manager who values interactions which engender

convenient, thoughtful interactions of women such as Shelley in their appointments, reviews and other exchanges, contribute to a shift in ways of being in the office. These interactions can include a preparedness to be flexible about review dates, appointment agendas and data-collection exercises including form-filling. Improved flexibility on the part of the organisational structure (and not merely the individuals in it) make for a service which is more helpful. The service becomes more cognisant of the needs of those citizens using the system, and possibilities are enacted for more convenient and respectful engagement. In scene two, the branch manager also instigates opportunities for workers to meet together to discuss the stories of service users in ways which are positive and which contribute to a construction of people in ways which attend to their resilience, strength, and humanity. The grand narrative of categorised, classified, numbered people as 'widgets' in a large system, is troubled with fragments of story from people's lives, fragments which story them as people who are worth helping, and for whom help makes a difference which workers might not otherwise learn of.

On a wider level again, shifts in storying in scene two demonstrate the generation of antenarratives in which ways of interacting in this specific office generate new stories which contribute to possibilities for other offices, services, and government departments. These cultural ways of being might shift in many small ways, to embrace a focus upon the wellbeing of people who are service users.

In scene two, Jeff explains how a group of like-minded workers are gathering together to eat lunch and provide an oasis of encouragement for one another, in an environment in which negative press, difficult life stories and lack of necessary resources contribute to a wearing-down of workers which in turn has effects upon those who they purport to help. Literature in which sharing mealtimes contributes to positive and supportive relationships among people, relationships which enhance their wellbeing, is outside of the scope of this thesis, but includes studies by Hamilton and Hamilton Wilson (2009), UNICEF (2007), and Utter et al. (2011), as well as critiques by Kinser (2012) and Lamdin Hunter and Dey (2016a).

Each of the possibilities told of in this second storying of Shelley's appointment at the welfare office, go against the grand narrative witnessed by VandenBeld Giles (2010), Humpage (2015) and Sudden (2016), in stories of people using the social services of countries such as New Zealand and other similar nations based on welfare states and now shifting to privatised, user-pays, neoliberal provisions. Prevailing versions of interactions of people with such services favour the view that the only positive outcome for users, is to move away from dependence upon others, including public safety nets, and toward self-sufficiency in the form of paid employment. For many, this is simply not possible. For many who move away from life on a benefit and into paid work, an old set of wellbeing-inhibiting difficulties is replaced with a new set. For those in work, lone mothers in particular, minimum or low rates of pay, work conditions and entitlements which are poor and insecure, and difficulties finding and arranging suitable child care, are the new stories of insufficiency, isolation and poverty. These stories are growing in volume and pitch among people in New Zealand and elsewhere, such as Britain and the United States. Stories of leaving children at home for long periods unsupervised and unsupported, of having to travel many miles for hours at a time each day to attend work, or of having to work in several jobs in order to manage the household financially, are not the happy-ever-after which is assumed in the sentiments of agencies such as, in New Zealand, the Ministry of Social Development, in their 2010 and 2012 statements in which they focus their intentions upon getting people "off benefits and into work". These are narrow, incomplete, poor grand narratives of success for such important agencies.

For many families with one parent such as the families of those women who shared their stories with me, and for families like Shelley's, living with government support is a legitimate expectation, and a story which can contribute to Shelley's wellbeing as much or more than a story in which Shelley would find a job and appear to be self-reliant. I do not want to imply that mothers need to act differently or do different things in order to be taken seriously by people in such agencies as this, or professional counsellors with well-intended advice to be more assertive, find work, get budget

advice and manage your money better. Instead I see the potential of individual case workers to interrupt the dominant stories of sole mothers as desperate and poor, and story a new interaction, with ways of being which are not impossible and which do offer fragments of new future in small, nuanced, yet significant and potentially transformative ways outside of grand narratives.

In the third scene from Shelley's story, we meet Mirna, an older woman who is an acquaintance of Shelley's and who has offered to help her in some small way possible. Mirna's story is made up of many smaller stories woven together.

### **Scene three: Mirna**

*I remember when I left my first husband. It was 1982. I had just found out that he was unfaithful; in fact, a bigamist. Hard to believe, I know. I never thought I would get a shock like that. I hadn't "worked" for years, well not paid employment – not that mothering isn't the hardest work there is! There was no childcare or maternity leave back then. Women worked for "pin money" they called it. None of us expected that we would ever have to support a family alone. There was no choice but to leave your kids by themselves if you were a single working mum then.*

*Prior to the birth of my first child, I had been a nurse. So, I tried to get shifts which fitted around school, and actually my workmates and the charge nurse understood my situation and helped me, even though there were not many single parents in those days! Not like now. I can't help thinking that mothers these days have it tougher than we had, in lots of ways. Things are much more expensive for starters, and they set themselves such ridiculously high standards for the home and their children's lives! I read in a magazine last week... "Helicopter parenting" they call it, yes, that's it – "intensive mothering". Constantly thinking up and paying for new activities for your kids to help them get ahead, making everything perfect for them and then exhausting yourself in the process.*

*My (second) husband Mike and I (we've been married fifteen years now) have been going to this little church for two years now. Nice young pastor and his stroppey wife. She's a real mover and shaker! I'd noticed this youngish woman Shelley and her daughter at our church. There every week they are - and she's trying to find work I've heard. The girl looks a bit sulky, but kids do these days. They think the world revolves around them! Well anyway, I said to Mike "I wonder if Shelley needs a hand with anything. Think there's anything we could do to help?" He said that he thought she might be offended if we offered help. She might think we thought she wasn't coping or something - might find it a bit patronising. Well I mean to say. Men. I don't know a single woman who would turn down help if she really needed it, and if it was offered in the right way of course. And then, after church Shelley actually came up to me, and asked if I might be able to help her get to her appointment on Tuesday at the welfare office. I use the term "welfare" loosely, because it's certainly not the help we had available thirty years ago... Yes, there was a social stigma back then, but it was much more normal to rely upon the State for things like the Family Benefit and stuff. I couldn't have survived without it! Everyone is so suspicious these days. You'd think things would get better for these young women, after the women's movement and all, but it seems worse now than when those feminists were out there marching and protesting in the 70's! Anyway, when Shelley said that - must have taken great guts I think - I glanced over at Mike - see? - and said of course, I would love to help, depending on the time of course - I'm pretty busy myself these days with grandchildren and whatnot.*

*Something else I remember, and something I hope and pray Shelley never has to endure. I told her about it in the car on the way home from her appointment. I told her how I remember trying to haggle with a property agent about a flat I wanted to move into with the kids. My awful unfaithful husband had insisted we sell the family home when we separated. Well of course, I couldn't get a mortgage on my own in those days without a husband - even though I earned pretty well on a nurse's salary and knew I could make the payments. I had driven around from bank to bank with the kids sitting*

*in the car waiting while I went into the branch and begged for a loan. Nobody would sign me up without a man's signature on my application. So here I was trying to negotiate with the real estate agent about this flat for rent. And he said that if I was prepared to help him out, then he could do me a favour and let me have the flat. Helping him out meant letting him use this flat during the day to bring his mistress to! My job would be to change the sheets, clean up after him and not say a word to anyone. He actually thought he could do that, the disgusting creep! I don't know what was worse – such a revolting idea, thinking I might be amenable to be his cleaning lady and condone his unfaithfulness, having the nerve to even suggest it, or my having to clean up my bed after him!! The cheek of it! Unbelievable. Well, when I told Shelley, her eyes popped out and she looked at me in a new light, I think! Really I mean, most of us carry stories inside us, which can't be imagined from the outside. You just never know when you look at someone. It's easy to think you are alone, though, isn't it.*

### **Analysis: Mirna's story**

In scene one, Shelley expresses the sentiment of many women, single and other, of feeling alone, unsupported and even overwhelmed in many aspects of their care of their families. In scene three, Mirna's support becomes apparent in ways which are initially tentative and small. Tiny supports begin with Mirna noticing Shelley, and mentioning her situation to her husband Mike. Mirna's capacity to remember her own history, including her own marriage ending and the risks she faced, economically in particular, as a lone parent. Mirna's reflection on her own past makes a space for her to empathise with Shelley, rather than ignoring or judging her. Mirna is undeterred by her husband's discouragement of Mirna speaking to Shelley. Instead, Mirna is able to contextualise how differently she and her partner view Shelley's situation. Multiple ways of seeing a potential offer of help, are possible. Mirna's gendered life experience informs her that Shelley might have some difficulties here and there as Mirna herself had once had. A brief conversation at church follows, between the three, and then a car ride to an appointment follows. Mirna's reflection on her own story, which might take place



while she waits for Shelley to finish her appointment, takes us inside her own reason for being there, her empathy and desire for things to be better, however possible, for Shelley, than they were for Mirna many years ago. Finally in this episode, we see Mirna further consolidate her support of Shelley by divulging her own story in a way which encourages Shelley and defends her position in an uncomfortable situation. Shelley is able to see Mirna from a new position of warmth; whereas she had found Mirna 'a bit guarded' previously, an emerging openness between the two women demonstrates the building of an alliance, with possibilities for the future.

Shelley's situation at the welfare office, going to ask for financial assistance over and above what she believes she is already entitled to, demonstrates a transgressing of the expectations which those in the governed system have for her, and likely many others. Doctrines of self-reliance abound. Yet the interactions between Shelley and Mirna which might be constructed as an example of failure or inadequacy on Shelley's part, are instead instrumental in constructing Shelley as courageous, determined to support her own and her daughter's wellbeing, and supported. Mirna's incremental steps of support for Shelley are each small and achievable for Mirna. However, they represent an expressed wish to reach out and offer help to someone in possible need. Factors which might prevent Mirna or others from offering help and generating stories of support, include busyness with other commitments such as her grandchildren, and an understanding that offering help might be seen as a diminishment of Shelley's self-reliance, undermining Shelley's pride and with it, her wellbeing.

The initial offers of help which are intended to be accepted in tangible terms, beyond a pat sentiment, sit outside the edges of a symbolic universe in which Shelley manages her own needs with no assistance or support from others. In this symbolic universe, lip-service is paid to support. People might say to Shelley 'if you ever need help with anything, just yell out!' Shelley might smile and thank people and never ask for help, or even know what help to ask for, and continue on her own, unsupported. Shelley's need for help and her sense of isolation can be addressed when others mindfully, carefully step in, with their own circumstances reflexively in mind.

Mirna's story is taken from the stories of several older women, women of my mother's generation, who I have known, worked with, talked with, and been honoured to learn from. I sought to acknowledge the journeys which these and other women in previous generations have traversed, in their quests to parent their children, sometimes as single mothers, and in journeys more difficult in many ways, and often untold except in laughing or disbelieving anecdote made palatable by the passage of time, or the erroneous belief that "this wouldn't happen nowadays". These women over many years have spoken to me of ways in which they too, were undermined as they battled to care for their families. They have also spoken of little ways in which some people noticed and supported their needs as mothers.

Stories of women from earlier decades unfold in a symbolic universe wherein women were supposed to rely only upon their husbands. State provisions such as in New Zealand, the 'family benefit' or 'DPB' (domestic purposes benefit) became available in 1973, accompanied by changes in marital property law and domestic violence law. At this time, grand narratives of self-sufficiency and independence from state safety-nets were institutionalised norms, yet in different ways. Women were expected not to rely upon those outside of their immediate family for help. Women were not expected to step outside of the patriarchal marital structure and seek independence from husbands. This is visible in Mirna's inability to be granted a mortgage loan, despite her robust income. The institution of patriarchy in family and society prevails to shape these mothers even as they notice, resist and propose alternatives.

Mirna's workmates and bosses are seen making space and assistance available for her, telling a story of support and assistance, which, while small, Mirna later remembers as a significant factor in her survival and wellbeing. Entertaining the challenge that the many little things which supported Mirna, such as understanding workmates and bosses, and the little things which now support Shelley, such as help from Mirna and a just approach by Jeff, might be deemed 'system preserving adaptations'(M. Humphries, personal communication), I considered carefully how to position help and support as aspects of hopeful transformation. I am also challenged to identify the

‘system’ which is arguably under preservation by the shaping of particular details in these stories such as the relationships between people, the policies which direct Jeff, the influence of others’ opinions such as the other welfare case worker or Mirna’s husband Mike, whose responses promulgate the idea that Shelley should not rely upon anyone else.

## **Evaluation of constructed vignette**

Rineheart (1998) describes factualising fiction. I toyed with this notion, settling on, instead, fictionalising fact (inasmuch as a person’s experience can be constituted as a fact). My decision to practice a creative storytelling approach in Chapters Seven and Eight, firstly through use of a constructed conversation woven from participant excerpts, and then to construct a series of stories based upon three semi-fictional characters, stemmed from my interest in creative approaches to research methodology. In doing this, I intended that my methodological interest might encourage others in more avant garde, performance approaches, such as those endorsed by Emerald, Rinehart, and Garcia (2016), and that the employment of such methods might enable inquiry to emerge in areas of interest in women’s lives, perhaps deemed unresearchable. I wrote about it:

### ***Researcher journal: Sunday 11 September, 2016***

*“Today, we (three workmates and myself) sat around talking about what everybody else might do a PhD about. ‘Kelly’ shared her enthusiasm for creative gift-card making, lamenting that you can’t write a PhD on that, even though it is so interesting to her. She spoke of how the women she sees at the craft workshops all come from different walks of life, yet when they get together and share their interest, constructing beautiful and unique pieces of artwork, giving each other ideas, chatting about their ‘outside’ lives, a special atmosphere emerges, one in which women are nourished in*

*their wellbeing, where differences are less relevant than the common desire to create a beautiful piece of artwork.*

*By the end of the conversation, we four 'scholars' had devised a feminist ethnography and action-research methodology by which Kelly could explore her interest, conduct a research study, get a qualification and do it in a way in which caring for herself as a person through her craftwork was valued. In focusing on some aspect of card making, she could tie this to her nursing practice with residents in long term care, carrying out craft activities as diversional therapy. There seemed to be so many benefits for this type of focus in her study. I recognised aspects of Marshall's Living Life as Inquiry (1999).*

*Later, I wondered what might even be possible in a group of women from opposing sides of political spectra, who might build understanding and relationships with others by participating in a seemingly politically neutral and non-threatening craft activity, and sharing areas of their life which they might have in common. What kinds of new learning, relationship-building, binary-busting conversations could be generated, in turn generating a more sophisticated, wellbeing-enhancing discourse among people?"*

In this Chapter, the vignette, constructed in three separate parts, has divulged the experiences of three different actors. The storytelling act has demonstrated the research-ability of seemingly small, common and everyday experiences. Paradoxically, the multiple perspectives shared have turned out to indicate areas of commonality among disparate actors.

## **Chapter summary**

In Chapters Four and Five I identified philosophical notions which have been crafted and used to contribute to the shaping of people as atomised, isolated individuals, projecting such constructions into the body of research which I reviewed in Chapter Six. Now, I have explored these narratives in thought, policy, and law in Aotearoa New Zealand, which accompany such individualistic constructions of people, and which

seemingly deny the real and ongoing ways in which humans continue to need one another. In particular, I have identified the historically significant welfare system and its repeal over several decades and governments, in favour of neo-liberal policies with privatised, neo-liberally valued rationale favouring a removal of societal support for those in need.

As a storytelling method, a constructed vignette offers multiple perspectives, shifting events and episodes, and different possibilities and futures from varying story details (Vickers, 2012). By playing with new possibilities for what could be said, done, expressed and noticed, I posit new possibilities for actors such as Shelley, as well as the others who hold promise for Shelley. By trialling different aspects of what is known, knowledge which informs people's responses, and by storying ways in which people of significance in mothers' lives could have access to living stories and antenarratives, it is possible to generate ideas for ways in which storytelling methods, and different constructions, can inform research and policy to be discussed in the next chapter.

If grand narratives of poverty, lack and struggle were to be instrumental in predicting a future for Shelley, the onus would rest upon Shelley to change her future according to the expectation of paid employment, a burden already endured by many women and without good effect in their lives. The actions, words and effects of individual case workers' would be deemed trivial and minimised, as well as the possible effects of agency policies and small cultural effects upon women, in favour of a "system" of policies, forms and rules which have been found to be of limited benefit in women's stories of their lives. My refusal to reinforce this grand narrative of what Shelley ought to do to improve her situation is a refusal to focus on the individual actions of mothers and blame them for their difficulty, a blaming which serves to distract people away from organizational structures and positions which undermine women's wellbeing.

In Shelley's story I have contextualised this symbolic universe, working at its edge, where the notion of individualism and self-reliance are troubled and faulty and where alternatives, seemingly small and unthreatening to the preservation of the current system, can be tinkered with. The use of a constructed vignette enabled me to pay

attention to spoken, unspoken, imagined, possible, not-yet-but-one-day, and even unlikely events (Vickers, 2012, p. 178). In this method of storying, a universal understanding of a total and complete narrative is neither possible nor preferred, so I have focused upon three related stories, each with sub-plots: the interaction between mother and welfare case worker, from the point of view of each, and a series of interactions between an older and younger woman, each with a contextual positioning and background. I have aimed to acknowledge and traverse the perspectives of different storytellers, actors and events.

In the next and final Chapter, I explore what some of these alternatives might mean in research, policy and everyday conversation. Bringing together the stories generated in Chapter Seven, the themes of interest to me and the revelations of mothers, along with the storying from this Chapter, I generate a discussion of the implications for these stories, in method and in meaning for mothers' lives.

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## Chapter Nine

### Discussion and implications

#### Introduction

In Chapter Seven I wove my conversations with the women who participated in this research into a reconstructed conversation among an imagined small group of mothers devised to capture the cumulative insights my participants had shared with me. In Chapter Eight, I exercised a constructed vignette in a story with three scenes intended to demonstrate the use of antenarrative in storying transformative possibilities in families. Chapters Seven and Eight exercise alternative pathways to new plotlines not recognisable in the dominant discourse about lone mothers I reviewed in Chapter Six - a discourse so often iterating insufficiency, inadequacy, and the vulnerability of motherled households. I do not intend to diminish those 'also valid' depictions where they apply. In chapters Seven and Eight however, I bring to light stories of self-sufficiency, economic sufficiency, and social positioning as told by my participants.

Berger and Luckman (1966) regarded the construction of (perceived) social reality as an ongoing production that engages all. Their theories provided me with a platform to explore the impact of literature on sense-making by policy makers, practitioners, and other 'experts' as part of the formation of a taken-for-granted context. This thesis goes to the heart of what it might mean to know something, to regard statements as facts or truth – particularly about human identities. I focus on those phenomena or dynamics presented as facts in research work and everyday life including mothering. I am interested in the opportunities of such critical reflection for embedding or transforming what is (or could be) made known and thus what might be lifechanging in our everyday worlds. In this thesis, I have addressed what it means to be subjected in some way to the shaping effects of imposed truths and what it might mean to shape alternate understandings to currently dominant ways of being. These are expressed in the

everyday life of a community, as well as in research inquiries where the wellbeing of mothers, families, communities, humanity, and the planet are under consideration.

I begin this final Chapter by recounting my research intent and process – of reflecting, reading, and storying, to generate implications from this study. My self-reflection, my reading of the literature, and my conversations with participants and others, along with an enduring belief that activist research can potentiate new stories, indicates to me that all is not as well as it might be with the worlds in which mothers and their children are walking. The worlds I am speaking of include those in which we are asked to believe that those in motherled households deviate from what is deemed best for their families, by purported evidence in research literature and everyday conversation.

I forge insights gained from the storytelling, reading, and conversing palette I have created. I illustrate these insights to mirror the unfolding inquiry, beginning with an exploration of the reflexive significance for myself as a researcher and epistemologically-situated methodologist discussed in Chapters Two and Three. I move to highlight areas of significance for the grand narratives in my reviews of literature from Chapters Four and Five. I discuss implications for the mothers whose stories, the fieldwork of this project, were revealed in Chapters Seven and Eight. I discuss implications for those researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and governors whose work with mothers includes the exercise of knowledge under construction, among which mothers are situated.

### **Recalling the origin of the thesis: A living inquiry**

In Chapter Two I revealed the backdrop to my self-reflexive positioning of this inquiry. Finding myself and my children in my own motherled household, I set out to understand what this shift in status might mean for us. I had had many years of osmotic messages regarding the importance of a two-parent family for the thriving of children, the specific responsibility of mothers to secure the conditions for children to



thrive, and the importance of a father's daily presence in children's lives. I was drawn to the implications of my own changed situation, implications sensed in a much wider sense of 'the personal as political' aphorism of radical feminists. I had come to think that due to the issues which had disrupted my marriage and our family life, wellbeing for me and my children was now better in many ways, in a motherled household. The contradictions between my experience and my observations of the universe about me, with documented research and different facets of public conversation, were becoming more obvious.

My research intention developed into a quest to make sense of the perplexing gap between diverse constructed versions of the same phenomena. My eye was upon my own situation, with a growing depth of insight into the many women whose stories I had heard over many years in my work as a nurse and in my everyday life as a mother and friend; stories shared at bedsides, ward handovers, coffee groups, supermarket checkouts, and elsewhere. I made myself visible in this research believing that in any case I would be implicated, and wanting this to take place reflexively and in self-awareness. I also believe my loved ones might read and question my thesis, and I chose to openly and honestly reflect on my shifting position and feelings in relation to my family.

Putting my life under the microscope, I allowed for the possibility of transformation of my life and perhaps also the lives of those close to me. I chose methods of inquiry in which my experiences, which had generated the thinking and in turn my reading of literature and shaping of this study, were valuable. I chose methods that would generate responses to my emerging research question about how women in motherled households are constructed, and what possibilities exist for new tellings and diverse constructions. My positioning of self as my researcher positioning in the form of critical self-reflection and researcher reflexivity, was explicit and could be appropriately included in the generation of expanded understandings of wellbeing and family, with an autoethnographic vein. Due to my belief in this transformative potential of lived research inquiry, I considered my inquiry to be action-oriented research.

The literature I reviewed and the articulation of overly simplified attitudes I had heard shared in research, professional, and general conversations contribute to what Boje (2014) calls the emergence of a grand narrative, hardening over time into a petrified narrative, a singular account of a story which becomes normalised and naturalised as common sense or fact. This petrification was in keeping with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theorising of human everyday social practices which are constructed into what comes to be experienced as social reality, having been shaped by actors who might include specialists in news media commentary, advertising, cultural iconry, political policy, online news stories and social media feeds, and religious doctrine. In the discourses of family and of motherhood, these everyday practices may be (un)noticed and/or (un)consciously absorbed and enacted by mothers themselves.

In most of the literature I reviewed, single mothers and those for whom they care, are largely depicted as rather one-dimensional and vulnerable characters. Vulnerability can be compassionately or judgementally articulated in policy and in everyday speech. Frequently, those in motherled households are attributed an identity that degrades their humanity, undermining their achievements and potential while embedding a simplistic construction of people with which others, and they themselves, might implicitly or explicitly concur.

The constructions of people and knowledge woven in the research which I reviewed, continue to construct and define mothers, families and wellbeing. Yet they are not one-way constructions without opportunities for those under constructions to shape them, as this chapter explains. My recognition of social construction as a manipulating, manipulated force in positing comparisons, categories and numbers as "truth", encouraged me adopt an interpretivist scope and method of inquiry into the processes of 'meaning making', and the fabrication of categories that are vested with meaning. I chose interpretive meaning-making rather than attempting to record some 'evidence' to support preconceived grand narratives about families and those within. My noticing of grand narratives in my reading of current studies which shaped wellbeing in families

of different stripes, narratives incorporating good and bad mothers, good and bad families, risk and peril to children, indicated to me an ongoing influence of earlier studies, lurking behind the academic research I was now reading. I based my problematising of certain attitudes and methods in research, upon the promulgation of values issuing from early-20<sup>th</sup>-century origins of research about families and wellbeing. I argued that these attitudes and methods are still visible and effective in influencing current studies of wellbeing, and studies about life in families including motherled households.

Encountering the reflection of contemporary academic literature and everyday media in these limited, petrified grand narratives, I troubled the categorisation of women, differentiated by their marital status as single, married or divorced. I troubled the categorisation of families, as single-parent or two-parent. My participants described how they encounter complex, shifting arrangements in which they do not see themselves belonging in one category or another. Some participants wished to avoid being categorised and stereotyped in certain ways; they resist and refuse titles that might be used to define them. I reflected on the problems of categorisation in the following journal entry:

***Researcher journal: Wednesday 11 February, 2015***

*Women in this study made nothing of their motherled household before this study was proposed. Some mothers are doing it without a partner, some with one child and some with four, some with a part time job, some without, and some with a highly paid career. Some have supportive grandparents and neighbours, and some have nobody at all. But, having a partner or not, being a motherled household or a two-parent household, seems to be driven by just one of many variables.*

I critiqued the comparisons which accompanied these categorisations. Comparisons formed by the gathering of data focused upon measurement and categorisation such as that on which many studies are premised, label some families as deficient. I

encountered a widespread implication made in such comparisons and measurements, that people in such families would enjoy better wellbeing in a two-parent household.

In this thesis, framed in relation to the theory of social construction, I posit that all research inquiry, including that relating to mothers, children and wellbeing in their households, is seen to be situated in a context of time, place, and discourse made available by dominant voices holding narrative power. I propose that all inquiry is necessarily shaped by somebody - with values and experiences of their own, and a reflected agenda made possible within a socio-politico-economic context and a set of guiding research values. My methods followed this reasoning, in which insights gained are reliant upon the researcher making explicit the context in which knowledge, including research knowledge, and researcher identity with all that this implies is always under construction. My study of the construction of (perceived) social reality as an ongoing process that engages all, provided the platform to explore the impact of literature on sense-making by policy makers, experts as part of the formation of a 'taken-for-granted', against which aberrations could be articulated, and those actors marginalised. Berger and Luckmann (1966) propose that "deviant versions" of symbolic universe are adopted by particular inhabitants of alternatives; such 'deviants' might include those who are marginalized and made aware of this, and those who are conscientized (in the words of Freire) into understanding their positionality in the symbolic universe. Stories told in particular ways, Boje (2014) argues, might generate different possibilities. This report documents my contribution to such storytelling.

## **Recalling fieldwork design and method**

I chose deep conversations with six women as the centrepiece for my research. I believed that this small group would enable me to focus closely on each story. I anticipated that I could address the need for rigor demanded of researchers of any methodological persuasion in the form of quality of stories that were 'fit for purpose'. I *intended* to make meaning *with my participants*. I contrast this 'purposive meaning

making' with positivist aspirations to record or depict aspects of the world. In such works significance value is placed on 'accuracy' of the recording and reporting in order to validate representation or replicability. The more similarities in ever bigger numbers of examples, the closer a work might be deemed to supporting truth claims. My readiness to make sense of living-story variability, and to disengage from the adage of greater reliability with a larger number of participants, enabled me to witness and participate in the making of meaning and to exercise living story methods with a small number of participating mothers with whom I conversed.

The mothers who participated in conversation with me talked of financial insufficiencies. These constraints were shaped in the literature as deficiencies, exacerbated in particular ways in the lives of lone mothers and single parent families. The women stated they felt alone and isolated sometimes, and would like more shared responsibility with others in caring for their children. Their comments chimed with aspects of reports of social stress indicated in the literature in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The vulnerability these mothers articulated was not of their choosing; rather, they found it bestowed by the construction and narration of stereotypes about women that were pervasive and persistent in their world. They storied financial strain and social isolation as challenges, yet in nuanced, complex, and multifactorial ways neglected in research. They told of saving money, prioritising spending, distributing scant income in many areas, and repurposing items for increased use. Their stories of were energising and satisfying to hear, even though they demonstrated a lack of equity or social justice in the society these women are embedded in.

The mothers who joined me in conversation characterised themselves as responsible, caring, and purposeful actors. They storied themselves as intentional and strong, as parents who knew, understood and met their children's needs well, and better in many situations, than they had in their dual-parent families. I could find no research literature that reflected this, and I suggest this forms a thread for future inquiry. The mothers were reluctant to imagine life back in their former household. Several expressed fears they might now be dead or incarcerated somewhere, had they not left behind their

stressful (or damaging or degrading) situations to choose life in a motherled household. Mothers recognised the shaping effects of stereotypes and everyday conversations about lone parents as pervasive and limiting to them and their children. Yet they resisted and rejected, in their telling of themselves, the limited, stereotypical implications of their motherled households as dysfunctional, incomplete, or unwell. These were stereotypes resonating with the mothers in everyday conversation and news reportage, and stereotypes which I noticed in social science and health literature, economic and family-focused policy, and research situated in the constructions of wellbeing I articulated in Chapter Four. The women shared stories unavailable in grand narratives recounted in the literature about wellbeing in families.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social reality is generated among actors. To examine their proposition, the storytelling intention I had envisaged at the outset of my research led me to form and weave in excerpts of many narratives, to create a semi-fictional story. This appeared as a constructed vignette in three scenes, including different characters and varying details. The story enabled the exploration of many aspects of women's stories without unwittingly exposing to view the mothers who, over years, had informally shared their stories with me, as well as those stories from participants. With pieces of real events in them, woven together, I acknowledged, in part, the many women whose stories have informed and shaped my inquiry over many years. Stories of the people in Chapter Eight depicted some of those actors such as the realty agent and the Work and Income caseworker, Jeff.

The "different voice" termed by Gilligan (1982) and used by myself and participants in talking about our lives, had been taken up by such vanguard feminist thinkers as Belenky (1986) and Oakley (1981). Motherhood through a radical feminist lens had been given expression by scholars such as Adrienne Rich (1976), Patricia Hill Collins (2007) and more recently, Andrea O'Reilly (2012). Now I faced the same dominant patriarchal narratives, in the guise of positivism, in the valuing of human life and our potential to thrive. The enriched insight generated from the form of 'reporting' in stories, as I have done, might be usefully extended to gathering and telling complex

stories of and by nurses, teachers, social workers, bank managers, property agents, and mothers themselves.

### **Limitations of this inquiry**

As I reflect on the limits of this study for participants, research inquiry, and for my own developing scholarship, I address the issues from within and from outside of my chosen research paradigm. In my thesis, vested in research values of a less dominant mode than commonly-invested positivist values, such markers of research quality as validity, replicability, and rigor can be understood as themselves the products of social construction. In the section that follows, I reflect upon tenets of quality in research, which are deliberately geared to an intricate, qualitative study such as this one. I recall aspects of the study in which complexities such as over-involvement or manipulation of conversation excerpts might be deemed risks, addressing each of these possible limitations.

### **Reflections on validity as meaning-full and generative**

In Chapter Three I expressed my interest in a study in which traditional positivist markers were going to be inadequate to evaluate the worth of my inquiry. I offered no commitment to a study that would be repeatable by another researcher or group of women, or a study in which the stories told could be generalised to reflect the lives of all mothers. I defended my theoretical and methodological orientations, and my chosen methods, as rigorous for my intentions. These were to explore constructions of mothering through the stories told by mothers themselves, and to extend my activist intent by emphasising storying as a valuable research pursuit in the generation of possibilities for mothers and children. The insights gained here are not intended to apply in general to all mothers and families, or even to all motherled households. Yet the transferability of my inquiry might extend to others who seek to ‘make a difference’

or change their world. I include youth, women, people of colour, those who see themselves as marginalised. I include also those who may wish to address the privileges they take for granted, privileges that may impinge on the opportunities of others, privileges particularly embedded in such occupations as teachers, nurses, and relatively wealthy consumers of goods and services, and planetary provision for life.

I have not intended this study to be generalised to others. I have made use of stories from a comparatively small number of contributing participants, seven in total including myself. The participants themselves have verbalised the benefits of participation to them. In this study, I have achieved what I proposed; that is, together my participants and I have generated new stories of mother's lives through conversations with each other.

### **Conversation reconstruction**

My crafting of a method of conversation reconstruction in the form of a fabricated story may be open to question by those who claim that this partial fictionalisation meddles with the purity and original intent of women's stories. Grappling to legitimise repurposed conversation text into a new assemblage, I proceeded carefully for those who entrusted me with their stories. My intent was not to change women's words but to create a fruitful, creative method to present the insights gained from the conversations. I sent each participant a copy of the constructed conversation, inviting feedback. Two women responded in person, expressing their interest and excitement at what appeared to happen in the repositioning of their words and the enhanced understanding of their experiences placed side by side with others' stories. One woman emailed a positive response to me, and one woman returned a printed copy to me with areas of text circled and commented on in pencil, areas that she found evocative and moving to read. These responses were encouraging. At this stage of my work, I also contacted a colleague who had edited a collection of performance-ethnographic publications to which I had co-contributed a chapter (Lamdin Hunter & Dey, 2016a).



The editor was enthusiastic and positive about the prospect of a constructed conversation and the collegiality and support it implied. Her professional opinion was an opportunity to guide my representation, to vindicate as authentic the re-working of women's words even in a fictionalised fashion, and the veracity of this method research and its reportage.

### **Self-inclusion**

Inclusion of my personal stories in the thesis might be perceived as an unnecessary and untoward shaping of insights. The inclusion of my own story may be read as a distraction from the stories of participants, or a potentially harmful bias, or an overly egotistical or introspective approach for a researcher to adopt. These are concerns expressed by critics not familiar with the extensive work undertaken in the areas of autoethnography as espoused by Behar (1996), and by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) and expressed in the insightful auto-ethnographic work of Caroline Allbon (2012). My understanding of my personal identification and inextricability as researcher in my interpretation of and participation in the construction of social reality, drew me to self-disclosure in the work as a whole. My explicit experiences of the world as a mother and lone mother, and my professionally-founded insights as a nurse and educator, are intended to contribute my part in the direction of this inquiry. As such, my ongoing reflection on my personal involvement indicates the value of self-reflection for the generation of an original contribution to research methodology, and insights about family and mothering. My quest to include myself appropriately is amply addressed in Chapters Two, Three and beyond, in my centralising of my critically-reflexive positioning acknowledged, revealed and made explicit as a valid contribution to stories told. This is endorsed by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) and Griffith's (2009) reckoning of a careful positioning of self.

## **Participant inclusion**

The inclusion of women, some of whom came from fairly similar income and education levels, as participants, might be suspected to promote a skewed focus on aspects of their lives which are not common or 'representative' among many women, and might be seen as a denial of representation of women from other backgrounds. In studies of single mothers, stories of women living in material poverty and social struggle are dominant narratives. The women in my study were not these poor women. I recognised that no study can represent all women unless all women are studied. Authentic representation is ever questionable due to the influences that each researcher brings to the inquiry. I sought to question the very idea of representation in which categorisation of women can occur, holding that such categorisation is not beneficial. I rejected the hope of representing all women in order to represent each woman in this study authentically. This was ensured by inviting each woman to read and comment on or change her story as it appeared written, and by garnering feedback during the conversation regarding its usefulness to her.

My quest to produce a thesis with activist-oriented evidence of change or transformation in women's lives is arguable and subjectively judged. Each of the women spoke of what they would like to witness, or experience as a result of participating in this study. Their wishes are explored below in the context of wider implications for this research.

## **Implications of this inquiry**

In this part of the Chapter, I project my insights into implications for the future. Patrice DiQuinzio (1999) advocates mothers and those concerned with mothering, including researchers like myself, consider a 'paradoxical politics of mothering (which) would... recognise that it cannot offer a completely coherent and consistent position" (p. 360), in relation to issues which are problematic in the lives of mothers. My discussion of

implications at all levels of interest, for researchers, those in policy and practice with motherled families, and mothers, is by no means exhaustive.

I highlight a range of ideas grounded in research methodology, policy and practice with families, and directions for mothers including those within my study. I situate myself, as researcher and mother, as someone who will soon leave this study and move on in all aspects of my life as possibility for inquiry, as suggested by Marshall (1999). I situate these implications as a closing part of the constructed conversation, guided by the women whose stories bring this study to life.

### **Implications for research inquiry: Positivism and social construction**

I am back in conversation with the group of mothers. Our time will soon draw to a close. I look around me at several thoughtful faces, on whom silence rests, and voice my last question. “What difference do you think this type of research could actually make?”

Pam starts. “Good qualitative evidence that motherled households are the epitome of wellbeing... If all the other evidence shows that we are financially disadvantaged and that things are harder, wouldn't it be nice to demonstrate that we can do a great job of raising happy, balanced children... and that we as mothers feel satisfied with our lot and empowered and capable.”

Bindi speaks next. “That it would be published, nationally and internationally... for people to understand a little more about what it's like and so that some of the stigma of single mums - you know, the “solo mum” and the mystery of that perhaps, would be eliminated.”

The spoken stories of intentionality, purpose, strength and resilience verbalised in conversations in this research, lead me to establish my intention to contribute to

research focused on the strengths and stories of wellbeing embodied by those in mother-led households.

Irina makes a suggestion. “I think it could potentially throw a different light on single-parent mothers single-parenting children. There could be aspects of resilience that have been undervalued so far; that yes - it is hard, a lot of the literature says there is great disadvantage to these children - but what does the literature say about children who have grown up in single parent families and become successful? And very often for the mothers as well is the kind of limping behind a socially constructed ideal of mother-father-children... that particular culture of single mothers, managing, is undervalued in society. And under-researched. So we might cast a different light on it.”

Addressing the processes of social construction provides ways to understand how what is taken-for-granted in certain circumstances is embedded in social norms. I argue that this occurs prior to the arrival of those actors who are subsequently influenced by these socially- pre-fabricated realities. Yet, they are not ‘water-tight’ ways of being. Conscious attention to the continuities and contradictions provides opportunities for a change in the trajectory of our humanity. Social constructionist thought offers a useful starting point to re-examine statements made as fact, presented as reality, and believed as truth, by noticing such statements as time-specific, place-specific, and useful to the participants.

Wellbeing research illustrates institutional cultures in which quantification, measurements, and overly simplified questions contribute to truncated statements and understandings. Guiding values in such inquiry include a propensity to rely upon positivist precepts and the power of quantification to fully represent subjective reality. Family-oriented inquiry naturalises nuclear family structures and blunt, binary constructions of mothers. Even ‘qualitative’ studies claiming to rely upon participants’ subjective realities are underpinned by positivist research values promulgating an external, measurable reality. Reliance upon empirical and externally-evident research findings posed by apparently value-neutral researchers, are limiting to women and

children. A renewal is needed in research methodologies which problematise positivist assumptions in social, contextual research. I hope to contribute to inquiry in which standpoints about truth, facts, and reality are recognisable as particular fabrications that are time- and place-specific, contextual and subject to negotiation.

### **Categorising humanity: Implications for people in families, in research and policy**

Categorisations of those in motherled households according to criteria based upon numbers such as dollars earned or hours worked in paid employment, or the presence of a male adult in a household, remain dominant in grand narratives constructing mothers and families. Categories are utilised in policies intended to create order by assembling people into groups to facilitate and govern decisions affecting their lives. In Chapter Seven, mothers highlighted their discomfort at being categorised as single mothers. I reflected on their noticing, in the following journal entry:

#### ***Researcher journal: Saturday 17 May, 2014***

*Women don't identify themselves according to the labels with which research studies, policies or organisations define them, even though such policies and organisations limit their lives according to such categorisations. Participants feel like they are the same woman doing the same job as they were or would be in a two-parent household. These women do life in a complex constellation of socioecological factors including number/gender/spacing/personality of children, income level, work/employment/study, housing, relationship issues/status, previous family history and so on. To pick out women for being 'single parents' is of limited benefit. Perhaps we might interview mothers of 'only' children and think that this will tell you something about mothers or about how these mothers are different or interesting compared with other mothers. Likewise, we wouldn't expect 'only child' mothers in the study to represent all only-child mothers, nor would we write policy based on these mothers, but: we would want this to contribute to policy for parents, of many or one child.*

Mothers in this study also reiterated what Pool, Dharmalingam and Sceats (2007), and also Silva (1996) notice: when mothers and families move from one situation to another, such as when they remarry, the difficulty in shifting them from one group to another renders categories unwieldy and problematic. The exclusion of people under classification also potentially isolates them from others facing similar issues elsewhere, with marginalising and potentially diminishing effects.

The categorisations I encountered in my literature reviews, conversations, and personal life emerge from constructions of mothers and children, as isolated, competing individuals, even within families. Use of biological apparatus to govern women furthers a grand narrative of mothering, which isolates, pressures, and diminishes mothers. This biological, patriarchal basis also excludes many others who would enact mothering and contribute to wellbeing in families, such as some of the support people introduced and storied in Chapters Seven and Eight. In the following journal entry, I reflect on my own growing discomfort at the use of categories to group and govern people:

***Researcher journal: Friday 19 June, 2015***

*I wanted to be an insider, to belong and be part of the community of lone mothers, to experience the solidarity of other women who were struggling for their families, women with whom I could relate. But what I came to realise is that there were many similarities in my life as a 'married woman' previously, compared with my life in a motherled household, and contrasts between both of those – but similarities also – with my life as a married woman. I felt so uncomfortable writing this. Perhaps I could see how rickety and damaging the categories were, how ultimately meaningless. So, how could I ever sum anything up, or 'know', or be sure? How had our world come to depend so wholeheartedly upon categorical constructs, which were so empty, and by attaching meaning to them, still meaningless? What of those who did not 'fit'? My husband and I experienced an acute discomfort at the presence of categories in our evolving relationship, when we were 'together' but not living together as 'husband and wife'. We bumped about in limbo for several years. There were no useful guides or*

*guiding qualities for how often we would see one another, where each of us would live, how this would work with the children and with our finances and with each of our needs, which sometimes collided with each other's. We lived in this uncomfortable not-belonging space, people around us scratching their heads, not understanding us, not able to fit us into a category on paper or in their minds.*

Categories adopted by those who write policy, perform research, and advocate for equity between people, are difficult to avoid. Analyses of narratives of wellbeing, and constructions of families, have come to rest upon categorisations and comparisons deemed necessary in proposing solutions in people's lives which are 'evidence-based', 'cost-effective', and 'fair' or 'equitable'. When people are made to appear in/as a group, a renewed, reiterative, and continuing constructive process determines their positioning. The group might contain. The container may constrain. What of those who don't 'fit' in the container or value the constraint? Categorisations of families contribute to constructions in research. Researchers instrumentalise inquiry in ways which discipline women and children to exist and remain in particular social configurations known as two-parent families, under threats of policymakers touting economic wellbeing or social support.

The categories of family type and marital status applied in research are imbued, not inherent, with meanings which carry blunt, homogenising effects that are degrading to some (while privileging others) as they foster stereotypes which are degrading. Yet those who care about and for, families and those within, find categorisation practically unavoidable. Acts of categorisation should be recognised as a constructive, iterative act, to be acknowledged, and critiqued, by those who impose limits of the category and interrupted with more generative antenarratives.

The critique and interruption which I have sought in this study leads me to posit that women and children in motherled households are not merely to be considered a population, defined by category/classification given meaning in research and policy. The mothers who participated in this study, embodied and storied many unique

variances, in terms of available support, number, age, gender and age gaps of children, difficulty of parenting experience, income, type of employment, home ownership, and support. Each story was a unique landscape. Even in such a comparatively small group, and with so many supposed commonalities among them, the differences between each woman render their collective categorisation an arbitrary process. Each provide the insight for a different kind of (ante) narrative. Their stories that have intrinsic value and resonate with potentiality to transform the trajectory of our humanity in hopeful ways.

Engaging with Berger and Luckmann (1966), Gergen (2015), and Burr (2015), I realised a fundamental shift in thinking where no categorisation could or should be as concrete and as deterministic as had been posited by those whose research I reviewed. The making and imposition of categories might initially be acceptable as a contribution to our identities as mothers or workers in our sense-making of ourselves as constructed beings. When such categorisation begins to undermine humanity, dignity or wellbeing, we might seek to remove ourselves from the identity, and seek to affiliate with other categories. However, when categorisation itself is realised as an issue, rather than a particular category, the dilemma becomes visible to researchers. The dilemma concerns those mothers, families, and their children, for whom the confines of the category, continuing unabated, legitimised, and unchallenged, are arguably harmful.

### **Comparison: Cautions for those in research and policy**

My growing critique of the institutionalised reliance - of individuals, families, researchers, policymakers, helpers and agencies - upon categories to classify people, spread to my problematising of comparisons of one person or one family with another. Even in a small group of women, comparisons among them were problematic, as I stated in my journal:

*Researcher journal: Wednesday 20 May, 2015*



*I realised, during conversations, how variable each of us was in my small group, and how non-comparable everything is, and how everything just is what it is - but how can I say that! What then will I have to say! Who can I claim to speak for?*

*How can I claim to speak when my circumstances are so much different from so many women in motherled households? And, given that each woman's situation is so different, how can I truly represent a group of women when each is so different from each other?*

I then wrote:

***Researcher journal: Friday 19 June, 2015***

*What is not apparent in the literature about motherled households, is that we are not static or moving simply from one set of 'married' circumstances to another 'single' set of circumstances. Women's situations evolve over many years, through separation, parenthood, child-rearing, jobs and home life, study and employment, new relationships, perhaps remarriage, and all sorts of combinations and permutations. The complexity and individuality of each person's journey can never be fully grasped, or one person's journey meaningfully compared with another's.*

Research studies such as those I have reviewed, featuring particular side-by-side comparisons of wellbeing of individuals, and families, invite conclusions to be drawn about families, mothering and wellbeing. These comparisons minimise unique nuances of difference between apparently similar families. Conversely, a lack of meaningful discussion into the commonalities that apparently-different mothers share, denies a useful gendered analysis of experiences of partnered life.

The categorising and comparison of mothers in one- and two-parent households, with no acknowledgement of how the situations of women and families shift over time, is perceptible to me as a false dichotomising of women's experience in a way similar to that documented by Douglas and Michaels (2004). They map a media-fabricated power play through the assignment of mothers of dependent children to one of two groups

who have been positioned in media and everyday conversation, as opponents - the ‘Stay at Home Moms’ and the ‘Working Mothers’. Presentation of these two groups in popular media as rigid, permanent and discrete from one another denies the complexity and malleability of mothers’ lives. Separating women into opposed groups in media headlines and articles, serves to create an atmosphere of conflict depicted as something akin to a ‘cat fight’ between women. This atmosphere enables the discounting of any commonalities, which women in both groups might share. Commonalities might include unfair distribution of unpaid work and responsibility for children, whether partnered or single, and a gendered incidence of economic instability and inequality, whether partnered or single.

The separation of people from one another by blunt comparisons, alienates mothers from others facing similar issues elsewhere. In current contexts of work, family life, and gender research, the issues described by mothers in this study are not unique to those in motherled households. In such reasoning, the supposed dichotomies between mothers and ‘childless women’ can also be troubled in order to allow for the acknowledgement of the many caring, nurturing relationships that women ‘without children’ engage in. I return to my statement in the opening paragraph of this thesis. There I proposed that all women are defined by their status as mother, whether they are mothers or not. There are disciplinary connotations that are situation specific: not having children might be seen as a ‘good thing’ for career-focussed women, numerous dependents as a worry to a prospective employer; no children a social aberration.

O’Reilly (2010) states that the persistent gendering of mothering is responsible for the continued entrenchment and disadvantage of women in constructions rendering them as the only proper carer for their children. She posits the solution as a shift in the verbage of “mother”, from noun describing one female, biologically related person, to verb describing the care and work done by anyone under such a guise. Only as mother becomes a gender-neutral verb, can parenting become more equally shared among persons of any gendered identification, visible and palatable to others, O’Reilly (2010)

argues. My envisioning of such a developmental shift is yet tentative; yet a worthy philosophical interest post-doctorally.

### **Storytelling research**

My utilisation of storytelling methodologies leads me to consider further projects in which expression is given to aspects of lived life, which cannot be usefully examined under categories of classification or positivist rationale. Storytelling, including the reconstructed conversations and constructed vignettes I have employed, enable a deep, close focus upon that which is meaningful to participants, instead of a check-list approach, often favoured by researchers and funders. Storytelling methodologies are useful for those wishing to engage with activist, action-oriented and participatory action research-related inquiries, offering potentially unexamined and unproposed futures and ways forward to be generated. Research projects which are small, 'boutique', nuanced, qualitative, have a place in valuing of people's stories as they tell them, and not as grand narratives draw them.

The orientation of Berger and Luckmann (1966) to the process of meaning-making in this thesis, has enabled me to re-review the limited ideas expressed in wellbeing literature. These ideas contribute to the selective solidification into patterns of policy-enabled, policy-directed, or policy-constrained practices which normalise, habitualise, routinise, and institutionalise how mothers, children, and families, should be viewed and addressed. The pervasiveness of these ideas appears to naturalise a particular form of social reality supported by a wider meaning-making story, against which those who disrupt or challenge the story, are then judged. Living stories are useful methods to enable contributions to policy (on workplace and politics), public conversations about, by and for families, and research into organisational studies and feminism. Contributions of research toward policy, including social, economic and workplace or employment policy, or policies of taxation, health and education provision, are

potentially hopeful to me. ‘Big’ studies of longitudinal, statistical or quantitative research content, might be reimagined in order to embrace living stories.

Parts of the *Growing Up in New Zealand* studies discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis highlight verbatim pieces of story told by the families who are included in the studies. Enabling such stories disseminated in storytelling research to contribute to policy about, by, and for families, political policy, workplace policy, health and education policy, is one desired outcome of this project. Foci might include those policies concerning family law, day to day care of children, childcare provision, family support, financial assistance, paid work, access to healthcare, access to education, and taxation. Storying can help to inform the writing of policies, protocols for engaging with families in forms as yet unrealised; governance of workplace law such as leave policies; and flexible workplace policies. Living stories which reimagine ways forward by those who implement the policy, perhaps including teachers, case workers, telephone operators, health practitioners, managers, public servants and frontline workers, are possible.

Storytelling may not be considered relevant, accessible, or a priority, to some of the actors who together give substance to an influential grand narrative with its embedded disciplinary effects. Reliance upon material generated by government department caseworkers, census-takers, or researchers in the ‘main’ persists. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), the continued dehumanisation of (antenarrative) alternatives to institutionalised constructions of reality, as not-to-be-taken seriously, or the assimilation of alternate realities as system-preserving adaptations which appear tolerant of, but avoid giving consideration to antenarrative constructions, reinstate hegemonic control, dampening and removing threats to the socially-constructed and maintained symbolic universe.

Boje’s view of the antenarrative potential in finding and telling the fragments of living story counters the rather mechanical processes of social construction with new possibilities. The acknowledgement of humans as more than isolated individuals,

opens the way for those in decision-making and governing positions to establish and embrace connections between those such as family members, families and local organisations including schools or workplaces. The legitimisation of connection invites a consideration of policies affecting workplaces, schools, and childcare systems, intended to validate human interrelationships and connections for parents and children such as those in my study. This might potentially encourage forms of support, useful for those in motherled households. Women should be recognised and supported in all work including parenting and paid work. It must be made possible for both forms of work to be not less conflictual – but mutually enhancing. The “obligation for working mothers (which) is a very precise one: the feeling that one ought to work as if one did not have children, while raising one’s children as if one did not have a job” (Crabb, 2014, p. 11) needs to be addressed, not only by mothers, and not only for those in motherled households.

DiQuinzio (1999) addresses the issues faced by a large number of mothers who are in paid work while also responsible for children and mothering. She envisages a ‘paradoxical politics of mothering’ and the generation of new ways for communities to care for children, “challenging employers, schools, local communities, and other institutions to respond to the needs of mothers and other child rearers employed for pay” (p. 249). She recommends discarding mothering within individualist subjectivities, and discarding “a univocal, coherent, and exhaustive position on mothering” in favour of “multiple and overlapping positions of resistance to individualism and essential motherhood” (p. 248), understanding that coherence and consistency is impossible.

The vulnerable positioning of those whose stories might be told, cautions me to be mindful of the risks taken by those who share their stories. To be vilified, taken out of context and misrepresented by sharing one’s story, is a situation faced by some whose stories appear in public domains. The continued subjugation of women and children makes storytelling a risky proposition. These risks should not be minimised, and

appropriate safeguards should be instated. Some may wish to wait or remain silent, and such wishes should be engaged with and ultimately respected.

### **Emerging inquiry in/on social media.**

Students of higher education and practice, read and retell research insights as facts or truths to underpin their professional actions. Those insights are sometimes disseminated as news stories with novel, truncated and overly simplified headlines. Small pieces of story, incomplete and fragmented, are increasingly normalised in dissemination of insights. Developments in research in, and about, social media as a storytelling facility are a worthy direction for future development, according to Wilson, Gosling and Graham (2012). Accessible living stories in social media are conduits to engagement of readers in ways that potentiate multidimensional and multi-layered tales. In examples by Shearer (2014) and in New Zealand, blogger and author Emily Writes (2017), little stories are infused into the public realm on Facebook and Twitter feeds, and in blog spaces. These offer interruptions to hegemonic grand narratives and provide opportunities for antenarrative and alternative stories. The current mode of professional education could do more to trouble rather than embed current categories of their focus – or to find ways to step away from the assumptions of the categories and treat each human before them as unique persons with values and concerns particular to them.

### **Feminist inquiry**

Inquiry in feminist orientations is useful for shaping research methodologies in which mothering and notions of family, are central. In my conversations with mothers, and reading of literature concerning women's experiences as mothers, the persisting, driving disadvantages faced by women in practically every area of life are visible. Subjugation wrought by continued sexism, judgements about intellectual capacity and

work habits, and a pervading minimisation of such oppressions faced by females across age and place are among the challenges. Many of the concerns mothers express, for survival and flourishing, are concentrated within patriarchal systems, characterised worries such as income insecurity/insufficiency, isolation, work-family conflict, lack of access to services to support wellbeing (such as publicly available goods for thriving like decent housing, transport, healthcare, education). In these systems, those mothers who notice and resist forms of patriarchy in their motherled household are admonished in policy and public discourse.

Many interpretations and narratives adopted by feminists, regard a supposed trajectory of women towards emancipation, justice, and wellbeing in liberal feminist terms, exist. An anthology of essays edited by Chesler and McGovern (2016) includes calls for renewed focus upon human rights mechanisms to improve access and wellbeing for women and girls in literature by Eliasson (2016) and Jain (2016). However, others in this collection including Bunch and Carillo (2016), and Chavkin (2016), critique a lack of improvement in women's safety and wellbeing within liberal frameworks. Calas and Smircich (2008) critique feminist scholarship in fields of organisation, proposing that little improvement in women's life conditions can be seen over the past two decades. They assert that feminist ideals are useful to discussions of globalisation. They posit that those under subjection continue to be women, commonly. The authors ask, specifically, "[H]ow are our theories and our practices complicit in producing the elite masculinities of global capitalism? What gendered, raced, sexed, classed relational practices articulate the restructuring of the world economy? How are we all implicated in the production and reproduction of abject poverty and its other (obscene wealth)?" (p. 360).

My understanding of hegemony in disciplinary outworkings in women's lives, has drawn me to the work of feminist writers whose positing of patriarchy drew me to a radical position in which the economic dependence and social alienation of mothers, seen as the conditions for oppression, is entwined with biology. Radical feminists postulate that the identity of women is tied to their reproductive capacities (O'Reilly,

2007). The necessary relationship between mother and baby renders mothers dependent, and independence impossible under patriarchy. A more nuanced, gendered analysis of agency, oppression, and power is needed in conversation and inquiry concerned with families. Such analyses might take place under the umbrella of radical feminist inquiry in which partnered women's trials might be discussed, or conversations between women of one- and two-parent households included, to add depth to the stories of women within partnership and without.

### **Implications for mothers**

Forms of consciousness-raising might be considered by mothers like myself, in which we revive and address the stories told by and about us. Raven et al. (2003) position consciousness-raising as part of a continuum along which individuals might build their confidence to assert for change, by joining with others and then grouping to use collective voice to "broaden support and created needed change" (p. 33) along the way to charge those in decision-making positions to add support or implement changes. The role of decision-makers in change in policy is discussed below.

Returning to the women in our conversation, Irina speaks to an idea of valuing time set aside for mindful consideration of one's life, which is, particularly for lone mothers, restricted or even impossible. "It's good to actually... have to sit down and have to think about it... It might be a sense of security; it might be a sense of regained emotional and financial independence... It might be a subtle moment of the whole 24-hour day and that subtle moment brings value to the day... I think that's the hidden aspect of wellbeing... a lot of that is hidden and only seen in the eye of the beholder, the person who is sitting in it." She pauses, and then continues. "I think these conversations just remind me daily that yes, I'm working full time, yes, I'm doing a Masters, but hey I need to make time. Every day, consciously. It's not how long, it's the conscious, it's the conscious aspect of sitting with him, how was your day, tell me



one thing that was really good today. And to build this into a daily practice of being mindful and I think that's the essence."

Irina's awareness prompts me to seek to support the sites and activities, online and in person, where mothers do take stock and consider their lives; be it in cafes, blogsite comments, and social media threads or pages.

### **Research diversity and culture**

Rene speaks next. "I would like the research to be bicultural, to have a Māori influence, so that it gives more weight to your research. There's so much western views but there's very little Māori views or non-western views."

Rene's standpoint leads me to reflect again upon contemporary inquiry practices inherited from traditions of conservative, colonial, positivist research ancestors. These studies appear infused with contemporary versions of positivist, colonial influences, evident in the structure, questions and results. Influence is expressed in the political views of writers, funders and sponsors, questions asked of participants, wording of study titles, and distribution of results, sometimes to those influencing policy, subtly portraying an image of any family other than a white, heterosexual, father-led two-parent family as incomplete, deficient or deviant. The influence of researchers, institutions, and increasingly, corporate sponsors, guide research directions. I propose that certain moral agendas, performed with positivist methodologies, might produce corresponding study results embedded in conservative gender values and neo-traditional "family values". These aspects are problematic to those in motherled households, who experience their socially constructed meaning, in diminishing ways. Those who claim an interest in the intensely complex, personal, and subjective aspects of wellbeing, and families, must challenge themselves, I suggest, to notice their own guiding principles and personal values, and make these explicit. The omission of researcher reflexivity, I propose, undermines research rigor. Raven, Rivard, Samson

and VanderPlaat (2003) agree, urging researchers and organisational members purporting to help families to adopt reflexive approaches to remove attention from “the behaviour of marginalised populations and look at others in terms of how they contribute to marginalisation” (p. 21). Understanding that researchers shape the research they produce, researchers should be careful, reflexive and self-critical in their work, with implications for how they and others might be educated towards a much humbler sense of expertise, but a more open sense of co-enquiry, with those they are mandated to serve. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this includes bicultural, kaupapa-Māori-led research, and research that embraces Māori models of wellbeing and of storytelling (Smith, 2012).

### **Implications for policy for those in motherled households**

Rene speaks again. “The best outcome I could expect from this research would be for the government to hear what has been written in this research and to lighten up and to give us some breathing space financially, whichever way it happens... not overloading us with more paperwork, and three monthly reviews, and yearly reviews and this and that. That’s ridiculous, you know, it’s unbelievable, they’re just crippling us at the knees.” She adds, “It might give an insight to those that aren’t from single parents...? It will give them an insight in academia... but proposals and recommendations to local and to the government would make a huge difference for us...”

The injudicious use of research, including unwieldy policies and forms of governance and surveillance enforced by blunt governmental measures, while intended to ‘prove’ need on the part of particular targeted families, can be a concern. I have critiqued recommendations by the Welfare Working Group reporting to the Ministry of Social Development (2012) in Chapter Six, and storied this problem in Chapter Eight. Rene speaks to these measures of surveillance and reporting, and the lived effects in her family. Current government requirements for maternal employment, a job of any kind, give expression to a quest by some in government toward improved wellbeing and thus

a better, more decent society. Policy appears based upon studies where women in work demonstrate better social connections compared with those not in paid work and less material hardship than those reliant on government support. This policy indicates a failure to acknowledge the intricacies of types of work performed by mothers, and the deep contributions of textured aspects of family life such as childcare, ages and stages of children, and involvement of supportive others.

Policy between institutions where children and adults attend, such as workplaces, employment policy and school policies are a relevant direction for future research inquiry affecting the wellbeing of those in families. The validation of connection between people, and between people and organisation would require resourcing and funding for involved parties. The diminishment of publicly-administrated organisation, in schools and health services, in favour of private interests, is a matter of concern which I return to later in this chapter. Reductions in public resourcing are seen in rising levels of inequality at a national and global level, and experienced by families in New Zealand such as those with lone parents. In places such as New Zealand, characterised by intensifying inequality, improvements are needed, to support those living with income and economic insufficiency. One current proposal being discussed in social media concerns the prospects of some form of universal basic income. Assuring motherled households of more robust levels of basic provision might go some way to tackle the poverty of income described in the literature, and mentioned by women in this study.

### **Troubling individualistic thinking**

I have already called attention to individualising constructions of people as atomised, independent, and competitive beings even as they are selectively herded into policy-supporting categories. In my experience and in the stories told by mothers, humans are not discrete beings, yet are depicted and embedded in this way in many studies and policies, including those I reviewed. A contradiction is evident to me, between the

deep connections between many humans, and not merely mothers and their children, and a taken-for-granted human ideal in which humans are self-serving individuals with no supposed connections to others. Human interdependence has been obscured by generations of venerating the heroic individual, required to compete for the means of life through an intensifying capitalist influence on the very shaping of society, families, and the very identities of the people whose relationships with each other then give substance to those values. This narrative of human life as a private and individualistic affair, even permeates those in groups as taken-for-granted as families, in the literature. This contradiction became a particular focus in publications I and a colleague co-wrote (Lamdin Hunter & Dey, 2015a, 2015b). We explored mothers' quests to privately manage all aspects of family food provision - planning, shopping, cooking, clean-up and disposal - "backwards and in high heels" (Thaves, 1982, cited in Lamdin Hunter & Dey, 2015a, p. 110). Positing a neoliberal contextualising of issues faced in families as private problems with private market-provided solutions, we proposed the persistent direction of much policy in neoliberal directions, as an obstacle to collective transformation.

### **Individualism and neoliberalist values**

Individualistic constructions of mothers and children contribute to directing and underpinning national and global policies of governance in directions, which, over time, entrench neoliberal values at the cost of human wellbeing. Neoliberalist thought contributes to policies that are limiting to the wellbeing of those in families, including (but not only) motherled households. A continued critique of this would strengthen alternatives that address the limitations highlighted. The limited depictions of women vested with duties of care and discussed in everyday conversations (conversations that might be compassionate or patronising or socially degrading or disciplinary), are right now exacerbated in view of the neo-liberal context from which I write. I propose that the most contemporary form of patriarchal rule is visible in a market-driven [de]valuing of humans, their work, relationships and surroundings. Neoliberal stances used to

eschew state involvement or support in raising children, support dwindling even in families on straitened budgets such as those of one earning adult, are assumed in much research touting the value of two adults in a preferred household family structure. The public provision of services to support families short on time, money and capacity, is not a popular topic as governments such as that in New Zealand seek to remove themselves from public policy and social provision of goods and services for wellbeing and leave such provisions to a profit-focused market.

The rational, post-Enlightenment ideal promoted in OECD jurisdictions and applied to all of those within, continues a concerted spread across the world, with some egregious effects, in ways deemed universally useful and indeed, necessary by those in charge of policy. I suggest that the tenets of neoliberalism – choice, user pays, rolling back the state, lack of public provision, and the notion of the competitive individual worker as outlined by Kelsey (1997), function poorly for families, mothers and children, particularly those in motherled households (Briar & O'Brien, 2003).

In my inquiry I have demonstrated the potential to disrupt/transform human ideals by the shaping of an activist research orientation useful for women and all others. A disruptive inquiry offers the potential for post-doctoral study to investigate how potentialities might play out in scenarios in which I have an interest – mothers and children, families, and nursing practice with families or educational practices with students, to name but a few. The embedded and taken for granted entities of neoliberalism which appear objective, are arguably concepts or objectified relationships vested with particular values, judgements, and policy implications. Those reified terms 'the economy', 'families', 'level playing fields', 'the competitive individual', and 'mothers', are appropriated by neoliberal game-makers invested in promoting particular ways of being in which a reduced role of the state can pave the way for private interests to operate, for private wealth to accumulate, and for people to avert their gaze from the suffering of others. The values of self-sufficiency, independence, and individuality in the name of autonomy, are normalised enough to be

naturalised, even though they are inherently problematic for mothers and children (VandenBeld Giles, 2014).

Those in lobby groups and opposition political parties frequently ask governments in countries in the OECD, such as New Zealand's government, to consider policy recommendations offered in the name of family wellbeing. A recent and well-debated area of policy development concerns the provision of paid parental leave to childbearing families. In New Zealand, in 2012 and again in 2016, widespread public and cross-party political support, founded on research into infant and family health from several fields, was given to a paid parental leave bill intended to improve child and maternal wellbeing by offering 26 weeks paid parental leave to mothers of newborn babies. It was rejected as unaffordable. This power of veto is indicative of policies across the OECD which have been repeatedly requested by many members of the public, and refused by governments over many years, in countries including New Zealand and the USA. Douglas and Michaels (2004) tell of the Comprehensive Child Development Act (1971), poised to offer universally-available, funded, locally-run childcare in USA, and rejected at the very end by US President Nixon on the basis of conservative moral advice. Similar policies tabled and vetoed in America throughout the 1970s and since, continue to be suggested but are still rejected. In many parts of the world including supposedly rich OECD jurisdictions, mothers lack public recognition and robust policy aimed at supporting families with children.

Bindi raises the responsibilities placed upon families in her suggestion: "If more appropriate policy/practice/support could be given to single parent families... I think understanding goes a long way to helping people see that they're not - I'm not - bludging off the dole sitting on my bum watching soap operas all day eating chocolate biscuits; that I actually have a really good role here raising a family - that they're actually contributing to society raising their families!"

A future direction for my work includes investigations of alternatives to neoliberally-focused policies, in the disruptive tenet suggested above. Critique by those who

question the value of neoliberalist tenets, receives some critique in research, mainstream media and everyday conversation. The entrenchment of neoliberal capitalist ideals in Aotearoa New Zealand as in other parts of the OECD, is becoming more visibly connected to human and environmental degradation in the name of economic growth. Evidence by writers in activist veins, among them Scheper Hughes (1985), Waring et al. (1995) and most recently Korten (2015 and Klein (2016), leads me to a connection between socio-politico-economic relationships and ecological, environmental and even spiritual matters. My growing awareness of this plagued the construction of this chapter, visible in the following journal entry:

***Researcher journal: Friday 15 July, 2016***

*For the last month, some of what I have been reading in updating my literature review has quite literally, made me sick. So that last week I collapsed with a cold and fever, to lie in bed and feel sorry for myself. I could feel myself becoming down, depressed; I was aware that this is my low time of the year – the time when a couple of years running I got ‘postnatal’ depression. This year my gloom has been accompanied by outrage and anger. I am angry that one person, a mother, must be left to look after a handful of babies and small children, holding (quite literally) their lives in her hands, while the world goes about its business which excludes infants, those inconveniently dependent and inseparable-from-another beings who just don’t fit the model of the competitive rational actor. The mother in charge of children faces the ongoing dilemma of how to care for oneself and care for babies as well, how to meet all of their needs while becoming invisible in the world where needs are met. Most households are motherled households, even if just for a few hours a day.*

*I have read so many stories about women and children’s lives under neoliberal rule from the 1980s and 1990s. I have read about the constant rejection of legislation designed to protect children and offer some security in the form of childcare and family support, the media-fuelled sensationalism of child abuse in childcare centres and the dire warnings to mothers not to ask anyone else to help them. I have read about the plight of mothers in workfare schemes having to leave their children unsupervised to*

*travel by bus for two hours each way for a minimum pay job in order to receive a pittance. After reading Scheper-Hughes (1985) and Klein (2016) I watched “Who’s Counting” and saw the positioning of mothers and children in marketised contexts. Twenty years ago! Industries of weapons manufacture and child trafficking (which I extrapolate now to imagine life in Syria right now), as well as the environmental degradation of successive oil spills and gas pipeline explosions (which I extrapolate to consider iron sand mining, fracking, and deforestation) make me literally, lose sleep. I find myself so worried for the world that it spills over in my mood and into my own wellbeing. I want to stop feeling hopeless about the world and women and children. I want to be proactive, and to focus instead upon what I can do to make a difference.*

Policy alternatives to those currently favoured in neoliberalist views of the world, views which are detrimental to women and children, and to those caring for others or in need of care, require further development. Such investigations could take place as a conversation between myself and others including scholars and academics such as those I write/converse with currently, others I meet at conferences or workshops, or practitioners in organisations working with families. I foresee this continued endeavour unfolding as part of my academic research either as part of or separate from work-based research allowances in present and future academic or other positions.

### **Implications for me**

Matters of deep significance to me, deserve further exploration, clarification and strengthening for the wellbeing of others also. This exploration is a worthy future direction for my work. I seek a deeper, lived engagement between seemingly remote links between mothers’ lives and wider world-wide issues alluded to above, such as environmental degradation, racism, sexism, and violence. I am encouraged by the examples set by Marshall (1999) and by the invigorating conversations I have had over many years with my own mentor and chief supervisor, to continue calling attention to



outrageous and diminishing practices on levels global to individual. I am also encouraged by the words of Adrienne Rich:

*“What is astonishing, what can give us enormous hope and belief in a future in which the lives of women and children shall be mended and rewoven by women’s hands, is all that we have managed to salvage, of ourselves, for our children... the tenderness, the passion, the trust in our instincts, the evocation of a courage we did not know we owned, the detailed apprehension of another human existence, the full realization of the cost and precariousness of life.” (1976, p. 279).*

Rich advocated that the quests mothers face for their children – “with sickness, with poverty, with war, with all the forces of exploitation and callousness that cheapen human life” must “become a common human battle, waged in love and in the passion for survival” (1976, p. 279-280).

I seek a continued engagement in transformative research processes wherein I keep women’s stories are at the forefront; where I meet, encourage, connect, reflect, reach out, notice, read and complain, tell, continue, rail, disrupt, share, discuss, call out and protest. These endeavours are described by Boje (2014), as storytelling practices. They are identified by Grant (2007) as forms of action research. I am also led to continue to inquire into how people thrive in their families. This thread of inquiry can be woven in a variety of disciplines with which I am familiar, including social practice, health, nursing, and organisational studies or management.

Pam speaks: “Good qualitative evidence that mothered households are the epitome of wellbeing... If all the other evidence shows that we are financially disadvantaged and that things are harder, wouldn’t it be nice to demonstrate that we can do a great job of raising happy, balanced children... and that we as mothers feel satisfied with our lot and empowered and capable.”

Bindi agrees. “That it would be published, nationally and internationally... for people to understand a little more about what it’s like and so that some of the stigma of single mums - you know, the “solo mum” and the mystery of that perhaps, would be eliminated.”

The spoken stories of intentionality, purpose, strength and resilience verbalised by mothers in this study, lead me to an intention to contribute to research focused on these strengths and stories of wellbeing.

Academic presentation with or without publication, can be used to develop and sustain such a conversation. Sponsored or independent evaluation and report writing is also a possibility. Opportunities for evaluation or report-writing based on monitoring of research and policy might contribute to community and non-government organisations, ministry committees or think tanks, or submissions to select committees which contribute in some ways, even those which appear tiny or intricate.

I am looking forward to refocusing on the reach of my research into my own family, in the lives of my children and other family members. I wish to thoughtfully equip them to participate in and shape a world in which transformations that enable all, and in particular those who care for others, to flourish, are made possible. My research journey has deepened my sense of myself as mother. In my life and in the lives of my daughters I see the importance of engendering new ways of being, new stories, for future generations of ‘us’.

### **Chapter summary: The closing of this book - but the work unfinished**

This Chapter began with a summing up of the study on which I embarked as part of a research journey culminating in a thesis for PhD presentation. I recounted my initial interest in motherled households, for myself and for other mothers. I spoke from professional perspectives that are also deeply personal. I intended my research to ‘make

a difference' – to me, other mothers, to researchers and those whose work is to write, plan and implement for those in families. My reflection in this Chapter, upon the ways in which the application of particular forms of research inquiry has limited and at times diminished wellbeing for those in motherled households has led me to critique such forms of research inquiry. I critique positivist paradigms as they are used to draw narratives of life for those in motherled households. I propose social construction as a more fruitful collection of ideas, suggesting implications for research in social constructionist domains; namely, feminist methodologies, action-oriented methods, and storytelling inquiries. Central to my troubling of the social construction of those in motherled households, is my making sense of the ways mothers, and families, have been constructed under categorisation and comparison in literature, even comparing themselves with supposed ideals for humans and family groupings. I argue that these ideals are limited and limit the wellbeing for those in motherled households, and those in other households as well.

In this Chapter, I have again given voice to the thoughtful women who shared their stories with me, with passion and integrity, to whom this thesis is, in part, dedicated. Their contributions for the implications of research such as this, will be shared in my ongoing work as nurse educator, mother, and friend. My own experiences of my continued endeavour as researcher, nurse, academic, and most significantly, mother will also continue to be shared. I end this Chapter with an epilogue in which the layers of mothering and wellbeing, in all versions - including messy fragments, interruptions, busyness, and uncertainty - are expressed, not as an ending as such, but as a re-emergence into the world where this study began and now continues.

## Epilogue

*An expletive is heard from that back seat. “I can’t even understand one word of the first sentence!” Holly wails. Hannah and I exchange glances. “Can’t you?” I respond, grinning. Azaria sees her opportunity. “Ha – shame!” she scoffs at her older sister.*

*It’s the last day of term three and we are driving to school. Spring is coming, though it’s cold and damp outside. This morning a book arrived in the mail, which I have waited for two months to get. Holly is flipping through it and finds me in chapter eleven. ‘Single-parent families, mother-led households, and wellbeing’ (Lamdin Hunter, 2016). Azaria objects. “But Mum, you aren’t even a single parent”. Holly answers her swiftly. “Well she was once. And lots of married women are like single parents sometimes”.*

*My mind wanders, as we speed along the country road. How frustrating it is not to have the right, best, clear answer to the big questions I found in this study. Surely at the end of the thesis, I had thought, there would be a proper set of guidelines, some pithy recommendations for me to make, some clear, measurable ways forward for mothers, and some ways to tweak policy and continue research to support change. Instead, I seem to have found complex issues of all sizes and shapes, and no easy answers which don’t require a radical overhaul of a system with economic, social and*

*political threads all tangled up, choking people it seems sometimes, and deeply concerning to me.*

*We reach town and pull up to the little blue bus in front of us.*

*Perhaps if I go back to the start... back to some of those good people in the acknowledgements, and those who inspired me to begin and continue. What might they advise?*

*My mum would say: 'Darling, start as you mean to go on'. The feminists: Gloria Steinem might say: 'Start where you are, and organise from there' (G. Steinem, personal communication, 14 May, 2016). My supervisors might say: 'Work on in your corner, trust others are doing so elsewhere, and eventually the dots will join up' (M. Humphries, personal communication, 2 November, 2016). My children might remind me: 'Just remember Mum, not everybody thinks like you do' (H. Hunter, personal communication, 20 September, 2014).*

*I pull into the parking bay, amid a scramble of kisses, wishes, schoolbags and car doors. Off they go into another day of it. And so too, do I.*

*Never certain, never completely coherent and never complete. But can I, and will I, continue with the advice of these sage women? I think so.*

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## Appendix one.

### *Application for Ethical Approval*

### *Outline of Research Project*



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

*Waikato Management School*

Te Raupapa

Template:

**Use clear and simple language. Avoid technical terms wherever possible.**

Please allow **at least two weeks** for your application to be reviewed by the WMS Ethics Committee. You must gain ethics approval prior to the commencement of data collection for your research project. See [How to fill out the form](#) for guidance.

### **1. Identify the project.**

1.1 **Title of Project:** Wellbeing in Mother-led Households.

1.2 **Researcher(s) name and contact information:** Rachel Lamdin Hunter, 11 Corrin street, Hamilton 3206. Telephone 027 764 8821. Email [Rachel.hunter@wintec.ac.nz](mailto:Rachel.hunter@wintec.ac.nz)

1.3 **Supervisor's name and contact information (if relevant)**

Chief Supervisor: Assoc Professor Maria Humphries. Waikato Management School. Email [Mariah@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:Mariah@waikato.ac.nz)

Second supervisor: Dr Suzanne Grant. Waikato Management School. [Suzanneg@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:Suzanneg@waikato.ac.nz)

1.4 **Anticipated date to begin data collection:**

April 2013.

## **2. Describe the research.**

### **2.1 Briefly outline what the project is about including your research goals and anticipated benefits. Include links with a research programme, if relevant.**

The aim of my research is to explore the experiences of New Zealand mothers as they manage their households, children, and selves, to be well and to thrive.

My project focuses on “Mother-led households” – those households or families in which mothers are the managers of the needs of the family and individuals within it.

I am interested in the many ways (visible and unseen) which women use to “get through”, or manage those times which are stressful or challenging. I am also interested in the day-to-day management of busy families with many commitments. The aim of this study is, with a small group of participants, to safely explore the “nitty gritty” issues of household management, work-life balance, parenting and wellbeing, in detail. At the same time my goal is to provide a site of support for women seeking to transform or improve aspects of their home lives, personal wellbeing, family wellbeing and caring practices. At this stage my proposal for ethical review is set out below; however, in the event that reviews of literature steer my project in a more particular direction, additional ethical applications may be submitted as the project unfolds.

### **2.2 Briefly outline your method.**

Data collection consists of a three-pronged approach.

Firstly, the researcher and all participants will keep a personal reflective journal and write entries into it weekly or thereabouts. Contributions from their journal will be made available for other group members to give responses, according to the participant’s decision to share aspects of their writing as and when they deem it beneficial for themselves or others, or when specific issues arise in which another’s point of view is welcome.

Secondly, participants will contribute to an online conversation forum which is password protected and managed by the researcher. The format/program is yet to be confirmed but will take the form of a general conversation space as well as

individual participant spaces in which participants have the option of keeping a journal or collecting individual writing which they may invite others to contribute to or post feedback on. One example of a format in which this has worked for the researcher to date, is the ‘Moodle’ space provided for postgraduate students. However the workings of such a system will need to work for research participants who may be less familiar with this. Broad topics for discussion will be suggested by the researcher or by participants who have issues to explore; however the specific direction of such discussion will be directed by the felt needs of participants whose contributions steer the conversation in particular directions.

Thirdly, two focus group meetings will be held for participants to attend; one will occur during the information-gathering online process, and one at the end of the journaling/online posting period, for participants to gather and close the online group engagement. These meetings will be recorded and facilitated by the researcher.

The rich data gathered by the online postings, journal excerpts, group responses and focus group material, will provide the data to be analysed in the Findings section of the thesis.

### **2.3 Describe plans to give participants information about the research goals.**

Contacts who are prospective participants will be approached by the researcher, using personal and social contacts occurring from the researcher’s wide scope of friends and acquaintances, or by the ‘grapevine’ of the researcher’s friends-of-friends. Women who express an interest in knowing more will be mailed or given **Information Sheet** to read and consider. Those contacts who express an interest at this point will be offered (mailed or given) further verbal information and a consent form to read and consider before signing. Prospective participants will be given multiple verbal and written opportunities to clarify the study before deciding whether to take it further. The level of commitment and engagement required by participants in this study means that participants must be clear of what the research consists of in order to make a truly informed choice about participation.

In accordance with the evolving nature of the researcher-participant engagement, research goals will evolve and will reflect the needs and identified requirements of the group. This is supported by the action research ethic (Reason & Bradbury) wherein researcher and participants work together to identify preferred outcomes of life and project.

**2.4 Identify the expected outputs of this research (e.g., reports, publications, presentations), including who is likely to see or hear the reports or presentations on this research**

Raw research data from participants will be made available only to researcher and supervisor.

The research is expected to form a PhD thesis which will be made available to the relevant academic personnel of the University of Waikato, and to relevant examiners and reviewers.

The findings from the literature review or research study may be presented at relevant conferences, both in New Zealand and overseas, during various stages of the study. It will be viewed by conference reviewers and attendees.

Findings may also contribute to publications in relevant journals throughout the study duration and afterward. Such publications will be viewed by editors, reviewers and readers of such journals, as well as health and social practice professionals, students of those programs, or other academic audiences.

**2.5 Identify the physical location(s) for the research, the group or community to which your potential participants belong, and any private data or documents you will seek to access. Describe how you have access to the site, participants and data/documents. Identify how you obtain(ed) permission from relevant authorities/gatekeepers if appropriate and any conditions associated with access.**

My place of residence is Hamilton, New Zealand. As such, many of the contacts with whom I speak and who may participate or refer me to prospective participants will likely reside in the Waikato. However this is not a requirement, as most of the study is carried out online over a period of about one year. Prospective participants



will be informed that focus group meetings (two in total) will be held in Hamilton, and will be encouraged to attend.

### **3. Obtain participants' informed consent, without coercion.**

#### **3.1 Describe how you will select participants (e.g., special criteria or characteristics) and how many will be involved.**

Contacts who are prospective participants will be approached by the researcher, using personal and social contacts occurring from the researcher's wide scope of friends and acquaintances, or by the 'grapevine' of the researcher's friends-of-friends. Women who express an interest in knowing more will be mailed or given an **Information Sheet** to read and consider. Those contacts who express an interest at this point will be offered (mailed or given) further verbal information and a consent form to read and consider before signing. Prospective participants will be given multiple verbal and written opportunities to clarify the study before deciding whether to take it further. A probable maximum of ten participants will be selected on a first come, first served basis.

Criteria for inclusion begin with the participant's self-selection as a mother who can speak of her experience of a "mother-led household", and this could include many variations of what it means to "lead" a "household" as a mother. Deeper conversation with prospective participants may help women to decide whether they fit the criteria and believe the research could resonate with their experiences, and whether they may have material to contribute.

Prospective participants must also have reliable internet access in order to engage online, and the time and commitment to thoughtfully participate for a period of one year or thereabouts. Participants must be willing to respect the confidentiality and other conditions of participation, although the specifics of how to engage and enquire can be learned and developed as the project progresses.

#### **3.2 Describe how you will invite them to participate.**

Contacts who are prospective participants will be approached by the researcher, using personal and social contacts occurring from the researcher's wide scope of friends and acquaintances, or by the 'grapevine' of the researcher's friends-of-friends. Women who express an interest in knowing more will be mailed or given an **Information Sheet** to read and consider. Those contacts who express an interest at this point will be offered (mailed or given) further verbal information and a consent form to read and consider before signing. Prospective participants will be given multiple verbal and written opportunities to clarify the study before deciding whether to take it further.

**3.3 Show how you provide prospective participants with all information relevant to their decision to participate. Attach your information sheet, cover letter, or introduction script. See document on informed consent for recommended content. Information should include, but is not limited to:**

- **what you will ask them to do;**
- **how to refuse to answer any particular question, or withdraw any information they have provided at any time before completion of data collection;**
- **how and when to ask any further questions about the study or get more information.**
- **the form in which the findings will be disseminated and how participants can access a summary of the findings from the study when it is concluded.**

Such documents are attached: see information sheet and informed consent form.

**3.4 Describe how you get their consent. (Attach a consent form if you use one.)**

Information sheet is attached. Consent form is attached.

Contacts who are prospective participants will be approached by the researcher, using personal and social contacts occurring from the researcher's wide scope of friends and acquaintances, or by the 'grapevine' of the researcher's friends-of-friends. Women who express an interest in knowing more will be mailed or given **Information Sheet** to read and consider. Those who contact the researcher for more information will be offered verbal clarification of the requirements of the

study to consider. Those contacts who express an interest at this point will be offered (mailed or given) a consent form to read and consider before signing. Prospective participants will be given multiple verbal opportunities to clarify the study before deciding whether to take it further. The level of commitment and engagement required by participants in this study means that participants must be clear of what the research consists of in order to make a truly informed choice about participation.

**3.5 Explain incentives and/or compulsion for participants to be involved in this study, including monetary payment, prizes, goods, services, or favours, either directly or indirectly.**

There are no material benefits or prizes in this study. The personal benefits of belonging to a group in which salient personal issues are addressed, meaningful conversations are held, strategies for improving wellbeing are explored, and support is given by the engagement of participants and researcher in respectful ways, are expected to be of interest to participants as helpful by-products of participation. Group members will be part of a supportive and encouraging group of women who are likeminded in some ways, and who inform, support and encourage each other in ways which are understood to be good for people's health and sense of emotional wellbeing. Many people find that journal writing and online participation engender a sense of community and belonging, and are valuable sources of moral support.

**4. Minimise deception.**

**4.1 If your research involves deception – this includes incomplete information to participants – explain the rationale. Describe how and when you will provide full information or reveal the complete truth about the research including reasons for the deception.**

There is no deception involved in this study; rather, the success of this project relies on openness and transparency between researcher and participants.

## **5. Respect privacy and confidentiality**

### **5.1 Explain how any publications and/or reports will have the participants' consent.**

The possibility of presentation of findings across several fora will be a topic for discussion among the group. Specifically, the question of “Who would you like to tell, and how” will be a possible topic for conversation in the interests of enhancing the benefit and reach of this project. In the event of publications or reports being presented, all identifiers of participants will be removed. Participants will be assigned (or may themselves choose) assumed names or numbers in that case.

### **5.2 Explain how you will protect participants' identities (or why you will not).**

Participants may choose to engage in the forum with an assumed name in order to protect their anonymity, or may provide a real name and a photo with their introduction to the group. Information shared among participants will be kept within the group under a confidentiality agreement which we will work together to craft. No identifying details will be available to anybody other than the researcher and supervisor.

Participant contributions are able to be removed from the study until three months after the forum and group engagement finish.

### **5.3 Describe who will have access to the information/data collected from participants. Explain how you will protect or secure confidential information.**

Raw research data from participants will be made available only to researcher and supervisor.

The research is expected to form a PhD thesis which will be made available to the relevant academic personnel of the University of Waikato, and to relevant examiners and reviewers.

The findings from the literature review or research study may be presented at relevant conferences, both in New Zealand and overseas, during various stages of the study. It will be viewed by conference reviewers and attendees.

Findings may also contribute to publications in relevant journals throughout the study duration and afterward. Such publications will be viewed by editors, reviewers and readers of such journals, as well as health and social practice professionals, students of those programs, or other academic audiences.

Online conversation data will be available by password-protected access, to researcher and supervisor. Participants will have access to that data shared by other participants on the online forum, and vice versa. The conversations held on the forum will be available to participants until the study finishes and the final meeting and entries have concluded. Verbatim copies of conversation text will only be seen by the researcher and supervisor, and will be safely stored in hard copy or Word format to be locked away at the conclusion of the conversations, and to be destroyed six years after the conclusion of the study. The online forum will be open until all participants have logged off the site for the last time. At the conclusion of the study, the forum site (yet to be determined in type) will be shut down and there will be no further access.

## **6. Minimise risk to participants.**

**‘Risk’ includes physical injury, economic injury (i.e. insurability, credibility), social risk (i.e. working relationships), psychological risk, pain, stress, emotional distress, fatigue, embarrassment, and cultural dissonance and exploitation.**

### **6.1 Where participants risk change from participating in this research compared to their daily lives, identify that risk and explain how your procedures minimize the consequences.**

**Risk:** developing personal interactive relationships with other participants and researcher predisposes participants to the issues and benefits associated with developing friendships; for example, unmet personal needs or occasional mishaps in communication.

This will be managed by clear communication within the group regarding the purpose of the study, and rigorous monitoring of the personal and professional boundaries required for participants to safely maintain their involvement. I will

also manage this with regular supervision and support to ensure I can safely manage such aspects of the research. Concluding relationships will be respectfully navigated to ensure that participants leave the study in appropriate states of wellbeing in relation to others.

**Risk:** Participants exploring their personal experiences and feelings risk uncovering emotions or memories which provoke sadness, anger, grief or fear. Such possibilities are able to be managed by the careful crafting of strategies for participants to safely manage such memories, of which the group interaction is expected to be beneficial. Participants will also have free or heavily-discounted counseling made available for them on an as-needed basis. Such management of emotional content is expected to be challenging but ultimately rewarding for participants. Participants who are prepared to undertake such a process are expected to have some personal skills in managing such situations; however the researcher will provide any and every support available to help participants safely negotiate sensitive personal content.

**Risk:** As a researcher involved in the online wellbeing of participants, I risk being exposed to stories or experiences which are difficult for me to witness, and which arouse feelings of sadness, anger, fear or revulsion.

I will safely manage my responses to such stories and will access appropriate counseling supervision and support in order to navigate this. My current capabilities of self-awareness and reflexivity will be rigorously utilised. Also, the exercise in journaling which I will undertake as part of the data-gathering process will be of benefit to my wellbeing as a safe researcher.

**Risk:** Mothers in mother-led households are often “stretched” in their everyday lives, and the commitment to participate in this study may add to the load of responsibility which challenges many women already.

This risk will be managed by making participants aware of the commitments needed to continue in the study, in initial meetings, information sheets and prior to

signing consent. Signing a consent form will not preclude any participant from deciding to withdraw at any stage, particularly if life circumstances provide insurmountable challenges to participation. Participants will not be pressured to continue in such cases. The information gathered will be done so online and in participants' own time, lessening the time, travel and management commitment for busy women. Focus groups will be occasional (two over the study) and journaling can be done in time to be negotiated by each participant, adding to the flexibility of involvement. The benefits of participating are envisaged to make such commitments of time and thinking worthwhile.

**6.2 Describe any way you are associated with participants that might influence the ethical appropriateness of you conducting this research – either favourably (e.g., same language or culture) or unfavourably (e.g., dependent relationships such as employer/employee, supervisor/worker, lecturer/student). As appropriate, describe the steps you will take to protect the participants.**

As the full proposal outlines, my associations with participants include our 'cultural' similarity as mothers, however this is robustly managed within the 'researcher positioning and reflexivity' section of the thesis. It may be that participants and I have met before. The scope of this research includes a developing personal interaction among participants/researcher which does not preclude this level of familiarity. No employees, students or others with whom I have an ongoing professional relationship will be involved as participants. Relationships will be on mutually-beneficial and equal footing bases.

**6.3 Describe any possible conflicts of interest and explain how you will protect participants' interests and maintain your objectivity.**

There are no conflicts of interest of which participants should be aware. My positioning as a co-participant in this study, alongside other participants, is clearly outlined and part of the research methodology.

**7. Exercise social and cultural sensitivity.**

**7.1 Identify any areas in your research that are potentially sensitive, especially from participants' perspectives. Explain what you do to ensure your research**

**procedures are sensitive (unlikely to be insensitive). Demonstrate familiarity with the culture as appropriate.**

In accordance with the document entitled ‘Ethical – red flags; things to be aware of’, I have identified the following areas of sensitivity with respect to this project: Any topic that has recently experienced controversy (especially as evidenced by the news): Parenting is an easy topic to target, and popular discourse about mothers is frequently a topic of interest to news media. Interest in this, and the associated social positioning of mothers in families, will be a topic to sensitively discuss in the group.

Gender identity: As mothers are by definition women, some exploration of gender and identity is expected in this project.

Sensitive personal issues: Issues of caring for family members and identifying as a ‘good mother’ are of interest in this study, which will sensitively deal with participant’s experiences of such personal issues as arise. The ethic of this group is to be a place of support and empowerment.

Parenting: By definition, this project holds parenting practice and experience as central facets of the conversations to be held within the group. Such topics will be handled carefully and participants will be encouraged to self-monitor their wellbeing and provide regular, honest feedback to the researcher with no fear of repercussion.

Anything related to pregnancy: Stories of parenting often involve accounts of pregnancy and birth, and these narratives will be handled with respect.

Anything related to health (problems): There is the possibility that in discussing ‘wellbeing’ a discussion of health issues may arise; this will be monitored by the researcher in relation to keeping participants and their information safe.

**7.2 If the participants as a group differ from the researcher in ways relevant to the research, describe your procedures to ensure the research is culturally safe and non offensive for the participants.**

According to the principles outlined in my full proposal, participants and researcher are similar in that both are ‘mothers’, although the culture of participants may differ



from that of the researcher in terms of ethnicity, mothering practices, family structure or cultural background. Every effort will be made to accommodate and welcome the cultural requirements of participants in line with the theory and practice of cultural safety which directs my teaching, nursing and mothering practices (Ramsden, 1992). The researcher will be open to the cultural values of each participant and will make this clear throughout online, verbal and face-to-face interactions which constitute the group processes of the study.

### **8. Final personal statement from researcher.**

In my professional life as a registered nurse, and now as a nurse educator, I have had many opportunities to demonstrate my practice in accordance with accepted ethical (and legal) frameworks in relation to cultural safety, privacy, and safe management of sensitive personal information. This research project is an extension of such safe practice. I will do my utmost to ensure the wellbeing of myself and participants, in accordance with the intent of this study into wellbeing. Rachel Lamdin Hunter. November 30, 2012.

## **Appendix two: Information sheet for participants**

*My name is Rachel Lamdin Hunter and I am doing a PhD study about motherhood and family wellbeing in New Zealand.*

I am interested in mothers and wellbeing. I am studying all of the ways we get through our day to day busy lives (as well as the tough times), as mothers.

You are invited to participate in the study, to share your experiences and share with other participants and myself, the researcher.

All that you need to be in this study is to be a mother in New Zealand who is open to discussing your ideas, thoughts and experiences relating to motherhood and your own wellbeing and/or the wellbeing of your family members, with myself (the researcher). You will also be invited to join a focus group discussion or online written conversation but you are not obliged to participate in any of these.

I would like to interview you in person and record our conversation, at a time which is convenient to you. The interview will take about one hour and be conducted in a safe private place. Our conversations will be transcribed onto computer. The private transcripts from the interview will be available for you to read and comment on in hard copy and also on Word file, until the end of the study when it is written up.

You will also have the option of participating with me and others, in a group focus discussion and/or private web-based forum in a small group of no more than ten participants. We will each introduce ourselves and share some of the stories of our lives as mothers.

For focus group and online group, we will have agreed-upon guidelines for privacy and respectful engagement; your contribution to these guidelines will be important for the group. Those interview participants who decide

to take part in focus group and online conversation will agree to keep information and stories shared confidential among group members.

Conversation and interview transcripts will be safely stored at the conclusion of the conversations, to be destroyed six years after the end of the study.

Information from our study may also be presented at a conference or publication/ report format, but there will be no identifying information in it.

If you decide to participate, you will sign a consent form; however you may change your mind and pull out from participating at any time during the study with no negative repercussions.

If you think you may be interested, the next step is to contact me, the researcher, for more information. You may:

Text or telephone me on **027 764 8821**, or email me at [motherledhousehold@gmail.com](mailto:motherledhousehold@gmail.com)

You can also contact my chief supervisor, Associate Professor Maria Humphries, at [Mariah@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:Mariah@waikato.ac.nz) with questions or to verify this information. The project has received ethical approval from the Waikato Management School Ethics committee.

I look forward to hearing from you.

***Rachel Lamdin Hunter.***

## Appendix three: Consent form for participants

### *Consent Form for Participants*



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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*Waikato Management School*

Te Raupapa

**Study title: Wellbeing in Motherled households.**

#### **Consent Form for Participants**

I have read the **Information Sheet for Participants** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out on the **Information Sheet**.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the **Information Sheet** form.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name and contact information: Rachel Lamdin Hunter.  
Telephone 027 764 8821  
Email:

[motherledhousehold@gmail.com](mailto:motherledhousehold@gmail.com)

Supervisor's Name and contact information: Maria Humphries

Email: [Mariah@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:Mariah@waikato.ac.nz)

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