

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

The Dis/Continuities of Mothering: Women Talk about their Experiences
of their Adult Children's Home-Leaving

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Phd
in the University of Hull

by

Patricia Green BA (Hons)

July 2007

Acknowledgements

Thesis completion is not a one-woman achievement, and I owe a number of debts of gratitude to a great many people for their help and support throughout the last three years. I am of course indebted to the women who participated in my research and who shared their stories of motherhood with me. I owe enormous thanks to my supervisor, Professor Gabriele Griffin, for taking me on in the first place, for her inspiring advice, support, guidance and encouragement and for her warmth and understanding during some of the tough times I encountered along the way. I also thank her for giving me the opportunity to attend the NOISE Summer School at Linköping University, Sweden, in September 2004. I am grateful to the coordinators of NOISE, Professors Rosi Braidotti and Nina Likke, for their advice on earlier drafts of my work and the opportunity to present at the workshops. I also thank Professors Ulla Holm, Goeteborg University, Sweden, Harriet Silius, Åbo Akademi, Finland and Karin Widerberg, University of Oslo, Norway, for interesting and helpful discussions over breakfast. Thanks are also due to Dr. Rachel Alsop, University of Hull for her useful comments and advice. My friends Jane, Jo, Karin, Maria and Pam have accompanied me on the emotional roller coaster that is part of the PhD experience, sustaining me with their humour and generosity and a grace that kept me going through some of the bleaker times; a big thank you to each of them. Finally and most especially, I want to thank my children, Zoë and Tom, who were the inspiration for my work, and maintained an unerring faith in me that I would succeed. Without them and their love, care and support this thesis would not have been possible.

Thank you all.

Dedication

To my children Zoë and Tom, and in memory of my mother.

Abstract

This thesis is about women's experiences of their adult children's home-leaving. It argues that the privileging of the child's shift to adulthood that occurs through their home-leaving occludes the mother's parallel but different transition; her experiences of this time are generally silenced. In consequence, our knowledge regarding the later phase of a mother's life course is extremely limited so that, to date, there remains very little acknowledgement of what mothering means to women once their children achieve the sociocultural status of 'adult' and leave home. The thesis provides an exploration of mothers' experiences of this phase of the life course and as such aims to redress this imbalance. The research undertaken for the thesis takes the young person's movement out of the family home as the catalyst of change for the mother. The focus of its enquiry thus falls on mothers' understandings and experiences of this time and forefronts not only the changes but also the continuities in mothers' relationships with their adult daughters and sons. Drawing on data from interviews with twenty-five women, the thesis explores how the research participants attempted to reconcile the two opposing phenomena of rupture and continuity experienced post separation from their adult children. It argues that the goals of successful motherhood within a western context remain focused upon the adult child's achievement of an independent and autonomous lifestyle. As such, a mobile and flexible adult citizen clearly emerges as the desired outcome for research participants' children. The thesis proposes that this signals a shift in the performance of mothering when discussed in the context of late modernity. In opposition to sociocultural representations of women's lives during this phase of the life course, the thesis also argues that mothers' lives do not remain static once their children leave home. Rather, each research participant was intent on pursuing goals and desires of her own, whilst simultaneously sustaining a sense of self as mother under changed conditions of interaction with the adult child. In and of itself, this engendered a reconfiguration of the mother/adult child relationship.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis is about women's experiences of their adult children's home-leaving. Almost three decades ago, Oakley (1979: 24) commented that 'mothers' lives are incurably affected by their motherhood; in one way or another the child will be a theme for ever', yet to date there remains very little acknowledgement of what mothering means to women once their children achieve the sociocultural status of 'adult' and leave home. In consequence, and although there is no shortage of work that considers women's transition to motherhood, and mothering experiences during the early years of children's lives¹, our knowledge regarding the later phase of a mother's life course is extremely limited. It is the aim of this thesis to redress this imbalance.

Whilst wanting to contribute to the subject of mothering over time and in relation to women's experiences of their children's emerging adulthood and subsequent home-leaving, my initial desire to explore this issue was aroused by my own daughter's leaving home for university in 2001, and was further reinforced by my son's leaving for the same reason in 2004. Each of my children's home-leavings provoked feelings that indicated to me that I had been unprepared for the meaning of their leaving *in my own life*. I began to question why no one had told me earlier about this phase of motherhood and, over time, this led me to further ask, if no one had told *me*, what about other mothers? As Reinharz (1992: 235) states: 'some feminist researchers [...] start with their experience, are troubled by it, and then collect other data to compare with their experience' and this is indeed what I did with my thesis. There is then much

¹ I provide a review of some of the available literature later in this chapter.

personal investment in the work I present here, and I now offer a brief reflection of my story to date that ultimately paved my academic way. However, and as Jamieson (1998: 10) states, ‘when story tellers seek an audience beyond a personal circle, they invariably have an interest in telling a particular version of events’. In providing the following snapshot of my life story to date, I shall of course be of necessity selective. In the methodology chapter of my thesis, I return to deal with this same issue regarding the interview narratives of my research participants.

A Personal Story

In my twenties, and before becoming a mother, I led a fairly transient lifestyle. I qualified as a nursery nurse in the early 1970s and worked briefly in my northern UK hometown before leaving to spend a year at a London art college. Following this, I moved to South Wales to live in a communal household for a couple of years and there I met my future husband. His work with a travelling theatre company, and my later involvement, meant that we spent the early years of our relationship on the move, although our base was the Midlands. Eventually, jaded by the constant insecurity and uncertainty of living in this way, my then-husband decided to undertake a university degree as a mature student. We moved to my hometown where he pursued his studies, during which time, in 1982, my daughter Zoë was born.

Towards the latter half of her first year I visited Greenham Common with a group of women friends, taking my daughter with me. I was a member of CND² and during my time in Wales had marched the Welsh streets carrying banners declaring ‘Ynni

² CND: Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Nuclear? Dim Diolch!’³, but Greenham was different; it was women only. Roseneil (1996) writes that ‘[Greenham] women reflexively produced themselves as changed in significant ways, and sensed themselves, often for the first time, as possessing agency’. I reflect on my stay at Greenham as life-changing. Although I returned home and a year later gave birth to my son Tom in 1984, my experience there continued to affect the way I felt about my life and lifestyle; in effect, I began to think differently. Following the completion of my husband’s degree, his employment took us to London and later Derbyshire, where we bought our first house. It was there, in 1987, that my husband and I separated. I loved mothering alone and I think of this aspect of my life as one of the most fulfilling and enjoyable. I believe the strength of the relationship the three of us have in the present-day lies in the fact that I brought my children up by myself and that the mutual love and respect we have for each other grew from the close-knit family the three of us became.

In 1989 I returned to my hometown and, falling back on my nursery nurse training, worked full-time in the day nursery of the local university. My children were in school and I relied on my parents for after-school and school holiday childcare, for which I shall be ever grateful. However, the contradiction of my life as a mother at this time will never escape me; I was paid to care for the children of others but, had I been given the choice, I would rather have stayed at home and cared for my own. However, the lack of welfare support for lone mothers during the 1980s and 1990s (which continues into the present day) meant that I would have received very little social security benefit. I therefore rationalise my reason for working during my children’s early years as underscored by my commitment to providing us with a home

³ Translation from Welsh: Nuclear Power? No Thanks!

of our own and ensuring our financial security. I continued working in the nursery, which included my promotion to manager, for ten years.

During this time I befriended mothers who were undertaking their degrees at the university. At their encouragement, I enquired about, applied for and was accepted as a full-time student of gender studies and social policy in the academic year 1999; I was 46, my children were 17 and 15. Following my degree I was awarded a scholarship, which funded a part-time postgraduate certificate in Applied Social Research. In 2004, following a brief spell teaching in a college of further education, I was offered a post as a research assistant that included PhD funding. In the time that passed between starting my first degree and beginning my PhD research, Zoë and Tom left home.

My children were both academically capable and throughout their schooling it was my expectation that they would go to university. Not only knowing my daughter and son would one day leave home in order to pursue their studies, but also wanting them to do so, was then part of the mindset that underpinned my mothering as praxis. My preparation for their leaving home for university was focused upon it being a positive movement forward for them. I did not think about how I would be affected by their leaving. I was shocked at the depth of emotion I experienced.

The difficulties I encountered at the time of separation from each of my children have over time progressed to my acceptance of them as adults from whom I live apart, of myself as a mother living alone and my acknowledgement of all three of us as separate, yet interconnected and interdependent, people. I value greatly the times we

are together and make the most of the times that we are not, including more recently becoming intent on PhD completion. Researching and writing about other women's experiences of separation from their adult children have proved essential components of the management of this separation in my own life. The overall process of my thesis has therefore been an emotionally as well as academically challenging and ultimately fulfilling journey.

Experience is part of everyone's life course and my work focuses on a particular event in the life course of women as mothers. As such the narratives of my research participants are central to my analysis. What I hope to elucidate in the chapters that follow is that motherhood is about much more than just bringing up children and that there are times during the course of a mother's life that the meanings it holds can emerge both powerfully and unexpectedly. For now, I turn to discuss the literature that has underpinned my intellectual endeavour and as such provided the backdrop to my research.

Literature Review

Although the ways of becoming a mother are increasing in their diversity⁴ (Sawicki, 1991; Sistare, 1994; Stanworth, 1987) and are no longer predominantly attached to heterosexual coupledness (Hornstein, 1994) at the time my cohort gave birth their individual transition was more clearly framed, and between the years 1979 – 89⁵ each of my participants produced at least one biological child within a heterosexual

⁴ Adoption, step-mothering, surrogacy and technologically assisted reproduction are just four examples.

⁵ The ten-year spectrum was the result of sampling mothers with adult children.

married relationship.⁶ The visibility of the pregnant body provided clear outward signs of a changing social status for each of them, and the delivered baby the embodied proof of a completed transition to the identity ‘mother’, dependent as this is on the presence of a ‘child’.⁷ As Draper (2001: 23) notes, pregnancy and labour provide ‘the framework of women’s transition to motherhood [whilst] social process[es] structure this transition’.

Transitional experiences are part of everyone’s life course. The transition to motherhood and early mothering experiences are, for example, well documented and remain ongoing foci of research (Brown, Lumley, Small and Astbury, 1994; Gatrell, 2005; Miller, 1998, 2005; Oakley, 1979, 1980, 1981a; Richardson, 1993; Rogan, Shmied, Barclay, Everitt and Wyllie, 1997). My thesis highlights a particular time during the life course of women whose children are about to embark on independent living away from the family home. Thus the time in the mother’s life course that is the focus of my work hinges on how she experiences her child’s home-leaving and accompanying transition to adulthood.

In her research with parents and children, Allatt (1996: 130) adopts a life course approach because ‘whilst individual biography is a process of change and becoming, in diverse ways we remain children, held throughout life, willingly or reluctantly, in the web of parent-child relations’. In representations of mothers and children, however, the two are encapsulated within a particular time-frame based upon the categories ‘mother’ and ‘child’: the child is perceived as dependent whereas the mother, as adult, is not. Childhood is, then, related to age so that it becomes difficult

⁶ The demographics provided in chapter 2 provide further information.

⁷ See Layne (2000) for a discussion of women claiming a motherhood identity in the aftermath of miscarriage and stillbirth.

to call an adult 'child', although clearly, as Allatt intimates, we are all someone's children. Mothers and their children thus remain opposites in relation to age and social positioning.

The particular parameters in which the concepts of mother and child are set, and within which women rear their children to adulthood, involve a socially accepted and expected transition in which the child, once able to meet her/his own needs, separates from the mother and the home. I shall argue in my thesis that the emerging adulthood of the child, which is part of the individual 'process of change and becoming' that Allatt identifies, can have a profound effect on a woman's identity as 'mother'. My aim is then to highlight how the shifting identity of the mother is intricately connected to the life course trajectory of the child. I suggest that it is the latter which can cause significant disruption to the former at particular moments in time.

As Hughes (2002: 139) argues, the concept of transition suggests 'sporadic and short-term' shifts from one phase of life to another 'bounded by extensive periods of stability'. It is not my intention to apply this idea to the transition to motherhood, nor to women's experiences of mothering. Indeed, Fisher noted that the mature women 'returners' to education she interviewed 'would conclude that they have been psychologically "in transit" almost all their adult lives' (1989, cited in Hughes, 2002: 140). My argument is rather that motherhood and mothering have attendant historical and sociocultural scripts that provide the context within which the individual practices of mothering take place and that these contribute to our understandings not only of how mothering should be done, but also of what 'mother' and 'child' mean.

Motherhood and mothering are thus ‘culturally, socially, historically and politically patterned and shaped’ (Miller, 2005: 138). In a western context, representations of motherhood and images of mother and child emanate from a range of sources in political, academic and popular arenas. These images are evident in childcare manuals and magazines aimed at mothers (and fathers, see Sunderland 2006). Thus, once they are mothers, women are able (and compelled?) to shape their motherhood with reference to, and measure their performance of mothering against, these readily available images and representations (Kaplan, 1992; Marshall, 1991; Richardson, 1993; Sunderland, 2006; Woodward, 1997). Moreover, the mother of TV advertising, from 1980s *Katie Oxo*⁸ to the modern-day *Vodafone* mum, whom I introduce in chapter 5 of my thesis, is a constant presence on our screens. These representations create a tension between the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’ that mothers constantly juggle as they rear their children.

Childhood is also ‘shaped by the politics and policies through which the conceptual category and social identity of “child” is given material form in everyday life’ (Hockey and James, 2001: 15). During the early years of my participants’ childrearing, the image of the ‘totally child-centred mother’ (Urwin, 1985: 166) permeated the ways in which women believed they should respond to childrearing. The mother was held, and as such held herself, responsible for the constant daily care of her offspring in order to ensure their future wellbeing (Jaggar, 1983; Steedman, 1985; Urwin, 1985; Walkderdine and Lucey, 1989). In these circumstances, as Jaggar (1983: 313) has observed, a mother might have felt ‘that a single word or action, let

⁸ The *Oxo* advertisements ran for a number of years during the 1980s and 1990s. These portrayed stay-at-home mother Katie cooking and serving the family meal, accompanied by the all-important gravy. During the run of the advertising campaign, her children grew up and one advertisement indicated that a child had left home, but Katie remained in the kitchen, happily providing for her family.

alone any of her habitual failings, may damage the child for life'. Such uncertainty, and the idea that the mother is culpable for the difficulties her child/ren might encounter throughout their lives, continues to prevail (Gattrell, 2005; Lawler, 1999, 2000; Miller, 2005; Silva, 1996; Walkderdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001). This is evident in the following letter from a mother to a UK daily newspaper:

I am at home with my three-year-old daughter full-time and while we do several activities each week (playgroup, soft play, swimming, etc), I always have a nagging feeling that I'm not up to scratch and could be doing more with her. This guilt strikes me particularly when I'm doing the housework and she has to occupy herself playing in her room or watching TV. She is a happy, healthy and bright little girl, so how can I stop my angst? (The *Guardian*, 17th February, 2007: 6)

In line with advances in time-saving domestic appliances from the 1950s onwards, the advent of what Silva (1999: 61) has termed the 'technological nexus' within the home, the importance not only of children's play but of mothers being actively involved in playing with their children began to take up increasing amounts of a mother's time (Urwin, 1985). As the above reader's letter attests, this constitutes an ongoing theme as women attempt to get their motherhood 'right'.

Mothers' 'time' spent with children was reconceptualised as an indication of her 'care' and from her empirical research on the women's experiences of mothering their young children, Ribbens (1994: 170) observed that her interviewees' 'belief about time [centred] not just on "spending time" on children, but on "being there", so that mothers are available when their children need them'. Ribbens' concept of 'being there' in this instance implies proximity, being *with*. It is an element of the mother/child relationship which separation disrupts.

In drawing on the notion of 'time *in* childhood', James and Prout (1997: 230, original emphasis) illustrate how child- to adulthood can be plotted sequentially across the western life course: 'childhood follows infancy and is succeeded by adolescence, adulthood, middle age and old age' (231). As they further observe, each of these phases is accorded age-appropriate boundaries. They highlight how 'time is used effectively to produce, control and order the everyday lives of children' (231). In this analysis, time has a structuring force in children's lives and, as my previous discussion highlighted, mothers' time is equally produced, controlled and ordered to meet the needs, not only of their children, but of the constructions of both mother- and childhoods. Thus, I suggest that the concept 'time *in* motherhood' is salient for my thesis because if, as James and Prout suggest, 'concepts of time play a key role in shaping and contextualising the lives and activities of children' (234), it is logical to assert that mothers' lives are similarly shaped.

Moreover, at the same time that mothers are 'being there' for their children, which I suggest provokes as well the notion of both immediacy and timelessness, they are also immersed in a developmental process of *childrearing* which focuses upon their children's *becoming* adult. Urwin (1985: 184) argues that the emphasis on ages and stages of developmental psychology of the 1960s and 1970s impacted 'not only on how [mothers] saw their children's development but also on *how* they thought they should spend their time with [them]' (original emphasis). In these terms then, the time mothers spend nurturing their children through the st/ages of development has an underlying purpose; as James and Prout (1997: 239) argue, 'the importance of age during childhood is that it indicates movement towards adulthood, the child's future'.

Mothers are thus situated as pivotal in the process of their children's preparation for the world beyond the family (Jaggar, 1983; Lawler, 2000; Mayall, 1996, 2002; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Walkerdine, Melody and Lucey, 2001). Their responsibility for 'getting motherhood right' was a recurrent theme of the interviews I carried out with my participants and was linked to notions of the future; as one of my interviewees articulated, 'you're raising the next generation'. Ultimately, she expressed a widely-held societal belief that underlies the purpose of mothering – that children are 'adults in the making' (Brannen, 1996: 114). A mother's life course is therefore inextricably linked to that of her child whereby she is placed (and also places herself) as guarantor of the social order (Lawler, 2000; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001).

The characteristics of contemporary western constructions of childhood are identified by Hockey and James (1993: 69) as rooted in notions of 'innocence, naturalness and vulnerability', which separate children out as different from adults. Indeed as Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2000: 787) comment, 'the fundamental social categories of "Child" and "Adult" [...] are constructed by reference to one another, so that we know what it is to be a Child because it is to be Other than Adult, and vice versa'. In order for children to acquire the knowledge they need to participate independently in society, they need guidance from 'one or more specific adults, [who give] children the social place and cultural knowledge required to be a participant in the society' (Jamieson, 1998: 8).

As Jaggar (1983: 311) observes, childrearing is always carried out 'in accordance with prevailing norms of what constitutes acceptable behaviour in children and

desired characteristics in adults'. Likewise, in his discussion of postmodern childhood, Jenks (1996a: 79) comments that 'to be socialised is to become one with the normative social structure'. Ultimately, how adulthood is conceptualised is key to the purpose, and so the practice, of mothering a child. Thus it is that the child awaits instruction on how to become a responsible adult from those who have already achieved that status. As Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2002: 201) note, 'the notion of the autonomous, self-contained individual predominates in Western cultures and suffuses the psychological, political, sociological and therapeutic literature'. In consequence, nurturing children's independence and autonomy remains a major goal of motherhood in the contemporary UK.

Jamieson's (1998) 'specific adult', particularly during a child's early years, is of course the mother, whose 'job' it is to ensure that her child is able to participate in society as an active citizen. Following Rose (1991) Lawler (2000: 35) argues that childhood 'has been the focus of scrutiny from governments throughout the post-war period, in order to ensure that families (and especially mothers) fulfil their obligations to produce "good citizens"'. It is therefore the mother's responsibility not only to protect the child's innocence but also to shape the child's future adult life and, as one of my interviewees put it, 'keep them on the straight and narrow'.

Thus being a child is set in the context of being an adult-in-waiting, where the mother is given the task of ensuring that society's desired characteristics of adulthood are achieved by her children. What these desired characteristics are shift over time however and, as Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse (2006: 381) found in their study of parents' support (or otherwise) of their adult children's partnership formulations,

‘there [were] no “traditions” to guide them in this respect, and they [could not] fall back on subjective assessment’.

The child-to-adult continuum continues to be popularly related to age and ‘common practice has been to break childhood down into three periods: early (0-4), middle (5-9) and late (10-14), with adolescence accounting for those aged between 14 and 17’ (Wyness, 2006: 4). As Irwin (1995a: 4) comments, ‘youth and adulthood are used as terms for describing particular locations with respect to the organisation of social reproduction’ and Gill (1999: 67) notes that the ‘middle years’ of childhood are ‘around eight and 14’.

Recent research conducted for the Children’s Society⁹ found that UK parents were reluctant to let their children leave the home unsupervised before the age of 14 years. The Chief Executive of the society stated in a national newspaper report, ‘as a society we are in a real quandary: on the one hand we want freedom for our children but on the other we are becoming increasingly frightened to let them out’ (*Daily Mail*, 05/06/07: 24). Although, as James and Prout (1997: 236) indicate, there are uncertainties in the position of ‘teenagers [as] neither child nor adult’, it would seem that the practice of delineating between particular ages and stages of children on their way to adulthood remains fairly intact and that the child’s age remains linked to a dual and competing notion of in/dependency (Brannen and O’Brien, 1996).

Furthermore, understandings of the mother/child dyad have retained some continuity over time as embodiment and age remain major differentials between each member of

⁹ The Good Childhood Inquiry is the first independent national inquiry into UK childhood (www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what+we+do/The+good+childhood+inquiry, accessed 06/06/07).

this coupling. Mother- and childhood are thus encapsulated within a particular time-frame that is reliant upon an unequal pairing and moreover defines the young child through dependency on the mother. As Allatt (1996: 131) observes, 'change is inherent in the physical, psychological and social development of the young' so that, as children get older they become less reliant on their mothers (and fathers), for example, they walk/take the bus to school by themselves or with friends. Many of these 'micro-transitions' (Allatt, 1996:138) are sited in the home, as the child progresses through the different stages of childhood. Thus, the shift to adulthood occurs along a continuum, the consequences of which 'become visible when age distinctions between adults and children are reconstructed, or rather come to assume less salience' (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996: 5).

The characteristics of chronological time include 'shifting circumstances and life experiences, [which] mean[s] that change and transition are major features of every individual's life' (Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland, 2001: 8). I shall indicate in the chapters of my thesis that many of the transitions my participants had undergone whilst mothering were to a great extent occluded by the parallel transitions of their children. Thus a focus on their children's transitions has enabled me explore how they were experienced by the mothers themselves.

As Hockey and James (1993: 5) argue, to participate in western society an individual requires 'an individualistic, knowledgeable, independence'. This therefore contrasts sharply with the social experience of caring for a dependent child, and also with non-western collective practices and parenting goals (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996; Ghuman, 1999). As Ghuman (1999: 24) notes in his comparative analysis of western

and non-western childrearing practices, '[western] children from the early years are encouraged to develop autonomy, independent thinking, self-expression and achievement for themselves. The overall aim is to develop into inner-directed persons'.

As previously established, a chronology of developmental ages and stages in which western childrearing is enmeshed, and that James and Prout (1997: 246) identify as 'a series of small transition points', creates and perpetuates an environment in which the child is in effect 'becoming' adult. Thus a sequence of staged accomplishments leads to the time of the child's acquisition of independence both within, and later from, the home. A timed logic is thus accorded adult children's home-leaving into which, as my discussion has established so far, mothers (and others) are acculturated from their children's birth onwards.

Separation is then a seemingly inevitable part of the mother/adult child relationship. Indeed, as Figes (2002: 357) also indicates, childrearing incorporates multiple separations between mothers and their children, such as starting school and so forth, which 'accumulate over the spectrum of a child's life'. This being so, at the time of home-leaving, children are supposedly 'ready' and their mothers supposedly 'prepared' for this final separation. Thus, for the majority of young people in the UK, their home-leaving is a culturally sanctioned and expected experience of the life course, for both the child and the mother.

However, the phase of a mother's life course during which children leave home has also been identified as a 'crisis period' (Bart, 1972; Lurie, 1974) and loss of maternal

identity expounded as underlying the 'symptoms' of women's depression at this time. Richardson (1993: 6), for example, has suggested that the centrality of motherhood in women's lives limits their opportunities to 'maintain a sense of independent identity' so that, at the time of her children's home-leaving a mother 'may experience a crisis of identity'. Relinquishing an identity that formerly structured their everyday practices was thus perceived to have implications for women's ability to cope. As Jaggar argues:

The dependence that the mother develops on the child often is not obvious until the child leaves home. At this point, the mothers who have been most devoted to their children suffer most intensely from the 'empty nest' syndrome. They often become extremely depressed because they feel unloved, unwanted and as if there were no meaning left in their lives. (Jaggar, 1983: 314)

In her study of mothers' depression during the 'empty nest' period, Borland (1982) provides a comparative analysis of white, black and Mexican-American women's experiences. Each of the white women Borland interviewed was a full-time homemaker/mother living within a nuclear family. Her black and Mexican-American counterparts worked outside the home and most lived in extended family situations. Borland concluded that the white women were more prone to symptoms of depression and loss of identity due to their domestic circumstances. Her conclusions indicate similarities with those of Richardson and Jaggar above, as she found that in the case of the white women who participated in her study: 'empty nest syndrome might be closely tied to the absence of alternative roles in which to continue building an identity after the children leave home' (1982: 127).

Much of the 'empty nest' literature, as the term implies, places the mother within the domestic arena and, although focused on the mother's experiences of the child's home-leaving, it is reliant upon particular models of motherhood. As such, the

changing context of mothering is not accommodated but rather fixes motherhood, and so women as mothers, into a particular time/less-frame that does not equate with continually transforming practices and lived experiences. During the time my interviewees reared their children, for example, the numbers of women working outside the home increased dramatically (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996; Silva and Smart, 1999; Silva, 1999). The focus of my thesis is not on the 'empty nest' but rather on the experience of separation between mother and adult child, although I found the 'empty nest' literature useful in the analysis of my interview data.

The application of 'nesting' and other metaphors, for example, 'fledglings' (Raup and Myers, 1992) are not of course without their problems, not least because of the conflation of nature with human life course experiences (Hockey and James, 2003).

However, I was surprised at the number of times my interviewees called on this terminology and indeed at the references to it I encountered in newspapers and elsewhere during the course of my study. For instance, in her discussion of domestic technology, Silva cites a magazine advertisement for a dish-washer: 'when the children have flown the nest, you'll be glad of the Top Solo option, a programme that washes a half load' (*Good Housekeeping*, October 1997, cited in Silva, 1999: 61).

Similarly, the first line of the response to a recent letter in an advice column of a popular magazine, which asked how couples cope once children leave home, states: 'the risk of empty nest syndrome (depression and loss of purpose) has been rather exaggerated' and ends with the advice: 'so start spending your children's inheritance now ... before they move back in!' (*Guardian Weekend* 21/04/07: 89). Both of these examples indicate some currency within non-academic sites of this phase of a mother's life course.

However, and seemingly in parallel with changes on the domestic front, the ‘empty nest’ has lost its research impetus, although a notable exception is Wadsworth and Green (2003), whose research into women’s experiences of the menopause includes a discussion of the ‘empty nest’ phase (213 – 7). There has, however, been a surge of interest in family and youth transitions. Indeed, as Silva and Smart (1999: 5) comment: ‘families remain a crucial relational entity playing a fundamental part in the intimate life of and connections between individuals’. Thus, mothers are not overlooked in the work that focuses on family transformation. In contrast to many of the studies on early childrearing (and also those on the ‘empty nest’), fathers are also present as a focus of empirical enquiry in several studies (Allatt, 1996; Brannen, 1996; Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland, 2001; Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). Changes in the individual life course of each parent, for example, are linked ‘with the changes in their children’s lives’ (Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland, 2001: 8).

Research explorations of parent/adolescent child relationships are based upon the premise that there is little empirical knowledge regarding how these relationships are experienced by family members themselves. In order to address this gap, Gillies and her colleagues’ study was conducted during 1998-9 across a heterogeneous sample of households. They interviewed thirty-two 16 to 18-year-olds, thirty mothers and thirty-one fathers¹⁰ regarding their views on being/parenting a teenager. The authors state that it was important for their study to identify families/family members ‘not labelled and identified as problematic [that were] just getting on with their lives’ (7).

¹⁰ Parents and teenagers interviewed were not always from the same families. See the authors’ discussion of their sampling techniques in their report, pp 10 - 12.

In their report, Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland indicate that their respondents' perception of independence 'was a key feature of interviewees' discussions of their relationships and their lives together' (14). Increasing agency and autonomy for parents and teenaged children emerged as salient themes in the data their research produced. The tentative divide between dependence and independence that continues into parent/adolescent child relationships was also evident:

Accounts from teenagers, mothers and fathers were of constantly modifying relationships and situations. Yet, running across the individual, evolving experiences of being or parenting a teenager was also a more general appreciation of the continuities associated with this particular family relationship. For most of the individuals taking part in this study, parent-teenager relationships were experienced in terms of enduring responsibility, love and interdependence. (Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland, 2001: 8)

As Gillies and her colleagues identify, *interdependency* was a core component of the parent/teenager relationship that evolved as a lived experience of home-life. The home environment thus gave shape and structure to the relationships within it. In my own research, my participants articulated that their relationships with their children had evolved in very similar ways to those identified by Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland: 'freer, more companionship-based interactions' (7). Building upon the work of these authors, I also diverge from it in my singular focus on mothers' experiences and perceptions of their evolving relationships with their children. My aim in the thesis is, in effect, to bring the mother back into the debate as a centralised focus of enquiry, as I believe she still has something to tell us about motherhood from her experiences of mothering during this phase of her life course and at this moment in time.

Much of the literature on youth transitions highlights how it continues to be structured by the gendered, classed and raced locations of young people (Bynner, et al, 2002;

Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, Thomson and Grigoriou, 2007; Jones, 1995, 2000; 2002, 2005; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001). Indeed, as Henderson et al (2007: 8) argue, ‘the UK is a diverse and unequal society [...] it is not possible to talk of standard “youth transitions” in a society in which young people’s lives are shaped by such uneven material, social, cultural and symbolic resources’.

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005: 82) observe that ‘the term “working class” encompasses a complex web of differences in economic status, educational and career aspirations and cultural and material capital’. In my own research cohort, participants who identified as working-class (either upbringing, present-day, or both) and whose daughters and sons left home for university, had encouraged their children to study outside their hometown and as such were adhering to a traditional, and thus, middle-class, expectation that leaving home was part of the higher education package (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Similarly, participants’ children who did not leave home for university were encouraged to buy property and/or to travel/work abroad, all of which I suggest were previously middle-class aspirations for young people.

In their turn, my participants’ narratives provided examples of mothers’ agency in pushing their children towards a form of independence that adhered to notions of bourgeois individualism. As Bauman (2002: xiv) observes: ‘casting members as individuals is the trademark of modern society’. Moreover, there were links between my interviewees’ experiences of mothering their children to adulthood and contemporary debates regarding the effect of the individualization process on western family life, which emphasises the impact of structural and social change on individual

biographies (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002). Beck (2002: 202) for example, comments that ‘individualization consists in transforming human “identity” from a “given” into a “task” – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences’. There has been contemporary shift from individualism in a philosophical sense toward that of the individual’s immersion in a process of individualization, defined by Morgan (1999: 23) as ‘a social product [where] the stress would seem to be increasingly on the individual as the key unit and with this individual comes an emphasis upon the self, fulfilment, choice, rights and freedom’. Each of the elements Morgan identifies as part of the present-day individual was present in my own data.

The transition from the parental home into a home of one’s own (whether accommodation during the years of higher education and beyond, partnerships, or shared living) is not a linear and seamless experience for growing numbers of young people (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Jones, 2002). As Allatt (1996: 132) observes, there are varied experiences such as ‘leaving and returning [to the parental home] due to entry into higher education, periods of employment away from home, experimental independence, or trial partnerships or marriages which break down’.

However, the child’s move out of the home is utilised in my work as an indicator to my participants of their children’s adulthood. In empirical work on young people’s experiences of home-leaving, the concept of home is often articulated as holding ongoing relevance in terms of emotional, practical and financial support (Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharp and Thomson with Grigoriou, 2007; Holdsworth, 2004; Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Kenyon, 1999; 2003, Thomson and Holland, 2004).

In her studies of students' transient experiences of home (1999) and young people's divergent household formations (2003), Kenyon, for example, explored the meanings her research participants accorded the concept of home. The majority of the students who participated in Kenyon's earlier research perceived the parental home as a safe place to which they could retreat between university semesters, or in other times of need, whereas their term-time homes were viewed as temporary and transient and their imagined post-graduation homes of the future were envisaged as signifying that the leaving home process was completed. Thus, the young people Kenyon interviewed narrated severing the ties of home as a process that occurred over the three years (plus) that they studied, and during which the parental home was in effect held in place until they formulated their own permanent future homes.

Underpinning Kenyon's analysis is the implication that her research participants' experience of the transition to adulthood was a gradual process of 'how conceptions and meanings of home adapt and evolve for young people on the verge of adult life' (1999: 95), thus implying change over a period of time. Her findings also resonate with Brannen and O'Brien's (1996: 5) formulation of home as 'providing young people with a sense of attachment reaching back into the past and holding the potential for extension into the future'. What can be gleaned from these authors' analyses is that the concept of home for the majority of young people in the UK 'concerns feelings of belonging, of moral claims to be there, as well as material and emotional support and physical place' (Allatt, 1996: 132)¹¹. It thus contains, as Holdsworth and Morgan (2005: 79) also observe, all the elements of Lasch's much earlier discussion of home as a 'haven in a heartless world' (1977).

¹¹ In focusing on positive images and experiences of home and home-life for young people, I am not negating the fact that for some, the parental home is a site of violence (see Coles, 1995, Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 and Jones, 1995 for discussions of this issue).

In their study of parent/adolescent child relationships, Brannen et al (1994) argued that mothers constructed relationships of disclosure with their children in order to maintain contact with young people in the future. As the above discussion highlights, Brannen and her colleagues' findings complement other studies. In discussing the reliance that mothers (and fathers) are said to be placing upon their children, it might thus be important to consider not only, as Holdsworth and Morgan (2005: 99) do in their study of youth transitions, 'who is becoming independent from whom', but also to further problematise the concept of independence that underlies much of the rhetoric on motherhood and childrearing. Indeed in their research with parents and teenage children, Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse (2006: 389) identified a 'complex blend of autonomy and dependence' in formulations of young adulthood. I suggest, however, that this mix has always been the case and this problematic is an ongoing theme throughout the chapters of my thesis.

The analyses of transformation in families and young people's lives that I have discussed so far in this chapter suggest relationships of increased equality between mothers (and fathers) and their growing children (Giddens, 1992). Indeed, in her discussion of 'disclosing intimacy', Woodward (2002: 190) talks of 'a material shift in the exercise of power in the practice and experience of different relationships', including those of parents and their children. Following Brannen et al (1994) and Jamieson (1998, 1999), Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse (2006: 387) note that disclosure is 'associated with increasing democracy in families'. Moreover, Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995) have argued that in a climate of increased divorce and relationship uncertainty, the stability and security of the mother/child relationship has replaced the trust that was once an expected part of coupledom. Roseneil and Mann (1996: 209)

also talk of the increased intimacy and the ‘permanence’ and ‘stability’ of mothers’ relationships with their children. Indeed, as Beck (1992: 118) previously observed, ‘partners come and go. The child stays’.

The increased fragility of heterosexual couple relationships is an area of interest for Brannen and O’Brien (1996) who argue that transformations in these relationships must be considered in any discussion appertaining to childhood, and similarly in his account, Jenks observes how wider social change is experienced as ‘disorienting’ which, he argues, has ramifications for how children are currently perceived by their parents:

Children are seen as dependable and permanent, in a manner to which no other person or persons can possibly aspire. The vortex created by the quickening of social change and the alteration of our perceptions of such change means that whereas children used to cling to us, through modernity, for guidance in their/our ‘futures’, now we, through late-modernity, cling to them for ‘nostalgic’ groundings. (Jenks, 1996b: 20)

Whilst I agree with Jenks that nostalgia plays a part in family life histories, and this was certainly present in my interviewees’ reflective accounts of their mothering, not least the yearning to return to their days of early childrearing and for the younger, pre-childbirth self in some instances, there was also the uncertainty of the unknown space outside the home that many of my participants envisaged as part of their children’s lives as adults. As Bynner et al (2002: xii) state: ‘the situation of young people today is substantially different from that which prevailed 25 years ago’. I therefore suggest that there is a need to consider what mothering children to adulthood constitutes in a contemporary UK context. In the chapters that follow, I shall highlight that my participants’ mothering was not only focused upon their adult children’s achievement of an independent lifestyle but also that a mobile and flexible adult citizen was clearly

the outcome they desired for their daughters and sons. I propose that this signals a shift in the performance of mothering when discussed in the context of late modernity.

In turn, I also suggest that mothers' nurturing of a relationship of disclosing intimacy with their children might well prove an essential component of the mother/child relationship post adult children's home-leaving. In consequence, my focus on mothers' narrative descriptions of their children's home-leaving and accompanying transition to adulthood will offer an opportunity to investigate how changes to the sociocultural landscape are impacting at the micro-level of experience, in particular on women's mothering as praxis and the reconfiguration of the mother/adult child relationship.

However, if, as Brannen and O'Brien (1996: 3) state, 'the child of these theoretical accounts is vital in constructing adult identities' (although I suggest that the 'child' has always been vital in constructing the identity 'mother'), then the mother/adult child relationship is in need of further scrutiny in light of the push for independence and autonomy that underpins the models of mothering in a contemporary western context. If as well, mothers are becoming increasingly dependent upon their children, inasmuch as the latter provide them with security and, I suggest, anchor mothers' identities when all around is perceived/experienced as fragmentary and unstable, I further propose that children's home-leaving disrupts and thus destabilises this identity because, and in contrast to Beck's (1992) postulation, the child *does not* stay.

Although I agree with Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2001: 768) when they state that 'parent-child relationships are about a great deal more than (disclosing) intimacy,

encompassing a much greater range of activities and experiences', in the analysis of my participants' narratives it clearly emerged that the loss of the child's physical presence was felt most strongly once children left home and face-to-face interaction with them was no longer part of mothers' everyday experiences. Part of my focus in the thesis shall be to examine whether there was indeed a shift towards 'disclosing intimacy' between them and if so, how this aspect of their relationship was maintained when the majority of children resided some distance from their hometown, both within and outside of the UK.¹²

Experiences of transition through the life course incorporate change and in the case of young people leaving home the shift from dependent to independent living underscores the transformation of child- to adulthood. However, the focus on the young person's movement out of the family home, with the concomitant privileging of the transition from child to adult that I suggest home-leaving affirms for the mother, occludes the latter's parallel shift. The non-discussion of the mother's individual experience of this time in her life course is evident in much of the present-day literature on youth transition and is clear in Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge's discussion of the following passage from Lee's autobiographical text:

The stooping figure of my mother, waist-deep in the grass and caught there like a piece of sheep's wool, was the last I saw of my country home as I left to discover the world. She stood old and bent at the top of the bank, silently watching me go, one gnarled red hand raised in farewell and blessing, not questioning why I went. At the bend of the road I looked back again and saw the gold light die behind her: then I turned the corner, passed the village school, and closed that part of my life forever. (Lee 1969, cited in Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998: 63)

¹² Information on young people's post home-leaving destinations is provided in the Methodology chapter that follows.

The above quote from Lee's novel is referred to by Billington and her colleagues as, 'a description of how the author's social identity underwent a transition at the age of nineteen' (1998: 63). Hockey and James (2003) refer to this same passage and it is utilised by both sets of authors to underpin a discussion of western life course transitions that centre on the protagonist's trajectory from his family home. Although Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge (1998: 75) later draw on traditional cultures, for example the Bemba ritual of *chisungu*¹³, as having 'relational implications that endured across generations', thus implying this life course transition is not experienced in isolation but resonates across the kin network, similar observations are not made regarding western youth transitions. The authors' discussion of the Lee extract thus presents a singular focus that privileges the transition of boy to man; what this separation might have meant for his mother is not explored.

In contrast, what intrigues me is that in this brief narrative Lee creates a still-life image of his mother; she is 'caught there', literally frozen in time, whilst the sun sets in the background. A particular representation of the mother as a static figure nearing the end of her life is thus captured, by both author and reader. I suggest it is further reinforced by the non-discussion of her experience in the texts I have cited above. As Turner (1967) states, 'our own "big moments" are "big moments" for others as well' (cited in James and Hockey, 2003: 28). Although it can be presumed that Lee's mother most likely returned indoors to carry on with her everyday life after her son's 'big moment' and thus crucial turning point in *his* life, we cannot be certain *what she did afterwards*, nor *how she was affected* by her son's leaving.

¹³ *Chisungu* is a marriage ritual of the Bemba people of north-eastern Zambia (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998).

Embedded within this extract from Lee's novel is the experience of separation between a mother and her child, enacted by the son's physical move out of the home. I take this as my starting point. But it is the unexplored territory of what a mother experiences when her child leaves home that provides the core of my thesis, the contents of which I shall now briefly outline.

Structure of the Thesis

In the methodology chapter which follows, I detail the personal values I took with me into the research field to highlight their effect on the design of my research and its process. The chapter discusses the methodological underpinnings of my research and the methods of data production I chose, the analysis of the data generated and the write-up phase of the thesis. I offer a discussion of the decisions I made regarding my use of questionnaires for the collection of demographic information and provide tables sourced from the questionnaire data. I also discuss my experience of using semi-structured interviews for the production of rich narratives and offer a reflexive account of the research process. I am aware that I have relied upon my research participants' partial stories and 'moral tales' (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000: 786) to provide the grounding for the production of the work presented in this thesis and address this issue in the methodology chapter.

The cultural representations and discursive constructions of mother and child, which emanate from a range of sources in both academic and popular arenas, are a central focus of chapter 3. I shall draw on these to argue that becoming and being a mother is predicated upon the presence of a dependent child. As this chapter will reveal, my participants' reflections on the early years of mothering were articulated in terms of

loving and caring for their dependent children, in which closeness to the mother translated as safety and security for the child. Alongside this, the development of their child's independence and autonomy was the ultimate goal of each of my interviewees' mothering practices. I shall explore how their adult children's home-leaving enforced the reconfiguration of the concept of 'being there' (Ribbens, 1994) for my participants which, in its turn, will provide an ongoing theme of the thesis. In this first substantive chapter, I shall also discuss this group of mothers' relationship to time's passing as one of the recurrent themes of their interviews was a 'sudden' realisation of their positioning further along the life course. Ultimately, the chapter will expose a gap in our knowledge of what it means to mother over time and in particular at the time of the child's emerging adulthood that their home-leaving affirms.

In turning to the experience of separation, chapter 4 explores women's management of the process of their adult children's home-leaving. Whilst the women I interviewed were acculturated into the discourse of western childrearing I discussed earlier, I shall illustrate that their children's shifting status and ultimate achievement of 'inner direction' (Ghuman, 1999: 24) was not clear-cut for this group of women, but instead raised multiple dilemmas. Not least of these was the conflicting mix of emotions they experienced at the time of separation from their adult daughters and sons. In this chapter I shall argue that the privileging of the child's transition to adulthood, exemplified by their exit from the home, masked my participants' simultaneous transition. Thus the shift in the mother's status, a by-product of the child's home-leaving, is an unacknowledged and, as such, a silenced and privatised experience. In this chapter I shall also explore the aftermath of their children's home-leaving, when the 'safe haven' of the family home underwent an immediate transformation that

rendered it an unsettled space for my research participants. In contrast to the studies on youth transitions I cited earlier, my focus is on mothers' perceptions of the home once their children had left it and when, from their vantage point, their children's adult lives began.

Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001: 81) observe that 'everything is presented as possible today'. My research participants had aspirations for their children as adults that equated with the perceived transformation of opportunity Walkerdine and her colleagues identify. Expectations of what their daughters and sons would/could achieve were often articulated with reference to my participants' own life chances as younger women, prior to motherhood. In many ways their own histories, alongside their knowledge of sociocultural changes, impacted on the aspirations they held for their children as adults. Advances in technologically-mediated communication have run in parallel with changes in young people's education and employment patterns and expectations of mobility. In chapter 5, I shall discuss how living apart from their children affected the mother/adult child relationship. My interviewees' use of communication technologies, such as land and mobile phones and the internet, to maintain contact with their daughters and sons across geographical distances is a major focus of this chapter.

In the final substantive chapter of the thesis I pursue my participants' experiences once they had adjusted to living apart from their children. All of the children of my interviewees were engaged in higher education, secure employment or travel/work abroad. This is not to suggest, however, that they did not 'struggle to establish adult identities and maintain coherent biographies' (Furlong and Cartmel: 1998: 108). In

chapter 6 I discuss how their short- and long-term returns to the family home affected my interviewees' perceptions, both of their children and of their mothering selves. I shall also problematise the notion of the mothers' autonomy to ask how shifting perceptions of self and child impacted on women's desire to make individual lifestyle choices that at times ran counter to their 'promise' of constant availability to their children. All of my participants were employed for some years prior to their children's home-leaving and in this chapter I shall also discuss the impact of paid work in their lives. My thesis incorporates the experiences of both partnered and unpartnered mothers. The effect of children's home-leaving on my participants' perceptions of relationships with male partners provides a further theme for this chapter.

The focus of my research is the experience of separation between mother and adult child. In the concluding chapter of the thesis I shall discuss the contribution my work has made to understandings of mothers' experiences of this phase of the life course and the implications for further study that the research has highlighted. A brief overview of an event I held for my participants at which, *inter alia*, I gave a presentation of my work in January 2007 is also a feature of the concluding chapter.

Although routes out of the family home for young people have become increasingly varied and complex, for the majority of the UK adult population home-leaving remains a culturally sanctioned, expected and thus planned-for event. In this introductory chapter I have argued that when women successfully manage the mothering of their children to adulthood, by which I mean their children are considered 'ready' to leave home, there is scant acknowledgement of the mother's

experiences that are embedded in the process of separation from her child. I shall argue in my thesis that her individual experience is silenced firstly by the sociocultural constructions of motherhood *per se*, secondly by the privileging of the child's transition to adulthood, underscored by her/his movement out of the home, and thirdly by a masking of the transformation of the mother/adult child relationship.

Home-leaving is an ordinary, everyday occurrence that most of the adult population of the UK experience, and one that mothers expect to be part of their children's life course yet, and as Jenks (1995: 6) asserts, 'in the familiar we find the most strange and the least known'. It is my intention in this thesis to confront a 'familiar' occurrence in order to explore what I consider to be one of the 'least known' stories of motherhood.

Chapter 2

Methodology

Introduction

In research-specific contexts the demand to be explicit regarding the research process has become increasingly pronounced, prompted by the recognition that the process itself exerts influence on the research outcome and therefore needs to form an articulated aspect of the research. (Griffin, 2005: 178)

As Griffin observes, it is necessary to make the practices of research and its process transparent. Therefore, I shall outline in this chapter the methodological basis of my empirical research and the impact of this on the methods I chose to use in order to explore my research participants' experiences of their adult children's home-leaving. Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002: 11) highlight the need to distinguish between the two terms method and methodology and they argue as follows:

Methodology links a particular ontology (for example, a belief that gender is social rather than natural) and a particular epistemology (a set of procedures for establishing what counts as knowledge) in providing the rules that specify how to produce valid knowledge of social reality. (Ramazanoğlu with Holland, 2002: 11)

Thus, the reasons why particular methods are chosen and how they are applied in social science research is indicative of the researcher's ontological and epistemological standpoint. As Maynard (1994: 23) succinctly states: 'all feminist work is theoretically grounded' and to further clarify my own research practices, I add that my background in gender studies, with its inherent interdisciplinarity, heavily informed the decisions I made in the design of my research and in turn as the research progressed, directed me towards the academic literature on which I have drawn for my analysis.

Making women's experiences visible has been one of the foundational goals of much feminist research on motherhood (Reinharz and Chase, 2003). For example, as discussed in the introductory chapter to my thesis, the transition to motherhood and mothers' childrearing practices have been and continue to be areas which draw a great deal of academic interest (Gatrell, 2005; Oakley, 1976, 1979, 1980, 1981a; Miller, 1998, 2005; Ribbens, 1994; 1998; Rich, 1977; Richardson, 1993)¹⁴. These issues also attract considerable attention from many diverse areas within formal settings, such as the medical profession and the political arena, as well as more informally, from women's partners, families and friends. However, as Reinhartz and Chase observe: 'despite the explosion of feminist interview research over the past three decades, many groups of women continue to be unrecognized as competent social actors' (2003: 74) and I count my own cohort of mothers in this category.

My cohort consists of 'successful' mothers, and I use the term successful to draw attention to the fact that the majority of mothers in contemporary UK raise their children to 'fit' the accepted role of independent adult in western society. In those terms, my interviewees could be perceived to fit a typology of mothering that has not been labelled as 'problematic' (unlike teenage mothers, single mothers, mothers of disruptive teenagers or overweight children, for example). Ribbens argues for a close examination of such stereotypes because 'if we do not listen to women living in these circumstances, we fail to look behind the ideology to explore how women themselves experience and understand "conventional" family life' (1994: 40). Indeed, Ribbens' argument follows that of Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) who assert:

By examining the most boring details of domestic and childrearing practices, we are not simply engaging in a debate about education and development, but

¹⁴ I provide only a few examples here.

uncovering the most fundamental political questions about the production of democracy, about freedom and about women's oppression. (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989: 33)

As such, by examining the mundane occurrence of adult children's home-leaving, the work I have produced for my thesis uncovers many of the themes identified by these authors, not least mothers' compliance with an understanding of motherhood based on notions of childrearing that, as I argued in the introductory chapter of the thesis, nurtures the child's autonomy and independence.

Although, and as the demographic information will highlight, the women who participated in my study raised their children under a diverse sets of circumstances, autonomy for the adult child was the perceived and achieved goal of their mothering. Therefore, a successfully reared adult child leaving home is an ordinary and everyday event that may generally be expected amongst parents and other family members and friends, especially with planned-for and structured leavings such as going to university. However, there are few (if any) sites where mothers can talk formally or informally about what happens *in their lives* when their adult children leave.

In chapter 4 I shall discuss my interviewees' emotional experiences of separation from their children to reveal that there was often no support network in place on which they could draw once their children left home. In consequence, some were faced with an unemotional man (Lupton, 1998a) whilst others felt unable to talk about their feelings with those who did not share the same life experience. My thesis will describe the ways in which taking part in my research offered participants a legitimate space in which to talk about how their adult children's home-leaving had impacted on their own lives, their understandings and renegotiations of the mother/adult child

relationship and consequently, their mothering as praxis. The research for my thesis contributes to contemporary understandings of motherhood identities because, as Lawler (2002) recommends, it attends to the stories my research participants told of their mothering experiences. It also offers insight into what Ribbens argues is often missed in academic writing on motherhood: 'the emotional content of mothers' experiences' (Ribbens, 1994: 37).

In their discussion of notions of the public and the private, Edwards and Ribbens proffer the concept of 'bringing in the personal' as a way of

Drawing attention to experiences that are constituted around a sense of self or identity, to do with emotions, intimacy or the body [because the personal] concerns the social as ontologically experienced by the individual; that is, in relation to a person's own sense of being or existence. (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998: 12)

The personal in these authors' definition is then a part of the self that, although carried across the tentative divide of private/public, often remains hidden. In addition, I suggest that emotional experiences at times conflict with the face we show to the world. As I established in the introductory chapter of my thesis, women's experiences of the transition to motherhood provides an example of the contradictions that might be experienced between personal/hidden emotions and lived reality. My participants' transition from hands-on to hands-off mothering reflects yet another paradox in women's internal/external lives, as their inner feelings about their adult children's home-leaving had often remained unarticulated. This was largely because the former ran counter to the culturally perceived goal of their mothering: the production of an independent adult. By asking women how they felt and thus incorporating the personal into my analysis, I was able to explore how the child's emerging adulthood

and subsequent home-leaving impacted on each of my participants' sense of self with regard to their understandings of motherhood and their mothering identities.

As the introductory chapter of the thesis explained, my motivation for researching this aspect of motherhood stemmed from my own experiences as a mother of two adult children who have left home. Oakley comments that 'academic research projects bear an intimate relationship to the researcher's life [and] personal dramas provoke ideas' (Oakley, 1979: 4). As I indicated in the introduction to my thesis, Oakley's observation was later echoed by Reinharz (1992). Thus the notion that the topic of research can often be grounded in questions raised by issues pertaining to a researcher's life experiences is a prominent adjunct to feminist research.

There is increasing recognition of the place of the researcher within the research design and its ensuing process, and an acknowledgement of this positioned self as an instrument of research inquiry (Coffey, 1999; Dey, 1993; Edwards and Ribbens, 1998; Mauthner and Doucet, 1994; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Morse and Field, 1996; Ribbens, 1989; 1998; Stanley and Wise, 1993). As such, by explicitly stating my place within my own research study I am acknowledging my position as 'a data creating social being' (Ribbens, 1989: 590) whose experiences and consciousness are integral to the research process. I thus also acknowledge my place as an interpreter of the data created, as argued by Stanley and Wise: 'the researcher is an active presence, an agent, in research, and she constructs what is actually a viewpoint, a point of view that is both a *construction* or version and is consequently and necessarily *partial* in its understandings' (1993: 6-7, original emphases).

The positioning of the self of the researcher as an integral part of the research process lies in tension with the history of traditional social science research, which seeks to eject the researcher's own experience and value judgments from the enquiry, in effect mirroring research procedures of the natural sciences (Hughes, 2002). The design of such research assumes that in order to generate objective knowledge the researcher should remain detached from the research process. As Parr explains:

The starting point is a theory, a hypothesis is formulated and data collected to test it. Data have to be objectively observed and classified (which makes the assumption of course that there is a single, tangible 'reality' which everyone defines in the same way). [...] There is considerable stress on the researcher's own values being kept out of the research arena. (Parr, 1998: 89)

As Parr also observes, in the design and execution of the type of research she critiques above there is an implicit assumption that 'internal meanings, motives, feelings and emotions cannot be truly observed and so they cannot be measured in any objective way' (89). In this scenario therefore, and in contradistinction to the previous discussion, the 'personal' aspects of the researcher's life and the lives of those whom she studies are not a valid area of enquiry. However, as Parr (1998) concludes, it is not possible for research decisions to be made without reference to one's own values and beliefs about the social world and these are explicitly stated in feminist research regarding the decision-making behind its design and subsequent data production and analysis.

In my thesis, I am seeking 'to use both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives on women's lives with their children, while prioritising the importance of listening to what mothers have to say' (Ribbens, 1994: 27) and as such I view myself as a feminist involved in a research study that seeks an understanding of mothers' lives from their own perspective. Oakley has more recently observed that 'self-labelling as

a feminist means only that one declares one's values, whereas the dominant [research] tradition is not to do so' (2000: 21). As such, my own decision to 'self-label' and declare my values both as a feminist and as a mother have underpinned the methodological decisions I have made regarding my own study. They also construct me as an integral part of the research as process. In consequence, because I wanted to know how mothers were affected by their adult children's home-leaving and because I think these experiences have previously been silenced, the decisions regarding the research methods I used to generate the empirical data for my thesis were firmly embedded in my desire to produce knowledge that is rich in women's own feelings, perceptions and experiences of this event in their own lives. So far in this chapter I have outlined the methodological underpinnings of my study that steered my decisions on the methods I would utilise to produce the empirical data and guide its analysis. I now turn to discuss the design of my research.

Designing the Research

Research design, methods of data collection, theoretical and analytic approaches and writing strategies are all part of an overall methodological approach and imply one another. (Edward and Ribbens, 1998: 19)

As Edwards and Ribbens indicate above, and my earlier discussion has highlighted, the epistemological standpoint of the researcher, the design of the research and the methods utilised are all implicated with one another. The catalyst for my research was my own experience, and therefore embedded within the design of my study was an urge to answer a question that built upon the knowledge that my own experience of this 'everyday' occurrence was not unique. As Letherby (2003: 53) states: 'feminism does aim to deconstruct the taken for granted' and in consequence, I made the decision to ask other mothers about their experiences of their children's home-

leaving. I therefore needed to use a research method that would encourage women to talk about an everyday and taken-for-granted issue, which resulted in my decision to use a semi-structured interview format because, as Griffin observes, these are 'less rigid in format, involving an interview guide rather than an interview schedule' (Griffin, 2005: 181). In order to elicit narrative responses from my participants I followed the lead of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) who suggest using open-ended questions beginning with the words 'can you tell me about ...?' In so doing I hoped to create a research environment which would, as Roseneil (2006: 6) puts it, 'give the interviewees time and space to construct their own stories in which meaning and values gradually unfold'.

I included a questionnaire (appendix 1) as part of my research design in order to gather demographic information from my cohort. The structured format of the questionnaire rendered this type of information more accessible for categorisation and analysis. It was distributed and received back prior to the interviews. I was therefore able to eliminate demographic questions from the interviews, meaning the latter could focus on generating the data that I wanted to elicit for an in-depth analysis of women's experiences of their adult children's home-leaving. This prior knowledge of women's circumstances was also useful as I was able to individualise the interview guide to some extent for each of my participants.¹⁵

Initially I intended to use focus groups as part of my research design with a view to following up salient themes as they emerged from my analysis of the interviews.

However, after the first four interviews I decided against this idea. It became apparent

¹⁵ In some instances participants' circumstances had changed, for example, a second or subsequent child had left the family home in the interim between questionnaire completion and the interview. The demographic information was updated accordingly.

that the data produced from the interviews with individual women were extremely rich in content and sufficient for the study. Producing additional data through focus groups would have become unmanageable within my overall time-frame, although a future research study could build on this idea. An issue that did emerge from the majority of the interviews however was that adult children's home-leaving had engendered feelings of isolation for my participants, an aspect of women's narratives that I discuss in chapter 4. With regard to my research design, this issue in turn shifted my thinking towards the idea of presenting the results of my analysis to the whole interview group, thus creating an opportunity for their discussion and feedback. The event is discussed in the concluding chapter of the thesis, but I refer to this change of plan here to illustrate how my research evolved as it progressed and that the interview data were integral to the changes I made. As Mason argues:

Qualitative research designs invariably need to allow for flexibility, and for decision making to take place as the research process proceeds. Especially if you are working with an ontological and epistemological model where theory is generated from empirical data. (Mason, 1996: 33)

I shall now briefly discuss how I contacted the participants for my research.

Finding Mothers

In order to find participants for my research I initially placed a brief call for respondents in the *Bulletin*, a monthly newsletter circulated to all academic and non-academic departments on the university campus where I worked. Through this medium, eleven women responded. One of these respondents then contacted a further three women, and through my own friends and work colleagues, eight more participants were recruited. One further participant was contacted via her daughter with whom I had studied and the links I had maintained with ex-work colleagues

resulted in 2 more women agreeing to participate. Overall twenty-five women showed interest in the research in a fairly short space of time.

Snowballing was therefore very effective in reaching my sampling target although this meant of course that participants were drawn from particular social circles, which resulted in certain commonalities within the group. I did not specifically sample for class, race or sexuality issues, all of which merit specific attention. Rather, respondents were self-selecting within the reach of the immediate environment in which I sought participants. The sample group might thus have looked quite different had I sampled from a different environment. What the impact of this would have been might provide the basis for further study.

Once women agreed to participate, I emailed/posted each an information sheet which briefly outlined my research and how I expected it to proceed. With this I included a copy of the questionnaire and permission statement with a stamped addressed envelope for their return. Once I received these, I sent out a letter of thanks along with a grid for participants to complete regarding their availability for interview. By September 2004 all questionnaires had been returned and the majority of interviews had been arranged. The twenty-five semi-structured interviews took place over a period of six months, from October 2004 to March 2005. The results from the questionnaires are presented next in this chapter.

Demographics of the Research Sample

That my group of research participants were self-selecting and contacted by snowballing set certain parameters on the research in that the majority (22) were drawn from the same locality, a further two participants lived on the east coast and one lived in the south of the UK. I am aware that the cohort I worked with could be described as from a particularly homogenised geographical base. They self-identified as follows regarding their ethnicity: twenty-two White British/English; one British origin/New Zealand birthplace; one White/Asian and one British/Anglo-Indian parentage. All of my participants were able-bodied; financially secure; in academic or professional employment; similarly aged (44 to 58: average age 50) and all were homeowners. The average age at which participants gave birth to their first child was 26, with the youngest aged 22 (n: 3) and the oldest aged 34 (n: 1).

The only criterion for women's participation in my research was that they were waiting for, or had experienced, a daughter or son leaving home. Although all who participated had experienced at least one adult child leaving, the timing of this ranged from one year to eleven years prior to the time of questionnaire completion. Sixteen participants also still had a child/children living in the family home. The women I recruited were therefore at different stages of this event in their adult children's and thus their own lives. The destinations of their daughters and sons also differed, as Table 2.1 indicates.

Table 2.1: Destination of adult children¹⁶

University (different town)	Own home/ same town	Own home/ different town	Own home/ outside UK	Travelling abroad
Alma ¹⁷ ; Bridget; Denise; Fiona; Heather; Ingrid; Janice; Judith; Linda; Maggie; Nancy; Paula; Rachel; Rita; Sandra; Vanessa	Angela; Dawn; Frances; Gina; Helen; Lois; Serena	Barbara; Sally*	Bridget; Dawn	Bridget; Fiona; Frances; Nancy
Total: 16	Total: 7	Total: 2	Total: 2	Total: 4

* Sally's sons' were in the Navy and based in the UK, but both also served abroad for long periods.

(Source: Questionnaire data collected 2004).

As Table 2.1 shows, the children of sixteen of the twenty-five women in my study left home to attend universities in different towns. None of these children went to their hometown university. Seven women in the study had children who had moved out of the family home into homes of their own in the same town. Two women had children who had moved out to live in different towns within the UK for reasons other than higher education and a further two had children living abroad. Four participants' children were travelling during their gap years. Six participants experienced the long-term return of their adult children into their home and two were awaiting the return of their daughters following graduation.¹⁸ Overall, ten of my participants' children lived locally; twenty-three lived in different towns in the UK (ranging from twenty to four hundred miles from their hometown) and seven lived abroad. The ways in which mothers maintained relationships with their daughters and sons across geographical distances is the main focus of chapter 5, whilst the issue of adult-child returners is a focus of chapter 6.

¹⁶ Participants' names at times appear more than once in the tables, indicating that more than one child had left home.

¹⁷ Participants' names are all pseudonyms.

¹⁸ Discrepancies in the figures are due to adult children outnumbering participants.

Table 2.2: Participants' paid employment during their children's early years (i.e. aged 0-5 years)

Part-time Employment*	Full-time Employment	At home full-time
Angela; Dawn; Fiona; Gina; Lois; Maggie; Nancy; Paula; Rita; Sally;	Heather; Helen; Ingrid; Linda;	Alma; Barbara; Bridget; Denise**; Frances; Janice; Judith; Rachel** Sandra; Serena; Vanessa
Total: 10	Total: 4	Total: 11

* Part-time = less than 16 hours per week.

** Denotes participant worked from home.

(Source: Questionnaire data collected 2004).

Table 2.2 indicates that in the early years of their children's lives, the majority of participants who took up paid employment worked part-time (ten) and four worked full-time. Eleven of my participants were at home full-time during their children's early years, although Denise and Rachel both worked from home during that time.

Denise undertook 'a few hours' as an ICT consultant and Rachel owned a farm which she ran with her husband. It is also noteworthy that Lois was a lone mother and worked part-time in bars during her first son's early years and was studying for her degree when her second child was born. Linda worked full-time both before and after her children were born. She was financially responsible for the welfare of her family whilst supporting her husband's undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. During their children's later school years, all of my participants took up paid work outside the home. Their employment status at the time of my research with them is illustrated next.

Table 2.3 Participants' employment at time of study

Type of Employment	Research Participants	Total
Higher Education Lecturers	Fiona; Rachel	2
Social Work/related	Sandra; Serena	2
Further Education Lecturers	Angela; Gina; Maggie	3
Nursery & Primary teachers/related	Dawn; Heather; Helen; Lois; Nancy	5
Administration/ICT related	Alma; Barbara; Bridget*; Denise; Frances; Ingrid; Janice; Judith; Linda; Paula*; Rita; Sally; Vanessa	13

* Denotes part-time employment.

(Source: Questionnaire data collected 2004).

As Table 2.3 illustrates, all twenty-five of my research participants were employed at the time of my research with them; twenty-three in full- and only two in part-time paid work. The majority of respondents worked in administrative posts, eight of which were in the same university, whilst the five others were employed by local companies. Of the three women teaching in further education, Angela and Gina lectured on childcare courses and Maggie taught psychology. Dawn and Helen worked as teachers' aids in a special needs school, Lois was a nursery assistant in a local nursery school and Heather and Nancy were both primary teachers in local schools. Sandra and Serena both worked in care-related employment. The data provided in Tables 2.2 and 2.3 is indicative of the increase in women's employment outside the home over the last three decades (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996).

Participants self-identified as follows regarding their class status:

Table 2.4 Research participants' class status

Working-class upbringing	Working-class at time of study	Middle-class upbringing	Middle-class at time of study
Barbara; Denise; Fiona; Gina; Helen; Ingrid; Janice; Linda; Lois; Nancy; Paula; Rachel; Rita; Sally; Sandra; Serena; Vanessa	Barbara; Denise; Gina; Helen; Ingrid; Janice; Linda; Nancy; Paula; Rachel; Sandra; Rita; Serena	Alma; Bridget; Dawn; Frances; Heather; Judith; Lois; Maggie	Alma; Bridget; Dawn; Fiona; Frances; Heather; Lois; Judith; Maggie; Sally; Vanessa
Total: 17	Total: 13	Total: 8	Total: 11

(Source: Questionnaire data collected 2004).

Seventeen participants identified as having a working-class upbringing and of these, thirteen identified as working-class at the time of the research. Lois appears in both the working- and middle-class columns as she described her upbringing as working/middle class, with her current status as middle-class. None of the participants who identified as having a middle-class upbringing noted downward class mobility so that, at the time of questionnaire completion, eleven participants identified as middle-class. Angela did not answer this question.

Although all of my participants had begun their mothering from within a heterosexual (married) relationship, at the time of my research the partnership status of several women had changed. Table 2.5 below indicates their partnership situation at the time my study was undertaken.

Table 2.5 Participants' partnership status at time of study

In original relationship/marriage	Re-partnered cohabiting	Re-partnered not cohabiting	Single
Angela; Bridget; Denise; Frances; Janice; Linda; Nancy; Paula; Rita; Sally; Vanessa	Barbara; Fiona; Heather; Ingrid; Judith; Lois; Maggie	Dawn; Rachel; Serena	Alma; Gina; Helen; Sandra;
Total: 11	Total: 7	Total: 3	Total: 4

(Source: Questionnaire data, collected 2004).

As Table 2.5 illustrates, eleven of my participants were in their original relationships/marriages (that is, they were with the partner with whom they had their children) and seven had re-partnered/married. Three women had re-partnered but were not cohabiting and four were single. Also, nine of the twenty-five participants had experienced a period of mothering alone, with two of this number experiencing two periods of lone mothering. I return to these data in chapter 4, where I discuss women's relationships and support networks in the immediate aftermath of their adult children's home-leaving and in chapter 6, where I analyse how their children's leaving impacted on their partnerships.

The demographic data presented here indicate the context-specific characteristics of my research participants' narratives, which are illustrative of a given experience rather than representative of wider society. Brief biographical details of each of my participants are available at appendix 3 which, alongside the information provided in this chapter, provide referents for the issues discussed in the following four chapters of the thesis. Next in this chapter, I turn to my use of semi-structured interviews and offer a discussion of how this method produced the data that were the crux for the

examination and interpretation of my research participants' experiences of their adult children's home-leaving.

Producing Data

I have discussed the purpose of the questionnaire and provided its results and I shall now concentrate on the role the semi-structured interviews played in generating the production of in-depth data for analysis. I prefer to use the terminology of data generation and production here rather than collection, as the latter implies that the data is out there waiting to be collected 'like rubbish bags on the pavement' (Dey, 1993: 15), whereas generation and production imply a more interpretive and reflexive approach to the process and subsequent analysis. Because of this, Mason also eschews the term collection in favour of generation which 'encapsulate[s] the much wider range of relationships between researcher, social world, and data' (1996: 36). As such, these terms are more in keeping with my own epistemological standpoint regarding how knowledge of the social world can be co-constructed within the research interview environment. In this section of the chapter I shall discuss the practicalities of creating the 'right' environment for semi-structured interviews to be successful generators of rich data.

My participants previously indicated the times they would be available to attend the interview. Six women wanted to attend across their lunch breaks and two at the end of their working day. All eight of these women worked on the same university campus as I did. This resulted in their interviews taking place in my office. A number of women (six) lived on the outskirts of the town in which the research was undertaken. As I do not drive and public transport was for the most part non-existent, all six

offered to come to my office for their interviews. A further nine interviews were conducted in participants' homes, one at a participant's workplace on the east coast, to which I travelled by train, and one in my own home. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes.

As aforementioned, I was aware that the topic of research might involve the recalling of sensitive and at times upsetting experiences, so tissues were always made available and I provided refreshments. When I interviewed women away from my office, I took chocolate biscuits as a small gift and was always offered tea/coffee, and lunch in one instance. Byrne (2003: 33) observes that 'the context of the interview may be very important in determining what kind of response is produced' and I had anticipated some differences to emerge in women's narratives dependent upon where the interviews took place. The resulting data did not indicate however that this was necessarily the case as overall women were equally keen and responsive at each of the interview sites.

There were however some practical differences that are noteworthy here. When the interviews were taking place on my 'home-ground', for example, I set up and tested the recording equipment prior to each of my participant's arrival, whereas in the case of those that took place in participants' homes I had to set up the equipment when I arrived, so each time I needed to ensure that I had all the necessary equipment with me: an extension lead, enough tape-time, batteries and so on. Prior to meeting with participants on their 'territory' I tested the recording equipment, as I did not feel this could/should be done on site and in the presence of my interviewees. This led me to consider why I felt it was important to obscure this, and other actions, from my

research participants. The face-to-face interview situation takes place between two people in close proximity and I suggest that the equipment the researcher uses, such as tape-recorders for example, act as a reminder that the research interview is not a 'natural' event. It is also, of course, about professional competence - wearing the researcher's 'mask' and 'being prepared' before going into the research field.

When interviews took place in my own space, I ensured that there would be minimum interruptions by unplugging my telephone and placing a 'do not disturb' notice on my office door. In participants' own homes these 'precautions' could not be taken.

Ultimately there were more disruptions during those interviews; the telephone would ring and the interviewee would take the call, for example, or a visitor might call at the house. In these instances, I turned off the tape-recorder and then turned it on again once the interview resumed.

These small incidents were a source of irritation to me because they hindered the flow of 'conversation' between the participant and myself. These personal reflections were an important reminder that, however much I describe the interactions with my participants as relaxed and friendly, I was nevertheless encouraging them to talk to me for a purpose. Thus the technology I was using alongside my pre-interview preparations and my reactions to the everyday interruptions of women's lives served to consolidate my own place as first and foremost a researcher in the research process and my participants as the 'subjects' of my research.

In her discussion on women interviewing women, Finch (1984: 78) suggests: 'being "placed" as a woman has the additional dimension of shared structural position and

personal identification'. I would add to this that in the interviews I conducted for my research, my age and motherhood status also impacted on the relationship and thus on the data produced. The majority of participants were not aware of my age or that I was a mother until we met for the first time for our interviews and I explained the focus of my research to them. I informed them I had chosen the topic of mothers' experiences of children's home-leaving for my PhD because when my own daughter left home I realised that this was an everyday occurrence that nobody talked about. I did not disclose any further information regarding my own experiences as I was cognisant of the questions posed by Reinharz and Chase:

If the research arises in part from the researcher's personal experiences or needs, to what extent – and why – should that personal connection play a role in the research relationship itself? Under what conditions might self-disclosure put the interviewee at ease or pressure her to adopt a particular point of view? When does self-disclosure indicate openness to the other's experience or a sharing of power within the interview relationship, and when does it indicate that the researcher prefers to speak rather than listen? (Reinharz and Chase, 2003: 80)

Although I was cautious about telling too much of my own story I nevertheless found that my brief 'unmasking' (Finch, 1984: 79) had a positive effect on the interaction between myself and interviewee. This in turn was conducive to the interview situation in that a good rapport was created and, in consequence, rich and useful data were produced. Indeed, as Maynard (1994:16) points out: 'the personal involvement of the interviewer is an important element in establishing trust and thus obtaining good quality information'.

When my participants asked me personal questions I answered them, but this did not occur very often as women were more involved in telling their own stories, rather than in listening to mine and, unlike Oakley's interviewees (1979; 1981b), my participants did not ask me for any advice, nor did they treat me as an 'expert' on

motherhood during this phase of the life course. Rather, I believe I was perceived as a kindred spirit who understood what they were talking about. This assumed 'likeness' was evident when participants would look to me for confirmation of their experiences by using tag-lines at the ends of some narratives, for example: 'you know what I mean'

I designed a semi-structured interview guide (appendix 2) with which to pursue the areas of enquiry for my research and was prepared to prompt interviewees when necessary. Although there were differences between women's reactions to the interview situation, my preparations and style of interviewing meant that I did not encounter any reluctant respondents (Adler and Adler, 2003) amongst my participants. As aforementioned, I had distributed a brief outline of my research prior to the interviews so that participants were aware of its main focus. Often my first question, 'can you tell me what being a mother has been like for you?', sparked women's narratives and they 'just talked', covering all of the topics I had on my schedule (and more) by the time the interview came to a close. In other interviews, women needed/expected more prompting and I referred to my interview guide more frequently. On one occasion an interviewee asked me if I would like her to stop talking so that I could ask my next question! I suggest the latter situation was partly due to it being arranged as 'an interview': 'a conversation between two people in which one asks questions and the other answers' (Reinharz and Chase, 2003: 77).

Reinharz (1992: 19) comments that 'interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words, rather than in the words of the researcher'. My decision not to stick rigidly to an interview schedule meant that my

participants were able in effect to guide the interviews themselves as they recalled experiences they felt were significant. This was a more empowering position for participants to inhabit, although I was conscious of the times when the interview veered too far away from the topic I was pursuing. I then had to guide interviewees back again, sometimes merely saying 'just going back to what you were saying earlier ...'. I found that over time I improved in my skills of keeping my participants 'on track'. In its turn, of course, this provides another indicator of my place as a researcher looking for a particular narrative response. My interviewees did not discount the significance for themselves of their adult children's home-leaving and it was obvious in a great number of instances that their own feelings had previously been subsumed by the privileging of the young person's movement out of the family home. In all of the interviews my participants had plenty to say about the impact of this event on their own lives.

In order to maintain my position as an active listener I did not make notes during the interviews but rather, once each interview had ended and my participant and I had parted company, I noted down how I felt the interview had gone, its duration, and any specific issues that had emerged, which proved useful when I began my analysis. Of course, there were times that I missed salient points; the playing-back of the tapes highlighted for example where I had failed to ask participants for further clarification of particular issues. Although this inevitably occurs even for the most experienced of researchers, it nevertheless revealed an occasionally frustrating shortcoming of the interview as a research technique more generally. It also exposed a dilemma between the need to allow participants time to 'chat on' against the need to generate the sought after information. However, by not pursuing some areas, others might have been

focused upon that further allowed for good rapport between us and in turn benefited the participant.

Whilst I agree with Finch (1984) when, following Oakley (1981b), she states that feminist research should ‘articulate women’s experiences of their lives – rather than merely creating data for oneself as researcher’ (Finch, 1984: 86), it would be dishonest of me to say that the former overrode the latter in my own study. The reason for undertaking my research was to expose a particular set of experiences appertaining to motherhood and my decision to interview mothers about these produced the data for my analysis. Did I then engage in a ‘pseudo-conversation’ (Oakley, 1981b: 32) with them? I do not believe that I did, and I agree with Griffin when she argues that ‘in most interview situations both the interviewer and the interviewee stand to gain and want something that the interview provides: data, a listening ear, or an opportunity to exchange views on a specific topic’ (Griffin, 2005: 184). In the next section of the chapter, I further consider the ethical implications of undertaking a feminist research study.

Ethical Considerations

In order for a researcher to gain the trust of her study participants she must openly provide them with the reasons for her research and be clear when explaining what will be expected of her participants during the research process. As Griffin (2005) observes, interviewees are more likely to talk openly to the interviewer once this kind of trust is established. In this section of the chapter, I shall describe how I addressed the matter of trust with the women who participated in my research. Additionally I shall consider the issue of what happens to the knowledge that is produced from

feminist research and then go on to discuss some of the dilemmas the interviews I undertook at times provoked.

In the introductory letter I sent out to my participants I provided an outline of the research design and clearly stated that I would be recording the interviews, that only I would have access to these tape-recordings, and that the transcripts produced from the recordings would be anonymised. Consequently women were informed that their names would be changed throughout my work, making their identities 'less obvious' (Summerfield, 2005: 61).

Knowing from personal experience that the topic of my research would quite likely touch on sensitive or upsetting issues, I assured my participants before the interviews began that the tape-recorder could be turned off at their request and that they were not obliged to pursue any issues they did not feel relaxed in talking about. Refreshments were offered and tissues were to hand in the event of participants becoming upset, which happened on several occasions. I consider that the information I gave my participants regarding my expectations of them, the assurance of their confidentiality and the practical preparations I have listed here, met and probably exceeded the ethical requirements of my study.

The issues of ownership and dissemination also need to be acknowledged however. As Summerfield notes, the words spoken in an interview belong to those who said them and it is therefore 'common to secure the interviewee's written consent to the release of the material on the tape of the interview' (Summerfield, 2005: 61) and this I did once the interviews ended. Further dilemmas surrounding this issue are however

the questions Skeggs (1994) asked of feminist research more generally when she described the difficulties she encountered in writing about young, working-class women's lives for an academic audience: 'who do we do research for?' (86) and 'who speaks for whom?' (87). A conflation of feminist research with feminist politics is implicit here. As Glucksmann (1994: 150) noted previously, when discussing the production of feminist knowledge 'the researcher's self-awareness and reflection on her research should include a realistic appraisal of the limits of research as a locus for authentic political activity'. Thus, although underpinning my own research was a desire to offer my participants the opportunity to talk about a previously silenced experience, I must accept that my overarching reason for conducting the study, and as such its overall outcome, was not only restricted to answering a personal question, but was rather aimed at producing knowledge for an academic audience.

Linked to the above issue is the question of researching sensitive issues with one's interviewees. As I indicated, I had informed my participants that the interviews could be terminated at their request, and I did on occasion turn off the tape-recorder when some of the women became upset. Once an interview had started however, it is possible that interviewees may have felt a sense of obligation to continue and this does raise questions of how far one should proceed with an enquiry that has the potential to cause distress. As Maynard argues:

It may be possible for participants in the study to have their consciousnesses raised without the corresponding channels for action being available. Feminists have raised issues about the ethics of research which, having generated all sorts of issues in respondents' minds, then abandons them to come to terms with these on their own. (Maynard, 1994: 17)

Maynard's comments resonate with some of my own experiences of the interview situation. Although I was prepared for the topic of my research to touch on sensitive

issues, I was not prepared for some of the revelations within the women's accounts. Searching into women's mothering histories at times uncovered previously hidden experiences and, although I was a relative stranger to the majority of the women I interviewed, several nevertheless shared some very intimate details of their lives with me. In several cases they had not talked about these experiences with others and I was at times given information that women explicitly stated they did not want to appear in my work. Of course, I have respected these requests.

Furthermore, women's off-tape comments made me aware of the ethical implications of the type of disclosure that the research interview can evoke. Summerfield (2005: 58) has commented on the 'proximity of the research interview to a therapeutic session' and Reinharz and Chase (2003: 81) suggest: 'it may be the very fact that the researcher is not involved in the participant's life that allows the participant the freedom to express herself in ways she might not otherwise'. Whilst these authors do offer some explanation, they do not fully address the question of what a feminist researcher should do when she is given unsettling information that does not fit neatly into her research design. Although in my thesis I have referred to some of the issues women spoke about (not those I was requested to omit), I have not attributed them directly to participants in order to protect their anonymity.

In considering the ethical implications of my research, and feminist research more generally, I feel I have raised more questions than I have answered. In the immediate context of my own research design and process I am aware of these problems but do not offer any solutions save those of ensuring the transparency of the process of my own research, the acknowledgement of my own place within it and my commitment

to the women who gave their time to the production of feminist knowledge. Thus, I have acknowledged the limitations and inherent problems for feminist research more generally, whilst also negotiating a research practice that is best able to work within a feminist framework on a political, practical and ethical level. I now offer my own interpretation of my participants' expectations and experiences of the interview situation.

Participants' Perceptions of the Research Interview

I decided there was one thing that I decided I wasn't going to talk about and I haven't talked about it. I've skirted round and over the top of it but I haven't talked about it in any depth so I feel, you know, ok about it all. And it's been nice talking to you. (Dawn)

As I stated above, I do not feel that I coerced information out of my participants by presenting myself as a willing listener. At the end of each interview I asked my participants if there was anything else they would like to add or any questions they would like to ask me, and Dawn's final comments above indicate that when interviewing as researchers, we are given only a partial glimpse of our participants' life stories with which we later build a 'bigger picture'. Inspired by what Dawn said, and in recognition of Maynard and Purvis' (1994: 4) observation that there has been little attention paid 'to the direct impact and meaning participation in a research project can have', in this section of the chapter I provide a discussion of other comments made by my participants during the latter stages of my interviews with them. I believe this adds a valuable dimension to my research and its outcomes and offers some insight into my interviewees' reasons for participating in my study.

The following interview extracts highlight two different expectations of what 'an interview' might entail:

I didn't know what to expect when I came. Until I'd spoken to you when we arranged it, I didn't know the length of time and I didn't know whether it was a question and answer type of thing, you know? I hadn't really thought how, I mean, it's nicer this way, just to be able to talk. (Helen)

I knew what we'd be talking about, you know, your sort of feelings about yourself and your children, yeah. (Gina)

Helen and Gina offer two ways of conceptualising the interview situation from the perspective of the interviewee. Helen's quote highlights the tentative expectation of a 'question and answer' interaction, which I suggest is process-focused and linked to the interpretation of the term 'interview' I gave earlier. In contrast, Gina's quote is content-focused and indicates that she was more attuned to the fact that the interview would be a forum in which we would talk about feelings pertaining to motherhood and childrearing. Her background in sociology and employment as a lecturer in child studies here impacted on Gina's understanding of the workings of social science research. The interviews were thus experienced as a talking forum by my participants which, alongside their placing of me as a mother talking to them as mothers, meant the interviews worked very well in that they were relaxed and friendly interactions that produced the rich data I was searching for.

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, and shall further reveal in the chapters that follow, the interview situation served as a cathartic experience for several of my participants who previously had not had the space to voice their concerns and anxieties regarding what their adult children's home-leaving meant in their own lives.

My purpose in conducting the interviews was to 'elicit and listen closely to the interviewee's life experiences' (Reinharz and Chase, 2003: 82) and the fact that I disclosed to my participants that the catalyst for my research was my own children's home-leaving meant that the women responded to me in particular ways. Fiona for

example said: 'it's nice to talk to somebody about it who understands'. This comment, alongside Helen's above and others like it, made me confident that the research I was conducting was meeting a previously unvoiced need for this group of women.

In their turn, of course, such comments from my participants resonate with Finch (1984) who discusses the development of trust between women in the interview situation and asks about the moral implications that arise from this. Finch is concerned with 'the extreme ease with which [...] a woman researcher can elicit material from other women' (Finch, 1984: 71) and the potentially exploitative nature of this interaction. She concludes by suggesting that interviewees may need protection from feminist interviewers.

From my own experience however, I would argue that the interviews I conducted were a reciprocal arrangement and that the women I spoke to took something valuable away from our interaction inasmuch as they had been able to talk openly about an issue they had until then mostly suppressed. I suggest that my participants were keenly aware that our interactions would be 'transformed' by me once I began my analysis and as such were concerned that I would be able to work with what they had given me: 'I just hope it's been useful' (Janice); 'You'll pick out the bits you want anyway, won't you?' (Linda); 'I hope I've been able to cover fully enough the points that'll help you' (Nancy). Often women had been prepared for particular issues arising in the interview prior to our meeting: 'I've been thinking about this' (Angela); 'I was talking to somebody about this' (Lois). In a broad sense of the term then, they were aware that their participation in the research potentially rendered them 'statistics-to-be' (Oakley, 1981b: 33).

My interviewees also indicated a variety of reasons for their involvement in the research. For example, all were keen to talk about their feelings regarding adult children's home-leaving: 'when I saw your advert in the *Bulletin* I thought, that's me, I want to talk about that!' (Rita). As well as this, some wanted to know the responses of other participants': 'how do I compare with other mothers?' (Barbara). There was also the indication that their own experiences of adult children's home-leaving had highlighted a concern for others: 'I just feel for other women now really, to be honest' (Paula); 'it's useful for mothers who are coming up to this type of thing to know the experiences of others' (Alma). Ingrid's participation in the research instigated her desire find out her husband's feelings about their adult children's home-leaving: 'I'll go home and I'll ask [my husband] how he feels now because I hadn't considered asking him how he felt. I just made an assumption about how he felt'. Still others were keen to know the outcomes of the research: 'I'd be interested to see the end results' (Rachel).¹⁹

I offer this discussion of my participants' interview extracts to indicate that the women involved in my study were actively engaged in the research process and interested in its outcomes. Moreover, although I was willing, following Oakley's (1981b) lead, to talk about my own experiences if asked, my participants were not interested in me *per se*. Instead they wanted to talk about their own experiences of their adult children's home-leaving in order to give something to the research and to get something from it, which is precisely what I wanted them to do. The reasons for our interactions were obviously different: the aim for me, although initially instigated by a desire to answer a personal question, was because in exploring the issue I might

¹⁹ I presented my work to my research participants in response to three underlying themes that emerged from my interviews with them and I discuss this further in the concluding chapter of my thesis.

gain academic recognition; for interviewees, it was the opportunity to talk about a lived experience. However as their narratives attest, during and after the interviews, our interest in the topic of the research converged in many ways. Each of my participants' interviews was fully transcribed and I discuss this process in the next section of the chapter.

Handling the Data

The first stage of my analysis centred on the questionnaires and the demographic information I provided earlier, which came directly from this data collecting technique. To begin to organise my research data, I made a 'hard-copy' folder of each of my participants in which I stored the completed questionnaire and two copies of the interview transcript, one of which I used for marking-up, the other which was kept intact. I began to transcribe the tapes immediately once I had finished the interviews so that the transcriptions were completed shortly after the six-month period of interviewing.

Although transcribing the tapes was not a job I relished, nor particularly enjoyed, largely because of the amount of time each took to produce, its positive element was the heralding of the interpretation of the data as I noted down the themes that emerged as I worked. Reading the transcripts and making notes onto the sheets performed a further stage of this early analysis. I formulated a series of symbols with a key, and used different coloured pens to mark up the transcripts, for example, 'O/M' written in red felt-tip pen indicated the places where participants referred to their 'own mothers'. The notes I made on the transcripts were then more fully annotated in notebooks, a series of which were always to hand on my bedside table, in my coat pocket and in

my bag so that I could jot down ideas as they came to me at 'odd' times, for example, when out walking my dog.

During the initial stages of data analysis I attended a training session on the use of Atlas.ti, an electronic computer package for qualitative data analysis. Following this, I attempted to use the package to code my transcripts. However, after only a short period of time I began to feel distanced from the transcripts, each of which I knew fairly well because I had transcribed and then later read them prior to their input into the computer programme. When I used the coding devices of the programme and was led to the 'right' places, I felt that some of the narrative build-up to particular topics was missed; instead an isolated extract would emerge which had no apparent substance.

I realise of course that my unfamiliarity with the computer package might have been a significant stumbling block. Nevertheless, I would argue that my participants' narratives did not always follow a linear pattern and in consequence the beginnings of an interviewee's thoughts about a particular issue might appear on one page and be finished a few pages later, with much important meandering along the way. As Lawler observes, 'in narrating a story, social actors organize events into "episodes" which make up the plot' (2002: 250). In my view, Atlas.ti lost the plot of my participants' narrated experiences. In resorting to paper and pen I therefore felt more secure that I was not missing the important threads that women had woven through their interviews. I also enjoyed the physical 'handling' of the data and so, after a brief foray into technology, I coded all of my transcripts 'by hand'.

Although Atlas.ti and other electronic packages are proving useful in the management of larger data sets (Barry, 1998), this is not always the case. For example, Holdsworth and Morgan (2005: 45), whose comparative analysis of young people's experiences of home-leaving in Norway and Spain and the UK generated huge data sets, comment: 'we decided not to make use of any of the available computer packages, preferring to familiarize ourselves with the transcripts through repeated reading'. My own brief attempt with the computer package did not fully satisfy my needs with regard to my own small-scale qualitative data analysis. Indeed, it was important for me to handle the interview transcripts in the way that I have described and, like Holdsworth and Morgan, familiarise myself with the data through re-reading. In doing so, I progressed more easily towards the process of further analysis and the writing-up stage of my PhD. In the next section of the chapter I turn to discuss how my interpretations of the data were further influenced by the theoretical perspectives of the academic literature I drew upon.

Making Connections

Interview methodology begins from the assumption that it is possible to investigate elements of the social by asking people to talk, and to gather or construct knowledge by listening to and interpreting what they say and how they say it. (Mason, 2002: 225)

Mason's observation regarding the interpretation of interview data as the basis for the construction of knowledge is in keeping with my decision to use the semi-structured interview method in my own study. As the title of my thesis implies, my research explores not only the changes to my research participants' lives once their adult children left home, but also the continuities inherent in that leaving. It also examines how each woman negotiated the shift from a proximal relationship with her child/ren towards one experienced across geographical distances, how this altered participants'

perceptions of their mothering selves in relation to the child as adult and, in consequence how their sense of motherhood was reshaped.

These issues emerged from the interviews in which the women talked to me about their experiences and by my listening to and then later interpreting what I had been told. Although committed to representing women's experiences in my work, I was also aware of my 'obligation [as a feminist] to go beyond citing experience in order to make connections which may not be visible from the purely experiential level alone' (Maynard, 1994: 24) and in this section of the chapter I shall outline the strategies I utilised in order to manage the large amount of data the interviews produced and the decisions I made regarding their ensuing interpretation and inclusion within my thesis.

As such I shall

try to explain the grounds on which selective interpretations have been made by making explicit the process of decision making which produces the interpretation, and the logic of the method on which these decisions are based. (Holland and Ramazanoğlu, 1994: 133)

When I began my analysis of the interview transcripts I realised that the production of thick description (Geertz, 1973) posed the quandary identified by Edwards and Ribbens (1998: 20): 'theoretical and practical dilemmas and challenges are involved when we are concerned with hearing, retaining and representing research participants' "voices". Throughout the analysis and the writing-up period I struggled to make decisions regarding what to include from the women's accounts and thus, in turn, what to disregard. I was also keenly aware how my own history and personal investment in the research topic could impact on my analysis and my management of this became a real balancing-act during the initial stages. I was vigilant in my attempt to engage in an empathetic interpretation of the narratives of each of my participants

(Riessman, 1990), whilst remaining alert to my own position within the research puzzle I had set myself (Mason, 1996).

During the early stages of my analysis my strategy was to select a number of broad categories that I had identified from my close readings of the transcripts and in so doing control what I can only describe as the data's unruliness. These initial findings felt, as Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 121) have stated regarding their own PhD work, 'more intuitive than anything else'. However, my early 'intuitions' did in turn formulate a structure for the thesis with regard to the number of chapters, chapter headings and the tentative contents of each. This early plan therefore gave me a space in which to slot the relevant themes from the data under four loose chapter headings: 'Modelling Motherhood'; 'Managing the Process of Separation'; 'Post-Separation Dis/Continuities'; and 'Mothers' Futures'.

As I revisited the transcripts and immersed myself more fully in the data over time, new understandings and meanings emerged. In consequence, I did not adhere fully to my initial structure, although three out of the four main chapter headings remained the same, whilst their contents shifted. One major change was my decision to devote a chapter to issues of contact and communication between mothers and their adult children which resulted in the replacement of 'Post-Separation Dis/Continuities' with 'Post-Separation Communication', a decision which I discuss more fully below. In turn, as its title suggests, a consideration of the dis/continuities of mothering post-separation from adult children became the predominant focus of the thesis.

In order to physically consolidate my ideas, I created electronic documents for each of the chapters and within these the relevant narrative extracts were categorised under the themes I identified. Some of these appeared under more than one category as my readings and understandings of the transcripts evolved so that, as Bailey found in her study of women's transition to first-time motherhood: 'a single section of a transcript might deal with a number of themes' (Bailey, 1999: 338). Alongside these then, I added my previous annotations from the transcripts and any further thoughts and ideas from my note books and post-interview notes. My comments on the readings of the academic literature and relevant quotes from these (and full bibliographic details, page numbers etc) were also included.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 121) note that over time, the process of data analysis becomes 'structured, methodical, rigorous and systematic' and this was so for my own work. My continued close reading of the interview transcripts and scrutiny of the themes I had identified, alongside the links I was making between existing academic literature and women's experiences, meant that I began to manage the work more efficiently and effectively. Thus, the vital connections between data and theory I needed to make began to evolve. Throughout my analysis I tried to remain alert to Ribbens' (1994: 33) crucial question: 'how are we to conceptualise women's lives in ways that both value women's perspectives [...] yet also allow for critical insights from outside?' and thus consciously strove to ensure I did not import the 'outsider misinterpretations' (37) she discusses. I am aware, of course, that the interpretations of the interview data are my own.

As I have so far indicated, the themes I identified that structured the writing of my thesis emerged from the rich data generated in and produced from the semi-structured research interviews. As such, my work is dependent upon the narratives that were produced within the interview situation and are at the heart of my interpretation of women's experiences of their adult children's home-leaving. However, Maynard and Purvis (1994: 6) have commented that women's experiences have become synonymous with feminist research, and argue that 'a focus on experience alone is not sufficient when conducting feminist research. [...]. Analysis of women's experiences must therefore be complemented by material sourced from other arenas'.

With the comments of the above authors in mind, my participants' narrated experiences have formulated the bedrock of my work, but are only one, albeit key, aspect of my analysis. As Lawler states:

Narratives [...] are related to the experience that people have of their lives, but *they are not transparent carriers of that experience*. Rather they are interpretive devices, through which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others. Further, narratives do not originate with the individual: rather, they circulate culturally to provide a repertoire (though not an infinite one) from which people can produce their own stories. (Lawler, 2002: 242, emphasis added)

As Lawler indicates, narratives are produced in particular cultural and historical contexts and as such cannot be analysed without reference to wider sociocultural understandings and beliefs. Maynard (1994: 23) argues that the accounts people give of their lives 'are a construction of the events that occurred, together with an interpretation of them' and the experiences of my interviewees were embedded in a western construction of motherhood. Thus their stories of mothering and the meanings they attributed to their experiences were interpreted within, and told from, this location. This is an issue I discussed in the introductory chapter of the thesis and it is

also a theme I develop further in chapter 3 and later drawn on throughout the thesis as a whole. Of course, these constructions are partial and might not fully be understood by participants themselves, or by me.

Existing theories thus informed the interpretations I was able to make of the data, and these in turn were enriched by the addition of my participants' insights and experiences. As such, a dialectical engagement between the data and the literature was created as an ongoing feature of my analysis. For example, in chapter 3, 'Modelling Motherhood', so named because of my identification of women's lack of a cultural model on which to draw at the time of their adult children's home-leaving, I searched for women's accounts of their experiences of being mothered themselves, their relationship to wider sociocultural representations of motherhood, and their experiences of mothering as praxis. Within the broad categories I identified, further themes developed that shaped the chapter.

As Ribbens (1998: 28) has observed from her own studies of motherhood: 'it was striking how all these mothers seemed to hold images of what motherhood, and childhood, should be like' and she further notes how these 'were very significant in providing a framework for the ways in which mothers talked about their childrearing'. Similarly, in the interviews for my own research, my participants' mothering was narrated from within a conceptual framework of motherhood based on theories of child development that define the goals of successful childrearing as nurturing autonomy so that the child will become a responsible and independent adult citizen. In chapter 4, this is contrasted with my participants' experiences of separation from their

adult children in order to highlight the fit and also the disjuncture between their expectations of this separation and its lived reality.

Thus the concept of hegemonic motherhood that shapes the realities of mothers' experiences until particular moments in time, in this case adult children's home-leaving, is exposed within my thesis to highlight the rift between the concepts of autonomy and independence that adulthood is based upon and the relational aspects of mother and adult child post-separation. I used the data therefore to guide me towards the theoretical perspectives and relevant literature which, in their turn, led me further afield to broaden the scope of my analysis and enrich its outcomes.

At times, the data drew me toward academic literature that I had not previously encountered, nor had I, at the outset of my study, considered I would use. This was so for Chapter 5, 'Post-Separation Communication' which, as I mentioned above, replaced the original focus of this chapter. As I discussed in the Introduction to my thesis, the women who participated in my research had mothered over a period of rapid political and social change (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; Harris, Charles and Davies, 2006), during which advances in technology ran alongside changes in employment and social mobility. It emerged within women's interviews that their preparations and expectations of their children as adults were based upon this transformed sociocultural landscape.

As the demographic information previously outlined, the daughters and sons of the majority of my interviewees had, on home-leaving, moved away from their hometown and this in turn highlighted the importance for my participants of contact with their

daughters and sons across geographical distances. Although participants' references to technology formed only a small part of the interview transcripts, they nevertheless emerged as key to women's ability to cope with the experience of separation from their adult children and thus provided the focus for the chapter overall. Because of the foregrounding of this issue, I was exposed to a body of work that was new to me and this proved to be an extremely positive and rewarding experience.

As this discussion has so far explained, in making the connections between data and literature in my analysis, I abstracted interview extracts and located these within different theoretical frameworks. Thus I followed Ribbens (1994: 45) who comments that 'what is said should always be understood in relation to the social context and cultural understandings of the individual who is speaking'. Although women's narratives were enriched by the theoretical perspectives I drew on, they remain the resource that underpins my work as a whole rather than merely a starting-point for the analysis. Similarities with the practices of some elements of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) are evident here. Dey (2004: 80) comments that 'grounded theory was conceived as a way of generating theory *through* research data rather than testing ideas formulated *in advance of* data collection and analysis' (original emphases). To some extent this is what occurred during my own analysis, as my readings of the data certainly evolved and led me to broaden the areas of my enquiry.

As Maynard (1994: 23) argues however, 'no feminist study can be politically neutral, completely inductive or solely based on grounded theory' and indeed, as this chapter has revealed, I entered the research arena with a particular set of personal, academic and political beliefs regarding the topic of interest for my research and notions of how

I should proceed with my enquiry. In turn, these directed the research process and ultimately impacted on how I analysed, interpreted and presented the data produced from the empirical study. Edwards and Ribbens (1998: 17) stress the importance to feminist researchers of 'claiming and asserting our interpretation' (see also Mauthner, 1998). I hope to have made clear in this chapter how I have attempted to manage the balancing act these authors identify, that is, of representing my participants' 'voices' as well as my own, within my thesis. In the next and final section of this chapter, I discuss how I have presented the women's narratives within the four substantive chapters that follow.

Re/presenting Women's 'Voices'

As the preceding section of the chapter has highlighted, throughout the process of my research there has been a continuous and reciprocal dialogue between the data produced from my empirical study and existing theoretical debates. Each has enriched the other so that within my thesis, women's narratives and my interpretations are presented together as the final phase of my analysis. In this, the last section of the chapter, I shall briefly discuss the choices I made regarding how to re/present the words of the women I interviewed.

Fundamentally, within the thesis the extracts from research participants' narratives are presented verbatim. The short and long pauses in dialogue are indicated respectively as one or three dots parenthesised: (.); (...) and I also include participants' 'ums'.

Significant non-verbal communications appear in square brackets, for example:

[laughs] and edited extracts from their quotes appear as three dots in square brackets:

[...]. However, although I was vigilant in not straying from the meanings women had

conveyed by altering the underlying structure of their narratives (Glucksmann, 1994) I nevertheless made the decision to 'clean up' some of the language of the transcripts in order to present women's words 'equally'. In so doing I have 'corrected' some of the language, for example, I have replaced participants' 'dropped aitches'.

The underlying reason for my decision to make these changes follows Summerfield (2005: 61), who notes that 'textualised conversation offends literary rules of phrasing, grammatical construction and so on'. This is reiterated by Griffin (2005: 192), who further comments: 'we are acculturated into assuming that we speak in well formed sentences'. It was not my intention to give my participants a copy of their interview transcripts prior to my analysis in order to confirm their legitimacy (Skeggs, 1994; Summerfield, 2005). I did however present an outline of the final work to them, and this included extracts from their interviews.

My decision therefore to make these changes was done in order to offer a consistent approach to the presentation of the data (to both an academic and non-academic audience) and provide a 'vicarious experience for the reader' (Sandelowski, 1994: 480) and, I would add, the listener. In so doing however, I have not silenced my participants' voices although, as this chapter has indicated, the interpretations of their narratives are my own. As such, at this stage of the research process I remain aware that I stand as 'the personalized interface between the expression of private meanings and their ultimate reception by the powerful audience of public knowledge production' (Ribbens, 1998: 37).

Concluding remarks

Reflexivity means reflecting upon and understanding our own personal, political and intellectual autobiographies as researchers and making explicit where we are located in relation to our research respondents. Reflexivity also means acknowledging the critical role we play in creating, interpreting and theorizing research data. (Mauthner and Doucet, 1994: 121)

In this chapter I have discussed the methodological decisions I made that structured my research design and influenced my choice of research methods. In explicitly stating my own location within the study, I have highlighted the ongoing connection between the methodology and the process of data production and its analysis, and have therefore provided a reflexive account of the research process that, as Mauthner and Doucet imply above and further state, ‘lies at the heart of feminist research’ (121). In the chapters that follow, I turn to give space to my research participants’ words and in so doing present my analysis and interpretation of their experiences of their adult children’s home-leaving.

Chapter 3

Modelling Motherhood

Introduction



Figure 1. *Madonna with Child*²⁰



Figure 2. *La Pietà*²¹

The juxtaposition of the two images above is symbolic of the main focus of this chapter. The characters in each image are the same, but they are identified in different ways. In Michelangelo's *La Pietà*²², an iconic image which importantly is never referred to as 'Mother and Child', the mother is locked into a timeless state and is represented as in the first image, as a young woman, whilst her son is depicted as a baby in the former and an adult male in the latter image.

Warner (1976: 336) observes that, in 'Marian iconography [...] the interlocking of myth and ideology is camouflaged'. She later argues that 'a Myth is a kind of story told in public, which people pass on to one another' (1994: 13). As Barthes (1973: 109) earlier argued 'myth is a system of communication [...] a message'. In their

²⁰ Image of *Madonna and Child* www.leonardodavincisecrets.com, accessed 12.07.07

²¹ Image of *La Pietà* www.wikipedia.org, accessed 11.03.06.

²² *La Pietà*: a picture or sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ. *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.askoxford.com, accessed 21.03.06.

critique of mother and child images used in advertising, Hockey and James (1993: 59) suggest that 'at the level of myth ... [the] cradling arms connote the child in its dependent relationship: as belonging to someone, as dependent'. The images above thus convey particular meanings of what 'mother' and 'child' are, and in turn how they are understood. They are, in Barthes (1973) terms, mythologized.

In order to unpack the mythology of the two images, one might suggest that whilst the mother figure of *La Pietà* might see her 'child', the onlooker perceives the figure of Christ as 'adult', a dying or dead male figure. The child has thus undergone change – from babyhood in the first image to adulthood in the second – whilst the mother has not. The child of the first image is cradled by his mother, both her arms supporting him whilst he suckles. In the second, the mother's arms are outspread; she is unable to hold/contain her son. Furthermore, in both images, the mother, although standing in the first and seated in the second figure, is fixed in the same pose. More complexly, the adult held in a child's pose is a dead or dying rather than a living adult, raising the unimaginable thought of a living adult as 'child'; potentially the child as adult being 'dead' to the mother. A paradox is therefore created between the mother's perception of her offspring (and perhaps herself) as opposed to that of potential onlookers. I do not intend to discuss these two images further here but I have introduced them into the chapter because they are iconic images of mother and child in western, Christian cultures, and are indicative of the problematic of thinking of 'mother and child' beyond the period of the child as baby or infant.

Although it is possible to offer a critique of some of the myths underpinning religious imagery, myth-breaking becomes more difficult when representations of motherhood and of mother and child proliferate in everyday settings inasmuch as the stories they

tell are conveyed across wider social spaces. Woodward (1997) comments on the number of different media in which such images are to be found: 'television, soap operas and advertisements, films, magazines and novels'. As she observes:

Any woman who has a baby is likely to be inundated with advice from relatives, friends and, most especially in the late twentieth century, from 'experts' – medical experts, health personnel and the promoters of products related to pregnancy and childcare. (Woodward, 1997: 241)

As the introductory chapter of my thesis established, sociocultural parameters dictate the practices of motherhood, placing mothers and their children within a particular time-frame; a continuum along which women's mothering is performed. The mother's life course is thus entwined with that of the child from the latter's conception and birth. In its turn, motherhood itself is linked to notions of women's youthfulness and fertility. In my study, my research participants often reflected on how their children's home-leaving was a clear reminder of their own ebbing youth, particularly when accompanied by bodily changes such as the menopause. As such nostalgia, and in some instances a longing for times past, played their part in my participants' reminiscences of their mothering experiences.

My use of the phrase 'Modelling Motherhood' for the title of this chapter is therefore deliberately ambiguous. It denotes both representations of motherhood on the one hand and doing motherhood, motherhood as activity and process, on the other. In order to fully explore the relationship between models of motherhood and mothering as praxis, in this chapter I shall discuss my participants' perceptions of mothering over time. In so doing, I shall illustrate that as my research participants progressed through motherhood, only limited models existed for them to draw on, none of which took them beyond pregnancy, childbirth, the early years and the young adolescence of their children. To enable me to explore more fully the issues I have raised, I shall now

turn to the empirical data and thread extracts of my participants' interview narratives throughout the remainder of the chapter in order to convey their experiences of modelling motherhood over time. The chapter is divided into three sections: Learning to Mother; Mothers, Children and Time; and The Purpose of Mothering.

Learning to Mother

As I discussed in the introductory chapter of my thesis and have further established above, sociocultural representations of mother and child portray the pair in an age-bracketed state of being that figures the mother as adult and the child as her dependent. In the remainder of this chapter I shall illustrate that my research participants were also acculturated into the dual-discourse of *childcaring* and *childrearing* which effectively engendered a paradoxical situation for them; on the one hand, they perceived themselves as providers of love, care and support for their dependent children, where closeness to the mother was translated as safety for the child, whilst on the other, they were immersed in a discourse of child development which encouraged them to nurture their children's autonomy in the push towards adult independence. As I shall go on to show, the discursive structuring of motherhood, and my participants' experiences of mothering as praxis, were frequently experienced as contradictory.

But you see, all these baby books and magazines and shows like Trisha, you know, they all say, 'you're having a baby'. They don't say, 'you're having a teenager'. But you are! Because it goes so quickly. They think they're getting a cute little bundle and it doesn't stay like that for more than three months ... you just don't realise when you're having this baby, what it entails. It's years and years. People don't think about the future and I'm sure I didn't either.
(Linda)

In a shift away from iconic representations towards those of everyday contemporary images with which women grapple, the narrative extract from Linda above clearly

outlines how media representations and literature on motherhood are limited in their portrayal of the realities of mothering over time and in fact offer only a partial glimpse of what motherhood entails. Linda's observation indicates how portrayals of mothers and babies discourage mothers' (and others') thoughts beyond children's dependent state. Collectively these images impact on women's perceptions of motherhood and on themselves as mothers. Linda's brief critique references a broad sweep of cultural models of mother- and childhood which are exposed as limiting in the extreme. Her narrative illustrates how these images continue to mask the realities of motherhood and obscure the 'years and years' mothering involves, the transformation of the 'cute little bundle' and the mother's negation of thoughts about the future.

Images and representations thus have the power to suffuse our culture and so ourselves, they become a part of us. Following Althusser (1971) Woodward (2003: 21) comments that: 'the concept of interpellation [explains] the ways in which people are recruited into the subject position by recognizing themselves – "yes that's me"'. Motherhood carries considerable weight as an identity, especially the image of the "good" mother'. Commenting on the 'idealism' of marriage and motherhood, my participant Gina said 'those images stay with you'. She also observed that when a woman becomes a mother, she also becomes the focus of society's gaze:

You're very aware of how judgmental people are as to what you're doing with your life and whether you're making the right choices and dealing with things properly. [...] I think our society is very judgmental and you do feel those pressures, mothers especially, about what you should and shouldn't be doing with your children. (Gina)

There is little wonder, then, that feeling judged by society and being members of that same society, women as mothers should attempt to live up to the cultural

representations of motherhood they encounter. In her research into women's experiences of the transition to first-time motherhood, for example, Miller (2005) found that the new mothers she interviewed felt unable to voice the difficulties they encountered because they were expected, and expected themselves, to 'naturally' embrace their new status.

In consequence, and as Miller observes, women's assumed natural capacities for love and care placed them in a precarious position if/when they did not immediately feel 'naturally loving' towards their infants. As Miller argues, 'this self-silencing only serves to further perpetuate the old myths of motherhood' (138). Miller's argument lends itself to my own, as my participants' feelings regarding their children's emerging adulthood were effectively silenced by the discourse of independence and 'letting go', in which the purpose of their mothering practices was embedded. I shall discuss the purpose of mothering further in the final section of this chapter and return to women's self-silencing in chapter 4, where it will formulate an important strand in my discussion of women's experiences of separation from their adult children.

Limited models of mother and child act on the understandings and expectations of women contemplating motherhood. Indeed, from my interviewees' narratives it was not difficult to ascertain how their aspirations for motherhood were linked to a specific set of accepted practices as the norm for them as younger women. The majority of my participants (eighteen) left home to marry. As my participant Gina reflected, 'there's an idealism that's built into you, that you get a partner and you get married and you spend the rest of your life together'. Indeed, all twenty-five said that as young women they had expected to become wives and mothers. Their narratives

thus resonated with the findings of Jones, O’Sullivan and Rouse (2006: 378) whose participants ‘follow[ed] a “traditional” ordering of life events, on a trajectory over which they had little control’.

Although Jones and her colleagues attribute their findings to working-class life course trajectories, in my own study this was a common experience of my participants regardless of their class positioning: ‘it was my ambition to be a mother ... marriage was a way of having children’ (Bridget); ‘I always wanted to be a mother. I didn’t want a career and I couldn’t see myself as anything but being married and having children’ (Serena). Similar expectations were common across my research cohort when participants reflected on their younger selves. As such the future aspirations of my participants as young women cut across the class and ethnic differences²³ within the group. As the quotes from Judith and Lois below confirm, the destiny for my participants as daughters was to become wives and mothers, and this was often nurtured from their early childhood:

I was always brought up with it. I did the baking every week from being about 9 years old, I did the baking every week, um. I always helped with the ironing. I was a perfect housewife even before I left home at 21, you know? (Judith)

When I was a little girl, my whole life revolved around dolls and then, when my little brothers and sisters were born, I was like their mum. So it was always something I really, really wanted to do. (Lois)

Within my interviewees’ reflections on their lives as younger women could be discerned ‘a deep-rooted desire to take time out to have children, to stay at home to rear them and to be “looked after” [by a husband]’ (Walkerline, Lucey and Melody, 2001: 81). Thoughts of the future for my interviewees as younger women growing up

²³ Details of the self-selected class and ethnic status of each of my participants are provided in the methodology chapter.

in post-World War II nuclear families in the North East of England in the 1950s and 1960s were thus entangled within a prevailing discourse that ‘powerfully formed feminine subjectivities’ (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001: 81), that is, the ideal of a heterosexual relationship, marriage and children. Their aspirations can thus be linked to issues of time and place and the limitations of the opportunities they were presented with. During the time that my participants became mothers, for example, it was widely expected that ‘women [would] experience a period of full-time work within the home and financial dependence after the birth of a child’ (Richardson, 1993: 24). As the demographic information provided in the previous chapter indicated and their narratives further illustrate, this indeed was the experience of my research cohort.

In their discussion of the proliferation of self-help manuals for all areas of life, Jackson and Scott (1997: 561) comment that ‘being told how to do what supposedly comes naturally is a feature of much advice for women’, which in turn points to the socioculturally constructed dimension of women’s ‘natural’ ability to mother their children. As Woodward (1997: 242) observes, ‘motherhood is taken for granted as an identity for women, and as such is constructed within naturalistic discourse as a biological role where motherhood is seen as the distinguishing female characteristic’.

In their narratives, some of the women I interviewed drew upon a similarly naturalised/essentialist discourse when they talked about their entry into motherhood. Serena, for example, said, ‘I just think you’re complete then, really. [...] everything sort of seemed to come naturally, like the giving birth and the breastfeeding’ and Denise articulated, ‘it’s what you’re here for as a woman, isn’t it, to have children’.

In discussing the concept of the 'ideal mother' Woodward (1997: 243) comments that 'motherhood is not only about having children, it is about having a mother; that is, about being mothered too'. Several of the women in my study deferred to their own mothers' practices inasmuch as their own experiences of being mothered informed their own mothering during their children's early years. As Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse (2006: 383) observed: 'some parents hang on to fixed beliefs derived from their own upbringing'. My interviewee Ingrid identified that her own experience of being mothered was the model she had adhered to when she became a mother herself:

You expect at that early age, in your twenties, that your parents are the perfect parents and that, if you do things the way they did, because you've turned out alright, your kids'll turn out alright. I guess that's a little bit of what's happened to me. Rather than thinking, well no, times are moving on and things have changed and children want different things and I have to move along with that, I guess I haven't. But I think that's what makes me feel as though I haven't been the best mother, you know? Because I haven't moved on.
(Ingrid)

Ingrid highlighted the similarities between her mother's and her own mothering practices and indicated that had she reflected earlier she would have altered the way she mothered. She identified her own inability to change with perceived changing times as having a negative impact on her mothering and felt she had not fulfilled the role of mother as well as she might. In her interview with me Ingrid expressed regret at having steadfastly adhered to a particular model of mothering which she felt had impacted negatively on her relationship with her daughter: 'there was an issue when she was a teenager when she went and talked to one of her brother's female friends and I was aggrieved at that. I thought, oh yes, I am like my mother, you know?' (Ingrid). The circumstances of Ingrid's entry into motherhood are worthy of note however; she became the step-mother of two young children at the age of 22, at which time she also gave birth to her son. One can assume therefore that her ability to create

an individual model of motherhood more appropriate to changing times was limited by her lived circumstances.

Maggie described her own mother as ‘all-consuming’ and told me their relationship was based on her mother’s ‘emotional blackmail’. She thus vehemently opposed the model of motherhood she had herself experienced as a daughter: ‘my role as a mother has been completely defined by what my mother was like. [...] everything that I thought she was wrong in, I have changed’ (Maggie). Others of my participants also consciously mothered differently from their own mothers, particularly in their approach to their children’s teenage years. Both Judith and Janice, for example, indicated how they drew on experiences from their own youth to inform how they approached the same period in their children’s lives:

I think [being a mother has] made me look at things in a different way, because I don’t want [my sons] to feel like I felt. I always felt like I had to do everything the right way, because if I didn’t do it the right way I would upset my mum. (Judith)

I’ve tried to think, um, don’t do as what my mother did, you know, in things like, well, what happened when I was a child. So I’ve always given them their freedom, their privacy and got them to sort of speak openly about most of the things. (Janice)

Denise articulated her reluctance to draw on her own experience of being mothered when a teenager to assist her in the mothering of her own teenage daughter with whom she experienced some difficulties: ‘your mother would just say “lock her up and don’t let her out again until she’s 20”, you know? [...] It doesn’t work like that anymore.’ Being without advice or reluctant to follow that of their own mothers, my participants referred to the feelings they remembered from their own youth to inform their practices during their children’s teenage years:

You never know whether you’re doing the right thing ... Well, nobody puts

a training manual out for it, do they? You just have to go by your own best instincts and, you know, think, what did I feel like when I was that age?
(Judith)

The cultural models of be(com)ing a mother for the women I interviewed were further shaped by the women's actual experiences of mothering their children. Effectively, they learned how to be mothers from 'doing' their mothering. All of my participants had more than one child and as such, provided examples in their narratives of learning to mother their subsequent children from actual hands-on experience of mothering:

I've learnt much more through being a mum of [my second son] than I did through [my first son]. But I always say I think your first children are guinea pigs a little bit. [...] Because I had to learn how to be a mum with him, but I kind of knew how to be a mum when the second one came along and I could kind of look back. [...] So I did learn that from the two different experiences of being ... two different motherhoods, really, in lots of ways they were.
(Lois)

I think the experience you've had with one affects your experience with, you know ... You think you might've got it right by the time you've had about six [laughs]. (Denise)

Exposure to the available models representing motherhood at the time and their own experiences of being mothered informed this group of women's decision-making and the vision they adopted for themselves as mothers. Although five influences on women's mothering practices can be identified from my discussion so far: mother and child images; expert advice; societal expectations; interviewees' own history of being mothered; and their experience of mothering, it was evident from my participants' narratives that as they moved through their mothering years, many found themselves without appropriate reference points from which to draw advice and support. This became particularly acute at the time of their children's home-leaving.

What I have shown so far in this chapter is that when my interviewees embarked upon motherhood in the 1970s and 1980s they were exposed to and had experienced particular models of mothering. At the same time, they responded to varying degrees

both to the social and political climate in which they lived, and the dependent children they had produced. What they took with them to inform their motherhoods and also what they left behind highlights how models of motherhood emerged from different arenas, and as such was a contradictory and thus confusing time for my participants. As young mothers, they were immersed within the rhetoric of childcare ‘experts’ of all persuasions, whilst simultaneously living within their own realities of motherhood and ultimately making their own choices on how to mother. What is clear is that as this group of women progressed through their childrearing years, there was an increasing absence of models on which they could build that shifted them forward in time alongside their children.

Mothers, Children and Time

Parents are unified in their sense that children ‘grow up so quickly’ and are no sooner walking than they are asking to borrow the car! (Jenks, 1996a: 38)

When my participants reflected on their experiences of mothering many responded in the way Jenks describes. Their children’s childhoods were perceived to have passed very quickly, which in some instances enforced a realisation of their own ageing and thus a transformation of their self-perception.

Seems like it’s gone really fast, yeah. I was saying the other day, um, it doesn’t seem two minutes ago since I was twenty and I was having the children. Now I’m 45 and I’ve got, er, three. One of which is married, one of which is pregnant, different one. It just seems to change my whole outlook really. I’m my mum all of a sudden, know what I mean? (Dawn)

When tackling the question ‘how do we know that we are ageing?’ Hockey and James (2003: 34) suggest that ‘ageing is a process which is imperceptible to the self. It takes place behind our backs, creeps up on us and is not therefore easily amenable to self-articulation’. On an individual basis this might be so, and it is possible that the

subtlety of what ageing means to those of us who are mothers might 'creep up' over the time of our children's growing years and culminate in their becoming adults and our becoming the mothers of adult children and thus, as Dawn asserts in her quote, older women. The transformation of the child to adult therefore acts as a marker of age/ing for the mother.

What emerged from my interview data was that for much of their children's childhoods, the mothers I spoke with seemed to have existed outside time, in a state that foreclosed considerations of ageing. Many of them articulated that mothering and childhood seemed never-ending, a feeling commonly evoked when my interviewees reflected on their experiences as mothers. During my interviews with them I asked if they had thought about their children growing up and leaving home during their children's early years, or if they had considered what their children might do as adults. Many of them explained their lack of thought around the issue of their children's getting older and going to school and beyond with a sense that at the time, these events had an unreal quality. Living in the 'here-and-now' as seemingly demanded by mothering a small child/ren thus occluded thoughts of the future, in relation to child and mother alike:

I can remember funny things from when they were really little, like not being able to imagine that they, one day, would be going to school, um, they were so little and that day seemed so far off that, well, it can't be real! (Bridget)

You were just coping at the time with what you had to cope with and you didn't really look to them being in their twenties and what they would do. (Janice)

I'm sure I did think about them growing up when they were little. Um, it seemed such a long way ahead. (Nancy)

It never occurred to me. You just think it's going to go on forever. (Frances)

These narrative extracts are indicative of the feelings of timelessness generated by women's time *in* motherhood, which I discussed in conjunction with the concept of 'time *in* childhood' (James and Prout, 1997) in the introductory chapter of my thesis. The model of motherhood to which my participants adhered when their children were in their early years did not encourage them to look towards the future. As such, their mothering was experienced as a state of being rather than as a process of becoming. This anchored them in a particular concept of time, or timelessness, which was then disrupted when their children grew up and left home.

As their children 'got older' many of the women in my study experienced a rift in their own life course, which enforced changed perceptions of themselves and of their children. Vanessa described this period as 'the beginnings of not being needed. That beginning feeling that actually gets more and more as you get older'. Changes in the life course can have a dramatic effect on an individual's perception of self and, as Hockey and James (2003: 39) argue, these might be 'experienced as profound, having not only a deep emotional and personal significance but also radically altering the course and direction of their lives'. Clearly, as my participants' narratives highlight, such transitions do not have to be 'your own', nor anything extraordinary. Sally's commentary below provides an example of how this might happen, with the ordinariness of a familiar and expected event in the life course of the child running alongside the unexpected feelings it created for the mother:

What I did find strange was when they actually left school. When the youngest left school it made me realise that they'd both grown up and that's when you realise that they're going to be doing other things and leaving home. (Sally)

She later added:

You don't really think that far in advance. It's only when they get to secondary school, um. I never really did with [my eldest son]. It was just when

the youngest one was going to be leaving and then you lose all your ties with the school and, you know, things change completely. Your involvement with the school is just cut off, you know? (Sally)

As she articulated, Sally did not think ahead whilst mothering her young sons. In her interview extract above she commented on two radical changes that she experienced because of changes in her children's daily lives. Firstly the realisation that her sons were growing up and approaching the time when they would be leaving home, and secondly that she would no longer be involved in the day-to-day routines of school-life, which had until then structured her sons' lives and, in consequence, her own. The child's transition out of compulsory schooling is therefore another point where the occlusion of mothers' life course experience becomes apparent. Hughes (2002: 150) argues that linear time 'shapes our material realities and our understanding of selfhood and development' and as I have established so far, childrearing is couched in terms of development and becoming adult (Brannen et al, 1996; James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002).

However, although Sally's life as a mother of two sons was conducted along a linear path, she seemingly lived outside of this conceptual framework; her re-entry into the linear time of her children's lives was experienced as 'strange'. Many of the women I spoke with provided similar vignettes concerning an apparent surprise at their children's grown-up status that effectively confirmed their children as potential adults who would be leaving home. As I established earlier, and Hughes further notes, 'child and adult development is charted predominantly in terms of chronological age' (140). Although this developmental model of the life course was expected of their children, and indeed nurtured by them, their children's seemingly 'sudden' achievement of

adulthood evoked feelings of uncertainty in several of my participants' sense of self-as-mother.

Women's narratives therefore revealed a complex nexus of their experiences of time: being immersed in the everydayness of motherhood and so seemingly existing outside of linear time; the experience of living life in 'slow motion', so that time passes without one being aware; and a sudden acceleration of time experienced at the point of the child's emerging adulthood and home-leaving. Furthermore, their interview narratives incorporated their looking forward from and back to their children's childhoods that indicated different concepts of time that the women occupied/experienced simultaneously. Regarding Kristeva's concept of 'women's time', Moi comments:

According to Kristeva female subjectivity would seem to be linked both to *cyclical* time (repetition) and to *monumental* time (eternity), at least in so far as both are ways of conceptualizing time from the perspective of motherhood and reproduction. The time of history, however, can be characterized as *linear* time: time as project, teleology, departure, progression and arrival. (Moi, 1986: 187, original emphases)

Kristeva's concept illuminates how mothers' time and linear time might conflict with one another at particular phases of the mother's life course. It adds to my proposal that women's time *in* motherhood is performed within a conflicting and contradictory set of models of child-caring (cyclical time) and -rearing (linear time), and that these are further confused by representations of mother and child (monumental time).

McNay (2000: 113) talks of 'multiple levels of temporality [...] that are simultaneously lived but not reconcilable'. Very often my participants talked of experiences which shifted them 'back in time' as they identified the practices they performed for their children as fitting the model of mothering they had 'lost' when

their children left home. Sandra, for example, told me her daughter had recently been ill and had returned to Sandra's home to recover: 'she came round here and, you know, I was doing all the comfort things and I was thinking, this is wonderful, *I'm back to where I was*'. Effectively, Sandra 'returned' to a time that fitted her concept of mothering a child who was dependent upon her care. In the next section of this chapter I shall elaborate on my participants' perceptions of the purpose of their mothering.

The Purpose of Mothering

Women's aspirations for their children as adults were often shaped by reflections on the restrictions they perceived had governed their own lives as daughters. For many of them, their experiences of growing up resulted in working towards ensuring that their children had wider opportunities and different life chances than they had had in their own youth:

I left home to get married, yes. I think that's why I've tried to be a bit more, um, involve the boys in other things, because my parents brought me up in a very sheltered environment. We didn't really mix with anyone else apart from just family which, to me you know, once you go out in the big wide world, you're terrified of everything around you because you don't know how to cope with anything. (Sally)

Wanting 'something different' for their children recurred throughout the interviews I held with my research participants. As Bridget said, 'I would hate for [my children] to feel in any way tied, or that they've got to live their lives around my aspirations, um, in that way. I do want them to be free to do their own thing'. The notion of children 'doing their own thing' was a commonly narrated across my study cohort and invariably involved their children leaving their family homes and, in the majority of cases, hometown, to pursue their life goals and interests. The aspirations of some of the women for their children were built upon feelings of having 'missed out'

themselves as younger women. As Dawn said of her daughters, ‘the only thing I ever wanted was for them to do all that I didn’t’. Similarly Rita said:

I wanted [my daughter] to do all the things I hadn’t done and I wish, in a way, I had done. I mean, it was different in the seventies, the fact that you went to school, got your O-levels and got a job and went to work.

[...]

We were a very poor family and they didn’t encourage me at all to go to university. It wasn’t their thing, you know? They’re just working-class people and, um, so I went straight from school to work, met my husband after two years, then married at 20. (Rita)

Issues from the women’s own lives thus influenced their resolve to work towards something else for their children. For some of the women, this involved an aversion to making their children ‘feel’ like they did themselves towards their own mothers who were regarded as having placed unrealistic demands upon them as daughters. In a similar vein to Maggie above, Judith for example said, ‘I’ve been dictated to all my life by my mother’. In rejecting the model of motherhood their mothers had performed, many of my participants worked towards ensuring their children did not feel in any way responsible for meeting their mothers’ needs even though this involved the paradox that wanting one’s children to have different experiences also constituted a maternal aspiration:

I’ve never wanted my kids to feel as though they’ve got to do anything, if you know what I mean. You know, my mum looked after my grandma and my grandma looked after her mother, so. Like, my mother thinks, right, well it’s my turn now to be looked after. Whereas I don’t have that attitude. I think that’ll stop anyway, because I think society’s changed. (Denise)

Although the quality of the relationship between mothers and daughters of earlier generations was often a pre-requisite for elder care (Finch, 1989; Finch and Groves, 1983; Finch and Mason, 1993) there was a pronounced shift in the perception of care and family obligation amongst the group of women I interviewed; as Denise said, ‘society’s changed’.

My participants were each aware that they had mothered over a period of rapid political and social change (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001). As my introductory chapter indicated and the demographic information in the methodology chapter showed, there were profound differences in my participants' situations at the time of my interviews with them from when they started out as mothers. Alma's comparison between her own and her daughters' experiences confirmed her perception of the shift in opportunities for women in the present day: 'my girls are having a completely different experience to my own. They're not waiting until they get too old to do something about it! [laughs]'. As Ingrid observed:

Motherhood's changing though, it's bound to change. Children are changing, we're changing. I mean, children become mothers and each time there's a movement on, something changes. (Ingrid)

Ingrid's comments acknowledged the impact of social and historical change on mothering as praxis. As Woodward (2003: 26) observes, 'there is no fixity in maternal identity, and changing times and changing social, economic, political and cultural circumstances can produce new figures'. Indeed, the teenage and young-adult years of my participants' children were experienced in very different ways from their mothers. Thus my participants' *childrearing* was shaped both by their response to wider changes in society and, in the case of several of my participants, by consciously mothering differently from their own experiences of being mothered:

My sister and I didn't [go to university], we stayed... we did all sorts of stuff but we didn't go to university because my mum didn't want us to go, um. I had a place at a training college and my mum said, it was only in Huddersfield, and she said, 'oh, what will I do without you?' I was very much the sensible, practical, older daughter who looked after her emotional needs, you see. (Angela)

Angela's experience of her mother's desire for her to remain at home (until she married) was implicit in the narratives of other interviewees. In its turn, then, their

experiences as daughters impacted on their desires for their own daughters', and sons', lives to be different:

I'd always thought that they would do [leave home]. I'd always planned that they would. I just think they're only lent, you know, for a certain time. I didn't want them to be at home forever. I just wanted to bring them up as good as I could, to be independent really, and stand on their own two feet, really.
(Serena)

Serena's idea of children 'being on loan', indicated her view of the child as a separate individual and potential adult in a tenuous relation to the mother. Judith also spoke of her sons as 'on loan' and the notion of 'standing on their own two feet' was called upon several times during the interviews. My participants perceived there being a cut-off point for childhood and a time when children would leave the family home as independent adults. Children's journey towards adulthood in these narratives was articulated by my participants as a 'natural' progression, as Maggie, for example, said, 'children are looked after by other people, children go to school, children go, you know?'

In their interviews, this was often linked to their children's ages and my participants therefore called on culturally recognised age-transitions as signposts for their own children's adult status. As my introductory chapter established, contemporary notions of childhood are immersed in issues of reaching the next st/age of development (Brannen, 1996; Jaggar, 1983; James and Prout, 1997; Lawler, 2000; Mayall, 1996, 2002). My interviewees' highlighted their immersion in this discourse. In consequence, and as I argued earlier, nurturing children's independence remains a major goal of motherhood in contemporary UK and was a remarkably resilient theme within the narratives of my interviewees.

Preparing their children for adult life was considered, as Alma said, to be 'part of being, um, a good parent. You're supposed to be able to prepare your children for life away from you'. Rita's daughter had left for university and although Rita missed her presence in the home, she also perceived adulthood to be achieved more easily away from the family home, which in turn impacted on her thoughts regarding her son's future home-leaving: 'I still want [him] to go away and have that experience of living away from home and actually, um, I think it would make him grow up a bit'.

Similarly, Heather said of her sons: 'the experience of going away to university is something that you can't give them if they stay at home'. That their children were now perceived to be autonomous individuals with responsibility for themselves, thus meeting the ideal of western citizenship, was evident in a number of participants' narratives:

You know, I really believe that once they get to eighteen, they're classed by the world as an adult so therefore it's up to them, isn't it? It's up to them what they do. (Sandra)

[My husband] says, 'he's twenty-one now, so we've done what we needed to do, really. We've got him to adulthood and he's safe and sound and well. He's set up, he's got a car'. So I think in that way, he sort of thinks, job done! Well, not quite job done but I think, in a way, we've succeeded at least, you know, and in a sense there is a relief we're not responsible for him anymore. (Barbara)

Sandra took an objective stance in her description of the sociocultural transition from child- to adulthood, and both she and Barbara attached a linear trajectory to children's life course. Thus the emerging adulthood of their children was articulated as an age-transition; an end of their dependent childhood and a beginning of their independence as adults. All of the women in this study felt responsible for ensuring that their children would be able to cope in the outside world. As Sandra said: 'you know you've done a good job if they do go, don't you?'

Nevertheless, for many of my participants, the anticipation of their children's pending home-leaving was also coupled with feelings of anxiety. Bridget for example said: 'I've been dreading it for ages [...] even though I knew it was going to happen'. Fiona had equally dreaded her son's leaving and yet clearly perceived that his future involved leaving home to go to university and that her responsibility as a mother had been to ensure this was achieved:

My whole aim, I mean, all the way through him being at school and everything, I knew he was going to go away to university, you know? That was the whole ... the whole purpose of ... You raise your children to leave home, don't you? Um, bring them up to be considerate with other people and to live with other people and be happy and successful. (Fiona)

Even though their childrearing was couched in a discourse of independence, perceived as achieved on children's home-leaving, many women's experiences of this time were suffused with mixed emotions and confusion of meanings regarding their children's status. As Janice said, 'it was like your little boy is now this individual, but you want them to be that, it's not like you don't want them [to be]'. Similarly, although she earlier drew on an age-transition as an indicator of adulthood *per se*, in her interview Sandra also articulated the confusion she experienced when she left him at university:

I think it's just the fact that, yes, they are an adult now, aren't they? Because, even when they turn eighteen, they're still your child and it's difficult to class them as an adult, yeah, it's hard to (...) view them in that way, I think. [...] And I was crying for myself, because I didn't have him anymore. (Sandra)

As Sandra said, she was crying for herself and what she felt she had lost. She found it difficult to perceive her son as an adult although he had reached the age of eighteen, the culturally recognised age of transition she earlier articulated, and would now be viewed by the rest of society as 'adult' not 'child'.

The move from the home to a new environment sometimes enforced a shift in the recognition of participants' offspring from children to adults. As Maggie and Denise both indicated:

We dropped all his stuff off and we went out for lunch and he just morphed from a boy to a young man within the space of about thirty seconds. [...] He stood up straight and he changed from the boy to the young man. It was almost as if something in his head was saying, 'you're away, you're growing up, you've got everything you want now'. (Maggie)

She was so ... vulnerable, you know? You saw her in a different light to how you'd seen her ever before. She always had this barrier, you know, this bitch-like, teenage, awful thing. But then you saw her as ... as sort of a person ... That sounds awful, but as a person rather than a daughter, you know? Rather than someone who was trying to make your life hell, you saw her as someone who was upset about it. (Denise)

For these two interviewees, the transition from child- to adulthood was voiced in seemingly gendered terms; autonomy and the freedom of the situation for Maggie's son, and the vulnerability and being 'upset about' the separation for Denise's daughter. Even so, each woman responded to her child as 'adult' differently from her child as 'child'; they perceived them in different terms and this seemingly happened in an instant. The child's move out of the home and into another place thus signalled a change in these mothers' perceptions of their children.

Clearly however, and although occupying the role of mother and performing practices from within that role was understood and undertaken as nurturing their children's independence, many of my participants had not envisaged what their children's transition to adulthood might mean *in their own lives*. I explore women's experiences of separation from their children in more detail in the next chapter of my thesis. My purpose here is to highlight how several of my participants had not connected the mothering of their children to adulthood with what this might mean for them as mothers. In some instances, for example, the child's leaving was a signal that motherhood was at an end:

You know that's the way it should be, um, but that's it, your job's over, isn't it? Your job as a mum is just ... finished. You know that you're there whenever they need you, um, and if they've got any problems or anything, you

know, they phone you up and whatever but ... basically, you know, your job's finished because they're looking after themselves now and *you stop feeling like a mum*. (Sandra)

Clearly, and as her previous narratives also attest, the model of motherhood Sandra practised was built upon the concept of caring for a dependent child; that was how she 'felt like' a mother. Even though she expressed her availability to him after he left, once she perceived her son as able to care for himself she experienced a shift in her identity, in effect from mother to not-mother. Changes in children's lives therefore acted as a catalyst for potential change in their own. In Sandra's case, this was seen as limiting her input into her children's lives once they became adults and thus signalled the end of her motherhood. Gina commented:

I think as a mum, you spend so many years doing things for everybody else and sacrificing maybe things that you would like to do or should've done for yourself. (Gina)

What can be discerned from Gina's statement is a realisation that her own needs had been suppressed by the all-consuming nature of the motherhood practices she had adopted. On reflection, she felt she had sacrificed her own desires in favour of those of her daughters. The circumstances in which she had reared her children had some impact here as Gina had mothered alone for the ten years preceding her eldest daughter's home-leaving. She infers that she should have spent some time meeting her own needs and pursuing her own interests and this was partially due to her awareness that her children would, eventually, both leave home. As she commented later in the interview:

You always know that your children are going to grow up and leave home but you never really (...) Well I've never really given it a tremendous amount of thought as to how it's going to impact on my life. (Gina)

Articulating that they had always known their children were going to grow up and leave home was common across interviewees' narratives. Clearly, the women's

purpose was to nurture their children to this point in their lives and ensure they were able to cope in the world beyond the home and, as Gina's comment indicated, this was undertaken to the exclusion of thoughts about *their own* futures. For many of the women in my study then, the seemingly ordinary and everyday occurrence of young people leaving home had a significant and unanticipated impact on their own lives.

I have established so far that women's experiences of mothering are often in tension with socio-cultural representations and models of motherhood. Alongside this, women's compliance with and resistance to the mothering experienced during their own upbringings, meant that in the case of my participants, their individual models of motherhood were constructed by drawing on a mixture of the contradictory elements provided by cultural representations of motherhood, their own experiences of being mothered, and the 'doing' of mothering itself.

Brannen, Dodd, Oakley and Storey comment on the perceived role of parents as follows:

To guide and to be seen to guide rather than to control children; they should regard it as 'good' to let go of their teenage children, and to give them space in which to create adult identities and take up their individual rights of citizenship. By contrast, there are no exit rituals for parents as they leave behind their more onerous responsibilities as parents. (Brannen et al, 1994: 136)

The transition from child-to-adult is interpreted by Brannen et al as symbolic of the parents' exit from the ties of responsibility for their dependent children. In later chapters of my thesis, I shall discuss further whether/how my participants were able to let go of the responsibilities they identified as part of their mothering. For now, I want to highlight how the lack of ritual for parents that these authors comment upon has the potential to fix them, and more specifically for my thesis, mothers, within a particular

model of parent/motherhood so that when change occurs in their children's lives, for example home-leaving as in the case of my research, change in the mother's life is not acknowledged. As Vanessa commented in her interview, 'nobody tells you about that bit'.

Several of my study participants noticed changed behaviour and a mis-match of opinions between themselves and their teenage children that preceded their home-leaving and, as Allatt (1996: 133) observes, 'threats to the parental ... meanings of home appear most forcibly at those transitional points of the life course when the older adolescent hovers between dependence and independence'. Vanessa, for example, indicated that her sense of home was threatened and she found it difficult to come to terms with her daughters' decision-making when it differed from her own, and perhaps found it hard to accept their emerging independence, even though she strongly articulated that this had been her goal as a mother. During her daughters' pre-school and early years, for example, she adopted the Montessori²⁴ approach, which advocates children making discoveries for themselves: 'you let the child become the man [*sic*] sort of thing' (Vanessa). Nevertheless, as her growing daughters more firmly asserted their choices of lifestyle and opinion, Vanessa experienced uncertainty in her mothering identity:

There's, you know, a chipping away when they're growing up, of a lot of things that you've done for years, and thought they liked for years. Suddenly they're changing their minds and making decisions on things, um, that they've actually tried from new and they liked and replaced. It made me think, god, what have I wasted my time doing this for? You know? Was I doing this and they really didn't like it at the time? That sort of thing [laughs]. (Vanessa)

²⁴ Montessori education is based on four key developmental stages: 0-6; 6-12; 12-18; 18-24 yrs. The aim of the approach is 'to aid the child's development to a complete adult human being' (www.montessorieducation.com accessed 08.07.07).

Similarly, children having their own homes created mixed emotions and an element of unrest for some of the women I spoke to:

She said, 'no, I do my own washing at home', you know? And that was 'at home' (...) And I felt a little bit, I don't know, sad really. Sad but glad, you know, mixed with (...) Glad that she was responsible but sad that you felt that that was the end. That she's no longer my responsibility in a way, really, you know? (Denise)

Although mothers' nurturing of children's independence was highlighted by the women in this study as the purpose of their mothering, and independent living the desired outcome for their children, many of their narratives revealed that the women continued to cling to the notion of motherhood in terms of caring for and meeting their children's needs. Thus these women grappled with two conflicting views. They perceived their children to be adults taking their place in society, whilst simultaneously they lived with an image of their children as continually dependent upon them, thus highlighting the contradictory discourse of child-rearing and caring in which the western concept of motherhood is immersed. I suggest that my participants' dependency on the model of the child-as-dependent acted as an affirmation of their own motherhood identities. In turn, my participants' narratives reinforce my argument regarding the inadequacy of the models of mother and child currently promoted and endorsed in contemporary images and child development discourse.

Children's assertions of independence were translated by my participants as a rejection of, or less dependency upon, maternal activities and in some instances, my interviewees were excluded from key phases of their children's lives and western family celebrations that mark child to adult transitions, the 'exit rituals' Brannen et al (1994) allude to. For example, Dawn did not attend her daughter's wedding as it took

place in America, and she was unable to travel there. This had a profound effect on how she perceived her daughter's new status: 'I don't feel that she's married ... It's strange, she's still my little girl'. Rachel too was denied the celebration of her daughter's culturally recognised age-transition to adulthood:

Um, it was quite difficult. I wanted to have a birthday party for her eighteenth and she didn't. She decided she didn't want to have one and I was really very hurt, very disappointed. I thought, oh, I want to celebrate that I was there too! You know? I was there too and I had you! (Rachel)

Secondary, or default, transitions such as becoming the mother of an adult, not a child and becoming the mother of a married woman (and a mother-in-law) are here unmarked by formal ritual, rendering Rachel and Dawn unable to publicly embrace their own 'new' status. Possibly in consequence for Dawn, her daughter remained locked in a state of childhood. Thus, granting our children freedom might mean that we also effectively exclude ourselves from aspects of our children's lives as adults. As such, our loss at these times and our ability to cope with such exclusions might prove both difficult and perplexing. For a significant number of the women I spoke to, their children's independent and now-adult status cultivated an element of uncertainty in the otherwise 'secure' identity of 'mother' they had, until then, inhabited.

Meeting children's needs underpinned the model of motherhood into which these women from the west had been acculturated, and was undoubtedly how my participants perceived their role. Being caught up in this discourse therefore subsumed the mother's interests should they differ from those of the child. As Woollett and Phoenix have commented:

The invisibility of mothers in much psychological work is probably linked with the lack of a conceptual framework for analysing mothers' feelings and experiences as distinct from those of their children. It is not surprising, then, that conceptualizations of motherhood and of good mothering merely reflect

ideas about children. What children are considered to need for development is generalized to define good mothering. (Woollett and Phoenix, 1991: 40)

Similarly, as Lawler argues, mothers are responsible for developing the 'good self' of the child. She states: 'in nurturing the child's "self", the mother's self threatens to disappear' (Lawler, 2000: 133). In these accounts, then, the good mother nurtures the good child, yet remains invisible in this process. Once the 'good child' became adult however, meeting their needs was an aspect of mothering that was re-negotiated by my participants and particularly so at the time of their adult children's home-leaving.

In pursuing familial interactions inherent in the practices of mothering over time I am attempting to make mothers more visible in their children's lives as adults and suggest that if, as Allatt (1996: 135) concluded, 'parents are the archivists of identity' for their children, then child-caring and rearing practices are key to the identities of their parents, and more importantly for my work, that of the mother. These practices continue to lock women into particular models of mother and child, a point from which the mother might have difficulty in articulating her own desires (Lawler, 1999, 2000; Woollett and Phoenix, 1991). Vanessa interpreted a mother's relationship to her children's needs as follows:

If you're going to be a good mum, you have to consider someone else's wants, needs, desires before your own. You're not suppressing it, you're just putting someone else first and later, if you've got time, you can sort yourself out, after you've done everything for everyone else. Often you don't have time to do that so that puts it on hold. I think it's an automatic response. That a mother thinks that this is the priority, that's the most important thing, to sort out somebody else's needs and desires. What you want is not important. (Vanessa)

Evident in my participants' narratives was a strong feeling that giving things up for their children was the right thing for them to have done. They either forfeited their claim on having their own needs met via an 'automatic response' to meeting the needs of others, as Vanessa clearly articulated, or perceived that their own needs changed in

line with their children's: 'you've got to give up things for your children, haven't you? You must, it's the way of the world. You don't give it up really, [the children] become more important, don't they?' (Frances). Both narratives adhere to the 'expert' childcare advice literature that was available to my participants during their early mothering years (Jolly, 1986; Leach, 1977, 1994; Spock, 1968; Stoppard, 1983. See Marshall, 1991; Richardson, 1993; Sunderland, 2006 for critiques of childcare 'expert' texts).

Although now the mothers of adult children and so perceived as less responsible for them and more able to make choices for themselves, my participants nevertheless continued to feel accountable for meeting their children's needs and in chapter 6 I return to this issue in order to explore some of the dilemmas this created for my participants once they had adjusted to living without their children in the home. In considering how meeting their children's needs might have impacted on women's lives over the time they mothered, Lawler has argued:

If the (age category) 'child' has needs which it is the mother's responsibility to meet, the relationship between mother and child can be structured by these needs and this responsibility, so that even relationships between mothers and adult children are constituted in terms of what the child needs and what the mother should provide. (Lawler, 2000: 4)

Thus, as Lawler found, a needs discourse dominated her participants' practices so much so that as children grew up the relationships between mothers and their children were shaped through the formers' continued meeting of the needs of the latter. I found the same was true for the women in my own study as each made it clear that she would always be there for her child/ren in times of need. These were not always assumed to have remained static, however. Maggie, for example, reflected on how her children's needs transformed over time, which in its turn changed how she would respond:

I'm not saying that the children don't need me, that need's changed. They needed me when they were younger, physically, for their survival. As they got older ... their need has, I suppose, um, their need for me has been, yeah, different, um, and what I hope to have achieved eventually is that they've always got me in the background, that they're not being overwhelmed by my presence, by my interference, but no matter what they do, or what they want to do, there's always somebody supporting them, in that role. (Maggie)

I discussed the concept of 'being there' in the introduction of my thesis in relation to women's early mothering practices (Ribbens, 1994) and commented that it was dependent upon the proximity of mother and child, an element of the mother/child relationship which children's home-leaving disrupts. Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2002: 210) further suggest that the notion of being there 'may define a key aspect of caring'. In my interview with her, the concept of 'being there' clearly emerged as a metaphorical bridge between Maggie and her children that maintained their relationship across time and space once her children left home. This was so for each of my participants. Sandra earlier articulated she was 'always there' for her son and Judith similarly said, 'I want them to know that I'm always here to help them. I'm always here for them'. In utilising this concept the mothers I spoke to effectively fixed themselves in time and space as available.

I return to the issue of the mother's availability to the adult child later in the thesis. For now, I suggest that the concept of 'being there' was an attempt by the mothers I interviewed to reconfigure the discourse of needs in relation to children who were adults and from whom they lived apart. As such, this signals both a transformation and a continuity in mothering practices and, in turn, the identity 'mother'. The children of my participants were not set adrift on reaching adult status because their mothers' 'being there' performed a vital function; it provided a bridge between

mother and child and its enactment confirmed the enduring bonds between the pair and in turn, women's identities as mothers:

They are the centre and have been for so long that everything revolves around them [...] You've just done it all their lives and, even though they're in adulthood, you still want to help, you know? But I don't think you ever stop, my mother says that. And I don't think that, until you become a parent, you can understand that, you know? (Janice)

I think you always have that bond if, if anybody upsets them, you know? It's not a case of, um, blaming anybody but you think, oh, I just want to go wrap my arms round him, say 'it's going to be alright', you know? Um, so I think you've always got that bond. (Judith)

Judith's desire to cradle her son during times of his distress and offer him comfort and protection was evident in her narrative, which in effect returned her to the role she performed as the mother of a dependent child. It also forges a link with the images with which I began this chapter. Janice's intimation, 'I don't think you ever stop' highlighted the placing of herself, like her mother before her, as a meeter of her adult child's needs. McNay (2000: 19) discusses 'the investments individuals may have in certain self-conceptions that render them resistant to transformation'. Evidently, my participants' children occupied a central space in their lives that they did not wish to lose. In effect, this rendered these mothers resistant to change. Their resistance served two purposes, as the adult child continued to need the mother for practical as well as emotional labour, an issue I shall discuss further in chapters 5 and 6, and the mother meets her own need to feel needed by fulfilling her perceived role. As Linda said: 'it makes me feel better, doing those things for him', highlighting her awareness that her actions were for herself as well as for her son.

My participants' narratives illustrated that the model of motherhood they performed was integral to their identities and in turn their sense of self. In reconfiguring the needs discourse, the women I interviewed actively attempted to adapt motherhood to

fit the changed circumstances of their mothering as praxis. I suggest they reinterpreted the rhetoric of 'being there' to ensure the continuity of their relationships with their children at the time of the latter's home-leaving, which in turn acted as an affirmation of the motherhood identity as they understood it.

I have indicated in this chapter that recognising their 'child' as 'adult' was, to varying degrees, a difficult task each of my participants worked towards at the time of their children's home-leaving. In some instances however, women were unable to accept the changed/changing status of their children:

He's still a child, I can't think of him as a man. He's still a child to me and, I don't know, you look at pictures of them don't you, you know, when they're little and they'll, um, they'll always be little to me. In my old house I had the living room full of pictures of them from babies, you know, but we had a lot bigger living room then, there's not enough room here, but I love photographs.
(Paula)

Paula's narrative illustrated how the meanings of 'child' and 'mother' might be disrupted at particular moments of a mother's life course, and one way in which the mother might respond. Although as Paula later intimated, acknowledgement of her son's transition would enforce a realisation of her self as 'getting old', and as I discussed earlier, this was certainly evident in several interviews, I also suggest that Paula was longing for a period in the past that 'made sense' to her.

Her focus on historical moments that the photographs of her sons as 'little' represented, locked her into a time that held meaning for her; she identified her sons as 'children' and herself, in turn, as youthful. Her experience can be linked with the images I presented at the beginning of this chapter. It is a further reminder of the absence of a model of motherhood that creates an acknowledged space for mothers in the lives of their children as adults from whom they live separately. Moreover, it

reveals the lack of recognition of mothers' lives as dynamic and processual rather than as static and unchanging. Paula's narrative is further testament that, for a mother caught up in such a model, it might prove difficult to accept and/or engender change.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I return to my original argument and consider how, throughout this chapter, my participants maintained, at varying levels, a dual notion of their daughters and sons both as dependent 'children' and independent 'adults'. I have argued that this is due to the lack of a model of motherhood that takes women beyond their children's early years and into their adult lives so that at the time home-leaving the mother/child relationship is disrupted and the identity 'mother' becomes unstable. My participants thus retained an image of themselves as nurturers of their children's needs, set up in their own earliest childhood in order to sustain their mothering identities.

As this chapter has highlighted, this way of thinking about our children is reinforced by the images and representations we have access to as well as 'expert' advice on childcare and childrearing within the public domain. In this chapter I have highlighted that having no cultural script that carried mothers forward from the point of their children's home-leaving created the hiatus many of my interviewees experienced at that time. Ultimately, many of them were faced with a dilemma regarding their feelings about themselves as mothers and of their children as adults.

Just as there are silences surrounding the realities of early motherhood (Boulton, 1983; Brown et al, 1997; Miller, 2005; Oakley, 1979, 1980, 1981a), a similar lack of

knowledge around mothers' later experiences exists. This goes some way towards explaining the sense of timelessness that many of my participants attached to their mothering years, why some experienced an element of surprise at 'suddenly' being the mothers of adults, and why so many of the women in my study were faced with a sense of bewilderment when their children's adult status was achieved. Although in their narratives they articulated an expectation that children would one day grow up and leave home, the models of motherhood available to them did not promote thoughts about themselves for this group of women regarding the time beyond their children's dependency.

When faced with the recognition of the emerging adulthood of the child, a rift occurred in the life course of the mothers I interviewed for which each found herself, to varying degrees, ill-prepared. The naturalising and normalizing of independent adulthood in discursive constructions of western childrearing explains to some extent why we do not think about the relational aspects that are attached to this time of transition and why women's feelings remain muted, but it is also, and more importantly, to do with the models of motherhood we have access to and our relationship to the cultural representations of what mother and child are. In the next chapter, I shall develop my argument further through a discussion of my research participants' experiences of separation at the time of their adult children's home-leaving.

Chapter 4

Managing the process of separation

Introduction

Now that she is a woman, and full of the stirrings of independence to separate from me, she likes to hold herself at a certain distance.

[...]

So we dance together, often awkwardly, and fumbling, and missing each other, and sometimes with a rhythm of understanding.

[...]

The invisible cord between us is still there.

[...]

Sooner or later my daughter will cut it. (Roberts, 1985: 178)

The above extract from Roberts' novel *The Wild Girl* portrays the dynamic relationship between mother and child. I use it here to symbolise the situation in which the women in my study found themselves at the end of the previous chapter, where I indicated that the mother/child relationship was in a state of flux, instigated by the emerging adulthood and home-leaving of the child. In the above extract Roberts conveys that the mother is an active participant in, but also a passive witness to, the actions of the daughter, who is perceived as preparing to separate from her.

In anticipating the consequences of her daughter's transition to womanhood, I suggest that the mother is awaiting separation between herself and her child. She senses that change emanates from the daughter and is waiting for her to cut the links that previously held mother and child together. As such, Roberts highlights the mother's anticipation and expectation of severed ties. Her passivity in front of an event that is not directly engineered by her effectively means that the mother constructs herself as the object of the daughter's actions, not as an initiator/subject. I shall indicate in this chapter that, in a similar way to the mother in Roberts' novel, the women I spoke with were waiting for their children to break the ties that previously bound them together. I

shall also illustrate that, although children's home-leaving was an anticipated and planned-for time, many of my research participants were not adequately prepared for the reality of separation from their children, for what this would mean in their lives and for them as mothers.

In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which nurturing independence is the goal of childrearing in contemporary western discursive constructions of motherhood and illustrated how the women in my study were immersed in this discourse and yet clearly experienced contradictory feelings regarding themselves as mothers and their children as adults. I argued that the emotional conflict they experienced at this time was linked to the limitations of available models of motherhood. I also established that mothers' aspirations for their children and children's own ambitions for the future clearly ran alongside each other, so that my interviewees had seemingly worked towards the time of separation from their children during their childrearing years.

Jackson and Scott state that the emotions 'continue to be subject to rational management while always threatening to exceed the bounds of manageability' (1997: 551), and in this chapter I investigate what was 'managed' and what was not at the time of my participants' adult children's home-leaving. By using the concept of 'manageability' as a backdrop to my analysis I shall articulate the complex interplay of women's emotional experiences before, during and after the time of separation from their children. I shall also pursue the notion that their children's transition to adulthood and subsequent home-leaving caused a rupture in the life course of each of my research participants, which in turn precipitated their own transformation towards that of accepting themselves as the mothers of children who were adults. I shall

illustrate how this disruption created emotional turmoil for several of the women in my study. As Craib comments:

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

The women who participated in my study experienced all of the emotional states Craib identifies and, although they expected to be affected when separated from their children, women's experiences of the process of separation were fraught with mixed emotions²⁵. Consequently, this chapter provides an exploration of my participants' experiences of the internal contradictions that often raged against the imposed external norms in which adult children's home-leaving is embedded.

During my analysis of research participants' interview narratives the three themes of preparation, separation and acceptance emerged. However, although each of my participants travelled through these three phases, it was clear that the time of their children's home-leaving did not provide a straightforward transition for many of my interviewees. Rather, their journeys were ragged, often difficult and for some not fully completed. As Thompson (2002: 1) comments, 'life is characterized by movement, change and development – and therefore by transitions, losses and grief' (2002: 1) and my research participants often likened their experiences of children's home-leaving to that of bereavement. As Thompson continues:

We have sets of rituals that come into play at the time of death and these rituals give a very clear signal that we are dealing with loss and grief. Other losses, however, tend not to have such rituals associated with them, and so awareness of the grief being experienced by the person or persons concerned tends to be at a much lower level. (Thompson, 2002: 2)

²⁵ Whilst acknowledging that different definitions can be drawn from the terms 'feelings' and 'emotions' I have chosen nevertheless to use them interchangeably as my participants did not differentiate between the two when describing their experiences.

My participants' experiences of loss at the time of separation from their daughters and sons was acknowledged at a 'much lower level' and, as I shall illustrate in this chapter, at times not acknowledged at all. Consequently, this means it is possible that women will go through the emotionally charged process of separating from their adult children in isolation. After exposing this situation the chapter goes on to explore the coping strategies my research participants engaged in and the support networks that were available to them. In utilising an overarching framework composed of the three different, yet interconnected experiences of preparation, separation and acceptance, six interlocking themes are pursued in the chapter: Preparing for Home-Leaving; Experiencing Separation; The Aftermath; Support Networks; Other Mothers; and Moving On.

Preparing for Home-Leaving

I established in chapter 3 that the women in my study were aware that their children would one day grow up and leave the family home. As Ingrid said, 'you know your children are going to leave you, naturally. You bring your children up to be independent and to go away'. What I now turn to discuss are women's experiences of their children's home-leaving, beginning with an exploration of the anticipation and planning involved before the actual separation. Preparation is deliberately loosely stated here, as I use it to mean both the practicalities of home-leaving, with all that this entails, and the emotional preparation that is part of a mother's life course.

The majority of the women in this study articulated home-leaving as an anticipated and to some extent planned-for event. As the demographic information of my sample outlined, the majority of children left home to attend universities away from their

hometown. Within the British tradition of higher education ‘students were expected to leave home’ (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005: 82). As such, several of the women in my study shared with their children the vision that school-leaving would be followed by university, even where this had not been their own experience. Janice for instance said of her son:

He knew what he wanted to do, knew what he had to work at, um, and he was more than ready, you know, once he got his grades through in the August time. You know, you forget now, but it’s all set out, isn’t it? Then that was it. He wanted to be off. He was really ready to go. (Janice)

As Janice said, ‘it’s all set out’ gesturing towards a socio-cultural structure that appears given and to which one submits. This pattern generates a linear trajectory in the child’s life course which in turn ‘makes sense’ of their home-leaving. As the previous chapter illustrated, age was often called on as an indicator of a child’s now-adult status and this was drawn on by women in the study to illustrate their children’s readiness to leave home for university. Rita for example said:

Oh yes, certainly she was ready to go. In the last year of being in the Upper Sixth, or whatever it’s called now, um, she was, you know, tending (...) not to stay out but to be out longer, to be away, to be on holiday with her friends, that type of thing. When she was seventeen, that’s when she started to feel (...) she was definitely ready to go away [to university].

Higher education was thus a signpost to the independent living of their children that these participants had gradually moved towards; an age-transition and a socio-cultural expectation which enabled them to consider that their children were ready to leave home. Clearly there are parallels to my discussion in the introductory chapter regarding the age transitions of child development that act as markers in the child’s progression towards independent adulthood. Where the traditional route into higher education is the goal, the child’s age becomes a particularly salient indicator of their readiness to leave home, and the peer pressure of pre-university school-life acts as yet another; leaving home becomes a collective expectation.

Children being 'ready to go' was an often-articulated phrase in my participants' narratives, and for some of them, this was mixed with the mother's equal readiness for her child/ren to leave. For example, Linda described her son's going to university as equally desired by them both:

I was ready for him to go, and he was ready. I don't know what he would've done if he'd stayed at home. I mean, university was a get-out. I don't think he particularly wants to study, but it was a way of getting away from home and not having a job, for him. (Linda)

That mothers were ready themselves for their children to move out, was often coupled with notions of their children needing to free themselves from parental constraints.

Janice said that her son was 'ready for a bit of freedom as well, probably, you know, from living at home and his dad was quite strict with him.' Ingrid also said: '[my daughter] was ready to leave home because she didn't like the regimented feeling of home, you know? [...] She was ready to get away from all that'. Ultimately then, the children of many of the women in my study were assumed to need to free themselves from restrictions of home in order to achieve adult independence. This resonates with Kenyon's study of students' transitions out of the family home and into university accommodation:

Very often an independent dwelling away from the childhood home is seen to be both a physical manifestation of independence and citizenship, as well as the arena in which other adult emotional and social developments are most likely to occur. Leaving home is therefore viewed as one factor associated with the complex movement from childhood towards full adulthood. (Kenyon, 1999: 84)

The comments of the students in Kenyon's study and her subsequent analysis complement the narratives of the women I spoke to and their acknowledgement that the independence deemed so necessary for full adult citizenship was only possible with the child's move away from the family home and thus the mother.

As the narrative extracts from Ingrid and Alma below reveal, some of the women I spoke to envisaged home-leaving as a way of enforcing a 'growing-up' in their children. In these instances, leaving home was perceived to engender changed behaviour, as in the case of Ingrid, and the fulfilling of career aspirations, as Alma indicated. Although their children were considered 'not ready', they nevertheless left home for university:

[My daughter] needed to go. She wasn't ready and it frightened the life out of her to have to go and fend for herself. She'd never really done anything for herself. As I say, she was lazy and mum being mum, was silly and did it all for her. So in the weeks leading up to university, she had the most dreadful panic attacks about going and at one point decided that she wasn't going to go. (Ingrid)

[My daughter] wouldn't have got the career she's got if she'd stayed at home, she realises that. She wasn't ready but (...) she needed to find things out for herself. It wouldn't have done any good somebody telling her. She's the sort of person who has to find out some things for herself. (Alma)

Whether the child was 'ready' or 'not ready', both views articulated the 'best interests' of the child as adult. As their narrative extracts have revealed so far, children were perceived to have 'outgrown' the time for living at home and this was considered by some of my participants to be one of the main reasons for children's home-leaving. The structure of higher education in turn lent weight to mothers' assumptions of their children's development, expectations and preparations for their adult futures.

Being included in their children's preparations for home-leaving was articulated as meeting the practical and emotional needs of both mothers and their children:

I was putting the bond up [for the flat]! [laughs] so they needed me really! And also I drove. I drove them up and down and took their luggage in the back, you know. Hired a van and took them [to university]. So yes, I was involved. I thought I was doing them a favour but, actually, it was probably very good for both of us that I was involved, you know? (Rachel)

Clearly, the mother's involvement in the preparation for a child's home-leaving was here part and parcel of the child's transition and ultimately for the purposes of my study, the mother's. As Rachel recognised, being involved in each of her daughters' leaving for university was 'very good for both of' them. Thus she highlighted that the reciprocal nature of the process of leaving meant the practical and emotional needs of both mother and child were met through joint involvement in the process. Again, going to university provided a forum for long-term planning as mothers and children were aware in advance of the destination of the child and the timing of the academic year.

When children left for reasons other than higher education, leaving home usually entailed a less predictable lead-up and thus a different experience regarding mothers' expectations and preparations. Planning to move in with friends, for example, had been a topic of discussion between Frances and her son for quite some time before he actually moved out of the family home: 'he'd been talking about it, but nothing had happened' (Frances). However, his decision to move out was experienced as sudden and consequently upsetting. Frances explained that her son informed his parents of his intention to leave home when they were on holiday: 'he said "oh, I've got a house. I'm moving out"'. So I was in floods of tears! Awful! I thought, oh no, he's leaving home! He won't be able to manage!' thus indicating her immediate perception of her son's inability to cope alone; his non-readiness.

Frances went on to explain that a more gradual approach was later taken by her son before his departure from the home, which she felt may have been his way of assuaging her feelings:

They were there painting for about a week before so what he did was, he just took so much stuff every night. So it wasn't like he just packed everything up in a case and went. It was quite gradual, really. Now, whether he did that for my benefit, or whether he did it for his own benefit, I don't know. (Frances)

Although Frances' son's plan to move out of the family home had initially 'shocked' her, there was a period of time before her son left during which she was able to adjust to the idea. Having time to acclimatise to the idea of the child's move out of the family home was articulated as an important element in the process of separation. As Helen said about her daughter's decision to move in with her partner:

They'd decided in their minds that they were going to move in together for two or three months before she sort of said to me that she was planning on doing it. Even when she told me, I can't remember how she phrased it, but it didn't sound as if she was going to do it straightaway. So I had time to get used to the idea before she actually did move out. (Helen)

Children's surprising or sudden departures were unusual in my research cohort and breaches in the mother/child relationship were even less common (only two participants talked about a child's unexpected home-leaving and, in both instances, these women also experienced another child leave under more gradual circumstances). When unexpected leaving occurred it was difficult and the pain of abrupt separations engendered feelings of being instantly 'redundant', as Dawn said about her eldest daughter's home-leaving:

I came home from work on the Monday and she said, 'I'm going to London tomorrow, I've got an interview'. It was that quick. And she packed her bags, took all her bags with her, rang me up and said, 'I've got the job'. It was that quick. [...] She just went. And that was hard. (Dawn)

Not being given time to become involved had denied Dawn the opportunity to help with her daughter's move out of the home and in consequence Dawn had had no time to prepare herself. However, even when women had plenty of 'warning' that children would leave, for example by their going to university, and where the child's future

was meeting the mother's aspirations, preparing themselves for their children's leaving was different from the actual event:

I knew it was going to happen and I knew they'd go and I knew, I suppose my brain knew, that that's what I wanted for [my children] and, um, if they were of the adventurous type, and two of them certainly are, um, I thought it was fantastic, but there's your heart, which is, um, a different thing [laughs].
(Bridget)

Although an expected and anticipated transition, the time of children's leaving home was in reality difficult for many of the women in my study. Bridget's narrative above highlights the gap between intellect and emotion. Her juxtaposition of 'head and heart' reveals the clash between these two concepts, where the reasoning of her 'head', when she considered the 'fantastic' opportunities that lay ahead for her children, was accompanied by the undertow of her emotional 'heart' and the feelings she experienced when she anticipated her children leaving. Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002: 28) list 'passion, prejudice, madness, subjectivity, superstition, magic, tradition' as standing in opposition to rational thought and action. Jaggar notes how rationality has historically been contrasted with emotionality. As she further observes:

This contrasted pair has often been linked with other dichotomies. Not only has reason contrasted with emotion, but it has also been associated with the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public and the male, whereas emotion has been associated with the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private, and, of course, the female. (Jaggar, 1989: 145)

The persistence of such binary oppositions, and the tension created by women's attempts at rational control of emotional expression, was evident when my participants talked about their experiences of separation from their adult children. As Bridget later said, 'there's a real double-edged thing' attached to this time in a mother's life and for many women, the knowledge of the child's leaving engendered a confusing dilemma for them as they attempted to rationalise the powerful emotions they experienced. Paula for example told me that during the year before her son's

departure for university, she had tried to prepare herself by thinking positively about her son's future:

All last year I just felt (.) I could just see it coming and I knew it was coming and I tried to prepare myself for it (...) but I didn't. [...] In my head I tried to think, well, it's good for him to go. (Paula)

The anticipation of their children's leaving, for both Bridget and Paula, was immersed in a conflicting set of emotions; on the one hand going away to university was perceived as a good experience for their children and something they both worked towards during the years of their childrearing, yet the situation they envisaged for themselves once their children left was anticipated, as Bridget said, as something to 'dread'. Many women articulated similar emotional confusion. Heather for example explained how she felt about her children's home-leaving and reiterated the fact that, in leaving, her sons were meeting her aspirations for them, 'because they're doing what they want to do and they're doing, really, what you want them to do, so you shouldn't be feeling miserable about it. It's a very mixed feeling'.

Feeling that children's home-leaving is 'right' for the child, especially in terms of their achievement of adult independence, did not therefore coincide with several women's feelings about their own readiness and emotional preparedness for that leaving:

I did feel that he was ready to go. I did feel it was time to leave home for him, for him. What bothered me and (...) I had not understood the impact of that, what that would mean when he did, I have to say [cries], ok? But for him, he had to be independent. He needed to have his own front door, that kind of thing. (Angela)

As Angela's and others' narratives indicated, helping their children get ready to leave meant that preparing *themselves* for their children's leaving was neither prioritised nor often thought about by my participants. Again women's rationalising of their

children's leaving: 'he needed to have his own front door', overwrote their emotional selves (Lupton, 1998a), and it was often the realisation that the tasks which had structured their everyday lives would no longer need to be undertaken that catapulted women into a realisation of what their children's impending departure from the home would mean for them:

It wasn't until I was actually packing him up^[26] for work and I said, 'oh, I won't be doing this next week' and I burst into tears. And *I hadn't realised how it was affecting me*. But I kept thinking, oh, he'll be alright, he'll be alright, you know? He knows where we are if he wants us, kind of thing, but it was (...) it was really strange. (Judith)

Judith had been involved in helping her son to decorate his new home. Thus the rituals of her son's home-leaving had superseded Judith's thoughts of herself until this moment in time, when she was engaged in a daily ritual of her own that was due to be terminated on her son's departure from the family home.

In the narrative extracts I have so far presented, I suggest that the women in my study practised what Lupton has called 'internalized policing' (1998a: 52) in that they attempted to regulate their own feelings (and behaviour) with thoughts of their children; as Judith said, 'I kept thinking, he'll be alright'. For this group of women then, thinking of their children's well-being managed the emotions they experienced and suppressed their feelings about themselves prior to separation so that, as Alma indicated:

You've brought this tiny little bundle into the world and you've nurtured it and loved it and cared for it and everything else and you can't imagine life when they're not there at your side and it's hard, very hard indeed. I don't think there's anything you can do to prepare yourself for that except be aware that you've done your job properly if they can leave home and, um, um, have a nice life. (Alma)

²⁶ 'Packing him up': Judith is talking about making her adult son a packed-lunch, eg sandwiches, to take to work (although why he was not making his own is yet another pertinent research question).

Thus successful mothers are those whose children leave home and ‘have a nice life’. Women’s own feelings are thereby imagined as mitigated by their children’s success and happiness away from the home. From Alma’s and others’ narratives it is clear that the experience of separation from the adult-child is not something that can be fully planned or prepared for. Neither can it be fully explained; as women’s narratives have indicated so far, their expectations of separation were in reality experienced differently. I now turn to discuss this experience in more detail.

Experiencing Separation

I have discussed women’s planning and preparation for their children’s home-leaving as a time that to some extent had been constructed along practical lines during the lead-up to separation. I also illustrated that during this period, the women in my study experienced a set of contradictory and conflicting emotions. For example, when Sally talked about helping her sons prepare for life away from home she said, ‘you’re doing all these things to help them to leave but really, you don’t want them to go!’ Hence the women in my study were actively engaged in the kind of emotional labour that Craib (1995: 155) describes as ‘the “internal” work of coping with contradiction ... and the “external” work of reconciling what goes on inside with what one is supposed or allowed to feel’. To explore these issues in more depth, I now turn to discuss the experience of separation between mothers and their now-adult children and the internal emotional conflict that ensued.

As already indicated, the anticipation and preparation leading to their children’s home-leaving had not adequately prepared many of the women in my study for what they experienced at the point of separation:

I just know how I as, hopefully, a fairly intelligent woman, um, had no idea of the impact it would have on me. And that's the thing. It crept up and hit me! You know that it's going to happen and you have these expectations of what it's going to be like so you prepare yourself, but when it actually happens it's completely different to what you expected. (Angela)

When Angela's son left to set up home with his partner, his separation from his mother was 'completely different' from her expectations. Similarly, Janice described the time she left her son at university in the following way:

You knew they were going and that he wouldn't be coming home and it's maybe easier to do that when they're still in the home. It's the actual, when you're there [at university]. As I say, I can still see him now, leaving him on those steps and us driving off and he was fine, but I think he knew we were upset, which did have an effect on him. Um, I think it's just one of those times that you'll never forget. (Janice)

Although all of the women in my study articulated awareness that their children would leave, as Janice said, 'it's maybe easier to do that when they're still in the home'. So, although the women in my study had anticipated this time in their children's, if not their own, lives, its preparation had taken place from the relatively safe space of the home before children left and where these women remained immersed in their daily practices of mothering.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, women's mothering was to a great extent dependent upon the presence of their children, whose needs they continued to meet. As Valentine (1999: 51) comments: 'in our everyday lives we constantly position ourselves in relation to others', and as I also highlighted in chapter 3, the relational nature of the mother/child dyad is dependent upon presence rather than absence. As such, making plans for children's futures had taken place in the shared space of the home. In the actual physical 'doing' of leaving, what was imagined no longer 'made sense'. Living with inadequate and incomplete models of motherhood which inform women's mothering experiences and expectations means that a woman's sense of self

and identity as a mother are disrupted during the child's transition to adulthood. This was evidently the case for the women I interviewed when they talked about their experiences of separation from their adult children.

Leaving her son at university for the first time created visual memories for Janice that she said she would 'never forget' and similar experiences were articulated by other women in the study. Nancy for example described the time she left her daughter at university:

Oh! It was just terrible! [...] I remember, um, as we drove away that day, um, seeing her walking up with her friend, both with long red hair, just walking off into the sunset, sort of thing, and we drove away. Oh, it was awful! Just the most awful feeling. (Nancy)

In her discussion of 'the unruliness of fluid emotion' Lupton notes: 'we feel the emotion accumulating within us, against which we may struggle to exert control, or else give in by letting it "out" of the body' (1998a: 85). At the point of separation and in its immediate aftermath, many women experienced similar feelings to Nancy and subsequently these accumulated within them, causing them and others to 'let out' their emotions in the form of tears. As Ingrid said, '[my daughter] burst into tears, we all did', and Denise said 'everybody was crying floods of tears, you know?' Janice described herself as 'a blubbering wreck' and Rita said 'we got in the car and tears started rolling down my face'. Similarly Paula said 'I cried all the way home'.

Some of the women in my study 'exerted control' over their emotions as it was important for them to hide their feelings from their children (and from others) and several women said they did not want their children to know that they were upset.

Consequently they allowed themselves to cry only after separation:

We took him to university and settled him in his room but that was terrible, oh, terrible, you know? I managed not to cry in front of him [laughs] but I could easily have let the side down there. (Bridget)

I managed not to cry until I got into the car to come back and then I cried all the way down the motorway! And my daughter kept saying, 'he'll be alright, mum'. 'I know he will. What about me?' (Fiona)

For Bridget, keeping her emotions under control and thereby not 'letting the side down' had been a way of preventing her son becoming upset as well. As she said: 'you don't want them to be feeling anything like that. You want them to be happy'. Thus she did not submit to her emotions at the point of separation. Her narrative also indicates the public performance of emotion, what is allowed, 'done', and what is not, and in their narratives both women articulated the 'management' of their feelings. As Lupton (1998a: 50) said of her own participants: 'the reactions and feelings of others were a vital dimension in regulating the ways in which [interviewees] expressed or suppressed [their] emotions'.

Interestingly, and although Bridget was attempting to shield her son, she later received a letter from him in which he disclosed he had experienced very similar feelings and thoughts to those of his mother. Fiona's narrative revealed that she experienced a shift in the perspective of whom she was crying for. Initially her son's well-being had been prioritised, but in the immediate aftermath of separation her thoughts shifted towards herself, 'what about me?', and the feelings of loss she experienced as a result of her son's departure. Thus Fiona's realisation of the meaning of her son's leaving in her own life manifested when she parted from him.

My participants' separation from their children was often accompanied by deep feelings of loss and Angela, in a similar way to Bridget, experienced emotions that she both felt she needed to express but at the same time was unable to 'let out':

It really does come up and smack you in the eye, it did for me anyway. I just felt terribly, terribly down, an enormous sense of loss, you know? There's an African word, 'keening'^[27] I think it is, and they (...). The noises that they make, and the wailing and the (...). Yeah, I think that describes it, I mean, I didn't do that, but that's how I felt inside, that I needed to let it out. It was horrible, it was horrible. (Angela)

Angela's reference to the rituals of other cultures is indicative of the socially sanctioned expressions of emotion within contemporary UK society I discussed earlier. The concept of 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka: 2001, cited in Thompson, 2002: 8) that 'refers to experiences of grief which are in some way not socially accepted, and which may therefore be more difficult to deal with because of a lack of social support or the benefits of established rituals' (Thompson, 2002: 8) helps to decipher women's confusing and contradictory emotional experiences. I would argue that this is linked to the absence of a social script, for the time of separation between mothers and their adult children, as evidenced in their narratives. Instead, children's home-leaving is couched in a discourse of 'letting-go' rather than in one of continuance of the mother/adult child relationship. Indeed, as Fiona's husband said of her son, 'you've got to let him go'.

Women as a group are often unaware of other women's experiences and in times of transition which are not socially recognised can, as my interviewees' narratives attest, define their feelings in terms of individual pathologies. It is, however, little wonder that women who lived with their children for sixteen-plus years, as the participants in my study had, should experience such raw emotion at the time of separation from them. Bridget for example said, 'I know this sounds completely crazy [...] but actually it felt as though I'd lost a child. It felt like a bereavement'. She added that she had not articulated that she felt like this to anyone else, and continued:

²⁷ Keen: Verb. To wail in grief for a dead person (www.askoxford.com/concise, accessed 9/04/06).

I thought, this is mad! You know, here [my son] is on the other side of the world, doing all the things that I had always hoped he would do and grown up to be a lovely chap who I'm ever so proud of, um, and yet I'm feeling as if he's died and gone to heaven, really [laughs], which must look terribly illogical from the outside. (Bridget)

Bridget concluded that her feelings were 'illogical', but she was not the only woman in my study who described the experience of separation in this way. As Nancy said, 'well, my daughter's leaving, well, it was just like a bereavement, just this empty feeling in my stomach, one of loss' and Janice said of her return home from taking her son to university, 'it was just as though there'd been a death'. Fiona had encouraged her son to travel after finishing at university and had been involved with his travel plans, yet she underwent a distressing experience when he actually left which, like Bridget, she had not tried to explain to her partner, nor to anyone else. As she described her experience of separating from her son at the airport, she drew on imagery of the maternal body to elucidate her feelings:

When I saw him off and I knew I wasn't going to see him for a year ... I just felt as if I had a big black hole in here [indicated stomach area] you know? It was just as if he'd been torn out of me (...). That's how I felt when I left Heathrow Airport when he'd gone (...) It was just awful. [...] It's like the umbilical cord, isn't it? (Fiona)

Lupton (1998a: 167) asserts that 'the experience of emotion involves the interpretation of physical sensations mediated through a body image that is culturally contingent'. By asking me, a mother and therefore an assumed empathetic listener 'it's like the umbilical cord, isn't it?' Fiona called upon a mutually experienced and culturally interpreted phenomenon in order to explain to me how she felt.

When Fiona saw her son off at the airport, she knew she would not see him again for a relatively long period of time and often the length of time that would separate

mothers from their children was talked about in the interviews. For example, Bridget articulated her feelings about her daughter's leaving to work abroad as follows:

That was horrendous. She and I are very close, um, and it's such a long way and she wasn't going for ten weeks to university, she was going for fifty weeks and, um. [...] I just thought; I'm not going to see this child for a year!
(Bridget)

Women's sudden realisations, 'I just thought', and emotional experiences were accompanied by a muting of the feelings they had because of their lack of legitimacy; as I have argued, their feelings of loss were 'disenfranchised' (Thompson, 2002). My participants' experiences also point to the lack of an appropriate language with which to express the emotions we might at times experience. In her discussion of love, for example, Jackson (1993: 207) states that it 'is in essence indefinable, mysterious, outside rational discourse. Its meaning is held to be knowable only intuitively, at the level of feeling, and cannot be communicated in precise terms'. Although she is referring to romantic love, Jackson's statement resonates strongly with my participants' experiences of separation from their children.

When women recalled anticipating their children's impending home-leaving in the interviews their narratives highlighted how they were not prepared for the conflicting emotional experiences of this separation. As the extracts from their interviews show, some were shocked by the depth of the feelings they had and, in some instances, did not think they would recover. Indeed, two women disclosed in their interviews that they had briefly entertained suicidal thoughts. In the next section of the chapter, I turn to consider women's experiences in the immediate aftermath of separation.

The Aftermath

As the previous section of the chapter indicated, once separation between mother and adult child occurred some of my participants experienced an emotional trauma akin to bereavement. I suggest that during this period each of the women in my study inhabited an intermediate or transitional position, 'a limbo state', as my participant Angela called it. Their sense of self and their feelings of well-being were disrupted by the experience of separation.

So we got in the car and tears started rolling down my face and by that time she'd turned round and walked away anyway. [...] I felt pretty awful and, even though my husband didn't say it, I think he felt pretty awful too. Even now he'll say 'isn't it quiet in the house'. (Rita)

Acute feelings of loss and emptiness were experienced by several of the women in my study and as the narrative extract from Rita indicated, for those whose children went to university or travelling, the journey back home after 'seeing them off' was emotionally loaded, and one that ended with a return to complex feelings about the home and about themselves as mothers. As Valentine comments:

The home is not only a physical location but also a matrix of social relations. It is the location where our routine everyday lives are played out. Not surprisingly, our homes – perhaps more than any other geographical locations - have strong claims on our time, resources and emotions. (Valentine, 2001: 71)

I discussed in the introduction of my thesis that some of the research into young people's home-leaving revealed their perception of the home as an unchanging place of safety and security. Indeed, this is how my participants articulated the home that they provided for their children. However, it would seem that once their children left, the meanings women formerly attributed to the space of the home were no longer applicable, nor did they make sense. As Vanessa indicated, being caught up in the

euphoria of her daughter's educational achievement had masked her own feelings of loss until she returned to the family home:

The first one, she went to Oxford so, you know, it was great excitement when she went. I didn't have the, the real miserable feelings, um, because it was a new place. I mean, it was just beautiful and exciting. She was just thrilled to be there as well, um, and she's a very live-wire. So when we left her there and we came home it was like (...) the whole place felt dead. (Vanessa)

Vanessa's articulation of the 'dead' space of the home as a metaphor for its new silence was a common thread of conversation among the women in my study, where the space of the home was destabilised and thus experienced differently once children left. As I previously outlined, the majority of my participants were responsible for the domestic and caring aspects of their households; the everyday routines that formerly structured their home lives. In my interviews with them, meal times were often drawn on as indicative of a time that family members would routinely spend together.

Valentine proposes that 'the performance and regulation of shared eating habits and practices of the self are two important ways that we can imagine our cultural space in the world' (1999: 51) and she further comments that when we

sit down to eat with others we consciously or unconsciously articulate our cultural place in the world. The importance of this lies in the fact that through these performative [...] acts and practices of the self, we express a common or shared identity with others and caring human relations. (Valentine, 1999: 54-5)

Responsibility for particular routines and everyday practices are thus imbued with meaning. As such, cooking a meal and setting the table in readiness suggests that when children's absence alters such routines a woman's sense of self and identity as 'mother' might be disrupted, ultimately shaking her sense of well-being and self-worth. In their turn then, the experiences of my interviewees are an indication of 'how meanings of home are structured by life course events' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005: 73), as Heather's recollection clearly shows:

It's at meal times that I miss them most, you know, when you make a meal, you set the table and you sit down and there's just me and [my husband]. Um, and it's (...) it just seems really, really empty then. (Heather)

Gregory (1999) comments that 'the provision of food and the organisation of meals are a pivotal feature of home life' (60) and as Heather's example indicates, the absence of her four sons altered the meanings of these times of the day. Following DeVault (1991), Gregory also interprets women's engagement in daily domestic tasks as 'an active endorsement of her gender identity' (61). For the women in my study, this had also affirmed their identities as mothers. Their engagement in the everyday of the domestic sphere was 'a key element in the construction of [the] self' (Morgan, 1996: 182). In some instances, this previously shared family occasion had alerted interviewees to the difference children's home-leaving might make, but this was not always experienced in the way they imagined:

It was funny when we first sat down to meals around the table, because we usually all sit together and [my son]'s place (...) I thought, how am I going to feel when he's not sat there? We never said anything, well, maybe I just commented. But we all moved round a bit so that the most awkward chair, that my husband had, nobody sat in it, just because it was awkward to get in, you know? So we just immediately just moved to somewhere and [my son]'s place was filled. And I thought that was good, because then we weren't sat there thinking, oh, where is he? What's he doing? Is he eating? All that kind of thing. (Linda)

Linda had earlier indicated her own readiness for her son's home-leaving and occasionally their children's behaviour was similarly interpreted by my participants to mean that they had separated from the family before their actual move out of the home. Gregory notes that sharing family meals also reinforces 'the family group and each members' place in it' (1999: 67). Ideological notions that home and family not only indicated togetherness and unity but also a kind of familial hierarchy clearly affected the way that some of the mothers I spoke to perceived their children's

behaviour prior to their home-leaving. Both Barbara and Frances's sons, for example, had moved out to live in shared accommodation with friends:

To me, he wasn't part of the family. He wouldn't sit and watch telly with you or anything and it got to where he wouldn't eat with us, because he was living a different life. (Barbara)

It's not as if they'd ever sit in on a night and chat to us, because they didn't. They were out with their friends or their friends were round here and up in the bedroom. (Frances)

However, many women also expressed that one of the things they missed post-separation was the noise and bustle of their children's lives, thus contradicting some of their earlier statements inasmuch as they felt their children had separated from the space they called home before actually leaving it. Some women ultimately indicated that the actions that accompanied this in-house separation had transformed into an element of their children's lives that they had lost:

It's just them that I miss and all their friends coming, that's the other thing, and the phone never used to stop ringing. I think it's the company, you know? It's different now. (Sally)

That's one of the things I miss, like I said. Them all going up and down the stairs and on the computer and things like that. It makes a difference to the house. (Frances)

Angela said her son's bedroom 'was a hard place to go into' and Gina talked about how her daughter's bedroom made her feel once she had moved out to live with her partner. Although Gina had nursed her daughter through four years of depression and described her home-leaving as 'almost a celebration', she nevertheless experienced feelings of loss and emptiness once her daughter had gone. She explained 'the void it leaves':

The empty room, yeah, I think that's the time when it hits me more than anything, when I go to clean it, that it is just that empty shell. It's a little bit of your life that (...) you'd left in the room. It almost sums up that feeling that you have, a little empty shell as you go in. (Gina)

Gina was able to describe her feelings about her daughter's leaving and the bedroom she used to inhabit using the metaphor of the 'empty shell' that contained only past memories of her life with her daughter. Many of my participants talked in similar ways about the home environment and the difference children's absence made to their everyday lives, with the empty space of the house often commented on. Fiona for example said: 'god, the house just seemed so empty when I came back, which is silly, because I wasn't on my own'. She continued:

[My son]'s bedroom is in the loft and he has his own bathroom up there, um, and I used to just sit on his stairs, just sit there and cry or just sit on his bed. You can smell them, their smell. I used to go in his room just to feel close to him. (Fiona)

Angela also said it was: 'a smell thing, very much a smell thing. You know, I could smell his aftershave'. Songs also evoked memories of times spent with children in the home. Rachel for example talked about spending Christmas without her daughters and said, '*New York City*²⁸, it's just the most wonderful Christmas song. So I was just listening to that and crying and saying "oh, we used to sing this together"'. Children's belongings that were 'left behind' similarly acted as reminders for the women in the study. Janice for example said: 'when we got home, sort of like, he used to have this table with all this stuff (...) I had to move it because it was just (...) yeah, his presence had gone.' The home is, then, 'much more than a repository of artefacts; it is in its own right and *par excellence* an artefact to which deeply buried meanings are attached' (Seely, 1956, cited in Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005: 78). The sensory furnishings²⁹ of their children's lives reminded my interviewees of the separation from their children; at times they heightened the sense of loss they experienced, at yet other times they became a source of comfort in the child's absence. As such, the

²⁸ Rachel is referring to the song *Fairytale of New York*, by the Pogues, with Kirsty MacColl.

²⁹ I am adapting this terminology from Umberto Eco (2005) *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, in which the protagonist contemplates the 'sonic furnishings' of his own childhood.

rooms and objects transformed the previously held meanings of home for my interviewees.

As their narratives have indicated, the differences children's absence made to the everyday-ness of the home were felt acutely by my participants, and Janice for example, talked about the day after taking her son to university: 'I have memories of thinking the next day, will he get up? Shall I ring him? You know, it was all the motherly things I used to do'. Being relieved of 'the motherly things' that previously structured the home, and in turn their own and their children's lives, emerged in the interview data as a painful part of the process of separation between mothers and their adult children. Reflecting on separating from her son during his infancy, when she left him with her mother in order to go out to work, Heather said: 'the physical separation was awful with [my son] when he was little, um, but it's, it's not as lonely as the separation now that they've grown up and taken their lives with them'. I now turn to consider how women managed this time in their own lives and discuss the support networks they were able to draw on.

Support Networks

Bridget: We had our kids within a few months of each other. She's got three and I've got three and, um, we know each other quite well. Well, very well and it's been just brilliant to be able to be very open with somebody about it.

TG: And has she had similar kinds of feelings to you?

Bridget: Oh yes, yes. Which makes you feel as if you're not mad!

TG: And is that how you felt?

Bridget: I think I could have done, yes. I suppose because it's not talked about very openly and very often. You don't turn on the radio and hear people talking about it.

I use the interview exchange above between Bridget and myself to illustrate that many of the women in my study expressed feelings of loneliness and confusion which they described as sometimes bordering on madness after their children had left home because the experience is not 'talked about very openly and very often'. As such, several of my participants thought their feelings were unique. As one of my participants commented during the feedback event I held in January, 2007: 'Trish is right, this is a silent experience'.³⁰

I suggest that the lack of acknowledgement of her experience goes some way towards explaining the silence that surrounds this time in a mother's life course. This is linked to my argument in chapter 3 regarding the inadequacy of the models of motherhood women can access once they become mothers. It is also indicative of my previous discussion where women are deemed (and deem themselves) pathologically lacking if they fail to control their unruly emotions. As Bridget said, 'maybe for somebody who hasn't been in that situation or who's just looking on, it might not even occur to them that you can actually have those feelings'. Indeed as several of my interviewees articulated, they were not aware how their mothers experienced their daughters' home-leaving. Paula for example, talked about the plans she and her fiancée had when younger:

I was really glad to go. I can remember my mother crying at the airport and me thinking, oh, what's the matter with her? Because when you think back, it doesn't really enter your head what they're feeling. It's for you, you're thinking about yourself, yeah. (Paula)

And Fiona surmised, 'I think we're destined to repeat that, aren't we? I suppose our own children won't realise how much it hurts us when they leave until their own children leave'. In consequence, the women I interviewed felt they were the 'only

³⁰ I discuss this event in the conclusion of my thesis.

ones' to experience such emotions: 'I thought, maybe it's just me. Am I stupid?' (Rita). As such, their emotional turmoil was experienced in isolation, which was distressing and in some instances provoked negative feelings about the self. Angela for example said she felt she was 'wrong' to feel the way she did, and further commented:

It wasn't about me preventing [my sons] from doing what they wanted to do, it was about a gap in me, um, so yeah, I felt isolated, because I felt silly and I felt selfish and I felt I shouldn't be (...). [...] Somebody said to me, 'if you truly love them, then you let them go', you know? And I thought, 'oh god!' [...] I wanted to say, 'I don't want them to go and I wish he'd come back!' (Angela)

The 'gap' that Angela identified 'in' herself highlighted how her son's leaving enforced her acknowledgement of how much she had relied on him to sustain her sense of being in the world. Social pressures and cultural norms made several of my interviewees feel that their emotional experiences at this time were not legitimate. This effectively silenced them and suppressed the feelings they had and the expression of such emotions; as Angela indicated, she did not say what she wanted to.

Many of my participants had had no opportunity to talk to anyone about their feelings of separation from their adult children. As Sandra said, not knowing anyone in the same situation made it difficult for her to talk about her son's home-leaving:

There isn't anybody else really, exactly in my situation. I think it's sometimes hard to talk to people when they don't know what you're talking about. They think you're a bit daft or something. They can't understand where I'm coming from. (Sandra)

Involvement in my research thus offered several of my participants the first opportunity to voice their feelings: 'this is helpful to me because I've just got nobody to talk to about it and people I know anyway are not aware of how you feel' (Rita). Fiona said that although a friend was supportive at the time her son went travelling,

the fact that she had not had the same experience meant that Fiona received sympathy, not empathy:

I told [my friend] how I felt and she can't empathise because, like I say, her older daughter's fifteen and the other's twelve, so she's not experienced it yet and unless (.) unless somebody's experienced it they don't know how it feels. It's like having a baby. Nobody can tell you what it's like. It's got to be your experience. Nobody can experience it for you. (Fiona)

Many of the women drew on the experience of childbirth as Fiona did, as a way of conveying how they felt post-separation from the now-adult child. As Angela said, 'you can talk about it, but you can't make people feel' and Linda thought that 'if they've not had the same experiences as you, I think it makes a difference'. As such, knowledge of 'what it's like' was often used as a criterion for understanding the emotional experience of separation between mothers and their adult children.

There was occasionally an assumption amongst some of my unpartnered interviewees that partnered mothers would find their children's home-leaving easier to deal with: 'I think people whose kids leave but they're still in their marriage, it's a totally different thing' (Sandra); 'if you've got a partner, you share that loss' (Gina). Although this was so for some of the women I spoke to, like Nancy for example who said, 'with my particular partner I just think I'm very lucky because we can talk about these things' and Frances commented 'it must be a lot easier for me to see the boys go than it is for somebody without a husband', overall when my partnered interviewees talked about the support they received from their male partners there was a broad sense of a male lack of understanding: 'it's fatal isn't it, when a man says, "oh I understand" and you think, oh no you don't!' (Bridget). Just as Harrison's (1998: 108) observations that the male partners of the women in her study were 'unwilling or unable to break the mould of "inexpressive male"', even when direct appeals [were] made' so too did several

women in my study perceive that their male partners failed to meet their emotional needs:

With [my husband], I'll often say something and he'll say, 'well, what do you want me to say?' and I think, that's not really the response I want. He's not very good with that sort of thing at all. [...] He just leaves you until you're ready to talk. But often you need somebody to talk to when you're feeling that way. You need some support, don't you? [...] He's hopeless, you know [laughs]. What's the point? So I'll just ring my sister or something. (Sally)

Few women said that they experienced the depth of understanding that they were looking for in their relationships with male partners and some indicated that their children's leaving had left them without a support mechanism they had previously relied upon. Rita for example continued to desperately miss her daughter, but did not discuss her feelings with her partner, although she assumed he understood what she was experiencing:

I've never talked about it with my husband. He doesn't get into deep conversations. He understands how it must be for me because she's, like, the only other female person in the house, um. I found that quite hard, actually, being left with two chaps! (Rita)

Mothers and daughters were often cited as having the kind of close bonds Rita experienced. However, it was not always so strictly gendered between mothers and their children. Several of my participants' articulated extremely close bonds with their sons, like Sally for example, who said, 'with the boys going, I've lost a bit of comfort and support in that way, because they were more supportive than their dad'. Fiona commented in a similar vein:

I do miss [my son] because (.) I mean, [my husband]'s supportive and [my daughter] is, but this time that I've had off work while I've been stressed and everything, I would've been able to talk to [my son] about things more. I don't know (...) it's a different relationship. I can't explain why, really. (Fiona)

Some of my interviewees told me that, at the point of separation from adult children, their male partners were upset and tearful. However, it would seem that in the period afterwards, with few exceptions, partners did not articulate their feelings: 'whether

he's upset internally, I don't know, because he's a man and he doesn't want to show it' (Sally). Duncombe and Marsden (1998: 213) similarly found that the women they interviewed attempted 'to make men talk openly about their feelings partly for men's own peace of mind but also to promote the sense of intimacy they themselves value'.

In the case of my own research participants, like Sally for example, this kind of intimacy was not forthcoming in their relationships. Consequently, women turned to female friends for comfort and support. Harrison (1998: 99) observed how the women she spoke to were able to 'do intimacy' with women friends, 'which required acts of disclosure, expressions of private thoughts and feelings, and the sharing of common experiences'. It would seem that interpreting the feelings of other women whose children had left home as the same as or similar to their own was integral to the depth of support my participants felt they received at the time their children left home. It was also the case that this kind of empathetic support was available to only a small number of my participants, like Bridget, for example, whose interview extract headed this section of the chapter.

Although I called on the discourse of support networks here, in reality this term has limited usefulness as it would appear that women did not have a 'network' with which to engage at the time of their adult children's home-leaving. Furthermore, the prevailing discourse of 'letting children go' effectively rendered my participants unable to voice their feelings of loss. During several of the interviews women talked about the need for a support group for mothers going through the process of separation from their adult children and I return to this issue in the conclusion of the

thesis. For now I turn to discuss the importance of female friendship in the lives of my study participants.

Other Mothers

In her research into married women's female friendships, Oliker found that 'women established bonds of best friendship by a mutual self-disclosure and empathy that most found unparalleled even in marriage' (1989, cited in Harrison, 1998: 100). As I previously illustrated, Harrison had similar conclusions herself. As the narratives of the women in my study have indicated, these findings were also true for some of the partnered women I spoke to. Across my own study many interviewees displayed an underlying belief that the bonds of friendship are predicated upon women's shared understandings, which meant that they could talk 'differently' to friends about how they 'really' felt:

I suppose because I knew, um, that she was just feeling exactly the same as I was and she is very expressive and very open and some of the things that she was saying, um, I just identified with so completely and probably the other way round as well. It was such a strong, um, bond. It was a really good support mechanism, it really was. Where would we be without our mates?
(Bridget)

I suggest that separation from their children had caused the women in my study to experience a dis-location in their sense of self that disrupted their ontological security. Those few with friends who also experienced children's home-leaving were thus able to create a solidarity of feeling and an affirmation of the self, for example as 'not mad'. For these few women, this 'contact and mutual discovery' (Urwin, 1985: 173) helped them to re-locate and move forward.

Discussing accounts of women's mothering experiences within the realm of the private Ribbens has noted the significance of mothers' friendship networks:

The exclusive picture of housewives as isolated may thus neglect an extremely significant aspect of some women's experiences as mothers, not least because such networks imply the possibility that, beyond the private sphere of the home, there may also be a female social world that is not part of male public worlds. (Ribbens, 1994: 31)

Ribbens further poses a consideration of such networking for women as creating 'gendered social worlds'. In her study of women's early motherhood experiences, Urwin (1985: 168-9) similarly suggested that women's friendships and the value of getting to know other women's experiences via a 'culture of mothers and babies' led her cohort to a 're-evaluation of [their] competence at mothering' and as such created a space for an alternative dialogue through which to challenge 'expert' discourses.

Although not absolute, there is a marked tendency for friends 'to be of the same age, have similar class positions, to be the same gender, and to occupy similar positions in the life course' (Allan, 1996: 91) and this was so for the women I spoke to, whose narratives overall reflected Allan's assertion. I would add that being mothers was integral to the friendships my interviewees had forged and that these were thus built on assumptions of 'being like each other', intersected by location, class, gender and motherhood. Harrison found in her study of friendship amongst middle-class married women that

the constraints that came with marriage, part-time work, motherhood, and household responsibilities also produced a variety of opportunities in which to develop their friendships both individually with close intimates and collectively with larger groups [of women]. (Harrison, 1998: 93)

Similarly, the women I spoke to were able to forge meaningful relationships with other women because of, rather than in spite of, the heterosexual matrix in which they lived/continued to live. Their situatedness in the gendered social order created the space for friendships to be forged although, of course, the opportunities to form these were governed by the networks they were able to access. As I previously outlined, my

interviewees had spent some time during their early mothering years as dependants within the male bread-winner/female home-maker living arrangement. For several of my participants the social worlds their children occupied therefore provided the grounding for lasting friendships with other women.

Social class position and the areas in which women lived meant that their friendships were for the most part formed with similarly located women. The catchment areas of schools, for example, reflect a specific demographic, and geographical immobility during the women's early mothering years meant they were more likely to make friends amongst women of a similar social background. As Ribbens observes regarding mothers' networks:

Not only are differences of view perceived as threatening (representing an Otherness that carries the potential for refuting our own beliefs), but also they are counter-productive to our endeavours to construct a coherent and useful framework by which to live our lives, and to bring up our children. If we are seeking such a framework, we will instead need to interact and develop our ideas in conjunction with those who will help us to confirm and elaborate those ideas, rather than those who present us with a completely different set of core constructs from which to start. (Ribbens, 1994: 43)

Thus as Ribbens illustrates, women seek similarities in the networks where they perform their mothering in order to confirm their mothering practices. The routines of their children's lives provided the women in my study with an arena in which to meet other women and as such stimulated interaction and ultimately friendships. Oliker (1998: 20) defines intimacy as 'the sharing of inner experience, mutual self-exploration and the expression of emotional attachment'. In many instances, the women I interviewed drew on a discourse of 'intimate friendship' (Oliker, 1998: 27) when they described their relationships with women.

Rachel started a playgroup with a friend in a rural area when their children were young and continued to work with the same friend when both sets of children had grown up. In this way, her children were the foundation stone of Rachel's friendship and the same was the case for other women. Bridget recalled the move from her hometown because of her husband's work: 'I woke up the first morning that we lived here and I thought, oh, I don't know anyone!' Her solution was to join the local toddler group with her children where she soon formed friendships, some of which continued into the present day. She voiced the feelings of others when she said her children had provided 'a very good bridge' to friendship.

As their narratives previously illustrated, participants who mothered alone as well as those who lived in heterosexual relationships indicated that they found comfort in talking to other women. Talking to female friends was couched in terms of being able to gain, and give, support and achieve a shared understanding. Gina talked of a friend living in circumstances similar to her own, whom she had spoken to before her own daughter's home-leaving. She told me she was able to understand more clearly her friend's experience, once her own daughter left:

We've been through a lot together and she's got two children, separated from her husband, so we do talk quite a lot about it. She's got a child at home and the other one's left. He went in the navy so she experienced him going away, um, and I think she found that possibly harder than I felt. I can relate to the way she was feeling more now that my daughter's gone. (Gina)

For the most part, where support was available for the women in my study it came from one (or two) close friends or relatives (sisters/female cousins) with similar experiences. Allan (1996) warns against an overemphasis on gender to understand how friendships work. However, my participants, who had had the opportunity, told me that speaking to other women about how they felt at the time of their children's

home-leaving sustained their sense of well-being and prevented overwhelming feelings of isolation and loneliness. These women's narratives demonstrated that the most reliable and understanding confidante was a similarly located woman who also experienced a child leave home. It was also the case that only a small minority of my interviewees had spoken to anyone about this experience and, in consequence, their involvement in my study provided many of them with the first opportunity to talk about their feelings.

Moving On

In the final section of this chapter I explore my participants' varying degrees of acceptance of separation from their children and discuss their experiences during the period of adjustment that followed. The children of this group of women had moved on to new ground, whilst the women themselves returned to the homes they once shared with their children. As such, their home lives no longer included the day-to-day caring tasks that previously structured their lives and which I suggest previously confirmed their motherhood identity.

Although in the earlier childrearing years of some of my interviewees, the home had been the arena of partnership difficulties and for a small number, also a site of violence, at the time of my interviews with them their perceptions of the home fitted Valentine's description of 'a safe, loving and positive space' (2003: 63) for themselves and their children. After children left, however, the home reverted to a 'three-dimensional structure' (Valentine, 2003: 63); a house, rather than the home they previously perceived it to be. I discussed earlier how women's feelings in the aftermath of separation were often most strongly evoked in the home in which many of my participants initially experienced feelings of desolation. I suggested that they

inhabited a liminal status at this time. As Hockey and James (1993: 8) observe however, a 'marginal social status can become a source of strength for those so classed, a position from which resistance, struggle and change can be embarked upon'.

In this final section of the chapter, I shall show how, over time, women began to settle into their 'new' lives. As such, new experiences meant that they began to make themselves 'at home' without their children. In the final substantive chapter of the thesis I discuss in more detail other transformations women experienced at this time. For now I intend to focus on the ways in which the women began to make the changes in their lives that inculcated feelings of 'home' back into their households and, in turn, into their feelings about themselves as mothers living separately from their children.

For participants who still had one or more children remaining in the family home, the experience of separation from one child evoked thoughts of the departure of others.

Paula, for example, said, 'well, I'll know what to expect next time, won't I?' and

Janice contemplated the aftermath of her daughter's future leaving in the following way:

I wouldn't start moving her bedroom round straightaway. Maybe like a period of time, maybe like a mourning period where you come to accept they're not coming back and staying so then, then you take over and then it's yours again.
(Janice)

As Janice related in her narrative, and my previous discussion highlighted, the initial aftermath of children's leaving was experienced by several of my interviewees as a 'mourning period' followed by a period of adjustment during which they were more able to address to the gap their children's departure had initially left in the home and, ultimately in their lives. My participants thus began to think anew of the changes this

made to their day-to-day lives and homes that in turn engendered an element of 'ownership'. A reclaiming of territory was evident in Janice's and others' narratives, where the house began to re-form into a home again, albeit with a changed occupancy. Yet again, this time-period was often replete with mixed emotions, identifiable in the extracts from Angela and Barbara below:

I went into the back bedroom, his bedroom, and started sorting stuff out and it must've taken me a week because (...) I would come across stuff (.) and break down and cry and think, oh god, you know? All his music, his scripts and scores and stuff that he'd written, well he left all that and (...). But it was quite cathartic and it was quite nice to have somewhere to put the spare bedding and towels and I arranged them all and I felt better to a certain extent, because I had reclaimed some of that space. (Angela)

When she actually finally went, um, the house felt awful. I just hated it for about three weeks, I think. I didn't like it at all. I couldn't settle. I was listless, you know, just really, um. I couldn't see the benefits of it, you know? And there are benefits. The fact that the house is so tidy for one. It doesn't need cleaning half as much, it's lovely. (Barbara)

The cathartic experience of clearing and reclaiming space that once 'belonged' to their children suggests a move towards a time when the women were able to accept both the separation from their children and themselves as the mothers of adults from whom they lived separately. Niemeyer and Anderson (2002) argue that a central feature of the grieving process is the reconstruction of meaning. Thompson discusses two aspects of 'meaning reconstruction' in the advent of mourning which together inform our sense of self:

Seeking meaning by looking back on the loss experience and its impact on the frameworks of understanding that are part of our identity and sense of personal well-being [...] and seeking meaning by looking forward, attempting to rebuild our lives and the meaning systems which also contribute to our ontological security. (Thompson, 2002: 7-8)

The readjustment of the home's spatial and temporal boundaries women described in their interviews indicated that over time they became accustomed to life without their

children at home. Thus they began to reconstruct their own lives as the mothers of adult children from whom they lived separately.

Changes to the household were often articulated in terms of having to engage in less domestic labour and the time women were able to garner after their children left was remarked on by Linda: 'well, you've got more time, haven't you? Life's a lot easier without him, really!' The fact that the women in my study continued to perceive themselves as the providers of domestic labour is not the issue here, although undoubtedly they considered themselves to be responsible for the majority of tasks within the home, both practical and emotional. I return to this issue in chapter 6. My purpose here is to indicate that the perceptions they held of themselves as mothers were entwined in the nurturing and caring role they inhabited when their children lived at home, where domestic and emotional labour had created the framework that sustained their motherhood identities.

My research participants' narratives indicated that the earlier experience of the separation process was followed by a period of re-adjustment during which they began to reframe their lives, as Frances made clear:

I thought I'd miss them so dreadfully, that I would be so miserable. Then I realised that I wasn't because they were still alright, they were still around. They hadn't just gone and were never coming back. They still did want to keep in touch and I thought, oh yeah, this is ok. (Frances)

Evident here is Frances' initial fear that she had 'lost' her children, a common thread that ran throughout the women's interview narratives. She later realised that this was not so, her sons still wanted to 'keep in touch', they had not 'gone and were never coming back'. For the women in my study, moving towards an acceptance of separation from their now-adult children was, to varying degrees, a difficult process to

manage but the majority of their narratives indicated that acceptance of their new situation, which involved redefining their relationships with their children, was underway. In the next chapter I consider in more detail how the reconstructed relationship of the post-separation mother and child was to a large extent dependent upon their continued interaction and communication across the geographical distances that separated them.

Concluding remarks

She has separated, you know, from me.

[...]

Because she's had that time away I think, and has made decisions.

[...]

She seems to have severed that link. I can only see her in her own place now.

[...]

She seemed so definite in her mind about what she wanted. It was a real leaving home. (Helen)

Helen's quote above provides a link to the extract from Roberts' novel at the beginning of the chapter; Helen's daughter is perceived to have severed the link with her mother. Her narrative moves Helen forward to a time of acceptance and indicates that she experienced the separation between herself and her daughter via her daughter's 'real leaving home'. Thus she shifted across the three main phases I have discussed in this chapter; she was prepared for her daughter's leaving, experienced separation from her and accepted her daughter's move out of the home that indicated to Helen her daughter's now-adult status. I suggest this culminated in Helen's own transition to becoming the mother of an adult child. Also evident is that this was not experienced as a brutal severance, and in my participants' experiences of separation from their adult children there was only one incidence of an unexpected and painful breach in the mother/child relationship.

My participants had progressed through an oft times rough terrain and for the majority of them at least, there was an acceptance of both their own new status and that of their daughters and sons. This is not to suggest that they were entirely free of the emotional entanglements in which they were embroiled during their children's and their own transitions, as the narratives I have presented here, and in the previous chapter, confirm. However, there was a sense of moving forward attached to many of their comments when they talked about how they felt in relation to their children's home-leaving at the time the interviews took place.

What I have proposed in this chapter is that a mother's separation from her adult child can be a highly emotionally charged experience and yet it remains in many respects unspoken. Women's expectations of this time were incomplete; as their narrative extracts indicated, no one had told them what it would be like. The experience itself underpinned and thus enforced their transformation. Being granted the freedom to articulate their feelings to others would have been enabled by a heightened awareness of the importance of this time in a mother's life course and I would further argue that the separation between mother and child needs to be discursively reconstructed in terms of interconnectedness and interdependency, an element of the mother and adult-child relationship I shall address in different ways in the next two chapters of my thesis.

I do not suggest that women's experiences of separation from their children would have been substantially different if there was greater awareness of this period of the life course, but the experiences I have recounted here do reinforce my argument that we lack an appropriate model of motherhood which lifts women out of the role of

facilitator of dependent children's needs and moves them forward alongside their adult-children in more positive and dynamic ways. Children's movement out of the family home is couched in a discourse that goes some way towards preventing women from speaking of their feelings of loss at this time, as the manifestations of my participants' mixed emotions attest, and I have argued in this chapter that women need recognition and affirmation from those close to them that their grief at this time is legitimate.

The continuity of the relationship between mothers and their daughters and sons was an integral part of my participants' ability to manage the process of separation and move towards acceptance of their new status as the mothers of adult children.

Although separation was complete, so that young people lived independently from their mothers in spatial terms, and for some this meant they now lived oceans apart, mothers and their children nevertheless remained interconnected; the child had moved from the home, and as such the relationship with the mother needed to be re-figured.

In their turn, women had shifted their perspective on the house and home they now inhabited without their children. In the next chapter I discuss the issue of post-separation communication between women and their adult daughters and sons in order to consider its importance in the maintenance of reconfigured mother/child relationships and, in consequence, women's motherhood identities.

Chapter Five

Post-Separation Communication

Introduction

All that coming together and drifting apart makes it possible to follow simultaneously the drive for freedom and the craving for belonging – and to cover up, if not fully make up for, the short-changing of both yearnings. (Bauman, 2003: 34)

Although focused on romantic rather than familial relationships, I use Bauman's words here because the incompatibility of 'freedom' and 'belonging' he identifies invokes a similar paradox to the one in which the women I spoke to found themselves enmeshed: although they wanted freedom for their daughters and sons, they simultaneously craved a continuation of the mother/child relationship and a sense of belonging, which I suggest hinged on their desire to feel needed. As I established previously, many of my participants were immersed in a conceptual framework which promoted independence and autonomy as the main goal of their childrearing. At the same time, they acknowledged that 'keeping young people close is the mother's role, in line with the principal defining feature of modern motherhood, which is emotional attachment to children' (Brannen et al, 1994: 182). The construction of their identities as mothers therefore rested upon a contradictory set of discourses, the incongruities of which, as I have argued, were only made manifest at the time of the child's emerging adulthood and home-leaving.

The notion of freedom that the women in my study wanted for their adult children, identified in chapter 3 as a maternal aspiration, was accompanied by a confusion of mixed emotions evoked when young people moved out of the family home, as I discussed in chapter 4. These chapters thus highlighted the divergence between the

imagined event of children's home-leaving and its actual occurrence. Hence for the women I spoke to, motherhood became a double-edged performance; an emotional balancing act that involved 'the difficult, vexing dialectics of the two irreconcilables' (Bauman, 2003: 34) as they attempted, albeit in different ways, both to let go of their daughters and sons and at the same time remain connected to them in order to hold onto their motherhood identities. Ultimately women experienced an enforced shift in their own 'ways of being in the world' (Ribbens, 1994; Edwards and Ribbens, 1998), via their transition to becoming the mothers of the adult children from whom they lived apart.

In the previous chapter, I discussed young people's home-leaving as experienced through three interconnected phases: preparation, separation and acceptance, and argued that coming to terms with the absence of the now-adult child was entwined with the knowledge that the child was not in fact 'lost' to the mother; the pair remained interconnected, albeit across differences in space and time. Hence mothers and young people continued, in Bauman's words, to come together and drift apart, although for the most part not in the same physical space. As such, how their relationships could be enacted was transformed, as distance became a metaphor for the re-negotiation of the meanings of the mother/child dyad and ultimately the performance of motherhood itself. In this chapter I shall show how, for the women in my study, contact with daughters and sons was embedded in sustaining a sense of self as mother under changed conditions of communication.

My main aim is to pursue the significance of communicating via different technologies: the land-line telephone, the mobile/cellular phone and the internet, for

the reworking of mother/child relationships post-separation and the meanings of motherhood itself. Underpinning the chapter is the notion that advances in technologically-mediated communication have run in parallel with the changes in young people's employment patterns and expectations of mobility that I discussed in the introduction to my thesis. As Robins (1997: 402) notes, such rapid transitions have undermined and reconfigured 'modernist ideas concerning space, time, reality, nature'. Together these changes posit a reconceptualisation of relationships and, for the purpose of my own study in particular, that of the mother and child.

This chapter therefore explores women's relationship with communication technologies and investigates how they helped to reconcile the two disparate yearnings experienced post-separation and contained in the notions of rupture and continuity. After a brief discussion of new communication possibilities for people separated across geographical space, the chapter follows five main themes: Does Distance Make a Difference?; Changes over Time; The Landscape of Communication; Two-Way Interaction?; and Mothering through the Wires.

Communication over Space and Time

Before the advent of technologically mediated communication, interpersonal and face-to-face contact occurred in 'environments in which two or more individuals [were] physically in one another's response presence' (Goffman, 1972: 2). Post-separation contact across geographical distances was reliant upon the postal service and later, telegrams which provided non-interactive, one-way communication, underscored by the time that elapsed between sending and receiving. The land-line telephone, mobile phone and computer have since facilitated immediate 'interpersonal

communication at a distance, either by electronically transmitted speech or by written text' (Moore, 2001: 141). Indeed, as Freed comments:

We've progressed from single-strand copper wires carrying telegraphs in Morse code to twisted pairs of copper wires carrying voices, faxes, data and video. Telecommunication advances into coaxial cables and now optical fibres are offering a range of interactive services never before possible. (Freed, 2001: 1)

Although, as Holloway and Valentine (2000: 768) remind us, technological development is geographically uneven and 'the wired world is not inclusive, as many countries of the South are less integrated into these networks than their counterparts in the North', access to the World Wide Web (whilst not denying the existence of spatial unevenness within the UK for example) has become part of the fabric of daily life. Its use, as Kitchin (1998: 386) states 'offers users a range of interactions, allowing them to explore the world beyond their home'. Indeed, its use in the home has outstripped that of commerce and academe (Batty and Barr, 1994). Hence, the majority of the population in the UK have access to the internet, either at home, an educational establishment or the workplace. Alongside this we have witnessed an upsurge in the availability of internet access in public spaces such as libraries and internet cafés. Indeed, the internet café culture is a growing phenomenon that offers a domain where people can connect with those they are geographically separated from.

The ubiquitous ownership of the mobile, or cellular, phone also promises that we can make contact, and be contacted, wherever we are; we no longer have to be fixed to a place in order to interact with others. Bauman (2003: 61) informs us that 'cell phones signal, materially and symbolically, the ultimate liberation from place'. The TV advertisement for *Vodafone* transmitted into our homes during the summer of 2006 offered its viewers a glimpse of the places mobile phones can take us. As viewers, we

watched (and interpreted) two white women walking through a forest, one middle-aged and one younger (mother and daughter), their heads were close together as they talked (maternal guidance and advice). At the edge of the forest (the end of adolescent turbulence) the daughter crossed a bridge alone (liberation and separation from the mother). The camera then focused on the anxious face of the mother (maternal concern and protectiveness) and in the next scene, the daughter was standing on the edge of a cliff (passively awaiting fulfilment). A young white male then flew down and took the hands of the younger woman (heterosexual coupledness) and, as they gazed into each other's eyes and flew off together, the soundtrack played, *I'm on another world with you*. In the final shot, the same young woman is walking down a busy street talking on her mobile phone. The voiceover asks the viewer: 'where will your conversations take you?'³¹

The imagery of this advertisement promises 'liberation from place' with the possibility of our presence simultaneously here and elsewhere and as such provokes a blurring of the boundaries of the real/virtual dichotomy. As Holloway and Valentine (2003: 107) comment, 'this ability of things to influence our emotions (bringing comfort, confidence, sensual pleasure, evoking memories, etc.) is after all, the basis of most consumer advertising'. In current advertising for technology, with its cast of 'familiar' characters, such playing with our emotions is evidently at work. In a similar vein to *Vodafone*, for example, the advertisement for *Tesco Internet Phones* portrays a mother at home contacting her daughter in another town. The camera pans out to expose a map of Britain, then the world and finally the moon (!), each with *Tesco*

³¹ This advertisement is available to view on the Vodafone website: www.vodafone.com.

icons indicating where the internet phone can be utilised, the ultimate message being its ability to immediately connect people across geographical spaces.³²

As Huisman (2005: 286) comments, ‘advertising writes stories which link products or objects with subject positions of desired attributes, such as those of being manly, neighbourly or adventurous and so on’. As such, the products on sale are imbued with social and personal meanings. In the advertisements I have discussed above, the discourse of heterosexual normativity is pervasive, alongside a normalising of the westernised autonomous and mobile lifestyle (except, perhaps, for the mother-figures in these advertisements, who presumably remain at the edge of the forest/in the family home, anxiously waiting for the telephone to ring. I return to the problematic of mothers’ autonomy more fully in the next chapter). Thus *Vodafone* and *Tesco* invite us to ‘taste the pleasures of narrative and figuration, of recognizing stories and images of which one is part’ (Haraway, 1997: 169). In so doing, they not only inform us that geographical distances between family members are now commonplace, but also that contact with others across such distances is not an obstacle since we can enjoy a simulated or ‘virtual visit’ to them at any time. As Kramarae states:

The claims for what the Internet has done or will do to change our lives for much the better are widely available in the media, in news stories, advertisements, and editorials. Clearly many people in many countries are going about their work, their communication, and their relationships in somewhat different ways because of their use of the Net. (Kramarae, 1998: 100)

The TV advertisements outlined above, and others like them imply, as Kramarae notes in her discussion of the internet, that the techno-goods on offer will service our

³² Fulton comments that ‘the extent to which we feel ourselves to be part of an audience depends on whether we feel addressed by a media text’ (Fulton, 2005a: 5) and I suggest that the timing of these advertisements is key to this, as summer heralds the end of compulsory full-time education; post- A levels; pre-university; pre-gap year and so on..

relationships and ultimately the way we live our lives, because they can bring us 'close to' those we live separately from. Travel in 'cyberspace'³³ is presented as a mundane and daily occurrence, as indeed it has become for many, whereas two decades or more ago such journeys dwelt in the imaginations of science-fiction writers such as Gibson (1984), who originally coined the term in his novel *Neuromancer*. As Freed (2001: 1) states, 'once a change is naturalized, the new order of life is naturalized in us from birth'. I suggest that the repetitive nature of advertising and the 'simulation of the real' (Fulton, 2005b: 303) normalize distance and render communication technology devices necessary possessions for the continuance of daily life as we live and understand it.

In her discussion of technoscience, Haraway (1997: 100) identifies cyberspace as a 'technical-semiotic zone [that] script[s] the future', and certainly the scripting of these advertisements and blurring of the dichotomies of present/future, local/global and real/virtual promotes a shift in the definitions of contact, distance and time alongside a reconfiguration of 'touch'. They also grant us immediate gratification: we just need to push the right buttons. Technologically-mediated communication therefore allows for human interactions to occur immediately across time, space and place, engendering an imagined merging of tangible and intangible connections to those we are geographically separated from, be they in the next street, town or country. In the following sections of this chapter I turn to consider how my participants' management

³³ I use the term 'cyberspace' here to refer to the non-place we 'inhabit' when using technologically-mediated forms of communication for human interaction, e.g. landline telephones, mobile/cellular phones and the internet, thus following Featherstone and Burrows, who define cyberspace 'as a generic term which refers to a cluster of different technologies, some familiar, some only recently available, some being developed and some still fictional, all of which have in common the ability to simulate environments within which humans can interact' (Featherstone and Burrows, 1995: 5).

of the separation from their adult children was assisted by their ability to communicate with them across geographical spaces.

Does Distance Make a Difference?

Post-separation my participants' daughters and sons lived/worked/travelled locally, outside their hometown but within the UK, or outside the UK.³⁴ In this section of the chapter I address the impact of geographical distance on the way women managed to renegotiate their relationships with their adult children following the latter's home-leaving. As part of the research interviews, I asked each of my participants to tell me whether distance made a difference to the way they felt.

I suppose, like a lot of parents, I liked to know they were safe, and the only way they could possibly be safe was if they were with me [laughs] and it's still true today! [...] I think worrying's a way, as long as it doesn't become over-obsessive, it's a way of ensuring the children are safe, isn't it? Because if we didn't consider all the things that could happen then they would, you know, fall down the first manhole they came across, wouldn't they? (Angela)

Many of the women I spoke to identified the conflation of closeness and protection as 'part of' motherhood. As Holloway and Valentine (2003: 7) suggest, 'risk and safety are increasingly central to the construction of childhood'. Evidently, this notion continued to underscore Angela's maternal feelings and concerns. Although both her sons lived locally, her comments indicated that their absence from the home created feelings of anxiety regarding their safety in the 'unknown' space outside the front-door; a habit of her mothering practised from her sons' early years. Although conveyed in an amusing way, Angela's expression of motherly protection and concern, made manifest in episodes of worry and anxiety, was a common feature of my interviewees' narratives. Worry and anxiety were not however, perceived as

³⁴ Children's post home-leaving destinations are provided in the methodology chapter.

weaknesses by my research participants, but as part of the make-up of motherhood and defined as indicators of maternal care. In this way, closeness to the mother translated as safety for the child, a basic principle of motherhood to which I alluded in the introduction to this chapter, and which is inherent in the concept of being there that I discussed in chapter 3. Gina, for example, said of her daughter's move into her own home in a nearby street:

She wasn't moving far away so I think, in that respect, it helped. You felt you could still be there for her if she needed you to be. Because you're quite protective of all children, but when they've not been well, I would've been quite concerned, having known that she'd been suffering from depression, if she was going away, perhaps to university, and living in a flat on her own or something. I would've been concerned about her mental health, but because she was close I felt, well, if she needs me, I'm not far away. (Gina)

Presence in these scenarios is coupled with safety and security, which in turn make the practical and emotional tasks of motherhood easier to perform, particularly when, as Gina's experience highlighted, children's teenage years had been difficult. Having easy access to daughters and sons because they lived locally obviously had an impact on how women felt post-separation:

I think because [my eldest son]'s near, it's better probably. He pops in all the time and I still do bits and pieces for him. He comes for a meal every week so if he forgets something, or wants something, or even if he's just been in the village, he'll just pop in and say 'hello', you know, so we see him quite regularly, really. (Frances)

Similarly, Serena said, 'I know that I can see them at any time, yeah. So for all they've spread their wings and they've got their own places they're, um, yeah, still quite close'. Having more than one child who had left the family home did at times cause women to ponder the differences between local and national separation:

The only problem is if either of them needed me in a hurry, I could be at [my youngest daughter]'s in 15/20 minutes, whereas with [my eldest daughter], you're two-plus hours away, so that's the difference but ... that is the only drawback, I suppose, the fact that there is that particular distance. (Alma)

Alma later told me that her youngest daughter had recently called on her for assistance in a situation with an abusive boyfriend. As her narrative indicates, she was able to reach her within minutes to provide the help and support she felt was needed and which her daughter accepted. This culminated in a short stay back in Alma's house, which provided closeness to the mother, and in turn offered the daughter maternal protection and security.

Having children who lived locally did not necessarily mean that women were unable to acknowledge the newly acquired adult status of their daughters and sons:

It's nice that [my daughter]'s not too far and yet I think if she was in the village we'd maybe be too close. I think, in a way, the distance is nice and it makes me feel that she is completely independent, type of thing. [...] We do see each other but we are, you know, two separate families. [...] I always think of them as, although of course they're part of a wider family, but they are a complete family of their own. A separate unit. And it's a strong unit, you know? (Helen)

A grown man, yeah, [my son]'ll come in and say, 'you should see the state he's left that kitchen in' about his flatmate. Just the kind of thing I used to say to him. So, yeah, it's changed him I think. He has to take a bit more responsibility, I suppose. (Serena)

For Serena's son, adulthood took the form of responsibility for the self; in Helen's case, in her daughter's setting-up home with her partner and baby. Formation of the separate nuclear family unit was linked with the notion of 'settling down' and was evident in other interviewees' responses, when it appeared to validate a young person's adulthood and a perceived completion of separation from the mother. This also had an impact on women's future decision-making, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

Physical proximity for many of my interviewees was articulated as easing the perceived practical and emotional performance of motherhood and in its turn highlighted the difficulties envisaged and experienced by separation across wider geographical spaces. As Barbara said of her daughter who lived approximately forty miles away, 'it is difficult when you're not physically close'. Although at the time of the interviews Janice's son had returned to live locally, he originally went to a university sixty miles away. Nancy's daughter's university was almost four-hundred miles away from her hometown:

I can't concentrate if either of them have a problem of any kind, you know, then it affects me and [my husband] will say, 'don't let it get you down' and I say, 'no, I know, but I can't, it's on my mind, I want to resolve it, what can I do?' because you've just done it all their lives and, even though they're in adulthood, you still want to help, you know? (Janice)

It was just this awful feeling, you know, worrying about them, hoping they'll be alright, hoping that they'll cope, hoping that they're happy. Just hoping for them, really. Not worrying about yourself so much as worrying about them, and having to do it from a distance. (Nancy)

The women I spoke to subscribed to western notions of autonomy and independence as the goal of mothering and as essential indicators of adulthood (Guhman, 1999) yet long-distance worry and concern for children's ability to cope alone, that is, without their mothers, was evident, as the above narratives highlight. Worry and anxiety are also exposed here as maternal rather than paternal concerns and, as Brannen et al (1994: 205) state, a mother's 'predicament is manifest in maternal worry – based on a combination of responsibility and impotence'. My participants' experiences of maternal impotence seemingly occurred because of geographical distances that created a barrier to the performance of motherhood as defined and previously practised by them. As Janice said, 'you've just done it all their lives', thus emphasising the difficulty in letting go of the responsibilities that become embedded during the life course of mother and child.

Geographical distance was perceived in practical terms by some interviewees, and did not, as Maggie told me, 'represent much of a problem except when you have to get in the car and drive through the night but, you know, that's just one of those things that you have to do'. Similarly, Rachel felt she could reach her daughters easily as it was 'a hundred miles to one of them and forty or fifty to the other. You can go up and down in a day. I think I still feel like they're quite accessible'. Having children who were perceived as easily accessible thus alleviated some of the anxieties women might have experienced post-separation.

In some instances, however, such practicalities were obliterated by the overwhelming feelings of absence their children's home-leaving had evoked. For example, unlike Rachel and Maggie, the experience of their child's physical absence in the home overrode both Janice's and Paula's ability to rationalise the manageability of the relatively short distances between them and their sons:

My son's at Sheffield [university] and somebody once said to me, 'god, you'd think he was a million miles away' and I said, 'well, it doesn't matter, when they're not here, they're not here', you know? When they're not at home, they're not at home, full-stop! (Paula)

Leeds was only an hour away but (...) he wasn't in the home, he wasn't coming home on a night, so he could've been in London, it would've been exactly the same type of thing. It's strange really, the distance didn't have anything, you know, I didn't think, oh, we're an hour away, type of thing. It was just that he wasn't there. (Janice)

Although the above narratives indicated an inability to cope with absence across nationally defined distances, as Rachel's and Maggie's accounts indicated, the difficulties of daughters and sons living outside their hometown but still within the UK were manageable in practical terms as all of my interviewees were financially secure enough to either drive/be driven or use the public transport system in order to

visit/be visited by their children. However, when young people's plans took them outside of the UK, geographical distance took on another set of practical and emotional meanings: '[my son] was homesick and it was horrible, because he was right on the other side of the world' (Fiona). Thus Fiona indicated that her inability to comfort her son was reinforced by the great distances that separated them. Bridget's daughter previously worked in Africa and, at the time of our interview, she was studying in America, whilst her son was studying in China:

I think there is an added something about them physically going such a long, long way. I mean, if they were in London or Leeds, even, I mean, maybe we wouldn't have seen them for several weeks at a stretch but (...) it just, sort of, feels different I suppose. It sounds very simplistic, but it's just such a blooming long way and, um, there isn't the option of popping to see them for a day or a weekend or whatever, you can't do it and, yeah, it just feels very, very cut off. (Bridget)

Physical separation across wider geographical distances carried with it the notion of severance. Bridget was physically 'cut off' from her children. She did not have the option of 'popping in' to see them, and plans for visiting had not only practical but financial ramifications.

Different ways of conceptualising distance and varied interpretations of near and far were thus evident in women's narratives. In this section of the chapter I have illustrated that geographical distance between mothers and their daughters and sons was differently experienced and managed by the women I spoke to. I now turn to discuss the changes that have occurred over the time this group of women mothered that have increasingly led us to observe, as Bridget did, that 'everybody nowadays is expected to be mobile, whereas at one time it wouldn't have (...) it would have been very unusual, wouldn't it?'

Changes over Time

My mum's two uncles emigrated at the end of the first World War and so my mum never met them. [My grandma and her brothers] never saw each other again. [...] As soon as her brothers emigrated, that was it and she had letters and photographs but my grandma never went out of East Yorkshire! [...] So the thought of going to visit her brothers in Australia was just beyond comprehension, so, really, the world's a much smaller place now, isn't it?
(Fiona)

In thinking about her sons' travelling in Australia, Fiona drew on 'past/present family biography' (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003: 119) to make an historical comparison, so that the changes in mobility that have occurred across generations could be traced through her reflections on the experiences of her ancestors. In their study of risk-taking, Tulloch and Lupton (2003) found that the conditions under which mobility is undertaken in the UK are currently 'more fortunate, since the industrial concentrations and confines of "place" have been breached' (119). The ability to leave the UK for other continents are indicative of the reaches of travel nowadays. A recent article in the *Observer*³⁵ newspaper (06/08/06) for example, reported on the massification of tourism that has in effect changed the culture of air travel: 'what was once the rare indulgence of a privileged elite has become everyday [...] It used to cost several thousand pounds to go to New York; now it is as cheap as chips'.

Alongside this change in global opportunities, and because of it as well, young people are increasingly taking 'gap' years either before or after university and travelling abroad. This was the case of several of the children of my interviewees, who were well-acquainted with such changes and welcomed them as providing the possibility of

³⁵ The *Observer* is a UK Sunday newspaper aligned with a centre-left and predominantly middle-class readership.

widening the horizons of their daughters and sons.³⁶ Recognition of the world having changed is of primary importance here, and women's awareness of the ease of access to travel alongside the increasing availability of cheap flights rendered distance less problematic than during their own youth. As Fiona's narrative indicated, it was male family members who emigrated, whilst females were 'left behind'. I add here that one of the major transformations in travel opportunities for young people in the west is the acceptance and expectation that daughters as well as sons will grasp the opportunities for travel/work abroad and will, for the most part, do so with maternal backing and approval. As Rachel said of her daughters, 'I want them to have adventures' and she evidently desired post-separation experiences such as travel for her adult children:

I like the idea of, you know, the swallows that shoot off to Africa and then they come back again. As long as [my daughters] keep shooting off and coming back I'll be happy. I've actually got three swallows tattooed on my back and I told them that's why it was. That's what I want them to do; to feel free to go as far as they like, but don't forget to come back. As long as I know they're there, I think. (Rachel)

That people are no longer confined to a particular place for employment and/or other experiences was often acknowledged by the women I spoke to: 'he might work in America. He might work all over the place, I don't know, and when that time comes, I'll just have to get used to it' (Judith). Judith's son initially left home to go to university within the UK. As her narrative suggests, she did not expect him to return to live locally. Instead she perceived that he would travel further away in order to pursue his ambitions and that this was something Judith would 'get used to'. Similarly, and although very positive about her daughters' future travels, Rachel also hinted at the possibility that they might not return. Another fear for some women was

³⁶ A recent television programme aired in June 2007 and entitled *Mind the Gap Year*, documented a number of recent tragic accidents and young people's disappearances. In turn, this might mean that the gap year loses its appeal and/or its maternal support.

that geographical distance might also mean loss of contact and communication: ‘I just hope [my sons] don’t just drift away, you know, with living away’ (Sally).

Often participants’ anxieties regarding young people travelling and working abroad emerged in perceptions of their traversing previously unexplored territories. As Paula said of her son’s intention to work in America, ‘I’ll worry more! It’s the unknown, isn’t?’ and when Nancy talked about her son’s travelling in Australia and New Zealand she said, ‘[it’s] a whole unknown quantity, really’, adding ‘when he’s in a base, I feel happier. When he starts moving around I feel more ill at ease’. For Nancy, the ability to fix her son geographically created fewer feelings of worry and anxiety and I suggest that this was at times linked to women’s inability, perhaps like their mothers before them, to envisage the whereabouts of adult children whose location in the world was for the most part outside their own experiences.

Nancy was, however, one of a minority of my participants who had worked outside the UK as a younger woman. Her son’s travelling abroad therefore caused her to contemplate her own mother’s experience:

I worked abroad for a while. I taught in Germany and travelled around there. [My mother] wouldn’t be able to envisage that scenario because it was out of her experience, but she would still have those maternal feelings, wouldn’t she?
(Nancy)

Nancy imagined her mother as having had the same ‘maternal feelings’ she experienced herself and these centred again on worry and anxiety. As she said, ‘what you worry about changes, that’s all, and you’ve no control over what’s happening to them’. However, although the majority of interviewees expressed similar concerns to those I have discussed so far, my participants also articulated they wanted experiences for their children that differed from their own: ‘I always wanted [my eldest daughter]

to travel, because it was something I used to dream of' (Dawn); 'it was an adventure for me for her to go away' (Rita). In this way, the location of their children was unproblematic in so far as maternal ambitions were being satisfied by young people's pursuance of their individual goals. Overall, the geographical distances between them and their daughters and sons were articulated as a fact of their new way of life, to which mothers would become accustomed:

If [my son] does what he wants to do as a career, he's not going to come back to [hometown] because there's nothing in this area. So he will always live away. Um, if he's lucky, he'll probably travel the world, doing what he wants to do but (...) so he'll be (...) always away from here. But that doesn't mean to say, you know, that there's not that bond between us. There will always be that bond. (Judith)

As Judith's narrative indicated, at the time of the interview she had accepted the fact that after leaving university and in order for him to achieve his aspirations as a musician, her son would 'always live away', but she also strongly articulated that this did not mean that the bonds between them would be broken. The maintenance of maternal ties with adult children was integral to the emotional management of the geographical distances between my interviewees and their daughters and sons. In the next section of the chapter I shall consider how women's interpellation into technologically mediated communication helped to maintain these bonds across the distances that separated them, and how in its turn this sustained their identities as mothers.

The Landscape of Communication

I wrote letters home, but I only phoned very, very occasionally. Um, and that went on when I was at college. Then I worked in Essex to begin with, then in Germany. All of that time it was mainly letters and just a very isolated phone call. No mobiles. No emails. And that was how it was done and you (...) So things are very different now. (Nancy)

When I spoke to [my eldest son] the other week, I couldn't believe he was thousands of miles away. It just sounded as though he was in the next room, it was so clear. I think it'd be very hard if we couldn't do that. [...]. It must've been a lot worse for people in the past, when people emigrated and things like that. (Sally)

Nancy's and Sally's narratives link to Fiona's comment on page 169 of this chapter, in that historical comparisons were made in order to draw attention to the changes in communication mechanisms that have occurred over time. Sally explained how unproblematic contact with her son made his absence more manageable and easier to cope with. Her engagement with 'distance-transcending technologies' (Wood and Smith, 2001: 70) meant her son 'sounded as though he was in the next room', thus adding to her appeasement: he was almost tangible. My participants' narratives also highlighted the changes in communication possibilities that have occurred within women's own lifetimes and, in reflecting on their own experiences of home-leaving, comparisons were again made between their own and their mothers' feelings at the time of mother/adult child separation:

But, you know, how did my mum feel when I went into the army? We didn't have a phone in the house. I mean, I joined the army at 18, but it's interesting, I hadn't given this any consideration, but my daughter had a phone in her room and she had her mobile, so I knew I could get her at any time. So, how would it have changed my feelings if there hadn't been that level of contact? (Ingrid)

Although it is not possible to know the answer to Ingrid's question I would nevertheless propose that the ability to be in contact with, and be contacted by, absent daughters and sons had alleviated some of the feelings of anxiety and worry the women I spoke to had experienced. Lull (2001: 1) emphasises 'the significance that communication processes hold for real people as they engage the entire range of material and symbolic resources at their disposal' and post-separation contact with daughters and sons was narrated as essential in the lives of my participants. Their

engagement with communication technologies ensured this was possible so that in redefining ‘the meaning of the technology’ (Holloway and Valentine, 2003: 123) the mobile phone and other technologies took up a significant presence in the lives of my study participants.

The phrase ‘keeping in touch’ is commonly articulated, even though we are unable to physically touch those we are separated from. Indeed, one of the issues I asked the women in my study to tell me about was how they ‘kept in touch’ with their daughters/sons now they no longer lived in the family home:

I’ve realised my first words to [my eldest son] are, ‘where are you?’ and I always say it. I said it last night to him. I want to know where he is so I can imagine him there. (Paula)

Paula’s is a question we can all guess has been asked every time we hear the words, ‘I’m on the train’. As she said, it was the first thing she asked her son. Markham (1998: 88) comments that individual identities can be ‘maintained through technology’ and I suggest that when talking on the phone to her son, Paula, like other of my interviewees, created a sense of place into which she could fix him and, in imagining him there, eased her anxiety in the knowledge that he was ‘safe’ in the ‘uncertain’ world outside the home. At the same time, she fixed herself as the mother of her son, thus easing her own anxieties regarding her changed maternal role.

As Paula’s narrative indicated, contacting her son through the wires of technology alleviated some of her anxieties, but for some interviewees the location of their children was not always conducive to this. As already mentioned, the majority of people in the world ‘are without basic telecommunication, and Internet access time and computer equipment are relatively much more expensive for those in South Asia

and Africa than for those living in most Northern countries' (Kramarae, 1998: 109).

When my interviewee Bridget's daughter left home to work in Africa, her traversing of geographical and cultural boundaries meant that she and Bridget glimpsed first-hand the spatial unevenness and unequal distribution of communication technology.

In a lived contradiction of the advertisements I outlined earlier in this chapter, they were confronted with obstacles to communication not previously experienced: 'no telephone, no email' (Bridget). Instead they relied on letter-writing, which in itself posed major difficulties:

Letters were very unpredictable and, as it happened, the first letter that she wrote to us took the longest to arrive. It took four weeks to get here, so I didn't know if she'd got my letters, I didn't know if she was ok, didn't know anything about where they were or, um, I didn't know what she was doing. I just knew nothing! She just kind of disappeared, really, and I found that really, really difficult. [...] When we got the letter, oh it was wonderful, 'oh, she's alive!' [laughs]. So I wrote lots of letters that year. (Bridget)

Bridget found her daughter's later move to America much more tolerable: 'I suppose because we'd done it once before and because the communication's so much easier from there'. Jones (1998: xii) suggests that 'electronically distributed, almost instantaneous, communication has for many people supplanted the postal service'.

Apart from Bridget above, and Nancy who said, 'I don't think I've exchanged any letters with [my daughter] or [my son] except to send them something, you know, and you put in a letter', none of the women I spoke to used letter-writing as a form of communication. Lupton (1995: 99) identifies the relationship between computer and user as 'symbiotic' and suggests that human interaction with such technologies renders other equipment, such as the pen, 'awkward as writing instruments'. Indeed, as Heather said, 'I never write to them, no, I never write letters'. It was also the case that the nomadic lifestyles of adult children post home-leaving also meant there was

no 'physical' place letters could be addressed to. Computer mediated communication therefore became a more than adequate substitute.

The form of contact Heather used with her four sons was email which, like letter-writing, is reliant (for the most part) on text via the internet. Unlike letter-writing it is immediate: the here-and-now can be transmitted instantaneously:

When [one of my sons] was travelling, it was email. When he was in Canada, because he worked in a ski resort for about five or six months and then he went travelling, um, through Canada, through the Rockies and into the States, so it was always email then and (...) I think we had a couple of telephone calls, that was all. (Heather)

Heather also said that during her sons' travels he would 'email about once a week, and that was quite nice because we saved them all as well, um, to pass on to his grandma and granddad' thus their transformation from electronic media to printed object meant that her son's emails performed the same function as letters, as they could be passed on for other family members to read, so strengthening wider familial ties. They could also be kept. One of the differences between electronic communication, such as email and mobile phone texting is that, although like letters they are text-based, they are not tangible nor, keep-able objects (unless emails are printed off, as in Heather's case). Internet mail boxes and mobile phone files 'fill-up', so that messages have to be deleted. Thus they do not/cannot formulate mementos of times past.

Email did however act as a mediator of everyday 'news' for several of my participants. Dawn's daughter, for example, was buying a house in America: 'so at the moment I'm getting emails with pictures' (Dawn) and Nancy said of her son's travelling, 'he emails us photos and things'. Having access to images of their

children's lives points again to the mitigation of the loss of proximity computer mediated communication has made possible, that of rendering the 'unknown' less mysterious and therefore less daunting. Nowadays, 'other places' are, to a great extent, no longer outside our scope of vision. Because we can 'see' them, they no longer hold the mystery they might have done for previous generations. From the perspective of my research participants, such images also performed the function of bringing mothers 'closer to' their absent daughters and sons, engendering meaningful exchanges in which they could feel included and remain 'part of' their adult children's lives.

In commenting on an overlooked characteristic of computer mediated communication, Fernback and Thompson (1995: 9) suggest there is 'the possibility, even likelihood, that as CMC grows in popularity, there will be less need for face-to-face interaction'. Certainly, my participants took full advantage of this means of communication post-separation from their adult children. I am reluctant to claim, however, that a mother's desire for interaction with her child/ren in the same physical space could be overridden by CMC. I would rather suggest, as Markham (1998) has done, that technological devices in some cases acted as harsh reminders of the geographical distances that existed between my interviewees and their children and in consequence that their experiences of 'virtual' motherhood would never become a substitute for mothering in the 'real' world.

Following Grosz (1994), Lupton (1995: 98-9) asserts that 'inanimate objects, when touched or on the body for long enough, become extensions of the body image and sensation. They become psychically invested into the self'. Referring to the mobile

phone and its users Ingrid declared: 'it's so much of an accessory now [...] people have become so dependent on it'. In these terms, the mobile phone is indeed becoming an 'extension of the self in wider space' (Holloway and Valentine, 2003: 101). Although obviously alarmed by what she perceived as its insidious nature, Ingrid did own a mobile phone herself so that her daughter could contact her: 'I guess because my daughter has this thing about exams, and she needs to feel confident' (Ingrid). In this instance, as in others too, the mobile phone became a link to the mother for the child, where a supportive boost of confidence could be immediately accessed.

Instantaneous messaging via the mobile phone was often commented on as allaying parental anxieties, as Janice said of her son, who returned to live locally after university: 'he realises that if he just texts or gives us a quick ring, everything's fine'. In almost echoing the advertisements I outlined earlier, Frances said, 'with text messages, you're in touch whenever you want, aren't you really?' At times the mobile phone took on an almost iconic status in women's narratives:

[One of my stepsons] is not brilliant at keeping in touch either but, you know, mobile phones have been the *salvation* of contact really. (Heather)

But the mobile phone is a *godsend*. I didn't really want to hear her voice, I just wanted to get the [text] message, 'I'm ok' or, 'I've made a friend called so-and-so, we're going out tonight'. Those were the messages I wanted, yeah, yeah. How they managed in the olden days without them I don't know. (Rita)

Rita's narrative again refers to the past management of separation; as she intimated, advances in technology are perceived to have made geographical distance less relevant as far as communication is concerned. Her narrative also indicates that she wanted to know her daughter was engaged in the everyday activities of making friends and 'going out'. Rita, like other women I spoke to, wanted to hear about the

mundane to enable her to fix her daughter in a place of relative safety and in so doing was able to alleviate some of her anxiety. I suggest that having access to snippets of the lives of their daughters and sons via email, mobile phones and text-messaging reassured this group of women that their children were engaged in the ordinary, everyday activities they had performed when living in the family home. Thus the quest for adventure and freedom that women claimed to want for their children was clouded by an underlying desire for their lives to be safely grounded in an everyday 'normality' taking place in the 'uncertain' space of the world outside the home.

As Bauman (2003: 63) comments: 'the advent of electronically assured out-of-placeness makes travel safer, less risky and off-putting than ever before', suggesting that 'it cancels out many of the past limits to the magnetic power of "going places"'. However, regardless of the 'location awareness [that] is built into cellular phone systems' (Rheingold, 2002: 98) on occasion, its use did raise some anxieties and negative contemplations for my research participants:

I want them to have adventures. It's great fun. I just don't want them to (...) I just have the idea that, if [my daughter] did that, the only way I would know where she was is her mobile phone number, and you don't know where that mobile phone is. And if it didn't get paid for, or got lost, you actually wouldn't know and you could lose someone. You actually wouldn't know where on earth someone was. Scary! (Rachel)

Nevertheless, Rachel's daughters, and the daughters and sons of other women I spoke to, were encouraged to 'go places' and women's travels in cyberspace in order to be close to their adult children were narrated by them as 'a place where meaningful human activities [took] place' (Markham, 1998: 88). In most instances, they were able to use the technologies available to them as forms of contact with absent daughters and sons, thus maintaining their relationships and sustaining their identities as mothers.

In her discussion of computer usage Lupton asserts that ‘rather than the computer/human dyad being a simple matter of self versus other, there is, for many people, a blurring of the boundaries between the embodied self and the PC’ (Lupton, 1995: 98). A similar ‘blurring’ could be discerned in the narratives of my interviewees regarding techno-goods such as the internet, land-line telephone and mobile phone. Indeed, although communication technologies are (not yet) built into our flesh (Jones, Williams and Fleuriot, 2003), mobile phones had become almost-integral appendages for the women I spoke to, allowing them byte-sized chunks of the everyday lives of their adult children. In the next section of the chapter, I turn to consider the reciprocal nature of two-way interactive communication technology in the lives of my interviewees and the daughters and sons from whom they lived apart.

Two-Way Interaction?

I got a mobile for when he went away because I thought, at least I can text, you know? I don’t have to speak to him all the time and I can get messages. He does send me messages so, it’s not the same as speaking, but at least he’s thinking about me, you know? (Paula)

The mobile phone was a novel way for Paula to contact her son and she evidently interpreted his texting her as a sign of her son’s thoughtfulness. In their discussion of on-line interactions, Wood and Smith (2001: 80-1) note that ‘it is the *sender*, who possesses greater control of self-presentation to others’ and that ‘the *receiver* can overestimate the qualities’ of the sender. There remains therefore, ‘an uncertainty about whether or not the message was received and interpreted in the way it was intended’ (original emphases). In Paula’s case, the intention and interpretation of text messaging between her and her son are, I would suggest, probably the same; her son intends Paula to be consoled by his messages and, indeed, she is. Accepting text

messages as adequate forms of communication from her son proved an important watershed for Paula, which helped to ameliorate past tensions between them:

He went back [to university] in September and, um, for the first three weeks he didn't ring me at all and I rang him two or three times and he said, 'what're you ringing all the time for?' and I said, 'I'm not'. He said, 'I'm fine, you don't have to ring me all the time' [laughs]. Well, I just sat and cried. [...] I wanted to ring every day. I'd sit here on a night thinking, don't ring him, don't ring [laughs]. (Paula)

Embedded within Paula's son's decision to text his mother there may be gleaned a covert intention to fend off what he perceived as his mother's intrusion into his life.

Levinson states that the mobile phone means that 'there is no place anyone can be away from family now' and continues that previously 'to leave the home was to leave both the physical space and most of the communication. Nowadays the cellphone keeps the family's communication intact when the home is left behind' (Levinson, 2004: 89). Levinson's comments relate to the lives of young people prior to home-leaving and indeed as he suggests, possession of the mobile phone does indicate the possibility of an increase in parental 'surveillance'.

As Holloway and Valentine (2000: 763) observe, 'children's identities are constituted in and through particular spaces' and as I established in the previous chapter, the space of the home was construed by my interviewees as a place of safety. With the advent of mobile phone ownership, public spaces might have been rendered less 'dangerous'; the child is contactable and, by default, 'safe' as the mobile phone in her pocket simulates an extension of the reach of the home/mother. According to Jones, Williams and Fleuriot (2003: 169), the 'child-technology interaction subtly reconfigures not only childhood and its spatialities but also the childhood-adult interface' insofar as mothers and their children are experiencing new ways of being

connected. I would add that this applies both before and after children's home-leaving.

As such, parents and their children will read different meanings into the possibilities for mutual contact that new technologies offer. Brannen and her colleagues comment that during the teenage years and before home-leaving, young people seek independence from their parents and interpret parental concerns and anxieties as interference so that 'maintaining channels of communication has a different kind of significance for them'. They continue:

It is the control aspects of the Janus-headed character of communication in parent-child relationships which concerns them more. While young people may interpret gentle enquiry from parents as signs of love and concern, more persistent demands for information may be perceived as unwarranted and unwelcome prying and interference. (Brannen et al, 1994: 183-4)

In a similar way to Paula, Linda had facilitated the means by which her son could contact her, paying for land-line phone installation in his university accommodation, and paying for credit on his mobile phone. Nevertheless, her strategies for ensuring communication were not successful:

I'm just in dispute with him at the moment because he was playing his first paid-for gig with his friends, with the rock band, and I did expect him [...] to text us or to tell us how he'd got on and I've texted twice and I've emailed once and he's still not been in touch, really. [...] I did say, 'right, well, text tonight' and, um, he hasn't done. So I'm a bit disappointed. (Linda)

As the narratives of Paula and Linda reveal, interest in their sons' activities post-separation were unwelcome, and their sons' obvious resistance to cooperating with their mothers' desire for continued communication was indicative of a shift in issues of power and control in these instances. In my study, mothers and their adult-children had equal access to technologies such as the mobile phone and as such both groups

were able to initiate, refuse or terminate communication via cyberspace post-separation: each had the freedom to communicate and the freedom not to.

Communication became the prerogative of Paula and Linda's sons in terms of when and how much contact they were willing to commit to once they left home. As I discussed in chapter 3, children's home-leaving forced a disjuncture in the meanings of 'child' and 'adult' and as such created a dilemma for some of my interviewees. Maternal (over)concern might then be perceived as control by their children, and mothers' inability to let go of practices that might be defined as 'controlling' thus placed the child as adult in a particular position from which they re/acted accordingly.

As Apter (1990) has argued, at this stage in their life course, young people desire acknowledgement of their adult status from their parents and in consequence recognition of their ability to be responsible for themselves in some respects. It was apparent that at the time of the interviews, some of my participants were unable to meet this need in their children because it was at odds with how they perceived their motherhood role and as such their daughters and sons. In their research with young people and their parents, Holdsworth and Morgan (2005: 104) found that home-leaving might thus allow the former 'more control over how they interact with parents in time and space'. In my own participants' narratives a shift could be discerned in the balance of control between mothers and their adult children, seemingly instigated by their physical separation.

Although independence was the goal of my interviewees' childrearing strategies, this does not automatically translate as a lack of communication, or a negation of

responsibility for others. Overall the majority of women I spoke to reported very few problems regarding daughters and sons accepting responsibility for the reciprocation of communication. Sons were however, sometimes reported as less committed to maintaining contact on any kind of regular basis:

I think all the while [my daughter] has tried harder with the contact than [my son] has. I don't think that it's that he doesn't care. I think, in a way, he's a typical young male. I think, generally speaking, and there are always exceptions, I think females try and keep up the contact more than males do. (Nancy)

Nancy excuses her son's lack of effort in maintaining relationships as part of his masculinity: 'he's a typical young male'. As Brannen et al (1994: 193) comment, 'mothers seem to accept their sons' reticence as part of their make-up'. Although some participants were aware that their sons could also be non-committal at times regarding their well-being, during telephone conversations 'non-verbal cues' (Wood and Smith, 2001: 71) sometimes acted as ways of 'knowing' what was going on in their sons' lives:

[My youngest son] went [into the Navy] in September and up until Christmas he seemed ok but then, when he went back, I was talking to him [on the telephone] and I knew there was something wrong. You can always tell with him. Well, I can tell with the pair of them because of their voices. (Sally)

Sally said she was able to 'prise out of' her son that he was finding life in the Services difficult for a variety of reasons, and had reassured him, saying 'we'll talk about it when you come home, so don't worry about it'. She went on to express her relief that her son's disclosure of his unhappiness had been made to her, and not to his father:

Now I just took it in my stride, but it's a good job he didn't talk to his dad, because [my husband] said to me [when I told him], 'there's no way he's leaving!' and I said 'don't say that to him'. So I was glad he'd told me and not his dad because when he spoke to him [on the phone] later on he said, 'what's this about you maybe not staying?' and I was going, you know, shaking my head and saying, 'just tell him we'll discuss it when he comes home'. (Sally)

Sally's success at creating a 'talking relationship' (Brannen et al, 1994: 205) with her sons, which she said she had attempted to nurture throughout her childrearing years, was evident in the strengthening of the close ties between them and the ability of her sons to offload and share information with her. In this instance, Sally felt that the difficulties her son was experiencing necessitated face-to-face as opposed to through-the-wires discussion because of their sensitive nature, an aspect seemingly overlooked by her husband. Sally and her husband wanted the same thing for their son, and that was for him to stay in the Navy, but their different approaches to reach this consensus are evident here and displayed a typically gendered and 'traditional' parent-child/mother-father dynamic: in order to achieve the same outcome, the father attempted to lay down the law at a distance, whilst the mother sought to offer support in the safe space of the home; this had been the pattern of Sally's familial relationships throughout her marriage.

Jamieson (1999: 488) comments that recent 'empirical research finds parents claiming they want to have closer relationships with their children than they had with their own parents' and Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse (2006) similarly concluded their discussion of parent/child relationships. Nurturing 'openness' and mutual disclosure prior to their children's home-leaving was a practice of several of my interviewees' mothering.

They articulated this as a different model of mothering from that of their own mothers. Many of them couched their relationships with their children in terms of friendship, for example, 'girlie chats' (Gina and Rita) or 'the next step beyond friendship' (Barbara).

Although Jamieson identifies the adoption of a ‘confiding relationship’ (1999: 488) with teenage children as a strategy of middle-class motherhood, the women I spoke to did not predominantly identify as middle-class. Middle-class values do, however, continue to discursively shape childrearing practices and goals. The emergence of ‘democratic parenting’ (Giddens, 1992) is a further indicator of this. Indeed, the women who participated in my study told me they had worked towards a more egalitarian relationship with their children than the one they experienced with their own parents. Brannen et al (1994: 205) comment that mothers’ strategies to construct relationships of disclosure with their children act as an ‘insurance policy in terms of ensuring the maintenance of contact with young people in the future’. However, one of the major anxieties women’s narratives highlighted was ‘loss’ of the adult child following separation. Thus their pursuit of a disclosing relationship within the home did not necessarily result in feelings of security that the same kind of contact would be maintained once their children left.

Reay (2004: 59) observes that ‘within families, women engage in emotional labour far more than men and [are responsible] for maintaining the emotional aspects of family relationships’. It was apparent from the interviews that for the most part, mothers rather than fathers instigated contact with absent daughters and sons. At the same time they ensured that their male partners were included, thus continuing their role as mediators of father/child relationships ‘it’s usually me who rings and then [my husband] will talk to them as well’ (Heather); ‘[my daughter and I] do keep in close contact, whereas my husband might just ring [her] once a week’ (Rita). Ingrid said:

I ring at least once a week, um, and I always make sure dad’s around. I’ll maybe ring her once a week from work, but don’t tell anybody! Then I always make sure we ring again, possibly at the weekend so her dad can talk to her or,

if it gets to Friday I'll say to him, "have you rung her this week?" so we have that weekly contact each, as mum and dad. (Ingrid)

Some interviewees did however talk about fathers' initiation of contact:

I ring [my daughter] about a couple of times a week but I ring her, like, about 8 o'clock, but [my husband] will just think, oh, I'll give [her] a ring, and just ring in the middle of the day, just for five minutes chat. [...] He seems to ring more than I do, really (...) I think so. Because when I ring her, we talk for about half-an-hour, for a good chat, whereas he just rings, 'oh, I just thought I'd see how you were'. So he probably has more contact with her now than he did when they were younger, because he was never about when they were younger. (Denise)

As Denise said, her husband had not engaged in proactive fatherhood and instead had immersed himself in the breadwinner role during their children's earlier years. At the same time as her daughter's home-leaving, Denise's husband retired whilst Denise remained full-time in the workplace. She told me she felt her husband had 'missed out when [the children] were young'. Once their daughter had left home he had, as her narrative indicated, become a more 'involved' father, albeit this taking form in 'five minute chats' over the telephone. In their discussion of relating via the internet, Wood and Smith (2001: 81) comment that 'online interaction may provide a forum to find a voice that might otherwise remain silent'. I suggest the 'silence' of the fatherhood role Denise's partner previously inhabited was able to find a voice via the telephone, engendering a 'new' and also 'virtual' relationship with his daughter once she left home.

Heather had recently remarried at the time of my interview with her, becoming the stepmother of three sons. She also had a son from her previous marriage, from which she was widowed when her son was eleven weeks old. All four sons had left home for university and she thought that the disparity in their communication post-separation was based on differences in upbringing:

[My biological son]'s really good, yeah. I think it's just the different sorts of family culture. He doesn't ring every day, um, but he'll ring maybe two or three times a week and always wants to know the far end of everything, whereas [my stepsons] are content to know that everything's alright. (Heather)

Fiona said that when her son was at university, 'he'd always tell me when he was going [away] so I always knew where he was'. Both Heather and Fiona had repartnered after mothering alone for some years. I suggest that this helped to engender a reciprocal relationship between mother and son which might not have emerged otherwise. This was so for several of the women I interviewed who had mothered alone and, in a similar vein to Holdsworth and Morgan (2005: 99), my data revealed close lone mother/adult child relationships. Where I diverge from their findings is that my participants' narratives revealed examples of both daughters' *and* sons' commitment to maintaining strong emotional bonds with their mothers.

On leaving home, the child as adult is geographically and thus physically separate from the mother. However, my interviewees attempted to ensure that their relationship with their children remained secure. In the next section, I discuss the effect of communicating through the wires of technology on women's mothering as praxis.

Mothering through the Wires

In some ways I'm redundant, but in other ways, um, when you get on the phone and they've got problems, um, you still get that awful feeling in your stomach, you know? You wish you could do something, and you can't always. [...] It makes you feel gutted, really, when you know they're worrying about things or that things aren't going right for them. I'm on the one hand trying to do my counselling bit, trying to make suggestions, you know? (Nancy)

In my study, women's emotional support for daughters and sons continued post-separation and was often conveyed through the telephone wires. In considering how

women managed and experienced motherhood as they shifted towards the 'weightlessness'³⁷ of mothering engendered by the lifting of the domestic burden they previously carried, I use Nancy's narrative here to highlight the difficulties encountered by some of the women I spoke to when they dealt with problems in the lives of their adult children and when face-to-face interaction was not possible.

Nancy's daughter was experiencing many difficulties in her working life and, in her turn, Nancy experienced feelings of powerlessness in her inability to help her daughter. An underlying assumption in her narrative is that had she lived nearer, her daughter's problems would have been alleviated. Indeed, Nancy was contemplating moving house in order to live closer to her daughter at the time I interviewed her. As such, Nancy reiterated the conflation of spatial closeness and maternal protectiveness I discussed earlier. However, distance in this instance also became a metaphor for the kinds of problems that cannot be solved by another person: 'we used to suggest things when she was feeling down, you know, "could you try this? Could you try that?" And we got really frustrated because she'd probably have an excuse' (Nancy).

As I have established, within western constructions of motherhood there is an underlying assumption that a mother's duty is to protect her (dependent) children. Thus, being unable to perform this aspect of her motherly duties engendered feelings of failure for Nancy. Although the mother of an adult child, this did not alleviate her desire to meet her daughter's needs. The emotional gratification Nancy's daughter might have felt following her conversations with her mother found their opposite in Nancy herself, who said her daughter did not take up any of her suggestions. After

³⁷ In *No Logo* (2001) Klein applies the term 'weightlessness' to the movement of heavy industry from the West to developing countries, thus the owners of production simply 'carry' the label of their companies.

each of their telephone conversations she waited for the next instalment regarding her daughter's work troubles and, as she said, 'my heart sinks sometimes, when the phone rings'.

Other study participants had similar experiences of powerlessness in their relationships with their adult children. Vanessa's daughter, for example, was living with an abusive partner but, unlike Alma and her daughter's situation that I discussed earlier, Vanessa and her daughter lived some distance apart. Thus the telephone was the medium Vanessa used for communicating maternal advice and support:

She rings me up in the early hours of the morning so, in one sense, I feel happy that she can do that. I said to her, 'don't get in a state, just ring, it doesn't matter what time'. I can't go back on that, so I have to keep the phone on and I get woken up. [...] You know, you give all sorts of advice, but the next morning she doesn't want the advice at all. She just wants everything to be smoothed over. It's very hard to know what to do, really. I feel like punching him on the nose! (Vanessa)

Vanessa was comforted by the fact that her daughter could disclose her difficulties to her. At the same time she remained powerless; her daughter wanted to offload her problems but, as Vanessa said, did not heed the maternal advice she was offered.

Brannen et al found that the mothers they spoke to were placed in similar situations to those of Vanessa and Nancy, in that they were given information by their teenage children (prior to their home-leaving) on the understanding that they would not 'act' on it:

For mothers, knowledge means power without authority; they continue to be the responsible parent, but cannot act on information, even when they disapprove of their sons' or daughters' activities. Through creating channels of communication, mothers endeavour to exert influence though without appearing to constrain. (Brannen et al, 1994: 205)

This was particularly so for Vanessa. Although she wanted to be proactive and protect her daughter from her boyfriend: 'I want to go and rescue her' (Vanessa) she was

constrained from doing so by her daughter: 'if you do that, you'll lose me'. Vanessa's dilemma is similar to the findings of Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse's (2006: 383) research, where parents' interventions into their daughters' and sons' relationships posed the risk of 'losing' the adult child. As my own research highlights, this becomes particularly risky once children have left home. Ultimately, the need to preserve the mother/child relationship involved mothers resisting impulses to take action in some instances.

Communication from daughters and sons to their mothers was often interpreted as a sign of the central role women continued to play in their children's lives. This was also indicative of the transformation of relationships over time between mothers and their children. In this scenario, the mother/adult child relationship is built upon the basis of reciprocal trust and support, of which mutual disclosure plays an important part. I suggest therefore that because of this, the interconnectedness of the mother/child relationship was not imagined as diluted by the distances that existed between them. Rather, mothering had to be transmitted, which changed the way it could be practised and also, of course, the way it was received:

He rang me from New Zealand to tell me that he couldn't sleep because he'd done something really stupid and he needed to talk to me about it, needed to tell me. He couldn't keep it a secret. And he's on the other side of the world and I'd never have found out (...). He'd got drunk and spent a ridiculous amount of money in dens of iniquity in Auckland! [laughs]. [...] It was just upsetting him so much and (...) the only person he could talk to about it was me [cries]. (Fiona)

Wood and Smith (2001: 75) argue that 'interacting in any given context is a subjective experience. [...] It is not inherent characteristics of the media that make the experience impersonal or not, it is our own perception that helps make it so'.

However, I suggest that the subjective experience of the mother/child interactions of

the women I spoke underwent an enforced transition in their technological mediation, and cyberspace became a place where mothering as praxis was re-negotiated and thus transformed. As Williams comments, in cyberspace there could be no ‘cuddle for the crying child’. He continues:

What we lose in cyberspace is the depth of emotional experience, warmth and understanding which comes from embodied gestures such as being ‘touched’ by another human being through face-to-face contact and physical co-presence in the real world (RW). [...] Embodied gestures touch us deeply and communicate a shared sense of trust, intimacy and vulnerability which is grounded in the contingencies of our fleshy mortal bodies. (Williams, 1998: 128)

Several commentators on cyberspace have defined it as an escape route from the self in real space (Jones, 1998; Markham, 1998; Reid and Kolko, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). However, my interviewees were not escaping from the real world self but in effect were running after a sense of self that was disrupted post-separation from the adult child. To this end, communicating via different technologies became an essential part of their lives as mothers. Although their mothering underwent change, the women in my study were able to effectively manage and maintain their relationships with their daughters and sons via the different technologies available to them.

However, as women’s narratives have highlighted, attempting to transmit motherly advice and comfort through the wires can at times be less than satisfactory, not least because prior to home-leaving, physical proximity was an everyday part of the mother/child relationship that rendered it an embodied experience performed mainly in the domestic arena:

I know we talk on the phone a lot, but I just do miss her. When you’re talking on the phone it’s so condensed, you’ve got everything to get into a short space of time, trying to say everything, whereas in the day-to-day, you brush against each other as the day goes on, don’t you? So it’s very different. (Bridget)

As I have established, the configuration of the mother/child dyad is one of close physical proximity that translates as maternal protection for the dependent child. On reaching adulthood and on home-leaving, this coupling is prised apart, thus creating a disjuncture in the former, and I suggest silent, meanings of mother and child.

Although previously the gate-keeper of the private/public boundary and thus protector of her children, the child's adult status changed the mother's function: '[my daughter] was flying, you know? I had to open the door and let her fly' (Dawn). Thus the differences geographical distances engendered were often profoundly felt when interviewees talked about communicating with their daughters and sons once they left the family home.

As Bridget implied, face-to-face interactions which necessitate the embodied presence of an other, are not replaced by the ability to talk on the telephone, which was perceived in many instances as a poor substitute for physical presence involving all of the senses. As Moores notes (2000: 135), 'all social interaction – including that which takes place between co-present participants – is “mediated by” the signs of language or gesture'. In the case of my interviewees, the signs and gestures that previously made up face-to-face interactions with daughters and sons had been caught up in their everyday lives together. As such, their meanings became more pronounced when recalled in the aftermath of separation, when mediation devices were unable to compensate for what was missed and so acted merely as an appeasement of absence.

In calling on the terminology of spatial as well as emotional proximity, Bridget illustrated how absence and presence are both embodied phenomena, a situation Kolko and Reid (1998: 221) identified in their discussion of on-line communities as 'a

separation of the embodied self from the sensory consequences of physical space'. For Bridget and others, the physical and sensory indicators of thought and feeling were missing from their technically-assisted interactions with their now-adult children. Brushing against a child in the nearness of 'the day-to-day' was recalled as very differently experienced from a 'condensed' telephone conversation that takes place over geographical distance. In its turn, this throws into relief the reconfiguration of the mother/child relationship and the transformation of motherhood when practised at a distance. As Fernback and Thompson state:

The least complex and most informative means of communications is to meet face to face. Direct, personal conversation has multiple levels of communication. In addition to the words that are spoken, vocal inflections, body language and even the setting carry meaning. (Fernback and Thompson, 1995: 11)

Post-separation from their children, the women in my study were forced to replace daily face-to-face interaction with word/text-based communication in order to maintain close contact with their daughters and sons, which at times proved limiting and frustrating. Although the distance-shrinking abilities of technology had to some extent enabled them to carry out some of the motherly practices that were part of their self-concept, and their engagement with technology engendered 'real' experiences, these were virtual. So, despite the fact that images were on occasion sent via the internet, sensory experiences³⁸ were for the most part missing, and so missed, from the women's encounters with their children in cyberspace. Thus they 'interact[ed] using words/text rather than bodies' (Markham, 1998: 79).

Although the ability to engage in motherly practises such as caring, support, a 'listening ear' at a distance, via communication technologies, does herald a major

³⁸ Image-relaying mobile phones are becoming more commonplace, although these were not mentioned by my interviewees. One participant also owned a web-cam, but did not elaborate on her use of it.

shift in motherhood as praxis in that when children leave home mothering can continue under circumstances previously not possible, technologically enhanced communication came a 'poor second' to the intimate relationships study participants had for the most part previously shared with their children.

Concluding remarks

The future is unfolding around us. Over the next decade we will be able to see all sorts of differences that we can barely imagine today. Vodafone is working hard to mobilize tomorrow's world, but we need your input. You are our partners in innovation, helping to shape a future that offers the mobile services we want, and brings us closer to the people we care about, wherever they are in the world. Together we can build a future that turns this vision into reality. (www.vodafone.com)

In this chapter, I have highlighted the issue of post-separation mother/child communication, because coming to terms with the shift in their identities as mothers of adult children from whom they lived separately, in part rested upon my participants' ability for continued communication and interaction with them.

Post-separation motherhood for my interviewees was for much of the time practised across geographical distances, yet embedded within women's narratives was a profound commitment to the continuity of the self as mother that depended on the knowledge that their daughters and sons were safe in the 'unknown' space outside the home. Unlike those who use cyberspace to transcend the 'seeming fixity of the "real world" self' (Kolko and Reid, 1998: 218), my interviewees attempted to ensure and fix their 'real-world' motherhood identities via cyberspace, where they attempted to reconcile the two opposing phenomena of rupture and continuity experienced post-separation from adult children.

The statement on the *Vodafone* website above conflates closeness in cyberspace with physical proximity, suggesting as their TV advertisement does, that mobile phone possession and usage render us part of a 'future vision': we can be 'mobilized' in more ways than one. As such, we the readers are addressed by its promise of bringing us closer to those we care about and, in consequence, by its normalizing discourse. There can be no doubt that communication technology is here to stay. Oddly, the conflation of proximity and care evident in such advertising rhetoric resonates with women's narratives regarding notions of motherhood and protectiveness/care, yet these have been exposed in this chapter to carry very different meanings for mothers themselves. As Williams bluntly states, 'virtual reality, as the term suggests, does not stand a cat in hell's chance of capturing the subtlety and sophistication of life in the real world' (Williams, 1998: 129).

To conclude this chapter, I want to return to the advertisements I outlined in its introduction, and turn my focus onto the 'mother' in each, in order to call attention to the fact that she is not mobile. With striking similarity to the mother of Lee's novel, whom I discussed in the introductory chapter of my thesis, the mother figure of these advertisements remains at the edge of the forest/in the home, whilst the young person is mobile/has moved away. However, although I have argued in this chapter that women sought to construct and fix a motherhood identity for themselves via cyberspace, I do not suggest that their lives once their adult children left home remained static. Rather, I argue that they desired affirmation of their identities as mothers. So, unlike the mother figure of mobile phone advertising, I am not implying that my interviewees' lives remained 'on hold'. In the next chapter, I pursue how my participants' identities as mothers, which rested upon their continued interactions with

their adult children, impacted on the plans they made, and the aspirations they had, for their own futures.

Chapter Six

Mothers' Futures

Introduction

In the previous chapter I highlighted the importance for my research participants of maintaining contact with absent daughters and sons across geographical distances. I argued that this was underpinned by my interviewees' desire for the affirmation of their maternal identity. To conclude chapter 5, I returned to the image of the mother figure in TV advertising to note that she was fixed in place. In this chapter it is my intention to highlight that in opposition to such representations, the lives of the women in my study did not remain static once their children left home. In order to do so, I shall explore what the mothers in my research sample did next. In other words, I shall consider my participants' experiences post-separation from their adult children. This chapter therefore investigates the other life circumstances of my interviewees and the chances and choices that were available to them once they had successfully mothered their children to adulthood and experienced their home-leaving. The chapter follows five main themes: Comings and Goings; Long-Term Returners; Women and Work; Women's Partnerships; and Looking Forward.

Comings and Goings

It's as though they've left home, but you've still got to organise your life around them and when they're home. We always say to them, you know, 'don't worry, we'll organise things around you'. [...] So we still do prioritise them, I think. I mean, you think, I can do all sorts now, and then you find you can't because they're always coming back! [laughs] They still rule your life!
(Sally)

As established in the two preceding chapters, the women who participated in my study indicated that over time they began to settle into home-life without their

daughters and sons. A major aspect of this acceptance, elaborated in chapter 5, was women's continued interaction with their children across geographical distances. The mothers I interviewed also, of course, continued to see their children when they visited and, as Sally's narrative above indicates, such visits affected the 'new' home-life she had established. This was so for all of my interviewees, and in this section of the chapter I shall discuss the effect of adult children's comings and goings on mothers' lives.

When young people made visits to the family home, for example between university semesters, or for shore-leave as in the case of Sally's sons, participants' households were often disrupted: 'you know, you get into this routine that she's not around then, all of a sudden, she's back again!' explained Rita, who further described the mixed feelings she experienced during her daughter's visits home:

I can be desperately lonely one minute then absolutely sick of her the next [laughs]. It's really weird when she comes back, you know. It's a novelty for a bit, then it all wears off, um, so it is a very fine line between, you know, really missing her and being fed up with her. (Rita)

Other interviewees also described the changes to the household when children visited and the ambivalent feelings this often aroused. At such times, several women stated that they found themselves once more responsible for domestic and other chores they had been relieved of at the time of the child's home-leaving:

Two days into him being home I'll be saying, 'oh my god, what a mess!' [...] Do you know, I'm so busy when he comes home, I ferry him here, there and everywhere, 'can you just take me to [work]?' So I'm backwards and forwards while he's at home, never seem to have two minutes to myself. When he goes back it's phew! I've got more time. It's all or nothing. When they're here there's all this stuff going on, and then he goes back and it all stops. It's really quiet when he's not here and yet I love him to be home. (Paula)

Although they lived elsewhere, the majority of daughters and sons retained a space in their parental home, usually their bedrooms: 'it's still her room and it's not touched' (Serena); 'she knows that her room's still there' (Gina). Although children's rooms were described as 'there' for daughters and sons, often my interviewees expressed surprise at their children's continued attachment to the home, its rooms and their contents:

[My daughter] doesn't come home very often anyway. She hasn't been here for about a year and this year we wanted to decorate her room and I was quite surprised because she wanted to have a say in what colours we chose and I said, 'but you aren't here anymore'. But she was quite adamant. She wanted to have a say, and that quite surprised me. (Nancy)

I said something about [my eldest son]'s room when he was getting his own place and he said, 'no, that's still my bedroom!' I suppose, you know, with him coming home, you know, it is still his bedroom. I would think it would only be, like, if he gets a partner or he gets married, that he'll then not want his bedroom, you know? (Sally)

Even though Sally's son lived in the south of England in his own flat, and Nancy's daughter lived in her partner's flat in Scotland, thereby giving the impression that they had 'really' left home, both maintained a place in their parents' house, highlighting their interconnectedness with the parental home/parents. As I discussed in the introduction to my thesis, this is also indicative of what young people imagine the parental home to be. Indeed, one of Holdsworth and Morgan's (2005: 78) study participants' said of his own parental home: 'something that you can identify with is waiting for you on your return'. In her discussion of the meanings of home that emerge across different academic disciplines, Kenyon lists the following:

Home as a projection and realization of self-identity and social and cultural status; home as a place of retreat, safety, relaxation and freedom; home as a space of privacy; home as a social support mechanism; and home as a place of familiarity and continuity. (Kenyon, 2003: 105)

As Kenyon further comments: 'home can be both an ideal and a reality' (105), and her observations of the meanings of home, both real and imaginary, were echoed in my

interviewees' narratives. Although Janice's son, for example, owned his own flat in the same town as his parents, she described his visits as suffused with his need for stability and continuity:

[My son]'ll just stay for an hour and that's maybe all he needs. Just come back into the (.) his home, as it was. The cats are there, you know, that home-life, and he chats with us and reads his mail. [...] He still, you know, calls in and comes round a couple of nights and one night he comes for his tea and, more often than not, we see him over the weekend, he'll come round for his Sunday dinner and it seems to go back to how it was before he left. I think he likes things to be as it was, sort of thing. (Janice)

In the scenario described by Janice above, her son appears unable to consider that his parents might have moved on during his absence; as Janice intimates, he 'needed' his visits back to an 'unchanged' domestic space. Vanessa as well said that when her daughters visited they 'just drop[ped] into place [...] if I've moved things or taken things down, "where's that picture of so-and-so I liked?" you know? So they like things to look the same, to hark back'. Vanessa also offered some understanding of young people's reactions to changes in the home by reflecting on her own experience of visiting her parents:

I always remember when I left home and I went back and all the old *Rupert* books and things like that, that I'd had for years stuck in the big cupboard between the bedrooms, they'd all disappeared. I think my mum had had a clear out, you know, and I was actually really hurt that she'd actually got rid of them. (Vanessa)

I use these examples to illustrate how daughters and sons regarded the home, and in consequence, the mother, as constant and unchanging: the mother's life was viewed in terms of stasis and their own in terms of dynamism, since they were the ones to have left the home. A young person might then perceive her/himself as 'owning' change and the mother's expected invariance thus contains the proof of the child's adult status: in effect, the young person has moved beyond the childhood self the home and mother represent.

However, and as I indicated in the chapters 4 and 5, over the time my interviewees and their children were apart, *all* of their lives had moved on. Consequently the mother/child relationship had shifted. Visiting the family home highlighted children's own ideas of their mothers' lives as static and in some instances they were confronted with changes to the home environment which they 'raged against', and which their mothers either resisted or accommodated:

When [my son] calls round he likes us all to be in, he doesn't like it when I'm at the gym [...] he gets despondent when I'm not in and I say, 'yeah, but I can't give up what I want to do' [...] So in a sense, I get a bit hardened now. Because they still want you to be there. [...] You know, [my husband] will say, 'well, you do go every Thursday' and I'll say, 'yes, I know, and I'm going to carry on going every Thursday'. And I get what I'd call emotional blackmail from him, you know? (Janice)

Janice said she became 'hardened' towards her son's despair at her absence from the home, indicating she no longer felt responsible for meeting *only* his needs. Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2000: 785) explored how 'the presence of dependent children [leads] to an overall key moral imperative concerning the requirement for responsible adults to put the needs of children first'. As women's narratives throughout my thesis have indicated, this was the stance taken by my study participants. As Janice clearly indicated, however, her feelings of responsibility had shifted in the time that had elapsed since her son left home. She thus resisted being held in place, not only by her son, but also by her husband. Spatial separation thus acted as an engine for change, as mothers and their children came to regard each other differently:

I think the relationship with the boys is different, um, that you're not sort of (...) running their lives anymore, sort of, making provision for them anymore. But I still feel very much their parent and I think they feel that much more that, um, that they're adult people coming home to their parents so that, um, the things that they talk to you about change as well, I think, um, you know, they talk about their own relationships that are outside the family, outside the household, much more. (Heather)

Time apart for Heather and her sons had created a space for the reconfiguring of family relationships and acknowledgement of changed and changing identities.

Heather said she was no longer 'running' her sons' lives, thus the relinquishing of a mother's 'control' and move towards her children's uptake of responsibility for themselves meant Heather perceived visits from her four sons as 'adult people coming home'. In turn, this engendered opportunities to share and discuss issues in all of their lives. Separation between my participants and their children also meant that the time they spent together was more precious. Making the most of this 'quality time' (Heather), mothers and adult children related on a more reciprocal and egalitarian basis. As Frances said, 'now [my son]'s gone, if anything, we seem to have a better relationship because we make more of the time that we have. We make sure that we both sit down and we have a nice chat and see what each others' doing'.

Although I would not say that the women I spoke to were fully released from their feelings of responsibility towards their children, I do suggest that spatial separation between them and their daughters and sons initiated a shift in their perceptions of their children's status: they began to 'see' the adult. But not in all instances was such spatial separation maintained. In the next section of the chapter I turn to consider the experiences of women whose children made a long-term return to the family home.

Long-term returners

As the introduction of tuition fees hit home for UK students and employment opportunities shrank, the 'progression' from school to university to independent adult ceased to represent the key life course transition which it used to be for many 18-year olds. (Hockey and James, 2003: 115)

Hockey and James (2003) highlight how the transition to adulthood that higher education once made possible is no longer guaranteed for increasing numbers of

young people, thus exposing that an ‘ages and stages’ approach to childhood, adolescence and adulthood masks the complexities of home-leaving and, indeed, the multiple departures and returns leaving home might entail (Allatt, 1996; Hockey and James, 2003; Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Noller and Callan, 1991).

The return to the parental home following undergraduate years, as Hockey and James (2003) suggest, is becoming a common occurrence for young people. Other life circumstances also impact upon this decision and in my own study, six of my interviewees (Angela, Bridget, Heather, Janice, Nancy and Vanessa) experienced the return of a child to the family home to live, albeit on a temporary but fairly long-term, basis: three returned after university, two from travelling/working abroad and one following the breakdown of a relationship. At the time of my interviews with them, Angela’s and Heather’s sons continued to live in the parental home, whilst the other children had left for a second time.

Although not all participants’ children who returned home had originally left for university, similar assumptions could be applied across this group of young people to those suggested by Hockey and James (2003: 115): ‘provisional student identities are predicated upon the comfortable but constricting category of “childhood” which continues to remain open to them on their return to the parental home’. Indeed, as Serena told me of her own return when her first marriage ended: ‘I just had a time when I lived at home with mum and dad again. And you soon slip back into daughter ways, with [my parents] looking after me’.

I established previously that my interviewees had cemented their availability to their adult children by building bridges of support, underpinned by the concept of 'being there'. I have argued that this was an albeit reconfigured continuance of the needs discourse in which mothers were immersed during their early childrearing years and which in its turn confirmed maternal identities after children's home-leaving: 'the kids will, um, always need help of some kind, and I always will be there for them' (Judith); 'I shall always be there for the girls' (Alma). As such, Hockey and James' assertion of a return to childhood which the move back to the family home seemingly offers, and which the terms 'kids' and 'girls' also implies, was then an option open to my participants' adult children and, given this, one might expect a degree of accommodation between mother and child if the latter returned to live in the parental home for any length of time.

However, this assumption was unwarranted since, of course, the 'children' in question were returning home as adults and, as such, not only had the power balance between parents and children potentially shifted, but the children's expectations of the kind of life they might lead had too, thus frequently leading to conflicts over territory, both literally and metaphorically. As Janice said of her son's return home, 'it sounded good at the time in theory, but in practice it's very different'. Ultimately, returners and their mothers were often in tension with each other in the space of the home they had once shared:

You had these feelings of, um, um, she'd come back and taken the place over again. Do you know what I mean? It's a bit like, you know, because she's older and more grown up, she wanted to do things the way she wanted to do them. Um, and I had got used to the peace and quiet [...] But I felt that all I was doing was clearing up, you know, going round and sorting her life out again. My life wasn't my own at that point, you know, it was back to looking after someone again. (Vanessa)

As Vanessa said, her life was not her own, a situation to which she had become accustomed during the time her daughter lived away. When her daughter returned home Vanessa resumed her role of 'sorting her [daughter's] life out', although clearly she found it difficult to accept her daughter wanting to do things her own way. In turn, this indicates the difficulty she experienced in accepting her daughter's adult status once she was back in the home. Although an instigator of some tension, meeting children's needs continued to underscore the mother/adult child relationship when children returned. In these instances it would seem, as Lawler comments, 'to be difficult for children (even adult children) to see their mothers as having a "self" outside of the subject-position "mother"' (Lawler, 2000: 155). I would add that it might also be difficult for mothers to perceive themselves differently in the presence of their adult children.

Long-term return home was thus a cause of practical and emotional disruption for my interviewees. Once again the child's movement, this time back into the home, enforced a realisation of time passing and of shifts in the way the home was inhabited. As Janice observed, returning home was not an easy option for the mother, or the child as adult: 'he'd been away for five years [...] So coming back was quite a trauma for him and, really, the rest of us because we didn't realise that over the five years you had, well, you had moved on' (Janice). Although financial reasons underpinned the logic for her son's return to the home, the reality of living together again proved difficult for all concerned. Janice explained that 'he'd had his, like, freedom as you might say. He needed that back and it's right, he did need that back. Equally, we needed that space, um'.

In the home that had once accommodated the whole family, Janice said she needed the space her son occupied on his return. Angela said of her son's decision to return home after a relationship breakdown, 'he always said that this was his safe place and he knew he could come back and he knew that we'd understand'. Yet, and in a similar vein to Janice, she experienced a lack of fit on his return and talked of the difficulties of living with her son-as-adult:

It isn't equitable to have three adults all with their own agendas living under one roof. *It's not my little boy living with me, is it? He's an adult* and he's come back to use, if you like, the facilities of his parents' home before he moves on, and we always knew that. (Angela)

My interviewees underwent a personal transition at the time of their children's home-leaving which placed them in a (precarious) position of accepting themselves as the mothers of adults from whom they lived separately. Angela and Janice both found this a particularly difficult and distressing time. However, their acknowledgement of the temporal status of their sons' return home and their impending second departure acted to further reinforce the recognition of their sons as adults. Indeed, Angela's comments highlighted the shift she had made in her perception of her son's status that enabled a letting-go of the responsibility that previously defined her mothering:

For three years I haven't known what he was doing, maybe this time I'm more accepting of the fact that he's an adult. Maybe when he left home the first time he was my little boy leaving home. I've tried to think about this. But this time, he's come back as an adult. [...] He's not dependent on me anymore and therefore I don't feel so anxious about him. I'm not responsible for his welfare. I'm not responsible for him, am I? (Angela)

What emerged from my research is that both mothers and their adult children may experience contradictory emotions when the latter return home, veering between the resumption of left-behind roles as children and parents as if no change had occurred, and expecting to experience the impact of both parents and children having moved on. Thus children may continue to desire the territorial and material stability of the

parental home, whilst expecting to display, and have accepted by parents, adult behaviours that invade the parents' space, alongside expectations of how that space and they are treated. The mother might expect to continue to 'parent' as opposed to 'merely' materially provide, but at the same time she has come to terms with her child/ren no longer being young, but adult.

So far in this chapter I have discussed how adult children's visits and returns home often caused disruption in my participants' lives. In turn, the difficulties my participants encountered further reinforced their sense of themselves as the mothers of children who were adults. In the remainder of the chapter, I turn to consider other aspects of my interviewees' lives that continued once their children left home. The first of these is a discussion of women's employment.

Women and Work

Over the time that my research participants were bringing up their children, women's relationship to paid work outside the home changed dramatically. As Witz (1997: 239) states, 'the steadily increasing participation of women in paid employment during the latter half of the twentieth century is arguably one of the most significant aspects of the transformation of gender relations'. Phillips (2000) indicates that women of the age of my participants (44 – 57 years) were amongst the first to encounter these changing trends. Although the majority of my informants were married in their early twenties and many of them did not work during their children's early years, all of my interviewees worked outside the home in either a full- or part-time capacity at the time of the interviews. In this section of the chapter I shall discuss how women's engagement in paid employment impacted on their sense of self in the aftermath of children's home-leaving.

I didn't have that feeling, where does my life go from here? which I'm sure, for some women it does, if they're not working. But I didn't have that because I was already in a job. I didn't have that feeling, well, where does my life go from now? because, well, I knew where my life was going from there, I had a job. (Nancy)

Nancy indicated that post separation from her children, her employment as a teacher became a stabilising presence in her life that she could draw on to provide some direction to her life course. Thus Nancy, and other interviewees, confirmed what Borland (1982: 122) suggests: 'the cessation of the maternal role should be cushioned by the already existing work role'. Nancy also said: 'I've quite enjoyed my working life', indicating that work had provided her with a sense of fulfilment that was separate from her mothering role.

In her study of middle-class women who combined motherhood with a career, Gattrell (2005: 86-7) comments that 'women, just like men, develop work orientations which are central to their social identity'. In her study, she observed the saliency of women's being able to establish 'a separate social identity from that of the domestic roles of mother, wife/partner' (87). Gattrell's focus is on mothering during children's early years. In my own study, my interviewees' relationship to paid work emerged as an area of major importance to them once their children left home. Many of them highlighted how work inculcated a positive sense of self: 'I still made a life for myself. I still did my degree, proved to myself I can do it. I've got a good job, you know' (Rita). The notion of 'making a life for oneself' was often attached to the working persona that existed outside the category 'mother'. This was amplified upon children's home-leaving: 'I want to focus more on what I want to do, um. I want to focus on things like doing this new job I'm doing, um, you know, and work on that, get that right' (Alma). Employment outside the home offered my research participants

an element of autonomy and independence, though not only from mothering responsibilities: 'I think now I've started this new job, that's what I see myself doing, is working. I've got this thing that I need to be independent and I don't want to rely on a man financially again' (Serena).

Paid work emerged as an important facet of my participants' lives at this time in their life course, and this is consistent with other studies in this area. Skucha and Bernard (2000: 29) for example, found that paid work provided their own study cohort 'with a social identity in addition to their familial one, social interaction with colleagues and clients, a sense of independence and [...] a source of income'. Engagement in the world of paid work was articulated as fulfilling and satisfying by many of my interviewees, not least because their employment status boosted their self-confidence: 'during my working life I began to discover things about myself; that I was extremely competent and well capable of doing whatever was put in front of me' (Alma). Paid employment thus enabled women to perceive themselves as skilled workers. As Bergman (2005: 12) comments, 'the cash wages which women earn motivate and finance many of the changes that have occurred in their lives'.

In some instances it was apparent that employment outside the home was also envisaged as an extension of the mothering self. For example, now that one daughter had left home, and a second was contemplating home-leaving, Gina was considering leaving her post as an early-years lecturer in a college of further education and returning to nursery teaching:

I am already thinking of going back to teaching little ones³⁹. [...] It's maternal instinct, you see. I just need to be with children. I just need to feel needed, you know, just feeling that you're needed and being wanted. (Gina)

Gina had talked earlier in her interview with me about feeling she had lost the element of 'need' in her life with her two daughters, particularly in the aftermath of the elder daughter's departure from the home. In expressing her desire to feel needed, Gina associated 'maternal instinct' with 'little ones', evoking my earlier argument regarding the incongruous nature of mothering the 'child as adult' and thus the inability for Gina to derive the same fulfilment from her role as the mother of adult daughters.

Although paid employment was articulated as a source of satisfaction by the majority of my participants, there was also some sense that being in mid-life⁴⁰ rendered it difficult for them to move from their current positions: 'it's not that easy to change jobs at 57, you know, people don't want you when you're 57' (Angela) and Vanessa, who was 58, said 'I've got to continue working where I am because nobody wants you at this age, doesn't matter how good you are. I mean, that should change with this, um, EU thing that's coming in next year, you know, against ageism⁴¹'. Alma, however, who was 55 when I interviewed her, had taken a more proactive stance with regard to a recent change in her employment status and Judith, also 55, was contemplating a job move:

I thought it was time for me to move on. I thought: I'll be regarded as a piece of the furniture. I probably needed a new challenge as well. It's very easy for things to become so routine that, um, you become staid in your outlook. So I'm pleased I made that decision at that time. It had to be. It had to be. You've

³⁹ When I held the feedback event for my participants in January 2007, Gina had returned to primary teaching.

⁴⁰ Mid-life as I am using it here encompasses those between the ages of 35 and 60 (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991; Hockey and James, 1993; 2003).

⁴¹ The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 - SI No 2006/1031 - came into force on 1 October 2006 (www.dti.gov.uk accessed 27/10/06).

got to take these opportunities as they come, there's no point in thinking 'if only'. (Alma)

When I took this job on I thought this was until I retire and now I'm thinking, no, it's not going to be, because now it's time to move on again. So, you know, you get used to those changes I think. (Judith)

All of my participants were engaged in paid work for some time before their children left home and during my interviews with them their employment emerged as an important factor in their lives. It was articulated as a factor in their lives on which they drew to sustain their sense of self and well-being that existed outside, but also alongside, their mothering, and that continued after children left home. In the next section of this chapter I shall discuss another important aspect of my participants' lives that surfaced in my interviews with them, that of their relationships with male partners.

Women's Partnerships

In a contemporary UK context, as Oakley and Rigby (1998: 106) note, 'most women (around 90 per cent) have children either in marriage or within a cohabiting relationship with the father of their child. However, one in five mothers are caring for children in one-parent households'. From an international perspective Northern Europe contrasts with southern nations, as Holdsworth (2004: 910) observes in her comparative analysis of young people's home-leaving under three different welfare state regimes in Norway, Spain and the UK. Marriage remains a dominant way of creating new families in the south, whilst northern Europe is 'associated with the decline in marriage and increase in cohabitation, divorce, re-marriage and extra-marital fertility'.

All twenty-five of my study participants had followed a traditional path to motherhood and lived in heterosexual relationships during their childrearing years. In the methodology chapter of my thesis I provided information regarding my interviewees' partnership circumstances which revealed that at the time of my study, less than half remained in their first marriages/relationships. These data are more or less in keeping with the findings of Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse (2006) wherein their own sample of 70 cases, '59 per cent of the parents' partnerships were intact; 21 per cent had re-partnered and 11 per cent were lone parents'. As these authors state, 'the indication is that transitions a generation ago were already risky, and that normative patterns provided no protection from this risk' (379). There was much variation within partnership typologies that emerged from my participants' interview narratives and in consequence, this section of the chapter is markedly longer than others and is divided into three sub-sections: Solo Living; Repartnered Women; and For Better or for Worse?

Solo Living

In Arber, Davidson and Ginn's (2003: 10) discussion of household statistics they note that 'solo living is closely associated with lack of a partner, since the majority of older people who are widowed, divorced or never married live alone'. Interestingly solo-living is here associated with 'lack' which carries with it negative connotations⁴². My participant Helen, who was not in a partnership when I spoke to her, said, 'everybody's answer is, "oh you need a man, that's what it is. Get yourself a man"'. They think a man's the answer to everything! [laughs]'. Gina said:

⁴² Definitions of the word 'lack' from the *Oxford English Dictionary* are as follows: absence, deficiency, want, need (*of* something desirable or necessary); the state of being in want; the fact that a person or thing is not present (www.askoxford.com).

I've never, sort of, been particularly bothered about going out and meeting somebody else. I've got friends whose marriages have split up and they've been out on the town, you know? It's been a real big thing. They've got to have a partner and somebody to be with them, whereas I've, sort of, been quite contented just being a mum and not having anybody else there. (Gina)

Managing alone and enjoying solo-living was clearly articulated by Alma:

I'm quite happy as I am, I enjoy being on my own. [...] I have enough interests to keep me occupied for as long as I wish and (...) it is good. I'm quite self-sufficient. I don't need anybody else. I mean, if I want to go anywhere, I'm quite happy to go. I don't have to have somebody to go with. I think I've now developed sufficient confidence to be able to walk into a room where I know virtually nobody and feel quite at ease, and it's an achievement. I think so anyway. (Alma)

Judith, who was in a relationship at the time of the interview, told me that following her divorce, a friend had become 'a right little matchmaker', to whom she had said, 'if it happens, it happens. It's not one of those things I'm out and out for, another guy, I'm alright by myself'. Similarly Rachel, who was in a new partnership, talked about going out for the evening with her daughters and their boyfriends: 'I could do that on my own. I don't have to have a partner to do that'. These narratives are not dissimilar from those in Davidson's (2001: 311) study of late-life widowhood. The women she interviewed 'were not prepared to relinquish the freedom and independence they had enjoyed since coming to terms with living alone'.

Seemingly, the 'lack' of a partner during their childrearing years and at the time of my interviews, was not perceived negatively by these participants; rather single motherhood proved to be a source of self-discovery. As Alma said of her marriage, 'all the time we were together I probably didn't realise how much [my husband] was suppressing me'. Similarly both Helen and Judith, who had separated from their husbands when their children were young, articulated that mothering alone over a number of years had changed their self-perception:

I was quite dependent on my husband [...] I was quite happy for him to do all the money and, um, things and I just tended to go along with whatever he wanted. So that when he went and I was having to make decisions [...] I found it difficult at first. Even for things like ringing up for car insurance. I'd never done anything like that. But over ten years, I've got more independent and stronger in my mind and personality. (Helen)

I kind of woke up when I got divorced (...) it, it changed my life in the way that I looked at things. [...] You get a strength from (...) from being on your own, really, because you get independent. You've got to do things you wouldn't normally do. (Judith)

Each of these women conveyed that within their marriages they had adopted passive roles but, following divorce, had managed their households, brought up their children and held down full-time jobs, practices which engendered changed perceptions of themselves as active, capable and independent women/mothers. In consequence, and in a similar vein to Smart and Neal (1999) who found that women were concerned with issues of independence and becoming 'your own person' once divorced, my interviewees experienced the emergence of a different self following the end of their marriages. Judith had later re-partnered, and she drew on her time alone to set the parameters of her new relationship: 'I was determined that, if I got into a relationship of any kind, I wasn't going to be the doormat again'.

Although time spent mothering alone confirmed women's ability to manage, after their children left home solo living was not desirable in the long-term for some of my participants. As Gina's interview extract above indicated, during her early childrearing years she had been content to mother alone. However, as she later expressed in our interview, the imminence of her second daughter's home-leaving promoted thoughts of repartnering:

I don't think I'd ever get married again. I just don't have much confidence in that. But socially and that, just to have a close friend who you can socialise with and go places with, I think it's something that's far more of a priority than I would say it ever has been whilst the children were little. (Gina)

Similarly, Sandra talked of the loneliness she experienced when she left her husband after her son's home-leaving:

I don't like doing things on my own, don't like going places on my own, don't like spending hours and hours and hours and hours on my own. [...] I'd love to meet somebody. I would love to meet somebody to share my life with. I don't know if I'd want to live with somebody, I don't know if I'd go that far.
(Sandra)

Although Gina and Sandra were keen to embrace new relationships, both stated they would not re-marry. I interpret this to mean that they did not desire cohabitation because of their negative experiences of married life (Gina's husband had left her with two young daughters and had no further contact with them. Sandra left her abusive husband when her son left home for university). Sandra told me: 'I feel as if I've missed out. [...] I want somebody to sit and snuggle up with while I'm watching a film'. I suggest that Sandra's desire for physical and emotional support was underpinned by 'the rhetoric of heterosexual love and protection which encourages women to see men as their saviours' (Oakley and Rigby, 1998: 123-4) and that even though 'romantic imagery may often disguise exploitation' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993: 237), the disappointment of her first marriage did not deter her from seeking a male partner again. As both women's narratives highlight, however, any new relationships they engaged in would be negotiated on different terms from those of their former marriages. A number of my research participants had repartnered, and I now turn to discuss their experiences.

Repartnered Women

Of the ten study participants who had repartnered, seven were cohabiting at the time of the interviews. All ten women had children of their own from previous

relationships. Of these, three had given birth to subsequent children after repartnering and three were the stepmothers of their partners' children (all six of these women were living with their partners). When I asked my interviewees how their children's home-leaving impacted on their partnerships, this was often articulated as having created a space for experiences usually ascribed to the early stages of romantic relationships. Once children left home, couples were able to capture time together they had not yet had:

I want to be able to make decisions for the two of us and do things together. I guess that's what I missed about not having that time at the other end of our relationship and having the children first. It's just a reversal, really, you know? [...] We're both starting to appreciate the time we've got now as a couple. We've waited long enough for it! (Ingrid)

We've just, at the moment, maybe in the last year or two, pretty much in the last year actually, we're starting to get a life that's just us two because we've never had it. I always had [my eldest son], you know, and there's always been children around. [...] I can have a relationship with [my partner] instead of just being mother and all that that entails, you know? (Lois)

Clearly, children's home-leaving engendered an opportunity for this group of women to pursue couple experiences that, unlike always-married interviewees, they had not yet shared. As Lois intimated, children had been a constant presence and her mothering of them was perceived to have occluded some aspects of her relationship with her partner.

Another element to emerge from this group of women's narratives was that of their gaining feelings of security from repartnering that ameliorated the uncertainty of a future without children in the home. Heather, for example, reflected on meeting her partner shortly before her son left home:

I think the future feels much more certain than it would have done if I'd been on my own. [...] If I'd been on my own once [my son] had gone, I could've done absolutely anything, but probably wouldn't have known what I wanted to

do, whereas now it just (...) it's just different, um, that what [my husband and I] do, we'll do together. (Heather)

And Judith said of her own situation: 'I suppose I could've been sat here on my own, um, thinking, you know, what is there in life for me? You know, sort of thing, what do I do?' Judith had mothered alone for some years. She drew on notions of coupledness to describe the difficulties she perceived she might have encountered had she remained single after her sons' home-leaving: 'all my friends are married so I always find that, if go out [with my friends] it's usually during the week, it's the weekends where you're sat on your own'. A further element that emerged from Judith's interview was that repartnering alleviated some of her sons' concerns about her:

I think [my sons] would probably have felt guilty about me [being alone], which I wouldn't want them to feel, um, kind of, especially [my younger son], you know, because he's more in tune with my feelings, really. He would've been thinking he ought to come round here and see me and make sure I was alright and all this kind of thing. So for them, [my partner]'s been a godsend, really, um, because they know he'll look after me. (Judith)

Although undeniably children's home-leaving had caused emotional disruption in women's lives that was, for many, ongoing at the time of the interviews, repartnered women were able to override some of these feelings: 'I miss [my sons] terribly but, because [my husband and I] have never had our time together, you know, we never had a sort of honeymoon time or a time when we had no children, it's quite nice'.

Whereas for this group of interviewees, living with their partners was built upon notions of coupledness and togetherness after children's home-leaving, others who had repartnered had chosen to retain separate households. I now turn to explore their decisions to do so.

Oakley and Rigby suggest that ‘formal marital status is increasingly a poor guide to actual living circumstances’ and to reinforce their argument they state that ‘married couples may be living apart, and non-married women may be living with partners in long-lasting relationships’ (1998: 106). Roseneil (2006: 5) also observes that ‘more people in Britain are living longer periods of their lives not just outside marriage and the conventional family, but also outside a co-residential partnership’. This was so for three of the women I interviewed:

[My partner] has his house and I have my house. Um, when my house gets too full I move into his house. If all the girls are home at once there aren’t enough beds for them so I just move into his house. Just take my clothes and move in. [...] I’ve got my children and I sleep with [my partner] but I live here. We’re all doing it. It’s actually not bad at all. (Rachel)

[I’ve been with my partner] three years now, about three years. It’s quite lovely because I live here, he lives in his house and we go out and have a wonderful time ... then go back to our own houses, and it suits me lovely. (Dawn)

The interview extracts above are examples of the type of relationship mid-life and older women (and men) might choose to enter into, and of which Serena said, ‘it’s just ideal the way it is [...] I’m not looking for any more than that’. Although the focus of some research attention (Levin, 2004; Roseneil, 2006), it is only recently that formal recognition of this type of partnership arrangement within the UK has appeared in household statistics (Roseneil, 2006). In Sweden, however, ‘living apart together’ has for some time been accorded legitimacy: ‘namely *särbo* (where *sär* stands for ‘apart’ and *bo* for ‘live’)’ (Borell and Karlsson, 2003: 50). As these authors state:

The acceptance of the concept *särbo* gives an ontological status to a type of relationship that involves separate domiciles, but is not a transitional form leading to cohabitation, within or outside wedlock. By being named, and thereby defined in relation to other family forms or intimate relationships, this type of relationship becomes a distinct alternative that people can consciously make a choice about. (Borell and Karlsson, 2003: 50)

Rachel, Dawn and Serena lived in the same town as their partners, so retaining their own homes was not due to the constraints of geographical distance. Instead, reasons given for their choice not to cohabit were linked to their being able to make their own decisions. Their narratives suggested that they were not compromised by having to defer to another's opinion, and this was considered a valuable part of their identities as 'single' women. In the absence of 'dependent' children in the home, (by which I mean those younger than 16) Dawn, Rachel and Serena were able to define their own needs more clearly and alongside the lack of legitimacy for this type of partnership runs the absence of a formal script for its enactment; women are therefore free to 'write' their own. Reflecting on her two marriages for example, Serena said these had involved 'joint decisions about, you know, what furniture you're buying and so on. I've never had that time where I could do that on my own'. She added:

Now that I can just about manage it financially, it feels good to be able to buy things for my house and pay for jobs and that. So I don't think I'd like to lose that, not yet anyway! [laughs]. [...] I think I'm just enjoying my life as I am now, him in his house with his boys, me in mine with mine. And I'm not dependent. I don't think I could go back to being dependent. I love him and I love his company and perhaps one day we'll end up together, but I don't foresee it because I don't want to live with him and take on his children.
(Serena)

Serena's partner also had two sons who still lived with him: 'and no signs of them going' (Serena). Clearly, Serena did not wish to take on the responsibility for the care of her partner's children. As Arber and her colleagues note, 'maintaining their own household enables older women to avoid some of the asymmetrical distribution of household labour and unequal demands of caring for a partner' (2003: 9) and I would add here caring for their partners' children, like Serena, or an aged parent, as in the case of Dawn: '[my partner] lives with his mother [...] He's the main carer for his mum'. Resistance to taking on extra caring responsibilities was not however the only reason women gave for living apart from their partners, as Serena showed in rejecting

the dependency she viewed as implicit in a cohabiting heterosexual relationship. The findings from my research therefore resonate with those of Roseneil, whose interviewees

expressed a strong sense of individual agency, and a determination to be in control of their own lives. Whilst their partners were important to them, this group of interviewees shared a more or less explicitly articulated commitment to maintaining separateness from their partners. (Roseneil, 2006: 11)

Each woman I interviewed who lived apart from their male partner still had a child living at home. Rachel and Dawn both had 17-year-old daughters, and Serena had a 21-year-old son. Consequently, although all three considered themselves as freed from some of the maternal practices that formerly structured their lives during their children's early years, they nevertheless did have an other present in their households and all articulated that they enjoyed good relationships with these children. It is therefore difficult to assess whether, once these children had left, all three women would continue living apart from their partners.

This is not to diminish, however, their choice to live separately. It was evident that Dawn, Rachel and Serena did not consider themselves to be in a transitional phase; rather they lived 'gladly apart' (Roseneil, 2006: 11) from their partners. As Serena said, 'the more I'm by myself, the more I like it. I do think it would be hard to give up'. Dawn echoed this: 'I do like my own space'. Each woman had made decisive choices on how to conduct her relationship with her male partner in the present time. Indeed, all three articulated a future in which they envisaged a shared home with their partners, although Rachel followed this with a cautionary note: 'we do have some sort of longish-term plans [...] he's been married twice before as well [as I], so that does make you quite a realist'.

In keeping with the study undertaken by Borell and Karlsson (2003), autonomy was a prime motivator for my participants who lived separately from their male partners. I suggest that in repartnering but living apart women felt in control and that this was borne of previous knowledge accumulated from live-in partnership experiences. This resonates with the experiences of my participants Judith and Helen I discussed previously. Although the end of a relationship might initially be fraught with difficulties, my participants' narratives illustrated that taking on new challenges increased their self-esteem and in turn their ability to manage alone.

Perhaps for the first time, Rachel, Dawn and Serena controlled their everyday lives and laid down the rules of engagement regarding their relationships. I suggest that the freedom they were enjoying at the time of my interviews with them was built upon their retreat from the domestic arena where they were expected, and expected themselves, to meet the needs of others. As Borell and Karlsson suggest, and as the narratives of my interviewees support, 'a household of their own is a place in which personal control is ensured, a resource women can draw on to balance their need for intimacy with their need for privacy' (2003: 59). In the next section, I turn to consider the experiences of my research participants who had remained married throughout their childrearing years and following their children's home-leaving.

For Better or for Worse?

In the aftermath of children's home-leaving, women who remained in their marriages were offered a space for consideration and reappraisal of these relationships. In the case of my participant Alma, this meant leaving her marriage of twenty-nine years following her second daughter's home-leaving:

Once the girls had got themselves so that their careers were off the ground, they were settled, they were as happy as I could be sure that they were happy, then I thought, that is it. It is now time for me to go. And I did. [...] When they had gone, there was nothing at all to keep us together, none whatsoever. [After I left] I just felt such an overwhelming sense of relief, I just thought, there's no way I can contemplate spending the rest of my life opposite you. That is it! (Alma)

As Alma later said, 'it's happening more and more. I know no end of people who almost the same thing has happened to. As soon as the children have flown the nest [couples] realise just how little they have in common'. Indeed her observation is confirmed by Hayman who states: 'when their child leaves home, parents may look at each other, [and] realise that there is nothing left' (www.parentlineplus.co.uk, accessed 24.08.04). This was the situation my participant Vanessa faced:

When it got to the last one going to university, [my husband] came in and said, 'right, well it's just us now. What are we going to do together?' and I turned round and said, 'we're not doing anything at all. I've done my bit and I'm going to have some space now'. I literally wanted out. I'd thoroughly enjoyed it, you know, with the youngsters, but there's no way I wanted to be on my own with one man, um, who hadn't really wanted me around prior to that. [...] He just assumed I'd just, like, click back into place. But I wasn't going to. (Vanessa)

Duncombe and Marsden found that women 'foresaw problems when husbands naively anticipated that the earlier, more intimate coupledness would automatically return after the children left; as one of their respondents stated, "it's too late!"' (1993: 226-7). Vanessa had a similar experience. She had, however, remained in the marital home. Knowing that there was little left in a couple's relationship once children had left did not always result in women ending their marriages. As Vanessa commented:

When you've had people around you all your life, um, and you've got a possibility or a prospect where you could be living on your own as a woman, for the rest of your life, then it's very daunting because, um, it can be very lonely. (Vanessa)

There were connections between Vanessa's negative perception of solo-living and those articulated by other interviewees, notably Gina and Sandra, discussed above.

Vanessa also considered how her outlook on life post-separation from her daughters would have differed had she decided to end her marriage earlier: 'I think it would probably have been better for me. I think I would've, um, done things more, um, that I wanted to do. I would be able to be alone now and not worry about being lonely'. Her speculation is confirmed when compared with the narratives of my participants who had mothered alone for significant periods of time and whose experiences I discussed earlier in the chapter.

Like Vanessa, Angela had stayed with her husband after both sons left home:

I do live on my own here, I have my own bedroom, I have my own safe place. I wouldn't, I wouldn't actually see where things would be that different because there are no constraints. I'm not answerable to anybody. Um, this is my house, where I've lived. This is what I've created. We both have. [...] I've lived with it for such a long time. It's become a way of life. [...] I suppose I jogged along, you know, reasonably safe financially. I worried about if I left, where would I live? Would I have enough money? You know, all those kinds of things and I suppose I just accepted it; this is who I am. (Angela)

In their study of marital disruption following the last child's home-leaving, Hiedemann, Suhomlinova and O'Rand (1998: 228) suggest that 'longer-term marriages are expected to be reservoirs of jointly held economic and emotional capital based on long-term investments not easily abandoned'. Indeed, financial constraint and investment in home-making was voiced by Angela as her underlying reasons for remaining in her marriage after her sons left. Fear of financial insecurity outweighed her desire to live independently from the marital home. However, it would seem that the emotional investment Angela and Vanessa both made in family life had left with their children, in whom that commitment was vested. It is also the case that their estranged partnership situations were in the minority amongst the women in my study whose marriages had remained intact during their childrearing years and after their children left home.

In their discussion of married couples' relationships over time, Duncombe and Marsden (1993: 225) identify two phases of love: 'the early, heady romantic stage of being "in love" and the conventional image of a mature and stable "companionate" love'. In my study, several of the always-married women talked of the transformed communicative and emotional landscape of their relationships. They indicated that a shift occurred after their children left home: 'it's like you go back, you think, oh god, this is how it was when we were first married' (Janice); '[our relationship]'s probably better than it ever was since we first got married really' (Denise). Bridget talked about a renewed closeness with her partner:

I think [my husband] and I are closer to each other now than we have been, um, we probably talk to each other more than we ever have done [...]. [We] are having to, sort of, re-discover who we are without the kids. (Bridget)

Hiedemann and her colleagues observe that 'the empty-nest^[43] phase has been labelled as a period of euphoria in marriages that have survived the demands of childraising' (1998: 220) and this was evident in the narratives of the majority of my always-married participants. As Bridget said, 'not only because we've got to, but because we've got the opportunity to as well'. Other participants also commented on the opportunity for self-discovery children's home-leaving had engendered in their relationships:

If I want to sit up the garden and have a glass of wine [my husband] will more than likely join me, there's nobody coming home going, 'what time's tea? [...]. There's just you two and you can watch what you like and the house keeps clean and it's just the workload, it isn't an issue when there's just two of you, you know, things are easier. (Janice)

We both love walking, you know, so we get out and do our walks. That's nice when the kids aren't at home anymore. [...] We come home and you don't

⁴³ Hiedemann, Suhomlinova and O'Rand (1998: 225) define 'empty nest' as 'the departure of the last child from the household'. As the demographic information for my study indicates, 15 of my interviewees still had children living at home as the only stipulation for women's participation was that they had experienced a child, or children, leave. Thus mothers with children remaining at home when a child leaves have been overlooked in previous research focusing on the 'empty nest' period.

have to cook a meal for anybody. It's definitely got more relaxing in some ways, when the kids have been away. (Nancy)

Once children left home interviewees were increasingly able to determine their own day-to-day schedules with partners, something that previously, as Linda Gannon notes of her own cohort, was 'precluded by being responsible for the care and feeding of [children]' (Gannon, 1999: 13). Having the space, time and opportunity to renegotiate relationships was a positive feature of this group of women's lives post separation from daughters and sons and viewed as an opportunity to resume previous activities that had been part of their relationship before children were born:

Luckily we've always had a good relationship so we're able to do more of the things that we used to do now. We used to do a lot of sailing when we were younger so we've even talked about starting sailing again, you know, things like this that we used to do. Things that went on the back burner, that we weren't able to afford, you know? The boys took precedence. There were their football matches, their cricket matches, you know, everything like that. So now we've thought, it's our time again. (Frances)

It was also the case that children's home-leaving created a space for women to pursue independent interests. Helen, who was unpartnered when I interviewed her, compared her situation to that of a partnered woman in the following way: 'I'm in a better position than somebody who's maybe married and, you know, wants to do something on their own and can't because their partner might not want them to'. Indeed, although not overtly restricted in the way Helen speculated, in some instances interviewees did proceed with caution with the opportunities children's home-leaving created:

I do think I've changed and getting more, it's me, to a point where I'm thinking, don't do it too much or [my husband]'ll be, you know? I'm like, well, [my son]'s off my hands, I'll go and do this, or I'll go do things I like doing and I have to cut back on that because I think, well, best do things together, yeah, because otherwise it's like you could (...) I suppose, revert back to when I was in my twenties, you know, just that I'll go there, or I'll go round and see that friend, just have a good natter. And then I think, oh well,

that's leaving [my husband], and I won't do that, just because I've got that freedom. (Janice)

The majority of my always-married interviewees talked positively about the changes they experienced in their relationships. More often than not this was articulated as having time to spend together without having to meet the everyday needs of their daughters and sons. Thus reclaiming time and space was a key element of women's relationships after children had left home. As Frances said, 'we're on a revival and we're getting back to doing things for ourselves again. It's just, you know, getting our lives back, really'.

In some instances, major changes within partnerships coincided with children's leaving, so that women's family lives that previously followed traditional patterns of female homemaker/male breadwinner, were overturned. Due to her husband's redundancy, for example, Denise told me that in her household 'the roles have reversed in a lot of ways'. She added that her husband's new status meant he had 'changed completely'. So had she: 'now I'm the main ... wage earner and he isn't and I've (.) I'm maybe more confident and more assertive now and he's lost a lot of it because of what's happened to him'.

Women's earnings within dual-income marriages are often, as Gattrell (2005: 86) notes, 'characterized as almost incidental to household income, and less important than the man's'. Although she worked on a part-time basis throughout her marriage, Denise identified that the change in power dynamics in her home life was due to her capacity to earn the 'family wage', which had provoked a shift in household relationships:

You get to the stage where you feel a doormat, don't you? You think, am I only here to work and clean up and cook for you lot? You know, why am I here? You know, and (...) I don't know, everybody seems to appreciate me more and you think, oh, I should've done this years ago! [laughs]. (Denise)

Denise's ability to be 'more assertive' in the home environment was closely tied to her earning power in the workplace: 'for the first time I think, well, I don't have to answer to anybody now and if [my husband] doesn't like it, well, you know, it doesn't matter. I don't depend on him anymore' (Denise).

Gannon (1999: 13) argues that 'men's lives [are] essentially their work lives, characterized by paid employment and much influence in the social, political, and family spheres' and suggests these are 'typified by considerable control'. Denise narrated her married life in this way when she told me of the inequality she previously experienced. Whilst he worked full-time, for example, her husband made little domestic input and his involvement in neighbourhood organisations resulted in his absence from the home during their children's early years. Upon her husband's redundancy, however, the couple renegotiated their relationship: 'we came to an agreement, I'd work full-time' (Denise).

The withdrawal of her efforts in the domestic arena coupled with her earning power resulted in Denise receiving more respect from family members and her experience highlights not only the wider ramifications of role reversal situations but the continued privileging of the 'breadwinner' status, irrespective to some extent of the gender of the earner. As Pahl suggests, 'being a breadwinner is often regarded as a burden, but it can also be a source of pride and power' (Pahl, 1989: 125). Of course, this also points to the continued denigration of the work involved in the domestic sphere, and not least the skills and commitment that childrearing necessitates.

Nancy, whose husband had retired early, had continued in full-time work as a teacher: 'it was like a reverse of the original, traditional roles, you know, him being in the house and me being the working person'. Like Denise, she noticed changes in her own attitude that indicated a letting go of her role in the household arena and an acceptance of her husband's ability to manage domestic work:

He's happy pottering around the house, doing the garden, doing his house-husband things, you know, looking after the home. I've changed as well because, when he first took on this role, I would come home and, um, he'd maybe be doing a meal and I'd be, 'no, you should do it like that', but I have learned to stand back [...] and not to criticise and let him get on. I just love going home and having my meal on the table. My pipe and slippers aren't by the fire but, um [laughs]. (Nancy)

Chapman (1999: 164) comments that the end result of the process of socialising women into a domestic role is that 'women feel responsible for the organisation of the home and, as a consequence, come to believe that they *know* the best way that tasks should be done' (original emphasis). As Nancy indicated, she had to 'learn to stand back' and allow her husband to 'get on'.

Of course, one major difference to the household post separation from daughters and sons is that there is no longer a daily demand for childcare, something both women had undertaken alongside paid employment before their children's home-leaving. However, financial implications cannot be overlooked and during the early years of my interviewees' childrearing men's greater earning power reinforced the gendered division of labour within and outside the home (Bergman, 2005; Oakley and Rigby, 1998; Pahl, 1989; Witz, 1997). Nevertheless, both Denise and Nancy enjoyed their working lives, their more recent role as main wage earners and the accompanying relationship restructuring. Denise welcomed the independence and newfound respect

her employment gave her and Nancy acknowledged her husband's ability to adequately perform domestic tasks.

Phillips (2000: 42-3) observes that 'despite increasing female employment and the loss of the traditional male "breadwinner", there has not yet been a significant shift in men's domestic roles'. Similarly, the study undertaken by Oakley and Rigby (1998: 122), which focused on parenthood during children's early (0-7) years, highlighted that 'the positive contribution men make in terms of domestic work, childcare and psychological and social support is a declining resource over time'. I suggest that, post children's home-leaving, we will begin to witness a greater number of role reversal situations like those of Denise and Nancy.

In this section of the chapter, I have discussed the complexities of my research participants' relationships and the reasons that underpinned their choices of whether to remain in married/cohabiting relationships or whether to reject them, once their children left home. In the final section of this chapter I shall turn to discuss my participants' future plans.

Looking Forward

Initially I just thought, that's the end [...]. Now I think, right, I've done that, I've got a few years left, now I'll do what I want to do, you know? (Denise)

I'm looking forward to getting just that little bit older and having fun!
(Rachel)

In the interviews with my research participants I asked them if they had any plans for the future and in the final section of this chapter I am giving space to their answers.

As Denise's narrative indicates, in the initial period of her daughter's home-leaving

she felt without direction. However, during her daughter's absence Denise clearly had come full-circle, and was ready to pursue her own aspirations and make decisions about the future. The majority of my participants' narratives indicated that during the time that had elapsed since their children's home-leaving, they were beginning, like the respondents of Wadsworth and Green's (2003: 214) study, to perceive 'the declining maternal role as a positive event'.

I discussed women's perceptions that an ageing self 'suddenly' emerged at the time of children's home-leaving in chapter 3. The above interview extract from Rachel shows that, rather than perceiving her ageing in negative terms, she was fully embracing it. She told me she was looking forward to spending time travelling with her new partner and several of my participants had plans to travel: 'it's my ambition to visit Rome' (Vanessa)⁴⁴; 'to visit exciting and exotic places!' (Bridget); and to take 'different kinds of holidays' (Heather). Barbara told me of a holiday she and her husband had taken without their children:

We went on holiday for the first time together, on our own without the children, in the summer. We had two weeks in Greece and I thought, god, are we going to get on without the kids. [...]. Before we went, I was thinking, what will we do? Will we fall out? And we got on great! [...] Just two people to look after, not four. (Barbara)

It was clear from my interviews with them that, following the initial turbulence that it created, my participants began to explore the opportunities their children's home-leaving opened up for them. Often this was articulated in terms of 'freedom' (Dawn, Ingrid, Judith) and 'change' (Janice, Serena). Shifts in their ways of thinking were

⁴⁴ During the event I held for my participants eighteen months after my interviews with them, it transpired that Vanessa had visited St. Peter's Church in Rome, and seen the statue of *La Pietà*.

evident in the interviews and the narrative extracts below indicate how, over time, some of my participants began to perceive their children's leaving differently:

I did decide somewhere along the line that you couldn't sit and mope forever and that you need to see the plus points, and one of the plus points was going to different bits of the world that I would never have gone to otherwise.
(Bridget)

It's nice that we're seeing more of the country! I like him being [in the south of England] you know, being down there, because it's nice to see areas that we haven't seen before and it's a bit of a holiday when we do go down there. [...] It's nice to be able, when we go there, be able to stay somewhere and not have to get bed and breakfast. (Sally)

Bridget and Sally observed that having children who lived/worked away from their hometown, either abroad or in the UK, in turn created travel and other opportunities for them. Sally, for example, was able to take holidays in a part of the UK she had not visited before her son's move there. Bridget talked about the advantages in having a daughter and a son living abroad. In chapter 5 I discussed the emotional and practical difficulties Bridget encountered during the time her daughter worked in Africa. Her daughter later moved to America and at the time of our interview, her son was studying in China. Bridget and her husband had visited all three places. She considered that the 'plus points' of being able to visit these countries alleviated some of the distress that geographical separation engendered:

It gave [my husband and I], um, an opportunity to meet people that we would never have done otherwise. You know, if you'd gone as a tourist, that's a totally different experience of the country and I think it's such a privilege that you sort of think, oh well, actually! [laughs] Their going has given me, and I'm sure will give me, all sorts of experiences I wouldn't otherwise have had.
(Bridget)

For other interviewees too, daughters' and sons' experiences created opportunities that might not have materialised for them otherwise:

[My daughter] and I have just booked our flights. We're going out there at Easter to New Zealand and [my son]'s going to get some time off and we're going on a 'whale watch', um, so he's really looking forward to that. I, a while ago, I wanted to go to Australia to see the relatives out there because they'd

been over here and, um, I wanted to go out there but then, um, [my son] going to New Zealand, I though, um, you know, it's an opportunity. If I don't go now while he's there, I won't ever go. (Fiona)

Fiona's narrative also points to the maintenance of familial ties across great distances, something that, as I discussed in Chapter 5, was not possible for earlier generations of her family. As these narratives indicate, my participants began to take advantage of the opportunities their children's home-leaving had opened up to them, which in their turn offered some solace to the feelings of loss initially experienced in the aftermath of that leaving.

As Denise said, 'I suppose independence works both ways, doesn't it?' and clearly, many of the women who participated in my study had moved towards an enjoyment of the lives they lived separately from their adult daughters and sons and anticipated a future taken up with activities with their partners and/or friends:

[My friend]'s daughter's fifteen at the moment and she's hoping she'll go on to university and my friend's always saying, 'we'll get motorbikes and go round Europe!' [...] It's a friend I met at work that does the same thing as me and, um, she's always saying we'll do all sorts together when the kids have gone. (Helen)

Hockey and James (2003: 103) state that 'mid-life is, demographically speaking, the key period for grand parenting'. They critique contemporary images which present grandparents as 'comfortably retired people with time on their hand to indulge small children, their ageing bodies easily falling into step with a toddler's ambling pace'.

They argue that these are 'at odds with the look and lifestyle of the forty-somethings who are *actually* grandparenting today' (Hockey and James, 2003: 103, original

emphasis).⁴⁵ Helen had mothered alone since her three daughters were in their early

years and at the time of the interview, all three were in their early twenties, the middle

⁴⁵ As Hockey and James (2003) note, 'forty-something' is currently the average age women become grandmothers. The women I interviewed were between 44 and 57 (average age 50), thus my study cohort falls into this demographic.

daughter having left to live with her partner and child. Helen was then also a grandmother and in full-time employment. She is testament to the notion of 'how orientations to lifestyles in later life are redefining ageing' (Fairhurst, 2003: 39). Helen not only challenged static notions of mothers' lives once children leave, but also the stereotypes of grandmotherhood that Hockey and James (2003) critique.

Although several of my interviewees looked forward to becoming grandmothers, this was not always the case. Ingrid, for example, was not ready to accept grandchildren into her life. As I discussed earlier, once adult children left home repartnered women embarked on a 'honeymoon time' (Heather). As Ingrid said, 'I know that if grandchildren come along, that I'll want to be a big part of their lives, um, and I'm not ready for that yet'. Jerrome (1996: 90) indicates that to some extent the role of grandparent 'interferes with the pursuit of new mid-life opportunities' and I would add that this is especially so in repartnered relationships. Like Rachel, Ingrid was in fact planning to travel with her partner: '[my husband] wants to go to all these countries that he went to when he was in the Navy and to explore them. [...] So that's what we're looking forward to doing'. As her previous narrative indicates, once grandchildren came along, Ingrid knew she would forfeit some of her newfound freedom.

Retirement also featured in women's narratives about the future. Although Nancy was due to retire two years following my interview with her, this phase of her life course was not particularly relished: 'I don't like to wish my life away. I don't want it to come any quicker'. She did envisage, however, that she and her husband would 'do as much as we can while the body allows, you know? Go off on holidays'. Barbara told

me: 'my husband will actually formerly retire at 65, that's in three years' time. That'll be a big impact on us I think as a couple. I think that'll be the biggest thing we'll face'. In her study on age and gender in life after work, Fairhurst found her respondents' notions of having to 'work at' relationships during retirement emerged as 'a matter for both rather than just one party in the marriage' (Fairhurst, 2003: 38). This was also evident in the narratives of several of the partnered women I interviewed. As Fairhurst comments:

Individuals' acknowledgement and assessment of social change are situated through contrasts made between their current experiences and those of preceding or ascending generations. This is particularly evident in talk about lifestyles in retirement and intergenerational relationships. (2003: 33)

The mother of my research participant Rita was a full-time housewife/mother throughout her married life, whereas Rita had worked full-time for most of her marriage. In my interview with her, she drew on the differences between her own relationship and that of her parents' when she considered how retirement would be experienced by herself and her husband:

They were very close, my parents and, because our life has been different, because we have been working and (...) we're really going to have to try and work on [our relationship in retirement]. That's why we do the allotment together. We do some things together, you know, and we've got plans, we've got ideas. We like walking, so we've got that to do together so I'm sure that will all come back together when we both, sort of, relax a bit from working because before we couldn't possibly afford to do that. (Rita)

Although enjoying the opportunities that children's home-leaving had created, their desire to be physically close to their adult children often steered some participants' future plans. As I mentioned in chapter 5, Nancy was considering a house move to Scotland in order to be nearer to her daughter. Similarly, when considering her son's mobile lifestyle and the thought that he might eventually decide to live in another country, Fiona said: 'perhaps after he's been away a year he might realise that he can

do it and, um, I don't know, he might [live in New Zealand]. I'll have to move to New Zealand! [laughs]’.

Some of my participants were planning to leave their hometown to live elsewhere, either within or outside of the UK, but often called on the notion of their children ‘settling down’ before making a move that would take them further away from their children:

We do plan that, when both the kids are settled, possibly, it's an idea, to sell up and go live elsewhere, in a different country. But they would have to be well settled before we did that. Um, so that's us moving away from them. It's an adventure, and I like adventures, and the world isn't a big place any more. It would be nice for them to come and join us wherever we are, you know, it's a holiday for them and provides a little bit extra in their life for them. (Ingrid)

I'm not going [to Crete] to get away from the kids but, you know, you're going because it's what you want to do, rather than what's best for everyone else. [...] Once [my son]'s got settled down then we'll probably [go] because (...) we thought, really, it's not much further for (...) it's four hours drive if you go to Newcastle, [to Crete] it's four hours flight. (Denise)

Ingrid justified her decision to move abroad in terms of it being beneficial to her children, and both she and Denise drew on the concept of the ease of travel between the UK and other countries, that I discussed in chapter 5. Denise and her husband also planned to buy a flat in the UK as a base for their children and a place to return to. Similarly, Rachel told me of the plans she and her partner had to buy a house in the UK and another in Rachel's home country of New Zealand.

Although also contemplating a house move, Maggie had rejected earlier thoughts of moving to France, perceiving it as ‘far too far away from the children’. Instead she and her partner had decided to stay in the UK: ‘I think we'll end up somewhere central, easy access to all the children’. Similarly, Dawn's decision to move house within the UK was made with ease of access in mind: ‘I wouldn't move far, well, I

would move far, but it'd be in this country, within train distance'. As their narratives have shown, my participants articulated several plans, some modest, some more adventurous, but all of them in opposition to the notion of women's lives as a time of stasis once their children leave home.

Concluding remarks

I have indicated in previous chapters that my participants fixed themselves as 'available' to their children via the concept of 'being there'. In this chapter I have problematised this situation by exploring the dilemmas some of the women experienced when their daughters and sons visited/returned to the home. I drew on these as indicators of mothers' shifting perceptions of their children's status and of their mothering selves. I revealed that time spent apart from their daughters and sons forced a reconceptualisation of their children and of themselves which in turn shifted them further towards their acceptance and/or recognition of the child-as-adult and so, of course, of themselves as the mothers of children who were also adults from whom, for the most part, they lived separately.

My participants' narratives illustrated that their children's home-leaving offered them a space in which a number of new experiences, choices and opportunities were opened up, which many of them were beginning to enthusiastically embrace. Their engagement in paid employment, for example, emerged as an important factor in their lives as it provided an identity that co-existed alongside their mothering selves and continued post children's home-leaving. My participants were also able to reappraise their partnership status once children left home. I have offered a discussion that revealed this group of women to be actively engaged in making choices of whether to

accept or reject the circumstances under which their relationships with men were formerly conducted and experienced. In the final section of the chapter, I discussed my participants' future plans. Many of these involved their taking holidays and travelling the globe and, in some instances, moving abroad. Nevertheless, they continued to indicate an unfaltering connection with their daughters and sons; as Sally said: 'they're still a major part of your life. They're still your children, whatever age they are'. It was clear from their interviews that considerations of their children's needs and a desire for ease of access to them remained important elements in the decisions this group of women were making for the future.

My participants' lives without their children at home were however, starting to take their own shape and their children's home-leaving was often reconceptualised as a 'new beginning'. What this chapter has established, therefore, is that my participants' lives were dynamic and processual rather than static and unchanging, and being lived in opposition to the mother of Lee's 1960s novel, whom I introduced in the first chapter of my thesis, and the twenty-first century *Vodafone* mum, whose representation I problematised in chapter 5. As my participant Serena said, 'I do feel that I'm still changing and, I don't know, I'm happy with myself. I like myself. I do like myself. Which is a good start, isn't it?'

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This thesis has explored women's experiences of separation from their adult children at the time of the latter's home-leaving, an aspect of motherhood that to date has received little academic attention. The data produced was grounded in the meanings of child- and motherhoods for my twenty-five study participants prior to, during and following the time that their daughters and sons left home. Underpinning the thesis is the recognition for the need to reconceptualise the mother/child relationship to encompass within it the relationship with one's children once these children are adults (and have left home). In this concluding chapter, I summarise the contribution my research has made to contemporary understandings of motherhood.

The concept of motherhood as a socially and emotionally experienced identity is an underlying feature of the four substantive chapters of the thesis. Each chapter has identified and elaborated on my research participants' reflections on motherhood and their feelings about themselves as mothers. The analysis of my interviewees' narratives has provided an insight into the mothering of children at the time of their home-leaving and as such is a valuable addition to other work in the area of mother/child relationships, notably Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2002: 210) who ask: 'what room is left for mothering as centred on emotion, moral identity and a particularistic relationship that does not constitute a purposive projective with clearly identifiable outcomes?'

The boundaries constructed around mother- and childhoods have received particular attention in my thesis, as it is these which inform mothers (and others) of what mothering is and should be. As Smart (1996: 48) suggests: 'motherhood is highly contrived and historically specific'. In consequence, so is childhood. When I began to write the thesis a difficulty in using the terms 'child' and 'adult' emerged as they invariably jarred and failed to convey the meanings I felt were relevant to my research. This awkwardness highlighted the inadequacies of the meanings we currently ascribe to the concepts 'mother' and 'child' and resulted in my decision to use the terms 'child' and 'children' interchangeably with 'now-adult child/ren', 'child/ren as adult(s)' and 'adult child/ren' so that their usage emphasised the disjuncture that occurs in mothers' perceptions of themselves and their offspring (as well as the perceptions of wider society), once those offspring reached a certain st/age in their life course.

Moreover, I have argued that motherhood is culturally perceived as a 'timed' event – the transition to motherhood which the birth of a baby signifies, a middle period of mothering, during which the child is reared and an 'ending', when the child becomes adult and separates from the mother. This negates certain continuities of mothering once children are adult. Motherhood is then performed within a specific framework that, as the chapters of the thesis have argued, is heavily embedded in socio-cultural definitions relating to time and place. As each chapter has established, these do not convey the depth of meaning mothers attribute to their relationships with their children as they grow up and then leave home. Effectively, this is because there is an absence of templates for dealing with the transformation of mothering that occurs

with the child's movement out of the home. I have argued that this is a silenced transition for the mother.

Gillies et al (2003: 33) argue that 'a focus on young people as the sole object of change risks obscuring the important turning points and continuities experienced by other "family" members, concurrent with the process of "growing up"'. Although the research undertaken for my thesis took the young person's movement out of the family home as the catalyst of change for the mother, the focus of my enquiry fell on my interviewees' understandings and experiences of this time and thus forefronted not only the changes but also the continuities in mothers' relationships with their adult children.

I have argued in the thesis for a broader view of women's experiences and suggested that there is a need to incorporate into constructions of motherhood the continuity of interactions with adult daughters and sons from whom mothers live separately. Thus it adds to the work of Holdsworth and Morgan (2005: 2) who suggest that the process of leaving home is important 'to the individuals concerned – both those who are leaving or contemplating leaving home and those who are left behind'. By drawing on mothers' experiences of this phase of the life course, my thesis has illustrated how young people's movement out of the family home has wide-reaching and complex consequences for our understandings of motherhood and for women's mothering as praxis.

Throughout the thesis I have elaborated on the mother/child relationship to highlight how the emerging adulthood of the child impacted on each of my participant's sense

of her self as mother. I have argued that their children's move out of the home disrupted the ontological basis of my interviewees' mothering identities. Each substantive chapter tackled this issue in different ways. In chapter 3, for example, I discussed the difficulties mothers encountered when confronted with the emerging adulthood of the child that manifested at the time of their home-leaving, whilst chapter 4 analysed mothers' management of separation from their adult children. In chapter 5, the ability to maintain contact with their children via their use of different communication technologies was argued to underscore women's ability to sustain their motherhood identities. Finally, chapter 6 discussed the mother's desire to meet her own needs more fully and explored my participants' plans and aspirations for the future. Overall, the chapters have highlighted how children's home-leaving instigates a reconfiguration of the mother/adult child relationship. The overarching conceptual framework of the thesis was drawn from women's experiences of mothering their children to adulthood. One of the strengths of the research was the application of women's narratives to a range of theoretical perspectives from multiple disciplinary bases to support my initial enquiry.

In the introductory chapter of my thesis I highlighted the gap in our knowledge regarding what mothering means to women once their adult children leave home and provided a review of some of the literature that informed my thinking and enriched the analysis of my research data. In this chapter I argued that, although home-leaving is an expected event in the life course of the child, there is little acknowledgement of what the child's transition means for the mother. I suggested that her experience is effectively silenced by the sociocultural constructions of mother and child and the

privileging of the child's entry into adulthood, underscored as this is by their exit from the home.

I outlined the design of my research and its methodological underpinnings in chapter 2, where I also discussed the research process and the choices I made regarding the production of data and its analysis. I also provided the demographic information sourced from the questionnaires I distributed to my participants prior to my interviews with them. Within this chapter I also included an overview of my participants' subjective experiences of the research interview.

In chapter 3, 'Modelling Motherhood', I revealed the disjuncture in sociocultural perceptions of mothers and their children via a juxtaposition of images of mother/child and mother/adult-child. The power of such images emerged as having a major impact on my participants' understandings of themselves as mothers. As such, the age-related dimension of mother and child and their relation to each other became confused at the time of the child's emerging adulthood, forcing a negotiation between static models of motherhood and the dynamic of change underlying the movement of their offspring from child towards adult identities. In this chapter I argued that socioculturally available models of motherhood did not take women beyond the early and dependent years of their children's lives and that this lack manifested itself most profoundly at the time of children's home-leaving. As such, my interviewees were positioned precariously as the mothers of children who 'suddenly' became adults and in consequence the women needed to re-think their mothering. The break in the continuity of mothering that the 'changing' child created engendered to varying

degrees the mother's mis-recognition of her child and, in consequence, her self as mother.

In many instances, this ran in conjunction with and in contradiction to, the fact that all of the women I interviewed were acculturated into an understanding of the purpose of their mothering to be the nurturance of independence and autonomy; as Ingrid said on page 118 of chapter 3, 'you bring your children up to be independent and to go away'. The chapter exposed the intertwining of the personal and social aspects of women's lives as mothers as my interviewees' mothering was identified as reliant upon and practiced with reference to the models of motherhood available to them. In rejecting the model of motherhood they experienced as daughters, the vast majority of my study participants were left without a mentor or precedent on which to base their experiences at the time of their children's home-leaving.

The chapter argued that the ultimate goal of 'successful' mothering in a contemporary UK context is the production of an autonomous individual and that this underscored women's accounts of the purpose of their mothering as praxis. Similarly, childcare 'advice' is couched in the rhetoric of development and 'becoming' adult, rather than in notions of 'being' a child. This was prevalent in the narratives of the cohort, who shared a collective aim to produce independent adults. The achievement of this by the child signified interviewees' successful mothering – the affirmation of getting motherhood 'right'. Paradoxically, once children were perceived to have achieved adult status, exemplified by their move out of the family home, mothers themselves were confronted by their perception of the independent adult-child. This was the cause of unease for many of my study participants, whose identities as mothers were

immersed in the understandings of mothering the child as dependent. The chapter argued that a reconceptualisation of the discourse of 'being there' (Ribbens, 1994; Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2001) was enacted by the mothers, through which they sustained their mothering identities.

Chapter 3 therefore highlighted the incongruity of the notion of mothering an individual whose identity rested upon the concept of 'independent adult'. This explained to some extent the negation of the emotional aspects of children's transition out of the family home and the mother's silent support of the child's 'independence'. More importantly however, the chapter concluded that the dilemma women experienced at the time of their children's home-leaving was linked to the inadequacy of available models of motherhood that inform collective understandings of what a mother (and in turn, a child) is.

In chapter 4, 'Managing the Process of Separation', I argued that my interviewees travelled a non-linear journey at the time of their children's home-leaving that culminated in an acceptance of their adult children's absence from the home. This chapter revealed the mother's transition at this time as ragged and often difficult as, regardless of her interpellation within the discourse of the goals of 'successful' motherhood, many of my interviewees were ill-prepared for the reality of separation from their adult children. In this chapter, the competing demands of 'head' and 'heart' were exposed through my interviewees' experiences of the contradictory emotions of wanting children to leave in order to achieve culturally sanctioned goals of independence and success, alongside a desire for the closeness and proximity with the

child that had until the point of separation defined the mother/child relationship and so, their mothering.

The concepts of preparation, separation and acceptance were drawn on in chapter 4 to describe women's emotional journeys at the time of their children's home-leaving, although I rejected the notion that this was straightforward or sequential for my interviewees. Indeed, although the child's move out was often articulated as following a linear structure, which was particularly acute for interviewees whose children left home for university, women's own experiences of this time were often disjointed. The preparation of the child for home-leaving did not go hand-in-hand with the mother's own preparation for the actual experience of separation, nor for life at home without the child in it.

The privileging of the child's movement out of the home was highlighted as suppressing the women's ability to display the feelings of loss they experienced. A key finding of this chapter was that my interviewees' lacked a support structure on which to draw when their children left. The internal emotional conflict that resulted was evident in many interviewees' narratives, which exposed the tension between the mother's support of her child's home-leaving with that of needing support herself at this time. My research indicated that the latter was 'played down' when compared to the 'big moment' of the adult child's movement away from the home/mother. Few interviewees were able to draw the support they felt they needed from male partners (when present). Rather, it emerged that friendship with similarly placed women was a greater source of support. It was also the case for several of the women I spoke to, that the research interview itself had provided them with the first opportunity to talk

in any depth about the feelings they had regarding their adult children's home-leaving. I regard this as a major strength of my work.

The emotional disruption caused by the separation from the adult child was articulated by many of my interviewees as engendering emotions akin to those of bereavement. Unlike bereavement however, interviewees' feelings regarding children's home-leaving were not accorded legitimacy; instead many women coped with their feelings alone. As such, their narratives highlighted the silence that surrounds this time in a mother's life course. Although some women recollected their own mother's sadness at the time of their own home-leaving, they had not pursued/understood its source; neither had they articulated their feelings to their daughters and sons when they left. Thus the creation and perpetuation of the model of silence regarding what a mother experiences when a child leaves home was evident in many of my research participants' narratives. I have argued that this was due to the naturalising and normalizing of the child's culturally sanctioned quest for independence from the mother and the home.

The child's absence altered the way the space of the home was experienced by my participants. Often in their narratives, the emptiness of the house became a metaphor for the emptiness mothers experienced within themselves once their children left. The chapter argued that the caring practices that had once structured participants' day-to-day lives, and which they interpreted as symbolic of a mother's love and care for her children, were forced to be relinquished at the time of the child's home-leaving. As such, participants were perplexed as to how they should demonstrate this aspect of their mothering.

Also highlighted within chapter 4 was that over time, my interviewees began to 'reclaim' the territory of the home that had once 'belonged' to their children.

Although they experienced feelings of being 'in limbo', as Angela described it in the chapter, this was coupled with a sense that my participants had begun to re-shape their lives in the aftermath of their children's home-leaving. Ultimately, although a spatial separation occurred, their home-leaving was not indicative of a brutal severance of the child from the mother but instead formed the catalyst for a reconfiguration of the mother/adult child relationship.

Undoubtedly, the fact that mothers were able to maintain contact with their children post-separation emerged as a major factor that assisted interviewees in the shift towards accepting themselves as the mothers of children who were also adults from whom they lived separately. This sustained the reconfigured mother/child relationship and, in turn, their identities as mothers. In chapter 5, 'Post-Separation Communication', the meanings of place and space were discussed. In this chapter, I elaborated that mothers' contact with their absent daughters and sons across geographical distances was integral to the continuity of their relationships and in turn their mothering selves.

The chapter asked how spatial separation impacted on the mother/adult child relationship and, in consequence, on women's mothering as praxis. Women's sense of being on the periphery of their adult children's lives and thus no longer perceiving themselves as central to their children's well-being was one indicator of their changed and changing roles as mothers. The chapter reiterated that motherhood is a relational identity that is most commonly understood alongside the presence of a 'dependent'

child. Within interviewees' narratives, this translated into the conflation of safety and proximity, which the child's home-leaving disrupted. As such, contact with their adult children helped to combat the feelings of exclusion separation had engendered and the unrest mothers experienced in their 'new' role as the mothers of adults from whom they lived apart. Key to this was the incorporation of communication technologies into the everyday lives of my study group.

Their use of the land-line telephone, the mobile phone and the internet were interpreted in chapter 5 as providing my interviewees with a virtual space in which meaningful interactions with absent daughters and sons could take place. Although articulating the desire for children to have life experiences that differed from their own, in terms of travel and adventure for example, I suggested that mothers' contact with their children via cyberspace also provided them with the knowledge that their children's lives in the 'unknown' space they occupied separately were safely grounded in everyday activities similar to those they had previously pursued whilst in the home.

The chapter also highlighted that, unlike those who use virtual spaces to transcend fixed identities in the real world (Jones, 1998; Markham, 1998; Reid and Kolko, 1998; Rheingold, 1993), my interviewees used cyberspace to fix their real world motherhood identities in an attempt to reconcile the opposing experiences of rupture and continuity that separation from their children had created. The chapter did not suggest that mothers' lives remained static after children's home-leaving, but rather that women desired affirmation of their motherhood identities. Thus it argued that

interviewees' contact with their children was embedded in sustaining a sense of self as mother, albeit under changed conditions of communication.

In chapter 6, 'Mothers' Futures', I explored the transformation of some aspects of interviewees' mothering, made apparent when women reflected on their adult children's visits or long-term returns to the family home. Although some of their daughters and sons were perceived by my interviewees to hold onto static notions of their mothers' lives, underpinned by their expectation of and desire for her invariance, the chapter exposed a shift in interviewees' perceptions of their children's adult status that took place when daughters and sons visited. This was particularly so for those whose children made a long-term return, not only because of the mothers' more clearly emerging desire to meet their own needs more fully, but also because the returners were no longer identified as 'children' coming back home, but as 'adults'.

In this chapter, the post-separation dis/continuities of the mother/child relationship that remained pertinent to interviewees' lives and the decisions they were willing/able to make regarding their own future plans were discussed to illustrate their lives as active and processual as opposed to static and unchanging. Rather than offering a nostalgic view of mothering which, as Silva (1996: 33) states, 'risk[s] stressing losses rather than contradictory shifts, gains and redefinitions', I was concerned in this chapter to emphasise how my participants reconfigured their relationships with their adult children with whom they enjoyed interconnected lives.

Adult children's home-leaving also altered my participants' perceptions of other aspects of their lives and my interviewees' relationship to paid work and their

partnership status were also a focus of chapter 6. In the aftermath of children's home-leaving, women's relationship to paid employment was commonly highlighted as having sustained a sense of self-worth and self-esteem that built upon an identity that existed outside of their motherhood and continued post children's home-leaving.

Likewise, the presence and absence of male partners in women's lives emerged as an important facet of interviewees' narratives. The chapter revealed much diversity in women's partnership status and the choices and challenges they encountered once their daughters and sons left home.

I concluded that, although my participants' future plans were often underscored by a continued consideration of their adult children's needs, pursuing activities independently from their children was articulated as an element of my interviewees' lives that they welcomed. The chapter highlighted that many of my participants were actively engaged in 'shaping mothering in ways that suit[ed] their own needs and interests' (Silva 1996: 34) once their children left. Thus, children's home-leaving created a space for my participants to more fully pursue desires that existed separately from their motherhood, and so from their adult children. An important element that emerged from their narratives was that their children's home-leaving also provided them with a number of opportunities that might not have occurred otherwise, for example, the chance to take holidays and travel to places they had not previously visited.

Overall, in embarking on a study of women who have successfully reared their children to adulthood, my thesis has highlighted the need to broaden discussions of motherhood as it appears to be only with hindsight, as my participants reflected not

only on what being a mother meant, but also on what it continued to mean to them, that they could begin to make more sense of their own experiences of mothering over time. I shall now turn to discuss the feedback event I organised for my research participants in January 2007.

Participants' Feedback Event

I really feel that with this there ought to be some recognition, you know. I'm not suggesting that we rush out and form self-help groups, but I think there ought to be something [...] it's not taken seriously. [...] There's no recognition, is there? (Angela)

Are other women feeling like me? I suppose that's what I want to know. (Rita)

I'd like to know eventually whatever you put together. I'd like to, sort of, keep involved. (Rachel)

The presentation of my work to my research participants was undertaken in response to three recurring issues that emerged from my research and are embedded in the interview extracts above: the call for this stage of the mother's life course to be acknowledged; a need to find out how other mothers feel about their children's home-leaving; and an interest in the outcomes of my research. As Griffin (2005: 192) suggests in her discussion of the presentation of the findings of research to study participants: 'interviewees frequently agree to be interviewed because they are interested in the topic; they will therefore also be interested in the findings' and this was indeed so for my participants. I was keen to give something back to the women who had given their time to my research, and inviting them to an event that offered the opportunity of networking with other mothers, and where I also presented an overview of my findings, provided an ideal solution that incorporated each of the above themes.

The event took place shortly before I was due to submit my thesis and, as such, did not serve as a data producing tool. Rather I envisaged its main function to be an opportunity to bring my research participants together, as in many of the interviews women stressed the need to talk to others who had undergone the same experience. Indeed, a key finding of my research that I discussed in chapter 4, was that many of my participants had no one to talk with about their experiences and feelings regarding their children's home-leaving.

I organised the event to take place in a large seminar room in the graduate school of the university, which was well-equipped with tables, chairs and an overhead projector and screen. I arranged three sets of tables and chairs near to a refreshments table as I wanted to create an informal atmosphere that would engender a talking forum. On arrival, my participants were offered tea and coffee and during this time introductions were made amongst the group and informal discussions took place.

I presented an overview of my work and invited comments that engendered a whole group discussion. Refreshments were offered and small group discussions ensued, where participants shared their experiences of their children's home-leaving and their feelings about the presentation. The rapport between the women was amply conducive to discussion and eventually led to whole-group comments and questions, where participants raised the main themes and queries of their group discussions. This was not simply a question and answer forum between the researcher and the researched, but a rich discussion regarding the study, their participation and their opinions on the work I had produced from our interviews.

Rather than using my participants' input to further my own research means, it served to provide them with a talking forum in which they could share experiences of their adult children's home-leaving with others and offered an opportunity for future networking. The holding of this event was a successful and satisfying way of ending my PhD study. Their comments during the day served to cement the relevance of researching this phase in mothers' lives and some of their suggestions regarding further areas of study are included below. What was evident was that women appreciated and enjoyed the experience of participating in the research and the opportunity to offer their feedback. This event proved not only a response to the themes from the interviews but also confirmed the importance of exploring this phase of a mother's life course.

Future Directions for the Research

The starting point for my thesis was the adult child's departure from the home and the main focus of my research was how my participants experienced this separation. My aim was to make this phase of women's lives as mothers more visible and I have included many details of mothers' experiences after their children leave home in the thesis. I provided an overview of some of the work on the 'empty nest' earlier in the thesis. Other work that has focused on women's mid/late life has not singled out children's home-leaving as a key site of research, although it is encapsulated within explorations of other mid-life experiences, for example, the menopause and bodily changes (Goldsworthy 1993; Greer 1992; Hunter and O'Dea, 1997; Wadsworth and Green, 2003), and women's experiences of caring for elderly parents (Finch, 1989; Finch and Groves, 1983; Finch and Mason, 1993). Although these were issues mentioned by my some of my interviewees, because of the limitations of space, I

chose not to elaborate on them in my thesis. This does not mean, of course, that I disregard their importance in women's lives.

My research was not an exploration of women's experiences of the last child leaving home, and many of the women I interviewed had children who had not yet left. It might be interesting, therefore, to pursue how siblings experience a sister or brother's leaving. Young people's perspectives on mother/adult child relationships, and issues of interdependency and intimacy across geographical distances could also be pursued. A comparative study of women's experiences of children's home-leaving across different cultures, and a class analysis of women's experiences would both provide rich areas for further study. Finally, an interesting avenue of research might be to explore women's experiences of holidays, travel and adventure once children leave home. As aforementioned, during the feedback event my participants discussed their own ideas for directions the research could take: the differences/similarities in mothers' experiences of their daughters and/or sons home-leaving (Rita); the differences/similarities in partnered and unpartnered women's experiences of children's home-leaving (Fiona and Sandra); and fathers' experiences of this phase in their children's lives (Ingrid and Vanessa).

Many of the themes and issues I have discussed here emerged within the data produced from my research. Although I have touched on some of them in the chapters of my thesis, I did not follow them up as major issues in my analysis. However, their presence in women's narratives are indicative of their relevance. As such, the starting points for further enquiry regarding this phase of women's lives as mothers are already in place.

Final Words

Despite the conflicting and contradictory messages in which motherhood is immersed, the women in my study successfully navigated their way through to secure a place in their adult children's lives post-separation. Each created a new dialogue across space and time; that of maintaining their identities as the mothers of adult children.

Contemporary cultural constructions of motherhood and childrearing might continue to shore up contradictory notions of dependence and independence, however, as my thesis has illustrated, for each of my interviewees' at least, mother and adult child remained markedly interrelated and interdependent.

I began this thesis with the assertion that we have limited knowledge regarding women's experiences as the mothers of children who have left home and stated that my aim was to redress this imbalance. In focusing on an unrecognised, under-reported and under-researched aspect of women's lives as mothers, I have achieved my aim. In turn, I have opened up a new area of research enquiry. In analysing the many different aspects of women's lives as mothers and emphasising the cultural, emotional and spatial aspects of motherhood in a contemporary UK context, my work has contributed to the understandings of the meanings and practices of motherhood over time, not only for an academic audience, but for mothers themselves once their adult children leave home.

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APPENDIX 1



QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire is about you and your family situation. Please answer the questions as fully as you can. I've provided some space for any further comments you may like to make.

Please be assured that the information you provide will be treated confidentially and anything used in the research will be appropriately anonymized.

1. Name: -----

2. Age: -----

3. Ethnic origin: -----

4. Are you single or living with a partner?: -----

Comments: -----

5. Please state the present age(s) of your child(ren):

Child 1 ----- Child 2 ----- Child 3 ----- Child 4 -----

6. Please state the sex of your children (F = female; M = Male):

Child 1 ----- Child 2 ----- Child 3 ----- Child 4 -----

7. Do you consider yourself to be:
(please circle most appropriate)

Working class
Middle class
Upper Class

8. Do you consider your upbringing to have been:
(please circle most appropriate)

Working class
Middle class
Upper Class

Comments:-----

9. What age were you when you had your first child? -----

10. If you had subsequent children, how old were you when they were born?

Child 2 ----- Child 3----- Child 4 -----

Comments:-----



11. How old were you when:

Child 1 left: ----- Child 2 left: ----- Child 3 left: ----- Child 4 left: -----

12. If you have more than one child, do your children have the same father:
(please circle)

Yes

No

Comments: -----

If you lived for a period of time as a lone mother, but have since re-partnered, please answer questions 13 and 14:

13. How long were you a lone parent? -----

14. How long have you lived with your new partner?-----

Comments: -----

If you are not living with a partner, please answer question 15:

15. How long have you been a lone parent? -----

Comments: -----

Please answer all questions from hereon:

16. Why did your child(ren) move away from home?

Child 1 ----- Child 2 -----

Child 3 ----- Child 4 -----



17. How far away from the family home do(es) your child(ren) live?

Child 1 ----- Child 2 -----

Child 3 ----- Child 4 -----

Comments:-----

18. Do you have any children currently living at home with you?
(please circle)

Yes

No

19. If you are presently employed, what is your occupation?

20. Did you work outside the home when your child(ren) was/were young?
(please circle)

Yes

No

Comments: -----

21. If yes to question 20, what did you do?

22. Was this: Full-time? Part-time? (please circle)

Comments:-----

23. Please list any hobbies or interests you have: -----



24. Are there any further comments you would like to make? -----

Thank you for completing the questionnaire.

Please return it in the SAE provided by 1st October, 2004.

Trish Green,
Department of Gender Studies,
Room 232 Larkin Building
University of Hull,
HU6 7RX.

Telephone: (01482) 466907
E-mail: t.green@hull.ac.uk

APPENDIX 2:

Interview Schedule

Can you tell me what being a mother has been like for you, and about the kinds of relationships you've had with your children.

When your children were younger, did you think about them growing up and leaving home?

Did you feel s/he was ready to leave home?

Did you help her/him prepare to go? What was that like?

What was it like when s/he left? OR [if appropriate] Did you take her/him to university? What was that like?

How do you feel about her/him living somewhere else?

Tell me about how you keep in touch with each other.

Do you think where s/he lives makes a difference?

Have you talked to anyone about your daughter/son leaving?

[if appropriate] What kinds of things did you talk about?

How have things changed at home since s/he went to university? What kinds of things are different?

[if appropriate] How was your daughter/son affected by her/his sister/brother leaving?

[if appropriate] What are their plans?

[if appropriate] Do you think it would be different if you didn't have a daughter/son still living home?

[if appropriate] Was your partner affected by your child's leaving?

What difference do you think having a partner makes to how you feel about your child/ren growing up and leaving home?

How do you think you've changed since your daughter/son left?

Could you tell me about any plans you've made for the future?

Is there anything else you'd like to say, or anything you'd like to ask me?

APPENDIX 3

Participants' Biographies

Alma (55) White British middle-class, with middle-class upbringing. She did not undertake paid employment when her children were young. At the time the research took place, she had two daughters, aged 29 and 27, both of whom had left home. Alma was single, having divorced her husband of 29 years following her second daughter's home-leaving. She had lived alone for 2.5 years. She worked full-time as a secretary.

Angela (56) White British. She did not answer the 'class' question, commenting: 'I attended a grammar school, as did all my brothers, sisters, cousins etc. and all my family went to university and have sound education backgrounds'. Angela worked outside the home in a full-time and part-time capacity alongside childrearing. At the time of the interview her two sons, aged 33 and 29, had left home but the youngest had returned after his relationship break-up and was living with Angela and her husband at the time of the interviews. Angela was a full-time college lecturer.

Barbara (43) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. She did not work outside the home during her childrearing years. She had a daughter aged 16 and an adopted son aged 21, both of whom had left home. Her son was from her first and her daughter from her second marriage. She had previously lived as a single parent for one year. Barbara lived with her second husband and worked as a departmental administrator in a university.

Bridget (48) White British middle-class, with middle-class upbringing. She did not work outside the home when her children were young. She had a daughter aged 22 and two sons, aged 24 and 18. All three had left home. Bridget lived with her husband, the father of all three children, and worked as a church administrator.

Dawn (44) White British middle-class, with middle-class upbringing. She worked part-time outside the home when her children were young. Two of her three daughters, aged 22 and 19, had left home. Dawn had experienced two periods of lone-mothering, for 18 months and for 6 years. She lived with her youngest daughter, aged 17, and was in a non-cohabiting relationship. She worked full-time as a teaching assistant.

Denise (45) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing and worked part-time outside the home when her son started school. Her daughter, aged 20, had left home for university and her 17-year-old son lived at home. Dawn lived with her husband, the father of her two children, and worked full-time as an ICT advisor.

Fiona (49) White British middle-class, with working-class upbringing. She commented: 'my roots are working class and my politics and my heart still are, but I am a professional so cannot now consider myself to be working-class by occupation'. Fiona worked on a part-time basis outside the home when her children were young. Her son (22) had left home for university and her 12-year-old daughter lived at home. Fiona's son was from her first marriage and she had spent 8 years as a single parent

before marrying for the second time. She worked full-time as a university lecturer and was undertaking a part-time PhD.

Frances (53) White British middle-class, with middle-class upbringing. She had two sons, aged 25 and 22, both of whom had left home, one into local shared accommodation and one travelling abroad. She did not engage in paid employment outside the home until her youngest son was 11. Frances lived with her husband, the father of her sons, and worked full-time as an administration controller for a local supermarket.

Gina (45) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. Her eldest daughter (18) had left home to live locally with her partner and her youngest daughter (15) lived at home. Gina worked part-time as a bank clerk when her children were younger. She had mothered alone for 9 years. She worked full-time as a lecturer in a college of further education.

Heather (51) White British middle-class, with middle-class upbringing. She was widowed when her son was 11 months old and mothered alone for 17 years during which time she worked full-time as a teacher. Heather had remarried and was step-mother to three sons aged 24, 22 and 19. All four sons had left home for university. She worked full-time as an Education Advisor.

Helen (49) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. She had three daughters, 15, 19 and 22. Her middle daughter had left home to live locally with her partner and baby; the other two lived at home. Helen had mothered alone for 13 years and had worked full-time when her children were young. She continued to work full-time as a teaching assistant at the time the research took place.

Ingrid (52) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. She was in her second marriage and had one son, aged 29 and was step-mother to two other children from a previous relationship. In her second marriage she was also step-mother to a daughter aged 19 who had left home for university. Her son lived locally with his partner. Ingrid had mothered alone for 4 years before remarrying and had worked part-time during this period. At the time of the research, she worked full-time as a senior departmental secretary in a university.

Janice (50) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. She was married to the father of her two children, a son aged 26, who had left home for university and at the time of the research had returned to live locally, and a daughter aged 24 who lived at home. Janice did not engage in paid employment outside the home until her youngest child was eight years old. She lived with her husband and worked full-time as an ICT advisor in a university.

Judith (52) White British middle-class, with working-class upbringing. Her two sons, aged 26 and 24, had both left home, the former to live locally and the latter to university. Judith had been a lone mother for five years following her divorce. At the time the research took place, she was living with her partner. She undertook paid employment when her youngest son was 8 and at the time of the research, she worked full-time as a human resources manager for a local company.

Linda (52) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. Her 18-year-old son had left home for university and her daughter, aged 14, lived at home. Linda was married to the father of her children. She had worked full-time for two years after the birth of her first child and part-time for the following nine years. At the time of the research, she worked as a full-time library assistant.

Lois (48) British with Anglo-Indian parents, middle-class with a lower-middle-class upbringing. Her eldest son (26) was from her first marriage. He had left home and lived in London but was shortly to return to live locally with his wife and child. Her 15-year-old son from her current relationship lived at home with Lois and her partner. She had worked part-time in bars when her eldest son was young and undertook a part-time undergraduate degree after the birth of her second son. Lois was employed full-time as a classroom support assistant and also worked as a musician and singer.

Maggie (48) White British/Asian Chinese, middle-class, with middle-class upbringing, commenting: 'I grew up in Hong Kong, the older of two daughters. My father was a successful businessman and became financially successful when I got to about 14'. Maggie had three daughters and one son. Her eldest daughter and her son had both left home for university. Two daughters (14 and 13) lived at home with Maggie. She had been a lone mother for 4.5 years prior to re-partnering and had worked in both a full- and part-time capacity when her children were younger. At the time of the research, she worked as a part-time sixth-form teacher.

Nancy (55) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing, commenting: 'depends how you define working-class, doesn't it?' Nancy worked part-time during her children's pre-school years. Her daughter, aged 25, had left home for university and now worked in Aberdeen. Her son (23) had completed university and at the time of the research was travelling and working in New Zealand. Nancy worked full-time as a primary school teacher. She lived with her husband, the father of both children.

Paula (49) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. Her eldest son, aged 19, had left home for university. Her younger son (15) lived at home with Paula and her husband, who was the father of both children. Paula worked part-time when her children were young and continued to work in the same job as an optical receptionist at the time of the research.

Rachel (48) White British /New Zealand, working-class, with working-class upbringing, commenting: 'I have difficulty establishing myself as part of a class group – as a member of a long established New Zealand family we did not consider ourselves as part of any class'. Rachel had three daughters, aged 24, 20 and 17 and all three had left home. Her eldest daughter was from her first marriage, the second two from her second. Rachel was not living with either husband and was in a non-cohabiting relationship. When her children were young, Rachel owned and worked on a farm so was effectively employed full-time, but from home. At the time of the research, she worked as a higher education technician/school assistant.

Rita (47) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. Her daughter was 21 and had left home for university. Her 18-year-old son lived at home with Rita and her husband, the father of her children. Rita worked part-time in a shop when her

children were young and was employed as a full-time university administrator at the time of the research.

Sally (52) White British middle-class, with working-class upbringing. Her two sons, aged 23 and 19, had both left home to join the Royal Navy. During her children's early years she had worked in part-time, temporary, secretarial posts. Sally lived with her husband, the father of her children, and at the time of the research she was employed part-time as a departmental secretary in a university.

Sandra (51) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. When her son left home for university, Sandra left her husband. Her 17-year-old daughter lived with Sandra's ex-husband. Sandra commented: 'although my daughter does not actually live with me, I only moved two doors further down the same street, so I still see her as much as when we lived together'. Sandra did not work until her children were 8 and 10 years old. At the time the research took place, she was working part-time as a donor-carer for the National Blood Transfusion Service.

Serena (51) White British working-class, with working-class upbringing. She had a daughter aged 23 and two sons, 25 and 21. Her daughter and eldest son had left home and lived locally. Her younger son lived at home. Serena had mothered alone for 4.5 years. She had re-partnered, but was not co-habiting. Serena did not work outside the home until her youngest child went to school, when she worked part-time as a sales assistant. During and after her divorce Serena undertook her undergraduate degree full-time and later qualified as a social worker. At the time of the research, she was working full-time as a primary care mental health support worker.

Vanessa (57) White British middle-class, with middle-class upbringing. Her daughters, aged 26 and 24, both left home for university and at the time of the research were living in their own homes in different towns. Vanessa was married to the father of her children and did not work outside the home when her children were young. She undertook a part-time undergraduate degree as a mature student. At the time of the research, Vanessa worked full-time as a conference centre office manager.