

# MOTHERS NEGOTIATING THEIR IDENTITY: A CREATIVE NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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## Abstract

*The following article is a creative narrative inquiry on the subject of becoming a mother and the process of negotiating this new identity. By using what I term 'creative (non)fiction' to explore this area, I was able to weave together the stories which have surrounded me together with my own experience, and this has allowed me a freedom to explore and express concepts which might otherwise have remained unsaid or unheard. I place my inquiry in the context of recently emerged postmodern research methodologies and evaluate the use of creative narrative as a research tool. Issues raised are returned to following the presentation of the creative (non) fiction, and suggestions are made as to how it might be evaluated.*

## Introduction

This article has two purposes, in that it addresses both women's experiences of motherhood and the concept of using creative narrative as a research methodology. An initial review is provided of the centrality of narrative to our lives, and consequently its value in the research process. The focus is then narrowed to a reflexive account of the process of presenting data in the form of a creative (non)fiction, the results of which are seen in the ensuing section, 'On Being a Mother'. I then return to the theoretical issues raised in the first section of the paper, and apply these to the creative (non) fiction presented as well as opening up a discussion on how such work might be evaluated.

The area of motherhood has been well researched over a number of years and has achieved prominence in various disciplines. From a psychological standpoint, Stefanisko (1998) focuses on maternal identity and employs a cognitive-developmental approach to analyse the means by which women attach meaning to their multiple roles of wife, mother and paid worker. Schen (2005) provides a useful overview on the literature on separation from mothers' perspectives before undertaking her own clinical studies, while Dornes (2008) focuses on areas related to attachment quality, cognitive

development and the development of aggression and reports that researchers who look at children cared for by their mothers versus children entrusted to other forms of day care have been unable to identify any differences between these two groups of children.

Meanwhile, from a linguistic standpoint, Bailey (2000) takes a discourse analysis approach with a study that examines the relationship between the discourses of motherhood and the discourses of employment for contemporary middle-class women. The subject of women's multiple identities is also explored from a sociological vantage point over two studies, Vincent (2004), and Braun et al (2006). These studies explore parental choice of child care, drawing on the literature on motherhood and identity to understand how professional middleclass and working-class women experience shifts in their self-identity. Meanwhile, Edwards (2006), another sociologist, focuses on the role of husbands' supportive communication practices in alleviating problems in the lives of employed mothers. Giele (2008), also working in this area, examines the effect of life course factors on women's decisions to stay at home or continue their careers after having children.

Despite the range and number of studies completed, there remains an uncertainty- a lack of conclusion and incompleteness in our understanding of motherhood. Gaps and spaces provide opportunities for further research, and whereas the studies outlined above all use traditional research methods to approach the subject area of maternal identity, the argument put forward here is that traditional approaches by themselves are not sufficient for conveying to the full extent of the lived experience of motherhood. Questionnaires and interviews shape and constrain the participant's responses, and may be inadequate for surfacing all relevant issues. Moreover, the researcher cannot ensure their veracity, as, for example, the participant might be giving the response he/she believes the researcher wants to hear. In this way, the data are filtered by the research process rather than being directly accessed and revealed to their fullest extent.

My aim is to demonstrate the value of narrative methodologies, and in particular, creative (non)fiction, as a form of inquiry into complex areas such as motherhood. This form of research makes use of the 'small stories', the everyday occurrences, abundant in child rearing, to which we give so little thought, and imbues them with the significance they carry for individuals in sense-making. In this way, the opportunities are there to explore more deeply the experiences of mothers and make them accessible to a wide audience. The following section seeks to demonstrate the value of creative narrative in accessing and synthesising stories of lived experience to produce a single multi-layered account.

## Review

Narrative surrounds us and connects us to others. It is partly through narrative that we understand those who have gone before us, those who are around us, and significantly, ourselves. We use it to look forward as well, both in our own lives and in what we expect for those who follow us. Ochs and Capps (2001, p. 2, after Kermode 1967) describe the process of narrating our personal experiences in this way: 'Personal narrative is a way of using language... to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience'.

Narratives are a key way in which people make sense of their lives. We use the term 'narrative identity' to refer to the stories we tell about ourselves to help define who we are for ourselves and others – the stories we live by, shaping a coherent life story in the telling of it (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich, 2006). We retain certain stories from our lived-out existence, abandoning others by the wayside, and researchers claim that the revisiting of these key stories contributes to the shaping of our identity. Linde (1993, p. 98) argues that 'narrative is among the most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity' for the following reasons. First, through the sequencing of events in narrative, and the links between them that narrators make, the stories we tell about ourselves represent or re-present the experience of continuity of the self over time, and in this way contribute to shaping our identity. In addition, through the use of personal pronouns, and because story-telling arises in social interaction, narratives represent the relationship of the self to others. In this way, personal identity is shaped both by identification with others and in contrast to others. Finally, through the retrospective process of creating (and, I would argue, re-creating) narratives, and by looking back on events in our lives, we highlight what is important to us, and create a prevailing narrative for ourselves stretching into the future. A complementary, if rather extreme, view is that 'We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell' (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich, 2006).

The possible significance of narrative in the shaping of individuals' lives and identities brings to the fore its value in the research process. Narrative practices are used by researchers across many disciplines in a quest for rich understanding. Individual stories can offer us different slants, thick description, and multi-layered accounts; in the local we can find the universal. Through stories researchers can access the abstract with piercing directness, holding up tangible, nuanced examples, often succinctly expressed. Not only are narrative practices used to capture experiences; they are also used to

convey complex ideas and abstract concepts in an accessible way.

Boundaries can be broken in the use of narrative. The containing – and constraining – borders which might wall-in traditional academic disciplines can be chipped away as narrative practices bring in travellers journeying along the roads of sociology, linguistics, business studies, medicine, psychotherapy... the list is endless. And we are working in a postmodernist climate, in the words of Richardson and St. Pierre (2005, p. 961), 'a time when a multitude of approaches to knowing and telling exist side by side'. Quantitative complements qualitative: the quantitative brings breadth, context, the abstracted and objectified, while the qualitative, including narrative, brings depth, feeling, texture and subjectivity. Different ways of looking, different ways of knowing, different ways of telling.

Accessing people's stories – and our own – brings with it myriad ways of transcribing and analysing what we find. There is another way, though, and that is to let the story stand for itself, to let it connect, to resonate with the experience of the reader. As Bochner (1997, p. 431) describes, 'Stories long to be used rather than analysed, to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled. And they promise the companionship of intimate details as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts...'.

Autoethnography (for example, Leitch 2006; Reed 2006; Sparkes 2007; Vickers 2007) is one research approach which can sometimes stand alone in this way, where the personal narrative may be used as a lens through which to view cultural and social issues. Having the 'I' at the centre of the narrative allows for unapologetic subjectivity in the research process, and accompanying this can come the depth of analysis and description gained from first hand experience. In another vein, Clough (2002) has published unframed fictions based on his research as a form of narrative inquiry. In reading his narratives, we are connecting with moral and political issues in a salient and memorable way. There is a continuum between this type of creative fiction- on one end there are narratives that are completely fictional and use virtual characters- whilst on the other end there is creative (non) fiction, which has at its heart symbolic equivalents of real incidents between real people. Researchers writing creative (non)fiction 'appeal to a particular kind of authority, truth, and trust that goes with their being present as witnesses, as opposed to making up their stories purely from imagination' (Sparkes, 2002, p. 154). The characters and setting are actual, not virtual, and the genre, while being fiction in form remains factual in content (Barone; Agar cited in Sparkes, 2002, p. 155). In addition,

*'...the reader of creative nonfiction needs to know, or be able to presume, that the events actually happened but*

*that the factual evidence is being shaped and dramatized using fiction techniques to provide a forceful, coherent rendering of events that appeals to aesthetic criteria (among others) rather than simply being reported'*

(Sparkes, 2002, p. 156).

Such arts-based accounts, when done well, evoke, make connections and open up spaces. The use of fiction in reporting research findings can allow the writer to get nearer to the truth and to say things he/she might not otherwise be able to say for ethical reasons.

In keeping with the narrative research approaches outlined above is the notion of writing as a methodology, of writing as a form of inquiry, where writing is the research tool. Richardson (1997, p. 2) views writing 'as a process of discovery', and elsewhere: 'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it' (Richardson, 1994, p. 517). St. Pierre (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, p. 970) views it this way: 'Thought happened in the writing'; while to Cixous:

*'What is most true is poetic. What is most true is naked life. I can only attain this level of seeing with the aid of poetic writing. I apply myself to 'seeing' the world nude... with the naked, obstinate, defenceless eye of my nearsightedness. And while looking very very closely, I copy. The world written nude is poetic'*

(Cixous, 1997, p. 3).

## Research Processes

I encountered the experience of discovery-in-writing in the following inquiry, 'On being a mother'. Before describing my research process, I will provide some ethnographic background details about myself as the researcher in order to contextualise the study. I am a white, British, urban, middle-class married woman and I worked in higher education for several years before having my first child at the age of 31. My employers allowed me to work part-time for the seven years it took for both my children to reach school age, and my husband continued to work full-time. The other mothers I have interacted with in my time spent caring for preschool children have predominantly had the same backgrounds, and most have undertaken higher education and worked in a professional occupation. While I was able to work part-time, I have first-hand experience of combining work and responsibility

for caring for pre-school children, of having children cared for by nursery staff, and of extended periods at home looking after children. I also interacted with women who work full-time and those who did not work at all while raising children; I have had many discussions with them about issues relating to motherhood, childcare and balancing work with home life.

My inquiry comprises an overarching narrative of two women experiencing motherhood in their different ways, some of which arise from decisions they have made in the raising of their children, and some of which arise from their narrative identities. I constructed the piece from my own stories and those of mothers around me, but the two women in my narrative are not representative of any particular individuals in my life, nor is either woman a pure reflection of my own perceived identity. Rather, the aim of the narrative is to capture some of the characteristics of motherhood and explore the diversity of values which surround it. Some events in the narrative actually happened, while others might have, but did not – and in this way, the piece hovers between being creative fiction and creative non-fiction, and would probably be best termed as creative (non)fiction.

I used the narrative as a vehicle for exploring issues of motherhood, and illustrating what it is like to grapple actively with these issues, rather than just describing them from a distance with a claim of objectivity. The piece points out dilemmas, identifies tensions and conflicts, as well as the origins of close friendship and shared experiences. I would see my work as re-search in its most literal sense. It is an exploration, an inquiry, a reflection, with no hypothesis, but which nonetheless I believe contains and conveys truths. I gained my breadth of data as a participant-observer, living alongside and listening to other women at this stage in their lives. The inquiry is there to resonate with the experience of others, to bring my personal understanding of the journey I have been on to add to the understandings gained from other kinds of research as well as from other women's stories of motherhood. Much has been written about the 'I' in writing (Zeal, 2006), and in my work, the 'I' is present in the research and the researched, both through my own stories and through my re-presentation of the stories of others I have known.

The narrative set out below stands in its own right for the reader initially to connect with in any way he/she can. It might personally resonate, it might be observed vicariously, or it might be rejected. Following this, I will provide an analysis of the narrative together with reflections on the ways in which writing the narrative has been a process of discovery for me as its author, and on what I have learned from the experience. Finally, I will provide suggestions as to how such work might be evaluated against defined criteria given by Richardson (2000).

The characters, Sarah and Alice, in the following narrative are fictitious, and a dialectic approach is taken to draw out the dilemmas I and others have faced. Sarah and Alice act out the life choices of women I have encountered, and attempts are made through the process of narrative inquiry to enter their minds and capture their different values.

## **On Being a Mother**

*Sarah absentmindedly straightened her skirt, made an unsatisfying attempt at a deep breath and knocked on her line manager's door.*

*'Come in,' and there she was, smiling nervously at those in the room before resting on the edge of her seat at an almost painful angle. She was aware that she had only an hour for this meeting if she was going to be able to pick up her daughter from the after school club on time. This silent deadline increased the pressure she felt this space, this so-called 'meeting', was already under, and rendered the initial small-talk all the more pointless to her. Ironical that she should be under time pressure for the very meeting that was being held to discuss her time management.*

*She was aware of the lack of eye contact among the professionals gathered in that room, although she knew that all too much would already have passed between them as they discussed her case in the days leading up to this meeting. Is there any empathy in this small room, she wondered, or are there only the other emotions, emotions she could only guess at, suppressed as they were at this moment. Teetering at the edge of a vortex of panic, she consciously willed herself not to get drawn into its spinning, disorienting centre. Then, every part of her mind was suddenly flooded with the painfully sunny image of her son, her second beloved child, sitting as an island among a multi-coloured lake of toys in the middle of the kitchen floor, gazing at her with pure, liquid eyes, then smiling at their unspoken connectedness. 'Connection, disconnection – where do I belong?' started a voice within Sarah.*

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*Alice absentmindedly wound her hair behind her ear, took an uncertain breath and knocked on the doctor's door.*

*'Come in,' and there she was, smiling anxiously at the female doctor before sinking into the disconcertingly low patient's seat, pushchair squeezed awkwardly into the tiny space alongside her, child thankfully asleep. For now it was worth it, but she knew she'd pay the interest on this borrowed time many times over with a sleepless night.*

*'I'm not sure why I'm here, really,' she started falteringly. The doctor gazed at her impassively. 'I think I'm just really, really tired... I'm just finding it really hard to cope at the moment... I don't know, I just...' her voice tailed off, leaving unspoken stories hanging in the air. Stories of deep, unfathomable love piercing her soul; stories of monumental frustration and anger at the most minute of details; stories of great warmth and affection for the tiny humans she was introducing to the world; stories of fear and helplessness at the enormity of the role; and stories of a tattered, frayed and ragged relationship which she longed to have restored to its previous wholeness.*

*'I feel like my partner and I are standing on opposite banks of a river, with a torrent of water passing between us. And no matter how loudly I shout he cannot hear me. We can see each other, but we can't communicate. That's how it feels, our life. There's no time for proper communication, or even for my own thoughts...' The doctor reaches for her keyboard, anxious to initiate a prescription, and end this monologue.*

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*Sarah and Alice are friends, each with two young children; Sarah works full-time – partly because she feels the need to financially, but also because she has the strong desire to remain connected with her work. Alice has more of a choice whether or not to work as her partner brings home enough money to support them all, and she has taken the decision to remain at home to bring up her children. Although the women outwardly respect each other's decision, there is tension in their friendship and a sense of self-doubt in both of them as to whether or not they have made the right choice.*

*'So, what is 'right'?' muses Sarah some months later to*



*Alice as she watches her making drinks for the children in her slow, methodical manner. It's the tail end of the Christmas holidays and they are in Alice's kitchen, with the detritus of breakfast around them and vibrant children's paintings emblazoning the kitchen cupboards. Alice bristles: already feeling edgy and self-conscious about welcoming her friend into the mess of her life – Sarah always seems so well organised – she perceives the question as an invitation to deconstruct the choices they have made, and right now she is feeling quite vulnerable about hers. The sands shift, she thinks: ask me at the close of a sunny summer's day, when the children's laughter has echoed joyfully round the garden and the washing was dry an hour after being pegged out on the line; when I have had a chance to sit with a friend and talk about how we are, really; when I am feeling the fulfilment of breathing in my daughter's gossamer hair as I envelop her at the end of her happy day. Don't ask me to defend myself now, on yet another indeterminate grey day, when I haven't had a chance to clear the breakfast-time crusts away, when all I've had today has been whines, tears and snot-wiping and I'm already exhausted by mid-morning. I have shed tears at the loneliness and isolation of it all.*

*And never mind me, thinks Alice, what about the children? Shouldn't this be what this is really all about? All those conflicting expert opinions she was always hearing about on the radio: the latest study which showed, without a doubt, that nursery care was wholly beneficial – no, hold on, wasn't it now wholly unbeneficial for pre-school children? Alice had at the time tried to grasp at the flailing strands of knowledge she still held about research methods from her previous experience in academia, and had readily dismissed the findings of the research which did not tally with her own perspective. 'Bollocks!' she'd shouted to the radio in anger: the study was bound to be flawed – too narrow in its questioning, too few participants, wrong research tools for the job, that kind of thing. Added to which, her perspective was founded on the certainty brought by generations of mothers stretching behind her, seemingly fully committed to their domestic domain.*

*'I'm not sure I'll even go back to work when they're both at*

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*school,' retorts Alice defensively, 'I want to be there for them when they're ill, and I'm not sure I'd ever find work to fit in with the school day.' She feels the colour rising to her cheeks as she speaks, and resents feeling that she has to deconstruct her identity in this way. She is not sure whose needs she is seeking to meet – whether those of the children in providing them with a bedrock of support, or those of herself in remaining unchallenged, unsullied by the world of work, but feels instinctively that there is a weakness to her argument: The lady doth protest too much, methinks. She saw in her friend someone frequently struggling to meet the demands of her different worlds, but Alice did not care to admit to herself that at times she also recognised fulfilment coming from areas other than childcare.*

*In Alice's response Sarah perceives criticism of her own position, and regrets initiating the conversation. They usually hedge around it, and whenever they come close to discussing it with any degree of explicitness, there is always individual regret that they have done so. The fabric of their friendship is strong – about more than the shared interest in children – but there are unfinished ends in it which can be used to unravel the beautiful patterns, and both women are learning that it is better not to pull at them. It is not difficult to undermine Sarah: hers is the prevailing narrative of failing, selfish mother, more interested in satisfying her own needs than those of her dependents.*

*I want to be there for them when they're ill- reverberates her friend's accusatory words. In an instant, painful memories are unlocked within Sarah. Memories of carrying out her work haunted by the demands of her child sick at home, which while she was not able to meet physically, she was tortured by psychologically. She had felt utterly in the wrong space, knowing intrinsically that she belonged at home in that moment, eaten by guilt and fear, longing to care for and show love to her child. Then- racing home from work unnecessarily early to find her child peacefully asleep on the sofa, husband deep in chores. Now she would seethe with unfocused resentment that she had not felt able to stay at work under the scrupulous gaze of her childless colleagues, completing her day's work to her own*

*and others' satisfaction. And there was the paradox of it all: inhabiting one space, yet feeling drawn to another – wanting to do it all, yet in a rather tired and hackneyed way, not feeling a success in any of it.*

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*The angst had started in Sarah almost the moment she found out she was pregnant: the euphoria was quickly replaced by uncertainty about her abilities even to house and nurture this unborn child. Advice, though not always sought, was freely given – from those with a professional interest as well as those with a more personal concern for the wellbeing of this infant. Lacking any experience in an utterly unfamiliar territory, Sarah was easily undermined, and seized on other sources of official baby wisdom, scanning the pages of these holy books for the answers to her anxieties. She was told how she should be eating, drinking, resting, exercising, even feeling. Her own small voice was no match for the booming tones of these giants; her emerging identity as a mother was stifled to secret moments of communion with her child, sometimes shared with her equally bewildered husband, when no-one was present to judge.*

*Sarah's child had burst into the world with such force that she barely had time to acclimatise to the soaring pain. And there she was, placed abruptly in Sarah's uncertain arms – a real baby. 'Whose is this?' wondered Sarah, in disbelief. 'What now?'*

*Sarah's new identity rested on her like an ill-fitting overcoat which she hardly dared claim as her own. Only last Tuesday she had been at work, driven to completing the project which had been absorbing her these last few months before having no choice but to relinquish it. As she lurched abruptly from her life as a competent professional to that of incompetent mother, that previous existence now seemed an ephemeral dream. Family life was all-consuming and extreme, with the highs set in sharp relief to the lows. She had no choice but to submit to the total dependence of her daughter, her demands punctuating Sarah's days and nights, their three lives tightly entwined like never before. Emotions marched unbidden across their*

*landscape, often in pairs: with the holding of something so achingly precious came the accompanying anguish that was evoked even by the imagining of its loss.*

*There were many stammers and false starts in Sarah's attempts at motherhood, but slowly there emerged a faltering self belief as she grew in understanding of her child. Her instincts started to dominate the conflicting 'expert' opinions which had besieged her from the outset. A new discourse of common sense started to prevail in their household, and with it dissipated the anxieties of those early days. The weeks started to disappear as routines became established, and the family eased itself into its new shape.*

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*And then, as abruptly as it had started, Sarah's maternity leave drew to a close. The kaleidoscope twisted and the familiar pattern changed with breathtaking alacrity. Rent through with guilt at the life changes she was inflicting on her soft, young daughter, Sarah looked with envy at her friend, Alice, cosseted and untroubled a few streets away. The unspoken judgements of grandparents reverberated through her, all the more potent for their silence. And yet Sarah knew that however callous it might appear from the outside, the decision they were making was the right one for their family. She had no desire to allow motherhood to smother in its comfortable embrace – to the point of suffocation – the identity she had spent her twenties carefully crafting. She could not allow it to subsume everything she had sought out in her work that had for so long offered her sustenance.*

*Holding these arguments within her like some kind of talisman, Sarah approached the nursery with her husband, each of them silent in the knowledge that any words could in a moment shatter the other's studied composure. Their daughter lay asleep in the car seat dangling awkwardly from her husband's tight grasp, oblivious that her world was about to change irrevocably, and this brought about by the two people who loved her most.*

*'I can't do this,' breathed Sarah as she buzzed on the*

*nursery intercom, 'I can't leave her.' They'd been rehearsing this moment for the last two weeks, with Sarah leaving her daughter for ever longer periods with the nursery staff while she had paced nervously round the nursery staffroom, startled by every noise which permeated through to her from the room below. It had dawned on her at one point how peaceful the baby room was, and how placid the babies had seemed – maybe her daughter would actually get things from nursery she could not get at home, Sarah told herself comfortingly.*

*But nothing could have prepared her for the bleak sense of loss Sarah experienced in handing over her daughter to the care of others for the first time. They left quickly, anticipating the screams of desolation they were told several hours later had never occurred. They could barely speak to one another, so focused were they both on containing the rising swell of emotion which was pushing at their defences. Feeling increasingly numb, Sarah parted company with her husband and started an excruciatingly lonely walk to work.*

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*Alice had, by the time her daughter was six months old, settled into some semblance of a routine, and had wholly submitted to her new role as mother and homemaker. She was quite surprised by how much she was enjoying it now summer was here, and did not envy her friend, Sarah, in the slightest her angstridden return to work. She had watched it from the sidelines, and while outwardly supportive of her friend, whom she cared for immensely, she was not able to still the quiet voice deep within her which reproached Sarah for leaving her daughter at such a tender age. She was aware that now Sarah's maternity leave was over, she and her husband would be sharing the domestic load between them, but Alice felt herself rising with some pride to the challenge of running the house and caring for her precious child almost alone. Her partner would be working longer hours now that she had given up work, and they had come to an earnest agreement that this was the way it should be.*

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*Huge drips of cold rain were tracing their way down Alice's neck as she struggled to keep the sodden, punctured pushchair on the pavement. It was out of kilter, being weighed down unevenly with shopping, and from deep within it rose the steady, piercing protestations of a thirteen month old child, hungry, thirsty and ill at ease with having her view obscured by a thick rain-cover. Alice knew she was running late from the moment she woke up that morning – she hadn't yet caught up from yesterday – and so far that day everything had conspired to make her ever more so. She was investing a lot into raising her daughter, admittedly, but then she felt anxious to provide her with the stimulation which expert wisdom suggested was needed. But the chores, the endless chores... Alice frequently berated herself for not getting down on the floor enough to play with her daughter, while at the same time feeling ever more driven to get things done around the house. How on earth does Sarah find the time to work, she found herself wondering as she played out her domestic dirge.*

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*More winters came and went, and Alice felt her burdens ease as she grew more accustomed to managing them. Her routines needed to be ever more fixed now that she had a second child: she had a weekly planner on the wall which showed to all who cared to look how full and interesting the children's lives were. This visual prompt helped assuage any guilt Alice felt in stealing odd moments to herself now and then, and she harboured secret desires for the time when both children would be at school and she could start to go to the gym again. Her routines were shaped now by those of the school day, the school term and the school year, and she was enormously relieved that she did not have to rely on the after school club or holiday schemes in the way that her friend Sarah did. Sarah always seemed so far ahead of herself, anxiously anticipating the next childcare crisis. Added to which, thought Alice inwardly, I know that what I can offer my children is far better than any childcare on offer. I am always there for them. I can nurture, unfettered.*

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*What Alice did not at first admit to Sarah when they met for one of their infrequent drinks several years later was her growing levels of dissatisfaction with her life. She felt ever more listless as she watched her children's increasing motivation to explore, learn and benefit from the opportunities they were given. As they grew strong in their purpose, so her own slowly waned. She would remind herself defensively that she could never become superfluous. Then moments later, like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, she would turn away from her mirror and be stilled by terror as she looked straight into the chasm their leaving home would create in her life. She would have to get a job, she told herself, though with her outdated skills and lack of confidence about the world of work, she could never again aim high.*

*Alice regaled Sarah with tales of the children's pursuits, embroidering them with details which only the most attentive of mothers could include. Despite her largely unfaltering self confidence, Sarah was once again stung by the oblique criticism of the narrative she and her husband had constructed for their children, and felt herself wondering even now what aspects of her children's emerging lives she might be missing out on. And what about them? Were they as secure and well grounded as they might have been had she been around for them more? The questions, easily stirred, buzzed around her mind insistently. She knew with some weariness it would be futile to attempt to pique Alice with tales of her working life, given the defensive nature of Alice's stance. Instead she decided it was at last time to initiate the frank conversation she felt they should have been having long ago. With guarded gentleness, she broached the subject of their own daughters.*

*'What do you want for Ruby?'*

*Sarah's words hung like smoke rings in the air as Alice contemplated their significance.*

*'Times have changed, haven't they?' came Alice's quiet and studied response. She spoke of her experience: that what might have been right for their mothers and grandmothers didn't necessarily fit in with today's way of*

*life. 'I don't feel there's any value placed on motherly wisdom any more – it doesn't seem so relevant, somehow. There seem to be so many choices that it's really quite hard to feel you've made the right one... No, I really don't think I would wish my life for Ruby.'*

*Alice wanted more for Ruby: more fulfilment of her own aspirations, a sense of her own identity rather than just the 'mother' label worn by practically every woman. She paused, lost in thought, then coming to her senses turned the uncomfortable focus away from herself. 'What do you feel?'*

*The honesty of Alice's answer moved Sarah into laying down some of her own defences.*

*'Do you know, I feel the same way. I'd never wish my life on Abby.'* She spoke of the difficulty of trying to combine a career with motherhood, and of the pain of knowing she had missed out on some fairly key moments. *'I know I've got the career persona and all that, but I don't feel I've done any of it properly. Life just seems so hectic these days, and I'd never wish the pressures I've felt onto Abby. Even part-time, I'm not sure...'* She felt she had lived with the clutter of conflicting identities for so long now, each jostling for centre stage. What she spared her friend in this vulnerable moment though was the thought that while it was undoubtedly true that her career had suffered from the onslaught, she had an underlying feeling that she might remain on a journey with places still to explore.

*Having given themselves permission to put aside the masks to their conflicting identity which for so long had kept them in competition with each other, Alice and Sarah continued in their conversation. What emerged was a sense of discomfort they had both felt in their polarised decisions and the lack of confidence they continued to hold in decisions made so many years ago.*

## **Discussion**

The writing of this narrative has been a process of discovery for me as its author, and in this section I will reflect on three areas. The first of these is to offer an evaluation of the methodology used in this study. This will be



followed by an analysis of the narrative, and finally a self-reflection in which I discuss what I have learned from the process. I will conclude by suggesting ways in which readers might evaluate this form of research.

There are challenges involved in research using creative (non)fiction. It relies on the researcher drawing on current or very recent experiences as their data collection: the richness of detail can only be captured while events are still present and vivid in the mind. The researcher has the additional requirement of being able to write effectively in the narrative genre, otherwise the nuances of experiences and concepts are lost through poor expression. There is creativity involved in the synthesis of experiences, dilemmas, values and issues, and with this creativity comes the inevitable risk that the researcher does not accurately re-present his/her data. Because of the fictional element involved, it is not possible to verify details through member checks. In my story, I am an omniscient narrator, able to enter the minds of both Sarah and Alice and express their realities. I speak for them, and as neither character is truly autobiographical, the danger is that they are not credible. This is why, as discussed below, the issue of resonance is so crucial to this type of work: if the narrative rings true, chiming with the experiences of other women, then I can be confident that my account has authenticity. In reality, however, the systematic collection of good quality feedback is not straightforward, and as with questionnaires and interviews there is always the danger that the respondent is providing the feedback he/she thinks the researcher wants to hear.

A further challenge I discovered in the writing of this creative (non)fiction was the difficulty of keeping the irony from expressing views which were not my own, and while I have consciously tried to avoid eliciting the reader's sympathy more for one character than for the other, I am not convinced that the piece does not at times come across as biased in favour of Sarah's position. As well as engendering sympathy for a particular position, the other more obvious way in which researcher bias might enter this form of inquiry is through the researcher's choices about what to include and exclude from the narrative. The subjectivity of this methodology must therefore be fully acknowledged alongside the researcher bias which is present to a greater or lesser extent in other more traditional research methodologies.

These criticisms aside, in its favour, I have found that creative (non)fiction allows for huge scope in terms of forms of expression. Issues can be explored through the experiences and interactions of characters; the researcher can enter the minds of characters and speak for them – in this case engaging with the polarised positions of working / non-working mothers – providing the reader not only with accounts of their experiences, but also

verbalising the benefits and drawbacks of these positions. Political points are often made through such writing (see, for example, Clough 2002), and the interaction and clashing of values can be clearly illustrated. Literary techniques such as the use of metaphor, direct speech, moving between the past and the present and the inner reflections of characters can convey with piercing directness the quality of a situation which would not be possible through other research methodologies.

Turning now to a thematic analysis of the narrative itself, the four areas I wish to focus on are: the negotiation of a new identity which motherhood brings; the social and psychological tensions of combining work with motherhood; the repercussions of choices made; and finally, the effect of these choices on friendship.

The two women in my narrative negotiate their new identities as mothers in very different ways, partly because of their circumstances, but also partly because of who they are. For Alice, there is an initial shift in her relationship with her partner as the duties of caring for their new baby come between them: 'We can see each other, but we can't communicate'. However, she gradually settles into a routine, and the experience of motherhood proves to be far more of a gentle continuum for her than for her friend, Sarah. For Sarah, the stages are abrupt and out of her control. She is unprepared for the suddenness of the birth, for the initial dropping off of her child at nursery, and is constantly having to adapt to new routines. Alice attempts to assume the mantle of the 'generations of mothers stretching before her', while Sarah is stifled and overwhelmed by the certainty of those who have preceded her. There is startling honesty in her response to seeing her baby for the first time: 'Whose is this... What now?'. The narrative illustrates the ways in which she and her husband negotiate their own way through the early days of parenthood, gradually growing in confidence at their own decisions to the point at which they are able to set aside the silent criticisms of their parents.

One of my aims in writing the narrative was to inquire as to what it is really like for a mother to live out the frequently cited 'work-life balance'. The piece opens with Sarah attending a meeting at work to discuss her time management, and the narrative provides instances where we can see the tension between the two areas of responsibility in her life. She instinctively prioritises the welfare of her children over her work duties, to the point of feeling that she alone can care for them when they are ill, to the detriment of her working relationships with colleagues. The anguish of dropping off her child at nursery for the first time is described, and she admits to feeling that she has missed out on some of the key moments of bringing up her children. Through her work and the raising of her children Sarah has two sources of

self-worth, but this does mean that in her life conflicts between time and responsibility prevail, and with these the resultant guilt. Her lasting sentiment is of not having fulfilled either of her roles properly, of having to compromise, and of enduring a 'clutter of conflicting identities'. She admits to herself, however, the value of remaining on a journey and that there is scope for further development in her career.

The repercussions of the choices made by the two women are quite different. In Alice's experience of motherhood loom large both the rewards and the drawbacks of full-time commitment to the role: her narrative is one of 'deep, unfathomable love piercing her soul' intersected with 'monumental frustration and anger at the most minute of details'. Her life lacks the conflict brought to Sarah's through work, however, as Alice's existence is lived out predominantly through her children, her sense of self-worth is dependent on the fulfilment of this role. Alice is all too aware of the unstable nature of her perceptions: being a mother on a sunny summer's day is quite a different experience from dealing with whining, demanding children in the middle of winter. She has no respite from childcare or alternative pursuits. At one point she is rent through with the isolation of inhabiting her children's world; at another she curses the endless chores which subsume her; yet at another she feels fulfilled by the control she assumes over the family's routines and activities, and the reassurance that she is there to meet her children's needs. Her position is not straightforward, and for Alice, the decision to remain at home to raise her children does result in a sense of underachievement, despite her best efforts to deny this to herself. Her identity has been subsumed into the emerging identities of her children: her routine is shaped by the school calendar; her weekly planner indicates how full and interesting the children's lives are – not her own. There comes a point when the unfettered nurturing becomes less essential, and the dissatisfaction with her own life grows. Reflecting on her choice, she is forced to admit that she would never wish her own life on her daughter.

Sarah's decision to return to full-time work results in her feeling that she does not belong fully in either her working or her domestic domain. She experiences a strong sense of connection and disconnection with them both. Sarah's guilt at working manifests itself in various ways. She knows she belongs by her children's sides when they are ill, and she suffers on the occasions when she is forced to inhabit this space psychologically rather than physically. The narrative exposes the bleak sense of loss Sarah feels in handing her daughter over to the care of others. She is undermined by the details Alice is able to provide of her own children's upbringing, and feels intuitively that she has missed out. The upbringing of Sarah's children is shared with her husband and paid others, and this inevitably dilutes her

experiences of motherhood. For Sarah, there are also personal sacrifices involved in being a mother, but they are different from those of Alice. Alice has no career to return to following the raising of her children, and while Sarah's career has been curtailed by the demands of parenting, she nevertheless feels there is potential to return to this aspect of her life with renewed vigour.

The choices made by Sarah and Alice undoubtedly affect their friendship. Despite her lack of assuredness in her decision, Alice attempts to persuade herself of the strength of her position, and presents to her friend a front of contentment. Alice finds the polarity of their positions a threat, and this results in a degree of defensive, brittle behaviour. Despite efforts not to, as she values their friendship, Alice does on occasion demoralise Sarah with comments like, 'I want to be there for them when they're ill', and the implicitly critical 'I'm not sure I'd ever find work to fit in with the school day': she is fully aware that Sarah's work takes her beyond these constraints. Alice is not beyond embroidering her accounts of her children's pursuits with details 'which only the most attentive of mothers could include', in this way undermining Sarah further. Yet Alice is aware of the weakness to her argument, and while she watches Sarah's struggles from the sidelines with a sense of relief that she is not exposing her family to the same problems, she is nevertheless sporadically troubled by her own lack of fulfilment and self doubt. For her part, Sarah is aware of her vulnerability in the face of criticism: as she admits to herself, hers is the 'prevailing narrative of failing, selfish mother, more interested in satisfying her own needs than those of her dependents'. From her unsteady beginnings in the world of motherhood, where she struggled to find her own voice against a backdrop of those who knew better, she has struggled to preserve herself from the readiness of others to undermine her. While she is gentle with Alice's sensitivities, knowing what it is like to be criticised, Alice's defensive stance does not allow her to afford her friend quite the same level of respect. The potential for this to change is hinted at in the final section, as Sarah finally introduces a more honest frankness to their dialogue on motherhood.

To end the discussion, I would like to offer my reflections on the process of writing as a form of discovery. The inquiry, for me, provided a vehicle for understanding, both of the area I was exploring, and of myself. I found the process of deconstructing choices by laying bare the women's experiences, and allowing them to be challenged by these experiences and each other, deepened my understanding of this area. In writing the narrative, I was constantly juxtaposing the benefits and drawbacks of each woman's decision. It provided me with the space to follow these decisions through to their possible conclusions as I drew together the narratives of women I have

observed. In doing this, I reached the conclusion that there could be no resolution to the story, no contrived happy ending - just a mutual acceptance, and perhaps greater understanding, of each other's journey. By projecting forward in their lives I clarified my understanding that while these women have entwined lives, they remain forever on separate journeys. I also learned the value of the 'small stories', and was able to see for myself how these carried such significance in creating women's narrative identities. Finally, there was a sense in which I was writing for personal development, along the lines of Hunt and Sampson (1998, p. 10), who write of 'how the act of placing oneself and one's experience on the page in fictional form can be a means to a deeper self-engagement and self-understanding'.

Postmodern narrative research of this kind reflects a departure from established empirical research methodologies, and emanates from a significantly different ontology. As Richardson and St. Pierre claim (2005, p. 964), 'We see more deeply using two lenses. ...see a 'social science art form' – a radically interpretive form of representation'. And such a different methodology requires its own criteria for evaluation if it is to become established within the academic arena. As a starting point, Richardson (2000) suggests five criteria by which to judge ethnographies, which might usefully be applied to the kinds of non-traditional methodologies discussed in this article

1. *'Substantive contribution: Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social-life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?*
2. *Aesthetic merit: Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?*
3. *Reflexivity: How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?*
4. *Impact: Does this affect me? emotionally? intellectually? generate new questions? move me to write? move me to try new research*

*practices? move me to action?*

5. *Expresses a reality: Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem “true” – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the “real”?’ (Richardson, 2000, p. 254).*

It is in the light of these criteria that I would put forward my creative (non)fiction. In particular, I would ask for it to be evaluated in terms of my quest for rich understanding. Does the piece resonate with you, the reader? Does it ‘promise the companionship of intimate details as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts’ (Bochner, 1997, p. 431)? My inquiry continues with your responses to what you have read, and I would therefore welcome your comments.

Finally, while they are a useful starting point in the evaluation of the work of others, Richardson’s (2000) criteria are limited in their usefulness to the researcher seeking to assess his/her own work. It is possible to apply the first criterion to an extent, as I believe my narrative does contribute to our understanding of some of the issues surrounding working or non-working motherhood, as addressed in my analysis. My own experiences are embedded within my approach, and I have reflected on the ways in which this perspective has informed the construction of the narrative. However, regarding the second criterion, it is not for me to comment on the aesthetic merit of the piece, other than to convey my intention, which was to present a carefully crafted, multilayered account which will resonate with readers’ own experiences and I hope will invoke a response. It has been my intention to address the third criterion, reflexivity, at various points in my article, but, given that I am the author, I cannot judge the extent to which there is adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view. Neither can I apply the fourth criterion, that of impact, which can only be addressed to the reader. I can only reflect on my attempts to address the fifth criterion rather than use it as a tool for evaluation: the experiences of motherhood I had, and the discussions I had with other women, were very fresh in my mind at the time of writing the narrative, and I fully acknowledge the subjective nature of this inquiry given that it is a product of my own stories and those of others around me. I have written myself into the text, and my intention has been to express a reality – although how credible an account of women’s experiences, of the ‘real’, I have created through my narrative is open to the judgement of the reader.

## Conclusion

Narrative methodology, drawing on recent, personal experience, can be an effective tool if we are seeking to illuminate some of the complex issues of motherhood general to women, albeit identified by the specific experience of the individual woman. Where narrative methodology goes a step further than traditional research methods is to illustrate what it is like to grapple as an individual with issues which are common to many. This quality makes it a suitable research tool for other areas where there is a desire to explore values, choices, interactions and emotions. I have identified that space exists for creative (non)fiction to complement other traditional research methods, and by applying this methodology, I have set out a multi-layered, textured account of some of the dilemmas faced by mothers, and some of the life and value choices they make. The narrative is rich in conveying the complexity of the experience of being a mother, in that it explores and communicates emotional issues effectively, but is also accessible to a wide audience. I have acknowledged that the subjective nature of this form of research can also become its weakness, and have also recognised the difficulty of checking credibility. In response to this, I have recommended the use of Richardson's (2000) criteria as a starting point in evaluating research of this kind, and suggested their potential value in providing the researcher with valuable feedback. In terms of assessing one's own work, I have found these criteria problematic to apply, as they rely so heavily on the way in which the work connects with the reader. Finally, I have found that undertaking a narrative inquiry of this kind has proved extremely valuable as a process of self development and understanding.

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