Special Session: Researching Motherhood: Experience, Empowerment and Embodiment
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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY “motherhood has usually been examined as something that happens to people, and almost never as something that people do.” Maushart 1999 Since this conference focuses on gender and consumer behaviour, it seems apt to offer a special session based on a fundamentally gendered consumption experience: that of motherhood. Much has been written in many different literatures about motherhood and identity and how this identity is shaped and moulded over time. However, as Maushart (1999) and others (Smith, 1999a; 1999b) acknowledge, very little has been written about motherhood as experience. Similarly very little has been written about the role consumption plays in women’s transition to motherhood. Some embryonic research has been published in recent years (see for example Prothero 2002, Jennings and O’Malley 2003, Carrigan and Szmigin 2004; and O’Malley 2005) and it is hoped this session will contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this area. While Adrienne Rich’s (1976) groundbreaking Of Woman Born talked of a distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution, this special session aims to explore how consumption shapes the experience of new mothers. The session also focuses on how research with new mothers is conducted and disseminated, and the role both gender and motherhood status play in researching mothers’ consumption experiences. The first paper in the special session is from a research project conducted by a team of eight researchers based in Denmark, Ireland, the UK and the USA. The second and third are based on projects currently underway in Ireland. The first paper is a methodological one and explores issues and experiences related to mothers researching mothers, and the impact this has on the collection and interpretation of data. The second paper raises the question of women’s empowerment in a maternity setting and whether this question can actually be asked in the context of the marketing academy. The final paper explores the area of embodiment, focusing specifically on the pregnant body and considers embodied experiences both before and after pregnancy.


[url]: http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12527/gender/v08/GCB-08

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**HALL OF MIRRORS: METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES FOR MOTHERS RESEARCHING MOTHERS**

Andrea Davies, Susan Dobscha, Susi Geiger, Stephanie O’Donohoe, Lisa O’Malley, Andrea Prothero, Elin Brandi Sørensen, Thyra Uth Thomsen

Within research attending to the experience(s) of consumers and consuming the number of interpretive studies choosing a phenomenological approach has been significant, and seems to be growing. Researchers working with this approach are usually aware of, and often make explicit, the need to “bracket” their own lived experiences to ensure their research design, mode of questioning and/or interpretations are not coloured by the concepts, theories and personal experiences they hold a priori. The issue of bracketing and its research implications have rarely been put under the spotlight and certainly have not been given any detailed empirical attention within interpretive consumer research.

For this paper we will focus on the topic of mothers researching mothers. We draw upon our own experiences as researchers in a larger cross-national research project, concerned with women’s transition into motherhood and their consumption. We examine the research process as experienced by eight researchers across four countries. As mothers researching mothers we seek to explore and understand how our gender and motherhood status inform our methodological choices.

Our data is generated via several methods in an effort to be open, tolerant, inclusive, and seek research opportunities rather than narrowly confine or define our study. It is divided between reflexive accounts and the artefacts of research practice. Four types of introspections together are used to attain a spirit of ‘unremitting reflexivity’ (Olsen 2000) or ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding 1991). Our documents reveal how we arrived at ‘ways of working’ for our multi-method, multi-site and multi-voice project. They include the researchers’ negotiations, our experience with these negotiations as they unfold with the progression of the project, and the realities about our data generation, data sharing, approaches and divisions in writing, as well as our goals and concerns on publication and dissemination. We shared a commitment to a non-hierarchical working style akin to a collective or co-operative, and recognition that we each brought different skills and contributions to the project as well as various personal and professional obligations.

At the outset of our work together it soon became apparent that to follow interpretive phenomenology was not as obvious, appropriate and legitimate a methodological platform as we had imagined. Questions and ambiguities were raised that centred on the subject-object split realised through bracketing, and how this was difficult to maintain in the context of mothers researching
mothers. Our ability, and whether it was desirable, to bracket personal experience, has been challenged by the ‘problem’ of identification between researchers and those they researched, and also among researchers themselves. It has also been well documented in the feminist literature of the importance of having empathy and involvement with one’s participants (see for example: McRobbie, 1982; Friend and Thompson, 2000; Madriz, 2000). We report on the erosion of several binary distinctions as evidenced in our study including researcher–researched, insider–outsider, novice–expert, and static–dynamic. Issues of voice, knowledge, consent, respect and a heightened sense of responsibility and moral obligation between researchers as well as between researchers and the first-time mothers will be reported. We will conclude by juxtaposing the alternative methodological frameworks of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Edwards et al, 2005), reflexive ethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2003), and the standpoint of feminist research (e.g. Hundleby, 1997) that we have considered for our research context of mothers researching mothers.

**EMPOWERED MOTHERS: CAN THEIR ‘VOICES’ BE HEARD?**

*Susi Geiger and Andrea Prothero*

This paper firstly presents an exploration of nine women’s accounts of their maternity and postnatal experiences for their first pregnancy in maternity hospitals in the Republic of Ireland and secondly reviewers’ responses to this research. The original study investigated pregnant women’s strategies to cope with (dis)empowerment in a situation that is often new to them, laden with anxieties, reigned by a variety of societal norms and characterised by highly complex service interactions. The empirical investigation revealed that women display very different levels of empowerment needs. The choices they make are dependent on personal, social and situational factors and are heavily influenced by how involved women choose to be (and also are allowed to be) in the management of their maternity care. Indeed, the study showed that while some women actively seek disempowerment in this particular situation, empowerment is hugely important for a positive birthing experience of other expectant mothers.

A competitive version of this study was originally submitted to a leading marketing journal and was rejected by all three reviewers; one because the paper didn’t have enough respondents and the other two because the reviewers felt it would be unethical to accept papers which ‘allowed’ women the right to be empowered in a maternity setting. One reviewer commented for instance that during pregnancy all women needed to do was “breathing exercises, lying positions and generally looking after themselves and their unborn babies”. The other suggested that the NHS would go out of business if pregnant women were allowed to be empowered. Thus, as well as discussing issues of female consumer empowerment this paper also raises serious questions about publishing such
work in the marketing academy, and how difficult it can be to give women a voice within this environment.

**BOUNCING BACK: EMPHASIZED FEMININITY AND PREGNANT EMBODIMENT**

*Maurice Patterson and Lisa O’Malley*

Pregnant bodies are sites of extraordinary flux. The most obvious changes are corporeal as bodies leak, flow, and are transfigured. In this way, pregnant bodies exhibit an ‘indifference to limits’ (Shildrick, 2002) which dissolves the boundaries between self and other and, ultimately, problematizes established notions of subjectivity (Young, 2001). However, pregnancy also bears witness to transformations in the ‘imaginary body’ (Gatens, 1999); a socially and historically specific body that impacts upon a body’s orientation in space and relationship to other bodies (Mullin, 2002).

One outcome of all this flux is that pregnancy has the potential to open up a space where some women enjoy relative freedom from the demands of emphasized femininity (Bailey, 2001). Nevertheless, it has also been noted that the institutions of consumer culture increasingly encroach upon this space, demanding that women engage in body work pre- and postpartum in order that they may better manage their pregnancies, produce healthy offspring, avoid many of the deleterious ‘symptoms’ of gestation, and reclaim their pre-pregnancy bodies (Dworkin and Wachs, 2004). This study accesses women’s embodied experiences during and after pregnancy in an effort to understand the role of consumption in encouraging and supporting their attempts to temper the boundaries of their bodies and once more affirm a sealed, controlled selfhood reflective of emphasized femininity. As such this paper challenges traditional notions of pregnancy as a period of passivity and ‘confinement’ for women (Maher, 2004) by foregrounding their experiences and by appreciating the degree to which they mobilize consumption to achieve embodied ends.

**REFERENCES**

Selected References (Further references available from session chair upon request)


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