

**Title: 'Work, Care and Identity: Reconceptualising Maternal Labour'**

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*Background*

The central aim of this project is to generate a critical framework for understanding the psychodynamics of maternal care as work. The links between mothering and work have been long fraught and social theorists have continually struggled to explain the affective and embodied aspects of maternal care in ways that make sense of its routine, mechanical elements. The simple but persistent protest is, How can mothering be a form of 'work', if 'love' and 'instinct' are involved? This key question can be answered by first acknowledging a more enriched notion of 'work'. It is here that this project begins.

Research in the social sciences into the relationship between work and selfhood today recognizes the psychic and social burdens that new methods of work management are having on individuals and their families. Christophe Dejours' influential contribution has been his development of a psychodynamic approach to understanding work and identity. His research findings have been fruitfully drawn upon, by a range of researchers across disciplines including work psychology, sociology, economics and social and political philosophy. These research projects include the collaborations of Nicholas Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty (Macquarie University) on work and recognition and work as self-development, and Deranty's critiques of Dejours' important thesis on work and identity.

The project engages with Dejours' analysis and related critiques by Deranty, Smith, and others, to develop an innovative feminist critique of maternal care work.

Importantly, the term 'maternal' here is not limited to biological mothers, but embraces all primary carers of a child, biologically related or not, whose daily tasks involve the primary care of children. The term embraces fathers, community 'other mothers', grandparents, aunties, and LGBT parents.

Feminist analyses of care work continue to be sites of intense debate; evolving from a 1970s focus on the right of mothers to work and be paid for their care work in the home, to questioning, for instance, the ethical dimensions and economic implications of outsourcing the care of children to poorly paid child care workers, or immigrant mothers. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild has proposed that emotional labour is the work of 'what I try to feel'; Judith Butler has influentially argued for the performativity of gender; and Sarah

Ruddick's 'maternal thinking' thesis (i.e. the practice of mothering involves reflection and thought) of the 1980s has been highly influential. What is now emerging in feminist discourse and labour theory more generally, is a theorization of work that does not confine mothering to the private, inter-subjective psychological sphere.

The central aim of the project then, is to generate a critical framework for understanding the psychodynamics of maternal care as work. The project is pioneering because it addresses contemporary struggles, principally by feminist theorists, to satisfactorily theorise maternal care. This is a pressing contemporary social issue with the spheres of work and family being increasingly 'de-bordered' and made ever more flexible individuals steadily worsening. Critical responses from the social sciences, such as those by Dejours, aim to counter these hegemonic, instrumental understandings of work which dominate economic discourse. This project will be a valuable contribution to that field, and address a major gap in the theorization of maternal care and mothering work.

#### *Approach and Plan*

I begin by drawing on two principal theoretical approaches around work and selfhood (Dejours) and emotion work (broadly, Hochschild/Ruddick/Butler), to develop a theoretical framework for understanding maternal care as work. Fiction and memoir are historically framed forms of discourse, and offer a rich pool of conceptual and empirical content, description and reflection through which to come to know and analyse the lived experience of mothers. The project's approach is then to draw upon selected novels, memoirs and oral testimonies as forms of auto-ethnographies (narratives of the self). These selected narratives, supported by sociological and empirical research where relevant, are engaged with in order to illuminate or debate the principal themes and arguments.

#### *Chapter Plan, Monograph:*

##### *'Work, Care and Identity: Reconceptualising Maternal Labour'*

Chapter 1: What is Work? Establishes the methodological framework for the synthesis of Dejours' psychodynamics of work with maternal care as work.

Chapter 2: What Do Mothers "do"? Mothering and Technique: maternal labour is constituted by an infinite array of emotional, intellectual and material practices. This chapter considers the applied, tacit practices. It delineates the affective complexity involved and what the physical/psychological self 'gives' in excess of what is proscribed.

Chapter 3: New Maternal Thinking. Examines Ruddick's foundational notion of maternal thinking, working with contemporary critiques of mothering and care work to extend this to

the psychodynamic.

Chapter 4: Emotional Labour. Traces developments in recent feminist thinking around emotional labour and gender and performativity. Considers/debates maternal care as 'the production of life' and considers this in relation to Dejours' psychodynamics.

Chapter 5: The Impossibility of Mothering: examines the gap between what is socially, culturally or legally/ethically prescribed for maternal practice, and what is actually possible. Draws on black and subaltern feminist critiques. Considers maternal care in-extremis: investigates the experience of maternal practice in contemporary Australian Aboriginal communities; refugee mothering and asylum.

Chapter 6: Jobs for Life: considers questions around the immutability of motherhood. Goes to the heart of 'What is 'work'?' and the differences between mothering as a practice/verb/a becoming, and motherhood as a state/noun/social status. Considers maternal abandonment, relinquishment and infanticide.