Mothers and Sons: Feminist Maternal Practice with Boys

Thesis submitted

by

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At the end of it all, I have come to understand that this thesis is my love letter to my own sons, Gabriel and Zachary. And, this is how mummy has learnt to make sense of the two of you coming in to my life, changing everything and teaching me about love and about hope.
This thesis explores feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons through the application of poststructural feminist theorising about gender as relationally constructed. Analysis of the data is grounded in the notion of feminist maternal practice as an agentic activity capable of repositioning both mother and son in relation to gender difference discourse. I argue that the mother and son relationship is a potential site for the transformation of gendered subjectivities.

The mother and son relationship is embedded within discourse about gender difference and consequently held accountable to a narrative that reflects hegemonic masculinity ideals about normative masculinity, femininity and motherhood. This constrains our understanding of the relationship and at the same time marks it as a discursive route for the construction of problematic gender relations. However, while gender difference is a dominant discourse, it is not the only available discourse about gender and thus the mother and son.

I have proposed that it is possible to think differently if the relations of power that sustain difference are identified and the assumptions of gender difference discourse are questioned. I have argued that gender is not only structurally located, it is relationally constituted through interaction between mother and son and ongoingly produced through the subjects’ orientation to gender norms, standards and values. The transformation of gendered subjectivity requires both a re-positioning in relation to gender discourse and the context that invites, supports and validates this change.

This is a qualitative research study that utilised in-depth interviews to explore the accounts of twenty self-identified feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons. Exploring which discourses about gender and motherhood these feminist mothers engage with, makes it possible to develop a more complex
account of the effect of dominant gender discourse on the mother and son relationship.

The research found that for the feminist mothers of sons interviewed, they do not successfully iterate the practices that are prescribed in dominant gender discourse. Instead, they position themselves as feminist activists and their maternal practice aims to disrupt the dominant narrative and undermine normative masculinity practices. Feminist mothers establish a critical distance from gender difference discourse in order to position themselves as maternal subjects entitled to, and capable of, enacting a maternal practice that rearranges gender relations in line with a feminist critique of masculinity and towards the feminist goal of equal gender relations. Feminist maternal practice is an ongoing relational activity that circulates norms, and establishes standards of accountability that are demanded, validated and externalised. Feminist maternal practice with sons is about establishing a social and cultural context that orientates boys toward non-normative masculinity practices.

This thesis makes a clear distinction between the boy and the discourse. It is this distinction that provides the foundation upon which the feminist mother and son relationship can write a new script. Consequently, the feminist mother is positioned as an important part of the process in the construction of her sons’ masculinities.

By looking into ways that feminist mothers re-position their sons’ masculine subjectivities, not only are oppressive practices made visible, we learn how feminist practice within the private domain works to interrupt, contest and shift oppressive practice. The feminist mothers’ accounts re-present the maternal subject as an emerging agent of power, generating change at the interactional level.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iv

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 1

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................. 3

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 9

  Inspiration for the Thesis .............................................................................................. 9
  Overview of the Research .............................................................................................. 16
  Thesis Rationale ............................................................................................................ 17

Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 17

Research Objectives ......................................................................................................... 18

Assumptions of the Research .......................................................................................... 18

Feminist Research ........................................................................................................... 19

Mother and Son Narratives ............................................................................................. 20

Gender Difference Discourse ......................................................................................... 21

Repositioning Gendered Subjectivities .......................................................................... 22

Feminist Maternal Practice ............................................................................................. 25

Feminist Mothers and Sons: A Discursive Route for Disrupting Gender
Discourse and Re-Positioning Gendered Subjectivities ................................................... 26

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 27

Chapter One: Researching Feminist Mothers’ Experiences of Raising Sons ............... 29

  Introduction ................................................................................................................. 29

  Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................. 29

    Feminist Research ..................................................................................................... 29

    Feminist Standpoint Epistemology .......................................................................... 30

  Designing the Research Questions ............................................................................. 35

  Qualitative Research Through Semi-Structured Interviews ....................................... 35

  Recruitment Process .................................................................................................. 36

  Data Collection .......................................................................................................... 36

    Interview Location .................................................................................................... 36
Recording the Data ..............................................................................................................36
Research Participant Demographic Details .................................................................37
Interview Process .........................................................................................................42
Transcription ..................................................................................................................45
Data Analysis Method ...................................................................................................45
Approach to Analysis .....................................................................................................45
Grounded Theory ............................................................................................................46
In-Depth Interview Analysis .........................................................................................47
Developing Thematic Categories ..................................................................................47
First and Second Reading of the Transcripts ...............................................................48
Main Focus and Criteria .................................................................................................49
Literal Coding ................................................................................................................49
Focused Coding ..............................................................................................................50
Emerging Themes ..........................................................................................................52
Moving the Data Around ...............................................................................................53
Short Memos ..................................................................................................................55
Thickening Thematic Categories ...................................................................................55
Third Reading ................................................................................................................55
Developing Secondary Themes ....................................................................................55
Discourses and Assumptions .........................................................................................57
Written Reflection Memos ............................................................................................59
Data Reflection Memos .................................................................................................60
Variations .......................................................................................................................60
Different Subjective Experiences ...................................................................................61
Inconsistencies ...............................................................................................................61
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................63

Chapter Two: Framing the Mother and Son Relationship .................................................64
Introduction .....................................................................................................................64
Mothers and Sons: A Neglected Subject ......................................................................65
The Patriarchal Narrative ...............................................................................................66
Historical Accounts of the Mother and Son Relationship ............................................66
Psychoanalytic Theories of the Mother and Son Relationship .......................................68
Contemporary Writing About the Mother and Son Relationship ...............................69
The Feminist Narrative .................................................................................................74
Gender as Relationally Produced ................................................................. 145
Gender as Performative .............................................................................. 147
Doing Gender ............................................................................................. 148
Conclusion ................................................................................................ 151

Chapter Five: Feminist Maternal Practice ................................................. 154
Introduction ............................................................................................... 154
Motherhood As Institution ......................................................................... 154
Mother Outlaws .......................................................................................... 157
Feminism’s Changing Relationship with Motherhood .................................. 159
Maternal Practice ....................................................................................... 161
Defining Feminist Maternal Practice ........................................................ 163
The Maternal Subject .................................................................................. 167
Agency ........................................................................................................ 169
Feminist Maternal Practice as a Precursor for Change .............................. 172
Feminist Maternal Practice and Doing Gender .......................................... 174
Conclusion ................................................................................................ 176

Chapter Six: The Role of Feminism in the Raising of Sons ......................... 178
Developing a Narrative Account of the Data: A Preamble to the Analysis .... 178
Making Sense of Feminism ......................................................................... 181
Feminist Maternal Practice Displaces Patriarchal Motherhood Discourse .......... 183
Raising Boys is a Particular Job Description for Feminists ........................... 187
  More Than Mother .................................................................................... 190
  Requalifying Women’s Experiences ......................................................... 195
Conclusion ................................................................................................ 202

Chapter Seven: A Critique of Normative Masculinity Discourse ............... 204
Introduction ............................................................................................... 204
Gender as Social Construction ..................................................................... 205
The Gender Binary is Problematic .............................................................. 208
Gender is Relational .................................................................................... 214
Violence ....................................................................................................... 218
Violence and Sport ....................................................................................... 222
The Normalising Gaze ................................................................................ 224
  The Normalising Gaze Constrains Behaviour ......................................... 225
The Practice of Being Unremarkable ................................................................. 229
Internal Surveillance ...................................................................................... 230
Empathy ........................................................................................................... 231
Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 234

Chapter Eight: Changing Gender Relations .................................................... 235
Introduction ...................................................................................................... 235
Undermining Difference Through Language .................................................. 236
Changing Expectations .................................................................................... 237
Co-opting Masculinity Ideals .......................................................................... 239
Empathy ........................................................................................................... 242
Making Gender Matter for their Sons .............................................................. 245
Disrupting Normative Masculinity Practices .................................................. 248
Establishing New Norms and Accountability Standards .................................. 251
Violence ........................................................................................................... 256
Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 260

Chapter Nine: The Role of Male Partners of Feminist Mothers in Raising Sons ................................................................. 262
Introduction ...................................................................................................... 262
Feminist Maternal Practice Includes the Father ................................................. 263
Feminism Within the Home .............................................................................. 265
Responsibility For Making Gender Matter ...................................................... 268
Stepping Into Non-Normative Subject Positions ............................................. 271
Partners Stepping into Non-Normative Masculinity Positions ........................ 273
Support for Non-Normative Masculinities ...................................................... 273
Domestic Responsibility and Division of Labour .......................................... 274
Embodied Experience Imbues the Father with Different Meaning .................. 276
My Reflection On the Role of the Partner ....................................................... 278
Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 280

Chapter 10: Conclusion ..................................................................................... 282
Introduction ...................................................................................................... 282
Writing a New Script ....................................................................................... 283
Locating the Findings Within Feminist Research About the Mother and Son .... 285
Limitations of the Research ........................................................................... 294
Further Research .................................................................................................................. 306
Specific Areas That the Thesis May Have Influence On ...................................................... 306
  Contribution to Public Discourse .................................................................................... 306
  Men’s Behaviour Change Programs ................................................................................ 307
  Teach the Teacher Education.......................................................................................... 308
  Parent Education Programs............................................................................................. 309
  Academic Contribution.................................................................................................... 309
  Concluding Comments: Reflections on the Research Process ...................................... 310
Appendix 1: Introduction Letter ......................................................................................... 315
Appendix 2: Plain Language Statement ............................................................................ 316
Appendix 3: Consent Form ............................................................................................... 323
Appendix 4: Demographic Data Form .............................................................................. 326
Appendix 5: Interview Questions ....................................................................................... 329
Reference List .................................................................................................................... 332
INTRODUCTION

Mothers and sons? Do they go together? Isn’t it supposed to be fathers and sons, mothers and daughters? The idea of a mother and son reunion makes people uncomfortable; somehow it doesn’t seem right. I’ve learned that we mothers of sons are afraid, afraid to try to influence male character, afraid of being blamed. We are hesitant to make too big an impact, or to be too visible in our sons’ lives – at the same time that we are desperate to do so, longing to build bridges between ourselves and our male children. (Arcana 1983:xii)

INSPIRATION FOR THE THESIS

Twelve years ago I gave birth to my first son. Amidst the euphoria of giving birth to a perfectly beautiful little human being, I became increasingly aware that his gender was a very big deal for me. As we entered the various social arenas as parent and child it became apparent that his gender was a very big deal for everyone else as well. It was his gender that others engaged with first. Thus I came face to face with preconceived ideas about the differences between male and female and the innate characteristics that each gender was supposedly comprised of. As a feminist, I was familiar with the dangers of this line of thinking; as a mother of a son I suddenly became very fearful.

As I witnessed constant entreaties to accept the ‘truth’ about masculinity in our (my son and I) interactions with the social world, I began to understand why my child’s gender was becoming problematic for me. I did not want others to define him according to preconceived notions of what a boy is, does, thinks, or will be like. I wanted them to see my son for who he was as a little person unfolding in the world responding to stimulus, urged on by curiosity and holding none of those considered ‘normal’ masculinity traits that I felt
would set him up as so very separate and different from me. I baulked at the possibility of his development into adulthood being so sharply defined by parameters that construct masculinity; a masculinity that is the antithesis of feminist ideals and that I believe is so socially destructive.

I grew increasingly concerned by concepts such as “he’s such a boy” or “it’s a boy thing” and horrifically, “boys will be boys”. First, this distressed me because even though he may have male genitals, I refuse to accept that he must fit into such a narrow and yet non-descript set of behaviours, thoughts and emotions. What does “a boy thing” and, “such a boy” mean? I heard myself ask time and time again. Other people’s responses were not satisfying and I would leave the situation concerned that I had come across as aggressive, or worse, that people were left thinking that I was deluding myself, or in denial and not ready to accept my son’s constructed destiny.

Second, the above-mentioned concepts concerned and angered me because they can be used to excuse behaviour (the child’s) or inaction (the parents’) and support resignation rather than responsibility for people’s (men’s/boys’) problematic actions.

Third, I felt increasingly lonely and isolated. I had been reflecting a lot about ways of engaging with my son that privileged his status as a child, a human being, rather than as a boy. I felt strongly that this was a way to open up for him choices about who he wanted to be. Yet at the same time I was finding that I had to increasingly engage in overt acts of resistance to gendered and, as a consequence, behavioural impositions bestowed on my son.

I was struggling to find ways to name thoughts and observations. I was trying to grasp the meaning of what I was experiencing. I found that I did not have the language or concepts to help me make sense of my experiences. In my sense of isolation and feelings of marginalisation I did what I had done many times in the past, I sought out feminist thinkers, writers and friends. I was looking for affirmation and I was looking for strategies that would help me to
take a stand against gendered constructs. These were constructs that feminists have railed against for years.

Feminism has helped affirm for me that constructs around femininity, ideas about how women are, should be, what they feel, and what they need were too often defined and described by men and the social institutions that they held control over. It was a source of comfort and inspiration to immerse myself in a movement, an ideology, a way of life that gave me words and living examples of how women were so much more than bystanders to social/historical machinations. Feminist analysis of society helped me to make sense of the world in which women lived. Feminism gave me insight into how women could be living as women in a post-patriarchal society.

I believe that a large part of patriarchy relies on the construction of gender divisions that set out separate personality traits between the sexes. These divisions, or differences, fit the gendered roles that a patriarchally-structured society creates in order for men to attain and maintain privilege and power. The roles proscribed for women are limiting and demeaning and they deny women access to social, political and material power. Feminists have lobbied for structural change to increase access to power. Women’s voices have become increasingly manifest. The experiences of women in society are more readily available and as such social resources and social policy has begun to respond. Feminism claimed more for women than patriarchy had allowed.

My early experiences of feminism, although demanding recognition for women as they experienced themselves (not as men chose to define us), accepted some common thread running through the veins of every woman that made us different from men. It was in this difference that we found identity and in this identity our purpose and meaning.

As a young feminist, I relished the ideas of strength, confidence and passion that my feminist cohorts urged and celebrated. Working in the area of violence against women further allowed me to immerse myself in woman-centred practice and theory. Working alongside women and for women gave
me a sense of solidarity and political purpose that truly felt like a privilege. I experienced a feminism that utilised the concept of ‘woman’ for political and revolutionary purposes.

I was energised by the idea that there was something special about women that made us different from men. I felt lucky to know the bonds that women create through shared experiences of marginalisation and through existing in this world as not a man. My feminist world, the community I was familiar with supported these ideas too. And, we celebrated them, I was fully immersed in a world that celebrated women, lauded women, knew how to nurture, encourage and rally for women. And then I had a son.

I realised that feminists too had definite ideas about boys. Although my experience of feminism had challenged simplistic, restrictive ideas about women and their identity, boys were still boys and men were just men. Having a son challenged everything for me. It realigned me with feminism because I could not agree to viewing my child or parenting my child in any way that I felt would allow him to grow up to be one of the men in this world that doesn’t think about what it is like for women, or what their privileged position means for women.

Simultaneously, having a son also exiled me from the feminism I had become comfortable with. I was not a mother of a daughter who could pass on feminist women’s wisdom and celebrate in my child’s strength. There were no books for boys that were written by feminists that told them how beautiful they were, how important they were, no “you go boy!” books.

Instead, all I felt that feminism had to teach me and encourage me was how to help my boy emerge into manhood via a process of negation. I noticed myself containing him, curbing his behaviour, restricting behaviour, obsessively attentive to his language and his interpersonal relations with girls. I noticed that I was always the one at the playground, play centre or playgroup curbing my son’s ‘enthusiasm’, obsessing about sharing, providing him with rationales for why he shouldn’t be doing, saying or acting in a certain way. I
was riddled with anxiety and it was killing me emotionally, creating an even greater chasm between him and I. I felt that my feminism was not giving me room to breathe.

In my feminist imagination there were never any excuses or allowances made for the boys but oh so much support and freedom for the girls in feminist talk, writing and socialising. I understood why feminism had focused on girls and their self-esteem, I understood why feminists placed so much stock in the younger female generation yet I became angry, morose, and sad for my son and me.

A part of me felt embarrassed that I had given birth to a son. I was embarrassed by the possibility that he would not behave or interact with the sensibility that I (wrongly) imagined a girl would or does. But, a part of me was also very angry about this embarrassment. When I would meet my fellow colleagues, they would ask me about my child, they would ask me if he was a boy or a girl. Upon hearing he was a boy there was so very often a look of resignation or disappointment or comments about how hard that will be for me. There were insinuations that I must be feeling disappointed, that I was going to miss out on something because I had a boy. I felt shunned by feminism just as I had felt shunned by the non-feminist community. The feminist collective that had given me strength and helped me to formulate alternative ideas was suddenly something I didn’t feel a part of.

I was exhausted. There had to be more out there for me and this child of mine. I had my little boy and I wanted to, in fact had to, believe that there was much more that he could be. And then, I gave birth to my second son and the world of possibility opened up for me.

How could two small people of the same biological gender be so exquisitely different from each other? I found their differences liberating because there was suddenly a clarity that masculinity was much more complex than I had previously imagined. Their presence was helping me to deconstruct traditional masculinity by being little sites of difference in and of themselves.
I wondered how other mothers of boys who had no girls as reference points were making sense of their sons’ developing humanity. I wondered whether other feminist mothers of sons were looking to find ways that celebrated and supported their sons’ humanity without needing to locate it within a gendered context. As I began to think about this more, I felt my focus on their biological gender recede. What began to emerge more strongly was an imperative to engage with all that sits between the gendered binary.

I experienced a more clarified concern as a consequence of this focus. I needed to know more about the practices of gender construction in order to understand how to challenge these practices and resist them. I wanted to help my children explore and experience themselves outside of a gendered norm that I believe as a feminist is restrictive for them. I wanted to know how I, as a parent, could help represent masculinity for my sons that is not demeaning of their potential and that doesn’t perpetuate a privileged status that disconnects them from diversity. I felt I had to refuse masculinity in its dominant form so as to allow my sons’ masculinity to be constructed in response to their humanity and ideas of difference.

My day-to-day lived experience demonstrates how difficult this is. This is further exacerbated by the lack of an Australian feminist collective to support me. The sense of entitlement to do this is consistently questioned by the loud and persistent public debate that focuses on men’s importance in the raising of boys. How can I enquire into masculinity and men from a vantage point that not all men share the same identity without querying the ontological concept of woman? If I want more for my sons than a hegemonic masculinity that is oppressive to women then I must deconstruct masculinity. As a feminist, my focus has always been on the oppressive effects of patriarchal structure and a dominant discourse about masculinity that harms women and restricts structural change.

Ideas about masculinity are so pervasive and persuasive that they have become truth and norm. But, just because normative masculinity is perceived as truth and norm, this does not mean it is so. As a feminist mother of sons, I
feel compelled to critique and challenge this perceived truth and the practices employed within hegemonic masculinity on a daily basis. I feel bound to do so for the sake of equity for women and our quality of life. But, even more profoundly for me, my feminism must somehow help me to resist and challenge the gendered construction of masculinity for the sake of my sons.

Feminism for me was experienced as a politics of solidarity, although, this sense of solidarity had previously been challenged upon becoming pregnant. I think this was due to diverse views within my feminist community towards mothering and motherhood. I experienced this as a disconnection from some, as well as value-laden comments that insinuated my impending motherhood was not something I had wholeheartedly welcomed of my own accord. Needless to say, I had been prepared for this due to previous feminist friends’ and colleague’s experiences and stories.

What I had not prepared for was the sense of alienation that bearing a son had brought me. I believe that feminism, its ideology and commitment to solidarity among women did not make possible the multiplicity of women and men’s lives. The commitment to using the concept of women as a unitary identity for the purpose of political change and representation precludes the possibilities for multiple masculinities as well. As a consequence of giving birth to my sons, I was alerted to how much this was a part of my own thinking.

As a heterosexual woman from a privileged class, I had understood the criticism levelled at feminism from women of colour, lesbian women, working-class women and women with different abilities. However, I had not experienced this sense of ‘other’ or difference outside the solidarity of the white middle-class feminist community. It was the experience of wanting so much more for my sons than a doomed vision of their fate as men and the experience of being with them as boys, from the very beginning of their lives, that alerted me to how traditional feminist ideology made it hard to imagine the possibilities for difference and to be inclusive of this difference.
Poststructural ideas have made it more possible for me to pursue ideas of multiplicity, difference and masculinities within the context of my parenting. This then creates the space to privilege ideas about mother-son relationships that are not part of dominant discourse. As a feminist, post-structural ideas also allow for new imaginings about my sons’ masculinities, where and how this might be difficult and thus possibilities for resistance.

As my relationship with my sons develops and matures, I am beginning to see the possibilities for alliance between men and women. I am determined to ensure that mothers of sons stake a very big claim in their teaching about who and what they can be as grown men. My sons have helped me to re-evaluate my position on men and in so doing I have further developed my feminist analysis. This has been the inspiration for this thesis.

**OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH**

The research surrounding the role that feminist mothers play in the raising of boys is an ongoing and negotiated process. This thesis is an attempt to contribute to the body of knowledge that explores feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons (Abbey 2001; Arcana 1983; Bem 1998; Blakely 2001; Dooley and Fedele 2001; Doucet 2001; O’Reilly 2001; Forcey 1987; 2001; Rashbaum and Silverstein 1994; Rich 1976; Rowland and Thomas 1996; Smith 1996; Thomas 2001; Wells 2001).

In this thesis I consider that the mother and son relationship is configured through the symbolic representation of the gender binary. As a foundational organising system, the gender binary positions the human subject within gender difference discourse. This discourse constructs the mother (as female) and son (as male) as polar opposites. This means that difference becomes the defining focus of the relationship.

The gender binary is totalising because it subsumes heterogeneity amongst and between the two singular categories of identity either male and female or mother and son. In this way, the everyday lived experiences of women are
unaccounted for. Problematically, the gender binary is not neutral; rather, women are positioned as other, and men are held accountable to hegemonic masculinity ideals. This represents the central issue of patriarchal relations, namely the privileging of masculinity above femininity (Walby 1990).

Consequently, the mother and son relationship is a study of the way that gender inequality is reproduced and sustained. This has far reaching implications for the mother and son relationship. Feminist mothers must grapple with how to raise boys whom they love, but who are also implicated in patriarchy by virtue of their social location. The aim of the research is to develop an understanding of the process through which feminist mothers make sense of their relationship with their sons as it is constrained within gender difference discourse and what they might do about this.

The main idea explored in this thesis considers how the feminist mother and son relationship is able to disrupt gender difference discourse, and reposition gendered subjectivities, in order to transform gender relations. I suggest that it is possible to think differently about the mother and son relationship if the relations of power that sustain difference are identified, and the assumptions embedded within gender discourse are queried.

**Thesis Rationale**

The rationale of the thesis is informed by two important considerations: First, what can be learnt about the mother and son relationship when the mother is rendered visible and a poststructural feminist lens is used to explore the relationship and question existing arrangements? And second, if normative masculinity is challenged and there is a visioning of alternative masculinities, are there new possibilities for a mother’s role in her son’s developing masculinity?

**Research Questions**

In order to explore these considerations this thesis is guided by three main research questions:
1. What are feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons?

2. What does gender and masculinity mean for feminist mothers in relation to raising their sons?

3. Do feminist mothers instil a need for their sons to achieve a certain kind of gender? And, if so, how might this work to destabilise dominant gender discourse?

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this research are:

- To explore the ways that feminist mothers of sons navigate their way around the social pressures to raise their sons according to traditional ideals about masculinity.

- To elucidate the practices that feminist mothers of sons engage with in the raising of their sons.

- To give voice to women’s accounts of the consequences and effects of choosing to mother their sons from a feminist perspective.

- To investigate the role that feminist mothers of sons believe their partners play in their sons’ developing masculinity.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to make feminist mothers’ accounts of their maternal practice visible, and in doing so, will hopefully locate itself alongside the process of ongoing social and cultural transformation.

**ASSUMPTIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

The assumptions that ground this research have emerged from three separate and interconnected positions; First, my own personal experience as a feminist mother of sons, second, my belief and commitment to poststructural feminist positions about the subject as relational and ongoingly constituted through discursive practice and third, from a critical review of the literature about
mothers and sons. Importantly the assumptions have developed over the course of the research project itself.

The assumptions of the research include:

- Dominant discourse about gender difference as innate and fixed constrains the mother and son relationship in ways that perpetuate unequal gender relations.

- Feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons is constituted within gender difference discourse at the same time as they make sense of these experiences by drawing on and enacting alternative discourses about gender.

The research develops an understanding of this process through the application of a feminist research methodology.

**Feminist Research**

The mother and son relationship is embedded within dominant discourse about gender difference and is held accountable to normative gender practices. These practices reproduce and maintain ideas about masculinity and femininity as two distinct and innate entities that are finite in nature and universal in kind. As a feminist research project these existing arrangements are questioned because the construction of normative gendered subjectivities reproduces gender relations of male domination and female subordination.

In Chapter 1, I argue that this is a feminist research project that can be considered a deliberate political act designed to raise awareness of the everyday lived experiences of women and to generate ‘an increased level of social consciousness’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007:346). Chapter 1 also identifies the methodological process and the interaction between theoretical ideas and the research data. The research process positions feminist mothers at the centre of the mother and son relationship and the knowledge produced is reflective of this standpoint.
I will argue that the exploration of feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons rearticulates the political relationship between femininity and masculinity. Most of the knowledge that is circulated through public discourse about mothers and sons is not produced from the standpoint of the mother, let alone the feminist mother. This brings the thesis into line with feminist research practice that aims to produce knowledge that reflects the lives of women.

**MOTHER AND SON NARRATIVES**

In Chapter 2, a review of the literature illustrates how the traditional narrative about the mother and son marginalises the mother whilst privileging her sons’ masculinity. Grounded in gender difference discourse the mother and son are held accountable to normative and essentialised ideas about femininity and masculinity. Because she is configured as separate from and different to her son, the mothers’ role is both limited and non-essential in the development of his masculinity (Lashlie 2007; Marsden 2002). As a woman, she is positioned as ‘other’ and this creates a conceptual space for certain writers to caution her against interfering in her sons’ masculine development (Biddulph 1998; Bly 1992; Gaylin 1992).

Feminist writing and research about mothers and sons speaks to the effect of mothering sons within this patriarchal narrative (Arcana 1983; Griffin and Broadfoot 2010; O’Reilly 2001a; 2001b, 2004; Rennie-Forcey 2001; Rich 1976; Thomas 2001). Feminists have assessed this narrative to mean that the mother stands as the obstacle to her sons’ masculinity, at risk of emasculating him and making him dependent on her (Backes 2000; Chodorow 1989; Koppelman 2000; Rich 1976; Smith 1996; Thomas 2001). Feminists also argue that the mother is essentialised and constructed as a powerless figure (Arcana 1983; Benjamin 1998; Green 2004, 2006). These feminists writing about the mother and son also reject admonitions to disconnect and step away from the development of their sons’ masculinity (Dooley and Fedele 2001; Rashbaum and Silverstein 1994).
Contemporary feminist writing and research about women, as mothers, has been wrested from an essentialised and powerless position at the same time as rejecting the patriarchal narrative (Dooley and Fedele 2001; Horwitz 2004; O’Reilly 2001, 2004; Ruddick 1995). This thesis takes up these ideas within the mother and son literature and considers what this might mean when combined with the idea that gender is relationally produced. I suggest that it may be possible that the mother is in a unique position to inform the gendered interactions between herself and her sons. A starting point for considering this further is through an interrogation of gender difference discourse.

**GENDER DIFFERENCE DISCOURSE**

In Chapter 3, I explore the mother and son as they emerge through discourse and practices grounded in ideas about gender as socially pre-existent, fixed and unitary. I argue that while this relationship remains entrenched within the gender binary it is at risk of being relegated to a theoretical cul-de-sac. This means there is little option available to think of the mother and son as anything else other than a reflection of difference between men and women.

Because the gender binary is a relational system, masculinity is defined through femininity (Belsey 2002), each working as the differential tool for the other. Similarly the son is defined by his relationship to his mother. Because masculinity can be configured as the absence of the ‘feminine’, the mother becomes the first obstacle in a boy’s journey to claiming his masculine self. The role of the mother is to facilitate a boy’s masculinity by her son learning ‘to differentiate themselves from their mother and other women’ (Thomas 2001:123).

That a son’s masculinity is dependent on his rejection of femininity is highly problematic for gender relations. Thomas (2001) is adamant that this process of negation can:

… manifest itself in the expression of misogynistic attitudes and sexual harassment… as well as in aggressive behaviours
toward other males and is thus, arguably, detrimental to society’ (p.123).

Thus, it is my contention that the mother’s value is positioned similarly to that of her position (as female) on the gender binary. That is, she is there symbolically to be of use to her son as male. She is held accountable to normative gender practices designed to facilitate ‘masculinity’ developing in her son. As with the gender binary, it is not an equal relationship and she is not higher on the hierarchy.

**REPOSITIONING GENDERED SUBJECTIVITIES**

Chapter 4 explores how gender difference discourse operates as a relation of power. I use the term ‘discourse’ in the Foucaultian sense where it is the ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972:49). The mother and son relationship like everything else we can see, talk about or imagine is a product of power relations. Power is central to the creation of possibilities and impossibilities for the mother and son relation and is thus central to this thesis.

Weedon’s (1987) definition of the term power is the foundational idea for the use of this term throughout the thesis.

> Power is a relation. It inheres in difference and is a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individuals (p.113).

The use of this notion of power is a conscious attempt to identify how gender discourse, as a relation of power, makes certain meanings of the male and female subject and how these meanings are produced and attached to the mother and son relationship.

The thesis seeks to draw attention to discourse and the assumptions within discourse because doing so facilitates a clearer understanding of how the
mother and son (as embedded within gender discourse) are constructed through relations of power. It would seem obvious to state that the mother and son relationship is about gender. I am keen to point out, however, that our assumptions about gender are both prescriptive of the mother and son relation and reflective of the power relations through which the production and maintenance of these assumptions end up applying to the mother and son. But most importantly it is by drawing attention to these assumptions, that is, where they come from and how and why they matter to the mother and son, that enable different forms of the mother and son relationship to be considered possible. As long as these assumptions are unchecked, they have the power of truth and the mother and son relationship can be held hostage against these assumptions.

Poststructural feminism, as a conceptual framework is able to benefit investigation of assumptions. A key component of poststructural inquiry is to ask questions about how we have come to think what we do, and what is obscured from our thinking as a consequence. The process of asking questions works to undermine certainty, including the claim that it is possible to be in possession of the truth (Belsey 2002).

Questioning truth claims can also help track the dominant stories about the social world and its inhabitants that are perpetually being constituted (Walby 1990). Possible questions that might be useful in regards to the truth claims about the mother and son could look something like these:

- Why is it important for men to socialise boys to become men?
- What can we learn about masculinity because of this allocation of responsibility?
- How has it come to be known and accepted that masculinity is so dissimilar to femininity?
- How has masculinity come to mean what it does?
• Whose interests are best served by this idea of masculinity? What assumptions about gender are present in the exhortation that men must socialise boys to become men?

• Who do these assumptions benefit?

Another way of undermining dominant discourse and the truth claims about gender is to draw on alternative discourses. This thesis utilises alternative ideas about gender as relational, socially constructed and ongoingly negotiated (Butler 1999a, 2006b; Davies 1989; Mansfield 2000) to throw into sharp relief the truth claim about gender essentialism. The presence of alternative or multiple discourses draws attention to ‘inconsistencies and gaps present in dominant or central discourse’ (Horwitz 2004:45).

The potential for disrupting the ‘truth’ is available to those interacting with alternative discourse. I suggest that the mother and son can be positioned alongside, but does not have to be solely bound by dualistic, hierarchical and fixed ideas about masculinity and femininity. I will argue that this establishes a critical theoretical opening for re-presenting the mother and son.

At the same time as gender discourse positions the mother and son, they are simultaneously in interaction with this discourse. The subject is not a passive receptacle for discourse; rather the subject enacts it. Butler (2005) argues that there is always an “I” that is in relation to the norms and values within discourse. That is, the subject is taking a position, always, in regards to discourse. This is a dynamic process of masculinising and feminising through which the gendered subject emerges as socially visible. In this way the subject is an interactive, contextual agent (Lowe 1998).

It is possible that feminist mothers do not necessarily successfully iterate the practices, actions and interactions prescribed in dominant patriarchal discourse. By drawing on Butler’s (1999a; 2006b) conceptualisation of gender as performative the thesis will consider how unsuccessful dominant gender discourse may be in feminist mothers relationships with their sons.
Interwoven with Butler’s (1999a; 2006b) notion of performativity are West and Zimmerman’s (1987) theorising of ‘doing gender’ that configures gender as a continual iteration of masculinity and femininity and as a consequence of practice, manifest through interaction. West and Zimmerman (1987) assert that we do gender in order to demonstrate eligibility to our sex/gender category. In this way, doing gender is about being accountable to normative standards of masculinity and femininity. The thesis explores if and how these standards are different within a feminist mother and son relationship. Some of the questions that inform this exploration are as follows:

- What legitimates masculine subjectivity in a home where the mother activates a problematisation of normative gender practices?

- How does this compare or set up a critical distancing from normative masculinity discourse and practice?

- Does this contribute towards establishing the potential for transformation of subjectivity?

- At the very least does this hold normative discourse accountable?

These questions inform both research structure and analysis and intend to advantage the perspectives of self-identified feminist mothers of sons. I seek to position the mother in her relationship with her son as central and agentic. This relies on the notion that a son’s relationship and experience of his feminist mother is constitutive of his gendered subjectivity.

**Feminist Maternal Practice**

After considering the theoretical potential for reconfiguring gendered subjectivities, Chapter 5 explores the idea that it is possible feminist mothers are in the position to ‘do gender’ through enacting a specific maternal practice in their relationships with their sons. I start by suggesting that one of the ways that mothers are positioned through gender difference discourse is through being held accountable to motherhood discourse. This discourse
establishes expectations and standards to which women, as mothers are expected to conform. The ideal mother is always connected, emotionally available, doesn’t yell and finds parenting meaningful (Green 2004).

Adrienne Rich (1976) argues that it is possible to theorise women’s experiences of motherhood as distinct from the patriarchal institution of motherhood. It is from this paradigm the mother as maternal subject emerges (Everingham 1994; Green 2004; Horwitz 2004). The maternal subject is able to be both resistant to dominant discourse and agentic when she enacts feminist discourses about mothers, motherhood and mothering (O’Reilly 2004; 2008).

Through consideration of the maternal subject as agentic it is then possible to explore how ideas about gender difference can be disrupted. Feminist theorising about motherhood re-qualifies mothers experiences and practices, and values their intentions and values as feminists and experts. Feminist researchers, practitioners and mothers do not always see themselves as victims of circumstance or as passive individuals overcome by social expectation (Horwitz 2004). Instead, they have found that feminist mothers participate in the relations of power by enacting feminist discourse that disrupts truth discourse about women (and mothers) and by facilitating critical consciousness with their children (Green 2004; Horwitz 2004).

**Feminist Mothers and Sons: A Discursive Route for Disrupting Gender Discourse and Re-Positioning Gendered Subjectivities**

Chapter’s 6, 7, 8 and 9 present the analysis of the data and demonstrate how research participants’ maternal practice with sons draws on a feminist analysis about both motherhood and gender. The data show that this is in order to position themselves and their sons in such a way as to develop a critical distance from their positioning within gender difference discourse. In large part this is evidenced by their reluctance to be held accountable to
normalising standards that their feminist analysis and values have problematised.

Analysis of the data identifies the conscious decision of feminists to mother against normative standards. Exploring how and where dominant gender discourse circulates through this relationship, provides the access point for examining the discursive routes through which the mother and son relation is constituted. This creates a conceptual space to view alternative discourses feminist mothers enact in their interactions with their sons. An exploration of feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons provides insight into the ways that they redistribute and reposition their own subjectivity.

**CONCLUSION**

I have suggested that gender discourse works to impose particular positions on the mother and son. I have also argued that the mother and son are given structure and shape through the gender binary and that this emulates and reproduces the current gender order, emphasises gender difference and constructs gender as a socially pre-existing attribute of the individual.

Drawing on poststructural feminist theorising the main contention of this thesis is that despite the dominant gender discourse and the organising structure of the gender binary, it is possible to consider that the mother and son relationship is a potential site for the repositioning of gender identity.

I am inclined to agree with Pease (2000) when he suggests that the dominant discourse about gender difference can be considered as misrecognition of the subject that constitutes a form of social injustice. Thus the transformation of subjectivity as well as the restructuring of oppressive power relations is necessary to achieve social justice. I have identified the theoretical ideas that the thesis will employ in order to reconfigure the mother and son relationship as a discursive route through which it is possible to disrupt the current gender order.
It is important to flag that I have chosen to focus on the mother and son relationship as a site for social transformation. Feminist analysis has long argued that structural and social change relies on both the restructuring and reconfiguration of both the private and public domains. This thesis however, takes one of these, a private domain, and explores the potential for social transformation through the repositioning of subjectivities. I acknowledge that there needs to be concerted effort in both domains for change to be effected. However this relationship, I believe can be theorised so as to demonstrate the contribution that feminist mothers of sons are making through their mothering practice.

I turn now to identifying the methodological approach I have taken in order to explore feminist mothers’ experiences.
CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCHING
FEMINIST MOTHERS’ EXPERIENCES OF RAISING SONS

INTRODUCTION
This study explores feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons and emphasises how feminism’s engagement with ideas of gender and masculinity intersect with the mother-son relationship. A qualitative method was used to explore the research participants’ subjective understanding of raising their sons. This chapter will discuss the theoretical framework of the thesis, the research methodology and procedures of data collection and analysis will be identified. By presenting a description of the methodological process, readers will be able to understand how the research narrative developed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Feminist Research
Feminist research documents women’s lives and concerns (Brooks 2007) aiming to make visible their diverse experiences and reveal the power relations that have subjugated their social realities (Ackerly and True 2010; De Vault 1996). Feminist research is a complex process that is informed by and interacts with theory, epistemology and method. Because it is connected in principle to feminist struggle, the research goal is concerned with contributing to change in gender relations. Feminist research methods are accountable to the research subject by ensuring that descriptions of her experience do not reproduce problematic categories of identity (De Vault 1996).
Feminist researchers claim that the social dominance of men creates research knowledge that is partial and reflective of social dominance (Haraway 1991; Harding 2004). Furthermore, traditional research often misrepresents women’s experiences (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007) and does not provide non-problematic understandings of women’s social reality. Therefore, feminist research benefits from bringing women into the research domain, re-qualifying women’s knowledges and using this information to generate social change. Feminist research begins to build knowledge from women’s descriptions of their experiences by constructing a better picture of women’s lives.

**Feminist Standpoint Epistemology**

Feminist standpoint epistemology is underpinned by two main assumptions: first, knowledge is situated and perspectival; and second there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced (Hekman 2004). This means the social location of the subject constitutes the knowledge that is produced.

**Rationale**

A review of the literature indicates that the bulk of the knowledge produced about the mother and son relationship does not arise from the standpoint of the mother. Patriarchal accounts of the mother and son relationship privilege the male standpoint the way general power relations privilege men leading to the production of a gendered hierarchy of knowledge that references men as the starting point from which to make sense of the social world. By working from feminist mothers’ standpoint, the knowledge from this research project is constituted from within the mother and son relationship, about the mother and son relationship, by mothers of sons. A feminist standpoint re-qualifies her experience and ‘places women at the center of the research process’ where their ‘concrete experiences provide the starting point from which to build knowledge’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007:56).

Feminist standpoint theorists assert that women’s vantage point from the margins of a patriarchal society provides visual clarity, of the social
structures and relations that they are both marginalized from and oppressed by (Frankenberg 1993). Feminist standpoint research is interested in understanding how women experience and conceptualise their social positions.

**Critiquing feminist standpoint epistemology**

Significant shifts in feminist standpoint epistemology have occurred in response to poststructuralist concerns that a feminist standpoint can be misunderstood as capable of revealing a grand theory of women’s oppression (Harding 1997; Harstock 1997). Conversely, feminist standpoint theorists have argued that there is concern a poststructural feminist focus on diversity and difference risks diluting the political impact of feminism (Harstock 1997). However, for the purpose of this thesis, I reject the idea that standpoint theory and postmodernism are mutually exclusive. I agree with Hekman (1997) and Hirschmarm (1997) that standpoint theory is not at odds with the notion of difference; rather it can be used as a means for developing different feminist standpoints.

Hekman (2004) suggests, that feminist standpoint epistemology reflects a paradigm shift in feminism that acknowledges and focuses on the situatedness of all knowledge. Feminist standpoint theory thus accounts well for a contemporary feminist imperative to recognise the difference between women, not only the different lived experiences between men and women. She argues that feminism and feminist research should work out ways to account for these differences and asserts:

> Women speak from multiple standpoints, producing multiple knowledges. But this does not prevent women from coming together to work for specific political goals (Hekman 1997:362).

Standpoint theory does not need to connect all women to each other through proposing a singular shared structural position. A standpoint is not only a structural position, it is also a discursive position and can reveal the effect of
power on women who are positioned through cultural and social discursive constructions such as gender.

Feminist standpoint theory re-qualifies the subjugated experience locating it as a starting point from which to understand the effects of discourse. By facilitating a better understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge, standpoint theory can explicate the machinations of the social and gender order (Harding 1997). I think feminist standpoint theory can address the poststructural concern about universalising and exclusionary discourses and can explore their effect from multiple feminist standpoints. Importantly, the power and value of feminist standpoint theory is the idea that the more alternative stories there are, the less force the dominant story has (Hekman 1997).

I am not interested in obtaining an objective account, but rather think it is useful to draw on a poststructurally aligned feminist standpoint to dismantle the dominant account. Similarly, both Hekman (1997) and Harstock (1997) agree that standpoint theory offers a partial perspective of the effect of hegemonic discourse and that the differences amongst and between women are all connected to power. Feminist standpoint theories need to be defined and understood as counter-hegemonic discourse aimed at destabilising hegemonic discourse.

Feminist standpoint theory is a research epistemology that rejects positivist scientific methods that claim the potential for ascertaining objective truth (Haraway 1991). This position fits well with poststructural feminist researchers who problematise truth claims (Hekman 2007). However, extending this logic is problematic as it could then be argued that the broader truth claim of women’s oppression might be untrue. This makes the feminist push to recognise women’s experience of oppression vulnerable, if male domination is considered only a story rather than the truth (Hekman 2007). This is a difficult issue for feminist methodology.
Hekman (2007) suggests feminist researchers need to make ‘some claim to produce valid knowledge’ (p.543). She posits that one of the ways of trying to resolve this potential impasse is a re-defining of empiricism that better fits feminism per se. This re-definition considers how values influence the knowledge that is produced, precluding a value-free and objective outcome. Hekman (2007) contemplates an empiricism that refuses to be confined within a true/false positivist dichotomy, instead focusing on the exploration of how knowledge itself is produced, continuously and differently across context. She argues that a material impact on the subject remains, despite all knowledge being constructed and therefore not pure or true. What we learn about a particular phenomenon may not be the truth; however, what we do with what we learn has ‘real, material consequences’ (Hekman 2007:544).

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) assert feminist standpoint theory resists having to establish a connection between knowledge produced through feminist research and the notion of truth. Instead, feminist standpoint theory focuses on exploring how knowledge is connected to power. Consequently, it important to make visible the relations in power that produce knowledge and the way that gender is the foundational organising principle.

Accordingly, I do not claim that the data or the analysed stories in this thesis are reflective of ‘truth’ about mothers and sons. Instead, I articulate how feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons reflects relations of power in which their experiences are constituted, and, how their experiences of raising sons provides information about ways the participants respond to gender as an organising principle of the relationship.

**Truth is a situated product**

This thesis is a situated product; the knowledge generated is specifically located within the social and temporal context of the participants’ demographic, politics, life experience and social location. It cannot and does not attempt to speak for the mother and son relationship in general. There is no attempt to generate an overarching explanation for the way that mothers
and sons do or should experience their relationship. Developing a unifying account of women’s experiences of raising sons runs the risk of epistemic sovereignty (Rouse 2003). For me it is not possible to capture any objective truth about the relationship at all.

At the same time, I assert that women’s experiences of raising sons (from a feminist perspective) can be considered subjugated knowledge. Therefore, the knowledge that is produced supports the re-emergence of women’s experiences, asking for it to be re-qualified as relevant, useful and contributory to the general debate around gendered subjectivity and normative masculinity. There are very real effects of gender discourse when it is propelled by science and truth (Foucault 1980). The effects of gender discourse infiltrate the mother and son relationship and are problematic and oppressive. Foucault (1980) argued that there is much at stake should the subjugated knowledge of everyday lived experience remain dis-qualified. It is this imperative that propels the research process onward.

**Feminist standpoint epistemology and the mother and son**

While feminist mothers of sons may be marginalized from multiple positions as women, mothers and through class, race and sexuality, my research is interested in their experience as constituted through alternative discourses about gender and motherhood. Pease (2000) suggests ‘where one stands shapes what one can see and how one can understand it’ (p.5). Researching feminist mothers’ experiences gathers different accounts of the relationship. The research participants locate themselves within a particular standpoint and this can generate information otherwise obscured by traditional accounts of the mother and son. It is possible to use the concept of standpoint to distinguish between structural location and discursive practices that construct the subject (Pease 2000).

The interaction between feminist mother and son offers an insight into the way that discursive practices (as relations of power) about gender, masculinity and the mother are taken up and interacted with. This explication
matches the emancipatory ideals of feminist research practice (Ackerly and True 2010; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007). In turn this resonates with poststructural feminism’s critical exploration of power relations and constructed identity.

**DESIGNING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research questions arose from a review of the literature around mothers and sons, poststructural accounts of gender as socially constructed and around ideas of normative masculinity and femininity. They also came from my own struggles with raising sons.

**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH THROUGH SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

This is a qualitative research study. I have searched for meaning through analysing language and action rather than through numbers. As a research method, qualitative data analysis involves connecting ideas to data and using the data to test ideas (Dey 2005).

I utilised semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of feminist mothers of sons. Semi-structured interviews are a useful way of gathering information because in-depth interviews focus on ‘getting at the “subjective” understanding’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007:118) of the participants’ situation in relation to her particular context.

Data from qualitative interviews are inherently subjective, ‘inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically, and contextually bound’ (Fontana and Frey 2005:695). However, even though data are not an objective statement of truth, they can still provide insight and understanding into the lived experience of the participants. The goal here is to contribute to a story about the mother and son experience rather than ascertain objective fact. While the potential for objectivity and neutrality is debated (Fontana and Frey 2005), both respondent and researcher do not engage in the interview process from a neutral position about the topic. The data that are produced is contextually,
and historically, bound by two individuals whose assumptions, values and intentions shape the emerging story. I view the interview process as a collaborative process of constructing knowledge that can contribute to the general group (Fontana and Frey 2005) of feminist mothers.

**RECRUITMENT PROCESS**

I utilised a snowballing sampling methodology. An advertising flyer was posted in *The Mothers of Intervention Internet Forum* requesting interested feminist mothers of sons to make email contact. The forum’s owner passed on the name of the project to four interested acquaintances who replied quickly. They then made contact with women in their social networks. Additionally, I used my own social network to recruit. From these two sources I subsequently interviewed 20 women. I have not formally advertised for participants.

All potential participants made initial contact via email and received a research data collection package. This included: an introduction letter (see Appendix 1); a copy of the plain language statement detailing the research and the data collection process (see Appendix 2), a consent form with reply paid envelope (see Appendix 3). After receiving their consent forms, I arranged an interview time and venue.

**DATA COLLECTION**

**Interview Location**

The research participants determined the location of the interviews. Of the twenty interviews conducted ten were interviewed in their home, six at my home, three in the participants’ work place and one at a café.

**Recording the Data**

The interview was recorded electronically for transcribing. The interviews were scheduled to run for 1.5 hours. In the majority of cases this time limit was met. However, most research participants chose to engage with the
researcher for a good deal longer once the interview had concluded. Post interview discussion was not recorded. Most participants asked me many questions and reflected on their experience of the interview and the interview questions. Even though these discussions were not recorded, they have informed this research. The research participants were forthright about wanting to contribute to the wider body of knowledge that women who mother have gained, and as feminists they were hoping to validate feminist ideas about mothers and about raising boys.

**Research Participant Demographic Details**

The feminist mothers interviewed for this project are representative of the female normative ideal, that is, they are predominantly white, tertiary educated, middle to upper class, heterosexual women. They enact their maternal practice from a feminist frame and describe a sense of entitlement to intervene and construct a worldview for their children that reflects their feminism. Likewise, the fathers of their sons are representative of the normative male ideal. They are heterosexual, white, and predominantly middle to upper class, most of them are tertiary educated and all of them (bar one retiree) are employed. Most are white-collar professionals. Importantly all of the research participants work part time and the majority of their partners work full time. This positions the research participants within a traditional dominant paradigm, which impacts on the capacity for the research data to be produced from a partial perspective. It presumably affects their sons’ experience of their mother and may reinforce gender difference along the normative axis.

I did not set out to recruit mothers who work part-time and whose domestic arrangements parallel patriarchal divisions of labour; however, it turned out this way. Consequently, this has resulted in the identification of significant political ramifications and skews the sample. This is a limitation of the data and is somewhat in tension with the research participants’ maternal practice goals. This is discussed further in Chapter 9 and at the end of the thesis and I posit alternative ways of making sense of this tension.
This research also takes up the concerns of second-wave feminist women writing about the mother and son. To this end, I thought it interesting to track any changes or ‘advances’ contemporary feminists may have made in making sense of the mother and son. Because many of the second-wave feminists applied a strong critique to their heterosexual male partners this invites a comparison with my thesis.

It is important to reinforce, that this thesis is a situated product informed by my own social location. I wanted to start my exploration from a familiar place to understand it better, and I am a heterosexual woman in a relationship with the father of my sons.

I also wanted to consider how gender might be done differently despite the location of this practice within the absolute norm. If father and sons live under the same roof, there is an active and ongoing construction of masculinity between the two, some of it observed by feminist mothers. I thought this would yield interesting knowledge from mothers through a feminist lens. I was interested in asking: If the partners of the participants are positioned so strongly within the norm, how might feminist maternal practice work? What might non-normative masculinity practice look like when it is enacted by men and women, who from an exterior perspective appear so normal?

Accordingly, the research criteria required all women to identify themselves as feminists and to be in a heterosexual relationship with the father of their male children. The definition of mother and father is connected to their direct biological connection with their son/s. And the notion of relationship is applied, in this thesis, to the mother and father as intimate partners living together with their son/s.

Twenty participants were interviewed. Eighteen reside in urban Melbourne and two in rural Victoria. The participants were aged 30 years to 64 years. All but one are tertiary educated and none work full time. At the beginning of each interview, I collected brief demographic information (see Appendix 4).
Participant biographies

Names were replaced by pseudonyms chosen by the participants. All are in relationships with heterosexual men who are the father of their sons, but details of their married status were not sought. The term ‘partner’ is therefore used throughout this thesis. In order to accrue more complex demographic data I chose to ask participants to identify their country of birth and their religious status. While I am aware that religion can be excluded from cultural analytics, as someone who identifies as Jewish, I am also aware that religious identity can have strong cultural meaning for others. Where participants identified their religious affiliation I have included this in the data. When they identified that their religion is not applicable it is not stated.

**Eleanor** was born in the USA and is a 38-year-old university academic who works part time. Eleanor describes herself as a feminist historian. Eleanor identifies as Jewish. Her partner is self-employed and together they have three children, two boys in primary school and a two-year-old girl. Eleanor lives in an urban environment.

**Simran** was born in India and is a 40-year-old woman currently studying for her PhD. She works part time as a counsellor and does some consultancy work in the area of violence against women. Simran’s partner works full time and together they have two primary school aged children, a boy and a girl. Simran was born in India and lives in an urban environment. Simran identifies as Buddhist.

**Leah** was born in Australia and is a 30-year-old woman currently studying part time for her PhD and also works part time. Leah’s partner works full time and together they have three children, a son in primary school, a daughter at preschool and a one-year-old son. Leah lives in the city.

**Kate** was born in Australia and is 39 years old and a doctoral graduate, she currently works part time as a museum curator. Kate identifies as Jewish. Her partner works full time and together they have three children, a daughter and
son in primary school, and a son in preschool. Kate lives in an urban environment.

Rose was born in Australia and is a 40-year-old musician who works part time. Her partner works full time and together they have two sons, both of whom are in primary school. Rose lives in a rural environment.

Muriel was born in Australia and is a tertiary educated 39-year-old artist who is engaged in casual work. Her partner works full time and together they have two sons, both of whom attend part-time childcare. Muriel lives in an urban environment.

Helen was born in Australia and is a 42-year-old doctoral graduate who is currently on maternity leave from an academic position in the area of archaeology. Her partner works part time and together they have two young sons. Helen lives in an urban environment.

Mary was born in Australia and is a 37-year-old university law lecturer who works part time. Mary’s partner works full time and together they have twin sons who attend primary school. Mary identifies as a lapsed Catholic and lives in an urban environment.

Iris was born in Australia and is a 36-year-old teacher who works part time. Iris identifies as Jewish. Her partner works full time and together they have three sons, two of whom are at primary school. Iris lives in an urban environment.

Katja was born in Australia and is a 45-year-old postgraduate part time student and a theatre director. She is engaged in casual work. Katja identifies as Catholic. Her partner works and studies part time and together they have two sons, the eldest in secondary school and the youngest at preschool. Katja lives in an urban environment.

Nina was born in Australia and is a 38-year-old postgraduate part-time student. Nina identifies as Jewish. Her partner works full time and together they have two small sons. Nina lives in an urban environment.
Susan was born in Australia and is a 39-year-old tertiary educated woman who works part time in the childcare and local government sector. Her partner works full time and together they have a young son and live with her partner’s primary school-aged daughter. Susan lives in an urban environment.

Doreen was born in Australia and is a 63-year-old woman with postgraduate qualifications. She currently works part time in the education and literacy sector. Her partner is retired and together they have three grown up children, two sons and a daughter. Doreen divides her time between living in an urban and rural environment.

Siri was born in Sweden and is a 52-year-old woman who was born in Sweden. She is a doctoral graduate and currently works part time in women’s health. Her partner works full time and together they have two sons, one in secondary school and the other in primary school. Siri lives in an urban environment.

Catherine was born in Australia and is a 47-year-old artist with postgraduate qualifications, she currently works part time. Her partner works full time and together they have two sons, one in secondary school and the other at primary school. Catherine lives in an urban environment.

Elma was born in Australia and is a 42-year-old tertiary educated woman who works part time in women’s health promotion. Her partner works full time and together they have two children, a son in secondary school and a daughter in primary school. Elma lives in an urban environment.

Bonny was born in Chile and is a 40-year-old tertiary educated woman who works part time as a flight attendant. Her partner works full time and together they have one son who is at primary school. Bonny lives in an urban environment.

Miriam was born in Australia and is a 38-year-old doctoral graduate and an actor who currently works part time. Miriam identifies as Anglican. Her
partner works part time and together they have three children, a daughter at primary school and two young sons. Miriam lives in an urban environment.

Anna was born in Australia and is a 45-year-old postgraduate student who works and studies part time. Her partner works part time and together they have a son at primary school. Anna also has a grown son from a previous relationship. Anna lives in a rural environment.

Gloria was born in England and is 38 years old, has postgraduate qualifications in women’s health promotions and currently works part time in events management. Her partner works full time and together they have a son and daughter both at primary school. Gloria lives in an urban environment.

**Interview Process**

The interview questions were grounded in a feminist research framework aimed at gathering accounts of women’s lived experiences particularly around ideas of gender and power. The questions were divided into five separate themes, which included: Feminism and Parenting; Gender, Masculinity and Partnership; Societal Messages about Parenting Sons; Relationship with Son; Hopes for Son. Each theme had a number of questions that I could refer to throughout the interview and that were used as a springboard for discussion (see Appendix 5).

In the initial stage of the data collection process, I adhered to the majority of questions in a linear order according to the themed sections. Later, the interview questions were utilised as triggers for reflection and unstructured storytelling. The format was semi-structured to support the exploration of issues of interest, triggered by key themed questions. The goal was to gather data that reflected my thematic breakdown, which is why I ensured I asked questions that attended to each heading. At the same time, I wanted to gather some explanatory data (Hesse-Biber 2007) that I believed would emerge with a semi-structured format that could follow (to an extent) the participants’ stories. Often this would take the form of directly responding to the participants’ comments. In the following example, I start with a set question
from my question guide and follow up Bonny’s comments with an ‘in the moment’ question that had not been predetermined.

Researcher: (Set Question) “Have you found yourself doing or not doing something with [your son] as a result of your feminist values?”

Bonny: “I will give you an example, it’s me being a café latte mum, but sharing that experience with [my son]. Someone made a really interesting statement the other day and it is a woman we clash with... she said something to my friend who has five kids, she said, ‘Are you disappointed you didn’t have a girl? If it was a girl you could take her out for coffee.’ And I think, why wouldn’t you take a boy? What’s the difference? So I would do things with James that are typical for girls.”

Researcher: (Follow up probe) “So tell me what it is about that comment she made that struck you? Can you tell me more about that?”

Bonny: “One thing about that was that already she is classifying people and that gets bigger, and then like there will be that sort of segregation which invariably for men creates problems... I am not going to go along with that...Why can’t you share that with your child? Try and have that experience with them regardless of gender? I don’t, in my way of thinking, I don’t see it is less possible for a boy.”

This follow up question or probe (Hesse-Biber 2007) demonstrates how the researcher can get at hidden experiences and assumptions. The follow up question drew out Bonny’s concerns about the ways that gender categorisation constrains opportunities for the mother and son relationship, produces segregation and that Bonny believes this contributes to poor relations between men and women. If I had only asked the initial question, it is doubtful there would have been such an elaborate account of Bonny’s
position. The researcher’s role is to ask a question but it is also important to listen and then ask clarification on certain points to thicken an account and provide more data (Hesse-Biber 2007).

**Positioning the researcher within the interview process**

From first contact with the research participants up to and during the interviews themselves, I was forthright about my personal position (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007) as both a researcher and a feminist mother of sons. They were aware that I had significant vested interest in the research as a whole. As a feminist researcher, I am committed to recognising the shared experiences between the participants and myself, as well as validating and normalising the differences. One of the ways that I tried to achieve this was by acknowledging where my comments and questions were coming from.

As a feminist researcher, I want to reduce the hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007), and I tried to achieve this through disclosing certain shared experiences. As a feminist counsellor, I am familiar with techniques of normalising and validation to re-qualify women’s subjugated experiences. Consequently, occasionally I introduced personal experiences to position myself alongside the respondent.

The interviews were an interactive experience resembling a dialogue about ideas and about the experience of raising sons. The ethos of the interview was one of self-disclosure by the researcher recognising shared experiences and valuing doing so. This reflected the feminist grounding and the intention of the research as a feminist project (Creswell 1998).

I adopted a position of curiosity and openness as I began the interviews themselves. This was not difficult as I was very excited to connect with other self-identified feminists and valued the potential to learn from them. Because I had developed the themes and questions already, I had specific ideas about the interview but remained open to new questions formulated ‘on the go’ in response to participants’ comments. I did not have pre-existing requirements for how they were to respond to the questions or parameters regarding what I
wanted them to cover. This is not anathema to feminist interviewing (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007) and while I often took control of which question to ask and when to ask it, I was supportive of the respondents’ decisions to focus on particular experiences. I also wanted to be supportive of changes in direction because while I was aware of my own experiences as a feminist mother of sons, I believed strongly that there would be ideas, positions and stories that would be different from my own. This would become an important source for data that alerted me to new ways of thinking and that reinforced and/or undermined some of my own assumptions.

I think it is prudent to acknowledge my prior experience with semi-structured interviews. Prior to this research project, I worked as a counsellor for ten years. Consequently I am comfortable and open to spontaneity. This comfort is supported by experience, and the long-held attitudes and positions of curiosity and non-knowing. As a result, I really enjoyed the interview process and felt energised after each one.

Given that the research is grounded in feminist theory and ideas, the data collection process aimed to contribute to social transformation and to support women’s lives (Ackerly and True 2010). I was committed to an interview experience that is generous, respectful and supportive of women’s descriptions.

Transcription

All of the research interviews have been transcribed verbatim. The researcher has transcribed six of these and a professional located at a university in Australia transcribed the remaining fourteen.

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

Approach to Analysis

Given the small number of interviews and a commitment to staying as close to the participant’s words as possible, I employed a manual qualitative
method to explore how participants understood their experiences of raising sons in everyday life (Sangster 1994), rather than computer-assisted analysis.

There is no singular feminist data analysis method, rather a number of methods that are consistent with a feminist research ethic (Ackerly and True 2010). The overall data analysis method that I used was designed to fit my research questions and to dovetail into a poststructural feminist framework. Creswell (1998) suggests that it is not unusual to custom fit a data analysis method. And so the analysis can be described as a grounded theory approach but it is also resonant of some of the key processes described in Hesse-Biber’s (2007) account of feminist in-depth interview analysis. Both approaches presented useful ways of engaging with content rich interview transcripts.

**Grounded Theory**

The grounded theory method was created by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and is used extensively in social justice research that focuses on contributing to challenging oppression and is both a method and a product of research inquiry (Charmaz 2005). It engages in multiple levels of data analysis (Ackerly and True 2010), generating a conceptual framework that supports theoretical interpretations of the data (Charmaz 2005). In grounded theory the meaning of the concepts are developed through interaction and reflection on the data (Ackerly and True 2010).

A key strategy of grounded theory data analysis is the way that the researcher uses the data at the same time as reflecting on the data so that both processes inform the other (Charmaz 2005; Dey 2005). In this way, grounded theory method is iterative of analysis and the resulting theoretical ideas are grounded in the data that has been produced.

I have adopted grounded theory guidelines as a tool for data analysis but adhere to Charmaz’s (2005) positioning of the theory away from a positivist imperative: the researcher maintains a focus on the object of study rather than being entangled in the imperative of technical verification and adherence to a
strict procedural logic. She positions grounded theory within a social constructivist frame that rejects the notion of decontextualized and objective data that exists external to the social world. Rather, the researcher recognizes their location in the social landscape where the data is both produced and analyzed. Charmaz (2005) asserts that the researcher makes sense of the data as a consequence of their own biography, intentions, relationships to the participant’s and their research experiences. Put simply, the researcher co-creates the data and objectivity is displaced.

Grounded theory fits well with feminist research because it is a structured inquiry that is useful for exploring questions that have historically been obscured by dominant discourses (Ackerly and True 2010). Grounded theory also resonates well with this research project because its tenets recognize the interconnectedness of researcher and subject and the role that the researcher plays in the construction of the analysis story. Grounded theory researchers emphasise that the researcher is not separate from inquiry but rather their location within the research process is iterative of the research process (Dey 2005; Karp 2007).

**In-Depth Interview Analysis**

Similar to grounded theory notions, the analysis of in-depth interviews is an iterative process where the researcher moves back and forwards between the data and different types of researcher memos and reflections in order to build an analytic story (Dey 2005; Karp 2007). The analysis of the data is the mechanism through which an argument about the research story is developed. The story develops through a process of engaging with the data a number of times and in different ways as an argument is developed out of the interpretation of the data and ongoingly reconsidered (Ackerly and True 2010).

**DEVELOPING THEMATIC CATEGORIES**

In order to develop thematic categories, I started by coding the data. Charmaz (2005) describes coding as a way of naming what is going on in the data and
part of the process that builds the analytic groundwork that will later be refined, reshaped and continuously interacted with throughout the data analysis process. Because the data are coded the researcher can consider an interpretation to review similarly coded data in other transcripts and reflect how they are connected, how they enhance each other and/or how they do not fit each other (Charmaz 2005).

Through comparing and building on transcripts and their codes, it is possible to get an idea of the participants’ conflicts and struggles. It is also possible to identify what participants find problematic and to gauge which discourses participants feel bound to and why. The data are also able to identify which discourses participants resist and which ones they make a decision to take up. Charmaz (2005) argues that because grounded theory is able to identify this, it is inherently compatible with critical inquiry and social justice research.

It is important to recognise that the codes do not emerge from a context free location. The codes are informed by both my assumptions and influenced by my reading about the mother and son relationship as well as gender. This provides a focus and informs what I see, what I am looking for, and contributes to the way that I make sense of the data (Charmaz 2005). The thematic categories that developed are connected to the ways that the researcher interprets the data rather than ‘emanating from them or from our methodological practices’ (Charmaz 2005:510).

The coding of the data was intended to identify central themes and was developed out of the conceptual framework of the thesis. The central themes were also established with the overall results of the analysis in mind (Dey 2005). The central themes identified broad preliminary distinctions that allowed me to place the data in groups and worked as auspicing categories.

**First and Second Reading of the Transcripts**

The first and second reading of the transcripts was an in-depth process that allowed me to become immersed in the data (Creswell 1998; Dey 2005).
Main Focus and Criteria

Feminist research draws attention to that which is either left out, or with how a dominant story, that reflects gender relations, constrains women’s experiences and perpetuates problematic gender relations. As a consequence, the most interesting data spoke to that which is totalised by patriarchal truth claims about motherhood and mothers and sons. I was keen to identify experiences and subject positions that sat outside of this in order to contest the truth claims and paint a picture of a reality that is either cautioned against in the mother and son literature or not considered. This is not a unique approach; rather it is a recognised feminist research strategy (Creswell 1998).

Dey (2005) suggests that in order to group the data, the researcher needs to establish criteria for doing so. Criteria can be developed through asking questions before the categorisation begins (Charmaz 2005). Two questions that I asked before proceeding with my reading of the transcripts were: “What am I looking for?” and “How will the data be grouped?” The answer to these questions was connected to the research questions, the literature and poststructural feminist ideas about power and gender. I searched for dominant discourse about mothering and gender and the mother and son relationship. I also sought alternative discourse about mothers and sons and gender, feminist discourse, and the connection between feminism and motherhood. The process of focused and literal coding helped shaped the way the data would be grouped.

Literal Coding

I started by using literal coding techniques where I would write down some of the key words of each sentence in the transcript margin. I paid a lot of attention to the words in order to develop an overall sense of the participants’ experiences. The literal coding was not intended to connect women’s words with broader thematic groupings or concepts, rather, just to immerse myself in the reading of each transcript and connect to the narrative by repeating the theme of each sentence.
**Focused Coding**

Focused coding identifies central themes and develops out of the literal coding process (Charmaz 2006). Focused coding is analytical rather than descriptive and does not necessarily utilise the language of the participant (Leavy 2007). This type of coding adopts a more conceptual meaning when the researcher builds on the respondents’ comments. Leavy (2007) suggests that it is common to move into more interpretative coding as the researcher moves through transcript documents. Below is an example of the way that the literal coding of my analysis process moved into a more conceptual focused coding that appears interpretive and lends itself to analysis.

| Nina: I will give you another example, we were in Sydney visiting my family and I said “You know [X] I used to live in Sydney and where do you think you will like to live, in Sydney in Melbourne or a different city?” And he said, “I want to live with [X], he said a man and a man together”. And I said, “Oh that is lovely darling”. So for me you know and that thought first crossed my mind and I thought I wonder if this is early signals that he is gay and if it is then it is and that is what it is and I want to give him positive um you know to allow him I don’t want to say oh that is not what boys do or um you know even to question him or give him any idea that something like that might not be acceptable or | Visiting family in Sydney  
Asking son where he wants to live  
Son wants to live with a man  
Acknowledging not dismissing sons reply  
Considering son as gay  
Wanting to be accepting and positive about homosexuality  
Rejecting homophobia  
Normalising homosexuality |


The value of focused coding was being able to return and collect similarly coded quotes from separate interviews. And so I could compare the quotes and develop the coded concepts’ meanings (Charmaz 2006). For example, I could build on the concept of normalising homosexuality and understand how the participants associated this with rejecting normative masculinity and understanding that homophobia (for the participants and in the literature) is connected to devaluing what are considered to be feminine ideals and practices.

Not all the quotations attended to each of these meanings but together they thickened descriptions and helped me to develop a more solid understanding and interpretation (Leavy 2007) of what the participants were saying about normalising homosexuality. Leavy (2007) suggests that this method moves the analytical process into a conceptual frame that helps develop theoretical ideas. As more transcripts were combined in this way and the analysis developed, modified focused codes were either moved into thematic category status or contributed to developing sub themes within the main categories. For example, what emerged from looking at the participants’ descriptions of their relationship with their sons was the concept of connection that is a big feature in the mother and son literature. While connection remained an issue it was transformed into a thematic category that I named affinity and kinship. Within this category the idea of embodied experience as an obstacle to kinship and affinity emerged. This is also how headings started to move into more abstract codes that required the data to give it shape and form. The morphing of thematic categories and subheadings is a part of the analysis process (Leavy 2007) and was a combination of the data and the literature interacting.

The focused coding of the data resulted in a total of seventeen broad thematic categories that appeared to resonate well with the research questions and gave
insight into the subjective experiences of the participants. Some of these categories were names that reflected the distinct themes in the research questions such as feminism, gender, relationship with son. However, other names better reflected the subjective intentions and/or experiences that were emerging from reading the data; for example, more than mother, representing women, affinity and kinship.

**Emerging Themes**

To start, I established larger categories based on existing theoretical concepts (Dey 2005) such as gender, masculinity feminism, motherhood and maternal practice. Within these, I established smaller sub categories grounded in poststructural feminist theory and reflecting the participants’ positions regarding the categories. This process established distinctions within the data regarding dominant and alternative discourses but also reflected the poststructural feminist notion which positions the subject within more than one discourse and in multiple subject positions. Thus, the categories further served the analytic purpose of building a theoretical understanding of feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons in relation to gender, masculinity and feminism.

Ultimately, the thematic categories connected to each other and collectively tell a story. This instinctive feeling came from conducting the interviews as well as the first reading of the transcripts. This also made me aware that there were data that would not fit all the themes that were connected and may ultimately be discarded (Creswell 1998). I was also aware that there would not be enough space within the thesis for all the data. Decisions about what to leave out of the final analysis were based on where they seemed to fit least with the overall research questions. However, I still developed thematic headings for these to ensure they would remain visible and considered within the whole.

The thematic categories were developed out of the literal and focused coding and contained repetitive statements throughout the interviews (Van Mannen
1990). I then clustered these statements into the main themes by grouping statements that appeared to connect or belong together by identifying similar concepts and discourses.

Before securing each theme, however, I wanted to ensure that each one was well reflected in the data. There needed to be diverse representation across the transcripts within each major theme. This is important as multiple forms of evidence support the thematic headings and concepts (Creswell 1998).

There were also some themes that contained the same pieces of data, for example, some of the women’s quotes contained positions about motherhood that were also connected to feminism. I knew that these would be connected and separate at the same time, but at this stage of the analysis was not going to engage with it. However, later on in the analysis process this served to signal new themes for development or collapsing, showing how some themes were especially connected and where sub-themes were more appropriate. Some of the themes were renamed. This preliminary process established categories for the final product which were not exhaustive (Dey 2005). I would later find that there were some very general categories that were not helpful in developing a more nuanced understanding of what the data were saying.

I combined all the data together underneath the broad thematic categories in order to re-immersing myself in the data, develop a feeling for the data and their connectedness to categories before I engaged in the process of developing secondary themes. This had the advantage of developing a holistic perspective of the connection amongst and between the data within the broad themes (Dey 2005).

Moving the Data Around

By this stage I had read each transcript twice, and I had conducted literal and focused coding that had established seventeen working thematic categories. I then categorised the data by moving it from its original transcript form into thematic headings.
This process enabled me to extrapolate further on the thematic categories and to determine the need for additional broad themes, the quality of interconnection of data within categories and the possibility of sub categories within themes. I developed confidence that my thematic headings reflected the data, the conceptual and theoretical story.

In order to affirm the relevance of the thematic categories and thicken their description I moved the relevant data into seventeen broad categories (Dey 2005), these included:

- Ensuring each printed transcript with the literal and focused codes in margins matched the electronic version.

- Ensuring that the electronic data connected to the literal and focused codes, related to the seventeen themed categories, was moved accordingly.

I chose sentences and paragraphs to be constitutive of data rather than single words or lines. I felt that sentences and paragraphs conveyed the meaning (Dey 2005) and identified the discursive positions of the participants and the taking up of certain discourses far better than a sentence or transcript line. I was also concerned with privileging the meanings within context and I think that larger chunks of data were better able to retain this.

- I then set up a manual index card system with seventeen dividers each with a category heading.

- The electronic data under the same heading was printed and then applied to index cards under the corresponding headings.

- The index cards with raw data were given a pink colour code at the top.

The process of establishing index cards helped me to review the large volume of data text that had been placed into large thematic categories. It was also easier to review from a different perspective as the data were more
manageable. The value of this process was a reengagement with the data that allowed me to immerse myself differently and facilitated an even stronger connection to it.

**Short Memos**

It was at this point that I was able to write short idea memos. Creating memos or reflections is a descriptive process and is a distinct analytic method: it can confirm the relevance of the thematic categories (Ackerly and True 2010). The short reflections were connected to the thematic categories and facilitated the making sense of the data from an analytic perspective, for example:

| Gender: | There seems to be a difference in category of woman versus category of femininity. Femininity appears as an oppressive idea. Inversely there is a sense of unification and connection brought about by the experiences of being a woman. |

Short memos were written onto the index cards under each thematic heading and colour-coded white at the top. The analysis of the data moved into a different phase as making sense of the data combined more overtly with reflection and a making sense of the data attitude.

**THICKENING THEMATIC CATEGORIES**

**Third Reading**

With 17 different data sets and short memos, I then reengaged in a different way with the data, as I was now no longer reading full cohesive transcripts. This next reading was aimed at developing secondary themes.

**Developing Secondary Themes**

With the third reading of the transcripts I reengaged with the data grouped in thematic categories as a way of developing stories about the themes and as a means for building sub-categories or separate conceptual stories within each main thematic category. These were coded separately on the index cards and
were highlighted in yellow across the top of the card. Muriel’s excerpt is an example of this process.

Muriel: Yeah I think my problem with those extreme ends, which seems to be a kind of fake expression of power on the masculine side and a kind of expression of helplessness on the other side. My problem with that is that it kind of fosters dependency that I find unattractive both ways. So I suppose I would hope, I would want my sons to feel like they could look after themselves and another person in domestic and intimate ways.

Binary is extreme
Binary is a problem
Binary constructs ideas about masculinity and femininity, Binary is about power
Binary constructs problematic opposites
These kinds of masculinity and femininity constructs are not ideal
Expectation that it is possible to develop masculinity differently to binary position and construct

For example, gender identity emerged as a sub-heading of gender. This developed out of participants’ descriptions of gender as a way of categorising people but also as a way of making sense of who they were or how they were being positioned in social experiences. An example of how the notion of gender identity developed minor themes is Nina’s description below:

“Interaction between perceptions is a big thing, everywhere you are female. If you are with other groups of women it is the girls, if you are the only woman in a group of men you are obviously female”.

Gender as an organising and relational category that positions the subject and constitutes the subject.
Discourses and Assumptions

A step towards developing secondary themes/sub-headings involved identifying discourses and assumptions. This was really a process of building a larger meaning (Creswell 1998) or story of the data. Building connections meant my ideas were building as well and this helped to enrich the main themes. The goal was to identify particular areas of personal experience that allude to the central theme but elaborate on it in variegated ways.

With the quotes placed into a different context, the data could be approached from a new perspective. For example, a quote could develop both a thematic category and then be used to develop sub-headings and identify discourse (see below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mary: There’s public panic discourse about if you put your child in childcare they’re going to be mentally damaged…I just think that’s a lot of bullshit...like a happy child has a happy mother and a happy mother has to be able to do what she has to do…I think it was quite clear for me that I did not feel guilty for one childcare is damaging is a public panic discourse</th>
<th>Disagree that childcare is damaging A happy child is dependent on happy mother</th>
<th>Dominant discourse about childcare is child focused Mothers mental state is valuable Mother has a right to a separate life</th>
<th>Women can, do and are entitled to occupy multiple social locations not just mother. Valuing paid work and validating childcare as a means for women working. Privileging mothers emotions and happiness,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

57
Within the larger categories, I established smaller categories, grounded in poststructural feminist theory but simultaneously reflected the participants’ positions to the categories. I coded transcript data according to dominant discourse about gender, masculinity etc. and alternative discourse about gender, masculinity etc. This process established distinctions within the data regarding dominant and alternative discourses. It also reflected the poststructural feminist framework that the subject is positioned within more than one discourse and occupies multiple subject positions.

I paid particular attention to the language used in the transcripts in order to identify the participants’ assumptions and intentions. I asked a number of questions to help me identify which discourses were being used. These questions included:
• What are the most significant discourses being drawn on and being rejected?

• What are the most significant discourses that participants are positioning themselves within?

• Which possible discourses are the participants drawing from?

• Which discourses are being alluded to?

The result was a list of discourses with clustered statements underneath them. Within each cluster contained examples of the use of dominant and alternative discourses. Underneath these were the alluded intentions and assumptions. The process of identifying discourses and assumptions helped me move into data reflection memos later on in the analysis process.

**Written Reflection Memos**

I used written reflections as notes to myself to develop my ideas about the central themes and sub themes. This helped develop relationships between the themes and anchor them in more analytic concepts (Charmaz 2006). These written reflections gave me an analytic focus and enabled me to consider the breadth of the information (Dey 2005). As a result, I could flesh out conceptual links and develop some transformative conceptual leaps.

In the written reflections, I was able to make sweeping generalisations about the data that did not fit well with my close data readings and coding. This part of the research process leads to a more thorough analysis (Ackerly and True 2010; Dey 2005) and I could identify queries about whether I was noticing a pattern and having a guess at what it might mean. My written reflection memos were a lot longer than the short memos and were filed on the computer rather than the index card system.

Writing the reflective pieces helped me to gather my thoughts and generate an overview feeling of the data and also work towards identifying some key ideas. Some of these written reflections were short paragraphs that
consolidated my understanding of a theme. Some were longer pieces that considered several ideas and/or themes. Often the reflections were written following the interviews, an in-depth reading of the transcripts and the emergence of data that resonated strongly with key ideas in the literature about mothers and sons, gender and resistance. The reflective pieces helped me work with the data to reengage theoretical concepts and helped me track the “toing and froing” that happened throughout the analytic process of bringing together the two. The written reflections were also attempts to retain awareness of myself as the researcher of the participants’ social locations and how their context is specific to their ideas and actions.

**Data Reflection Memos**

Throughout the analysis process, I tried to capture aspects of the narratives which represented the participants’ subjective experiences of mothering, of gender and masculinity. Alongside this I drew on literature about mothers and sons, and about gender and motherhood, to identify the stories to which mothers aligned themselves. Combining these, I wanted to move backwards and forwards from the themes to examine the social forces that inform, influence and affect the participants’ experiences.

At various points throughout the analytic process, I wrote what Karp (2007) describes as data memos that aim to ‘integrate the theme with data and any available literature that fits’ (p.145). I wrote many data memos as I analysed the transcripts and then again as I reconnected with certain key theoretical concepts such as feminist maternal practice and doing gender. These memos enriched my thinking about common pathways (Leavy 2007) developing out of the data.

**VARIATIONS**

Poststructural feminist research attends to the differences between and amongst women as a strategy for resisting the totalisation of women’s experiences which marginalise and exclude. Importantly, I attended to the different subjective experiences evidenced by differences between transcripts
and inconsistencies within individual transcripts. Individual women’s experiences are contradictory and complex, even more so when twenty voices are merged.

**Different Subjective Experiences**

To account for differences amongst and between women, Hekman (2007) suggests paying attention to the differences within the specified research group. This notion is not novel in research method and analysis: it is important to build a robust interpretation of data. Identifying that which does not fit the main research stories enables the researcher to hold the dominant stories accountable.

The feminist mothers interviewed for this research are not a homogenous group. While they share similar social locations and educational backgrounds, there were clear distinctions in their lived experiences and to a lesser degree their subjective understandings of the mother and son relation.

Analysis of the data identified variability in the participants’ experiences of raising sons. Some of these differences appeared to stem from the absence or presence of having daughters as well as sons and I do take this up in the analysis chapters of this thesis.

**Inconsistencies**

I was conscious of trying not to marginalise some parts of the data (Ackerly and True 2010) especially that which did not appear to fit easily with the main developing research stories. To resist totalising the data, Hesse-Biber (2007) suggests the researcher asks, ‘What doesn’t support my interpretation?’ (p.145). In order to try and hold myself as accountable as possible to the emerging data, I took up this question and borrowed from Ackerly and True’s (2010) discussion about the need to compare data with the literature and with the theory within and across each separate transcript. Thus I also asked ‘What is different here in this piece of data?’ and ‘What does the difference tell me about the dominant research story?’
Throughout the analytic process, I endeavoured to include and code data that do not fit the dominant stories. However in considering the above questions I did not always write down my responses, at times this looked more like a ‘thought experiment’ (Ackerly and True 2010:189). The process was designed to build my conceptual understanding of the data and a commitment to the analysis story. For example, where the research participants spoke about their rejection of the gender binary as a restrictive way of constructing gendered subjectivities, there were also competing data that initially appeared to undermine their spoken commitment to socially constituted gendered subjectivities. At times a participant may express a position that refuted gender essentialism, while at other points in the transcript her descriptions appear to adhere to the notion of an intrinsic masculinity or femininity.

Drawing on a poststructural feminist frame enabled me to make better sense of these competing pieces of information. The subject is not a finite entity nor is it consistent, logical and singular. The subject is also only able to make sense of their experience with the language and ideas available. Finally, the effect of dominant discourse is real and impacts on all subjects. Because the subject is constituted through discourse it is difficult to separate our experience from that which has constituted us. Competing discourses exist alongside each other and it is impossible to not be influenced by dominant discourse (Butler 2006; Foucault 1980). Combined, these ideas help make sense of, and account for, the inconsistencies in the data rather than needing to resolve them. It is possible for the participants to commit to a non-normative idea while at the same time enacting and/or responding to normative discourse. This is the iterative process through which the subject emerges.

Comparing the inconsistencies and items of data that did not fit helped make sense of the dominant discourses within which the research participants are embedded, and also helped identify how these discursive practices inform and impact on the participants’ sense-making of their relationships with their sons. Ackerly and True (2010) suggest that the value of engaging in
comparison helps identify critical factors of the researched area that have ‘produced the outcome we seek to explain or understand’ (p.189).

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter positions the research within a poststructural feminist framework and identifies some key ideas that inform the sense making of the data and the literature. I have explained that because of these key ideas the mother and son relationship can be researched in ways that both support feminist research goals and provide a different perspective from which to understand feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons. I have also suggested that poststructural feminist inquiry is an important and useful strategy with which to re-qualify subjugated knowledges that traditional research has not considered and that the dominant story about the mother and son has not been thoroughly considered.

I have described the different stages of this research project to give an understanding as to how I have developed a research story that reflects both the literature, the theory and the data collected from the research participants themselves. Each chapter in this thesis builds on the assumption that a poststructural feminist inquiry of the mother and son makes it possible to think differently about this relationship. I turn now, in the following chapter to the mother and son as represented in the literature.
CHAPTER TWO: FRAMING THE MOTHER AND SON RELATIONSHIP

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between a mother and son is embedded within Anglo-American ideas, the nature of masculinity and the role of the mother. This chapter will explore how patriarchal ideas attempt to govern this relationship. I will outline how feminist theorising challenges age-old restrictions within the mother and son relationship. Within this context, contemporary studies by feminist scholars will be explored and the current gaps in the literature identified.

The review of the literature demonstrates that the theorising of the Anglo-American mother and son relationship has developed across a large period of time. Consequently, I will divide the literature review in order to reflect this. Historically male authors describe the mother and son relationship in biblical texts and Greek and Roman mythology. Later psychoanalysis paid particular focus to a son’s relationship with his mother through the Oedipus complex. In the latter half of the 20th Century, writers adopted central themes from mythology, ancient customs and psychoanalytic theories and produced popular texts about manhood, boys and their relationship to the mother.

As the feminist movement began its second wave of political activity in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the mother and son relationship attracted attention. The ‘problem’ of raising boys was seen in the light of women’s barriers to equality within marriage and in sharing domestic labour. Mothering became a large focus for feminists as they struggled with issues of childcare, unpaid domestic labour and the re-visioning of mothers as independent people within the family unit. Feminists voiced their concerns that raising boys within a patriarchal societal structure which oppresses
women (in part through motherhood) serves against their (the mothers) best interests.

The third wave of the feminist movement in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia generated a shift in the theorising of the mother/daughter relationship. This produced a greater focus on the mother and son relationship and allowed some specific research focusing on feminist parenting of boys. These studies will be identified and considered within the framework of history. Currently, the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century has seen a proliferation of masculinities studies and postmodern theorising of gendered subjectivities. Within this context, the role of the mother in the development of boys’ masculine identity is noted yet not substantially explored.

**MOTHERS AND SONS: A NEGLECTED SUBJECT**

The bond between a mother and her son ‘is one of life’s most permanent and powerful relationships’ (Backes 2000:29) and yet it has received limited theoretical and literary attention (Backes 2000; Koppelman 2000; Rowland & Thomas 1996; Schacht and Ewing 2004; Smith 1996). The National Library of Australia in 2006 records just seven titles with “mothers and sons and Australia” as a keyword descriptor. Similarly the United States Library of Congress ‘lists only seven titles between 1968 and the mid-1990s with ‘mothers and sons in literature’ as a descriptor’ (Backes 2000:29).

Susan Koppelman, a feminist historian in the United States, attempts to compile a short story collection:

I’ve never done a mother/son collection because I have yet to encounter the crucial one hundred stories. During the years of reading and studying short stories by U.S women writers and of trying to construct a history of U.S. women’s participation in the development of the genre, I have observed that the mother/son relationship is one of the less scrutinized family relationships in women’s writing (Koppelman 2000:89).
This contrasts with the mother/daughter relationship that ‘is the single most frequently revisited themes in all of women’s short stories’ (Koppelman 2000:90).

**THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVE**

Where the relationship between mothers and sons has been explored, a patriarchal narrative has historically circumscribed it (O’Reilly 2001; Smith 1996; Schacht and Ewing 2004). Within this context, attention has been on the ‘difference in sexuality’ (Smith 1996:53), the importance of the mother privileging the father’s role in developing ‘masculinity’ (Biddulph 1998; Bly 1992) and of ‘maternal displacement and denial’ (O’Reilly 2001:94).

I will explore the literature about mothers and sons written within a patriarchal framework in three parts. First, an historical focus including the Old Testament and Greek and Roman mythology; second, Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the Oedipal Complex and its impact on the mother and son relationship; third, modern and contemporary male writers’ ideas about a boy’s relationship with his mother.

**Historical Accounts of the Mother and Son Relationship**

In the patriarchal telling of the mother-son relationship the ‘potency of connection’ (Pollack 1999:111) is ignored, hence devalued, or cautioned against. The mother’s displacement as natural corollary is set in motion in Judeo-Christian dogma in Genesis 22:2. The biblical narrative of the ‘binding of Isaac’ tells of God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Talmudic and contemporary commentaries speak of this demand as a challenge to Abraham’s devotion to his God (Maimonides 1904:III:Ch24).

That Abraham does as he is told, without consultation with his wife, Isaac’s mother, implies the negligible influence Sarah had in the upbringing of her son. According to Yanow (1994):
Others have suggested that he [Abraham] did tell her and that this is precisely why she is silent: Sarah is in a state of shock over Abraham’s intentions, perhaps even at his unwillingness to listen to her about why he shouldn’t carry out God’s command. Some see this shock as the reason for her death at the beginning of the subsequent chapter in Genesis 23:2 (p.400).

The omission of Sarah’s voice in this story perplexes many feminist biblical scholars. The sister of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) was a prolific biblical commentator born in 1040. Rashi’s sister (known only by this name) wonders why an account of Sarah’s response to this request is not documented in Genesis 22 (Yanow 1994).

The reader is left to wonder what Isaac’s mother may have said or done if she had been consulted. Susan Koppelman (2000) specifically asks: ‘And what about Sarah? She was his mother!’ (2000:88) Sarah’s relationship with her son is certainly not regarded highly enough to warrant her counsel when negotiating with God. Koppelman (2000) asserts that ‘(w)hatever she might have wanted or thought or felt or deserved just didn’t count. Why didn’t God talk to her? Probably because she wouldn’t have paid attention! What mother would?’ (p.88).

In Greek mythology, Achilles, a mighty hero of Ulysses’ Iliad was part immortal and part man. ‘According to myth, his mother, Thetis, dipped him into the river Styx’ (Dooley and Fedele 2001:185). This river left those who had touched it immortal. However, Thetis, concerned about her son falling perilously into the river, remained connected to him, holding onto him by his heel. The meaning of this myth according to feminist theorists (Dooley and Fedele 2001; O’Reilly 2001) signifies that ‘because of that one holding spot, Achilles remained mortal and vulnerable to harm. Thetis would be blamed forever after for her son’s so-called fatal flaw, his Achilles heel’ (Dooley and Fedele 2001:185). The ramifications are dire for the son should his mother retain her connection with him.
Psychoanalytic Theories of the Mother and Son Relationship

The patriarchal telling of the mother and son story reached its cautionary heights with Freud’s description of the Oedipus complex. The “Oedipal” period ‘after about age three . . . focuses on the attainment of a stable gender identity’ (Chodorow 1989:50). As the little boy ‘first experiences strong sexual feelings for his mother’ he learns ‘to detach and differentiate himself from her, to identify as a male with his father instead of perceiving him as a rival, . . .’ (Rich 1976:197).

Here is the premise that the mother’s strong hold over her son has the potential to emasculate him. (Backes 2000; Chodorow 1989; Koppelman 2000; Rich; 1976; Smith 1996) To attain his ‘masculine gender identity’ (Chodorow 1989:51) the boy must ‘give up his attachment to his mother, and… internalise and identify with his father, whom he recognises as superior in power’ (Rich 1976:197). Achilles’ price was his death. A boy’s failure to become a ‘man’ bars him from entry to the realm of the patriarch and society.

According to Rich (1976), the Oedipus complex also impacts women who have never read Freud themselves. In Babette Smith’s book Mothers & Sons (1996) she interviewed post World War Two mothers of sons. For these mothers: ‘Freud’s theories burst the confines of professional and academic enclaves to be widely propagated in the mass media’ (Smith 1996:18). Smith says that during the 1940s to 1950s the author “Betty Friedan described the United States…as being permeated by a ‘Freudian mania’ (1996:18).

Freud’s influence is acknowledged below:

No one aspect of his [Freud’s] theory has been more influential than the so-called Oedipal complex. Women who have never read Freud are raising their sons in the belief that to show them physical affection is to be “seductive,” that to influence their sons against forms of masculine behaviour they as women abhor, is to “castrate” them or to become “the ‘devouring,’ ‘domineering’ creature that their sons will have to reject in order to grow up mentally healthy,” or that they, and they are alone, are

In their writing about the mother and son relationship, feminists contest Freud’s admonition to mothers of sons. Rashbaum and Silverstein (1994) in their book *The Courage To Raise Good Men* claim that myths such as Oedipus Rex and the resulting Oedipal complex discourages women from retaining a connection with their sons as they develop into adults. They state that as a consequence, the idea of a mother’s love for her son is contaminated. Mothers, therefore, have construed their depth of feeling for their male child as problematic and dangerous. The bond between mother and son if not checked and renounced ‘is believed to “feminize” a boy, to make him soft, weak, dependent, homebound. “Mama’s boys” are sissies’ (Rashbaum and Silverstein 1994:11).

**Contemporary Writing About the Mother and Son Relationship**

Contemporary writers about mothers and sons from a patriarchal perspective have sold millions of books while arguing that feminism is a ‘trend’ (Lashlie 2007:15) and that boys are being parented in an ‘anti-male era’ (Biddulph 1998:62). In this social milieu, masculinity is learnt through male role models (Biddulph 1998; Bly 1992; Lashlie 2007) and hampered by a mother’s inability to understand what it means to be a man (Biddulph 1998; Marsden 2002). Lashlie (2007) explicitly articulates that feminism as ‘women’s quest for freedom’ has resulted in negative consequences ‘on our perception of men and manhood’ (p.15).

**Difference between men and women**

Men and women are described as psychological and spiritual ‘opposites’ (Bly 1992:174). By employing a metaphor of divided nations in competition with each other Bly (1992) asserts that ‘each is a pole with its separate magnetic charge, each is a nation defending its borders…’ (p.175). Biddulph (1998) echoes this assertion: boys are ‘just different’ (p.6).
In 2002 Marsden published *The Boy You Brought Home: A single mother’s guide to raising sons*. Marsden apparently felt that he had something unique to offer boys journeying to manhood that their mothers do not. He champions the difference between the genders, exemplified where he counsels mothers to let their sons play with toy guns.

If you don’t let him have toy guns, you’ll find him pointing his ruler or his pencil case or a stick and going ‘bang bang’. Okay so maybe it’s phallic. Whatever the reason, don’t stress about it. It’s just a guy thing (Marsden 2002:7).

As I will explore later, this is in stark contrast to literature written on the same subject by feminists.

Anderson and Accomando (2002) analysed some of the men’s movement literature about boys (*Raising Boys* 1998; *Real Boys* 1999; *The Wonder of Boys* 1996; *Raising Cain* 1999) This revealed essentialising claims about gender that ‘actually are constitutive of ideas about gender in general, and about mothers, fathers and boys in particular’ (p.494). Once deep-seated distinctions between genders are claimed, the allocation of distinct roles can be made, and ‘mothers and fathers are regarded as fundamentally and essentially different kinds of parent’ (Anderson and Accomando 2002:494).

Popular books on raising boys demarcate inherent gender differences in parents which means they are able to campaign for the specific role of the father by identifying what he is able to offer that the mother cannot (Anderson and Accomando 2002). The male subject ‘is dependent on its unambiguous location within the clear definition of gender according to strict binarism: men make men’ (Mansfield 2000:103). Gender difference discourse is the foundation from which the mother is edited out of her son’s life as he moves into ‘manhood’.

**Masculine traits**

These writers attach distinct social and psychological attributes to masculinity (and femininity) as they position their analysis deep in gender difference
discourse. Unsurprisingly, testosterone is a defining factor in the evidence of masculine and feminine traits in boys and girls. For Lashlie (2007) this means that boys are more competitive than girls and need outlets for this. Thus, sport is important because of their ‘competitive nature coupled with the sense it can give them of being a part of something bigger than themselves’ (p.109).

For Biddulph (1998), there is a distinct ‘energy and focus’ which means that a ‘boy with high levels of the hormone makes good leadership material’ (p.45). Harking back to Biddulph’s (1998) claim that ‘boys are not inferior – just different’ (p.61) it would seem that they are in fact superior because they make better leaders.

Masculinity is also connected, according to Bly (1992) with action and energy that is akin to the ‘Wild Man’ (p.6) a metaphor for the ‘deep masculine’ (p.7). Lashlie (2007) extrapolates this by asserting that boys’ ‘strength and male beauty lie in their pragmatism’ (Lashlie 2007:127). This notion of masculinity being about action, creation and production is valorised through Biddulph’s (1998) exhortation:

> In an anti-male era its important to remember (and show boys) that men built the planes, fought the wars, laid he railroad tracks, invented the cars, built the hospitals, invented the medicines and sailed the ships that made it happen. (p.62)

From a feminist analytical perspective, these ideas are problematic in several ways. They are devoid of a power analysis and are remarkable for their lack of intersectional analysis of race, culture and sexuality. The focus of men and women becomes difference and distance between them.

**Disconnecting from the mother**

Robert Bly in his book *Iron John* (1992) writes of a boy’s obligation to move from the mothers’ world to the fathers’ world if he is to stake a claim in his masculine strength. He warns against the boy staying in the world of his mother: ‘. . . the movement [to the fathers world] involves convincing the
naive boy or the comfort-loving boy, to die’ (Bly 1992:89). Note, only this part of the boy is required to die: ‘Other interior boys remain alive; this one dies’ (Bly 1992:89). The boy who must die is the boy beget by his mother. Bly describes the death or ‘independence’ from his mother’s ‘womb world’ as a slow and agonizing process, from which ‘we wake exhausted’ (Bly 1992:89).

Willard Gaylin, clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, echoes these words in his book *The Male Ego*:

> The essential goal in becoming a real man is to liberate one’s self from the previous identification with the mother. To be a real man, we must stop being a Mama’s boy’ since a crucial stage in male development demands abandoning the primary identification with the mother (Gaylin 1992:30).

Popular self-help literature takes up the re-birth motif. Biddulph (1998) asserts that it is ‘only by leaving the world of women that young men can break the mother-mould and relate to women as fellow adults (p.23). So, in order to grow into manhood, the boy must separate from his mother and there is no role for the mother in teaching her son about women.

John Marsden is an Australian writer of both fiction and non-fiction for young people and their carers. In *Secret men’s business, manhood: the big gig*, Marsden (1998) communicates his assumptions about mothers. First, he allocates a whole chapter to fathers (there is no chapter about mothers); second, he alerts his pubescent male readers to their mothers’ nervousness ‘that there is now another sexually potent male in the house’ (p.3) and cautions she may try to ‘keep you as her “little boy” a while longer, so she can keep mothering you’ (pp.3-4). Apart from the suggestion that her son’s potency disturbs his mother, this asserts that the mother’s role as a parent stops when he is no longer a small child. Third, Marsden (1998) suggests that an alternative to the mother wanting to hold her son back from maturity because she is his mother, is the mother who ‘could be delighted by your new-found independence and maturity . . .’ (p.4). His rationale is that she
‘might be pleased by the fact that she can now have more time to follow her own interests’ (p.4). Presumably, the mother cannot teach her son what it means to be a man. And, her renunciation from the role of mother will suit her fine, as she can then pursue what really interests her, which is not her child or his ‘masculine’ world.

For Biddulph (1998), a boy’s burgeoning masculinity needs a computer program that women do not possess and cannot write:

A boy knows that he is turning into a man… He has to download the software from an available male to complete his development (p.17).

Lashlie (2007) asserts that the mother must understand her role to support her son’s access to available men and encourage this transmission of knowledge, without critique. She argues:

The challenge remains for we women to accept who the men in our lives are and to stop wasting our energy trying to make them something they’re not (p.126).

The idea that boys need to renounce their identification with their mother in order to become men lies in long held and socially sanctioned ideas. The first belief is that there is a very real and quantifiable gender difference. Second, the idea that normative ideas about masculinity do not, in any way, resemble normative ideas about femininity. That normative masculinity is envisioned as that which is not femininity and therefore not mother. Therefore, to achieve normative masculinity status a boy must ultimately reject the feminine and disrupt his connection with his mother to steer the right course.

William Pollack in his book *Real Boys* (1999:85) recognises that ‘a mother receives constant outside reminders that she must comply with society’s rules about boys and masculinity’. He acknowledges the difficulty for mothers who are persuaded through myth and culture to disengage from their sons yet are also held accountable for their developing emotional and psychological
health. Mothers are beleaguered by what Pollack terms ‘a boy code’ that propagates myths such as ‘boys will be boys’ and ‘boys should be boys’ (Pollack 1999:87). He believes ‘that mothers should be encouraged to trust their instincts over society’s misgivings . . .’ (Pollack 1999:82). To this end I now turn to feminist literature about mothers and sons that engages specifically with societal rules and norms about boys, masculinity and the role of the mother.

THE FEMINIST NARRATIVE

Second-Wave Feminism

Adrienne Rich (1976) in Of Woman Born proposes that women, mothering within the patriarchal institution she calls ‘motherhood’, must relinquish their sons so that they may grow into a culturally prescribed masculinity. Thus the scant attention paid to mothers and sons represents a purposeful belief that

…it is distinctively the father who represents not just authority but culture itself . . . Civilisation means identification, not with the mother but with the father (Rich 1976:197).

Rich and her contemporaries, such as Judith Arcana - Every Mother’s Son: The Role of Mothers in the Making of Men in 1983 and Linda Rennie Forcey - Mothers of Sons: Toward an Understanding of Responsibility (1987), share doubts about the agency of mothers in general. Arcana (1983:115) asks whether mothers of sons are ‘contractors rather than architects, following specifications not of our own design?’

When boys approach puberty, mothers are not considered equipped to raise them into ‘manhood’ (Biddulph 1998; Bly 1992; Gaylin 1992; Marsden 2002). Historically, ceremonial rites of passage have provided young boys in primitive and tribal communities with the opportunity for a second birth, a spiritual reawakening, that inculcates them into the world of men and adult masculinity (Biddulph 1998; Bly 1992; Rich 1976; Ross Epp and Cook 2000).
The significance of the rebirth, suggests Rich (1976), is that ‘the young men are as it were swallowed up by the tutelary spirit of this masculine world and are reborn as children of the spirit rather than of the mother’ (p.199) The mother must relinquish her responsibility to her birth child, for ‘[i]n becoming a man it is necessary to expunge all susceptibility to the power of women’ (Rich 1976:199).

Perhaps the relationship between mothers and sons has been ‘too paradoxical for feminists to theorise’ (Rennie Forcey 2001:2). Alternatively, this relationship might threaten the development of hegemonic masculinity (Klein 1984). Regardless, this is a contested site where the patriarchal ethos is at odds with contemporary feminist theorizing of maternal practice and pro-feminist theory of men and masculinities.

For Arcana (1983), feminism’s focus on challenging patriarchal ideas about women must shift to include a focus on masculinity. She asserts that feminist mothers of sons must contest ‘the socio-psychological canons that label us emasculating or seductive mothers, we must raise our sons to feel their needs, to truthfully express them. They must be sensitized; they must develop the capacity to nurture; and they will come to understand that to live thus is to embody and be surrounded by contradictions’ (p.4).

Arcana writes of her hopes and desires for her son: ‘Daniel needs a sense that being male is okay, even good, with the possibility of full humanity available’ (1983:22). Feminist mothers cannot reconcile hegemonic masculinity with concepts of goodness or the possibility of the full human experience. Only through the exploration of potential alternative masculinities can the mother-son relationship fulfil its own potential and the mother teach her son to love himself as she loves him.

Arcana (1983) explores the meaning of raising sons for mothers. She documents her experience of parenting a son as well as the accounts of her interviews with sixty mothers and sixty sons in America during the second wave of feminism. She writes of that moment at birth where a feminist
mother realises the symbolism of her son’s genitals register to her and those around him:

As the mother of a son, I recognise the frustration and pain of knowing that my child is at once of my body and alien to it; I live with the anxious understanding that my boy’s life is not in my hands, that all I want for him must be wrested from the patriarchy that claims him. Though I made and fed him out of my flesh, I am now “other” than he’ (p.1).

Defiantly, Rich (1976) claims ‘I saw them [her three boys], not as “sons” and potential inheritors of patriarchy, but as the sweet flesh of infants . . .’ (p.194). Yet Smith (1996) asserts that ‘[b]oys will be boys not because they were born that way, but because masculinity requires it of them’ (p.14). For Arcana (1983), this means entering ‘into conscious struggle with our sons, actively seeking to change what is currently defined as male and female behaviour’ (pp.3-4).

Third-Wave Feminists

O’Reilly (2001), proposes that Anglo-American feminist theorizing on the mother-son relationship has ‘been informed by and has developed in the context of feminist thinking on mothering and motherhood over the last thirty years’ (p.106). Feminist ideas about mothers and sons is ten years behind the thinking on the mother/daughter relationship yet ‘mirrors and re-enacts’ the same ‘theoretical trajectory’ (p.106).

According to Ross Epp and Cook (2000)

The contours of modern feminist mothering theory and practice is documented by third-wave feminists of our own era…A portion of this literature has been devoted to the question of the effective nurturing of male sons…The focus of much of their work is based on the perception that feminists consider men to be “the enemy” and therefore must hate them all, even their own children (p.19).
Rowland and Thomas (1996) suggest, ‘[s]ince the late 1980s motherhood has been more positively reassessed’ (p.44) yet, notwithstanding feminist theorizing on mothering and motherhood, the relationship between mothers and their sons has, historically been ‘[q]uarantined from feminist influence’ (Smith 1996:x). As such, the ‘dynamics [of the mother-son relationship] have survived substantially intact during the same decades which have wrought much change for daughters’ (Smith 1996:x). In a special issue of *Feminism & Psychology* (1996) focusing on mothers and sons, Rowland and Thomas (1996) note ‘it has only been recently that feminism has turned any attention to the relationship between mothers and sons’ (p.44).

Enders (1996) suggests that the paucity of feminist focus stems from the perceived paradox of the mother-son relation; ‘Mothering boys and feminism is often presented, by feminists, as a contradiction in terms and deeds’ (p.127). Rennie Forcey in her book *Mothers and Sons* (1987) asserts that the mother-son relationship is a direct challenge to feminist thinking and, unlike the comfortable fit that has grown around feminists and their daughters, the mother-son relationship is a ‘taboo topic’ (p.2). Enders (1996) affirms, ‘[w]ithin feminism, it is more acceptable to raise daughters than sons. Mothering boys is seen as a betrayal to women - demanding energy and time that would be more productively spent on wimmin (sic) and girls’ (p.127). Schacht and Ewing (2004) defend the emphasis on the mother-daughter dyad:

‘…mothering efforts of feminists over the past thirty years have largely been directed toward empowering daughters, in hope of giving them the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully survive in a man’s world while trying to shelter them from the harmful messages of female inferiority so forcibly fed to them by patriarchy’ (p.138).

That boys grow up to inherit a patriarchal legacy is a universal theme in the literature on mothers and sons. What is debated is the role that women as mothers can or cannot and should or should not play in the construction of their masculinity, and thus the future shape of patriarchy. O’Reilly (2001)
contends ‘…that maternal erasure and disconnection are central not only to patriarchal thinking on mothers and sons but also to Anglo-American feminist thought on mothers and sons as well’ (pp.91-92).

The mother is charged with primary responsibility for her infant son’s growth and development. According to Ross Epp and Cook (2000) this can be said of the majority of contemporary societies:

> Whatever the religious orientation, political positioning, class or ethnicity, women are likely to be given the task of interpreting, inculcating and monitoring the socialization of young children on behalf of the wider society. But women have not always had much to do with their growing sons (p.8).

Feminist theorists assert that the connection between a mother and her son has, in response to myth and patriarchal dependence on hegemonic masculinity become something unhealthy and ‘is by nature regressive, circular, unproductive’ (Rich 1976:197). Before I move on it is important to define what is meant by the terminology of hegemonic masculinity. The concept ‘hegemonic masculinity’ refers to a socially and politically constructed ideology of masculinity that strives for cultural dominance (Connell 2005; Pease 2000). Connell (2005) refers to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as a patriarchal manoeuvre that facilitates men’s leading position in the social structures of a society (p.77). She defines hegemonic masculinity as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (p.77). The relevance to this discussion is the idea of a constructed normative masculinity that poses as a natural biological maleness. Anything that does not fit the ideological practices of hegemonic masculinity is disqualified and/or rendered ‘feminine’ thus, lower on the gender hierarchy.

The resulting cultural pressures on mothers of sons ‘suggest restraint and withdrawal, rather than comfort and nurture’ so as ‘many mothers feel
conflicted about their desire to stay connected to their sons’ (Dooley and Fedele 2001:185). Mothers, suggest Rashbaum and Silverstein (1994) are fearful of causing psychological damage to their sons.

The mother’s opinion and experience is considered within a feminist analysis of the mother-son relationship. Although historically sceptical of motherhood, contemporary developments in Anglo-American feminist theory reinstate agency and celebrate the maternal. The importance of a mother’s connection with her son is valued greatly and their relationship is envisaged as a potential site for social transformation.

**Feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons**

Anglo-American feminist theorists suggest that the relationship between a mother and her son is complicated by the recognition at birth that she must contend with the social conditioning of her son towards a type of masculinity that represents much of what she dislikes, and sometimes, fears. This new mother and child relationship exists within cultural myths and patriarchal ideologies that devalue her position and challenge her role in the upbringing of her son.

Susan Koppelman (2000) extrapolates on the theme of loss and apprehension:

> What do we do about our ambivalence when they are born and we learn that ‘It’s a boy’? He may not consciously become, but he cannot entirely avoid becoming, her oppressor. These little boys we bear from our bodies are no more “ours” than the silver polished by a maid is hers (p.87).

Similarly, Robyn Rowland (1996) in speaking about her own experience, evokes the anticipated overpowering by patriarchal machinations:

> To feminists, the sex of their children is not insignificant. The greatest fear I had was that my sons would be somehow taken from me into the world of patriarchal privilege and violence (p.108).
Privileging connection

Contemporary Anglo-American feminist theorists see change happening in part via a reinvigoration of the mother’s role in raising her son. According to O’Reilly (2001) early Anglo-American feminist writers mistrusted motherhood. If mothers remained in service to their sons and husbands this might have a negative effect on their son’s attitudes towards women. Mothering was considered an oppressive responsibility that did not garner respect from their sons nor render women/mothers positive role models for their daughters.

O’Reilly (2001) contends that the mother daughter relationship (like the mother-son connection) was pathologised (albeit by feminist theorists) within a patriarchal narrative; ‘The mother represents for the daughter, . . . the epitome of patriarchal oppression that she seeks to transcend as she comes to womanhood...’ (p.106). Successful negotiation of her ‘ego-boundaries’ and the ultimate attainment of the daughter’s autonomy rely her renouncing her mother (O’Reilly 2001:106).

Developments in feminist theorising have moved on from this second-wave view (O’Reilly 2001). Instead, mother-daughter closeness is considered part of the journey to self-empowerment for young women. Similarly for mothers and their sons, contemporary ‘Anglo-American feminist theory focuses on maternal presence and argues that mother-son connection is what makes possible the new non-patriarchal masculinity we desire for our sons, and for all men’ (O’Reilly 2001:115).

Reinstating the mother alongside her son, feminist writers explore the nature of their connection and place significant value on what this may mean for boys and the re-visioning of masculinity (Abbey 2001; Backes 2000; Dooley and Fedele 2001; Koppelman 2000; O’Reilly 2001; Rowland and Thomas 1996; Thomas 2001).

Returning to the myth of Achilles, Dooley and Fedele (2001) consider an interpretation that celebrates Thetis’ holding on to her son’s heel so he does not fall into the river.
...the holding place of vulnerability was not, as the myth would have us believe, a fatal liability to Achilles. It was instead the thing that kept him human and real. In fact, we consider it Thetis’ finest gift to her son. Every mother of a son hopes to prepare him for life’s “battles” while also preserving his emotional/relational side. Because mothers value connection, they want to “hold on,” to keep open that place of vulnerability (p.185).

For Dooley and Fedele (2001), the mother-son bond provides a foundation for boys to develop their relational abilities. Such abilities, present in both boys and girls, are considered necessary for the development of healthy relationships. Through a ‘sense of mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment’ (p.194) the mother parents her son within this definition of connection. Accordingly, through their workshops and clinical practice with mothers, adult sons and couples, they have come to believe ‘that boys with a secure maternal connection develop stronger interpersonal skills and enjoy healthier relationships as adults’ (p.188).

Mothers, suggest Dooley and Fedele (2001) have not grown up within a ‘boy-culture’ (p.188). They can therefore develop a vision of possibilities for their sons that have traditionally been confined to girls. They argue that ‘[c]hanging cultural expectations to include relational development for boys can change outcomes for both boys and girls’ (p.189).

Rendering the mother visible creates the possibility for boys developing respect and appreciation for women (O’Reilly 2001; Thomas 2001). Building boys’ self-esteem, helping them to develop their interpersonal skills and relational ways of being will ‘modify the course of development for both genders’ (Dooley and Fedele 2001:189).

Dooley and Fedele (2001) have conducted workshops for mothers and their adult sons. Their practice experience and their research gave rise to an interesting observation. ‘We have found in our work with more than three thousand mothers of sons that in spite of the cultural message, many mothers follow their inclination and stay in relationship with their sons’ (pp.187-188).
Contrary to the idea that failure to de-identify with their mother will produce a problematic gender identity, retaining ‘a strong connection is the way to teach sons how to navigate the many and complex nuances of relationship’ (p.188).

Caron (1995) supports their analysis in *Strong Mothers: Strong Sons*. Whilst not a feminist text, she moves the value of the mother and son relation beyond the Oedipal stage into adolescence when she says, ‘I am convinced that an adolescent son needs his mother. His early disengagement from her will inhibit, not foster, his adolescent search for a sense of self’ (p.1). Male writer William Pollack (1999) carries forward the theme of connection. He contends that continuous demonstrations of love and bonding with his mother can help a boy ‘launch himself into a healthy masculine life’ (p.82).

Smith (1996) speaking about her interviews with post World War 2 sons asks:

‘Too much mother emotionally? Smother love perhaps? The testimony of most sons delivered a resounding negative. Not “too much”. Rather, “not enough”. Many sons of that era looked back unhappily, feeling bewildered about their relationships with their mothers’ (p.40).

Thomas (2001) reads the mother-son connection as a challenge to socially constructed ideas about gendered characteristics, suggesting that patriarchal teaching about masculinity requires the rejection of “femininity” that can ‘manifest itself in the expression of misogynistic attitudes and sexual harassment…’ (p.123). Therefore, the mother-son connection can contribute to disrupting ‘the masculine socialization process’ (pp.123-124) through its encouragement of a reciprocal empathic and nurturing dynamic.

**The difference between mothers and sons and mothers and daughters**

Feminist theorists make mention of the different issues facing mothers of sons and mothers of daughters. Feminist mothers, suggests Thomas (2001), have shifted the paradigm for their daughters by role modelling
unconventional femininities. This is made easier, ‘by the fact that there are also obvious and tangible rewards for young women in resisting conventionally feminine roles (especially when this entails relinquishing some of the responsibility in the home), since such roles are no longer accorded much status in contemporary society’ (Thomas 2001:125).

Feminist mothers and their daughters can be united in the ‘struggle for liberation’ yet ‘these same women and their sons represent opposing forces in which mothers encourage their sons to give up power’ (O’Reilly 2001:153). In other words, forging a strong relationship with her son may result in a loss of privilege for him if gender equity is achieved (Castle 2001). If feminist mothers want to generate change they ‘must come to deal with the tension they experience from delivering messages that might disempower [sic] their sons’ (Castle 2001:111).

The mother wrestles with the belief that challenging normative masculine development will benefit her son because she is fully aware that ‘for young men the “costs” of challenging conventional masculine roles are much higher – given a society that still does attach considerable prestige to “masculinity” - and when this entails (for example) sharing domestic responsibilities with women, such “costs” are not clearly compensated by tangible benefits’ (Thomas 2001:125). Although there may be benefits for boys and men in this sharing, like greater empathy with women and a sense of fulfilling responsibilities, relinquishing privilege and status is not an easy process.

Wells (2001) emphasises that ‘[w]e all know that the world tells girls what they cannot do and boys what they cannot feel…[feminist parents] strive to encourage our sons to embrace all kinds of emotions’ (p.161). She describes parenting practices that encourage sons to use their words rather than their bodies as negotiation tools. Within the home she suggests, feminist parents try to teach their sons ‘self-sufficiency in terms of domestic chores like cooking and sewing and picking up after themselves’ (p.161).

Abbey (2001) believes that feminist mothers of sons are finding ways to help their sons ‘become free, confident, and independent men who are capable of
liking themselves, taking risks, forming close and authentic relationships with others, and facing the future with courage and optimism’ (p.142) Ross Epp and Cook (2000) stress that for the majority of feminist mothers patriarchy as a system of oppression is the problem rather than individual men. They explain:

We want our sons to become men who understand the issues associated with male privilege and refute the inequity that they see there. This may alienate them from men who view feminist sympathizers with the same disregard as they view women. Thus the aims of feminists raising sons and daughters are similar. They hope to nurture them in a belief that all people are equal and to prevent them from being damaged by patriarchy (p.19).

RESEARCH ABOUT MOTHER AND SON RELATIONSHIPS

Feminist research into the mother and son relationship has been sporadic. Arcana’s (1983) book Every Mother’s Son: The Role of Mothers in the Making of Men draws on her relationship with her son and interviews with sixty mothers and sixty sons in the United States. Her book is located within the women’s movement’s concern for positive role modelling of independent and strong women, capable of achieving more than patriarchal ideas about femininity had professed.

Arcana (1983) focuses on the realities of ‘male supremacy’ (p.2) and voices disappointment at the perceived powerlessness of the mother to generate significant societal change within the institution of motherhood. She questions possibilities for real change in attitudes towards women whilst women’s power is significantly diminished within patriarchal society. Arcana (1983) expresses concern for how her son might view her within the context of mothering in a patriarchal culture that does not value the mother. Both the
lack of alternative role models for her son and feminism’s perceived blindness to the needs of mothers of sons form part of her thesis.

In 1994, Rashbaum and Silverstein published *The Courage To Raise Good Men*. They identified how dominant discourse about gender difference affects women’s approach to their relationship with their sons. They write:

> Most women…fear that a mothers influence will ultimately be harmful to a male child, that it will weaken him, and that only the example of a man can lead a son into manhood (p.9).

This fear connects to the concept of her feminine influence emasculating her son so that he will be excluded from mainstream or ‘malestream’ society.

In the third wave of feminist activity, three separate studies (Abbey, Castle and Reynolds 1998; Rowland and Thomas 1996; Smith 1996) are found, as well as a number of workshops for mothers and sons by the Wellesley Centre For Women in the United States. In 1993 Ms. Magazine in the United States apportioned part of their Nov/Dec issue to raising sons. In 1998 the Association for Research on Mothering ran a conference titled *Mothers and Sons Today: Challenges and Possibilities*. Most recently, in 2010 Griffin and Broadfoot reflected on their own experiences as feminist mothers raising sons in a book chapter: *Outlaw Mothers Raising Gentle-Men to Disrupt Hegemonic Tension Between Masculinity and Femininity*.

In 1996 Rowland and Thomas conducted a small-scale study into feminist mothers’ accounts of raising sons. The participants in this study came from western English-speaking countries and had one or more sons. Several of the participants also had daughters. The participants included lesbian and heterosexual women, some of whom were raising their sons alone and others who were partnered (Rowland and Thomas 1996). They echoed Arcana’s (1986) fear of losing sons to patriarchy. Their research showed that the women’s feminism was a driving force in their attempts to support their sons to ‘defy traditional male stereotypes’ (Thomas 2001:133). The women feared
losing their sons to a dominant culture where they become ‘brutalised’ (p.147) by a masculinity that harms women and men.

A recurring theme was the struggle that parenting women feel to resist masculine ideals. According to Thomas (2001): ‘Many women made it plain that their commitment to doing this stemmed from their commitment to feminism…’ (p.133). The impetus to continue this push, Thomas (2001) argues, came from their belief in the value of their sons learning different ways of being male.

Thomas’ (1996; 2001) research utilises the notion of sex roles and sex role stereotypes to encourage boys to identify with alternative ways of expressing masculinity. She argues that the shifts in gender roles in the last few decades represent an opportunity to rethink gender identification regarding our children’s experience. Thus her research asserts the importance of finding ‘anti-sexist men willing and able to act as unconventional role models’ (2001:126).

This research, like Arcana’s (1986), appears to paint a picture of an either/or paradigm where one chooses to adopt certain ‘models’ of masculinity. This is limiting, I believe, without a conceptualisation of power relations as part of the construction of gendered subjectivities and the notion that it is possible to engage in non-normative masculinity practices. This latter conceptualisation, explored in this thesis, aims to further examine the role of values, ideas, norms, assumptions and recognition in the interaction with normative masculinity practices.

Another interesting finding from Rowland and Thomas’ (1996) research was the fear the participants expressed about the criticism of the negative aspects of traditional masculine values damaging their own relationship with their son or ‘undermining their son’s self-confidence’ (Thomas 2001:132). As a consequence, one of the participants spoke about ‘trying to draw a line between encouraging his personal development and stopping him developing a macho type personality’ (Thomas 2001:133). Here there is the suggestion that the sons are required to deal with conflicting messages about masculinity
leaving some of the mothers feeling that they needed to provide ‘extra support…[to their sons, while at the same time]…being wary of allowing him to take that support for granted’ (Thomas 2001:133). As well, the feminist mothers identified an ongoing tension ‘between not reinforcing male expectations of women to look after them and “save them” and responding to [their] real emotional needs for nurturance, support and a place to be vulnerable’ (Thomas 2001:133).

Not surprisingly then, feminist theorists identify the struggle, ambivalence, tension and unease that accompanies mothers who attempt to parent their sons outside of the norm. Feminist mothers of sons begin visualise the possibilities for alternative masculinities. For Rowland (1996) it is about wanting

…to challenge the assumption that autonomy for boys means guillotining affection and connection; that masculinity means contempt for women. I want to teach my boys a sense of their own wholeness, while rejecting privilege based purely on their sex. I want them to learn the complementary qualities which are traditionally seen as opposites; to learn that men, like women, can be nurturant and strong, at peace yet vital, kind and critical, trusting yet politically aware; that men can listen as well as speak-sympathize and empathize as well as direct and lead (pp.108-109).

Smith in Mothers and Sons (1996) makes a similar proposal to feminist mothers. Smith’s research relied on interviews and questionnaires with mothers, some daughters and sons ‘over the generations from World War II to the 1990s’ (Smith 1996:x). These participants were from Australia and Great Britain and not all self-identified feminists. Smith asserts that for ‘centuries, women have mothered male children without understanding the masculine culture of which their boys are a part’ (Smith 1996:3). She suggests that historically, feminism has not considered the effect that cultural constructs of masculinity have on boys. ‘The gathering impact of
‘masculinity’ on the child is masked by the stereotype, just as assumptions about femininity once concealed its ill-effects on girls’ (Smith 1996:4).

She argues that the effect of the masculinisation process of boys might be similar in its ill effects to the assumptions historically made on girls and women regarding femininity. She contends that lack of access to and understanding of masculine socialisation disconnects mothers from their sons and does not support them to develop alternative masculinities (1996). She concludes that the biggest factor affecting the mother and son relationship is women’s lack of understanding about the construction of traditional masculinity:

More than anything else, writing this book has taught me how fundamental it is that women who mother boys develop a realistic understanding of the socialization process which creates what is called masculinity. It has made me realize that it is a woman's ignorance of masculinity that is her downfall in the relationship with her boys (Smith 1996:ix).

Smith (1996) also emphasises that it is ‘how male conditioning shapes male identity and the implications for mothers and sons-which is of interest’ (p.8).

To re-vision a socially healthy masculinity, feminist theorists should develop their understanding of what creates and perpetuates oppressive masculinity (Clatterbaugh 2004).

Dooley and Fedele (2001) echo Smith’s (1996) concerns by recommending mothers learn in depth how the masculinisation process influences boys’ development. They argue that in understanding the masculinisation process, mothers may be more able to help their sons devise strategies to counteract problematic relational patterns learnt in their wider cultural context.

In 2001 Dooley and Fedele explored the emphasis of dominant gender discourse on mothers separating from their sons. Their experience from workshops with mothers and sons led them to argue the case for raising ‘relational boys’. This privileges the mother’s connection and emphasises the
importance of working explicitly with sons to facilitate emotional literacy and emphatic capacity. They argue that this increases their resilience and reduces a desire to lash out later in life.

In 1998 educational academics Abbey, Castle and Reynolds undertook a study of ‘our responsibility as feminist mothers raising sons’ (p.143). This was part of a wider study Comparing How Mothers Influence the Education of Daughters and Sons. They found that their sons experienced a ‘general lack of confidence and confirmation about their masculinity’ (p.145), which they (the researchers) found problematic. Their sons’ ‘confusion about masculine identities’ concerned Abbey and her colleagues. This has led Abbey (2001) to ask:

To what extent do our sons feel abandoned and betrayed? Why were we not more sensitive and attuned to our sons’ identity struggles? What degree of responsibility should mothers take for gender difficulties and their possible solutions? In the end we realized that we had given little prior thought to the complexities of male gender identity and, as a result, had a lot to learn about masculinity if we were to offer support of our sons. In this regards, I don’t think we are alone (p.145).

Castle (2000) concurs and emphasises her unease about their (Abbey, Castle and Reynolds’s 1998) lack of knowledge of ‘the ways in which messages from the culture were received and negotiated by young men’ (p.110).

In 2010 Griffin’s and Broadfoot’s research developed out of their own reflections of being feminist mothers raising sons. Their self-reflections identified that social institutions generation of norms and expectations exerted great influence on the domestic configuration of gender roles and gender identity. Drawing on Rich’s (1976) notion of Outlaw Mothers and O’Reilly’s (2004) explication of this idea they describe this kind of mothering as practice that ‘disrupts hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity’ (p.313) by drawing attention to motherhood discourse that positions women on a reductive binary as either good or bad mothers. They suggest that
Outlaw Mothers seek to renegotiate the value of bad mothering and argue that mothers seek to create a space where their sons feel able to experiment with alternative expressions of masculinity, in particular the expressing of emotion and the externalising of dialogue of introspective thoughts and feelings. This is an endorsement of Thomas’ (2001) and Dooley and Fedele’s (2001) arguments. Broadfoot and Griffin (2010) describe this space as ‘sanctuaries of respite’ (p.214) where boys can learn alternatives. They identify the principal obstacles facing Outlaw Mothers:

… mothers must reject, reframe, and re-create historical, societal, and familial pressures and codes as they navigate away from what often feel like unnecessary and unnecessarily limiting norms for their sons (p.214).

Griffin and Broadfoot’s (2010) exploration of their own relationships with their sons concurs with this research. They emphasise the tension between external social expectations and norms about masculinity and the mother and son relationship. They argue that feminist mothers want their sons to be accepted, not ostracised, which places pressure on mothers to feel ‘bad’ about inviting their sons to take up non-normative masculinity positions and retain a connection to their mothers.

Their reflections identify their concerns about the limitations of social norms and social context on their sons’ conceptualisation of masculinity and the tension that dominant masculinity practices raises for feminism and feminists. Their conclusions, based on exploration of aspects of their own relationships with their sons, identifies the continual negotiation and renegotiation by feminist mothers between ‘hegemonic and subordinate masculinities for, through and around our sons’ (Griffin and Broadfoot 2010:314) and how they understand the consequences of this process. Located within a framework that considers gendered subjectivities as an ongoing production, they argue that feminist maternal practice with sons functions as a ‘counter narrative’ reflecting the tensions mothers face in their navigation through ‘the tricky terrain of masculinity and feminism’ (Griffin and Broadfoot 2010:314).
MASCULINITIES AND THE FEMINIST MOTHER: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As a subject area, it is important for feminism to scrutinise men and masculinities. Many contemporary Anglo-American theorists caution that simplistic and essentialist views of masculinity ‘can only narrow rather than expand men’s opportunities to be human’ and ‘denies their differences among men themselves, and the wide range of attributes which could simply be called human’ (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998:149). Feminist mothers attempting to raise their sons to resist the dominant mode of masculinity locate themselves outside of the dominant culture (Griffin and Broadfoot 2010; Thomas 2001) For mothers to reclaim their relationship with their sons and help them ‘develop a healthy sense of who they are, their maternal role must be valued and taken seriously by others’ (Abbey 2001:143). I suggest that feminist research about mothers and sons should aim to validate maternal practice, as well as claim it as relevant, in the constitution of masculinities as fathers and men.

The struggle to raise boys according to a feminist vision for social transformation is impeded by assumptions about gender as well as ‘the expectations of the school system, peer group pressures, the mass media and, for some, the influence of their son’s father and other adult male role models’ (Thomas 2001:129). Feminist mothers raising sons to be different vitally need support. Rowland and Thomas’s (1996) research did not appear to ask the feminist mothers specific questions about co-parents. However, some of the women spoke of ‘the active, practical support they felt they had from their son’s father for their aims’ (Thomas 2001:131). Another woman explained that attempting to re-vision masculinity with her son was made easier for her son because he was ‘growing up with a father who did not conform to dominant stereotypes of what a “man” should be…’ (Thomas 2001:131). And finally, that some of the women in their study felt that ‘early experience of close care from fathers was seen…as significant in influencing how their sons
formed their own expectations of the gendering (or not) of adult roles’ (Thomas 2001:131).

A review of the literature about mothers and sons indicates that where there is a male co-parent, it is not clear the extent of these men’s involvement in supporting feminist mothers to build on their connection with their sons. According to Schacht and Ewing (2004) ‘[m]ost, if not all, attempts at feminist parenting over the last thirty years have been made by individual mothers struggling to find alternative models for childrearing’ (p.136). It is not clear to what extent feminists engage the fathers in the appraisal of hegemonic masculinity and form alliances with them in the imagining of alternative masculinities. However, that the possibilities for feminists raising sons would seem to be strengthened by the support of a cooperative and supportive male co-parent. My research paradigm seeks to engage feminist mothers of sons in discussions about men, masculinity and the role of their male co-parent in supporting her feminist ideals and representing alternative masculinities to their sons. This line of inquiry was explored in the research interviews.

The majority of existing research about mothers and sons does not appear to specifically consider this relationship within a poststructural feminist account of gendered subjectivities as an ongoing and negotiated activity. However, more recent feminist research begins to consider the mother and son relationship as a location for the negotiation of gendered subjectivities. To this end, Griffin and Broadfoot (2010) identify the process of ‘gender work’ as an ‘active process of creating and re-creating gender over time…’ (p.315). This is inclusive of the interaction between mother and son that, as a social process, is constitutive of gendered subjectivities. They articulate the contradictions feminist mothers face as they make choices in how they respond to their sons’ overt and less conscious desires to fit in, make friends and stay safe (emotionally and physically). This is easy for the feminist mother who is committed to feminist analysis of patriarchy and/or hegemonic masculinity. And, importantly, Griffin and Broadfoot (2010) emphasise that
the choices feminist mothers make exist within a social and historical context that constrains their choices. It is my hope that this thesis extrapolates on the ways that feminist mothers navigate these contexts, in particular the dominant narrative of gender difference.

Apart from Griffin and Broadfoot’s (2010) exploration of the choices made by feminist mother and son there has not yet been a larger and deliberate exploration of the conjunction between mothers and sons and the construction of gender regarding men and masculinities. Feminist research about mothers and sons works to position the relevancy and efficacy of maternal practice in the ongoing production of gendered subjectivities. The re-qualification of the mother’s interaction with gender power relations is also supported through feminist research.

In addition, through taking the position that the mother and son relationship is a discursive route through which gender is produced, this thesis privileges the private domain of mother and son. And through the consideration of maternal agency within this domain I consider the possibility that it may exist as a disruption of the dominant narrative not just a coexisting story.

My literature search indicates that it is only in feminist literature and research that the mother is configured as an emerging agent of social change in regards to the development and construction of masculinity. While profeminist masculinities literature mentions the mother in regards to her son, her agency in working to construct alternative masculinities has not yet been addressed.

The quoted studies identify concerns about women’s exclusion from the masculinisation process and lack of understanding about the construction and maintenance of masculinity. Contemporary discussions critique normative masculinity practices in a more nuanced way and are overtly influenced by women’s relationships with their sons. However while much of contemporary feminist literature re-establishes women’s entitlement to maintain connection with her son, and explores the intentions feminist mothers have of developing
their sons’ relational capacities, this has, to an extent, obscured focus on male entitlement and privilege.

There has not yet been a deliberate exploration of the intersection between feminist maternal practice with sons and the concept of gender as relationally and interactionally constituted. One aim of this study is to fill this gap. This thesis retains focus on the specific themes identified in both second and third-wave feminist writing about mothers and sons, and then grounds these in poststructural feminist theorising about gender as performative and relational. By drawing on the theoretical frameworks of gender as relational, ongoingly and situationally produced, this thesis takes up historical and contemporary feminist theorising about motherhood and mothering to consider how the two ideas can validate and lend theoretical support to the goals and hopes of feminist mothers raising sons. I want to take the idea of doing gender, and drawing on maternal agency, explore how the mother and son relationship can be a deliberate and specific site for understanding and challenging gender relations. As feminist mothers interact with and enact gender discourse, their maternal practice takes shape and they inform relations of power.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed the literature about mothers and sons and has helped me articulate the conceptual frame I want to use to generate my own narrative about this relationship. In this way, the chapter is the springboard for the following three theoretical chapters of the thesis. The middle chapters will argue how I believe poststructural feminist ideas about gender and motherhood can rearticulate the relationship between masculinity and femininity so that gender relations become less problematic.

A review of the literature identifies how the patriarchal narrative that has historically circumscribed the mother and son relationship uses gender difference discourse to argue that the development of boys’ masculinity is paramount to his development as a man. The mothers’ role is marginalised (as a reflection of wider gender relations regarding men and women). For her
son to emerge a man, the mother must step back, disconnect and support her son to become as unlike her as possible. Not only is this a phallocentric explanation of the relationship, the construction of her sons’ gendered subjectivity, predicated on a gender binary process of difference, is uncritiqued and promoted as the ideal. This narrative underscores the theoretical imperative of this thesis that seeks to frame the mother and son within poststructural accounts of the subject that reject gender essentialism.

The marginalisation of women’s experiences in the patriarchal narrative grounds the following chapter where I will present the feminist argument for contesting the phallocentric dichotomy within which the mother and son are positioned. Feminism has historically refuted the normative male ideal as the reference point for the sense making of the social world. I suggest that if uncontested and under theorised, the mother and son relationship is constrained by phallocentric discourses. Unchecked, the relationship contributes to the production of male privilege.
CHAPTER THREE: GENDER
DIFFERENCE DISCOURSE

INTRODUCTION
This chapter explores the way that all human beings (including the mother and son) are organised around the boundary line drawn between male and female (Beasley 1999; Fenstermaker and West 2002; Risman and Myers 1997; Rubin 1975). I will describe the gender binary as the symbolic representational system that marks the human body as male or female and discuss accounts of the process through which the human subject develops a sense of their gendered self. I will identify how this positions women (and mothers) outside of meaningful subjectivity. This chapter establishes the argument that any configuration of the mother and son that reproduces the gender binary constrains the relationship and marginalises the mother.

GENDER DIFFERENCE DISCOURSE
While we are born human beings in a material body, there is a culture that conditions each individual through providing language, imagery and meanings which construct a socially visible human subject. Discourse carries these messages, languages and symbols which direct ideas about the way that society and culture should be structured. Discourses can be defined as a ‘specific structure of statements, terms and categories that are historically, socially and institutionally specific’ (Horwitz 2004:44).

A discourse can secure its dominance through the idea that truth is objectively possible to calculate and that the discourse is grounded in this truth. Foucault (1980) proposes that dominant discourse secures its authority within society by being linked to the institutional and functional organisation of society and by adopting methodological processes that claim scientificity.
Knowledge grounded in scientificity is powerful knowledge because it seeks to organise and categorise the social world.

Scientific methodology is privileged because of its supposed ‘powers’ of objectivity and thus the capacity for revealing the truth. According to Foucault (1980) scientifically revealed knowledge is formalised within a systemic characterisation of society that he describes as a ‘functionalist coherence’ (p.81). In other words, dominant discourse totalises and homogenises human experience at the same time as organising it. The gender binary is the symbolic organising structure utilised by gender difference discourse.

**The Gender Binary and The Gendered Subject**

The gender binary renders the human body socially visible. Butler (2006) explains this well when she states:

> The mark of gender appears to “qualify” bodies as human bodies: the moment in which an infant becomes humanised is when the question, “is it a boy or a girl?” is answered (p.151).

Using these terms begins the construction of the gendered subject (Lilly 1998). The establishment of gender difference begins within these terms as each invokes conceptual stories about men and women, boys and girls. Thus the gendered subject is first positioned in relation to gender difference discourse.

The development and experience of the self relates directly to the social and cultural context within which the subject is born and subsequently entangled. Thus the subject is made through relationship to context. Recognising the ‘self in context’ in this way, cultural and critical theorists understand the concept of I, or self, by using the term ‘subject’ (Mansfield 2000).

Poststructural ideas about subjectivity consider that the process of ascribing fixed and unambiguous meanings ‘should be understood as an act of power, or as reflecting the capacity of a social group to impose its will on others by
freezing meanings’ (Seidman 2004:167-168). To expand, feminists assert that patriarchal power ‘rests on the social meanings given to biological and sexual difference’ (Weedon 1987:2). I agree with both of these ideas and believe it is important to problematise gender difference in order to conceptualise the mother and son relationship as a contested site for repositioning gendered subjectivities.

**Sex Categorisation**

The language of the gender binary fastens meaning to the material body so that it becomes a sexed body. In this way, gender is culturally inscribed on the material foundation of the body. The cultural practice of utilising the gender binary assigns sex category; this is where the division between sex and gender can be seen to exist (Butler 2006).

Gender difference discourse can construct the idea of pre-discursive subjectivity by drawing on anatomy to position the body as male or female. This locates the body as the source of gendered identity and creates the appearance of gender as an attribute of the individual. Because of different physiological construction a story of difference is established that is constructed so as to appear pre-existent.

Dedication to the pervasive organisation of social life around the contrast between male and female (Bem 1998) is made possible by the idea of biological difference but this creates the perception of men and women as ‘two homogenous groups’ (Marchant and Wearing 1986:34). There remains little room to account for variance and makes differences vulnerable to stigma.

Being named as male or female is the discursive pathway through which the gendered subject emerges. At the same time, this regulatory practice only allows two socially legitimate subject positions (Davies 1989). The only available words for an infant’s anatomy are bipolar and mutually exclusive: the infant can only be a boy or a girl, a male or a female. Binary linguistic
structure makes it difficult to ‘conceptually and practically’ (Davies 1989:9) position the subject as anything else.

The gender binary only renders the subject visible once it is gendered and in turn the gendered subject can only exist within the gender binary. Despite transgendered, asexual and intersex identified subjectivities, the gender binary permits and requires two homogenous categories of identity. It is a prescriptive, closed and circular paradigm that makes it very difficult to conceptually make sense of the multiplicity of masculinities and femininities. I emphasise that the gender binary misrepresents homosexual, transgendered, asexual and intersex subjectivities. However this thesis will account only for the mother and son as they are reflected within the dichotomous heteronormative male/female paradigm.

Sex Categorisation Establishes the Process of Difference
Mothers and sons will encounter difference in ways that are directly connected to their anatomy and thus their status as male or female. The pronouncement of her infant as a boy (in utero or at birth) marks the beginning of a mother’s experience of raising a son. The focus in this relationship then turns to their difference rather than that which might unite or connect them (Bem 1998).

The moment a mother’s son is positioned within the gender binary, she is simultaneously drawn into a process of difference. Her baby is labelled as other than her and is imbued with a pre-existing narrative. Before they have uttered a single word, a story exists about their relationship. I now describe the dominant discourse about gender difference, one that is prevalent in the literature about the mother and son.

Psychoanalytic Gender Difference Discourse
The psychoanalytic account of the gendered subject is important because it specifically centres on the difference between mother and son.
Psychoanalysis theorises about the development of the gendered psyche and considers how we come to make sense of ourselves in relation to masculinity and femininity. Psychoanalysis also introduces the idea that gendered subjectivity is produced relationally. Both traditional and feminist psychoanalysis engage the idea that how we come to make sense of ourselves as male or female is dependent on our relationship to power, the phallus, and the father. Psychoanalysis is also important, as will be explored, because traditionally it has established the psychological imperative for the mother to retreat from her son.

**The Development of the Gendered Psyche**

Psychoanalysis points to the gendered moment when a child recognises that they are either a boy or a girl. Psychoanalytic thought proposes that there is an interior life that is awakened and then triggers conscious awareness of self as separate from others which then facilitates unconscious processes, neurosis and drives (Chodorow 1989; Mansfield 2000).

For Freud, individuals are not born with their identity already complete (Mansfield 2000). However, he believed that ‘there was an innate biological sequence of human development and that this pattern was universal for men and women alike’ (Goodstein and Sargent 1977:169). The external environment engages with internal structure (Goodstein and Sargent 1977; Mansfield 2000), both conscious and unconscious, and produces the subject. For example, regarding concepts of femininity, Freud (1965) seems to suggest that the social context of the subject is relevant to the development of the subject, but that ultimately the subject is limited by innate or core realities:

…(N)or is it always easy to distinguish what should be ascribed to the influence of the sexual function and what to social breeding. Thus, we attribute a larger amount of narcissism to femininity, which also affects women’s choice of object, so
that to be loved is a stronger motive for them than to love
(p.132).

Freud’s (1965) theory of the development of femininity does not ‘try to
describe what a woman is’ (p.116). Instead, psychoanalysis ‘sets about
inquiring how she comes into being’ (Freud 1965:116). Freud’s theory of
psychosexual development suggests that it is not until the phallic stage that
the first clear differentiations between the sexes come into play. Then,
through the Oedipal phase, at least for the female, her femininity fulfills its
developmental destiny and achieves a fixed state.

On the other hand I cannot help mentioning an impression that
we are constantly receiving during analytic practice. A man of
about thirty strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unformed
individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the
possibilities for development… A woman of the same age,
however, often frightens us by her psychical rigidity and
unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and
seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no
paths open to further development; it is as though the whole
process had already run its course and remains thenceforward
insusceptible to influence – as though, indeed, the difficult
development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of
the person concerned (Freud 1965:134-135).

In the phallic stage, the penis and the clitoris become a site for pleasure and
this marks the development of sexuality (Goodstein and Sargent 1977). Freud
placed meaning and value on the recognition (beginning in the phallic stage)
of the ‘importance’ and ‘value’ of the penis. The phallic phase marks the
beginning of identifying ‘genital differences with gender differences’ (Fast
1984 p.80). From this point, for Freud, the development of masculinity and
femininity centre on the relationship to the phallus. The female child becomes
aware that she is missing something and experiences a sense of lack, which
results in penis envy (Goodstein and Sargent 1977).
The Oedipal Complex shows Freud’s belief in the role that social and environmental ideas play in the development of identity. According to Mansfield (2000)

…the Oedipal model understands that the key contributing factors to the production of subjectivity are the gender relations and sexual identifications of the child’s environment. Subjects are not born into an undefined world that they then order according to their own priorities…For example, although the child only has its gender stabilized after the Oedipus complex, it arrives in a world where certain biological attributes are read as naturally and necessarily connected with the particular sets of behaviours, feelings and appearances we call gender (p.31).

Importantly for this discussion, this theory sets the development of femininity solely in relationship to male biology and thus masculinity in general. This establishes a lesser value placed on femininity and relegates ideas about femininity in the negative or passive sense. For example, a ‘little girl is as a rule less aggressive, defiant and self sufficient; she seems to have a greater need for being shown affection and on that account to be more dependent and pliant’ (Freud 1965:117). What is of particular importance to feminists is that despite Freud’s (1965) suggestion that ‘[t]hese sexual differences are not…of great consequence’ (p.117), these ideas about the development and nature of femininity have translated to social inequality and less political and personal power.

**Psychoanalysis and the Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity**

Freud’s theory of the development of masculinity marks ‘the starting-point of modern thought about masculinity’ (Connell 2005:8). For boys, the ‘Oedipal complex’ is the defining point in their development. The male child establishes gender identity through the phallic and Oedipal stages. Centering on the power of the penis, the male child notices the female vagina, which he views as castration (Fast 1984; Sargent 1977). Mansfield (2000) asserts that
the female body is thus considered a ‘site of lack’ (p.32) and the male child is aware that such lack can be connected to less power. The male child is threatened by the possibility of his own castration and sees his father (who also possesses a penis) as his main rival (Connell 2005). The male child at this point is faced with a choice.

…he can either identify with the father who owns the penis and seems to be the policeman of the very principle of penis ownership, and imagine having sex with the mother, as the father does; or he can identify with the mother who has lost the penis, and imagine being the object of the father’s sexuality. Freud calls these alternatives the active-masculine and passive-feminine (Mansfield 2000:32).

Normative Masculinity and a Boy’s Relationship to His Mother

The Oedipal stage marks the young boy’s break from his mother. The physical difference between himself and his mother is the penis. The development of his subjectivity relies on how he chooses to make sense of the masculine/feminine divide that has come before him. Although, prior to this, he ‘felt himself in direct unmediated relationship with his mother’ (Mansfield 2000:41), the penis (the symbol of masculinity) and his awareness of this symbol creates conflict. It is the threat from the father, his awareness of the focus the penis already has on his own young life as well of ‘the gender hierarchy that will bring the boys sense of self into crisis, and lead it to the highly fraught field of subjectivity’ (p.41).

Frosh (1994) focuses on the problematic definition of masculinity. Although the presence of a penis is seen as constituting masculinity and thus as ‘something positive…emphasizing this… is a masculine strategy employed to deny the implications of the converse, that masculinity is defined negatively, as that which is not feminine’ (p.79). I suggest this is a very significant factor for the understanding and development of non-hegemonic masculine subjectivities. And, along with Abbey (2001) in “Sons of feminists: learning
from their talk”, parents and sons alike struggle with the visioning and naming of what masculinity is and what it means for boys (p.145). The awareness that being a man is being unlike a woman does not support the development of alternative non-hegemonic masculine subjectivities.

This idea, I think, is especially significant in this thesis because of the role that the Oedipal complex is supposed to play in the development of a boy’s masculine subjectivity. According to Frosh 1994:

… the Oedipus complex operates as a division between the child and mother: the boy only becomes a boy through renunciation of the feminine, not just as object of desire but also as subject of identification, and incorporation into the very general, very ‘other’ paternal Law (p.79).

Effectively, connection and identification with the mother (other than woman as object) must be removed in order for the male child to claim his masculine status. In fact, the mother must remain as ‘other’ in order for the masculine subject to emerge and be sustained (Frosh 1994). Removed from his mother, the son must develop his sense of himself as a man by not mirroring or adopting her characteristics and by necessarily rejecting her ways of engaging in the world. The son must do this to claim his separateness from her and thus his masculine status.

For Frosh (1994) the symbolic ‘Name of the Father’, the paternal Law or the practice of hegemonic masculinity is what stands between the mother and son (p.80). The masculine/feminine polarity sets the boundary which defines and explains what it is to be masculine or feminine. In actuality, this negates diversity and diminishes acceptance and value of alternatives. Importantly, it warns the mother against contributing to her sons developing masculinity because it is only against her stance as different and separate to him that he can become his masculine self. Masculinity then, must maintain distance from the ‘other’ or Mother in order to ensure its birth and survival. To
identify with ‘other’ is to risk castration and deny access to the paternal, that is, the patriarchy.

The value of the ‘other’ is as confirmation of the masculine subject’s status as masculine because of his ownership of a penis. However, this is a fragile basis for masculinity to rely on. For Frosh (1994), ‘the explicit reference here to the mother’s lack of phallus is a reminder of the extent to which masculinity – the status of supposedly not being castrated – is built upon the shaky foundations of distance from the mother, of being other than the mother of whom one once was part’ (p.88). Not to mention the lesser value this places on the mother and women as a consequence.

In many ways, masculinity is understood as something that is different to femininity while femininity is understood or relegated to that which is other. I contend, that through the exploration of what lies between that alternative masculinities one can envision and value feminine subjectivities. Contemporary theorizing of masculinities suggests that the focus on difference and the insistence on the ‘other’ pressures men who do not define themselves according to the masculine norm.

Some profeminist male writers insist that only through the engagement of alternative masculinities can women’s inferior status be changed (Connell 2005; Kimmel 2000; Pease 2000). Seeing femininity as incomplete only serves to blur understandings of masculinity.

Feminists challenge ideas of femininity as empty and other, as sitting outside of that which really matters. Simone de Beauvoir (1952) puts it well: ‘He is the subject, he is the Absolute– she is the Other’ (p.xvi). She argued that an understanding of femininity is depicted only as the relation existence of women to men. This also makes women accountable to men because he represents the Absolute and the universal. Men are not, however, held accountable to women other than by negation and de Beauvoir (1952) asserts too that Woman signifies lack and becomes imbued with ‘pure otherness’ (p.xviii).
For Freud, masculinity is determined by the relationship to the penis, a symbol of power, and ‘the penis operates as the essence of the system of gender order’ (Mansfield 2000:48). Grosz (1990) calls this a phallocentric representational system whereby women’s corporeal specificity is defined an understood only in relation to men’s…’ (p.73). As long as the feminine must defer to and is defined in terms of the masculine (Alcoff 1988), the mother and son relationship retains a phallocentric dichotomy. This constructs the maternal role as ensuring that her son looks, acts and feels nothing like the mother. Phallocentrism gives credence to patriarchal claims about manhood that aggressively argue for male (father) entitlements to shape and raise their sons into men.

Feminist Psychoanalytic Accounts of the Gendered Subject

The reworking of Freudian phallocentrism towards the matricentric marks feminist attempts to utilise psychoanalytic ideas in progressive ways (Benjamin 2002; Chodorow 1999; Mitchell 1974). Feminist critique rejects the idea that the development of the gendered psyche is located in women’s sense of lack, and that femininity can be characterised as a failure to achieve masculine status (Chodorow 1999). Instead, feminist engagement with psychoanalysis places an emphasis on the social and cultural context as intrinsically connected to a relationally constructed gender.

Juliet Mitchell (1974) argued that psychoanalysis could explain how women’s oppression is embedded within the psyche, and is reproduced through gender socialisation. Because patriarchy positions men and women differently, female oppression constitutes gendered subjectivity because the cultural dominance of masculinity attaches to the child constructing opposing gendered psyches. Consequently, she argues that psychoanalysis does not recommend patriarchy but is, instead, an analysis of patriarchy (Mitchell 1974).

Chodorow (1999) similarly interrelates gendered subjectivity with patriarchy, focusing on the unequal division of labour where women are the primary
caretakers and the father is absent. Chodorow (1999) explored the
development of the male and female psyche focusing on the mother-daughter
relationship and ‘how women create and recreate this relationship internally’
(p.vii). She utilised a form of object-relations theory that holds to the idea that
the subject unconsciously internalises certain parts of the social structure
around them (Heenan 2002). She was interested in the way that the internal
masculine and feminine psyche, or a sense of the male and female self, are
‘formed developmentally, mainly though unconscious communications
between mother and child’ (p.viii). By engaging object-relations theory and
utilising clinical case studies, she explored how we come into being as a self,
that is the moment of individuation and the infant’s awareness of their
separate self, which is an understanding of where we start and what is within
and what is external to us. Chodorow (1999) uses the relationship between
child and mother as the starting point for the development of a ‘sense of
ourselves in relation to our primary others’ (p.viii).

In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow (1999) argues that the pre-
Oedipal space is not solely interacted with by girls, but rather is the location
that establishes gender difference. She utilises object relations theory to
privilege the role of the mother-child relationship in the development of
distinct male and female psyches between boys and girls. She argues that
because women mother, girls’ sense of self is developed in relation to the
mother. Girls retain a focus on their mother into adulthood that centres on the
tension between individuation and continuous identification. Because they
retain an interactive connection, girls traverse back and forward to the pre-
Oedipal phase of empathy and ‘emotional resonance’ (Benjamin 2002:39).
The emphasis is on the internalised psychic machinations of the child who is
conflicted about separation and individuation as an explanation for how
gendered subjectivity develops. Significantly their emotional relation is not
connected to compromising their ego and their sense of self is not threatened
by empathic engagement.
In contrast, boys have to differentiate their identity from the mother in order to establish their masculinity. Masculinity is grounded in the move from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal position, which is established through his denial of identifying with his mother. Because boys’ sense of self is developed in denial of their relation to the mother, this process positions women more generally as the ‘other’. This, Chodorow (1999) argues, both reflects structural gender inequality at the same time as reproduces men’s desire to dominate women, and devalue femininity.

In a feminist critique of Chodorow’s (1999) theory that masculinity arises out of disconnection with the mother, Benjamin (2002) suggests that this is not explanatory enough. Segal (1990) argues that power inequality between men and women are important indicators in the discrimination and subordination of women rather than solely as a result of the male-psyche born of his repudiation of the mother.

However, Chodorow’s (1999) theory helped develop feminist thinking about the connection between the individual and their social context and linked mothering with male dominance.

Chodorow’s (1999) theory of the reproduction of mothering argues that because men are mothered by women, they reject intimacy and caring because they don’t identify this with what it means or feels like to be male. Consequently, men’s parenting capacities are reduced and the mother and women in general are objectified and devalued. She states:

As long as women mother, a stable sense of masculine self is always more problematic than a stable sense of feminine self (Chodorow 1999:213).

This lead her to argue for changes in social structures to reduce the absence of men from the home and increase their physical and emotional care taking of their children. She asserts that father-absence only serves to leave boys conflicted about their masculinity and fosters their fear of women because while they are reliant on the mother and intimately connected to her, they feel
simultaneously confused and guilty about this connection because of their desire to identify with their father. Chodorow (1999) is unequivocal about the strategy for change when she declares:

Any strategy for change whose goal includes liberation from the constraints of an unequal social organization of gender must take account of the need for a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women (p.215).

The value of shared parenting for Chodorow (1999) is that both girls and boys would be able to establish their sense of self in relation to both men and women and masculinity ‘would not become tied to dependence and devaluation of women’ (p218).

In sum, psychoanalysis is useful because it explores the concept of gendered subjectivity per se and establishes important groundwork for the central idea that masculinity and femininity are relational. However, Freudian psychoanalysis also establishes the psychological imperative for the mother to retreat from her son in order to ensure his ascension to full masculine status. As well, Chodorow’s (1999) account is problematic because it lacks both contextual nuance and does not explore the notion of maternal practice as a stand-alone and important indicator in the mother and son relationship. Her re-qualification of the mother, however, may open an important path towards maternal subjectivity and the idea that her position is symbolic of the phallocentric organisation of society. The mother and son relationship may be enacted from within a phallocentric framework or can be attempted from outside of phallocentrism. However, it is not possible to be free of the implications of phallocentrism (Threadgold 1990).

**Difference Defines the Relationship**

The gender binary is the organising system that defines male from female. I argue that the mother and son relationship can be considered to reflect the symbolic configuration of the gender binary. Psychoanalytic accounts of the
development of gendered subjectivity are connected to gender binary discourse that configures the mother through her differentiation to her son and vice versa.

At the same time, the binary configures both categories in intimate relationships to the other (Belsey 2002). Masculinity lacks meaning without femininity –this is the trap of the binary. Binary oppositions trap our thinking into an either/or; it makes it difficult to imagine all that might sit between and alongside the binary. If we define things by their relationship ‘to the term that is excluded by and from itself’ (Belsey 2002:83) then masculinity can be understood in conjunction only to how we understand femininity. This means that masculinity has no content in and of itself; rather its difference to femininity is ‘the only source of its meaning’ (Belsey 2002:83). In this way, the binary opposition renders the term ‘woman’ as a relation of difference or a tool to elaborate and infuse the category ‘man’ (Frosh 1994; Kimmel 1996). And, masculinity then becomes recognisable because of its relationship of difference to its dualistic other rather than any inherent, pre-existent meaning or substance (Butler 2006). Because the terms male and female signify difference, this establishes from the beginning the differential preparation for their gendered expression (Risman and Myers 1997) and this difference is privileged over the dynamic interaction and texture of the whole (Thorne 1993).

The idea of difference and the way that gendered subjectivity is predicated on and constituted within the discourse of difference greatly informs the social meaning that is ascribed to the mother and son relationship. The gender binary, as a process of difference, relies on and produces a chasm between male and female. In this way, a mother’s son is first and foremost established as irrevocably different to her. This chasm (constructed as real and natural) plays a large part in defining how the mother and son should interact with each other. Because they are two distinct gendered entities, there is a limit to the understanding that a mother can have about her son. At the same time, their relationship is defined by this difference rather than what might be
shared between them (Bem 1998). And, because masculinity is privileged over femininity, the mother must restrain herself in interaction with her son; otherwise she may ‘pollute’ or hinder his maleness. Just as the binary discourse enacts a subject that is fixed, it also makes it very difficult to conceptualise the relationship between mother and son as fluid and interactive.

**Gender Difference Discourse Hierarchizes the Relationship Between the Mother and Son**

The gender binary is not value free because, rather than the category of male and female simply reflecting anatomical distinctions, each term embodies a cavalcade of cultural values and ideas about masculinity and femininity. Power relations enact gender rather than individual attributes (Butler 1999). Importantly the gender binary is a culturally hierarchized discourse where hetero-normative masculinity is privileged and women are positioned outside meaningful subjectivity.

Within this cultural hierarchy, masculinity is privileged and it is power relations that enact gender rather than individual attributes (Butler 1999). This then positions women as existing outside meaningful subjectivity.

**The Difference Between Mother and Son Maintains Gender Inequity**

The gender binary is self perpetuating and reliant on the production of two distinct and homogenous categories of identity. These two categories are predicated on heterosexual normativity and are constrained by the power relations of a hegemonic masculinity discourse. It therefore strongly reinforces the status quo.

The binary asymmetry of male and female is a part of the systemised social organisation of society that maintains an inequitable social order (Fenstermaker and West 2002, Rubin 1975). The mark of sex on the infant is unavoidable because the ‘inclusion in a sex category is used as a fundamental
criterion for differentiation’ (Fenstermaker and West 2002:21). That is, the
male/female dichotomy is used to determine who we are in relation to the
social world. Because the gender binary is constructed as a normalised
account of natural difference it is an accepted foundation for the organisation
of social life (Fenstermaker and West 2002).

The Gender Binary Produces Problematic Masculinities and
Femininities

Everingham (1994) suggests that modernist and structural accounts of the
subject enforce a notion of autonomy that relies on binary structures that
privilege men and subordinate women, in specific regard to motherhood.
Women’s position as mothers have been essentialised and restrained within
the public/private dualism where the private becomes a trivialised realm. The
female subject is produced through relationship; she means something,
becomes something to the specific others she is in relationship to. She is a
reactive receptacle rather than a male protagonist. Her relevance as female
depends on her performance of certain activities as wife, mother and nurturer
(Poole 1990).

According to Poole (1990), the public domain and (patriarchal) institutions
have come to be synonymous with rationality and action. He argues that
rationalisation involves separation of private and public, institutions and
government from the domestic sphere, which is considered the familial and
emotional, or what Everingham (1994) calls the intuitive. This demarcation
means that masculinity has been imbued with the ideals of reason.

However, masculinity is not wholly constructed through the public domain,
as the male subject also exists in the private sphere. Thus masculinity is
‘doubly representative’ (Poole 1990:55). Masculine identity within the
private sphere is informed by and dependent on his place in the public sphere.
He is the rule enforcer, the breadwinner and the worldly authority.
Patriarchy as Gender Difference Discourse

Feminism identifies the gender binary as a source for the production of gender inequality whilst working within the gender binary to effect very real institutional and structural change for women. The following discussion will recognise the importance of this; however, I also argue that this is unhelpful for the mother and son relationship in terms of repositioning problematic gendered subjectivities and understanding how to do so effectively.

The framework of patriarchy explains the social relations between men and women (Oakley 2002) in terms of dominance, subordination and exploitation by men of women (Beasley 1999; Millett 1970; Rubin 1975; Walby 1990). Male dominance is manifest and institutionalised within societal structures, including the external/public domain and the domestic/private realm. Importantly, patriarchy implies that men, by virtue of occupying important social positions, access and exercise power over women and children (Lerner 1986). Thus, patriarchal social practices produce and reproduce social division and gender inequity (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007). Historically, the term patriarchy provided an overall conceptualisation for gender inequality within a social, political and economic system that enabled feminists to argue that change needs to be targeted at institutions and structures rather than individual men (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007; Oakley 2002).

Feminists utilising the concept of patriarchy could use the category of woman as a political tool to expose inequality (hooks 1984; Walby 1990). Consequently, great social, economic and legal change ensued. More recently feminist writers have suggested that for middle-class Anglo-American women, patriarchy has now shifted and the domestic realm has ceased to be the main location for oppression (Oakley 2002; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007; Walby 1990). I think that, for the feminist mother and son, patriarchy still remains an important concept: her son as male will have very real and
different material access to structural power than her. However, the category of woman is not unproblematic.

Patriarchy has been critiqued as a social theory because it collectively labels men as oppressors and women the oppressed (hooks 1984; Edgar & Sedgwick 1999). This again identifies the way that binary thinking is a conceptual loop. The concern is that if patriarchy becomes synonymous with women’s (an amorphous term) oppression, it cannot account for the intersectionality of oppression (hooks 1984; Walby 1990). Feminism may have universalised patriarchy at the expense of context and the lived reality of different groups of women (Butler 2006; hooks 1984; Jackson and Scott 2002; Oakley 2002; Walby 1990). My particular concern is that it is very difficult to separate our sons from masculinity discourse and that patriarchy encourages us to think in terms of our sons as future patriarchs.

The gender binary is unable to account for context. The gender binary locks individuals into pre-existing identities that are ‘cast in a prediscursive domain’ (Butler 2006:10) and are presumed to sit outside of ‘locally grounded meanings’ (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007:99). The gender binary fails to acknowledge the multiple and intersecting cultural, social and political relations that constitute and reconstitute the subject as an ongoing process (Butler 2006). There are multiple intersections that inform women’s everyday lives; class, culture, sexuality and ethnicity are but a few (Meyers 1997). When they are considered, they paint a better picture of how to work towards and develop ideas for change (Evans 1997; Rhode 1990). Thus the traditional category woman is problematic because it facilitates universalising assumptions by identifying women as a group on the basis of sex differentiation (Rhode 1990). In reality, there are multiple other identifying features that may link specific groups within the category woman or even between men and women (Butler 1990; hooks 1984; Meyers 1997).

The subject emerges through power relations that are a complex interaction between ‘subjectivity, interpersonal relationships’ (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007:99) and other institutions such as the family. Fixed and pre-
existing categories of identity such as man or woman or boy and girl or male cannot account for these complex interactions. Because there are diverse forms of power and identity, not all women’s experiences can be neatly cordoned off (Beasley 1999).

Butler (1999) problematises the feminist subject that is constituted within a patriarchal framework of gender identity because it recreates, and therefore is constitutive of, a gender binary that is rigid, exclusionary and hierarchical. She queries the logic of feminism seeking to ‘extend the representation to subjects (women and girls) who are constituted through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject’ (p.9). She argues that this is why the undoing of the binary representational system, or the destruction of sex, is the only way to institute women as equals or as holding the same status as men as the universal subject. Power relations, she argues, are set within a ‘hegemonic cultural discourse’ dependent on binary frameworks ‘that appear as the language of universal rationality’ (Butler 1999:13).

Butler (2006) further argues that a feminist politic that defines itself through patriarchal oppression constitutes a gendered subjectivity makes it difficult to reconstitute, not only as more inclusive of diversity, but also outside of the gender binary. While I am reluctant to dismiss patriarchy as a useful conceptual tool for identifying male privilege, it is also important to consider more particular analytical frameworks that might be better able to account for the heterogeneity of women’s lived experiences.

Structural accounts of patriarchy universalised gendered subjectivity into two distinct and unitary groups, the oppressed and the oppressors (Butler 2006; Rubin 1975). There is an argument that this limits the ability of patriarchy to generate insight into the inter-relational realm of gender because women’s oppression conceptualised structurally cannot account for how sex and gender are socially produced as a form of social organisation of gender relations (Rubin 1975). Butler (2006) argues that universalism is an attempt to account for all and everything. Patriarchy as a concept can be conceived as a
normative classification of a universal category excluding anything that does not appear to fit within the universal category. Consequently, there are masculinities and femininities that are unaccounted for. These variant or divergent masculinities and femininities are marginalised and subjugated (Butler 2006).

**Limitations of Patriarchy in Relation to the Mother and Son**

Patriarchy has relied on unitary and finite categories of gender identity in order to auger structural change. However, this configuration perpetuates the notion of male and female polar opposites and is unable to account for diversity in and amongst women and men across time and context (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007) and is therefore both obtuse and inadequate (Butler 2006; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007). If feminist mothers are to interact with ideas about masculinity in order to support the taking up of non-oppressive masculinity practices, they need a far more nuanced understanding of power and gender.

Historically, in order to privilege women’s experiences and identify gender inequity, feminists and feminism identified masculinity as the problem, not femininity. As Evans (1997) explains:

> … feminism discovered and articulated the power of women and through this new sense of the feminine began to refuse to engage with what was seen as male thought and male knowledge’ (p.45 my emphasis).

I believe that structural accounts of the division between men and women present particular problems for feminist mothers of sons because they define the mother and son relationship as problematic from the beginning. Redolent of Arcana (1983) and Friedan ([1963] 2001) this feminist focus is evident in their articulation about motherhood as patriarchal institution, marriage to men as oppressive and their male children as inheritors of male entitlement and privilege. They voiced their conflicting feelings (Arcana 1983, Rich 1976) and mother and son are at risk of being constructed as enemies. Worryingly, I
think this has the potential to conceptualise the relationship as irreconcilable and this makes the feminist praxis for mothers and sons very complicated.

I argue for utilising a different feminist lens on the mother and son relationship, which reassesses men and masculinity through women’s lives (Braidotti 1990). This could facilitate a vigorous investigation of the relationship between men and women, mothers and sons. Importantly, Evans (1997) calls for the inclusion of men and masculinity when gender relations are the focus of study.

Women… do not live or act in a world from which men are absent; what it is therefore essential to study… is the dynamic of relations between the sexes (p.13).

The feminist analysis of the mother and son relationship is an exciting opportunity to articulate women’s experiences of men and the construction of masculinity. Before exploring a feminist lens that may be able to do this, I need to state that I do think patriarchy has value and purpose when reassessing masculinity from feminist standpoints.

Macleod (2007) presents an argument that patriarchy is a critical methodological and theoretical concept in feminist work with men and in understanding gendered power relations. She argues that the burgeoning masculinities literature risks rendering women not only marginalised but invisible, because masculinity can only be established through the absence of femininity. The exploration of hegemonic masculinity and the work towards construction of non-normative masculinities is at risk, she argues, of displacing patriarchy as a tool for analysing gender relations. Patriarchy is an essential term, as opposed to gender, sexism or hegemonic masculinity. To this end, she argues that patriarchy has been accommodated within poststructural feminism and amended in the drive to redress the failures of its historical incarnation.

Poststructural feminism has redrawn patriarchy as multimodal and mobile, utilising ideas founded in Foucaultdian notions of power as a network of
relations. This allows for the incorporation of history and context as well as ‘men’s enmeshment in patriarchal patterns’ (Macleod 2007:10). It is vital that patriarchy remains the ‘theoretically dominant signifier’ (Macleod 2007:11) because masculinity/masculinities obscures the effect on women of the gender binary.

This does not preclude the usefulness of masculinities as a theoretical or practical concept for feminist mothers of sons. Macleod (2007) argues that any study of hierarchy amongst men must be of service to understanding their power relationship with women and must keep the ‘central problematic of patriarchy in focus’ (p.11). Pease (2013) echoes this when he argues that a profeminist study of masculinities, that is accountable to feminism and the lives of women, must start from men’s position in relation to both patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity.

This thesis will show that the feminist mothers interviewed are working hard to intervene in a hegemonic masculinity discourse that seeks to colonise non-normative masculinity practices that they believe are vital (for men and women) to enact. Macleod (2007) argues that any study of hierarchy amongst men must be of service to and in specific regard ‘their power relations with women’, the import of which, she says, is in keeping the ‘central problematic of patriarchy in focus’ (p.11). Examination of the research data demonstrates these feminist mothers are in prime position to enact this contemporary formulation: one that theorises masculinity while ensuring accountability to women.

**CONCLUSION**

Gender difference discourse positions the mother and son relationship as conflicted by the very ‘nature’ of their opposing positions. With the mother and son positioned by and within the gender binary the current gender order has the potential to be reconstituted.
When a truth claim like the gender binary is made it is difficult to engage (conceptually and in practice) in something that does not resemble the truth without becoming vulnerable to claims of going against nature, of being unnatural. The mother and son interaction is vulnerable to these claims because the relationship is rendered visible through gender difference discourse that is purportedly a true and natural reflection of masculinity and femininity.

Gender difference discourse constrains the mother and son relationship within the boundaries of male/female duality. This provides the grounding for psychology, popular culture, media etc. to warn mothers to ‘back-off’, retreat and disconnect from their sons as they approach young adulthood. And ultimately, because of this, they have no claim at the least to get involved and at the most to intervene.

I have argued that traditional feminist accounts of patriarchy, while important in maintaining a focus on male power and women’s oppression, are not able to account for the reproduction of gender and the interrelationship between the subject and relations of power. While the concept of patriarchy is able to establish clear instances and locations of structural inequality, it is not able to offer the detailed analysis of power that I believe the mother and son relationship requires in order to understand how it can be configured as a location for change.

I argue that, in order to reconfigure the mother and son relationship, we have to be willing to disregard truth claims and categories of identity, even though these have served feminism well in the past and continue to do so in engendering legal, political and economical change. However, rejecting the ‘truth’ is for the mother and son, an important precursor for change.

I have also discussed the idea that, while dominant discourse does constrain behaviour and reproduce problematic relations of power, this does not mean that it is the only discourse available with which to make sense of the social world in which the human subject lives. I have taken Foucault’s notion of
subjugated knowledge as the starting point for my argument, that the existence of alternative knowledge and experience both destabilises the stronghold of dominant discourse, as well as pointing the way to social change through the re-qualification of this knowledge.

Feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons is, I believe, a fertile location for understanding how gender difference discourse informs their practices, intentions and interactions with their sons. What they have to say about this and why they enact the maternal practice that they do tells us a lot about how gender difference discourse utilises relations of power to try and hold men and women, mother and son accountable to specific ideas about masculinity and femininity.

I move now to a more detailed analysis of how relations of power construct and sustain the current gender order. I will consider how understanding these relations of power support different thinking about gender. Thinking differently about gender can position the mother and son relationship in ways that support this location as a site for disrupting dominant discourse.
CHAPTER FOUR: REPOSITIONING GENDERED SUBJECTIVITIES

INTRODUCTION
This chapter considers the potential for new understandings about the mother and son relationship. This is predicated on the thesis argument that change in gender relations, and the role that the mother and son have in this change, is best established through consideration of key poststructural ideas about the self and the power relations through which the gendered subject is enacted. This chapter works to position the mother and son relationship within a paradigm of social change.

DIFFERENT ACCOUNTS OF THE SOCIAL WORLD AND THE HUMAN SUBJECT

The Self
The idea of the self is one of the key sites of contention regarding what constitutes masculinity and femininity. The meaning that is made of gender changes depending on how and where the self is understood to come into being and on how the subject itself is understood to be structured. Some key theoretical developments contribute to contemporary understanding about identity and the individual’s relationship to the social world. Understanding these developments helps build an argument for an active interaction between the subject and the social world. Ultimately this interactional exchange provides a theoretical opening for the gendered subject being repositioned in relation to gender discourse.
The Fixed and Unitary Subject

Traditional accounts of identity support the belief that there is a fixed, coherent essence at the core of the individual that is revealed to the self and the world over the course of their lifetime (Beasley 1999; Belsey 2002; Everingham 1994; Weedon 1987). While the social position or structural location of the individual is seen to inform and constrain, traditional accounts argue that there is still something about fundamental nature that cannot be tempered. There is an essential self that makes us, as human beings, what we are (Weedon 1987). The humanist subject has a knowable content, and is measurable against a normative path of development (Mansfield 2000). The subject is a ‘thing’, quantifiable and predictable on its trajectory of development in relationship to the environment. These ideas of the formation of the self rely on the subject as a rational and creative being who influences their environment.

The Structurally Determined Subject

Conversely, a structuralist account of the subject sees the environment as an external force imposing on and affecting the subject (Belsey 2002; Seidman 2004). These ideas are founded in wider modernist and structuralist accounts of the human condition. As a theoretical framework structuralism examines culture in order to discover commonalities that can be traced to universal structures deeply embedded within the human psyche (Beasley 1999; Belsey 2002). To decipher the commonalities beneath different cultural surfaces it is hoped to reveal the ‘mastery of the single principle that would hold together the apparently disparate features of all cultures’ (Belsey 2002:42).

The Poststructural Subject

The subject of a sentence is the person (or thing) who enacts the verb… A subject takes a position by uttering, even if silently, a sentence using “I” (Belsey 2002:52).

In contrast, the poststructural subject marks a break from the humanist subject who expresses an interior substance. Unlike the humanist self, the
The poststructural subject is not engaged in a search for this interior, authentic and hidden self. The subject as material body does not necessarily correlate with what is inside (Bruns 2007:353). There is no revelation of true identity or liberation of self. Rather, the poststructural subject is in production, an ongoing invention. The poststructural subject is not ‘the ‘self”; while it is inseparable from the material body and ceases to exist when the body dies, it is still distinct and rational’ (Belsey 2002:67).

Poststructural accounts of identity propose that human beings are in fact contradictory and non-linear. As Weedon (1987) suggests, the human subject is a precarious construct that is in a process of ‘constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we speak’ (p.33). There is no ‘identity behind the social process that renders the subject legible’ (Butler 2006:34). Instead, the subject is constituted through its social structural location, of which it is possible to occupy more than one. The subject is not predictable, linear or particularly consistent in the positions it takes up (Kinser 2008).

At the same time, the subject interacts with and is conditioned through a number of different contexts: the family and work place and school are but a few. Within these contexts, the subject is perpetually interactive and responsive, constituted both in the moment and ‘as a consequence of past constitutive actions’ (Butler 1992:10). It weaves together ‘multiple selves always in motion and capable of undermining itself’ (Kinser 2008:124). Thus the subject is not capable of reaching a conclusion or of realising itself.

**Poststructural Feminism and the Subject**

Poststructural feminism is a framework with which to query structuralist and traditional accounts of society, power and identity (Brooks 1997). Poststructural feminism challenges conventional constructions of identity whilst acknowledging ‘the intellectual heritage of feminist identity politics’ (Shepherd 2008:3). Poststructural feminism can be positioned within the context of feminism as a constant evolutionary movement (Brooks 1997).
Poststructural feminist analysis interrogates the idea that identity is stable, instead arguing that gendered discursive practices have the effect of constructing gender so as to appear stable and pre-determined (Butler 1999; Shepherd 2008). This is in part why poststructural feminism critiques feminist identity politics because it both claims ‘rights on behalf of a stable subject’ (Shepherd 2008:3) and promotes the universal category of woman (Meyers 1997).

Poststructural feminism conceptualises a politics of difference (as opposed to an identity politics) that reject essentialist definitions of identities per se and question self-evident unity of race, culture gender or sex. Poststructural feminists argue the promotion of stable categories operates so as to construct immovable and unpassable lines of division between groups (Beasley 1999). Any distinction based on commonality renders invisible the non normative.

There has been criticism levelled at poststructural feminism’s rejection of a stable and unified identity (Brooks 1997). To avoid definitions opens space for traditional and dominant power relations to construct and fill the void. Additionally, the rejection of a stable and unified identity has been critiqued because of a lack of ability to mobilise and advocate for structural change (Shepherd 2008).

However, oppression is not the same for all women. I argue that poststructural feminist analysis ensures that women’s experiences (as diverse as they are) are at the forefront. This throws complex power relations into sharp relief, and is better able to identify how and where women interact with and inform these relations. Beasley (1999) argues that poststructural feminism can be considered a critical stance that offers both strategy and process ‘concerning women and power when investigating specific contexts’ (p.28). Poststructural feminism intends to destabilise universalising practices by identifying problems within normative discourse that presume and produce essential, common characteristics between human beings, women as a group included (Beasley 1999; Evans 1997). One particular way poststructural feminism does this is through disrupting concepts of identity in
order to make possible the emergence of alternative subjects. I would also argue that it is important because it makes possible the actual existence of alternative subjects.

Poststructural feminist theories take the position that understanding and coming to know women’s everyday lived experiences is supported by engaging with a process that explores difference, inconsistency and ambiguity (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999). A poststructural feminist project does not seek to mobilise based on distinguishable identity. Rather it focuses on undermining the multifarious mechanisms of power (Beasley 1999).

While there is reluctance within poststructural feminist theory to categorise identity, such emphasis on the particularities of power enables attention to the specific like, certain groups or locations where women may be engaging with power relations. The mother and son interaction is one such site. The recognition of this location of enquiry may generate new possibilities for both understanding and activity. I believe that an identity politics that reinforces the gender binary and thus replicates sexual difference means that mothers of sons have been at risk of being universalised by both men and certain feminist theories.

**The Role of Language in the Discursively Constructed Subject**

Language is the key organising principle available to the subject to realise the social self. It provides the conduit through which these structural locations are enacted and through which the subject itself is constituted. That is, the subject is not a viable social entity until linguistic classification is enacted. Language facilitates a story about the subject that enables a coherent narrative to appear. And, language pre-exists the subject. The subject is an ‘exact grammatical term that relies on existing language and symbols to bring it into existence’ (Belsey 2002:52). Language limits and defines the way we are able to give an account of ourselves (Belsey 2002; Butler 1999, 2005).

The words we use and the meaning words carry position people within pre-existing discourses and narratives that are not only about individuals but also
about their position in the wider social order. Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1996) *Course In General Linguistics* proposed that language is made up of an organised system of signs. He challenged previously held notions about language by arguing that the sign does not denote a link between an object and the name of the object; rather the linguistic sign is a “link between a concept and a sound pattern” (p.298). Each sign, according to Saussure, contains both the signified and the signifier. The *signifier* is the form, word or sound that the sign takes. The *signified* is the meaning or concept that the sign represents (p.300). For example, the word ‘boy’ is the signifier or the sound that is uttered. When the word ‘boy’ is uttered, it represents the signified - the meaning ascribed to the word ‘boy’. That is, when we hear or speak the word ‘boy’ this gives rise to a conceptual story about what the word ‘boy’ means.

Saussure (1996) proposed that the signifier (boy) does not come before the signified (meaning or concept). Instead he suggested, ‘it is the viewpoint which created the object’ (p.291). This theory of language allows the development of the idea that the standpoint from which one looks at something determines what it is we see and the meaning that is made of what we are seeing. According to Kearney and Rainwater (1996), this is a revolutionary idea because it challenges the notion that signifiers have inherent meaning. Traditionally, the sign has appeared to stand as the sign of something, yet this is contested by Saussure’s suggestion that meaning resides only ‘in the sign and nowhere else’ (Belsey 2002:10). The signifier, in this example, the word ‘boy’, does not reflect pre-existing meaning. Instead, he argues, that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary one. That is, the meaning ascribed to the signifier (boy) is not necessarily referential to any inherent meaning of the object (boy).

Because we learn language when we are so young, ‘meaning seems evident, natural and obvious’ (Belsey 2002:7). Yet language pre-exists the human subject and is something that ‘we participate in but do not invent’ (Kearney and Rainwater 1996:290). So, even though when we name something it feels like it reflects something that is within it, in reality it has been taken from
exterior to the subject and then applied. Language is external to us and ‘ideas are the effect of language; ideas are not the cause of language’ (Saussure 1996:291).

Saussure (1996) breaks down the assumption that there is something innate to an object that is connected to and reflected by the language that is attached to it. Instead he draws attention to the possibility that we take an idea and attach it to an object. He argues that the object or the signifier is a stable category, whereas the idea or the signified changes across time and context. Thus, language ‘transmits the knowledges and values that constitute a culture’ (Butler 2006:4) whilst also reproducing existing knowledges and the values of existing culture.

This concept is important because the object is imbued with meaning drawn from its exteriority. Relating this specifically to mothers and sons, words and symbols do not reflect the essential meaning of the individual, rather, the individual must use pre-existing terms, such as man or woman, boy or girl, to think about who they are and to describe who they are (Davies 1989). In this way, the values and knowledges that dominate a particular time and context will constitute the object.

This idea is the conceptual precursor for the notion that the interaction between the subject and culturally determined notions of sex constitute the gendered subject. Saussure’s (1996) semiotics helps to support the argument that ideas about gender are socially constructed rather than reflective of an essential, pre-existent substance. It connects what it means to be masculine or feminine to socially dominant values and the processes and practices that privilege certain knowledges over others. Over time and across context, these values and knowledges about masculinity and femininity change.

For feminists who identify that there are ideas about masculinity that are problematic, this also means that it may be possible to influence what those values and knowledges might be. Language is a signifying act that labels our sons because it is imbued with meaning dispersed through discourse. As
male, he is immediately positioned within a pre-existing discourse about who he is and what he will be like in terms of the current social description of masculinity. He is also immediately positioned within a pre-existing discourse that dictates the type of relationship he should have with his mother in order to preserve his masculinity and ensure that he is able to claim a healthy masculinity. Not only does this approach to masculinity pre-suppose that there is a masculine essence that pre-exists the social self but it also provides a prescriptive framework for the development of subjectivity. The language that is used both classifies and orders a baby boy’s life and this includes the beginning of the organisation of the relationship between mother and son.

To put it another way, the moment he is labelled a boy the baby is imbued with meaning that constructs the notion that who he is and who he will be is carried within him and in order for this pre-existing substance to fulfil itself, the right course of action must be taken around him. Thus, language is used as a signifying act and in this scenario directly impacts the relationship between the mother and son.

POWER RELATIONS, NORMATIVITY AND THE MOTHER AND SON

As discussed in the previous chapter, patriarchy as a framework for understanding women’s oppression has been critiqued as too simplistic and unable to elucidate the diversified mechanisms of women’s oppression (Beasley 1999; Butler 2006; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007). This is because traditionally, power has been conceptualised as a commodity, as something that one can take or give, be possessed or exchanged and lost or recovered (Apperley 1997; Foucault 1980). Traditional concepts of power are located within a system, a structure, or an individual. This is not dissimilar to traditional and structural accounts of gender or the self.

I am interested in the concept of power as constitutive of the female and male subject and their experience. In order to consider where and how women are
able to influence their experience it is useful to reject monolithic concepts of power. Poststructural feminist understandings depart from a binary construction of power, located with the oppressor and emanating from a singular source. Instead, power is relational, everywhere and emanates from multiple locations (Foucault 1980; 1991). This Foucaultian concept allows feminist researchers to consider women as capable of and active in ‘resisting power in multiple ways’ (Hekman 2007:542).

**Power is Everywhere**

The idea that power is exercised relationally was explored in Foucault’s (1991) book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In it he argues that the agenda of the penal system was to incite the individual to conform by subjugating themselves to the dominant values of society for threat of punishment carried out behind closed doors (Foucault 1991). He argued that the effect of power is to transform the behaviour of individuals and therefore the makeup of society. Foucault (1991) used Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon as a metaphor for understanding self-surveillance and to exemplify the techniques of modern power.

The Panopticon is designed with a tower at the centre that has windows opening onto the inner side of this circular building. The building that surrounds this tower is divided into individual cells and has windows facing the tower so that its contents are constantly visible. Inside each cell, the prisoner is observed by a supervisor located in the central tower. For Foucault (1991), the effectiveness of the Panopticon lay in its ability to engender obedience through the guise of constant observation.

The possibility of being observed at any time helped conceptualise power as existing everywhere yet not necessarily emanating from a single location. Because prisoners are never able to tell when the gaze will be turned upon them they self-correct their behaviour just in case. Panopticism describes the dispersion of relations of power that keep the subject in check by holding
their behaviour accountable (to standardized norms) or risk marginalization and punishment (Foucault 1991).

This marks an important development in mechanisms of power, as control is no longer exercised from a singular site or sovereign. The consequence of this is such that the human subject is continuously positioned by normative expectations and is aware that they are visible at all times. This is a primary function of modern power. The effect of modern power means that the subject engages in self-surveillance and eventually expectations of acceptable or normative behaviour become internalised. This results in the subject conducting surveillance on the self. For Foucault (1991), coercing the subject to exhibit appropriate behaviour, is the desired effect of the exercise of power.

**Constructing the ‘Truth’**

The generation of normative standards of behaviour relies on a process of establishing a standard of measure or, the ‘truth’ about individuals. Poststructural accounts of this process argue that normative standards make meaning that appears to be a reflection of an inner essence or truth. For example, the normative standards about gendered behaviour invite the subject to exhibit gendered activity considered appropriate to their sex category (Fenstermaker and West 2002). Because the normative gaze is everywhere, at all times the human subject is conscious that their gendered practices are observed and assessed according to normative standards. These normative standards circulate through discursive practice.

If the subject enacts normative masculinity or femininity practices this reinforces the discursive assumption that gendered behaviour is reflective of natural and innate gendered attributes and identity. The foundation for this assertion, that of physiological appendages, forms the objective and material data that reinforce the ‘truth’ about gender behaviour. We make sense of our own behaviour and presentations by measuring ourselves against these standards. We are also assessed by others against these normative standards.
Consequently, that which does not appear to fit the norm is vulnerable to being positioned as wrong or abnormal. Nonconformity or difference has pejorative judgement attached (Beasley 1999). The effect of all this is to obscure the power relations that circulate throughout society that ensure boys, girls, men and women conduct self-surveillance on their own bodies, behaviour and interactions.

Poststructural analysis of the construction of truth argues that the only source of meaning is the process that establishes difference (Belsey 2002). It is not that the normal is a reflection of any pre-existing inherent meaning. Rather it is the establishment of what is different to or not reflective of this standard that establishes the standard in the first place (Belsey 2002). In other words, the establishment of standardised or normal behaviour simultaneously constructs the opposite of that norm. In this way we come to understand the normative through its oppositional character.

**Truth Holds the Mother and Son Accountable**

Foucault’s (1991) conceptualisation of the way that modern power operates has been illuminating when trying to understand the way that normative gender practices are so pervasive and effective in their coerciveness. The male and female subject emerge through normalising depictions of the gendered self (Butler 2005). The role of these norms, argues Butler (2005) is to ‘prepare a place within the ontological field for a subject’ (p.9). Normative depictions of the subject construct and impose a unified identity conditioning the subject’s existence and disqualifying particularity.

There are ideas about men and women, masculinity and femininity, parent and child, mother and son all of which form the context within which the mother and son relationship is enacted. This context forms the matrix of meaning (Butler 1999) that informs, shapes and constrains this ubiquitous relationship. This context is infused with the idea that there is an essence of masculinity and femininity that pre-exists the individual (Butler 1999; Davies 1989; Fenstermaker and West 2002).
Norms exist about how a mother feels about having a child and norms about how a mother parents her child. And, there are norms about the role a mother must play in the relationship with her son. All of this speaks to a homogenised and non-context specific framework rather than the specific lives of mothers and the differences in and amongst their sons. It would not be such a problem if normative expectations of mothers and sons were simply expectations. However, normative expectations are founded within dominant gender difference discourse that draws on claims to be speaking the truth.

To emphasise this, it is useful to consider that within contemporary Anglo-American culture one of the meanings attached to femininity is that women have a large capacity for expressing and understanding complex emotions of both women and men (Biddulph 1998; Lashlie 2007). Consequently, women are often delegated responsibility for the emotional caretaking of each other and of the men they are in relationships with. This expectation is extended to the role that mothers are expected to play with their children. In contrast, one of the meanings attached to masculinity, mythologised through Jungian archetype and the mythopoetical men’s movement, is the concept of a wild man spirit or inner warrior that requires freedom to roam, explore and not be confined by anything in order to fulfil an essential need and experience fulfilment (Bly 1992).

When placed together in relationship, such as that of mother and son, these divergent characteristics are not always considered compatible. The matrix of meaning infuses each term ‘mother’ and ‘son’. Devoid of unique context this relationship is expected to resemble the universal and homogenous gender binary. In part this means that the gender hierarchy, which privileges masculinity, demands tasks that are not similarly imposed for a mother looking after a daughter. This is superimposed with parenting discourse of doing what is best for the child and, so combined, the resulting narrative cautions mothers not to emotionally smother their sons on their path to ‘manhood’ for fear of emasculating him. The mother’s interactions with her son and their relationship is assessed according to the ‘truth’ about
masculinity and femininity. Additionally she is held to account for the proper practices of herself and her son in terms of their fitting their assigned gender category.

The upholding of truth about gender difference limits understanding of the mother and son relationship by placing boundaries around identity. The emphasis on pre-existent meaning is ‘reliant upon the refusal and repression of other possibilities’ (Beasley 1999:93). The promotion of sexual difference as fact is a strategy that enforces hierarchy and is rigid in terms of making sense of the social world. Sexual difference is constructed as separate from or outside of power, yet is intimately entwined with social context. The ‘truth’ about sexual difference is a product of and constitutive of power relations. This makes the dismantling of and/or changing of male domination and female subordination difficult.

DEVELOPING ACCOUNTS OF THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER

Discursive Practice as the Cornerstone of Change

Gender difference discourse makes gender appear as an attribute of the individual that is pre-discursive and fixed. There are manifold consequences of this discourse for the mother and son relationship as their interaction is measured against and constructed through this gender difference discourse. Social locations (like the mother and son relationship) are arranged by and held accountable to gender difference discourse, (Fenstermaker and West 2002). If the social location accommodates what is promoted as the ‘natural’ order, this in turn legitimises the existing social order. Consequently, the subsequent limits and constraints that gender difference discourse places on the social location are rendered inevitable as well as natural (Fenstermaker and West 2002).

However, if knowledge limits individuals in different ways then questioning the authority of that knowledge draws immediately on the potential for alternative knowledge to exist. If there is more to know, different meanings to
consider and alternatives to the truth to think about, then it is possible that knowledge exists that can benefit different individuals. It is also possible then to consider that constraints placed on individuals through dominant discourse can be reconfigured.

Discourse can be used to both reinforce and contest dominant social practices (Fraser 2004). This is an important possibility. Alternative discourses about gender can be enacted to support different and multiple ideas about gender. Existing alternative discourses about gender can threaten the stranglehold of dominant gender difference discourse. Alternative discourses also draw attention to inconsistency in the ‘truth’ about gender. Identification of inconsistency reduces the capacity of discourse to totalise the human experience and account for the lived experience as real. It is possible that these alternative discourses configure the gendered subject differently or make visible different ways of making sense of gender as a wholesale concept. The first alternative discourse I would like to consider is the concept of Sex Role theory.

**Sex Role Theory as an Extension of Structural Accounts of Gender**

It is not new to consider that gender is not an attribute. Feminists have engaged different ideas, over time, in trying to understand gendered behaviour and the role that this plays in gender inequality. Before I move onto poststructural accounts of gendered activity I think it is important to explore the idea of sex role theory, as this was an attempt to explain the reproduction of gender inequality. This is also a useful way of identifying how structural accounts of gender inequality, cannot develop a nuanced account of gender relations nor theorise how feminist mothers of sons might disrupt gender difference discourse.

Sex role theory is an important idea in attempting to understand how gender roles and gender inequality were reproduced. This theory is located in structural and modernist accounts of identity and was an attempt to
understand how individuals learn to behave and act according to assigned sex categories.

For feminists, the concept of sex role socialisation was potentially liberating because it was considered possible that the influence on the socialisation process could provide an alternative to traditional (and oppressive) sex role behaviours (Connell 2005; Deutsch 2007; Martin 2005; Segal 1990). This following section explores the notion of sex role theory. Additionally, I present a critique of this theory that directly challenges the notion of fixed gender identity and the passivity of the gendered subject.

Sex role theory emerged out of role theory, a theory of socialisation developed in the 1950s and 1960s (Jackson 1998). It employs the idea that as children we learn that there is appropriate behaviour for each sex. We learn this through observation of the actions of males and females present in our lives (parents, teachers, peers). Consequently, we gather mental conceptions of sex appropriate roles and behaviours. These are then ‘encoded’ into our memory where certain activities are seen as either male or female activities and actions.

When children demonstrate an understanding of typical sex behaviour they are rewarded (via positive feedback) which further supports their reproduction of sex role behavioural repertoires (Perry, White and Perry 1984, Risman and Myers, 1997). Thus, gendered behaviour is a social display of femaleness and maleness according to a range of social expectations, analogous to social positioning (Deutsch 2007; Fenstermaker and West 2002).

In developing an understanding of gender, sex role theory relies on external displays of normative ideas of masculinity and femininity where gendered behaviour is socially located but not necessarily socially produced. This means that within sex-role theory, masculinity and femininity are ‘quite easily interpreted as internalised sex roles’ (Connell 2005:22). For sex role theorists, the successful internalisation of sex-role expectations (i.e.,
normative ideas about masculinity and femininity, beliefs about what constitutes masculinity and femininity) contributes to social consensus and conformity, and is ‘important because it facilitates social integration’ (Jackson 1998:50).

Within this model, there are two sex-roles that human beings are socialized to choose from. Social change is considered possible by altering the socialization process through the presentation of alternative roles (Connell 2005). The idea of using sex-role theory to understand gender and generate social change was taken up by second-wave feminists who believed that female sex-roles were oppressive and a major contributing factor to social inequality (Deutsch 2007; Martin 2005). Segal (1990) writes:

To see ourselves as players, as hapless victims of a malign scriptwriter, freed us from our past and invited us to embark on writing our own future (McIntosh cited in Segal 1990:65).

Second-wave feminism engaged with sex-role theory as a way of understanding gender stereotyping (Deutsch 2007; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007). There was great value in this because it provided different ways for understanding women’s experiences as a consequence of their sex-role stereotyping and suggested possibilities for changing women’s lives (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007). Consequently, the 1970s and early 1980s saw a proliferation of books about non-sexist child rearing that were grounded in sex role theory (Carmichael 1977; Harper 1980; Levine 1976; Russell 1983). However, while sex-role theory supported feminists in understanding how sex-roles were inequitable, it did not facilitate understanding of how and which particular social practices ‘were used to reproduce social divisions and inequality’ (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007). Sex-role theory also failed to realise that institutions and structures are intrinsically gendered and thus influence and interact with individuals’ ideas and experience of gendered behaviour (Martin 2005).
Attempts were made to subvert female sex-roles and to support women to break out of traditional sex-roles. However, as Martin (2005) concedes, socialization and sex-role theory did not prove effective ‘…especially as attempts at gender-neutral socialization did not begin to radically transform gender, and as gender, began to be seen as a more complex phenomenon’ (p.457). Sex-role theory has been criticised for not adequately attending to the complexities of gender and identity (Aronson and Kimmel 2000; Connell 1987; Deutsch 2007; Fenstermaker and West 2002; Martin 2005; Risman and Myers 1997). However it is worth pointing out that there are still current entreaties within men and masculinities literature that asserts boys benefit from and require positive male role models as well as alternatives to the norm in order to reduce violence against women. This appears to conflict with masculinities literature that critiques sex role theory per se. I would argue it is wise to be cautious about gender equality initiatives that emphasise the importance of the involvement of men in leadership roles.

Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007) assert that the sex-role ‘paradigm is driven by a search for sex difference’ (p.21), which is problematic because evidence of difference is taken as objective fact which in turn is supported and reproduced by sex-role theory. Thus Connell (2005) asserts, ‘sex roles are seen as the cultural elaboration of biological sex differences’ (p.22). These differences are defined (within sex-role theory) by a supposedly ‘objective and unproblematic measurement through an index of norms of masculinity and femininity’ (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007:21). They echo Connell (2005) when they say:

Through socialization, sex role theorists argue, the biological basis of male and female becomes attributed to social norms and expectations that are circulating through masculinity and femininity (p.21).

Sex-role theory does not account for the factors that produce, influence and maintain social norms and expectations. Jackson (1998) suggests, ‘role theory falsely reifies certain social ideologies into concrete realities or objective
Sex role theory’s dualistic interpretation of gender sets clear demarcations for what constitutes masculinity or femininity, as these are recognised according to social norms, and expectations. Thus normative ideas about gendered behaviour are taken as indicative of masculinity and femininity which become ‘false universal standards of behaviour against which individual’s [men and women] are measured’ (Jackson 1998, p.51). As a consequence, monolithic ideas about what is masculine and feminine are reinforced with little room for differing masculinities and femininities to be accepted or made visible.

Sex-role theory is individualizing in the sense that men and women who do not fit the standard measure of masculinity and femininity are seen as deviant from the norm. The explanation given for the lack of fit often relies on ‘explanations of insufficient socialization or a mismatch between one’s personality and behavioural expectations…’(Jackson 1998:51). Alternate masculinities or femininities within this framework could be considered as less than ‘ideal’ and the focus for change is directed away from problematic societal structures or ideologies. Instead, responsibility for adjustment rests with the individual (Jackson 1998).

Normative ideas about masculinity are hegemonic and do not reflect the reality of multiple masculinities instead supporting masculine ways of being that are oppressive of women (Aronson and Kimmel 2000; Connell 2005). Feminist analysis and gender theorists point out that normative ideas about femininity contribute to lack of equality for women in the home as well as within cultural, social and political life (Deutsch 2007; Martin 2005; Risman and Myers 1997; Segal 1990). Therefore, as a way of conceptualising gender, sex-role theory is seen as reinforcing social inequality or at the very least not engaging with the mechanism or ideas by which social inequality is produced.

Sex-role theory has also been criticised for being ahistorical in its failure to conceptualise power and the intersection of gender with other social systems (Connell 2005, Deutsch 2007; Fenstermaker and West 2002; Jackson 1998).
Within sex-role theory, gendered behaviour is linked to social location yet sits outside of social relations (Connell 2005; Fenstermaker and West 2002) so does not intersect with ‘other social divisions such as class, ‘race’ or sexuality’ (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007:24).

This limits the understanding of gender as it does not account for the possibilities that male and female roles may look different or are expected to be different across different cultures and societies (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007). So, if masculinity and femininity are internalised sex-roles, how does sex-role theory account for variance of masculinities and femininities?

From a sex-role perspective, the socialization process, once it has been encoded into individual behavioural repertoires, becomes an attribute of that individual (in fact becomes part of that individual’s core identity) and thus gender is set (Risman and Myers 1997). The gender socialization process is viewed as a ‘one-way conduit of information from adult to child’ (Risman and Myers 1997:231) rather than an ongoing process of negotiation. Fenstermaker and West (2002) argue that when gender attaches to the individual not only does it become fixed once it is acquired, but the identification and appraisal of gendered behaviour ‘…involves no well defined set of criteria that must be satisfied to identify someone, rather it involves treating appearances… as if they were indicative of underlying states of affairs’ (p.65) that is, biological status.

The sex-role theory of gender socialization places emphasis on individuals learning a set of behaviours that, through trial and error, validation and correction, the individual eventually gets right. Sex-role theory does not explore the extent to which an individual must negotiate ‘proper’ gender roles until there is an unproblematic resolution of their gendered identity. Although sex roles once they are established attach to the individual informing a sense of masculinity or femininity, there is no focus on an individual’s engagement with this process. Risman and Myers (1997) and Thorne (1993) critique sex-role theory as viewing individuals (or children) as passive recipients lacking
agency. They stress that the context within which children engage with sex-role behavioural expectations and the nature of the child themselves are as important determinants in the development of gender identity as the social location that they occupy (Risman and Myers 1997).

**Sex role theory and the feminist mother and son**

Sex-role theory of gender socialization does not account for the management of conflicting messages and invitations that children might receive from different social agencies such as school and home. It is possible that different ideologies or beliefs about appropriate or possible sex roles exist. For example, how might a young boy living within a feminist household, exposed to non-normative sex role behaviour integrate this experience with a school environment or media outlet where normative ideas are more commensurate with the existing social order? Sex-role theory would need to engage with the concept of power to address the possible effects of navigating conflicting power structures. At the very least, sex role theory, to be useful as a social theory, needs to engage with why certain social structures are more successful with their invitation to normative behaviour (e.g. school, media) than the family structure might be.

Sex role theory fails to capture the complex machinations of the social construction of gender and so provides limited opportunity for understanding gendered identities and the possibilities for resistance (Jackson 1998; Fenstermaker and West 2002; Deutsch 2007). In *Doing Gender, Doing Difference*, Fenstermaker and West (2002) argue that gender is a social accomplishment that is produced across various social settings. They suggest that gender needs to be understood as a constant process, located throughout a variety of everyday activities across an intersecting social matrix where social interaction effects and reflects individual’s interactions. Sex role theory fails because a conceptualisation of gender needs to:

… accommodate to authentic variability in its relevance to interaction, its meaning and salience to members, with content
that could be endlessly and effortlessly adapted by participants to the situation at hand (p.28).

Within the above conceptualisation of a boy raised in a feminist household negotiating mixed messages about appropriate behaviour and expectations, it is possible to see the intricacies presented to a young person. From this perspective, we can begin to name the different situations and scenarios where invitations to account for one’s gender are present. It is possible to identify the varying situations and scenarios where parents might find themselves resisting invitations to account for their sons’ appropriate sex-role behaviour. It is also possible to depict scenarios where there is a disparity between mothers and fathers of what might be appropriate sex-role behaviours and how accounting for their sons’ gendered behaviour might appear.

Again, through the conceptualisation of a young boy living in a feminist household, it is possible, to understand the multiple situations in which a young boy might be engaging as he negotiates masculinity. The invitations to account for his gender can be located within various scenarios and from within the home regarding household duties and interactions with a sibling, or as he observes variant or similar gendered expressions by his parents. At the same time, he may account for his gendered identity as he joins classroom and playground activity where gendered behaviour may be more representative of hegemonic and normative ideas of men and women. He may also be invited to account for his gendered behaviour differently in interaction with a feminist parent compared to a friend’s parent.

Each interaction may inform another at the same time as being influenced by power structures and relationships. It is possible that despite a parent holding more power in contemporary Anglo-American culture, the school as a mass institution imbued with formal power may have more influence than a parent, even more so than the mother of a son in a society that privileges men over women. It is possible within this conceptualisation, to see the opportunities to
account for multiple masculinities that are available and provide opportunity for consensus or conflict, problem solving as well as resistance.

In sum, while feminists engaged with sex role theory’s potential for interrupting problematic socialisation practices and models, ultimately it portrays gendered behaviour as an expression of biological difference that is related to social location. This conceptualisation does not make it possible to properly understand or address the machinations of power nor the intersection between gender and social inequity (Fenstermaker and West 2002). Sex role theories focus on fixed, normative ideas of masculinity and femininity that are not able to represent individual subjective experiences or account for the subjects’ sense making of their relationship to the external world.

**The Self and the Other: Intersubjectivity**

Jessica Benjamin (1998) is a psychoanalytic feminist who explores how we come to identify with others and develop an autonomous identity in the process. She considers the notion of ‘Intersubjectivity’ to capture the process whereby the subject is capable of simultaneously bridging and obfuscating the differences between self and other. She argues that the subject is creative in its appropriation and development of identification with other at the same time as developing an understanding and appreciation of others as being outside the self.

Benjamin’s (1998) account of mother/child interaction helps develop the notion that feminist mothers have the potential to be agentic through the rejection of the psychoanalytic oedipal complex where mother has only one position available, that of the other. Intersubjectivity, as a concept, helps develop an argument for feminist mothers’ capacity to resist the positioning of woman as other. Benjamin (1998) suggests that an exploration of masculinity from the standpoint only of the dualistically opposed other - woman - can result in an affirmation of the binary and thus herself as lack. However, she cautions that the dilemma of gender difference is such that ‘if we do not begin with the opposition between woman and man, with woman’s
negative position in the binary, we seem to dissolve the very basis for our having questioned gender categories in the first place’ (p.37).

In arguing that this notion of other is a construction, perhaps it is possible to configure change in the intersubjective interaction between mother and son. Examining the mother and son relationship through a poststructural lens the focus is not based simply on women’s position ‘as Other to the male subject, but on the binary logic that produces the complementarity male subject-female object’ (Benjamin 1998:37). Regardless of the success of an argument for the construction of gendered subjectivities, men and women’s positions within the binary relentlessly organise and shape lived experience.

However, I think it is important not to underestimate the transformative possibilities for the mother in raising her son by taking gender identity as multiple and unstable. This is because such an idea dramatically resurrects the validation and formative effect that women can and do have in boys’ lives. Benjamin (1998) contends that this thinking can ‘overthrow the original psychoanalytic framework of two sexes poised in different relationship to one organ, the phallus’ (p.37).

Benjamin (1998) argues that agency and authorship are central to the subjectivity concept. Subjectivity is not solely a reaction to (the parent, the other, the mother) rather an activity that is implicitly generative, an action of ownership that involves conscious intention. She describes subjectivity thus:

…(a) continuity of consciousness that mediates between the experience or feeling and its meaning or object, at once giving it a context and creating a space between self and object (p.39).

Intersubjectivity considers the development of self as involving complementarity and symmetry ‘between two active partners’ (p.40). Within this concept, the feminist mother and son come into a form and force that has not previously been argued. I profoundly agree with Benjamin (1998) that such a notion of intersubjectivity reconfigures terms such as masculinity and
femininity because they are ‘no longer in the same formal relation to each other, separated by an uncrossable, fixed divide’ (p.40).

Benjamin (1998) takes the subject-object paradigm where there is always only a singular subject and suggests instead a revision. She argues that the subject-object paradigm is unworkable because it both pushes one into submission over another, and because displacement of the subject into the position of object is a further negation. She describes this as a zero-sum relationship and argues that the other is more than the self’s subject and that there is a reciprocal, ongoing constitution in relation to each that relies on the other’s recognition. This simultaneously positions the subject as other, thus changing it as it becomes a different subject.

The Role of the Psychological in Understanding the Self

How is it possible to recognise the other without colonising them or being colonised? Benjamin (1998) positions this question within a feminist imperative that considers how it is possible to respect, recognise and accommodate diversity and differences. A central theme in poststructural feminism has been the critique of essentialism and concern for the way that the subject negotiates differences. I will explore in this thesis the particularities of feminist mother interviewees concerns in regard to negotiating their embodied and material differences with their sons whilst simultaneously negotiating and recognising their relationship to each other. Underlying this, yet openly articulated, is the notion of violence and empathy that are concerns and priorities respectively in the raising of boys. What Benjamin (1998) seeks to emphasise is that consideration of the psychological production of the self ‘must not be subsumed by a focus on the discursive production of the subject if a theory of respect for difference and empathy is to be developed’ (p.86).

While it is possible to utilise the discursive subject to configure change and identify access points for feminist mothers of sons to destabilise dominant discourse, the psychological self is an important concept too. Benjamin
(1998) argues that it is with an understanding of the psychologically constituted self that we may understand further impetus for sustaining and perhaps initially achieving the relational, empathic respect of difference. However, this is the realm of psychic agency and beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead it is with notions of social agency that I have positioned the feminist mother and son.

**Gender as Relationally Produced**

There are some important theories about gender as accomplishment and performance that engage with the debate about gender as innate and as a social construct in particular (Butler 2005; Davies 1989; Fenstermaker and West 2002; Thorne 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). Insight into the construction of gender makes visible the institutional and social structures that are accountable to sex category and the social interactions and processes that facilitate and sustain it. These ideas suggest that dominant discourse about gender constitutes and reconstitutes the subject because the subject is always being positioned by this discourse. This is as opposed to gender as a pre-existing attribute.

As long as gender identity is conceptualised as pre-existent, it is not possible to properly account for the heterogeneity amongst men and women. Walby (1990) argues that in order to better account for the politicised and socially located gender identity, it is important to include relations as ‘the source of production of gendered identity rather than assume and promote a solid, finite, non-political, non social gendered identity’ (p.68). The idea that gender is done through interaction and performance is a significant shift from top down adult to child sex role socialisation theory (Messner 2000). In considering that gender is interactional it is conceivable that both child and adult are active agents in the construction of gender.

Poststructural feminist theories about gender reject the idea of pre-existent fixed gender identity, arguing instead that gender is a social display not essential attribute (Butler 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987). These
important theories about gender as accomplishment and performance engage
with the debate about gender as innate or as a social construct (Butler 2005;
Davies 1989; Thorne 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). This is important
because as long as gender identity is conceptualised as pre-discursive, it is
impossible to properly account for diversity and difference amongst and
between men and women. Ideas about gender as accomplishment and
performance highlight the notion that gender is relationally produced. Walby
(1990) argues that in order to be able to better account for diversity and
difference as a consequence of the subject’s social location, it is important to
include relations as ‘the source of production of gendered identity rather than
assume and promote a solid, finite, non-political, non-social gendered
identity’ (p.68).

Gender is active and ongoing and there are multiple contexts within which
the subject interacts. Thus gender is configured as also unstable and fluid.
Because this employs the notion of sexual identity as constructed across
contexts, and not ever reaching a final conclusion, poststructural feminists
employ the terms identities, differences, masculinities and femininities. This
thesis is grounded in the notion that gendered subjectivities are continually
being constituted and reconstituted.

Gender positioning is active because we consistently draw on our identities
and experiences when we make sense of gendered encounters and we then
absorb and assimilate this as we develop further understanding of ourselves.
We then re-engage with others around us, acting on our own position, and
interacting with others positions (Messner and Sabo 1990). Butler (2005)
refines this practice of doing gender and takes it specifically into the realm of
interaction (or performance) and moral autonomy.

… I begin my story of myself only in the face of 'you’ who asks me to give an
account (Butler 2005:11).

That is, we self-narrate in social context in relation to both the wider social
order, and in relation to others. We measure ourselves (and are measured by
others) against these values and norms and we account for our gendered subjectivity to an exterior context on both counts. This is a very important distinction from the essentialist notion of fixed and innate gendered identity.

Like Pease (2000), I believe that theorising gender as socially constructed is primary to considerations of men’s capacity to change. However, as he argues, the social position or gender order must also be reconstructed in both the private and public domain (p.23). I argue that the mother and son relationship, within the private domain, has the potential to become a localised site for social change.

Consideration of gender as relational brings into the foreground the interaction between mother and son. For the feminist mother raising a son, the idea that interaction between men and women is constitutive of gender (as opposed to a reflection of gendered identity) is a useful theoretical framework from which to explore potential for maternal agency.

**Gender as Performative**

Butler’s (1999a; 2006b) theory of gender performativity considers how the everyday language and actions (or performance) of the subject are constituted and reconstituted in relation to gendered norms and discourse. Discourse depicts language and practice through which the individual becomes a live subject, socially visible and located as male or female. A key aspect of performativity is repetition. Butler (1999a; 2006b) argues that gender discourse is a script performed repeatedly, enacting gender and giving it social force and substance.

Gender is not an expression of the individual rather something that is done. However, while the script or discourse may be constant, the performance, while repeated is not necessarily ‘accurately’ reiterated. In part, Butler (2005) argues, because the “I” that enacts the discourse is continually applying a moral or ethical assessment of the script. There are two important ideas here that I wish to emphasise.
First is the notion of agentic activity in the enacting of gender discourse. Second, is the idea that it is possible to reiterate incorrectly. When combined, it is possible to consider that feminist mothers may be applying a feminist values system and ethical framework to dominant gender discourse at the same time as committing to a feminist discourse about gender and motherhood. I take the mother and son relationship as a location in which gender performativity occurs, in particular, given I have interviewed mothers not sons, the repeated actions and talk of mothers in interactions with their sons. I have also considered the conscious intent feminist mothers have for their sons as witness to her performances.

**Doing Gender**

There are gender theorists who assert that doing gender is unavoidable (Butler 1990, 2006; West and Zimmerman 1987; Fenstermaker and West 2002) because of the social consequences of sex category membership: the allocation of power and resources not only domestic, economic and political domains but also in the broad arena of interpersonal relations. In virtually any situation, ‘one’s sex category can be relevant, and one’s performance as an incumbent of that category can be subjected to evaluation’ (Fenstermaker and West 2002:21).

In 1987 West and Zimmerman published a ground-breaking work titled *Doing Gender*. This approach comes out of an ethnomethodology framework that proposes ‘the properties of social life, which seem objective, factual and transsituational, are actually managed accomplishments or achievements of local processes’ (Fenstermaker and West 2002). Consequently, doing gender focuses on the construction of differences between men and women and boys and girls. The result of this construction, they argue, is that these differences then reinforce the notion of the essential nature of gender. Gender then is not an attribute rather it is configured through an action and is oriented according to awareness of the individual’s accountability ‘that is, how they might look, and how they might be categorized’ (p.136).
The process through which activity is rendered accountable is interactional. *Doing Gender* (1987) marked a theoretical shift from considering gender as ‘an ascribed status into an achieved status’ (West and Zimmerman 2009:114). Gender as interactional rather than attribute positions both masculinity and femininity as ‘social properties of a system of relationship’ (West and Zimmerman 2009:114).

West and Zimmerman (1987) propose that sex category is an omnirelevant situation in which the subject is perpetually accountable. The subject is always engaged in activity where they are held accountable to their sex category. When we ‘do’ gender, we are not always proving ourselves appropriate for our correlative sex category, rather we are engaging ‘in behaviour at the risk of gender assessment’ (p.136 original emphasis). There are actions of accountability that are both remarkable for their lack of adherence to culturally accepted norms as well as those that are unremarkable ‘thus not worthy of more than a passing remark, because they are seen to be in accord with culturally approved standards’ (p.136). Conversely it is possible, considering the capacity of individuals to enact agentic behaviour, to ‘transgress and reshape the fluid boundaries of gender... (Messner 2000:770).

In their follow up to *Doing Gender* (1987) they published *Accounting for Doing Gender* in 2009 in which they sought to clarify and argue for the concept of doing gender as capable of recognising and spring boarding from the multiple and complex social, historical and political contexts within which gender discourse is enacted. When we do gender, it is always, simultaneously practiced within socio-cultural and political contexts. These contexts have the effect of both constraining and/or making possible specific iterations (Fenstermaker and West 2002; West and Zimmerman 2009). In order to make sense of the gender performance, Messner (2000) argues it is crucial to account for agentic activity as enacted within the socio-cultural and structural contexts of the gender act.
The context through which gender performance is enacted informs the activity and the meaning or interpretations made of the performance. Otherwise, as Messner (2000) emphasises, ‘performances of gender can all too easily be interpreted as free agents’ acting out the inevitable surface manifestations of a natural inner essence of sex difference’ (p.770).

Smith (2009) critiques Doing Gender for appearing to suggest that observable acts of gender accountability practices may not adequately account for difference amongst and between gender categories nor accurately reflect intersections of class, race and gender. Yet, gender accountability played out through interaction is regulated through a normative system that is absolutely contextual and historically specific. West and Zimmerman (2009) argue that this system is as wholly responsive as it is constitutive. Any changes ‘involve both changes in persons orientation to these norms and changes in social relations that reflexively support changes in orientation’ (West and Zimmerman 2009:118).

They argue that the practices enacted to account for gender are drawn from and held against normative standards established and practiced in the institutional social domain (2009). Whilst drawing on gender difference to include class and race, they suggested that individuals do difference as a way of categorising and creating distinctions. These practices appear to reflect naturality, essentiality and normality. Once difference is constructed it is used to measure the individual’s social location and access to the various and multiple categories (West and Zimmerman 2009).

Risman (2009) expressed concern that their theory demonstrated a lack of attention to drawing on gender accomplishment in learning how interactions can be a process of undoing gender. She argues that this critique is located in accounts of gender as fixed and rejects the term undoing. However, and I think importantly, West and Zimmerman (2009) counter that undoing gender suggests the idea that gender can be done away with. Instead, they suggest that such interactions of undoing gender could be reworded as ‘a change in
the normative conceptions to which members of particular sex categories are held accountable’ (p.117).

Accountability is central to gender and relies on difference for measure. They stress ‘the oppressive character of gender rests not just on difference but the inferences from and the consequences of those differences’ (p.117). Inferences and consequences are imbued within interaction as well as enmeshed in and responsive to socio-cultural and historical context. As such, any change in context can ‘facilitate inferential shifts in the terms of gender accountability and weaken its utility as a ground for men’s hegemony’ (p.117). Gender cannot be undone; rather it can be redone (West and Zimmerman 2009).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued for the potential that poststructural conceptualisations of the subject can offer for both an alternative discourse about the mother and son, and to establish a theoretical foundation for the repositioning of the gendered subject. In this chapter I have proposed that because there is more than one way to understand the human subject these ideas frame our understanding of the mother-son relationship in very different ways. I argue that in order for the mother and son relationship to be a location for change, poststructural accounts of the subject as relationally and socially produced are necessary. The interaction between the subject and the social context is implicitly generative. This is an important idea because it establishes the mother and son relationship as a context that is constitutive of subjectivities.

If gender is ongoingly constructed rather than fixed and is contextual and thus variable, it is reasonable to consider that the social, cultural and emotional climate of the feminist mother and son relationship is as constitutive of gendered subjectivity as other contexts. The argument is that children’s gender does not unfold or emerge; it is enacted through a system of relationships performed over and over in context. The mother and son relationship is one of these systems where boys are invited to take up
gendered subject positions. As a system of relationships and site for interaction, the mother and son relationship can be considered a social context in the way that the playground or school classroom is. There are gender boundaries to be negotiated between mother and son just as there are between girls and boys in the classroom, in soap operas, and on the monkey bars in the playground.

The mother and son relationship is a location for the performance of gender. This interactional level exists within and contributes to the structural context of the relationship and draws on, co-opt and may be able to disrupt cultural symbolism. And importantly in considering the role that feminist mothers intentions and values about gender normativity play, gender boundaries are ‘activated and enforced’ (Messner 2000:765) in ways that do not work well with normative categories of difference between boys and girls. The moments of interaction between mother and son, while they may exist simultaneously within dominant gender discourse, can also be considered meaningful for our sons and can present at best alternatives to normative gender positioning or at worst create a fissure in dominant gender discourse. If we do gender in order to account for our positioning within our gender category the mother must be considered as a credible and viable witness to gender performance. The mother is both witness and agent in interaction with her son. As a feminist, her ideas and beliefs about dominant gender discourse, male privilege and the problems inherent in normative masculinity practices are both the lens and the measure she uses to assess and validate gender performance.

In the analysis chapters ahead, I will explore the extent to which the interviewees might co-opt ‘symbolic resources’ (Messner 2000:765) with the intention of disrupting gender difference and normative masculinity practices. I will also explore the influence that feminist mothers believe their sons’ fathers have in regard to the mother and son relationship. But first, I turn now to the idea of feminist maternal practice in order to establish the argument for the potential of maternal agency to do gender. The following chapter will explain that the notion of women’s agency from their positions as mothers
has not been self evident, particularly within feminist theory. Therefore, this is an important idea to establish if feminist mothers’ interactions with their sons are to be accepted as contributing to the constitution of their sons’ masculinities.
CHAPTER FIVE: FEMINIST
MATERNAL PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION
The relationship between feminism and motherhood has been both long and conflicted. There have been theoretical turns and major conceptual leaps as this contested site has been wrested away from a patriarchal construct alone towards a woman centric understanding of the motherhood experience.

Feminist theory about motherhood forms part of the wider body of research, activism and thinking about gender relations. This means that the move into the 21st century and the shift from structural to poststructural understandings about gender and subjectivity have import for the way we understand mothers and motherhood.

I would suggest that feminists theorising motherhood have moved from describing the experience as oppressive and part of the perpetuation of unequal gender relations; to considerations of maternal agency and the potential for constituting non-normative subjectivities. This chapter sets out to track these shifts and describe the process that has led to the potential for feminist maternal practice with sons to be a part of wider feminist work towards social transformation.

MOTHERHOOD AS INSTITUTION
The notion of motherhood has been critiqued throughout feminist history as a culturally constructed discourse that is given form through the institution of marriage (O’Reilly 2004). At the same time, within this discourse women’s identity becomes connected to their potential for reproduction (Rich 1976) and the social expectation that marriage and motherhood are what women aspire to (Friedan [1963] 2001). Before I explore what this has meant to
feminists who have engaged with the notion of ‘Motherhood’ it is prurient to employ a definition of this discourse. Tucker (2008) defines it thus:

The belief that children’s optimal growth and development are directly and exclusively related to the quality and quantity of maternal care they receive, and caring mothers always put children’s needs ahead of their own (p.210).

O’Reilly (2004) has assessed this further where she explains that:

(1) Children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother; (2) this mothering must be provided twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; (3) the mother must always put her children’s needs before her own; (4) mothers must turn to the experts for instruction; (5) the mother is fully satisfied, completed, and composed in motherhood; and finally, (6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children (p.2).

Feminist theorists writing about women’s experience of being mothers have historically defined this discourse as the Institution of Motherhood. In historian Ann Taylor Allen’s (2005) account of feminism and motherhood, she tracks the shift that moved motherhood ‘from a lifelong status to a role – an identity that could be taken on, thrown off, or combined with other identities’ (p.220). Following World War II, there was a large increase in (paid) employment by women (mothers). This challenged the singular status as mother that women had long been identified with. According to Taylor Allen (2005), by 1960 ‘women from high income families, chiefly those with professional qualifications, were disproportionately represented in the labour force’ (p.221).

Importantly, unlike the wartime influx of married women into paid labour, post war women entered the workforce via personal choice in addition to doing so out of economic necessity. With paid labour available and increasingly accessible (due largely to the efforts of feminist activity)
motherhood as an institution loosened it grip (Taylor Allen 2005). Women’s choice to adopt more than one identity as both mother and worker afforded feminist critique that challenged women’s experiences of mothering (Arcana 1986; De Beauvoir 1952; Firestone 1979; Friedan [1963] 2001; Millett 1997; Rich 1976; Ruddick 1995).

The relationship between motherhood and feminism has shifted and turned in a dynamic process often revealing conflict (Kinser 2010) and demanding repudiation (Friedan [1963] 2001). However, all seem in agreement that the parameters of mother as it exists within patriarchal discourse constrains women through the determinants that equate her womanhood with motherhood (Kinser 2010). In fact, the institution of motherhood, argued Simone de Beauvoir (1952) has such negative effects on women that it makes them miserable and is bad for their health.

In 1963 Betty Friedan argued in her book The Feminine Mystique that the prevailing social view of motherhood meant that women’s identity was solely connected to her potential for reproduction and the social expectation that marriage and motherhood were what women aspired to. She argued that it was only by breaking this oppressive link to marriage and childbirth that women’s liberation could be found. For Friedan ([1963] 2001) the status of ‘mother’ worked against women’s empowerment.

For feminists writing during the second wave, the institution of motherhood is a source of oppression because it excludes women from public life leaving them politically disadvantaged (Bernard 1974). The institution of motherhood perpetuated the expectation ‘that women should be economically dependent on men, the unequal distribution of household and social power that stemmed from that, and the limitations on women’s access to gratifying work and education outside the home’ (Kinser 2010:85). Jessie Bernard (1974) argued further that women’s relegation to the private domain allocated all the responsibility to them without any real power thus minimising the value of their ‘motherwork’. This exposes women to critique and validates the father’s
entitlement to exercise ultimate authority over the child and her mothering work.

Second-wave feminists identified material, political and social concerns with the unpaid domestic and child rearing labour of the married mother. At the time, Kinser (2010) argues this was a radical turn. Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1979) argued that family structure was a direct link to women’s oppression. In Juliet Mitchell’s (1974) *Woman’s Estate* she argued that the role of child bearer was undervalued and dismissed as unimportant because it was unpaid. Continued participation in the unpaid workforce propped up women’s economical dependence on men and was considered antithetical to women’s freedom and their quest for selfhood.

Thus, this discourse compromises women’s identity as separate to that of her child. She is allocated all responsibility but imbued with no power. Motherhood denies women the ‘authority and agency to determine her own experiences of mothering’ (O’Reilly 2008:10). By relegating the role of mother to the domestic realm, rendering her work non-public, women’s effect on social change is restricted (O’Reilly 2008).

**MOTHER OUTLAWS**


> We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood (p.195).

She argues that motherhood is both ‘institution’ and ‘experience’ and that Motherhood as Institution, is shaped and constrained by patriarchal ideas about women. Rich’s (1976) critique joined the voices of other second-wave feminists who were able to reveal some of the key issues for women within the patriarchally defined and prescribed role of ‘mother’. However, what was ground breaking was her distinction between the Institution and women’s lived experiences of being mothers. Her emphasis on the experience of
mothering attends to a woman’s own experience that is necessarily female centred and wrestled from male definition.

This distinction is important because it is an attempt to reclaim motherhood and allow women to define the terms. Additionally it marked a conceptual break with earlier second-wave feminists because of the potential to focus on the idea of mothering as a positive experience for women that celebrates their relationship with their children and is not solely oppressive (Jeremiah 2006).

Rich (1976), a mother of three sons, sees herself as consciously *mothering* outside the construct of motherhood. She interrupts the patriarchal idea of motherhood while simultaneously immersing herself in mothering and claiming herself in the process. Rich (1976) and subsequent feminist scholars assert that it is through the outlawed locale that a woman can do her best work, the kind of work that engenders social transformation (O’Reilly 2004; Jeremiah 2006; Ruddick 1995). O’Reilly (2004) in her book *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* asserts:

> It has long been recognised among scholars of motherhood that Rich’s distinction between mothering and motherhood was what enabled feminists to recognise that motherhood is not naturally, necessarily, or inevitable oppressive, a view held by many early second wave feminists (p.2).

From Rich’s (1976) foundation subsequent feminist scholars make a distinction between motherhood and the actual practice of mothering (Everingham 1994; Green 2004; Griffin and Broadfoot 2010; Jeremiah 2006; O’Reilly 2004; Rennie-Forcey 1987; Ruddick 1995).

Rich’s (1976) distinction generated a theoretical leap because ‘feminists were able to offer a more nuanced critique of how motherhood *could* function as oppressive but wasn’t necessarily or inherently this way’ (Kinser 2010:85). According to Jeremiah (2006) the requalification of the mothering experience has been a pivotal concept in understanding the maternal subject as being in relationship to multiple ideologies and discourses about maternity.
So, the term mothering encompasses the possibilities for women within their mothering practice as well as recognising the political and structural inequities that motherhood thrusts upon women. Mothering challenges the dictates of patriarchal motherhood (O’Reilly 2004; Ruddick 1995). Mothering outside the institution of motherhood is a rejection of the claim that patriarchal culture seeks to assert on women. Additionally, mothering seeks to reduce the impact motherhood has on the developing femininities and masculinities of her children, that is the way they understand the status, roles, make up and ways of doing gender.

In sum, the exploration of women’s experiences of mothering is not designed to diminish or eradicate motherhood. Instead O’Reilly (2004) asserts it is designed to re-qualify women’s experiences as a ‘source of power’ (p.2). Women who mother outside the institution of motherhood prescriptions are ‘mother outlaws’ (O’Reilly 2004:2). As a rejection of the dominant discourse and through the development of an alternative practice ‘mothering can be seen as a political act… a form of political resistance…’(Dooley and Fedele 2001:194). I turn now to the development of contemporary feminist theorising about mothering and the notion of the maternal subject and her capacity for agentic activity and influence.

**Feminism’s Changing Relationship with Motherhood**

The mother has been rejected at times, almost deified at others, but she has never been ignored by feminists (Umansky 1996:3).

Historically, feminism’s relationship with motherhood has been conflicted. This is primarily because motherhood as patriarchal institution was considered an obstacle that required dismantling in order to facilitate a gender revolution (Everingham 1994; O’Reilly 2008). Umansky (1996) is adamant that the feminist debate in the 1960s and early 1970s about motherhood was not so much about rejecting the mother perse but an applied and sustained attempt to ‘understand her oppression’ (p.42). Feminists have urged women
to repudiate the motherhood discourse ‘in conjunction with political agitation for birth control and abortion rights, and alongside a critique of the nuclear family’ (Umansky 1996:2). The critique of motherhood has been a feminist strategy to advance the ‘material conditions of mothering in contemporary society’ (Umansky 1996:50).

Kinser (2010) suggests that feminism in general has not so much repudiated motherhood, which has the potential to undermine mothering, but rather ‘what feminists have actually tried to undermine is a notion of family that requires a breadwinning decision-making father and nurturing, submissive at-home mother’ (p.96). Regardless, motherhood is a discourse that women are positioned in relation to and thus it has a central place in feminist theory. And Umansky (1996) details that many feminist writers have shared the belief ‘that an understanding of human existence necessitated a thoroughgoing analysis of motherhood’ (p.141).

Through the late second wave of feminism and continuing through the third wave to the present day, feminists shifted focus from the child to focus on the mother, exemplified by Rich’s (1976) articulation of motherhood as experience. Consequently, women’s experiences as mothers became the subject of feminist investigation and research (Everingham 1994). This marks the introduction of women’s standpoint into a patriarchally defined domain. Interestingly, according to Umansky (1996), second-wave feminist efforts demanding women’s access to academia saw their entry in large numbers in the late 1970s that ‘provided another potent impetus to the surge of feminist publications on motherhood…’ (p.136).

Kinser (2010) suggests that:

Feminism has come to a place where its treatment of mothering no longer focuses mostly on patriarchy and the institution of motherhood (p.130).

While feminist critique of the institution of motherhood recognises the political and structural inequalities that are thrust upon women, feminists
theorising motherhood seek to encompass the possibilities for women within their maternal practice (Kinser 2010). This reflects a feminist drive to reinstate the notion of empowerment and agency in women’s lived experiences as mothers, wives and partners. One of the strategies for doing so is the requalification of mothers’ experiences and their ‘care-work’ as legitimate feminist activity.

MATERNAL PRACTICE

Sara Ruddick’s (1995) book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* was an attempt to move mothering away from something that is naturally occurring and must necessarily be provided by women only. She argued that mothering needs to be seen as distinct from birthgiving because it is something that can be carried out by a man or a woman. Her book was an attempt to undermine the notion of maternal instinct by positing that women develop both a set of skills and way of thinking that is honed through interaction with their children. Through ‘care-work’ they establish a craft of child rearing borne of the applied (unpaid) labour in caring for our children.

In separating ‘birthgiving’ from mothering she contends ‘to be a mother is to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one’s working life’ (Ruddick 1995:17). Mothering work is a commitment to responding to the demands of looking after children and is not dependent on identity or a ‘fixed biological or legal relationship’ (Ruddick 1995:xii). Her conceptualisation of mothering rejects the idea that women, by virtue of their physiology, are naturally suited to nurturing and caring for children. The notion of mothering does not accept that a woman’s social status relegates her and her alone to being the primary care giver. As well, mothering thus presupposes women’s right not to mother (Rennie Forcey 1987).

Placing an emphasis on mothering as work draws attention to what is being done rather than felt. Ruddick’s (1995) shift of focus challenges the patriarchal discourse of maternal instinct that links women’s biology and
gendered subjectivity to the role of mother. By employing the concept of maternal logic she theorises mothering as a discipline, a set of maternal practices, which involves a sense of judgements of success and failure. Further moving mothering away from the essential, she argues that these disciplined acts are intellectual not emotional.

The feminist theoretical turn towards developing a theory of feminist maternal practice can be contextualised by using a definition of practice taken from Ruddick’s (1995) book.

Practices are collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims. The aims or goals that define a practice are so central or “constitutive” that in the absence of the goal you would not have that practice. I express this intrinsic dependency when I say that to engage in a practice means to be committed to meeting its demands. People more or less consciously create a practice as they simultaneously pursue certain goals and make sense of their pursuit. Understanding shapes the end even as the practical pursuit of the end shapes the understanding (pp.13-14).

Everingham (1994) engages with Ruddick’s ([1989] 1995) concept of maternal thinking and summates that maternal thinking ‘arises from maternal practice which dictates certain interests that guide the mothers judgement’ (p.31). The areas of interest are related to nurturing and socialisation of children. However, she argues that it is important to emphasise that the forms that such interest takes are not universal. For example, women from diverse cultural or class backgrounds may foreground different areas of concern and prioritise particular emphasis on areas of socialisation. Or, women who identify as non hetero-normative may privilege or engage in socialisation and nurturing from different positions and/or towards different ends than their hetero-normative counterparts. And similarly, women who have sons may
want to contextualise their nurturing and care taking of their children differently than when they mother their daughters.

Everingham (1994) critiques Ruddick’s (1995) theory for lacking analysis of how maternal thinking is socially constructed and constrained. She proposes a way around this by suggesting that maternal thinking be considered as a moral attitude ‘adopted by mothers amongst any number of possibilities’ (p.32). This suggestion paves the way for a feminist paradigm that provides context and form for moral attitudes feminist mothers enact with their children.

The moral element becomes the central focus for sociological investigation….As a moral attitude, its binding power could be investigated in terms of its location in a communal form of organisation; in the action of the particular mothers, caring for particular children in a particular socio-cultural environment (Everingham 1994:32).

Ruddick (1995) suggests that mothering, if considered as practice, promotes empowerment. The exploration of women’s experience of mothering, that is the naming and thinking about their mothering, challenges the invisibility of women’s work and lays foundations for social transformation. Rendering oneself visible within the mothering process is antithetical to patriarchal motherhood yet vital as a tool for women’s empowerment and role as social change agents.

**Defining Feminist Maternal Practice**

Feminist maternal practice as an area of study can be considered to fit within and form part of the development in feminist theory that has occurred across the second-wave into the third to the present contemporary Western climate. In an assessment of these developments Snyder (2008) suggests that the third-wave proposed a ‘tactical approach… to some of the impasses that developed within feminist theory in the 1980s’ (p.175).
The action for women’s liberation established a social and political movement that sought to unite women in solidarity to agitate for change. The feminist engagement with motherhood was a part of this and looked to female solidarity being forged through the shared experiences of motherhood (Umansky 1996) as one of these tactics. As discussed earlier in this thesis this led to critiques from women marginalised or unaccounted for by second-wave grand narratives of womanhood (Snyder 2008). While identification with a community, even an oppressed one, can be rallying and promote a sense of connection and hope, it can also be an obstacle to making sense of the individually lived experience. The dominant motherhood story of the second-wave did not measure accurately the reality of many women’s lives (Snyder 2008).

Contemporary feminist maternal practice does not stand in opposition to second-wave and structural feminism but is rather a response to the critique and an exposition of poststructural feminism as it applies to the notion of maternal practice. This means that feminist maternal practice, as a theory is not concerned with measuring motherhood. Motherhood instead is a contested site and as such resists definitions that are universalising and totalising. Poststructural theorists describe this shift as a break with the search for singularity or truth. This is considered an important theoretical turn because it opens social theory to unlimited freedom and, tolerance and innovative understanding about our world (Flynn 2003; Seidman 2004). Feminist maternal practice wrests on a similar theoretical foundation and is interested in exploring the multiplicity of women’s mothering experiences. Women make choices, exercise values and ideals in and through their interactions with their children and in response to diverse socio-cultural contexts. In the step towards developing a theory of feminist mothering O’Reilly (2008) argues that feminist maternal practice must be inclusive of women from diverse lived experiences, and importantly advocate that:
A woman’s capacity to mother is not determined by class, culture, age, sexuality, ability or mental status or biological relationship to the child (p.11).

Another critique of second-wave feminist engagement with motherhood has been the structural positioning of the mother within an oppressive and static location. This has been read as both essentialising the mother and prohibiting her social location as anything other than passive and fixed. However, contemporary feminist maternal practice attempts to deregulate maternity and position both motherhood and the mother as culturally relative. An exposition of the motherhood discourse considers the ‘mother’ as constituted through this discourse at the same time as being in relationship to it and/or the ideals, values and norms this discourse sustains and creates. Simultaneously this develops the theoretical space for alternative discourses about women, mothers and mothering to become visible and engaged with. This reinforces the notion that mothering ‘is no longer seen as a fixed, static state, rather it is viewed as a set of ideas and behaviours that are mutable, contextual’ (Jeremiah 2006:21).

Into this space, feminist researchers and theorists have been able to explore if and how feminist mothers draw on and engage with feminist ideals and values in their interactions with their children, partners and the social context this forms part of. Consequently, feminist mothers are in constant interaction with multiple narratives and positioned within conflicting discourses. I would argue that poststructural feminism is better suited to ‘accept the messiness of lived contradiction’ (Snyder 2008:177) than any push for a united womanhood is capable of. Poststructural feminism recognizes the multiplicity of maternal subjectivities and ‘foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism’ (Snyder 2008:175).

In 1998 Andrea O’Reilly developed the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) that has now been re-launched as the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI). This is a
feminist scholarly and activist organization on mothering and motherhood. Through this organisation, theorising of motherhood and maternal practice has developed into an academic field and an important area of research. To this end, feminist writers and researchers have explored practices engaged in by women who live their lives (including their parenting) with commitment and inspiration from feminist ideology (Green 2006; Horwitz 2004; Jeremiah 2006; Obrien-Hallstein 2008; O’Reilly 2004; 2006). Feminist maternal practice is configured within the context of a definition of feminism that works ‘to create conditions of freedom, equality, justice, and self-actualisation for all people by focusing on gender-related issues in particular…’ (Snyder 2008:192).

Feminist maternal practice takes a feminist standpoint as a framework that women who engage in mothering can use to normalise, validate and understand their experiences of motherhood as an institution. A feminist standpoint supports women who mother to draw on and justify feelings, hopes and experiences that are ‘at odds’ with dominant mothering discourse. Working from a feminist foundation that considers women as agentic, entitled and capable of supporting each other, feminist mothering has come to mean a lived resistance to normative expectations and construction of motherhood and femininity (O’Reilly 2008). Feminist maternal practice seeks to requalify motherwork as culturally valued and one of the ways of doing this is to enact alternative practice in order to render it valid (Jeremiah 2006). This also works to destabilise motherhood discourse because it exposes the inconsistencies in dominant motherhood discourse by introducing alternatives (Horwitz 2004).

Feminist mothering is a considered reaction to traditional motherhood (Jeremiah 2006; O’Reilly 2008) whereby women are making non-normative choices about how they practice mothering (Horwitz 2004; O’Reilly 2008). These choices are explicitly foregrounded in feminist thinking and ideals. Feminist mothers recognise myths of motherhood (Johnson 2003) that hold women accountable in ways that devalue and hold hostage their individuality
(O’Reilly 2008); essentialise the role of mother (Everingham 1994; Rennie-Forcey 1987); and trouble taken for granted assumptions about mothers and mothering (Kinser 2010). Feminist mothers charge these standards as ensconced in misogyny and gender inequity (Green 2008; O’Reilly 2008). Feminist mothers consider their maternal practices as ‘an essential strategy for contributing to positive social change’ (Green 2008:166).

O’Reilly (2008) describes feminist mothers challenging ‘male privilege and power in her own life and that of her children’ (p.9). In fact she argues that feminist mothering must be defined by its challenge to patriarchal motherhood because this institution ‘constrains, regulates and dominates women and their mothering’ (p.10).

In this section I have argued that feminist maternal practice sits within a broader poststructural feminist framework and is a response to some of the impasses that were reached with second-wave and structural feminism. In addition, one of the important differences within the theory of feminist maternal practice is the taking up of poststructural ideas about power as relational. As feminist maternal practice considers the maternal subject as mutable, multiple and constituted through discourses, mothering has been wrested from a structural location where it is a result of and acted on by external forces of power. Instead, poststructural feminist ideas about power allow the concept of maternal practice to form a part of, be responsive to and inform relations of power.

**The Maternal Subject**

One of the ways that maternal practice informs relations of power is to reconsider structural accounts of autonomy (Everingham 1994). As mentioned earlier, such accounts rely on binary structures that essentialise women’s position as mother. This both relegates them to the primary role as birth giver and care taker as well as trivialising their work because it is socially and politically isolated and unpaid. Everingham (1994) argues that autonomy can be configured to include maternal activity or ‘the agency of
women carrying out nurturing activity’ (p.6). She seeks to theorise autonomy as a form of subjectivity ‘constructed in relation to another’s claim to autonomy, in concrete social situations which are imbued with power’ (Everingham 1994:6). Autonomy is rejected as a stand-alone achievement rather it is an activity. She states:

The child’s autonomous subjectivity is constructed in relation to the (m)other’s own claim to autonomy during this activity’ (p.6).

Autonomy in this context can be understood as an emancipatory form of subjectivity because it is actively constituted within the particular socio-cultural mother/child context ‘by a (m)other, whose claim to autonomy must also be asserted…’ (Everingham 1994:6).

Like Everingham (1994), Jeremiah (2006) tracks the shift in feminist thought from essentialist constructions of motherhood to the more poststructural terminology of mothering. Within this she argues that motherhood is no longer taken as fixed or biologically driven but conceptualised as a set of ideas and practices that change across time and context. For Jeremiah (2006), the maternal subject first emerges through a consequence of engaging in maternal practice, that is she becomes a maternal subject as a ‘consequence of decision-making on the part of the individual woman, that is, of a decision to become a mother’ (p.26).

She also critiques structural feminist accounts of mother and maternity as if it exists outside of culture. Instead, maternal subjectivities are constituted through discourses about gender difference, mothers, maternity, the body and motherhood. She proposes a poststructural feminist engagement with mothering where there are explicit feminist discourses that constitute maternal subjectivities that are removed from an essentialist foundation and which recognises a maternal subject who enacts maternal practice.

In this way, mothering involves the taking up of maternal practice imbuing the subject as active, interactive and part of an exchange (Jeremiah 2006).
One of her main arguments is that despite feminists being aware of the social construction of gender, they have not historically well conceptualised maternity, as it is constituted through relations of power and dominant discourse. Jeremiah (2006) argues that Rich’s (1976) notion of motherhood as experience has been a pivotal concept in understanding the maternal subject as being in relationship to and constituted by multiple ideologies and discourses about maternity. The emphasis in feminist maternal practice is her agency that works to disrupt motherhood discourse. This means that the mother’s experience and knowledge has authority and her agency is legitimated. The concept of the maternal subject represents a shift in thinking because she is constituted through activity and practice. Mothering positions women as outside or external to the individual.

**AGENCY**

Contemporary feminist theorising about motherhood considers the private domestic domain as a valid location for disrupting dominant discourse. Rather than being considered as sequestered from the public domain and thus the arena where power is held and exercised, feminist maternal practice draws on poststructural notions of power as dispersed, everywhere and relational. In this way, the exercise of maternal practice within the private domain is not exempt from relations of power. Rather maternal practice is directly in response to and forms part of the relations of power.

Power as relational considers the agentic activity of all subjects, the mother and child included. The reconfiguration of power in this way fits well with the reconceptualization of mothering as activity. Jeremiah (2006) suggests that maternal practice is a combination of performance and action. This practice is performed over and over and is likely to be varied. Butler (1992) argues that this variation is an effect of agentic activity and constitutive of subjectivity. This is an important idea to consider because of the traditional motherhood discourse that positions women within a patriarchal structure, powerless and constrained (Jeremiah 2006).
While it is the private sphere where agency is enacted, mothering practice is still context bound and historically specific. The reason for action may be taken from a response to basic necessity; feeding, changing nappies, picking a child up from school etc. When mothering is relegated to meeting basic requirements alone, this activity can be considered as responsive, as a passive role. However feminist maternal practice draws on ideals, values and aims of feminism that are given expression through interaction and activity enacted with our children. Everingham (1994) emphasises the following:

… mothering involves more than the instrumental act of meeting the child’s needs. It also involves more than the imposition of normatively held beliefs and values. The uncovering of the interpretive action of the mother exposes the mother as a critical agent, reflecting upon and responding to, the agency of the child in a particular socio-cultural setting, and in the process actively constructing cultural meanings and forms of subjectivity within that milieu (p.8).

Everingham (1994) argues that, taken from a feminist perspective, maternal activity traverses the personal and political, the ideological, philosophical, the private and the public domain. This she asserts sees the mother moving ‘into focus as a subject (and) a creator of cultural meanings and human value systems’ (p.7).

According to Fraser (2004), narratives can be used to both reinforce and contest dominant social practices. She suggests that:

Whether it is by accident or design, individuals do not always take up the types of narrative that they are “meant” to’ (p.180).

It is possible that individuals do not take up dominant narratives properly or as well as they could. It is also possible that alternative narratives are introduced. In so doing, multiple narratives encourage ‘a plurality of truths to become known…’ (Fraser 2004:181). Consequently, the strength of dominant stories and the potential for monopolising the truth about individuals is
lessened. Transformation of society is predicated, I believe, on the telling of multiple stories about ourselves and our lives so that no single dominant story can claim the truth.

While all may be affected by dominant discursive practices, not all may subscribe to the inherent beliefs and expectations. It is possible, that in the process of navigating ourselves within dominant discourse we may try to unravel and resist the effects and promoted ideas all at the same time. It is also possible that women draw on alternative discourses that support them in this unravelling and resistance of dominant discourse.

Like second-wave feminism, contemporary feminist theory still looks to ‘personal experiences to provide knowledge about how the world operates and to trouble dominant narratives about how things should be’ (Snyder 2008:184). However, there is criticism levelled at the reluctance to be authoritative and the focus on the subjectivity of narratives. Snyder (2008) warns that the critique of dominant stories through exposition of the diversity of lived experience needs to be able to have effect on social context and must move the personal to the political. However, there is an argument that the privileging of multifocal and variegated narratives both highlights the inaccuracy of totalising narratives about motherhood and makes visible the fissures in conflicting narratives about motherhood and about gender. Snyder (2008) concedes that:

> By occupying female subject positions in innovative or contradictory ways, third-wavers unsettle essentialist narratives about dominant men and passive women and shape new identities within the interstices of competing narratives’ (p.185).

Maternal practice operates within a theoretical structure, one that contextualises personal narratives positioning them as political rather than merely an expression of individualism. In this way, the enacting of maternal practice fits with the feminist tradition of casting a critical lens on dominant
discourse, their institutions and cultural practices (Everingham 1994; Snyder 2008).

**Feminist Maternal Practice as a Precursor for Change**

There are different ways of theorising the mother and son relationship. Located within the second-wave analysis of motherhood as institution, the mother’s role is essentialised and confined within a patriarchal structure where she nurtures a future patriarch. The mother and son are positioned within a gender binary where their identities are fixed and unequal gender relations are recreated both through the institution of motherhood and her caretaking role. If this relationship is explored from within the second wave the outlook for change is grim. For feminist mothers of sons, a critique of motherhood as institution does not work towards a feminist praxis with sons unless there is a conceptual consideration for maternal agency.

In order to consider the potential for feminist mothers to enact change in gender relations, a theory of feminist maternal practice fits best because it is within this theoretical space that women’s agency is recognised and configured. Like Everingham (1994), I am interested in potential ways women, through their maternal practice, contribute to the construction of value systems. While feminists mothering sons enact their practice within a patriarchal paradigm, at the same time they are drawing on feminist analysis of their experiences within this institution. Their maternal practice seeks to disrupt dominant values and hierarchical arrangements of contemporary western society. As previously mentioned, while mothers are relied on and expected to transmit dominant values, the feminist maternal subject cannot be relied on to do this properly. In fact, feminist research asserts that women who enact feminist maternal practice are deliberately unreliable.

If maternal agency is established, then feminist maternal practice with sons can be explored from this foundation. In addition to this, however, I argue that it is through ideas about gender as socially constructed that maternal
agency can really come into effect. If gender is socially constructed through dominant narrative practices, then it is possible to refute the claim that gender is an innate essential characteristic that can be divided into masculine and feminine. This is an important possibility because this means that there are alternative discourses about gender that can be enacted to support different and multiple ways of understanding, and knowing, and doing gender.

I have stated earlier that the concept of feminist maternal practice can be considered within wider poststructural feminist theory. Feminist activists, theorists and practitioners are forthright in their problematizing, questioning and challenging the meaning and truth about gender difference (Belsey 2002; 2006; Butler 2006; Davies 1989; Deutsch 2007; Fenstermaker and West 2002). They consistently and prodigiously challenge the positioning of women as hostage to a feminine essentialism. Following this, I position this thesis within a poststructural conceptualisation of the construction of meaning and the freedom that is conferred when the truth is contested (Belsey 2002).

The instability of truth is exhumed via a poststructural critique and as a consequence this means that nothing is certain. This conceptualisation has the potential then to release the mother and son relationship from the confines of gender essentialism towards a plethora of possibility. Poststructural analysis helps track the dominant discourses that are being constituted. This makes visible the masculine and feminine dichotomy and helps make sense of and draw attention to the process of difference. This is useful for understanding the mother and son relationship because biologism privileges and produces difference between the two. In addition to constructing the notion of gender as innate attribute, this reinforces notions of good and bad mothering and right and wrong parenting practice with boys.

Poststructural feminism can be a framework for discerning what is problematic about normative masculinity discourse as well as why they are problematic. This presents entry points for contesting them and as a framework feminism can facilitate a sense of entitlement to intervene. This concept, as well as the practice, can feel empowering. For feminist mothers
committed to social change through their maternal practice, this sense of possibility is exciting and full of hope.

Feminist theory and practice has worked hard to address institutional change through restructuring of child care, maternity and paternity leave, abortion rights and advocating for access to family centric child care services (Everingham 1994; Snyder 2006). Feminist maternal practice asserts that the everyday mothering context is an extension of, and critical location for, social change.

**Feminist Maternal Practice and Doing Gender**

One of the ways that the mothering context can be considered as a location for social change is through application of West and Zimmerman’s (1987) notion of doing gender. They posit that gender, rather than an innate attribute of the individual, is something that is accomplished through social interaction. This means that gender is fundamentally about relationship. Gender is done through all aspects of our interaction and relationship to the social world. When we do gender we engage in the activity ‘of managing situated conduct in light of normative expectations of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category’ (West and Zimmerman 1987:127).

Categorisation practices are how we learn and display normative gendered behaviour. In children ‘this is a part of the desire for social acceptance’ (West and Zimmerman 1987:141). The subject monitors their own and others’ conduct with regard to the consequences for gender accountability (p.142). They suggest:

> If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals – not the institutional arrangements – may be called to account (for our character,
motives, and predispositions)... Social change, then, must be pursued both at the institutional and cultural level of sex category and at the interactional level of gender (pp. 21-22).

The omnirelevance of doing gender means that any interaction location is imbued with expectations of and depictions for doing gender (Fenstermaker and West 2002; West and Zimmerman 1987).

I want to consider the mother and son interaction as a site where the consequences of doing gender as a theoretical formulation can be played out. If a family can be configured as a cultural matrix, then we are required to do gender according to established and traditional norms. It is reasonable to think, that our sons strive to achieve gender in their encounters with us as their mothers and vice versa.

Feminists theorising social change in gender relations suggest that it is possible for social movements, such as feminism, to provide the ideology and impetus to question and transform existing arrangements (Fenstermaker and West 2002). At the institutional level, legislative and policy changes have and may continue to ‘weaken the accountability of conduct to sex category, thereby affording the possibility of more widespread loosening of accountability in general’ (Fenstermaker and West 2002: 21). It may also be possible that at the interactional level, in particular the domestic and familial level, feminist maternal practice has and continues to work towards contesting and thus hopefully weakening accountability to sex category.

Women in their position as mothers draw on wide ranging social and cultural contexts as they enact maternal practice. They draw on their own identities and experiences to make sense of gendered decisions, encounters and practices. Through their interaction with external context, imbued with values and norms about men and women (and mothers and sons), they simultaneously enact their maternal subjectivity in response to and in defiance of externally imposed measures of accountability. They rely on a feminist ideology to do this and draw on the feminist matrix of ideas to
impose additional and alternative standards of accountability in their interactions with their sons. They are actively and ongoingly constituting gendered subjectivities, as are their sons. This autonomous interactivity may open possibilities for the social transformation of gender relations.

As well as being positioned in the gender order, we ‘engage in the practical taking and assigning of gendered positions’ (Messner and Sabo 1990:89) ourselves. It is possible for mothers to see themselves as having the ability to inform gender practices through affirming or critiquing gender norms. This can inform the mothering of their sons.

**CONCLUSION**

A review of the literature explored contemporary feminist writing about the mother and son. Feminist analysis of this relationship reinvigorates the role of the mother (O’Reilly 2001), privileges the mother-son connection, and emphasises the importance of the visible mother as a means for establishing respect for women. There is also a focus on the importance of boys developing relational selves, through their connection to their mother. To date, there does not appear to be research that specifically explores the mother and son relationship as a location from which to understand how gendered subjectivities are relationally constituted. This gap has provided the rationale for Chapters 4 and 5 that engage the recent theorising about feminist maternal practice with the idea that children’s gender does not unfold, but is enacted in social relationship systems that are contextually specific and performed over and over again (Walby 1990).

This chapter has discussed how feminists’ theorising maternity have historically problematised motherhood as a institutional structure that undermines women’s empowerment (Friedan [1963] 2001). In contrast, some contemporary feminists’ theorising about motherhood places an emphasis on women’s experience as the standpoint from which to explore maternity and make a distinction between motherhood discourse and the practice of mothering (Everingham 1994; Green 2004; Griffin and Broadfoot 2010;
Through establishing this distinction, the mothering experience has been requalified and has helped develop into the idea that it is possible to consider a maternal subject who is positioned in relation to multiple ideologies and discourses about maternity (Jeremiah 2006).

Motherhood then is not a fixed state, but rather a set of ideas and practices that are responsive, contextual and ahistorical (Everingham 1994; Jeremiah 2006). This chapter has helped frame the emerging data regarding the decisions the feminist mothers in this study make every day. The concept of maternal practice gives form to these feminist mothers’ description of the responsibilities they believe are theirs in regards to raising sons. Maternal practice is relational because the feminist mother enacts maternity in response to these demands.

Maternal agency comes into greater focus when ideas about gender as relationally constructed are taken up. The idea that gender is an essential attribute of the individual is contested in this thesis because this age-old lens holds the mother and son relationship to ransom through patriarchal ideology and hegemonic masculinity practices that perpetuate gender inequality. The conceptual frame of this thesis adheres to the idea that gendered subjectivities are produced across time, through social interaction according to normative representations of masculinity and femininity.

Overall this chapter has identified the changing relationship between feminism and motherhood. The mother has been reconfigured as maternal subject who enacts maternal practice. I have argued that the potential for the agentic maternal subject comes into sharper focus when considering the mother and son context as a location for social change.

In the following chapters, analysis of the data will consider the extent to which the feminist mothers in this study set out to inform gender practices and how they do so. These chapters will take up the concept of feminist maternal practice as agentic and constitutive of gendered subjectivities.
CHAPTER SIX: THE ROLE OF
FEMINISM IN THE RAISING OF SONS

DEVELOPING A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF THE
DATA: A PREAMBLE TO THE ANALYSIS

We start, all of us, always, in the middle of ongoing histories of

My own experience as a feminist mother raising sons has, and continues to
play, a large role in my approach to this research area and undoubtedly, and
deliberately, my analysis of the research data. Consequently, before I launch
in to my attempt to re-present the experiences of the twenty women
interviewed for this thesis, I would like to position myself within these
chapters.

While the research participants are all self-identified feminist mothers of
sons, their involvement has been constrained through semi-structured
interviews conducted early on in the research process. Conversely, I have
been present, actively reflexive (Etherington 2005) and continually
interactive with both the research data and the relevant literature and existing
research about mothers, sons and the gendered subject. This has many
consequences for how the research data is presented, the way that the analysis
is structured and re-presentation of the data narrative.

It is reasonable to consider that I have concocted my own narrative
(Czarniawska 2004) out of the information elicited in the interviews through
my writing up, rewriting and interpretation of their accounts. This has meant
that each time I interpret and write anew their excerpts, the story changes and
the meaning evolves.
Czarniawska (2004) suggests that the act of rendering someone else’s story according to my own agenda and in my own language ‘is a political act of totalizing’ (p.61). I do not mean to reject this assertion, what is left is to attempt to position their stories within a feminist frame and draw on language that reflects, and is framed by, a broader feminist goal of re-qualifying the subjugated knowledges of the mothers of sons. Or, in different terms, to contribute towards the feminist project that Kinser (2010) terms a questioning of the taken-for-granted assumptions about women and about their lives.

Further, Czarniawska (2004) argues that the researcher is ethically bound to take responsibility for the end narrative that is presented. That is, the presentation of the analysis is a story constituted by participant’s accounts but also re-presented and given a storyline in accordance with both my own assumptions and intentions for this research (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). While this may still open the analysis to critique and charges of pollution, a poststructural notion of the production of knowledge asks primarily that the machinations of the production of knowledge be held accountable because the search for ‘truth’ in and of itself is a vagary (Belsey 2002).

The poststructural feminist lens that foregrounds this thesis privileges a non-positivist approach to understanding the social world. This means that there is no drive for a definitive answer, or the penultimate story, rather there is an intention of exploring a part of the story, and for this part to be heard from the mother’s perspective. Because the machinations that construct knowledge are considered suspect or open to competing interpretations (Czarniawska 2004) and are always part of the relations of power (Foucault 1980, 1991), my analysis attempts to organise the mother and son narrative around a plot that is different to a patriarchally prescribed notion of mother and son.

While compiling segments of narratives that have been taken from an interview has the effect of decontextualizing them, there is a simultaneous re-contextualisation process that happens (Czarniawska 2004). Within this too the analysis narrative, because it is aligned with feminism, attempts to tell a
story of gendered social realities (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). This is important because a feminist standpoint recognises that knowledge production is gendered rather than neutral. This means too that feminist research both entails a theory of power and engages in power relations because it makes claims over production of authoritative knowledge that recognises the gendered nature of all knowledge (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). As such, feminist research attempts to skew both production of knowledge and the subject under investigation in favour of a woman’s standpoint.

However, as discussed throughout this thesis, while feminism relies on the category of woman to marshal social change there are significant problems with such a universalizing and totalising term. To whit, the analysis casts specific focus on a particular, localised and self-identified group, namely feminist mothers of sons living in Melbourne, Australia. The knowledge produced and examined is authoritative only from within and for this specified locale.

I would like to return to the quote that heads this chapter. While the knowledges presented in the analysis chapters are drawn from a specified locale they are not ahistorical and non-contextual. The women interviewed for this research and the lived experiences they account for are impacted on, enact and interact with wider social narratives about gender and mothers and sons. The information gleaned and re-presented forms part of and thus contributes to ongoing exploration and understanding of the ‘mother and son’ relation.

The dominant discourse about mothering does not necessarily resemble the lived experiences or intentions of all women’s lives (Green 2004) and this is particularly evident for feminist mothers raising sons. However, I argue that the act of identifying (in this thesis) the discourses they draw on, and position themselves within, simultaneously constitute both these discourses and their multiple subject positions. I turn now to the interview participants’ feminist frame in order to establish the context for their experience of raising sons.
MAKING SENSE OF FEMINISM

Feminists cannot define in general what a feminist ideal of justice is (although they can investigate what definitions people actually use, and what conditions they actually live under (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:35).

All of the women interviewed for this thesis make sense of their experience as mothers through a feminist lens. For the twenty women interviewed, all were asked to speak about what feminism means for them. The rationale for this started with the idea that participants self-identified as feminist. With feminism as a word that all had actively embraced it seemed plausible, perhaps even useful, to develop a working definition of a term the participants used as a frame through which to explore the mother and son relationship.

Rather than put forward a definition of feminism that can be taken as a true meaning of the term, I was keen to build a picture of feminism as a concept that reflects and is imbued with specific values, ideas and goals. And, instead of working towards a term that unites women through its name, I had hoped to establish a connection between them (and the research) through the exposition of a commonality of ideals, values and hopes.

Most importantly, if I am to use the term feminism, it can take on the role of a sign, or a signifier. I would like then to be explicit in regards to what it signifies, that is, the concepts that are enacted through the use of the word feminism. To this end, I cannot define what feminism is per se; however, this research has investigated the ideals and concepts used by the feminist mothers interviewed. And it is these ideals and concepts that they use to make sense of and identify the conditions they live under.

Primarily, for all participants in this research, the feminism they identify with is grounded in one or more of the notions of equality, choice and empowerment. These are the ideas that they draw on in their sense making of
their relationship with their sons and when they consciously interact with discourse.

*It’s about equality. It’s about women...not having to strive harder to achieve that same result as a man* (Kate).

Equality is about the same expectations being placed on all men and all women and there was expressed concern for equal recognition of the obstacles encountered by women, and the effort put in to overcome them. Additionally, equality as a feminist issue was identified as a material reality by the women who speak about *‘equal pay for equal work’* (Nina) and *‘equal choice’* (Leah) in the job market.

Equality is considered an important precursor for the notion of choice. Some of the participants felt it important that multiple opportunities were made available to women because without the same plethora of opportunities women are *‘limited by gender...as far as things I would like to do in my life’* (Miriam.)

Equality in terms of access to the same opportunities as men was specified rather than simply *‘just having the same opportunities’* (Susan). Equality then was seen as a principle belief and goal of feminism.

Choice was perceived as an important idea that helps develop equality for women and a principal element of feminism. For Anna choice *‘encompasses all’*. While Elma states:

*Choice. I think it is actually that simple for me...the ability...for everyone to do whatever it is they choose to do."

Siri extends this concept when she states her belief that it is important to,

*Give women choices and options and open doors and not shut them.*
The interview participants suggested that women’s exercising of choice was connected to discourse that attributes masculinity and femininity to biology. As Iris explains:

So for me it is about giving everyone the choice to be whomever, and whatever, they want to be irrespective of whether they have a penis or a vagina...

Gender difference discourse was identified as perpetuating gender as fixed and knowable producing stereotypes about women that impose ideals that ultimately limit choice. As Nina elaborates:

It is about allowing women to be who (sic) they want to be...and not putting labels and telling girls you have to do things like this.

Categorisation and positioning within a fixed binary order is seen as counterproductive to possibility and choice as Iris insists:

So what I want is openness and not definitions.

The resistance to totalising terms and norms was further extended by Nina who spoke about choice involving validation and acceptance of the decisions and actions made by women regardless of how ‘traditionally female’ (Nina) their choices may seem or ‘how radical’ (Nina) they appear.

**Feminist Maternal Practice Displaces Patriarchal Motherhood Discourse**

Women who engage in feminist maternal practice negotiate the prescribed expectations of traditional motherhood on ‘the fringes of patriarchal space’ (Trimble 2008:129). Mothering outside the institution of motherhood is a rejection of the claim that patriarchal culture tries to have on women as well as the impact this can have on her children. As a rejection of the dominant discourse and through the development of an alternative practice, ‘mothering
can be seen as a political act...a form of political resistance...’ (Dooley and Fedele 2001:194).

It is from this notion that the ‘Outlaw Mother’ is given form as she enacts maternal practice from an independent and feminist standpoint. This, according to Horwitz (2004) is an exercising of social power because she is constructing her own view and drawing on alternative discourse that then informs her maternal practice.

The idea of practice refers to activity undertaken with specific intention in response to demands made. Intention is central to action because without the goal, the action has no practice. According to Ruddick (1995), it is both the intent that makes the action constitutive as well as the commitment to meeting the demands of the goal. The intention is both a moral position and a political stance that is taken up deliberately (Everingham 1994). When the activity is undertaken, with intent and goal in mind practice ensues and is performed over and over again (Jeremiah 2006).

Ruddick’s (1995) theory of maternal practice is inclusive of the mother/child interaction. This is something that Jeremiah (2006) suggests sees the mother as ‘relational, as constituting a complicated, ever changing relationship’ (p.24). While she is an active agent (Benjamin 1990; Ruddick 1995), her practice is ‘shaped and defined by context...and constructed as such’ (Jeremiah 2006:24). What is important here is that her maternal practice (or activity) is dependent on the inter-relational context rather than on any innate or natural understanding of the child’s needs.

Feminist writers argue, and I agree, that feminist maternal practice is part of wider feminist work towards social transformation. I think then that the feminist maternal practice of the women interviewed for this thesis needs to be recognised as feminist activism in the broadest sense. Eleanor explains this when she says:

*I do see it specifically as feminism motivating me to raise them in the way that I have. I came up with my own strategy, but I*
was pretty clear in my mind that I wanted to raise them as a feminist, as a feminist mother.

All of the feminist mothers in this study report choosing not to be accountable to dominant discourse about motherhood or about mothers and sons. Rather they choose to be accountable to a feminist discourse. It is this decision-making and interaction that constitutes feminist maternal practice with sons and enacts alternative maternal subjectivities.

When they draw on feminist discourse to resist the dominant discourse they activate the discourse. And when a feminist mother consciously draws on feminist discourse, she is being an agent of discursive activity. This in turn constitutes her feminist maternal subjectivity. As I have discussed in this thesis contemporary feminist theorising about motherhood argues that making visible the experiences of women in their positions as mothers creates a story around resistance. In so doing, women’s role as social agents within the family is mainlined.

All of the participants in this study had started engaging with feminist ideals before they became mothers. They all described how feminism is a lens through which they both make sense of their experiences as mothers and in the way that they make sense of their maternal practice. This is a rational connection because, as Bonny says, ‘It has to, it is part of my person’. Gloria extends this when she declares:

_Feminism informs my whole life. So to break that down...I don’t know anything different, you know I act...I don’t know anything different in terms of being a parent, any other way. So how much has feminism brought or you know influenced our parenting? It completely influences our parenting because that’s all we think about._

For Gloria, having children localised her feminist activism:
I think that my feminism changed from a political framework. Initially when I started discovering feminism and what feminism meant I looked at things on quite a global level and I think when you give birth everything narrows right on down. The global issues are still there and you want your children to be thinking about that, but it’s narrowed it down to what’s going on in your own house.

Interestingly, two of the women’s accounts specifically assume that their mothering practice can be a form of feminist activism. For Kate it is an extension of her feminism:

My feminism and the way that I analyse the world is constant and conscious and so I am constantly checking how I am dealing with them, what kind of people they are, what kind of discussions we have...

And similarly for Leah, feminism is intimately connected to her position as mother:

I think it is something that I think about all the time, about how to be a good feminist mum...

Feminism is the lens, strategy and values system through which they enact their maternal practice. Everingham (1994) suggests the feminist paradigm provides context and form for moral attitudes mothers enact with their children. These mothers check their maternal practice against feminist ideals and goals and in so doing patriarchally defined motherhood is displaced. This means that the positions they take up as mothers are the result of a feminist critique of gender and the discourse they draw on is a feminist discourse about motherhood and about women.

This commitment and goal is activated in response to what they perceive are specific demands made on them by having sons. It is their commitment to feminism that means that having sons manifests as a demand.
The context that gives rise to the research participants’ maternal practice is particular to her feminism but it is also directly connected to the fact that she has a son. This is why feminist maternal practice with boys is different to feminist maternal practice with girls. The analysis of the data that follows endeavours to account for what happens when these two factors converge.

**RAISING BOYS IS A PARTICULAR JOB
DESCRIPTION FOR FEMINISTS**

One of the most significant themes that emerged from the data has been the conscious decision all of the participants make in direct response to their feminist intention and the contextual demands they believe are attributable to having sons. Both participants who have sons and daughters as well as the mothers who have sons only express the belief that the demands made on them, as *feminist* mothers of sons are different than the demands which result in raising daughters. Catherine asserts:

> Yeah well obviously the imperatives are different.

And these different imperatives are experienced as challenging:

> Yeah I think probably it’s more...it’s probably more of a challenge for me to have boys because of that, the difference in the imperatives and maybe I wouldn’t be so challenged if I had girls, maybe I could relax and enjoy it.

In this, Catherine identifies a theme that is consistent with most of the mothers interviewed who had sons but did not also have daughters. Not only did they express a feeling of being challenged by the complexity of having sons, but that their envisioning of raising sons was at first a lot murkier than they imagined it would be had they raised daughters. It has been a matter of developing an interaction between feminism and masculinity.

There was also, unsurprisingly, a big difference for the mothers who had sons only and the mothers who had daughters as well. For the participants who had sons only, there had been a period of coming to terms with not having female
children. There is a richness and complexity to these participants’ feelings that involve both a letting go and a re-evaluation of their ideas about sex and gender. Participants’ who did not have daughters described mourning the potential for a kinship that they imagined they would have had with a female child. Nina provides a good summary of these feelings that were shared by the other participants’ who had sons only.

Nina: Yeah I would of loved to have had a girl. I didn’t mind having a boy but I wanted to have a girl. I think also from a feminist perspective enabling a girl to grow as a positive girl and also I guess bringing my experiences as a girl and a woman to parenting a girl... I don’t know whether it is more about me and you know wanting to bring up someone like me, an ego thing... I think because you know women go through similar experiences...I think I probably perceive that there would be more of a sort of kinship. So I suppose I do see some gender difference you know that maybe a girl would see her mother not so much when they are little...but perhaps later on...when they are older that there will be more affinity between a girl and her mother. I think it may be more about what I want...my sons might not want to share things or have the same affinity as young adults with their other, I don’t know, I hope I am wrong because I would love to have that sort of relationship with them...

At this point I asked Nina if she felt there would be more chance of this is she had a daughter.

Nina: Yes...I think that girls are closer to their mothers than boys are. Yeah I guess just in terms of my own experience that has been the case and I guess I don’t know women who are very close with their sons.
These participants described wanting intimacy, emotional connections and affinity with their children. And they felt that having a daughter may mean there was more chance of this kind of relationship with their children. As feminists, their work with their sons was important, but they had also had to let go of the experience of a feminist maternal practice with a daughter that would be about encouraging her to embrace the world from a position of entitlement and validation. The participants placed a high value on the type of emotional connection that they imagine mother and daughters’ shared experiences and gender affinity could foster.

However, the women who had both daughters and sons also articulated different imperatives. Gloria sums up her thinking about how these different demands manifest:

*Having sons has actually informed my feminism. You can assume certain thoughts with a girl. You can assume it’s easy to teach what you need to believe in. That’s very easy when you’ve got a daughter...The messages that you teach your son have to actually be about opportunity, the fairness of opportunity as opposed to the right to opportunity.*

And so Gloria defines two distinct yet intimately connected areas that feminist maternal practice is all about. For girls, it is working to build her sense of entitlement, her belief that she is important and equal to men. For boys, it is about building a relationship to women and a commitment to justice. As Gloria describes:

*To me it’s actually about justice and it’s about making sure that equality is thought of in terms of a justice framework, a social justice kind of framework.*

For Gloria’s son to understand and commit to a social justice framework she believes that understanding feminism is vital:
I think it’s important that [my son] understands what feminism means. Because without understanding what feminism means, then for me it’s like you can’t understand what justice is about. You can’t understand what opportunity for everybody means.

For Gloria, this is an ongoing effort, an ongoing conversation that her son contributes to and has a responsibility for continuing. The idea is that our sons are partners in the action towards social justice:

I think about it as a long story that just needs to keep going, I don’t ever see that there’s going to be a lapse...but he is also going to be contributing to that conversation and bringing new ideas forward...

The data clearly showed that in addition to readjusting their feminist practice in response to having sons, it also meant that these feminist mothers position themselves as both mothers and as women in very specific ways. The following analysis explores how the participants attempt to do this.

**More Than Mother**

Traditional ideas about the mother valorise her selflessness and her commitment to putting her child’s needs before her own (O’Reilly 2004). This discourse about motherhood holds women accountable to patriarchal ideals about women (Green 2004). In contrast, feminist mothering means a lived resistance to these normative expectations of motherhood and femininity (Horwitz 2004). O’Reilly (2008) has argued that the first step towards transformation through childrearing is the mother who seeks to liberate herself from traditional motherhood.

My research data suggests that there are multiple situations where these feminist mothers raising sons actively and consciously resist normative accountability standards. Analysis shows that the majority demonstrate a critical distance from their positioning within motherhood by actively working to reconstruct a better representation of mother that fits their feminist
ideals and intentions. Like Friedan (2001), the majority of women seek to have their identity be connected to more than their status as mothers. In so doing, they deliberately work to establish a representation of women, for their sons, where she is independent and vital. As Muriel attests:

*And this is the feminist thing, that they are not threatened by potency in a woman, so that’s a part of my rationalisation if you like for setting up child care so that I can go on working so they know me also as having a separate professional life and that I am not just mother.*

At least a quarter of the feminist mothers interviewed openly contest the idea of selflessness through motherhood as they consciously seek to build upon their non-mother identity and they speak with a sense of entitlement about the ways they seek to do this. This is a conscious rejection of motherhood discourse. Mary asserts:

*Like a happy child has a happy mother, and a happy mother has to be able to do what she has to do and if that means you know swimming three laps at the pool or you know pole dancing or going to work...I think it was quite clear for me that I did not feel guilty for one minute at all about working.*

For Mary, a requirement of her maternal practice is to retain a connection to the world outside of her mothering:

*Well I made a conscious decision...like you’ve just got to keep in the pool...like you don’t get out of the pool and you’ve got to be in the pool, even if you’re treading water at the shallow end and other people are lapping you, that’s okay because your responsibilities should be elsewhere and your main attention should be elsewhere but you don’t get out of the pool.*
These are discourses that imbue the mother with multiple needs and a belief that attending well to their children requires attending to the mothers needs as well. This analogy is exemplified by Rose’s comments:

*A bit like fitting your own oxygen mask before you fit your child, if you are in a bad way you can’t be a good parent, I reckon you can perform the basic functions but you can’t teach your child.*

Both Mary and Rose have acknowledged that the basic needs of child rearing are performable by the selfless mother. However they argue in order to fully engage, to ‘teach’ their children and to be a positive ‘happy’ presence, attending to their independence from their children is paramount.

Despite feeling entitled to occupy multiple social locations as mothers, doing so is not easy. As Rose describes:

*Well the biggest problem is remembering and reminding myself and having it truly entrenched inside me that it is alright for me to still have my life...I used to tour with a girl who had daughters and she and I sued to feel the same was, but we insisted on our right and I insist on my right to do those things...*

Despite this, Mary describes how her feminism enables her to hold on to her sense of entitlement:

*Sometimes [my sons] will say I don’t want you to go to work...I’ve said because I need to do this and it’s important, end of story. You know like I’m not going to be a slave to you either.*

Wanting to be seen as more than mother is not solely about entitlement. For some of the women in this study, what mattered to them was the availability of subject positions beyond that of mother, even though their responsibilities
as mothers were ever present. Miriam describes the process of navigating between subject positions.

There’s a constant thing of on the one hand wanting to be available to them and teach them things that I know and nurture them. I also, throughout the whole thing have always needed to have some continuing sense of my own space...

Below Catherine’s description attends to the idea that being more than a mother requires doing and being something that bears no relationship to her children at all.

In a way I suppose there’s also a sense that there has to be a me in my life that’s separate from my mothering or my parenting and separate from my children and separate from my husband. That there has to be a me and so that has always actively been fought for, even when the children were babies and very young.

This is a discourse that directly contradicts the notion of a woman who defines herself through her position as mother. It is also fluid as she steps in and out of these two positions, through a process of negotiation. The result, according to Eleanor is that:

My children have a very clear idea of me as being someone other than their mother.

For Muriel, she wants to be recognised as both woman and mother:

Their relationship with me might be a template for their relationship to the feminine. So I hope that they have a feeling of safety about that, like not some nameless yearning that goes on...Hopefully that ends up being a positive thing in that they can, rather than some combination of mother and martyr and endless provider.
The goal of making women’s lives visible to their sons is not to establish difference, even though there is the intention of teaching their sons to understand that there is gendered experience. Rather, as Muriel’s words imply, it is to requalify women in the lives of boys so that they are not positioned as unknown and mystified or disqualified.

Not only did the majority of women in this study feel entitled to occupy multiple subject positions and seek to represent these to their sons; they also wanted their sons to value these non-maternal subject positions. Eleanor describes:

*I think it comes down to the children, they know that, the boys particularly just take it for granted that what I do is just as important as what Dad does. I think that on some taken for granted level that what they end up taking for granted is not the domestic stuff that is done everyday, what they end up taking for granted on some level is that women are capable of doing all these things and it is integral to who they are.*

In seeking to represent women to their sons the interviewees are aware that this is about demonstrating non-normative practice to their sons. This is enacted in order to make visible the different positions that women are capable of occupying. Gloria describes this when she says:

*You know you create that social norm about women for your kid. There’s some power in that I think, and it makes you think about, it makes you draw a line in the sand. It makes you say okay, if this is where I am and this is what I believe then what are the steps that I need to get there and what is not acceptable and what is acceptable.*

The majority of feminist mothers interviewed consider it their responsibility as mothers to make themselves visible to their sons through all of their practices, not solely the one directly connected to care taking and nurturing. Eleanor provides a detailed description of what these practices look like and
how they encompass her subjectivity as a woman as well as a mother when she says:

*I concentrate more on what attributes you display that you would like them to hold up as being the virtues of a woman and not necessarily them seeing me as a mother in that kind of way. So I hope in that scale that they see me as being intelligent, creative, contributing something to society, expansive looking and connected to the outside world, engaged with a whole range of interesting friends and I bring interesting in to the house because of my work and because of what I do that my ideas inform society in some kind of way.*

For many of these feminist mothers their maternal practice is not exclusively focused on ensuring their sons recognise them as more than their mothers. They are also concerned with re-qualifying women’s lived experiences so that this knowledge is available to their sons. They are clear that this is important knowledge for their sons to have because it is contributive of their understanding of the social world.

**Requalifying Women’s Experiences**

In line with Ruddick’s (1995) description of maternal practice over half of the mothers in this study identify specific demands that they feel compelled to respond to. They describe the renegotiation of what a ‘good’ mother is that entails working to make visible (to their sons) the lived experiences of women and girls.

The discursive language that the women draw on to give definition to the demands they feel having sons has placed on them is imbued with notions of obligation. As Gloria describes:

*I see it actually as a duty; a duty of care to make sure that those issues are discussed freely and easily at home.*

For Iris this responsibility is borne of her own positioning in the gender order:
Even though I am a mother of three boys, my allegiance goes to fight for women and even though I connect with boys better, because I think what girls have to deal with is so much more complex.

And for Bonny having sons occasions access to particular opportunity:

*I think it is a good opportunity. It is an opportunity to develop an individual or help assist an individual develop their views you know that values women in society at all different levels.*

The women in this study identify wanting to draw attention to women’s lived experiences regarding the material and structural differences. This involves both describing what certain situations might be like, and specifically inviting their sons to consider how a girl may be feeling or experiencing a particular situation. Both Miriam and Gloria described this as a direct “challenge”. The goal is to introduce the material or political reality for women and girls. As Gloria describes:

*You know I do want him to have an understanding about what it’s like being a female, a political female, and the type of things that I need to think about as a woman, as opposed to the type of things that he needs to think about as a bloke.*

Gloria goes on to describe how this is grounded in feminism and what this practice might entail:

*Much of it is based on a social framework, but that’s where my feminism comes in to it. In that when he makes a decision, when he makes an absolute decision about something I would then challenge him and say, ‘Well have you thought about that?’ In some ways trying to make sure [he] is also thinking about what it’s like for a female, whether or not that is a fair thing, whether or not that’s something he should think or do.*
And for Eleanor it is drawing attention to the unpaid work that women do, making visible her experience so that it is not taken for granted.

*The priority here is to have them recognise the work that women do around the home. So, although their capacity or their inclination is to look right past or through me, it is to draw attention back around to say hang on, what I am actually doing here is making your lunch, someone is doing the work here.*

Helen is also concerned about making the work she does visible to her sons and how she does not want this to be taken for granted. While this is tied to wider feminist concerns around unpaid labour, she infers that men’s attitudes and awareness of this is connected to men’s treatment of women.

*I am not going to be treated like a doormat from my sons. We all know about mothers who do all the washing and the cooking and don’t get thanked or acknowledged for that. I have no intention of being that kind of mother and I want my kids to appreciate what I do for them and to be involved and have the skills to be involved. That’s talking about labour but also that extends to the way I want them to treat women.*

The women interviewed in this study identify the embodied experiences of women as significantly different from men and an important area of knowledge that has historically been subjugated. Because the embodied experience is considered to be different for men and women, the feminist goal is to not only have this difference recognised but to ensure that the experience of this difference is taken in to account and circulated. As Nina explains:

*It also means valuing things that perhaps are seen as more traditionally female.*
The data also showed that the participants took responsibility for ‘educating’ their sons about the embodied experiences of women, both their own and women and girls in general. Anna describes:

*I talk to them a lot about birthing because of my midwifery experience and the importance of the birthing experience for women and I hope that that sinks in a bit too.*

For Leah the impetus is the challenge to the supposed gender neutrality of knowledge:

*Also appreciate the strengths of women and importance of women’s unique abilities in mothering and birth and that kind of thing.*

It is important to recognise the knowledges women have that can contribute to our understanding about society. The idea of the everyman disqualifies the value of women’s contribution, subjugating the particularities of women’s lives. Anna asserts that obscuring the embodied experience as an important and specific area for women’s contribution fails to recognise ‘women’s needs and wants and then being able to acquire them...’ Feminist maternal practice with sons is then also about incorporating women’s particular experiences into the everyday for their sons.

The women spoke about the sharing of these stories as a means to both normalise women’s bodies and also as a way to de-mystify what the girls around them may be going through. In the excerpt below, Rose is cognizant of discussions with her sons drawing attention to the embodied experiences of women and her commitment to making life easier for the girls her sons come in to contact with. She is deliberate in her attempt to demystify both the process and paraphernalia that women go through during their menstrual cycle:

*What about if they found out about it and started calling pads whispers? It is something that over half the population does*
every month, what is the bloody secret? It is not necessary. So I value the frankness of my discussions with the kids about that and that fact that you know they may grow up to be the kind of guys who won’t worry about going to the shop to get tampons. Because it makes life easier for women, for me and other women if you have a bloke who is not funny about it…

Requalifying women’s experiences is about privileging women’s experiences. In the first instance, Leah speaks below about undermining gender neutrality in order to have women’s experiences valued:

Valuing the female experience over a male experience and the female way of seeing the world. Or valuing and drawing attention to it because it is not drawn attention to. That we all live this life as gender neutral, which we know is never gender neutral, it is male, it’s a male way of being, it is not neutral. There is no neutrality.

Re-qualifying women’s experiences is considered an important step, because it validates women’s experiences as important. If their experiences are considered important then they are more likely to respect women. This will make life easier for women.

Maternal practice is grounded in the idea of the relational

Of equal importance for the majority of feminist mothers interviewed is the belief that re-qualifying women’s experiences are constitutive of their sons’ masculine subjectivity in relation to women and girls subjectivity. There is a sense that intersubjectivity (Benjamin 1998) can provide a solid foundation for their relationships with women and establish grounding for respectful and appreciative relationships with women. Below is an excerpt from Rose’s transcript where she describes hoping that her efforts to position women’s lives as knowable and valuable will benefit both women as well as her sons.
Well I would like to think that all these things that they get their heads around will help to you know add value to them as men in terms of the fact that they are able to deal with the ups and downs of everyday life. And that they will never be the sort of men who have a reaction to something that will make the woman that they are around of the girl in their class or whatever feel left out… I think that for boys and girls to accept and understand each other can only lead to greater possibility of good relationships…Because I think that if there is acceptance and understanding there is a lot more scope, or a lot less need for conflict and lots more scope for good healthy friendships which can lead to romantic relationships or just friendship. And I think it is important for girls and women to feel like it is alright to be female and to have those who understand them and appreciate them…As a feminist, I would say that we have, women and girls, have all our sorts of foibles, peculiarities and weaknesses and all that and just have those accepted without being dismissed as silly women’s behaviour.

The feminist mothers interviewed seek to represent themselves and other women in order to inform how their sons relate to and make sense of women’s lived experiences. They share their stories so that their sons have knowledge that they hope will facilitate a valuing and respect for women in general. They engage in this feminist maternal practice with the hope that “it just becomes an automatic stepping stone for him to be thinking about what it’s like” (Gloria).

At least a quarter of the feminist mothers of sons identify that they think about their sons in relationship to women and girls. This means that their maternal practice is grounded in the relational, the idea that their sons subjectivity impacts on and is impacted by their relationship to the other. Bonny attends to this by trying to influence both the activities that her son is exposed to and through the social relationships he is encouraged to have:
It is in the way he interrelates with people, having friends that are of both genders and not being specific. It is him having interests in various things that aren’t necessarily attributed to boys, like cars. He generally has that tendency and I respect that but it is also introducing other elements so that he gets what I would call a well-rounded view.

For Miriam this is attended to by the ways she and her partner engage in conflict in front of her children:

*I want the boys to grow up and in their relationships with women I think that obviously looking at my relationships with [my partner] and how we resolve problems and I would hope...because we’re not fighters, we don’t enjoy fighting and certainly there’s no physical abuse. And so I think that thing of watching your parents and seeing how they resolve difference is really a big one...Boys need to learn how to deal with difficult times and still respect the other person.*

This comes from a direct awareness that their children are boys and is considered by the women a key area of responsibility that they, as feminists, have. Mary below expresses the intention for this:

*I suppose the real focus for me I suppose as boys is that they be respectful of girls, I think that is a key responsibility having a feminist mother, is raising boys who are nice and decent and who are cognizant of the opposite gender.*

In thinking about their sons’ relationships with women, these feminist mothers set certain standards of acceptability that they describe as establishing conditions conducive for respecting women. As Helen describes:

*I think I want my sons to grow up being able to do the housework, to pull their weight because they need to be competent in those areas and it is only fair they are living in a*
Thus this feminist maternal practice with sons re-qualifies women’s lived experiences by acknowledging structural and material inequality as well as attempting to disrupt gender discourse that normalises difference thus either obscuring women lived experiences and/or positioning women and mothers as other and unknowable.

**CONCLUSION**

The data indicate that feminism is the frame of reference for the research participants’ maternal practice and gives shape to the expectations and hopes they have for their sons. The data also explains the conscious decision interviewees make to be accountable to a feminist discourse about mothering. This helps them to establish a critical distance from the traditional patriarchally proscribed institution called motherhood. Locating themselves outside this institution the feminist mothers interviewed consider their maternal practice as an extension of their feminist activism. As such, their feminist maternal practice is intended to contribute to wider social change, specifically in regard to change in gender relations.

In the concluding comments of her research analysis, Horwitz (2004) suggests that ‘resistant, empowered mothering is about the mother; it is about making herself count as much as her children (when possible); it is about being a part of the equation; and about making choices that are not only beneficial to her children but also to her’ (p.55). I argue that analysis of the data in this thesis extends Horwitz’s (2004) idea.

Through focusing on women’s experiences of raising sons, it would seem that resistant mothering casts a lens on gender relations and works to make visible the lives of women and girls to boys, our sons. This is informed by their commitment to feminism and the recognition that women’s unpaid labour,
structural locations and male privilege have the effect of obscuring women’s lived experiences.

Analyses of the data have detailed the way that feminist maternal practice interrupts dominant discourse about mothers, women and boys. This chapter classifies the main themes that demonstrate how they set about doing so and was divided into two separate parts. The first half of this chapter pinpoints the intentions the feminist mothers interviewed have to make the lives of women and girls visible to their sons. To this end, they occupy multiple subject positions that includes mother but is not exclusively so. They contest the ideas of selflessness through motherhood and believe that attending to their independence is paramount to effective maternal practice. They also work to make unpaid labour within the home visible and seek to educate their sons about the embodied experiences of women. They consciously privilege women’s experiences by bringing these particularities into the everyday lives of their sons.

The practice of making women’s lives visible has a number of goals that include an attempt to undermine gender neutrality and to make life easier for women and girls. However, her maternal practice is also a direct response to what she perceives having a son means, from a feminist perspective. As feminists, they believe they have key areas of responsibility. Their maternal practice has resulted from developing an interaction between feminism and masculinity. The mothers in this research project view the demands on their maternal practice through a feminist lens and their practice is shaped by their commitment to transforming gender relations.

As such, feminist maternal practice with sons can mean a lived resistance to normative expectations of motherhood and femininity by actively resisting the normative accountability standards of both. In so doing they work to construct a representation of mother that fits their feminist ideals and intentions. As a result, they enact maternal agency through repeated and conscious diversions from the norm and activate alternative discourses by drawing on them.
CHAPTER SEVEN: A CRITIQUE OF NORMATIVE MASCULINITY DISCOURSE

INTRODUCTION
Mothers of sons are in a unique location where they are witness to and part of the power relations that produce and maintain normative masculinity practices. Analysis of the data show that this positions these feminist mothers as valid and entitled critical theorists of masculinity. As this project developed and the analysis of the data emerged, it became clear that it was about an exposition of masculinity from a feminist standpoint. This standpoint is significant because it has the potential to maintain a feminist politic and resist the subjugation of women.

Gardiner (2002) argues that in order to properly theorise gender relations ‘nuanced feminist analyses of masculinities are necessary’ (p.4). I argue that the mother and son relationship can be a keystone for the intersection between feminism and masculinity. It is evidence from the data that from a feminist standpoint, masculinity practices are critiqued with a feminist lens on power, privilege and gender relations. The mother and son relationship works to rearticulate the political relationships between masculinity and femininity.

Gardiner (2002) also proposes that feminism cannot fully account for social and gender relations without understanding that this shapes men too. In response, I suggest that because feminist mothers of sons are witness to, and agents, in the construction of masculinities, they are in a unique and vital position to problematize and explain gender and social relations. In the raising of sons, the research participants are working to unveil normative
masculinity practices and identify entry points for intervention. While these entry points will be explored in the next chapter, the focus of this chapter will be on these feminist mothers’ experience and position on gender as a socially constructed category of identity. In particular, this chapter will explore how they problematize normative masculinity practices.

**Gender as Social Construction**

The feminist mother and son relation brings together what has, throughout feminist history, been a particularly fraught and contested union. However, one of the ways of resolving this potential impasse has been contemporary theorising about the social construction of gender. Doing so enables a critical distance to develop between our sons and masculinity as an ideology, socially and institutionally entrenched in relations of power and enacted through a set of practices by boys and men (Gardiner 2002).

I have explored in this thesis how normative masculinity reflects and constructs a particular masculinity that stands at the top of the gender order, displacing femininity as valuable and rendering all men accountable to its standards (Beasley 1999; Connell 2005; Evans 1997). Gardiner (2002) suggests that profeminist masculinities scholars argue normative masculinity practices have harmed men because:

…it narrows their options, forced them into confining roles, dampened their emotions, inhibited their relationships with other men, precluded intimacy with women and children, imposed sexual and gender conformity, distorted their self-perceptions, limited their social consciousness, and doomed them to continual and humiliating fear of failure to live up to the masculinity mark (p.6).

Analysis of the data demonstrate that this too is how these feminist mothers of sons problematize normative masculinity practices.
I argue that masculinity itself cannot be seen as the social problem, otherwise what basis do we as feminist mothers form our bond with our sons? This is the imperative that I believe is at the core of feminist maternal practice with sons. This is the drive to understand how masculinity has come to reflect power and privilege over women.

Analysis of the data show that the feminist mothers interviewed do separate the boy from the discourse and that through this process they provide a critical interrogation identifying the mechanisms of power that maintain and reproduce normative masculinity.

Both men and women are constituted through gender and feminist mothers of sons are in a unique position to bear witness to this process. Over half of the women in this study start from the position that gender is socially constructed. For them this means our ideas about masculinity and femininity are historical and contextual:

...Actually eighty years ago boys came home [from the maternity hospital] in pink and girls in light blue. It is not nature... (Iris)

While discourses around gender are not ahistorical, they do pre-exist the body and the subject’s interaction with the discourse renders a social and cultural gendered subject (Butler 2006), as Miriam identifies:

...There’s a sense of you know, generations of a certain understanding of what’s expected of you as a woman or a girl or a man...but they’re changing too, that’s the thing...it’s not fixed what’s out there too. And I certainly think...there’s fluidity around all that...

Gender discourse contains very specific statements and utilises particular terms that are always contextually specific (Horwitz 2004). Bonny describes this when she says:
They are part of the messages about being a boy. ...So I think society still does place certain things on boys, but as people are becoming more informed and more aware, I think it is also a socioeconomic thing...and maybe if you did your research somewhere else...you would probably find that would differ and I am trying to link it to Chile because I know that there it would be different.

And so as Helen says:

Well I have always had strong ideas about social conditioning, I suppose is one label you could put on it. I think that gender... is determined largely by the way we are conditioned to behave from birth.

Most of the feminist mothers interviewed are alert to normative masculinity discourse and as Nina emphasises below, there are different conditions placed on boys and girls that are grounded in the gender binary and that take the shape of normative gendered practices:

I guess in practice terms it means we don’t want him to become a macho kind of boy because I think that is constructed, things like boys can’t cry, boys hit or you know even the whole sort of thing of boys are physical...

For Doreen, these expectations shape the materiality of our sons:

I think there are two things. I think inherently they are more physical...but then society is saying you know be a man you know, sort of get it out there and show your muscle and you know don’t turn the other cheek...

For these feminist mothers of sons, they draw on discourse about gender that positions the subject as ongoingly constituted within an historical and cultural context. While normative expectations of boys and girls are contextually
specific they are different for boys and girls and are grounded in the gender binary.

**THE GENDER BINARY IS PROBLEMATIC**

Most of the mothers in this study identify multiple situations and practices that work to categorise their sons’ gendered identity within a binary paradigm. Bipolarity is activated through the signifying language of boy and girl where each are imbued with different meanings that result in entirely different narratives. For Iris, her experience suggests that these categorisation practices are activated in utero and at birth as she describes:

*When my eldest son was born he weighed nine and a half pounds. He was treated like a god in the baby room, a big fat healthy baby. A girlfriend of mine had a baby girl the month before and the first thing the nurses said to her was, ‘So when are you going to ring weight watchers?’ And that is an extreme example, but that is why I say from the minute they are born. From the colour that is put on them!*

Categorisation is a form of accountability to sex category (Fenstermaker and West 2002) that some of the mothers in this study identify as present in all social contexts. Invitations for mothers to comply with the classification of their children are present from the moment their child’s sex is made public. As Helen describes:

*It’s really the expectations that other people have of the way my little boy should be or the way I should be bringing him up. So it started in very simple ways when I had my first child. I didn’t even think of him as a boy versus a girl, then you realise that people are going to force him to dress in blue. The cards that everyone had sent, and there were a lot of them, ...were all in blue. And I just thought it’s plainly a marketing problem but*
it is indicative of the kind of very crude ways that people categorise little boys and girls.

Leah describes this categorisation process on a simple trip to the department store and her conscious decision to not engage with it:

*It is really hard when you go in to Toys R Us or anywhere else and there are all girls’ toys and there are all boys’ toys and I have tried not to do that.*

The mothers’ sons become socially legible through these categorisation practices (Butler 2006). For some of the women in this project, these practices position their sons in a wider narrative that pre-exists their sons’ birth. This narrative shapes expectation and constrains opportunity, as Siri argues:

*I think boys, like girls and women, should have opportunities and not be restrained or constrained by their gender and…I think you can make it really difficult for yourself if you decide that this is how I’m going to raise my children.*

This is not a one-off positioning, it starts once their sons’ sex is known and is an ongoing social process. They also express concern that this places problematic constraints on their children. As Helen explains:

*I know the clothing thing is superficial but it is a kind of brand. It is hurtful to little boys…Their creativity and just their joy in colours and the world around them is being beaten out of them or constrained by these sorts of daily, seemingly trivial experiences in the shops, in the playground, at school, at playgroup and so on.*

Butler (2006) asks if women are bound together through their experience of oppression or whether there is something essential that unites us. The refashioning of a feminist movement that works with constitutive notions of gender and subjectivity provides a theoretical framework for the construction
of femininities and masculinities that does not rely on a patriarchal framework for context.

Over half of the feminist mothers’ in this study report drawing on non-normative ideas and expectations in interactions with their sons demonstrating that in their everyday lives they reject binary and unitary ideas about gender. They reject the assumptions that the binary makes about difference because they feel that this is totalising of their sons and circumscribes their relationships with their sons. This excerpt describes Bonny’s position:

*I will give you an example. It’s me being a cafe latte mum and wanting to share this experience with [my son]. Someone made a really interesting statement the other day...she said something to my friend who has five kids and she said, “Are you disappointed you didn’t have a girl? If it was a girl you could take her out for a coffee”. And I think, why wouldn’t you take a boy? What’s the difference? ...One things about that was that already she is classifying people and then that gets bigger, and then there will be that sort of segregation which invariably for men creates problems. Why can’t you have that experience with them regardless of gender...in my way of thinking I don’t see it is less possible for a boy.*

Bonny recognises that mother and son are being positioned within a gender binary that relies on demarcated gender difference imbued with meaning. This defines the relationship and the nature of a mother’s interaction with her son. Bonny’s concerns resonate well with West and Zimmerman’s (2009) warning that ‘the oppressive character of gender rests not just on difference but the inferences from and the consequences of those differences’ (p.117). Bonny also connects this discourse to the consequences, for her son and boys in general; she alludes to the problems that boys might develop from not having experiences of interacting conversationally with others, as well as the idea that socialising is gendered.
A critique of representational linguistic functions like man and woman can allow for their redeployment and identify how these terms authorise a story about men and women. The stories appear as ‘true’ when they do not accurately reflect the lived experience (Butler 1992). Iris explains her concern:

*Masculinity and femininity are pretty problematic for me as words in and of themselves because I worry that it is also another attempt to create a truth that is not quite there because again it is creating categories that some people don’t fit in to.*

*Having three sons reaffirms my feelings that there is such diversity within such a small family unit that whichever sociologists are trying to make rules for society when you couldn’t make rules about one tiny little family...My statistics in my family show that more boys are not really ‘boy like’ than those that are. I have very two untypical boys and I don’t necessarily think, maybe it’s how they are being nurtured, but I also think they are human beings you know.*

And for Nina, the gender binary does not reflect her lived experience:

*Femininity, I don’t consider myself very feminine actually. Femininity I guess it is a stereotype about being all those sorts of stereotypes about girls. I don’t consider I fit in to that category. I think the labelling is problematic.*

The gender binary reproduces grand narratives about masculinity and femininity. These grand narratives are totalising because they place everything that is masculine under a singular banner, reducing all the nuances or smaller stories to the one term (Belsey 2002). Yet lived experience is not readily accounted for by totalising categories such as man and woman. Additionally, the gender binary works to reinforce the idea that masculinity and femininity are innate attributes of the individual, fixed and oppositional to each other. However, these feminist mothers’ experiences of their sons
suggests that masculinity is more fluid, conflicted and contextual. For Rose, having sons has informed her knowledge about masculinity and alerted her to the complexities that simplistic accounts of gender difference have afforded:

*Having two sons just makes me. It’s an awakening I suppose to the complexity of masculinity and the fact that it’s as deep and mysterious and fraught with danger and all that sort of stuff as femininity is. And it’s you know, we make frequent mistakes with boys and men because they appear so simple, they will project that image...but in fact you know of course, and this is what I have learned more than anything from having boys is just how much is going on under the surface and how much more emotional complexity there is and how many different ways there are of seeing one thing and all that.*

The gender binary is a paradigm that establishes an oppositional division between men and women. These subject positions are often positioned as essential and antagonistic which complicates and makes it difficult for male and female relationships. As Gloria asserts:

*Because I think if I did think of a sexuality division, you know a male versus female, then I’m setting up already some framework that I’m fighting really hard to break down.*

Because the gender binary is totalising this has the effect of excluding and marginalising the individual, as Iris explains:

*There are a whole lot of boys who miss out when they are taught a curriculum that is boy structured because they are not typical boys and there are a whole lot of girls who are left out...From the minute they are born, to explore who they really are because they are told this, and this is why feminism for me is about both. How can you, they cannot access that because they have opportunities taken away from them the minute they are born.*
This paradigm determines both expectation about who the subject is and how they will behave. This constructs expectations and accountability measures that are homogenous and generalised, which obscures idiosyncratic demands. Doreen explains:

> My whole philosophy is that you look at people individually and say okay what’s going to help you or what do you need, or what should I be doing with you know and then working from that point. So whether you’re a boy or a girl shouldn’t make any difference. It just makes me aware of difference generally you know. You can’t fit them into slots, gender slots because I think if you do slot them in to gender slots then you run the risk of an expectation of behaviours that are stereotypes of those gender roles.

And importantly, the gender binary is neither neutral nor equitable, as Helen argues:

> A lot of the differences between gender roles are unfortunate. I don’t like them. I would like to see fewer differences because I think they are part of a sort of inequality that goes a long with it.

The gender binary places different value on masculinity and femininity and valorises particular representations of masculinity (Connell 2005) over other representations. Two of the women in this study directly connect this critique to their commitment to social justice values and the connection this has with their feminism. They are concerned both with how the gender binary constrains their sons expression as well as the de-valuing of non-normative masculinities and femininities per se. Nina summates:

> Because it is again, ...you know my feminism is about social justice and broadly is about allowing people to do and be who they want to be without having to conform to predefined stereotypes because that can be extremely oppressive.
While the gender binary constrains their sons, the pre-existing narratives that each sex category is imbued with results in material inequality as well. Helen describes this below:

*I think that we live in a world where the kind of structural inequalities around gender are very, very strong...there are enormous differences between the aspirations that men and women are sort of allowed to have and the ways that they are expected to live their lives. I still use gender to refer in a broad sense to talk about the different roles that men and categories are given to the categories of man and women and other sort of gender categories in our society and the roles that they are expected to play. So yeah I think those categories are powerful and very effective.*

**GENDER IS RELATIONAL**

The gendered subject is constituted through gender discourse. This means that gender discourse and the subject interact and the gendered subject becomes socially visible. As Miriam explains:

*They’re certainly not going to be living in some kind of vacuum where they can completely make their own identities.*

The gendered subject does not pre-exist discourse; however, because the gendered subject only comes into existence through this discourse it is difficult to conceptualise that gender is made through the subjects’ social location rather than gender being an attribute of the individual (Nilan 1994). Some of the feminist mothers of sons interviewed have described this conceptual difficulty and how it confuses the ideas of innate attributes with external gendered practices. As Katja describes:

*Yeah I don’t know. I don’t know. I sort of feel like gender, I don’t know, gender is a weird thing. What is inherent and what isn’t? I think it’s very murky for me and I feel like I’ve become*
very...what’s the word, suspect? I am suspect about things being gendered.

Leah too is confused by the way that gender works and challenged by how embedded gender as a system of difference constructs the subject.

_Oh it is really confronting. It is really confronting because of these ideas that so many of our behaviours are learned behaviours, there is no kind of natural gender behaviour. But then I see this behaviour in my boys and it is so stereotypically boy behaviour and you know I wonder...like it’s kicking balls and the sounds they make when they kick the ball and moving trucks around and making truck noises. And I know he gets it from my eldest son but when you see these things that are taken as innate behaviours you go oh do boys do this? Is it natural? When I know that...gender is mostly a constructed experience not a natural experience. So it is really confronting...Well I have become much more of a feminist since I have had kids. I have realised how more important this gender system is, because we are bringing up our kids in this entrenched gender system that you know treats boys and girls differently._

Simran describes further how gendered subjectivities are relational:

_It’s not even how to get along, that is one aspect, but also to make meaning of themselves in relation to the other. You know, make meaning of themselves is not independent of the other because it is interrelated. Like my sense of self is continually being made sense of in relation to how men see how I am with men and how I am with other women. Like it is all about that._

Similarly for Nina gendered subjectivity is constructed and experienced in relation to the other in the social world:
I can’t think of myself without gender, without thinking of myself as a woman. And again it is to do with you know, that interaction between perceptions and your own perceptions, which interplay coz everywhere you go you are female. If you are with other groups of women it is the girls, if you are the only woman in a group of men you are obviously female.

While the participants ascribed to the notion of gendered subjectivities as culturally and socially constructed, there were some inconsistencies within individual accounts that reflect the multiple positions taken in relation to the idea of gender. Interestingly, these inconsistencies were the most apparent in the transcripts of the participants who had daughters as well as sons. In the following excerpt, Eleanor’s description of her relationship with her sons and her daughter shed light on the account of Nina’s fear (described in the previous chapter) of emotional distance, or perhaps an insight into what Nina fears missing out on. This account also identifies the complexity of participants’ relationship to gender discourse. Below Eleanor is discussing her sense of feeling her sons were alien to her when they were born.

Eleanor: Well I think... in a way that feeling comes more into relief for me since I have had my daughter. I didn’t identify with them [her sons]... I identified with her. Where does she start? And where do I start and she stops? Where, how to draw the line between her and me and then even more so, how do I draw the line between me and my mother? There was this continuum between daughter, me, mother. So, I think using that as a way of casting back on my experience with the boys I had a very clear sense that they were of me but not me... I find it more psychological, the stuff between her and me even her being little at two than there is between me and them.

I was curious about Eleanor’s response regarding what it was that facilitated the sense of a continuum between her and her daughter. Was it from the moment of birth the idea that her sex indicates affinity, a sharing of
continuum? Or was it in practice and experience her daughter’s interactions and words that engender affinity.

Eleanor: *I am saying that what I feel about them I can articulate more clearly because I know what the opposite is or what the other position is. I might never have been able to say this or know this if I had not of had a daughter. To be able to divide, the contrast is amazing, to be able to go aha that is what I mean.*

In this thesis I argue that there is a meaning ascribed to differing genders that is socially and culturally constructed. I do not deny the existence of embodied experience and I recognise wholly that normative ideas about masculinity and femininity result in men and women having very different lived experiences from each other. What Eleanor is suggesting in her comments is that there is something about having a female child that triggered a sense of connection. Given that her daughter is two years old and her sons are both at primary school, it would seem that despite her daughter’s limited language and cognitive development, there is something already happening between her and her mother that produces a particular affinity.

This leaves me with some further questions. How much of the affinity is produced as a consequence of Eleanor’s idea about what a girl child means? Does the idea pre-exist the affinity? If we were to ascribe similar ideas or meanings to a boy child what kind of affinity could possibly develop? Additionally, if we ascribe particular meanings to girls and not boys are we severing a link that if unobstructed could develop into something like the kinship Nina openly longs for? Eleanor’s comments could suggest that with recognition of her daughter’s sex, meaning is piled onto every interaction, every observation and from this a strong affinity develops.

Eleanor’s description of seeing her boys as “other” indeed “opposite” facilitates the making of meaning; that is her understanding of them and her relationship with them. This could be argued as creating a division as real as
the one she perceives exists by virtue of their physiology and how our physiology generates different lived experiences.

Eleanor: *What I suppose I mean is that I feel like my relationship with the boys is quite straightforward in a way. And what I have learnt to appreciate about them as boys is I can pretty much say stuff to them and it is all pretty much in the moment and then it is all pretty much over pretty quickly. And that might be noisy and it might be confrontational but it’s pretty simple and it’s pretty well gone. Whereas I feel with her even as little as she is that it is all much more complicated and it is all much more subterranean in a lot of ways and it comes back to that thing of that kind of inability to separate my identity from her identity.*

It is not clear from Eleanor’s comments here what is making her confrontations with her sons less complicated than with her daughter. If she feels separate from them even before they engage in conflict, does this lead to less emotional complexity? And, does this then lead her to believe that her sons also experience less emotional and psychological complication during conflict with their mother? Is it that their experience of emotional complexity is different to Eleanor’s? What is clear is that for Eleanor separateness exists.

**VIOLENCE**

Unsurprisingly, all of the feminist mothers interviewed for this research identified violence as a major concern in regards to their sons and the construction of masculinity. The data throw light on two specific areas: first, the effect of the culture of violence that is promoted through the media, sport and play; second, the concern that their sons will use violence themselves. The following section takes up these ideas in the data while in the following chapter I will continue the exploration of violence and masculinity from the perspective of these feminist mothers’ maternal practice.
Below Iris explains how normative masculinity practices position her son inviting him to take up practices laden with assumptions, values and ideas about masculinity and violence:

(My son) was invited to a birthday party, an outdoors one, a laser one. It was scary, it is like real war and they are outside with guns. When they explained to him what it was, I made the mistake of letting him know what I thought about it before asking him. And then I said, “If you really want to go we will have to talk about it, this is how I feel about it, I am not going to say no.” He (then) went and told the child that he was going to Phillip Island and I told him, “you know that sometimes telling a story like that is good because you are protecting yourself from being teased and you understand that he is not going to ask you any more questions about it and I completely understand you saying it.” And he was adamant that he wasn’t going, that he didn’t want to be shot at. He had never held a gun before; we don’t have any toy guns at home. I can’t believe there was a party like that. The invitation was this kids cut out face with an army uniform and guns and aeroplanes with bombers.

The above excerpt from Iris’ narrative is both a literal and figurative invitation for her son to take up hegemonic masculinity positions informed by (and perpetuating) to masculine norms. The dominant discourse about masculinity here is that boys are violent and that they have fun by engaging in violence. The assumption is that being hurt is the way that boys enact being boys. This involves engaging in activities that normalize hurting each other, that require acceptance of pain and that putting up with pain is one of the ways to demonstrate masculinity.

Iris’ reluctance to support her son’s attendance at the party could be read as a rejection of the assumption of two distinct genders. Or, a reluctance to assume that masculinity is presupposed with inherent traits such as violence.
Many of the feminist mothers interviewed problematise the culture of masculinity because they believe it promotes practices that place boys in physical danger. Drugs, fast cars and pack mentalities that exclude women were identified by Mary as significant factors placing her sons at risk. She explains this well when she says:

> Oh violence worries me. Violence and people getting in to cars and depressive suicide which I’ve... you know, I’ve had experiences with, with friends in my early 20s, with men, young men...

Being victims of violence as a result of partaking in the culture of masculinity was a concern for the majority of participants in this study. Below, Siri explains further the culture of masculinity that invites a bravado and masculine display that is counterproductive to keeping her sons safe. I asked Siri if she was worried about violence given that he is a young man and she replied:

> Well I am because....and interestingly enough the head of senior school at his college...yeah what she says and to warn them that they could be at either end and to stay out of any situations that potentially end up in and never...and if there’s an argument to get away from it rather than...and I think he’s certainly one of those really sensible people, [my son]. Whereas I think my [younger son] will be the one who’s out there you know either giving punches or receiving them....You can’t tell when the kid is little but he’s a very different personality...

Boys’ ability to reject a culture of masculinity that places their sons’ at risk is queried by these feminist mothers of sons. They believe that such a culture is perceived (by their sons) as important to partake in for them to be accepted. Eleanor explains:
I hope that [my son] is safe. My main fears for him are for his physical safety. He is a real risk taker and he is a boundary pusher and he is very out there and he is a bit of a follower as well. And, he hasn’t got an inherent sense of self-protection. Because he is always wants to, he is very competitive and he always wants to climb higher, run faster, look at me, look at me I can do this better than anybody else and I hope he gets through his adolescence unscathed, physically unscathed. He seems to be the perfect candidate for getting into somebody else’s fast car which frightens the hell out of me.

As women who have grown up in a culture where male privilege is very real, and hegemonic masculinity is idealised and promoted, the fear of sexual and physical violence is a part of their lived experience. Some of the women have also been victims of male violence. Many of the women consider normative masculinity practices constitutive of a lack of respect and violence against women. Below Leah articulates her experience and the non-normative masculinity practices she believes are important ways of mitigating the likelihood of violence against women.

I guess that I want him to, I had a few encounters as a child, I was sexually abused as a child and I was, also as a teenager I grew up in a country town and look men in country towns were not very nice back then, probably still aren’t. So (laughs) um you know I don’t want him, I just hope that he doesn’t grow up to be you know that kind of man that I so hated. I hope that he grows to be an adult not a man yeah. I never thought of it like that but now that you have said it yes I want him to grow up to be an adult who is kind and gentle and respectful and intelligent and thinking and you know doesn’t run with the crowd sort of thing.
The notion of ‘running with the crowd’ is a common theme in the data and the interview participants believe that the culture of masculinity supports misogynistic practices.

**Violence and Sport**

A quarter of the interview participants equate normative masculine ideals with sport and Eleanor’s comment below is not unusual:

*He does engage in masculine behaviours. He is quite good at sport and he has been on the basketball team.*

The data also showed feminist mothers in this study think sport is associated with normative masculinity practices that are hostile and aggressive:

*Like my best friend is gay. He’s a bear, he’s an artist, he’s spent a hell of a lot of time with my children...So I have a lot of men in life who offer different things to my children. But none of them are agro. None of them are sporty... and all of them love being with women (Mary).*

The feminist mothers interviewed value the correlation between sport and physical health. They also value their sons learning to work with others through a team. However, they identified sporting activities as fostering competitiveness over their peers and that this combined with team goals of winning at all cost, marginalised particular masculinity practices. Helen describes her beliefs about masculinity and sport below:

*And boys are encouraged to play sport which I think is great, but it’s violent and I don’t like it...I think my ideas about masculinity are different from a lot of stereotypical masculinity. I think a lot of male sport is about aggression and conflict and beating the other person or being stronger than the other person...*
Helen believes that organised team sport privileges aggression in order to achieve victory, which associates and valorises using violence to win over other men. Helen’s comments extrapolate on this idea:

[A footballer] played for St Kilda and he had a sore arm. The other team targeted his sore shoulder and so he was forced to leave in tears because they were doing it deliberately, and I just think there is no way I would like or want my sons to participate in that sort of culture.

A quarter of the feminist mothers in this study suggest that sport attaches aggression and physical dominance to normative masculinity practices. There is value attached to this that positions the winner higher on the gender hierarchy.

The interview participants are located within a society where contemporary football culture is dominant and within this culture young women are routinely de-valued through language used in game tactics and sexual violence off the field. Helen explains this well when she recalls a recent event where a team member used language linked to sexual assault and directed this at another players’ young daughter:

And there was the thing about the man with the tattoo of his six year old daughter and a revolting stoush and the other guy said something about it and he said he didn’t know it was his daughter. But why is he slagging off women in that very ugly way anyway? Why is that acceptable?

There is concern that team sport invites masculinity practices that normalise violence against women by encouraging and validating the use of misogyny as a legitimate winning tactic.
THE NORMALISING GAZE

In order to become socially visible, the subject must be positioned in relation to gender discourse (West and Zimmerman 1987) thus doing gender is unavoidable (Butler 2006). In this sense, power is everywhere (Foucault 1991) and the effect of power can be the acquiescence to dominant ideas and normative practices about masculinity and femininity (Belsey 2002; Foucault 1991). These ideas and norms function as surveillance techniques through which our sons’ behaviours are measured and standardised. If behaviour is not aligned with these standards and measures then they are positioned as ‘not normal’. Gender discourse is specific for both boys and girls who are invited to transform their behaviour so that it resembles the standard.

The data demonstrate that these feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons can unveil the way that relations of power, in the shape of norms constitute masculinity. Most of the feminist mothers in this study identify the normalising gaze and the effect this continuous surveillance has on their sons. What their sons’ peers think, and believe, results in accountability practices (actions, interactions and, clothes and language). As Eleanor describes:

*I know my older one, because he is very conscious of what other people think of him would not do something that he thinks he is going to get laughed at...*

Expecting boys to resist accountability is difficult, as Leah asserts:

*Yeah it is going to be very hard, I know that he is susceptible not to peer pressure but he is susceptible to what his peers think and believe. So I think it will be very hard for him to resist.*

Resistance is very difficult for our sons when they want to fit in and be seen as competent members of their sex category.

*He used to wear jewellery because he saw me wearing jewellery. So he would wear it and I would never discourage it,*
and he did get a hard time about that from other girls. From other girls!

The Normalising Gaze Constrains Behaviour

Expectations to conform to normative masculinity practices in order to properly account for sex category significantly constrains boys in multiple ways. I introduce Katja’s feelings by way of setting the tone that resonates throughout the data regarding both their concerns for the impact on their sons, and also what these feminist mothers believe this means for the wider community.

I feel like it’s important for the future direction of society. Because you know for me, a great world would be a world and we’re so far away from it but I can see glimmerings of it. A world where people can actually grow like trees you know? And be the tree that they’re going to be, whether you’re an elm or a eucalypt and it’s not like having your shape bent or transformed in to something less.

One of the critiques of normative masculinity practices, by the women in this study, is the way that gendered boundaries order and control social relationships that ultimately serve to both constrain and privilege men at the same time. They constrain men by monitoring their behaviour so that it does not in anyway resemble femininity. As a consequence hyper masculinity is privileged and femininity subjugated.

Our sons’ masculine subjectivity is positioned in relation to feminine subjectivity. This means, as I have argued earlier in this thesis, that masculinity is imbued with what it is not, female, and that one of the better ways to invite our sons’ conformity to the masculine ideal is to entreat them to behave as unlike girls (the feminine) as possible. In application, normative masculinity practice that reflects this discourse means that our sons are made fun of, as Gloria explains:
I guess a good example is the length of [my son’s] hair, which is now longer than his sister’s. To be honest that’s the thing that perhaps we get the most challenged on by the rest of the school community...You know and people sort of making comments like ‘oh, we’re going to have to get you some bobbles and ribbons for your pretty hair soon’.

And according to Susan, our sons are regulated along gender lines regarding what colours they are allowed to wear:

*He is a human being first and foremost yet he is already getting these very strong messages that you little being is male, and part of being male is not to wear that.*

For Leah, gender lines are used to regulate how they should adorn their body:

*At kinder there were a group of girls and they were the ones that kept giving him hell about wearing jewellery...he used to like to wear jewellery...so he would wear it and I would never discourage it...and you know he did get a hard time about that from other girls, from other girls!*

The way that normative masculinity discourse holds our sons accountable to their sex category gives great insight into the gender order and the role that femininity plays in this. As already mentioned, the interview participants have noticed that normative masculinity relies on reproducing the gender binary to the extent that our sons’ masculinity must not represent femininity in any way, shape or form. Consequently the gender boundaries around masculinity are heavily policed and boys’ everyday behaviour and representation of masculinity is constrained. As Doreen describes:

*I think masculinity is more proscribed than femininity. If you are talking just generally in society I think society expects very many different things from men than it does from women.*
Women can do sort of masculine things okay, but it is much harder for men to do feminine things and for that to be okay.

Miriam asserts that the gender order exerts particular pressure on the exteriority of masculine expression:

*It's interesting because maybe there is a sense that has developed out of...you know, having had a girl first, but in some ways it is easier for a girl to transgress perhaps, you know and to try out stuff....or get interested in stuff that's normally thought of as boys stuff without suffering from that. Whereas, maybe it is harder for a boy to branch out in that way without it being more shocking.*

Importantly, the feminist mothers of sons in this study are not saying that boys are ‘worse’ off than girls. Rather, that normative masculinity perpetuates a gender order that diminishes femininity and subjugates women; this means that masculine ideals are connected to maintaining a distance between the ideal male and women. Consequently, our sons’ masculinity rests on looking as little as possible like femininity. As Bonny describes:

*Men supposedly are not able to be as emotional as what women are. But then it gets fobbed off as you being female you know like they are the sorts of things society just brings up and they just attribute femininity to it.*

Normative masculinity discourse is actively spoken to our sons, as Gloria describes:

*You know his grandmother saying things like ‘oh well your daddy's away now so you're the man around the house...and I think that’s a message that doesn’t just happen from his grandmother but also in the wider community...*
All the feminist mothers in the study observe normative measures. Most identify that they do not accept these standards as natural, instead describing them as imposed on their sons:

Well I have noticed this in dealing with my father and in dealings with my husband and my sons. There is always a sense of the changing way in which men and boys are sort of expected to behave and the things that are considered valuable male characteristics. And I have been wary of the boys, my boys being forced to feel that certain thing are not alright for them to do, say or feel. (Rose)

Boys and girls, men and women, children and adults all police the gender boundaries. However, there is a difference in the ways that the boundaries are policed. The gender order that exists amongst and between men is founded in a binary understanding about masculinity and femininity. Within this frame gender is so highly regulated that the consequences for our sons can not only be felt physically but also can compromise their safety. Below Anna describes the consequences for her son who chose to befriend girls and socialise with them:

He got beaten up a few times as a teenager because a lot of his friends were female...around 14 or 15...and he got called a poofter a lot...because he could communicate with women...yeah I think that’s what they saw, the taboo of a 14 year old actually having a conversation with someone of the opposite sex and we’ll beat him up for that because we can’t do that...

Segal (1990) explains that by looking at the standards that men and boys are expected to meet we understand that the normalising gaze regulates the differences between and amongst men and boys. It is a function of hegemonic masculinity that a gender order is established amongst men where the ideal male represents the antithesis of femininity (Connell 2005; Kimmel 1996;
Pease 2002). Any identification with women can be seen as compromising masculinity.

**The Practice of Being Unremarkable**

We are held accountable to our sex category when our behaviour does not appear to accurately represent our sex category. Thus when we ‘do’ gender we are always at risk of being assessed as unacceptable (West and Zimmerman 1987). Our sons are aware of the normative gaze that is the measure through which they are held accountable and judged appropriate. Some of the women in the study call this the ‘gender lines’ through which the ‘gender police’ (their peers – both boys and girls) actively monitor each other’s behaviour. This is successful because it has the effect of inviting boys to conform to normative masculinity practice. These normative masculinity practices include certain ways of dressing, acting, expressing themselves and whom they play and socialise with. Helen clearly feels her son’s masculinity is informed by his clothes:

*Well it seems to me that, well clearly he is being shaped by these experiences all the time, you know all his clothes are little boys clothes...*

And Kate believes that colour constructs masculinity:

*He suddenly at five realised that socially pink is regarded as a girls’ colour.*

And for Eleanor, awareness of normative masculinity practices begins the process of masculinising her sons:

*Boys do tend to be more expressive and creative in that kind of way when they are little and then they get around to that age...where things do start to spread along gender lines and the boys just run a mile from it, they do not want to be seen to be a part of it.*
Importantly, all of these women’s comments identify that their sons’ masculine subjectivities are constructed and maintained according to normative ideals rather than their sons’ masculine subjectivities reflecting an inner male essence.

**Internal Surveillance**

After a while, the effects of the normalising gaze is such that the subject internalises them and will then self-correct behaviour, actions and language (Foucault 1991). This form of self-surveillance means that our sons are censoring themselves and adjusting their behaviours against normative masculine ideals. Eleanor’s comments below generate insight into the messages about normative masculinity that our sons learn to measure themselves against and then try to emulate:

*He sometimes butts up against external markers of masculinity…of courage and what it means to be brave and what it means to be strong and what it means to be successful, what it means to achieve. I think those things for men are very clear indeed.*

The external markers of masculinity construct a paradigm for male behaviour and expression as Helen describes:

*I think in some ways the constraints are fewer but they are certainly constraints. I think it is truly hard for men to sometimes express how they feel. Men aren’t allowed to do certain things, to be in certain ways. They feel a responsibility to behave in certain ways. And I think those things are quite tough on men.*

In practice, the following two feminist mothers identify situations and contexts where they have witnessed their sons’ self-surveillance practices, below Iris describes an instance of this:
Well it is already happening. [My son] is a brilliant dancer, but he won’t dance, he won’t do it and that is devastating for me.

Iris’ son is not prohibited from dancing at school; the avenues for dancing are made as structurally available to him as they are for the girls in his class. It is not even that any one individual has needed to say to him that he cannot or should not dance. Leah describes the effect of self-surveillance when she talks about her son’s experience of being made fun of and told that he is not allowed to paint his nails or wear jewellery. As a consequence she declares:

So he has kind of stopped doing that now.

Both Iris and Leah’s sons have internalised the normalising gaze and checked their own behaviour.

**Empathy**

One of the effects of gender discourse is the division that is constructed between men and women and boys and girls. At least a quarter of the feminist mothers interviewed suggest that as a result, not only relationships with women and girls are de-valued, but relationships with others in general. They argue that normative masculinity invites their sons to focus more on their exteriority at the expense of their interior emotional and psychological landscape. Katja suggests that this means men and boys interior lives are compromised:

So there’s a reality there...It's that warrior thing you know, enjoy the fact that you can do that stuff with your body. But this can be at the expense of the interior life, their emotional life, their vulnerability, their femaleness.

The data revealed these feminist mothers’ commitment to supporting their sons to develop their relational abilities and their ability to navigate their inner life more easily. This came out of both their experiences with men and
from observation of normative masculinity practices. For Susan, this results in a hope for her son’s ability to feel connected:

*It is certainly not that all males are like this but if I were to look at my female friends they are all connected. And the men I know who are not connected are not in a good space. They are just disconnected. I see connectedness to other people as being absolutely integral to health. I want [my son] to be really connected with people and I want him to have a strong social network. I want him to feel that the social network he has grown up with is something that he can continue to come back to. And in some ways I expect that is what females will do because they are brought up that way but I don’t think boys or men necessarily do.*

Some of the feminist mothers of sons in this study reveal that because normative masculinity is predicated on difference with normative femininity they worry that their sons are not socially encouraged to connect with others. These feminist mothers suggest that normative masculinity is predicated on an individualistic selfishness that undermines connection and empathy. As Catherine explains:

*I suppose I feel that that’s the force we counter as feminists, you know that’s what’s wrong with the world, that energy and that level of aggression or that level of not understanding your neighbour or your friend…*

There is conviction amongst some of the participants that their sons’ ability to develop meaningful relationships with other people relies on their ability to understand or have empathy for people other than themselves. They also believe that developing a wide-ranging vocabulary as well as experience in communicating in across diverse situations will facilitate meaningful intimate relationships. Katja describes this further:
I feel like with my sons, the process of intimacy with other men or with women is going to be intimately bound up with how they can express themselves...I’ve got friends my age who say to their boys ‘don’t cry’. And I just want to gently try and go ‘I think it’s okay if he cries. He’s got some feelings there and better out than in...and you can encourage him...and then you know often...if you let it go they’ll cry and then there’s a natural closure and a moving on.’ I think what it is for men is that they don’t get to go through that, so they can’t move on. And so they’re kind of emotionally retarded, you know. I think that’s what happens. They get emotionally inhibited. And then of course what I think as a woman and as a feminist is then this is the beginning of the division and the incompatibility between the sexes begins in earnest.

The majority of the feminist mothers interviewed describe wanting their sons to develop the ability to engage in inner dialogue in order to enrich their emotional and psychological landscape. This will build the skill to be able to articulate their own experiences and be receptive to others. For Bonny, this means that there is less chance of her son feeling isolated and will be better able to resist making assumptions about others.

I think later on in life things like that come through and they enable you to deal with various situations and relate to people in the workforce, relate to individuals in relationships of friendships...It makes a better-rounded individual...the more you communicate the more you have an understanding of what if going in their minds...so then you are able to tap into and not retreat and make assumptions...

These feminist mothers critique normative masculinity practices for discouraging boys to value verbal communication and consideration of others. However, they spoke also from concern for the way that this may impact their own relationships with their sons.
...I would like to have a relationship with my sons where we can discuss things and we are there emotionally, perhaps a bit more articulate than earlier generations. So I would like them to be, all those awful pop expressions come to mind like you know ‘in touch with their feelings’ or emotionally available’ and where as traditionally women have been more emotionally expressive and men bottle things up, I would like men to be able to express those things and I would like that to be part of our relationship, part of our communication...

(Helen).

Normative masculinity practices do not emphasise the value of empathy, communication, care and understanding for others. Feminist mothers in this study are concerned that masculine subjectivity is constituted outside of meaningful relationships with others.

**CONCLUSION**

The feminist mothers of sons in this study reject gender difference discourse believing that it is a totalising construct that obscures the realities of their sons’ lives. They express concern that because their sons gendered subjectivity is positioned in relation to discourse about gender difference this has a regulatory effect and can impact on boys’ relationships with girls and with women. They are clear in their assessment that the gender binary perpetuates gender inequality. The research participants begin their exposition of normative masculinity from a feminist standpoint and draw on their observations of their sons’ interaction with normative masculinity practices to substantiate their concerns.

Their problematising of gender discourse and normative masculinity is a critique informed by the interaction of feminism and their experiences of raising boys. The following chapter sets out to identify how, as a consequence of this intersection, the research participants enact a maternal practice that does gender differently with their sons.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CHANGING GENDER RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

I have positioned the research within the notion that we self-narrate in social context, in relation to both the wider social order and in relation to others. As we engage in this activity, we measure ourselves against values and norms. We account for our gendered subjectivity to an exterior context and this is why gender is social rather than innate. In this way, children’s gender does not necessarily unfold or emerge. Rather it is enacted through a system of relationships performed over and over in context. Relations are the source of production of gender identity (Walby 1990).

I have also argued that maternal practice is relational because women enact maternity in response to the needs of their sons (Jeremiah 2006). Demand is viewed through a feminist lens and shaped by commitment to transforming gender relations. What is so interesting about the maternal practice of the feminist mothers of sons in this study is that needs are determined within a feminist analysis of normative masculinity. This is how these mothers’ standpoint rearticulates feminism’s relationship with masculinity. Feminist maternal practice with sons does not privilege masculinity while subjugating women or depoliticising feminism.

What the data show is that feminist maternal practice with sons is about establishing a context where alternative discourses about gender are enacted through the circulation of non-normative expectations about gendered (masculinity) practice. The care-taking of our sons is grounded in the belief that this will benefit them but not at the expense of women and girls. This chapter explores how the feminist mothers’ maternal practice in this study
engages alternative discursive practices making non-normative subject positions available to their sons.

UNDERMINING DIFFERENCE THROUGH LANGUAGE

Unequal gender relations do not only occur because of discourses about difference but also the ‘inferences from and the consequences of those differences’ (West and Zimmerman 2009, p.117). Most of the feminist mothers in this study put in place particular expectations that do not appear to fit normative accountability standards considered appropriate to their sons sex category. One of the ways they do this is by using specific language. Language embodies values and ideals that can place different expectations on men and women, boys and girls. As Gloria describes:

So I don’t...we don’t use the expression ‘manhood’ in our house, nor do we use the expression ‘womanhood’ if that is even a word. We think about it in terms of growing up and the responsibilities that come with that.

Terminology carries assumptions that reflect ideals but can also constitute them at the same time. Helen actively resists the notion of ‘manhood’:

That term manhood strikes me a so loaded with all sorts of assumptions. Manhood eeeew (laughs) you just think about manly, that is an expression we don’t hear much any more, just you know being strong and brave...It’s in relation to women it is constructing a structural relationship with the category womanhood and so again because we have that is you know a traditional category I guess for me it is loaded with all of those negative and sort of unnecessary stereotypes that go along with it. I would be resisting those.

Helen’s description emphasises how language is part of the process of constructing difference and infers lack in the relational term. Undoing
difference can happen when the expectations placed on our sons are the same as they are on our daughters. Rejecting the term manhood is a part of this and is a reflection of the way these feminist mothers choose to view their sons as future adults. As Siri describes:

    I don’t actually think of him as an emerging man. I just think of him as an emerging person I think.

Doreen explains why this is important for her:

    Adulthood always yes, because it was never a gender view. It was always adults I wanted to be in my society.

In consciously raising their sons towards adulthood, as opposed to manhood, these feminist mothers address gendered expectations.

**CHANGING EXPECTATIONS**

As feminists, their ideas and beliefs are both the lens and measure they use to assess and validate their sons’ gendered activity. At times this means ensuring that equal expectation is placed on our sons and daughters. As Gloria describes:

    Well, I try to make sure that the kids are raised with the same responsibilities, so it doesn’t matter whether they are a male or a female. We try and ensure that the division of labour is seen as something that is a division of labour as opposed to a right.

Gender difference is a process and placing different expectations on boys and girls is a part of this process. Equal responsibility diminishes difference and for Gloria it is hoped male entitlement can be undermined as well.

The challenging of traditional gender socialisation practice is central to both a theory and practice of feminist mothering (O’Reilly 2008). As such, Leah invites her sons to take up non-normative experiences that do not resemble the norm:
I have always tried to provide all kinds of play experiences for my sons rather than just general boy stuff.

Feminist maternal practice is about inviting boys to take up discursive practices that blur the gender binary. This is the explicit objective of exposing them to a multiplicity of experience. The languages they use to describe this intention are the ‘making available’ and ‘introducing’ of ‘opportunity’ and ‘openness’. Miriam wants to “keep things open” because she believes that categorisation practices dictate expectations about her sons’ experiences. By keeping things open she imagines they will be better positioned to “find their way...and know that they can try pretty much anything out”. It is similar for Iris who positions herself when she says:

I am facilitating the development of human beings to have opportunities to explore whatever they want to explore.

Susan draws on her feminist framework in the way that sheformulates societal messages about gender and the constraints that can ensue:

Look I think it’s actually that he is not boxed in to anything in particular...It’s just you know the open opportunity, it is really what you want in a female too…and I think the difference might be that for a girl it gets couched in terms of you can hope they are not limited by what a society thinks girls can be, that they can keep that open for a boy too.

Our sons’ positioning within the gender binary limits opportunity because it excludes the possibility of alternatives. As Helen describes:

I guess I have made an effort to introduce my little boy to a whole range of things and I will continue to do that...I don’t want him to conform to those stereotypes because of outside pressure...If he chooses to take up stereotypically male sort of activities then that is his decision and that is fine provided it is not at the expense of something else.
Gloria’s description below explains the sense of urgency and the seriousness in not wanting sons to be totalised by normative masculinity discourse. She describes the complex and interwoven effect that this discourse produces individually for our sons and the simultaneous impact for women and girls:

For him to accept manhood in the kind of framework I have explained well he’s not thinking about more than half the population in that. You know there’s no justice actually in that framework compared with equality in terms of choice. It would absolutely limit his choices. Because if he feels at any point that he has to kind of…it’s almost too painful Sarah. It’s such a white fear in me that he will feel like he has to be someone who has to cover his emotions to fulfil people’s expectations. Because I think that then he’s not having freedom of speech, then I think he’s missing out on so many opportunities to express himself and to be who he wants to be...

**CO-OPTING MASCULINITY IDEALS**

Horwitz (2004) talks about resistance as ‘destabilising dominant discourse’ (p.47). One of the outcomes, she argues, of destabilising discourse is a re-defining of what a mother’s role is. I would add to this another outcome which is the re-defining of a mother’s role in relation to her sons as well as the ways that she works to re-define masculinity. Trimble (2008) suggests that maternal practice as a form of activism can support our sons to develop a critical distance from normative masculinity. In doing so they may be able to engage in masculinity practices that can be less destructive for women and for them as well. At least a quarter of the feminist mothers in this study openly identify that destabilising dominant discourse about masculinity is a deliberate intention, Gloria provides an example of this:

I want to make sure that those concepts of what masculinity is out there in the greater community are challenged.
Doreen begins the process of interrupting this discourse by describing how she re-defines masculine ideals:

*It’s like you are always in your head. You have got a picture of what you want at the end. In my head there was a picture of what you want at the end, and I wanted what I got...I didn’t want them to be over aggressive, I wanted them to have a lot of skills in terms of their own self-maintenance skills, I didn’t want them to be that helpless aggressive male, I wanted them to know how to plug the jug...*

The vision of masculinity moves from domestic independence towards emotional independence as Muriel describes:

*I think my problem with those extreme ends seems to be a kind of fake expression of power on the masculine side and a kind of expression of helplessness on the female side. My problem with all of that is that it kind of fosters dependency that I find unattractive. So I suppose I would hope, I would want my sons to feel like they could look after themselves and another person in both an domestic and an intimate way.*

Within the emotional realm they envision a masculinity that occupies the same spaces as femininity, as Leah articulates:

*Hopefully he wouldn’t feel the need to conform to a masculine stereotype. That was another thing I was thinking Yes I want him to know that it is okay to show emotion, to be and to do things that are perceived as feminine. Like to be nurturing and caring which is perceived to be a feminine trait not a masculine trait.*

The feminist mothers of sons are conscious that their sons are male and will occupy a particular social location when they grow up as Kate describes:
I am raising them to be men, but raising them to be thoughtful feminist men rather than more traditionally constructed gendered masculinity. So I am conscious of the fact that they are boys when I am raising them.

Alternative masculinities are also envisioned from the perspective of these mothers as women and of young women and girls. Their ideas about how their sons enact their masculinity take into account the way they will think about and interact with girls. Leah explains:

Someone that respects and is respectful to women and who doesn’t, you know, doesn’t un hopefully is not going to buy pornos by the time he is thirteen like so many young boys are these days. Hopefully, he will grow up to see that women are just as valuable as men...and also to appreciate the strengths of women and the importance of women’s unique abilities in mothering and north and that kind of thing.

In disrupting gender difference discourse, the feminist mothers report interacting with their sons in ways that try to take attention away from external markers of normative masculinity. Feminist maternal practice tries to privilege alternative expressions and practices as Eleanor explains:

He is very popular and he has been voted his class junior school rep. But often the way he sees it is that he also feels like that he is not brave enough, that he lacks courage. And I think these are the things that you might think of being more kind of masculine sort of external markers of masculinity. And I try to reinforce in him all the ways in which I feel that he is very brave and I try to remind him of those things. I don’t try to reinforce what I think the world sees as being symbols or virtues of masculinity, of being a good man or a strong man or a good boy. I more try to emphasize what is kind of core and internal to him and to bring those things out.
These feminist mothers privilege alternative masculinities because they believe that this will benefit their sons. This is part of the process of trying to undermine normative masculinities that they think are harmful and problematic for their sons. The normative view that masculinity means not being good at expressing and assessing emotions is of particular concern.

**EMPATHY**

Feminist maternal practice with sons makes available ideas ways of acting that are mindful of others. This is intended to foster empathy and build capacity for interpersonal relationships. For Leah it has been important to make experiences available to her son where he has been invited to engage in practices traditionally ascribed to girls and femininity:

"He has always had dolls from a young age. We always had dolls around...So yeah that nurturing is still okay. That showing emotion is okay, that you don’t have to go out and kick the footy to be a boy, that you can do other things."

Feminist mothers of sons in this study facilitate non-normative practices in their sons by validating and normalising them, as Nina describes:

"We let him cry and cuddle him and that sort of thing..."

For Bonny it is about privileging emotion:

"I think for [my son] being a boy it is important that he cries."

Simran describes acknowledging and making available the emotional world as a reality for men:

"My best friend is gay and he has recently split up with his boyfriend...and it was gorgeous because he was able to cry and able to be sad and to be looked after by my kids. But also it being about masculinity, of being able to cry and be sad about relationships. You know being able to see that and for my [son and daughter] to find their ways of comforting him. And I think"
that again is engaging with ideas about relationships pain men and you can cry and talk about it rather than that closed idea of relationships for men...

While there are dominant discourses that position the subject, marginalised discourses do exist, albeit on the margins. Horwitz (2004) argues that because of this the individual is ‘able to note contradiction and gaps within dominant discourses, which allows them to challenge their prevailing messages’ (p.45). Some of the feminist mothers of sons in this study they make deliberate attempts to displace the totalising effect of dominant discourse, as Iris attests:

*I am trying to give them as much opportunity, whereby in spite of all the other pressures on them, there are small opportunities to experience other options.*

In this way, the feminist mothers report displacing the imperatives of hegemonic masculinity by introducing non-normative masculinity discourses that they expect their sons to hold themselves accountable to.

Doreen’s own experience and her commitment to improving gender relations inform her decision to place non-normative expectations on her sons:

*I think I thought that if you can’t look after yourself then you have a possibility of becoming first of all dependent on others but specially an aggressive dependence...because if you yourself are helpless and wait for somebody else to boil your egg...and I actually saw this in action with my step-father, you become aggressive towards the person on whom you are dependent...It’s a resentment and aggression towards that person and your attitude towards that person is sort of hard. You see them as beneath you because they are the one who is in the kitchen...and that develops behaviour that I didn’t want to see in my boys.*
Doreen’s critique of normative masculinity is given form through her maternal practice and the way she expects her sons to do gender within the home:

All of their childhood, so you know, ‘Where’s my footy jumper?’ and I would say ‘Oh, I don’t know’. So consciously saying I don’t know where your footy jumper is, so you are teaching your kids that women have to have that independence from them, whereas the boys you want them to go their way but you also wanted them to know that their partners have to go their way as well.

For Doreen, not looking for her sons’ footy jumpers or engaging with them in finding their footy jumpers was intended to send the message to her sons that she, as a woman was not responsible for knowing where their belongings are. Doreen would not automatically do something for them that they are capable of (and responsible for) themselves. At the same time, her intent is to encourage her sons to go their own way, to develop their independence and be responsible for their own things.

These feminist mothers of sons are consciously working to identify where the invitations to engage in normative masculinity practices are while simultaneously introducing alternative discourses about masculinity. One of the main cultural locations for discursive practice that the majority of interviewees isolate is the school environment. Their sons’ entrance into school culture is considered a main entry point where dominant and alternative discourse intersects. Gloria sums this up:

In the last year where his world has become bigger at school, initially in the first five years there’s no problems because you know I was actually the only influence and my [partner] was. But now he has so man the he has to kind of you know work it all out. And it’s been interesting really because you actually realise that the first five years are not an absolute gateway in
to a feminist or social equality framework. You know those through processes are not natural. He’s getting conflicted messages now and that’s the hardest part.

**MAKING GENDER MATTER FOR THEIR SONS**

As discussed earlier, most of the feminist mothers of sons in this study engage in practices designed to make women and girls lives visible to their sons. In an extension of this, they work to make gender as a concept relevant and noticeable. As Simran describes:

> Gender does matter, just as culture and skin colour matters, like people notice...Whatever is the most marginalised the other matters, so it is being a man but it’s more about being the best person and masculinity is one aspect of that. Like it is important how he holds that and what he knows about that and that if he becomes an accountant or a lawyer or I don’t know a busker, what is important is that he’s being respectful to all human beings with that and that he notices gender.

One of the ways that these feminist mothers of sons make gender matter to their sons is by drawing attention to the dominant discourses about women that circulate through media and the written word. As Kate explains:

> So I suppose it’s a question of he’s going to see that male domination he’s going to come across that but I’m going to help him deal with it in a way that...and understand it ins way that I would like them to....little examples like the ads on TV when it’s brought up we’ll always discuss it... Or if I read a story that’s got funny gender roles in it we’ll talk about it. Like at the moment we’re about to start reading some Enid Blyton. And I know that’s going to involve a lot of conversation about the kind of society those children come from...
Conversation that draws our sons’ attention to gendered practices is an ongoing practice that the feminist mothers in this study identify as part of their every day interaction with their sons. For Simran, this is a part of an ongoing and continuous conversation that repeats ideas and draws attention to the way that gendered practices are experienced differently by men and by women. As this has been an ongoing process between her and her son she describes how over time her son has begun to take up the role of noticing gendered practices. She starts her example below by describing a recent trip she and her family made to India:

*We were wandering around the streets of Jaipur and [my son] got really shirty at one stage...and he is going ‘Mum they are all just looking at you’. And I said ‘Yes the men do…it happens because I am lighter skinned and I am smallish and I look different and I experience that and it is a gendered response. They look at me because I am a woman...and it was gendered and it was sexual’. But I was so intrigued that he noticed and that he was angry...and yeah so he speaks it and I have gone, ‘They are looking at me and it does tend to be men but it is also this idea of me being different as well.’ And he’s gone ‘But they are only looking at you, they are not looking at dad’. And I said ‘You are right, I am wondering how we can try and make sense of it’. And then we had this lovely conversation about how he could make sense of it. And it was important for him...and that he noticed and that an eleven year old boy says why are they looking at you, and why are they looking at your breasts? I think he is able to do it because I keep going with it so there is always that retelling of it, so I will tell...people in front of him and I ask ‘What do you think about it? Do you remember that happened? So that story becomes richer because he then goes yeah I did think that...So he reflects along with what happened and I do that a lot. Otherwise things get taken for granted and...*
gender only equals women and is static and there is no reflection or capacity to engage with it.

Making gender matter is about drawing attention to the gendered meaning that is continually constructed in the social world and at the same time taking up their son’s noticing of these practices. They describe being open to engaging their sons in conversation as a practice that build awareness of both male power and privilege, but also the way that their social world is continuously informed by gender relations. Below Katja describes valuing her son’s awareness and curiosity about this process and how she invites his opinion as a way of developing his critical distance from normative masculinity.

Actually, a couple of years ago there were those awful shoe ads...and they were up all around the place where we lived...pink billboards with women with boobs, three women in a bed you know looking like sluts and this one guy with a pair of white shoes. And I remember driving home and [my son] would look at that and go ‘Mum what is that about? Why are they advertising shoes with women’s boobs hanging out?’ And I’d go ‘Good question darling, what do you think that’s about?’ And he couldn’t really fathom it and he said ‘Do you think it’s because the men like seeing the women and the boobs and think maybe that the shoes go with that in some way?’. And we have those fascinating discussions, not lead by me but just me asking questions. And he’d go, ‘Yeah that’s really funny isn’t it, a woman with her boobs out and long blonde hair and looking a bit dumb. Is that what men like?’ And I go, ‘Well that’s what some men think that they like’...

This practice is taken up by Simran as well who describes her belief that it is important to talk with her son about the conflicting and problematic messages about masculinity that he is exposed to:
We were watching the ads before a movie and they had all these ads and it was sexism after sexism, women in bikinis literally selling cars...and then they had an ad for say no to violence against women and I was like how do you make sense of this, like you have all this that sets up this attitude towards women and then you say no, don’t do this. And if you don’t talk it with him and like make sense of the lack of sense then what have you got?

These feminist mothers articulate the meanings and importance of gendered practices to their sons. According to Fenstermaker and West (2002), this practice is a core component of doing gender. The mother constitutes herself and her sons when she identifies discourse that positions both of them. When there is conversation that makes meaning of discourse and enacts alternative discourse, subjectivity is constituted (Davies 1989).

**DISRUPTING NORMATIVE MASCULINITY PRACTICES**

The data show that while gender difference discourse circulates through the mother and son relationship, many of the feminist mothers interviewed actively work to be disruptive. This can be as simple as disputing the notion that who we play with or what we play with as children is determined by our sex category. As Nina describes:

I see it as giving him the tools to allow him to make a choice by making him comfortable in accepting who he is and who other children are and understanding that while, yes there are stereotypes of boys do this and girls don’t do this and whatever, that people shouldn’t be defined by that. So yes, okay lots of girls do like doing x and lots of boys do like doing x but if you want to something that girls like to do then that is okay as well.
In making available the complexity of situations, they are inviting their sons to occupy a critical distance from what could be seen as a natural or acceptable position. In so doing, our sons are offered the opportunity to exercise choice, consider their own moral position and understand the context that their actions exist within. The feminist mothers in this study do not think that it is inevitable that their sons’ gendered subjectivities will inevitably work against gender equity.

The feminist mothers in this study work hard not to collude with grand narratives about gender as Nina describes:

> When he brings home ‘girls don’t do this’ and ‘girls don’t do that’, it is more about challenging that.

Instead they interact with these narratives, taking them on as teachable moments (Green 2004), where it is possible to contest the narrative and introduce doubt. For Kate it is about contesting the narrative in front of her son at child care:

> A little boy said ‘you can’t be the dad because you are a girl. They were three and I said, ‘do you pretend to be superman?’ and he said ‘sure’. I said well if you can pretend to be superman she can pretend to be a dad’.

Similarly for Leah, teachable moments happen in the presence of her son and are about building ideas about the breadth of practices that masculinity can and does encompass:

> They will say, ‘gee he can kick the ball really well and isn’t he clever’ and I will say ‘You know he is also a really good drawer’, or try and draw attention to his other abilities.

For Leah it is also about attending to the different values and expectations that are placed on boys and girls:
And I never say things like boys can do this or girls can do that. If my sons or actually my oldest son who can talk, if he does say things like that I really try to correct him...they obviously know that they are girls or boys but not to attach any significance to being a boy or a girl.

And for Eleanor, it is also important to contest gendered expectations:

I would never say boys are this, boys are that or you know men are this or men are that. I think we have as parents the values about what it means to be a good person and we try to educate our children in that paradigm and pretty much steer clear of any idea of what it is or where masculinity and femininity fits in to that.

The feminist mothers of sons interviewed described different conceptual ‘tactics’ that they employ when undermining gender difference discourse, Leah identifies one of hers when she recounts:

I will try and say things like, oh you know for a while there he was saying, ‘I hate girls’ and I said, ‘What does that mean? Does that mean you hate me? Your auntie? Does that mean you hate your grandmother?’...and I named every female friend he had you know. And he had to think about it and he goes ‘Oh no, I don’t hate girls’. And I said, ‘Some of you friends might say silly things at school but you know that is not true and you don’t have to say those things just because they say them’. But yeah it is a useful tactic to use the example of other people. He will say things, one time he said, ‘Women don’t build houses’, and I said ‘Well my mum built her own house’ So I got out photos of mum laying bricks and stuff and said ‘See women build houses’.
Eleanor chooses to interrupt the gender difference paradigm by contesting discourse that not only places different expectations on boys and girls but also by trying to undermine the notion of what is considered appropriate:

*I will say, there is no such things as boys’ activities or girls’ activities. We are socialised and acculturated into believing these things. And I can explain that in child friendly language and I have. We do talk about those things, and have always, you know: ‘There is no such thing as boys’ clothes and girls’ clothes and there is no such thing as boys’ colours and girls’ colours’ and all that stuff.*

Normative masculinity is dependent on enactment for validity and this means that it is vulnerable, when this discourse is critiqued deliberately this means that feminist mothers are being agents of discursive activity. Consequently she represents an emerging power as an agent of knowledge (Foucault 1980).

**ESTABLISHING NEW NORMS AND ACCOUNTABILITY STANDARDS**

In presenting their ideas about ‘doing gender’, West and Zimmerman (1987) assert that when we do gender, we are engaging in practices according to standards and norms held up as being appropriate for our sex category. The data show that the majority of feminist mothers’ of sons in this study work to establish different standards, and that they impose accountability practices on their sons that do not reflect normative masculinity practices. The feminist mother and son relationship, as a social situation, has particular cultural conditions. In this culture there exists language, imagery and meanings articulated that are oppositional to dominant culture. Feminist mothers work to ‘unsettle dominant meanings’ (Threadgold 1990:23).

When the mother activates and enforces accountability (Messner 2000), she is both agent and witness. According to Everingham (1994), it is through this interpretive action where she is a critical agent. When she responds to the
agency of her child in a particular socio-cultural setting, then she is actively constructing cultural meanings and forms of subjectivity within that milieu (Everingham (1994). It is important to stress here that she is deliberately activating cultural meaning in certain situations.

The feminist mothers in this study establish new norms and accountability standards by introducing non-normative masculinity practices about caring, responsibility and equality. This is in contrast to normative masculinity practice that imposes will, ignores care taking and invites the abdication of responsibility. These feminist mothers are concerned that their sons develop both an awareness of others and an awareness of how their actions impact on those around them. As Kate describes:

*Well one of the things that is important to me is that they are considerate, that they think before they act and that they think about how they, their actions impinge on others.*

Consequently, the feminist mothers interviewed impose standards of expected behaviour on their sons that reflect their concerns for undermining male privilege as well as their commitment to developing their relational selves. Simran addresses this when she talks about recognising anger as a valid emotion and working with her son in developing appropriate ways of expressing this:

*You know so we worked out ways that he would talk angry and yeah maybe he could slam a door because I reckon we have to show angry and I am really loud when I am angry and how can we do that, but how can it be safe? How can it be safe and protected and that we are aware of others in that space...*

Rose speaks specifically about introducing non-normative masculinity practices about care taking and describes the expectations she places on her sons to take up these alternative discourses:
Well basically, if any body gets hurt at all, everything stops until the hurt person is seen to alright. If there needs to be an adjustment to the way that the wrestling is happening, like do we need to move a table or should the chair be pushed back further...and yeah be mindful of your surroundings and if someone is in pain, never ignore it, always stop and see to it, make sure you take care of each other yeah.

This is an example of the cultural conditions that the feminist mothers in this study do place on their sons’ masculinity practices. These conditions contain standards of practice that their sons are expected to be accountable to and in so doing they constitute particular masculine subjectivities grounded in feminist mothers’ critique of normative masculinity. Rose’s sons are expected to engage in care taking practices with each other. This requires acknowledging and attending to pain, hurt and sadness. Her sons are expected to pay attention to the way their bodies move within and around the space they occupy. They are expected to adjust their behaviour to accommodate this space. Importantly these practices are to be enacted in relation to each other. This means that they are more than ideas about care; they are the material outcome of particular values, goals and discourse.

Rose is establishing standards of behaviour that require her sons manage their conduct in accordance with non-normative masculinity practices. These behaviours do not reflect or reproduce dominant discourse about gender difference. Instead Rose establishes that appropriate behaviour from her sons requires care-taking, awareness of the physical space her sons take up and attention to the emotional requirements of another. She expects her sons to be accountable to these standards as they interact with each other and in front of her.

Most of the feminist mothers of sons in this study have problematized male privilege. In so doing they make conscious decisions to invite their sons to take up non-normative masculinity practices in an effort to undermine male privilege. As Helen describes:
I guess things that are important to me are that I will try and explain to [my sons] that you don’t push people around and I mean these are very preschool kind of issues. I guess when he gets older they will obviously be more complex ideas. But at the moment you don’t push people around, you share, you take it in turns. So these are things that probably a lot of parents would be aware of but to me it also seems connected to feminism. The idea that you don’t let little boys think that they can rule the roost and push little girls around. And not thinking that you are in charge of things and you can rule the roost because you are a boy.

Above, Helen articulates the connection between the standards she expects her son to meet and the way that this will work to mitigate male entitlement. In re-defining masculinity the feminist mothers interviewed hold their sons accountable to masculinity practices that are in direct opposition to the norm. Helen is concerned with undermining male entitlement by expecting him to take turns, share and acknowledge others around him. She does acknowledge that sharing and taking turns can be linked to general parenting practice. However, feminist mothers have identified that gender matters and gender is always being constructed. By doing this they are also telling their sons that it is possible for them to choose, that they are able to position themselves in relation to normative masculinity practices and decide what this position looks like.

In establishing what is acceptable, the feminist mothers in this study reveal they are also undermining normative masculine ideals. One of the significant ways that they are doing this is by deliberately introducing homosexuality as a valid and acceptable sexual orientation. As Catherine describes:

*I’ve tried having more deep and meaningful discussions about their sexuality. I have said to them whoever you become is fine by me as long as I can still love you and you still love me, that’s the most important thing. Whoever you are to become,*

254
whatever your preferences in the world are for what you want to do, who you want to be with, whatever, that’s okay so long as still love each other and we can still talk about it. And they’ve gone sure, yeah (laughter).

There is deliberate intent behind having these conversations as Nina explains:

I will give you an example. We were in Sydney visiting my family and I said to [my son] you know I used to live in Sydney and where do you think you will like to live, in Sydney or in Melbourne or a different city? And he said ‘I want to live with X [his friend], he said a man and a man together’. And I said, ‘Oh that is lovely darling’. So for me...I want to give him positive, you know to allow him. I don’t want to say ‘Oh that is not what boys do’. Or you know even question him or give him any idea that something like that might not be acceptable or may only be acceptable in a particular context...

I think it is possible to consider that these feminist mothers of sons’ maternal practice could be described as doing gender with their sons. This is because when we do gender we are adjusting or correcting our behaviour according to standards and measures that are seen to best fit our sex category. These standards and measures are circulated through and in social situations and interaction. The mother and son relation can be considered as a cultural location for the circulation of norms and values and the feminist mother can be seen to hold her son accountable to these norms and standards of gendered behaviour. The process through which gendered activity is rendered accountable is interactional. West and Zimmerman’s (2009) concept of doing gender argues that accountability is the core component of gender. The transformation of gendered subjectivities requires the subject recognising the norms that they are being held accountable to and a social or cultural context that validates, encourages and supports the subjects’ change in orientation to the norms (West and Zimmerman 2009).
VIOLENCE

Because many of the women in this study have sons who are younger, and were not yet adolescents at the time of interview, they express their concerns about their sons engaging in violence against women in the future tense through the language of ‘I hope’, ‘I imagine’, ‘I would think’ and ‘I want’. Where these hopes are expressed there is awareness that male privilege and entitlement, and the culture of hegemonic masculinity, is both appealing and has tremendous social currency.

However, underpinning much of this is a belief that they can support their sons to make good choices. At the very least, they feel able to provide their sons with alternative ideas about how he can and should treat women, girls and children. This sense of belief and hope is also connected to a sense of control and efficacy. Muriel’s comment below reiterates a significant theme of belief held by the majority of research participants:

…Like if I knew that either one of my boys [hurt someone else]
that would be deeply, I would feel a deep, deep sense of failure
about that.

However, as I mentioned in chapter two, I made a concerted effort throughout the analysis process to be mindful and include data that did not appear to fit the central themes and sub category headings. One of the reasons for doing so was to use the data to help make sense of the main analysis story. While all of the participants interviewed for this research project spoke about violence and masculinity it was Elma’s story that stood apart from the others. For Elma, she feels like the above ideas are all an illusion, a powerful illusion that she once had and that has since been shattered.

I now include a synopsis of Elma’s story that throws into sharp relief the pain, confusion and consequence for these feminist mothers of male violence.

[My son] had been accused (by the parents of her sons’ friend)
that he had molested their son, like you know that he had tried
to have anal sex with him basically and that he had been trying
to have anal sex with their son…

I thought he had just so fucked up and so my immediate
reaction was to try and talk and so I got on the phone and I
talked to various services…including CASA House [the Centre
Against Sexual Assault] and…by the end of the day it was, you
know, my son was a sexual perpetrator and that was just
horrible.

He was 11…or just turned 12 actually. I wanted to kill him. I
actually wanted to kill him. I couldn’t believe that he would be
so, I mean with a father like [my partner] who is incredible, I
mean [my partner] is an amazing man who is just so respectful
of women and…for me is like the ultimate in male feminism…

And those words from one of the people at CASA House and
they said ‘your son is a sexual perpetrator’ and so those words
just kept playing out, you know your son is a sexual
perpetrator.

We kind of talked about it…We both gave him huge raves about
respect…It kind of came out ultimately that [my son] did have
a problem in the sense that he was actually trying to play with
the penises of other children over a period of time. I have to
say that the counsellor was…good with [my son] in that she
talked to [my son] about taking responsibility for his own
actions and…acknowledging that [my son] had done something
very wrong…at one stage the counsellor said to him…’why do
you think you did this?’ and he said ‘oh, you know it was
because of my hormones’. So it was trying to remove himself
from responsibility. But after a while he knew it was the wrong
thing…but it kind of led to this ongoing nightmare.
It is always there in the background...I always wonder whether he is telling the truth...I have gone through phases of thinking...is he actually a really evil person. It is just shocking.

Elma talks about the consequences for her, and her partner, in that they now feel like their trust in him is “completely broken” and clouds everything he is involved.

That is absolutely the worst part of it, that there are times when, and he would never know and for him it is ancient history so that when, and here is a classic example, we had a friend stay over, a family and they have got a boy who is 13 or something. And they were both going to sleep out in [my son’s] studio together. And I said to [my partner] I don’t feel good about this...

He goes out to his studio with his girlfriend you know, we tell him off, not to do that, leave the door open. It is really hard to find that balance. We have had him in counselling and I kept thinking what if this is just a normal thing for boys to go through, what if it is actually quite normal for boys to play with each other’s dicks and stuff and what are we doing making such a big deal of it, because of a fucked up society that thinks sexuality is this really kind of you know, so what if we got it wrong?

…I feel incredible confused but it is also, I suppose in some ways normalised the whole kind of parenting experience for me because I didn’t believe, you know I was extremely idealistic as a parent, incredibly, so...well I really genuinely believed that I could make something of my child, you know that I was able to influence what he was going to become...No, I so don’t believe that now...His actions have undermined my ability to I suppose, it is a total slap in the face. Oh right, actually he is
completely his own person, I mean I still fucking try...but yeah, I feel completely, completely undermined...I think it is about us being able to just kind of...recognise that despite everything we love him...Look it is about the fact that at this point he is almost sixteen so at this point it is not actually about us anymore. It is about us in the sense that we can provide him with you know a loving kind of stable home and we can provide him with resources but actually he has to make a choice, something has to happen now in his head...

On first glance, Elma’s story appears distinct from the others. However, over the course of the analysis process I believe it has come to be emblematic of the concerns and fears all of the feminist mothers interviewed for this project expressed. I also believe that Elma’s response and consequent engagement with her son’s behaviour is reflective of attitudes and practices the other interview participants identify as necessary feminist maternal practice.

Elma’s initial response was to identify her son’s behaviour as sexual violence against another child. She spoke with services that use this paradigm and validated the disclosure of the other child. Both she and her partner focused on holding their son accountable and acknowledging responsibility for his actions. These responses and strategies are grounded in her feminist analysis of male violence.

At the same time, her critique of normative masculinity is also present when she wonders if her son’s behaviour may be identified as deviant as a consequence. Mindful of not wanting to excuse his behaviour, she has created some space for the normalising of sexualised play between boys. She considers this idea at the same time as believing that she and her partner did ‘the right thing’ by positioning his actions as sexual violence.

Her comments conclude with the description of the complex consequences for her and her partner and the idea that their parenting ultimately has limits
and that this has not only been confronting but ultimately has undermined and eroded her confidence.

Elma’s story is unusual I believe because of both her response and her sense making. However, I query whether this would be any different for the other women in this study. The feminist mothers interviewed for this project all acknowledge male power and privilege. The undercurrent of all their maternal practice is the desire to influence their sons so that they do not engage in violence.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter takes into account the way that boys’ masculinities’ are relationally constituted. The research participants flout normative gender expectations and choose to take up or reject normative standards based on their critique of normative masculinity and informed by their feminism. Through the mother and son relationship mothers impose standards and expectations of behaviour that do not reflect the standards and behaviour of normative masculinity ideals. A feminist lens is used to assess, establish and validate their sons gendered activity and they are aware of the relations of power that construct masculine subjectivities. Therefore they introduce non-normative masculinity practices and expectations that are designed to destabilise gender difference discourse and undermine male entitlement over women.

Always conscious that her son is male she works to destabilise dominant discourse about masculinity. She tries not to collude with grand narratives and works to redefine masculinity beyond the scope of normative parameters. She looks for opportunities to dispel dominant stories as truth, undermining them by introducing alternative possibilities and introducing different standards. Some of the ways that she does this is to actively develop her sons’ domestic and emotional independence and build awareness of others by fostering empathy. The feminist mothers in this study introduce alternative discourses about caring and care-taking. Additionally, she privileges non-
normative masculinity practices and expressions in the way that they interact with other boys, with men, their fathers and with girls and women.

The feminist mothers interviewed also use language to displace gender difference discourse and take up their sons’ curiosity and questioning as an opportunity to have a conversation (as a practice) that builds awareness about gender, male privilege and power as well as conflicting messages about masculinity. It is important for these mothers to support their sons to notice gender and understand that it matters. These feminist mothers redefine the mothers’ role in masculinity and actively construct cultural meanings of gendered subjectivities within the context of their relationship and in regard to certain social situations.

As already mentioned, the relationship between violence and normative masculinity is an overriding concern for feminist mothers of sons in this study. Consequently, one of the main drives of feminist maternal practice with boys is to influence them away from engaging in violent practices and they are vigilant in supporting their sons to make good choices.

It is not that these feminist mothers intend to raise their sons so that they are more like girls. Rather they discard patriarchal narratives about gender so that they aim to raise their sons to be mindful of the power and privilege they are imbued with because they are boys. In addition, by discarding essentialist notions of masculinity, these feminist mothers place expectations and standards of behaviour on their sons that invite subject positions better able to reflect equality of the sexes. Activating their feminist maternal practice, these mothers do gender differently with their sons.
CHAPTER NINE: THE ROLE OF MALE PARTNERS OF FEMINIST MOTHERS IN RAISING SONS

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in Chapter 3 of this thesis, feminist research that explores the mother and son relationship has not explicitly considered the role that feminist mothers understand their partners play in the construction of their sons’ gendered subjectivities. While the parameters of this thesis do not afford an in-depth exploration of the role that male partners play in the raising of sons, I have included an analysis of the data that give insight into how the feminist mothers in this research understand normative masculinity as construction by identifying where their male partners are positioned in relation to this.

The primary impetus for doing so stems from two key resources that I relied on in the early phase of this research process. Both Adrienne Rich (1976) and Judith Arcana (1983) wrote what I believe to be very important texts about the experience of feminist mothers raising sons. However, it is important to acknowledge that these texts were written during the second wave of feminism. What is missing from their accounts is the consideration that contemporary feminist mothers may feel that their male partners are co-authors of non-normative masculinity practices.

At the same time, contemporary patriarchal texts about raising boys (Biddulph 1998; Marsden 2002) that are highly influential ‘manuals’ parents are encouraged to read, sidelines the potential for the mother to be a co-contributor of his ‘normative’ masculine development. This thesis is, as stated throughout, a direct rejection of this patriarchal tenet. However, it is
important, I think, to include the ideas that the feminist mothers in this study have about the contribution that they want, and believe, the fathers of their sons can make.

The women in this study do not parent alone; all are in relationships with heterosexual men, the fathers of their sons. I am interested in the extent to which these feminist mothers of sons believe they have found a collaborator to introduce alternative masculinities and how they experience that alliance. Feminist maternal practice that considers the father might produce knowledge that I had not previously read about. I think also that the data around this identifies where further struggles and challenges lie.

I did not spend time with the interview participants’ partners. However, I did set aside a portion of the interviews to ask them how they perceived their partners contributed to the construction of their sons’ masculine subjectivities. It is my contention that the rationale and value of including the following data is in extending the narrative of feminist maternal practice with sons that includes the mothers’ ideas about the fathers’ responsibility for doing gender. To this end, the following section takes on board the data that explore if and how these feminist mothers believe their male partners are co-contributors of non-normative masculinity practices. And if they do, how they see this being enacted.

**Feminist Maternal Practice Includes the Father**

Analysis of the data highlight the conscious decision the majority of these feminist mothers have made to choose a partner who is both supportive of feminism and committed to presenting their children with multiple masculinity subject positions. That is, the majority of these feminist mothers’ maternal practice is inclusive of their choice of partner with whom they have children. As Iris describes:
He doesn’t believe that my biology determines what I do…He really respects my mind. He values it and I think there is a lot of exchange…We have chosen each other for a reason.

Similarly for Muriel, she has chosen a partner whom she believes shares the same lens as her:

He is not…the kind of person who fundamentally sees any limitation to what a woman can do or think. He doesn’t talk down to anybody.

It is important for all the interview participants that their partners’ support, understand and respect their commitment to feminism. Katja explains the nature of this understanding when she says:

...an alliance and also supporting...supporting the cause...I know I’ve said to [my partner] that he is behaving like a misogynist and rather than saying don’t be ridiculous [my partner] will say ‘Yeah I can see exactly why you’re saying that and I think that we should work on it in this way’. Whereas, I can imagine how easy it would be to just fob that off as a woman’s imagination or not something to take seriously.

That their partners are understanding of the work involved in raising children and recognise the importance of sharing this responsibility is also a vital factor in these feminist mothers’ relationships, as Helen asserts:

Absolutely critical, I cannot imagine having children without a partner who was very involved...I cannot imagine being in a relationship with somebody who says ‘Can’t you keep that baby quiet. I can’t function without a good night’s sleep’ and goes and sleeps separately.

And, they require their partner’s support in representing non-normative masculinities. Gloria describes her partner’s position when she says:
[My partner] is a terrific dad because he’s as committed as I am to ensuring the kids have a sense of opportunity...

**Feminism Within the Home**

Most of the feminist mothers in this study report that feminism contributes to the shaping of the domestic arrangements within the home, to the representation of women and men, and to the nature of interaction between father and son. As Gloria states below, this is a non-normative arrangement that requires acknowledgment, commitment and mutual support:

> You know if you are going to choose a path that’s different...[my husband] and I have actively chosen a path that’s about equality and about optimism and it’s about trying to make sure that there’s no gender division on so many levels. We have to acknowledge that that’s not the usual, so we have to stick together...

At least a quarter of the women have allocated ‘traditional’ areas of responsibility to the father, around masculinisation, and turned this on its head. Because of their feminist goals (both mother and father), the father takes responsibility (as a man) for introducing non-normative masculinity concepts and gendering. Simran explains this well when she describes:

> I said to [my partner], ‘I need you to do this shit I don’t know what to do with the penis’. But then it was about how to do lots of stuff and [my partner] was really strong on the masculinity stuff. He bought the most beautiful book and in it no one knew the gender of the baby... they went through life without naming the gender of the baby...and that was always important to us, so yes feminism did matter...Because it was about what would it be like to not construct this child as almost like the Target boy or the Kmart boy...and what would that mean to not do that but not make him be the other if he didn’t want to. Is there
an either-or? Or is there space for him to make sense of that himself?

One of the interesting ideas that emerged from analysis of the data is the way that a quarter of the feminist mothers speak about the role that their partners play within the home. They speak from both a position of authority and entitlement to expect behaviour and levels of responsibility from their partners, as Nina explains:

I think that [my partner] knows that I expect fairness. That is I don’t expect to automatically have to do certain things because I am female. And that definitely informs my negotiations...

What they expect and why are overtly grounded in a feminist frame and they speak with a great sense of entitlement that their expectations need to be met. This sense of entitlement extends to the language that they use when describing the role their partners play, as well as the type of responsibilities that are allocated. Kate illustrates this well:

Well look, I have quite consciously in the last little while when I have been quite exhausted by eight years of mothering allowed a significant shift to occur so that he takes more responsibility for them than he has done. And partly that’s possible because no one is no longer breastfeeding, well just in terms of they are not dependent on me in some way. And I am now working two days a week so we have shifted things so that he takes a more equitable, you know he will take them to school, he will make their lunches. There is more of an equitable relationship even though financially he has the capacity to earn much, much more than I do. And part of that has been giving him more daily interaction with them and more daily responsibility for...and one of the major parts of that has been giving him sole responsibility on the weekends for all of them or for certainly some of them... The shift occurred when I went back
to work and he has, as I said, the capacity to earn a squillion more than I can... But, I am not prepared to accept that because I will never have the capacity to earn what he can and I still have a legitimate right to expect that he will make a contribution that enables me to go to work and he has been fine about that, we haven’t needed to fight about it, it did need to be encouraged. But he does come home early enough to help... And I will quite often give him the most responsibility...

While Kate spends more time with her children than her partner, this excerpt describes the entitlement that these feminist mothers describe to place expectations on their partners in regards to both domestic chores, and domestic care taking of the children.

At the same time, the research participants described recognising that their own gendered subjectivities are complicated, an effect of male power and privilege and that there are consequences of this that they have had to consciously and deliberately wrestle with. As Rose describes:

> And so I have had to let him learn his own lessons and not feel like I have to sort of look after him as well you know...And I think that women can get caught up in that really easily, that feeling of having to be responsible for absolutely bloody everything...or sometimes I will just take myself off because I think well he can handle it and it will be great. So I have that faith in him now that I didn’t have in the beginning at all because I didn’t know how to have it...

Below, Helen explains further her internal dialoguing around entitlement to having her partner’s physical and intellectual support, and how her feminism interacts with this:

> I say I am lucky because I don’t want to appear smug but I also think we are entitled to that. I feel a sense of guilt...but really all women should have this and I guess the thing is that it is
more about entitlement, the way it should be, the fact that it is a part of our relationship and the way we both feel about our relationship, and having kids and a family.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAKING GENDER MATTER

A quarter of the mothers explicitly acknowledged that they play the main role in being vigilant about gender relations and normative practices in the family and in their bringing issues to their partner for discussion. While shared responsibility is active, they describe being aware that they are the instigators as Gloria describes below:

> He actively contributes to the household duties. But they are planned things. They are things we talk about. You know there are moments where you kind of wonder if you don’t talk about them so much would they happen on a natural level.

Leah speaks of introducing specific ways she wants language and gender to be spoken within the home when she says:

> Well I have had conversations (with her partner) about how I think it is truly important to use pronouns that are not always he...

While they believe that they take more responsibility for making gender matter than their partners, the interview participants describe letting their partners know that this is happening and that this is problematic. Simran explains this when she says:

> And I don’t think it is enough to just have the actions and [my partner] and I have had some discussions about it recently, arguments and discussions about how we do it because I said he doesn’t speak up enough with [the children]. He needs to be able to speak it with [our son], like it is not enough that he doesn’t speak it...and I don’t mean I think you need to have a
male role model. I think that men need to also speak it, they need to be able to go, ‘oh that’s not on’ or, ‘did you see that billboard?’ . Because [our son] is asking about some of that stuff now…or seeing the ads on TV and saying ‘God do you see how many women are wearing nothing to advertise cars, what is that about?’ And you know I think, I can do that, and I will do that, but I think that it is important that [my partner] does it...

For Rose below, she has sought out her husband to explain to him how she wants her partner to interact with, explain and engage with her sons in ways that undermine traditional or normative masculinity practices. She describes:

I have said to him things like, ‘You know it’s really important to me that the boys can talk about their feelings and never be told it’s not alright to feel like this, it’s not alright to feel like that’. I have said to him ‘We can certainly say once you know you have a feeling then how do you act and if their behaviour or their actions are not good then we can say you going to have to change but this is what we think is the right way?’

The maternal subject is not immutable or cohesive, and she is not necessarily consistent either. She is positioned within multiple discourses and interacts with these on an ongoing basis. While she expresses a sense of entitlement and describes her partner’s support in disrupting normative masculinity, it is clear from the data that she is positioned in such a way as to engage in the consciousness raising of her partner and her sons’ awareness around gender as a problematic discourse.

That at least a quarter of the research participants overtly acknowledge that they take responsibility for making gender matter is a key issue in the research findings. This would appear to be in conflict with these feminist mothers’ accounts of their partners’ aspiration for sharing joint responsibility for doing gender differently with their sons. That is, feminist mothers’
accounts of taking responsibility for making gender matter and for reinforcing that this is a key parenting issue, appears to mean that their male partners’ reported practices do not reflect these feminist mothers’ accounts of their male partners’ goals.

Consequently, it is possible to infer that there are implicit and ongoing messages being sent to their sons about both gendered subjectivity and the importance of gender change. This disconnect between the feminist mothers’ accounts of their partners’ ideals and the actual inequity around shared responsibility for gender as an issue has significant implications for how gender power may not have shifted enough in general, and in the specificity of these feminist mothers’ lives. This is telling information about the lived experiences of gender power differences within the family, including family systems that are informed by feminist ideals.

When this information is combined with all of the research participants’ domestic arrangements, the mother, because she works part time, appears to carry more physical responsibility for the unpaid labour and day-to-day parenting. If gender is relational then this can be considered to constitute problematic gendered subjectivities.

It is important to consider this disconnect in combination with all of the research participants’ domestic arrangements. Because the mother works part time, she also carries more physical responsibility for unpaid labour and day-to-day parenting. This can be considered to have important implications when considering the stated goals of feminist maternal practice with sons and how they may be undermined by the real time traditional practices, and maintenance of these practices, that are happening in the home. The discussion within the final chapter of this thesis will revisit these research findings. In particular I will focus on the disparity between aspiration and experience and the implications for the potentiality of maternal feminist practice.
STEPPING INTO NON-NORMATIVE SUBJECT POSITIONS

Chodorow’s (1999) theory of the reproduction of mothering argues that because men are mothered by women, they reject intimacy and caring because they don’t identify this with what it means or feels like to be male. Consequently, men’s parenting capacities are reduced and the mother, and women in general, are objectified and devalued. She states:

   As long as women mother, a stable sense of masculine self is always more problematic than a stable sense of feminine self (p.213).

This lead Chodorow (1999) to argue for changes in social structures that result in the reduced absence of men from the home and an increase in their physical and emotional care taking of their children. She asserts that father-absence only serves to leave boys conflicted about their masculinity and fosters their fear of women because while they are reliant on the mother and intimately connected to her, they feel simultaneously confused and guilty about this connection because of their desire to identify with their father. She is unequivocal about the strategy for change when she declares:

   Any strategy for change whose goal includes liberation from the constraints of an unequal social organization of gender must take account of the need for a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women (p.215).

The value of shared parenting for Chodorow (1999) is that both girls and boys would be able to establish their sense of self in relation to both men and women and masculinity ‘would not become tied to dependence and devaluation of women’ (p218).

The majority of feminist mothers in this thesis believe it was an important and specific responsibility for their partners to step into non-normative
masculinity subject positions in front of and in relation to their sons. Helen describes this notion when she says:

He is quite stereotypically male and masculine but also in other ways he is not. So I guess that kind of complex blend shapes the way he engages within his sons, the expectations he has and the ways that he relates to both his sons... I think he [their older son] sees his father as much of a parent, you know it is not all about me...he will say cuddle daddy...[our son] is very close to his dad and I think as he gets older he will have that strong relationship...he will see men taking an active role in the family I think.

The feminist mothers interviewed also described their belief that the multiple and non-normative subject positions occupied by their male partners play a large part in their sons’ awareness of these subject positions and the opportunity for their sons to take these up for themselves. Descriptions of their partners indicate that this supports their optimism about having sons because their partners’ masculinity practices help vision the potential of being able to take up multiple gendered subject positions. Miriam explains this when she says:

When I had a boy the second and third time, I wasn’t at all disappointed...maybe that’s also got to do with what I see in my partner which is I feel like he’s got a good, nice sort of combination of male and female. You know he loves football but he also loves to cook and he’s sort of open with his emotions and all that stuff, but he’s also strong and likes to fix things around the house. So I feel like he’s got a nice combination that I hope he would pass to the boys.

There is optimism about having her sons because she uses her partner to help vision the potential for them. She experiences her partner as the kind of ‘man’ that suits her values and ideals of masculinity. This is different to some of the
feminists writing about their partners in the second wave such as Arcana (1983) and Friedan ([1963] 2001), who described fathers as unhelpful, not good representations of masculinity or contributing to mothers’ subjugation and oppression.

PARTNERS STEPPING INTO NON-NORMATIVE MASCULINITY POSITIONS

Support for Non-Normative Masculinities

Emotional availability and competency on behalf of their partners was considered by most of the participants as an important representation of masculinity to their sons, as Bonny describes:

> I think he [her son] has developed a better sense of self given that he has...[my partner] as the male and female. He can see that [my partner] can do that quite well so I think it is very good for [my son]. And I see that as part of the feminist approach to parenting as an important thing to allow the female part of the man to come out and show that to the son.

Again this excerpt emphasises the feminist frame underpinning these feminist mothers’ maternal practice and the lens through which they view their partners’ masculinity practices. Bonny’s partner does gender by enacting what are considered feminine practices of both emotion and nurturing and this is a clear feminist intention for her.

Susan describes how she perceives her partner as supportive of non-normative subject positions:

> He is conscious of these sorts of things he is happy to have discussions about what it means to you know present kids with different experiences or what they will learn from that.

Further she describes how these are experiences her son has with his father that are not the ‘norm’:

273
You have got a dad who is really, you know, who sees their relationship with their child beyond the hop on a bike and take them for a ride, a much more emotional and consciously tighter connection with their child.

Analysis of the data show that both the active stepping into non-normative masculine subject positions and the naming of doing this is an important way that interviewees consider their partners do gender with their sons. Eleanor provides an in-depth description of this below:

I would say that he has an idea of what sought of men he would like them to be and that’s a reasonable unconventional kind of man...He has always told them for example that richness is about spirit, that richness is not about money or success or how big your house is or how fast your car is. He has said that richness is about what is in your heart and what you put on your table and how generous you are with what you put on your table and what sort of people you will have at your table. He says that a rich household is one that is open and giving and tolerant... So that is quite a specific counter message to the general cultural idea that your masculinity is informed by how much money you make and what sort of job you have, what sort of material levels of affluence you are able to achieve...

**Domestic Responsibility and Division of Labour**

Another theme in the data that emerged was the requirement by at least a quarter of the feminist mothers in this study that their partners are willing to take up domestic work in order to undermine dominant discourse about what it means to be male and female. As Gloria describes:

In many ways [my partner] has a higher pressured role in the bringing up of [our son] because he has the responsibility to be a role model. He understands that, that’s something that he’s
very comfortable with and he actively tries to do that by making sure that [our son] sees him folding the washing...cooking a meal, washing up, being active in those roles....because you know it’s going to be much harder for [my son] in those types of tasks around the house because not all his friends have that. That role model is not everywhere.

This is a conscious decision by the interview participants, agreed to by their partners to ensure he occupies multiple gendered subject positions within the home. Eleanor describes below the importance of her sons seeing their father taking on domestic tasks.

*My husband is very good at chores. He helps around the house, we have a very equitable relationship...he has always been part of their child care. He’s not an absent husband. He leaves piles of clothes on the floor but then he picks them up and puts them away. He hangs out washing; he does dishes. It is not like they don’t see another man doing that...*

Eleanor’s description indicates that not only is it fair to share the domestic chores but it is equally important for her sons to witness their father, as a man taking on these responsibilities. This is similar for Gloria when she says:

*We have been very careful about the roles that we play around the house and understand that we need to up the ante in terms of equality. We realise how important it is to be those kind of role models.*

Similarly for Iris, it is the representation of gendered subject positions and the ability of both mother and father to take these up that are very important in undermining dominant ideas and disrupting the norm. She describes:

*The fact that they often call me dad by accident or him mum by accident, to me that is real, he makes their lunches and they often complain about his lunches. But in real life that is what*
they see, they see [my partner] tidying, [my partner] cleaning up and [my partner] doing the washing or making breakfast or whatever it might be. I don’t think it would ever occur to them [that he would do it differently]. But I think that they are very aware that in other families it is different...

Analysis of the data indicate that in addition to negotiating domestic responsibilities in order to do gender differently, it is important for the research participants that this is explicitly spoken about within the home and to their sons. Simran explains this well when she says:

Like [my partner] doing lots of the caring and you know before and after school now and us talking about that, that it is different for them [her kids] because [my partner] has done a whole thing for the whole day, intentionally given up the day of work for [my son] and now [my daughter] and that they did not realise that he was one of the only men there and that he actively made choices to do that. You know, that as a couple of parents we decided we would earn less money so that we could make these type of choices and that is quite a powerful thing men earning less money...

Embodied Experience Imbues the Father with Different Meaning

At least half of the feminist mothers in this study believe that the embodied experience is very real and very important and as such an area of growing up male that they hoped and witnessed their male partners contributing to. Kate explains this when she says:

They see him shave with a razor every day. By modelling this behaviour [it] will show them how to deal with some of those biological things of masculinity that I can’t help them with.

Leah explores this further when she describes the otherness for her because she has grown up within a female embodied experience:
I was having a conversation with my partner the other day. You know with [my daughter] I know what it is like to have that body, I can identify with it and I can talk to her about these issues. But what do I say to my son when he says his balls are hurting...and I don’t have that experience...

The embodied experience is also connected to male power and violence. For some of the women this has been something they have experienced first hand, as Rose explains:

I am not afraid that he is going to hurt them anymore...Because I had seen a lot of that go on as a kid...

The research participants in general describe this as something they are aware of, as Miriam describes:

I mean certainly there’s that thing of because he’s physically bigger than I am and stronger...you know, there is that sense as a different role that he plays in that way...

However, it was very important for these women that their partners recognise the different meanings that can be made because of the embodied differences, and that as a consequence, their partners have to be both aware of this and adjust their behaviour accordingly. It was also important that their partners do not misuse these differences, as Miriam asserts:

But as far as that kind of thing [physical size and strength] entering into how you resolve differences or problems or anything like that...they're not, they won’t be getting that message.

Analysis of the data show that these feminist mothers believe that as men there are specific areas of responsibility that their partners do have precisely because they are men. Below Iris explains the specific contribution she believes her partner makes in their sons developing masculinity because of these issues:
I think that he realises when he loses his temper...It resonates differently with them because they are boys. And I think a man losing his temper is scarier than a woman losing her temper. And I think he is very aware of the impact it has on the kids and the fact that he ultimately can reel them in easier than I can. Because he has got that, it can be easily misused by a male parent as the father.

Unlike mainstream literature that champions the benefits of the father representing normative masculinity in raising sons, the research participants believe that their partners must always be mindful and aware of the symbolic embodiment of masculinity that their partners represent to their sons.

MY REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF THE PARTNER

To conclude this chapter, I present some of my own reflections about my experiences of the role my partner has played, thus far, in the raising of our sons. While the thesis starts with my description of the inspiration for the research that solely reflects my position, I think it important to position my partner within the thesis topic as well.

I was in an unusual position when I had my first child, as my partner is an emergency paediatrician. This meant that rather than relying on midwives, maternal health nurses and books to learn about how to take care of my baby, I was able to rely on my partner a great deal. This reliance should not be underestimated. It was my partner who taught me how to hold my baby, wash my baby, change a nappy and swaddle him in ways that comforted him. It was also my partner who changed all the nappies for the first few weeks and nursed his circumcised penis. My partner too, organised his immunisations, checked his weight and growth against the weeks and months and explained, when I asked, how this was all going. This was the same when my second son was born.
In addition, my partner has always been, and continues to be, committed to both the physical and emotional caretaking of our children. This has meant, especially when the children were young, that he has organised his work around domestic responsibilities and we were, back in the day of child care, able to rotate days together with the kids, days where one of us had the kids to ourselves and days where one of us was at work or in my case studying and doing occasional paid work. Why is all of this important?

Reflecting on it now I have come to understand that it was important because it gave me time to retreat into my own head and to process, explore and dialogue with myself about masculinity and gender. Freed from sole responsibility for the children and having someone at hand who took the lead in physical care work in the beginning, meant that these were things I had the luxury of learning over time. This also meant I was afforded the rare opportunity to ruminate and reflect on my experience as it was happening.

I am aware that this is not the case for women who sole parent, I am also aware that this is not the case for many women who are in heterosexual relationships with men. And I am also aware that the dynamic has a different complexion for women in lesbian relationships. And importantly, I understand that our financial position, which places us in a small percentage of the population, afforded me time and space to engage in self-examination. Hopefully, my reflections turn out to be useful for more than myself, and others may take something away that contributes to their own sense making.

I write this from my own position as a woman who had given birth to sons and was immediately positioned in relation to masculinity discourse in ways that I had never previously experienced. So I was preoccupied with what this meant for me, and what I wanted it to mean for my sons. While it may seem like I am viewing my partner through rose-coloured glasses, it really did not occur to me that he would be anything other than supportive of my efforts to rethink the masculinisation of our sons. Is this naïve? I do not think so. We had been together for many years before we had children, and he had been present and shared my feminist journey in both my professional and personal
life. I felt secure in the belief that we would work things through together, from a feminist standpoint. And, thus far, I believe this has been the case.

This does not mean that we don’t fight, debate and work endlessly to negotiate the effect his male privilege has on our relationship, our parenting and the position from which our sons make sense of his masculinity. Nor does it mean I don’t feel ‘mother guilt’, experience anxiety or worry that I am not doing enough because he is more involved than many other fathers around us. But what it does mean, is that I always feel that the door of possibility and potential is open for us to try to get things right. As the women’s stories in this thesis suggest, this is not so different for them either.

At the end of the day, I feel strongly that because my partner, (like the male partners in this thesis), occupies a normative masculinity position, this behoves him as the partner of a feminist and as a man committed to gender equality, to listen to a feminist standpoint and to adjust his behaviour, his thinking and his masculinity practice accordingly. Is this an arrogant position to take? Is this the attitude only of a woman who is so very privileged? Many would answer yes I am sure. And I am far too uncomfortable with my own privilege to dismiss this possibility.

However, I do believe that women are entitled to have their experiences, and their opinion based on their experiences, listened to and acknowledged. I do feel lucky that my domestic situation exists as it does even though I know how hard I work to maintain it as such. I also feel entitled to demand that my concerns about the masculinisation of our sons be more than considered.

**CONCLUSION**

The majority of feminist mothers’ of sons interviewed for this research project actively introduce values, norms and accountability practices that aim to transform normative subjectivity by validating multiple masculinities. This practice is inclusive of their choice of partner and the fathers of their sons. In this partnership, over half of these feminist mothers try to co-opt the father in
order for him to make active contributions to the introduction and sanction of multiple masculinities. Consequently, I have extended the narrative of feminist maternal practice with sons to include the intentions these feminist mothers have for their partners and the expectations placed on them.

Feminist mothers in this study describe their partners as supporting a feminist critique of normative masculinity as well as support for introducing alternatives. Research participants describe their partners’ masculinity practices as inviting their sons to reflect on and take up multiple expressions of masculinity. In practice this means that feminism shapes the domestic arrangements within the home and mothers have a sense of entitlement to make demands, expect support and share responsibility. While the research participants believe that they take the responsibility for making gender matter, they allocate responsibility to fathers for masculinising their sons around non-normative masculinities. In this way, the feminist mothers interviewed describe the specific contribution by their partners as being in the construction of their sons ‘masculinities’. Their partners, according to the research participants, step in to non-normative masculinity subject positions in front of and in interaction with their sons. Feminist mothers in this study describe their partners’ practices as helping to undermine dominant discourse about what it means to be male or female. However, because this chapter identifies the unequal distribution of responsibility for making gender matter, this would appear to suggest a potential discrepancy in realising the full potential for undermining and changing gendered subjectivities.
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

This research aimed to explore feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons. This was approached through poststructural feminist ideas about gender as relationally constructed and feminist maternal practice. These two frameworks have been utilised as a means to dislodge patriarchal claims over the mother and son and to destabilise hegemonic masculinity ideals that perpetuate gender inequity. An in-depth exploration of twenty self-identified feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons has been the starting point from which to understand how these conceptual frameworks might be able to position the maternal subject as agentic and her relationship with her son as a legitimate location for the repositioning of gendered subjectivities.

As a conclusion to this thesis, I reflect on how the different chapters contribute to the research aims and construct a new story about the mother and son. I also locate the contributions made by this research within existing bodies of knowledge produced by feminist research about the mother and son. This chapter explores some of the potential limitations of the research and identifies specific areas that I believe the thesis can make an important contribution.

I argue that the overall significance of the contribution made by this thesis is to extend the feminist narrative about mothers and sons by connecting feminist maternal practice with the theory of doing gender. The result is a demonstration of the feminist mother and son relationship as an exciting and authentic location for feminist activism.
WRITING A NEW SCRIPT

But only men can initiate men, as only women can initiate women...boys need a second birth, this time a birth from men... (Bly 1992:16).

So to me feminism is about removing the other... (Iris).

This research signals a shift in feminist theorising about the mother and son relation. Through establishing that feminist maternal practice with sons is about doing gender the feminist mother is positioned as a feminist activist. Feminist maternal practice with sons is illustrative of power because it is ‘a relation of struggle’ (Belsey 2002:55) where the mother emerges as an agent of power. Through the interactional location between mother and son, she works towards the overall change of the status quo.

It is important to be clear that the majority of feminist mothers in this study do not have a problem with boys. They identify the discourse about the boy as a problem. This means that they are concerned that the discourse that positions their sons as boys, constructs their masculinity in such a way as to privilege masculinity over femininity. For these feminist mothers of sons, the discourse about their sons establishes a problematic relationship between masculinity and power.

The subordination of femininity is enacted through the patriarchal narrative about mothers and sons. This narrative establishes the argument for the exclusion of the mother, and is grounded in the idea that gender difference is innate, natural and fixed. This is the same argument that patriarchal ideology has utilised to establish structural, social, political, legal and economic gender disparity. And as such, the feminist mothers’ in this study describe their maternal practice with their sons as a consciously deliberate rejection of this narrative and gender difference discourse.

This discourse positions the mother, as symbolic of femininity, as other than her son. His masculinity must develop in relation to the understanding that to
become a man, he must establish as great a distance as possible between himself and the other. To do otherwise puts him at risk of being emasculated. And for the mother, this means that not organising her relationship with her son around difference is unnatural.

To emphasise, the mother, through dominant gender discourse, must be positioned as other. In this moment too, it is possible for her to be objectified. On a personal level between mother and son when she is objectified then her authority is removed, her knowledge is disqualified, her value is diminished. This means that masculine subjectivity is predicated on denial, and dismissal of the feminine subject. And masculine subjectivity is constructed around absence, of the mother, of the feminine.

This has far reaching implications for the relations between men and women on a much larger scale than the mother and son relationship. How is it possible to relate to someone when they are positioned as other? How is it possible to recognise someone as an equal if they are positioned as other? And how is it possible to establish empathy and understanding when women are positioned as other and the focus of any relationship becomes the difference between men and women? If the focus of the mother and son relationship becomes the difference between men and women the potential for gender equality remains grim.

That gender difference is made to appear natural through the doing of gender is crucial to the maintenance of the status quo. This thesis engaged a poststructural feminist enquiry in order to identify how gender difference is established and maintained through the mother and son relationship. I have also offered an alternative discourse that utilises the concepts of feminist maternal practice and the idea of gender as performative and relational. These ideas are used to interpret how the research participants’ experiences of raising sons resists gender difference discourse and attempts to disrupt the construction of problematic gendered subjectivities.
Power is not an object that is capable of being seized, held onto or shared. Power does not reside in an individual, agency or institution. Power is a relation; it is exercised through complex social networks. The action of ‘peripheral agents in these networks’ (Rouse 2003:109) that include the family, can be what establishes or enforces the connection between dominant discourse and a subordinate or marginalised discourse. The feminist mothers maternal practice in this study establishes them as part of the equation in the construction of their sons’ masculinities. And they emerge as agents of power generating change at the interactional level, within the mother and son relationship.

Constructing a feminist narrative about mothers and sons reinstates the maternal subject as both entitled to and capable of repositioning gendered subjectivities so that the mother forms part of the equation. Feminist maternal practice with sons constructs gendered subjectivities that are positioned in relation to each other not at the expense of the other.

Above all, the investigation of these feminist mothers’ experiences of raising sons has shown that there is a profound distinction between the boy and the dominant discourse about the boy. It is this distinction that provides the foundation upon which the feminist mother and son relationship can write a new script.

**LOCATING THE FINDINGS WITHIN FEMINIST RESEARCH ABOUT THE MOTHER AND SON**

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 present the story that has emerged through analysis of the data. The idea that the maternal subject enacts practices that are constitutive of gendered subjectivities frames the sense making of the data produced from the interviews with feminist mothers. This approach recognises feminist critique of the patriarchal narrative of the mother and son and employs a conceptual framework that I believe is able to contribute to new understandings about the intersection between feminism and masculinity discourse.
The following questions help elaborate on the way that I used the conceptual framework to allow different knowledges about the mother and son to emerge: First, if the mother as maternal subject is configured as agentic, how might feminism be able to inform the mother and son relationship? Second, if gender is considered constitutive, rather than pre-discursive, are there new possibilities for a mothers’ relationship with her son? Third, if gender is relational and feminism informs maternal practice, what is required for the relationship to be considered a site for social transformation? The following discussion situates my research within the emerging feminist story about the mother and son.

Feminist research that explores the mother and son relationship (Arcana 1983; Abbey, Castle and Reynolds 1998; Dooley and Fedele 2001; Griffin and Broadfoot 2010; Rowland and Thomas 1996; Thomas 1996; 2001; Rashbaum and Silverstein 1994; Smith 1996;) has been successful in identifying how patriarchal narratives and structures constrain the mother and son relationship. This cumulative body of knowledge that takes into account the mothers’ experience from her standpoint has identified, from a feminist perspective, the conflicts mothers’ of sons face and try to manage when they raise their sons. I would like now to consider how the findings of this thesis supports this knowledge and extends the narrative of the feminist mother and son relationship.

In Arcana’s (1983) research, she found that the traditional motherhood construct devalues the mother and that this affects boys’ attitudes towards women. She also argued that motherhood, as institution, needs to be dismantled in order to facilitate women’s empowerment. The feminist mothers I interviewed, try to establish a critical distance from the institution of motherhood in order to position themselves as a maternal subject capable of enacting a feminist maternal practice that rearranges gender relations. By establishing a critical distance from motherhood discourse, the feminist mothers interviewed for this thesis explain that their maternal practice is designed to re-present women as more than mother and to make women’s
lives visible to their sons. As a starting point they hold themselves accountable to feminist discourse in order to normalise, validate and make sense of their experiences. The findings clearly demonstrate that this is a position and a discourse that these feminist mothers of sons choose to orientate themselves in relation to and to enact. This standpoint supports them to conceptualise her entitlement and to process hopes and expectations that do not fit dominant discourse about mothers and sons.

Feminist maternal practice does not resemble motherhood discourse. The feminist mothers interviewed contest the idea of selflessness and adopt a discourse that ratifies a multiplicity of needs. They believe that attending well to children is predicated on attending to the needs of mothers as well. It is important for these feminist mothers to occupy multiple subject positions so that they are connected to more than their status as mother. They want to be seen as independent and vital and work to maintain a connection to the world outside of mothering. Independence means engaging in activities that do not resemble mothering and are separate to their relationships with their children. While it is important and possible to occupy multiple subject positions that include that of mother, it is not easy to do so. There is a constant negotiation between and across multiple subject positions. It is through their active interaction with feminist discourse that they are able to maintain their sense of entitlement to maintain this. They reject the idea transmitted through motherhood discourse that a woman is best able to define herself through her position as mother. What is paramount is her active re-positioning of her own maternal subjectivity so that her son views her as more than their mother.

Arcana (1983) also cautioned that the role models for boys are normative and therefore problematic. The thesis findings have identified that feminist maternal practice is inclusive of their choice of male partner. The feminist mothers interviewed in this research describe their partners as supportive of feminism, committed to presenting children with multiple masculinity subject positions and sharing the same beliefs in equality and opportunity. These
feminist mothers are forthright in saying that feminism is the framework from which the demands on their male partners emerge.

In this way, feminism contributes to the shaping of domestic arrangements within the home including the representation of men and women. Feminism also informs the interaction between father and son. The majority of feminist mothers in this study describe the way that fathers’ responsibility for masculinity has been rearranged to privilege and include the introduction of non-normative masculinity practices. These feminist mothers speak from the position of authority and entitlement to expect these behaviours and levels of responsibility from their partners.

The research participants describe the goal as being to undermine normative masculinity practices and see their male partners stepping into non-normative subject positions as facilitative. Stepping into non-normative subject positions is inclusive of engaging in non-normative masculinity practices in front of and in relation to their sons. This reflects the participants’ position that occupying multiple masculinity subject positions is constitutive of their sons’ gendered subjectivity.

The research data would suggest that their male partners make these feminist mothers feel optimistic about having sons and helps them to vision non-normative masculinities. They believe that their partners do gender with their sons by stepping into non-normative subject positions and by naming this practice as it happens. Occupying multiple subject positions is considered to be part of the process of undermining dominant discourse. For the research participants, witnessing is constitutive because it undermines dominant ideas, disrupts the norm and recreates possibilities.

In Smith’s (1996) research, while the women who were interviewed were not self-identified feminists, their ideas were subject to feminist analysis. Smith (1996) found that women lack an understanding about the construction of traditional masculinity. Her conclusion was that mothers are disconnected from their sons and thus not able to support them to develop alternative
masculinities. From this I have presumed, if mothers are aware of the social construction practices of normative masculinity then they will be in a better position to support their sons to occupy non-normative masculinity subject positions.

Smith’s (1996) findings are supported by Abbey, Castle and Reynolds (1998) who found that as feminist mothers themselves, they felt ignorant about the construction of male gender identity and do not believe they had placed enough focus on the complexity of masculinity as their sons were growing up.

In contrast, the feminist mothers I have interviewed describe witnessing the constant interaction between their sons and the normative gaze that places them under continuous surveillance. They recognise that it is hard for their sons to resist holding themselves accountable to their sex category because they want to fit in. The practice of conformity, they believe, constrains behaviour due to the risk of exclusion. They are witness to the consequences for their sons if their masculinity practice resembles femininity whether this is through the clothes and colours they wear, the emotional expressions they enact or the type of friendships they have. These feminist mothers of sons are also witness to the way their sons measure both themselves and others against normative masculinity practices. Their sons’ own behaviour is subject to internal surveillance as well. The external markers of masculinity construct a paradigm of behaviour that becomes internalised so that he engages in activity that makes him appear as unremarkable as possible. In addition, the feminist mothers interviewed recognise the impact they believe this has on their sons experience in the social world and express concern that the normalising gaze impacts on gender relations at large.

Rowland and Thomas (1996) interviewed lesbian and heterosexual women, not all who were in relationship with the father of their sons. In contrast, this thesis interviewed research participants who occupy hetero-normative subject positions from which they attempt to destabilise the norm and make visible the potential to enact alternative maternal subjectivities. Operating from a
normative subject position means that the research participants experience and make sense of their experience from a privileged location. Their privilege affords an opportunity to reject normative conditions as real, true and something to aspire to.

Rowland and Thomas (1996) found that feminist mothers are fearful of losing their sons to patriarchy and that this feminist critique, as well as their feminist goals, is a driving force supporting their sons to resist normative ‘male stereotypes’ (p. 133). The research participants in this thesis critique normative masculinity from a feminist standpoint and as such male privilege and power are of significant concern. Through their maternal practice they do gender with their sons by introducing standards of accountability and circulate norms and values that are deliberate attempts to dislodge male entitlement. In practice this means that their sons are expected to reorientate their masculinity practices so that they are mindful of the physical space they occupy, take into account the experiences and feelings of others, are allocated and expected to take equal responsibility for everyday domestic work and understand the value of a range of masculinity subject positions that do not reflect hegemonic ideals. Within the home, feminist maternal practice attempts to re-position masculinity, and boys are held accountable to these practices. Non-normative masculinity practices are validated and rewarded.

Thomas (2001) argues that her and Rowland’s (1996) study identifies feminist mothers concern that masculinity harms both women and men. She utilises the notion of sex roles and sex role stereotypes in describing mothers’ reliance on finding ‘anti-sexist’ men able to present non-normative ‘role-models’ (p.126) to their sons. In this thesis I have argued that gender is not only structurally located, it is relationally constituted through interaction and ongoingly produced through the subjects’ orientation to gender norms, standards and values. In this sense, the sons of feminist mothers require more than a model for how to behave appropriately according to their sex category. The change in gendered subjectivity requires both a re-positioning in relation to gender discourse and the context that supports and invites this change.
There needs to be a recognition of this change in orientation. It needs to be monitored and reinforced in order to stabilise new norms and establish different standards. This is an ongoing, interactive and fluid notion of change and gender. The mother is an interactive agentic participant in her sons’ development as an anti-sexist or pro-feminist adult male.

Rashbaum and Silverstein (1994) argue the dominant discourse about gender difference proscribes women’s relationship with their sons. This is a discourse, they argue, that promotes masculinity as an attribute of the individual that requires the right conditions necessary for a ‘healthy’ masculinity to emerge. Grounded in Freud’s description of the Oedipal complex, Rashbaum and Silverstein (1994) assert that mothers are exhorted to retreat from their sons, severing strong emotional connections as he enters the phallic phase for fear of emasculating her sons and causing psychological harm.

Dooley and Fedele (2001) also emphasise this and explore the effect of this discourse on mothers that require them to separate from their sons. In their research and their practice, they explore the ways that mothers raise ‘relational boys’ by privileging their connection to their sons. They focus on the importance of mothers working explicitly with their sons to develop their empathic capacities. In the course of their work with mothers and sons, they have found that this is indeed part of mothers’ maternal practice with their sons despite the societal messages to do the opposite.

The findings within this thesis echo Dooley and Fedele’s (2001) experience. While the feminist mothers interviewed work to develop their sons’ empathic abilities and support the development of their inner emotional landscape, this is considered important on two counts. First, these feminist mothers are clear that they believe developing their relational abilities will support their sons to feel connected in the social world and that this will facilitate their ability to foster meaningful relationships with others around them. Second, it is directly connected to their feminist critique of normative masculinity and the gender hierarchy that subordinates femininity. Because the gender binary asserts a
natural disconnection between men and women, these feminist mothers’ maternal practice has a strong focus on building their own relational practices. They believe that the gender binary devalues relationships between boys and girls instead valorising masculinity practices that are physical and engage the exterior activity of male bodies. These feminist mothers believe that this compromises their sons’ interior lives and diminishes their sense of connection to others.

The research findings identify that making women visible in the everyday lives of boys is intended to build their sons’ relationship to women in general. They share stories to normalise women’s bodies and demystify embodied experiences. This is a process of privileging women’s experiences in order to undermine gender neutrality. They aim to requalify women so that they are not as easily positioned as other, unknown and undervalued. Their feminist maternal practice is grounded in the relational, which is the idea that their sons’ subjectivity impacts on and is impacted by their relationship to the other. They aim to facilitate their sons understanding that their subjectivity exists in relation to femininities. They believe that this notion of intersubjectivity provides a solid foundation for relationships with women.

Griffin and Broadfoot’s (2010) research reflects on their own experiences as feminist mothers of sons. They assert that social institutions generate norms and expectations that cross over from the public domain influencing gender roles and identity in the home. They utilise the concept of outlaw mothers (Rich 1976) and argue that mothering can be a practice that disrupts ‘hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity’ (p.313). They conceptualise the mother and son relationship as a sanctuary of respite where space is created for sons to express alternative masculinities, engage in introspection and explore emotions.

This thesis explores the potential of the outlaw mother to enact a maternal practice that repositions boys’ subjectivities through in-depth interviews with twenty self identified feminist mothers of sons. The theoretical concepts of maternal practice are connected to the concept of gender as relationally
produced and the idea that gender is about accountability. A poststructural feminist analysis of the mother and son relationship has argued that discursive practices, as relations of power exact a normalising gaze on the subject. In order to emerge as a socially visible the subject must account for their gendered subjectivity by orienting their behaviour and actions according to standards and norms circulated through discourse and monitored by the normalising gaze.

Through this process, a detailed critique of gender difference discourse has emerged. Motherhood and masculinity as symbolic signifiers of the gender binary are critiqued and problematised from within the intimate location of the mother and son relationship. The resulting story demonstrates how mothers of sons engage a sophisticated feminist analysis of the effects of power.

The standards of behaviour that are imposed as feminist mothers do gender with their sons reflects these mothers critique of normative masculinity, their commitment to developing their sons relational selves and their goal of undermining male privilege. The theory of doing gender engages with not only the social location of oppression but how oppressive practice is produced. By looking into the ways that feminist mothers re-position their sons’ masculine subjectivities, not only are oppressive practices made visible, we learn how feminist practice actively works to interrupt, contest and shift oppressive practice.

These transformative masculinities are grounded in feminist critique of hegemonic masculinity ideals. This critique enables feminist mothers to develop a critical distance between their sons as boys and normative masculinity. This process also destabilises dominant discourse by considering alternatives that identify gaps and inconsistencies in the dominant discourse. Into these gaps and inconsistencies, feminist mothers create an opening for multiple masculinities.
LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This thesis is a situated product. The knowledge produced is specifically located and therefore informed by class, culture, race, sexuality and ability. I cannot speak for the mother and son relationship in general. There is no objective truth to capture; rather, I have been concerned with raising awareness of the under-scrutinised group that is the feminist mother and son.

Grand theories are normative and exclusionary, necessarily subordinating everyday lived experience of individuals who are on the margins (Everingham 1994). Therefore, this thesis is limited in developing a general strategy for bringing about social change that is representative without being totalising. However, there are some key concepts within contemporary feminist theory that engage, from a poststructural position, with the concepts of agency, autonomy, interaction and the social construction of the gendered subject. And I have attempted to apply some of these ideas to the particular and localised site of the mother and son interaction.

It is also important to me that this thesis does not act as a normative standard to which mothers of sons who might read this feel they have to measure themselves against. The risk in exploring how women mother is that those who may not recognise themselves in these pages are made to feel less than, or different, or that there is something ‘wrong’ about the way they mother.

Additionally, because this is an exploration of feminist mothers’ experiences I am wary about women who choose not to identify as feminist, feeling as though they are being told how they should think, feel and behave. Feminism in the public consciousness occupies a precarious position and I am aware that anti-feminist politics holds great sway often holding feminism up as an anti-men ideology that dissuades women from relating to feminism as a whole, and circulating the idea that feminists do not respect women who do not call themselves such. Having said this, however, I am not an apologist and I do believe that in emphasising that this thesis represents an alternative
story, not necessarily the true or best one, that it does not act as an exclusionary tale.

In considering the limitations of this thesis I think it is important to consider how realistic the premise is that mothers can choose to outlaw themselves from patriarchal motherhood? And, if women successfully establish a distance from motherhood discourse, what are the chances of mothering being a site for resistance, let alone an effective one? I believe that these questions still need to be explored if we are to consider the idea of raising sons as a potential site of resistance.

I do think, however, that there is a distinction to be made between actual sites of resistance and perceived possibilities for resistance. It is arguably unproven whether or not feminist mothers of sons are in any real position to subvert the dominant paradigm of mothering, the mother and son relationship or hegemonic masculinity practices. However, what this study has shown is that the feminist mothers in this study believe it is their responsibility to try and they believe that they are entitled to do so. This is a big enough statement on its own, given the historical patriarchal narrative about the mother and son, and contemporary public discourse that demands the mother disengage from masculinity.

The women in this study showed an optimism and sense of certainty in their ability to affect their sons’ lives and in so doing the lives of those around their sons. This could in large part be due to their social location and high education status. These women are privileged in many ways. They have a sense of control over their own lives informed by secure financial positions, supportive partners (financially and emotionally) and an education history that generates insight and language skills. It is likely that all this fosters a greater sense of their ability to affect the world around them.

Another limitation of this thesis is the participants’ demographic. Given that the majority of women in this study have primary and pre-school age children, much of what they spoke of was an imagined ideal and possibility
based on their own lived experiences and their knowledge about human interaction. However, construction is not a ‘complete and closed process’ (Jeremiah 2006:25) so it is important to consider what this might mean for the ongoing interaction between mother and son throughout childhood, into young adulthood and as adults. Many participants felt it was unreasonable to expect their sons to radically reject a ‘macho’ masculinity or patriarchal privilege. These are the biggest limits to this study and it would be interesting to speak again with these women in ten or twenty years time to gauge their sense of success in interrupting the process of hegemonic masculinity and how they experience their sons as grown members of society.

The machination of doing gender that saturates the social fabric of society outside of the home may indeed, in the end, be too attractive a proposition for their sons. Peer culture, school, the media etc. are powerful mediums for the circulation of normative masculinity discourse that reflects and maintains the institutionalisation of male power and privilege. I do not want to over estimate the potential of feminist maternal practice when in reality neither the boys in this study, nor their mothers and fathers, are sequestered from the everyday influence of hegemonic masculinity discourses.

All these families are embedded within a social, cultural, political and economic culture that promotes, validates and circulates hegemonic male dominance. Male privilege and power are attractive options for boys and men, and, while they may be aware of alternatives within the home and of values and ideals that reflect a social justice and anti-sexist stance in regard to women, it is likely that they are ongoingly positioned in relation to hegemonic masculinity ideals and that this may suit them more often than not.

Another limitation of this study is the work status of the twenty research participants. Of the twenty women interviewed, all work part time while fourteen of their male partners work full time, four part time, one self-employed and working on an ad hoc basis and one of retirement age. The women interviewed are more bound to the domestic and private realm than
their partner and they remain more readily available to the demands of their sons. This appears to indicate that the women in this study are not structurally upsetting the dominant paradigm and it is important to consider the implicit message that their sons are getting from the domestic arrangements.

The research findings indicate there remains, within the research participants’ domestic arrangements, an unequal relation of power between these men and women. Traditional structures do subordinate women and reproduce cultural gendered norms. Additionally, gender difference as natural is reinforced and reconstituted by the maintenance of existing traditional structural arrangements. Through these traditional gender arrangements, normative masculinity and femininity are ongoingly produced. This is in direct contradiction to the articulated goals of the interview participants’ feminist maternal practice. It is also, according to key feminist theorists around mothering (O’Reilly 2004; Rich 1976), necessary for traditional arrangements to be dismantled if mothers are to inform social change through parenting. It is important then to consider what the data might say about this contradiction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the data reveal key similarities for these mothers with the day-to-day arrangements in the majority of heterosexual families at large. While there have been shifts in the uptake of caretaking of their children by men, mothers remain the primary caregivers and fathers are more generally categorised as ‘secondary parents’ (Arnold and Wall 2007:508).

In particular, there are replications in this research project where fathers themselves identify similar ideals in regards to shared parenting and equal responsibility for children. A national study undertaken in the United States (Harrington; Humberd and Van Deusen 2011) interviewed 963 fathers engaged in fulltime employment. The majority of fathers in this study identified a belief in the equal division of caretaking for their children and a desire to be involved in their children’s lives. These aspirations existed alongside these same fathers’ goals for their own professional growth and development through their paid work outside the home. However, the key findings of this research found that after the birth of their children, little
adjustment was made to their paid work and their spouses provided more care for their children.

The researchers were led to believe that there is a significant disconnect between ‘aspirations and reality’ (Harrington; Humberd and Van Deusen 2011:22). The research authors question the fathers’ articulated goals of wanting to be more involved with caregiving, yet who spend more time in their paid work place where they identify a ‘strong emphasis on advancing to senior positions with their employers’ (2011:23). The tension between feminist mothers’ accounts of their partners ideals in my research and their more traditional lived family arrangements, has resonance with the disconnect between fathers who have aspirations for shared caregiving and the reality of their work/home make-up.

There are a number of factors that inform the disconnect between aspiration and reality. Arnold and Wall (2007) suggest that it is a complex interrelationship between public and social policy, the culture of the workplace and the gender wage gap. Harrington, Humberd and Van Deusen (2011) highlight income capability as a key indicator. And, to some extent this is supported by a quarter of the research participants in my study who do mention their partner’s ability to earn more as a factor in the decision making in relation to who works full time and who does not. Hays (1996) succinctly summarises the problem as linked between the general values of the marketplace versus the values of parenthood and she goes on to say that:

> Under current circumstance, our best hope for easing women’s burden remains increased public power for women, higher public status for those involved in caregiving, and greater paternal participation in child rearing (1996:176-177).

The implication of the data sample where these mothers work part time and their partners fulltime, combined with the research findings that these feminist mothers take more responsibility for making gender matter, indicate that male privilege still operates within feminist-informed households. There
is a distinctly unequal distribution of psychic and physical responsibility in relation to parenting their sons. Are the fathers in this study blind to the consequence of their privilege because their day-to-day lives benefit? Or, does their male privilege mean that they assume entitlement to develop professionally at the expense of increased involvement in domestic life? And do the benefits they gain from their privilege in terms of less menial work, public recognition through career advancement as well as financial gain mean that their ideals about equality are subsumed and relegated as secondary. Does being the secondary parent not create as much concern for fathers as being secondary workers?

As men, it is possible that normative constructions of masculinity are still very strong invitations in these fathers lives. They have also been socialised within a culture of hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps then it is not surprising that they may measure their value as being connected more to their professional development and status than shared involvement in domestic duty and parenting practice?

I think too that the class status of the interview participants is an important factor to consider in regards to the more traditional domestic arrangements that shape these women’s families. Perhaps once they had children these women, all of whom had careers and qualifications, were reluctant to work full time because of the difficulties with logistics, care taking or a sense of responsibility connected to their status as women. It is also possible that their relationship to their own ideals as women and mothers have constituted a maternal desire that results in reluctance to privilege full time employment. However, I think it is also very reasonable to assert that they are privileged enough not to have to work full time per se.

Regardless, there remains the larger issue of the impact that traditional patterns of gender socialisation have on these feminist mothers’ ability to experience empowered mothering and activate their goals of social change through their maternal practice. O’Reilly (2004) emphasises that raising empowered daughters and anti-sexist sons is only possible ‘outside the
patriarchal institution of motherhood’ (p.60). While in this thesis I have argued, and the data I believe demonstrate, the different ways these feminist mothers are doing this, there still remains the significant issue that the structural arrangements within the home in regards to caretaking, and thus gendering, is predominantly carried out by women. This undoubtedly reflects traditional power and patriarchal paradigms. O’Reilly’s (2004) concern is that maternal agency and a sense of empowered mothering is predicated on maternal authority and autonomy. Patriarchal power is embedded in these family arrangements and this can undermine maternal authority.

The research sample and the data indicate that feminist maternal practice, in regards to day-to-day parenting and decision-making, remains hostage to traditional gendered power disparity. Fathers’ work, and time spent parenting, informs the structure and the relational exchange within the home for everybody. Power imbalance is woven through these feminist mothers’ families and the data reveal that shifts in power have not changed, even for feminist mothers.

While these feminist mothers’ accounts of their male partners indicate support for the repositioning of non-normative masculinity positions, there is a disparity between the actual family structure not mirroring the mothers’ ideals, language and relational practices. Their sons may be invited to take up non-normative masculinity practices, and they may see their fathers engage in non-normative masculinity practices when they are at home; however, because their sons witness and are parented in response to traditional gendered divisions, this is a significant disconnect.

In order to further examine this impact of the domestic arrangements within the research participants homes, it might be useful to identify the social world in which Chodorow’s (1999) theory of the development of the gendered psyche and its connection between mothering and male dominance is situated. Her description of said society is thus:
In a society like ours, in which mothers have exclusive care for infants and are isolated from other adults, in which there is physical and social separation of men/fathers from women/mother and children, and institutionalised male dominance…(Chodorow 1999:108).

I am aware, however, that while the context of the mothers in this study is not a mirror image of Chodorow’s above description, it is of concern that the majority of mothers in this study are the primary care takers. However, even though institutionalised male dominance persists and the women occupy a more traditional social position the context of the mothers in this study are not a mirror image of Chodorow’s (1999) description above. There are two main differences I believe it is important to point out.

First, the women in this study describe a maternal practice aimed at representing and making visible both their maternal subjectivity and non-maternal subjectivities to their sons. While the mother does carry out more unpaid labour than her partner, the consequences of her maternal practice should not be underestimated. Benjamin (2002) argues that the emergence of the maternal subject and her sustained visibility ‘allows maternal identification to become less repudiated by men, again ameliorating the split between object love and identification’ (p.42).

As discussed, the results of the data indicate that the feminist mothers of sons in this study are concerned with maintaining an identity that sits outside of their relationship with their sons and they attempt to do this both logistically, but, also through articulating and naming this in their interactions with their sons. Similarly they describe their male partners verbalising this to their sons.

Chodorow (2002) has more recently suggested that the visibility and validation of the maternal subject is significant. This would appear to reflect the findings that Harry Christian (1994) encountered in his research into the life experiences conducive to anti-sexist attitudes among men. Of the 30 men interviewed, one of the main findings was 23 of the men’s description of their
early life departing from traditional gender expectations. He found that a predisposing influence in the making of anti-sexist men were their descriptions of having ‘strong mothers’ who were involved in ‘regular paid employment at some stage during their childhood’ (p.23). And importantly, it was the mother displaying unconventional gender roles who had a more ‘decisive influence’ (p.23) rather than their fathers. While the women in this study only work part time, they do nonetheless earn an income and/or actively pursue non-mothering related activities.

Second, in recent years Chodorow (2002; 2011) has adjusted her thinking about the effect of shared parenting between men and women suggesting that she overestimated the relationship between shared parenting and the personal meaning of gender (Chodorow 2011). She acknowledges a tension with attaching external structural change to a requirement for internal (psychic) change. In this she submits:

If you take seriously that psychological subjectivity from within-feelings, fantasy, physical meaning-is central to a meaningful life, then you cannot also legislate subjectivity from without or advocate a solution based on a theory of political equality and a conception of women’s and children’s best interests that ignores this very subjectivity (Chodorow 2011:59).

However, Chodorow’s (2002) changed thinking has also developed as a consequence of observing ‘the differences between mothers and fathers who share childcare…’ (p.51). She argues that mothers and fathers are not interchangeable because of the embodied experience and the differences assigned to men and women socially and culturally. Additionally, she differentiates between ‘shared’ parenting and ‘equal’ parenting and ‘would not assume that behavioural sharing eliminates or need eliminate gender difference and individuality in psychic reality’ (p.51). Increased involvement from the father in physical and emotional care taking of their sons will,
according to Chodorow (2002), leave boys feeling less conflicted about a masculinity that involves emotional and physical intimacy.

While the majority of the interview participants’ partners work full time (14) and some part time (5 excluding one who was retired), the feminist mothers interviewed describe the content of their partners interaction with their sons as being qualitatively different than the men Chodorow (1999) describe.

However, role adoption is not synonymous with the quality or nature of children’s interactions with their parents. And it is possible that the son can identify with his father in a personal way, rather than solely in a positional way (Duindam and Spruijt 2002). The interview participants’ partners engage in physical care taking that is inclusive of nurture, emotional connection, physical contact and mundane (according to the interview participants). It is possible that as a result of the content of their interactions with their fathers, despite their structural positioning that their sense of their own masculinity may not be entirely founded on their ‘rejection of an earlier, identification with his mother…’(Duindam and Spruijt 2002:29).

Duindam and Spruijt (2002) conducted a study that explored caring fathers in the Netherlands and their connection to their sons’ experiences of their fathers when young. While their definition of caring fathers meant that men share equal task division with their female partners, they found that it was ‘having relatively good relationships’ with them that inspired boys and ‘influenced the amount of caring activities they did’ (p.31). They concluded that they were in agreement with Chodorow’s theory that asserted the positive development of a caring masculinity and that ‘boys who identify with their father in a personal way acquire the capacities and motivation to care’ (p.31).

Christian’s (1994) study found that of the 30 men interviewed only four described identifying with their fathers and these were the only four who described their fathers as unconventional and nurturing. I would suggest that if not all then the majority of partners described in this thesis do not meet conventional gender expectations despite 14 of the 20 working full time. I
think that Christian’s (1994) findings may be a useful idea in order to consider that, despite the feminist mothers in this study not appearing to structurally upset the dominant paradigm, the fact that they work part time, occupy multiple subjectivities and that their partners are committed to emotional and physical intimacy and a degree of care taking, could be conducive to supporting both their sons positive identification with their mother and father and support their commitment to non-normative masculinity practices. This would appear to support Chodorow’s (2002) more recent elaboration on her both-and relational individualism, which she describes as meaning ‘a separation and individuation that are relational and require recognizing the other as a subject’ (p.50).

A further limitation of the thesis is that the information about male partners is from a feminist mother’s standpoint and meaning making, not the fathers. This means that there are stories not told, especially about the time alone between father and son. These interactions are also constitutive and could be very different. The partners of the research participants spend time and interact with their sons on their own, away from and separate from the interviewees. This has the potential for very real impact on the research participants’ sons to be doing gender with a father who socially, culturally and economically reflects the norm. This is information that is missing from my thesis. To not include these means that the doing of gender between a father, who is positioned as normative, and his son remains unexplained from the research participants’ perspective.

The gap is in not knowing what it means for the transformation of masculine subjectivities when a father who is positioned as normative does gender with his son. My goal, however, was to extend the narrative of feminist maternal practice with sons that is inclusive of women’s standpoint about their male partners.

I would say though, that regardless of the age of the research participants’ sons, it is clear from their accounts that these feminist mothers are privy to and very much aware of the way that normative masculinity is the standard to
which their sons are held accountable. Their stories demonstrate a nuanced feminist analysis of gender discourse and the way that their sons’ gendered subjectivities are positioned by this discourse. Reconstructed forms of subjectivity are required to challenge social relations of subordination and domination. And understanding how subjects are constituted is important in creating the capacity for critical reflection and reconstruction.

They are absolutely clear in their assessment that normative masculinity does not reflect an innate essence but rather that it is constitutive. And with a feminist focus, they invite their sons to reorientate and take up masculinity subject positions that are designed to disrupt male power and privilege. I have argued throughout the thesis, that context conditions the subject as the subject continuously interacts and respond to multiple contexts within which they are located. The mother and son relationship may only be one of these, but it is still an important social context through which the gendered subject emerges.

Their attempts to reposition their sons’ subjectivities may not always be successful, but through their feminist maternal practice they are committed to do gender differently and to stake a claim in the construction of their sons’ masculinities. And I do think that feminist maternal practice with sons needs to be included in feminist accounts of the transformation of gender relations.

The private domain does not exist outside of culture. Its members interact with and respond to dominant discourse by enacting alternative discourse. This is a deliberate, disruptive practice designed to identify the inconsistencies and gaps in dominant discourse and reducing the totalising effect. Maternal practice is not exempt from power relations but rather in direct relationship, establishing cultural meanings and values (Everingham 1994). I argue that transformation of society rests on the telling of multiple stories about lived experience so that no single story can claim the truth.

Through understanding that the mother and son relationship is a discursive route through which gender is constructed, it is possible to think differently
about motherhood and gender. This difference can position the mother and son as a site for change in gender relations.

**FURTHER RESEARCH**

It would be interesting to conduct research with sons of feminist mothers and explore how they experience this relationship. I would be interested to know if they have come to understand the relationship between masculinity and masculinity discourse. I would also be interested to know how they think their relationship with their mothers might have informed their thinking about masculinity and about women in general. And importantly, I think that future research needs to consider the political implications for mothers and sons if maternal practice continues to operate within patriarchal divisions of labour like the sample in this thesis.

**SPECIFIC AREAS THAT THE THESIS MAY HAVE INFLUENCE ON**

**Contribution to Public Discourse**

The findings in Chapter 9 of this thesis suggest that real gender equity in the domestic realm is still an elusive reality, even for women who identify as feminists and where feminism is a factor in the cultural landscape of the family activity. The interrelatedness between public policy, gendered wage gaps and access to parental leave that is not gendered, may all conspire to reinforce the culture of hegemonic masculinity. Any focus on the mother and son relationship as a location for change will need to include a call for structural change outside the home.

I would like this research to contribute to the public discourse about mothers and sons. At the time of writing, the only contemporary books available to mothers of sons, about mothers and sons, in public libraries and bookshops, are either written by men (bar one) and/or espouse a patriarchal narrative. This has not changed over the 12 years since my first son was born. In addition, regular newspaper articles reinforce the narrative of the over bearing
mother who emasculates her son because she just can’t step away. Movies and advertisements regularly represent the mother and son connection as problematic. The public discourse about the mother and son is very clear about speaking to the normative male ideal. And because it is embedded within the idea of gender difference, for the mother to be involved is to go against nature.

To suggest that the mother may not want her son to grow up into the normative male defies public discourse. This idea is highly problematic for patriarchal ideology because when we, as women, construct our own views that inform feminist maternal practice, we are exercising social power.

The patriarchal narrative is able to retain authority as long as the status quo remains. I am very much committed to making an alternative story available. And it is my intent to use the knowledge produced in this thesis to contribute to public discourse about mothers and sons.

I also think that making this thesis story available to mothers can facilitate their own dialogues with their sons. Making a feminist narrative available to mothers might help define what feminism can be and how it can work in the everyday lives of women.

**Men’s Behaviour Change Programs**

The research story and results can be used to develop the program content, structure and goals of men’s behaviour change groups. That these feminist mothers hold both their sons and masculinity accountable, means that a focus on male power and privilege is retained. This also means that a feminist critique of the effect of male power is used to assess masculinity practices that are enacted in the everyday. While it is important to focus on masculinity, historically this has meant that femininity and women’s lives have been marginalised and the impact of masculinity practices on women has been assessed from men’s standpoint.
The experiences of these feminist mothers of sons demonstrate how masculinity can be studied without marginalising women. This has strong implications for the structure of men’s behavioural change programs and provides a rationale for feminist women’s input and assessment of men’s behavioural change programs.

Men’s behaviour change programs exist in order to address the abuse of male power and privilege. The critique of normative masculinity and the elaboration of normative masculinity practices that position men, according to hegemonic masculinity ideals, is conducted by the feminist mothers of sons in this research. The knowledges that they have about these mechanisms of power could be very useful in the design and content of men’s behavioural change programs.

In addition, feminist mothers’ maternal practice draws attentions to different ways of doing gender that reposition masculinities. These practices could have useful application within men’s behaviour change programs.

**Teach the Teacher Education**

While teachers already have a heavy workload, it is important to build on their knowledge about the ways that gender is done in the classroom and the school environment in general. The research participants’ analysis of the ways that normative masculinity practices are enacted through gender discourse can provide a useful framework for teachers when they work with boys and girls. While there are existing programs and resources about masculinity operating in the Australian school system (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003), to my knowledge the information used to provide content for these programs does not necessarily stem from a feminist standpoint generated by women. Understanding the mechanisms of power that invite boys to take up normative masculinity practices and the discourses that can either reinforce these practices or undermine them, can potentially be useful tools for teachers in unpacking how masculinity is constructed.
Parent Education Programs

Parent education programs are often targeted at new parents as part of primary prevention strategies. For example, VicHealth (a Victorian Government health promotion initiative) runs the ‘And Baby Makes 3’ program. The goal of this program is to develop equal and respectful relationships between men and women as they transition to parenthood. As a discussion-based program there are numerous opportunities to provide information to fathers about ways that they can support their partners. This VicHealth program also targets maternal child health nurses and focuses on ‘practical strategies for promoting gender equality during the transition to parenthood’ (Flynn 2011:1).

The data from this research could be used to establish information and training components of the above program (or those that are similar) in regards to key practices for parents to think about in their everyday discourse and parenting practice with their new child. Supporting new parents to think about gender difference discourse in ways that can undermine the reproduction of gender inequity could be considered a key primary violence prevention strategy. Information provided to new parents can support them to make considered decisions about the raising of their sons. Importantly, the information that the feminist mothers in this thesis have shared about the supportive role of their male partners in both occupying and making available non-normative masculinity subject positions could pave the way for new parents to consider alternative gender discourses that are more in line with gender equality principles.

Academic Contribution

This thesis has contributed to theoretical ideas about gender and maternity that can be taken up by future theorists. The conceptualisation of feminist maternal practice with sons as an interactional location for doing gender differently will generate further thinking and ideas about gender relations. The experiences of the feminist mothers raising sons in this study, extends theoretical ideas about gender as relationally constituted. I have combined the
contemporary feminist idea of maternal practice with the theoretical accounts of gender as performative, in order to establish the mother and son relationship as a location where feminist analysis and activism can be considered as an important and legitimate site for social change. In so doing, the thesis requalifies women’s experience and knowledge produced in the private domain and establishes their feminist practice as part of wider feminist activism.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The start of this thesis identifies my inspiration for this research topic but there has been a number of years go by between then and now. The process has been a long one and over the course of time both my sons have moved into primary school and my oldest son is starting high school next year. On completing this journey, I have asked myself, how have my ideas about my sons and gender changed through the course of doing this thesis?

While I interviewed the research participants in 2008 I write this reflection in July 2013. Between then and now I have been intimately involved with their transcripts and the theoretical literature that provides the framework to make sense of their words. This means that for me, the interview participants’ stories have become a part of my conscious process in the everyday interaction with my own sons. It has become impossible now for me to identify where my ideas about masculinity stop, and where their stories and ideas start. It might help I think to share two stories of my own.

The exact impact on my own maternal practice as a consequence of the ongoing interaction with these feminist mothers’ stories is hard to gauge, yet I feel as though it is vast and constitutive. I share, just as one example although there are so many more, how I embraced Rose’s story about demanding non-normative masculinity practices when her sons wrestle.
In Rose’s story, detailed in Chapter 8, she described creating some very clear rules when her sons set about play fighting with each other. For Rose it was important that they move away any furniture or objects that could either cause her sons physical harm or be destroyed by their own wrestling. Rose explained that if one of the two hurt each other, play must stop. During this break they need to attend to each other, asking each other if they are okay and sticking with their brother until he feels better. Then they were allowed to resume the wrestle.

When I first interviewed Rose, this example resonated very strongly with me. At that time my two sons were very young possibly 5 and 7 years old. Many parents and raising boys books may have suggested to let them wrestle and at such a young age have no expectation that they would be able to control themselves, let alone follow Rose’s idea. These books, or other parents, may have even said that to ask them to do what Rose suggests would be to ask them to not be themselves, that it is natural that such young boys wrestle, hurt each other and that it always ends in tears and that there is not much one can do about it. However, for Rose, and for myself, I understood that this offered an opportunity to do gender differently. So I appropriated Rose’s practice and introduced this in to my own home.

Like Rose, my children are not discouraged from wrestling; however, like in Rose’s home, there are very clear parameters and expectations of behaviour that they are expected to conform to. That is, we have established normative standards of behaviour that are considered appropriate and do not resemble but instead work to undermine normative masculinity practice. When they engaged in these non-normative standards their actions were validated and acknowledged positively.

It is now some five and a half years later and my two sons are nearly 9 and a half and 12 years old respectively. They have been accountable to these standards for a number of years now and they still love to wrestle multiple times a week. We now have a trampoline and this is their favoured space to wrestle. I can see the trampoline from our kitchen window.
When I hear a cry or a scream I look out the window and without failure they have stopped their wrestling and the unhurt son sits with his hand resting on his brother asking him if he is okay. Importantly he stays with him until he is feeling able to move on. They do not start again until the one who is hurt has moved through his pain and his brother has stayed with him in that process.

It is hard to fully describe how momentous I believe this practice has become. They do not turn away from someone else’s cries, they do not hurry each other to get over the pain, they acknowledge the pain and they allow the pain to be expressed. They are not afraid of their brother’s cries, they know it will pass and they know that if they attend to their brother it will pass more quickly and they can get back to wrestling!

I believe that this practice encourages them not to trivialize or ignore another. I also believe that it constructs a masculine subjectivity that privileges connection to another person, that invites empathy and challenges normative masculinity practices that invite our sons to ‘man up’ to ‘get on with it’ and to leave another person to push through on their own.

It is a frequent occurrence that I am told by another parent or a teacher that one of my sons has been responsible for guiding another boy into sick bay, or finding a teacher, or stood up for a boy who has been hurt or picked on. I choose to believe that this practice is an extension of the care taking standards initiated by Rose’s comments so long ago. I think too, that the sense making I have made has come from trying to weave together the ideas of feminist maternal practice and doing gender. This has both helped me to remain committed to this practice and importantly, helps me to describe how feminist maternal practice with sons is about doing gender.

Over the course of this research process, I have read, re-read and written about gender. My instincts so many years ago that the gender binary limits potential and totalises experience to the extent that certain experiences and feelings are marginalised, left without a name for describing them, has influenced the way I make sense of my sons.
Like the women in this thesis, language matters very much to me. I am vigilant about attending to the language that my sons use; it is and always has been, the norm to correct gender-biased language. I have been doing this since they were born. While I cannot fully know how all of this will impact on my sons’ sense making of the world in twenty years time, or even when they are in the playground at school, there are events and scenarios that give me some idea. This leads me to the second story.

Last year my partner and I wanted to go to a same sex marriage equality rally. I had told our sons that we would be going in a few days time and that the day before we would head to the shop to buy materials to make a banner. I had told them that they had a few days to think about what they would like to say or draw on the banner and that it was their job to come up with the concept, choose the materials and work out how to carry the sign. As the banner-making day arrived we headed out and they chose the materials of the banner, the coloured markers, the wooden poles etc. We arrived home and the two of them discussed their ideas for the banner. They had decided that they wanted to use the symbols for men and symbols for women that were often on male and female toilets. They wanted to use two female symbols next to each other with a plus sign in the middle and a big heart drawn around them. This would be similar for the two male symbols. They set about making their signs. When they had done this they brought them in to show me. They were very excited to point out, in case I missed it, that they had coloured the two male symbols inside a love heart with pink marker and the two female symbols were coloured with a blue marker. My younger son explained slowly to me, so that I would understand, that they had swapped the colours around on purpose. He wanted me to know that they thought this was another way of making things fairer.

In some ways this is a complicated scenario to unpack. Were they trying to please me? Undoubtedly. They know my position about gay marriage, they understand that some of the grown ups they know don’t have the same rights as other grown ups. And they know that being gay is difficult, that violence,
discrimination and exclusion happen often to men and women who are gay. This is a constant and open conversation in our home. And as my children, they feel good when they have pleased me. This is the power I wield as a grown up, as their parent.

At the same time, because they feel good when they please me, because they get my attention in a positive way when they stand against homophobia or use language that is inclusive of homosexual love, they engage in this way all the time, in interaction with me. In this sense they are being oriented towards non-normative standards, their context demands this of them and their context rewards them when they meet these non-normative standards. This is what West and Zimmerman (1987) mean when they describe how gender is done.

The end result? Two posters made by 9 and 11 year old boys that demonstrate they understand the power of symbolising systems. And I am reminded of Simran’s story where she is emphatic about believing the potential of young boys to understand that gender matters, and of how it is constructed.

Above all, I have learnt through reading and re-reading the transcripts that I am not alone in thinking that gender difference discourse is a problem. And having these women’s words and stories running through my head has helped me maintain the energy that is required to do gender differently. It is not easy mothering on the margins, but it is easy to doubt yourself, to worry about making a fuss over something and placing demands on little people that others around me don’t always seem to understand. But I have also learnt, from the women in this thesis, that it is okay to mother on the margins and that I have a right to want to do it differently. That it is not a pie in the sky idea to believe that somehow, how I parent can affect the world outside of the relationship I have with my sons.
APPENDIX 1: INTRODUCTION

LETTER

10 September 2007

Sarah Epstein
990 Drummond St
North Carlton 3054
Melbourne

Dear

Hello and thank you for taking the time to read this information.

I have enclosed:

- Plain Language Statement - which describes a bit about the research, the research process and what your involvement would mean for you.
- Consent Form – after you have read the plain language statement, if you are still interested, can you please sign the consent form and return it to me. I will give you a photocopy when we meet for the interview.
- Postage paid and addressed envelope - please place the signed consent form in the envelope and mail back to me.

If you decide to participate and send in the consent form I will contact you by telephone. We can then make a time to conduct the interview.

Regards and thank you,

Sarah Epstein
Dear

This letter contains detailed information about the research project. Its purpose is to explain to you as openly and clearly as possible all the procedures involved in this project before you decide whether or not to take part in it.

Please read this document carefully. Feel free to ask questions about any information in the document. You may also wish to discuss the project with a relative or friend. Once you understand what the project is about and if you agree to take part in it, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form. By signing the Consent Form, you indicate that you understand the information and that you give your consent to participate in the research project. You will be given a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep as a record.

Student Researcher Information

My name is Sarah Epstein and I am enrolled in a Masters Research program at Deakin University. The title of my research is Mothers and Sons: Feminist
mothers’ narratives about raising sons. My formal qualifications include a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Social Work degree. I have worked as a youth worker, social worker, counselor, group worker and clinical supervisor in individual and group settings. My focus has primarily been in the area of violence against women, family support and more recently the provision of clinical supervision and support to workers in the women’s and youth sector.

**Motivation for the research**

This research project has come about due to my own experience as a feminist mother raising two young sons. Consequently, I have realized that this topic has not been a considerable part of the feminist agenda nor indeed has it been a large focus of the wider community. I have found that a review of the literature supports this thesis and, especially in Australia, the experiences of women raising sons has been marginalized.

This research project aims to explore the reasons why and to make visible feminist mothers’ experiences of raising their sons. The research project will explore concepts of masculinity and how this relates to feminist mothers’ parenting experiences. I am also interested in how feminist mothers may or may not involve their male partners in the parenting process.

I am interested in speaking with you about:

- Your experience of raising your son/s
- How you feel about having a son
- How you work with your partner in parenting your son/s
- Ideas you have about masculinity and gender
- Dilemmas you might experience in raising your son/s

I believe that feminist mothers raising sons are important contributors to the development of an equitable, diverse and just society. As such, I am committed to making these stories visible and in so doing, learning about this enduring and important relationship.
This letter is an invitation to participate in this research project. I have outlined below the research process and what this would mean for you as a research participant.

**Participant Involvement**

- Telephone or email contact will be an opportunity for you to ask me questions and seek further clarification of the project. We will make a time to meet to conduct a one-on-one interview.
- The interview can be conducted at your home or work address if this suits you. If this is not suitable then we can arrange a time to meet at my home address.
- The interview will be one and a half hours in duration.
- During the interview I will audio-record our conversation that will later be transcribed.
- Once your interview has been transcribed I will send you a copy. In addition, if you wish, I can send you sections of text where elements of your transcript are included.
- After the interview has concluded you may find yourself thinking further about some of the topics we have covered and/or ideas, thoughts and feelings that you feel were not covered during the interview. I would strongly welcome your written reflections.
- Your written reflections following on from the interview will be incorporated into the transcript of the record of your interview.
- Participating in the interview does not mean you have to provide a written reflection afterwards. The written reflection is an option only that you are welcome to take up if it fits for you.
- After we have met and the interview has been completed it is likely we will have some further telephone contact with each other.

**Single session focus group:**

As part of the research process, I am intending to conduct a one off, two-hour focus group. This part of the project will be open to all who have participated in the individual interview. The focus group is not compulsory. After the individual interviews have been conducted I will invite participants to attend the focus group. I anticipate that the focus group will consist of between six to twelve participants. The focus group discussion will be audio-recorded and later transcribed.
Focus Group Structure:

The focus group content will follow on from the individual interviews. Themes and ideas raised in the individual interviews will be tabled during the session and participants invited to discuss and reflect with each other. The aim is to gather a rich description of women’s stories about raising sons that is generated through lively and considered discussion with each other, as opposed to a more rigid and isolated individual interview structure. Parenting can be isolating in and of itself, perhaps the focus group will contribute in some way to facilitating a sense of connection.

The focus group will be facilitated and moderated by myself and I am confident that my experience and training in group-work can be utilized well in the focus group format. The focus group participants will be asked to agree to guidelines for the session that are aimed at providing a respectful, non-judgmental and safe space for discussion. The session guidelines will be sent to participants prior to the focus group session commencement date. At the beginning of the session, the guidelines will be explained and the participants present asked to ratify them.

I anticipate that the focus group will be fun, relaxed and provide the opportunity to explore with other women some of our stories and experiences of raising sons. I very much welcome your involvement at any stage of the project and if you feel that your time and interest is best utilized by the individual interview alone then that will be greatly appreciated.

Estimated timeline for the research project

Data collection through individual interviews will begin in July 2007. The single session focus group will be conducted in the last week of September 2007. The writing up phase (including incorporating transcripts) will begin on 1st November 2007. The research project is currently expected to conclude on 1st December 2009.
Your time and commitment is expected to include:

- Initial telephone and/or email contact over last week of June and beginning of July 2007
- One interview during July 2007 or early August 2007
- Telephone contact post interview
- The option of writing post interview reflections
- Receipt of interview transcript in October 2007

Issues for participants to consider

A decision to participate in this project will require your time (average 3 hours for telephone contact, travel if necessary and interview) and an additional 3 hours for the focus group session, please include time for written reflections if you choose to write one.

Interviews and focus groups can be intense, emotionally draining and potentially stir up thoughts and feelings that do not always sit comfortably with the individual. I will ensure that there is an opportunity to debrief if participants indicate this would be helpful. I have many years of counseling experience and I am confident in my ability to provide you with support. If you feel that follow up support would be useful I can support you to access some suitable referral options.

Confidentiality

Any information obtained in connection with this project and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will only be disclosed with your permission. Identifiable information about participants on individual consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet separate to the main data. The audiotape and the transcripts of both the individual interviews and focus group session will be locked in a different filing cabinet.

The only people who will have access to the filing cabinets will be myself and my supervisor Bob Pease. Bob is also the principal researcher of this project. Bob is the Chair in Social Work at Deakin University. The data will be stored in accordance with Deakin University guidelines.
After a period of six years the data collected throughout the project will be disposed of via a shredding machine. The only people who will have access to the data throughout the six-year period will be myself as student researcher and Bob Pease as principal investigator.

The written thesis will replace research participant’s first names with a pseudonym. Participant’s surnames will not be used throughout the written thesis. It is likely that I will seek to publish the results of this research in relevant peer-reviewed journals and conferences. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. By signing the consent form you will be providing permission to publish research results.

The issue of confidentiality with focus groups is different to individual interviews. I can guarantee that names of participants in the focus group will be replaced with pseudonyms in the research report and that the focus group transcript will be seen by myself and Bob Pease only. At the beginning of the focus group session I will articulate a request that participants maintain the confidentiality of the group, however it is not possible for me to guarantee this or demand this of the group. I understand that this may be a contributing factor in deciding whether or not to participate in the focus group session.

**Participation is Voluntary**

Participation in any research project is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. If you decide to withdraw from the project after information has been gathered the data will not be used in any way and will be confidentially disposed of.

If you decide to withdraw from this project, please notify a member of the research team before you withdraw. This notice will allow the student researcher or the research supervisor to inform you if there are any special requirements linked to withdrawing.
Results of Project

You will be asked if you are interested in receiving a summary of results when the study is completed. If you are interested, we will send a summary to the address that you provide.

Further Information or Any Problems

If you require further information or if you have any problems concerning this project, you can contact the principal researcher Professor Bob Pease at Deakin University, phone (03) 52278445 or Ms Sarah Epstein, phone (03) 9481 4046.

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project, please contact the Secretary, Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee, Research Services, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood VIC 3125. Tel: (03) 9251 7123 (International +61 3 9251 7123) E-mail: research-ethics@deakin.edu.au Please quote project no. EC 62-2007.

Sarah Epstein

Bob Pease

(Afterword note to Appendix 2) I would like to note here that the focus groups did not eventuate. This was a combination of two factors; first, there was a plethora of data obtained through the individual interviews. Second, as the project developed the idea of the focus groups did not appear to fit with the way the project was tracking. All participants were notified of this decision.
APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSENT FORM

Mothers and Sons: Feminist mothers’ narratives about raising sons

I,                                       of

Hereby consent to be a subject of a human research study to be undertaken by Sarah Epstein and I understand that the purpose of the research is to explore how mothers who include feminism as part of their world view, experience their relationships with their sons.

The research process will include:

- Telephone discussions with the student researcher regarding the research process and my involvement in this process
- Provision of a plain language statement describing the research process, interview participants involvement and data collection procedures
- Individual interview of one and a half hour duration that will be audio recorded and later transcribed
- Access to my interview transcript and the portion of my transcript that will be included in the research report
- An invitation to participate in a focus group discussion
- Information regarding the completion of the final research thesis

I acknowledge

1. That the aims, methods, and anticipated benefits, and possible risks/hazards of the research study, have been explained to me.
2. That I voluntarily and freely give my consent to my participation in such research study.
3. I understand that aggregated results will be used for research purposes and
may be reported in scientific and academic journals.

4. Individual results **will not** be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.

5. That I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study, in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used.

Signature:                                                                             Date:
CONSENT FORM

Mothers and Sons: Feminist mothers’ narratives about raising sons

I, ________________ of ________________, hereby consent to be a subject of a human research study to be undertaken by Sarah Epstein and I understand that the purpose of the research is to explore how mothers who include feminism as part of their world view, experience their relationships with their sons.

The research process will include:

- Telephone discussions with the student researcher regarding the single session focus group process
- Provision of a plain language statement describing the research process, interview participants involvement and data collection procedures
- Two hour single session focus group discussion
- Access to the focus group transcript and the portion of the transcript that will be included in the research report
- Information regarding the completion of the final research thesis

I acknowledge

1. That the aims, methods, and anticipated benefits, and possible risks/hazards of the research study, have been explained to me.
2. That I voluntarily and freely give my consent to my participation in such research study.
3. I understand that aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals.
4. Individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.
5. That I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study, in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used.

Signature: ________________ Date: ________________
## Appendix 4: Demographic Data Form

*Mothers and Sons: Feminist Mothers’ Narratives About Raising Sons*

### Demographic Details

**Interview Participants Details:**

Name: ____________________________

Age: ____________________________

Country of Birth: ____________________________

Parents’ Country of Birth: ____________________________

Religion: ____________________________

Education History: ____________________________
Paid Work (Please Circle)

Full Time/Part Time/Casual

Are you currently studying? (Please Circle)

Undergraduate/Postgraduate

Other_________________________________________________________

Full Time/Part Time

**Partner Details:**

Age:

Country of Birth:

Religion:

Education History:

Paid Work (Please Circle)

Full Time/Part Time/Casual

Is your partner currently studying? (Please Circle)

Undergraduate/Postgraduate

Full Time/Part Time
**Children’s Details**

Son/s Age/s

Daughter/s Age/s
Interview Questions

Feminism and Parenting

- I would like to start by asking when you first started engaging with feminist ideas and what this was like for you? How old were you? Where were you? What stage of life were you in?
- What does feminism mean to you?
- Tell me a bit about what it’s like being a mother? How has life, your self perception and politics changed?
- What is it like being a feminist mother of a son?
- Have you ever found yourself doing/not doing something with your son as a result of feminist values/beliefs?
- Has your relationship with feminism influenced your relationship with your son? If it has, how?
- Would you say that your relationship with your son (given you are a feminist) might be different to other mother and son relationships? In what way?
- How might your understanding of feminism provide you with guidance as you raise your son? For example, does it inform the way you discipline your son? Does feminism inform the kind of play choices you make available to him? Are there particular conversations that you feel are important to have with your son? Cultural life? Risk-taking behaviour?
- Has having a son contributed to your feminist thinking? Can you tell me a bit about some of the conversations you might have had (or intend to have) that tell me about important ideas you are actively trying to share with your son? What are some of the things as a feminist you do in front of or with your son?
- Are there times or moments when being a feminist and a mother of a son has been especially hard for you?
- Since giving birth to and raising a son do you think about feminism differently? Are there areas of your feminism that have been especially touched or thrown into relief by having a son?
- Where do you think your son fits into your feminism and feminist thinking now?
- Were you conscious of actively wanting a child of a particular sex?
- Can you talk a bit about why this might have been so for you?
• How did you feel when you found out you had a son?
• Do you think that contemporary feminists favour having female children?
• If so, how have you become aware of this, or what has led you to think this?

Gender

• When you hear the word gender, what comes to mind?
• What does masculinity mean for you? What does femininity mean for you? Are these separate than man or woman? Male/female
• Are there stories you can tell that describe how having a son has informed your thinking about masculinity?
• Do you think that male identity is as proscribed as female identity?
• If gender is socially constructed, in what ways have you noticed this affecting you or your son’s life?
• Is it important for you to actively resist this? Are there times when you can recall yourself challenging this?
• Do you make a distinction between raising your son to adulthood versus raising him to manhood? If so, can you describe this distinction?

Masculinity and Partnership

• Can you speak about your partner’s role in the parenting of your son?
• Do you and your partner talk about what being a boy means for you both? Do you and your partner talk about what it is like having a son?
• Are there areas of your son’s development where you feel your partner can make a specific contribution as a father?
• Are there stories you can tell about how your feminism informs the way you and your partner negotiate the parenting of your son?
• Are you aware of your partner having a specific interest in your son’s developing masculinity?
• If so, how might this be similar or different to your own interest?

Societal Messages About Parenting sons

• What messages (in society, amongst friends, colleagues, the community, media, popular psychology) are you aware of about parenting sons?
• Is mothering different? Are there specific messages about mother’s role in parenting sons and/or about the mother and son relationship?
• Have your thoughts on these messages changed in any way since having a son?
• What messages about fathering and a father’s role in parenting sons are you aware of?
• How might these messages about parenting sons influence your parenting?
• What images of mothering sons do you see everyday or seem to just know about? Are they different to the ones of fathers?

Relationship with son/Hopes for son

• What are your hopes for your relationship with your son?
• What are your hopes and expectations for your son?
• Do you have hopes for your son understanding the forces acting against you as a woman?
• Do you feel that your ideas about gender influence your expectations for your relationship with your son?
• What has been interesting in your relationship with your son?
• How might your son model himself on you? How might your son see himself in you? How are you a role model for your son?
REFERENCE LIST


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