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A narrative analysis of one mother's story of child custody loss and regain

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to illustrate how existing theoretical concepts may be used to advance understanding of the maternal identity of mothers who lose and regain custody of their children. The study subject was a fifty-five-year-old African-American single mother of three. She consented to an interview with the author regarding her experience with mothering, seven years after reunification with her children. The interview was a general interview guide. It was audio-taped and transcribed following standard transcription practices. The 76-page text was analyzed with a form of structural narrative analysis that allowed identification of the surface and deep manifestations of her maternal identity. Findings are evaluated in relation to child welfare research and practice.

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1. Introduction

A mother's loss of custody of her children and their subsequent placement in foster care calls into question her ability to conform to cultural expectations of mothers; exposes her to stigmatizing experiences within the child welfare system; may engender shame and associated rage and self-defeating behavior; and undermines a sense of personal control, a dominant if illusory goal in North American society.

This condition, combined with the debilitating poverty of most mothers with children in foster care (Lindsey, 1992; Wells & Shafran, 2005), renders it unsurprising that a substantial proportion of mothers with children in foster care fail to reunify with their children (Wulcyzn, 2004). Understanding the maternal identities of mothers who *do* regain custody of their children in this social–psychological context is important to developing policies and practices to promote family preservation. However, we lack substantive knowledge on this point.[1]

In recognition of the current state of knowledge of this issue, this study was undertaken and designed as a case study. *It examines how one such woman characterized herself explicitly and implicitly as a mother, in short, how she constructed a maternal identity in discourse.* Her account is a retrospective one, and it is shaped therefore by the meaning that she assigns to reunification with her children at the time she relayed her experiences with mothering to me (Mishler, 2006).

The intent of this study is not to produce findings that could be generalized necessarily to other mothers who have reunified with their children or to develop a new theory of the process through which reunification occurs but rather to illustrate how existing theoretical concepts may be used to advance understanding of an important phenomenon (McAdams & West, 1997). As such, this study is similar in intent to case studies completed early in the past century in which, for example, Freud used emerging psychoanalytic concepts to illuminate understanding of a patient who had a problem from which others suffered.

As one form of biographical research, this study also highlights ways in which individuals' discourse is connected to the social context of which they are apart because language contains inevitably the embedded assumptions and patterns of reasoning that characterize a narrator's society (Wengraf, 2001). Thus, biographical case studies of the type reported in this paper may be used to "re-story" or to re-conceptualize public child welfare policy and practice (Rustin, 2000).

2. Background to the problem

2.1. Motherhood

Despite diversity in family forms and roles (Collins, 2000; Featherstone, 2004), mothers perform the majority of the physical and emotional work of caring for children (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). This work is sheltered by the dominant motherhood ideology in North America that may be described as "intensive mothering" (Arendell, 2000; Hays, 1996), an ideology that declares mothering as emotionally-involving, time-consuming, and fulfilling.

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[1] The most extensive studies of parents' with children in foster care (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Festinger, 1994; Jenkins & Norman, 1975) were conducted prior to child welfare and welfare reform. These investigations showed the majority of parents of children in foster care at that time were poor, relied on some form of public assistance, had emotional problems, and a significant minority struggled with mental illness. We do have relatively current knowledge of the themes that characterize mothers' reports, themes such as the importance of motivation, family support, and housing (Marcenko & Striepe, 1997, as well as having a case worker able to work collaboratively with them (Dumbrill, 2006), of the things that helped them to regain custody of their children.

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Women's experiences as mothers vary (Josselson, 1996); yet, the identity is powerful and salient. Arendell's (2000) review of empirical investigations of motherhood underscores several points: Motherhood does require intensive emotional work but no single emotion dominates. Mothers experience both positive and negative feelings toward their children. Second, mothers receive limited social support for the mothering that they do, and they must improvise—that is, they must find private solutions to the conflicts they experience between mothering and work. Third, mothers experience more distress than do fathers. Fourth, poverty looms large in the experience of especially unmarried African-American mothers whose rate of poverty is about 35% (U. S. Census Bureau: http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs). Fathers are now reported to be less involved in the lives of their children than at any other time in American history (Arendell, 2000). Thus, there is a gap between the ideology of intensive mothering and mothers' actual experiences (Hays, 1996) thereby preparing the ground for cultural and intra-psychic conflict regarding motherhood.

Contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives on motherhood (Hollway & Featherstone, 1997) help to clarify the nature of the conflict. By attending to unconscious motivations in relation to familial identities, they argue that the "idea of mothering…arouses anxieties which may be managed through defenses which, reproduced at a cultural level, are manifested in the idealization and denigration of mothers—neither set of images faithful to reality (Featherstone, 1997, p. 1)."

Parker's (1997) analysis of maternal ambivalence is especially useful. She argues that feelings of love and hate toward one's children may be manageable, allowing insight into the complexity of caring for and nurturing children; or, it may be unmanageable. Under the latter circumstance, mothers may experience their children as demanding and punishing and or themselves as highly punitive. In both cases, she argues ambivalence is the product of complex interactions between internal and external realities and must be considered within a specific social–cultural context.

Thus, knowledge of motherhood underscores the centrality of the maternal identity to women (Carlson, Smith, Matto, & Eversman, 2008); the distorted cultural images that constrain social interactions around mothering especially in a North American context; and the role that ambivalence may play in women's experience of mothering.

2.2. Mothers and the child welfare system

Not surprisingly, the intensive mothering ideology is reproduced within the child welfare system. Mothers are held responsible, when their children are neglected or abused (Appell, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Roberts, 1999). The latter occurs even when fathers are present; indeed, within child welfare practice, the strengths of and dangers posed by fathers, especially minority fathers (Reich, 2005), are generally ignored or marginalized (Coohey & Zang, 2006; Strega et al., 2008).

Once a mother is identified as maltreating, the child welfare system casts her primarily in relation to a set of risk factors that has to be managed and a set of professional discourses that construe her as an object of corrective treatment (Brown, 2006). Mothers must submit to monitoring and public accounting of their risk status, decide how much to disclose as to their real circumstances, and participate in multiple services in order to have a chance of regaining custody of their children.

Indeed, workers view mothers' compliance with their case plans as evidence of mothers' motivation to care for their children, and both child welfare workers and mothers view mothers' involvement in the child welfare system as punishment (Smith, 2008). Detailed examinations of workers' conversations with mothers show the strenuous efforts workers make to construct mothers as having failed their children (Hall, Jokinen & Suoninen, 2003). Mothers must show signs of or "perform" deference to the authority of the state in order to reclaim custody of their children (Reich, 2005).

2.3. Stigma and shame

As a result, prevailing child welfare discourses and practices provide opportunities for mothers to be stigmatized and to experience shame in relation to the neglect or abuse of their children. Stigma, which may be defined in relation to loss of status and social exclusion in response to deviation from cultural norms (Link & Phelan, 2001), has been demonstrated experimentally to increase aggression and self-defeating behavior, as well as to reduce intelligent thought and pro-social behavior (Twenge & Baumeister, 2005). Negative behaviors may be especially dominant, when the individual believes she lacks the resources to cope with the demands associated with stigmatization (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Therefore, mothers who lack hope as to restoration of custody may express rage in ways that work to undermine their abilities to reunify with their children. Mothers who regain custody may have to harness such rage in the service of the goal of reunification.

Shame, which may be defined in relation to the wish to "escape the eyes of the onlooker" due to social disapproval (Buss, 2001), indicates a strong sense of self as social object. It is linked to the sense of humiliation regarding aspects of the self that are open to public observation. Its consequences are a sense of worthlessness, but the effects are variable depending on how well the individual may buffer its effects through, for example, devaluing the attributes on which one is stigmatized (Major & Eccleston, 2005).

Responses of mothers to stigmatizing experiences and to shame may be further complicated by the presence of psychiatric disorders (Marcenko et al., in press') including substance dependence that undermines mothers' abilities to sustain a stable (and non-addicted) identity (Denzin, 1987). As a result, mothers who lose custody may devalue the importance of their identities as mothers at a given point in time in order to ward off feelings of worthlessness associated with the shame of custody loss, and mothers who regain custody may have to fight hard against adoption of this stance.

2.4. Costs of custody loss

Knowledge of the actual emotional reactions of mothers who lose custody of their children placed in foster care is limited. Knowledge from studies of custody loss under other conditions is suggestive, however. Studies of mothers who relinquished custody "voluntarily" show they experience feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt, and anger, and that they engage in self-destructive behavior (Hollingsworth, 2005). Studies of mothers separated from their children due to psychiatric hospitalization show how societal discourses regarding mental illness, specifically that the ill are violent and dangerous, make it difficult for mothers to maintain the position that they are competent mothers (Savvidou, Bozikas, Hatziegeleki & Karavatos, 2003). Studies of mothers who lost custody of their children due to divorce show how departure from normative expectations for mothers may trigger a profound sense of inadequacy and destabilize identity. As Kielty (2006) explains, when mothers cannot fulfill the duties associated with being a good mother, their 'moral self' comes under threat as 'good mother' tends to be synonymous with 'good person' (p. 86).

Thus, the belief that one is living a moral life, that is the conviction that one is living in relation to what one considers right (Kleinman, 2006), is tied closely for women with children to how they view themselves as mothers, that is, their maternal identities.

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3. Method

3.1. Narrative and identity

Although identity may be cast in relation to a wide range of concepts including social roles, motivation, and or social structure (Burke & Stets, 2009), this study shows how casting maternal identity in relation to narrative theory deepens understanding of mothers who lose and regain custody of their children.

Contemporary philosophy points to the relevance of narrative to identity (MacIntyre, 1984; Ricoeur, 1991). For example, Ricoeur (1991), a primary theorist of narrative, argues that human experience is experience in time and that this experience can be "understood only through the stories that we tell about it (p. 31)." MacIntyre (1984) argues identities inevitably draw upon the narratives "proposed to us by our culture". Thus, narratives issue from the inside and from the outside, from memory and by validation by others (Bruner, 2004), and they may be used as modes through which individuals resist prevailing ideologies (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008), a position that is especially useful to understanding narratives of neglectful and or abusive mothers.

3.2. Surface and deep structure of identity

In this study, I adopted Gregg's (2006) model of narrative identity.[2] His interest is in how narrators construct identity in discourse, that is in both narrative (story) and non-narrative (such as statements of attitudes or beliefs) forms of speech, because he believes that individuals depend on both to fashion identities. He argues that identity is organized in relation to both a surface structure and a deep structure contained within the episodic-plot of a story the narrator tells. Thus, Gregg views identity as layered: It resides neither in the deep nor in the surface structure of discourse but rather in the connections between the two.

The surface structure of identity is reflected in the *explicit and recurring contrasts* the narrator makes in relation to self, meaningful events, and relationships. These explicit contrasts or *binary oppositions* serve as "self-definitional landmarks". As the narrator shifts between these explicit contrasts, the narrator conveys not only valuable information as to what she thinks is important but also suggests implicitly her identity. To clarify the identity to which these contrasts point, the investigator examines each explicit contrast the narrator makes and formulates what Gregg calls a *mediating term*. This term is not a mid-way point between the two opposing ideas that define each contrast but rather is a blend of the two that shares some, but not all, of the features of each pole.

Taken together, these explicit contrasts (or binary oppositions) and associated mediating terms *point to a fundamental binary opposition and associated mediating term* that define the deep structure of the narrator's identity. This identity is elaborated within the sequence and plot structure of the broad story the narrator tells.

Thus, in Gregg's approach, identity is defined in relation to space (surface and deep structure), time (plot), and story. This conceptualization of identity is ideal for study of individuals whose identities may be difficult for them to claim or to explain and that may even be outside of conscious awareness.

[2] Gregg's approach to identity is informed by the structuralist narratology of Levi-Strauss (1964/1969) and Propp (1928/1968). However, his analytic model does not depend on the assumptions regarding narratives of either one. I omitted Gregg's detailed use of ideas drawn from Propp (1928/1968) who examined sequences of actions by characters in order to identify a universal structure of Slavic fairytales.

3.3. Research participant, interview context, and narrative interview

To study the narrative maternal identity of a woman who lost and regained custody of her children, I examined an extended account of one mother who had had this experience. The research participant for this study was a 55-year-old, unmarried African-American mother of two adolescents and one adult child. Her children, beginning when her first child was an infant, moved between her home and that of her own mother, over an approximately twenty-year period of time. The child welfare agency in her community was involved in her life sporadically and, at times, her children were in kinship care, that is, in the state-supervised care of her mother. The research participant's use of alcohol and drugs, economic impoverishment, homelessness, and involvement with the criminal justice system are common among mothers with children in foster care (Child Welfare League of America, 1998; Wells & Shafran, 2005).

At the time she was recruited for this qualitative case study, she had had custody of her two younger children for several years, and she was working in a peer-mentoring program for mothers identified as abusive and neglectful seeking reunification with their children. Her involvement in the study was voluntary, and no financial or other incentives were provided for her help. It was her hope that her participation in the study would assist other mothers to regain custody of their children. Although the participant had claimed publicly her status as a mother who had lost custody of her children and she coached other mothers as to how to work with the child welfare system in order to achieve their goals, I found no evidence that the account she provided to me had been told repeatedly.

The interview took place in my private office. Prior to beginning the interview, the participant signed a statement of informed consent to participate in the study. She understood that she was participating in a pilot study of the experiences with mothering of mothers who had been involved in the child welfare system. The interviewee talked easily and at length regarding her life experience. The interview took about two and one half hours to complete and was recorded with a digital voice recorder. Immediately after the interview, I recorded my observations regarding the interview process and content. These observations were used to clarify the transcription of the audio recording of the interview described below.

I interviewed the participant with an interview guide designed to elicit an extended account and approached the interview as a "depth interview" (Johnson, 2002). Depth interviewing requires rapport between the interviewer and interviewee; depends on few pre-established questions; and requires an interviewer who is able to allow silence, to stay focused, and to ask additional questions only when necessary.

The questions that comprise the interview guide used in this study are modeled after those advocated by Wengraf (2001). By design, the number of questions posed was small. The orienting question to which the participant responded was "Could you tell me whatever you would like to tell me about your life as a mother, starting wherever you would like to begin?" Follow-up questions included probes such as "Thinking back to when you first became a mother, please tell me as much about this period of time as you wish"; "Thinking back to the six months before you lost custody of (name of child), please tell me as much about this period of time, as you wish"; and "How did you regain custody of your child?"

3.4. Translation of voice-recordings to text

The recording was transcribed relying on the basic scheme developed by Tedlock (1983). In this approach, each spoken word

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is transcribed; each line of text is numbered; lines are separated on the basis of the identity of the speaker (the letter, R, refers to the respondent or narrator, and the letter, I, refers to the interviewer) and pauses in speech; words are placed in parentheses to indicate a possible hearing; empty parentheses are inserted in the text, if a spoken word cannot be heard; words are capitalized to indicate a loud voice; and other highly distinct emotional reactions such as anger or crying are noted and placed in parentheses. Each single dot in a text represents a pause in speech of less than two-tenths of a second.

I compared the transcription and the digital audio recording and made a few changes in the transcript in order to clarify what was said or identify paralinguistic expressions that were missed or misunderstood by the transcriber. The completed transcription is 76 double-spaced pages of typed text.

3.5. Analytic process

The interview was analyzed with a form of narrative analysis (Reissman, 2008) that examines how a story is structured for what it means (Wells, in press). Relying on the specific analytic procedure outlined by Gregg (2006), the analysis of the transcription proceeded in the following stages: 1) I divided the entire text into episodes representing the basic plot of the story in the order in which it was told; 2) within each episode, I eliminated material that was irrelevant to the plot, primarily reports of facts; 3) within each reduced episode, I identified the stanzas (lines that comprise a single theme) and, guided by Labov's (1972) definition of story, *stories of specific events* that were embedded in the plot as a whole; and 4) within and across each episode, I identified the explicit contrasts, conceptualized the mediating terms for each contrast so identified, and then conceptualized the fundamental binary opposition and associated mediating term that characterizes the deep structure of the narrator's identity.

This approach differs from the more familiar approach to the analysis of language—content analysis—in which narratives are fragmented as a result of their conceptualization into independent themes.

4. Findings

4.1. The episodes and the plot

The broad thrust or plot of the story the narrator told is not a formulaic one, for example, the quest of the hero (Propp, 1928/1968), but, rather, it is a story of an evolving struggle to live a moral life "amidst uncertainty and danger", a struggle that is both fierce and desperate (Kleinman, 2006), in which she accepted responsibility and cared for her children and through which she constructed a maternal identity with which she could live in the present. This identity does not reject the dominant motherhood ideology but it resists this ideology in subtle and unspoken ways.

To identify the plot, I divided the account into five episodes. The episodes do not relate to a single event or to a single period of time but rather to the sequence in which the narrator told the story, a story in which the loss of her oldest child and then of her two youngest children blended together in the telling.

Episode 1 describes the narrator's moves from home to home; episode 2 her feelings of being lost; episode 3 trying and failing; episode 4 the determination to change; and episode 5 the acknowledgement that although her mother had cared for her children over a long period of time, she was not, in fact, their mother.

As shown in Fig. 1, the explicit contrasts within and across the episodes are organized in relation to the narrator, labeled, "Self",

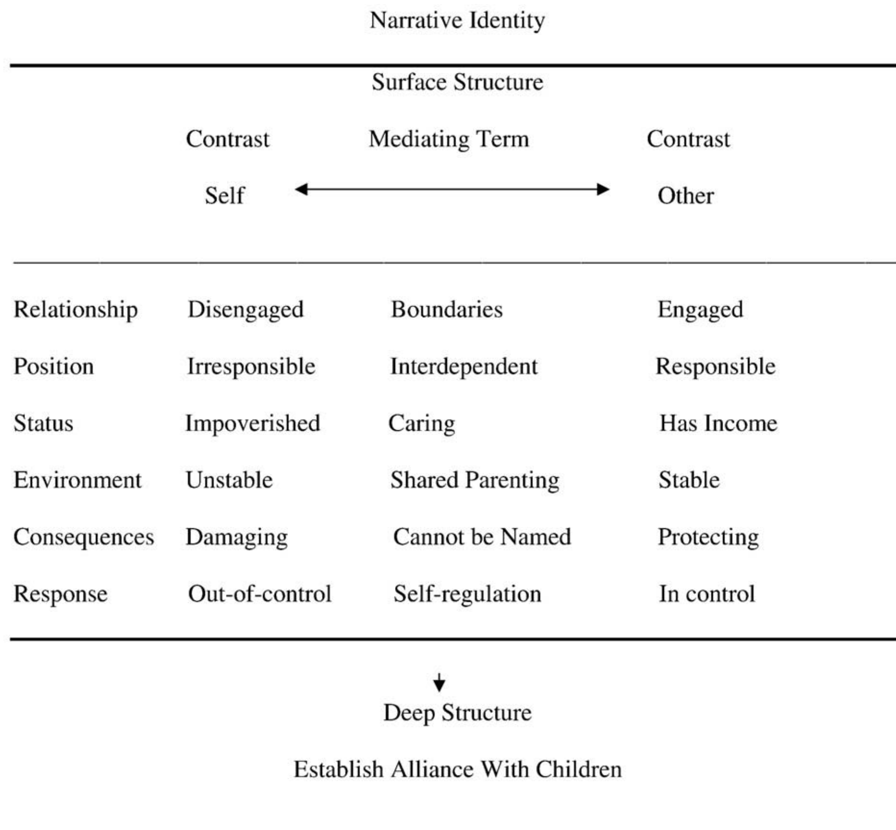

Fig. 1.

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and to another person, labeled, “Other”. The “Other” to whom the narrator refers may be one of several people such as her mother, an agent of the state, or the father of her children. The contrasts are framed in relation to core parameters of mothering such as the relationship a mother has with her children, the position and socio-economic status from which she operates, the environment she provides, the consequences of her behavior, and the way in which she responds to challenges.

4.2. Episode 1

In lines 102–502 of the transcribed interview text, or episode 1, entitled “Steadily Moving”, the narrator sets the stage for the story to come. In response to an early question as to the number and location of her children from birth through age 18, she names her three children, indicates their ages, noting the multi-year gap between the birth of her first and second child, and describes where each has lived throughout his or her childhood. Within seconds of beginning the interview, she states the position from which she wishes to recount her story: “I just want to get that clear. Will we be able to see the printout?... or…Because I am proud of it.”

She then goes on to describe her illegal drug use as beginning when her first child was born, and the life she had with her husband as “crazy”—characterized by multiple moves and break-ups with her husband. Though the narrator's first child lived with her “most of the time”, she described a pattern in which she left her daughter with her mother or her mother took her daughter into her care, when things were particularly unstable, and the effect of this instability on her child. She notes her own confusion as to whether she wanted “to be a mom or …a teenager”; her “sense of abandonment”, “loneliness”, and feeling of “pretence”, when her child was not with her.

Read literally, the first part of the interview is episodic, moving between the present and the past and from one event to another. This narration is held together loosely by the effort to establish the location of her children over time, in response to my initial question.

In the stanzas and lines below, the narrator contrasts herself with her mother, and describes herself as *disengaging from as well as damaging her child* and her mother as *engaging with* as well as *protecting her child*, contrasts that are repeated in the episodes to come: (The stanzas and lines from the transcribed interview text have been renumbered, each beginning with the number 1, for ease of presentation.)

Stanza 1:

1. I: Um-hum.
2. R: Yeah. I do… my daughter was about ten then. And
3. That's where I got something like a little gap
4. Because I think I end up leaving her then for a year or two.

Stanza 2:

5. But…and because I know when I would
6. Come to my mother's just to leave her, it would
7. Almost be just antagonizing, you know, all the
8. Screaming and pulling on me and, you know,
9. Because she wanted me…she wanted to be with me.
10. I: Um-hum.
11. R: She wanted to stay with me. She wondered ‘Why
12. you going and I'm not going?’
13. I: Um-hum.
14. R: And, ah, and it got to really be [ ] real strenuous on me and
15. my daughter

Stanza 3:

16. My mom had suggested I maybe need to stay away for a while…
17. I: Yeah.
18. R: Because it was too much for the child and getting her calmed back
19. down
20. Even after I would be gone a couple hours. She would just be
21. hysterical.
22. I: Um-hum.

Stanza 4:

23. R: Um, I pretty much see that today in her... little bit at 33.
24. I: Um-hum.
25. R: When she comes to my house, I almost have to open the door and
26. say ‘Good night!’ Like they were there
27. I: Oh.

Stanza 5:

28. R: yesterday. She…and she has…I have three grandson, beautiful
29. grandson. But
30. I: Um-hum.

Stanza 6:

31. R: That is one part I know, I did damage her. She clings, she's a clingy
32. person. But that's far as I can remember.

The term that mediates between the explicit contrast she draws between the damage she caused her child (line 31) and the protection her mother afforded her child (lines 16–18) is her own behavior whose consequences cannot be remembered or perhaps *cannot be named or acknowledged*, as suggested in line 32, allowing the narrator perhaps to manage guilt regarding the consequences of her behavior in the past for her child.

The term that mediates between the explicit contrast she draws between disengaging from her child (lines 6–8) and engaging with her child (lines 18–21) is *boundaries*, neither pulling away from nor moving toward her children, but marking the narrator's separation from her children, as suggested in lines 25 and 26. Both of these mediating terms point to the way in which the narrator wishes to be known as a mother in the present.

4.3. Episode 2

In lines 503 through lines 664 of the text, or episode 2, entitled “Feeling Lost”, the narrator describes feeling “lost”; using alcohol and drugs and the eventual inability to “master” drug use; and being “haunted” by the feeling that she should be with her child. In this part of the text the narrator contrasts herself again with her mother, describing herself as *irresponsible* and her mother as *responsible*, a contrast that is repeated throughout the other episodes.

In stanza 2 of this episode the narrator says, for example, “I really felt that void at a certain period of my alcoholism. I don't care how much I would drink, I didn't feel comfortable inside that I knew my child was at my mom and she had the full responsibility …of nurturing her and making her happy.”

The term that mediates between the explicit contrast she draws between irresponsible and responsible is *interdependent*, a condition to which she alludes throughout the final episode of her story, an episode that contains multiple stories of events in which she depends on her two younger children and they on her.

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The second episode is also replete with fragmentary as well as stories of specific events that run together. Read figuratively, however, episodes 1 and 2 establish the beginning of the plot of the broad story she has to tell. For example, the last event story in episode 2 illustrates the narrator's despair, the emotional ground from which she moved to reclaim custody of her two younger children, as well as reflects implicitly the contrast she draws elsewhere between her rejection of and her mother's acceptance of responsibility for her children.

She recounts, for example, walking past a house on the Fourth of July (a national holiday in the United States), when she was homeless, behind which children were playing in the yard:

R: I just felt disgusted, real yucky with myself…
I: Okay.
R: and hurt
And I passed that house
And I looked and I said, 'One day that's how my family is going to be'.
I: Okay.
R: One day.
I: Hm.
R: I never will forget that. That was one of the most…And it…that
You know, I never thought that.
I mean, walking up the street that I would meet myself like that, or meet that feeling…
I: Yeah.
R: like that…You know, I'm just passing the house
And then I look. This is a holiday and I have no one,
No family. I HAVE it.
But I'm not doing the things I need to do to be there with them.
And that is one crazy…
I: Yeah.
R: Feeling I never want to go back to. NEVER (shouting)

Thus, she emphasizes with the volume (as well as the tone) of her voice the shame, shock, and pain that she experienced in relation to her isolation from her children and her society and with the content of her speech, the power of the dominant motherhood ideology and cultural expectations of mothers to frame her subjective experience.

Indeed, following one theoretical analysis of how shame may function for women (Seu, 1998), the narrator's adoption of this position in the account above may simultaneously work to defend against the wish to be free of her children; to protect against envy of other mothers; or to engender rage as a defense against the shame itself. In any case, by adopting the position of shame, she endorses cultural expectations of mothers.

4.4. Episode 3

In lines 666 through 1019, or episode 3, entitled "Trying and Failing", the narrator details a long period of time in which she tried but failed to care for her children. Her efforts were undermined by continued drug use, poverty, and imprisonment, and they were complicated by relationships with men who used drugs, and by her older daughter's assumption of caretaking responsibilities for her younger siblings. In the event story below, the narrator implicitly contrasts the environment she provided her children with the environment provided by her mother, equating adequacy with stability and inadequacy with instability.

R: Like the projects, I had them there.
I: Um-hum.
R: But then I either couldn't get groceries, or I couldn't get lights. Or I was having wrong type of people round my kids and I end up losing the kids, losing the place.
Then I had…I had to call my mom to come and get the children, you know.
I: Um-hum.
R: Or she'd come down and see they wasn't bathed properly, hair wasn't combed properly, because I'm on a stew [ ] for three or four days.
I: Um-hum.
R: Then she would take them from me.
And I got tired of feeling like I'm not adequate, I'm not capable of being a woman, combing hair, making breakfast, going to the grocery store with the list or the coupons, coming back home on time, doing the right thing, going to work. I felt like I couldn't get it into gear.
Ah, but I was [ ]. That's the good part. I kept… I kept…something kept pushing me. I was very fearful. I thought I wanted this, sometimes I didn't want it.

The stanzas and lines below are preceded immediately by the observation that all children need physical affection. (The stanzas and lines from the transcribed interview text have been renumbered, each beginning with the number 1, for ease of presentation).

Stanza 1:

1. R: Because those two, their father's not in their life. He calls every week
2. and check on.
3. I: Hm.

Stanza 2:

4. R: But like I told them, 'There's not nothing can compare when you got
5. intimate time with one on one'
6. I: Right.
7 R: You know.
8. I: Right.

Stanza 3:

9. R: And he never did establish that with your two kids. 'You bought them
10. with money, and …and you bragged', and they see that today. That don't
11. wave nothing with them. That's why they said, 'My mom is my mother
12. and father'.

In the stanzas, she contrasts her parenting with that of the father of her two younger children. Here the narrator describes this father's adherence to societal expectations for men who do not live with their children, maintaining contact with them and providing them with money, and she acknowledges the societal approval such behavior brings when she notes "and you bragged".

In a succession of incomplete sentences, reported speech, and implicit comparisons, she devalues the significance of his behavior, thereby undermining the grounds on which she has been found a neglectful mother in the past, and asserts her superiority as a parent in the present. Because she is "intimate" (line 5) with her children in a way that their father is not (lines 9–11), the children now consider her both "mother and father" (lines 11–12).

A complex and nuanced section, in which the negotiation of stigma and blame predominate, here the fundamental contrast is between the narrator as a parent (being *economically impoverished*) and the children's father as a parent (*having an income*). The concept that mediates between the two, being with and providing for children in a way that *supports caring and intimacy* rather than use, points implicitly to the identity the narrator wishes to assert in the present.

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4.5. Episode 4

In lines 1020 to 1342, or episode 4, entitled "You Going to Do This", the narrator recounts encounters with figures of authority—police officers, child welfare workers, and judges—who are involved in the question as to whether she is able to care for her children—encounters that also involve relatives and friends.

The stanzas and lines below are part of a long fragmentary account of having a drug-using boyfriend care for her children, while she looked for a job, that captures the content of this episode. (The stanzas and lines from the transcribed interview text have been renumbered, each beginning with the number 1, for ease of presentation.)

Stanza 1:

1. R: And my son told my mother,
2. and she called, and we got in to arguing about the remote control,
3. and he told them that he was coming in our home taking over and that he
4. was smoking marijuana. And he was big enough to mention that word.
5. I: Um-hum.

Stanza 2:

6. R: And my mom called the police.

Stanza 3:

7. I ended up catching another case. I was already seeing a social worker,
8. dropping urine, staying clean, had got my kids back
9. And that was a stipulation which increased all my parenting.

Stanza 4:

10. You know, they didn't take the kids out to remove the kids, but
11. He wasn't allowed to be around them anymore. He..or me.
12. I had to consistent drop urine some more and extend my meetings and
13. different stuff like that.

Stanza 5:

14. But what I am saying is that I really panicked, because I thought my kids
15. was going to be removed again.
16. I: Yeah.
17. R: And I knew I had worked so hard trying to be the person I wanted to be
18. THAT stuck in my mind.

[I omit here 13 lines that refer to being in prison and her relationship with this boyfriend.]

Stanza 6:

19. And … and then I felt betrayed, everything, because my mother did co-sign
20. for the apartment.

[I omit 6 lines that refer to being afraid of losing her children.]

Stanza 7:

21. So what I did, I just got real active. I just got REAL, you know, active, and
22. real still. And I kind of shut down from entertaining with the guy. I just
23. closed him out.

The stanzas and lines above report a complex family interaction involving the narrator, her boyfriend, her son, her mother, the police, and implicitly the child welfare department. In the background of this struggle is the narrator's poverty and need for love and practical help, and in the foreground is the ferocity of the fight being waged by her son, her mother, and ultimately the narrator for her sobriety.

For example, in the first stanza, the narrator recounts the use of drugs by her boyfriend, and her child's phone call to report this to her mother. An ambiguous passage, it is unclear to whom she refers when she says that "we got into arguing about the remote control" (line 2), but whether it is the narrator and her son, the narrator and her boyfriend, or metaphorically the narrator and her mother, the phrase underscores the primary explicit contrast she makes in this and other sections between herself as *out-of-control of her family environment versus the "Other"*—whether this "other" was her boyfriend (line 3), mother (line 6), the court (line 7), or her social worker (line 7)—as *in control of that environment.*

The term that mediates between the explicit contrast or binary opposition she draws is *self-regulation*, a condition to which she alludes in lines 21 through 23 above, and which points to the identity the narrator wishes to assert in the present.

She then goes on to tell this story of a specific event:

R: You know, because it started out when we went to court, and Judge [name omitted] had said I went to prison and I had see…took numbers and acknowledged the Twelve Step Program.

But the point is that he had told me regardless of me being in prison and I'm sober for a year, I needed to still be in a program.

And I was so angry with him! Because I need to go to parenting. I need to go program. I need to stay clean. And I didn't like that in him, because I feel like I don't gave a year of myself. Let me be me, you know.

[6 lines about programs omitted.]

And I was angry.

And the kids' father started laughing. And he says: 'She going fail'. I heard him in the back, while the Judge was talking

[11 lines omitted pertaining to interaction with the Judge; and 24 lines omitted pertaining to her mother]

and I was so angry with him [the Judge]. And, but in the same token, the kids' father was laughing at me.

I: Yeah.

R: Saying a failure. And what… and as I was leaving, angry and hearing him with his fiancée…

I: Hm.

R: Something just rose up in me and say 'You going do this. YOU GOING DO THIS, to show him he's … Because he wanted to get married for all the wrong reasons, because he wanted to the guardian of the kids.

I: Oh.

R: He had talked with my mom and he had [ ] his own scenario about my history and everything because he didn't know me THAT well, but he had knew OF me.

This story places in high relief the fight she is waging as to how she is to be known by others and, perhaps, herself. She recounts feeling simultaneously humiliated publicly by the instructions of a judge and by the taunts of the father of her two younger children and then asserts a core of her identity that is unknown and perhaps untouched by such social censure: "He had his own scenario about my history and everything because he didn't know me THAT well, but he had knew OF me". Thus, she constructs a position of righteous rage and as having special knowledge of herself from which she speaks to power.

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4.6. Episode 5

The last half of the transcription (lines 1344 to 3400) comprises episode 5, entitled, “Returning Home”. This episode circles back to themes introduced in the first half of the interview, but does so in ways that add complexity to the experience of custody loss and regain. In this section, the narrator recounts her shattered dreams as to what marriage would be for her; her wish, after the onset of her addiction, that her mother would save her and take her baby; her observations of the ways in which her oldest daughter is like her; how her mother would “tempt” her to resume care of her children; how she experiences being a mother in the present; and the complexity of her relationship with her mother.

Returning to her childhood, for example, the narrator contrasts her mother's ability to work “the second shift”, to “keep a clean house”, to “manage her drinking”, and to be, in short, a “no-nonsense person” with her own *inability* to maintain a home *and* to use drugs and alcohol.

The narrator emphasizes that she could not keep “everything separate”: “What fell apart, I left apart, and if you wanted my kids, here, there they go, because right now I'm doing this.” It is unclear to whom the “you” is intended to refer—to me as a representative, as a university professor, of the professional child welfare community, to an unnamed agent of the state, or perhaps to her mother. Irrespective of the identity of the “you” to whom her statement is directed, throughout this section of the text she portrays herself and her mother as agentic: Her mother takes her children from her, and she chooses drugs and alcohol over her children.

Indeed, one of the narrator's event stories in episode 5 contains a hint of triumph: Today, the narrator's mother continues to drink, and her kidneys are failing. Therefore, her mother's ability to “take care of business” may, in the end, be less important than the narrator's sobriety and current relationships with her children.

4.7. Identity structure

The plot of this woman's narrative reflects her slow almost imperceptible movement toward becoming a specific kind of mother. The plot does not reflect a specific genre: That is, it is not a romance, a tragedy, or a comedy in its thrust. Rather, it is a story of one woman's answer to the question as to the grounds on which she can claim a maternal identity with which she can live.

4.8. Surface structure

The explicit contrasts (or binary oppositions) that I found within the plot work as self-definitional landmarks, and they reinforce the power of normative ideas pertaining to appropriate child-rearing environments, relationships with children, ethical commitments that mothering entails, the behavior that sustains such commitments, and how mothers should respond to challenges to their ability to care for their children. In short, they reproduce the ways in which mothers are idealized and denigrated within North American society.

4.9. Deep structure

The mediating terms I conceptualized in relation to these contrasts reframe these ideas in a way that allows the narrator to de-stigmatize the way in which she cared for her children in the past (living in multiple houses, wanting to disengage from her children), limits acknowledgement of the harm she caused them, and promotes a definition of mothering that emphasizes its emergent and interdependent nature. Taken together, these terms point to a *fundamental binary opposition* of the absent frightening mother versus the present protective mother and the associated mediating term, the interdependent mother who establishes an alliance with her children, that constitute the deep structure of the narrator's identity.

4.10. Narrative identity

However, the narrator's maternal identity resides *neither* in its deep structure *nor* its surface structure but rather it reverberates in the spaces between the two. The narrator does not name this identity, nor was it obvious upon first reading of her account, because it emerges in dialogue with the others she names and, in some cases, accuses (Gregg, 2006).

Indeed, this identity resonates with literary portraits of African-American women: Portraits of African-American mothers' need to claim their daughters as sisters in a struggle against adversity and oppression (Walker, 1974) as well as daughters' struggles to recast their mothers' labor (working the first, second, and third shifts) as affection (Collins, 2000; Morrison, 1974). This identity may help the narrator to negotiate contradictions between economically impoverished African-American women's resources and dominant ideologies of motherhood within contemporary North American society (Collins, 2000).

5. Discussion

In this case study, a mother who lost and regained custody of her children constructed a maternal identity in discourse that reproduced cultural expectations of mothers, expectations that place responsibilities for child-rearing primarily on the shoulders of mothers and therefore cannot easily be met; that resisted the implications of her failure to conform to such expectations; and that suggested, albeit implicitly, an alternative maternal identity that allowed her to claim a moral life in the present.

My interpretation of the text should be considered, of course, as incomplete, in part, because interpretation is always problematic, influenced as it is by circumstances pertaining to the narrator, the production of the text, and the narrative analyst (Mishler, 2006), as well as by the concepts employed in the analytic task at hand.

Nonetheless, the effort to exemplify the utility of narrative concepts and methods to the analysis of the maternal identities of mothers identified as abusive and neglectful suggests two directions for further study with respect to both child welfare practice and research.

First, child welfare practice tends to under-estimate the enormity of the task of maternal identity construction that mothers identified as abusive or neglectful face in light of the prevailing cultural expectations of mothers; maternal ambivalence toward children (Davies, Krane, Collings & Wexler, 2007); and the complexity of mothers' relationships with members of their families, especially their own mothers. Moreover, child welfare practice also tends to over-emphasize monitoring and rule-following behavior and inadvertently shames. Paraphrasing Nussbaum (1995), reduce the mother in thought, it is easier to deny her respect in practice.

Therefore, a move toward a feminist-inspired and individually-oriented practice might well break open the discursive and material opportunities for women engaged in the child welfare system to address the psychological and social concerns relevant to them and to reconstruct a maternal identity with which they can live.

Second, child welfare research has tended to reproduce the social constructions with which abusive and neglectful mothers must struggle within themselves and to treat mothers as equivalent members of a deficient (or a maligned) group. While examination of concepts pertaining to mothers' socio-economic, psychiatric, or service-use status is important, for example, knowledge of mothers' experience, experience in time that can only be understood in relation

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to the stories they tell of it (Ricoeur, 1991), might well break open the questions child welfare researchers seek to address and promote knowledge-building alliances with scholars in the humanities and social sciences who are concerned with the same.

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