

**LEARNING TO MOTHER OVER COFFEE AND CAKE:
NAMING OUR INFORMAL LEARNING**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a feminist inquiry into the learning experiences of mothers in an informal Parent Support Group (PSG) that meets through regular coffee mornings. The research explores informal learning, motherhood and social support within a framework of Freirean and Feminist thinking. It situates this women's support group within the wider sphere of Community Education in Ireland.

This thesis is a piece of insider research as I am a member of this group. As such, it includes biographical inputs on my experiences as a mother using the services of this PSG. The findings were drawn from three focus groups and three e-interviews with 17 women in total, all of whom were members of the group. The methods used for collection of information from these focus groups were feminist and participatory, that is, the women took part in various activities designed to stimulate conversation. The findings show that the women in this group find motherhood challenging and isolating. To help combat this they joined a support group. This support group allows possibilities for the sharing of knowledge and experiences. This sharing of experiences leads the women to describe feelings of normalising and validation. The women in the research gave examples of ways in which their perspectives had changed since becoming a mother. They also described how the process of learning to mother was different to ways they had learned previously. Rather than relying on authorised knowledge, such as books, they were relying on experiential knowledge more, the knowledge of other mothers. As a group of women many of their parenting practices were divergent from the dominant practices in Ireland. As such, despite them occupying positions of power in some areas of

their life, such as economic and working life, these women gave many examples of silencing and othering. Their membership of the support group provided them with a space where they could discuss these issues in a safe and trusted space. This group adopts many of the characteristics of feminist community education and as such provides an environment where rich learning experiences are taking place. This research has implications for the wider adult education sphere as sites of informal learning are often overlooked. Informal learning has an important role to play in adult education practice in all its forms.

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This thesis is dedicated to my Mum. I miss her smile and her laughter.

Her patience and serenity in her role as a mother seemed limitless and

I aspire to be more like her in these ways every day.

PREFACE

Late one Tuesday evening sometime in 2012 as I was immersed in my task of making dinner for our family and bringing my thoughts to my evening class due to start in a few hours I was interrupted by a ring at my doorbell. I answered, and was greeted by an enthusiastic researcher asking would I consent to take part in the CSO household quarterly survey. As an always eager research respondent I agreed. I asked how long it would take as I was preparing to go to work and was reassured by him that it would only take about 15 minutes. My husband was there too so we were both able to take part. After many questions we soon realised how long this process would actually take. During his line of questioning about our employment status and educational level my husband, a full-time, permanent staff member in the Health Service gave details about his work and his Level 9 Masters qualification. I then gave details of my part-time, temporary employment with the Vocational Education Committee and my nationally accredited Level 9 qualification in Adult Education. Despite the fact that he had already ascertained my occupation within the area of education, and my knowledge of the Qualifications Framework, he greeted my answer of 'Level 9' with a suspicious "Are you sure?" The whole experience was getting a little unsettling.

Unexpectedly, towards the end of this survey my husband and I were then asked a series of questions from a 'special module' designed to identify to what extent we had participated in Lifelong Learning in the preceding months. The pre-set categories included formal, non-formal and informal. While we muddled our way through what types of learning might suffice, the adult educator in me was immediately struck by the list of choices available to us. My husband was

enthusiastically commended on his example of 'Informal Learning' when he described watching a video on YouTube to assist him learn how to erect an 8 foot high fence in our back garden – a perfect example we were informed, with both the subject matter of 'DIY/Gardening' and the method of 'Educational Online Broadcasting' both listed as possible answers. When it came to my turn to describe how I had also learned using informal methods I enthusiastically described the learning I experienced as a mother attending a regular parent support group, my main method of learning being sharing stories, chatting about different aspects of mothering, observing more experienced mothers and discussing and debating hot topics in the media.

Our researcher was a little more confused and told me there was no category for my example. I felt sure that what I had suggested to him was an equally strong example of informal learning. For me, this was social, dialogical, experiential and reflective, all ideal components of transformative adult learning. But parenting wasn't mentioned anywhere on his screen, and the method I had described of learning within an informal support group didn't fit into any of the prescribed boxes. Statistically, I had not in fact learned anything that could be quantified as anything apart from 'other'.

It was my turn to ask "Are you sure?"

CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW

Introduction

As detailed in the preface, when I was confronted with a question about my engagement in informal learning my thoughts immediately went to my participation in an informal parent-to-parent support group. This research uses my involvement with this group as the starting point for a wider study related to adult education theory and practice. This research will ask: What are the learning experiences of the mothers attending this parent support group (PSG)? Through this exploration of learning experiences I will examine how these experiences intersect with Adult Education theory and practice.

Influenced by feminism and with a specific interest in birth and childrearing this research is an inquiry into the educational significance of an informal PSG that meets through regular coffee mornings. This research is important to adult education because typically this category of learning is not valued in the same way as other categories of learning. In this research I will explore the methods of learning informally in small, relational groups used by these women when negotiating the information and skills needed to rear their children. I will outline how these women are creating a space where they are learning and generating knowledge, a space where through dialogue with others they can tell their stories - an act of naming their world in order to understand it. My research shows that, when it comes to mothering, the women in this group value this form of dialogical learning above others and often reject other methods of learning. Although this type of learning has existed in the community education sector for many years, this research will show that it is largely overlooked when

collecting statistical data on informal learning. Recognising and naming informal learning is important to the theory and practice of adult education in order to ensure this type of learning is not overlooked in favour of other more formalised ways of learning. Informal learning is not something to be squeezed in between more validated formal and non-formal learning, it has a distinct value and merit of its own.

My own perceptions of the world and motherhood have shaped both my choice of topic and how my research was conducted. This intersects with my experiences as an adult educator of more than 15 years. In these years I have seen first-hand the importance of dialogical learning, or rather, the importance of chatting, conversing, listening and sharing. This research seeks to elucidate the value of the informal peer learning that often takes place when people are enabled to come together in caring and supportive spaces. The group I have chosen to research is a grass roots organisation that can trace its history alongside the wider story of the Women's Community Education movement of the 1970s and 1980s. This is an all-volunteer parent-to-parent group with branches throughout the country. I argue that this support provides the space for meaningful learning episodes predominantly through dialogue and care.

A little more about myself

Like many of my respondents I do not fit neatly into the dominant statistical norms associated with mothering in twenty-first century Ireland. I have three children who were all born at home. Although at twenty-one years old I was considered relatively young for my first pregnancy (HSE, 2014) following from undergraduate research on the medicalisation of childbirth (Fitzsimons, 2000) I

engaged the services of an independent homebirth midwife to assist with the birth of my first son. This was followed ten years later with the birth of my daughter and the following year another son, both born at home with a midwife-led scheme. I exclusively breastfed all of my children for the first 6 months, I fed my eldest until he was over one year and my youngest until he was over two years.

When my eldest son was born I had an in-built support structure of four older sisters who had all become mothers in the same nine month period, two of whom in particular modelled behaviours I valued. I also had my own mother who had given birth to ten children, raising nine, and without placing a name on it practiced some of the behaviours associated with attachment parenting, practices such as close proximity, responsive care and positive discipline (Attachment Parenting International, 2013). Ten years later when my second child was born I found myself with less familial allies and felt a need for something more. I wasn't struggling as such, but I felt something I previously had was lacking. I found the parent support group that is the focus of this research following a recommendation. I called to my first coffee morning one Friday in late 2010, was welcomed into the host's home and offered a cup of tea or coffee. Spending that morning in the company of a small group of other women who were all breast feeders, two of whom also had home births, I was no longer the 'other' of my social world (De Beauvoir, 1949). I had found my parenting village, and I haven't left it since.

About the Group

The PSG that I have based my research on is a vibrant and large group which has been established for many years. It is one of my aims in this research to shine a light on the experiences and processes that are taking place in this group. However, to name the specific group might suggest that there is something inherently unique or special at work in this particular PSG. This may well be the case, but what is more likely is that the experiences highlighted in this piece of research will mirror and echo the broader picture of informal women's groups and PSGs that are currently meeting in various guises, under the umbrella of several organisations, and in numerous locations around the country. The history of this particular group has its roots in the broader women's community education movement (Fitzsimons, 2015; Connolly, 2003; Inglis, 1987). Like many other women's groups of its time it was established by a small, dedicated group of women who recognised a scarcity of resources in their local area and who ensured, by their actions, that the needs of mothers looking for support were met. The nuances of how it began have been articulated evocatively in this research by one of the women who was there to experience it and who assisted in driving and shaping the group into what it has become today (See Appendix Five). This research aims to explore the educational significance of this informal support group as it is today in the lives of the women who are involved with it.

Style and Voice

This thesis is written in the first person, this is my preferred style but is also fundamental in a thesis about feminist research and silenced voices (Letherby,

2003). As it includes accounts from women who are members of the PSG it also includes my own voice: as a member of this group, as a mother and as a researcher. I will use autobiographical accounts where necessary in order to locate my own experiences alongside the experience of my respondents. Whenever possible I have included the words of my respondents exactly as they said them in order to preserve a 'feel' of the exchange (May, 2011: 136-137).

Stylistically, references throughout this thesis identify key contributors by their forename and surname when they first appear, then by surname only on subsequent inclusion. The same core themes run through the thesis as headings in the literature review and findings chapter. However, it is important to note that the focus groups were coded using an open coding method and all of the themes that emerged are being represented. When choosing headings there was a reflexive relationship between the literature and the focus groups, they informed and changed each other throughout the process.

Outline of the Thesis

In this opening chapter I have introduced the research question as: What are the learning experiences of the mothers attending this parent support group (PSG)? I have also given some more information about myself and the group and described the style of the thesis. While adult education policy is incorporated into this thesis it is beyond the scope of this research to explore this in any depth. I will now outline the remaining chapters in turn.

In Chapter Two, *Learning to Mother*, I will present an overview of the literature relating to the learning experiences of the mothers using this PSG by exploring the topics of motherhood, support, and informal learning. I will then present a theoretical overview of Freirean and Feminist ideas and will conclude with an overview of community education in order to situate this PSG in the wider context of adult education practice in Ireland.

In Chapter Three, *Coffee and Cake*, I will describe my methodology as a feminist researcher and the methods used for collecting information.

In Chapter Four, *Around a Kitchen Table*, I will present the findings from the focus groups and e-interviews.

Chapter Five, *Naming Our Informal Learning*, will bring together the previous chapters to respond to the question of what are the learning experiences of the mothers in this group. I will draw out the main points of the thesis under the headings of: responding to motherhood; rejection of traditional ways of learning; transformative learning; ways of knowing; creating useful knowledge; revisiting feminism; situated learning; and naming our world. I will conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of implications and applications to adult education and a summary of the chapter.

Finally, in Chapter Six, *Nobody Really Knows*, I will summarise the main points of the research.

CHAPTER TWO: LEARNING TO MOTHER

The central inquiry of this research is to explore the learning experiences of mothers in a parent support group (PSG). The title of this thesis - Learning to Mother Over Coffee and Cake - was chosen to reflect how women in modern society are seeking out support in informal PSGs. This chapter will start by outlining the main concepts relating to motherhood and support for mothering in order to present my ontological position. I will then move on to exploring the literature relating to informal learning, presenting some of the various positions on learning relevant to my research question. Following from this I will then explore more complex discussions of Freirean adult education, feminist epistemology and the value of sharing experiences. From this, I will conclude with an overview of Community Education in Ireland in order to situate this group into a wider context of learning.

Motherhood

This research uses the phrase 'Learning to Mother' and I see the word 'mother' in this context as a verb, one which delineates the action of caring for a child or children and one that should not necessarily correlate to a specific gender. This research is a study of a support group which although predominantly made up of women is a group that is open in its language and access to membership to all who are parenting, including mothers, fathers, grandparents, childminders and so on. Carol Smart states that motherhood 'has been a politically contested site for centuries' (Smart, 1996: 39). She explores the ideas of essentialism

(discussed later) and motherhood and historically traces motherhood describing it as an 'institution', one that purports to be a natural outcome of biologically given gender differences. In some of the first examples of feminist research Ann Oakley (1992; 1980; 1979; 1974) also explores concepts of motherhood through her studies on housework, becoming a mother, childbirth and social support. Motherhood as an institution has had many incarnations over the years, along with a corresponding variety of behaviours dictating what it means to be a 'good mother' (Smart, 1996). Nancy Chodorow's 'Reproduction of Mothering', originally published in 1978, is an exploration of the socially constructed role of women as primary care givers. She explores the social and psychological aspects of mothering as socially constructed, maintaining that non-feminist theories do not inquire about the reproduction of mothering or of the social relations of parenting, instead assuming biological inevitability (Chodorow, 1999: 30). She determines that mothering is a product of feminine role training and role identification, that girls are taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance, and told they ought to mother (Chodorow, 1999: 31). More recently, Tamar Hager (2011) refers to 'the myth of motherhood' and describes motherhood as a relatively new social construction, drawing on the seminal work of Adrienne Rich's 'Of Woman Born', published in 1976, which critiques the socially constructed notion of motherhood. Rich distinguishes 'mothering' from 'motherhood' (O'Reilly, 2004), thus allowing for consideration of essentialist questions about women and men's roles and mothering. I understand the striking reality that women are predominantly the users of this PSG as a manifestation of the socially constructed nature of mothering and wider socially constructed gender roles in our society.

Support and Motherhood

Contemporary childrearing in developed, industrialised nations is leading many mothers raising their child in relative isolation to lean on the much-repeated proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'. Relying on 'a village' could equate to the desire to rely on the support, skills and knowledge of others when faced with the experience of mothering. Naomi Geens and Michel Vandebroek (2014) carried out a comprehensive review and critical examination of literature on social support and parenting. They outline how conceptualising social support is difficult, stating that:

Despite the large body of research on social support in the context of parenting, some important gaps in the research literature can be noticed. While there is a large consensus on the value and benefits of formal and informal social relations for families, there seems to be less coherence in the conceptualisations of social support. Several notions are used and the same concepts often cover different meanings across studies

(Geens and Vandebroek, 2014: 491).

They conclude that in the dominant research literature social support is individualised and instrumentalised and that, as such, minimal attention is given to the relational aspect of social support as a relevant source of support in the everyday parenting process (Geens and Vandebroek, 2014:492). Dimitra Hartas' article on 'The Social Context of Parenting' (2014) showed that parent's internal resources and background affect the way they parent but that parenting is also relational and affected by social, spatial and cultural factors, such as neighbourhood connectedness, family relationships and access to social networks. These findings have implications considering that family's social contexts, in the form of social support networks and neighbourhood connectedness, are shrinking in the face of global recession and disappearing

national resources and public services (Hartas, 2014). This opening section looked at deconstructing the concepts relating to motherhood and social support. The next section will explore the concept of informal learning in a similar manner.

Informal Learning

Michael Murray discusses the attempt to define the field of education and learning as an attempt to control and dominate the discipline (Murray, 2014: 105-106). Despite this viewpoint, different learning environments are often defined as formal, non-formal and informal, and these definitions are recognised and utilised by the European Commission (2003), The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2015) and the Central Statistics Office in Ireland (CSO, 2010)¹. However, there is a lack of exactness in these terms and they overlap in people's understanding of them. These definitions do not imply firm categories and there may well be some overlap (and confusion) between the informal and the non-formal in particular. Peter Jarvis states that when attempting to categorise these various types of learning into examples of formal, non-formal and informal there is an inherent prejudice displayed, since the terms informal and non-formal learning imply that all the important learning is formal –structured, accredited, provided for in recognised institutions of education, and so on – whereas the remaining examples of learning which are not so orientated can be lumped together as 'informal' (Jarvis, 2010). Similarly, Etienne Wenger, in his publication 'Communities of Practice' (1999) states that, for many, the concept of learning conjures up

¹ It is beyond the scope of this research to discuss policy in more depth than this.

images of classrooms, training sessions, teachers, textbooks, homework, and exercises, yet in reality learning is an integral part of our everyday lives, part of our participation in our communities and organisations. For Wenger, 'the problem is not that we do not know this, but rather that we do not have very systematic ways of talking about this familiar experience' (Wenger, 1999: 8; also 2015; 2009).

Allen Tough in his influential publication 'The Adults Learning Projects' (1971) sets out clearly his idea of learning episodes and 'very deliberate learning', quantifying and classifying it, breaking it down into episodic chunks, defining it based on intention, motivation, clear and definite knowledge and skills in mind, and retention. He maintains that despite the variety, all learning episodes have in common the dominant desire of the person to 'gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skills' and states that this desire is stronger than the sum of all other desires for beginning and continuing the activity (Tough, 1971: 8). Many theories of informal education still point towards an 'educator' being present (Jeffs and Smith, 1997, 2005, 2011). Important to the body of knowledge on informal education are the contributions made by Ivan Illich (1978) in particular his publication 'Deschooling Society' (1978) where he critiqued the role of institutions, professional educators and schools which exist to reproduce the dominant hegemonic norms and create inequality. Instead, Illich put forward his vision for education where knowledge was accessible to everyone, at any time, through a sharing of knowledge in convivial peer relationships (Smith, 1997-2011; Illich, 1978).

Knud Illeris (2009; 2007; 2004) believes the terms of formal and informal to be very abstract and instead introduces the concept of different learning spaces. The central idea behind this concept is that since all learning is situated,

different types of learning situations or learning spaces have different characteristics. For Illeris (2007; 2004), there are five main types of general learning spaces, which are very different in nature and history. They are: everyday learning; social and educational learning; workplace learning; interest-based learning; and net-based learning. The two learning spaces that are most significant in this group are the interest based learning and everyday learning. Illeris maintains that everyday learning takes place in daily life; it is mainly informal, multifarious, personal and related to the cultures and subcultures in which the person is integrated. Interest based learning takes place in community activities and associations, or is related to a personal interest or hobby. It may be seen as a consciously goal-orientated type of everyday learning in which incidental and informal features are replaced by a clear motivation and resolution (a relevant example for this PSG would be learning how to breastfeed). Illeris (2007) also outlines four basic learning types based on Jean Piaget's assertion that to learn something involves first accumulating a schema of concepts, then assimilating and accommodating new information into this schema. To the learning types cumulative, assimilative and accommodative Illeris added transformative (or expansive). He described transformative learning as personality changes or changes in the organisation of the self, not something to be remembered or recalled but something that has become part of the person characterised by simultaneous reconstruction of several schemes including emotional and social patterns (Illeris, 2007: 142). Jack Mezirow's writings on transformative learning are influential and wide reaching. Mezirow developed the concepts of 'meaning perspectives' - one's overall world-view and 'meaning schemes' - smaller components which contain specific knowledge, values, and beliefs about one's experiences. A number of meaning

schemes work together to generate one's meaning perspective. For Mezirow, life experiences provided a starting point for transformational learning, a disorientating dilemma, and these life experiences create the conditions where our overall thoughts and views, our 'meaning perspectives', can be explored and critiqued (Mezirow, 2007; 1991; 1990). In his multi-layered critique of Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory Jack Newman describes it as unjustifiably 'the dominant discourse in the academic world of adult education' (Newman, 2014: 346; Newman, 2012). While there is much I agree with in Newman's critique, particularly the propensity to overuse or overstate what is considered 'transformative', the experience of becoming a mother is one which lends itself to descriptions of transformative learning.

As outlined above, there have been many theories of learning over the years but despite more recent additions to the literature on the presence and importance of informal and non-formal learning (Knowles, 1984; Illich, 1978; Tough, 1971) the area of informal learning within parent support networks is one that appears to be overlooked, especially given the importance many women (and men) place on this learning experience. Jarvis states that everyday life is a strangely under researched subject when it comes to human learning, with adults often not recognising their changing and developing thoughts and behaviour as learning unless they are engaging in an active, formally acknowledged or accredited, conscious episode of learning (Jarvis, 2010). In terms of education there are no accredited courses offered in parenting in Ireland (aside from courses in disciplines such as Parent Mentoring) but there are many non-formal options, run on a statutory basis², voluntary basis, and

² In January 2016 David Cameron announced plans to introduce government-run parenting classes in the UK following a previously unsuccessful pilot of state-run voluntary parenting classes for underprivileged parents under the CanParent pilot in 2011 (Ross, 2016).

private basis. In fact the sector is so large and diverse that Barnardos (2016) manage a comprehensive database of parenting courses, most of them marketed towards parents who are struggling or who are experiencing some kind of challenge. Alongside these non-formal courses, parenting in the form of books, column inches, websites and television shows is a multi-million euro industry. 'Experts' with varying levels of practical and theoretical experience of parenting offer a myriad of advice to the general population of parents and non-parents alike. In their article about parent education outcomes within a transformative learning framework Joy First and Wendy Way (1995) describe how typically parent education had typically been dominated by 'behavioristic models' that focused on skill acquisition, and also that research on parent education was predominantly positivist and focused on outcomes that were easily measured (First and Way, 1995: 108). Their research explored the potential for parent education based on transformative learning and they suggested that the women in their study experienced a 'major shift in world view from reactive to proactive, unempowered to empowered' (First and Way, 1995: 106). Furthermore, they maintain that as the women in their study 'began to question their basic assumptions about parenting, they seemed to develop new ways of thinking about their lives altogether' (*ibid*).

Siu-ming To, Siu-mee lu Kan, Kcon-wah Tsoi and Ting-sam Chan (2013) critique 'transmission perspectives' in structured parent education programmes, that is, the idea that parents should be taught by professionally trained practitioners through structured and systematic programs. They outline their main criticisms which include: that parents may overly rely on transferred knowledge rather than on other skills; that parents struggle to connect meanings of their learning in relation to their daily situations; assumptions that

professionals are more knowledgeable leads parents to follow professional advice blindly rather than addressing the unique challenges their children are facing; that unilateral parent education neglects the social capital possessed by parents in mutual learning and support; and finally that children's development is influenced not just by parenting style but by family interactions and dynamics (To et al, 2013). To generate transformation in parent education, the crucial elements are group sharing, mutual understanding and mutual support among the participants

Through continuous dialogue among parents they generate careful considerations and locate their own perspectives as to how their daily thoughts and actions in childrearing are shaped by society.

(To et al, 2013: 82)

Taking a critique of transmission perspectives in parenting education and a reliance instead on dialogue I will turn now to looking at some of the literature on generating 'really useful knowledge', a concept developed in the nineteenth century that critiques dominant forms of knowledge, instead promoting democracy and social amelioration (Connolly, 2010). Lynn Tett (2007) places an emphasis on learning which is essentially about making knowledge that makes sense of the world and helps us to act upon our world collectively in order to change it for the better. Tett believes that experience counts and how we are interpreted and understood helps us to challenge the 'common sense' of everyday assumptions, produce 'really useful knowledge' and opens up ways of reflexive thinking about the social construction of our experiences (Tett, 2007). When people create their own knowledge and have their voices heard, narrow definitions of what is thought to be 'educated knowledge' and who it is that makes it, are thrown into question (Tett, 2007). This knowledge, gained from

sharing experiences and stories, is mirrored in Jean Barr's assertion that when we identify and make space where alternative ways of thinking and being can be explored this increases the possibilities of knowledge — that is, 'knowledge that is useful to those who generate it' (Barr, 1999: 82). These forms of knowledge production through dialogue are a core feature of this research when exploring the learning experiences of the women in this PSG. To bring this idea on further I will turn to a more theoretical exploration of how we can go about sharing our experiences in order to generate knowledge.

Shared Experiences – a Freirean Perspective

There is little doubt that becoming a mother is a time in our lives when drastic changes usually occur at physical, cognitive, emotional and social level, in turn shaping much of our subsequent action and engagement with the people and the world around us. Prominent adult education theories outline how definitive knowledge cannot be deposited from an all-knowing teacher to an incompetent student, something which is particularly evident given the diversity of mothering experiences. We must therefore explore more suitable ways of learning to mother based on self-direction, experience, mutual engagement and dialogue. Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy rests on people acquiring new identities, new self-conceptions, overcoming a 'culture of silence' and gaining emancipatory understanding so that they can intervene in their social world to transform it (Freire, 1974; 1992; 1993). Freire outlined how this could be achieved by fostering 'Conscientisation': awareness of social and political structures that oppress, and 'Praxis: a cyclical process of action and reflection (Freire, 1993). Freire believed that all of us have knowledge - in our subjective relation to

objective reality we are capable of knowing, even if we consider that level of knowing only as opinion. Through conscientisation the more accurately we understand our experiences the more critical our understanding of reality will be. Freire believes that commitment to the cause (in his case the cause of liberation, in this case, the cause of learning to mother) is an act of love and therefore it is inherently dialogical. In fact, *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire's book written primarily in response to many of his followers and detractors, is littered with examples of 'conversations' and 'dialogue' that Freire draws on to make his point and demonstrate learning (Freire, 1994). The methods proposed by Freire were based on dialogue, a horizontal relationship between person, dialogue which fosters critical thinking and is nourished by love, humility, hope, faith and trust (Freire, 1993). Relational dialogue and a subsequent 'naming of the world' are crucial elements to Freire's theories.

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself.

(Freire, 1993: 70)

Freire advocates starting with the knowledge of the 'educands', the knowledge of experience. From there, while respecting that knowledge, we should then come together to get beyond that knowledge. With progressive education, respect for the knowledge of experience is inserted into the cultural and class contexts of the educands (Freire, 1994). As the coordinator of the Adult Education Project of the Movement of Popular Culture in Recife, Freire developed the 'culture circle'.

Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants; instead of alienating stimuli, compact programs that were “broken down” and “codified” into learning units’. In the culture circles we attempted through group debate either to clarify situations or to seek action arising from that clarification. The topics for these debates were offered to us by the group themselves.

(Freire, 1974: 39-40)

Freire’s work has been criticised on grounds of gender blindness but also because it fails to address the different forms of oppression experienced by different groups, or to acknowledge the possibility that the oppressor in one domain can be the oppressed in another (Ryan, 2001; hooks, 1994; Barr, 1999). Anne B. Ryan (2001) succinctly criticises Freire for his dualism between oppressor and oppressed and the assumption he makes that all forms of oppression are uniform without giving enough consideration for intersectionality (Ryan, 2001). The world cannot always be divided so neatly into dualisms of the oppressor and the oppressed and the concept of intersectionality helps us to understand that oppression leading to a culture of silence can be based on many factors. Despite being criticised for gender blindness³, Freire’s work was taken on by feminists around the world, including the women’s movement within the community education sphere in Ireland from the 1970s onwards, an encompassing movement that produced the conditions that allowed groups like this one to form.

Exploring Feminism - Feminist Epistemology

A second important theoretical contribution can be found through a postmodernist critique of the work of Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule (1986). Their book

³ Freire addressed this criticism somewhat in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994)

'Women's Ways Of Knowing' states that in response to their question 'What is the most important learning experience you have had?' many of their research respondents selected childbirth (Belenky et al, 1986). Belenky et al believed that women's self-concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined and they sought to uncover how for many women the real and valued lessons learned did not necessarily grow out of their academic work but in relationships with friends and teachers, life crisis and community involvement. Drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan (1993) they believed that conceptions of knowledge and truth that are accepted and articulated today have been shaped throughout history by the male-dominated majority culture and that relatively little has been given to modes of learning, knowing and valuing that may be specific to, or at least common in, women. These were what they referred to as 'women's ways of knowing'. They felt that formal educational programs took relatively little interest in preparing students for parenting and other social roles traditionally occupied by women (Belenky et al, 1986: 12-13). The authors identified 5 epistemological positions from which their respondents viewed and knew the world: silence; received knowledge; subjective knowledge; procedural knowledge and constructed knowledge. The authors posit 2 contrasting epistemological orientations: Separate, which is based on impersonal procedures for establishing truth: and Connected, which is where truth emerges through care. Belenky et al move from silence to construction highlighting their various findings about what they saw as distinct ways of knowing.

While Women's Ways of Knowing was seen as an influential piece of research it is not without its critics (Ryan, 2001; Oakley, 2000; Luttrell, 1989). These criticisms largely focus on: unclear selection processes with little cross reference to male ways of knowing; the seemingly hierarchical nature of their

ways of knowing; how data was collected and analysed to arrive at their 'ways of knowing'; how women were categorised (with almost half falling into their category of subjective knowing); and perhaps most forcefully, critics also argue the very idea that women have a different way of knowing than men. Although dominant ideas undoubtedly change, in her 2001 publication 'Feminist Ways of Knowing', Ryan states:

I am constantly struck by how dominant is the idea among feminist educational practitioners and theorists that there exist natural differences between the genders and that there are naturally different women's and men's ways of knowing.'

(Ryan, 2001: 72)

Ryan believes that it is important to connect being and knowing through a model of education which draws on the everyday experiences of women. However, she goes on to say that suggesting that women have different ways of knowing that require different ways of learning implies that the problem lies in naturally occurring differences between all women and men and that this fails to address the deeply complex ways in which inequalities based on gender are structurally constructed (Ryan, 2001). For Ryan, theorists such as Chodorow, Gilligan and Belenky et al address women's ways of knowing and learning as something intrinsic to women rather than challenging it as socially and politically organised, thus promoting a male/female dualism which reinforces the status quo (Ryan, 2001: 71-72). Ryan proposes instead a means where pedagogy influenced by poststructuralist feminism needs to investigate how gendered experiences are produced, how difference can be celebrated without resorting to essentialism, and how humans are organised to know (Ryan, 2001).

Wendy Luttrell's research on how black and white working-class women define and claim knowledge also challenges the feminist analyses that have identified

a single or universal mode of knowing for women (Luttrell, 1989). Instead, the women in her study speak to complex gender, racial, and class relations of power that shape how they think about learning and knowing. Luttrell highlights that although patriarchal impositions on knowledge may exist, not all women experience them in the same way (1989: 79). Crucially therefore, since women do not all experience being a woman in the same way, this makes it unlikely there is a single mode of knowing. Luttrell's research respondent's describe "Common sense' knowledge - relying on family and friends who 'know the ropes', and 'seeking advice from people who can be trusted, not because they are professional experts, but because they share the same problems' (Luttrell, 1989: 38). Feminists and social scientists are very interested in the divergences between the knowledge of the academy - authorised knowledge - and knowledge drawn from everyday experience - experiential knowledge (Letherby, 2003: 22). The women in Luttrell's research classified the type of knowledge needed to rear children and run a home as different to dominant conceptions of knowledge, a distinction which Luttrell believed diminishes women's power. Luttrell highlights how for the women in her research common sense knowledge supports working-class judgments about what is relevant to everyday life and assessments of 'really useful knowledge' in educational practice (Luttrell, 1989: 38). Jane Thompson (2007: 31) further explores the concept of 'really useful knowledge' linking it to radical adult education, thus producing the conditions where development of critical thinking and recognition of human agency can lead to increased confidence to develop collective forms of social action to achieve political change.

This section looked at the importance of shared experiences through the framework of Freirean and Feminist adult education practices. It explored the

pitfalls in theories which suggest that women have a distinct way of knowing by virtue of their gender and finished by exploring the concept of generating knowledge that is useful through dialogue with others. The next section will conclude the literature review by exploring features of community education.

Creating a Community

Mark Smith (2012) outlines how locally based organisations, often based around the needs of families and child care, have considerable educative power, with participation in an association being a form of education in itself while also having the potential to strengthen the quality of community life.

One cannot reduce adult education to a series of regular activities consisting of modules which have now become ritualized in the form of courses. The very participation in the life of an association, being conscious of what one is doing there (such as the running of a centre) is, in itself, a form of education

(Smith, 2012)

In Ireland, we have our own unique history of participation in the life of an educational association through the development of the women's community education movement, acknowledging here that 'community' is a word which is ambiguous, contested and often appropriated for different uses (see Shaw, 2008). In the context of Women's Community Education AONTAS describes education as not just structured formal learning programmes but states that:

A women's support group is a group involved in education, because participants tell their stories and those stories can teach others about ways to understand their own lives and cope with difficulties

(AONTAS, 2009: 23)

In 1993 AONTAS produced a report, 'Liberating Learning', with the aim of identifying 'daytime groups' and then providing statistics and information on these groups. The main challenge named in this report was to find and contact these groups as many were run on such an informal level (Inglis et al, 1993). This problem of identification of women's groups as spaces of learning continues as shown in the omission of these groups from the CSO statistical analysis on informal learning. By not including these groups in the study we are ignoring the potential for uncovering the significance of a PSG to the parents who use them.

Community education in Ireland provided a forum for voices of otherwise silenced people, it developed a process which valued their stories and it enabled the participants to interrogate their own words (Connolly, 2003; CEFA, 2011). It is well documented that there has been a decline in this form of women's community education (Fitzsimons, 2015; Connolly, 2014; Connolly 2013; Fitzsimons, 2012) most likely aligned with the move toward neo-liberal policies of community development and education (widely discussed in Murray, et al 2015; CEFA, 2014; and Grummel, Devine and Lynch, 2009). This PSG is a form of community education that has high membership and is active in many communities in Ireland.

Community Education strives to value the subjective experience of the participants, uses participatory group processes, and incorporates feminist ideals of consciousness raising, gender awareness, participative democracy and emancipation. Feminist education in community settings provides a participatory and dialogical context in which knowledge can be co-created from the bottom up. It allows for the exploration of diversity and the development of a

political analysis, often leading to involvement in change at a number of different levels (Moane and Quilty, 2012). It recognises learning not just as the individual act of acquiring knowledge but as a group process, with each group member bringing their gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and status with them (Connolly and Hussey, 2013).

The emphasis on dialogue and common understandings; underpinned by ethical considerations such as respect for difference and diversity; driven by the key players; and devoted to growth and development, and fulfilling the potential of all the participants, are the major characteristics of adult and community education.

(Connolly, 2007: 122)

Community education reaches difficult to reach people and communities but not just that, it reaches difficult issues and trends. Connolly (2010) states that these difficult issues are not always located just at the local level, which is clearly shown by the seemingly personal issue of mothering, which as mentioned above, is described as an 'institution' which is politically contested including many different visions of what it means to be a 'good mother' (Smart, 1996).

Summary

In this chapter I outlined the main concepts relating to motherhood and support for mothering and in doing so presented my ontological position in this regard. I explored the literature relating to informal learning and some current philosophies of learning. Following from this I then explored Freirean adult education, feminist epistemology and the value of sharing experiences. This section presented a critique of a generalised 'women's way of knowing' as

distinct from men and instead used theories related to intersectionality to examine how really useful knowledge is generated. I concluded this chapter with a brief outline of the principles of Community Education in Ireland in order to situate this group into a wider context of learning. The following chapter will explore my methodology and methods for this research.

CHAPTER THREE: COFFEE AND CAKE

The predominant research question addressed in this thesis is to investigate the learning experiences of mothers in a parent support group (PSG). It also seeks to explore how these experiences intersect with Adult Education theory and practice. One of the reasons for the inclusion of 'Coffee and Cake' as part of my title is to reflect the informal and relational nature of the setting and to examine the significance of these features in producing spaces conducive to learning. These conditions of informality and relationship and were also crucial to my research approach regarding methods and ethics. This chapter will begin by exploring feminist methodology and identifying this research as insider research taking a broadly feminist approach. From there, I will then outline actions taken to lateralise power including the co-construction of data. This chapter will conclude with an account of how I took a reflexive approach to my methods of researching.

Feminist Methodology and Epistemology

This piece of research draws significantly from feminist theories and feminist research practices and builds on an academic interest in these areas that first began as an undergraduate Social Science student. Donna Mertens states that different philosophical assumptions lead to different methodological assumptions and method choices (Mertens, 2012). My approaches to this research came before I was fully aware of what paradigm or framework was influencing me. My ontological view of the world influenced my choice of topic and how I chose to

approach my exploration of this topic. Leaning on the words of Gayle Letherby (2003) my concern as a feminist researcher was not just with what I did but how and why I chose to do it and the relevance of the techniques and approaches I chose.

Issues of method, methodology and epistemology are not peripheral – they matter. The questions we ask, and the way we choose to use them, often determine the answers we get, and help us understand the overlap between knowledge and power which is one of the central tenants of feminist research.

(Letherby, 2003: 3)

Drawing from feminist theories is paradoxical – on the one hand it can appear unified in its view of women as subjugated and oppressed by patriarchal systems, and on the other hand it contains many concepts at variance with each other. A central claim of feminist theory is that society has been dominated by patriarchy and men have used their positions of power to define issues, structure language and develop theory. Thus men have been able to promote their own interests and as a result all the dominant forms of discourse in western culture exhibit predominantly male characteristics (Letherby, 2003). Within this overarching claim it is possible to distinguish a number of different and sometimes incompatible positions. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all of these various positions (for more see Letherby 2003; Tong 2009). Taking a very cursory and apologetically crude look at feminist thinking I will attempt to outline the main components of some feminist theories that have influenced my ontological and epistemological position with regard to this thesis. The divergences in feminist thought are complex so in order to give my discussion a framework I am going to attempt to trace discussion points most relevant to my topic and to my research participants to elucidate my feminist

position at this time. As a woman born after the beginnings of liberal feminism I have benefitted from many of the triumphs which allowed me significantly more choices than my own mother (who incidentally was one of many women affected by the 'marriage bar'⁴ when she married in 1963) but much of the original focus of liberal feminism may have lost some of its cultural relevance to middle class women in industrialised countries. In the twenty-first century liberal feminism's concern with equal opportunity within the free market or equal provision of services within welfare state provision might have little relevance to this group of women (certainly before they had children) as they hold positions of economic power within the workforce, many of them occupying roles traditionally associated with male professions. Radical Feminism, while no doubt relevant to many women, has proponents who strongly challenge the role of mothers and motherhood (Tong, 2009: 82-85). As will be seen, given the views expressed by my respondents towards motherhood these are perhaps not viewpoints they would share. Radical feminism is also most often criticised for its focus on the dichotomous relationship between men and women and in doing so strengthens the concept of essentialism (Tong, 2009; Letherby, 2003; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Essentialism relates to the idea that for men and women there is a core, natural state, an essential femininity and masculinity, an essence that cannot be changed. Initially a total rejection of essentialism was problematic for me, especially within the framework of this piece of research. Given the centrality of my own and my respondent's identification as women with unique personal stories but shared experiences of birth, mothering and breastfeeding I wondered if my respondents might share my unease with an

⁴ The 1932 'marriage bar' required women National School teachers to retire on marriage, a bar eventually extended to the entire Civil Service. The Civil Service [Employment of Married Women] Act 1973 removed the ban on the recruitment or employment of married women in the Civil Service, Local Authorities and Health Boards

outright rejection of essentialism. As it currently stands females have the potential to biologically become pregnant, to carry a child in their womb, to birth the baby and most commonly are biologically able to breastfeed. It would initially appear that these things cannot currently be said of someone who is male. However, further problematising of these biological 'facts' through exploring the diversity of experiences within them all reinforce my emerging rejection of essentialism. The concept of gender is such a recent one and the more contemporary understanding of gender fluidity serves me far better than previous dichotomous definitions of gender.

However, for some, rejection of the dichotomy between male and female might challenge some mother's ontological thinking about the biological abilities they possess and which they place great significance on. One position which often presents a critique of essentialism is post-structuralism, with the position held that there are no overarching truths in this world. Within poststructuralist feminism, there are no grand narratives, no fixed meaning. All ideas are unstable, we simply become used to looking at things in particular ways so they appear to us to be stable. Poststructuralists are particularly interested in subjectivity and the power of language as a discourse; this is because language is unstable, contested, localised and contextualised (Ryan, 2001; Weedon, 1997). This contextualisation of language highlights how we also contextualise our own individual lived experiences, therefore nothing is objective and we exist in a world of subjectivity. Barr (1999) describes poststructuralism as a position that dispenses with universal categories of class, race, gender, even woman, and views the concept of power as localised and relational rather than power as the possession of individuals and groups. Poststructuralism could be seen as offering a description of the world to which there are only different points of

view, endlessly shifting and fragmentary, none better or more justifiable than the rest. Barr (1999) states that post structuralist insights can assist feminist theory and practice to the extent that they discourage efforts to explain (or get rid of) oppression crudely and instead describe our lives as structured by a number of forces, including race and class as well as gender.

Feminist research moves from seeing the respondents simply as sources of data and instead sees a two-way process aimed at inclusion and dialogue. Descriptive research, where women are asked to talk about their lives, goes some way to address traditional, patriarchal power-laden research, however this reliance on experience continues to focus on the individual rather than relational features such as power, agency, resistance and difference that gives rise to each person's account (Ryan, 2001: 74). Women's experiences, she argues, need to be included in research not to show the 'true nature of women', but as a starting point for developing less rigid gender hierarchies (*ibid*: 75). Ryan proposes that we can support equality by meeting the needs of women and mothers while rejecting and challenging the idealised institution of motherhood (Ryan, 2001: 40)

For me, while there are elements of feminist poststructuralism that I can identify with, I do not identify with it fully. Taking it to its extreme, I'm not sure it serves us well to wholly reject 'structure'. While I agree that we exist in a subjective world we continue to have shared meanings, albeit with their inherent subjective interpretations. We need to acknowledge a certain sense of constructed femininity and social construction of our role as women and mothers in order for us to connect as feminists of all genders in the common goal of obtaining equal rights. We have individual agency to accept, reject or attempt to abolish

structures. The first step is to recognise these structures and uncover our understanding of how they impact on us. This shared meaning allows us to collectively construct meaning together; it is what makes us strive for participation, emancipation and transformation (Freire, 1993; Mezirow, 1990, 1991).

Because we actually live in a system of patriarchal relations... feminists have to take positions that assert the value of women as women, in order to counter the structural devaluation of them

(Ryan, 2001: 39)

Women who are mothers who have experienced discriminatory practices based on their choices around birth, feeding and parenting need shared understanding in order to name the reasons for these discriminatory practices as social rather than individual.

Insider Research

Part of my decision to begin my thesis with an autobiographical preface is to pinpoint a moment when my thinking about feminist epistemology developed, although I did not call it that back then. It also serves as an introduction to this research as a piece of insider research. The experience recounted in the preface relates to my membership and involvement in a local PSG as both a user of the parenting support services provided and as a member of the local branch committee. This meant that many of my respondents were known to me, although not all. Carrying out insider research has distinct advantages in terms of my knowledge of the workings of the group, my access to willing respondents and my expectation of themes that might emerge from the

research (May, 2011, Bryman, 2012). However, insider research also carries inherent considerations which had to be upheld. The first of these that I puzzled over was the issues of confidentiality and anonymity. I made a decision early on in the process that although it might have been beneficial to name the organisation and to potentially provide a platform to profile the service I concluded that in order for me to be more open to presenting honestly and deeply the experiences of the respondents it would be best not to name the service. Although respondents were provided with a confidentiality agreement the confidentiality is limited by the fact that people who know me may know of the organisation I have been involved with, and this is very likely as I have always been keen to promote the services offered.

My insider status also impacted how I chose to recruit research participants. I chose to recruit respondents by using our Facebook closed page, of which there are over 1000 members with widely varying levels of participation and involvement with the group. With consent from the committee I posted a 'Call for Research Respondents' to the Facebook page giving some information about myself, my research topic and stating that anyone who wanted to express an interest in taking part could contact me for more information. I acknowledge that this consent was given to me as a committee member however there was an ethos of supporting research that predated mine and I was not the first to use the Facebook forum in this way. I specifically included in this post that those wishing to express an interest should private message me or email me for further information. With such a large cohort of people and with my final number of respondents from this method of recruitment amounting to fifteen women this ensured, as far as reasonably possible, that the anonymity of those who accepted the invitation to participate was protected. As further efforts to

protect anonymity I assured my respondents that in the finished thesis the organisation would not be named, nor would their role or position within it be named or alluded to as depending on their role it could be a strong identifier.

On receipt of an expression of interest I sent potential respondents an information letter and a consent form by email detailing the study and outlining the confidentiality agreement. After receipt of these documents people were asked to contact me again if they wanted to take part. It was at this point that I selected 3 different dates across different times in the day - one morning and two evenings, and asked potential respondents, by individual email correspondence, to indicate which date was their preference. Potential respondents were informed that the proposed location for these focus groups was my own house but that anyone that wanted to host could contact me to discuss this. Two focus groups took place in my house and a third took place in the house of a respondent at her request. For this group all members who had selected this date were informed individually about the venue change and asked if they were agreeable to this, which they all were. There was also a time change suggested by a respondent to fit better with the time that children were more likely to be in bed. This suggestion was also put to the rest of the respondents individually for comment and they were all also agreeable to the slightly later time. These changes of time and site were all sitting well within the feminist research paradigm as it gave a greater sense of equality of process and participation.

Lateralising Power

As the potential pool of respondents was so large I don't feel that people felt under pressure to 'help' me, however many of the respondents were known to me, although not all. This led to what Letherby termed the 'kindred spirit role' which implies a two way exchange and mutual support (Letherby, 2003: 124-125). Respondents did reveal private and personal aspects of their lives and to do so placed their trust in myself as the researcher and in the process. I was aware of my privileged position in the group, and within the conceptual framework of my chosen topic I do acknowledge I have certain intellectual privilege. One of the limitations of qualitative research lies in the inherent power dynamics between researcher/researched that can exist in all settings. Oakley, revisiting her previously held views about women interviewing women, recognised the potential for power dimensions to be present in feminist research (Oakley, 2000). Some of these power relationships can be minimised in a predominantly open-ended focus group of women where the power role of the researcher/facilitator is more diluted. While the group may serve to diminish the power of the researcher due to numbers, (for example 1 researcher:5 respondents) it may contain its own inherent power dimensions leading respondents to select versions of their truth they deem to be more acceptable to the researcher, or to other members of the group. Interestingly the focus group where I felt power was most lateralised was the one which took place in a respondents home, perhaps because she created a space where a group of women were sitting around a kitchen table with candles burning and tea and coffee flowing.

Letherby writes about the responsibility of researchers to provide accounts of their research process so that readers can have access to the procedures which underlie the way knowledge is presented and constructed by the researcher. She states that as researchers we 'have the final say' (Letherby, 2003: 77). We may have a more powerful voice in the construction of the finished piece but ethical due-process will give respondents the possibility to reflect on the research experience, to read and amend their transcripts, and ideally to see the findings before publication. The methods section shows how I sought to include the respondents in my analysis of the focus groups. The focus groups were transcribed in their entirety and were sent to each member of the focus group by email. The research was co-constructed (Bryman, 2012; May, 2011), and the women who attended the focus groups were invited to comment on the transcript, from which some did, giving insightful and thought-provoking responses. Their written words in response to the focus groups feature in their entirety in Chapter Four.

Reflexivity and Research Methods

In this chapter I have already outlined feminist methodologies, insider research and lateralising power. Now I will trace some of the main areas where my perspectives shifted in the process of completing this thesis. When beginning my research it always seemed a certainty to me that I would do qualitative research and that this would entail carrying out in-depth interviews. When drawing up my consent form I asked respondents for consent to conduct interviews and focus groups, but at that time the inclusion of focus groups in my consent form represented for me a 'just in case' option, including this option in

case I might need it. As the time came closer to begin my primary research and as my research question began to take hold it quite suddenly and profoundly struck me that if the social act of coming together to converse and to share was so important to me why was I considering isolating my respondents? The process of preparing for the interviews led to a realisation that an individual interview was counter-intuitive and at odds with what I was hoping to explore. My view shifted to focus groups, and even more so, to using the group in the way that I knew how. My thoughts began to move to my practice of over 15 years working with adult and community education groups: my experience in developing and delivering experiential activities for groups; my experience of facilitating discussion following such activities; and most importantly in this regard my experience of trusting the mantra that 'the group can take care of itself' (Sheehy, 2001: 33). I set about deciding on a series of open-ended activities that I could do with my group to provide us with the space to explore this topic together. I drew on three activities I had used before in groups that I felt would create the conditions I was looking for and would allow my respondents the space to discuss issues key to them. These activities are discussed fully in Chapter Four. For me as the researcher it is striking to note how much my perspective has changed from these focus groups to this finished piece. In particular, the reactions and input from the women in the focus groups to issues of feminism fed back into my research question again leading me down a very different path than the one I had envisioned before the focus groups took place. Alcoff (cited in Ryan 2001: 40) states that when women become feminists, the crucial thing that has occurred is not that they have learned any new facts about the world but that they come to view those facts from a different position, from their own position as subjects. A political change

in perspective means that the framework for assessment has changed, not that the facts have changed, although new facts may also come into view. The focus groups organised as part of this research had an unexpected consequence of providing a space where myself and others began to view 'facts' from a different position, a more feminist position. While a member of this PSG this is something I have also witnessed through coffee mornings and other events, such as a recent evening talk entitled 'Respectful Maternity Care' given by a prominent Homebirth Midwife (Canning, 2016) highlighting the wide arm of the Irish legal system and its effect on the birthing choices of women. It was yet another awakening of my feminist sensibilities as a member of this PSG and one I shared with others in the room. The next chapter will explore the features of the focus groups and then present the findings from them.

CHAPTER FOUR: AROUND A KITCHEN TABLE

The title of this chapter 'Around a Kitchen Table' was chosen to reflect the manner and conditions under which the majority of my research findings were collected. It is a recognisable phrase in adult education but was also a phrase used by one of my respondents in the third focus group. This chapter sets out to explain the methods and processes used in the focus groups and to present the findings from three focus groups and three e-interviews. It also draws from my own biographical accounts in the focus groups. Findings are presented by theme from across all respondents. These themes are linked to the main headings from Chapter Two, which are: Motherhood, Support and Motherhood, Informal learning, Shared Experiences, Exploring Feminism, and Creating a Community.

As stated in Chapter One, I used an open coding method and all of the themes that emerged from the focus groups and e-interviews are represented in this chapter. I made the decision to use the same headings here as in Chapter Two in order to bring a structure to findings that by their nature contained lots of interweaving and overlapping of themes. I have sought to represent the views of my respondents as best I can using their words in eliciting a particular sentiment or feeling.

Findings are presented with the pseudonym of each respondent written after their comment, except where there is a dialogical exchange of views, in which case each respondent's pseudonym is written before their comment similar to the style of a script. Comments will be linked to the focus group they originated

in, for example focus group 1 (FG1), focus group 2 (FG2) and focus group 3 (FG3), or indicated as a comment from one of the e-interviews.

Overview of the Research Participants

This research includes the contributions of 16 women in total. These contributions were voiced through three focus groups on three different nights with a combined total of 13 respondents. I also had 4 women who had agreed to attend a focus group and for reasons relating to their health or the health of their child they were unable to attend on the night. To these 4 women I gave the option for them to have their voices heard through e-interview and of these four, 2 responded. The women ranged in age from their early 30s into their 50s with some having one child and others having two or more. The area this PSG serves is very large and as such covers a range of diverse social backgrounds, although there are striking social class features within my research cohort with the respondents firmly within the middle to upper classes. This is partly due to wider demographics within this geographical area but also because frequently this demographic is more likely to agree to participate in research (Bryman, 2012; May, 2011), and indeed some of the women stated when they expressed an interest that it was due in part to their own experience of previously recruiting for research. However, as my cohort is drawn from a wide geographical area and a large pool of people it is highly likely that the homogeneity of class background of my respondents is influenced also by the intersectionality between class and childrearing methods. These women adopt practices that are peripheral to mainstream culture in Irish society (Layte and McCrory, 2014). They sought as natural a birth as possible, including for many respondents

birthing at home or birthing with a midwife-led service. For the most part, these women breastfeed, co-sleep, 'babywear' and practice baby led weaning, and in the focus groups more than one woman described themselves as a 'hippy mum'. This is where drawing on quantitative research brings useful information into focus, for example all of my respondents identified themselves (to varying degrees) as a breastfeeding mother with almost all extended or 'full term' breast feeders⁵. There was also a far higher than national average of respondents who gave birth at home or with midwifery-led services rather than consultant-led care despite the dominant model of birth in Ireland being hospital-based consultant-led care (Begley et al, 2011). Interestingly the diversity (or lack of) within this parent support group was independently raised as an issue and problematised in the first focus group (outlined further below). All of the women were either currently working or were on leave from careers which would be considered high status and high achieving. These include: doctors (from traditional and holistic medicine); engineers; accountants; an IT worker; university employees; school teacher; public sector employees; a nurse; and entrepreneurs and business women running their own successful enterprises. All respondents were university graduates, although this was not a criteria for selection and was information that was not known to me until the focus groups took place. The research also contains insights taken from an additional e-interview I undertook with a founding member of the group. Her vivid account of these early days (edited only to remove signifiers) appears in its entirety in Appendix Five in order to provide a picture of the type of group this is.

⁵ Meeting the Department of Health and Children and the World Health Organisation guidelines of 'exclusive breastfeeding for the first two years and continuing to breastfeed until two years and beyond' (WHO, 2016; DOHC, 2005).

Profile of Respondents

So far in this chapter I have presented a general outline of my respondents, now I will give a brief outline of the women who attended the focus groups and participated in e-interviews. All names and identifying features have been changed to protect anonymity.

Anna has one child aged 2years. She grew up in another European country but has lived in Ireland for a number of years. She works in the IT sector and volunteers with this group at a local and national level

Elaine has one child, almost 1 year. She works as an accountant and nearing the end of her maternity leave is preparing to return to accountancy on a full time basis.

Fiona has one child, 3 years. She is a fulltime accountant and volunteers with this group at a local and national level

Laura has two children, 4 years and 1 year. She is a solicitor who is currently working in the home raising her children and has volunteered with this group at a local level

Michelle has two children, 6 years and 4 years. She is an engineer who has been working in the home raising her children since her second child was born and volunteers with this group at a national level

Zoe has three children, 7 years, 4 years and 2 years. She works in the engineering sector and is currently working in the home raising her children and has volunteered with this group at a local level.

Emma has three adult children. She is working full time as a public servant having reared her children and volunteers with this group at a local level.

Ruth has two children, 5 years and 2 years. She works full time as a nurse and volunteers with this group at a local level

Carol has two children, 4 years and 2 years. She works full time for a higher education institution and volunteers with this group at a local level

Denise has three children, 7 years, 5 years and 3 years. She is self-employed but currently works mostly within the home raising her children and volunteers with this group at a local level

Jenny has one child, 3 years and is expecting her second. She grew up in another European country but has been living here for a number of years. She works in a University and volunteers with this group at a local level

Una has two children, 5 years and 3 years. She works in primary education on a full time basis and volunteers with this group at a local level

Niamh has two children, 3 years and 2 years. She works part time as an entrepreneur in the business sector and at home raising her children and volunteers with this group at a local level

Tracey is a mother of two 3 year olds, who works full time as a public servant in the education sector and volunteers with this group at a local level.

Lisa has one child, 1 year. She works fulltime as a medical doctor.

Aileen has two children, 3 years and 1 year. She grew up outside of Ireland and works as a self-employed practitioner in holistic medicine.

Sinead is a mother and grandmother who moved to Ireland in the 1980s with her husband and young children. Her story is included as Appendix Five.

The Nature of the Focus Groups

I began my focus groups by asking respondents to introduce themselves and to share something they enjoyed about being a mother. From this I moved the respondents to their only solo exercise of the evening, the creating of a life path or tree (using their choice of two images). The unstructured nature of my life path, and other activities, provided qualitative depth by enabling interviewees to talk about the subject within their own frames of reference, drawing upon meanings with which they were familiar and allowing those meanings of events and relationships be understood on their own terms (May 2011). I had prepared a life path myself prior to the groups, using the same guidelines given to the respondents, in order to ensure that it was a comfortable experience and also so I could relate to the process and give further guidance if needed. This exercise was included in order to allow the women some space for reflection on their role as mothers; their instruction was relatively open and non-specific (see Appendices 1 - 4 for all documents presented to respondents on the night) but gave some direction of how they might define and describe their learning experiences of being a mother. Respondents were also reassured that the creation of this document was a private enterprise and that the document they

produced was theirs alone. I made this decision with the intention that it would free the respondent to record whatever thoughts they wanted without feeling the need to explain or explore unless they chose to. During this period of relative silence I sat with the group. While observing the time and the group I gauged when they were winding down their activity. On completion of the task, in all but the third focus group (due to a smaller number of members), I suggested that people would talk to one other person and share as much or as little from their life paths as they wished. I also suggested that they might explore any commonalities between their experiences, as informed by my ontological position. From then we moved to facilitated discussions of the various features that came up for people while completing the life path. When conversations looked to be winding down I moved the group on to their second activity of the night, an exploration of the Pat Ingoldsby poem titled "Then I learned some more" (Appendix Three). Due to time constraints and my awareness of the groups including members who may not have understood all of the references to Irish culture in the 1980s I used an abridged version based on the poem cited in Sheehy (2001). I had used this activity successfully in recent learner evaluation exercises and I felt that I could use it here to provide a tool for the respondents to evaluate some of the learning experiences they had been discussing. While this exercise was shorter I felt it brought another dimension to the process where group members were able to reflect more on how there may have been a time when aspects of their mothering that seem natural or normal to them now might have fit into the category of "I used to believe". I chose this group exercise to help uncover any movement and shifts in thinking, which may or may not have signified a shift in perspective (Mezirow, 1991). The final activity was included as a back-up depending on how time went and I

used it in two of the three focus groups. I collected a selection of photos, quotes and images to use as 'codes' to stimulate discussion (Freire, 1993). As I was an active member of this parenting support group my choosing of these codes was akin to conducting a listening survey (Hope & Timmell, 1984) and I had anticipated these topics might come up in conversation. It was reassuring to note that in all of the focus groups almost all of the codes I had chosen were brought up in conversation independently. The final piece of my focus groups was to present to the group an overview of where I was coming from and to tell them my own story behind my reason for choosing this topic. I presented on flipchart pages a very brief summary of the three main areas I had been exploring in my reading prior to running the focus groups. These were a description of Communities of Practice; Transformative learning theory; and a brief overview of feminist theory and how this was underpinning the whole of my research question. The responses by the women to feminism were the most illuminating and invigorating to me as a researcher, but perhaps even more fundamentally as a person. The act of coming together to talk about learning over coffee and cake led to some clear examples of all of us learning in exactly that way, although apologetically I must admit on these occasions unfortunately I provided no cake. As was the established dialogic practice of this group, research participants often took ownership of the discussions and came to their own conclusions on topics. This is evidenced in the exchange below relating to the diversity of the group.

Laura: There are people from all backgrounds and it does broaden out your mind, it broadens everything out...

Michelle: Can I just make one very quick point just in regard to diversity and meeting a lot of different people, yes to a certain extent but again there's a certain demographic with the groups that we kinda tend to hang around in so we should probably bear that in mind. So

while it's very interesting we're meeting people from different backgrounds it's not really *that* diverse, really.

Anna: It is though, when you think about it

Michelle: No it's not,

Fiona: No, it's not

Michelle: No, we're all in our mid to late 30s, we're all sort of...

Laura: Middle class or whatever.

Michelle: ...well educated.

Laura: That's true, and you don't see any younger mothers.

Michelle: No, and if you do they don't stay very long. And 99% of us are breastfeeders, 98% of us are babywearers⁶, 97% are baby-led weaning⁷...

Anna: Yeah, I suppose...

All of the women who took part in this research have links with the organisation in some way. Some, like the respondent Sinead (Appendix Five) have left behind the group as their children grew and they moved on to different things, others are still actively involved. Many of the women in this group no longer attend the regular coffee mornings for reasons such as: their children are too old or are in school; they are back in work; they no longer feel a need for this kind of activity; but all women are still linked in with this group in some way. This includes high levels of involvement at a local and national committee level; completion of training which enables them to act in a regularised and specific support role; continuing to host coffee mornings; remaining active on the Facebook page; and attending social events aimed predominantly at parents rather than parent and child, such as weekend brunches and evening talks.

⁶ Babywearing is the practice of keeping your baby or toddler close and connected to you as you engage in daily activities through the use of one of a variety of types of baby carriers. It is a traditional practice in many cultures that is not widely used by modern industrialized societies (Babywearing International 2007-2015).

⁷ Baby Led Weaning, quite simply, means letting your child feed themselves from the very start of weaning <http://www.babyledweaning.com/>

In this chapter I have established the main processes from the focus group and have presented some of the general findings. I will now explore findings in more details pulling out comments that elucidate the main themes that were present.

Motherhood

The conversations and reflections from the focus group were rich and varied but a number of key findings emerged that point to the central question regarding experiences of mothers in a PSG. Following the individual lifepath exercise and subsequent discussion in small groups most respondents opened their large group discussion with comments on their viewpoint about motherhood before they had children and how this contrasted with their lived reality. Denise opened FG2 with the following account:

I think something that is interesting that came up is expectations of motherhood. I've written down here the fantasy of motherhood I had when I was pregnant (laughter), of what kind of a mother I would be and it was very much "Well, I will do it this way because I will be organised and I am this type of person and I will be in control and I will do parent-led mothering..., like, just ridiculous! (Laughter) And I suppose you just can't conceive of what it's going to be like before you have kids... (Denise, FG2)

Throughout all of the focus groups there were many conversations about ways in which these women perceived differences in their thoughts and behaviours since becoming a mother. A number of the women described this as a 'change' with a number of comments from Michelle in FG1 such as:

I've changed my priorities so much. I think motherhood changed me, I don't think 10years of work changed me as a person, I think motherhood did. I think 6 years of motherhood changed me far more than 15 years of my career. (Michelle, FG1)

There was a similar comment in FG2,

You adapt and change in that disorientating period (Carol, FG2)

And again in FG3,

I think you change as a person when you have kids. (Una, FG3)

Carol commented in the second focus group that,

I feel I definitely did change, or even, is it just that you become a more authentic version of yourself? (Carol, FG2)

In the same vein, there were many comments relating to motherhood that the women described as 'learning', comments in FG1 such as:

You learn what's actually important (Elaine, FG1)

And in FG3,

I definitely think I've learned more in the last 5 years than the previous 30 years. (Una, FG3)

And from a wider discussion there were a number of comments from FG2, such as:

I think it makes you reflect and learn more about yourself. (Carol, FG2)

You learn a lot about yourself. (Niamh, FG2)

You learn so much about yourself, about your situation, about life, about so many things (Tracey, FG2)

FG1 opened their discussion with a respondent sharing advice she had learned to 'take each day at a time' and not to have rigid goals of how things will go, with Fiona adding:

Taking one day at a time is completely different from what I've done in my career, and the last 33 years in general. (Fiona, FG1)

Support and Motherhood

Women talked in the focus groups about why they joined the PSG and their perceptions of women's groups before they started attending themselves.

Jenny was one of those women who had perceptions of the group following a visit she paid to a coffee morning while pregnant. This was her account recalling her first experience at a group:

It was insane like! A baby puked, and a dog was licking the puke, and Tara might have been feeding her 4 year old, and I was like 'Jesus Christ!' And I remember there were some people I thought were weird [...] And I really wanted to be in a group so I thought 'I don't care what they're like, I'm just gonna go and they're gonna be my friends', but now... Now I feel like I'm closer to them than I was before. (Jenny, FG2)

There were comments from some of the women in FG1 on their previously held negative perceptions of a group made up of women:

I thought, Jesus Christ, it's going to be all women, it's going to be terrible. And it was great! (Anna, FG1)

I thought it would be bitchy because it's a women's group. (Fiona, FG1)

...imagining a situation where you're de-facto back in the school yard (Elaine FG1)

In FG2 Denise, a very established and active member of the group, also spoke about her perceptions and feelings before coming to her first group.

Before I had Tim I thought 'I'm not into that mum and baby scene, whatever! I have my own friends, I have a life!' (Laughter). I dunno, I just had this thing that groups were for losers or something like that, just some "mothers" hanging out having coffee. (Denise, FG2)

There were also comments about how attending a group would be 'intimidating' with one respondent saying:

It took two months to get the courage to go to one (Una, FG2),

and another recounting her worries about being a stranger among

'... women that know each other from like, I dunno, *years* of breastfeeding! (Laughter) (Anna, FG1)

Carol also spoke about her feelings before she started with the PSG saying:

I remember that (support) being such a big need but not being able to put my finger on it and feeling guilty for it, like, feeling if I don't want to be at home on my own is that because I'm not happy? (Carol, FG2)

The feeling of 'guilt' is one that is named by three women at various points in FG2.

There were a number of comments that recounted the feelings experienced by the women in relation to being alone when their husbands returned to paid employment following paternity leave after the birth of the baby.

The first day my husband went back to work I was like "So, what time will you be home? (Fiona, FG1)

I'd be counting the minutes for Nick to get home, sometimes we used to sit in the porch waiting for him. (Carol, FG3)

This sentiment was expressed evocatively by Michelle in FG1 describing her husband's return to paid work,

The first day my husband went back to work I set Eric in one of those rocking swings and through the tears said "If I can keep you alive we're doing well". That was my standard for day one. (Michelle, FG1)

There were many conversations in all the focus groups and coming from the email correspondences about the levels of 'isolation', 'loneliness' and 'vulnerability' as a parent to a young child. It is these feelings that often led the women to the PSG. These feelings are articulated strongly and honestly by women across all the focus groups, including comments in FG1 such as,

I was at home thinking what am I going to do with this baby? (Anna, FG1)

You've been going so long thinking you don't need help then the minute you have a child you're like, bloody hell, boy do I need help! (Laura, FG1)

Further comments in FG2,

It's that vulnerability, you really haven't a clue. (Una, FG2)

It can be quite lonely. I didn't realise how lonely I was until I went to PSG⁸ (Denise, FG2),

and another from an e-interview.

I think modern mothering is especially tough as someone who doesn't have my own family in the same country. (Aileen, e-interview)

There were numerous accounts of struggles in each of the focus groups, struggles that related to women with one child, women with more than one child, and struggles located at various stages of their parenting journey. These conversations included discussions of 'sick children'; 'sibling conflict'; 'pressures to conform'; 'teenage years'; the feeling that 'everyone wants more of you'; 'juggling'; 'baby blues'; 'postnatal depression'; 'lack of paternity leave'; 'childcare costs'; 'infertility'; and feeling 'frustrated', 'overwhelmed', 'challenged' and 'worn out'. The times when women describe openly and honestly feelings of being overwhelmed are very powerful. I have included three accounts, the first from FG2 between Jenny, Una and Niamh, the second from FG3 between Ruth, Emma and myself, and finally another conversation from FG1. All three examples include strong descriptions of people being pushed to their limits and trying to puzzle out what this means for them.

Jenny: I just took her by the hand but I'm like... (makes angry, exacerbated gesture), I'm like... "I almost want to hurt you". It's scary.

Una: It's real inner anger as well. It's like everyone wants more and there is no more to give sometimes and it's just an explosion

Jenny: And then all these things, this Gentle Parenting⁹ shit is going through your head (laughter).

The example taken from FG3 is one where Ruth recounts a situation when her husband was on a night out and had been drinking.

⁸ The name of the organisation is mentioned many times by the respondents. To protect the anonymity I will continue to refer to it in this chapter as PSG

⁹ Gentle Parenting UK (2016) define gentle parenting as 'parenting with empathy, respect, understanding and boundaries'.

Ruth: I remember, I'm pacing the floors at like 4 in the morning, pacing the floor, I feel like I want to throw her out the window, obviously I wouldn't do that but that feeling... I need a break. And he'd come in steaming and I'd be like (gestures passing the baby over to her husband) "Give me 10minutes, just give me 10 minutes"

Emma: Are you sober enough to hold your child? (Laughter)

Ruth: You feel like it, but obviously you'd never actually do it

Emma: But I don't know, I don't know... if you were pushed to it.

Ruth: When I was having those bad times with her I could then relate to people who had shaken their child, I could relate to them, because although I didn't do it, and in the end I would scream at the top of my voice because I was so angry, even at 4 o'clock in the morning, I had no neighbours at the time, but I was so angry...

Emma: You could see how the last straw could tip you.

Ruth: I could, yeah.

Sarah: And if you say something like that, which is really honest, and really open and revealing something about yourself...

Ruth: Only to people like this!

Emma: Oh god, you wouldn't say that in public!

In FG2 Denise had the following input about her struggles with being a 'mammy', followed by reaction from Niamh, Tracey and Una.

Denise: You know the way you have these ideas about yourself and I was thinking, 'I just never lose my temper and that's just the kind of person that I am', but there's nothing like the intensity of children making demands on you from the minute you get up in the morning, and even when you go to bed because it's through the night you know (laughter), and the buttons that are pushed! It's been like finding this inner rage, almost like a monster. I really struggle with that anger that comes up and it's sort of like a mixture of anger and resentment and losing my temper and I might have a moment where 3 children are all going "Mammy, Mammy, Mammy, Mammy" and I actually just want to say "Fuck off the lot of you! I just want to go to bed and read a book"

Niamh: That sounds so lovely! (laughter)

Denise: But I sometimes really struggle with that...

Tracey: But how can humans endure that, that kind of 'at you' the whole time?

Una: And that comes back to that whole thing that we weren't designed to parent alone...

Informal Learning

As seen above, one of the first pieces of information to emerge from the focus groups was the inadequacy of the knowledge about mothering these women felt they had before they had their first child. Dialogue came up a lot as a method of learning with many references to conversations that the women recalled. This dialogue had a few names and was often referred to as 'conversations', and also 'random conversations', 'talking', 'chats on the sofa', and included comments in FG1 such as,

It's very supportive hearing mothers talking. (Laura, FG1)

And again in FG3 relating to the breastfeeding support group held in women's own homes,

When you have it in the houses people would generally be around a kitchen table so everybody is cross-conversing. (Emma, FG3)

There were many examples given of learning through conversation in FG2, most notably,

One of my biggest learning curves was at a Birth Experiences night, like this, just sitting around having a chat. (Una, FG2)

I find that through being with other mothers who've been there, and talking about it, that I don't feel... guilty. (Niamh, FG2)

It was reassuring hearing all of them talk. (Denise, FG2)

In FG2 three of the women directly discuss the value of these exchanges when Jenny recalls some information she received from Una in a previous conversation at a coffee morning,

Jenny: That would have been a huge learning to me to realise that, somebody actually had to tell me that, you know.

Una: But that only came up in a random conversation!

Carol: It's the tiny little nuggets that can be so powerful.

As the focus groups were themselves a form of dialogical learning there were comments relating to learning that arose from the conversations we had on those nights, such as in FG2:

It's really interesting to hear someone else say it like that. (Sarah, FG2)

That's actually lovely to hear. (Niamh, FG2)

I never really thought about it like that. (Carol, FG2)

And in FG3 a closing comment from a respondent saying,

Thank you, it made me think about things differently. I never actually thought about this really before, like this, so it's interesting. (Emma, FG3)

Throughout the focus groups there was a large amount of discussion about methods of learning as a mother, including a rejection of previous ways of learning, and how these methods can be measured. I have included the following conversation between Denise, Niamh and Jenny in FG2 as an example:

Denise: I think you learn in a different way, I think how you've "learned to learn" is a different way of learning to how we're learning as mothers.

Niamh: The 1 plus 1 doesn't equal 2.

Jenny: Yeah, and it's not appreciated the same way because you can't measure it, you can't say she's doing a worse job than I am, or I got an A and you got a B minus.

There was also evidence in FG1 of women describing using different methods to those they previously relied on, for example:

I think I was very research based before I got pregnant, hypothetical. (Laura, FG1)

It was learn, learn, learn, academic, academic, academic, and now it's much more... empirical. That? Ok, that didn't work, try something else. Ok that didn't work, try something else (laughter). (Michelle, FG1)

In FG2 Tracy encapsulated some of these thoughts on learning in the following comment, exploring how when old ways of learning didn't work for her she internalised it as 'her failure' and emphasised her individual role in learning:

A lot of us who studied really hard, and we got the points, and we went to college, and you put the effort in, and the results equal the effort that you put in... and I found that bit of parenthood the hardest bit 'cos my breastfeeding journey was *not* easy and yet it *should* have been easy cos "I read all the books, and I went to PSG, and I did this, and I... Like, I did everything! I was like, 'this is not working for me' and I found that one of the hardest things to accept because I think we came from that generation of effort in equals results, so it must have been *my* failure, it had to have been *my* failure because I couldn't compute it any other way. (Tracey, FG2)

There were examples of other forms of learning being preferred, methods such as observation, social media, experiential learning, instinct and so on, rather than external sources such as books or TV. This was reflected by comments in FG2 such as:

You can read books, you can do whatever, but until you're doing something... You learn by doing. (Una, FG2)

Yes, and listening. (Denise, FG2)

And FG3,

I find it really hard to read a book, if someone summarises the book I'd take it in a lot more. (Ruth, FG3)

I have to show up. (Zoe, FG3)

Observation of other mothers was mentioned a lot with comments in FG2 such as:

You watch the more experienced mothers. You watch everything. (Carol, FG2)

People stand out for me. (Una, FG2)

And also in FG3,

It's the interactions... you take it all in. (Emma FG3)

In FG2 Una describes clearly the importance to her of learning through observation when describing her first PSG event:

One person who really stands out is Rebecca and I remember her feeding Jo and I thought, God he's standing up and feeding, that's amazing! (laughter) That was my first close introduction to longer term breastfeeding and it was from that that I ended up feeding my kids for longer, even the whole notion of it had never even entered my mind. And had I never gone to one of those coffee mornings... Even that very first interaction changed how I was doing things.

In relation to listening, one respondent in FG2 mentioned a very well-regarded breastfeeding counsellor who called to her home to help with her newborn and

...fixed what was wrong in 5 minutes but talked for 2 hours just about being a mother. I wish I had recorded it, it was just so amazing. (Carol, FG2)

Two women in two different focus groups made direct reference to innate mothering behaviour, recounted later in a comment from Denise and here from Michelle,

I think it's kind of a mind-set thing, you come into a space thinking, I'm a mother in this space and a mother is naturally nurturing. (Michelle, FG1)

One of the methods used to gain knowledge and information that came up in discussions in each of the focus groups was the use of books as a method of learning to parent. Across the board, all references to books as a means of learning were negative, yet most respondents talked about trying to learn from books and linked it to previous success when learning using this method. An exchange in FG1 showed the process of one mother, Michelle, realising that not only was she not gaining from reading parenting books but it was actually becoming a negative:

Michelle: Has anyone with older kids decided to stop reading the books?

Anna: Yeah, I stopped after about 2 weeks!

Michelle: Good woman! At first I read everything. And now... I think it was clouding my gut reaction 'cos I was reading and going "oh that must be how I think". No! I actively stopped reading parenting books.

Elaine and Laura in FG1 also had this exchange in relation to book learning:

Elaine: It's the way I've always done everything, if I'm going on holiday I read the guide book. It's always been all about the books and the studying and if you do X you will get Y and you will plan, plan, plan... and now that's gone! You can't do that!

Laura: Yeah, everything was by the book up until then. If you did this, you got that, but there's no book, like, and even I thought there was a book, did you?

There were many comments about the notion of there being 'a book' and whether the books contained information that was useful. This is reflected in further comments from FG1,

Once your baby is there it's just like, this is nothing like what the book said. Most of them have bullshit anyway to be honest. (Anna, FG1)

You can read all the books...but only you are a parent to your child, your child is not in any book and I try and remember that. (Elaine FG1)

In other comments from FG2,

It's a sort of learning that evolves, it's not a 'you read it and you know it'. (Denise FG2)

All the reading and all the other things you do, it doesn't necessarily prepare you (Una FG2)

And finally in FG3,

What I did over the years was I spent an absolute fortune on books that I never read, I just bought them (laughter). (Emma FG3)

The discussion around books led to discussions on specific information relating to childrearing. Two figures to bear the brunt of the frustration in this regard were Gina Ford and 'Supernanny' Jo Frost, despite many stating that they had not read Gina Ford's book. I had included as a code in the focus groups the book 'The New Contented Little Baby' by Gina Ford (2006). Both of these public figures were named in discussion in all of the focus groups before I had produced this book as a code. To give a flavour of how they were discussed, upon seeing the book Emma declared 'Oh Gina Ford! Shoot her!' The exchanges in relation to letting go of unhelpful knowledge can be reflected in the following comment from Denise in FG2:

Like, I read Gina Ford, you know, and I actually had memorised in my head, you know, quarter to 7 open the curtains, let baby rouse (laughter from group) 8 o'clock tea and toast, half 8... (Huge laughter from group). You know, it's been a big process of letting go of that and finding my own inner mother or whatever you want to call it and trusting your instinct as a mother and growing and learning with that. But me and Jenny were saying that all the information you get it really comes from this community of mothers you find and it could be PSG or whatever Facebook groups you've found but it's other mothers rather than sort of outside of that, books or TV, you know.

The following conversation in the first focus group led to a conversation about the 'validity' of knowledge with other respondents joining in:

Elaine: They write about kids when they don't have any kids, Gina Ford I'm looking at you (laughter).

Anna: Have you read her book?

Elaine: No, but I know that she has no kids

Anna: I wanted to visit her and slap it around her head.

Elaine: Come back to me Gina when you haven't slept.

This particular exchange between Anna and Elaine led to a stimulating conversation relating to whether one can know about parenting and can purport to have expertise in the area of childrearing when they are not a parent.

Michelle: I think there's an academic thing that they can write about kids without having kids, but to be so prescriptive I think is wrong.

Elaine: Or you can have a view, like my sister, the psychologist with no kids. She has many views!

Michelle: Yeah but I think there would be a certain... there is a validity to that, she has researched.

Elaine: Well, she has studied very hard, and therefore she knows (laughs)

Michelle - Yeah, but it's more of a generalisation, I don't think you can specifically know...

Fiona: You can say the same about Jack Newman¹⁰ and breastfeeding.

Michelle: Exactly!

Fiona: He's never going to breastfeed.

These ideas, although mostly developed in FG1, were present in some degree in each of the focus groups. There was further evidence of discussions of 'expert' knowledge,

Tracey: It took me about 2 years to realise that everyone is just winging this! (laughter)

Carol: That is so liberating!

Tracey: And now, I just know that it's grand, everyone's winging it, even the experts!

¹⁰ Jack Newman is a renowned Canadian Physician specialising in Breastfeeding support and advocacy.

Shared Experiences

A large feature of the discussion regarding the support that women received at the PSG related to sharing similar experiences and the resultant feelings of 'being normal'. FG1 started with an early comment in this regard from Laura saying,

I remember thinking, 'Oh brilliant, there's loads of normal people in there with all the same problems'. (Laura, FG1)

From this comment I shared my experience of my first group, an experience that I had included in my own timeline exercise. I recounted it in FG1 as follows:

I remember going to my first group and after about 15 minutes, without even knowing I had been feeling like this, I realised how abnormal I had felt over the past few months. I felt like I was a weirdo, home birthing, breastfeeding, putting my baby in my sling... I just thought nobody else is doing this, and then you walk into a room and you see everybody else! I think two other people there had home births, they were all breastfeeding. I just thought 'Oh my god I'm normal'. (Sarah, FG1)

Other comments that related to these feelings of normalising are:

I think as humans we need confirmation and we seek out confirmation so I think the culture within PSG welcomes that. One of the best things about a mothering group is that you can vent and that's brilliant (Michelle, FG1)

And in FG2 and FG3,

It's nice to hear that it's normal. I just feel like this is a safe place to be that kind of hippy mum or whatever, just go with the flow, you know (Niamh, FG2)

A lot of us feel the same things but we don't realise our feelings are normal, the fact that two people just open up and say, "yeah, I've got that too", it's so liberating. (Emma, FG3)

Normalising was also described in the e-interview by Lisa,

Talking to other mums who had had a difficult time helped normalise my experience, and make me realise that I was not a bad mother for feeling the way I did. I had a traumatic birth and the group was one of the few places where I felt I could be honest about how I felt about

the birth. PSG is a safe place to chat to other mums and realise it's 'normal'. (Lisa, e-interview)

In FG2 Carol described her feelings of being around other mothers,

I feel like I was able to be more of the parent I wanted to be with strangers than I would have been able to be with people I already knew. I felt like I really just need to be around other mothers. (Carol, FG2)

These descriptions of normalising also brought forward more emotional responses relating to being part of the group. This is seen most clearly in

Emma's account in FG3:

I went to my first breastfeeding morning and I just felt I had come home, I felt I had found my tribe or my group, and I still feel like that. Sorry I'm getting emotional now, but I still feel it's where I'm me. (Emma, FG3)

Exploring Feminism

There was a lot of interest from the focus groups in the issue of feminism and feminist issues were evident in the conversations on the night. The women were interested and enthused by it as a topic and they were incorporating language from the flipchart into their conversations. When discussing feminism in FG2 Tracey gave an honest account of her perceptions about maternity leave before she had her own children:

I think this here (points to the feminism flipchart page) this is huge. The patriarchal systems are so strong that even I would have felt that way before I had kids and I'm a women. I thought people on maternity leave were on their holidays. (laughter) Genuinely! They were on their holidays, and they came back to work looking for parental leave and I thought "for fuck's sake!" (laughter) I really thought that, and it couldn't be further from that. (Tracey, FG2)

Evidence of silencing, trivialising, sexualising and infantilising women and women's lived experiences can be found in the focus groups. In my own story I

recounted how I referred to PSG as 'baby club' until I reflected on the importance of the words we use and made a decision to stop calling it by this name. This recounting of my own story led to women sharing language that they would use themselves, or language that others used. These included 'baby club', 'booby club', 'booby group' and an example was given of a husband talking about '...going to your tea parties on Fridays'

When discussing the importance of the groups some of women talked about how their husbands recognised the value of the group. However Michelle noted,

I would get a "so what are you doing today, just a coffee morning?" My husband would definitely have seen the value and been very supportive but I think he saw the value of the groups *to me*, I wonder would he see the value of the groups to society, probably not. (Michelle, FG1)

In all three groups women debated and discussed various issues and related them to their understanding of feminism across their life spans. Some comments of note are:

A lot of people think feminism is I can do the same as a man, or people think it's anti-men but it's nothing to do with that (Una, FG2)

I think I subliminally grew up thinking of being a mother, being a stay at home mother, as sort of a failure, as being sort of pathetic. At school it was very much, you'd go to university and it was a very academic focus and you'll work and, like, being a mother was... was not something you aspired to. (Denise, FG2)

Breastfeeding and birth were the main areas where women express clear examples of silencing throughout the focus groups. Their birth stories, while never directly asked about, permeated their life stories. Many of the women described their experiences of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding within a

system they felt was ill equipped to meet their needs. These experiences left residues, and this was a strong reason given by many of the women for joining the group. The following reaction from Tracey, commented on by Denise, mirrors a lot of other sentiments expressed:

Tracey: This here, (points to the feminism flipchart), sorry for harping on about this again, but this has really stuck out for me, the invisibilising. To me this starts for women and parenting in the hospital system where you're actually not listening to, you're not heard, I couldn't actually believe it when I was in it, I couldn't believe it! And then the amount of women I know who've actually been traumatised by birth and who have been butchered by birth and nobody talks about it! And it starts there, and the value of a woman and a woman's body and their child, everyone's concerned about it when you're pregnant and then afterwards no one gives a shit once that baby is out.

Denise: happy healthy baby, that's all that matters

Tracey: That's it! And I actually just couldn't... I couldn't believe it until I was in it.

Regarding childbirth another respondent in FG2 said,

It was a fine birth, but birth is still, I think, just shocking, you know, absolutely shocking, but people don't talk about it. (Carol, FG2)

Lisa and Aileen, the email respondents, gave lengthy detail about perceived injustice while birthing, with Lisa commenting on her experiences and relating them to her perception of other types of medical practice:

There is a strange dichotomy between the esteem with which mothers are purported to be held, and the manner in which we are treated by the medical services and law of the land. I am still reeling from the manner in which I was treated by staff during the course of my pregnancy and delivery. I myself am a doctor, and I can safely say that such attitudes simply do not exist in the spheres of hospital medicine in which I work. (Lisa, e-interview)

There was a discussion in FG3 about what women tell other women and the image of childrearing they portray. Emma had this to say:

The most valuable thing my mother ever said to me was that other women lie about children. And then I discovered another thing, we can lie too. (Emma, FG3)

Regarding breastfeeding there were also examples of women discussing how they converse with friends and family about breastfeeding, giving examples of how they choose to share information in this regard. In FG2, again mentioning Gina Ford, Niamh talks about her relationship with other parents,

A lot of my friends don't breastfeed, I'm kinda the different one, the odd one that attachment parents and co-sleeps. They're all kinda Gina Fords and stuff and I still find it hard to talk about parenting with them and I actually kinda feel like it's effected our friendship because they just have different ways, and I can't judge because I don't want them to judge my way, that's their choice... (Niamh, FG2)

There were other examples of women discussing how family and close friends didn't know they were breastfeeding in FG2 and FG3,

I wouldn't be as confident with some of my friends who don't have kids, I would *never* tell them I was still Breastfeeding, I just don't want to go there, I don't want to see their eyes rolling (Jenny, FG2)

My mum and dad don't know I still feed, it's frowned upon. I wouldn't feed out in public as such but I would feed in the breastfeeding group (Ruth, FG3)

And in relation to her older child who she was also feeding Ruth said,

I would never feed Elle outside of the group, does that make sense? I remember when I was tandem feeding the two of them¹¹ I totally forgot my Mother-in-law was in the house, Elle jumped up for a feed as well and I just started feeding her, I just totally forgot, and my mother-in-law's face dropped (laughter) and she turned away (gestures dramatically looking away) and said "Would you like a cup of coffee?" and she left the room... (Ruth, FG3)

Even in the safe space of FG3 there was evidence of silencing,

I'm not going to tell you how long I fed the last one for but she can remember it very well, she loved it. (Emma, FG3)

¹¹ Tandem feeding is feeding more than one child, often children of different ages.

Michelle recounts an occasion where as the only woman in a group of men a male work colleague was giving advice on breastfeeding to recent, first-time father. Here she clearly states how she remained silent in the conversation, despite being a breastfeeding mother, anticipating that as a woman her input on the topic would not be received in the same way as her male colleague's was.

He was putting it in language that made sense, whereas if I had discussed it, it would've been like, "Oh my god, Michelle's gonna get her tits out".
(Michelle, FG1)

There were examples in FG1 and FG2 of women responding to the silencing, but it was expressed with a knowledge that this was nonconformist, for example,

I'm kinda at a point where I don't care what other people think.
Yeah, I'm breastfeeding my toddler, I couldn't give a shit (laughs).
(Denise FG2)

Creating a Community

Having people who 'get it' was seen as being important to all of the women in my research. This is reflected in Elaine's comment in FG1 saying,

What I've discovered since I had R is that it's really important to find your tribe, or your village, or your go to, or your mummy friend that 'gets it' because you cannot do it by yourself, you just cannot. And you shouldn't, you know. (Elaine, FG1)

These are many comments from across all of the focus groups about the people in the group and the conditions that are created in the PSG in order to facilitate this. There was much mention of the breastfeeding counsellors and hosts going out of their way to reassure and welcome new members (with some people

mentioned by name). There were also many comments about how the women treat each other within the groups. These include comments in FG1 such as:

You can cry, and no one gives the eye. (Anna, FG1)

There's a nurturing. Shared suffering makes you kinder, I didn't sleep last night, you didn't sleep last night, I'm not going to give you a hard time about your shoes (laughter) (Michelle, FG1)

And again in FG3,

I think the great thing is that you can say things and you won't be judged. (Emma, FG3)

There were comments across the groups about the setting of PSG being in people's homes and the benefits this brought, encapsulated by Zoe in FG3:

One thing that is key to PSG is the homes, there's something about being in people's homes. Being in someone's home you get to know someone at a whole different level. (Zoe, FG3)

There were also comments in FG1, FG2, and FG3 from women showing how after they had become more established in the group they sought to support the newer members,

I was walking around just chatting to new people because I know how hard it is to actually get there. (Anna, FG1)

Sometimes I feel I need to talk to the new people because you know what it's like and sometimes it's really hard to do that with your own two kids, it's hard but you do it. (Carol, FG2)

I think we realise the support that we get and then we emulate it. I like touching on things that I appreciated hearing, giving permission, mentioning those things just in case someone else needs to hear that. (Zoe, FG3)

Other Findings

In no particular order these included: Discussions about how most women at PSG breastfeed despite services being offered to all; mention of support from

outside of PSG from friends and family; conversations in FG1 about two fathers who had attended coffee mornings and their experiences from this; minor mention in FG2 of online social media; mention in FG2 about how we learn from children; more in-depth conversations around birth and breastfeeding than have been represented here; a discussion on the Men Sheds as a comparative organisation; more in-depth conversations about paid employment, childcare and reconciling these with the role of mother; conversations about the workings of the group and ways to improve it; and finally, discussion of other services provided by the group. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to cover all of these points.

Responses to the Focus Groups

As a researcher I was very aware of my role in designing, organising and facilitating the focus groups, but I was also aware of how much I was learning from the process also and I felt privileged to have been a part of the discussions. Once all of the focus groups had taken place I sent the transcripts to all respondents and offered a forum for them to reply if they wanted to. As responses came in I was struck again by the impact the focus groups had on all of us. Like their conversation in the groups the women's responses were honest, visceral, eloquent and poignant. I could think of nothing more fitting than to include their responses here in their entirety.

I'm afraid to look at the document! I think I'll be mortified at how much I talk! Sarah it was a really lovely evening. You are a very skilled facilitator - it all felt so relaxed yet you did keep us on track and moved the discussion on nicely. One thing the evening really brought home to me was the importance of talking with and being in the company of like-minded and supportive women. I have to admit I

had been feeling a bit low in spirits that day and wasn't particularly looking forward to the night. But I felt really uplifted and energised afterwards - I think it was simply having the connection to other people, reminding me that I'm not alone. I really enjoyed getting to know everyone a bit better and hearing their stories. So thank you, and to everyone who came :-) (Denise)

Thanks Sarah and to everyone else who was there. I really enjoyed that evening. I was trying to pinpoint what I got out of it and I think the opportunity to be in a facilitated circle of like-minded women where our discussion was guided but still let to go where it needed to go. There is a reason why women's circles have existed for eons and it's because we need them, I think we are all hardwired for connection and with parenthood being so difficult in early years, these are even more necessary. I think there may be a need in PSG for facilitated evenings with a particular topic up for discussion. Also noticed that I curse too much! (Tracey)

I remember feeling particularly exhausted that night in the throws of what felt like a never ending cycle of doses and sleep deprived nights. It's so interesting how the effect of exhaustion plays its part on how you feel and speak from one day to the next and how things can magically seem more manageable after a good night's rest. The topics really offered a lot of food for thought and it felt comforting to be among a trusted circle of women knowing we all face challenges every step of the way in the early years and support is vital. That it's ok and normal to feel that range of emotion and then let it pass without feeling bad or guilty for struggling as they're as valid and as important to recognise as the good days. It's our close family and friends and the invaluable support of community groups like PSG that make such a huge difference in our lives and it's been a lifeline for me through all the highs and lows. (Niamh)

Thank you so much for your careful and respectful facilitation. I really enjoyed the session and the chance to reflect on my parenting journey so far with such a lovely group of mothers. (Carol)

Thank you for recognising the importance of it. I hadn't seen it as a feminist issue, but my god it is. (Michelle)

Summary of Findings

In this chapter I presented an in-depth look at the findings from the focus groups and e-interviews. I began by outlining a general profile of the respondents then presented an individual description of each respondent. I then moved into an exploration of the main themes of Motherhood, Support, Informal Learning,

Shared Experiences, Exploring Feminism and Creating a Community. I followed this with a list of other findings. To conclude the chapter I included the responses I received following the focus groups. The next chapter will present an analysis of these findings using the framework outlined in Chapters Two and Three.

CHAPTER FIVE: NAMING OUR INFORMAL LEARNING

This chapter sets out to respond to the question of what are the learning experiences of mothers in this Parent Support Group (PSG). It also seeks to present the implications and applications of this research question to the practice of adult education. This final section of the research will bring together the various elements from the previous chapters in order to present an analysis of informal learning within this PSG. It will begin by responding to the role of a mother in society and the requisite support needed to fulfil this role, as expressed by the women in this research. This will be done to elucidate that support groups like this are sites for education. Having established that this support group is a site for learning I will explore the learning experiences taking place within it, starting with a rejection of some more typical forms of learning and an analysis of transformative learning. The analysis will then explore 'ways of knowing' and the generation of useful knowledge for the women in this group. From this, I will revisit some of the feminist arguments to highlight the ways in which the women in this group are combating silencing and experiencing learning by naming their world. I will conclude the analysis by exploring some implications and application of findings from this thesis.

Responding to Motherhood

As you will recall from Chapter Two, Chodorow (1999) maintained that mothering was socially constructed, that women were taught to be mothers, were trained for nurturance. If we uphold that this socialisation of women as

mothers remains today, we can see that the women in my research did not always feel adequately 'taught' or 'trained' for this task. I have presented throughout this thesis the view that Mothering in our society can be an isolating experience and that the women in this group found their experiences of mothering challenging and difficult. In order to cope with these challenges they sought out and valued the emotional support and connection from other mothers. As shown previously in Chapter Two, parenting is relational and is effected by access to familial support and social networks. As you will recollect, in their review of the literature on social support and parenting Geens and Vanderbroeck (2014) showed there is minimal attention given to the relational aspect of social support, yet they also present the widespread position in the literature that the informal network of parents is the first place parents turn to for support. The analysis of sites of support is relevant to this research question because it shows that support groups that apply community education principles, such as this PSG, are sites for learning. As seen in Chapter Two, Smith (2012) states that participation in local organisations has considerable educative power and AONTAS describe a women's support group as being involved in education because having space to tell our stories teaches us to understand our lives and cope with difficulties (AONTAS, 2009).

Rejection of Traditional Ways of Learning

Now that I have established this as a learning site what are the learning experiences for the mothers in this group? Returning briefly to the social construction of motherhood, it is interesting to note a divergence with these ideas, as seen by comments relating to innate mothering behaviours, for

example from Michelle in FG3, 'a mother is naturally nurturing', and other similar remarks. While questions of essentialism were discussed in Chapter Three, these divergent findings from the research allude to dominant discourses in everyday life that continue to align themselves with conceptions of motherhood as a 'biological inevitability' (Chodorow, 1999: 18). There were also remarks about other essentialist characteristics associated with women, represented in the findings with the comment 'I thought it would be bitchy because it's a women's group'. Whether the women in this research believe their mothering behaviour is innate or constructed, this research has comprehensively shown that for these women, when it comes to mothering, traditional methods of learning did not always work for them. To et al (2013) said of their respondents 'the art of letting go, appreciation and effective communication were uncovered in their narratives'. The stories from the women in my focus group mirrored this 'art of letting go', but it was mostly articulated as a letting go of previous, unhelpful learning and an appreciation of the effectiveness of other forms of learning. One of the main findings from this research was a rejection of more typical ways of learning when negotiating the topic of childrearing. This can be seen in many comments from the focus groups, such as 'The 1 plus 1 doesn't equal 2'; 'I think you learn in a different way', and more than one reference in the focus groups to 'academic' learning and 'studying' being replaced by other forms of learning, for example, 'it's much more empirical'. An unexpected outcome for me was how forcefully this leaving behind of more traditional ways of learning was voiced, especially in relation to learning from books. You will recall many comments from Chapter Three in this regard, for example, 'Most of them have bullshit anyway...' In their place these women are largely relying on methods such as:

Dialogical learning – ‘One of my biggest learning curves was like this, just sitting around having a chat’,

Experiential learning – ‘You learn by doing’ and ‘by listening’, and

Observational learning – ‘It’s the interactions... you take it all in’.

Together with this leaving aside of old ways of learning we see interesting findings when we apply descriptions of what constitutes informal learning to this setting. Within Chapter Two, I identified how Tough (1971) provides us with one of the most developed frameworks of informal learning. These research findings help illuminate how, although useful, to a point, his overreliance on motivation and intent ignores the incidental learning that takes place when someone has a different intent. Tough maintains that all learning episodes have in common the dominant desire of the person to ‘gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skills’ (Tough, 1971: 8). This research shows that it is unlikely this is the predominant reason for attendance at the groups. More dominant reasons for attendance would be to combat isolation, to feel part of a community, to feel ‘normal’, and so on. So would participation at a typical PSG gathering constitute learning using Tough’s definition? Certainly not his definition of ‘very deliberate learning’ (Tough, 1971: 8-11). You will recall how Una’s example of unintentionally witnessing someone feeding an older child led to a learning episode which she rates very highly. Her stated intention for arriving that day was not to learn something about extended breastfeeding, yet that was what happened.

Transformative Learning

The reasons stated for joining a PSG are not likely to be 'to learn' however while many women might state that they joined for support, for companionship or because 'something was missing'; there was evidence in this research that they experienced a change in perspective. While one might argue this change could occur from the transition into motherhood alone, as members of this PSG these women are describing relationships, support, and dialogue with other mothers as important to them when negotiating and learning through this transition to motherhood. As referred to in Chapter Two, To at al stated that to generate transformation in parent education the crucial elements are group sharing, mutual understanding and mutual support among the participants. For most adult educators, 'the essence of learning is when such encounters result in a change in our perspective' (Fitzsimons, 2015). In the focus groups the women have named a change in their views around parenting, birth, paid work and so on since becoming a parent. This change is a form of Transformative learning. Illeris (2007; 2004) described transformative learning as a reconstruction of several schemas, including emotional and social patters. There are many comments from the women in this research that describe their thoughts, emotions and social patterns as being different from those before they had children. We can see this in examples, such as the description of Denise's shift in thoughts regarding being a stay at home mum as 'a failure' and 'pathetic' and 'groups were for losers'. We can also think back to Tracey's views on maternity leave before she was a mother, 'I thought people on maternity leave were on their holidays', and also Niamh's comments (among others) regarding a reconstruction in social patterns, '...it's effected our friendship'. As stated in Chapter Two, Mezirow's theories on transformative learning are some of the

most wide-reaching. Despite critiques of his theory (Newman, 2014; 2012) there are many comments within the focus groups which suggest that negotiating motherhood (the disorientating dilemma) through critical reflection and rational discourse with others is leading to changes in their world view. For example, 'I think you change as a person', 'it makes you reflect and learn more about yourself', and finally, 'you learn so much about your situation, about life, about so many things'. Jenny's story shows another example of a transformation of perspective when she describes her visit to the group while pregnant. She begins her story showing derision at some of the behaviours she saw then finished by commenting 'now I think I'm more like them than before'. This shows a change, but also illuminates the process of othering - if we can discover the experiential logic behind ideas, the ideas become less strange and the owners of the ideas cease to be strangers (Belenky et al, 1986).

Ways of Knowing

A major influence in feminism is the idea that women have special 'female' ways of knowing which coincide with essentially female ways of being (Ryan 2001: 69). Although some feminist writing speaks of distinct 'women's ways of knowing' I uphold that rather than women having distinct ways of knowing, there are instead particular ways of knowing and learning that serve us best for particular situations. Mothering is one of those situations where the women in this PSG are relying on ways of knowing that work for them rather than these being particular ways of knowing based on gender. For the mothers rearing their children with support from this PSG the knowledge they rely on is created and shared in dialogue with other mothers.

As explored in Chapter Two, Belenky et al outlined their categories of 'women's ways of knowing' which many view as a hierarchical structure, moving from silenced through to constructed. Since women do not all experience being a woman in the same way it is not possible to identify a single mode of knowing. Furthermore, when looking at categories of knowing, the women in my research show aspects of many/all of their stages, they use constructed knowledge, yet are silenced, they receive knowledge by relying on others, yet show self-awareness and evidence of critical self-reflection. The women in my research share a 'subjectivist' distrust of books and the written word (Belenky et al, 1986: 74), yet like constructed knowers they 'need and value attentive strangers as well as friends and colleagues' (*ibid*: 146), as seen in Carol's comment, 'I feel like I was able to be more of the parent I wanted to be with strangers'

A more useful analysis would be to revisit Tett's (2007) description of making knowledge that makes sense of the world and helps us act upon our world. These women are doing this within the PSG, exploring what it means to them to be a mother, making sense of their experiences and how these experiences fit in their wider social context. This research shows through the rejection of more traditional ways of learning that there is a certain type of knowledge that is more highly valued than others in the area of parenting. This is experiential knowledge, learning from those who have walked the path before you. This is the 'really useful knowledge', this is the knowledge that these mothers trust. Luttrell's (1989) research shows the complexity of how working class women know and shows that their ways of knowing are not homogenous. Luttrell outlined 'common sense knowledge', the knowledge which supports judgements about what is relevant in everyday life. Recognition of the importance of this

everyday knowledge can be seen in the focus groups with comments such as 'you learn what's actually important'.

Creating useful knowledge – Experiential versus Authorised

I have analysed how these women are learning and experiencing changes in their perspective and how they demonstrate many ways of knowing and learning. This includes generation of knowledge which is useful to them. Regarding this generation of knowledge this research shows that these women often value knowledge more highly when it comes specifically from other mothers, and indeed many of the comments are disparaging of the information and knowledge that is offered from those who are either not mothers or who are not seen to be mothering in a way that was 'like-minded'. The sources of knowledge for these women are predominantly coming from other mothers, 'You watch the more experienced mothers, you watch everything'. They are largely relying on 'experiential knowledge' rather than 'authorized knowledge' (Letherby, 2003: 22). There was a particularly interesting conversation in FG1 relating to these epistemological questions of knowledge, specifically whether one can 'know' about mothering when they are not a mother. From the comments made in this regard across all focus groups the dominant opinion among these women would be that one cannot 'know' unless they are also a mother. This brings me back to the concept of essentialism, that perhaps there is a perception among these women that the natural essence of a mother is one that is 'knowing' whereas a non-mother is not. To highlight this we can remind ourselves of the comments relating to Gina Ford as a source of authorised knowledge (best-selling author) but not a source of experiential knowledge. The women in this research disregard her methods, evident from their comments,

from their riotous laughter in response to Denise describing a typical Gina Ford routine, and also, drawing on my insider knowledge, evidenced from the decision made by this PSG not to add her book to the lending library. As Gina Ford is widely regarded as an 'expert' on childrearing this is perhaps another example of where these women are making choices around mothering that are somewhat divergent from dominant discourses. These choices mean that perhaps the mothers in this PSG are experiencing episodes of silencing and othering to a greater degree than other mothers. The following section of the analysis will apply some of the feminist arguments put forward in Chapters Two and Three to explore these experiences.

Revisiting Feminism

This section will revisit feminist epistemologies and use them to explore the learning experiences of the women in this group. From a feminist perspective the omission of parenting from official statistics on Lifelong Learning (CEDEFOP, 2015) could indicate that these spaces for learning are not recognised or valued because they are seen as something that women do. Women's experiences and the subsequent knowledge created from these experiences have been silenced, infantilised, and subjugated by traditional education and the pursuit of more legitimate knowledge. Their silence is perhaps even more pronounced due to the fact that these women often define themselves as 'the other' of the parenting world, as can be seen by comments in the focus groups. They adopt practices that are peripheral to mainstream culture in Irish society, practices which are often ostracised, for example longer term breastfeeding and co-sleeping.

This group provides a space where women can share their cultural norms that often deviate from the dominant parenting norms, they can share their personal histories, they can share their perspectives, and in doing so feel more at ease with the construction of their own identities as women, as mothers and as members of their societies. In the focus groups the women were animated when discussing feminism, for example when Tracey went back to the topic again by saying 'sorry for harping on about this again, but this has really stuck out for me'. There are many stories in the focus groups that relate to doing things differently in different arenas, for example Ruth's story about her experiences of tandem feeding and feeding her older child, practices she says she 'would never do outside of the group', but practices which are considered relatively normal within this PSG. There were many comments across the focus groups that highlighted that the PSG was a 'safe place' to voice things, or to 'vent'. This was most evident after Ruth's disclosure in FG3 when Emma said 'Oh god, you wouldn't say that in public!' There was also evidence of times when the women demonstrate that they collude with the mainstream ideals because these discourses are so dominant, for example, 'other women lie about children... we can lie too' and 'I would never tell them I was still breastfeeding'. Issues around the sexualisation of breasts are often highlighted by breastfeeding advocates who lament the double standards of how breasts are objectified, yet breastfeeding is largely concealed. We see evidence of this form of silencing in Michelle's story when she stayed quiet for fear that there would be a sexualised response, 'Michelle's gonna get her tits out'.

What is perhaps most interesting to note from the research is the evidence of intersectionality and oppression. There are clear stories in the research of women who occupy positions of power being oppressed as mothers, with some

striking use of language such as 'butchered', 'violated', 'traumatic', and 'silenced'. These women occupy traditionally strong positions in society, their list of occupations would sit easily in a list of powerful, influential jobs and as such it would not often be the type of demographic that we would expect to be described as 'silenced', as 'other'. Yet their position in society as mother includes stories relating to oppression many times in the focus groups and e-interviews. These women possess different levels of power and marginality dependent on their roles, for example, doctor/birthing mother; engineer/stay-at-home mother, full-time business entrepreneur/full-time carer. Their power or marginality is relational and their role or status in one arena does not necessarily transfer to the other (Ryan, 2001: 37-38).

Situated Learning

This silencing, othering and overlooking of these types of groups is what prompted me to consider this research. When we regard this PSG as a learning space we can then inquire about the nature of the learning taking place. In Chapter Two I outlined some of the main features of Illeris' 'situated learning' (Illeris, 2007). This is the idea that all learning is situated, therefore different types of learning situations or learning spaces have different characteristics. Community education recognises the importance of non-formal and informal learning, learning that does not need to be in a classroom, learning by doing, and learning that can take place over coffee and cake. It is interesting to note that in the setting of a PSG coffee morning nobody is working overtly as an informal educator or facilitator and the setting is not a traditional site for education, reminiscent of Illich's vision of a sharing of knowledge in convivial

peer relationships (Illich, 1978). Similar to many groups in the 'Daytime Education' report (Inglis et al, 1993) the characteristic of this PSG meeting in people's homes brings with it situated learning, and many of the comments from the focus groups related to this, most notably Zoe's, 'there's something about being in people's homes'. The PSG is a co-operative movement with minimal assigned roles, the coffee mornings in particular are a space for women to meet and engage in conversation without any one person being identified as an educator, informal or otherwise. While having a skilled facilitator in an informal group could have benefits (this was also identified by a respondent in Chapter Four: Responses to the focus groups) there are also benefits to the truly informal act of learning through conversation, one where the input of group members into the conversation is the only direction the learning can take, similar to Freire's 'Culture Circle' outlined in Chapter Two. This is reminiscent of the wider community education movement in Ireland where content and format were organised by the local community for the community, but takes this even further as all content is unprepared and spontaneous, it is by its nature self-directed.

Naming our world

This self-directed learning can come from many sources. The women in the focus groups describe the difficulties they face explicitly as isolation, loneliness, vulnerability, with accompanying feelings of rage ('like a monster'), resentment, fear (It's scary) and anger. In the focus groups the women often discussed their opinion that people should not mother in isolation, 'we weren't designed to do it alone'. Hartas (2014) maintained that this is becoming more of a problem as

social support networks and neighbourhood connectedness are shrinking, and this was echoed in comments from the focus groups.

The women in this research use groups such as this one in order to share and explore their subjective meanings with the hope that it will lead to a more secure understanding of their world. This understanding of their world and their new place within it leads to greater feelings of stability and greater feelings of connection. Sharing space, discussing generative themes that effect women's lives, exploring and understanding the structures and systems behind those themes provide us with an opportunity to understand and change our world. This can be achieved within informal education groups that uphold the principles of feminist community education (Moane and Quilty, 2012). Consientisation tells us that the more accurately we understand our experiences the more critical our understanding of reality will be. We can understand our experiences more accurately if we talk about them with others, with those who understand, that feeling voiced in the focus groups as 'it's not just me'. Through Praxis, having reflected on our experiences with others we can take action.

A group such as this PSG can provide a space where mothers can come together to share their reality of the 'institution' or 'myth' of motherhood (Smart, 1996; Hagar, 2011). As seen in Chapter Two, PSGs are perceived as having a value to the individual rather than to society, they are viewed as something that is put in place when an individual (usually the mother) is not able to cope with the demands of childrearing. This links with wider issues of the individualisation of learning, and individualisation of society as a whole. This can be seen in comments from the focus groups, most notably when Tracey describes her inability to breastfeed her children as 'her failure' because she 'couldn't compute

it any other way'. Recent research into breastfeeding, highlighted in Chapter Two, shows how important political and societal factors are on the individual experiences of mothers. Coming together in a community education setting underpinned by a feminist ethos allows for possibilities for mothers to re-evaluate their perceived individual failures or challenges as features of a wider socially constructed, subjugated role of women and mothers. Women who as mothers have experienced discriminatory practices based on their choices around birth, feeding and parenting need shared understanding in order to name these discriminatory practices as social rather than individual.

Sharing these subjective and often private thoughts and feelings leads to empowerment and emancipation, named in the focus groups as 'liberating' and by others as feeling 'normal' and 'normalising'. Sharing leads to more sharing, for example when Zoe says 'I like touching on things that I appreciated hearing, giving permission'. There are many examples of this sharing in my focus groups and many occasions where the women state very clearly their relief at discovering that the individual thoughts and feelings they had were actually shared by others, 'a lot of us feel the same things but we don't realise our feelings are normal'. As previously outlined, my ontological position is that as individuals we have our own subjective reality, but that we share experiences of overarching structures that exist in society. The subjectivity of experiences proposed by Poststructuralist Feminism, as outlined in Chapter Three, is not irreconcilable with this action of naming. If we can create, or maintain, or reclaim the conditions that enable us to talk and to listen, to tell our diverse stories, we can accept and appreciate both our alternate realities and our shared realities. In doing so we can collaborate for change on the areas that we concur and allow meaningful opportunities to listen on those we diverge. We

can use our combined understanding rather than our individual understanding to expose systems and structures that are oppressive and to achieve change. Together with others we can name our shared world.

In the final section of Chapter Two we see from Connolly's description that 'ethical considerations such as respect for difference and diversity' are a characteristic of adult community education (Connolly, 2007: 122). Issues of diversity were raised by women in FG1, but interestingly questions of respect for difference and diversity were present in many comments relating to 'judging', often expressed as a fear of being judged themselves but also as a desire not to judge others. This presents another version of how the women in this group view difference and diversity in parenting. In Chapter Two we saw that Belenky et al maintain that connected knowing is more advanced than separate knowing. Connected knowers' purpose is not to judge but to understand, and to refrain from moral judgment, in ideology if not always in practice (Belenky et al: 112–130). Naming the behaviours you associate with being a 'good mother' (Smart, 1996) is an act of judging in itself due to the inherent act of identifying other behaviours as objectionable. This can be seen in all of the focus groups with some of the comments relating to behaviour, including describing other parents as 'Gina Ford Parents', an act of generalising and stereotyping mothering practices perceived as different to your own. However, while prejudice and stereotyping are undoubtedly negative attributes a certain amount of identification of compatible mothering thoughts and behaviours is necessary for this form of support to function. We can revisit Michelle's comment in FG1 that 'as humans we seek out confirmation' and Emma's comments in FG3 where she described feelings of 'coming home'. This identification with 'like-minded' others creates the necessary conditions of trust and support that

enable mutual learning to take place. As some of my respondents voiced, I too would wholeheartedly welcome a more diverse group, however I don't believe diversity of membership can be contrived, it can only be promoted by practice. As a group we would benefit from analysing the questions of diversity of mothering more deeply with the aim of ensuring we truly are inclusive to all.

A need for identification with like-minded people and practices is no doubt what makes a community establish in a voluntary capacity such as a PSG. It continues to exist due to a deep and meaningful care for others that extends to the new members and the next generation. There are many examples in the focus group of care shown to others, for example, 'There's a nurturing', and 'Sometimes I feel I need to talk to the new people because you know what it's like'. If we apply a radical Freirean approach we can hope that members of a community will support and facilitate each other in achieving learning of self and learning of skills through an invested interest, or as Freire describes it, love.

Implications and Applications

This research question considered the informal learning experiences when we give and receive support in a PSG. The findings have pointed to this form of support as being of significant benefit to this group of women. Yet despite the literature showing the importance of support from others as an educative tool, as outlined previously, it is not recognised in official demarcations of learning. As we saw in Chapter Two Jarvis (2010) presents the implication that informal learning is not as significant as other forms of learning, and also that adults often don't recognise this type of informal activity as learning. National census

data is often seen as value-neutral and is often used to prove or highlight social facts, however the categories chosen for what data is collected are far from neutral (Letherby, 2003; Oakley 2000). How we record things is important, statistical analyses can and has assisted in the construction of woman as 'other' (Letherby, 2003, 66). As mothering has 'at its centre the teaching of the next generation' (Belenky et al, 1986: 13), it is imperative that something so crucial should feature in the measurement of lifelong learning. Overlooking this arena of learning is a perfect example of where experiential and affective knowledge that is associated with the private sphere is disregarded in favour of the far more measurable political, economic and technical knowledge that dominate public spheres (Grummell, 2014). These opinions were also present in the focus groups, encapsulated here by Jenny's comment 'it's not appreciated the same way because you can't measure it... you can't say I got an A and you got a B minus'. Despite the ability of PSGs to provide spaces for meaningful learning, these forms of learning are more difficult to measure and quantify, are by their nature non-accredited, and are very often not seen as having a value to the labour market. Overlooking these sites of learning leads to situations where the experiences of these women remain silenced and 'other'. If these groups are not counted, if they are not seen, how can we begin to uncover what is taking place within them?

This research has aimed to shine a light on the educative nature of PSGs and the value to their members and to wider society. When we apply these findings to wider adult education practice we can see that learning that takes place informally, as described in this thesis, should be recognised as an important and effective means of learning within more formalised settings. This can be integrated into classrooms through fostering peer relationships, creating

conditions for dialogical learning and utilising small group work. As seen here, adults learn very effectively through convivial conversation, something which we can incorporate into all of our practice no matter what definition our learning fits into. As first mentioned in Chapter One, informal learning is not something to be squeezed in between more validated formal and non-formal learning, it has a distinct value and merit of its own.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION - NOBODY REALLY KNOWS

The title of this chapter was drawn from a conversation with my youngest two children. When nearing the end of this, at times, gruelling journey I excitedly told them that I was almost finished my 'book' and they were in it. Surprised, they asked what my book was about so I told them it was about baby club (old habits die hard). My five year old daughter responded by saying "Is that because nobody really knows about baby club?" This one remark reminded me of my research question and my rationale for choosing the topic.

This research asked the question: What are the learning experiences of mothers in a Parenting Support Group (PSG)? Through a deconstruction of mothering, support and informal learning within a theoretical framework based on the ideas of Freire and Feminist Epistemology, this research traced the learning experiences of these mothers in the PSG. The women in this research use the PSG to respond to their role as mother, one which they describe as challenging and isolating. They describe their experiences of motherhood as a change from their experiences and expectations before they had children. The PSG that is the focus of this research provides a space where they can come together with other mothers and share their experiences, leading to feelings of liberation, normalisation and a deeper understanding of self and others. The women in this research expressed the need for support from mothers they considered to be like-minded in order to help them deal with expectations they had about mothering which were no longer working for them. The findings of this research highlight the inadequacy of formal methods of learning to mother. Traditional methods of learning did not prepare these women for the reality of

being a mother. This research showed the manner in which these women are coming together in groups and experiencing significant learning through a dialogical sharing of stories and experience. They are involved in the process of naming their world and seeing that world reflected in the experiences of other mothers. This form of informal learning from other mothers supersedes other forms of learning, showing that these women have a reliance on experiential knowledge above authorised knowledge. Women in the research explore their own perceptions of feminism and reflect on their experiences of birth, breastfeeding and mothering in the context of a patriarchal society. This research has shown that although the respondents occupy positions of relative status and power in some areas of their life they often express feelings of silencing and othering, hiding certain aspects about their mothering experiences from those outside the group. Although some feminist writing speaks of distinct 'women's ways of knowing' this research maintains that gender roles and mothering are social constructs and that instead we all rely on the ways of knowing that serve us best. For the mothers rearing their children with support from this group the ways of knowing they rely on are created and shared in dialogue with other mothers.

This research has implications for adult education theory and practice by highlighting the qualities and importance of informal learning. In my experience as an adult educator I have seen the value of informal learning incorporated into more formalised educational settings. What I will take away with me from this research is an invigorated desire to create conditions of mutual learning through dialogue and care relationships in all settings.

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APPENDIX ONE: CONSENT FORMS

Participant Information Leaflet and Consent Form

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in my research towards the Masters in Education (Adult and Community)

About me

I am a mother of three and have been involved with [REDACTED] since the birth of my middle child over 5 years ago. I have a strong interest in the area of education and have been working in this field for the last 15 years. I first attended one of the [REDACTED] coffee mornings when my daughter was a few months old and from then spent many years attending other [REDACTED] events. I joined the committee in 2013 as I felt passionate about the work being done by [REDACTED] and wanted to stay involved after I returned to work.

About the research

My general research aims are to explore and document some of the experiences of women using the services of [REDACTED]. From my years of being part of informal chats and discussions over coffee and cake I know that I learned a lot about myself as a person, as a mother, as a woman and as a member of my community. I think that important learning experiences are happening for women within [REDACTED] and I hope that together we can uncover and document some of these.

You are invited to participate in a one-to-one interview and/or a follow-up focus group which will take place at a time and place convenient to you. Should you decide to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw from the process at any stage up to Spring 2016 when I will be writing up my thesis.

Confidentiality

It is very important that you feel comfortable and are satisfied with every stage in this process. Your name and the name of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] as a national organisation will not be named in any research publications. Research data will remain anonymous (i.e. information about you which could mean you were readily identifiable, such as your specific role or title etc., will not be included) and the organisation will be referred to as a parent support group. The interviews and focus groups will be audio-recorded and I will send you a full written transcript after the interview. From this transcript you will be given the opportunity to amend or remove any of your statements

and you are again offered the opportunity to withdraw your contribution altogether and withdraw yourself from the research.

All data is stored securely and will be destroyed upon completion of the research. What you say in the interviews and focus groups will be treated confidentially but there are limits to this confidentiality (such as information disclosed that represents a serious risk of considerable harm to yourself or to others). Any such breach of our confidentiality agreement would not be made without due care and consideration for all concerned. In the unlikely event where a breach of confidentiality is necessary, only the information needed to avoid harm will be passed on to the relevant authorities.

Any findings will be used for my MEd and possibly further academic papers and presentations. Please feel free to contact my supervisor or myself at any stage if you would like to discuss any of this further.

Sarah Coss

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If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

If you wish to proceed please complete the attached consent form.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this

Sarah Coss

I agree to participate in the research study outlined to me. The purpose and nature of this study has been explained to me in writing and I have been provided with a copy of this information. I am participating voluntarily and understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, within the time frame stated in this document above. I understand that anonymity will be provided to me and my identity will be disguised. I understand that by giving my consent, information and extracts from my interview/focus group can be used in the thesis and any subsequent publications.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

APPENDIX TWO: LIFE PATH/ TREE OF LIFE EXERCISE

This exercise has been chosen as a tool to help us to capture some of the key moments that have occurred in our lives as mothers. The Life Path/Tree of Life exercise is private to you, you will be given approximately 10 minutes to prepare it and then I will welcome everyone back into the group space to share and explore our life paths together. You do not have to share everything and it is important that you feel comfortable with sharing only the information you want. This exercise is designed to help us look at potential learning moments/episodes/outcomes.

Instructions

You can begin your life path at any point in time prior to becoming a mother and can continue it to the present day or into the future if you wish.

Choose 2 or 3 moments of motherhood that stand out for you as examples of times when you feel you experienced growth or learning or personal development or any other significant insight.

When exploring the moments you choose try to remember how you were feeling surrounding the event? What were the challenges? What were the joys? Who were the people involved? And so on...

Please feel free to represent these moments and feelings using words, pictures, colours, symbols, anything that helps you describe them to others.

APPENDIX THREE: THEN I LEARNED SOME MORE PAT INGOLDSBY (ABRIDGED)



*I used to believe
There were little men in the radio
There was nothing my father didn't know
I must eat all my dinner to grow
And then I learned some more*

*I used to believe
Cabbage and carrots will make me strong
Sermons on Sunday are much too long
Every other church is wrong
And then I learned some more*

*I used to believe
America is good and Russia is bad
I mustn't cry when I'm feeling sad
Anyone who acts strange is mad
And then I learned some more*

*I used to believe
English people have got horns on their heads
Only married people sleep in double beds
Big boys smoke in the bicycle sheds
And then I learned some more*

*I used to believe
If I get my sums right all is well
If I kiss a girl I must kneel and tell
If I enjoy it I'll go straight to hell
And then I learned some more*

*I used to believe
All poor people eat bread and lard
The teacher is allowed to hit me hard
I must be tough outside in the yard
And then I learned some more*

*I used to believe
The same road waits for every man
A good job has got a pension plan
Money is the measure of who I am
Thank god I learned some more*

Directions for use of poem

The poem overleaf has been chosen as a tool to help us to further capture some of the learning moments in our life relating to motherhood. This abridged version of a longer poem (there are 12 verses in total) gives some examples of shifts in our thinking that can take place.

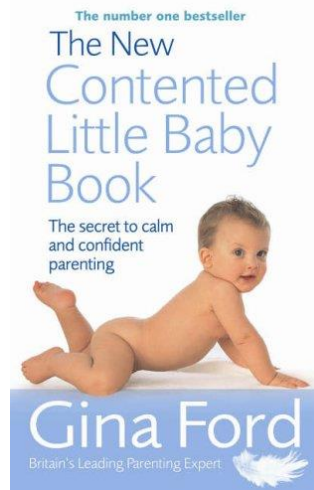
In your pair/group use the poem to think about some of your own examples of things that you 'used to believe' about motherhood, in particular the moments when you feel a sense of relief/joy/praise that he captures in his final line "Thank God I learned some more".

When you have thought about some of these examples I will ask you to share as much as you would like with the rest of the group. We will then discuss how we are coming to these new understandings and explore if there are any common threads running through our various examples.

You are invited at this point to create your own verse if you wish. This can be done now in the group or if you are interested in doing this and would like to give time to it please feel free to do so. You are welcome to send me on your own verse(s) for inclusion into the focus group transcript.

APPENDIX FOUR: CODES

Sample of Codes used in the Focus Groups were a copy of the Gina Ford book, a printout of the proverb (Google stock images) and a printout of the created by popular blogger Katie Kirby found at <http://hurrahforgin.com/>



APPENDIX FIVE: SINEAD'S STORY¹²

In my life story the parent support group would be a very important chapter. We arrived to Ireland in 1975 with a 6 week old baby, daughter number one. We had no Irish connections and absolutely no money, but my husband had acquired 'the good academic job' and it was quite the adventure. We found a newly built house at the foot of the mountains and we started to build a new life on a barren estate with other young couples, many of whom were out working all day. In England I had been a member of the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) and attended their antenatal classes, which would have provided a ready-made peer group for breast feeding and postnatal support. I knew there was no NCT in Ireland, I knew that I needed other women, so I became very adept at 'mother and baby' spotting whilst pram pushing in our area. There wasn't really anywhere to go, except to say hello to the cows and pop into the portacabin near the church, which save for weekly supermarket trips was our shopping experience. I started to develop a local network of like-minded mums, still great friends, and we shared our parenting ideas and children and generally prevented each other from going mad! Being an English 'blow in' in the 1970s was an interesting experience, the Irish were used to doing it the other way round. Ireland at the time was like a trip back to my Yorkshire childhood in the '50s and '60s, service provision had not been invented and if you wanted something you got stuck in to make it happen. Obviously I had no job to go back to, so I became a childminder for neighbours whose families were from the country, no crèches or nurseries then. When my husband was home and the baby in bed, I headed to work in the pub. The wages and experience were dire, but the tips helped to keep us going.

In 1978 I was expecting daughter number 2 and heard on the grapevine that a Public Health Nurse who had worked in England and trained as an antenatal teacher was making steps to set something up in similar to the NCT. A similar situation arose in another location in Ireland pretty much at the same time, as I recall. And so the parent support group was born with two branches. (Details may not be exact after nearly 40 years!). The natural childbirth movement was growing and women's lives were changing rapidly. Women were better

¹² All names and identifying features have been changed. This is due to confidentiality agreements with respondents of the research but also, drawing on the words of Sinead, to reflect that "it could have been written about any self-help group development"

educated and wanted active participation in their pregnancies and labours and were hungry for knowledge and challenging of 'the way things are done here', which is what the matron in Holles Street said to me when I asked to have my baby with me rather than in the nursery. 'I don't know how long you've lived here, but this is the way things are done here.'

Locations seem to have become closer over the years but in 1978 travelling across the city for night time meetings after a day at the coal-face was difficult, so the 'sensible' thing to do was to start a local post-natal support group. An antenatal teacher lived close by for a few years and I linked in with her classes, but I also relied on friends and neighbours to become involved and help establish regular meetings. Very often this meant going to collect women who didn't have transport and then taking them home afterwards, but a very committed group emerged that not only shared their experiences, the fun and the tears, but also developed skills and knowledge that were a resource in the community. Counselling courses blossomed, antenatal teachers and breastfeeding counsellors started their training, workshops and seminars were organised, telephone help-lines established, isolated mothers visited and other groups supported as the network grew. Somehow daughter number 3 arrived into the mix and I can still picture a member, (dear friend, breast feeding counsellor, midwife) pacing up and down trying to deal with my baby's colic whilst I tried to assure a visiting speaker that she was welcome and that she was indeed in the right place! It was all kitchen table work and it greatly enhanced our mothering experience. At 4pm the telephone started to ring, Bosco was on the television, children were 'plugged in' and mothers gave and received support, and did their organising and networking. I remember one Christmas morning the phone rang and I sat on the stairs in my dressing gown making hand signals to the children to fetch coffee and be quiet, this was quite usual, but not on Christmas day. Having listened to a distressed caller for an hour, with no mention of a baby, I asked why she chose to ring our number. "You were the only place open today".

As babies grew we needed toddler groups, playgroups, parenting courses, the list goes on. There was a veritable tsunami of self help groups initiated in the late 1970s and 1980s as women responded to perceived needs, very often as a result of their own challenging experiences - miscarriage, stillbirth, cot death,

twins, breastfeeding, postnatal depression, parents under stress (now Parentline), AIMS, gifted children (now a DCU project), support which we now take for granted and which professionals (once so wary of the influence of these groups) acknowledge for their significant role in helping families. As the group I was involved in had started as a postnatal support group I inevitably encountered women with Post Natal Depression and developed a particular interest in the issue and the development of the Post Natal Distress Association of Ireland. I remember the excitement of being invited to present at a HSE seminar in Galway and being paid! I contributed to the publication 'Coping with post-natal depression: Light at the end of the Tunnel' by Mary Pigot (1996) on the chapter relating to Self Help Groups and PND. I looked it up again today whilst writing these notes and it could have been written about any self help group development. I don't recall documenting the development of our parenting support group but maybe the attendance records and minutes are still around.

In 1989 after 14 years 'at home' rearing three daughters, I returned to university to do my post-grad. As a mature student I had to submit a personal statement and I know that the experience I accrued through my community involvement with groups for both parents and children was significant in my being accepted onto my chosen course. It is often said that volunteers get out more than they put in, but it doesn't make it any less true. I subsequently returned to the work place and whilst still being in touch with many old members I have not been actively involved with the parent support group for many years. However, when my middle daughter was pregnant with her first child in 2007 it was wonderful knowing that a generation later the parent support group was there to support her journey into motherhood and for her in turn to contribute to the group. Companionship and the opportunity to share experiences is essential at all stages of life, but perhaps never more so than when we confront the challenges of mothering. All that responsibility, so little control! It's great being a grandparent.