

"It Saved My Life"

The National Association of Mothers' Centers, Matricentric Pedagogy, and Maternal Empowerment

Motherhood scholars have long recognized and argued that motherhood, as it is practiced and perceived in patriarchal cultures, is disempowering and oppressive for mothers for a multitude of reasons: namely, the societal devaluation of motherwork, the endless tasks of privatized mothering, the current incompatibility of waged work and motherwork and the impossible standards of idealized motherhood. However, the article argues that, while motherhood scholars have identified well the many ways that motherhood functions as an oppressive institution, more discussion is needed on how empowered meanings and practices of mothering may be created and sustained. In making this argument, the article draws upon Adrienne Rich's crucial distinction between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children," and "the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential and all women—shall remain under male control" (13). Thus, the term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which is male-defined and controlled and oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women's experiences of mothering, which are female-defined and potentially empowering to women. Building upon interviews with members of the National Association of Mothers' Centers and participant observation of group meetings, the article explores how their model of "Mother Circles" enables mother to challenge patriarchal motherhood and achieve maternal empowerment through what is termed a 'matricentric pedagogy' and its practices of what is referred to as security, community, and validation. More specifically, the article argues that through the matricentric pedagogy of the Mother Circle model mothers acquire the authority, authenticity, autonomy, agency and advocacy central to empowered mothering and necessary for maternal empowerment. The Mother Circle model, thus enables, or more precisely empowers, mothers, to borrow

from Rich's words above, to move from motherhood to mothering and mother against motherhood. The paper is organized by way of four sections. The first section provides an overview of the ideological assumptions that structure and sustain patriarchal motherhood and reviews characteristics of maternal empowerment, while the second introduces a theory of matricentric pedagogy which makes maternal empowerment possible. The third provides an overview of the National Association of Mothers' Centers (NAMC) and its model of Mother Circles, and also introduces the research project that this theory of matricentric pedagogy is developed from. In the fourth section, the findings are discussed and draw on three themes—security, community, and validation—to illustrate how the matricentric pedagogy of the Mother Circle model enables women to challenge and change patriarchal motherhood and achieve maternal empowerment.

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I. Patriarchal Motherhood and Empowered Mothering

In my current work, I argue that patriarchal motherhood is informed and maintained by ten ideological assumptions that cause mothering to be oppressive to women, which I have termed the essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization of motherhood. Essentialization positions maternity as basic to and the basis of female identity, while privatization locates motherwork solely in the reproductive realm of the home. Similarly, individualization causes such mothering to be the work and responsibility of one person and naturalization assumes that maternity is natural to women, all women naturally “know how to mother,” and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence, and developed by habit rather than skill. In turn, normalization limits and restricts maternal identity and practice to one specific mode, that of nuclear family, wherein the mother is a wife to a husband and she assumes the role of the nurturer, while the husband assumes that of the provider. Biologicalization, in its emphasis on blood ties, positions the birth mother as the ‘real’ and authentic mother. The expertization and intensification of motherhood, particularly as they are conveyed in what Sharon Hays has termed “intensive mothering,” and what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call “the new momism,” cause childrearing to be all consuming and expert-driven. Finally, idealization sets unattainable expectations of and for mothers, while depoliticalization characterizes childrearing solely as a private, non-political undertaking with no social or political import. All ten of the aforementioned assumptions or mandates of patriarchal motherhood work, separately and in unison, to structure and sustain motherhood as a patriarchal institution that causes mothering to be disempowering, if not oppressive, to mothers. For example, they generate the

societal devaluation of motherwork, the endless tasks of privatized mothering, the current incompatibility between waged work and motherwork, and the impossible standards of idealized motherhood; this culminates in mothers being overwhelmed, fatigued and guilt-ridden because of the hard work and responsibility that they alone assume in motherhood.

However, what must be remembered and emphasized is that the ideological assumptions that structure and sustain the institution of motherhood are culturally produced, they are neither natural nor inevitable to mothering itself; likewise, because these mandates have been constructed, they can also be deconstructed. "The institution of motherhood," as Adrienne Rich reminds us, "is not identical with the bearing and rearing of children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy or sexual love. Both create the prescriptions and conditions in which choices are made or blocked: they are not 'reality' but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives" (42). Borrowing from Rich again, resistance to patriarchal motherhood thus requires that mothers "[reclaim] the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood" (275). But the larger question remains: How do mothers reclaim this power, to, in Rich's words "destroy the institution of motherhood" (280) and achieve the empowerment denied to them in patriarchal motherhood? Motherhood scholars have long argued that, once freed from "motherhood," "mothering" can be experienced as a site of empowerment if, to use Rich's words again, women became "outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (195); however, there is little discussion in current motherhood scholarship on how mothers are able to move from motherhood to mothering, or how they can mother against motherhood.

In an earlier work, *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (2004), I argued that while there is very little overt discussion of empowered mothering in *Of Woman Born*, except for the oft-cited passage of her vacation with her sons where she describes herself as a conspirator, an outlaw from the institution of motherhood, the book enabled motherhood scholars to envision an empowered mode of mothering by poignantly distinguishing between motherhood and mothering, and in identifying the potential for empowerment in mothering. In the introduction to this book I observed that, "while we may not yet know completely what empowered mothering looks like, we, in interrupting and deconstructing the patriarchal narrative of motherhood, are able to destabilize the hold this discourse has on the meaning and practice of mothering, and clear a space for the articulation of a counter-narrative of mothering" (12). This counter-narrative of empowered mothering, I wrote, "is concerned with imagining and implementing a view of mothering that is empowering to women as opposed to oppressive" (12). In the last decade, with the emergence of Motherhood Studies as a distinct academic discipline

and with the rise of a vibrant motherhood movement, the topic of maternal empowerment has emerged as a prevailing theme in both maternal scholarship and activism; consequently, paving the way for a more meaningful exploration of the emancipatory potential of mothering in the twenty-first century. Integral to this exploration has been an attempt to more precisely define and more fully theorize a counter narrative of empowered mothering.

In my work on empowered mothering I argue that the central and organizing aim of maternal empowerment is to grant mothers agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy, and advocacy/activism. Maternal agency, as Lynn O’Brien-Hallstein explains, refers to “the ability to influence one’s life, to have power to control one’s life” (698). A theory of and for maternal agency is concerned with, as O’Brien-Hallstein continues, “mothering practices that facilitate women’s authority and power and is revealed in mothers’ efforts to challenge and act against aspects of institutionalized motherhood that constrain and limit women’s lives and power as mothers” (698). Authenticity, in turn, as Elizabeth Butterfield explains, “is an ethical term that denotes being true to oneself, as in making decisions that are consistent with one’s own beliefs and values” (790). In contrast, inauthenticity is generally understood to be an abdication of one’s own authority and a loss of integrity. In the context of empowered mothering, maternal authenticity, as Butterfield continues, “draws upon Ruddick’s concept of the ‘conscientious mother’ and O’Reilly’s model of the ‘authentic feminist mother’” (2009a) and refers to “independence of mind and the courage to stand up to dominant values” and to “being truthful about motherhood and remaining true to oneself in motherhood” (Butterfield; O’Reilly 2006). Similarly, maternal authority and autonomy refer to confidence and conviction in oneself, holding power in the household, and the ability to define and determine one’s life and practices of mothering. In Ruddick’s words, the refusal to “relinquish or repudiate one’s own perceptions and values” (112; see also O’Reilly 2006). Maternal advocacy/activism, in turn, recognizes the potential political/social dimension of motherwork whether such is expressed in anti-sexist childrearing or maternal activism. Thus, the agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy, and advocacy/activism of empowered mothering stand in sharp contrast to the mandates of patriarchal motherhood described above. Such, to use Richs words, makes the “destruction of the institution of motherhood” possible, which in turn creates space for the emancipatory potential of mothering to be realized.

While there has been increased attention paid to the possibility of maternal empowerment in motherhood studies over the less decade, there has been little discussion on how empowered mothering, as both practice and politic, may be achieved and sustained (Green; O’Reilly 2006; Jeremiah; Hewitt; DiQuinzio; Stooke et al.; Stadtman Tucker). How, in other words, can mothers individ-

ually and collectively refuse and resist the ten assumptions of the patriarchal institution of motherhood, discussed above? What is needed to make such resistance possible? While researchers agree that “the process of resistance entails making different choices about how one wants to practice mothering” (Horwitz 2003: 58), the larger question remains: What is needed at both the individual and cultural level to enable, or more specifically, to empower women to comprehend, critique, challenge and change patriarchal motherhood? The emergent literature on empowered mothering suggests that peer-support and a community of like-minded mothers are crucial, if not essential, for women to resist patriarchal motherhood (Green; Horwitz 2004, 2011; Duquaine-Watson; O’Reilly 2006). However, this literature has considered only informal support networks, with particular attention given to the Internet and, more specifically, “mommy blogs” and their role in creating and maintaining virtual communities for the creation of empowered mothering (Stadtman Tucker; Connors; Friedman and Calixte). To my knowledge, there is no academic research that examines formal mother groups or centres and how they enable women to both understand and alter the underlying conditions of the ten mandates of patriarchal motherhood that I described above, and the disempowerment and oppression they inflict upon most mothers.

II. Matricentric Pedagogy: A Model for Maternal Empowerment through Maternal Standpoints and Consciousness-Raising

The aim of this paper, as noted above, is to explore how one such group, The National Association of Mothers’ Centers, empowers women to challenge and change patriarchal motherhood through what I have termed its matricentric pedagogy. I will argue that the matricentric pedagogy of the Mother Circle model empowers women through its unique maternal standpoint and its specific maternal practice of consciousness raising. In using the term ‘matricentric pedagogy,’ and in theorizing its maternal perspective and its practice of consciousness raising, I am informed by the framework of maternal pedagogy, and borrow from Wanda Thomas Bernard’s definition of empowerment, and draw upon my own work on matrifocal narratives and matricentric feminism. Maternal pedagogy, as Sharon Abbey explains, “recognizes the potential that education holds to be liberating and progressive and foregrounds social justice issues” and sees “[w]omen’s voices [as] important devices to identify, clarify and bring about positive resolutions to social problems by linking personal experiences with wider structures of power and inequity” (719).

Wanda Thomas Bernard defines empowerment as the: “naming, analyzing and challenging [of] oppression” that “occurs through the development of critical consciousness,” and is concerned with “gaining control, exercising

choices, and in engaging in collective social action” (Bernard and Bernard 46). A matrifocal narrative, as I argue in my book, *From the Personal to the Political: Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narrative*, borrows from Miriam Johnson’s theory of matrifocality, and refers to a narrative “in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated, valued and structurally central to the plot” (O’Reilly 2009b: 11). Building upon the work of Sara Ruddick, a matrifocal perspective also insists that the experience of mothering must be understood as an intellectual, self-reflexive, and philosophical practice. In my later book *The 21st Century Motherhood Movement: Mothers Speak out on Why We Need to Change the World and How to Do It* I use the term matricentric feminism to denote a mother-centred standpoint and to designate it as particular, long overdue and urgently needed mode of feminism” (25). Matricentric feminism, I continue “positions mothers’ needs and concerns as the starting point in theory and activism on and for women’s empowerment” (O’Reilly 2011: 25). In so doing, matricentric feminism “emphasizes that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman, and that many of the problems mothers face—socially, economically, politically, culturally, psychologically and so forth—are specific to women’s role and identity as mother. Indeed mothers are oppressed under patriarchy as women *and as mothers*” (O’Reilly 2011: 25). As a result, “mothers need a mother-centred or matricentric mode of feminism organized from and for their particular identity and work as mothers” (O’Reilly 2011: 25).

Thus, drawing from the above, a matricentric pedagogy refers to a perspective and practice that is emphatically mother-centred in its standpoint, (recognizes and responds to the specific needs of women as mothers), and matrifocal in its perspective (values and validates the intellectual, self-reflexive, and philosophical thinking and practice of mother work). As well, it seeks to achieve the development of critical consciousness by affirming the importance of mothers’ voices, and by linking personal experiences with wider structures of power and inequity so that women are able to name, analyze and challenge patriarchal motherhood by gaining control, exercising choices, and in engaging in collective social action. By doing this, I argue that a matricentric pedagogy enables, or more accurately, empowers mothers to resist patriarchal motherhood: to mother against motherhood and achieve the authority, authenticity, autonomy, agency, and advocacy/activism denied to them in patriarchal motherhood. In the pages that remain I will explore how the Mother Circle model of the NAMC makes possible such a matricentric pedagogy; I will also look at how its practices, which I have termed security, community, and validation, result in maternal empowerment. However before turning to this discussion I will first provide a brief overview of the NAMC, its Mother Circle model, and my own

research study on the NAMC upon which this theory of matricentric pedagogy as empowerment is based.

III. History and Philosophy of the National Association of Mothers' Centers and its Mother Circle Model and Overview of Research Project

Founded by Lorri Slepian and Patsy Turrini, the first group of what would later be called the National Association of Mothers' Centers opened in Long Island, New York in January 1975. In that Mothers' Center, as founder Slepian explains, "we created an environment built on the principles of open, non-judgmental, honest sharing" (328). There are now over 30 Mothers' Centers across the United States, and the NAMC has reached tens of thousands of women in its close to 40 years of operation (Slepian 2011: 328). The philosophy of the NAMC, as founder Lorri Slepian writes, "is centred on the belief that in an atmosphere and culture that values women, children and families, fosters deep connections among women, embraces ambiguity and diverse viewpoints rather than insisting on the one "right" way; and raises women's voices, mothers can become the experts on the developmental and social needs of themselves and their families" (2011: 324). "Mothers' Centers," as Slepian explains, "are mother-driven. They are places where women/mothers are valued as women and as mothers and where they can come together and grow in a safe, supportive environment that affirms and expands their knowledge" (2011: 328). The Mothers' Centre culture, she emphasizes, "is one in which women do a radical thing. They speak and tell the truth" (Slepian 2011: 325). While the NAMC now engages in many and diverse activities, including annual conferences, leadership programs, worksite support programs, blogs, newsletters, and its recent economic rights initiative, Mothers Ought to Have Equal Rights (MOTHERS), what remains central to their philosophy and mandate of empowering mothers is their Mother Circle model.

The Mother Circle model was developed from and in response to the recognition that mothers, in Slepian's words, "are deeply affected by the developmental changes, the behaviour, the experiences, the successes, and the failures of [their] children" (2011: 326). These changes in our children, Slepian continues, "have been studied by many researchers but our responses to the developmental struggles of our children and how mothers cope with them had not been looked at as developmental challenges. No researcher had named them yet, much less studied them. Our own questioning about our self-worth and development typically happened alone, in isolation" (2011: 326) "If mothers were lucky," Slepian continues, "they found places to talk about the stresses of fatigue and the battles around toilet training. But where did [mothers] talk in

safety about the blows to our self-esteem, about the ambivalence, the anger, and the guilt, as well as the learning and insights about development we gained from our mother work? The idealized mother was a happy, energetic, fulfilled mother and to feel different from that was to make yourself an oddball, an aberration” (2011: 326). Mother Circles were created to provide this much needed place, a space where women “could study ourselves and our mothering” and “safely speak about the truth of their maternal experiences to each other” (Slepian 2011: 324).

The central and organizing goal of every Mother Circle is to create, in both theory and practice, a nurturing environment. Such is achieved by way of five principles that all group members must adhere to and practice: Support, validate, and value women in their mothering experiences; provide an open forum where all ideas are welcomed and considered; create an environment that avoids any abuse of power and approaches each woman as a resource of skills and talents; encourage women to be responsive to the needs of women and families in their community; and provide good information related to the health and development of women and families (see Appendix A). Through this, a Mother Circle group provides, as described on the NAMC website, “an open, non-judgemental place where you can talk about your joys, and challenges, fears and successes, a place where you can identify solutions that are best for you and your family; a place where women in a community can connect with one another, ask questions, share experiences, learn and even just ‘vent’” (www.motherscenter.org). Mother Circle groups meet weekly for several months and often focus on a particular topic such as “Childbirth” or “Becoming a Mother;” many of the groups offer childcare. All groups are facilitated by a leader who is trained in the philosophy and principles of NAMC, and who is usually a former member of a Mother Circle group. Each Mother Circle, Slepian explains, “grew out of the desires of women/mothers to connect with other mothers, share experiences, and learn from each other” (2011: 330). The NAMC provides support for women interested in starting a mother circle in their communities and offers the needed resources such as start up kits, discussion guides and facilitators manuals on their website.

In 2004, as I was beginning my research on maternal empowerment I had the good fortune to be invited to speak at the NAMC’s conference, “Mothering Matters,” held in Parsippany, New Jersey, November 2004. While I was familiar with the organization and impressed by its long history and its innovative programming, I was not prepared for the huge impact this conference would have on me both professionally and personally. From the moment I registered for the conference and began meeting the 100-plus women attending, I knew this was going to be a conference unlike any I had previously attended. The women were all leaders or members of current or past NAMC centres, and



Lorri Slepian in the centre, Karen Horowitz on the right, Karen's daughter Lori Zlotoff on the left, and her baby Abigail.

most had travelled across the country, at their own expense, to attend the two day conference. Even today as I write this paper, some eight years after attending the conference, the words that could accurately capture and convey the atmosphere of the event elude me. Vibrant, exuberant, engaged, dynamic, and enthusiastic, come close but still fail to describe the heartfelt bond these women had with each other and with the NAMC or their staunch and unwavering belief in the organization. The depth of their commitment and the strength of their convictions could only be likened to what one would experience at a religious revival. From discussions in the workshops to conversations in the hall, I heard women speaking time and time again about how Mothers' Centers changed their lives, or as many expressed, "saved their lives;" I heard about how they become more confident mothers and stronger women through their involvement in the organization. In particular, I recall the closing event of the conference when the 100 plus women gathered in a circle in a large hotel banquet room and were asked to briefly share their thoughts on the conference. Passionately, and often in tears, the women shared story after story about how their mother centre and the NAMC, what they called their family, supported

and empowered them, and about how they would be lost as mothers without it. One middle-age mother Karen Horowitz, still an active NAMC member though her children are fully raised, attended the conference with her adult daughter Lori Zlotoff, a new mother herself, and her infant granddaughter; she shared how her daughter, having witnessed first-hand the importance of Mothers’ Centers from her own life, became a member upon learning she was pregnant. This daughter was now a facilitator of a newly opened Mother Centre, and with her infant daughter in her arms, she said that her wish was that her daughter, like herself and her mother, would have a Mother Centre there to support her when she became a mother someday. As a mother of then three teenaged children, I was deeply moved by their stories as I remembered my own loneliness and fear in new motherhood, and how desperate I was for the support and community a Mothers’ Center could have offered me during those difficult years. As a motherhood scholar with a recent interest in the topic of maternal empowerment and seeking to learn how patriarchal motherhood could be challenged and changed, I was captivated by their stories of becoming empowered in mothering through Mothers’ Centers. How, I wondered, did Mothers’ Centers make this happen?

A few years later, in early 2008, I was awarded a Social Science Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant for the research project “Mothers’ Centers, Feminist Pedagogy, and Young Motherhood: Creating Empowerment Programming for Young Mothers.” As part of this research project I would interview NAMC members and attend selected groups to learn how these groups created the empowered mothers I met at the conference a few years earlier. With its national office located on Long Island and with many of its groups located there, most of my research was conducted on Long Island. In February 2009, I spent five very full and long days meeting with past and current members of NAMC centres. In total, I participated in three group meetings of a Mother Circle, interviewed the current NAMC leaders at their national office, conducted two group interviews during a Mother Circle meeting time, and finally held two open group interviews; one was held at a former member’s home and another was held at my hotel. In November 2010, I conducted another set of interviews in Colorado. There I interviewed a founder-leader of a former Mothers’ Center, held a group interview with members of this former group and interviewed a group of women from a newly-formed Mothers’ Center. In total more than 40 women were interviewed in these two locations. With some of the groups there were upwards of a dozen women participating so I developed a strategy of the “walking stick:” I would ask a general question and the women would pass around the tape recorder to answer the questions asked. The interviews lasted approximately two hours, and in every group all the women actively participated in the discussion. The participants were

diverse in age—ranging from their early twenties to their fifties; however, they were predominantly white, middle-class women who were at home full-time with the children during the pre-school years. This demographic was largely the result of the location of most of the interviews, which was Long Island, an affluent community. Several of the women from the Colorado groups identified as working class or lower-middle class and were engaged in some form of paid employment during their early mothering years. Importantly, while the findings of this particular research project are drawn largely from white, middle-class, married stay-at-home mothers' experiences at Mothers' Centers, NAMC membership overall is more diverse as evidenced by the two NAMC conferences I have attended. Thus, while drawn from a particular group of mother's experiences, I believe that the matricentric pedagogy of the NAMC Mother Circle model described in the pages that follow, serves to empower all NAMC mothers, as evidenced by the many and diverse testimonials from women at the NAMC conferences, though in different ways depending on the particular identity of the individual woman.

IV. "I Don't Know Where I'd Be Without the Mothers' Center:" Maternal Empowerment through Security, Community, and Validation

As noted above, I undertook this study to determine how the NAMC Mother Circle model created the confident, strong and engaged mothers I met at the conference a few years earlier; how did it enable these women to challenge and change patriarchal motherhood and become empowered as mothers? I developed two sets of interview questions to explore such; the first set dealt specifically with the women's experiences with the Mother Circle and asked questions such as: Why did you start attending the group? Has your mothering changed since attending the group? Do you view mothering differently since attending the group? The second set asked the participants to reflect more generally on their motherhood experiences and put forward question such as: Prior to becoming a mother what did you think motherhood would be like? What are the common myths of motherhood in our culture? How do these myths affect you as a mother? Over the last several years as I read and reread hundreds of pages of transcribed interviews and sought to uncover how the Mother Circle model empowers women, I came to see that such was made possible through what I came to call their mother-centred perspective and their philosophy and practice of critical consciousness raising. As noted above, the perspective and practice of the Mother Circle model is emphatically mother-centred in its standpoint, (recognizes and responds to the specific needs of women as mothers), and matrifocal in its perspective



NAMC Leadership Retreat in April 2012

(values and validates the intellectual, self-reflexive, and philosophical thinking and practice of mother work). In affirming the importance of mothers' voices, this mother-centred standpoint leads to the development of critical consciousness by linking personal experiences with wider structures of power and inequity. Through this, women are able to name, analyze and challenge patriarchal motherhood by gaining control, exercising choices, and in engaging in collective social action. I argue that this matricentric pedagogy, as it is developed and sustained through a maternal standpoint and consciousness-raising, gives rise to maternal empowerment that affords mothers the authority, authenticity, autonomy, agency and advocacy/activism denied to them in patriarchal motherhood. However, as I reread the interviews and came to understand the centrality of a mother-centred standpoint and the importance of consciousness-raising for maternal empowerment, what I termed a matricentric pedagogy, I still wondered how the Mother Circle model made such possible. I wondered how the women were able to speak as mothers with the candour and courage necessary for consciousness-raising, particularly in a culture such as ours where mothers rightly fear speaking the truth of their maternal experience knowing that they will be judged, censored, and blamed by doing so. After rereading page after page of transcripts, I realized that it is precisely the core concepts of the NAMC, discussed briefly above and included in full in the accompanying appendix, and their philosophy and practices of creating and sustaining a nurturing environment for and by mothers, that make possible a matricentric pedagogy on which maternal empowerment

depends and from which it develops. Building upon the NAMC statement of Core Working Principles, I have identified three central themes—security, community, and validation—that enable the women of Mother Circles to speak authentically as mothers in order to achieve the maternal standpoint and consciousness raising that is integral to both matricentric pedagogy and maternal empowerment. It is to this discussion that I now turn.

Security: “I was so insecure and nervous and constantly feeling judged until I got to this place where I wasn’t.”

The second core concept of the NAMC philosophy is to provide an open forum where all ideas are welcomed and considered. They accomplish this by: 1) Running peer-led groups that do not promote advice giving, and instead welcome women to share what they know from their own experience; 2) Not taking a stand on issues that would divide women and families in having to choose sides; all women can feel comfortable to explore many sides of issues they are struggling with; 3) Teaching and maintaining a non-judgemental attitude (see Appendix A, “Creating a Nurturing Environment,” NAMC 2005).

I would argue that it is precisely these NAMC values and directives that generate the security needed to make it possible for members of a Mother Circle to speak from a maternal standpoint, to engage in consciousness raising, and to explore their maternal experiences authentically and deeply. In using the word “security,” I do not mean that the mothers were not challenged in their thinking; rather, I refer to respect in the group and consideration for each other’s feelings and thoughts. Many mothers spoke about how they felt ‘safe’ in the Mother Circle; they could discuss and debate ideas without worry or fear that their opinion would be ridiculed, attacked or dismissed by other mothers, as often happens in other Mothers’ Groups. As one mother remarked:

Other organizations like the PTA are very judgemental. Here I know I can say pretty much anything. [The other mothers] might have a different opinion but they keep it to themselves or they say what their opinion is but in a way that doesn't make you feel like you are wrong about that. Here what it is right for you may not be right for me.

As another mother commented, “other groups seem a little shallow. What I like is the depth, and at the Mothers’ Center we don’t waste a lot of time talking about the weather. I mean we get really right down to what you’re feeling. And it is safe to say what you’re feeling and it is validated ... everyone can walk out the room knowing that they were heard.”

“It was just a very welcoming environment,” explains another mother,

I started on a journey. I was becoming more confident to parent from my heart rather than from fear. It gave me the confidence to say I know my family best and even what works for one isn't necessarily what is going to work for another. And I was strong enough to be able to say that.

Another mother shared a story about when her young child was bitten by a dog to illustrate how the non-judgmental philosophy and practice of her Mother Circle gave her needed support:

When my 23-month-old daughter was bitten in the face by a dog I was feeling so guilty and my mother-in-law laid this horrible guilt trip on me. And I was feeling so awful and I went to the Mothers' Center and nobody questioned it. Nobody judged me. They were like how can we help you? What can we do? What can we do to make it better? I had cried for days and all of sudden I felt like okay, I didn't do anything wrong ... and I spent days thinking that I had. And through everything with my kids, and they have given me a run for my money—they are now 21, 20 and 18—I've always known that this is where I can come. I can come here and I won't be judged. I'll be helped. I'll be supported.

“I think the people who do join and stay they get it—the core principles about respecting everybody, not judging, and confidentiality,” another mother explains, “And I think that if they don't get it, they know enough to leave... I think that everybody that stays is committed enough and really respects those principles. And that is what makes it different because you know that when you walk in a room with all these people no matter who they are, they get it.”

I would argue that such security, particularly as it is conveyed in the NAMC philosophy and practice of non-judgment, is crucial and essential for mothers because mothers, rightly fearing criticism, disapproval and censor, mask the truths of their maternal experiences. Susan Maushart develops this metaphor of the mask to refer to “an assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, and all knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experiences” (x). To be masked, according to Maushart, “is to deny and repress what we experience, to misrepresent it, even to ourselves” (1-2). The realities of motherhood, Maushart writes “are kept carefully shrouded in silence, disinformation, and outright lies” (5). The mask of motherhood, she continues, “keeps women from speaking clearly what they know, and from sharing truths too threatening to face” (7). The mask of motherhood, as Fiona Joy Green explains, “assists in escalating images and expectations of mothering that are

inaccurate, ill-informed, disabling and delusional” (691-692). [It] can prevent mothers from recognizing the power and knowledge they possess and conceals the work of their mothering, silences mothers’ knowledge, and fosters a belief that mother’s don’t have anything interesting to share” (692). “Removing the mask by speaking the truths offers women,” Green continues, “the comfort that comes from learning that one is not alone and that the fears, frustrations and confusions of early motherhood are not evidence of personal failure, but rather are due to a host of unworkable social structures, extravagant expectations, and conflicting demands” (692). However, while the mask of motherhood is, as Maushart notes, “the most deeply repressed and destructive of all female deceptions,” and in wearing this mask “mothers divest themselves of their authenticity and integrity” (7), most mothers continue to mask themselves, pretending to be the ideal and perfect mother, in order to protect themselves from reproach and blame. In my view, this is precisely why the security of the Mother Circle is so crucial: it creates a safe space for mothers to unmask themselves to speak truthfully and deeply about their maternal experiences without fear of judgement or censor. As one mother expressed, at a Mother Circle, it is indeed

okay to have a child that is not going to be the perfect child. It is okay to come in my sweats and no make-up and just be myself, and you can say you know it's really not a great day. That is really what the mother centre brings to you: "You can just be yourself."

Or as one mother described her experience at the Mother Circle: “I was so insecure and nervous and constantly feeling judged until I got to this place where I wasn’t.” I would argue that it precisely this “unmasking” of motherhood made possible through the NAMC core principle of security that allows women to speak truthfully about their mothering experiences and acquire the authenticity central and integral to empowered mothering.

Community: “This really is a sisterhood”

Like security, community is essential for the creation of a maternal standpoint and consciousness-raising, and a key requirement for a matricentric pedagogy for maternal empowerment. The first core concept of the NAMC is to “support, validate and value” women in their mothering experiences. They accomplish this by 1) providing a space in the community that brings women together, builds connection and eases isolation; 2) Recognizing each woman’s individual contribution and valuing it. Mothers continually emphasized the importance of the close and caring community of the Mother Circle. As one mother

commented: "There is a bond between women whether it's a woman who has a 21-year-old or an eight-year-old ... I connect with everybody else that's in the room because even though my story is my own, everybody has one. And what goes on in this room stays in this room and that bond I think is what draws everybody together." "Here I would feel anyone would fit," remarked another mother, "it is not dependent on the age of your kids, whether you're married or not, whether you had a career ... as with other places you have to be a certain type of person to join. But it is not like this here. It takes away extraneous things, and it goes from the point that each person is a mom, and that's what unites all of us, whereas in other groups that I've been to, are more like it matters what your kids are wearing." "You don't get that same bond if I was to go Gymboree class," as another explains, "If I was to have a problem I couldn't call any of those women. But I know any of these women in this room I could call if I was having a problem and they'll all, every one of them, would jump to help me." Or in the words of another mother: "Best thing I ever did, cause all of sudden I wasn't alone. I mean there were people going through the same things I was going through and who were feeling the same things I was feeling about being home after having worked ... it was a great feeling to feel like, I'm not alone in this ... it was wonderful, it was a feeling of connection finally."

Reading the transcribed interviews I was reminded of the simple but profound transformative power of women coming together to share their stories. Indeed, as Lorri Slepian argues: "It is through connection with other mothers that mothers find their power. It is through connection that mothers learn from their own lived experiences as mothers and validate what they know. It is speaking the truth with others about the mothering experience that the critical voice is silenced" (2012: 194). Indeed, the community of the Mother Circle model and the support that such provides enables mothers to trust in and believe in themselves; and in doing so they come to acquire the authority of empowered mothering.

Validation: "It is nice to say out loud as I was never able to do before, I have days when I'm like, I hate my kids"

Community, as well as the security discussed earlier, give rise to and make possible the third theme: validation. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines valid as "having legitimacy, authenticity, or authority, and defines validate as "[to] lend force or validity to; confirm or substantiate" (1605). Validation, as I use this word, conveys both meanings. Indeed, the aim of a Mother Circle is precisely to 'confirm and substantiate' the 'legitimacy, authenticity, or authority' of mother's experiences and knowledge. Therefore, validation is not completely synony-

mous with encouragement, for the latter means to “give courage, confidence, hope,” while to “validate” means this and more. Too often, as evidenced in the interviews, patriarchal culture convinces mothers that their knowledge is inadequate and does not count; it convinces them that their feelings are wrong and do not matter. Thus, a central aim of a Mother Circle is to *invalidate* these patriarchal messages and to *validate*—confirm or substantiate—mothers’ own wisdom and knowledge.

As one mother commented: “We tell it like it is, whereas the expert is gonna tell you how it should be.... But you can do it different ways and that’s what you get from the other moms, because through their experiences they learned this: how we’re able to do this and try that. You can try different ways, you know as opposed to saying you have to do this.” Another mother described her “own self doubt and listening to a doctor and thinking he must know more. You come to a place like this and you realize it’s crap.... There’s something wrong and I know it and I feel it and I’m much more confident in that decision.” Another mother who went through a difficult divorce and moved to Long Island to be near her parents commented,

Not only did [the Mother Circle] get me out of a depression, it just literally changed my life. I was just in such a bad place. It just, you know having the support, just having other mothers say to me its okay to feel this way or having people say, you know, we’ve been there, or you know if you’re frustrated and you know you wanna kill your kids at this moment, it’s because we all feel that way. I had to say it really definitely saved me. I don’t know where I’d be without the mother centre.

Another mother explained:

I just felt so isolated, so lonely. I didn’t know anybody and my son was three months old at the time. At the Mothers’ Center I [found] women who were in the exact same boat and it’s so comforting when you’re having a horrible day and you feel like you are like the worst mom in the world, and to hear they had the exact same day, and you are going through the exact same thing, it’s really comforting.

“These people felt the same way,” explained one mother,

it didn’t matter if they had five kids or a newborn ... that is why a Mother Circle is different than traditional moms groups like “Mommy and Me” or Gymboree. There, everybody goes and pretends that everything is great and then you really think that you’re the wacko because I have the children

who run out of the circle. And everybody else is like, this is great and I love my child. So this is what is different: here it's more real. It is nice to hear someone admit that they couldn't do it sometimes and, you know, be able to confide, to say I love my husband but I'm gonna kill him too ... so it was just nice to hear this and know it wasn't just you.

“You know I have heard that over and over again,” as another mother concludes, “I guess its validation, just being able to come and say, you know, this is my experience.”

Thus, validation empowers Mother Circle members in two important ways: they value and validate women as mothers, and they validate the mother work they do. As one mother described it, “Validation [that] what you are feeling is normal.” Likewise, as another mother explained, validation “counteracts [the negative messages mothers receive about their mothering] and builds you up so you are not being brought down by society. You have this community that brings you up again ... so you end up feeling better about yourself than you would have had without the community of the mother centre.” Mother Circles, as another mother explains, “change where the bar is set. You know if your ideal is that the kids are always dressed impeccably and the house is perfect, etc. I think knowing that such is not realistic helps you lower the bar for yourself and you can say okay, this is not gonna happen. But what can I do? Okay, I can get dinner on the table at the right time and my kids are clean although they have got ketchup on their face from lunch ... it lowers the bar and makes your goals more attainable.” Or in the words of another mother: “Because I'm allowed not to be perfect it has made me a better parent”

Just as validation confirms to mothers that they are ‘good enough’ mothers, it also affirms the importance of the mother work they do. As one mother explains: “The mother centre helped me know that there was value [in what I was doing], that its okay you're not earning a pay check, but what you're doing is really important if not more important. It made me feel like it's okay to be a stay at home mother; that I am so much more than that. To embrace the role and cherish it.” Or in the words of another mother:

A Mother Circle makes [mothers] feel good about what they're doing. And whatever they're doing. You know it's not one way or the other but [about] empowering you or making you feel good about whatever it is you are doing. Make me feel good about raising my child, not to show me how to do it. Not to tell me how to do it, but just to make me feel good about doing it.

With this affirmation of their abilities as a mother and the importance of the

mother work they do, Mother Circle members gain both agency and authority. As one mother commented: "Instead of feeling guilty and internalizing, I felt like okay I should really defend myself and defend my child's behaviour because they are just children. And before I wouldn't have been able to do that." Validation thus confirms both the worth and legitimacy of the work women do as mothers, and the knowledge they gain from such, what Sara Ruddick has termed "maternal thinking." Validation empowers mothers to act and speak from this knowledge; it instils them with, in the words of one mother, "the audacity to do so."

Conclusion: Mothers' Centers Saved My Life

The security, community, and validation of the Mother Circle model allow mothers to speak as mothers and to explore their maternal experiences authentically and deeply. In the words of one mother: "What I think is so central is the lack of judgement, the community support, and the validation of mother work as work. Women need to be validated, women need support, women need not to feel guilty, and they need to feel not being watched and the Mothers' Centers were doing this." Or in the words of another mother: "[In the Mother Circle] I got the validation and the empowerment. I left the meeting going wow, okay, now I feel good. I am renewed. I'm reinvigorated." The maternal standpoint and consciousness raising created through the security, community, and validation of the Mother Circle, makes possible a matricentric pedagogy that empowers mothers to resist patriarchal motherhood and become more confident women and stronger mothers. In and through this matricentric pedagogy, as the article has shown, the mothers learn to believe in themselves, trust in their own experiences, speak in their own voice, and make real changes in their own lives: to acquire, in other words, the agency, autonomy, authority, authenticity and advocacy/activism of empowered mothering. In this, the Mother Circle model is not only a life changer, for many it is also a life-saver; in the words of one member, "[it] gave me something to hang on to," and in this, "saved my life."

¹It is often said that, "It takes a village to raise a child." I would also say that it takes a village to write an article such as this one. Scholars, like mothers everywhere, soon come to realize that they require a caring community of other mothers to do research well. Fortunately I was blessed with such kin with the National Association of Mothers' Centers. I am particularly indebted to Lorri Slepian, founder of NAMC and Executive Director Linda Lisi Juergens for their unwavering belief in the importance of motherhood scholarship and for their generosity, care, and wisdom that sustained me throughout this research

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Appendix A



CREATING A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

IN THEORY AND PRACTICE HOW CAN A MOTHERS' CENTER PROMOTE A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT?

CONCEPTS THAT PROMOTE A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

1. The Mothers' Center supports, validates and values women in their mothering experience.

HOW DO WE DO THAT?

- Provide a space in the community that brings women together, builds connections and eases isolation.
- Recognize each woman's individual contribution and value it.

2. The Mothers' Center provides an open forum where all ideas are welcomed and considered.

HOW DO WE DO THAT?

- Peer led groups do not promote advice giving; they welcome women to share what they know from their own experience. Being considered and valued for what you know promotes feelings of competency and individual empowerment.
- Mothers' Centers do not take a stand on issues that would divide women and families in having to choose sides. All women can feel comfortable to explore many sides of issues they are struggling with.

- Teach and maintain a non-judgmental attitude.

3. The Mothers’ Center creates an environment that avoids the abuse of power and approaches each woman as a resource of skills and talents.

HOW DO WE DO THAT?

- Create a non-hierarchy, a structure that encourages all members to have a voice in the decisions, policies and practices of their center.
- Use a self-selection process for training and leadership roles.
- Train facilitators, coordinators, committee chairs and other center leadership in the importance of recognizing strengths and talents in others, valuing them, and facilitating their participation in work that will enhance the individual’s development, as well as that of the center.

4. The Mothers’ Center encourages women to be responsive to the needs of women and families in their community.

HOW DO WE DO THAT?

- Design and develop programs, activities and leadership that consider and reflect those needs. Recognize that change happens, be responsive.
- Formulate social action programs and activities. Members are more likely to get involved in something that directly relates to what they care about.

5. The Mothers’ Center provides good information related to the health and development of women and families.

HOW DO WE DO THAT?

- Bring current information into the center through groups, lectures, conferences, newsletters, etc.
- Welcome professional expertise into the center in a way that respects what the mothers know.