

Mothering in Self- Defined Challenging Circumstances: A Photo-Elicitation Study of Motherhood and the Role of Social Media

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Abstract : Concepts of the ideal mother and ideal mothering are disseminated through familial experiences, religious and cultural depictions of mothers and the national media. In recent years social media can also be added to the channels by which mothers and motherhood are socially constructed. However, the gulf between these depictions, -or in the case of social media 'self-curations' - of motherhood and lived experience has never been wider, particularly for women in disadvantaged or difficult circumstances. We report on a study of four lone mothers who were living with one or more of the following: limiting long term illness, large families, in temporary accommodation and on low incomes. The mothers were interviewed 3 times and invited to take a series of photos reflecting their lives in between each of the interviews. These photographs were used to ground the interviews in lived experience and as stimuli to discuss how the images within them compared to portrayals of mothers and motherhood that participants were exposed to on social media. The objectives of the study were to explore how mothers construct their identity in challenging and disadvantaged circumstances; to consider what their photographs of everyday life tell us about their experiences and understand the impact idealised images of motherhood have on real mothers in difficult circumstances. The results suggested that the mothers both strived to adhere to certain ideals of motherhood and acknowledged elements of these as partially or wholly impossible to achieve. The lack of depictions, in both national and social media, of motherhood that corresponded with their lived experience inhibited the mothers' use of social media. Other themes included: lack of control, frustration and strain; and parental pride, love, humour, resilience, and hope.

Keywords : motherhood, social media, photography, poverty

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