

Healthy Maternal Ambivalence

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews the psychoanalytic omission in theorising maternal subjectivity and the subsequent idealisation of the early mother-baby bond that excludes negative maternal feelings. It suggests that painful maternal experiences of resentment, persecution and hatred remain under-explored. Perhaps even more alarming, this exclusion compels mothers to hide conflictual and shameful feelings from professionals – and from themselves. The paper suggests that healthy maternal ambivalence is an inevitable feature of mothering. Drawing on psychoanalytic theoretical accounts and on empirical study it offers a model of different manifestations of maternal ambivalence. These maternal orientations - Facilitator, Regulator, Reciprocator and Conflicted mothering - manifest antenatally, preceding knowledge of the child's actual characteristics. The various permutations of ambivalence in parenting are a function of the mother's inner world and the child's affective communications.