

A 'Book of Experts'

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In my country, Chile, motherhood is associated with, among other things, worship, unconditional love, instinct, and to an exclusive and intensive bond. Despite the substantial changes in the construction of female subjectivity that have occurred in recent decades, assumptions and prejudices about the exercise of motherhood remain alive and continue to restrict women's subjectivity. For instance, the upbringing and care of children is still thought of as the sole responsibility of women. The school, society, family, couples and their own children, see the mother as responsible of the social and emotional development of each child.

This discourse of motherhood brings with it burdens for women. In my clinical practice, I find myself constantly working with overstretched mothers who are blamed for anything that goes wrong with their children, whether they are a single mother or a part of a two-parent family.

In this project, women's stories about unplanned motherhood without a partner have been gathered into a 'Book of Experts'. Each 'chapter' tells the subjective experience of a different woman in relation to motherhood. Through the metaphor of a book, and the use of narrative practices, the stories of five mothers are honoured. Space is created to rescue the values and skills that accompany these women as they respond to the difficulties surrounding the exercise of motherhood. The narrative perspective adopts a political position which places each woman as the protagonist of her story, and as an expert and theoretician of her own life. Each woman has decided how and where to begin and end each chapter. Now you, the reader, are placed as a witness to their lives and efforts.

These mother's stories mean a lot to me.

As a woman, they help me to challenge dominant narratives about motherhood and femininity, and help me consider motherhood and its demands as a cultural construct. By delving into various voices that constitute local Chilean stories about the experience of unplanned motherhood without a partner, I have come to notice how our voices as women are so shaped by cultural contexts.

As a daughter, these stories evoke a deep admiration. In them I recognise the weight of sacrifice involved in motherhood for many women, including my mother. My mother was eleven years in a fertility treatment so that I could come into this world. Our story has been loaded with a long wait, much pressure, and relentless pursuit. Through the following stories, I could think about her stress of constructing motherhood through her difficulties to conceive, the tension between her pursuit of happiness and the struggles of motherhood, and how her identity was challenged as a woman first, and as a mother later.

As a psychologist, these stories remind me that, while motherhood is a subjective experience, it is also embedded in a social practice. These women's voices challenge me to deconstruct restrictive notions about the maternal, and expand my understanding of women's stories that I hear in my clinical practice.

As the Director of the Fundación Santa Ana Emprende, an organisation that works with women in La Pintana, a working-class area of Santiago, this 'Book of Experts' is a political and ethical attempt to recognise and honour the skills of the women who meet with us. It is also considered a consultation document that we will share with future women who attend our Foundation. Through these stories, these future women, who may be struggling with motherhood and their identities, may be able to construct a wider perspective of who they are.

This 'Book of Experts' is also a consultation document for professionals working in our institution. There is much that we as workers can learn from these stories of women's local knowledge. Together we can then construct alternative stories to the dominant discourse on the shortcomings associated with the process of unplanned motherhood without a partner. Together we can recognise and establish for many women who meet with us the possibility of having a career: a space of resistance to the woman = mother myth.

Parenting is not only a personal responsibility but a social responsibility. So too is broadening the discourses of motherhood and womanhood.