

# Investigation of collective imaginaries about motherhood with the themed drawing-and-story procedure

## Summary

This study aims to investigate collective imaginaries about motherhood, focusing specifically on a situation in which children need extended and lasting care due to altered health conditions. Based on the strand of concrete psychoanalytic psychology, it is methodologically articulated as qualitative research using the psychoanalytic method by approaching 36 medical students, chosen as participants because they are engaged in training that provides proximity to mothers who accompany children in need of medical care. The material was produced in collective psychological interviews organized around the use of the PDE-Theme. Psychoanalytical consideration of the material led to the production of five fields of affective-emotional meaning: “Love, sublime love”, “Painful mother”, “Exclusive dedication”, “Reconciling activities” and “Neither fairy nor witch”. This sets up an imaginative situation that points to a contradiction whereby there is simultaneously a difficulty in perceiving the concrete living conditions of mothers, along the lines of the persistent idealization of the maternal figure in the sense of imagining her as strong, powerful and capable of unlimited generosity, while at the same time considering the mother as a person with qualities and difficulties who is called upon to authentically care for her children. These imaginings about the mother indicate a configuration that generates important subjective effects and gains a certain intelligibility in the macro-social context that establishes the sexual division of labor in capitalist society.

**Keywords:** maternity, childcare, collective imaginary, themed drawing and story procedure

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## Introduction

Positions based on the idea that women carry, in their essence, the ability to care for others, postulate that becoming a mother would be an exclusively natural occurrence. It is supposedly because of her nature that a woman is better able to look after her children. We think that, from a biologizing point of view, it is possible to imagine motherhood as a mere extension of the ability to gestate and breastfeed, but such a view hides the complexity of care that corresponds to a well-defined type of work, which qualifies as reproductive.<sup>1</sup> This work is a set of activities, such as feeding and physical, psychological and educational care for children, as well as care for the domestic environment, which guarantees the sustenance of human life and the maintenance of the home as a protected space. In this way, it is because of supposed innate qualities that women should be in charge of care tasks, especially for babies and children. It is currently thought that this arrangement should be maintained even when women work professionally, since this social transformation only partially affects the sexual division of labor (Hirata, 2014).

However, we already know that motherhood, as we conceive of it today, was created in Europe at the end of the 18th century. In other words, it is a human phenomenon which, like all others, is culturally constituted. However, we now know that there are various ways of organizing childcare, as attested to by studies in the field of the anthropology of motherhood which, by describing various habits of different cultural groups on how to raise children, have found that there is no obvious, correct or natural way of conducting this care, as attested to, for example, by Gottlieb and DeLoache.<sup>2</sup> In fact, empirical studies show that children are not always cared for within the context of the nuclear family, since other people from the extended family

and the community usually contribute to this role.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we can say that motherhood as we know it, i.e. as an experience in which the biological mother takes on the care of her children in an integrated way, in the home of the nuclear family, is one of the possible cultural solutions for providing childcare.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to note that profound socio-economic changes have altered social expectations of women in contemporary society. Among these changes, women's entry into the world of work seems to be one of the most significant, as it favors greater financial independence and experiences of fulfillment, transcending the sphere of reproductive work,<sup>1</sup> even if it can be taken advantage of by neoliberalism to increase the exploitation of the workforce. On the other hand, we know that women's entry into the labor market has not been strong enough to change social expectations about what is expected of mothers in relation to their children. Therefore, mothers continue to be the main caregivers, even when they are professionally active, which has been empirically confirmed.<sup>4-6</sup>

Bueskens<sup>7</sup> points out that the organization of childcare seems to be a nodal point when considering the conditions that generate suffering that affect everyone involved in motherhood, especially mothers. The same author examines the contradictory duality experienced by contemporary women, who are at the same time free to work but imprisoned at home, since they have responsibilities towards their children. Therefore, in general terms, there is a female overload and an affective-emotional impoverishment of the life of the man who, being removed from the issue of care, fails to realize a humanizing potential, which is the ability to care.<sup>8</sup>

Bearing in mind that we are faced with a situation in which the biological mother is still considered to be the best caregiver for the

children, while at the same time having to take responsibility for solving other tasks, it is possible to question how the maternal figure is conceived in the collective imaginary of different social groups, knowing that various fantasies about being a mother are produced and shared with society, including the mothers themselves. This type of comprehensive research is of significant importance because institutions such as educational, health, legal and religious institutions, among others, as well as professionals such as doctors, teachers, lawyers or even clerks, among others, relate to mothers. In this way, we aimed to investigate the collective imaginary of medical students about motherhood, focusing, through a methodological resource, on a bonding situation in which children need extended and lasting care due to specific health conditions.

## Methods

This study is a qualitative research using the psychoanalytic method, from the perspective of concrete psychoanalytic psychology.<sup>9</sup> In the case of this investigation, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas (CAAE no. 67962017.4.0000.5481) under opinion no. 2.930.199, we used psychoanalysis as an investigative method. We know that there are various ways of linking psychoanalysis and qualitative research. For example, there are hermeneutic studies aimed at understanding psychoanalytic theories and concepts, such as those carried out by Fulgêncio<sup>10</sup> Another type of research would be the so-called psychosocial studies, carried out predominantly in English universities, which seek to understand social phenomena, as attested to by Frosh<sup>11</sup> and Parker.<sup>12</sup> For our part, we are part of a group of researchers, such as Herrmann,<sup>13,14</sup> Hollway (2016) and Kvale (2003), who use the psychoanalytic method in qualitative research.

When we use psychoanalysis as an investigative method, we are, strictly speaking, taking direct inspiration from Freudian texts such as Gradiva, Schreber, Michelangelo's Moises, etc. In fact, Freud himself (1922), when preparing the entry on psychoanalysis for the Encyclopedia Britannica, chose to put the investigative method dimension first, the theories dimension second and the clinical dimension last. This choice was recorded in Laplanche and Pontalis (1963). Thus, we maintain that our choice to use psychoanalysis as a method corresponds to a recognition, already pointed out by Herrmann<sup>11</sup> that this field of knowledge goes beyond a purely clinical vocation, allowing us to understand cultural and social phenomena. To this end, we used two fundamental concepts from Bleger's<sup>9</sup> concrete psychoanalytic psychology: conduct and the affective-emotional field of meaning.

It is also worth remembering, as Herrmann<sup>11,12</sup> has shown, that method is the invariant element of the entire psychoanalytic field. Authors from different schools, who produce diverse and even conflicting theories, use the same method, but theorize by appreciating interpretations according to different theoretical references. This peculiarity was already present in Freud's text, to the extent that the author elaborated the results that the method provided according to two perspectives, the drive and the relational (Poltzer, 1928/2001; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Faced with the need to define our theoretical perspective, we opted for concrete psychoanalytic psychology,<sup>9</sup> a relational theory that values macrosocial contexts in which bonding phenomena occur. Concrete psychoanalytic psychology is articulated around two fundamental concepts: conduct and affective-emotional field of meaning.

By conduct, we mean any and all human acts, which can manifest themselves mentally, bodily, as actions in the external world or as the remaining product of human activity, in other words, as artifacts, habits

or institutions. In the context of concrete psychoanalytic psychology, behaviors are not understood as the result of a compromise between defense and drive, but rather as emerging from fields of affective-emotional meaning, since Bleger<sup>9</sup> critically abandons the notion of a purely intrapsychic unconscious, replacing it with a conception of the unconscious as a configuration of interpersonally created meanings. The fields of affective-emotional meaning are constructed as psychological environments from which behaviors emerge, but they are themselves products of human behaviors. In other words, affective-emotional fields of meaning and behaviors are both produced solely by human acts. The term imaginary is used here to descriptively designate both behaviors and fields, according to a view that understands that the human world is imaginatively instituted.<sup>15</sup>

## Participants

The aim of this research was to study the collective imaginary of motherhood, focusing specifically on a methodological situation in which children require extended and lasting care due to specific health conditions. In our opinion, addressing the situation of mothers whose children require more continuous and lasting care allows us to draw attention to when the exercise of motherhood is more demanding than usual.

We thought it would be interesting to define university students from the health sector as participants, as they will be working in professional environments where it is easy to find mothers looking after children who remain dependent for periods that may go beyond what is characterized as usual. We turned to medical students because they represent a section of the population with higher education who are attentive to people becoming ill, dealing both with the limits and fragility of human life and with care and possible relief of suffering.

We invited 36 students, 23 women and 13 men, from a fourth-year medical course at a private university in the interior of the state of São Paulo, to take part in a psychological interview.<sup>9</sup> This interview was carried out in a collective setting and articulated transitionally around a mediating resource.

## Mediating resource

We organized the collective psychological interview through a modified use of the Drawing-Story Procedure with Theme, known as PDE-Theme. This mediating resource was developed by Aiello-Vaisberg<sup>16</sup> based on the work of Trinca<sup>17</sup> with a view to researching collective imaginaries on various themes (Aiello-Vaisberg & Ambrosio, 2019). The PDE-Theme, which has been thought of in the light of transitionality, is shown to be a resource that can be modified according to investigative needs, and its heuristic fruitfulness was highlighted in an integrative review study carried out by Rosa, Lima, Peres & Santos.<sup>18</sup> This mediating resource can be used in individual and collective interviews, allowing a large number of participants to be approached.

In its original form, the PDE-Theme consists of asking the participant to draw a picture and write a story on a pre-established theme according to the research objective. In this investigation, we used a modified form, which consists of complementing this classic model by adding the request for a second narrative production, in which the figures drawn must be projected into the future, since the second story must be imagined after 20 years have passed. This period is justified in that it encourages participants to imaginatively refer back to a time when their children would normally have become autonomous and independent.

It's worth explaining why we chose the topic "mother of a disabled child". *A priori*, we wondered which situations would demand more

maternal attention and care in terms of intensity and duration. Among these situations, the literature points to the child's disability as one of the conditions that would prolong the time spent caring for mothers.<sup>19-21</sup> In other words, we evoked an imaginary situation that amplifies the differentiated need for care. In other words, we didn't propose this instruction to meet a specific interest in conditions of child disability, but rather to evoke a condition emblematic of those in which the needs of children are greatly increased. We therefore followed Frederico's methodological guidelines, which have already been used successfully in the field of psychological research by Machado (1995), De Paula (XXXX) and Zavaglia (2020).

### Production and recording of material

The material for this research was produced during a collective psychological interview organized around the modified use of the PDE-Theme. Considering the established research objective, we asked the students to draw "a mother who has a son or daughter with a disability". We then asked them to write a story about what they had drawn. Afterwards, we asked them to write another story about what would have happened 20 years after the situation portrayed in the first production.

We collected all the research material produced by the participants and kept it in its entirety. Not least, we scanned the drawings and transcribed the stories, exactly as they were written, including any grammatical errors, saving them in electronic files for analysis.

### Interpreting the material

We interpreted the material in the light of the pillars of the psychoanalytic method, namely free association of ideas and floating attention (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1968). We came into contact with the material several times within the research group, discussing memories, feelings and associations that came to light. At this point, we tried to interpret the non-conscious determinants underlying the productions, in other words, the affective-emotional fields of meaning. In this way, the interpretative production of the fields necessarily occurs in the transfer established between the material produced by the participants and the researchers.<sup>14</sup>

### Interpretations as results and reflective interlocutions as discussion

The results of empirical research, in this case the fields of affective-emotional meaning, announced in the form of interpretations, are defined in a minimalist way in order to specify the nuclear fantasy around which they are organized. If, on the one hand, consideration of the material would allow for the production of other fields, in other words, more than one interpretative result, which is perfectly plausible in qualitative research, on the other hand, certain fields deserve to be focused on because of the reflections they give rise to and the progress they can make in knowledge. In this way, psychoanalytical consideration of the material, consisting of the participants' drawings and stories, allowed for the interpretative production of four fields of affective-emotional meaning: "Love, sublime love", "Painful mother", "Exclusive dedication", "Reconciling activities" and "Neither fairy nor witch". Table 1, 2 show, respectively, the number of productions in each field and which productions emerge from each field, bearing in mind that, due to its complexity, the same production can be a function of two fields. We have identified all the productions by the letter P, followed by a numeral. The men's productions correspond to the sequence from P1 to P13, while the women's coincide with those from P14 to P36. Remember that each production is made up of a drawing and two stories, one relating to the moment portrayed in the drawing and the other imaginatively set in the future.

**Table 1** Number of productions emerging from each field

| Field                   | N  | Man | Woman | % men <sup>2</sup> | % women <sup>2</sup> |
|-------------------------|----|-----|-------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Love, sublime           | 14 | 6   | 8     |                    |                      |
| Mater dolorosa          | 7  | 3   | 4     | 8,3                | 17,3                 |
| Exclusive dedication    | 10 | 3   | 7     | 8,3                | 30,4                 |
| Reconciling activities  | 7  | 3   | 4     | 8,3                | 17,3                 |
| Neither fairy nor witch | 4  | 0   | 4     | 0                  | 17,3                 |

Note: 1. Percentage based on the total of 36 participants. 2. Percentage based on the group separated by gender, 13 men and 23 women.

**Table 2** Productions emerging from each field separated by gender

| Field                  | Productions - Men       | Productions - Women                    |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Love, sublime love     | P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10 | P16, P18, P19, P20, P21, P27, P29, P32 |
| Mater dolorosa         | P1, P12, P13            | P17, P25, P30, P33                     |
| Exclusive dedication   | P2, P3, P4              | P16, P21, P23, P27, P28, P31, P33      |
| Reconciling activities | P9, P10, P11            | P14, P22, P24, P26                     |
| Human mother           | 0                       | P15, P34, P35, P36                     |

Note. We noticed that six productions emerged simultaneously from two fields: P9, P10 and P11 emerged from the fields "Love, sublime love" and "Reconciling activities", P16, P21 and P27 emerged from the fields "Love, sublime love" and "Exclusive dedication" and P33 emerged from the fields "Mater dolorosa" and "Exclusive dedication".

There were no differences between drawing-history and the history of the future. In other words, all the productions were internally homogeneous, emerging from the same fields. Thus, the suggestion of the passage of 20 years does not change the affective-emotional determinants underlying the productions.

The "Sublime love" field is organized around the fantasy that maternal love will save children from any and all problems. Below are excerpts from the material that can be understood as emerging from this field.

"A mother is a mother. Each one in their own way, but there's no difference in the fact that they're mothers. They're all mothers!" (P18 - history of the present)

"In 20 years a lot can change, but some things remain. A mother's love, regardless of how she demonstrates it, will always be there. (P18 - history of the future)"

She feels confused and sad about everything she has yet to face, but she is also happy to have discovered a love for her son that is so true that it will be able to overcome everything." In the story that takes place in the future, the student imagines: "She believes she has done a good job, she loves her son very much and even today she finds herself overprotective of him, but she vehemently states that she would do it all over again if she had to (P32 - present day story).

She believes she has done a good job and loves her son very much, and to this day she finds herself overprotective of him, but she vehemently states that she would do it all over again if she had to. She believes she has a good life and likes to know that the future tends to be promising for her son, which makes her very happy (P32 - story of the future).

The "Mater dolorosa" field is organized around the fantasy that the son's suffering is devastating, summoning the mother irrefutably. Below are excerpts from this field. Below are excerpts from this field.

A mother who is exhausted, physically and emotionally, but loves her son very much, who has a neurodegenerative disease. Incurable. Both live haunted by the knowledge of the disease's progression and the final outcome. In this way, death becomes a constant presence in their lives, taking away their hope of a better future. All they have left is the present (P1 - story of the present).

Dead son. Predictable future. Inevitable outcome. Ironic wound. The mother mourns and is grateful for the end of her torment. Conflict. Lighter because heavier. Heavier because lighter. Mother-child relationship. Always closer, deeper. There is no hope, nor has there ever been, but there could be. Becoming. Accepting. To live. There is no choice but to choose (P1 - history of the future).

The "Human mother" field is organized around the fantasy that the mother is a person with qualities and defects. Below are excerpts from this field.

Luiza, 32, is taking her 6-year-old son Daniel to school in the morning. She woke up early, prepared milk and bread for the family and is now walking with Daniel to school. While Daniel is at school, she works as a manicurist and her husband, Daniel's father, works as a physical education teacher. At the end of the afternoon, they all meet up at home and play with Daniel and the family dog, Paçoca (P15 - present day story).

Luiza, 52, runs her own beauty salon. She still works as a manicurist. Over the last 20 years, she has studied business management and waxing. She uses a house in the center that she inherited from her parents as her salon. She lives well with her husband and is currently thinking about how to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. She is waiting for the weekend to meet her son Daniel and ask his opinion. (P15 - story of the future).

The "Exclusive dedication" field is organized around the fantasy that the mother should dedicate herself completely to her children. Below are excerpts from the material that can be understood as emerging from this field.

Miguel was crossing the street to meet a friend and was hit by a car. Since that day he can no longer move. Maria has known since then that she will have to take care of him for the rest of his life and that her son will always be dependent on her. Maria lives 24/7 for her son. She has given up her entire private, intimate life and her dreams (P21 - present tense).

"Miguel is 20 years old. He is still totally dependent on Maria. Maria still lives to take care of her son. Despite the chronological time, little has changed since 2017. Miguel is dependent on Maria. Maria is Miguel's mother. Maria is his mother (P21 - future story)".

The "Reconciling activities" field is organized around the fantasy that the mother should take care of the children without giving up her professional life. Below, we present material emerging from this field.

"Tired, exhausted. But strangely happy. For every difficult moment, a victory. She's felt alone, overwhelmed and even abandoned." (P22 - history of the present).

"Sometimes you feel alone, overwhelmed. At other times you realize you've gained a lifelong companion. And loneliness strikes. Problems that you didn't expect arise, that other mothers might not have. But the joy and hope for the future are the same, perhaps even more exacerbated." (P22 - story of the future)

After a long day at work, exhausted and tired of the demands of everyday life, the mother comes home and picks up her son, who was at home resting after a long period at school, and goes for a walk with him in the park (P16 - story from the present)

That young mother, full of worries and willing to do anything to guarantee her son a future, is still that warrior, but with the security that her boy no longer needs her nails and claws (P16 - story of the future).

### Reflective interlocutions on the field "Love, sublime love"

As we begin to reflect on the field "Love, sublime love", we remember that it is organized around a fantasy of an extremely powerful, almost omnipotent mother. From an emotional point of view, we can consider that we are dealing with a fantasy of a mother whose love would save her children. The fantasy about a completely good mother could be usefully understood in the light of the concept of divalence, as developed by Bleger.<sup>9</sup>

Bleger<sup>9</sup> explained that divalence means an attempt by the person to reduce anguish caused by ambivalent or depressive conflict. Through divalence, the person operates a separation or distancing of objects, making one object completely good and the other completely bad. From the theoretical perspective of concrete psychoanalytic psychology, the object must be understood as the other person and the quality of the bond established with them. This schizoid split makes it possible to operate a division in the field, but also in conduct itself.<sup>9</sup>

Divalence, according to Bleger<sup>9</sup> costs the integration of conduct and the total personality, as it could not be otherwise when we relate to partial objects. With this consideration in mind, it seems to us that this field would give rise to behaviors imbued with high expectations of the mother who, imaginatively, would always be present and completely devoted to the child. Thus, we are led to consider that this affective-emotional field of meaning favours idealizations of the mother. Such idealization results in the consideration that no mother is good enough, because she falls short of what is required of her. We are not dealing with fantasies that the mother could be good enough, but that she should be completely good. In other words, such a field could become an impediment to the potential of mothers, in the sense that it would hinder not only the recognition that no mother needs to, should or can be good all the time, but also the possibility of developing her own way of being a mother, as it places her before unrealistic standards when it comes to childcare.

We know that, for the human baby, its experience of absolute dependence means that the lap of the primary caregiver, which in our culture is usually the biological mother, is *holding*. However, this experience makes it possible to think about other human experiences insofar as *holding* can be understood as the most fundamental aspect of human coexistence, in other words, respect for the personhood of other people. In other words, the fantasy that maternal love is capable of overcoming all difficulties, regardless of the mother's living conditions, seems to be in line with the results of other studies, such as Aching and Granato.<sup>4,5</sup>

We could understand that the "Love, sublime love" field would favor positions according to which possible misfortunes and suffering that might befall the child would be seen as the mother's responsibility, in such a way as to ignore other people and institutions that could also take care of the child, such as the father, the extended family, the school, the community and the government. The picture, which is clearly wrong, would be one in which neither the mother nor the child

would live in the world of human relationships, but would be isolated, as if inside a bubble, where only maternal acts would have an effect.

It is relatively clear, as this field shows, how much the mother is still seen as the best caregiver for her children, which has significant emotional repercussions, converging with the results of other studies, such as those by Henderson, Harmon and Newman<sup>22</sup> and Odenweller et al.,<sup>23</sup> insofar as they consider that mothers who do not meet socially established expectations about caring for the new generations tend to feel more anxious and guilty. We could consider that, in the “Love, sublime love” field, the mother’s active and constant participation in caring for the new generations would be seen as if her presence alone ensured the child’s well-being.

This idealization, being part of the divalent conflict, places people in a world in which there are no women, in other words, there are no people who have their humanity recognized. In this field, it is only possible for completely good mothers to exist, so anyone who doesn’t display infinite kindness and patience can only be seen as a completely bad person. Imagining that mothers’ only activity is to take care of the new generations, and that they must always be available, patient and rested, actually covers up all the effort that such an activity requires. In other words, the possibility, which the present material unveils to us in order to resolve this conflict, would be to imagine that this work derives from the mother’s “being”. This type of fantasy makes it difficult to recognize that care is the realization of human potential, in other words, it is not gifted.<sup>8</sup>

### Reflective interlocutions on the “*Mater dolorosa*” field

The “*painful mother*” field is organized around a fantasy that the mother would not be able to carry on with her life because of the suffering of her children. The suffering would be so intense that the mother would experience a kind of paralysis, as if her life were losing meaning.

We can understand that the field “*Mater dolorosa*” is a function of the field “Amor, sublime amor” insofar as it is possible to consider the results of the idealization of maternal love. In other words, if the mother’s love is sublime, the loss of the object to which this love is linked, in this case the child, would be experienced as endless despair. This relationship seems to have been observed by Tachibana (2011), who, when investigating the collective imaginary of obstetric nurses about interrupted pregnancies, realized that the professionals initially differentiated between two types of mothers: those who had suffered a miscarriage, who would be worthy of compassion, and those who had caused it, who would deserve disapproval. In this way, the mother would experience an eternal void in her existence, impossible to overcome by losing a child.

In this sense, the idealization of maternal love is paradoxical. On the one hand, from an imaginative point of view, it paves the way for women’s personal fulfillment.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, even at the same time, like any paradox, idealization is offered to mothers as a problem that is part of gender relations.

Badinter<sup>24</sup> explains that various sciences, such as medicine, ethology and psychology, played a key role in creating the fantasy of “natural motherhood”. It was through hormones and human evolution that the mother, like all other mammals, supposedly bonded deeply and intensely with her offspring. The path of naturalizing motherhood appears to be a powerful way, from an imaginative point of view, to relegate childcare to biological mothers, placing them in charge of their children’s health and illness and offering justifications, reductionist in our view, for their suffering.

By understanding that the mother is imaginatively better prepared to care for and love her children because of her nature, we can understand that this fantasy is part of a broader social context. Bueskens<sup>7</sup> considers that the construction of motherhood in the West, since modern times, has been characterized as “*intensive mothering*”, that is, as intensive care practiced exclusively by the biological mother for her children. In a specific socio-economic organization like ours, the mother continued to be responsible for caring for the home, family and children, at the same time as she started working in the world of work. According to the author, women experience themselves in two ways, that is, they have two *selves*, one focused on the market and the other on motherhood. In this sense, the suffering of the child would be a kind of frontal attack on this second *self*, considering not only the “*Mater dolorosa*” field, but also the “Amor, sublime amor” field. Thinking along the lines of Tachibana (2011), what kind of mother wouldn’t suffer bitterly, in other words, wouldn’t pass through the “*Mater dolorosa*” field, if her child suffered some kind of illness? Imaginatively, it would be a mother who doesn’t feel sublime love for her child. This is a fantasy that generates clinically considerable psychological effects

The “*Mater dolorosa*” field presents a maddening result of idealization. It’s a kind of personal fulfillment through motherhood, but it occurs through great psychological pressure in the sense that they won’t have a fulfilled life if they don’t become mothers. In other words, this field leads us to consider that there is a kind of threat to women, as if they will regret it if they don’t have children, while at the same time condemning them to terrible suffering if they lose the

### Reflective interlocutions on the field of “exclusive dedication”

We can reflect that the field “Exclusive dedication” denounces a motherhood that has been imagined and practiced as solitary, as can be seen, for example, in studies of *mommy blogs*.<sup>6</sup> Knowing that, in other cultures, extended family members and other agents, such as public health workers, will be more engaged in caring not only for the new generations, but also for the mother herself, as the studies by Gottlieb et al.,<sup>2</sup> and Rogoff<sup>3</sup> teach, we can consider that motherhood, in our society, is imagined as natural. In other words, when it is imagined that the mother is the best caregiver because of her natural qualities, an argument that derives from this would be to imagine that only she could do this job.

We remember that Badinter<sup>24</sup> discussed the fact that pediatrics played a fundamental role in the conception that the mother should automatically establish a deep and loving bond with her baby. Based on studies of ethology, genetic biology and evolutionary psychology, many professionals, since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have tried to convince women that their nature is identical to that of mammals, just like all females of other species. According to this type of argument, if certain hormones, such as oxytocin and prolactin, didn’t trigger a mother’s exclusive dedication to her children, there would supposedly be a neurological or psychopathological problem, or both.

We know that hormones are not enough for a mother to look after her children. However, we are seeing a resurgence in the naturalism of motherhood. Since the end of the Second World War, it has been argued that exclusive maternal dedication - a fantasy that persists to this day, as the field of this imaginary points out - is linked to the survival of children.<sup>25</sup> However, it is argued that this dedication should occur not only in order to ensure the baby’s physical health, such as the proposal regarding exclusive breastfeeding by the mother, but also in order to ensure the baby’s psychological health and then that of the adult who will become.<sup>24</sup>

When we looked for support in the literature of relational psychoanalysis, in view of our theoretical and epistemological foundations,<sup>9</sup> we came to engage in dialogues with Winnicott.<sup>26</sup> This author was not interested in an enigmatic symptomatology, but rather in the quality of the experience, that is, how authentic or submissive the person feels in relation to the environment. For a person to experience something, they must first “feel” themselves, in other words, there must be a differentiation between *me* and *not me*. For the English psychoanalyst, the origin of this differentiation would be the sufficiently satisfactory result of the processes of integration, personalization and realization.

In our view, recognizing that babies and children must necessarily receive good care, due to the processes of constitution of the *self*, does not imply the association that care must necessarily be exercised by the biological mother, in order to understand that she should dedicate herself exclusively to the baby, which suggests a clear detachment from the drama of the mother and the new generations. If we reflect on Winnicott's<sup>27</sup> contributions in terms of motherhood as a social creation, we can conclude that the author, guided by the social parameters of where he lived, developed a theorization that reflects only one of the various possibilities for dealing with childcare. The field “Exclusive dedication” and the possible psychological effects on the people who pass through it therefore reveal not a maternal instinct to dedicate oneself to one's offspring, a concept which, in our view, is a hindrance to authentic motherhood, but rather evidence of the effects of a specific social organization of motherhood.

In this sense, the exclusive dedication of the mother arises in a context of capital accumulation, so that socio-economic changes have favored conservative conceptions regarding the sharing of childcare work between men and women.<sup>1</sup> It is not in vain that authors such as Bueskens<sup>7</sup> argue that, due to the separation between the private and domestic world and the world of work, there is a duality in the *self* of women mothers. On the one hand, there is the mother, and on the other, the woman. These two modes of *self*, one individualized, focused on professional work, and the other maternal, focused on the home and children, would encourage the mother, while working outside the home, to dedicate herself to caring for the new generations.

### Reflective interlocutions on the “Reconciling activities” field

In a study on the transformations of human relationships, Giddens<sup>28</sup> discusses motherhood as a social construction, a position that seems to converge with concrete psychoanalytic psychology.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Giddens<sup>28</sup> argues that the idealization of the maternal figure is fundamental to the creation of a socio-economic model in which women are placed as caretakers of children and responsible for domestic chores.

Considering that women's roles have been restricted to those of wife and mother since the 18th century, it would not be surprising to understand that maternal control over children has increased as Western families have shrunk, while children have come to be seen as more vulnerable. If the father was responsible for the financial support of the household and the mother for the children, then we would be faced with a scenario that clearly favored certain emotional repercussions for those related to motherhood, but obturated others, so that some aspects of this model of childcare seem to be maintained to this day.<sup>29</sup> More specifically, the major social changes since the end of the Second World War, a significant milestone in the reconstruction of the Western world, have favored women's entry into the labor market, but have not altered social expectations regarding childcare, which continues to be seen as a maternal responsibility.

The field “Reconciling activities” seems to us to converge with what has been called, in current literature, the “motherhood penalty” or “double motherhood penalty”. It seems that England and Budig<sup>30</sup> were the first authors to discuss the motherhood penalty. In a documentary study, the American researchers used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1982 to 1993 to examine the impact of motherhood exclusively on wages. They found that the mother's salary fell by 7% with each child. So, mothers with more children not only had less experience in the world of work, but also more care burdens and suffered more discrimination from employers for being mothers. In other words, the costs related to childcare, not only financial, but of various kinds, such as the time needed to spend with children, are placed disproportionately on mothers.<sup>31,32</sup>

We understand that the “Reconciling activities” field is part of this scenario from a different angle, that is, from the affective-emotional dimension of a group that is being formed to care for people. We reflect that this fantasy seems to make it difficult to establish an environment that is good enough for individuals and groups in general, including mothers and medical students.

### Reflective interlocutions on the field “Neither fairy nor witch”

The field “Neither fairy nor witch” is organized around a fantasy which, in our view, can be understood as evidence that the humanness of mothers is being recognized, either because they love their children and care for them, or because they suffer. We think this is a fantasy of a mother who recognizes the otherness of her child, but who also deals with her own limitations. human and not completely good. In this way, we can understand this interpretative result with the help of Bleger,<sup>9</sup> but this time in the light of the concept of ambivalence.

Bleger<sup>9</sup> defines ambivalence as the coincidence of love and hate in the same object. He also states that ambivalent conflict is more mature than divalent conflict, because it occurs with a total object and not with a partial object. In his view, ambivalence is about a type of relationship in which there are certain insecurities, because at the same time as loving the other person, there are also frustrations and the chance of rejection.

The fact that people, in certain circumstances, are gratified and frustrated stems from the fact that they are seen and experienced in relationships as otherness and not as objects placed at the disposal of drive relief. However, realizing this fact is an achievement in emotional maturation, as it is difficult to perceive and maintain the relationship with the other person as such, in other words, as ambivalent, considering that every relationship deals with love and hate. This conflict can be resolved in two ways. In the first way, there is the possibility of what is known as integration. In other words, genuine acceptance of the qualities and defects of other people, but also of oneself. In the material, we see productions in which mothers are imaginatively conceived in their entirety. Like the second, there is the possibility of defending oneself from this drama through divalence, in other words, one can fantasize that the person who frustrates is not the same person who gratifies. Mothers would then be defined as completely evil, who always punish, or, as in the case of the first field, “Love, sublime love”, as completely good mothers, who always solve all problems with their love.

Now, a total object is directly linked to recognizing the humanity of people, in this case, the humanity of mothers. This is precisely because the other person is seen as a person. In this way, it seems plausible to us that the transit of individuals and collectives in the “Neither fairy nor witch” field can facilitate the acceptance of the

mother's personhood in her suffering. In this field of the collective imaginary of the university students we interviewed, it is possible to perceive an imaginative conception of the mother according to which she is good enough, that is, she loves her children and does what she can to help them, but also recognizes her limits, considering the environment she is part of.

Based on the material, we can see a certain coincidence between the humanity of the mothers and an environment that not only welcomes them, but is also part of it. This relationship seems relevant to us, as we are dealing with real, living people. In other words, we are not dealing with a completely good mother, but a human one. We can consider that the mother's ability to develop her own way of being a mother depends on the relationships that are able to welcome her, seeing her not as a good object, but as a person (Granato, 2004).

With the help of Gottlieb and DeLoache,<sup>2</sup> we can state that even though pregnancy and childbirth depend on the female body, after birth, numerous cultural arrangements can be put in place for communities to deal with the absolute dependence of the human baby on sensitive and dedicated care. In the model commonly referred to in our society as motherhood, mothers can suffer significantly.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, they can also feel authentic and genuinely gratified by caring for the new generations (Zavaglia, 2020). In this way, this field presents an imaginative conception of a truly human mother, who accepts her child's condition and also her own pain, as well as recognizing that her role is limited to accompanying her dependent child, even if she cannot always meet their varied demands in an absolutely satisfactory way.

## General considerations

When we consider the results of this empirical research, i.e. the interpretations of the material as fields of affective-emotional meaning, we can start by saying that we didn't notice any differences in the participants' productions in terms of the instruction given. In other words, asking them to write stories in the present and in the future about the characters they have drawn does not encourage transit between fields.

We also noticed differences between men and women in terms of their imaginative conceptions of the mother. In this sense, two fields appear to be more clearly inhabited by women, namely the "Neither fairy nor witch" field and the "Exclusive dedication" field. We can understand these two fields as being organized around how the mother will organize herself in terms of childcare - either as a person whose life encompasses motherhood, or as a mother exclusively dedicated to childcare. According to this imaginary, the two *selves*, altruistic and individual, proposed by Bueskens<sup>7</sup> can be experienced in extremely different ways. In the "Neither fairy nor witch" field, the two *selves* may be in relative harmony, precisely because it is an ambiguous relationship.<sup>9</sup> In the "Exclusive dedication" field, the individual *self* may be hampered, because by dedicating oneself exclusively, only the altruistic *self* will be experienced. In this sense, it's possible to say that men are understandably less connected to these fields, as they don't perceive caring for their children as something that also affects them.

On the other hand, there are three fields in which men and women are relatively similar. The fields "Love, sublime love", "*Mater dolorosa*" and "Exclusive dedication" point to maternal omnipotence, the consequence of the first, emotional field, where maternal impotence prevails, and the possibility of being a mother, in other words, doing everything. It doesn't make perfect sense to "listen" to a simple and candid "Mary is a mother" in light of these fields. In fact, these fields reflect a paradoxical state of surrender, fullness

and passivity on the part of the mother, because she becomes that being who is both powerful and powerless, capable of everything and incapable of doing anything. In these fields, the mother's life ceases to be human drama and becomes superhuman drama, ceasing to be comedy and becoming tragedy - in the Aristotelian sense of the term.

We feel confident that changes are possible, and are already taking place, with regard to motherhood and its emotional foundations. The creation of a world in which mothers can be cared for so that they can develop their potential in motherhood itself and in other areas of life necessarily involves taking into account the affective-emotional dimension of human acts.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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