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BEING A GOOD ENOUGH MOTHER: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON MY EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERHOOD IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Table of Contents

THESIS DECLARATION.....	3
ABSTRACT	4
LAY SUMMARY.....	5
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	6
CHAPTER I The Introduction	8
CHAPTER II The Literature Review	12
2.1. Becoming a mother: emotions evoked.....	12
2.2. Donald Winnicott and his concept of a “good enough” mother	15
2.3. Mothering in time of pandemic	20
2.4. Cultural context	32
2.5. Impact of parenthood on partner relationships: closer look at inequality	39
CHAPTER III Methodology	43
3.1. The search	44
3.2. Ontology and Epistemology	45
3.3. Autoethnography	47
3.4. Reflexivity and Transparency	55
3.5. Cultural context	59
3.6. Personal motives and agenda	64
3.7. Final thoughts	66
CHAPTER IV My experience of motherhood. Autoethnographic exploration	68
4.1. My journey: transition into motherhood and emotions evoked when I became a mother ..	69
4.2. Gender roles and stereotypes: my own cultural context	72
4.3. Impact of becoming parents on my marital relationship	77
4.4. Lack of equality embedded within me	85
CHAPTER V Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on my experience of motherhood. Autoethnographic exploration	96
5.1. My marital relationship and gender roles yet again	104
5.2. Impact of the pandemic on my professional and academic work	107
5.3. Searching for the silver lining	114
CHAPTER VI Guilt, Shame and My Sense of Deficiency	119
6.1. Guilt and Shame as my shadows, following me everywhere	120
6.2. Social Media and its impact on my sense of deficiency	127
6.3. Again, what does it mean to be “good enough”?	137
CHAPTER VII The conclusion and implications for practitioners	147
CITATIONS	158

Thesis Declaration

1. I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

2. I confirm that this thesis presented for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling, has:
 - i) been composed entirely by myself
 - ii) been solely the result of my own work
 - iii) not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification

3. I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Signed: Natalie A. Schiewe-Kopyra

Date: 30.11.2023

Abstract

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In this thesis I embark on the explorations of my personal journey, I will pick up on Winnicott's concept of the "good enough" mother and explore what this means during the pandemic. I examine those concepts through the use of autoethnography.

I outline the existing literature on the topic, highlighting some gaps in the current sources. Next, I talk about my epistemology, ontology, and methodological approach. I bring in the cultural aspects and gender related debates in relation to Polish society.

I then move on to my autoethnographic exploration of my own experiences. The goal of this thesis is to broaden understanding on the experience of motherhood during the global pandemic, looking through the lenses of the Winnicott's concept of "good enough" mother. Such understanding is highly relevant to the field of psychotherapy. Through my own stories and reflections, I strive to understand and convey the complexities and demands of what it means to be a mother today, especially considering the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. It is my hope to contribute my work to the therapeutic body of knowledge as well as offer new viewpoints and perspective on the issue of motherly feelings of deficiency, specifically during the time of the global pandemic.

Lay Summary

Considering Winnicott's concept of a "good enough" mother, in this thesis I write about my own experience of motherhood, especially looking at it through the lens of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Using autoethnography as my research method, I explore the sociocultural aspect of motherhood, specifically in my personal context. I pay attention to my sense of deficiency, questioning the issues of gender bias and inequality. Then, I also consider my career and academic work, and the impact of the pandemic on those aspects of my life. I look closely at emotions that have been evoked in me ever since becoming a mother, such as anxiety, guilt and shame. I write my way through the mess, the uncertainty and chaos that have accompanied me in this journey.

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CHAPTER I

The Introduction

Becoming a mother must be one of the most significant events in a woman's life, commencing a lifelong journey of motherhood. While it might seem like one of the most natural, instinctive and well-explored phenomenon, it is also complicated, demanding and filled with contradictory emotions. My own pregnancies and motherhood - already major and stressful life events - were made even more complicated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, which brought about unusual and unfamiliar transformations and problems, including an increase in mental health issues in pregnant women as well as mothers (Pierce, et al., 2020; Preis, et al., 2020). My experiences of being a mother during the pandemic are unique to my own circumstances: being a white, middle-class woman living in a heterosexual two-parent household within a heteronormative society.

My research asks: What does it mean for me to be a “good enough” mother, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of my journey to explore this question, I have wondered: Where is my persistent sense of deficiency and guilt coming from? How does the society I live in shape my experience of motherhood? What impact has my own family that I was raised by, had on me becoming the mother I am today? Why, in the 21st century, is there still so much gender inequality? And how has all this been impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic?

This thesis will explore these questions using an autoethnographic approach as I write about my personal experience, which is set in the specific context of my own life as well as the culture I live in. In Chapter Two, I will touch on the existing literature and outline current debates on the topic. Donald Winnicott's writing and his concept of a “good enough” mother are introduced and discussed as well as more modern researchers who engage with Winnicott's concept. Existing literature on the pandemic will also be outlined, especially in the context of its impact on mothers, and I will point out gaps in research.

In Chapter Three, documenting my process of understanding and reflecting on my experience of being a “good enough” mother, especially during the global pandemic, I explore the rationale behind my use of autoethnography as method as I write about the struggles and dilemmas that have accompanied me during the lifecycle of this research. I show my concerns as I have worried about the validity of my “data” which is constituted of my own, deeply personal written account of my experience.

Autoethnography has offered me flexibility and scope for creativity: but it has been difficult finding a balance as I have attempted to make my writing academically robust and meticulous while also telling my stories and expressing the depths of emotions honestly and with rawness. My struggle to shift into writing a personal account and view my own experiences and reflections as “data” is shown and told as a discussion in the methodology chapter before I move on to the main part of my thesis.

Reflexivity and transparency have been fundamental in my writing process and in the construction of this thesis they enabled me to add a fresh, new and up-to-date honest account of my experience to this research topic. My own personal reflections on my journey into motherhood appear in Chapters 4 – 6 where I provide a first-person reflexive testimony by discussing my own cultural context, gender gaps and pressures which have been particularly felt by me – a sense of inadequacy, guilt and comparing myself (and being compared) with other mothers. I also talk about the impact the media (especially social media) has had on my experience of motherhood. As a big part of my motherhood has been during the COVID-19 pandemic, I will deliberate on the significance this health crisis and the restrictions related to it has had in relation to my parenting experience and examine the imprint it has made on me as a mother.

Through the process of writing, I document my process of making meaning of my experiences of being a mother during the COVID-19 pandemic. In my autoethnography, I include vignettes - raw stories from my life and my recollections or diary entries of specific events as well as my poetry. The goal of this thesis is to invite you – the reader – to be a witness and a companion in my journey and through

this broaden your understanding of the experience of motherhood, specifically during the global pandemic, and to bring to light many dilemmas mothers go through. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will highlight that this research is particularly relevant to the field of counselling and psychotherapy, which focuses on understanding individual human experience. Instead of providing answers, I will ask questions and inspire you to ask some too.

Throughout this thesis, my reflexive and personal writing seeks to bring out the complexity of what motherhood entails and how the pandemic impacted the experience of motherhood, especially focusing on what it means to be good enough in a world of social isolation, fear, high demands, cultural pressures, managing multiple roles and managing constant comparisons. I will keep referring to the pandemic, as it has vastly shaped my own parenting journey so far. My sense of love and joy, but also guilt, frustration and exhaustion will come through in my writing as I strive to comprehend the complexity of my own experience. There will not be a finished, polished conclusion to this thesis. There was no solid destination I wanted to arrive at as writing it has been a journey, as is life itself. My grappling with what it is to be a good mother will undoubtedly continue beyond the pages and the years of this thesis. This thesis is not an attempt to tell others how to be a parent. I stay in the position of learner. Instead, this dissertation will think through Winnicott's concept of the "good enough" mother within the particular context of the pandemic and aims to expand and rethink what this means (Winnicott, 1960, 1967).

Through personal writing and engagement with literature, I unveil, dissect and make meaning of my own experiences, and, if you decide to continue with me in this journey, I invite you to witness my process and become a part of it, and to explore alongside me and through my eyes. You will be a witness, but also a judge of the truth of my experiences and interpretations. You will be my companion, if you will, in these often dark, shameful moments. And by you being with me in mine – I would like to think that I may also appear for you – in yours.

As I am writing this thesis, I am aware of your presence in it and the part you're playing. The way I write might feel hectic and disorderly. It is not a linear process, instead it is messy and confusing. But it is my process. Being a mother to toddlers is

messy, this writing is messy, written sometimes during bath time and sometimes with a baby on my knee, sometimes with little space for reflexivity or time to process, but none the less, here is my story, of my interrupted attempts at being a good enough mother in unprecedented times....

CHAPTER II

The literature review

2.1 Becoming a mother: emotions evoked

The bar for what it means to be a “good enough” mother is constantly being raised, requiring more and more “time and expertise” from women (Press, 2006, p. 235). It can be said that women are evaluated as well as evaluate themselves using “a scale so harsh that most internalize permanent feelings of failure both on the work front as well as the mom front” (Press, 2006, p. 235). It has been established that becoming a parent is a highly emotional and life-changing event (Kerr, et al., 2021), which has certainly been the case for me. It can be considered, psychologically speaking, a life changing event, i.e. one that concerns important matters and cherished values, and which is accompanied by a feeling of ineffectiveness of the previous methods of conduct, the state of burden, tension and mismatch between requirements and competences, which forces the individual to make changes in her behaviour and life (Sęk, 1991). The birth of a child, especially the first one, is an experience so significant that it is also given the meaning of a critical event (Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2009; Kuryś, 2010). A critical event is a psychological situation analysed from the point of view of the person directly in it, i.e. the actor, containing a strong subjective component; a situation in which the balance between the individual and the environment has been disturbed. It is a new and often difficult situation, overloading the “I”. (Kuryś, 2010). Motherhood can be treated as a turning point in a woman’s life, as a breakthrough related to the subjective and objective way of experiencing one’s own life (Budrowska, 2000).

In the context of parenting (especially becoming a parent for the first time), one can also talk about a specific way of coping with the development crisis (Kuryś, 2010). This crisis is an inherent part of human life and is associated with basic life events, but because they are always accompanied by a feeling of losing something, some change, some novelty, and taking up new roles and tasks, emotional tensions and insecurity are woven into them (Badura-Madej, 1999). In some cases, when

motherhood is related to a situation perceived by a woman as dramatic, one can speak of a crisis defined by James and Gilliland (2004) as feeling or experiencing an event or situation as unbearably difficult, exhausting resources of endurance and violating the mechanisms of coping with difficulties, and - in the absence of adequate support - leading to serious disturbances in affective, cognitive and behavioural functioning. It is worth noting that there are people in particularly difficult and overburdening life situations where the likelihood of suffering (and loneliness) is very high, and motherhood can reflect that (Włodarczyk, 2003). Motherhood may be disturbed by existential difficulties (material and social situation of the family) or (and) health and personality difficulties (Maciarz, 2004). It is then associated with two other types of crises distinguished by the Swedish psychiatrist - Cullberg, who, apart from the normative crisis mentioned above, also pointed to the existence of situational and chronic crises (Badura-Madej, 1999). The former, also known as random or incidental, are caused by unexpected events that threaten health, life, sense of security and identity (Badura-Madej, 1999), and what distinguishes them from others are the key features of the triggering event such as unpredictability, suddenness, shocking character, intensity and catastrophe (James & Gilliland, 2004). My motherhood journey has encompassed all of these factors: despite all the preparations, it has been sudden and unpredictable, intense, and the global pandemic has definitely brought on a sense of it all being a shock and catastrophe. Negative feelings, especially stress and anxiety, as well as sadness and a sense of deficiency, have been ever-present.

A robust body of research has found that the transition into parenthood may bring about feelings of anxiety, elevate stress levels, or cause depression (Canário & Figueiredo, 2017; Matthey et al., 2013; Paulson & Bazemore, 2010, Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2007). An emotional reaction to the challenges of becoming parents has oftentimes been referred to as “parental stress”, which can be defined as an aversive psychological response to the demands of parenthood (Deater-Deckard, 1998). Parental stress may have a negative effect on various aspects of life, like the well-being of parents (Crnic & Low, 2002), marital satisfaction (Cowan & Cowan, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2008), and of course, the relationship between the parent and the child (Pereira et al., 2012). It has been well-established that stress can aggravate the potential for harsh parenting (Beckerman, et al., 2017), potentially leading to the

maltreatment of children (Rodriguez-Jenkins & Marcenko, 2014). Some factors, like a parent's perceived level of control, or family and social support, can reduce the distress and, as a result, a potential risk for child maltreatment as well as maternal distress (Frazier et al., 2011; Li, Godinet, & Arnsberger, 2011). The levels of parenting stress vary from one individual to another, and depend on a range of factors, such as a child's personality and behaviour (Östberg et al., 2007), and a parent's personality, as well as their physical, emotional and mental health levels (Leigh & Milgrom, 2008), financial hardships (Neppl et al., 2016), social support (Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014), and more.

Research has found that maternal anxiety has a significant impact on the quality of a mother's life as well as the life of her baby (Bradely, et al., 1999; Brazelton & Als, 1979; Feldman, 1993; Green, Fox & Lewis, 1983; Kramer, 2001; Mogg, Millar & Bradely, 2000; Monk, et al., 2000; Whaley, Pinto & Sigman, 1999). Bowlby (1958) proposed that the absence of a caregiver as a secure base is a source of anxiety. Anxiety has been said to be the most frequent disorder reported in western culture (Kaplan and Sadock, 1998). It is difficult to define; however, its physiological signs include heavy breathing or shortness of breath, excessive perspiration, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, and general tension, while psychologically it manifests in feelings of nervousness, fear and worry (Lupi, 2009). It is important to note that anxiety can be hidden deep beyond the surface and outside the conscious awareness of an individual (Fonagy, et al., 2004). In this case, if a mother experiences deep levels of anxiety which she is not consciously aware of, she might be burdening her child with lifting some of that anxiety. It has been found that anxious mothers allow less independence in their infants, are more negative and colder, as well as more critical of their children, compared to non-anxious mothers (Whaley, Pinto & Sigman, 1999). Maternal anxiety has been found to be a significant predictor of later attachment and emotional difficulties for children (Brazelton & Als, 1979; Manassis et al, 1994; Weinberg & Tronick, 1998; Weinberg et al, 2008). Anxiety has been an emotion accompanying me ever since I can recall and it has become particularly strong ever since I became a mother, hugely impacting on my already insecure sense of competence and efficiency. Moreover, the pandemic has majorly contributed to my increased anxiety levels, bringing on a lot of

unpredictability and fear, turning lives as we know them upside down, leaving me feeling helpless and deficient.

2.2. Winnicott and his concept of a “good enough” mother

The concept of a good enough parent was coined by British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1953, 1957, 1964), who raised the idea that, in terms of parenting, perfectionism is unreachable and therefore parents should not be judged on this basis, but instead they should strive to be “good enough” as “good enough” is sufficient to raise a child well (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). “Good enough” refers to a mother (or primary caregiver) that is “acceptable”, rather than perfect (Winnicott, 1960, 1967).

In this thesis, I will focus on the mother as the primary caregiver as it is an autoethnographic piece on my own experiences related to being a parent. It has been said that imperfect parenting can be satisfactory to raise a child who then becomes an emotionally healthy and functional adult (Ramaekers, et al., 2013). Being “good enough” creates space in which it is acceptable to fail and recover from a failure (Reeves, 2012). In a nutshell, the concept of a “good enough” mother assumes that a child experiences aggressive and sexual impulses from the beginning of their life. The mother, or the person who constantly looks after the child, has the task of being a “container” (Bion, 1962), that is, receiving these strong impulses from the child, and then enduring and soothing them. A “good enough” mother refers to the mother doing this well enough and often enough for the baby to develop properly. A mother, who is “good enough”, starts off with being completely attuned to her child’s needs and , with time, she gradually withdraws, creating space for the child to deal with their own failings (Winnicott, 1953). In Winnicott’s (1960) psychoanalytic theory, a sufficiently good environment is the basis of a child’s emotional development.

However, how can we determine if a parent is “good enough”? Choate & Engstrom (2014) state that it might be helpful to consider it in terms of a few separate categories: physical care, community safety, family safety, substance abuse and addiction, mental and physical health of the parent, making space for the child,

nurturing, using external networks, and capacity to change. If we consider each of those elements, bearing in mind the individuality of needs of each child, we might be able to get a sense of what it means to be a “good enough” parent. Winnicott (1956) stated that, in his view, most mothers are “good enough” to establish communication and dialogue with their offspring, which facilitates the innate abilities of infants to grow and develop in a “good enough manner”. What I find troublesome is that the concept of “good enough” parenting is not something that has been uniformly quantified (Brazelton, et al, 1974), even though some criteria have been proposed, which still leaves a lot of space for interpretation and uncertainty. I speak to that uncertainty and feelings of deficiency that follow it in this autoethnography. Many researchers studied the mother-infant interactions and used statistical data analysis to attempt in some way to quantify and enhance the understanding of what it means to be a “good enough” mother (Beebe et al, 1979, Beebe & Stern, 1977; Jaffe et al, 2001; Stern, 1971, 1974, 1977, 1989; Stern et al, 1975; Tronick & Clanton, 1989; Tronick, et al., 1978; Tronick & Gianino 1986; Cohn & Tronick, 1988; Conn, et al 1986; Lyons-Ruth, 1998; Lyons-Ruth, Alpern, Repacholi, 1993), however the concept is still fluid and subject to various personal, cultural and socio-political circumstances. This is also a reflection of my thesis, where I am not trying to propose any universal truths or data, instead offering my own experiences with all the mess, chaos and uncertainty they entail. Winnicott (1953, 1957) claimed that any ordinary mother who is not seriously mentally disturbed can create the conditions for her child to develop properly. “Good enough” is not average, it simply means that, at the moment, taking all factors into account, the benefits are sufficient and there are no critical issues. Think of it as a way to continue improving – to achieve excellence by progressively meeting, challenging and raising standards – without striving for a mirage of excellence. The best approach to any endeavour is to start with “good enough” and continuously improve and reflect – because being perfect is simply an illusion (Sidebotham 2017).

Winnicott (1953, 1956) introduced the concept of “early maternal preoccupation” which essentially means that a mother’s “ordinary devotion” to her infant creates an environment for her infant, in which they can create their own identity. A mother whose primary preoccupation is her infant is thought to be “good enough” - not perfect - as her failures and mistakes enhance the infant’s capacity to develop an

independent self (Winnicott, 1949). According to Winnicott (1960), a mother's care enables an infant to have a successful and creative life. That care involves physical holding of the baby and the "psychical elaboration" of her baby's experiences. The main developmental goal for the baby is to be able to experience both inner and outer reality, to be able to be themselves in a world of experiencing others. However, with a mother being in a state of "maternal preoccupation", I wonder how much space is there left for her own emotions and feelings? I will elaborate on this later in this thesis. Winnicott argues that the relationship between a mother and her baby is dependent upon the mother's own sense of being "good enough" as well as her "capacity to hold the paradox of unity and separateness" between herself and her infant (Caldwell & Joyce, 2014, p. 20). Research related to this concept initially focused on the possibilities and limitations of the mother's ability to be "good enough" (Winnicott, 1956/2000) when the mother lives in socially insecure conditions. Winnicott (1956/2000) describes the state of "primary preoccupation" with the mother as a condition that is required but is not sufficient for the mother to reconcile the child's needs with maternal care. This care improves due to the sensitivity developed throughout pregnancy and reaches its peak in the postpartum period, when the mother is able to meet the needs of the child. . A "good enough" mother is a person who cares for a child and is attuned to their needs. However, "good enough" mother allows the child to be alone so that her constant presence is not perceived by the child as too interfering (Goldstein, 2003).

It is extremely important for the mother to tune in to the child's needs. Both deprivation and excessive maternal interference inevitably lead the child to create a false identity. Therefore, the task of the mother is to create a safe, secure environment for the child, in the emotions of the child can be "contained" (Tosone, 1996). There is a general consensus within mental health and child development fields that the quality of the infant's relationship with their mother has a significant impact on their later life, their sense of self and their ability to create healthy relationships in the future (Lupi, 2009). Shields (2016) stresses that a child's upbringing weighs heavily in determining their future capacities and capabilities - like an ability to create successful and healthy relationships, including becoming a "good enough" parent him/herself. "Good enough" parenting enables the infant the ability to

self-regulate while at the same time maintaining the optimal level of contact with his/her primary caregiver (Lupi, 2009). Hence, the parental role is crucial in enabling the child to reach their potential and advance their interest in becoming healthy adults who have a capacity for creating healthy relationships. This knowledge leads me to consider the pressures I have felt as a mother to be “good enough” in order for my children to have the best possible life and feeling lost in what it actually meant to be “good enough”, and therefore fighting a constant sense of deficiency.

It has been concluded in a qualitative study by Kellett and Apps (2009) that “good enough” can be attributed to four factors: meeting the child’s health and developmental needs; putting children’s needs first; providing routine and consistent care; and parental acknowledgement and engagement with support services (2009). These days, “good enough” parenting is more and more frequently seen as a co-construct by mother and baby (Lupi, 2009). Coordination of mother and infant is bi-directional (Cohn and Tronick, 1989); and in order for that coordination to be “good enough”, there must be a certain level of intensity of that coordination, as too much of it or too little would not be “good enough” (Jaffe et al, 2001; Beebe et al, 2002). The relationship between a parent and a child is a fluid one and it will change over time, like any other relationship. What is important to pay attention to is how a parent adapts to these changes in order to create a relationship that is at least not harmful to the child (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). A body of research has stressed the importance of parents distinguishing between seeing a child as a separate, unique individual who should be nurtured, cared for and has their own needs to be met; and of a child being seen as a mechanism to fix parents’ own traumas and losses from the past (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). It has been suggested that unresolved trauma and issues that have not been worked through have a negative impact on building healthy relationships (Schoore, 2001; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007). Therefore, being “good enough” means the mother does not see a child as a solution to her own issues or a tool to fix those issues. Mothers who have not resolved their own issues will likely project their unmet needs onto their child and as a result the caregiver might require care taking from their child. Choate & Engstrom (2014) summarise that, in essence, this means that if the parent has unresolved traumas from the past, she will crave for the child to be “good enough” for her, not the other way around. She might need the child to care for her, reassure her, and provide externally, what

she should be able to find within. As a result, she will not be able to be a present, attuned and caring mother for her children, in short, she will not be “good enough”. Winnicott (1988) states that a “good enough” mother is sincerely preoccupied with her baby by providing emotional and physical care. It is important to note that authentic living involves facing our upsetting emotions, such as guilt or rage. Repressing our emotions, positive or negative, numbs us as human beings. “Our drives and urges are the very sources of our vitality, so to extirpate them, or to put a gulf between them and us is to cease living” (Watson, 2014, p. 288).

As a result of parenting that is not “good enough”, an infant might develop what Winnicott called a “false self” (Winnicott 1960), which can happen when the mother experiences her own feelings as those of her infant’s. As a result, the baby might not feel seen, valid, or real. “It is only on a continuity of existing that the sense of self, of feeling real, and of being, can eventually be established as a feature of the individual personality” (Winnicott, 1967, p. 22). Hence, according to Winnicott, an infant would not have a true self at all, if they do not experience a reliable environment with uninterrupted feelings of being loved by a parent who is present and attuned. Choate & Engstrom (2014) state that only if a parent is present in their role as a parent and caretaker, can he or she be open to gaining new skills, receive support and shift their role. Hence, facing negative emotions, resolving traumas and a reflective attitude are crucial in living in an authentic way and therefore providing an authentic, and “good enough” environment for our children.

It is also important to state the obvious, that children differ in regard to their needs with some being extremely demanding (emotionally, physically or behaviourally) and others very undemanding. While it is crucial for a parent to understand and meet the needs of their child, some parents may find it difficult when it comes to high demand children (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). Jonsson and Taje (1983) say that it is crucial to acknowledge that children’s needs vary and accordingly, a mother’s ability to satisfy those needs, or to be “good enough” varies accordingly. They did a study examining mothers of colicky infants and concluded that the large majority of babies experiencing infantile colic did not receive a sufficient amount of physical contact or positive learning experiences from their mothers due to them feeling significant amounts of anxiety and insufficiency in relation to their infant’s distress.

In my autoethnography, I am exploring my own sense of what “good enough” means and my journey to understanding it and attempts to achieve it. Parenting is a very individual concept, and it differs for each parent-child relationship, not necessarily meaning better or worse. Hence, it is crucial to focus on how a parent is meeting the needs of their individual child and whether they have the motivation and skills to meet those needs. Even if the parent is lacking skills but has the motivation, then they are likely to ask for help or develop skills to meet their child’s needs (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). Hence, Choate & Engstrom state:

A parent who is prepared to engage in change may be “good enough” as opposed to one with a similar problem unwilling to work on the issues. A “good enough” parent may, in essence, be one who is willing to accept their limitations, seek help to change what they can and accept support for those areas that will remain deficient (2014, p.347).

2.3. Mothering in times of pandemic

COVID-19 virus, which was detected in December 2019, and since then spread all around the globe, caused a range of symptoms from very mild to serious respiratory illness and even death (CDC, 2020). The global pandemic, which the COVID-19 virus brought on, caused a global crisis on many levels - health, social, emotional, etc. - and produced high levels of stress and anxiety in society (Torales et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020). Families across the world are experiencing a new range of stressors brought on by the global pandemic. The changes and disturbances brought on by the pandemic have impacted families in a negative way, causing a decrease in children’s physical and mental wellbeing (Syed & Ahmad, 2020) as well as a decline in parental welfare. A growing number of studies investigating the impact of the pandemic on mental health have been published, revealing increased emotional distress as well as social disorders, specifically in women and mothers (e.g., Rajkumar, 2020; Thapa et al., 2020, Favieri et al., 2020).

As previously stated, early motherhood has been associated with increased stress and anxiety, or even depression, which has only been aggravated by additional

stress related to the pandemic (Taubman-Ben-Ari & Ben-Yaakov, 2020; Brown, et al., 2020). On the family level, there were findings of increased stress levels, a lower capacity for tolerance due to health fears, uncertain economic situations, lack of options to spend time apart, but instead being constrained to staying indoors together at all times (Cluver et al., 2020). Emerging research on the impact of the pandemic on families has shown that parents' perceived implications of the crisis have increased the distress levels and potential for harsh parenting (Chung, et al., 2020). Also, it has been found that parental depression increased compared to pre-pandemic times (Feinberg, et al., 2022). The global pandemic of COVID-19 meant that parents were forced to take on additional roles and responsibilities in relation to their children, for example home education (Perez, et al., 2021). Brown et al. (2020) concluded that most parents reported elevated levels of stress, anxiety, depression and poor sleep. Disruptions have been shown to affect women more than men (Clark, et al., 2021). Increased maternal stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms related to the pandemic caused mothers to be less responsive and attuned to their children's needs (McPherson, et al., 2008). A study by Xue, et al. (2021) has shown that parents caring for young children during the lockdown period exhibited lower levels of parenting self-efficacy compared to other times. A sense of self-efficacy is important for parents as it may improve their competences and therefore their sense of being "good enough" (Jones, et al., 2005). Maternal self-efficacy has been shown to decrease with the increase of stress, anxiety and depression and it rises with parenting satisfaction and social support (Leahy-Warren & McCarthy, 2011).

One of the biggest challenges the global pandemic brought on for families has been social isolation, which has been linked to increased stress and a negative impact on mental and physical health (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Another aspect of social isolation has been limited access to or even a loss of childcare options due to schools and nurseries being shut (Patrick, et al., 2020). Often, the people we lived with were the only ones we were able to communicate with face to face, which in my case was my husband and two young children. This put a huge pressure on my marital relationship. A satisfactory marital relationship and letting go of expectations promotes psychological flexibility and enables individuals to better adjust to changing circumstances (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010), which can be a helpful factor to being able to cope better with uncertainty and stress related to the pandemic (Coyne et al.,

2020). Some research has been carried out on the impact the pandemic had on work-life balance (e.g., Craig & Churchill, 2020). Pandemic-related disturbances may have also disrupted family routines, arrangements and rituals (Fiese, et al., 2002). Parents were forced to come up with new routines and adapt to the current unusual circumstances as well as creating a sense of normalcy, which promotes resilience (Harrist, et al., 2019). Researchers have only just begun to explore the effects of the pandemic on parents (e.g., Craig & Churchill, 2020), but already it is emerging to be an area of growing interest and more research is needed in order to understand the lived experiences of parents and their long-term consequences.

Güney-Frahm notes:

Until now, COVID-19 has deepened existing problems with respect to gender equality. The pandemic has reinforced the neoliberal vision of motherhood with additional patriarchal elements due to women's increased workload in the domestic sphere. An additional element has emerged in the image of the modern, powerful woman who can have both a family and career and looks sexually attractive. Nowadays, she is also expected to be resilient, in charge of organization of the family's daily life during exceptional circumstances" (2020, p. 853)

It is not possible to consider the impact of the pandemic without referring to gender as "caregiving labour is overwhelmingly performed by female-identified parents is being excised from many conversations about the effects of COVID-19 on parenting households" (Green & O'Reilly, 2021, p. 55). Mothers especially were faced with extra challenges during the pandemic (Perry World House, 2020). Labour market reports during the pandemic say that lockdown strengthened the traditional division of roles in the family. Even though both parents worked remotely, the mothers assumed the burden of taking care of the children and carrying out household chores. For many working mothers, the pandemic has been a time of exhaustion and constant pressure, which reduced job satisfaction and had a negative impact on efficiency. As a result of the pandemic, a large proportion of adults around the world began to perform their professional duties remotely. At the same time, their children switched to distance learning due to the closure of schools or nurseries. This situation forced a completely new approach to managing work, school,

extracurricular activities and home activities. According to a new study by Penn sociologists (Perry World House, 2020), these additional burdens disproportionately fell on mothers. The aim of the study mentioned above was to determine how changes in work and school resulting from the pandemic affected the division of labour in families. Using data on two-parent households, the researchers found that the gender imbalance in unpaid domestic work was most pronounced when the mother was the only parent in remote work or when neither parent had the option to work remotely. Research has shown that when a mother works remotely and her partner does not, she takes over many more responsibilities than him. On the other hand, when the father works remotely and his partner does not, the situation is different: he does not take on more household duties. It would seem that remote work creates the possibility of greater equality between the sexes in terms of household chores, because two parents are permanently at home and have the same availability. But, in fact, the analysis showed also that it was families where both partners worked remotely who had the most balanced division of domestic and parenting responsibilities. Both mothers and fathers reported a similar increase in home and childcare responsibilities, as well as feeling a similar degree of pressure managing their children's schooling. However, even the best scenario was saturated with gender inequalities as it maintained the typical pre-pandemic patterns, the authors of the publication say. So, remotely working mothers were responsible for most of the housework and looking after the children.

An even more difficult situation arose when only one parent worked remotely and the other away from home. The gender imbalance in household chores was much more evident here. Mothers who worked at home took over almost all of the extra work, while fathers who worked remotely reported much less interest in extra housework and childcare. Another model is one in which neither parent could work remotely. Here, mothers again bore the full burden of the extra work. In the case of such couples, mothers twice as often than fathers reported an increase in the amount of time spent on housework and seven times more often indicated that they were responsible for the majority of organising children's educational activities. On the basis of data, it can be proposed that the pressure mothers experienced during the pandemic was considerably higher than before the pandemic, which may lead to some women leaving the labour market (Dunatchik, et al., 2021). Such inequalities in

terms of a disproportionate amount of household and childcare burden falling on women could stem out of:

the historic inequality posed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The different expectations placed on mothers and fathers allow for different responsibilities in the present moment; mothers may feel more keenly the impossibility of blending paid employment and homeplace responsibilities as well taking on more acutely fears for their children's emotional and physical safety (Green & O'Reilly, 2021, p. 55)

The pandemic had most impact on the lives of mothers who switched to remote work and in an instant were forced to fulfil several full-time roles at the same time: caregivers, teachers, employees, cooks and cleaners. In addition to cleaning, shopping, caring for the child and helping the child with their homework they also had to fulfil professional duties - and balancing the two proved to bring on a vast amount of stress (Weaver & Swank, 2021).

The status of mothers during the pandemic has been detailed in recent research. I will focus more closely on the situation in Poland, as that feels most relevant and applicable to my own experience. The pandemic radically changed the conditions of the lives of working women, who were additionally burdened with a whole range of negative effects caused by the pandemic. The results of the study by Deloitte (2021). showed that almost 82% of the women surveyed in the world and not much less, 76% in Poland, believe that the pandemic had a negative impact on their lives. The research also showed that 86% of Polish women working full-time or almost full-time in various industries believe that the changes caused by the coronavirus had a negative impact on their mental well-being, and 79% declare that also on the physical. Additionally, 74% of Polish women from the surveyed group (70% globally) are concerned about the further development of their professional career. For many working women, the pandemic has meant a total imbalance between work and private life. The vast majority of them switched to remote or hybrid work in 2020, while at the same time they performed most of the tasks related to taking care of the home, children or other family members. The Deloitte study (2021) highlighted that as many as 78% of women worked in the office less often than before. With 42%

working from home before the pandemic for at least one day a week, and after its outbreak and during subsequent lockdowns, they fully switched to working from home. At the turn of 2020 and 2021, 43% worked remotely full-time, and earlier it was only 4%. At the same time, people who were close to them intensively (performing three-fourths of the related tasks) were taken care of at the same time by as many as 67% of the respondents (much less than before the COVID-19 outbreak, i.e. 43%). Also, more than half (58%) declared that they were heavily burdened with household chores not related to the care of children and other family members (an increase from 47%). After the outbreak of the pandemic, 63% of the respondents complained about the increased burdens related to everyday duties in their private life. Their situation did not differ from that of all working women in the world (65% of indications in the global Deloitte survey). During the pandemic, women also had more stressful factors related to the professional situation of Polish women. For example, the increase in workload has affected as many as 73% of them. In comparison, on a global scale, it was felt by only one third of those questioned.

The results of the survey in Poland are therefore worrying. In addition to significant changes in the organisation of private life forced by the pandemic, many women feared that the pandemic would negatively affect their career development, both in the short and long term. More than half of working Polish women, who experienced additional burdens related to the increased amount of work in the first year of the pandemic, wondered whether it was worth trying to pursue a career with their current employer. Many of them also fear that they will be forced to make a difficult choice: work or private life. Almost half of the respondents were of the opinion that their employer did not make efforts to provide them with support that would improve their mental and physical well-being in this difficult period. The situation after the outbreak of the pandemic made a large number of Polish women consider changing jobs – 40% of them declared that a change was probable or very probable due to the fact that their private lives were suffering more than ever. Women in senior management positions were most troubled by the imbalance between work and private life (as many as 66% of responses), as well as the lack of their company's mission and values with which they could fully identify – they were more loyal to the current employer than other groups. Another disturbing thing was also revealed in the survey: almost half of women (49%) felt that they now had to be available non-stop

at work. This is largely due to the nature of online functioning at home, and the blurring of the boundaries between what is private and what is work. At the same time, the feeling that one has to be constantly available is more frequent in respondents occupying more responsible managerial positions. What worries the respondents the most in this situation (45% of responses in the “available” group and 32% in the case of the general population) is that they may be excluded from participating in important meetings and projects. They also had other fears such as the sense of responsibility for the rest of the team. For example, the fear that if at some point they are not available, someone else will be burdened with their tasks after hours. They also do not want to disappoint their colleagues. As a result, they felt even more overwhelmed with work and frustrated, and sometimes ineffective as well. This feeling of constant “readiness” had other negative consequences as women worry that their careers will suffer if they are not always available. It turns out that the highest price for the burdens during the pandemic was incurred by female workers aged 30-40. This is due to the fact that they are at the same time most burdened with family (often having small children) and professional responsibilities, due to the career stage they are at. At the same time, they are very ambitious and committed to their development. All of this can lead to tremendous levels of stress and overstretching. Hence, there is a risk of burnout and a waste of the potential for women. (Deloitte, 2021).

Szczudlińska-Kanoś and Marzec (2021) carried out a study on the division of domestic duties during the pandemic and found that before the pandemic, every fifth parent indicated that they independently coordinate childcare, however during the pandemic, almost every third parent assessed that they looked after their children individually. The situation is similar in the case of children’s education. Before the pandemic, every third parent declared they managed their children’s education alone. However, during the pandemic, the number of caregivers who indicated that they individually supervised the children’s education increased. In terms of household duties, it is still mostly women, either on their own or mostly, doing household chores.

A significant correction in terms of the change of domestic duties took place in the case of the organization of free time for children. Before the pandemic, only one in

five parents looked after their children on their own in their free time. Since the beginning of the pandemic, every third parent has been forced to plan their children's leisure time independently. During the pandemic, some parents faced the fact that they could not share responsibilities with other people and took over a one-person organisation of time outside of education. Responsibilities vary from family to family, which entails unequal commitment to parental responsibilities and the length of time spent caring for children. The multiple division of responsibilities and divergent time devoted to performing parental roles is additionally exacerbated by the differences in the income earned by the mother and father (Szczudlińska-Kanoś & Marzec, 2021).

Female academics, such as myself, also focused on organising family and home life, and the duties related to it made their scientific and research work significantly more difficult. This trend was visible all over the world (Kaczyńska, 2020). In the academic community, the coronavirus pandemic is revealing and further visualizing gender inequality. Women are in a worse situation than men – their number of scientific papers or submitted grant applications has significantly decreased in contrast to men who have published more. Due to additional care for children and other family members, and thus the increase in such responsibilities and housework, the professional development of female scientists significantly slowed down (Fazackerley, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has caused a large part of the population, including people working at universities, to start working remotely. At the same time, in the family environment, members of their families began to work and learn at home, and the children were deprived of institutional care. Research (from March to June 2020) on academics from Italy and the USA who worked at home during the pandemic and had small children (up to 5 years of age) showed that academic mothers interrupted, postponed or rejected research and devoted most of their time to their children, because they did not have any alternative care options. Viglione (2020) writes about a huge divide between the amount of academic work being published during the pandemic stating that female academics with children pretty much stopped publishing while, in contrast, male academics' productivity increased. In accordance, Flaherty states that during the pandemic, female researchers (especially ones who were mothers) were much less productive (Flaherty, 2020). This issue feels particularly close to my own experience of being an academic and a mother of two young children during the global pandemic and brings

on a strong sense of frustration and anxiety. This disparity in terms of productivity as well as an additional amount of extra chores to be shared between my husband and I has had serious consequences on my mental and physical well-being during the pandemic. I felt an enormous pressure to work on this very dissertation you are reading now, and the impossibility of the situation I found myself in. I will explore this further in my autoethnographic chapters.

Thus, the pandemic exacerbated the gender imbalance as women, especially mothers, spent more time in caring activities than before. Consequently, we were not as productive in the context of academic work that requires time, silence, concentration and inspiration. In addition, respondents highlight that academic fathers and childless scientists were more productive during the lockdown. Changes in the organisation of care, time constraints and a significant reduction in scientific work made them fear for their professional future. The subjects felt pressure to compare themselves to other academics who were deprived of their caring responsibilities (Minello, Martucci, Manzo, 2020). It turned out that during the pandemic, the number of articles reported to the so-called preprints (articles that have not yet undergone peer review) by women dropped significantly compared to men. According to preliminary analyses, it seems that the pandemic significantly slowed down, in particular, the scientific activity of women. However, the authors of the COVID G.A.P. study (Leonowicz-Bukała, 2021). which was attended by over 100 women scientists (from various countries) at various stages of their research careers, showed that not all women reduced their research work due to lockdown. Some of them, due to the reduction in the number and pressure of administrative duties, meetings at the university, regaining time spent on journeys (e.g., to university and back), praised the greater flexibility and the possibility of more effective management of time devoted to scientific development. However, the vast majority of the researched scientists found it more difficult. What mainly troubled them was: lack of access to laboratories or libraries, disturbed work schedules, no boundaries between home and work life, or additional time spent on preparing online classes. The respondents also struggled with the sense of responsibility for the children under their care and their education at home (even if they had the support of their partners in this regard). There was also a decline in motivation and concentration disorders or mental health problems – in some cases significantly

exacerbated by the pandemic. A greater burden of domestic duties concerned women working in academia, regardless of their place of residence. The important thing, however, was whether they played a parental role i.e., whether they have children under their care. It was the offspring (most often those in preschool and early school age) that constituted the decisive factor for the possibility of undertaking academic activity. The findings of the researchers from the COVID G.A.P. indicate that female academics, especially those with a maternal role in relation to young children, experienced a huge reduction in the amount of time they could devote to research – much more so than their male colleagues and childless people. It seems that the effects of the current inequalities may have far-reaching consequences for the academic careers of an entire generation of researchers. Hence, university authorities (regardless of the country) should take measures to eliminate inequalities in order to prevent the efforts of the last decades in this area from being wasted (Leonowicz-Bukała, 2021). The Daily Life in the Times of the Pandemic report (Drozdowski et al., 2020) showed that people with higher education and with a doctoral, postdoctoral or academic degree indicated changes in well-being, mood and mental health more often than other age categories (51% of responses in total). Changes in the care and educational functions were most often described by people with an academic degree or title (25,8%) (Drozdowski et al., 2020).

I feel it is important to bring in some (relatively still very new and fresh) research and statistics related to the pandemic, especially in relation to how it impacted women and mothers as it strongly relates to my own personal experience. Pew Research Center surveys (2020) highlighted some of the unique challenges faced by mothers during the pandemic. For example, a survey conducted last October found that among employed parents who worked all or most of the time at home, mothers reported more than fathers that they had a lot of childcare responsibilities while at work. Working mothers with children under the age of 12 at home were also more likely than fathers to say that during the coronavirus outbreak they had at least some difficulty coping with their childcare responsibilities. By the time the pandemic began in March 2020, women were more likely than their spouses or partners to claim to bear a greater burden both in terms of parenting and household responsibilities. Moreover, working mothers more often than working fathers stated that they face certain challenges at work because they reconcile work and family responsibilities.

Care takes many forms, whether it is caring for a new baby or a sick family member. Women more often than men said that women would do a better job at caring, hence assuming the majority of caring responsibilities (Barroso, Menasce, Horowitz, 2021). Despite the fact that the cited research results relate to the USA, in my opinion, similar relations of values concerning the studied variables would also appear in other countries – including Poland. Similar (although much more general) research was conducted in Poland in May 2020 (Partyla, 2020). When it was necessary to perform professional and parental roles at the same time, every second mother was found to take on additional duties, compared to only every third father. There was no (or very limited) help from grandparents because, due to the recommended isolation, they did not meet their grandchildren at that time. Every third mother, in this difficult situation, could not count on the support of a partner. In the quoted study, half of the mothers directly admitted that combining a full-time job with caring for children was very difficult, because domestic and caring duties distract from work and reduce productivity. Four out of ten mothers stressed that less commitment to work could translate into the loss of their job, worsening financial conditions or dismissal. The fears were additionally aggravated by the difficult situation on the labour market. According to this research, keeping the house in order was the most problematic issue for working mothers. In addition to cleaning, shopping, caring for the child (or children) and helping the child with their homework were also more burdensome than professional duties (Partyla, 2020). The report “Women vs. Coronavirus” shows that the pandemic has left its mark on many areas of family and social life, as well as the economic situation and the labour market. It hit those groups that had a difficult situation before – single-parent women, remote families, people with various diseases or disabilities. It brought a fear of getting sick and worries for the health of oneself and those of relatives, but also the fear of losing a job, fears related to future financial situations, and fears of relationship difficulties (Agora, 2021).

Protective factors

Brown, et al. (2020) state that some factors, including adoptive coping strategies, may mitigate the effects of increased pandemic-related stress. Specifically, support from family, and a perceived level of control (Dijkstra & Homan, 2016) may serve as

protective factors. Taubman-Ben-Ari and Ben-Yaakov (2020) found that while the pandemic has generally elevated the psychological stress levels in new parents, some personal resources could play a protective role and reduce the distress, for example a parent's secure attachment style and higher self-mastery. They concluded that new parents felt apprehensive about raising their child during the pandemic and worried about the impact home lockdowns would have on their infant's development with the absence of wider social or family interactions. This highlights the complexity of anxieties and stresses that raising a young child during this time brought about. Moreover, a satisfying marital relationship has been associated with decreased overall stress levels and increased psychological well-being as well as resilience levels during the pandemic (Johnson, et al., 2021). I will elaborate on the importance of my relationship with my husband in my autoethnography.

The pandemic also turned out to be an occasion for some mothers to show their courage to admit that the situation related to the need to reconcile many roles, often without the support of a partner, is tiring and unbearable. The pandemic seems to have provoked many mothers to willingly share their experiences and feelings, making them more willing to admit that they simply had to start fulfilling some of their duties in a minimal way ("good enough") and really drop the idea of perfectionism (Saud, et al., 2020). During the pandemic, Winnicott's concept of being a "good enough" mother gained additional meaning and I believe provided a certain level of comfort in being able to abandon the idea of perfection.

Another area to be considered is physical activity, which is an important tool for both children and adults to relieve stress and anxiety levels. Physical activity is vital in a child's development and health (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Spending time outdoors has been associated with decreased levels of stress during the pandemic (Werchan et al., 2022). For many, the pandemic meant that their options for physical activity were severely limited. The global pandemic made it difficult to provide adequate levels of physical activity to children, especially in families with limited access to private outdoor space or exercise equipment (Perez, et al., 2021). However, it was found that parental encouragement and involvement was crucial in supporting a child's physical activity, even in the absence of outdoor

space during lockdown (Perez, et al., 2021). This, once again, highlights the importance of parental presence and involvement in children's healthy upbringing.

2.4. Cultural context

Historically, our (western in general) view of a family has been quite heteronormative, where a women's position in society has been strongly related to and dependant on her being a mother. However, feminist literature has presented arguments that motherhood is not necessarily natural for a women, but instead that it has been historically, socially and culturally constructed (Silva, 1996). Silva argues that this evolutionary process is non-linear in that it is continually affected by ideologies, labour markets, law, resources, and technology. In her book, Elizabeth Silva (1996) attempts to open a debate on the role of women in society, the extent of women's autonomy to choose how they are going to live, and the difficult balance between home-life and career.

Winnicott talks about the emotional needs of people and the importance of feeling protected by family members who are the safety net of those receiving support in times of crisis. It is assumed that it is impossible to meet higher emotional needs of each family member in families having problems with meeting many basic needs, such as housing, food and medical and psychological care (Aching & Granato, 2016). The identification of the affective and emotional fields present in interactive narratives, focus groups, and transference narratives often applies the concept of a "good enough" mother to the context of social sensitivity. When Winnicott (1956/2000) came up with the idea of a "good enough" mother, he referred to the mid-20th century nuclear family where women did not have to, or did not feel they could, work outside the home and were devoted to housework and caring for their own children. The husband was the only source of income for the family and was completely devoted to his profession. A "good enough" mother lives in a society that requires sacrifice on the part of the mother but does not provide the minimum conditions of well-being (Granato, Aiello-Vaisberg 2011). The pandemic has only made it more difficult for mothers, limiting social support, increasing stress levels and the volume of responsibilities. Consequently, the deconstruction of the idealisations of the mother figure needs to happen as she now has to meet other needs, such as

paying bills, caring for other children, working, travelling long distances between home and work, lack of money, and lack of social and emotional support (Granato, Aiello-Vaisberg, 2011).

Regarding the work and home life balance, it seems that being a mother means compromises have to be made. Being a full-time mum, one must depend on another individual (usually a man), or the state, for financial support. In essence, it is either a public or private patriarchy (Kasper, 1998). On the other hand, working, and providing financially for her children, means a mother must rely on others to support her with taking care of her children. Hence, oftentimes, the environment is not secure and stable. The research reveals the possibility of satisfactory maternal care and the development of functional bonds between mother and child, even in an insecure social environment. Achieving this is not easy or straightforward, and it is not known if enough good care can be sustained over time, but it has been noted that being a mother in such precarious conditions must be an emotionally exhausting task (Granato, Aiello-Vaisberg, 2011).

Western societies recognise motherhood as the main goal in life by which femininity is achieved (Chrisler, 2013) and the dominant discourse of “intensive motherhood” (Hays, 1996) norms requires mothers to be the primary person responsible for caring for their children and to be fully committed to this task, putting their children’s needs ahead of their own (Newman & Henderson, 2014). The idea is that a “good enough” mother sacrifices and devotes herself for the benefit of her child and invests the majority of her resources and time to her child, thus being permanently available for her child. The ability to live up to the norms of motherhood is important to strengthening this central social identity and sense of self (Gaunt, 2008). However, often the cost of living up to those expectations is so high, mothers frequently experience burnout (Meeussen & VanLaar, 2018). A modern woman most often follows two life paths: she focuses on raising children and running a home (the role of a mother and housewife) or raising children, running a home and working professionally (the role of a mother, housewife and worker). Less often, women focus solely on their careers. This points to the multitasking of women related to both household and professional duties. In terms of the impact of the global pandemic of COVID-19 and looking through the lens of the “intensive motherhood” philosophy

(Hays, 1996), motherhood has become an individual and lonely effort, rather than a collective crisis. In a study by Staneva, “mothers described mothering as a ‘personal failure’, which was arguably a result of internalised responsibility and individualised self-blame” (2021, p. 411).

As this is my reference point, I will now focus on the realities in Poland. However, research does show that many themes are universal across most western societies. Reconciliation of duties is associated with the still traditional perception of the roles of women and men, with the low activity of men in fulfilling family responsibilities translating into a double burden on women. Undoubtedly, the low level of partnership in Polish families is a factor that makes it difficult to reconcile work and family life, but not the only one. It seems that organisational limitations related to the labour market, as well as insufficient solutions proposed by family policy, are more important. In practice, these two issues are intertwined and determine the effectiveness of attempts to harmoniously combine work and family life. It is also important to be aware of the mutual dependencies (positive and negative) between work and family. The knowledge of mutual relations can be used to prepare optimal facilities for reconciling both spheres (Szyszka, 2015). The struggle to find a balance between work and family seems to be a big struggle. Women frequently bear more of the burden and they experience much greater difficulties in fulfilling the parental function, running a household and fulfilling the tasks of an employee than men as it has been reported that women spend significantly more time on housework and childcare than men (Titkow, et al., 2010).

It is a great success to spot signs of problems in this regard in good time – with a partner who is aware of the excessive burden placed on the mother and recognises that it is necessary to revise the division of responsibilities. Often, however, the problem is diagnosed by partners too late, or even the partner considers such a diagnosis an exaggeration (because other mothers somehow manage to cope with all their duties). Lack of communication and vigilance of the partner – it should be assumed that an adult should be aware of the enormity of obligations that arise when we have children – results in the disturbance of the relationship between parents. Despite the social transformations taking place in the traditional reality, the role of the mother still remains one of the most important roles assigned to women

(Kotlarska-Michalska, 2001). Although fathers' involvement in raising children is increasing, mothers are still more involved in raising the youngest generation than fathers, and women devote more time to these activities than men. Therefore, (specifically in Poland) mothers continue to be considered the primary caregiver and fathers are the supportive caregiver (Titkow, et al., 2010). Moreover, the activity of women is connected to a greater extent with works related to the functioning of the home (such as washing, cooking) than the activity of fathers. It also turns out that the professional activity of women does not significantly differentiate the amount of time allocated to a child by mothers but is a determinant that differentiates fathers' involvement in the child's affairs. The quality of motherhood is influenced by other functions that a woman performs and what help and support she receives in her family and professional life (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2001; Titkow, et al., 2010; Siemieńska, 2007; Szlendak, 2009; Ostouch-Kamińska, 2011; Śniegulska, 2015).

Although the partnership model of the family is more and more often preferred and implemented (in fact, more often disproportionately female), according to Szyszka (2015) women are still doubly burdened and bear the main organisational and educational effort. The necessity to meet the multitude of tasks assigned to the parental role and the role of an employee obliges the state and employers to create and introduce work-life balance instruments. It is important to note that the more family-oriented the work system is, the easier it is for employees to achieve a balance in life and the higher their quality of life. However, it should be noted that the more employee entitlements are implemented, the greater the barriers might be to employing women as they are frequently being seen as problem workers (Szyszka, 2015). This, however, remains in the sphere of opinions and stereotypes, and changing them takes more time than introducing family-friendly solutions (Szyszka, 2015). According to Badinter (2013), the idea that women can successfully combine motherhood with work is a thing of the past. A similar tendency is revealed in research conducted in Poland by Kosakowska and Petrus. The groups of women surveyed by the aforementioned authors, working both in an environment perceived as stereotypically feminine and in professions traditionally regarded as masculine, unanimously recognise that the role of a mother, a homemaker, and of a wife is their primary and most important role (Kosakowska & Petrus, 2006).

Güney-Frahm state that:

(...) it is very problematic that women are told through a large number of channels that it is their natural, primary and ultimately own responsibility to bring a healthy child into the world, and that they should therefore be extremely careful during their pregnancy, learn how to bond with their child even before birth, embrace physical pain, look attractive and continue to work before and after giving birth. If anything goes wrong in the process, then the women themselves are the ones to be blamed. It is this this extreme pressure on mothers which emerges as the main problem. Moreover, it is highly paradoxical to remind women of all these duties and tasks they must perform if pregnancy and motherhood are at the same time portrayed as a very natural thing. With the outbreak of COVID-19, resilience has had a more prominent role in the expectations from an individual mother (2020, p. 853)

Immense pressures mothers have been under during the pandemic should be recognised and their mental health problems should not be seen as their own fault. Pressure to be the perfect mother can reinforce gender inequalities in the field of work. We find that women experience poorer work-family balance the more they feel the pressure to be the ideal mother, and this weaker balance experienced is associated with lower career ambitions. While this may also be a functional response to enabling women to meet their mother's high expectations, it also has costs: women's under-representation in positions of power, lower participation rates, and lower wages give them less influence in organisational and political decision-making, and make them less likely to women who are economically less independent than men, which puts them at greater risk of poverty (Meeussen & Van Laar 2018).

A push to strive for perfection

Glorification of the mother and motherly love can be found in many texts, located in scientific, popular science, counselling, prose and poetry, in scientific journals and journalism. Sometimes they take the form of statements that exaggerate and emphatically idealise the role of the mother, sometimes with a distance and without

exaltation they argue the importance of the mother for the multifaceted development of the child. Motherhood is filled with images that emphasise the richness, meaning, beauty, and personal and social value of being a mother. This idyllic image, almost like from an advertisement, is only a part (and not a significant one) of being a mother. In more recent years there been more bold talk about motherhood stripped of ideal images and instead showing that mothers can be exhausted, frustrated and unhappy that their happiness is sometimes a pretence to others, sometimes even masking depressive states. Internet blogs, letters to the editors of magazines for parents and items appearing elsewhere on the publishing market somewhat disenchant motherhood, finally giving it realism (Włodarczyk, 2017).

The behaviour of mothers is subject to social evaluation and control. Mothers who struggle to live up to idealised norms are referred to as “bad mothers”. Such a social mechanism of mother-blaming consists in assigning a special, sacred role to mothers responsible for the survival of mankind and blaming them for an insufficiently good performance of such key tasks for society (Walls, 2007). The helplessness that mothers often experience is reminiscent of the idea of “holding” (Winnicott 1965/2005). Despite the feeling of helplessness and loneliness, women decide to get pregnant - even if the perspective of motherhood seems to be lonely - as shown by previous studies on motherhood (Granato, Aiello-Vaisberg, 2011). The father does not appear to bear much responsibility for the child, as confirmed by Granato and Aiello-Vaisberg (2013) who find that the mother is expected to take full responsibility for the child. Winnicott (2002) states that given the requirements of childcare, the father may not like the role for which he is responsible and is unable to share with the mother the enormous responsibility that the child should always represent. Tachibana (2011) agrees with the Winnicottian position that having a supportive environment makes the mother feel specifically supported, allowing her to provide a good, supporting environment for her baby. Analysis of the reports on abandonment and helplessness, make clear that even when there is a marriage, family and social environment, it does not mean basic physical and mental health needs are met. The severance of affective bonds, already compromised by social sensitivity, prevents families from offering the physical and emotional care required for the development of the subjectivity of family members (Gomes & Pereira, 2005).

Perfectionism (as opposed to being “good enough”) has been associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Haring, et al., 2003; Trub, et al., 2018). This was especially significant for women who expect perfectionism from their partner, which when not achieved contributed to marital dissatisfaction (Haring, et al., 2003). Demands of parenthood and its unpredictable and inconsistent nature (Lang, Reschke, & Neyer, 2006) may be particularly difficult for perfectionistic parents who often see things as either a success or a failure with often it being the latter (Egan, et al, 2007). Interpreting everyday parental difficulties as personal failures evokes the feelings of incompetence and lack of capability and self-efficacy (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008).

One aspect of striving for perfection is comparing ourselves to other people. Researchers referring in their publications to the issue of comparing oneself with others - including comparing mothers with other mothers – mention three key theories that may be of most importance in this case. First, there is the self-efficacy theory, which states that if people believe they can get the job done, they will actually become better at it. This theory relates directly to this research as it explains the effect of perceived skill on the actual task. If these studies provide evidence that browsing maternity blogs does affect perceived parenting skills, the theory of self-efficacy suggests that this change in perceived parenting skills may have an impact on actual parenting skills (Germic et al., 2021). Then there is the social comparison theory assuming that individuals compare themselves to others in order to understand themselves better. This theory has its roots in psychology and will be an integral part of this work as it explores how mothers compare themselves to blogs about motherhood. This theoretical framework will be important as research has shown that people tend to compare themselves to the dominant image of their peers, which in the case of motherhood is a form of ideal motherhood (Abetz & Moore, 2018). Mothers are not exceptions in this case and react similarly when comparing themselves to others (Tosun et al., 2020). Mothers are also prone to compare themselves to photos and posts that awaken their engagement on social media (Coyne et al., 2017).

The maternal role as it stands in the present day, is the result of a long process of constructing maternal models. Such models depend on the social expectations of the

era and include ideals, warnings and recommendations that guide the behaviour of mothers and the attitudes of family members, professionals or community institutions. In the process of constructing and fulfilling the role of a mother, the mechanism of idealising motherhood is of great importance as it implies mothers should strive for perfection. Idealising is defined as a feeling of love and admiration for something or someone for which one feels both love and hate, with hatred removed from consciousness. Such love cannot be real as it is artificially separated from the hatred with which it is inextricably linked (Tardy, 2000).

As one can conclude from the concept that is the background for the presented text and the sources cited earlier, it can be argued that there is no such thing as perfection in motherhood. There is no perfect mother, just as there is no perfect child, no perfect husband, no perfect family, no perfect marriage. It may take longer for some to abandon the idea of perfection than others. It depends on personality, family background and willingness to change. One thing that remains certain, however, is that when the strive for perfection is let go of, it becomes easier to appreciate the chaos and mess of motherhood, which in turn leads to conscious parenting. It could be said that the key function of sufficiently “good enough” parenting is to provide the necessary background to allow the growing child to be disappointed in their parents and the world without destroying their appetite for life and their ability to accept (external and internal) reality (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Especially young parents can find it difficult to remember that their needs are important if they are to be competent parents. Good motherhood is not perfect motherhood. However, as has been established, the environment must be optimal in order for the mother to be able to be “good enough”, hence it is crucial to consider the sociocultural and environmental aspects, which I will explore in more depth in my autoethnography. One of those aspects must be the relationship between both parents.

2.5. Impact of parenthood on partner relationship: closer look at inequality

Fincham et al. (1997) state that “marital satisfaction is defined as the subjective evaluation of one’s experience in marriage, and it is used in research interchangeably with other terms such as marital adjustment, success, happiness, and quality”

(cited in Trub, et al.,2018). It has been established that relationship satisfaction weighs heavily on our overall mental and physical well-being and quality of life (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000; Proulx, Helms & Buehler, 2007). Being in a happy relationship brings many advantages to one's physical, mental, sexual and economic well-being (Waite, Luo & Lewin, 2009). At the same time, marital dissatisfaction has been associated with increased anxiety, substance abuse and risk of mood disorders (Proulx, et al., 2007; Wu, et al., 2020). Hence, it is important to understand the link between marital satisfaction and mental well-being in order to promote enhancing the quality of those relationships and, in the context of this thesis, to understand the impact of marital relationships on the ability to feel "good enough" as a mother.

It has also been found that relationship satisfaction declines when raising children (Lawrence, et al.,2008; Trub, et al., 2018) compared to the beginning of a relationship, and it increases again later in life, once the intense period of raising young children is over (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Studies found that a couple's transition into parenthood is one of the most demanding, stress provoking and challenging times (Twenge, et al., 2003). In accordance, Lawrence et al. (2008) concluded that couples who are also parents experience more relationship dissatisfaction compared to nonparent couples. This could be attributed to overtiredness, increased stress and financial demands, reduced free time (Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Feeney, et al., 2001) which in turn impacts the relationship in a negative way - increasing the risk of conflicts and miscommunication (Lawrence et al., 2008).

It has been stated that the good relationship of a married couple will positively affect the "triadic system" of the family, i.e., after the child is born (Senator, 2004).

Researchers say that good relations are based, among others, on: personality; maturity of partners; the authenticity of each partner; mutual openness and honesty; respect for the dignity of another human being; partner communication' empathy; common life goals; values and interests; mutual responsibility; and self-affirmation (Slany, 2008). The birth of a child causes a qualitative change in the system, expressed primarily in its enlargement, i.e., as psychologists emphasise, by the transition from the dyadic system to the triadic system. It is emphasised that this

approach is more valuable because a child comes into the world with two parents. The first, however, is, as already mentioned, the quality of the relationship between husband and wife that affects the functioning of the family. A child's relationship with the father and mother is different from those with other people. Mother-child relationships are significantly modified by the father's involvement in caring for the child (Senator, 2004). The positive fulfilment of the father's role affects the entire "family system". It is worth emphasising here the emotional situation of the mother, who, after experiencing pregnancy and childbirth, and experiencing 24-hour care for a baby, often feels exhausted and overworked. The support from the husband allows the mother to cope with motherhood. A mother who is well-connected with her husband can later support the child's quest for individualisation without feeling the loss of closeness, abandonment or even betrayal. This is possible when the triad becomes an emotionally integrated whole. The perception of the child as a value in the family depends on how they perceive each other and how they treat each other. The birth of a child often changes the image of a partner in a favourable or unfavourable way, as parents become not only partners but also parents – the range of roles played significantly expands. The concept of the role of the mother and the role of the father, and the playing of it, are fundamental to family, maternal and paternal satisfaction. Unfortunately, as research shows, role conflicts related to this sphere of life are extremely frequent (Senator, 2004). Research shows that children build a bond with the mother and father at the same time, but it manifests itself differently due to the different levels of importance of mother and father for the child's development. Building a bond in a triad is more important for a child's development than relying on a separated bond, e.g., mother-child, father-child, husband-wife (Kluzowa & Slany, 2003). Of course, the difficulties in the parental relationship take their toll and in turn also impact the parent-child relationship (Owen & Cox, 1997) as well as child's well-being (Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992). This in turn adds to maternal stress and feelings of insufficiency leading to a sense of guilt, shame and unhappiness.

The importance of a "village" supporting the parents cannot be undermined. In western countries an individualistic approach is more valued than cultural force (Choate & Engstrom, 2014), which would indicate that parents should be able to care for their child on their own (Fontes, 2005; Ramaekers, et al., 2013). However, in

many cultures, raising a child is a joint family (including extended family, who can be a source of support and additional care provider (Berrick, 1998)) and community effort. A robust body of research has found that a mother's perception of family support is associated with a reduced level of parenting stress and anxiety (Deater-Deckard, 1998; Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014). I will explore the importance on family support, when writing about the global pandemic and related to it social isolation as it is also an important theme in my autoethnography.

CHAPTER III

The Methodology

In this chapter I will offer an account of finding the focus of my research and my struggle to find the methodology that best fits this writing. I will also propose a rationale for choosing a particular research method. My hope is that my onto-epistemological position will become clear to you, the reader of this thesis, as it is intertwined with my methodology and my research question in itself. As my research will be about my own lived experiences, I will focus on issues such as narrative, language, reflexivity, personal experiences and the links between these.

I believe that my journey (and I do feel that the metaphor of a journey is particularly accurate in this case) of coming to my research topic and narrowing it down is consistent with my epistemological and ontological positions. In hindsight, I can see that my struggle to find the right research topic, engaging with what is present for me through reading, reflecting, and writing, all that was the very essence of the methodological approach of this thesis, which is autoethnography. I am the researcher and the participant of this thesis, and the lines between the two are often blurry and messy, which is also an accurate reflection of my writing process as well as my experience of motherhood during a global pandemic.

In this chapter I will introduce you to my topic and explain how locating it has not been a linear process but a long, bumpy journey of searching, and finding, and changing, and searching again. How it never felt quite finished or completed, never quite “good enough”, which mirrors my sense of myself as a mother and as a researcher too. I will consider what is the “data” for this project, how accurate is it and what are the ethical implications of my thesis. My onto-epistemological position will be explored explicitly, but it is going to be present throughout the chapter. I will also consider cultural aspects of my topic and how my choice to use autoethnography enables me to engage with such issues. It will become apparent that what I call “data” in this project and the process of generating and analysing it are inseparable.

3.1. The search

I have searched for the topic I wanted to write about for a long time. This journey has been a long and difficult one, with many disruptions, turns, lots of frustration and confusion. I was struggling to find a balance between my academic approach, and what my heart was telling me. Sela-Smith (2002) calls it the “internal call” – the need we feel inside to attune to something that is not fully known to us yet. In hindsight, I feel this topic has been waiting for me to be at the right place and the right time to be able to explore it. I considered what it would mean for me to write from the heart about my personal life, to expose myself, but in the academic way too. I realised how complex this issue was for me. I struggled to believe in my ability to articulate my thoughts and translate the feelings into words. And to be a “good enough” researcher who can contribute something valuable to the field of knowledge. I worried about being able to find the balance between writing from the heart and making it an academically valid piece of work. The internal struggle drove me to change my topic multiple times, and even consider different methodological approaches. My process of searching for the “right” topic felt very close to heuristic inquiry proposed by Moustakas (1990), which stresses the importance of the research question being deeply felt and having an emotionally profound connection with the researcher. The searching for the topic is about attuning inwards in order to discover, to embrace the unknown and messy in order to explore a question that is deeply personal and meaningful. Sela-Smith (2002) stresses that the search for the topic should be intuitive and the researcher should trust and follow what they feel is drawing their attention, even on the most visceral level, and explore what feels significant and meaningful to them. Eventually, my internal call was becoming louder and louder, and as I was becoming more attuned to it, the gap between that call and my research topic gradually started to close. It became more and more clear how to integrate the deeply personal and the academic aspects. I also allowed myself to feel that my experiences are important, valid, and “good enough” to be a foundation for this doctoral thesis. The more I started to embrace the incoherence, the lack of linearity and certainty, the closer to the heart my writing started to feel. My goal is to capture the reader’s attention, provoke their reflexive thinking and engage them in a conversation (Speedy, 2005). I have sought to find the balance between engaging

the reader's imagination and providing sufficient theoretical data so that my research both educates in the field I am writing in as well as encouraging readers to think freely and creatively with me through my writing.

In this research I study my own lived experience of being a mother, specifically exploring what it means to me to be a "good enough" mother during the pandemic. I explore the process of challenging my assumptions of what motherhood is and how becoming a mother has impacted my way of being. My research is situated within my own experience of being a mother, and is influenced by my cultural background and context, and therefore it contributes a personal account to what we know about what it means to be a "good enough" mother in present times. I have reflected upon the issue of my own context when I was thinking about my research question as well as the methodological method best to use in order to answer that question

3.2. Ontology and Epistemology

A phenomenological approach has influenced my autoethnographic writing as it values and focuses on individual experiences as well as the meanings held about those experiences (Finlay, 2011). I combine my phenomenological approach with hermeneutics (the process of interpretation [Heidegger, 1962]) as my thesis seeks not only to describe my experiences but also analyse and interpret them. This serves as illustrative material - my "data" - which enables me to explore various ideas about motherhood. It seems as though the two philosophies depend upon one another and influence each other. As Smith, Flowers and Larkin emphasise, "without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenology would not be seen" (2009, p. 37).

I focus on investigating a subjective experience of being a mother. By subjective experience I mean my own interpretation of my life, feelings and thoughts as well as my interpretation of how these relate to a wider knowledge of being a "good enough" mother. My social reality consists of that personal experience. Universal truths do not exist when it comes to human experiences. However, there are certain levels of similarity and I offer the reader the opportunity to ask themselves whether my story

“speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 751).

My ontological position shares a common ground with Gendlin (2004) who talks about the implicit meaning that we carry in our bodies and how frequently that meaning cannot be verbalised. For Gendlin, there is a strong link between what is embodied and what is language, and generating knowledge is about making sense of both and creating a healthy relationship between the inward and outward, while acknowledging that a gap between them is unavoidable. Gendlin encourages us to search for the words that match or express or are the closest to expressing the meaning of what we feel. He claims that our body, if we attune to it and listen, knows what it wants or needs to be said, and will find the language to say it (Gendlin, 1995).

Thinking further on it, I ask myself: how can I find out about my personal, subjective experience? By personal, subjective experience I mean my own description of a particular aspect of my life. How could I translate my experience into a doctoral thesis? I think it is through reflexivity and interpretation. Because many of my experiences are visceral, raw, and pre-verbal, it is a challenge to first bring them into my awareness, and second, to write about them in a reflective manner. Inevitably, there are losses in my efforts to translate my experiences into this thesis as awareness of those experiences is not the same as my visceral, embodied sense of them. For me, that embodied language, the expression of myself that most accurately touches on what is felt inside, and describes the raw and messy parts of me, is poetry. When I write poetry, I feel free, I do not think about the rules, or the academic expectations, or what the right thing to say is. It just flows straight out of my heart and out of my body, onto the paper. Poetry takes away the pressure to deliver something logical, or well thought through- it makes space for the unfinished and conflicting thoughts, for emotions I might not yet have words for. In accordance with this line of thinking and with my research in general, Lahman and Richard (2014) advocate for “a space called *good enough poetry*”, which they say gives poets a chance to share their work “in the hopes of improving and getting closer to the essence of participants’ understandings, something all social science researchers hope for—poet or not” (Lahman & Richard, 2014, p. 354). The idea of “good enough poetry” is particularly resonant with the rest of my thesis and my

sense of deficiency- as a mother and as a researcher. I wonder what the criteria for my poetry would be, in order for me to consider it to be “good enough”. My main goal in including poetry is to bring you closer to my way of experiencing and being. I hope the poetry makes me more accessible to you and enables you to connect to my story. By using poetry, I want to add an additional layer of intimacy and honesty into this thesis. ‘The poet makes the world visible in new and different ways, in ways ordinary social science writing does not allow. The poet is accessible, visible, and present in the text, in ways that traditional writing forms discourage’ (Denzin, 2014, p. 86).

My knowledge is not independent from my mind as I cannot make a clear distinction between my values and facts. The knowledge described depends on the human describing of it (Rorty, 1979). Hence, as a researcher of phenomena, I will always be implicated in the findings as these will depend on my interpretation. Bochner asks, “So why not observe the observer, focus on turning our observations back on ourselves? And why not write more directly, from the source of your experience? Narratively. Poetically. Evocatively” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 747). Bochner’s argument appeals to my research aim of using my own experience in order to contribute to the knowledge about the phenomenon of motherhood in the times of a pandemic and affirms me in my methodological choice of autoethnography.

3.3. Autoethnography

Autoethnography can be defined as “anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it” (Strathern, 1987, p. 17). Autoethnographic research employs two factors that constitute its methods of analysis: introspection and cultural analysis. As Hokkanen says “Introspection and cultural analysis of this kind are not single steps in a linear process of analysis, but practices that are carried out iteratively. Indeed, the process of ethnographic analysis is far from linear” (2017, p. 27). Autoethnography seems to be more than just a research method, in fact, it has been said that autoethnography has become “a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do” (Ellis in Holman

Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 10). This has become particularly true to my experience. Ever since I dove into this project, it is like I see layers of thoughts, feelings and interpretation of those in everything I experience. I listen to the stories of other people with a new set of ears, ones that hear more, hear what is said in between the words. I also often take a third person perspective to my own experiences and become an observer and interpreter of my own life. I guess writing such a personal thesis requires the ability to step back and forth, one moment being immersed in my story, the next observing myself tell it from a distance.

Autoethnography values the personal experiences of the researcher in order to understand the multi-layered social world we live in (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Napier, 2011). Hence, as an autoethnographic researcher, I try to examine all the layers of my thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears in relation to my work. One of the main purposes of my writing is to “break the silence surrounding” the experiences of motherhood and feelings of deficiency attached to it by “privileging subjectivity, personal voice, and emotional experience” (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p.35). While observing myself, my thoughts and feelings in relation to my research, there is a degree of honesty that should be present in autoethnographic writing. Feelings are a valid part of autoethnographic writing, in fact they are the research material and data that I am using. Hokkanen states that:

“insofar as interpreting and translation are regarded as social phenomena, the inevitable influence of the researcher as a social being on the research process becomes difficult to circumvent. The ethical benefits of reflecting and reporting on such influences are obvious and highly important” (2017, p. 24).

Writing an autoethnography has been like entering an uncharted territory. Some years ago, I had not even heard of “autoethnography”, while now it seems to have taken over the majority of my time and focus; it’s become a lens I view the world through. Coming from a quantitative background, the idea that I could write about my own experiences, in the first person even, seemed unimaginable. Hence, please, dear reader, bear with me while I stumble in the dark and try to make sense of what autoethnographic writing means to me. As I fight off my “desire to know what the rules are in order to avoid the punishment of breaking them” (Humphreys & Learmonth, 2012: 326) and just allow myself to be submerged in this process as I

embrace the lack of “reassurance of a checklist (Humphreys & Learmonth, 2012, p. 326).

Each autoethnographic piece of writing is unique and different, even though there are some commonalities. That freedom to tailor my writing in a way that best represents me as well as my experience thrills and terrifies me simultaneously as sometimes I crave structure, data and diagrams. One of the biggest shifts in coming from a positivistic paradigmatic way of thinking about research, common for an undergraduate applied psychology student (Higgs, 2008), has been the exposure of my own self, making myself vulnerable for the reader and letting my voice be heard. This unknown and flexible research method feels just right for what I want to research and convey. It enables me dive into my experience and be open to what I can find, instead of needing to conform to a specific research goal. Moreover, I feel that such a research method enables me to get as close as possible to embodied, visceral experiences. It seems like an organic, natural next step in the process of meaning- making as well as for me as a researcher. I feel the need to be present in my research and to make it personal and mine. Reading other autoethnographies has been deeply touching and has made a real impact on me as well as provoked me to interact with the personal writings of other academics and empathise with the stories they tell. Often, I was able to put myself in their position and consider what such an experience could mean. Frequently, I felt like I was listening to a friend. Also, as a counsellor, I appreciate the value of the embodied, visceral wisdom human beings hold. In accordance with Bochner (2002), hearing other people’s stories helped me to understand my own life better. This autoethnography is a product of my processing of my experience and my journey of learning about myself, adding a new perspective to the phenomenon I am studying. It seems as though autoethnographic writing is dynamic and organic, and I hope to involve you, as my reader, in this research. I invite you to witness my journey of meaning-making and growing, and if you can, to join me as well in learning more about the phenomenon of motherhood.

I hope to bring my writing alive (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005) and to contribute something to my own life as well as the lives of others. Echoing Atkinson (1997), I believe that a piece of writing can promote self-discovery or self-creation. The

process of writing in itself allows me to process and comprehend my experiences. In accordance with Norris and Sawyer (2012), writing an autoethnography has had a transformative effect on me as a researcher. However, I am aware my research needs to have a goal beyond myself. By consciously translating my thoughts and feelings into words I hope to generate a more meaningful and multi-layered way of looking at what it means to be a “good enough” mother during the global pandemic. I hope to critique and dissect existing scholarship and, in doing so, add a wider purpose for my research. Bochner makes a claim that the stories we produce about our lives become indeed our lives, “thus personal narrative is part of the human, existential struggle to move life forward” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 746). While writing this thesis has not resolved or concluded my anguish, as a side product, it has been a medium for healing and emerging as a person and as a mother.

If the purpose of my research is to inform the reader about the human experience of what it means to be a “good enough” mother, I must work with an account of such experience. Bond stresses the importance of incorporating lived experiences into social science research, especially in the counselling field, where “subjective awareness is so essential” (2002, p. 133). Hence, as any experience is subjective and particular to the individual it belongs to, I chose to research my own experiences instead of analysing other people’s experiences. “Lived experience is, by its very nature, both immediate and subjective and therefore most directly accessed for study by turning our gaze on ourselves. My life becomes the ‘site of my fieldwork’” (Bond, 2002, p. 134). I am not claiming any universal truths, nor predicting any future phenomena. Instead, I carry out an in-depth exploration of my own subjective experiences as they are at the time of writing. My interpretation of the very same experiences would possibly differ if I were to write it at another time. After all, qualitative methods explore “human intentions, motivations, emotions, and actions” (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 21). I underline the subjectivity of my experience and, in accordance with Carolyn Ellis (2004, p.29) I focus on “detailing concrete experience and multiple perspectives that include participant’s voices and interpretations”.

There are risks associated with researching my own life. I will inevitably cross the personal boundary of privacy and disclosure. Some very personal aspects of my life will be exposed, which will make me vulnerable. My struggle is to find a way of telling my story in a constructive and reflective manner. However, it is still just *my story*. Bond asks: “Is this research?” (2002, p. 134). As a researcher, I will be the focal point of my study, rather than an objective, impartial observer. The data will be my own subjective experiences and my interpretation and reflection on those experiences. I think about the aspects of writing autoethnography that might be difficult. Can I write about my personal life without any serious consequences to me or people I write about? Will I hurt those people in the process of writing? How do I distinguish between “fact” and “fiction (Richardson, 2001)? In my ambivalence I have found Mary Weems’ (2012, 2021) and Maria Lahman’s (2021a, 2021b) writing particularly inspiring and helpful. They write beautifully about deeply personal things, many related to motherhood, which is particularly close to my heart. They manage to translate the true and raw meaning of her experience onto academic pieces of writing. They also use poetry, which really helped me feel closer to them as well as made me feel incredibly moved and connected to their stories.

I have wondered how to strike a balance between narrating a deeply personal experience in order to evoke empathy from a reader and, at the same time, to write in a manner that provokes a reader’s critical reflection. Bond states that research’s ability “to elicit the empathy and critical reflection of the reader” (2002, p. 136) is a marker of a good qualitative research. Hence, I hope that my research will motivate you to empathically enter my world, encourage you to think critically about your own experiences and assumptions, and to broaden your horizons. I hope my narrative has an evocative nature and inspires you to enter into a dialogue about your own life, values, experiences. An autoethnographer, who I feel is able to balance the evocative, personal, analytic, academic, and beautifully moving way of writing is Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (1998, 2005, 2016, 2017). His raw and honest way of speaking about his own experiences has inspired me to be braver and take more risks in writing this thesis. He asks difficult questions and is not afraid to point out the things that most of the society would rather avoid to think about. He says: “to write about autoethnography now requires a willingness to confront the place of personal writing as a producer and carrier of “knowledge” in the academy (Gingrich-Philbrook,

2005, p. 298). He calls himself an “autoethnographic outsider” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 302), which speaks to his attempt to understand what autoethnography is, what value it holds, the question of how to “measure” or “weigh” its worth. He stresses the importance of autoethnography being aesthetically sophisticated (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005), which is something I have been striving towards. Later in this chapter, I touch on my ambivalence on whether I can write beautifully and evocatively enough.

I have experienced some ethically challenging aspects of writing an autoethnographic thesis. It is the exposure and vulnerability that is the part of autoethnographic writing that makes me feel uneasy and scared. There might be some intimate details I might choose to withhold in order to preserve my own and my loved ones’ privacy, however that might impact the level of honesty and transparency. I struggle to write my research with all the uncertainty that surrounds it - often I am speculating and questioning the validity of my own experiences. It is difficult to embrace the emotionality that is inevitably attached to such research. The end product - my thesis - is a piece of writing. It feels limiting and impossible to compress all that is happening inside of me into words, including all the raw emotions attached to this topic. This issue highlights some of the epistemological challenges of conducting an autoethnography. I wonder how I can truly represent my experience using language. Can words ever do justice to lived experiences of human beings? How can I describe the pain and complexities of emotions? Translating these experiences will inevitably carry losses. Bochner states, “given the distortions of the memory, and the mediation of language, narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 745). He continues by stating that when using language to describe either our internal or external world there is bound to be discrepancy, “slippage, inexactness, indeterminacy” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 747). Moreover, I wonder how self-aware I really am in terms of my experiences. I do know now that it will never be a finished product: my feelings and my perspective change every day - and will continue to do so. Mead (1962) argues that we can never fully know people, not even ourselves. It highlights the limits of our ability to be fully self-aware and to be conscious of all the layers of our being, experiencing and feeling. I accept that my thesis will be a

statement of where I am at the time of writing, not my lifelong positing in the subject - and I believe it to be “good enough”.

As a qualitative researcher, I believe that my own experiences, and my interpretation of those in relation to literature and various philosophies, are a valid topic of investigation in their own right. By making myself a central focus of my research I aim to convey passion and depth in this work. Ellis and Bochner (2000) encourage writing in the first-person perspective while questioning what constitutes academic writing. They re-evaluate a commonly accepted way of academic writing, where an author's feelings and thoughts are omitted and state that such writing produces passive and abstract knowledge. The authors question what constitutes a valid academic contribution and the norms we are used to within a scholarly discourse. They encourage the reader to reconsider those norms and make an argument for more personal autobiographical writing. Autoethnographic writing gives more weight to “direct testimony of personal narrative and the first-person voice” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 734). Ellis says when she writes, she uses “systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall” in order to make sense of her experiences (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 737). I have used my journals and personal therapy sessions to really dive into my sense of what this experience has been like for me on both emotional and cognitive levels. I bring in snippets of my life and various situations in order to really transport you into my life and I hope to engage you in my experience and my journey. Bochner states that autoethnographic writings:

activate subjectivity and compel emotional response. They long to be used, rather than analysed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversations rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstract facts (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 744).

My “writing story” (Richardson, 1997) is messy. It is not linear or organized. Instead, I jump in time, I try to embrace my own confusion, fear and messiness. I attempt to find a balance between the academic and scholarly writing as well as the writing which illustrates the personal and raw bits of my life. In order to do that, I use

vignettes, poems and narratives in order to illustrate my experiences. Through them, I aim to bring honesty and rawness into this thesis. Those parts of my writing aim to enable you, dear reader, to connect with me, relate to my story. Poetry, as well as diary writing, has always been a big part of how I express myself and make sense of my world. The goal of including some of that writing in this thesis was to give you a chance to do the same- understand my story, and perhaps by doing so, also understand your own story a little better. By using the vignettes, I am hoping to bring closer the little moments of my life, the ones I feel are the ones that impacted my sense of being or seeing or understanding myself, and the world. Those snippets of my life, the raw, unedited, messy and honest bits of my reality, aim to offer you a chance to feel closer to my experience. They are my language, one that feels the closest to my heart. I hope those bits of writing allow you to visualise my reality, to smell and taste and hear it. To be there with me for a moment. Perhaps they might make you, dear reader, cry, or laugh, feel moved, or consider your own life from a different perspective. Perhaps you can use them in your work.

Hence, using poetry in this thesis aims to create a deeper relationship and engagement with the reader (Richardson, 1997). Writing diaries and poetry was my way of getting to know myself as well as make sense of my reality and the world. In writing, I felt no judgement, no rush, no need to pretend. I could be me, even if that would not make sense to anyone. “Writing was and is how I come to know” (Richardson, 2001, p. 33). Writing became my method, my window into understanding myself and my world. The poems and vignettes in this thesis aim to show my humanity and the reality of my experiences. They are also an invitation to allow yourself to get lost in it all with me, in the mess between the personal and the academic, the objective and the subjective.

People who write are always writing about their lives, even when they disguise this through the omniscient voice of science or scholarship. No writing is untainted by human hands, pure, objective, “innocent.” The old idea of a strict bifurcation between “objective” and “subjective” – between the “head” and the “heart” – does not map onto the actual practices through production of knowledge, or knowledge about how knowledge is produced (Richardson, 2001, p. 34).

I have been writing poetry since I was about twelve years old. Back then, I felt poetry was my way to connect to myself, especially to the emerging parts of me that I was scared of or did not understand. It enabled me to find out about myself and to learn about me and my world. Poetry was my way to express the terror and confusion in relation to my growing sense of being desperately alone and at the same time surrounded by so many people. I started to name my anguish, anxiety, loneliness and my search for purpose. Some of the poems in this thesis were written years ago (for example the one named “Coffee” I wrote when I was fourteen, and slightly adjusted it for the purpose of this thesis). In my process of writing this dissertation I re-read my old journals and poems and was shocked to discover how many feeling and themes remained the same in my life. How the context might have changed but the emotion was universal. My sense of not feeling “good enough”, my anxiety, loneliness, sense of inadequacy, strive for perfection, my need to please others and to fit in. Echoing Owton, H., & Sparkes (2017, p, 735), I hope that the vignettes and poems I am including in this thesis enable me to “tell, retell and re-understand” my own life and by doing so a “range of responses” and a sense of being involved will be evoked in the reader.

In this thesis, poetry is my way to express and amplify my experiences, or more precisely, the emotions attached to those experiences. Poetry allows me to show my truth, in the most vulnerable and raw way. I use poetry “as a means of representing research” (Richardson, 2007, p. 218). I use poetry when I feel that any other kind of writing will not do the justice to what I am trying to say (Faulkner, 2005). In accordance with Faulkner, I think of poetry as “fun and messy embodiment” (Faulkner, 2007, p. 224). It pushes me to dig deeper into my conscious and unconscious way of being and enables me to talk about my life as I live it, “up close, and personal” (Prendergast et al., 2009).

Hence, the story I write is my research material. It is personal and explorative. I am referring to theories and academic concepts in order to understand my experience and explore it on multiple levels, but I am also contributing something new and unique. I hope you find my story truthful and allow yourself to become a co-constructor of that story, mixing your own feelings, experiences and interpretations

with what you read. I invite you to engage with the text morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Richardson, 1994).

3.4. Reflexivity and transparency

“Reflexivity consists of turning back on our experiences, identities, and relationships in order to consider how they influence our present work. Reflexivity also asks us to explicitly acknowledge our research in relation to power” (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 29)

Hokkanen (2017, p. 26), based on her interpretation of Tracy (2010) and Baker (2001) states that “while reflexivity - in the sense of thinking through the implications of the researcher's person on the study - is important in all qualitative research designs, in autoethnography the interaction between the researcher's multiple identities as a researcher and as a member of a social world constitutes a major part of the 'observations' that are then analysed” (2017, p. 26). I use reflexivity through my research in order to make my thought processes, dilemmas and internal debates explicit to you, my reader.

Reflexivity has been defined as the “ability to notice our responses to the world around us, to stories, and to other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform and direct our actions, communication, and understandings” (Etherington, 2007, p. 601). I am aware that my interpretations of my own experiences will depend on my circumstances at the time of writing (there are many ups and downs in my experience of being a mum, or my everyday battle, as I often think of it on the days that are hard). I am aware I am using metaphors to describe my experiences and, through the use of reflexivity, I hope to problematise them. Firstly, the “up and down” (the vertical plane metaphor) symbolises the extreme differences in my emotional state with “up” being happy and “down” being sad - to put it in an overly simplified manner. Moreover, “up” could symbolise my higher state of consciousness while “down” could be my lack of it. The “up and down” metaphor paints a picture of contrasts, changes and confusion, or dizziness even - with my cognition and affect moving constantly. This further highlights the need for reflection in order to be aware

of my own thoughts and feelings as they change and fluctuate. I see reflection in autoethnographic writing as not taking anything for granted but thinking and challenging any ideas I am writing about.

The metaphor of a battle feels particularly poignant when I pay attention to it. “Battle” brings to mind words like warfare, attack, army, combat. I feel this metaphor captures some of the difficulties I experience when living with and trying to understand how difficult my transition into motherhood has been so far. Battle seems fitting as even though it is often difficult, I keep on going, fighting and I have hope that I am “good enough” for my children, as well as for myself. Historically, there are two opposing sides in any battle. I wonder who (or what) is on the opposing side of my battle. Is it my own body when the exhaustion cripples me? Or is it my children? Or the society with the constant comparisons and never-ending growing demands? Or is it the global pandemic, which has turned life as we knew it upside down? It feels impossible to clearly identify my “enemy”. Hence, my overwhelming volume of feelings of frustration and confusion. Another way to look at the battle metaphor would be to see me as a warrior/ fighter, rather than a passive character. This, I feel, is aligned with how I see myself most of the time, as I am not giving up. However, there are some “down days” (to refer to my “up-down” metaphor), during which I have no energy in me to be a fighter. However, one problem that comes up with using the word battle is that it creates an expectation that it will either be won or lost and an illusion that it is within my power to choose the result. As in a “good enough” mother did something better, or did more, than a person (a not “good enough” mother) who lost such a battle. Yet, as I explore it in my autoethnography, the sense of helplessness has accompanied me along this journey. The battle metaphor I hope symbolises the struggle and hope, rather than winning or losing.

Finally, there is also a metaphor of my motherhood experience as a journey. Not a destination, but a sort of never-ending trek or expedition, filled with explorations, quests, progresses and also regresses. It is an open-ended odyssey and I am learning to embrace the process and an ever-changing itinerary rather than strive to find a non-existent finish line. My journey metaphor symbolises constant fluidity, change and a state of evolving, as well as the need to constantly adjust, reflect and learn, which is a reflection of my motherhood experience.

Reflexivity and transparency are crucial in my research. Taking a very personal experience and translating it into an academic research project requires critical thinking and reflexivity in order to generate meaning from such an experience. Ellis and Bochner say: "By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life" (2000, p. 737). In accordance with Ellis, "I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 737) My account of myself is imperfect, but it is also honest and human. Hence, even though this thesis is very personal and subjective, it contributes to our understanding of a human experience of what it means to be a "good enough" mother during the global pandemic. I am producing a thesis that attempts to understand the human experience. I take on a dual identity as I am both a researcher and a subject. By entering this complex and blurry territory, I make an attempt at "rewriting of the self and the social" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.4). In accordance with my ontology and epistemology, subjective human experiences and people's account of those are valid sources of knowledge about the world and our existence. I use illustrative vignettes (Humphreys, 2005) as well as my poems to give you a raw insight into my way of experiencing the world. I want to transport you to the "here and now" of my life. Those deeply personal, raw and terrifyingly honest bits of writing invite you, dear reader, to enter my reality, to feel the shame, anxiety and the deficiency I carry with me. They also invite you to connect with me, engage with my writing and allow yourself to enter my world and my way of perceiving it too. Perhaps, they will allow you to connect to yourself in the process too, and to reflect on your own life.

I hope to instigate a discussion and invite you to engage with the story I am telling and observe your thoughts and feelings. After all, trying to comprehend any emotional or cognitive experience a person can go through, will always be based on the thoughts and feelings of individuals and the subjective interpretation of those. As a reader of this thesis, your interpretation of my writing is through the perspective of your own life. Hence, autoethnography "displays multiple levels of consciousness, connecting the personal and the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). By exploring cultural and societal aspects of motherhood and relating those to my own personal experience I believe I can produce a multi-dimensional account of this beautiful, yet very difficult and challenging journey. In this process, I expose myself

and make myself vulnerable while continuously being aware of my role as a researcher. Reed-Danahay (1997, p. 2) breaks down autoethnography into three components: auto (self), ethnos (culture) and graphy (the research process, from the Greek for “writing”). She stresses that every research project will have a different emphasis. I struggled to find a balance and decide how much of each component of autoethnography to include in my research. It seems as though the three components lay on a continuum, and it is an individual researcher’s choice where they position themselves in relation to their focus on the self, culture and research process. Thus, the process of autoethnographic writing requires researchers to look at their experience through multiple lenses, however each lens requires reflexive thinking. Reflexive writing touches on multiple aspects of life that relate to my research. It brings my relationships into light, the values I hold and makes me examine closely the way I live in relation to the culture I live in. Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis say that “autoethnography creates a space for a turn, a change, a reconsideration of how we think, how we do research and relationships, and how we live” (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 21).

3.5. Cultural context

It is important to acknowledge that as human beings we have our culture inbuilt into us. Multiple layers of cultural identity, which we accumulate from birth (and even before we are born) all influence who we are and how we live. Hence, culture is not something outside of us, instead it is deeply ingrained into human beings. It has been said that all autoethnographic research has one thing in common: “the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience” (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 22). If not for the cultural aspect of autoethnographic writing, it would not differ much from any kind of autobiography. Autoethnography of course contains multiple elements of autobiography, however it also adds a multidimensional context to personal experiences.

I tell my own story, which is situated within my cultural context. “In autoethnography, then, you use your own experiences to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which you are a part” (Patton, 2015, p. 102). I am locating myself in this research as an individual exploring the multiple identities that are emerging within

her: a mother, a wife, a doctoral student, struggling to connect the multiple roles during the difficult time of the global pandemic. It has been said that autoethnography is a research method which accommodates and values “subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 274). Hence, my cultural background and impact of that on my values and perceptions is made explicit in my writing as I address the cultural aspects of autoethnography - the “ethno”. While my academic training constitutes a big part of it, there is more to it: my ethnic and cultural background as well as the values of my family and wider society.

Born in Germany, to a mixed Polish and German family, raised in Poland, educated in Scotland, becoming a mother and raising a family in Poland again, I wonder where does my cultural identity actually stem from? Is it simply a mixture of cultures I encountered in each of the three countries I lived in? Or is it more related to individual people I have come across in my life, who left a significant trace? Or perhaps my culture is a mirror image of my family of origin's culture? There are also aspects which have influenced my cultural background, such as economic and financial environments, which enabled my growth and development to a certain extent. I feel each of these micro-cultural aspects has had an influence on who I am today, what I consider my culture to be and what values I hold. It is important not to assume that all women from a similar cultural background would have the same experience of motherhood as me. I can only speak for myself while taking my cultural context into consideration and thinking about what role it has played in my experience and my process of making sense of it.

My culture, age and values affect the way I experience and interpret this journey. I am making these debates and my process of coming to understand explicit to you. Echoing the social constructivist theory, which states that our emotions, thoughts and general way of being and relating are influenced by the society we live in (Cartledge and Ryan, 1983), I engage with the sociocultural influence on my experiences. As a Polish female, who grew up in a traditional Christian family, was born in Germany and moved to Poland at the age of four right after the communist regime ended there, and who at the age of nineteen moved to Scotland and entered

adulthood in this different (and yet so similar) culture, I have been exposed to a lot of changes. In hindsight, I can clearly see how my values and ways of thinking, relating and understanding the world have changed depending on where I was and who I was surrounded by; but also what a huge role my upbringing has played in it. I believe that my understanding of the world and myself is a result of all the social process that occurred over the course of my life, an accumulation of my experiences and cultures I have had a privilege to be a part of. I explore these cultural influences in my thesis, paying attention to contrasts as well as similarities between cultures I have been exposed to. After all, “Autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self” (Chang, 2008, p. 48-49).

Moreover, my thesis is focused on my experience of being a “good enough” mother during the global pandemic of COVID-19. Despite being aware that I had no control over the restrictions and risks associated with the pandemic, I feel it has had a strong impact on my feelings of deficiency as well as my general well-being. The social support as I knew it disappeared over night. The pandemic meant limited social interactions, fear of contracting the virus, isolation, uncertainty, inability to travel and do various activities, lack of childcare options, and much more, which is explored later in this thesis.

This research is my elaboration on my journey into motherhood. I explore what it means to me to be a mother, specifically during the pandemic, and I pay attention to the fear of not being able to rise to a certain standard I set for myself as well as the demands and hardships that “motherhood” herself made that I never imagined before. I elaborate on being a mother and wonder if I am “good enough”, living in a culture, which prioritises and values mothers, families and babies as well as portrays and bombards us with idealised views of motherhood. I place my thoughts in the cultural context. As a researcher, I look at my experience analytically and introspectively, so that my text reaches beyond just a description of my experience, to become valid research material too. In order to achieve that, my writing is framed around methodological tools of autoethnographic research. It is also situated in the context of appropriate literature. My research is placed in the cultural and societal frame. All this lifts my thesis from a personal description of my experiences to the

research category (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). The process of writing is also the process of generating data. “Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 273). This, yet again, highlights the need for reflexivity in autoethnographic writing. It is not sufficient to make statements, each of those should be consistent with the others, supported by literature and explored from multiple angles.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner state that “When researchers write autoethnographies, they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (2011, p. 276). Hence, it seems that autoethnographic researchers should also be good writers, in order to capture readers’ attention and do justice to translating their thoughts, feelings and experiences into a piece of writing. Evocative autoethnography is “meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience” (Ellis et al., 2010, para. 3). I do worry about my ability to write beautifully and poetically. What rings especially loud here for me, is that English is not my first language, and I have always felt conscious about how I write, the vocabulary I use, and my ability to actually translate what is inside into words. However, even if I was writing in my mother tongue, there is still the issue of whether one can ever express verbally what is embodied, which I discussed in the ontology part.

I found that attuning inwards, and allowing myself to really listen to my body, freed the words, that felt right, that accurately represented the embodied feelings (Gendlin, 2004). Gendlin advocates for listening to our embodied feelings and claims that if we allow, the language will emerge: “Our bodies imply what we want to say” (1997, p. 28) as our bodily experience looks for symbolisation and finds a relief when one is found, even if it is not the exact match, but the nearest possible way to express in words something that might not be possible to fully verbalise. Moreover, as I have been writing during the times of the pandemic and lockdowns, with two young children under my care, with many interruptions and breaks, I am aware that the messiness and frustrations that I have experienced in this process would come across. However, after reflecting on it, I feel it is a valuable part of my journey and trying to make it appear neat, linear or predictable would be a false representation of it. Hence, I decided to embrace the mess and lack of structure, and make my fear,

sense of lack of control and unpredictability of this project, as well as my life, come through in this thesis. Whether or not my writing sounds beautiful, I write honestly and reflectively, and do my very best to verbalise what is embodied and I hope that will be enough.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) raise questions of “reliability”, “validity”, and “generalizability” when it comes to autoethnographic research. They question the meaning of an objective “truth” and bring to attention that memory is frail and hence, even a truthful author’s account of their own experiences will most likely be imperfect. Coffey reminds me that “[e]thnography is an act of memory” (1999, p.27). Therefore, I presume that my autoethnographic research is inevitably biased by my own self and skewed due to my imperfect memory and inability to ever be fully aware, even of myself. However, while that might sound like a disadvantage or an argument to make autoethnographic research seem less valid, I feel it is exactly what makes it valuable and unique. It seems to me that presenting an honest account, with its biases and gaps, gives real insight into a visceral experience and contributes to what it means to be human. Through the use of reflexivity, I make those “imperfections” explicit and integrate those reflections into my research. After all, my whole writing is vulnerable, imperfect and filled with human qualities and emotions, such as pain, hope, guilt, shame, struggle, etc. and the methodology should reflect that too. Moreover, as I decided to work with individuals and their stories by becoming a therapist, doing autoethnographic research fits with my values. I appreciate the uniqueness of individual voices and appreciate their wisdom and depth. I feel there is a lot to be learned from people’s individual experiences, and even more so, their thoughts and feelings about those experiences, even (or maybe especially) those raw, ugly and not yet fully processed ones. Qualitative research provides “a way for scholars to answer questions about the nature of reality, knowledge, action, and values that were generated in response to developments and events in human history” (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 26). My research does not generalise the experiences of motherhood, or provide any universal truths about this phenomenon. Instead, it provides an in-depth exploration of what it means to be a “good enough” mother through my own eyes. I use my own personal journey to create a detailed description of this experience, which I also situate in the context of literature and culture. Richardson (2001) talks about

subjectivity of writing and the impact of socio-historical context on how we are and what we write. She convinced me that I do not have to have all the answers, or present universal truths. Instead, I am embracing the doubts that I have and the partial and personal parts of my writing and the fact that all of my knowledge is contextualised. “What postmodernism does is to recognize the situational limitations of the knower. It recognizes that you have partial, local, temporal knowledge – and that is enough” (Richardson, 2001, p. 35).

As an autoethnographic researcher, I use reflexivity as one of my main tools of analysing data, which consists of my own experiences and interpretations of those. Coffey brought to my attention an unclear boundary “between self-indulgence and reflexivity”, which constantly forces a writer to consider “how much of ourselves to reveal” (1999, p. 133). While I do want to present an honest and personal account of my journey into motherhood, I am aware that my research is not a personal journal entry. Hence, I have wondered how to find a balance between revealing enough of myself and yet not self-indulging. I think it comes down to finding a way to present my personal experiences in a reflective manner and to situate them within multiple contexts. Moreover, I am not hoping to test a specific theory, or to find a universal truth. Instead, I hope to question my own sense of what it means to be a mother. Hence, reflexivity is a skill in autoethnographic writing and, while it can be improved by gaining deeper levels of introspection, is something one can grow and deepen, not something a writer either has or not. Qualitative research favours exploring in-depth experiences of an individual or a community and their unique circumstances or carrying out interviews on a small number of people over a larger scale, than more general data generating methods (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

3.6. Personal motives, agenda

Within the potentially large webs of complex personal, political, theoretical and institutional rationales for particular research agendas, perhaps the most important consideration, when we consider the relationship between our projects and ourselves, is to reflect on and dissect the personal or political motivations that matter in how we come to our research topics. Moreover, it is important to be open to hidden motives that may emerge unexpectedly while

we are in the process of undertaking particular qualitative or ethnographic research projects (Doucet, 2008, p. 75).

As a reflexive, autoethnographic writer I feel I should consider and make my personal motives and agendas for undertaking this particular research clear to you. While my motivation for undertaking this research seems clear and explicit to me, I am starting to realise there are “ghosts” (Doucet, 2008) in my motives that I was not so aware of to start with. Doucet (2008) writes about “ghostly” memories and motives explaining that those are the motives we might not quite be aware of yet, perhaps related to our early memories and experiences. I believe there are limits to my reflexivity and there might be aspects of my motivations which I am not able to access, or may only be able to access after a considerable time has passed and distance has been gained. Grosz points out, “the author’s intentions, emotions, psyche, and interiority are not only inaccessible to readers, they are likely to be inaccessible to the author herself” (1995, p. 13). I realise there is a selfish need within me to explore my experience and give myself a voice that I never felt that I had. To prove that what I have to say is valid and important and worthy of your time and by proxy that I am worthy too.

What appeals to me about autoethnographic research is how accessible it is. Reading such research often makes me feel really connected to the author and their experience, as though it was an old friend telling me a story. Also, I feel that autoethnographic writing really captures and beautifully illustrates human vulnerability and ways of presenting it and coping with it. Ellis says: “I tend to write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself. I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so” (2004, p. 33). While I worry about exposing some of the most painful aspects of my life, and I question if I can tell them in a way to do them justice, deep down I know that this is the work most worth doing.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) elaborate on the therapeutic qualities writing autoethnography can have, both for the author as well as for the recipients. They also list other possible beneficial aspects of carrying out autoethnographic research,

such as making sense of the experiences, encouraging cultural change and responsibility, and bettering the quality of human relationships. While I understand that the goal of my research cannot be me working through a difficult experience, I must acknowledge that it could be a desired side product of writing an autoethnographic thesis. I feel excited to be able to have an opportunity to explore in depth a question which is deeply meaningful to me on a personal level. Similarly, I cannot expect you to find my research therapeutic, however I do hope you will be soothed or enriched by it in some way. I do hope to make a valid contribution to the knowledge in the field of motherhood.

3.7. Final thoughts

At the time of writing, I am in the midst of my experiences of motherhood, the pandemic, and all that it entails, rather than writing from a position of hindsight. An advantage of that is that my emotions are very immediate and therefore easily accessible. However, on the flipside, being so involved in my experience mean I might struggle to look at it with some distance and analyse it from sociocultural standpoints. Hence, the process of writing involves a lot of moving in and moving out” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 752) of my experience in order to capture the intensity and immediacy of my feelings and also gain the distance necessary to understand and analyse them. I am aware I will have to make myself vulnerable and exposed if I want to write truthfully. Behar (1996) says that social science “that doesn’t break your heart isn’t worth doing” (in Tamas, 2009, p.3). I will be vulnerable and exposed in my research, but I feel that in autoethnographic writing it will be a strength rather than weakness. My process of writing is fluid, and I move in it back and forth, between past and present, internal and external, self and others, between raw and processed and emotional and cognitive. By moving closer and further to my story I hope to be able to reflect on it - to convey a sense that I am the story - but also interpret and analyse it through different lenses. And I hope to bring you along and engage you on this journey.

I am not attempting to propose any universal or everlasting truths, as such truths do not exist when it comes to human experiences or relationships. By immersing myself in mess and chaos, which autoethnographic research entails (Adams et al., 2015), I

invite you, my reader, to personally encounter my experiences and reflect upon your own. I present my raw and messy self in this thesis, with all the subjectivity it entails, and at the same time, I am aware that your sociocultural background will differ, as will your perception of the phenomenon of motherhood explored here. I believe that through your interpretations of my writing, new layers of meaning will be produced.

CHAPTER IV

My experience of motherhood. Autoethnographic exploration.

Finding myself

I'm close
Too close perhaps
I don't want to suffocate you
So I move away
But now I'm far
I barely feel you

I can't get it right
Each time I try
I'm being judged
I want to cry

Cry for myself
Constantly battling
But never winning
I am screaming

But the scream is silent
I'm not allowed to shout
I hold it inside
And hide in the crowd

Pretending I fit in
Pretending I'm ok
But all I feel
Is my need to break away

To strip the layers
And really be myself
So I say my prayers
And put the mask on the shelf

4.1. My journey: transition into motherhood and emotions evoked when I became a mother

Pregnancy and becoming a mother were an extremely fragile and transformative time in my life. I was trying to re-establish my identity but also fit this new, huge role I undertook into the life I already had (Rubin, 1975). I was trying to find balance, but also I struggled to recognise myself within this new reality. My state of “primary maternal preoccupation” (Winnicott, 1956/2000), a state which has been found to entail greater emotional fragility and instability, was, in my case, additionally aggravated by the pandemic.

Motherhood is a highly emotional experience, which has a big impact on a woman’s life (Kerr, et al., 2021), as it also has had on mine. Referring back to my literature review, I would say that for me, becoming a mother has been a critical, life-changing event (Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2009; Kuryś, 2010). I experienced an overwhelming sense of love and joy. However, having my first baby also marked the point of a radical transition to a completely different world, a world of great responsibility for another human being, endless duties, resignation from my own needs, a world in which my way of thinking about life changes, matters that are completely different than before become important. I had to make far-reaching plans, worry about another human being, it was a world in which every decision should be considered in terms of the child’s needs and where the pressure to be perfect was overwhelming. More than ever before in my life, as a mother, I experienced a deep sense of deficiency and inadequacy, perceiving the expectations placed on me to be extremely high. Unknowingly, I entered a never-ending race, a battlefield even, to achieve impossible standards. I experienced on my own skin that we live in the world and culture with deeply rooted ideals of “perfect” mothers and motherhood (Lamar, et al., 2019). The idea that I needed to be perfect, combined with a world (and personal) crisis, which was the global pandemic of COVID-19, made my lived experience as a mother challenging and full of emotions I had never associated with motherhood prior to becoming a mother myself.

I gave some theoretical background on the topic of crisis in motherhood in my literature review, which I will refer to now. Since becoming a mother, I have

experienced many times of crisis, smaller, or bigger in nature, lasting anything from a few minutes to a few months. All those times pushed me into a dark place where doubt and fear ruled over any positive feelings. Those times revealed my tendency to plummet into the worst-case scenario and feel overwhelmed with sadness, anxiety and deficiency. I questioned my ability to push through and overcome those obstacles. At the same time, guilt and shame for my lack of ability to cope at the standard I felt was expected, made me feel I was failing as a mother.

I'm at the doctor's office having a mid-pregnancy scan. I'm on my own, my husband had an important meeting at work, and I insisted I'd be fine by myself, it's all routine after all. I always do tell him there is no need to accompany me to medical tests or visits, or give his input on what we needed to do or buy before the baby arrives. As if somehow that was just my responsibility, like he had more important things to do or worry about. Anyway, back to that scan. Suddenly, during the visit, the doctor goes silent. Calls in a colleague and consults something on the screen. I can feel my anxiety and stress grow. Eventually they say there is a lump on my baby's neck, which wasn't there before, and they have no idea what it is. I call my husband, inform him while also minimising my sense of stress - again, he is probably busy with something important, doesn't need me panicking over the phone. After that scan, I go for multiple tests and consultations, spend the final weeks of my pregnancy at the hospital, separated from my 1.5-year-old daughter. My relationship with my husband is extremely strained - we are both very stressed and overtired. I feel guilty and feel I am not a "good enough" mother to my daughter as well as to this unborn baby. I wonder if the lump is the result of something I did. Probably my constant stress and anxiety. Medically, we still don't know what the lump is or how it would impact my son's life - his ability to breath or swallow for example.

The delivery day is finally here, I feel extreme distress and desperation. At the same time, I feel enraged that it has to be this way, that what is supposed to be one of the happiest days of my life is one of the scariest. My son is born through a C-section. He has to undergo a very complicated and life-threatening surgery when he's only 7 days old, which, thankfully, is successful. The relief I'm feeling is impossible to describe. But after the relief fades, waves of various emotions come on top of me. I am lonely, exhausted, depressed. I should only be happy and grateful and instead I feel hopeless. I feel guilty and ashamed for having such emotions, and therefore I don't share my negative feeling with anyone, only falling into a bigger despair inside. We spend a few weeks at the hospital, with very limited contact with my husband and my baby daughter. While I'm at the hospital, in the news, I hear reports of a deadly virus spreading around China. I'm thinking "thank God it's not here, I couldn't deal with something like this after the nightmare we've just been through". Little did I know what was coming...

This whole ordeal with my baby son left me feeling anxious, depressed and exhausted. And just when I felt like I could not take any more, the COVID-19 virus came about, turning life as we knew it upside down and bringing on a whole new layer of fear and uncertainty. Suddenly, nothing felt safe or predictable anymore. After coming home from the hospital, instead of enjoying my newborn son and toddler daughter, and exploring the joys of early motherhood, I found it difficult to function day to day and care for my two young children. Every day felt like a battle, and I just needed to survive it in order to do the same the following day (and night). There was no rest. The start of the pandemic brought about anxiety, uncertainty, fear, isolation, and so much more, which I will get into in more detail in this chapter. In hindsight, I feel I was extremely vulnerable at that time - becoming a mother of two, my son's health issues and the pandemic felt like a combination of events that were too much to handle. I struggled to find help and support, especially when being advised (and later made) to isolate and stay at home at all times. It marks one of the most difficult times in my life, a time of extreme crisis, filled with anxiety, guilt, loneliness, exhaustion, and the sense of being a terrible mother (very far from "good enough"). I felt robbed of the special time that the pregnancy and the postpartum period is supposed to be. The sense of loss I was experiencing was overwhelming: but I had no place to put that grief.

Anxiety

It feels like a spiderweb
That entraps me
I'm doomed to fail
As even when I manage to free myself
Sticky threads follow me everywhere
They become my uniform

When I pretend it isn't there
Or put something over it to hide it
The threads of fear pinch me
And whisper in my ear
That I'll never be free
Stop trying, dear

They tighten around my chest at night
Not allowing me to fall asleep
They're always there
Influencing my behaviour and decisions
They are my past and want to be my future too
I can't escape

4.2. Gender roles and stereotypes: my own cultural context

This thesis is rooted in my own experiences and personal context of being a white middle-class heterosexual and cis-gendered woman living in central Europe, in Poland, in 2022. However, even in twenty-first century Europe, there is still a big struggle with ever-present issues of inequality and gender bias (McFeely, et al., 2013; Kleven, et al., 2019; Pedavic, et al., 2020), where women are expected to sacrifice themselves to the role of being mothers, even at the cost of other commitments (Hays, 1996; Turco, 2010), and any distraction from their family obligations causes them to be perceived as “bad mothers” (Blair-Loy, 2003). This is in line with “intensive mothering” ideology, “which advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children” (Hays in Ennis, 2014, p. 9). Hays (1996) argues that intensive mothering supports patriarchy

because “the benefits of such intensive caregiving are directed at men, who can still work and enjoy a relatively unchanged lifestyle. Such discourse showcases the demands of motherhood, which, in turn, are exacerbated in this pandemic” (in Staneva, 2021, p.412). I feel I became a victim of “intensive mothering” ideology, which in my case meant I believed I, and I alone, had to do everything for everyone, at my own expense. During the pandemic, I started to feel even more lonely than before, believing I alone needed to find the solutions and take care of everyone as well as my own mental health. External help or social support were non-existent. As I initially pushed my husband to believe I had it all under control and did not need any help, I could sense I was getting increasingly more overwhelmed and drained. However, in hindsight, I realise now how huge a gender gap I was creating in my own marriage and how both our relationship, as well as I, suffered for it.

When I speak of gender I refer to “behavioural, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women (Pryzgoda, & Chrisler, 2000, p. 554). Connell (2002) states that gender and relationships are key to understanding how society operates and to grasp the social, political and historical aspects of the culture we live in, in order to gain a better insight into the issues we struggle with, which are highly contextual. Clandinin (2007) stresses the importance of context, and states that all human interactions and experiences are set in a cultural context of a specific person and specific situations. She mentions the importance of our history and its impact on the present and claims no situation can completely be decontextualised. This autoethnography is situated within my own cultural and personal context and hence it is focused on European (specifically Polish) culture and my experience of living in it.

The image of “good (enough) mother” in western societies is contextualised within traditional, middle-class, heterosexual, white values; a mother is presented as always present, instinctively and primarily caring for her children, self-sacrificing and child-centred, but not complaining about it or questioning it (Tummala-Narra, 2009). Narrative theories indicate that dominant sociocultural ideals create scripts which people then use to selectively design their identities (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). The pressures and a high set of standards placed on mothers in western cultures makes it difficult for women to feel like “good enough” mothers, due to constantly

shifting and growing demands, the multiple roles they fill, diversity of family structures and frequent migration (Tummala-Narra, 2009).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, referring back to my literature review, it became evident that mothers have internalised that it is their responsibility to care for their children, make sure they are safe, ensure their continuous education and emotional and cognitive well-being, as well as household duties and career (Staneva, 2021). I have felt the need to take personal responsibility for all these things. Of course, the standard to which I was performing all these tasks never seemed “good enough”. I experienced vast amounts of self-blame and, constantly feeling like I was failing everyone, especially my children. All this produced a lot of internalised guilt and a sense of failure and deficiency.

As a millennial I have had the push (mostly coming from online space, specifically social media, which I was exposed to growing up) towards considering the issues of identity, gender and sexuality. While in my educational journey these topics were (and in Poland still are, I feel) taboo, I and my peers seemed to be the first generation to start asking questions and rebel against the current way of living and thinking. There was a very rigid, common attitude coming from older generations, and clear messages being voiced such as: “homosexuality is an illness”, “abortion is murder”, “pre-marital sex is a sin”, “living in an unofficial relationship or not having children makes you an outcast and a sinner”. Writing this down now I feel ashamed and angry, and it makes me question whether I made the right decision to come back to Poland and raise my children here, as, unfortunately, those still are often the directives communicated to children in my country. Although slowly the attitudes become more fluid and less rigid, I wonder if the change is happening fast enough. There is a sense in the Polish community that there is one correct way to be, and being any other way is wrong. Having had the experience of living in Scotland for eight years, I observed some major differences in how tolerant and open-minded society can be, which has produced a lot of anger within me towards my motherland. While I sense that the Polish society is becoming more and more progressive, there are still huge gaps, which I have experienced very personally and painfully at times. The influence of the Catholic church is huge in Poland, and their message often misinterpreted to fit the homophobic and “traditional” views on how to live, which is

currently also encouraged by the governing party. I never really questioned it, but now I am realising how pre-programmed I have been to live in a certain way. There was always an order of doing things that I had in my head, and it just felt so obvious and natural to follow it that I did not stop to think whether this was actually what I really wanted and what made me feel happy and fulfilled on a deeper level. I was supposed to finish University, find a job, get engaged and then married, have children and a dog, buy a house, focus on being a wife and a mother but also have a successful career and “live happily ever after”. Sounds a bit like a fairy tale, which I have learnt now has nothing to do with the reality of life, and the “princess” is often the victim of the life designed for her. The “happily ever after” proves to be much more challenging than I anticipated and filled with dilemmas and difficult decisions.

I function simultaneously in two spheres and try to make sense of them both and find balance between them: the first is the ideal picture of motherhood, an image I seem to have internalised I need to strive towards and one that is at the root of my sense of deficiency. The second sphere is the reality and the challenges of motherhood, which painfully crushes the ideal. On the one hand, romantic patterns, pre-modernisation resentments, and nationalist ideologies are still alive and overwhelmingly influenced by Catholicism, especially in Poland. On the other hand, the effects of both the social and cultural changes in the era of real socialism (for example, the universality of women’s work) and the drastic transformation of the system of the past two decades (including particularly growing social stratification and dismantling of institutionalised forms of care, as well as limiting the reproductive rights of women) are clear. All these factors significantly influenced the situation of women (in Poland specifically) and the discourses, practices and ideologies of motherhood, creating a kind of crucible in which you can see various problems and trends present in the contemporary world (or at least a large part of it) (Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2012). There is no doubt that the desire for equality and self-fulfilment in other fields of life than just within the family structure resulted in the weakening of traditional attitudes towards motherhood as an obligatory model of social participation (Włodarczyk, 2008). It seems, however, that the expectation of women to give birth to children who are best born into a full and traditional family model is still unchanged (at least in some parts of Polish society), so every couple from the moment of getting married is under procreative pressure from the environment

(Korzińska, 2003). I have felt that pressure immensely due to fertility issues I encountered. Despite my very strong desire to have children, my husband and I struggled to conceive for quite some time. Unfortunately, strong pressure from society to start a family was adding to a huge level of stress and desperation. People kept nagging and asking why we weren't having children. Little did they know about endless doctors' appointments, medications, and floods of tears. How could I be failing at something so basic and natural as conceiving? It seemed back then that it came so easily to everyone but me (which, of course, I know not to be true, but I seemed to see everything through the lens of bitterness, disappointment and sense of failure). Upon reflection, I realise I felt not "good enough" as a mother even before I conceived, and that sense of deficiency stemmed from sociocultural norms and demands as well as my need to compare myself to other (seemingly successful and happy) people.

Traditional cultural and social norms shape a broad catalogue of requirements directed at women. It concerns the social compulsion of childbearing (based on the belief that motherhood is the natural vocation of all women, the fundamental female function, the fundamental social and biological role of a woman, and giving birth to a child is the act that symbolises the highest degree that a woman reaches maturity and adulthood). Others define the image of an ideal mother, driven by an innate maternal instinct which makes women bear children, and then care for and raise them with care, without difficulty in guessing and satisfying the child's needs. The perfect ("real") mother (and the kind of mother I certainly aimed to be) devotes herself entirely to her child, renounces her goals, emotions, needs, biography, and her desires are reduced to the happiness of her child, because it is the only reason for her existence and supreme value, and the welfare of her child is her good.

I felt that my role and any life goal and aspirations were (and should be) limited to my role as a mother, existing only in relation to my children. The baby's needs were brought to the fore, and I felt all my attention should be focused on satisfying them as much as possible, even if it was at my own cost and the cost to my career and personal growth and happiness. I felt I was the only one fully responsible for my child's development, their physical and mental health, appearance, behaviour, etc. I assumed it to be my emotional and practical responsibility for my child around the

clock (after all, a good mother should be inseparable from the child, I believed in my early motherhood). Moreover, somehow I felt that being a mother should only trigger positive emotions; the mother should give the child a constant, unconditional, forgiving love, always being tender, kind, gentle, accepting and forgiving. Hence, each time I felt frustrated, anxious and deficient, I felt guilty and it added to my sense of not being “good enough”. In hindsight, I can now think: what an enormous pressure to live under! Every day I was battling my sense of deficiency and I fought for perfection. As a result of internally and externally formulated social pressures and the primacy of motherhood as a form of female fulfilment, the situation when women do not give birth to children or when they are not fully devoted to motherhood may evoke remorse and guilt in them (Stańska, 1997). I have struggled to accept that me being a “good enough” mum also means letting go - allowing others to help, inviting and accepting my husband’s equality in parenthood to our children, and taking care of myself.

4.3. Impact of becoming parents on my marital relationship.

We just got home from the hospital with our first baby. I know we are a family now, the three of us. I also know my husband aspires to be as involved as possible in caring for our baby daughter. I want him to be too, at least on the cognitive level. But at the same time I feel a deep need to be in control and inability to let go or trust that my husband’s care would be just as good as mine. I push him away, criticising his bathing, changing, etc. I feel privileged to have milk in my breasts and glad I do not have to share that one. Due to my psychological background I also am able to convince my husband to agree with my ideas regarding the way we should raise our child, supporting my claims with suitable theories or studies. At the same time, I am increasingly more and more exhausted and frustrated and a sense of loneliness comes down on me. My husband, little by little, withdraws and lets me take the lead. It becomes even more natural when his paternity leave is over and he returns to work. A part of me is relieved, as I know I have full control now and also that we are finally living the way we’re supposed to: me - a full time mother, and him - a breadwinner. That was the way of living I knew and the way of living still so common in my society. I was proud that I was coping with taking care of our child so well (on the surface, of course) and that my husband did not have to do much around the baby. The sacrificing mother I am becoming, in some way, makes me feel satisfied. However, the other part of me is falling deeper and deeper into despair, loneliness and exhaustion. I am trying to navigate this new, uncharted territory and find myself in this new role, but also find a new way to be with my husband. It seems as if overnight, when I became a mother, our relationship has shifted and is almost unrecognisable. I am aware I am slipping into patterns that are so very deeply

*embedded in me. I wish I had the strength to fight it, but I'm just too scared and tired.
I stick with what I know. I can't help but go deeper and deeper.*

The level of integrity between the psyche and the external reality is achieved primarily through the bond with the parents. This bond allows the construction of self-awareness and hence the importance of the presence of both parents in the process of raising a child. In the works of Winnicott, the concept of “favourable environment” appears, which the author defined in practice as the presence and participation of many people in the upbringing of a child – not only the mother. The father has an equally crucial role to play (Winnicott, 1984/2010). Although Winnicott emphasises that the role of the mother in the first months of the child's life is to submit to them completely – it should be understood quite naturally. However, that does not mean the father (partner) should withdraw from parentage during this time, considering himself redundant. In the first months after the birth of the child, family life is not only focused on caring for them - parents still have jobs, other responsibilities – and each other. In my opinion, a reasonable expectation in this period should be that both parents engage with the baby, even if the role of the father is limited as, for example, he cannot breastfeed. It seems the most important component should be the partner's care for the mother of the child. However, as much as I cognitively feel that to be the truth, instinctively I felt that caring for the baby was solely my responsibility and I would distance and isolate my husband from parenting duties in the process.

In those early months of motherhood, my husband made the effort to be present and engaged, and to support me: in practice, however, I experienced a state of loneliness - even in the presence of other people. I felt this unspoken expectation from the environment (including my partner) that I, as the mother, take on the majority of responsibilities related to the care and upbringing of the children. I realise now I was projecting my own, internalised, set of expectations towards myself. Indeed, in the first months of my child's life, I was indispensable: I provided food and care. I felt I was most attuned to what my baby needed and I genuinely felt what she needed was me, at all times. I wanted to be attuned to my baby at all times, fully. Unfortunately, I disregarded entirely what I needed, putting my baby's needs so far ahead. Unfortunately, in my personal experience, this period extends to the first few

years of life. My husband, seeing that I am better at taking care of the children (or maybe just more willing to, or I feel I do not have a choice), finds (it is difficult to determine on what basis) that I have more patience; that I know how to care for the child; that I cook better; I clean more thoroughly; that I can play with children. And I do it all with a smile on my face, reassuring him that I am happy to take all this on. I feel like a martyr, and part of me is satisfied with such an image of myself - the sacrificing, never complaining mother. In my culture of origin it is what a mother would frequently be portrayed as, but with pride. My husband, having often been pushed by me into the parental background role, recognises that it is most appropriate to return to his original role as a provider of livelihoods, making professional work his main parental and partner duty. The pandemic, with all the restrictions and isolation it brought on, in some weird way, gave me an excuse to fall deeper and deeper into this role.

There came a time when the pandemic restrictions loosened up and it became possible to provide care for my children in a nursery and kindergarten. I, with a huge sense of ambivalence and anxiety, returned to work, academic and therapeutic, which radically changed my situation of being a full-time mother. However, it turned out that from that moment on, I got an additional job – and in practice - a few additional jobs: a cleaning lady, a chauffeur, a nanny (when the child is sick – quite regularly, at least once a month), a cook, and a house manager. It was also expected (have I internalised this expectation by this point?) that the additional activities will be carried out flawlessly, on time or well in advance and at a high level. As a result of this extra burden, my frustration kept growing and so did the feeling of loneliness as mentioned before. I struggled to share my worries, weaknesses and anxieties with other people due to my perceived expectation to constantly perform at a certain level. Murray notes that “We, as a society, are losing our ability to be ‘with’ . Reaching out could be felt like weakness, and weakness is a taboo” (2022, p. 502). I worried I would be judged, and such negative judgements would constitute a huge threat to my already weak maternal self-esteem.

In addition, I felt fatigue and nervousness and tremendous stress ending in blaming myself for not being able to meet the (assumed and internalised) expectations of my partner and everyone around. I just felt like I was failing, despite trying so very hard. I

felt frustration at my children each time they were ill and I would be forced to abandon all my other responsibilities, and then I would feel guilty for being frustrated at them in the first place. Madness! At the beginning of my motherhood journey, I was able to focus solely on being a mum and a housewife (although that was occupied with a constant guilt of neglecting my career and the sense of heaviness regarding not having my thesis finished). When my son was one, he started attending nursery, and, a few weeks before him, my daughter did as well. So finally there was some space for me to return to writing and to practicing. However, as I mention before, it did not feel like I finally had more space for myself, but instead the burden of extra chores overwhelmed me. My children would be sick frequently (as is natural at that age), and the nurseries would often shut due to pandemic restrictions. The responsibility to look after my kids in those times would fall on me, which caused frustration and dissatisfaction with regard to my only just sprouting career after a long break. As my husband was the main (pretty much the sole) breadwinner for the family, it felt his work was more important than mine as it sustained our livelihood, paid the mortgage, bills, for groceries, etc. So I also felt no right to voice my anger and frustration, which were simmering underneath the surface. Johnson, et al. (2021) found anger, specifically unexpressed anger, to be associated with increased stress levels and sense of deficiency. I felt I was not “good enough” as a mother, being permanently torn and frustrated, and not “good enough” at my work. My husband was able to notice some of my growing frustration and stress, and while we were not able to practically do much to change this situation, the emotional support I received helped me to deal with those overwhelming negative emotions and instead plan out the work realistically so that I would be able to do it even in unforeseen circumstances (like illness). Of course, in practice it was not as straightforward, but having his support and understanding helped me be more understanding and forgiving towards myself. We also reached out to family members to ask for help, which was not easy and had implications. Firstly, I needed to admit that I did need some assistance and I felt like I was not coping on my own. I also would have to let go of some control and trust someone to take care of my children well enough. That was difficult, as I still struggle with feeling like I am a “good enough” mother, and that extends towards other people. The expectations, when it comes to my children, have been set unrealistically high. A part of me feels that is because I am also trying to compensate some things to my own child self. However, I was desperate at that

point, and so I did admit I could not do it alone. In hindsight, I see it as a demonstration of strength and balance to admit I cannot do it all. It just did not feel like it at the time. I also see the power and importance of having a support network around me and what a difference it makes to be able to count on other people, share the difficulties and allow others to participate in our life and help. However, the pandemic restrictions made that really difficult, frequently isolating me and my family from the outside world and forcing us to only count on one another, and hence putting a lot of pressure on us as spouses to be the only form of support for one another.

The terms “mother” and “father” are relational, they exist in relation to another person – a child. Recognition of oneself as a parent requires accepting (biologically or (and) socially) of a person as one’s child (Bakiera, 2013). However, this is not a single event, but a very complex process with many short and long-term consequences. The birth of our first child (or I would even say the moment we learnt I was pregnant) has brought about many transitions of functioning at the family level. The parent’s care and responsibility for the child are unlimited in time (i.e., the permanence of parenthood), and not only is the presence of the parent important for the child and its development, but also their level of involvement. Being a parent is a daily task. On the one hand, it’s satisfying and increases life enjoyment, but it is also often difficult, requiring a lot of effort and resulting in a sense of resignation (Kwak, 2008; Małyska, 2015). The implementation of the parental role takes place in a specific time and space; it is integrally connected and conditioned by sociocultural and economic factors. The changes taking place now, largely inspired by the postmodern trend, have an impact on the current condition of parenting (Jucewicz, 2010). Jucewicz (2010) points out that the fundamental elements of the postmodern ethos are individualism (the focus of interests and activities in a specific person and his life) and pluralism (the multiplicity of systems, styles and philosophies of life, values, theories, and fashion). Individualism is related to the autonomy of the individual and his freedom, with the need for self-realisation and self-sufficiency, often with the rejection of authority. The cult of success (the desire to succeed) and the cult of professionalism (the desire to be the best) developed against the background of these trends. This cult of success (or my need to strive for perfection) has impacted my motherhood experience, often leading to frustration, because I felt “success” is

understood not as a bond with my own child, but as a necessity to catch up with those mothers with whom I compare myself (or in my perception I am compared with) or the ones I feel judged by. Hence, the feeling of never being quite “good enough”, as a mother, as a wife, as a career woman, etc. I felt the standards were just unattainable and the pressure to strive to achieve them so high, that if I could not break out of this vicious cycle somehow, the feelings of frustration, sadness and exhaustion might just overtake me. Again, a crucial factor, for me, has been the stability and steadiness of my relationship with my husband as well as the social support from other “imperfect” mothers and their “imperfect” children and households.

The decision to have a child is a big one and is, in itself, stress inducing in its complexity. There are also numerous obstacles related to having a child. One cause for concern may be the economic costs associated with the process of raising a child or restrictive costs related to the restriction of the spouses’ freedom in the cultural, professional and private fields. A significant problem is associated with physical costs, which means the constant care for the child, more work in the household, which causes fatigue and loss of time in the lives of the spouses (Kluzowa & Slany, 2003). Many studies discuss the problem of “loss” of love for a partner as a result of giving birth to a child. As I said before, I have found it extremely (even dangerously) easy to focus on the child (or children later on) alone, and neglect (or push away) my husband in the process. It felt as though there physically was no space for anything or anyone else but the baby. Moreover, I knew I was not the same, not in my body, not in my mind, as before I was a mother. I worried I would not be accepted if I revealed my new self fully, with the stretchmarks on my body and on my soul too. That is it... I was feeling stretched - to my limits - and I could not take on anything else. Frictions in communication started to appear and conflicts started to arise. We were both tired and frustrated and had no time for each other. At that time, I could not ask anyone for help, as I not only felt the need to control everything to do with the baby, but also feared judgement and being seen as not coping with my new role. The crisis in my relationship with my husband seemed to be getting only worse, until, after many fights and efforts to communicate, we realised what was happening and decided to consciously take action. At first, consciously working on our relationship, felt just like another chore and that one thing that we had no energy for, and another

thing I could potentially fail at in my strive for perfection. It also highlighted my sense of not being a “good enough” mother as I felt it was my obligation to provide a child with two happy, connected parents and a conflict-free household and relationship model. However, with time it started to become natural to regain some of the space for just the two of us and to feel like partners again, not just parents. At the present time, it still takes a lot of effort, and there are times when we forget about one another when we are overwhelmed with the pace of life, but now that we are aware of the importance of looking after our relationship, we try to find ways to take care of it. I wish, however, we were more aware of how hard parenthood is, and the toll it would take on us as individuals and as a couple, prior to having our first baby. Budrowska (2000) states that if parents are aware of the positive and negative aspects of parenthood before the birth of the child, they can cope better with the difficulties when the child arrives.

Journal articles, blogs and parenting websites, which indicate the negative impact of the birth of a child on the relationship between partners, have been helpful for me to think critically about what this has been like for me. The authors of these sources are most often mothers who describe their own experiences relating to their relationships and how those changed after having a child. They talk about challenges such life change presents and sacrifices that have to be made. Several dependencies emerge. Someone appears, something disappears – this is how I would describe the change that takes place in a relationship after the appearance of the first child. And I never gave myself any space to grieve for what was lost. Everything changed, the dynamic, the lifestyle, sexual attraction, me as a person outside of being a mother. There is an age-old problem called “the wife is the mother, the husband seeks his way”. In fact, it is an anthropological trap that is replicated by the majority of society I live in, as there seems to be a common belief that a “good enough” mother is one who devotes herself to her child without limitations, and a man stunned by the change and loss of his first place in a woman’s heart must somehow distance from reality. As a result, he might be left alone with feelings of frustration and alienation. However, if the mother objects to him distancing himself, it will arouse rebellion and anger, which in the climate of colic, downpours and baby-related exhaustion will grow into frustration. The underlying cause of conflict between new parents is not usually psychological and does not relate to emotional intelligence, but pure biology.

After giving birth, I was sore, tired and scared and incredibly overwhelmed. I was practically incapable of showing my husband the tenderness, understanding and affection to which he had grown accustomed to. The sexual element was practically non-existent, which, while it may not be the most important thing in a relationship, is by far the best glue that connects us. Our everyday routine changed drastically with the arrival of the baby. My husband complained that he has to get up every day and go to (stress-inducing) work, in which he is the one who fears for the good of everyone, and the night is divided into painful pieces of falling asleep and waking up between screams. Diverted from eroticism and the sense of community, attention suddenly began to focus on the details that trigger frustration. We began to notice grey hair, dirty socks, sloppiness, and this exacerbated a lack of tenderness. In annoyance, somewhat hasty accusations and reproaches were made, which one of us would quickly forget and the other would keep deeply in their mind to pull an ace out of their sleeve at the next quarrel. And so ugly duels turned into war, and we both dug up behind our own walls of regret, disappointment and frustration. Additionally, there were completely new battlefields. Because as long as there were no children, it was safe to say that we both came from different homes and we had different habits. However, when a helpless little baby lands in a crib, it turns out that our different views on parenthood are the topic of much anger and disbelief. He thinks it is necessary to let the baby scream out, when I know for sure it is not. When he opens the windows to toughen the baby, I close them to protect against a cold. The nap system, the frequency of feeding, the interference of grandparents, bathing habits, and so much more— all this made us (the tired parents) angry and willing to fight. We have tried to find some balance and a new way to be together. However, the journey to finding that balance has made me feel weak and deficient. As I mentioned, a social support, especially one coming from my husband, has been a crucial factor keeping me sane through the toughest of times. Without it, I felt I was crumbling and failing terribly as a mother. This, unfortunately, highlights my deep sense of deficiency and my sense that love is conditional.

4.4. Lack of equality embedded within me

Motherhood is not a private endeavour. In my experience, it is boundlessly and thoroughly public, and yet so lonely. I feel that in some way I have been told every day that I instinctively possess motherly tools by nature, yet at the same time I have been subjected to social dictates about how to deal with my children in order to be recognised as a “good woman” and “good mother”. Since becoming a mum I have experienced being judged by the environment around me. As I highlighted in my literature review, the model rooted in today’s public perception in western societies shows childcare as almost exclusively the role of the mother. I feel this to be especially true for the Polish society where I live and raise my children. I do not have to look too far to find examples of inequality in terms of the responsibilities of parenthood. In fact, my dad (and his dad before him) never changed a single nappy or bathed their children. While he was the fun parent, it was my mum, on whose shoulders the vast majority of the responsibility to look after myself and my sisters fell on while my dad was working and providing financially. After work, he somehow felt excused from any family duty as his contribution was already provided (in the form of his job). My mum never seemed to question it, and even seemed to encourage it telling him frequently he should just rest or go out with his friends and that she would handle the children. That is how her mother lived too. Interestingly, I find myself instinctively jumping into the same role, despite all the knowledge and awareness I have acquired.

We’re on a family holiday, my boy is six months old, and my girl just turned two. I’m walking around pushing the pram with her in it, in scorching heat, hoping she might have a nap just so I would get some rest. I delegated my son to my mother during this time. I am exhausted and frustrated, and dreaming of just a bit of time to myself to lie down and read my book. But the need to let my husband have a good time and rest is stronger than my needs. As I push the pram he spots me and offers to swap, I smile and tell him: “No bother, I’m enjoying it, don’t worry about it”, he goes back to playing beach volleyball and I am left with a growing sense of frustration and anger for putting it all on myself and my inability to act otherwise.

My recollection of a vacation to Greece, where I was with my family as well as my parents and my mother-in-law highlights the pressure I was feeling (mostly coming from within) to let my husband rest and to take the burden of taking care of the two young children by myself (or share it with my mum). I remember very well the conversation I had with my mother-in-law who was deeply shocked and kept asking me why I was acting this way (my mother-in-law lives abroad and we rarely see each other, so she was not familiar with how our family structure works on a daily basis). It hit me then and I recall thinking to myself - "was I becoming my mother?; and was I repeating the very same model that I feel crippled me in so many ways - in perceiving a role of a man and a woman; a role of the father and the mother; equality between genders and partnership in marriage and parenthood; in having the power to express what I want and need and fight for it; in the sense that I felt my ambition and career was secondary to my husband's, but also my rest, my happiness and my sense of being an independent being from my children. I feel that was something of a turning point for me, and while things did not just change overnight, I started taking small steps towards equality and partnership. It has not been a natural feeling for me to delegate the kids to my husband after he has finished work, and just to rest. I had to literally force myself to do so, and I kept saying to myself: "it is ok to do so" hoping I would eventually believe it. While I cognitively knew that looking after the children all day was also work, I just did not feel I deserved a break in the same way as my husband did. After all, he had something to show for his work (meaning the income which enabled our livelihood), and what did I have? A sink full of dirty plates, a messy house and two tired and often screaming or crying kids. However, each time I forced myself a little closer towards listening to my own needs and acknowledging that they are just as important as other family members' needs, I actually was getting closer to equality and breaking the cycle of gender assigned roles that were so deeply embedded in me. Unfortunately, a sense of guilt would usually accompany my attempts to let go of this constant care for my children. I had this sense within that my children are better off with their mother - me. And admitting this makes me feel ashamed. The feeling that only I, as the mother am able to take care of the children properly. Only I can dress them adequately for the occasion and weather conditions. Only I can prepare a nutritious and healthy meal. Only I can organise and clean the house in such a way that all household members can find their belongings. Only I can operate the washing machine. Only I can save on purchases for the whole

family. Only I can play with the baby. Ironically though, I still did not feel “good enough” even when doing it all myself. In my opinion, such a state of mind results from many years of educational neglect and the implementation of traditional ideologies in family life. It also stems from the examples I was exposed to while growing up. Such a sense of my own superiority has had a negative effect on my family as it not only has isolated the father of my children making him feel inadequate, but also put an enormous pressure on me and, eventually, I have just cracked under pressure.

The statistics I listed in my literature review chapter highlight the huge gender gap which has become even wider and more evident during the pandemic. Most of the household chores and childcare duties fell on women. For me, to understand how much our behaviour is dictated by gender roles, it is enough to look inward. I can literally feel the weight of many thousands of years of patriarchy, which pushed me in the generally accepted system of values and concepts. Growing up, watching and soaking up the “traditional Polish” family system that my parents represented, and their parents also, and many generations before them too. Resolute son and attentive daughter, disciplined husband and quiet wife, authoritative father and affectionate mother, enterprising subordinate and understanding boss - I unconsciously fit into this system of coordinates, so as not to be a stranger among my own. It took me many years to even start to question this, not to mention making steps towards changing it and breaking this cycle so that my children would be free from a gender stereotype burden. Referring back to my literature review, I felt that in order to be a “good enough” mum, I must not project any of my unresolved traumas or issues onto my children. I desperately did not want my children to be a solution to such traumas or issues or a tool to fix them. However, as I mentioned before, I was, on some level, compensating to my inner child and mothering my child self. Realising this resulted in an overwhelming sense of guilt and deficiency. How could I have been so selfish! Working through this during my personal therapy has enabled me to separate my own issues and create some space for myself, that was not there before. In that space I could look after my child self and consider all the gender stereotypes that little girl soaked up.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has made it extremely difficult to navigate, question and change the gender roles and inadequacies I was experiencing. The new reality felt terrifying, and worrying about gender equality seemed like a luxury I did not have. People were getting sick and often dying everywhere I looked, there was no vaccination or cure, and all I was able to think about was getting everyone through the day without catching the virus. It was a battle. I worried desperately about my family, especially my elderly grandparents living abroad. Each day everyone was healthy felt like a blessing but also evoked guilt - I struggled to feel happy or experience any sort of joy in the face of what was happening in the world and what other people were going through.

Holding

I hold my daughter
I never want to let go
And with that holding
I hold so much more

I hold myself
When I was only so small
And I hold my mother
When she needed holding too
And her mother before her
All the women I know
And realize that holding
Fills the voids and allows us to grow

So I hold her tighter
And heal all the wounds
All the times when I cried
And felt alone and doomed
I feel the need to compensate
And to make up for it all
But really it's the little girl within
That needs the holding too.

We have seen how the development of civil society entails an inevitable change in the roles of men and women in today's world, where women are increasingly involved in decision-making, gender equality is comprehensively defended and its ethnic and sociocultural dimensions are taken into account. The formerly rigid family form, in which the man was the breadwinner, is changing its contours. In my own experience, I have observed other women and have also myself been striving for equality in the family and a harmonious division of responsibilities between spouses. I am feeling the need (and pressure coming from within and from outside as well) to become more independent and to fulfil myself not only in the family but also outside it, in my professional and social life. I have been feeling the need and pressure to try to equate myself with men, both at work and in the family dynamic. I think that in the 21st century society, the two-parent family model seems more attractive and in line with modern realities. The traditional family model in which the father is the breadwinner and the mother is the housewife is (slowly) being replaced by another family model in which there is partnership and equality. I think that more and more women (including myself) realise that in order to be happy, or to fit into the new, modern standards of living, they must combine the main areas of their lives: family and work. The thing that caused me a lot of frustration and made me feel deficient was the sense the main spheres of my life must be combined in such a way that the different roles do not overlap and that I can reach my full potential in all areas of activity. A slow but sure process of revision of established standards and connections has taken a new turn in society. There is a lot of talk about body perception, about finding harmony within ourselves, and about how important it is for our overall comfort to learn to accept and love the diversity and uniqueness of people in a multicultural global reality. However, I think this process is not possible without understanding how existing patterns of relationships have developed, how notions of "right" or "traditional" have become entrenched in our minds, and why change is inevitable. We begin the big conversation about gender roles - the social perception of gender - and what is happening in today's world with the concepts of "man" and "woman" or "father" and "mother".

In this chapter I am discussing the roles of males and females (husband and wives; fathers and mothers; sons and daughters). There are clear dichotomies when it

comes to gender, even though those are socially constructed categories, not objective, universal categories (Burr, 2015). The idea of binary gender is very much at the forefront of this thesis as it is at the core of my own personal context. In my experience, there is a huge push in Poland towards fitting into gender stereotypes. I grew up experiencing this push on a regular basis (as a girl, I was expected to be polite, kind, caring, get good grades, clean and help my mum around the house, be tidy and dressed in “girly” clothes, etc), but did not even question it - or I felt I could not question it. However, when I became a mother and started to notice this societal need to gender-categorise extends to my children, I started to question it, really struggle with it and eventually rebel against it. Instinctively, I felt that is what a “good enough” mother would do. An example would be that I felt an expectation to dress my boy in blue and my girl in pink, and I was critiqued for not making them do “male” and “female” things. As my son is the younger sibling, he keeps copying his sister, something I feel is quite natural. So when he’d demand to wear an “Elsa” dress, while his sister was also wearing a princess costume, my natural instinct was to encourage that. Unfortunately that was met with a huge amount of critique from people I knew, and even strangers. What felt most shocking was comments like: “Do you want him to grow up to be gay?”. I felt struck, and helpless. I felt I wanted my son to grow up to be whoever he wanted to be, as long as he was happy. But I also felt this need to fit in and to be accepted as a mother. There was a big need within me to hear: “You’re doing a great job, you are a ‘good enough’ mother”. However, at the same time I instinctively felt that in order to be “good enough” I needed to follow my instincts and tune in to my children, which frequently would not conform with the common views around me. I would try to educate and reason with other people, mostly without much success unfortunately.

I am queuing in the grocery store, my baby boy is in his pram. It’s a really hot day and the queue is really long. My son is wearing a pink t-shirt, it also has some sparkly elements (a hand-me-down from his older sister, although I am angry that I feel the need to explain). The check-out lady is staring at me and my son as she scans the items, I can feel a very negative vibe coming from her. Eventually she can’t help herself and speaks up, but directing what she says towards my infant son: “And why would mummy dress you up like this? She doesn’t want you to be laughed at or have no friends when you’re older, would she? You would much rather wear a

blue t-shirt, with some footballs on it wouldn't you?", and she just smiles at me and continues scanning. I feel paralysed and enraged. I am speechless. I am surrounded by strangers and feel I want to shout but instead I leave without a word. How did she manage to make me feel like a terrible mother in just a few seconds? Why did I let her? I am mad at myself not for dressing my boy in pink, but for not being able to speak up and protect my child from her words.

I was raised to be polite and always show respect to older people, which often meant keeping my opinions to myself. There is a saying in Poland, which would translate to "Children and fish have no voice". As a child, I would frequently be told to be quiet, to behave myself, and I would not question it. In hindsight, I am realising that hearing such a message made my inner voice go weaker and weaker and eventually disappear altogether, even for myself. I was slowly losing my true sense of self, and as I could not hear myself, I could not find any true sense of happiness. Only now am I realising what a horrible thing that must have been to hear and how disempowering it was. As I grew up, and especially after becoming a mother, I wanted to fit in to society so bad, but I also felt this need to be true to myself and listen to my instincts. I started to question what would make me a better mum, and whether I was actually harming my children with being different and rebelling against societal norms. Each day I doubted myself and felt unsupported in my motherly decisions. But it just felt so wrong to box my children into the "acceptable" roles, that I also feel I was boxed into. As a girl, I was supposed to be polite, kind, calm. I was not to raise my voice or be "hysterical". I was expected to be smart, but not brag about it, get very good grades (at all times). I often heard: "you're not a boy" in the situations where I would get my knee bruised, eat messily, etc. Hence, when I watched my daughter being put in the exact same box, burdened with similar expectations and assumptions that I was, I just could not let it happen. I want her to have a voice, her own voice. To be able to shout when she needs to shout and to have a sense she can speak up when she has something to say.

I'm at some family event. There are a few women there older than me by a generation or two. Grandmothers, mothers of already grown-up children. At some point we start to talk about situations when mothers would save their children's lives or health. One of them brings up a story of when she fell down the stairs while

carrying her daughter. She was quite badly injured, but the child was fine. She held her so well that she saved her from any injury. In fact, the little girl barely even noticed anything had happened. The other lady told a story of how, in the eighties she was in a car as a passenger, with her little boy on her lap. Suddenly some kids ran out on the streets, the driver had to stop the car really abruptly and she twisted her body in such a way that she nearly fell out of the front window. But again, she saved her son, he was totally fine. The other one fell while rushing to work at 6 am, carrying her one-year-old son to the nurse. She fell in such a way she had to be taken to the hospital, but the child was okay, she proudly said.

I recall the very same stories, when I heard them nearly thirty years ago as a child. They are still the same. They have the same colours, smells and taste in my head. I recall thinking back then: "Those mothers have it tough, they always have to protect their kids at their own cost". An image started to form inside my mind, of a mother who needs to sacrifice herself for the good of her children. She must, without question. Otherwise she would not be a good mother. When I attended the family event a few days ago, listening to those very same stories yet again, I suddenly realised I am a mother too. I do not have to listen to those stories as a scared little girl just forming her view of what it means to be a "good enough" mother. However, I felt so overwhelmed at first, it took me a short while to realise I can speak up too. I now have a rightful place at this table. I said: "I actually do not recall a situation where I would save my child's life like this". They all went silent and looked at me with what I interpreted as: "You do not belong here", or "you're not as good of a mother as we were". I could hear their thoughts: "mothers these days, selfish and spoil". I am now thinking that this image of a sacrificing and suffering mother has been so embedded within me, that breaking out of it has been a painful, long and lonely battle, which I am still fighting today. As a little girl, I had this sense I should be forever, and without any question, grateful to my mother, grandmother, etc., for the sacrifices they were making. However, I am now realizing what a burden it is for a child and the adult that this child will eventually grow up to become.

When I became a mum of two children under two years old, I was exhausted and frustrated, and it was just the beginning of the pandemic, which also made me feel really lonely and scared. Any sense of society I had disappeared over night. So my husband suggested we seek some help and I posted an advert online. There were

not many responses - of course, people were scared of being around other people, even though that was before a strict lockdown. There was an older lady who said she loved children and would be happy to help me. Unfortunately, she came into our home bringing all her gender bias with her. She kept putting my daughter in a “girl box”, insisting she wears dresses, has her hair nicely tied at all times, that she does not shout. The nanny kept referring to the issue of respect for older people (which is a big thing in Poland and often treated as an excuse to silence people) and insisted it is impolite not to give a kiss or hug to someone when asked, or to speak back even and express one’s opinion. To this day, I feel guilty, and I feel I was not a “good enough” mother, for not stepping in and allowing my daughter to be exposed to such toxic influence. I felt confused and scared that the nanny would leave and I would not have any help. In hindsight, I also feel that this lady put me in my childhood role: I became a little girl again (as a child, I also had a nanny, who would take care of me the majority of the time, and who was extremely conservative and strict). I felt like this woman came into my home and in an instant wiped away many years of work I did to overcome those deeply embedded assumptions about myself. Around her, I felt like a silent little girl, and I allowed her to try and put my daughter in the same role too. It is still hard to forgive myself for not stepping up sooner. However, eventually there was a day, when I woke up and decided not to let her make me feel small and powerless anymore. I felt empowered enough to decide no one would ever make me feel this way again, and I needed to protect my daughter from such gender stereotyping at any cost. Of course, that was the day when the lady stopped coming to my home, and despite having much more work and feeling very tired every day, I felt a huge sense of relief and most importantly, for the first time since the lady appeared in our lives, I felt “good enough” as a mother. It felt so clear to me that it was so much more important to provide my kids with an unconditionally loving and accepting environment, even if it was at the cost of a clean home or a home cooked meal every day.

I’m at the park with my son. He’s having a bad day, keeps crying and clinging onto me. I sit down on a bench, hugging him and welcoming his tears and sadness. An older lady passes by, and with an intention of helping (I think), she says to my son with a smile: “Don’t be a girl now, stop crying and give your poor mum a break. Boys

don't cry!". This time I was not silent or paralysed. I learnt my role was to not let anyone speak to my children this way. Even though it was still too much for me to respond and challenge the lady directly, I just said to my boy: "Your tears are perfectly normal, and mummy is here for you". I walked away.

I remember that day as a turning point for me. I encouraged my son to express all the sadness and frustration he was feeling, and I protected him from judgment and pressure from others. And then I did feel "good enough", and I felt like I did right by my son. However, a sense of sadness appeared, and the question: would I ever really fit in and also would my children fit in? Do we need to fit in anyway? I consciously started to surround myself with people who were more open minded and tolerant than the mainstream Polish society and that gave me a micro substitute society where I felt at home. I signed my children up to private institutions which, even though came at the financial cost, offered similar values and made me feel like we belonged. Unfortunately, around that time when I started to realise that it was more important to go with my gut and be a "good enough" mother for my children, rather than "good enough" for society, and I started to feel like I had my small village of like-minded people, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, isolating us even more than we already were. It felt as though the world as I knew it crumbled around me and I was walking in the dark trying to navigate, not really knowing where I was heading.

Always

They always stare and comment

They say:

“You wore wrong coat
Or your hair is too long
You carry your baby too much
You have a not gentle enough touch
You talk too loud
You stand out from a crowd
You walk too fast
Or that you’re last”

They will sing this old song
That what you say is wrong
And so is the way you live
And everything you believe

But I learnt to walk ahead
Push away all this dread
Leave them behind and their stares
And learnt to say: who cares!

They laugh when I fall
They say: told you so
But I keep going up the hill
And all they do is stand still

CHAPTER V

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my experience of motherhood. Autoethnographic exploration.

“Now that we are experiencing a serious pandemic, mothers are caught, tethered among a myriad of roles, constantly wondering if they are spending “enough” time ‘being’ any of these” (Burk, et al., 2021, p. 226)

Pandemic

I wake up
Everything seems the same
But feels very different

Where are the people
Where is the traffic noise
The silence is screaming at me

The fear starts very small
Like a grain of sand
Inside my chest

But soon it grows
I can't stop it from spreading
I'm paralysed with it

No one knows anything
No one has been here before
We're all in the dark
Together
But so alone

As it has been established so far, motherhood can generally be a challenge, especially if the mother (and this is the case most often) has to reconcile, apart from duties related to the child (children), also other roles – employee, partner, volunteer, housewife, etc. The already complicated and uneasy experience of motherhood I have had become even more complicated when a huge additional stressor appeared - the global pandemic of COVID-19 - which started at the beginning of 2020 and is still continuing (with much smaller restrictions, thankfully).

In the existing literature, the pandemic has been found to have a negative impact on the mental health of pregnant women as well as mothers, causing depression, anxiety, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and more (Thompson, et al., 2022; Davenport, et al., 2020; Durankuş, et al., 2020; Wu, et al., 2020). It will not be an exaggeration to say that people of my generation had not encountered a pathogen so dangerous to health and life, spreading so quickly and on such a scale. I guess no-one also expected that measures to reduce the number of cases in individual countries could be so far-reaching. The possibility of free functioning in society was eliminated almost overnight. Care and educational institutions were closed, and a large part of workplaces switched to remote work. Many mothers had to accumulate all the roles and tasks that they normally performed consecutively at the same time. Homes were filled with bored and energetic children who demanded the attention and commitment of their parents who, apart from their inability to take advantage of the benefits of education at school/nursery, faced the necessity of the parallel realisation of professional goals and their own adaptation to a completely different reality. Therefore, mathematics and physical education lessons took place next to extremely important strategical online meetings, meetings with teams led by leaders with children on their laps, or business talks conducted from bathrooms, basements, gardens and cars become everyday life. It became my life: carrying out online therapy sessions with my toddlers screaming on the other side of the wall, while knowing my husband was anxious for me to take the kids over so he could get back to his own work; or trying to write this very thesis in the small scraps of time I was able to find while the children would nap (never both at the same time!) or watch cartoons for a few minutes before getting bored and demanding my attention again. I was terrified and paralysed by uncertainty, fear and the need to pull myself together in order to try to navigate this new uncharted territory. The pandemic changed my life

dramatically, I switched to remote work only and in an instant was forced to fulfil several full-time roles at the same time: caregiver, teacher, employee, cook and cleaner, and a mother and a wife. Balancing various spheres of life has been one of the biggest challenges of being a mother during the pandemic. Wattis et al., (2013) write about work-life balance and state there are three responsibilities to be recognised: work, family and personal life. Even without the pandemic, balancing these three sectors of life has been difficult for mothers (Oakleaf et al., 2019), however the pandemic has made it much harder.

“Women, mothers and caretakers, are in impossible, untenable situations with no end in sight” (Baker, 2020, p.16)

I realise that the pandemic is still ongoing, and hence my perspective lacks the distance and reflection it will hopefully have in the future (as I am writing this, I am thinking why is there such hope for this distance and already formulated reflections, and I am, yet again, convincing myself that there is beauty and value in a raw, still being processed, honest, personal account). However, over two years into it I can safely say it has been the most challenging time of my life. It was not just due to the pandemic health threat that I found it so difficult, however the fear, isolation and disruption to our still very shaky routine was the factor that just tipped me over the edge. Firstly, the start of the pandemic fell right at the time when my son was undergoing a lot of his treatments, which as a result meant I was hugely isolated from the rest of the family through all the hospital visits and stays. The coronavirus also contributed to already many health concerns and fears we had. It felt like there was nothing that I could control. I recall feeling terrified, lonely and really angry as I kept thinking: “Why is this happening now, why to us?”. After coming home from the hospital, the pandemic only added to what already was a very difficult time in my life. I was finding my way in this new reality of being a mother of two children under two. Inability to meet people, go to baby classes, invite friends and relatives into our home made me feel extremely lonely and isolated. My ideal view of the “village” raising children got crushed. The feeling of anger and the sense of unfairness kept growing. I was surprised at how much I missed simple physical contact with other people. A small hug with a friend, or a handshake. I was overwhelmed with a sense of loss of those beautiful experiences of people you care about coming to meet your

new baby as no one could come to meet my son. Moreover, some people in my family did not understand just how serious we felt about the virus, so when explaining our isolation we got some push back. Managing those tensions created additional frictions and stress. I realised that it became extremely difficult to stay in touch with people who had different attitudes toward the pandemic than I did. I lost any sense of community and relatedness with other mums. My natural social and outgoing routine of spending time with other mothers and babies got taken away and I grieved for it. My whole way of perceiving and experiencing social support had to be re-organized and re-defined.

All these feelings were aggravated by a sense of uncertainty and fear of an unknown disease, of contracting it and of the short-and long-term consequences it would have on our physical and mental health. I was thankful my son was a newborn and his life as he experienced it would not be as affected, however I worried about my toddler daughter who already then craved contact with other people, especially children, and enjoyed our usual outings and activities, which now became a distant memory. I was anxious about her social development and how a lack of direct interactions with other people would impact her. I felt I was failing her as a mum, despite having absolutely no control over it myself. Moreover, pre COVID-19 I felt the responsibility to plan my children's future and felt I had control over it. During the pandemic I could not predict what tomorrow would bring, not to mention what would happen in a week, a month or a year. This uncertainty highlighted my deep sense of deficiency and inability to be a "good enough" mother as, in my perception, such a mother protects her children and can provide them with safety and stability. I felt I could not. All that pushed my anxiety levels through the roof. I realise now I have had an internalised sense of responsibility for my children, and the fact that I felt it was all on my shoulders only increased that sense. Practicing "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996) (or being a victim of it) made me feel I could not ask for help or admit that I was not coping. I felt my problems were simply not big enough or worthy as the whole world was struggling and observing ever-increasing death rates. Yet, my sense of personal failure, going backwards, and depressive feelings were increasing just as fast.

The mother's attitude towards the child is associated with a universal pattern, essentially resistant to cultural influences (Tyszkowa, 2004; Plopa, 2005). This

finding especially concerns the emotional component of the maternal attitude (Budrowska, 2000). New challenges for women resulting from changes in the family model (Wojciechowska, 2002a, 2002b), as well as new patterns of paternity (Plopa, 2005), postponing taking up the parental role (Wojciechowska, 2002a, 2002b), different models and ways of constructing a family (Slany, 2013; Willan-Horla, 2013), increasing the number of roles undertaken by women (Budrowska, 2000; Wojciechowska 2002a; Titkow, 2012; Bakiera, 2013) modify the scope of behaviours included in the pattern in question. In the literature, the accuracy of the term “good mother” or “perfect mother” began to be questioned (Budrowska, 2000; Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009a; Brown, 2012; Badinter, 2013; Kasten, 2013; Graff, 2014), referring to the individual dimension of experiencing motherhood. That was a difficult thing to grasp or unify and hence mothers entered into a never-ending test of fulfilling this impossible standard, which often evokes a sense of embarrassment and guilt. I am optimistic that there is a slow increase in social acceptance for mothers to fulfil various roles (Sikorska, 2009). For me, the most desirable image of motherhood consists of combining one’s own ambitions and professional interests with the function of the child’s primary caregiver (Kowalczyk & Rzepa, 2015). However, both this model and the possibility of choosing other models of fulfilling the role of a mother are often sources of internal conflicts that arouse fear, anxiety and uncertainty in women (Wojciechowska, 2002b; Sikorska, 2009).

I have been learning to find some balance in my motherhood, combining my role as a primary caregiver to my two very young children, and reinstating my professional life. However, the pandemic has complicated things further, limiting (or even eliminating entirely) any childcare options as well as social support and any sense of normalcy and predictability. I recall the tension I felt to get back to work, but also the pressure to be a “good enough” mother and somehow make up to them what they were losing because of the lockdowns and restrictions. Make up for the horrible times they had to live and grow up in. Make up for the fear and isolation. I had no idea how to be a “good enough” mother in those unprecedented times. However, I was also torn and felt the pressure to return to my academic and professional work. I felt terribly guilty for feeling this push to focus on my work as I also felt I should just devote myself to my children during this time and ensure their safety and minimise their negative experiences at all costs, even my own. “What prevents women who

felt isolated and itched to return to the office from acknowledging so without feeling like a 'bad' mother? What prevents women who enjoyed full-time mothering to acknowledge so without feeling like a 'bad' feminist?" (Whiley, et al., 2021, p. 616).

After about three years of being a full-time mother (and feeling guilty for doing "just" that, all the way throughout), in every aspect it might involve: emotionally, mentally and behaviourally, with the restrictions easing off, I am now trying to restore a more balanced and diverse way of living, where there is space for my own needs too. After becoming a mother, I gave up a big part of myself, put all my own needs somewhere far away from sight, and gave up my career thinking I would be a terrible mother if I didn't give my children my everything. Just like my own mother did before (at her own cost I now know). Now I am realising that my striving for perfection is an illusion, and that it produced huge amounts of anger and frustration, as well as guilt and shame which, ironically, made me feel a bad mum. The level of frustration, which I could not contain, spilled over on my family. It was not as simple as deciding to postpone my work: I had deadlines and the pressure kept on growing. In fact, this very piece of work you are reading now, was the source of major stress during the pandemic. It felt impossible to write a doctoral thesis with two toddlers running around. I felt I needed peace and order to write, and my life was anything but. Mess and lack of order were overwhelming, and I now feel it also translated onto this work. The sense that my thesis might be chaotic or not linear and "tidy" bothered me for a long time, however I can appreciate the beauty of it now. It mirrors what was happening for me at the time, both on the inside and outside. I never was really writing alone, being frequently disrupted or having an awareness my kids are nearby. I had no idea what I was doing, not just in regard to work, but generally. I did not know how to be a "good enough" mother, never mind a "good enough" mother during the global pandemic! One thing I came to understand before the pandemic started, the thing that Winnicott talked about too, was that a "good enough" mother is supported by society, which I was being kept away from during the pandemic. I could not look to other people for advice, as no one had lived through such times before. I felt I was drowning. It seemed to be an impossible task to work with my children at home, without any external help. I felt like I was failing terribly as a mother, as an academic, as a housewife, as a wife, and as a person in general. Yet again, there was this sense in me that I could not take a break - that my husband's work was so

important to us that he deserved his rest so much more than I did. There was this pressure coming from within (but also the outside - I realise now, mainly social media) to deliver in every aspect of my life, and just like I did so many times before, I put on a brave face and pretended that I was handling it all, which I was not. One of the worst parts of it all was the feeling like I was the only one. Somehow I convinced myself that everyone was coping with this situation and that made me feel extremely isolated and lonely in my experience until I found some ways to talk to other mums in similar situations to my own.

I go the bathroom. It is the only place I seem to be able to get a few minutes of peace (not always anyway, but now my husband took over the kids). So now I do have a few minutes. Out of habit, I take out my phone and open Instagram. I scroll mindlessly, but feel my heart rate increase. I see news footage of people getting sick with Covid-19, I see the statistics: how many people got sick today, how many died. I see overfilled hospitals and respirators. I am terrified. I think of my own family and my terror grows further. I continue scrolling. I see mom posts: fun activities they've been doing with their kids: DIY projects, some games they've been playing as a family, healthy cookies they've made. Looks like they are making the most of the situation. In each of the pictures I see no mess in the background, no one seems sad or scared. I feel my anxiety and sense of deficiency growing. How could I be failing so miserably and how could they be doing so well, when we all live in the same world? How did they have the time? Did they not see the same news stories as I did? My few minutes of alone time left me feeling even more fearful and miserable than I was feeling before. I regret even looking at my phone and resent that it made me feel this way, but at the same time it is my only window into the world these days.

Due to the fact that the pandemic restrictions significantly limited the possibility of direct, personal contacts, a significant part of my social relations moved to the virtual space. Again, that is a two-edged sword. On one hand, at least I was able to maintain social interactions and hence minimise my feelings of isolation. On the other hand, as, most days, this was my only source of human contact outside of my immediate family, it was easy to get entrapped in the idealised worlds that are being so frequently displayed through social media. It has been found that that increased exposure to social media during the time of the pandemic has been linked to heightened levels of depression and anxiety (Werchan et al., 2022, Gao et al., 2020). I felt that each time I looked at my phone, I was bombarded with negative and hugely distressing information. As a mother, especially during the pandemic, I experienced

pressure to share ideals and successes on social profiles as frequently that was what I would see. While well-known social “personalities” in this role appeared quite regularly before, I felt I was being bombarded with ideas for providing children with entertainment, more efficient way of fulfilling household chores, faster dinner ideas, etc. As I know from my own experience – the reality of a mother working at home during a pandemic with two children under the age of four was a challenge and did not resemble in the least the wonderful moments spent with my own offspring fully focusing on their development. I felt everyone was handling the pandemic better than me. However, as I learnt to adjust the content on social media to better suit myself, I realised mothers also seemed to have a need to share the dark side of pandemic motherhood as well. It turned out that 100% performance of all assigned roles is simply impossible, and not just for me. It seemed that many people out there were making sacrifices and were just trying to survive. Knowing that felt freeing and somehow gave me the absolution I was looking for, for what I perceived almost as sins of not being a “good enough” mother and failing in other areas of my life. I decided to prioritise my children, as that was just what I instinctively felt I needed to do, and my work went on a back burner. I was painfully aware however that the restriction of professional activity could result in either stopping a professional career or losing a job, and in my case make me fail my doctoral degree. However, my motherly (perhaps even survival) instinct was taking over, hence the selection of roles for which the level of engagement could be slightly lowered was therefore relatively simple. I must honestly say, however, that each time I decide to turn on a cartoon for my child, sit them in front of the computer, or simply not take care of them with full engagement, it causes remorse, shame and guilt. There is this need within me to constantly strive for perfection. My own expectations towards myself come from within – my desires, ambitions, resolutions, as well as from the expectations of other people – my husband, mother, mother-in-law, friends and a certain social pressure. Some of these expectations feel extremely important and others much less important. Their compilation creates an internal image of an ideal mother that is specific to me. It fulfils its function if it motivates me to act, to change for the better. It has been a journey of learning what to hold on to and what to let go of. I have observed that the more this internal set of expectations deviates from the existing reality, the more guilt, bitterness, helplessness, sadness and regret I would feel. Excessive self-demands have had the power to immobilise me, because it simply felt

like if every solution is not good enough, it would be best not to do anything. A strong sense of guilt has made it difficult for me to make rational decisions. Additionally, low self-esteem which usually, in my case, goes in pair with guilt and a sense of failure, has made me more prone to listen to other people's opinions and numerous expert advice. More than half a century ago, Donald Winnicott said that a child does not need an ideal, but only a "good enough" mother for proper development. An ordinary, devoted mother who stops in the course of everyday life, slows down the pace of her life, pays attention to herself, her interior, her feelings, and the changing body, is "good enough". For me, the pandemic has successfully demonstrated that the high bar placed on me as a mother serves neither myself nor (even less so) my children and that I cannot take my mental health and strength for granted as it could easily be crumbled. In addition, the pandemic has brought into light how the traditional division of roles into typically female and typically male is not fair and caused a sense of harm and loneliness in me when, during the pandemic, I was deprived of social support, and sometimes also of my partner's support because of my need to make this fake impression that I had it all under control. How far off from the truth was that...

5.1. My marital relationship and gender roles yet again

"For parents, especially mothers of young children, the responsibility of caring for their children has landed squarely on their shoulders" (Burk, et al., 2021, p, 229)

We're sitting on the sofa. It's been a long day. The kids are finally asleep after a nearly two-hour battle. I'm always the one who puts them down. Wish I could have a night off from this long and tiring chore happening at the end of each night. But I'm not saying anything, not complaining. I know he's stressed too, and tired and had a long day at work... we stare at our phones mindlessly. TV plays in the background. There are up-to-date news alerts about the number of new Covid cases detected and deaths just from that day. The numbers don't even shock me as much as they did before. What a crazy time to live in. I've stopped planning, I'm not excited about anything anymore. Every day, I'm just surviving. We both are. Together, confined to this space. And yet so far away from each other, each of us in our own screens, finding any sort of escape.

I feel that the problem lies in the traditional division of roles in the family. The coronavirus pandemic and the related restrictions meant that many industries were forced to stop or change their current operations, which in turn had an impact on the financial situation of households, and my own household was no exception here. We adopted a traditionally heteronormative approach, in which I would mother our children, full-time, and he would provide. As I was forced to stop seeing clients, our household budget had shrunk. The pandemic situation forced my husband to organise work outside his company's premises, and into our home. The new conditions during the pandemic increased commitment to caring for children, something that could previously be delegated. Closure of nurseries and inability to get any help with childcare due to social distancing was particularly difficult. Szczudlińska-Kanoś & Marzec (2021) mention other difficulties which were also mentioned by parents in Poland: the limited possibilities of organising free time for children, the lack of relatives who could support parents in taking care of the youngest, as well as problems in dealing with everyday matters without involving the children. In Poland during the pandemic, changes in the division of household duties and parental roles have been observed, particularly in the area of childcare, it can be noted that parents made modifications in relation to taking care of their children.

I am playing with my two small kids in their nursery. F. doesn't walk yet, he doesn't even crawl. That's a relief- he can't disturb my husband who is working across the hall.. However, E. , she is super-fast, and can leave the room without me even noticing. I feel a constant sense of stress and pressure that the kids do not interrupt my husband who is working in the other room. The room he is working in has no lock, so E. can get inside quite easily. So each time I have to use the bathroom, or make a phone call, or even just go into the kitchen for a few minutes, I am stressed. I feel it is my responsibility to keep the kids away from my husband when he's working. After all, his job is so important to us. I look at my laptop lying on the kitchen counter, knowing there is my own work piling up, and I look at the messy kitchen around it, and the messy flat we live in, and my kids that I feel I should give more to than I am able to. A sense of panic and helplessness is overwhelming. I stuff it down, but I stuffed down so much lately that there is no space to put it. When my husband comes out for his coffee break, I put a smile on and act as if I have it all under control. But I am falling apart on the inside. It seems as though we live in some parallel realities, trying to survive this crisis by pretending we are both doing ok. I know he has a lot on too, so I don't want to add on with my problems. But I am not doing ok.

Based on my literature review and the studies I quoted, I feel it can be concluded that (in the context of Polish culture) the traditional division of responsibilities is a burden mainly on mothers. My own situation and experience are aligned with this statement as well. In more complex and stressful conditions, such as the pandemic, it has often felt like a burden that was extremely difficult to bear without the support of my husband, who was mainly preoccupied with his professional work, and navigating it in our home. I feel there is another effect of the pandemic related to the relationship between parents and it is extremely difficult for me to assess whether it is a positive or negative effect, again each coin has two sides. I had this realisation that regardless of whether the conditions are normal or exceptional, I am mostly alone with my children and home – despite functioning in a full (as it previously seemed) family. Isolation from the outside world has made it painfully clear. I have however, as a result, also realised that I am able to cope on my own with many things that I previously felt were out of my reach. While my husband was physically there, it seems there was this (unspoken) agreement that since his main task so far was professional work, also during the pandemic, his activity may be mostly limited to this. Therefore, I had to face not only my own work (I kept on trying to work on this thesis) but also – basically – the service of all members of my own family, which mostly consisted of taking care of my children, preparing meals, tidying, etc. We were both growing increasingly frustrated, feeling stuck in the roles we were supposed to be fulfilling. We were growing apart, each of us consumed with worry and uncertainty, trying to find a way to survive. I felt extremely alone, overworked and hopeless.

There was a point when I started to strongly protest against such a partnership. While many honest conversations with my husband helped me voice my dissatisfaction, a whole new wave of frustration came over us, as we both realised there was not much we could do at the time to change our situation. We both were able to acknowledge how our roles, yet again, became gender stereotypical, but we felt stuck in those roles as well. However, those, often painful, observations have, in the end, brought about a positive change. The time of the pandemic and intense lockdowns, from (what is still a small) perspective, has been a bit like a magnifying glass, bringing to the surface family issues, conflicts and dissatisfactions and forcing

me to acknowledge and deal with them. And while during the lockdowns and restriction there was not much we could do to change the situation, since then we have been implementing small changes which, step by step, drive us toward more equal role division. In hindsight, while that time was incredibly difficult, I was able to have many constructive, honest and productive conversations with my husband, which we probably would not have had otherwise in the crazy pace of life that we lived.

5.2. Impact of the pandemic on my professional and academic life

‘(...) the structures that held our worlds separate and (barely) functional collapsed, the two worlds of home and work collided, and we could constantly feel the trade-off between one and the other’ (Whiley, et al., 2021, p. 616)

The negative effects resulting from the global health crisis and restrictions have been felt to a much greater extent by women who, combining various social roles, in particular professional and family roles, have experienced a bigger burden (Burk, et al., 2021; Guatimosim, 2020). In my worried experience, gender inequalities have increased due to the pandemic, affecting women’s participation, development opportunities and career aspirations. Despite the fact that the position of women in the labour market has changed positively over the years, there is still no equality in this matter. Analyses of the labour market in Poland and in the world (which I quoted in my literature review) show still significant differences in the treatment of women and men. This is evidenced by the (persistent for years) lower economic activity and employment rate of women, their higher level of unemployment, wage inequalities or the low presence of women in senior positions and company boards. This is confirmed by data at the global level, which is presented later in this text. Gender inequalities in the labour market were exacerbated by the outbreak of the pandemic (Krause, 2021). It is worth considering how the period of the pandemic (especially hard lockdowns) influenced the economic activity of women, especially women who are also mothers.

I was in the unfortunate circumstance of making my first professional steps during the full swing of the pandemic after a break of being a full-time mother and also in a new country (I have never worked professionally in Poland having finished university and making my first steps in professional work in Scotland). I was confused and struggled with multiple and varied demands. On one hand I was aware I still had not finished writing my doctoral thesis (yes, again, the one you are reading at present), as my writing got interrupted twice by my maternity leave and the pandemic was the biggest blow to my ability to be productive. I felt a growing urge to make time for my academic work, as the time pressure was higher and higher each month. I also felt I wanted to and needed to get back to counselling work with clients (I have started to see clients again but only for a couple of hours each week which only made me realise I really missed it) and I also felt that with each passing month I was not working, I was becoming less and less competent. Additionally, I felt that my work as a psychotherapist and my academic work somehow both needed one another and complemented each other. I made an effort to seek out mothers as my main client base, which allowed me to gain a wider perspective on what I was writing about and, at the same time, all the research I was carrying out gave me more insight and theoretical background into understanding my clients. However, neither my writing, or counselling work (which I was mostly volunteering for at the time), provided the income and work contract that I felt I needed during that time, as we were hoping to buy a house (the first few years after moving back to Poland, we were renting and moving frequently, and after becoming parents, we strongly felt we needed to provide a more stable environment for our children, and a house was a big part of that). Also, during the strict lockdowns, having a garden seemed to be the highest luxury, as it was the only option for children to spend time outdoors, which, as I stated in my literature review, has been associated with decreased stress levels (Werchan et al., 2022). Living at the flat at the time was making me feel, yet again, I was not doing well enough for my children, and giving all that I felt the need to give them. Hence, for financial reasons, but also due to my own sense of deficiency and inferiority, I privileged my husband's work and career (as has been documented seems to be the case for many heterosexual marriages (Stone, 2007; O'Brien Hallstein & O'Reilly, 2012)). My husband's job was essential to our livelihood, and mine was not.

I was considering, more than once, giving up my academic work. However, I knew the sense of failure I would experience if that happened would overwhelm me. I wanted to believe there was a way for me to grow my career, one day, and completing my degree would be essential to that. Also, I felt pressure, for the sake of my daughter, and for all the mothers out there, to persevere. I decided to keep going, against all odds. To this day I am still struggling with connecting the multiple roles I undertook. I feel lucky though, that I had the privilege to consider quitting my research or counselling work as my husband has a stable position. I realise other women might not have had a choice, and that makes me feel guilty and even more of a failure - with all the resources and support I am still struggling to cope with the everyday reality of pandemic life.

I am sitting at my dining table, with my laptop open and a pile of papers messily spread around me. I am trying to read some articles for my thesis. Next to me, there are my two young children, my little girl with her nursery 'homework', which during lockdowns we'd be doing at home, and my little boy just grabbing anything he can and throwing it on the floor or tearing it, or painting on the table instead of the paper - which I am trying to ignore. I can hear my daughter cry as her brother destroyed yet another one of her drawings and I can feel my frustration grow. All I am thinking of is how much I need space and silence to do my own work and how much the time pressure and deadlines are crippling me. And then I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt and I feel like a terrible mother for not giving them my full attention. I feel like I am failing on every front. Even during mealtimes, I keep staring at an ever-growing pile of papers, crayons, pencils and think to myself: "When is it going to end? When do we get our life back? And our dining table, will it ever be just for eating again?". I am sobbing, sitting at that messy table, and wondering how can I go on, what do I need to give up, and is it ever going to end?

As my dining table was getting messier, the work backlog bigger, and the kids more and more bored and unstimulated, I was cracking. At that time, I felt as though I failed as an academic, as a mother, and as a person. I was desperate to get some guidance and instruction manual I could rely on to get through this time, but there was nothing. No one had done this before. I was overwhelmed by the sense of chaos everywhere around me and my own lack of control over anything. The lack of predictability and an end date to this situation were making me feel shaky and

unstable. The constant battle of what to prioritise - family or work - and zero time for myself - left me feeling like a failure - inadequate, scared and full of guilt. The boundaries between my academic work, household duties and childcaring blended and eventually became non-existent, which was even more challenging due to the lack of any sort of external support. Having such a high volume of responsibilities, and so little sense of accomplishment, success or end date to it all made me feel extremely stressed, exhausted and anxious. I was desperately trying to be a “good enough” mother but felt lost as to what that looked like in those scary and unpredictable times. What felt helpful, was implementing clear boundaries, rather than allowing for every aspect of life to be mixed together, like that dining table, which became a place of work, of play, of crying, of eating, of studying, of talking. Having clear boundaries (for example working for two hours while my husband is playing with the children, being with the children then without my laptop open at the edge of the kitchen counter, taking a bath in silence, without paying the bills on my mobile phone or responding to work emails). At first, I thought such boundaries would make me less efficient, however, they helped me regain some emotional balance and shake the feeling that I was failing in every aspect of life: work, motherhood and family, and taking care of myself. Of course, I was much less efficient academically and professionally compared to pre-pandemic times, as the childcare was mostly my responsibility, but at least I was not feeling as guilty for being “just” a mum when I was with my children; or for doing work and not being with them at all times. Kreiner, et al. (2009) claims that having boundaries between life and work (the actual ones or ones we perceive we have) helps people feel more in balance and be more efficient at each of the roles. Setting clearer boundaries allowed me to shake some of the guilt I was feeling and focus on the one thing I was actually attending to at the time. Caring for my children, making sure they were happy, without doing anything else, was also an accomplishment, although I needed to keep telling myself that at first. With time it became easier to see it that way, however, being so used to needing to see results that are quantifiable or easy to measure, I struggled to be able to be just a mum when I knew there was so much else needing to be done and attended to.

The situation of mothers during the pandemic was more complicated inasmuch as in traditional societies where certain phenomena and relationship patterns are still

visible, which determine (apparently naturally) a greater burden related to the role of mother and wife. Usually it is women who get the responsibility to look after the offspring and take care of domestic duties, at the cost of their work: “Being a working mother during a pandemic is a *disadvantage*” (Baker, 2020, p. 16). The mechanisms occurring in the labour market make up the so-called glass house in which a modern woman who wants to fulfil herself must function. Phenomena such as glass ceilings, glass escalators, glass walls, and sticky floors support sexual inequalities to the detriment of women. What most severely limits the functioning of women in the labour market are: stereotypes rooted in society; insufficient institutional care for children and dependants; the popularity of the traditional family model; and low level of wages (Deloitte, 2017). Most people consider it “normal” and “natural” to classify life into “feminine” and “masculine”. This is sustained by the traditional family pattern. In Poland, this division of roles is strengthened in education at all levels, up to and including professional, social and political life (Instytut Analiz Rynku Pracy, 2020). The time of the pandemic highlighted this division of roles even more and the gap between the declared and practiced equality of women and men became more visible and felt. Gender turned out to be a variable differentiating the adaptation strategies of individuals in crisis situations, in which the defence mechanism activates what was most strongly imprinted in socialisation – in this case, traditional gender roles. Returning to them is a blow in the struggle for equality, but also a withdrawal to positions that give a sense of security. Traditional role division also means more often than in the case of men, women declaring coping with a pandemic situation by talking, helping others, but also reducing their own needs. The costs of a pandemic for women include not only greater involvement in reproducing everyday life at home, but also deeper sacrifices that must be made to make it possible (Drozdowski et al., 2020).

Baker writes about inequality and hardships women have faced during the pandemic:

We knew all of these things, right? Study after study documents and analyses the barriers women *still* face at home and work. The pandemic made those barriers more obvious. While it already was impossible for many women to

manage their jobs and motherhood, the pandemic made it impossible for more women, including those privileged enough to be able to work from home (2020, p. 16)

Reconciling my professional career with family and home responsibilities, including childcare, shopping, cooking, online learning, and caring for good family relationships, has been extremely difficult during the pandemic. Something had to give - and some sacrifices had to be made. While before the pandemic the gender gap and inequality I was experiencing was easy to mask with the outings, social encounters, childcare options, during the pandemic, in the prison of our home, it became painfully obvious and clear. Based on the research that has emerged and on my own experience as well as experiences of mothers in my close environment, I believe it is women (especially ones who are mothers) who largely have paid the price of the pandemic. I have felt responsible for administering the family and home sphere in a crisis, to be the animator of free time, to take care of the homely atmosphere, and take care of dependent people (children). I felt responsible for everyone's mood, making extra effort to satisfy everyone's needs as best I could. However, I have painfully experienced the lack of time, freedom and space to take care of myself and just bottled up my anxiety, terror and exhaustion. However, I have felt the need and pressure to undertake all these new roles. There has been a sense of responsibility within me, which I now associate with an increased sense of insecurity or fear as well as my sense of deficiency as a mother. I felt it was on me to make up to my children for all the losses the pandemic brought on. A "good enough" mother would know how to do that, I was thinking. There were long stretches of time when I was unable to do any academic work, which made me feel frustrated and really embittered, and at the same time guilty that I had these feelings as I understood that was just the reality of life at the time. But the reality also was that I was falling behind with my own work and there was nothing I could do about that and no one I could get advice from, as it was all so new and no one had any experience in how to deal with this crisis.

Motherhood is already a challenging time for many women, during which we face various difficulties. In my own experience, being locked up at home and limiting social activities during the pandemic made me feel even more lonely and isolated

from the world than I would normally do in the early years of being a mother. I felt alone and scared, as there was no way to anticipate what the future would look like and the threats I was dealing with. I was not able to reach out to my own mother for advice, as she (or anyone else) had not experienced being mothers during this global pandemic. The sense of being alone in it was overwhelming. Before the pandemic, professional activity, for me, had been an opportunity to meet people, to make contact with reality outside of taking care of my children, and it had given me a chance to talk and exchange views with other adults. Hence, for this to have been taken away from me during the pandemic was a huge blow. I frequently felt helpless and stuck. There were depressive thoughts circling in my head around the unfairness of the situation and also frustration related to the fact that no one was really to blame. It felt as though I would never again be able to be myself and have space for my own development, career and passions. On top of all that, constant fear, even terror, for the health and safety of my family, was at the forefront of everything else. What I found helpful, other than learning to honestly communicate with my husband and voicing my frustrations, was reading online about other women in a similar position to my own. I was also able to get in touch and have conversations with other mothers who shared my feelings of loneliness, exhaustion, uncertainty and anger, and I found that extremely freeing and invaluable in surviving the most difficult times. This shows that all kinds of support groups for women or, more specifically, for mothers, play an important role. This applies to both professional issues and those related to family life and motherhood. It became especially clear for me as a mother that I had a big need for social interactions and a sense of belonging during the pandemic. My social media activity increased, as it was the only way so be in touch with other people and I found it extremely helpful in maintaining and strengthening my relationships and friendships during that time. Thomson, et al. also found in their study that “the changing use of digital technology during the pandemic has enabled social support and prevented social isolation” (2022, p. 1152). I will return to the issue of social media and how it impacted my motherhood, especially during the pandemic later in this thesis.

5.3. Searching for the silver lining

Having gained some distance to the issue of the pandemic and lockdowns now, I have tried to find some positives they might have had on me and my family. A coin always has two sides and throughout the worst of the pandemic I desperately tried to find some silver lining to it all, to feel it was not all for nothing, all my tears and despair, that there was a learning in it too. There has been some research carried out on the positive aspects of the pandemic and it has been found that some mothers were able to develop new hobbies and interests, form new friendships as well as strengthen the relationships they already had, develop a deeper sense of community spirit, and this enabled them to re-evaluate their lives and priorities (Thomson, et al., 2022). In my pre-pandemic experience of motherhood, I felt the push to be more than “just” a mum. If I was not in a constant rush and multitasking motherhood with my academic and professional work as well as having an abundant social life, I felt I was not doing enough. Whiley, et al. state:

“In an age where women have been increasingly empowered to ‘smash glass ceilings’ and reject traditional stay-at-home gender roles in favour of ‘having it all’, the COVID-19 pandemic has also allowed us a brief glimpse of what a different pace of life and a more sustainable world might look like, and brought to the forefront the many conflicting narratives that we, as mothers who work in a neoliberal context, embody on a daily basis” (2021, p. 613)

A modern, fast-paced lifestyle had been preventing me from spending valuable time with my family – my partner and children - constantly rushing towards something. A large number of professional duties, engaging in social activity, keeping a wide group of friends and the desire to multiply income inevitably limited the possibility of fulfilling myself completely as a parent. At the same time, the period of the epidemics and subsequent lockdowns could be regarded as an opportunity to change the functioning paradigm described above, or at least a chance to slow down and re-evaluate my priorities. It seems that the opportunity to spend time with my loved ones should be an opportunity to supplement several aspects of functioning in the family. First, I was able to learn more about my husband’s work and the challenges he would face on everyday basis. The ability to work remotely turned our home into

an office, so it was a little bit as if we became colleagues, meeting each other for coffee breaks. Secondly, although my inability to work (or limit my work to the absolute minimum) made me anxious and frustrated, I got another chance at spending days with my children while the nurseries were shut. Of course, at the time I would not call this “an opportunity”, instead I would say “burden”. However, now that they are spending their days elsewhere, I do feel nostalgic about that time when we were “forced” to be all together. My husband admitted he now feels closer to our children and had an opportunity to get to know them much better (this has been the case for one out of three UK based fathers who admitted that because of the pandemic, they feel closer to their kids (ResponseSource, 2020)). As a family, we have also all become aware that a house that looks like it is from a magazine cover is in fact impossible to maintain, and maintaining relative order (especially while being a parent of young children) requires an enormous effort – usually by one of the parents. This aspect, although difficult to arrive at, as both my husband and I really like to keep our house very clean, was particularly helpful as we both learnt to let go a little and yet again re-evaluated things that were important and things that were not crucial to our well-being. Another somewhat positive aspect of the pandemic was the time we gained as a family by not having to travel to work, etc. It made us realise how much time daily we would spend in traffic and the sacrifices involved. In hindsight, I feel that spending so much time in the group of loved ones only, having the opportunity to disconnect from professional duties or intrusive conversations with the wider environment, has been a blessing. We have gained the opportunity to share the responsibilities related to running the house and caring for children more fairly, even if in practice it only included my husband appreciating my efforts more as he still was mostly working professionally while I was the main care giver. However, that appreciation and gratitude helped me feel more valuable and capable, highlighting my external locus of evaluation (but that is a topic for another time).

Re-evaluation of my priorities and physical limitations to what I could do, forced me to slow down and learn to let go. In my journey to healing and becoming more at peace with myself, I had to learn to “let things be” (Tamas, 2022, p. 281). During the lockdowns, many everyday challenges came at me with doubled force, but with time, my expectations have lowered a bit. Thanks to social media, I realised that most of the parents were in a similar situation, with all or most of the household members in

a limited space, working remotely and providing care for the youngest children and support for remote learning for older children. Knowing I was not alone gave me a lot of comfort (Berry, 2022). In addition, the mental burden associated with the fear for the health of loved ones and my own health put things into perspective. Suddenly, it did not matter as much whether the sink was full of dishes, or the kids spend most of the day in their pyjamas watching TV: what mattered was getting through another day without contracting the virus, and being together. Slowly, there was a reduction in the level of expectations and requirements. I stopped aiming for perfection and began to embody the concept of a “good enough” mother in reality, which during the pandemic seemed to me the only way to maintain my mental and physical health. This was the process of me “allowing things to be” (Berry, 2022), or at least learning to do so. During the pandemic, things that during “normal” circumstances, would have made me feel like I was failing as a mother, became “good enough”. I started to appreciate the small things that otherwise would have probably been missed. As the social contacts were so limited, the bonds I was actually maintaining got deeper and enabled me to realise who was really important to me. Thomson, et al. (2022) found a similar phenomenon in their study, where mothers reported deepening of their relationships with some people and a sense of connection they had not experienced before the pandemic.

While I am able to identify some positive aspects of the pandemic, I keep thinking about the trade-offs and compromises that needed to happen in order to survive or to maintain some level of “normality”. It has been a constant balancing act between the various roles I was fulfilling, which suddenly collided. My role of a mum, but also my career-oriented self were in a state of permanent tension. When I would dream about being at work without my kids around, I instantly felt overwhelmed with a sense of guilt. I would feel like a “bad mum”. Simultaneously, when days on end I would only look after my children without having any space for work, I felt like I was falling behind, and I felt guilt for being ‘just’ a mom. There was a part of me that really savoured that time together: the lie-ins, the long bedtime routines, no hours stuck in traffic, taking the time to cook or bake, etc. But the other part of me ached to get back to pre-pandemic reality. It was quite a rewarding feeling when, at the end of the day, my daughter would say: “thank you mummy for baking with us today, and for the fun games during bath time. I wish we could stay like this forever, spend

every day together, and never go back to the kindergarten”. But then I saw her joy when she was reunited with her friends and had a day outside of the house. She, also, was happy to go back to normal, but also grieved for our time together, just like I was. “Sensemaking our lockdown experiences via the lens of critical femininity and femmephobia (Hoskin, 2019a, 2019b; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019) allows for the possibility that mothers who work can simultaneously relish their lived experiences with their children *and* grieve for its loss” (Whiley, et al., 2021, p. 615). I carry this ambivalence, the sense of relief the worst is over, and a huge sense of loss, with me to this day.

In this chapter I have written from a deeply personal perspective about my experience of being a mother in the midst of the global pandemic of COVID-19. I revealed my deep sense of deficiency and inequality. My struggle to see myself as an equally valuable member of my family is outlined as well as my struggle to let go. The chaos and mess of pandemic life was discussed, as well as my struggle to carry on with my professional work and my frustration related to my limited ability to do so. I talked about my marital relationship and show you some of the ups and downs I endured during this time. Finally, some positive aspects of the pandemic are brought in as part of my ever-lasting attempt to find some silver linings and lessons even in the worst of times.

Grey days of pandemic life

Each day looks the same
They are terribly grey
I miss the colours and the smells
The sounds of ringing bells

I miss the laughter
And what comes after
The peaceful bliss
Of a goodnight kiss

I miss the hugs
The sight of mugs
In the busy cafe
After an eventful day

Now it's always the same
And no one's to blame
For taking my joy away
making every day so grey

But I decide to paint
Without any constraint
Add some new shades
Break down barricades

And slowly we find joy
With colours we toy
Painting this new globe
With love and hope

CHAPTER VI

Guilt, Shame and My Sense of Deficiency

Shame

There is a shadow
Following me
It's often dark
But sometimes it's green

It makes me question myself
It makes me wonder and ask
Am I a good enough mother
Or is it all just a mask

I have often been told
To pay attention
How I speak and how I look
To constantly question

To be modest and calm
And not brag or shout
But this only put me down
And drove me to hide

So I question myself now
And I hear the evil laugh
Spreading within and screaming out
That I am not enough

Whose voice is this
That I constantly hear
That one makes me hide
And want to disappear

I have apologised for simply being me
But enough is enough
And slowly the beauty I start to see
In the imperfect, and the rough

6.1. Guilt and Shame as my shadows, following me everywhere

Reflecting on my instinctual behaviours as a mother, I realise how much pressure there is, a constant need to strive to be better and better. Hill Collins (2014) states that all mothers are subject to “controlling imaging”, which they are being judged against. Usually those images are of an idealised image of motherhood, which makes it incredibly difficult to feel good enough and instead puts a lot of pressure to take part in a race towards achieving a (in my opinion, impossible) level of motherhood. Every single weekend, instead of being happy we get to spend more time together as a family, I am on a mission to make it the best possible weekend for my children, and I frantically come up with exciting and unforgettable experiences we could do, as if I am trying to make up for all my shortcomings.

I realise that partially it is also due to looking at social media and having a sense like all the children out there have those amazing, exciting lives, and those resourceful, full of energy parents, and my need to play catch up. However, another big aspect that I am only coming to comprehend now, has been the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns. I feel that my children have been isolated for so long and forced to stay home, and I know I am trying to make up for it. The lockdowns happened during the time when they were still very young and only just learning about the world. They should have been exploring the world, meeting people, gaining new experiences and be free, instead the only people other than us they ever saw were wearing face masks, they had no contact with other children, and were constantly reminded not to touch anything. They were being kept in a golden cage, watching and learning about the world and making human connections through glass screens. They were told any signs of physical affection (for example hugs) were wrong and forbidden, the same as inviting people over and visiting them or exploring their surroundings in a sensory way. From their perspective, life was very different, and they did not understand why. As a mother, I felt incredibly guilty that this was the reality I was giving them, and when the lockdowns relaxed, I have this urge to make up for the “lost” time.

After such weekends, when I feel the need to come up with only extraordinary activities, I feel exhausted and upon reflection, I realise I am often unconsciously angry at my children and resenting them for feeling so terribly tired, emotionally and

physically. What a terribly vicious cycle! When I started to slowly think about what I could do to also take care of myself, I realised how much my children need a happy mother (which might also be just another expectation, I realize now). Only thinking about my children's needs and neglecting myself in the process was making me anything but happy. I am learning that caring for my children starts with caring for myself. I matter. My needs matter. My feelings matter. I keep repeating that in my head like a mantra. And not just because I am a living human being, but ironically, because I am a mother. And I say ironically, because ever since becoming pregnant for the first time (actually even before conceiving - ever since even starting to think about myself as a mum), I instinctively put myself very far behind everyone (but especially my children). Another aspect of this behaviour is the message I am actually conveying to my children: mum and her feelings and her needs do not matter. And I want them to feel that everyone in our family is important, and I want them to respect other people's needs and feelings. Yet, by example I am teaching them the opposite. This aspect of raising children brings up plenty of guilt within me, as it is a very difficult balancing game which I feel I am constantly playing.

The pandemic has also added a huge layer of guilt to my experience of being a mother. My increased levels of stress and anxiety caused me to feel I was not doing well enough for my children. I felt I had to make impossible decisions, and regardless of what I would choose, I would be left with a sense of guilt. For example, as the lockdowns eased off, and the nurseries re-opened, I had to decide whether to send my kids off to daycare and risk them contracting the virus, but be able to get on with my work, or whether to sacrifice my work and keep them at home, isolating them even more from their peers as a result. I felt that regardless of the decision, a sense of guilt would accompany me. I wondered if I would endanger my children's health for my own benefit if I decided to send them to the nursery. At the same time I was aware that if I was to keep them at home my level of stress and anxiety would continue to grow and have a negative impact on my family too. There were multiple dilemmas like this one that I have faced during the pandemic, compounding the sense of guilt I was experiencing.

Guilt and shame are two self-conscious emotions, which have been found to accompany many mothers and have a profound impact on mothers' well-being (Kerr,

et al., 2021; Staneva & Wigginton, 2018). Guilt has been accompanying me very often since becoming a mother. I feel guilty in all sorts of situations, for example after raising my voice or losing my patience with my children, when being away from them or when being with them but preoccupied with other things. In literature, motherly guilt and shame have been associated with unfortunate events or circumstances, which mothers perceive as resulting from their own incompetence, negligence or otherwise their fault, such as a child's illness (Kuhn & Carter, 2006), inability to breastfeed (Thomson, Ebisch-Burton, & Flacking, 2015), or mothers who struggle with balancing work-life balance (Borelli, et al., 2017). Mothers feel guilt for choosing to stay at home (Rubin & Wooten, 2007), but also to going back to work (Murray, 2015). It seems like literally anything could be at the source of guilt. Guilt has accompanied me every step of my motherly journey. At the time of being a full-time mother, I would feel guilty for not having a career, not growing and developing as a person outside of being a mum. However, there were times when I was working a lot, and then an even stronger sense of guilt would come at me, for being a "not good enough" mother. And then there were little situations every day, accumulating on top of each other.

I ordered a new set of plates, which I have been really excited about (little joys in the middle of the pandemic lockdowns), and the courier has just delivered them. I put them on the counter, out of my children's reach. After a day filled with tantrums and crying over the fact they cannot watch another cartoon or eat another ice-cream, they won't put their shoes on, or take their shoes off, I am exhausted. And, as I go into another room for just a minute, I hear the noise of breaking glass – my plates. They somehow managed to climb up on the counter and push the plates off. I am feeling a mixture of emotions, and at first I think it is anger. But then I realise I am terribly exhausted, helpless and frustrated. I shout, louder than I would like to admit. And as I look at my kids' faces, and they smile and seem surprised, I don't think they even realise they did anything wrong, they were just playing. I am feeling like the worst parent in the world. It's just plates, and those are my children, how could I shout at them? I am feeling guilty and ashamed. A thought comes through my head: "At least no one saw this" and I feel even more ashamed, for being relieved that no one saw - what does it matter? Being a "good enough" mum is for my children, and for me, not for show.

After reflecting on this situation, and many situations and days similar to the one I described, I am giving space and acceptance to my feelings of guilt, shame and inadequacy. As a psychotherapist, I am well aware that it is crucial for mental health to acknowledge one's feelings, instead of stashing them away to the unconscious. And an honest conversation with another person can be very helpful in expressing emotions. However, since becoming a mother, I have been hiding my emotions, from myself, and from others, and I realise it has been mostly due to the fear of being judged, misunderstood and seen as a bad mum as well as my need to self-present a certain image of motherhood I felt was acceptable. It has been ironic: at the time of my life when I needed support, understanding, help and human connection the most, I have been the most shut away and alone. I was afraid that if I were to honestly admit what is on my mind, people would think: "Is she not ashamed to even think this way?", "She must not love her baby!", "How lazy and ungrateful is she!", "She was the one who wanted the baby and now she's complaining", "Others have it worse and do not complain and cry as much, she should be happy", "I must avoid negative people like her". The fear of being judged forced me into silence, which in turn generated a huge amount of guilt and shame. The lockdowns have made it even harder to speak to people honestly, as doing so through a glass screen added another barrier. Moreover, during the times of lockdown, my internalised sense of guilt and self-blame became unbearable. I felt guilty about being in a bad mood frequently, worried what effect it would have on my children and as a result felt a huge amount of self-blame. I noticed then that I was assuming full responsibility for my children's anger or frustration, instinctively feeling those negative feelings were my fault. What has been most helpful in breaking that silence has been a sense of empathy, which I first received when I returned to personal therapy. Being a client for the first time since becoming a mother gave me a taste of what it's like to feel listened to without being judged and that gave me some confidence to try and open up to people again. As that confidence, and my sense of being "good enough" grew and evolved, so did my attitude towards sharing my feeling and admitting my shortcomings. To my surprise, I did not hear any of the things I worried that I might, instead I opened the door for other mums to also admit they shared similar emotions and questions. Being together in our sense of deficiency and constant pressures from the outside world, and after the loneliness the pandemic brought on, has made me feel like I could accept myself, with all my shortcomings, because I was feeling

so accepted by other people. But of course, the battle to overcome those negative feelings I had about myself has gone on.

Shame has been like a shadow following me ever since becoming a mother.

“Maternal shame refers to a domain-specific shame arising from negative evaluation of the maternal self-concept against socio-culturally derived ideals of motherhood” (Sonnenburg & Miller, 2021, p.661). I feel shame has been one of the most inadequate emotions for me, which I should have experienced when doing something wrong, but instead I experienced it when doing anything at all: shame related to what I do, what I do not do, who I am, and who I am not. Moreover, shame does not relate to only myself anymore, but (and I am (ironically) ashamed to admit!) also to my children. I would think: “Why does my child act that way? What kind of a mother am I that I cannot deal with their behaviour? What do other parents think of this?”. Hence there would be two layers of shame: I would be ashamed of myself and my children.

I am at the horse riding class with my daughter. Last time she absolutely loved it. She kept asking when we'd be back. Now she is screaming. She won't even go near the horse. She clings onto me and is crying. I cannot even hear the instructor. There is another girl, even younger than my daughter, on a horse having a great time. I feel ashamed and judged. But I consciously decide that to be a good enough mother, my mission is not to get my child onto that horse, but instead let her know her emotions are valid. I realise I would not think in the same way a couple year ago, but my therapy and a lot of self-work is clearly helping me be (what I feel is) a better mom. So I whisper into my daughter's ear that I love her and I see how sad she is. I let her know I am right there and not going anywhere. I feel bad for her but I also feel the emotions of self-consciousness crippling on me and trying to take over. I am aware of the stares I am getting from other parents. I worry that my daughter's behaviour will set off other children too, I can sense the tension. I feel like I should feel guilty and ashamed. But I am fighting it with all I've got. What was most helpful and became the thing that helped me stay on course was the instructor who said: "It's ok. You can't do anything else today, sometimes a child is just having a bad day. If she feels like riding, she will, if not that's ok too, we will try again next time. Let's take the lead from your daughter." What the instructor did, was priceless. She consoled and comforted me. She was my good enough mother in that moment.

Reflecting on my recollection of that horse riding class, I feel shame has been a feeling that was deeply within me, stemming from a sense of inadequacy, however it

was “externally imposed through public policy discourse, which can, in turn, undermine human dignity and social solidarity” (Leonard & Kelly, 2022, p. 857). And in that moment, all it took was for another person to show me compassion and understanding, for the shame to be pushed away. However, it is not always the case (in my experience it rarely happens) that I receive such support. Both social media, and the societal standards that I am surrounded by impact on my sense of shame and guilt with regards to my motherhood, which led me to view myself often as a “bad mother” or a “not good enough mother”.

Due to his medical condition, my son had to be born via a C-section and fed formula instead of breast milk. Even though I was aware it was not my choice, I experienced huge waves of shame and guilt with regard to those things. I recall a home visit from a midwife, who said with disgust: “Bottles, bottles, I see bottles everywhere, are you not breastfeeding?! Are not aware how good breastfeeding is for your baby?! I saw on your chart, your son did not have a natural birth, which is of course preferential, but is he not getting your breastmilk either?! Poor baby”. In that moment, I felt like the worst mum on the planet, and felt the need to explain myself to that midwife. Then I realised, that even if I had chosen to formula feed and have an elective C-section, that would still be my choice and I should not be made to feel bad because of it. However, at the time, I was fragile and vulnerable, and societal pressures were squashing me. Only after quite some time and a lot of work, was I able to rise above the sense of guilt and shame and pick the welfare of my child and my own over all else (as during the horse riding class).

I am on a walk with my two close friends, and our young babies in their prams. We are chatting about all the mum/baby related things, having a bit of a laugh. Eventually a topic of breastfeeding comes up (at that point they are now aware that my baby is formula fed), and they keep going on about how good breastmilk is, about how it impacts the bonding, and how good it is for the baby's health, etc. I can feel myself getting tense and anxious, and not able to say anything. I come home, with a huge sense of guilt and shame, and I burst out crying. I feel I should have explained myself - I have a good enough reason for using formula milk - but then I just feel angry at myself for having this need to explain and to be accepted by the outside environment, instead of seeking an acceptance within.

It has been found that using formula evokes shame in mothers, and causes them to doubt themselves and their competencies, as well as feel like they go against their instinct and nature and thus feel “exiled from the institution of motherhood” (Doonan, 2022, p. 530). My experience is in line with those statements, and using formula was just another example of what made me feel not “good enough” as a mother due to the expectations of others. I am only starting to comprehend the extent of sociocultural pressures that I have been adhering to, and my need to conform to society’s unachievable image of a “good mother”, and a huge level of anxiety, shame and guilt attached to it. It has been found that mothers who are desperately trying to rise to the level of expectations they feel is placed on them struggle to form a positive maternal self-concept (Chae, 2015). I am realising that my children do not need perfection, instead they need me to love them, and because of that love - unconditional, persistent and continuous, - but also imperfect, I am a “good enough mother” for them. I realise my children need to see me making mistakes, something that I have been so scared for them to see. Watching me fail gives them permission to make mistakes and teaches them how to deal with failures and learn from them. I am learning that my first responsibility towards my children is love and care and respect, all else will follow. My world is filled with to-do lists, pressures and a constantly increasing number of things that I feel I should be doing with regards to my parenting, and because of it, a sense of feeling overwhelmed and deficient has been my constant companion since becoming a mum. These days, I am allowing myself to admit that there is not always enough time, space and resources for it all. And I am learning that just because there is something that I cannot do (as I simply might not have the energy for it), I am not the worst parent in the world. It simply means I am a mother who does not have enough power and energy everything in that moment, and instead I do what I can, and that is enough. There are days when being a “good enough” mother means to survive. And then there are days when I feel like I am flying.

6.2. Social Media and its impact on my sense of deficiency

What if

What if
Instead of a keyboard
There was a handshake
Or better , a hug

Instead of a filtered, impeccable image
There was a snap of a true, imperfect reality

What if
instead of a well composed message
There was an honest, true reaction

Instead of clean floors and and carb-free diets, and morning smoothies

We'd see messy homes and less than ideal bodies , complicated relationships and days we
feel feel like shit

Let's embrace them, connect through our imperfections, let's not feel alone in this idealised,
desolate motherhood

Let's not try to impress
Instigate envy
Be greedy for the comments and likes
What do they mean anyway ?

Let's connect
Let's feel together
In our messy, complicated, beautiful lives

Anxiety, worry, doubts, dilemmas and tensions inherent in being a mother are not uncommon. Motherhood – although it is certainly a beautiful experience – also has its dark sides that are little talked about. The analysis of media discourse shows that it presents motherhood as a unique and joyful experience, and the messages focusing on the less positive sides of being a mother are rarely presented in the mass media. Sociocultural expectations placed on mothers are prevalent on social media, especially the “good mother” ideology, which includes the desirable traits, attitude and behaviours which mothers are judged against, and which also influence the way mothers perceive themselves (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Social media has been a big part of my motherhood experience from the start, and played a vital role in my sense of feeling of being or not being, “good enough”, as well as in my sense of being connected to other mums, especially during the pandemic, when most of my social interactions moved to online space and any sense of society or village I had I was able to access only through a glass screen. During the pandemic, especially the most restrictive lockdowns, social media became “the society”. It became the place I went to in order to be held and to find comfort and connection. However, I often found the opposite too - I would be left with a sense of deficiency and extreme loneliness. My relationship with social media and technology has been complex, ambivalent and has brought on a lot of contradictions ever since I became a mother and the pandemic has only deepened those emotions. I hated that my son’s first steps or his first words were being watched through the screen by my close family. At the same time, however, I was grateful that there was such a possibility at all. I resented social media for making me deficient and not “good enough” as a mother, but also I loved it for enabling me to stay connected and maintaining some sort of a social support. As social media has played such a vital role in my experience of motherhood, especially during the global pandemic, I will explore it in more detail.

After becoming a mum for the first time, I really struggled with what the media (especially social media) was feeding me, because my experience of motherhood and the reality of being a mum was so very different to what I was seeing. I started to feel that everyone out there was coping with the pressures of being a new mum, everyone but me. It seemed they all had perfectly clean homes, beautifully dressed, smiling babies, had time to get dressed and put some makeup on, and even have a sit-down meal. What was I doing so wrong that my baby was crying so often, and my

home was a scene of utter chaos, and I was permanently exhausted? Not to mention the state of my mental health - it seemed I was experiencing a full spectrum of emotions, every single day. I felt the overwhelming sense of unconditional love and gratitude, and also a huge sense of loneliness, frustration, anxiety, guilt, anger and confusion. What was most confusing was that I would sometimes feel all of these things at the same time, which then also made me feel guilty: how could I possibly feel so much despair and annoyance when I just received what I always dreamt of: a beautiful, healthy baby girl. I wasn't giving myself any space for the negative feelings, which made me bottle them up – ready to explode eventually. I just could not shake the sense of not being enough, not “good enough” as a mum, and a wife, and as “me”. And social media did a very good job at reasserting that feeling.

“Promoting more flexible constructions of parenthood through media imagery such as the portrayal of more relatable experiences of motherhood, diversity in family structures and women’s roles, and the inclusion of fathers sharing primary care tasks, may encourage the macrosystemic change required to better support women’s maternal development” (Sonnenburg & Miller, 2021, p.673)

In expert discourse, but also in popular culture, the “ideology of intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996) is popularised, which requires exceptional commitment and energy from the mother. Such messages can only increase mothers’ anxiety, putting them in a difficult situation of comparing themselves to the highly idealised image of mothers presented in the media (Sikorska, 2012). This aligns with my sense of not feeling “good enough”: no matter how much effort I was putting in, it never felt enough. I had this sense that I should try harder, do better, be better. The irony was that the harder I tried, the worse I was feeling. It seems I entangled myself in a web of demands and expectations that I decided to put on myself, under the pressure of (social) media. I craved to be able to be vulnerable, to feel it was ok to fail, and to sometimes just do the bare minimum, and for that to be enough. These rather rarely disclosed and verbalised desires and expectations of women – regarding the possibility of free and open expression of their feelings, fears and anxieties - relate to the fact that there is little social acceptance of their right to create their own biography and make their own choices, taking away their right to feel uncertain, lost and imperfect in the role of

a mother (Sikorska, 2009). I have not been able to cope with the idealistic image of the mother that was coming from sociocultural norms and social media. I certainly was not able to achieve that ideal image of motherhood, despite giving up my career, sacrificing the relationship with my husband as well as other relationships, and perhaps most importantly, ignoring my own emotional and psychological needs. Continuous (after all, raising a child is a long process) attempts to cope with the sociocultural demands (the actual ones and the ones we perceive as real due to social media) led me to feel a permanent tension, a sense of guilt and shame, anxiety, a sense of being a failure, a reduction in self-esteem, and states of depression. I can identify with Rachel Cusk who claims that caring for a child can be perceived as a sort of servitude or slavery. But being a mother does not mean the other parts of me have gone away. There is still the other “I” that a woman has been or would like to be (Cusk, 2003).

As a mother, I frequently wonder about how public I want to make my parenthood experience. In the era of Facebook and Instagram, which during the pandemic became my main way of maintaining relationships and contact with others, I frequently feel the pressure to share some photos (especially ones depicting the happy or interesting moments). I think partially this pressure is coming from watching many images of mothers and children online and feeling like I am somehow being left out when staying out of the spotlight or, even worse, like I am not coping as well as the others seem to be (which is in all honesty my perception of it all). Numerous motherhood related feeds pop up each time I look at my phone. There are the confessions of famous people, parenting blogs and Internet forums, public debates on motherhood and social campaigns. Such publications lead to the social circulation of new models of motherhood which transform the current model of a Polish mother (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009b; Bakiera, 2013). As I see it, there are two angles to consider the issue of parenting in the Internet era from. Firstly, it is how it affects us to be watching those distorted and idealised images of motherhood, making us feel not “good enough” and deficient in so many ways. Secondly, if we decided to step out of being just observers and share some parts of our own motherhood, there are fears of being judged, misunderstood, accused of dishonesty or feeling like deceivers if we too share just the good moments. I am not sure if escaping social media entirely would be possible for me, or if this is even what I would want; however, I feel it is

important to filter what I expose myself to and what I expose of myself. I have been trying to find a balance of how to use social media to my advantage (I actually have met some wonderful people online and learnt many valuable things). During the strict lockdown periods, social media has been my only window out into the world, and my only way of feeling connected to others, so looking back, I feel I really did lose my balance then and submerged myself in the online world. It has been reported by young mums that during the pandemic they had the need to distance themselves from social media as they found it increased their anxiety and stress as we all consumed them without balance (and it became a dangerous escape) (Kinser, et al., 2022). Since the lockdowns have eased off, I have been learning not to live (entirely) in social media and be present in the moment, without considering what comments I will get if I share a particular moment online. It is a difficult lesson to learn and a very tricky one as it is all a grey area, not black and white or just good or bad. And there is no one golden rule or recipe that would work for everyone. Ever since becoming a mother, and after the lockdowns have eased off especially, I feel I have been on a quest to find some balance in how I use social media and filter the content I am exposing myself to so it empowers me instead of making me feel deficient.

The common truth is that no one can speak so negatively about a mother as another mother (and, unfortunately, I have learnt that first-hand). In my own experience, pressure on mothers is ubiquitous. The very conception of pregnancy and the birth of a child I feel entails the necessity to receive “support” from closer and more distant surroundings, and often from complete strangers. I feel I have gone through this stage, listening (patiently or less patiently) to the advice of all those who already have the experience of being a parent. In my case, social media has hugely contributed to putting pressure on me as a mother. What I observed was this phenomenon that many (especially well-known) users of social media turn into experts on motherhood on the day they become pregnant, and even more so after they give birth and become a mother. I have observed that fathers are often seen as this background figure, almost in the shadows of the mother. That is especially true in the beginning of parenthood. I feel I pushed my husband into those shadows, I was the one who was pregnant, then I was the one giving birth and breastfeeding. I felt no one (including my husband) would be able to take as good care of my child as I was (all while feeling deeply deficient myself). I feel this attitude has crippled my

husband's ability to feel like an adequate parent and to contribute equally to the childcaring. At the same time, it has put an immense pressure on myself, I felt as though I was the only one who could look after my baby, and that I would somehow harm her if I left her with anyone else. It became obsessive and I was spiraling down the exhaustion path. Again, watching (in my opinion) perfect and fully involved mothers online only confirmed my assumption and internal obligation to keep going like this and strive for the very same perfection. Many internet celebrities strive to promote the image of a united, happy, trouble less family (Abidin, 2017). When watching such content, I immediately feel self-conscious about my own family situation and wonder if I am a "good enough" mum because I do not feel like one in comparison to what I see on the screen. In (my) real life, and in (my) real relationships, there are ups and downs, times of joy and of sadness and desperation. I feel that showing a one-sided image of family and motherhood (the happy one) creates the sense of being a failure by not being able to achieve those idealised standards, something which I painfully experienced on my own skin. However, it must be said that these days more and more bloggers and influencers are deciding to show a more "realistic" side to motherhood. This form of blogging about motherhood has not yet been scientifically studied as intensively. However, scientists say that showing a more "realistic" image of motherhood online is a feminist and empowering act as women struggle with the idea that mothers must be perfect parents and perfect people (Chen, 2013, p. 512). When bloggers or motherhood influencers share their "realistic" unedited version of motherhood, they show it's okay to have a weakness and share the struggles (Lopez, 2009). Celebrities with children have the opportunity to function in the media as a symbol with an assigned role. They frequently are fit, debutant, successful mothers. Each of the representatives of particular types of "social" mothers is subject to constant evaluation. In the case of social celebrity profiles, I have examined (as a mum and before becoming a mum too) - at what age famous people get pregnant, at what point in the relationship it happens, how they prepare for the birth of a child (regenerative treatments, rest, arranging a child's room), the child as their greatest (at the moment) achievement and how well they are dividing time between childcare and work - as if there was one right way to live one's life. It is not surprising that observing how beautiful and easy it is to be a mother through the perspective of a social profile, I have started to feel deficient. I have learnt, even during the best periods in my motherhood (when I was

well organised and physically and mentally quite healthy) that the reality, especially in the case of working mothers or those pursuing a scientific career, life is not as beautiful and flawless as it is portrayed in social media. There is no doubt, however, that observing those idealised images in social media has had a big impact on me. When taking a step back and gaining some distance, I can understand how I was only getting a glimpse of someone else's life online, the one thing they wanted to show, and not the complete picture of what their reality looks like. It has been worryingly easy for me to assume what we see is how it is, in this case - just good – without any moments of doubt, crisis, exhaustion or frustration.

From my own experience, and from observing my surroundings, I think that out of all social media, Instagram is becoming the most significant and opinion-forming medium, also in the category of health information. It allows for very precise targeting of all content and pro-health messages to a specific group of recipients, which undoubtedly enhances its effectiveness. When I became pregnant, I engaged much more with Instagram, where I sought not only information about correct health and organisational behaviour, but also expected emotional support and observed examples of mothers I would then strive to be like. To make it even harder on myself as I see it now, I also made social comparisons with non-mothers. I think there is always someone on the Internet who (seemingly) looks better, has a more interesting and fulfilling life, better relationships, and so on. On Instagram, I have observed something that I find quite interesting when reflecting back upon it: I noticed that many mothers feel superior to non-mothers because of the widespread cultural belief that motherhood is essential for the psychological fulfilment of women, and that a good marriage and family are considered very desirable for all women. This is something that made me feel really low and depressed in the many months when I was not able to conceive, even though I was not quite aware of this phenomenon back then. Now it seems very clear to me that each time I looked at social media, I was getting this sense of superiority from women who already had babies. Of course, when I became a mother myself, things seemed quite different to me, and I noticed that being a mother can also lead to me feeling inferior to non-mothers in some comparative domains. Some of the consequences of pregnancy, which I endured, such as weight gain, body deformities, postnatal depression and maternity leave, led me to perceive myself as inferior to non-mothers in comparative

terms such as beauty, career performance, and overall life satisfaction and happiness. Again, in hindsight I feel that it has been a long and painful journey (still not complete, and I do not think it will ever really be) towards learning to use social media to my advantage, and actually feel better for being a part of it, and not worse. I have started to make comparisons with other mothers regarding my competence to deal with potential threats to their beauty and professional performance that arise after being a mother, rather than comparing myself in those categories to non-mothers. And while I am aware that the ideal would be not to compare myself at all, I am not able to escape this trap.

My internal sense of being compared to others as well as the need to compare myself often causes me to feel inadequate in various aspects of my life. What I realised is that the comparison is frequently so difficult that I internalise a persistent sense of failure both relating to my career and to my parenthood, and this phenomenon affects many mothers (Press, 2006). In conditions of permanent fatigue and physical stress, on par with mental stress, it has been impossible for me to maintain a high (and steadfast) level of self-confidence in my own strength and abilities. It has been impossible for me to escape comparisons completely, even after becoming increasingly aware of the harmful impact it might have on mothers and their children. I compare myself both to the creators of content on social media and to the users who comment on the content. Comparing myself with someone who seems better than me causes negative emotions, such as the sense of failure and deficiency, frustration, annoyance and anger. Conversely, comparing myself with someone who seems to be inferior to me has caused positive emotions, but only short term. Another aspect of constant social comparison, other than a huge sense of deficiency has been that I found myself living in the online world almost more than I did in the actual reality. Instead of playing with my children, I would constantly just have a glimpse at my phone, treating it almost as a very short-term escape. The irony was that I would frequently look at profiles showing parents spending time with their children, and inspirations for creative play and ways of spending time. And while, on some level, I believed that would make me a better mum, and so I felt excused, I also felt an increasing level of guilt, shame, anxiety and a sense of failure as a mother. My real-life children and my real-life relationship with them suffered for it. I feel that each time I would go online, I would be putting my parenting

competences to the test – as if taking care of my children itself was not the biggest challenge in this matter. I realise now that we often do not know the background of the events, spots, photos and situations that we see on social media. Behind beautiful publications of happy celebrity mums there can be: sponsors (offering equipment for a child's room), babysitters (responsible for the quality of time spent by the child), make-up artists (providing mothers with a beautiful appearance), personal trainers and dietitian advisers (helping famous mums quickly and efficiently) recover after pregnancy).

Comparing my competences and skills with other mothers, not knowing the reality, and only the created (or perceived) image caused me great difficulty in being able to accept (or maybe even embrace) my own shortcomings and flaws. I think that faith in my own effectiveness as a mother has been crucial in my own perception of my parenthood but also in the quality of my relationship with my children. And what I mean by perception of my effectiveness is really the feeling that what I do is good enough. However, it is difficult to build a sense of faith in my own abilities while being bombarded from every direction with instructions, good advice or “liked posts” by celebrity mothers from social media. In addition to maternal competences, I have also compared my appearance, level of professional (or scientific) career development, the appearance of an apartment or house, and even the level of development of my own children, assuming that it is me who is responsible for how well my children compare with their peers. A reflection comes to mind as I am writing that my own pressure to compare myself with others has spilled onto my children and comparing them with other kids. I think it is an important realisation as comparing my children with others could potentially be very harmful to their development and their own sense of being good enough and unconditionally loved. In turn it could also lead to them starting to compare themselves with others and feeling deficient. I think another important aspect is coming to the surface here, and that is the fact that my own behaviours and emotions impact my kids directly, and also set an example for them. Hence, the pressure to really be “good enough” for them is growing even more. I would love for them to be able to feel comfortable in their own skins and to have a sense that they are enough, and they are capable, and they can be themselves and trust their instincts. But I do not think they will be able to achieve this way of being if I am constantly beating myself up and questioning my

effectiveness, efficiency and competences. I have also noticed that the more confident I feel as a mother, the more I perceive things like this as motivation instead of pressure, realising that being aware of my own deficiencies and striving to be better for my children already makes me somewhat good enough.

There are emotional ramifications for all these social comparisons mothers can make with other mothers (Tosun et al., 2020; 603). I have observed the shift of how I use my social media and who I follow (and who I compare myself with) since becoming pregnant. While before my feed consisted of various topics (travelling, fashion and beauty, psychology, food, etc.), after learning I was to become a mum, slowly the motherhood content started to overtake, and before I knew it, each time I looked at my phone I was literally bombarded with an overwhelming amount of baby, pregnancy and motherhood related content. Before I learnt to only observe people I could actually learn something from, be inspired by, or sympathise with, each time I went online I felt depressed, insufficient and guilty. Simply not “good enough”.

Thankfully, with time, I was able to pick the content so that I feel I mostly use social media to my advantage now, not the other way around. Also, as other parts of my life become more prominent (my career, the relationship with my husband outside of being just parents, travelling, etc.) so is my social media feed becoming more and more diverse, expanding my life and making it more full. Ironically, taking a step back from being a full-time mother and delegating some of the childcare to others, has made me feel like a better mum. I feel my self-esteem has increased and therefore I can focus more on the sense of fulfilment I get from being a mum, than a feeling of guilt. Because I get to be things other than just a mother (a wife, a friend, a therapist, and most importantly - myself), the time I do spend with my children is of much higher quality and much more pleasant, both for me and my kids.

Technology and social media were key ways of staying connected to other people during the heavy lockdown periods of the pandemic, however it has been a “double-edged sword”. Kinser et al., summarize the results of their study saying that technology has been both “a challenge and an opportunity” (2022, p. 5) for new mums during the pandemic. It enabled sustaining social relationships however the quality of those relationships has been of significant lesser quality than traditional contact. For me, another aspect that technology made easier for me during the

pandemic was the ability to attend some meetings, such as medical consultations or therapy sessions, which were not possible to do face to face. However, constant exposure to distressing information impacted my mental health in a negative way. I wanted to stay off social media entirely, but at the same time I longed for connection with other people. I was in a bind.

6.3. Again, what does it mean to be “good enough”?

My experience of motherhood has had many faces. It has been beautiful, full of laughter and joy, filling every cell of my body with happiness. However, it has also been dark, difficult and much more demanding than I expected. That side has been much less talked about, as if the negative emotions were not allowed to be spoken. It has resulted in a huge level of frustration and dissatisfaction. I have to keep telling myself something that might seem very obvious: that apart from being a mother, I am still a human being with my own needs. I found myself being surrounded by stereotypes and unreasonable ideals to strive for. In this case, being a mother is no different from any other life role I fulfil – each one is burdened with a package of norms and beliefs. However, in the role of being a mother, the pressure has been much higher for me because the stakes are really high - it is my own children's well-being and the biggest, most important role of my life (as I have deeply internalised it). I have felt pressure from society to always be happy, patient, devoting time and energy to my children one hundred percent, to have great self-control, a total lack of anger, to be well-groomed, rested and full of positive energy and to show initiative towards the children. I felt that the ideal parent is the one who never loses composure, cares about the needs of the child (ahead of her own), does not raise her voice, always explains everything patiently, can at the same time take care of the household, cook a delicious and healthy meal for the children, look beautiful and devote to the children, engaging in conversations, activating games and loving care. This is still a limited vision of the ideal as there was so much more to it. And as I see it now, the worst thing about it was not my vision of what the ideal is, but the sense that I must embody it in order to be a “good enough” mother. However, I am realising more and more these days that “good enough” also means rested and satisfied with myself as an individual, not just serving the needs of my children. Also, being “good enough” is all about making mistakes and being flawed, and learning from it and

growing from it too. It is impossible to achieve the “ideal of parenthood” because there is no such thing. Moreover, I have come to the realisation that my children do not need a flawless parent. Instead, they need authenticity and love, and a parent who loves herself too. My experience of motherhood has not been black and white. When I think about whether I am “good enough”, I think about situations in which I collide with everyday stress at work, fatigue at home and mental overload caused by the multitude of tasks I perform, and about the impact that all this has on my children and our relationship. Realising that I am operating in a grey field and feeling my motherhood does not fall into any of the extremes has been somewhat of a safety valve, which has reduced the level of uncertainty and provided, to some extent, “allowed” ambivalence. Sometimes being a “good enough” mother is keeping my children’s basic needs met, allowing myself to catch a breath. From my own experience, I can also say that limiting myself to being sufficient for my children is mobilizing – when I refuse to play with them, have no energy to provide spectacular attractions (most often it results from the need to perform professional or other duties, but sometimes I just need a minute for myself, which I am still learning is also ok), children begin to show initiative in self-service activities. In addition, ironically, I noticed that that boredom increases creativity. When I let go of control and was battling with guilt for feeling like I was neglecting my children for not giving them my undivided attention, they started to come up with creative and original ways to spend time and interact with one another. I feel that would not have happened with my constant presence. So, sometimes being “good enough” is also about taking a step back.

Sometimes being a “good enough” mother, for me, has been about how much I am prepared to let go of, and my ability to be vulnerable, ask for and accept help. In my opinion, the role of a parent and the very purpose of parenting is to respond to the child’s needs. Since I became a mother, I am expected (ironically, more and more I realise that this expectation comes from within) to organize the day (month, year) perfectly; to remember every detail and event in the life of the family (not only the closest one); maintain a clean and tidy house; provide attractions for children every day; have a refrigerator full of healthy (hand-made) snacks and a warm dinner for my husband right after his return from work. At the same time, I am expected to immediately return to my ideal form after pregnancy (mentally, physically and

visually) and to look great at any time of the day to the delight and satisfaction of the environment. In the catalogue of expectations mentioned, you can successfully find several full-time jobs: manager, planner, cleaner, babysitter, personal shopper, cook. On top of that there is of course my professional and academic work. In addition, finally, apart from performing all the above-mentioned duties, I am supposed to be a joy for the environment, always smiling and uplifting. In all this, however, a few important issues are forgotten. As I mentioned, the most frustrating aspect at the moment seems to be that I am realising how much of those expectations are coming from within. They are the pressures that I have put on myself, due to social and cultural norms that are embedded in me, and due to the way I was raised and the family model that I soaked up while growing up, and also due to my current environment and constant need to compare myself with others (both online and in real life). Also, there is an aspect of feeling like I am judged as well, however the environment focuses on what is seen around me, not what happens (or doesn't) in my psyche. Secondly, apart from that, I did not become a mother on my own – it seems, however, that for men the environment after the appearance of a child is not that demanding. The requirements described here arise under “normal” conditions. In my experience, in conditions that are particularly demanding, expectations towards me as a mother seemed to grow and became an increasingly heavy burden. I have always had this belief within me that the mother should be able to handle every aspect of parenting by herself (apart from the financial providing). In my environment, this belief is strong and closely connected with the statement that every woman is created for the role of mother and wife, and fulfilling these roles is the quintessence of her life, ensuring fulfilment and satisfaction. This is not always the case. In my case, the realisation that the role of a mother could be satisfying and could really be shared came only four years after the birth of my first child. Previously, I was convinced that apart from satisfying my children's needs (all, even those that the child himself did not signal, but I thought I should have), I also had to satisfy my surroundings – In terms of appearance, behaviour and other people's opinions about motherhood. Thinking about it now makes me deeply sad because then I realise that I “served” to meet the needs of others without being able to meet my own needs. One of the things that prevented me from having a breakdown has been to divide the responsibilities in parenting more equally (which in my traditional society requires some level of rebellion). When I talk to critics of equality in

parenting, I am met with the opinion that such an equal division is not possible due to the determinants of the parent's gender. I recall some conversations I have had with my own grandma, who would on one hand encourage me to grow my career and be independent, and on the other hand be surprised when I would leave my children with my husband for the whole afternoon or ask him to prepare dinner for the family. She would frequently say that mother nature equipped us (women) to care for our babies, the way men cannot. I would explain to her that the point is not that the men suddenly start breastfeeding – the point is that while the mother is breastfeeding, the man should prepare a place for the child to sleep. She would nod in agreement and then would look at the clock and panically say: “Oh no, look what time it is, I must start making dinner for your granddad, you know how grumpy he gets if it's not on the table at 7pm”. Those attitudes seem to be so deeply ingrained, that despite living in a modern society, and having multiple conversations with people thinking and living differently, my grandma (and my mum, and me as well, although to a lesser extent, I hope, and many, many other women) still put everyone, especially their husband and children so far ahead of themselves.

I am pregnant for the first time, I frequently imagine my child. I also imagine myself as a mother. What kind of a mother I aim to be. I recall when, as a little girl, I could not express my anger, or how there was too much of my mother and not enough of her at the very same time, how I her craved closeness and was pushed away instead. I think of it all and I promise myself to be better. It is more than a promise, it is a sure fact. My baby is still safe inside of me, safe from all my emotions and doubts. I wonder what I have to do to be better. My intuition tells me to do things differently. But how? Do I just do the opposite? Do I just fall into the other extreme? Would that be “good enough”?

Finding the balanced way to be a mother and really thinking about what is best for my children led me to wonder whose needs I was really fulfilling. Whose need for closeness is it? Whose need for co-sleeping? I want to give my children everything, in the process not thinking about what I need. A therapist once said to me that it sounds like, as a mother, I am trying to fulfil my own unmet needs. At that point, I could not accept that suggestion. However, now that my daughter is nearly five years

old, I am realising I have lived purely to fulfil her and her brother's needs. And, in the same way that I felt as a little girl, I still feel silenced and unimportant. Just as my emotions were dismissed back then, I dismiss them now. And as my spark would slowly die down, I wake up. Perhaps, it is through the process of writing it all down, confessing the darkest, most shameful aspects of my soul, that I want to speak up. Shout even. I do not want to be a sacrificing mother anymore, living in a constant sense of deficiency, guilt and shame. I want to break out of this vicious cycle of comparisons and perfection seeking, and say to everyone who made me question it, and to myself especially: "You are the best mother for your children. You are good enough".

There has been a huge level of ambivalence in my experience of motherhood. I love my children more than anything in the world, but I have also been grieving for my life before becoming a mum, and I have not realised that I was. And therefore, I have not created any space for that grief. It was simply not allowed. I felt that any level of complaining would make me seem ungrateful. And then I felt guilty again. When I did complain, I have on occasion heard "why have you decided to have kids if they make you so unhappy?". Such questions would normally come from people who were not parents themselves, or ones who created an image (usually online) of being perfect parents. I realise now that I felt silenced and misunderstood. Only now am I starting to claim space for a whole range of emotions in relation to being a mother and giving acceptance to them all, regardless how ambivalent they might be. I learnt that the more acceptance I give myself, the less of it I need from the outside. And during the pandemic restrictions, when the scope for social support was so limited, I started to really appreciate the value of being able to be my own friend at times.

When I first became a mother I was bombarded with various pieces of information about how to best stimulate my child's cognitive and emotional development, and in this process I lost the essence of the matter, which is good communication with my baby - something, that if I only let it, would come very naturally and instinctively to me. Hearing good advice from others, made me feel confused and caused me to make a whole lot of mistakes that I probably would have avoided by acting intuitively. Usually, my instincts lead me onto good paths, if only I allow them to come to the surface. However, due to my insecurity and sense of deficiency, I was not able to

trust myself. It is commonly believed that the instinct of motherly love is something innate, however, I have learnt this is not always the case, and love for a child does not necessarily arise immediately after birth, when the newborn is placed on the mother's belly. Sometimes it has to be worked on and comes after some time. I feel this is a very taboo thing among mothers, and related to a huge sense of failure as well as, in my case, shame. "The word taboo could be replaced with the word unthinkable or even unmentionable" (Murray, 2022, p. 503). I have painfully experienced this feeling with my second baby, which still arises as a sense of guilt, shame and maternal deficiency within me. I also felt I could not speak about how I felt. There were no acceptable words to express it, nor was there space or people that would welcome such confession. The lack of overflowing positive emotion felt to me extremely shocking and unexpected, because the overwhelming sense of love came so naturally the first time around. However, due to the fact that my second pregnancy was so stressful and full of uncertainties, and instead of thinking of baby names and buying cute newborn clothes and nesting, I was terrified of what was about to come, and exhausted from constant stress and frequent medical tests and doctors' appointments. On top of that I have felt guilty and on some level (I hate to say this) I blamed this unborn baby for making me feel like a terrible mother to the baby I already had. I remember very clearly the first moment my son was shown to me during the caesarian section, I recall feeling so stressed and anxious, terrified, but also relieved he was there and he could breathe on his own (we were not sure whether that was going to be possible). Because there were so many emotions, and the buildup and uncertainty were so big, this unconditional, huge love was not the first feeling that I felt, or maybe that I thought of. Of course, once I realised this - the guilt was overwhelming. This poor baby, not only did he have such a difficult start, but also me for a mother! I was crushed. And I longed to also be with my daughter, who I was separated from during that time, and she was just over one year old at the time. And (again, I hate to be saying this), but in comparison to my son, she felt just so easy to love back then, and so familiar. I felt I could not voice my feeling out loud, as I feared being judged and totally misunderstood. I was extremely alone in my fear and uncertainty. In hindsight, I can see that the love for my son was there all along, it just needed a bit more time to emerge. There were more important and urgent things at the time it seems. Adrenaline was very high and the survival instinct kicked in. Love did not feel like a priority at the time (although I feel the need to stress again,

that I realise now that it was there all along; and it makes me think about how huge of a pressure I feel as a mother to love my children unconditionally; there is no space for anything else). During that difficult time, I was on a mission to protect my babies and be reunited as a family, to survive this. Many people commented throughout this ordeal how strong I was being, without realising that I had this glass front, that I needed to appear ok, but also that anytime it could all be shattered and I would just be a pile of broken glass. Once we were home safe and together, only then I started to focus on really bonding with my baby and learning what it felt like to love each other. And while I might not have felt overwhelming love for my child (yet), I had a lot of concern for his well-being and the need to communicate with him, which was enough to start with. Again, I am learning that the pursuit of the ideal is never really successful, instead being in the moment and giving myself the space for ALL the feelings, especially the unwanted and undesirable ones, is what is important.

We are finally home, the four of us together at last, reunited, and safe. External interference feels unnecessary, even undesirable. I want to shut it all out and live in this bubble, away from the “good advice”, the pressure, the judgement and the need to be a certain way. As a mother of two, although I feel lost in many ways, left to myself, I am learning to communicate with my children well enough. And be enough for them. I do realise that the bubble we are in currently will not last, and we will be reintegrated into the world and society, but I do not want to think about it just yet. I just want to be in this moment. Just be. Be enough. I feel I cannot contain anything else at this point, but just holding (in a literal and symbolic way) my children and keeping them safe.

In his concept, Winnicott emphasises that the mother’s knowledge must flow from deeper layers, not necessarily dressed in words and matching generally accepted patterns. The basic things that a mother does with her child cannot be accomplished through words. In his works, Winnicott (1956/2000) also points out that no one (regardless of the level of their own knowledge and experience) is authorised to tell mothers what and how to do. Even though it might seem that we all do exactly the same things as mothers, especially as mothers of newborn babies – every mother and every child is different, which is something I also had to learn first-hand and at first I found it scary (“what, there is no standardised way of doing things??! No list I

need to tick off in order to be ‘good enough’??”), with time I realised this uniqueness is actually beautiful. Schemes that work effectively in one family may turn out to be completely useless in another. Even though I had solid plans and experiences (the knowledge I acquired before having a baby), my motherhood and everyday reality were significantly different from what I expected. Winnicott himself recalls that many doctors, teachers, and nurses who thought they could tell mothers what to do and who spent a lot of time instructing parents then become parents themselves and start to face some difficulties. It turns out that for the most part they had to forget about everything they thought they knew, which in fact was learned knowledge (Winnicott, 2010). They often found that this knowledge initially disturbed them to such an extent that they did not know how to behave naturally with their own first child. Gradually, however, they managed to throw away these useless layers of bookish knowledge filled with words, and truly engage in the relationship with the child. In the early stages of a child's life, it is nothing more than reacting to his dynamically changing needs, which resembles a guessing game. Indeed, the task is not easy at first. Eventually, however, the mother finds the cause of the unhappiness, and the mother-child parable briefly returns to balance. This, according to Winnicott (1956/2000) is “good enough” motherhood – it is about giving the baby a “holding”, both literally and figuratively. The mother is to create a world for the child in which they will feel safe and their needs will be met. The inevitable failures that the mother will make will also be an opportunity for development, because each of the failures will be remedied by the mother, giving the child a taste of what true success is. These relative disasters, which are about to be remedied, are undoubtedly of great importance for building consensus. It is precisely the innumerable failures, followed by a certain kind of concern to correct the wrong done, that constitute the transmission of love, the fact that there is a human who cares. In order to be able to take care of an infinitely dependent baby, a mother must identify with it, somehow taking over its features – she becomes very dependent on her own, while remaining an adult (Winnicott, 1994). A supportive environment that understands the delicate nature of confusion and dependence that mother and baby are in is extremely helpful for them.

“This global pandemic and its implications were experienced by most mothers not in a “we-are-all-in-this-together” way but in an internalised one. They felt

responsible for all the headaches the pandemic caused and adapted a highly individualistic approach to parenting. This is a symptom of greater and unaddressed social constructs and norms around what it means to mother today, as well as the breakdown of communities, which used to share some responsibility for raising the next generation of people” (Staneva, 2021, p.420)

My experience of pre-pandemic motherhood was dramatically different in this regard to my experience of being a mother during the pandemic, especially during the strict lockdowns. It has been found that loneliness and social isolation increased significantly during that time, for parents more so than non-parents (Buecker, et al., 2020) and as I discussed earlier, I felt that very deeply. My whole social support network crumbled overnight and with it, I lost my mental health buffer. I always embraced the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. However, the village got taken away from me, suddenly, and for a long period of time. Nothing felt, easy, predictable or clear. I felt out of balance and was easily frustrated and irritated. I felt the weight of it all on my shoulders, and I blamed myself for the reality my children were living in. My responsibility was to safeguard their health, well-being and happiness, and during the pandemic, all that felt out of my reach, which made me feel like a terrible mother. With time, I was able to navigate through this experience a little better, and find some silver linings to it all, which was a coping mechanism. I reframed my experience from something that was entirely horrid to something we could live with. For me, as a mother, the global pandemic of COVID-19, highlighted once again the importance of social support and shared workload between partners. I always knew I wanted to raise my children with a “village” around me, but never before have I felt so strongly about it until I was robbed of it. I realised that my motherhood is a social, not individual, endeavour, and being left all alone was a huge blow leaving me stretched extremely thin.

This chapter explored my sense of deficiency through the lens of my feelings of guilt and shame which have been particularly strong in my motherhood journey. I also spoke in more depth about my conflicted relationship with social media, and how on one hand it has been a great source of human connection (especially during the pandemic), and on the other, one of the greatest burdens to my mental health. My

fragile and uneasy journey towards finding myself as a mother and making sense of this experience has been laid out.

CHAPTER VII

The conclusion and implications for practitioners

My journey

The first page
I don't know what I'm doing
My sense of deficiency
Is overflowing

I want to say so much
But struggle to find a way
to express with gentle touch
All that I want to convey

However as I start
My heart begins to trust
That all of my doubt
Put on that paper I must

As it is a key to my inside
Where I expose my heart and mind
And as I open it wide
I hope to be kind

To find the empathy and love
For my mother self
To go below and above
"I'm good enough" to yell

And eventually it starts to change
I don't feel like a fraud
It is still rather strange
To accept that I am flawed
But still good enough to be loved

The major sins I listed point to my own deep insecurities, the issues and traits that I fear in myself and cannot allow—but I can sit with them, here, with you, in the cozy space of a “good enough” autoethnography—one where care and failure combine to lead us out into the world (Tamas, 2022, p. 286)

Below, I summarize every chapter draw out what each chapter’s nugget of contribution is.

The literature review chapter provides an academic background into the main topics of this thesis. It introduced the notion of what motherhood is, what emotions it evokes, as well as the concept of a “good enough” mother. Then, the existing research on the global pandemic of Covid-19 is brought together, with a specific goal of understanding the impact of the pandemic on mothers. Finally, I write about culture and its impact on how motherhood is perceived and experienced, specifically in my own societal and cultural context. This leads me to introduce the topic of inequality, specifically within in the relationship between mothers and fathers.

In the methodology chapter I give my rationale for using autoethnography as my research method. I talk you through my writing process and the struggles I encountered along the way. I explain why I am using poems, vignettes and my diary entries in this thesis, which I support with existing literature. In this chapter I make my struggles about distinguishing between what is personal and what is academic explicit. I talk about what it means to me to provide value and my difficulty in writing a deeply personal thesis, yet making it valuable for academics and for practitioners. I hope this chapter helps other academics in their own searches and their own research journeys as well as enhances their understanding of this particular methodology. In this chapter argue that autoethnography is the most suitable way to explore and understand the phenomenon of motherhood during the times of global pandemic. I tell my stories and share my experiences accounting for my socio-cultural context. I argue that autoethnographic research can enhance understanding of what it means to be a “good enough” mother, specifically in the context of the pandemic, which can be valuable learning for mental health professionals and academics.

In Chapter IV I explore my journey into motherhood and what emotions becoming a mother evoked in me. In this chapter I introduce my own experiences of not feeling “good enough” as a mother. I also talk about my own specific cultural and societal context and how much that has shaped me and impacted me as a parent and as a woman. Further, I explore my marital relationship and how my sense of inequality (externalized and internalized) became apparent once I became a mother. All that is explored through the lens of the pandemic and its impact on those issues. This chapter gives insight into the specific socio-cultural background I am presenting, which might prove to be valuable for practitioners in understanding the contextual circumstances of some of their clients as well as gain insight into what it actually could mean for mothers to feel not “good enough”

Chapter V focuses specifically on the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact it has had on my experience of being a mother. I explore how this global crisis impacted my own sense of deficiency. I talk about my sense of isolation and impact having to rely on social media and technology in order to stay connected to society and friends/family. Then I circle back to my own marital relationship and the gender roles within it and talk about how the pandemic impacted those. I also raise the issue of professional and academic work and the difficulty I have had as a mother in managing and fulfilling all the different roles for me as a mother during the pandemic. This chapter brings to light a whole new layer of understanding of what it might have been like to be a mother during the pandemic, something that might be valuable in counselling practice as well as in other helping professions.

In Chapter VI I write about the three most difficult feelings I experienced in my motherhood journey so far: my sense of guilt, shame and deficiency. I further explore the impact of social media on my sense of not being “good enough” as a mother. Finally, I outline my journey to coming to a place where I am more at peace with my faults and limitations, embracing the mess, uncertainty and mistakes I make along the way. So if you are a counsellor and reading this thesis, what do you take out of this? I believe this chapter gives an insight into those aspects of motherhood that are not frequently spoken about. It informs practitioners of what their clients might be going through, almost like they heard it before from a close friend.

I offer my story as a resource for counsellors, social workers and people working in other helping professions and encourage them to think about their own perceptions of motherhood, and the impact of the global pandemic on mothers they work with. Echoing Sparkes (2007), I hope my story resonates with you, dear reader, and that you “share it with others with a view to supporting and encouraging change at the individual and institutional level” (Owton & Sparker, 2017, p. 742).

Writing a conclusion of this thesis is not easy for me. The process of writing it has become an integral part of my life, I feel like it has been with me forever now. I did not anticipate how therapeutic writing this dissertation would be for me. I have learnt plenty about myself and experienced a catharsis and a sense of relief. By including visceral parts of my life in this work through the use of poetry, diary entries and vignettes, I was able to access the deeply buried part of myself and really stay with them which, in hindsight, was very healing. It allowed me to ease the tension around the topics I wrote about and really come to terms with my experiences as well as shake off my sense of shame and isolation. Even though it was not my goal at the outset, I found writing this thesis to be one of the most therapeutic, life enriching experiences. That there is no black and white way to see the world, no simple yes or no answers, no one universal way to deal with any experience. Instead, I learned and proved that there are multiple truths, no absolutes- both in life and in social science research. I feel a sense of freedom now, to shake off the shame and inadequacy. Hence, this writing has had a therapeutic impact on me as a writer. However, having said that, I did not write this autoethnography for myself, I wrote it for others. I used myself as a tool in order to do that. My own learning has merely been a welcomed side product not the goal.

In this thesis I have explored my experience of motherhood through the use of autoethnography. I have discussed the importance of using personal experience and reflexivity as a valid data source. The concept of mothering, specifically being a “good enough” mother in the context of a global pandemic, has been tied to the relevant literature and discussed in relation to it. I have opened up a psychotherapeutic conversation about, and contributed to understanding, what motherhood is, the emotions it entails, especially in the current times of the global

pandemic and lockdowns. I brought a fresh, personal perspective to understanding what it was like to be a mother in the current times of the global pandemic. I wrote about my sense of deficiency in the context of my sociocultural background, my marital, relationship, social media and my academic and professional work. I related my experiences to the issue of gender bias and a sense of inequality I have carried within. I hope my thesis has brought counsellors and psychotherapists a step closer to understanding the experience of mothers of young children and complexities related to that experience, specifically in the context of the pandemic. Understanding the difficulties mothers face has important implications for therapeutic practice as well as interventions supporting mothers with young children. I hope that reading this thesis and being a witness to my journey has enabled you to gain some understanding of my experience and through this form a connection with me. I believe that your willingness to accompany me and to take the risk to be a part of my story and feel some of my feelings may have offered the opportunity to deepen your own understanding and experience of being human. I hope I added some layers to your experiencing of the world, enhanced your senses, and provoked you to read between the lines. Maybe you got lost in this writing and somewhat consumed by the chaos that is so present here, and maybe you embraced the lack of certainty and clarity. Perhaps your empathy allowed you to feel some of my despair and doubt, but also my hope and love. I promise my account has been an honest and truthful one, but those truths are often not obvious and clear but lie somewhere out of sight, somewhere in between, and somewhere where they wait to be ready to be seen.

Through my poems as well as vignettes from my life I wanted to transport you to the here and now of my experiencing, to the raw, the painful, unclear and messy bits. However, only you can judge the value that participating in this project with me has brought to you and your life, whether it enriched your knowledge and understanding and inspired you to ask some questions, whether it moved you in some way and brought on an emotional response.

Upon reflection on the process of writing of this thesis, I can acknowledge that it has been, in many ways, healing, meditative, and eye-opening. It has been a therapeutic journey towards self-acceptance and self-understanding, as well as *really* grasping and feeling deep within the “what it means to be a ‘good enough’ mother and how

multi-layered motherhood actually is. Dissecting my experience of being a mother, especially within the context of the pandemic, enabled me to understand the complexities it involves, such as my own cultural and societal context, my experiences growing up and the layers of experiences from my ancestors that I embody and the relationships and pressures I feel. Through the process of writing, I was able to make meaning of my sense of deficiency and make steps towards having a more aware and fulfilling life as a mother during the global crisis of COVID-19, and after. This process, with all the pain and confusion it brought along, has deeply impacted and changed me. Taking my experiences apart and dismembering them allowed me to re-build myself and make me feel more of a whole.

My life as a mother has been full of challenges, turns and unexpected emotions. The pandemic has turned everything as I knew it upside down and forced me to re-learn how to be a mum and how to navigate the new, terrifying reality. It has also brought on a new layer of humility and forced me to consider aspects of my life and my experiencing of it from a new perspective. I have learnt I can never be prepared for the day ahead. In the morning, I can be the best mother on the planet (in my own perception of course), and by the evening, or even midday, I find myself to be the worst one. Then I feel like the kind of mother I never wanted to be, the kind I watched before being a mum, and promised myself not to ever become. It has been a rollercoaster, a battle filled with ups and downs. It is this ambivalence that makes it particularly hard, as I constantly must adjust and work through it, but it is also a part of life, and motherhood. What I have been learning is that I do not have to be (it is not even possible to be) a perfect, infallible, ever patient, or ever-present mother. I can be that sometimes, but it is always fleeting, and trying to catch that moment and make it stretch and last forever is impossible, and, as I learnt, leads to a great deal of frustration. What I have been learning instead, and still continue to learn every day, is that it is enough to be a “good enough” mother. Ironically, I feel that I am doing my kids a favour for it, showing them my humane, imperfect parts, showing them that it is a human thing to fail, and to make mistakes, and to fall, and to get up and try again. Over and over.

I have played a variety of roles throughout the writing process of this thesis, and I feel each of them has had a voice. Sometimes these voices were contradictory,

causing me frustration as I have had all of these roles in mind. I have been a mother, a wife, a researcher, a therapist and a client, a friend, a daughter and sister. I am a writer, and the editor, and an artist, a director and an actor at the same time. I feel in control as I am driving this process, and at the same time I am lost and walking in the dark naked. I dialogue with myself, or the different parts of me dialogue with each other, they debate, question, even fight. Hermans & Hermans-Konopka (2010) talk about the multiplicity of roles and positions in the process of writing and the dialogical sense of experiencing oneself. My “core position” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), which is my voice connects all of the various parts of self that emerge in this thesis, which all contribute to portraying and exploring my journey of motherhood, what it means for me to feel “good enough”, and how the pandemic of COVID-19 impacted those feelings.

I feel all of these roles come through in my writing and account for the non-traditional style of this thesis and many contradictions that I discuss. I am bringing together Winnicott’s concept of being a “good enough” mother, attachment theory and placing it all in the context of the global pandemic of COVID-19, which is my original contribution to the body of knowledge. As the pandemic is still ongoing, we still have no idea of the long-term consequences it will have on women, especially (working) mothers and what cost they will have to pay. I believe that, through my research and the lens of a world health crisis, I was able to highlight the need for more support for mothers, family bonding, mental health and support. My research brings us a step closer to grasping the phenomena of motherhood, and what it means to feel “good enough” as a mother, especially in such unusual and challenging circumstances as the global pandemic. I hope my project inspires others to explore further some of the themes that I wrote about, such as the positive aspects the pandemic might have had as well as the sense of loss and grief that it brought on, as well as ways to use social media to our advantage and by doing so to minimise the negative impact on our mental health.

Coffee

If I was to make a coffee
That tastes like my life
Would it be sweet like a toffee
Or would it be sharp as a knife

If I was to write a song
Telling you of my journey into motherhood
Would it be loud and long
Or warm and soothing like burning wood

And why do I have to pick
I can be all the things
I can change in a flick
When I spread my wings

So sometimes the coffee is sweet
And sometimes it is bitter
Sometimes it is served neat
And sometimes it's covered in glitter

But whatever it is today
I try to welcome it and greet
Pushing the expectations away
Learning that life is bittersweet

For those seeking therapy, addressing perfectionism and feelings of not being “good enough” and its roots in parents, it is important to break the cycle and not pass down dysfunctional family dynamics to the next generation (Bailey, et al., 2009).

Perfectionism has been found to often stem out of the early experiences of conditional acceptance based on accomplishments, where a child's sense of self-worth is strictly related to meeting parental expectations (Flett et al., 2002; Greenspon, 2014). Hence, children who believe they are loved and accepted only if they achieve set demands, tend to develop perfectionistic behaviours as well as thoughts and feelings (Greenspon, 2014). Identifying and exploring perfectionistic tendencies in parents can be helpful in creating a healthier environment for their children, one which values being “good enough”, not perfect (Winnicott, 1953). Bettellheim (1987) echoed Winnicott (1953) and also reinforced the idea of “good

enough” being enough and stressed the advantages of raising a child without a focus on perfection for the well-being of the child as well as the parents. Trub et al. conclude that “[t]he combined effects of parenting stress and perfectionism may have profound implications for the health and well-being of individuals, couples, and families” (2018, p. 2878). They highlight the importance of addressing perfectionistic behaviours and feelings in therapy for couples and individuals, especially when they are parents, so that the children can be raised with unconditional love and space for making mistakes and recovering from those. “The world is a complex, imperfect place, and our children must learn to live in it and to weather the imperfections, their own, our own, and those of others” (Gilsdorf, 2016, p. 2089). As a parent, I feel it is crucial to teach my children to be resilient, to get up after falling down and to not be afraid to fall again. But first I must learn that too, and that journey has been explored in this thesis.

Weaver & Swank (2021) state that more research is needed to understand the lived experiences of families during the pandemic, however in their study they found that with appropriate resources and support, counsellors can help parents manoeuvre the instability the pandemic brought on as well as endorse positive coping skills and family communication and cooperation. It is important to look at the family as a whole as well as each individual member separately in order to understand the short and long-term consequences the pandemic will have on our mental health (O’Sullivan, 2021). There are multiple directions for further research. One of those would be further exploration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mothers and children. As the pandemic is still ongoing, the topic remains relatively new and unexplored. Also, we still lack the perspective gained with time. Additionally, as the majority of research has been carried out on the negative aspects of the pandemic in relation to parenthood (Thomson, et al., 2022), there is scope and a need for more research on the positive effects of the pandemic on the psychological states. Moreover, I feel the impact of social media on the experience of motherhood should be researched further as the digital space is constantly changing and evolving (for example, when I was starting to write my thesis, most users relied on Facebook as their main source of social media, these days however Instagram is much more popular). Also, more research is needed in the specific cultural contexts, for example, it has been studied and identified that “good mother” ideology dominates

cultural discourses of motherhood in Australia, USA, United Kingdom, and Korea” (Sonnenburg & Miller, 2021, p. 661), and other countries should also be examined. I acknowledge that my sensemaking and experiences in this thesis are embedded in (and also limited by) my socioeconomic and cultural background. As I have shown, the pandemic has had a meaningful and real impact on people’s lives. Specifically, a sense of deficiency mothers have experienced during this crisis is a real problem for mental health and will possibly have a long-term effect in our society. It would be beneficial for therapists as well as other professionals (social workers, mental health professionals, health care providers, teachers, etc) to recognize and understand the extent of this phenomenon.

This thesis, with the use of poetry, vignettes, personal diary entries, encourages you, dear reader, to connect with me as well as consider your own experiences related to the topic. I believe this work also could encourage others to speak up about their own struggles. By doing so my hope is that we, as human beings, can realise how connect we are in our experiences and perhaps that can be helpful in overcoming personal difficulties related to being a parent in the times of global pandemic, sense of deficiency and isolation. And who knows, perhaps in this world where it feels like we are so disconnected, scared and lonely, we can come closer together.

My hope is that this thesis informs therapists and counsellors, especially those working with parents, children, couples, or families, and will enhance their understanding of the feelings of maternal deficiency, hardships of balancing professional and family life, and the impact of raising children on the relationship with a partner in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe other professionals, such as social workers, health care and mental health workers, teachers would also benefit from increasing their knowledge, understanding and sensitivity to this issue as that might increase their emphatic response towards their clients. I hope this thesis enables you to learn something from my experiences, just like I have learnt through the process of writing. But also writing this dissertation encouraged me to be more open and sensitive to learn from my clients. This thesis brings to light messy parts of motherhood with the goal of practitioners gaining more wisdom. It is a as though, through knowing my story in a deep and intimate way, they can gain more

insight and knowledge that they can draw on in their work. Bringing to light the hardships mothers face during a social crisis such as the global pandemic can be helpful in designing relevant interventions in order to lower maternal stress and improve quality of life and promote resilience. The aim of this thesis was to contribute research to the area of maternal deficiency during the pandemic. This thesis is a personal account of my own experience, which, I hope, starts a conversation around what it means to be a “good enough” mother, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, more research is needed in order to understand and explore further the long-term consequences the pandemic has had on our society. I have covered many topics in this work, yet I feel there are so many more that could be explored. But, just like I choose to feel I am “good enough” as a mother, I choose to settle for a “good enough” thesis. One that contributes to the field of knowledge and enriches the understanding of the topics explored, but also one that asks more questions and opens up discussions. This dissertation aims to encourage you to ask questions and make your own connections, not to seek the answers I might provide.

Finally, this thesis is for all mothers out there, who have experienced a sense of deficiency, isolation, guilt and shame. All moms who lived through the pandemic and carried the weight of fear and loneliness, fulfilling all the different roles all at once and doing their best to protect their kids from the scary reality we were all living in. I hope my transparency and honest account helps you to shed some of the heaviness you have been carrying, and let go of the sense of shame and failure. Perhaps this thesis gives you the space and incentive to think about your experience, and to heal. I hope it inspires you to be kind to yourselves and feel that you really are “good enough”.

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