Motherhood is a universal construct. This fact alone makes the study of mothers an important venture. While we may not all be mothers, or even able to imagine becoming mothers, we were all born of mothers. And while not all of us were cared for by our biological mothers, most individuals in Western society were cared for in the past, and will be cared for in the future, by mothers. Given the universal nature of mothering, it is surprising that until recently motherhood has remained almost invisible as a comprehensive area of academic study. This is not to say that theories surrounding the practice of motherhood and the impact of mothering on child development were not significant topics in the research and popular literatures of the past. We can even go back in time many hundreds of years to the works of some of the great thinkers and see how motherhood was understood. Certainly, these ideas from the past have informed how we imagine the roles and responsibilities of motherhood in the present.

The term “motherhood” dates back to the 1400s. Motherhood is a word that was and remains imbued with a sense of goodness, “something regarded as so unquestionably good as to be beyond criticism [and a state of being] representing irrefutable and unquestionable goodness and integrity” (Oxford English Dictionary). However, this everyday understanding does not problematize or recognize the socially constructed nature of motherhood, nor does it speak to the fluid and shifting nature of the practice of
mothering and its dependence on historical, social, political, and economic contexts. Instead it imagines simply that women naturally bear and rear children and that, for the most part, they perform these functions in a state of unquestionable joy. The voices of women (and men) who mother in the “real” world are largely absent from this imagining.

In addition to its universal nature, motherhood also provides a lens through which to view the complex world that women inhabit in contemporary Western societies. Women who enter into motherhood do so from complicated spaces, spaces further complicated by pregnancy, childbirth, and the caring of infants and children. Not only are these spaces defined by cultural, social, political, and economic contexts, they also involve women’s mental and physical health, their sexual orientations, and their employment situations, as well as the quality of their intimate and close personal relationships. Women who mother must negotiate the challenges of pregnancy, childbirth (or adoption), and child care from within those same spaces. In short, women’s lives are complicated, not simplified, by the prospect and reality of motherhood. Though the wonders of birth and the joys of motherhood are ideals celebrated in contemporary Western societies, not all women are able to approach and experience motherhood with such positive feelings. Thus the critical study of motherhood involves an understanding of the complex realities defining contemporary women’s lives and the consequences of those realities for women’s, children’s, and society’s well-being.

This text brings a decidedly social sciences perspective to the study of mothers and motherhood. In doing so, it emphasizes social structure as a critical variable for understanding the realities of women (and men) who choose motherhood (or have it chosen for them). More than 50 years ago, Naomi Weisstein challenged the discipline of psychology to include women as a legitimate area of study. At that time, she noted that “psychology has nothing to say about what women are really like, what they need and what they want” (1993, p. 197), simply because psychology did not know. A first step in expanding the focus of the traditional discipline was recognizing a need to include and make visible an understudied and essentially invisible group. At that time, the group was women. Early advocates for a “psychology of women” faced a number of challenges. These included both legitimizing the need to study women to make them a focal point in psychology and
articulating a knowledge base upon which psychology of women courses could be taught. Perhaps the most contentious of all issues faced by this new subdiscipline, putting it at odds with traditional psychology, was that it valued knowledge derived from disciplines outside of psychology (Richardson, 1982). In so doing, the psychology of women acknowledged the critical role that social context played in shaping human behaviour. Today we see the study of mothers in a similar light.

Pregnancy, childbirth, and the transition to motherhood are significant life experiences for most women and represent important choices for all women, whether they become mothers or not (Hoffnung, 2011). This stance is not advocating that women be defined by their childbearing capacity, but it is asking that we teach about mothers and mothering in ways that challenge the “motherhood mystique”—the shared cultural belief that motherhood provides ultimate fulfillment for all women. While there are no shortage of books and articles that focus on mothering, much of this literature originates from the popular press and outside the established methodologies of the social sciences. Despite the fact that “the world has close to 7 billion inhabitants, each of whom was produced by a women’s pregnancy” (Matlin, 2012, p. 319), the sheer frequency of this event has not made it a popular topic for psychological research, leaving mothers, mothering, and motherhood as almost invisible topics in North American psychology journals (Hoffnung, 2011; Matlin, 2012). When motherhood has been studied, the focus has almost always been exclusively on topics that could be associated with “problem mothers,” such as teen pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy, and drug use during pregnancy. While important, these are not the foundational issues that should inform social science courses in motherhood. Mainstream psychology still tends to ignore or pay lip service to gender, race, class, and sexuality in its research. As a recent example, Cortina, Curtin, and Stewart (2012), in assessing personality research published in psychology journals, concluded that there is still “a stunning neglect of social structure in contemporary personality research—a neglect suggesting that psychologists may find it difficult to respond to recent calls for attention to the intersection of these structures” (pp. 259–260). In short, attention to intersectionality un-simplifies what psychology has worked very hard to simplify. Supporting intersectionality in research on mothers is critical to fully understanding how social context
Interrogating Motherhood informs mothering practice. With that in mind, this text addresses some of the pressing social, political, and economic issues affecting mothers in contemporary Western societies.

We can all conjure up images of what motherhood means to us. These images may rest in our own personal experiences of being mothered and, for some, in the experiences of mothering. We are also confronted with an array of messages, on a daily basis, that promote both idealized and demonized stereotypes of mothers. On the one hand, we expect mothers to be protective, nurturing, and self-sacrificing, while on the other, mothers are criticized for being domineering and overly protective and are held responsible for all of the ills and evils that befall their children (Matlin, 2012). Mandates for the “good mother,” originating from many different academic and scientific sources, are also co-opted and translated for women by an influential popular media. Sophie Goodchild (2007), for example, reported in *The Independent*, in an article entitled “Monstering of the Modern Mother,” how “it seems that everything a woman does these days comes in for criticism from an army of child-rearing gurus, government campaigners and healthcare experts who are only too ready to wag the finger and dish out blame” (p. 56). Paradigms supporting notions of the good mother are continually shaped and reshaped by gendered assumptions, culture, and the context of the historical moment in which motherhood is being examined.

Although motherhood has emerged only over the past 25 years as a significant matter for scholarly inquiry, its exploration, as noted earlier, has largely taken place outside of the boundaries of traditional social science disciplines such as psychology. It is an area engaged by a variety of academic disciplines, and explored through a diverse range of topics (O’Reilly, 2010). O’Reilly coined the term “motherhood studies” to acknowledge and highlight scholarship on motherhood as a legitimate area of study as well as a discipline distinctive from other studies. As such, motherhood studies is grounded in “the theoretical tradition of maternal scholars” (O’Reilly, 2010, p. 1) dating back to the early 1970s. Feminist motherhood scholars credit Adrienne Rich for making critical distinctions between the terms *motherhood* and *mothering*. In 1976, Rich published a brief article challenging women and the discipline of women’s studies to take on a new world view. Since then, feminists have issued many other challenges that help
us to understand the constructions of motherhood as well as how those constructions, past and present, affect women’s experiences of mothering and, more generally, women’s place in societies.

Rich (1976/1979) used the term “motherhood” specifically to refer to a patriarchal institution that was male-defined, male-controlled, and oppressive to women; by contrast, the word “mothering” was identified as female-defined and focused on women’s interests. She described mothering as an experience that had the potential to be empowering for women. O’Reilly (2008a, 2008b) reiterates the notion that mothering, freed from motherhood, can be a site of empowerment. She goes further in defining “feminist mothering” as a term to refer to an oppositional discourse of motherhood, one that is constructed as a negation of patriarchal motherhood. A feminist practice/theory of mothering, therefore, functions as a counternarrative of motherhood: it seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is empowering to women. (O’Reilly, 2008a, p. 4)

Historically, women’s reproductive capacity, and consequently motherhood, was seen by some feminist theorists as a site of women’s oppression (Badinter, 1980). Rich (1980) not only questioned assumptions of patriarchy but took her discussions of motherhood to a new level by challenging notions of “compulsory heterosexuality.” By the mid-1970s other maternal scholars continued to acknowledge women’s oppression but also began to draw attention to the empowering aspects of mothering (O’Reilly 2008a; O’Reilly, Porter, & Short, 2005). Ruddick (1980) was one of the first feminist scholars to look at “maternal power.”

Kinser (2010) claims that “the relationship of feminism to motherhood has clearly been a complex one, even an ambivalent one” (p. 2). In her study of feminism’s relationship to motherhood and mothering she examines the constructs relevant to understanding the way in which beliefs and attitudes about women in general, mothers in particular, are shaped. Such constructs include power and agency, dualisms, essentialism, and diversity. Kinser highlights the importance of feminist writings that have interrogated the ways we think about motherhood, including our understanding of the ways in which motherhood can provide women with more power. While we may not all agree with the critiques and analyses offered by feminist theorists,
as Kinser notes, we all benefit “from feminism’s willingness to confront ideas, even when it makes people uncomfortable” (p. 26).

While empowerment has become a central and important theme in motherhood studies, allowing and promoting theoretical and practical spaces wherein to envision mothering as an optimistic and positive endeavour, it has done so at the risk of ignoring the social inequities apparent in the real world. It also promotes a potential false sense of agency that can be readily undermined by structural inequalities. And, perhaps most importantly, such a perspective privatizes mothering issues, making mothering practice a personal affair at a time when the issues surrounding mothering need to be fully restored to the public domain. The intent of Interrogating Motherhood is to place public concerns ahead of private practice and to complicate the discussion of mothering through a critical examination of those impoverished structures—political, economic, and social—that not only impose motherhood on women but also force mothering and child care into the background of women’s and men’s lives.

This text is organized around three broad themes: (1) the dominant discourses that have played an influential role in defining motherhood for mothers, (2) public factors shaping private practice, and (3) the ways in which women (and men) negotiate mothering in contemporary Western societies. Each chapter highlights the profound role that structural factors play in defining mothering and in determining the kinds of choices that women (and men) are able to make as they enter into the realm of motherhood. Chapter 2 following this introduction, “Reflections on Motherhood: Theory and Popular Culture,” looks at how theory and popular culture have influenced each other and how both profoundly shape our understanding of mothering and motherhood. Although individuals draw on their own experiences to understand mothering, theory plays a critical role in defining common knowledge and best practices for women negotiating the terrain of motherhood. Advice comes to mothers from experts such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and medical practitioners, and each new generation of mothers has been bombarded with academic theories and popular manuals designed to guide them through the challenges of pregnancy, childbirth, and child care—reinventing motherhood to suit or, alternatively, to challenge social, economic, and political sentiments of the era in which the advice is centred. With the possible exception of feminist analyses, casting
motherhood in terms of essentialism and biological imperatives has taken precedence over social constructionist perspectives and has set the agenda for mothering practice for the past six decades. Despite significant changes to women’s involvement in education and employment, cultural discourses of femininity continue not only to centre on motherhood as a defining feature of women’s identity but also to prescribe the ways in which mothering must be enacted.

Changes in the social, political, and cultural landscapes from the 19th century onwards have affected women’s roles in many different ways, including their rights to and their participation in education and employment. Chapter 3, “Paid Employment and the Practice of Motherhood,” looks at how the dramatic rise in participation of women in higher education and employment has profoundly affected family structures and women’s experiences of mothering. In the short period between 1991 and 2001, the proportion of women holding university degrees increased from 21% to 34% (Statistics Canada, 2007a, 2007b). This is a trend that continues today (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2015). Because more women hold doctoral and professional degrees, they also make up a significant minority of those holding positions as physicians, lawyers, and academics (Catalyst, 2011; Canadian Association of University Teachers: CAUT, 2011a; Canadian Institute for Health Information: CIHI, 2010). Although the employment status of women has changed, their roles and responsibilities in the private sphere have not appreciably altered over time. Working women with children are still subject to a family penalty—where women perform more domestic work and caregiving than their male counterparts (Mattingly & Sayer, 2006). While experts recognize that women’s participation in the workforce is essential for a healthy society and for a strong economy, women still perform the bulk of the work needed for the caring of children. As such, women living in contemporary Western societies are caught between the pressures and desires to be good mothers as well as successful and productive employees.

Discussion of the realities confronting women who are attempting to blend motherhood with paid employment leads logically into Chapter 4, “Enabling Policies: In Theory and in Practice,” explores family-friendly

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policies currently in place in several countries around the world to see how well these policies enable women’s equality. The discussion begins with an exploration of the global gender gap, and then looks at developments of the welfare state. The second half of the chapter explores family policies in developed countries pertaining specifically to the interests of working mothers. These include maternity leaves, child care, and economic supports for families. As the chapter describes, public policy both influences and is influenced by national and regional cultures. Laws regarding marriage, child custody, legitimacy, citizenship, and property are reflections of how we, in Western societies, think of families. These rules and regulations also shape behaviour. In relation to mothering, public policies are a product of society’s beliefs about the role of mothers in caring for and raising children, but they also profoundly influence the ways in which women are able to balance work with family lives.

Neoliberal discourses influencing public policy in relation to women and work also inform our understanding of poverty and its relationship to mothering. Such discourses are prone to removing responsibility from the public domain and reducing it to a private and personal issue. Chapter 5, “Mothering and Poverty,” looks at how poverty is defined in Western societies and interrogates the effects of poverty on the welfare of mothers and children. Poverty is not simply about income but also embraces the cumulative and exponential effects on well-being that result from multiple and overlapping hardships (United Nations Development Programme: UNDP, 2010, 2011). We currently see high rates of poverty in developed nations like the US and Canada, as well as huge imbalances in wealth among various groups in Western countries. In light of the social, economic, and personal hardships endured by many women prior to and during pregnancy as well as following childbirth, it is clear that many mothers who are forced to live in poverty do not receive the care needed to sustain healthy physical and mental states.

Just as poverty reflects the real world for many mothers living in wealthy Western nations, where “being poor erodes the spirit just as malnutrition erodes the body” (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women: CRIAW, 2010), we also see an erosion of the mental health of mothers in these same societies. Chapter 6, “Mothers, Mothering, and Mental Health,” explores the mental “disordering” of women who are in
their childbearing years. The social unease associated with depression and other mental disorders in Western societies for pregnant and postpartum women extends beyond concern about the mental health of individuals to concern for healthy fetuses and offspring. Pregnant women, from this perspective, are seen as containers or vessels. Their primary responsibility in coping with an affective “disorder” during pregnancy is to protect their unborn children; following childbirth, women become the protectors of their offspring. Depression, perhaps because of its prevalence in Western societies, to date has received the lion’s share of attention from the psychiatric, medical, and therapeutic communities in relation to postpartum women. How or even whether pregnancy, childbirth, and new motherhood should be conceptualized as risk factors for women’s mental health is interrogated in this chapter.

Chapter 7, “‘Other’ Mothers, ‘Other’ Mothering,” further explores women’s struggle to achieve “good mother” status in situations that go beyond some of the private and public concerns discussed in previous chapters. Middle-class stereotypes continue to largely dismiss poor, unmarried, young, and disabled women as incompetent or “unfit” to mother. Although in many Western countries gay marriage is legally recognized, motherhood for gay and lesbian individuals or couples has become a site of tension. Politics, culture, and religion clearly intersect with attitudes and practices surrounding who is deemed capable of mothering and who is not. Included in the discussion of “other” mothers are fathers, because mothering seldom occurs in isolation from fathering. At a personal level, a mother’s life and those of her children are often profoundly affected by the quality and quantity of fathering. At a structural level—social, political, economic—the ways in which fathering could be transformed in contemporary society will greatly affect women and the practice of mothering.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, “The Future of Motherhood,” ties together the themes explored in previous chapters and further challenges the notion that neoliberal discourses of mothering can be empowering to women when they occur within the current social, economic, and political framework. This chapter also revisits and challenges theory that has led not only to definitions of the good mother but to current intensive mothering scripts that are responsible for the heightening of expectations placed on mothers and that bring mothering practice to a whole new and unreasonable level.
In many ways this text paints a rather bleak picture for mothers, mothering, and motherhood in Western societies. Bleak as the picture may be, it is not an unrealistic one. Western societies continue to place the burden of parenting squarely on the shoulders of women while at the same time devaluing the act of mothering. Women in Western societies are being asked to spend more and more time, energy, and resources in caring for children. Yet the state does not reciprocate with the support needed for many women who, for example, mother alone, in poverty, or while engaging in demanding professional work. The result is a struggle that for many women and children means their lives will be lived in far more difficult circumstances than should be the case in progressive, wealthy Western societies.