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“Plugging In” Epistemology: A Theoretical and Methodological Manoeuvre in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

In this paper I aim to illustrate how an epistemological three-way manoeuvre I propose may work in qualitative academic research. Epistemology is critical to my research because I live the topic that I research and in this paper I chart a three-way manoeuvre between and through an articulation of my researcher self, theoretical framing and the intent of the research project. This paper is my response to Jackson and Mazzei’s (2013) work “Plugging One Text into Another: Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research.” I have included the paper title here to introduce the reader to Jackson & Mazzei’s work earlier in my paper in which they advocate a “plugging in” of ceaseless variations of ideas and theories. I suggest that a “plugging in” of forthright epistemology in academic research is an important text that can “plug into” theory and data for rich explorations in qualitative research. Articulations of epistemological foundations of research allow researchers to be explicit about their worldview and acknowledge that it is integral to their researcher self and therefore impossible to separate from research practice. In this paper I demonstrate a methodological move through epistemology, drawing on the epistemology section in my own research work which details my researcher positioning and is able to examine how my experiences of sole parenting in higher education has influenced and informed this study. I consider three critical incidents; my initial assumptions and judgement about sole parents, regulatory exchanges I experienced as un-helpful as I transitioned into postgraduate education and the institutional structures of postgraduate timetabling as regulatory and potentially exclusionary. Articulating one’s research positionality infuses research with context and embeds a “thinking with theory” which can open up new meanings in research by foregrounding the epistemological pathway that is fundamental to the research process.

Keywords

Epistemology, Qualitative Inquiry, Recognition, Accountability

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“Plugging In” Epistemology: A Theoretical and Methodological Manoeuvre in Qualitative Research

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In this paper I aim to illustrate how an epistemological three-way manoeuvre I propose may work in qualitative academic research. Epistemology is critical to my research because I live the topic that I research and in this paper I chart a three-way manoeuvre between and through an articulation of my researcher self, theoretical framing and the intent of the research project. This paper is my response to Jackson and Mazzei’s (2013) work “Plugging One Text into Another: Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research.” I have included the paper title here to introduce the reader to Jackson & Mazzei’s work earlier in my paper in which they advocate a “plugging in” of ceaseless variations of ideas and theories. I suggest that a “plugging in” of forthright epistemology in academic research is an important text that can “plug into” theory and data for rich explorations in qualitative research. Articulations of epistemological foundations of research allow researchers to be explicit about their worldview and acknowledge that it is integral to their researcher self and therefore impossible to separate from research practice. In this paper I demonstrate a methodological move through epistemology, drawing on the epistemology section in my own research work which details my researcher positioning and is able to examine how my experiences of sole parenting in higher education has influenced and informed this study. I consider three critical incidents; my initial assumptions and judgement about sole parents, regulatory exchanges I experienced as un-helpful as I transitioned into postgraduate education and the institutional structures of postgraduate timetabling as regulatory and potentially exclusionary. Articulating one’s research positionality infuses research with context and embeds a “thinking with theory” which can open up new meanings in research by foregrounding the epistemological pathway that is fundamental to the research process. Keywords: Epistemology, Qualitative Inquiry, Recognition, Accountability.

You must learn to use your life experiences in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work
(Mills, 1970, p. 216)

This article is a response to Jackson and Mazzei’s (2013) call in their paper “*Plugging One Text into Another: Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research*,” to avoid simplistic and mechanistic approaches to qualitative research that is devoid of context. In this article, I specifically aim to disrupt simplistic treatments of epistemological insights in research that tend to restrict the potential for epistemology to introduce substantive and multilayered new explorations and thinking with/through theory to academic research. Articulations of epistemological foundations of research allow researchers to be explicit about the meanings ascribed to knowledge creation and it facilitates a thoughtful space in research to share our researcher worldview and acknowledge that it is integral and therefore impossible to separate from our research. I propose that epistemology is critically useful in placing research firmly

within context and is another avenue through which research is able to think with and through theory. Often epistemology is limited to a paragraph or two, a gesture towards researcher positioning that whilst may be interesting, I argue, misses the creative and theoretical potential in utilising epistemology to open up research to alternative meanings. I advocate for a three-way manoeuvre through epistemology in research, a three-way link between researcher experience, theoretical framings which then open up research questions and tighten the framework of research projects. This paper incorporates illustrations from my own research that demonstrates this three-way manoeuvre that facilitates “thinking with theory” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 745) and embeds research work within context and theoretical engagement.

In their piece, *“Plugging One Text into Another: Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research,”* Jackson and Mazzei (2013) articulate a methodological practice that opens up ways of thinking with data through theory. They argue that this thinking with theory through data interaction enables them as researchers to question “question what we hear and how we hear (our own privilege and authority in listening and telling)” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 262). They take up Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of “plugging in” as a process not as a research concept. The process of “plugging in” was useful to me in articulating my own “plugging in” of epistemology in qualitative research and in this paper I aim to offer a methodological foundation for “plugging in” theory into qualitative research through epistemological processes and articulations. Jackson and Mazzei’s (2013) “plugging in” theory and data assisted me in responding to feedback I received in response to my epistemological writing and sharing in my research. This feedback strongly claimed that my epistemology section was “self-indulgent” and even “embarrassing” for me and limited my capacity to produce “objective” research. This feedback was from a friend from outside the academy, but his claims were frustrating to me in that I had failed to strongly argue in my research work for the imperative I felt for a coherent and detailed epistemology section in my research. For me, the epistemology section of my research enabled me to “plug in” my researcher-becoming subjectivity, to reflect on the ways how I came to think what I think is infused throughout my research project. I understand this embeddedness of my researcher-self as mandatory, as fundamental to interesting and honest qualitative research, so I began to grapple with how to explore and understand the links between my epistemological frameworks and the theoretical frameworks I drew on to examine my research topic. This is the “plugging in” process that Jackson and Mazzei (2013) share, through this reflecting, thinking and writing I “plug in” epistemological foundation and this is enmeshed with theoretical ideas because “the theory was in our selves” (p. 264).

Thinking with Jackson and Mazzei (2013) I understand epistemology as a process of folding my researcher self into the theoretical threshold, “the *I* of the researcher is always becoming in the process of researching, listening, and writing” (p. 266). Judith Butler (2005) wrote, “In speaking the *I*, I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by the *I*, since I always arrive too late to myself” (p. 79). Epistemology is critical to my research because I live the topic that I research. My attempts to navigate this research terrain as a sole parent postgraduate investigating the experiences of sole parents in postgraduate education, demanded a strongly reflective epistemology. I wanted to consider and articulate how my research self was infused throughout the project; indeed, that I live the thesis topic influences the whole conceptualisation of this research project. I understand this process as an unsettling of my *I*, my researcher subjectivity. Thinking with Butler (2005) I was arriving too late to myself, but late is not never and my research demanded a response and an articulation of the interactions within my becoming researcher process. My epistemology opens up the space for me to begin the work to express that “there are selves behind the projects” (Halberstam 1998, p. 63).

I quoted Mills (1970) above, “you are personally involved,” to illustrate the first part of my three-way epistemological manoeuvre, in other words, I am not at a distance from the data, interviews and participants. Epistemology is one of the endless entanglements (Barad) that create textured and interesting research and ways of thinking differently. Following Darlaston-Jones (2007) “it is essential for researchers to understand who they are, what they hold true, and to understand the inherent bias and prejudice that we are all subject to as a function of our context” (p. 25). Epistemology is not memoir, life-narrative or necessarily auto-ethnographic. Research does not require a full and complete story of how your personal experiences have influenced the research work that you do, this would be impossible in its incompleteness. Rather, epistemology in research enables space to illustrate that the “selves behind the projects” work has been considered by the researcher, reflected upon and articulated, not all of their life experiences, but critical and contextual connections between research positioning and the research project. To do this epistemological manoeuvre in my research, I drew from three critical incidents that I understood as turning points and creating a threshold space that constituted my becoming as a sole parenting in postgraduate education.

Epistemology, as a central and foundational component of qualitative research is theoretical. An epistemology lacking in theoretical framing fails to employ the potential for epistemology to open up alternative meanings and I argue may result in simplistic and mechanistic qualitative research. Thinking with theory in research can begin or be illustrated through epistemology, by interweaving personal experiences with theoretical framings, epistemology introduces theory to the research project and foregrounds how you intend to analyse the research data. Framing epistemology theoretically avoids simplistic versions of epistemology as statements of experience that seemingly results in a linear progression towards a simple interest and/or starting point for the research topic. I argue that epistemology facilitates an articulation of the intensity of this connection; that deeply held experience which became significantly influential to propose and (hopefully) sustain an academic research project. For me, my experiences of sole parenting as a postgraduate were significantly frustrating and worrisome that they not only prompted my research project but sustained the three and a half year doctoral process. Theory can elaborate on these complex connections between researcher experiences and the conceptualization of research projects. It does this by adding a layer of thought and complication to the researcher experience, to think about/of the researcher experiences through theory illustrates an additional analysis, it takes the experience beyond narrative reflection and binds research to its context and adds a depth of understanding that opens up broader questions in the research project. A theoretical framing places the research work firmly in context and limits dangerous assumptions of researcher objectivity and highlights the messy and troublesome nature of qualitative research.

Research epistemology that interweaves researcher experiences through articulations of critical incidents with theoretical framing can focus the research topic. The writing process central to epistemological work is useful in excavating what the research topic is as it shifts and evolves throughout particularly the research project design phase. Epistemology tightens a focus on the area of research and feeds the formation of useful data seeking questions. A strong epistemology responds to questions relating to why ask these research questions of these participants. Through epistemology, those questions of research form and structure are clear; these researcher experiences opened up questions that are explored through theoretical frameworks and that intersection is further explored through research questions. Epistemology that I advocate for is also able to respond to questions of reliability, validity and trustworthiness that particularly early career researchers are required to respond, by ensuring theoretically demanding research which has responded in-depth to one’s

researcher positioning. In this way, epistemology is able to alleviate some of Mazzei and Jackson's (2012) concerns regarding the transparencies of decision making by researchers who are "always already shaping those *exact words* through the unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative research agendas and timelines" (p. 746).

An epistemology that I have described here facilitates a "plugging in" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 747) of additional material; "a plugging-in of ideas, fragments, theory, selves, sensations" (p. 747). Therefore, epistemology can contribute colour, depth and an "authentic essence" to research because it enables a writing and thinking process that infuses researcher positionality throughout the research project, its design, implementation and analysis. I argue that epistemology introduces another voice to the research process to produce something new. "Voices (of data, of theory) make each other in the plugging-in and create new ways of thinking about *both theory and data*" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 747; emphasis in original). In the next section I provide a brief overview of my research project to provide a foundation for my subsequent illustration of how I incorporated a three-way epistemological manoeuvre in my research process.

Framing the Research Project

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the experiences of sole parents in higher education. A case study is a study of a "specific, unique, bounded system" (Stake, 2000, p. 435). My aims are, "concerned with revealing and understanding problems, rather than finding solutions to them" (Armstrong, 2003, p. 40). The purpose of this research is not to embark on a study that will make general empirical claims about sole parents, rather, this research is a theoretical analysis of the performativity of gender and how gendered constructs are accounted for in the context of postgraduate education by drawing from the insights provided by the 10 sole parent participants in this collective case study. Central to this inquiry is my aim to develop further understandings of the interactions and connections between institutional structure and personal agency in relation to how sole parents negotiate the uneasy terrain of postgraduate education. This research design enables an investigation into the constructions of an "educational identity" (Webb, 2001, p. 40) for these participant sole parents postgraduates because it draws from multiple data sources to examine the personal and institutional conditions of account.

Conducting a collective case study was important for this research project because it allows for a wide variety of data gathering techniques and facilitates a strongly focused and contextual research project because case studies report on bounded and clearly delineated social systems. The advantage of this is two-fold, initially it ensures that the research design draws clear parameters of what and whom will be studied ensuring that it is manageable with clearly defined scope and aims of doctoral research. But also, a collective case study anchors the work in a particular time, place and space, which becomes the context for the study. This doctoral research is firmly set in Australian universities, in postgraduate work and after 2006. These factors provide the contextual dynamics for this thesis and I regard them as important because it enables a sharp focus on research and academic trajectories and an analysis of a key social welfare reform; the Welfare to Work policy. My reasoning for this methodological framework draws from the work of Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) who notes that case study is especially well suited to producing "context-dependent knowledge" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223). This contextual focus on sole parents in postgraduate education stems from my own experiences and the following section begins to articulate how my experiences inform this research work as a theoretical positioning and foregrounded my data generation questions and interviews.

Towards an Authentic Essence Through Research Epistemology

“there are selves behind the projects” (Halberstam 1998, p.63).

The epistemology section in my research seeks to acknowledge and articulate some of the critical ways my experiences of sole parenting in postgraduate education has informed this research project. Judith Butler states that, “telling a story about oneself is not the same as giving an account of oneself” (2005, p. 12). In this epistemology section, I want to give an account of myself, as a sole parent postgraduate, as opposed to telling my story. This distinction is important because I give this account in ways that relate to this research work and which are necessarily partial and incomplete. “Although we are compelled to give an account of our various selves, the structural conditions of that account will turn out to make a full such giving impossible” (Butler, 2005, p. 20). My epistemology aims to avoid what Flinders and Mills (1993) called, “immaculate perception” (in Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 190), a tendency to present a clear and concise research project without reference to the ways in which the researcher arrived at their complex and emergent subjectivity nor attempting to articulate how this messy process is infused within the research. In response to this, I reflect on critical incidents in my experiences as a sole parent and university student and demonstrate how these experiences influence research questions I posed and the theoretical framework I utilise.

The connections between my epistemological insights, theoretical frames of analysis and research questions are critical to this thesis because this research aims to be, “generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (Yin, 2009, p. 15). These connections are illustrated through three key critical incidents drawn from my own experience, I describe the event/incident and how I came to understand that experience through theories of shame, recognisability and accountability that have critically shaped this research, its design, implementation and interpretative analysis.

I do not attempt to detail all or even most of how I have experienced sole parenting and higher education over the last 12 years. I regard that story as auto-ethnographical and as such, not my chosen methodology. The epistemological work I offer in this section is inspired by Judith Butler who writes in the preface (1999) to *Gender Trouble*:

At the same time that I was ensconced in the academy, I was also living a life outside those walls...it began for me, with a crossing-over...wondering whether I could link the different sides of my life. (p. vii)

Therefore, this section is my attempt to offer clarity and depth to my research positioning and to do this I have inevitably had to link my life outside the university with my academic work which culminates in this thesis. It has been a messy and problematic crossing-over and this epistemology begins to make some sense of that process. What follows, is an account of my crossing-over and emerging researcher self in order to demonstrate my reflective thinking about this research and my ontological positionings that influence the nature of this research project.

In articulating a reflective crossing-over, I am refusing more conventional research structures that seek, reliability, validity, trustworthiness and objectivity. I am aware that sharing some of the critical detours and epistemological uncertainty I have experienced as a sole parent postgraduate may problematize my recognisability as a researcher/postgraduate/academic within some sectors of higher education. Butler (2005) describes the concerns I address:

It also turns out that self-questioning of this sort involved putting oneself at risk, imperilling the very possibility of being recognized by another, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability as a subject. (p. 23)

Recognition within the academy is more straightforward for some students/academics, other are out-of-place and following Taylor (2012) “I argue that only certain subjects can make legitimate claims on the future – as educated, knowing” (p. 65). Drawing attention to one’s own sense of being out-of-place as an academic researcher is risky when the academy seeks safe and capacitated workers. Further questions as to what to “leave out” become salient when detailed and expressive epistemology is undervalued and often problematized as self-indulgent in academic research. I argue epistemology that is based on a three-way manoeuvre can mitigate putting oneself at risk by attending to the fundamental basis of research; that “there are selves behind the projects” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 63). Also, epistemology I propose provides a strong theoretical framework, highly recognisable in academic research. Furthermore, epistemology introduces the context of the research; it is perhaps the point of imagining and impetus for the project. The following section provides space for me to give a partial account of one/my/self and to illustrate, insofar as this is possible, how my researcher self has influenced the directions and substance of this research. Indeed, that I live the thesis topic influences the whole conceptualisation of this research project. Again, Butler (2004) reflects this foundational point, “[o]ne asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives” (Butler 2004, p. 308). An epistemological crisis is central to the first critical incident I share in the following section.

Critical Events and Epistemological Openings

The first crisis I articulate in my research epistemology section refers to my experiences of shame and “othering” that I had un-critically held in towards “single mothers.” This sense of shame and vulnerability associated with my pre-existing understandings of sole parents came to the surface when I was unceremoniously dumped/deposited into “becoming” one myself. Michael Warner (1999), states that shame “attaches not to doing, but to being; not to conduct, but to status” (p. 28). The immediacy of my shamed response to being dumped into solo parenting confirms Warner’s (1999) notion of shame. As my status changed to a sole parent, I felt shame because I attached to this subjectivity a deficit model to the status of sole parent.

Warner links this sense of shame to “a hierarchy of respectability” (Warner, 1999, p. 49), and he nominates marriage as a hierarchical social norm that denotes respectability. This hierarchy exists because “marriage sanctifies some couples at the expense of others. It is selective legitimacy...if you don’t have it, you and your relations are less worthy” (Warner, 1999, p. 82). Although Warner is discussing same-sex marriage, the point remains relevant for sole parents whose families “don’t have it” (marriage) and therefore are often seen as lacking legitimacy. Being unceremoniously dumped with a new-born baby into sole parenting I felt a slide down the hierarchy of respectability and a sense of shame for being a “less worthy” family for myself and my child. The second critical incident I discuss in my research epistemology centres around my experiences of transitioning into postgraduate education. This became a critical incident because the sentiments and exchanges I had with many people shifted sharply in response my intent and movement into continuing further Honours degree

university studies. I theorise these exchanges as examples of regulatory discourses that sought to shape and regulate my recognisability as a sole parent and educated subject.

Thirdly, I draw from my initial and ongoing responses to the timetabling of postgraduate classes as a critical incident that focused my attention on institutional structures of higher education as enabling constraints; who it works for and how? Experiences of my university timetabling compulsory evening classes for postgraduate students keenly bought into focus how giving an account of oneself is always conditioned and relational and it is therefore impossible to fully account for oneself and that doing so, always comes at a cost. In relation to my experiences of managing university postgraduate timetables, I theorise how sole parents negotiate familial relations and responsibilities in order to engage with postgraduate education.

I give this account of my epistemological positioning in relation to this research tentatively, understanding that it a full account is impossible and acknowledging the academic context within which I articulate this position limits its very nature. “If I am trying to give an account of myself, it is always to someone, to one whom I presume to receive my words in some way, although I do not and cannot know always in what way” (Butler, 2005, p. 67). However, I proceed with this account, through an analysis of three critical incidents as a demonstration of the work I have done to explore the issue of researcher positioning and in my case the “dangers of proximity.” In other words, I hope to demonstrate the “interconnectedness of personal and theoretical concerns” (Sholock, 2007, p. 128). The detail offered and the reflective nature of the following epistemological writing seeks to articulate and explore what Clifford (1988) described as “inevitable but treacherous subjectivity” (cited in Van Maanen, 1995, p. 2). My articulations illustrate the negotiations I have made to connect my lived experience with my researcher self, an ongoing process that Butler calls a “crossing-over.” By plugging in an epistemological voice to research, researchers are able to include another voice, to make a new connection between a researcher voice and a theoretical voice, as they “*constitute* one another and in doing so resist (over) simplification” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 747 emphasis in original).

Shame and Vulnerability: Instant Responses Demonstrating Accumulative Subjectivity

It took about 2 minutes for the conversation to conclude as my then husband announced the end to our marriage and his relationship with another women. In that short space of time, I had moved from a wife and mother embedded in a nuclear family to being unceremoniously deposited into sole parenting. With \$48.60 in the bank, mastitis, no paid employment and a seven month old baby I experienced a crisis within my epistemological field.

I don't recall much about that time, 11 years ago, apart from feeling physically sick and reeling in what Butler (2004) calls a “nonplace.” A conflicted space that didn't equate to what I knew or had experienced,

[t]hese are nonplaces in which one finds oneself in spite of oneself; indeed, these are nonplaces where recognition, including self-recognition, proves precarious if not elusive, in spite of one's best efforts to be a subject in some recognizable sense. (p. 108)

My struggles to adjust, comprehend and begin to recognise my new sole parent self is illustrated as later that same afternoon I recall apologising to my seven month old baby, apologising for having now placed him in a “single mother” family.

This reaction is epistemologically significant, my apology to my oblivious seven month old child demonstrates my now magnified and overwhelming responsibility of a very young baby as I viewed its enormity from this new “nonplace.” It wasn’t just that I was now single after a decade of marriage, but that I had just had a baby and was now single. My reaction to the way in which I became a sole parent is one shame and vulnerability. Brené Brown (2006) argues that shame for women is constructed through interpersonal experiences of relationships and connections and points to the “very prevalent role of cultural expectations and the relationship between shame and the real or perceived failure of meeting cultural expectations” (Brown, 2006, p. 45). Brown’s analysis of shame offers three key concerns relating to feelings of shame; feeling trapped, powerless and isolated. By becoming a sole parent without warning I felt trapped in a new scenario with limited options and increased obligations for myself and particularly my child. I felt powerless because multiple decisions were being made, but not by me or in consultation with me, with very little reference to me and arguably little or no reference to my child. If power is the ability to choose and act to produce an effect then at this time I felt powerless.

The apology I offered my seven month old baby illustrates my deeply held deficit model understanding of the lives of children raised in sole parent families. This apologetic statement seems very strange to me today, but back then this apology reflected my, “assumptions about father and mothers, and what normal family life is, and should have been” (Butler, 2004, p. 77). This apology is interesting because it comes just hours after becoming a sole parent, not long enough to have anything logical or meaningful to apologise for. The apology reflects my pre-existing notion of sole parenting as a problem, negative and in deficit. I draw on the work of Erinn Gilson (2011) to extend the applicability of vulnerability to an analysis of my apology. Rather than relying on a largely negative definition of vulnerability that is understood as “simply to be susceptible, exposed to risk, in danger. In short, it is to be somehow weaker, defenceless and dependent, open to harm and injury” (Gilson, 2011, p. 310). That is somewhat an apt description of how I recollect my experiences on the day I am describing here. However, we can elaborate on these responses if we take Gilson’s extended definition of vulnerability as an ambivalent state whereby “vulnerability is understood to be a more general term encompassing conceptions of passivity, affectivity, openness to change, dispossession, and exposure, which are the basis for certain fundamental structures of subjectivity, language and sociality” (Gilson, 2011, p. 310). In the context of this research I follow Gilson (2011) in understanding vulnerability as also a condition of potential, an enabling position which simultaneously is a condition of limitation and possible suffering. Drawing from Gilson’s (2011) framing of vulnerability, as opening up possibilities, we can begin to consider that vulnerability has the potential to be the prompt for change and part of the process of becoming different.

The “ignorance of vulnerability is generated through the achievement of invulnerability as a desirable character trait and form of subjectivity” (Gilson, 2011, p. 312). I achieved my sense of invulnerability from the structural and normative advantages of being an insider to the dominant heteronormative nuclear family construct. I had solidified this notion of invulnerability as a member of the nuclear family, purposefully constructed by demonstrating mastery of that construct, heteronormative marriage, home ownership, middle-class, thirty with baby. That constructed position was dismantled in only a couple of minutes and the illusion of mastery instantly dissipated. But, simultaneously the possibility of other conditions opened up, an enabling condition began to emerge because “vulnerability is a condition of openness” (Gilson, 2011, p. 310). The apology I gave to my son, whilst somewhat irrational, may be understood as an openness; an openness to the newly constituted family. This openness was articulated by me through a sense of dread and shame in regard to my new conditions of sole parenting but importantly this became part of my process and

adjustments to our new family construct and an end to the mis-placed illusion of mastery within an idealised nuclear family.

This critical incident demonstrates how closely I held the legitimate sociality of motherhood tied exclusively with the heteronormative nuclear family. It also demonstrates how I had constructed my subjectivity as a mother, a mother always and already connected by marriage to the father, and it follows that I had disavowed single mothers because “disidentification with those vulnerable others goes hand in hand with the idea of vulnerability as a negative state” (Gilson, 2011, p. 312). I would not have issued an apology to my child if I had understood sole parenting as an ideal family state or even as having the potential to be so. The language of an apology, of sorrow and pity demonstrates my tightly held connection to the invulnerability of the “proper” family and that a family ‘outside’ the nuclear family construct required sympathy and pity. My vulnerability on becoming a sole parent prompted my awareness and demonstration of how “categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence” (Butler, 2004, p. 308). Two weeks later, I made use of the new conditions and participated in my first university class as a mature age student culminating, some ten years later, in the doctoral research project I draw from throughout this paper.

By theorising aspects of shame and vulnerability in relation to my experiences of becoming a sole parent, I am able to extend these reflections to incorporate contextual framing through discussion relating to connections with socially constructed notions of sole parent families. This theoretical analysis also enables an account that moves my thinking towards vulnerability as an openness and as a prompt for new ways of living and thinking; thinking with theory. These reflections on my initial understandings of sole parents and the subsequent changes to my understandings of sole parenting over the following decade has motivated my consideration of subjectivities in relation to sole parents more broadly in this research work. How these subjectivities are established over time, within particular contexts and in relation with others became central to the investigations I undertook in this research. My reflections on the processes of subjectivity has been prompted predominately by my responses of shame and vulnerability during and immediately after that relationship ending conversation.

I sought to incorporate an examination of how sole parent subjectivity is (re)produced, how the historically sedimented privilege of heteronormative nuclear families is established as idealised and invulnerable. This process lead me to explore gendered parenting practices embedded in heteronormative families as fundamental to the sense of deficit that often constitute sole parent families. By theorising vulnerability as an openness to change I designed my research project to investigate agential responses to enabling constraints for sole parents in postgraduate education. In order to theorise agency I drew from Butler’s theory of recognition and accountability. In *Precarious Life* (2004a) Butler reminds us that, “Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned” (p. 16). Accounts we give of ourselves are in flux and are influenced by the conditions within which that account is given and all accounts of oneself come at a cost. This theoretical framing emerged as useful through the epistemological writing process. It enabled an examination of personal and institutional factors and facilitated an investigation of how recognisability for sole parents is sought and conferred in higher education contexts. This epistemology infused theoretical framework provided a foundational point for the questions I asked during the semi-structured interviews I conducted for this research. I asked participant sole parents how they believed the university understood their needs as sole parent postgraduates. I also asked them about their exchanges with academic supervisors as a consideration of recognisability as necessary for sole parents in postgraduate education. These questions enabled my analysis of the

interrelatedness and active process of recognition as something the sole parents sought from universities and something that could not become postgraduates and academics without.

By reading my initial responses to sole parenting through Butler's theoretical framework of recognisability and accountability I was drawn to consider subjectivity in broader contexts. The following epistemological reflection illustrates some of my foundational exploration of educable subjects in particular relation to sole parent postgraduates.

What? Aren't You Going to Get a Job? Performative Exchanges Regulating the Educated Subject

Another epistemological trigger for this research was the responses and exchanges I had with many people as I transitioned from undergraduate to postgraduate education. I had some very interesting and telling conversation and interactions with various people, friends, family and acquaintances which were strongly resistant and negative in relation to my continued education into an Honours degree. Comments such as *get a job, professional student, academic wanker, work-shy*, and *welfare dependent* are examples of the comments and sentiments that were expressed to me when I had completed a double Arts/Education degree and ambivalently moved into further study in an Honours degree. By completing the largely vocational orientated Education degree and passing through the "credential mill" (Giroux) there was a clear employment trajectory which I delayed and/or rejected in order to complete an Honours degree. It was interesting to me then and now, why a universally supportive sentiment existed for me to complete a vocationally orientated Bachelors degree, and why that sentiment altered and the support reversed when I choose to continue studying an Honours degree. This transitioning period illustrated some of the existing conflicts between paid work, study work and parental care-work, particularly challenging for sole parents

My agency to move toward an identity as an Honours student was not created through widespread affirmation, indeed I understand these negative interactions as "challenges to the conditions of possibility" and almost a "*demand* to align oneself" (Butler in Bunch, 2013, p. 46). The demand in this case was for me to fulfill the expectations of my educational trajectory and seek paid employment in the field that I was now qualified for. My resistance to this employment "demand" may have been regarded by many as me being a "killjoy" (Ahmed, 2010) as the "killjoy refuses her place once again" (p. 4). There were also some interesting and important constructs of mothering/parenting and of educated and educable bodies that were expressed in these exchanges and they became critical to the design and implementation of this doctoral research.

By reflecting on my experiences of transitioning into an Honours degree, I am endeavouring to begin a process of "interrogating how subjects become recognisable as students within regulatory and disciplinary institutional spaces" (Burke, 2010, p. 25). I was seeking recognition as an Honours student, this process of establishing a coherent identity as an Honours student is dependent upon the interactions I had with others. Negotiating recognisability as an Honours student was a process that evoked several regulatory discourses, primarily associated with constructions the "good" parent and the "good" student. I understood much of these discussions as directing my choices towards employment in order to fulfill the expectations of the "good" parent. This construct of the good parent is closely linked with "concerted cultivation" and "intensive mothering," providing and facilitating activities and lifestyles for children. This concerted cultivation of children is dependent on high level of financial support and I argue that my rejection of employment and financial gain was, for many people, a rejection of good parenting because I could not/chose not to provide intensively or concertedly for my child. I understand these interactions as also regulating

gendered norms of recognisability in relation to “mothering.” A preference for paid employment and concerted cultivation is closely linked with orientations toward happiness. Following Ahmed (2010), my continuing education rather than taking up paid employment was perceived by many as dissenting from normative family/mothering happiness scripts and thereby jeopardizing my future happiness and that of my child. Regulatory discourses relating to “good mothering” are gendered because they “claim that women are happy and that this happiness is behind the work they do functions to justify gendered forms of labour not as products of nature, law, or duty, but as expressions of a collective wish and desire” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 573). Mothering is a key form of gendered labour, and for many, my decision to remain a low income student was orientating away from happiness and many people expressed disapproval and removed their previous support of my education when I transitioned into the Honours program.

I argue that some of the disapproval and negativity I encountered as I transitioned into an Honours degree was indicative of a failure to recognise a sole parent as a ‘good’ or ideal postgraduate student. When the “ideal” student is institutionally constituted as an unencumbered young person highly focused on their studies then a conflict exists between the distractions and obligations sole parents experience as being counter to the preferred attributes of a postgraduate student who is directed exclusively toward their study.

Identity then, is produced by relations of power, the power relations relating to social welfare provisioning, employment, motherhood and who can access education and how this access is possible, are evident in the exchanges I experienced and provided a key impetus for this research project. I reflect on these exchanges as repetitive productions of identity that are interrelational, and attempt to maintain boundaries. But importantly this process and these interactions provide the space and potential to re-think and adjust the identities that we generate. Therefore, the process of recognition is not passive, whilst they take place within power relations, the possibility for revitalising a coherent identity, incrementally and potentially, also exist in this interaction.

I drew from this theoretical framework to make sense of my own experiences of transitioning into an Honours degree as a sole parent. This connection between my reflections on this critical incident and Butler’s theory of recognisability provided the foundational for the focus this research takes in relation to institutional policies and practices that variably recognise particular student subjectivities. This is reflected in the research questions that relate to participant’s experiences of transitioning into their postgraduate education; I asked participants how they made this decision and who they sought assistance and advice from in order to commit to continuing into postgraduate education. I asked them about their motivations for engaging with postgraduate education and the negotiations of creating a coherent identity as a sole parent postgraduate student un-earthed several critical insights into the experiences of postgraduate education for these sole parents.

Conflicts of/in Time: Postgraduate Timetabling and Conflicts of Recognition

The final key incident I want to articulate here that had a determining influence on the design and process of this research is my experiences of university timetabling as an Honours student. I enrolled in an Honours program as a day student however the classes associated with this course were timetabled at night, from 5pm to 9pm. This timetabling was a fundamental conflict for me; child-care facilities are closed and with no other parent available for child-care duties at home, night classes were problematic. These conditions created a time and space conundrum that I experienced as exclusionary and jeopardised my participation. Given that “the subject is produced through certain kinds of foreclosure – certain things become impossible for it” (Butler, 2004, p. 333), I regarded this timetabling

conflict as central to how I was able to construct a coherent identity as an Honours student. Whilst the university probably provided off-campus study options, this was not the study mode I enrolled in, nor my preferred study approach. I engaged with and paid for on campus interactions and the face-to-face study mode because it supported my learning patterns successfully established at the same institution over the preceding 5 years at undergraduate level. Accessing my preferred on-campus classes became a timetabling conflict that prompted a broader institutional considerations relating to equitable access to higher education; who is able to access higher education and in what ways are they able to do so?

Youdell (2011) supports this type of exploratory work when she asks; Which knowledges are authorized and which are silenced? I argue that my timetabling dilemma is “based on institutional and educator judgements about *who* students are?” (p. 9). As I sat in the evening lecture associated with the Honours program I began to question the institutional structures that determined this timetabling and how the institution understood their provisioning of education and which students this was directed towards. I questioned the perceptions of and the provisioning for sole parents by higher education institutions. Despite rhetorics of widening participation in higher education, I argue that university timetabling constitutes normative ideal student engagement by conferring the responsibility for postgraduate success onto the individual student who must fit in with institutional practices in order to become a postgraduate student and thus “being simultaneously made a subject and subjected to relations of power” (Youdell, 2004, p. 420). In this way, timetabling of night classes is potentially excluding because it demands a greater impost on some students attendance than others and is an example of how institutions (re)produce norms for student recognisability.

These are pragmatic orientations by higher education institutions towards legitimate students, who are perceived by the institution as “safe” and are indicative of neo-liberal marketization of higher education wherein “an atmosphere of scarce resources, this manoeuvre effects the re-directing of resources away from the hopeless cases and towards students constituted as not only promising better returns but also deserving of these resources and rewards” (Youdell, 2004, p. 411). The re-directing of academic resources is evident in the institutions refusal to resource and offer postgraduate level lectures and classes at multiple times to ensure wider and more conducive attendance by diverse students.

I draw on the works of Judith Butler to reflect on my experiences and responses to the timetabling of night classes which initiated an exploration of how I was able to give an account of myself as an Honours student within timetabling conditions that were not of my own making. Through these reflections I began to not only consider the conditions that alternative students experience university policies and practices that mediate and regulate our educational acts, but also to consider diverse responses to these conditions. The anger and disaffectedness I felt in response to my perceived exclusion based on timetabling in the Honours program prompted my awareness and critique of the institutional and structural conditions and factors that are highly influential in student engagement in higher education.

In additional to prompting my theorising following Butler’s concept of accountability, my epistemological reflections on postgraduate timetabling opened up my exploration of agency and responsiveness to conditions in higher education which enable diverse students to participate. I draw from Butler’s theory of agency to explore sole parent responsiveness and agency in relation to their postgraduate education. Articulating participant agency and acts of intent is important because it enables this research to investigate not only the conditions within which sole parents are able to given an account of themselves in postgraduate education, but how they respond to the enabling constraints of educational conditions in Australian universities. Whilst academic timetabling was deeply problematic for me as a sole parent, I did attend class, I negotiated the conditions of recognisability for postgraduate

students. It is this re-working with and through agency within ambivalent conditions that opened up my research questions and focused my research towards considerations of purposeful intents to act as sole parents and postgraduate students. These ambivalent conditions were explored in my interviews through discussion about financial management, child-care work, contingent autonomy and the potential re-working of “motherhood” norms.

Concluding Comments

In this paper, I have attempted to illustrate the usefulness of “plugging in” an epistemological voice in academic research. Following Mazzei and Jackson (2012), I argue that qualitative research can never be interpreted free of context and circumstance and critical to establishing contextual framework in research is the researcher themselves. Articulating one’s research positionality infuses research with context and embeds an additional avenue with which to incorporate a “thinking with theory” which can open up new meanings in research by foregrounding the epistemological process which forms a critical pathway towards opening up new ways of thinking and being in qualitative research.

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Author Note

Dr. Hook's research interests explore gendered constructions of sole parent care-work and familial contexts influencing the engagement of sole parent postgraduates in the Australian academy. Drawing on Judith Butler's theoretical framing of gender performativity and accountability in higher education, she examines parental care-work and equitable engagement for under-represented scholars within academic research and the academy more broadly.

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