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Abstract

Most considerations of daughtering and mothering take for granted that the subjectivities of mothers and daughters are negotiated in contexts of physical proximity throughout daughters' childhoods. Yet many mothers and daughters spend periods separated from each other, sometimes across national borders. Globally, an increasing number of children experience life in transnational families. This paper examines the retrospective narratives of four women selected from a larger corpus who were serial migrants as children (whose parents migrated before they did). It focuses on their accounts of the reunion with their mothers and how these fit with the ways in which they construct their mother–daughter relationships. We take a psychosocial approach by using a psychoanalytically informed reading of these narratives to acknowledge the complexities of the attachments produced in the context of migration and to attend to the multi-layered psychodynamics of the resulting relationships. The paper argues that serial migration positioned many of the daughters in a conflictual emotional landscape from which they had to negotiate 'strangerhood' in the context of sadness at leaving people to whom they were attached in order to join their mothers (or parents). As a result, many were resistant to being positioned as daughters, doing daughtering and being mothered in their new homes.

Keywords

attachment, mother–daughter relationships, narratives, psychosocial, serial migration, transnational families

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Introduction

The publication of *Daughtering and Mothering* in the early 1990s helpfully documented ways in which daughtering involves an active, lifelong process of developing subjectivities and acknowledging mothers' subjectivities while remaining connected with, and separating from, them (Van Mens-Verhulst, 1993a, 1993b). Most considerations of daughtering and mothering, however, take for granted that the subjectivities of mothers and daughters are negotiated in contexts of physical proximity throughout daughters' childhoods. Yet, globally, many mothers and daughters spend periods separated from each other, sometimes across national borders. In some countries (e.g. in the Caribbean, Latin America and the African continent) such separations are sufficiently common to be culturally normative (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). The notion of 'child shifting' in the Caribbean, while pejorative in objectifying children, was developed in recognition of the long-established common practice of kin and friends looking after children while mothers are employed away or when children are sent to live with non-parental adults who can help to increase their life chances or whom they can help (Brodber, 1974; Rodman, 1971). Serial migration, where family members migrate at different times, constitutes one example of the separation of mothers and children that is globally common for families who do not have the power and/or resources to migrate together. The psychosocial implications of serial migration for the negotiation of daughter–mother relationships, subjectivities and intergenerational relations have, however, been under-researched. In consequence, understandings of daughtering and mothering are largely based on research conducted in affluent countries and do not represent the perspectives of women in most cultures and ethnicised groups. Their explanatory power is therefore limited.

This paper reports findings from a study of adults who, as children, were left in the Caribbean when their parents migrated to the United Kingdom and joined them later in the process of serial migration. It addresses the negotiation of daughter–mother relationships and subjectivities following reunion. In order to (re-)establish their relationships, daughters (and mothers) need both to establish everyday practices and to conceptualise their mothers as mothers. This paper attempts to present a holistic picture of daughtering following reunion by taking a psychosocial approach that engages with the social context in which mother–daughter relations were negotiated, and explores psychoanalytically informed readings of the women's narratives (Van Mens-Verhulst, 1993b). It first briefly discusses attachment theory and internal objects from Object Relations Theory—psychoanalytically informed concepts that are employed in the psychosocial analysis below because they allow insights into how the daughters' conceptualisations of, and emotions about, their mothers were related to their daughtering and the relationships they established. It then considers the burgeoning field of research on transnational migration before briefly describing the study that informs the paper. The main section of the paper examines adult daughters' accounts of their reunions with their mothers following transnational separation and analyses the impact of the separation and reunion on their feelings about their mothers.

The paper argues that most negotiated ‘strangerhood’ in the process of doing and/or resisting, daughtering.

Attachment and mothers as internal objects

In 1951, John Bowlby published the landmark text *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, which highlighted the importance for infants and young children of warm, intimate, and continuous relationships with their caregivers (usually their mothers). According to Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1979), who played a key role in developing the theory, caregivers can help infants to manage their anxiety by responding ‘sensitively’ to them and so helping them to form secure attachments. A strong and stable attachment to her/his mother provides the infant with a secure base from which to explore the world and has long-term consequences for mental health. Bowlby (1969) suggested that experiences of interaction and attachment lead children to develop Internal Working Models about themselves as worthy or unworthy of care together with ways of dealing with, and understanding, the people in their social worlds. However, the relationship between early attachment experiences and later development is complicated (Barrett, 2006; Thompson, 1999). There is no one-to-one correspondence between what happens in childhood and how this is experienced by adults (Hauser et al., 2006; Howard et al., 2007). Adult experiences can transform identities and the meaning of previous traumatic events (Thomson and Downe, 2010). In addition, the ways in which adults are able to understand and narrate their childhood experiences has an impact on their mental health (Fonagy, 2003). This suggests that adult mental health and wellbeing depend on how childhood experiences are stored and the coherence of adult narratives of childhood (Main, 2008).

Object Relations theory places relationships at the heart of what is to be human (Gomez, 1997). Indeed, Fairbairn (1952) famously stated that ‘Psychology is a study of the relationships of the individual to his objects’. The term object was first conceptualised by Freud as an intrapsychic mental representation, and developed by Klein et al. (1935, 1955/1993) who posited that the psychological growth of the infant is governed by mechanisms of introjections and projection, through which internal objects, both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, are formed (Buckley, 1986). An Object Relations framework places the human being in a dual world of external and internal relationship, each of which affects the other. Our inner world is a changing dynamic process, with some more fixed and some more fluid patterns, both conscious and unconscious. These dynamics influence how we experience external reality and are also themselves influenced by our experience of external reality (Gomez, 1997).

We take as a starting point that the mother–daughter separation in transnational migration interrupts and interferes with what Winnicott (1965) called the child’s ‘going on being’ (or capacity to be and feel alive) and her/his state of mind. Within this framework, narratives of reunion capture the moment in which the child’s internalised mother (referred to as the internal maternal object in Object Relations) encounters the external (often estranged) figure of the real mother

(who has followed her own material and internal trajectory) in a country and context new to the daughter. We propose that the narratives of reunion discussed in this paper tell us about the vicissitudes and multi-layered nature of this encounter. There is a complex interplay between the child's state of mind, her agency and the conflicts negotiated through both her intrapsychic defence processes and in her attachment to her mother over time.

Serial migration and transnational family lives

Over the last decade it has increasingly been recognised that families are central to transnational migration and transnational practices (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). As Goulbourne et al. (2010) suggest, transnational families are increasingly common as the world becomes more globalised. They are linked over time, across national boundaries, cultural divides and spatial distances. They are constituted by multiple and overlapping identities, but are plural in terms of generations, age, class and which family members are left behind. It is, therefore, not possible to fix the characteristics that constitute transnational familyhood. Mothers, more frequently than fathers, are involved in 'global care chains' (Parreñas, 2005) as they improvise strategies for mothering and 'emotional transnationalism' across national boundaries and in new, and dynamic, contexts (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 2003; Lutz, 2008; Wolf, 2002).

'Re-emplacement' in families requires emotional work (McKay, 2005) and is constitutive of family life, rather than simply being one aspect of it (Skribiš, 2008). Research on children who are reunited with their parents generally finds that serial migration disrupts parent-child bonding and can have damaging effects on children's self-esteem and behaviour. Reunions are less likely to be successful if separations have been extended and if other children have been born to the parents during the period of separation (Smith et al., 2004). Children's experiences before migration, including the conditions in which they were left, the relationships they leave behind as well as the conditions they arrive into, all have an impact on their feelings and experiences after migration (Pottinger and Brown, 2006; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Parents often consider financial support to be an expression of love and are disappointed if their children, who do not share this view, are not grateful (Chamberlain, 2006: 67; Menjivar and Abrego, 2009).

Foner (2009: 1) suggests that such intergenerational relations 'are characterized by an intricate tangle of attachments and divisions'. She sums up the contradictory possibilities for reunions of child serial migrants from Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador to the USA and their parents:

The reunion . . . can be bittersweet, leading to great joy and renewed intimacy as well as tension and disappointment. Among other things, parents and children must become reacquainted and get used to living together again in a situation in which both may have unrealistic expectations of each other. The children's separation from grandmothers or other close kin who cared for them in the home community for much of their childhood is often wrenching. Not only do children have to adjust to new

living arrangements in an unfamiliar country, but also new schools and a new cultural, social, and physical environment. In some cases, they also have to adjust to a new step-parent and new siblings as well (Foner, 2009: 10).

From her study of 21 adult women who had been serial migrants from the Caribbean, Arnold (2001, 2006, 2011) reported painful experiences of separation from, and reunion with, their mothers that the women suggested led to difficulties in trusting other people. Most, however, considered themselves resilient in other ways. Arnold suggests that this meeting of mothers and daughters, who are virtual strangers, provides a template for later relating. Such findings indicate that the mother–daughter reunion itself warrants attention as a site that throws into relief the negotiations necessary to forging child–parent attachments and relationships and so to daughtering and mothering.

This article suggests that the significance accorded to the first meeting after separation and the ways in which it is retrospectively narrated are metonymic of daughter–mother attachment and the relationship (to be) established. The paper argues that the process of reuniting and negotiating daughter–mother relationships in serial migration is also a process of negotiating strangerhood.

The study

The analyses of the four women's narrative accounts presented below come from a study of adults, who were interviewed as part of a larger research programme ('Transforming Experience'; see Phoenix, 2010). The parents of the participants in the study left the Caribbean between the early 1950s and mid 1960s at a time when their labour was solicited in the UK (Bauer and Thompson, 2006). Since serial migration was common in Caribbean countries, it was not considered 'non-normative' in the countries in which the women had been born, or in their social circles (Arnold, 2006). The sample consisted of 39 women and 14 men ($N=53$), who ranged in age from the late 30s to the early 60s, with a mean age of 53 years. The participants were left in the Caribbean when their ages ranged from 8 months to 7 years, and they rejoined their parents in the UK between the early 1960s and mid 1970s, when their ages ranged from 15 months to 17 years. The mean age at separation reported for the sample was just under 4 years of age, with a mean length of separation of 6.5 years and so an average age at reunion of 10.5 years. The period of separation ranged from 6 months to 14 years and occurred in a period when few people had access to telephones and before the internet made synchronous communication possible. The serial migrant participants in this study were in a very different position from contemporary children serial migrants, many of whom are able to talk to, and see, their parent(s) each day while separated (Madianou and Miller, 2011; Parreñas, 2005). The interviewers were four women, all with Caribbean ancestry, three of whom were black and one of mixed parentage. By definition, all members of the sample that constitutes the focus of this paper were Caribbean born. All were black. The interviews ranged from just under an hour to over 6 hours in length, with most interviews lasting about 2 hours.

The analyses below foreground narratives of 4 women, who were in their 50s at the time of the interviews, but draw on analyses from the 39 daughters in the study.

The theoretical resources on which the project draws include the notion that we 'make ourselves' through our autobiographical narratives (Bruner, 1990) and that memories do not simply re-present past events, but simultaneously construct those events and identities (Lambek and Antze, 1996). What is remembered is as much dependent on how events fit with constructed experiences and life stories and the ways in which particular people 'refashion' themselves through narrative as on how memories are stored (Polkinghorne, 1988). Identities that are unsatisfactory can be reworked to provide new, more emotionally acceptable versions and new understandings of difficult stories. Adults in the study were asked to look back on their childhoods and tell the stories of their serial migrations, with the aim of understanding the ways in which they re-conceptualise their experiences over time and the impact of those experiences on their identities. Alongside this narrative analysis, we also present a psychoanalytically informed reading that is sensitive to the conflictual and dilemmatic nature of the psychodynamics involved in the reunion. In this way we attempt to engage with the possibility of feelings and experiences that might be too painful to articulate and acknowledge or to remember. Taken together, the narrative and psychodynamic approaches help to provide a psychosocial understanding of mother–daughter relationships following serial migration.

Each interview was fully analysed thematically. In addition, some were analysed narratively in their entirety or in part, on the basis of theoretical sampling of the themes they evoked. Since narrative analysis is time-intensive, it was not possible to analyse every interview narratively. The first question, inviting participants to tell their stories, frequently elicited mention of all the themes elaborated in the rest of the interview. It almost always told the story of both the separation from their parents (particularly their mothers) and of the reunion. The answer to this question was, therefore, most frequently analysed narratively. In the extracts presented below, underlining represents talk louder than usual, while (.) indicates a short pause, and a number in brackets indicates a longer pause in the narrative, timed in seconds. Three full stops '...' indicate that some material has been omitted and '/.../' that the omission is extensive. The women have been given pseudonyms and any potentially identifying details have been omitted.

Negotiating reunions in context

The impact of separation from parents, and how it is remembered retrospectively, depends on the context of the separation, its length, the age at separation and experiences in the country to which children migrate (Smith et al., 2004). In the example below, Cheryl's memory of meeting her mother after only a year's separation (from 8 to 9 years old) indicates that attachments can be maintained when children are old enough to remember loving relationships and have not been separated for too long to do so.

Cheryl: It was my sister who collected me yeah. The police had contacted her at work and she left work and came and met me at the station. And er, she decided not to tell my mother – well you couldn't, in those days there was no phone, didn't phone in work or anything like that, you just waited until people got home. So she hid me in the cupboard ummm, and I could hear my mother coming in, "Any news?" [laughs] And my sister said "No mum." Well I'm sorry, I couldn't play the game any more, I just jumped out of that cupboard and hugged my mum, and you know that was lovely, that really was lovely!

Question: So did that reality live up to your expectation . . . ?

Cheryl: It did, it did, very much so.

According to Cheryl's account, her father had died before her mother migrated to the UK and although she was happy staying with the family friend with whom she was left, she always knew that she would be rejoining her mother and her sister in the UK and, for the year they were separated, was eager to do so. She retained an Internal Working Model (Bowlby, 1951) of a loving mother she wanted to be with. The context is crucially important here in that when Cheryl's mother left, Cheryl was old enough to understand why she was going and that it was important for her mother to make a new life for the family following her father's death. Migration was part of a family project. Thus, while a year's separation at a time when telephones and internet communications were not available, was a long time in a 9-year-old's life, Cheryl recounts her relationship with her mother as close and companionate and herself as keen to rejoin her mother. It is not surprising, therefore, that she retrospectively evaluates the reunion as 'lovely' and an exciting game.

It is perhaps more surprising that Cheryl's account of her serial migration is of having arrived at the airport, not being met and having to be looked after by the police until her sister could be contacted to collect her. Such experiences were generally reported to be traumatic by other participants and it is unlikely that a 9-year-old travelling alone would not have experienced some stress and anxiety about arriving in a strange country in such circumstances. Many readings of this 'happy' reunion are possible. One is that the context and her continued good relationship with her mother rendered the negative experiences at arrival relatively trivial in her narrative, which focuses on how she and her mother resumed the negotiation of a strongly attached daughter–mother relationship. It could also be that Cheryl's idealisation of the meeting with her mother and sister defends her from thinking too much about the negative aspects of her arrival so that the fact that she glosses over her experiences on arrival cannot be viewed as simply factual. It is impossible to draw conclusions on this from her retrospective account. Nevertheless, one could postulate that the brevity of the separation, Cheryl's cognitive understanding of the separation, as well as her father's death is likely to have made her investment in the attachment with her mother, as the surviving parent, especially important and precious. Benign defence mechanisms, such as idealisation, might have been employed to preserve and strengthen, rather than attack, her

internal maternal object. Cheryl could be argued to have glossed over (and so denied) what is likely to have been a painful separation, with the effect of protecting her Internal Working Model of her mother as loving and a source of security (her 'good object' in Object Relations). A crucial element in Cheryl's narrative is that, even though her mother did not meet her at the airport, she evidently longs for and seeks her daughter—'any news?' she asks as soon as she comes from work. So Cheryl's mental representation of her mother–daughter relationship is one of mutual benign desire. In this scenario her mother is idealised as a pioneering provider for her daughter and the separation is rationalised as for Cheryl's 'own good'.

A contrasting example is provided in the following extract. Nanny was left at 4 years by her mother and rejoined her at fifteen and three quarters, just before she would have been too old to be allowed entry to the UK as a dependent child.

Nanny: Yeah. (.) Erm, and er, yeah so we got to er [London] and erm, the other little girl her parents were there, and my mother wasn't there yet. She arrived late and in that period I don't know how long it was I felt erm like lost, completely lost because here I am in a strange place, I don't know anyone. The hostess just left me on a seat because she had to go off duty. She must have said something to somebody else. Erm, she didn't just leave but she said she's going off duty now and she told somebody else that **this little girl's mother is going to turn up and blablabla**. But for all intents and purposes I'm sitting there; my mother had left when. I [was] four years old. And I couldn't remember what she looked like. So I'm sitting there and I'm in this strange country, this strange land and she's not there yet and I feel completely and utterly lost. I was tired I remember feeling really tired, because I didn't sleep on the flight much. Because this is all so disorienting. This is all very disorientating. And nothing in my experience up to that point has prepared me for this experience. So it's completely disorientating. And I'm sitting there forcing myself to stay awake to try and see erm, if I can recognise this person who's supposed to come and get me. Thinking what happens if she doesn't turn up? What does she look like? And trying to remember one of my aunts who she looks like, and I can tell that from photographs that I'd seen. And thinking **I have to stay awake cos I must recognise her, and she must turn up and da-da-da**. So it was completely disorientating. And that's part of my distress as well, tapping back into that experience. So that was coming here. (.) That was coming here so that's, the beginning of the story. And she came and she had a coat and er, I, I couldn't connect with her. She was just this person; this person's just turned up. For me the important people were left behind. My grandmother felt more to me like my mother, my grandfather felt more like my father/.../So I couldn't connect with my mother at that point, it almost felt like a stranger came to collect me. But this is a stranger who my family back home knows. So I'm alright with this person (laugh). And er, we, er, I don't think we hugged or anything like that at all it was very strange. It was very kind of business like and functional it had no warmth or anything like that to it. **Cos by the time I saw her again, I was** four it was like 11 years had gone by. So I had no memories to draw on and it was very bizarre it was like something happening in a movie. Distant, detached. Erm, so we went, and of course I'm completely erm, overwhelmed by these experiences going on. New place, new woman, new mother, new everything.

And I can't make sense of all these new experiences, so I went into **shut down mode**. I literally went in to a kind of, **I switch off and just, it's all happening**, I switched off. (Emphases added)

For Nanny, the evocative memory of the trauma of waiting at the airport for her mother to arrive relates to the fact that she could not remember her and had left behind the people she loved. Her mother was trusted, but a stranger. Nanny's powerful narrative is constructed in complex ways that, even decades after the event, seem strategically designed to defend her against the trauma she reports. She compresses time by flipping from the past to the present at various points in her narrative. For example, '...and of course I'm completely erm, overwhelmed by these experiences going on' has a timeless quality, bringing the experience into the present. The timelessness and switching back and forth in the narrative hints at the multilayered, deeply disorienting nature of the reunion as not just being traumatic itself, but reactivating the old trauma of the separation. Crucial in this is the co-existence in the narrative of Nanny as 4 and as 15 years old. Her report that the hostess allegedly refers to her as 'this little girl' (which is unlikely, given her age) illustrates how Nanny is speaking in multiple, heteroglossic voices and suggests that she might be re-experiencing previously repressed experiences. From an analysis of her narrative, the 15-year-old Nanny was lost because she was in a new country, but the ambiguity and possible slip of the tongue in 'I was four' suggests that the new and current feeling of being lost might map onto and re-voke the experience at 4 years old when her mother left. Nanny's statement "*cos by the time I saw her again, I was four it was like 11 years had gone by*", could simply be an example of mixing tenses, omitting temporal markers and narrative leaps in time. However, other elements in Nanny's narrative signal conflict. For example, she says 'da-de-da', rather than finishing her account of her struggle to stay awake so that she could recognise her mother, avoiding further voicing of her distress and almost inviting the listener to join in dismissing it. She also uses the words lost (three times in this extract) and 'disorient' (four times) in signalling her dislocation and lack of connection with her mother as well as 'distant', 'detached' and 'switched off'.

Reading the narrative in this multi-layered way, gives important clues to Nanny's experience of separation. One wonders whether her reported internal dialogue '*I must stay awake cos I must recognise her*' might reflect what Nanny kept saying to herself during the years of separation, encouraging herself to keep her mother alive internally so she could recognise her and reconnect with her later on. It seems that she did not quite manage to do that. From her account the more extreme, but common, defence of disassociation as a response to trauma, was used to help her survive, '*It was very bizarre it was like something happening in a movie. Distant, detached... I went into shutdown mode [...] I switched off*'. Maybe then, the mother as a good object was almost obliterated and Nanny was left with '*no memories to draw on*'. Not surprisingly, given the juxtaposition of the old and the new (concretely in terms of country, strange place, new experience of flying and psychodynamically in the experiences of a four and a 15-year-old) Nanny

repeatedly describes the experience as disorienting, overwhelming and a meeting of strangers.

Angela (below) was separated from her mother for at least 6 years (from 7 or 8 years to 14 years). Unlike Nanny, she reported that she had not been happy with the grandmother with whom she had been left. Her mother was at the airport to meet her when she arrived but, like Nanny, she narrates a story of strangeness and alienation.

Angela: I remember sort of landing here... And this lumbering woman, this big woman lumbering towards me cos I can't remember what she looks like, cos she left at four. I don't know do I? You sort of probably because you probably have a photo I suppose, but yeah, you don't really, (?) cos you're a child and you've just been travelling for god knows how many hours and hours and eating very strange food on the plane and just not understanding. I'm really searching my memory to see, imagine myself walking up the stairs getting on the plane and all that. I just have no memory that in itself, can't say./.../And so she left in 60 and I saw her in 69... So I didn't know this woman, I didn't know this person...

The above extract suggests that the moment of meeting her mother was an unpleasant meeting of strangers. It is hardly surprising that Angela did not know her mother, having had no contact with her for a number of years and never (as far as she can remember) having seen a photograph. However, her account vividly brings to life the strangeness she felt about the 'big woman lumbering towards' her at the airport and sets a context where everything was strange; the food she had on the journey as well as air travel, her mother and the country. While Angela's account is extreme, accounts of the strangeness of reunions at the airport were common in the sample. However, it is striking that Angela's narrative fixes the experience as unchangingly negative. In the short extract above, she switches between 'I' and 'you' in describing the event and returns to the present of the interview to be meta-analytic about the process of remembering; strategies that perhaps distance her from any painful memories that might be raised.

Angela's narrative consistently indicates that the meeting with her mother at the airport was metonymic of her entire relationship with her mother. At the time of the interview, she had been estranged from her mother for several years. She indicated that they had never established what she would consider a daughter-mother relationship and blamed her mother for this. She described her mother as affectionless and exploitive in having made her look after her younger siblings and do the housework. Her account makes clear that there was no attachment between them. Angela considered that she had been damaged by her childhood experiences, but that counselling had been efficacious in helping her to deal with the resulting painful emotions and difficulties in managing relationships.

A psychosocial reading that takes seriously these accounts and the social context and psychodynamic processes that led to their production would suggest that for both Angela and Nanny the maternal object had to become bad. According to

Fairbairn (1952), negative experiences are internalised as bad objects in order to control them. Having a bad internal maternal object also makes separation more bearable; it is after all easier to lose a bad object than a good one. The absence of photographs in Angela's case and of memories altogether for Nanny, might be symbolically interpreted as referring to the absence of images of a good mother to hang on to.

The juxtaposition of Cheryl's, Nanny's and Angela's accounts help to illuminate that the ways in which they narrated their memories of the reunion has to be contextualised in relation to the length of the separation, their understanding of the process of serial migration and how their relationships with their mothers developed subsequently. The actual reunion is retrospectively narrated from their current positioning. For Cheryl, this explains why not being met at the airport is rendered trivial in a happy family story, while Angela and Nanny narrate it as part of alienation and estrangement that for Angela was never ameliorated and for Nanny, continued until she became a mother herself:

Nanny: But my mother and I never connected for a long long time . . . And for me I've had to navigate another way to reach a relationship with her. Which I have, but it took (.) for me, er, (.) me becoming a mother for that to happen.

What's in a name? 'Mother' as signifier

A recurrent theme in Angela's account is that she did not know her mother, who she does not refer to as her mother, but as 'this woman' or 'this person'. This was not uncommon for those daughters who felt that their mothers were strangers, as in Nanny's narrative.

Nanny: I can remember something else about the first day I didn't know what to call this person. I had no idea how to address her, what to say to her, I felt completely lost. You know. Erm, it was bizarre. I know that you're my mother but nothing else connects me to that word at all and I was lost I didn't know what to do. And over the next days and weeks what I did was, (.) well one thing saved me I went to school straight away (laugh). Came on a Thursday I think it was, it was towards the end of the week anyway and on, I think it was a Thursday and on Monday I was in school. So there was no honeymoon . . . (.) And er (.) I decided to, if I shut down I read, I bury myself in the library, I read. And I still do, I read ferociously but back then that was the thing that saved me. I didn't have to, she was happy because I'm in the library, she knew where I was. If I was at home I'm reading. I'm not watching TV. So for her that was a good thing. For me that was a way of escape. I didn't have to address her or talk to her because I don't know how to talk to, I can't, I don't know what name to call her. And for the first few weeks I didn't call her anything. More than that, more than that, for the first couple of months if I wanted to speak to her I'd physically position myself in front of her and say something, 'cos the word couldn't come out, mum could just not come out. It had no meaning for me.

Nanny's reported inability to name and address her mother illuminates the emotional incommensurability of motherhood with strangerhood as well as how the term 'mother' is emotionally relational, rather than purely positional. Psychodynamically, it also speaks of Nanny's difficulties in connecting with her good maternal object. Nanny's obstacles might not be only inter-psychic, but also intra-psychic. Recognition and acknowledgement are difficult to do if the mother has had to be denied for a long time in order to protect the self. Far from being a name like any other, 'mother' appears to be performative so that naming her mother as 'mum' would have entailed positioning herself as daughter to her mother. In the chain of signification, Nanny is unable to accept the connotations of the word 'mum'. This is partly because the term 'mother' is overdetermined, heavy with meanings about attachment, identification and love, when Nanny felt no connection to her mother. Her resistance to 'doing' daughtering highlights the struggle for subjectivity that daughtering can entail (Van Mens-Verhulst, 1993a). It may also have communicated her antagonism, resentment and unhappiness to her mother as well as illuminating the contradictions inherent in negotiating strangerhood as a daughter–mother dyad. For Nanny, her brother's arrival as a serial migrant enabled her to begin to address her mother since he appeared to have no difficulty in doing so and she highly valued him.

June illustrates the ways in which it is possible to experience the daughter–mother relationship as uncanny. She came to the UK aged 8 years as a serial migrant to join her father and stepmother, who had no other children, while her mother, who she had not lived with in the Caribbean resided in another part of the UK and had other children.

June: I was very, very, very (.) upset (.) I remember the first time my dad told me I was going to see my mum (.) My first question was, 'what do I call her?' (3) Because I didn't know (.) I'd already started calling one woman (.) mama (.) what do I call this other person?. hh (.) Now I knew that this other person was my mother but I didn't knooow (.) and my stepmother, she was- now that I do remember (.) she sat me down and (.) explained to me that she was my mum and I called her (.) mum (.) too (.) but to me that was confusing (.) How can you have twooo? (.) I had to kind of- I felt I had to make a choice but in actual fact (.) she made it clear to me that I didn't have to make a choice (.) between the two of them (.) They were both my mother. It's just that I lived with one (.) and not the other. And that was scary (.) That was scary (.) Aaaaain (.) this feeling of not knowing, how do I react to this woman? And in actual fact I was very resentful towards my mother for *maany* (.) *many* years (.) I actually refused to call her my mum. I would not call her mum (.) I did not call my mother mum until I was innn my twenties (3) I would not- I just didn't call her anything.

June presents the difficulty for her as one of not knowing what to call her birth mother, given that she had already started to call her stepmother (who she grew to love very quickly) mother. Yet, her account complicates the explanation that her difficulty was about not being able to have two mothers by introducing the notion

of resentment at her mother for having other children with whom she chose to live and fear about *'this feeling of not knowing, how I react to this woman?'* The *'this woman'* depersonalises her mother and renders her a stranger (as indeed she was). That June says that she refused to call her mother *'mum'* for many years illustrates the resistance and struggle with subjectivity that is produced in the process of reunification. Psychodynamically, anger and resentment might also play a role in this dynamic. After all, June's birth mother did have her other children living with her. The crucial role of recognition in the mother–daughter relationship illustrates another aspect of the relational quality of this relationship and what happens when recognition is not mutual. June's resistance arguably allowed her to maintain an identity of herself as an agent, with some control over her intimate and attachment relationships, despite having no control over when she was left and sent for. Her mother's acceptance of June's resentment allowed June to develop a daughter–mother relationship. The fact that June begins to call her mother *'mum'* in her twenties (almost two decades after meeting her and as a result of *'probably having a child of my own'*) indicates that, as Van Mens-Verhulst (1993b) suggests, the process of daughtering and mothering is dynamic, and lifelong and that it is possible to develop new attachments and to produce new narratives of relationships. It illustrates the complexity and dynamism of the relationality involved in negotiating daughter–mother relationships.

While some of the women could not bring themselves to use the *'M'* word to their mothers, the difficulty in finding a comfortable term was frequently because the children who came to rejoin their mothers were already attached to a woman (often a grandmother) they considered to be their mother. While it has long been clear in psychological literature that even infants form strong relationships with people other than their mothers, it is less known how people evaluate abrupt separations from attachment figures that have been central to their lives, but are frequently not seen again for decades.

Even though some of the daughters in the study were excited to meet their parents, it was a shock for most to come to live with *'strangers'* and in a strange country that they often described as cold and grey. In addition, most had to negotiate their grief at leaving their grandmothers or other carers and missing them as well as missing the everyday practices to which they were used. Daughters and mothers each had to get used to each other. Against this background it is not surprising that the attachment, trust and warmth connoted by the words *'mother'* or *'mum'* were difficult to apply to birth mothers children met as strangers. As adults, the canonical status of motherhood led participants to recognise the enormity of the task of developing a relationship with their birth mothers, particularly if they had never entirely resolved some of the difficulties in their relationships (as was common within the sample). It is striking, however, that most reported that over time they did manage to negotiate relationships with their mothers that were not painful to them and that constituted agentic daughtering, even if they did not consider those relationships ideal.

Towards conclusions

This paper makes a contribution to the sparse literature on transnational families (Goulbourne et al., 2010) and gives some insights into the employment of attachment theory and Object Relations in analyses of daughter–mother reunions. One consequence of the popularisation of attachment theory has been a consistent and intensive academic and popular concern with mothering as productive of good or poor psychological adjustment (Barrett, 2006; Golombok, 2000). Mothering and, by extension, mothers are routinely held responsible for how children turn out, often in ways that ignore other people with whom children have strong relationships (Burman, 2008; Riley, 1983). Mothers have been focused on as the principal attachment objects for children (Barrett, 2006) and daughter–mother relationships have achieved iconic status as productive of particularly strong identifications and disidentifications (Chodorow, 1978; Hollway, 2010). Although knowledge of how secure attachments are produced is not complete, ‘sensitive’ mothering is frequently privileged as explanatory and, following Bowlby, children’s separations from their mothers are constructed as particularly detrimental to attachments and children’s mental health (Golombok, 2000).

The process of serial migration has an important contribution to make both to attachment theory and adult attachment theory in that it serves to illuminate the ways in which adults make retrospective sense of their childhood experiences and relationships. It destabilises canonical views that attachment is reliant on physical proximity and which privilege mothers as the primary objects of attachment. The narratives of the daughters in this study who were separated from their mothers and then reunited with them indicate that processes of attachment with their parents are negotiated throughout the life course in many and complex ways.

The women in the study re-evaluated their relationships with their mothers over time and often came to settlements that they did not find painful. They, therefore, exercised agency in daughterhood. They illustrate the ways in which motherhood is relational and daughter–mother relations are imbued with power relations and sometimes power struggles in which daughters can refuse to consent to the mothering their birth mothers try to provide. Over time most daughters in the study negotiated a space in which they could accept and name their mothers. Most, however, considered that separation had produced more distance between them than would otherwise have been the case. Many were regretful about this. Most of those who had children themselves viewed their own motherhood as (at least partially) reparative of their relationships with their birth mothers. They used their relationships with their birth mothers as a foil to enable them to do mothering differently. This determination to mother differently went along with their implicit acceptance of canons of mothering in the global north that treat mother–child separations as inevitably non-normative. The women’s experiences of serial migration were psychosocial in that they were produced in particular sociocultural contexts and were central to their subjectivities as well as to their daughtering. The analyses presented above indicate that complex attachments to their mothers and

other carers were central to the women's experiences as daughters and show that these changed over time and across countries.

A psychoanalytically informed reading of the women's narratives enabled a 'thicker', dynamic understanding of the women's stories and captured the complex and conflictual nature of the reunion with their mothers. By offering tentative expression to conflictual and un-acknowledged feelings, a reading through Object Relations made it possible to recognise the often dilemmatic and conflictual nature of the mother–daughter reunions produced by serial migration. These psychoanalytically informed readings capture how women, while narrating the reunion with their mothers, speak in multiple, heteroglossic voices when narrating conflict and pain. Narratives of the reunion itself gave indications of the sort of relationships women could establish with their mothers, but also showed that these relationships could be ameliorated over time. The findings illuminate Wetherell's (2012) notion that affective practices are complex, shifting, socially situated and interlinked with personal histories.

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