‘Am I Grateful Enough?’: Emotions and Communication in the ‘Deep Story’ of New Mothers in Latvia[1]

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Abstract: The ever-watchful eyes of society have created burdensome challenges for mothers in the 21st century, who are constantly trying to manage their emotions and daily life in accordance with the dominant discourse of what a ‘good mother’ should be like. The aim of the paper is to explore the ‘deep story’ of new mothers in Latvia, employing the theoretical framework of sociologist Arlie Hochschild and her concept of ‘emotion work’. Data were gathered from ten phenomenological interviews with women with a child under the age of two. The results of the narrative analysis show that new mothers systematically apply the principles of ‘emotion work’ and communicate negative experiences only to selected confidants out of a fear of being condemned for not complying with the dominant narrative of motherhood. Although the ‘deep story’ of mothers is rather bleak, the key is open communication without judgement or patronising remarks.

Keywords: motherhood, emotion work, deep story, communication, narrative analysis, phenomenological interviews

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Time flies when you have an infant on your hands, and the period when all thoughts and efforts are devoted exclusively to the infant is relatively short. However, young parents, especially mothers, characterise this time as intense, tiring, and all--consuming, no matter how joyful. Unforeseen challenges, unclear guidelines for doing unprecedented tasks that a person cannot prepare for in advance, unrealistic

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expectations, and, in some cases, a lack of support and information result in various strong emotions, not all of which are positive or coincide with society's views on what constitutes a good mother. Exiled into motherhood, some women begin to question not only their capability but also their experience, often trying to hide their mistakes, doubts, or failures from those who might judge them.

In recent years, motherhood, the experiences of mothers, and the communication of those experiences have been explored by various researchers (Hays 1996, Miller 2005, Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2017, Archer, Kao 2018, Moore, Abetz 2019); but, there has been little coverage of taboo topics or of mothers navigate between conflicting dominant narratives on motherhood and their own attitudes. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore the 'deep story' of new mothers in Latvia, i.e. mothers whose youngest child is less than two years old, by employing the theoretical framework of sociologist Arlie Hochschild and her approach of 'emotion work'. Accordingly, the research questions are as follows:

1. Is it possible to observe emotion management and 'feeling rules' in the narratives of new mothers in Latvia?
2. What are the core themes visible in the 'deep story' of new mothers in Latvia?

Motherhood in the 21st century: uncertainty and loneliness

Although motherhood is not considered a 'gender fate' in the 21st century, one of the central ways in which a woman is defined is still on the basis of her becoming (or not becoming) a mother (Miller 2005: 48). The 'mommy myth' also implies that women are incomplete without children and are the best caregivers (Prikhidko, Swank 2018: 279), even though it is several decades now since Friedan wrote of the 'problem with no name' (1963: 15–32) and Chodorow (1978: 207–209) published the ground-breaking *Reproductions of Motherhood*, arguing that a mother's role is not biologically determined but is in fact a product of the mother-daughter relationship dynamic. Thus, the persistent judgement of women on the grounds of how capable they are of providing childcare that is consistent with the prevailing authoritative knowledge (Miller 2005: 28), the still isolated nature of the motherhood experience, despite changes in society and gender roles, and the ideologies that still dictate the 'correct' forms of mother all mean the experience of motherhood is still a relevant topic (Feasey 2017: 6–7).

In contrast to previous generations, the dominant discourse in the 21st century supports 'intensive mothering', a term coined by Hays (1996) to refer to certain guidelines on how a mother should behave and what emotions she should feel (Hallstein 2006: 97-100). 'Correct' mothering involves lasting and loving affection for a child, whereby a mother's struggles with the tasks of motherhood and other emotions, including sadness, fear, or anger, are automatically classified as

inappropriate, and new mothers are then left feeling stress, guilt, and even shame (Murray, Finn 2012: 56). As Feasey argues, the mother is 'entirely responsible for the social, psychological and cognitive well-being of her children' (2017: 6).

The master narrative of motherhood dictates that mothers should feel an overwhelming, instantaneous, and absolutely positive bond with their new-born (Kerrick, Henry 2017: 9), and the whole mothering experience should create an unrelenting and rewarding sense of gratitude (Murray, Finn 2012: 44). In her recent study, Lehto (2020: 658–659) emphasises that mothers are aware of what society expects from them and this may lead to self-observation and the performance of 'proper' motherhood with intent, which at the same time may be in conflict with a mother's reality and actual emotional and pragmatic experiences.

Not being able to comply with the unrealistic ideal of a mother as an omnipotent, patient, content, and saintlike caregiver, new mothers often suffer from a sense of guilt (Prikhidko, Swank 2018: 278). Thus, while it is not uncommon to feel isolated, angry, or depressed in the postpartum period, new mothers may choose to hide these feelings when they conflict with the dominant discourse (Dubus 2014: 43). Negative emotions and experiences, such as not feeling an immediate bond with the infant and needing time to grow accustomed to the new role as a mother, may also come as a surprise (Kerrick, Henry 2017: 13).

Miller (2005: 56) argues that the dominant discourse combined with the prevailing ideologies of biological essentialists mean that women have a set of 'natural' knowledge about mothering that provides them with guidelines on how to care for a child and how to feel and behave. However, there is often a gap between reality and ideals – for instance, the existence of negative emotions towards motherhood that women feel forced to deny (Lee et al. 2019: 1335). Women feel pressured to appear grateful and fulfilled in their role as a caregiver. Social pressure and a lack of experience have a great impact especially on primipara mothers (Prikhidko, Swank 2018: 278). According to Forbes, Donovan, and Lamar (2020: 69), stress from intensive mothering and eagerness to conform to its standards is also common.

Other cultures, non-Western in particular, recognise the need for helping hands when raising a baby and to understand this sensitive period, as well as the need to devote special care and 'to mother the mother', to recognise her value, and to protect the woman's ability to mother her own child in the future (Dennis 2007: 497–498). By contrast, in Western Europe motherhood is often accompanied by physical and social isolation, thus, motherhood becomes a kind of 'exile', and a young mother's only companion 24/7 may be her infant, (Dubus 2014: 44). Moreover, 9% to 19% of women face major and/or minor postpartum depression in the year following childbirth (Rode 2016: 429).

While previous generations often shared a close bond with female relatives,

mothers in the 21st century generally live separately from their own mothers and in their 'exile' may lack simple, open communication and 'permission to be authentic'. New mothers recurrently experience confusion, self-doubt, guilt, and anger, which may be resolved by having an empathic conversation with an experienced mother without judgement or condemnation, who shows care and support and allows the woman to accept herself as a mother and shed unrealistic expectations or an idealised image of motherhood (Dubus 2014: 50). Most new mothers also need social support in the form of help with menial tasks around the house to escape the still existent 'second shift' (Hochschild, Machung 1989).

Nowadays the physical 'second shift' is often accompanied by unseen but time-consuming and emotionally draining 'mental labour'. As emphasised by Robertson et al. (2019: 184–185), cognitive tasks such as worrying, information processing, and the division of labour that are the most essential for running a household fall on the mother, contributing to her exhaustion. Social and physical isolation combined with an uneven distribution of household tasks and a lack of time for oneself also create a sense of loneliness. Up to 28% of first-time mothers feel lonely, according to a recent study by Lee, Vasileiou and Barnett (2019: 1334). Left without social support, a new mother may focus on self-analysis and may come up with a negative self-assessment if her experience as a mother does not coincide with her expectations of motherhood. Moreover, lonely individuals tend to mask their feelings and avoid discussing them with others, thus, failing to discover that other women may share similar problems.

To sum up, even though mothers' expectations from reproduction and the mothering experience are not universally the same and the context is socially constructed, depending on historical influences and culture and on the authoritative knowledge created and maintained in interaction with society (Miller 2005: 28), the dominant discourse of motherhood in Western modernity is consistent with the principles of 'intensive mothering'. Although historically this ideology has been 'a highly raced and classed discourse, driven strongly by white, middle-class values', its influence is evident in other classes and lower income groups (Das 2019: 499–507). It is held as the standard and the norm at the institutional level even in other cultures; a distinct branch of 'intensive mothering', called 'extensive mothering', has been adopted by working-class or working mothers (Meng 2020: 180). 'Extensive mothering' constructs the good, employed mother as a 'delegator' of caregiving tasks, while retaining the ultimate responsibility for her children and reinforcing the traditional belief that 'women – not men – are the best caregivers of children' (Christopher 2012: 91–94). It gives women power to 'enact responsibility and care while not always there' (Lazard, Capdevila, Dann et al. 2019: 4).

Motherhood in Latvia

Social surveys indicate that the people of Latvia view families as the foundation of society and accept the nuclear family as the norm (Jansone-Ratinika 2013: 7). Despite a progressive social transformation, a balance is still being pursued between traditional and transformative models, as the structure of the family and gender roles are in the midst of change. As Jansone-Ratinika and other researchers suggest, systemic transformation calls for the integration of equality principles into family life; however, the discourse portraying the man as the breadwinner and delegating the woman with childcare and household tasks remains strong (Jansone-Ratinika 2013: 8).

The importance of values that are commonly referred to as 'traditional' is diminishing, especially among the younger population, who share more liberal views, including the notion that children do not play a strong role in self-fulfilment (Trapezņikova et al. 2019: 26). Although the situation has improved, the inequality of women and the 'second shift' they face at home were recognised even in Soviet Latvia, according to a survey done in 1975, where it was concluded that men have 2–3 times less of a workload at home than their spouses (Jurciņa 1975: 101). Still, in 2018, 68% of respondents in an extensive survey revealed that women are more suitable for childcare duties than men; the majority of childcare chores at home are the woman's responsibility (Trapezņikova et al. 2019: 47–69). Yet, when it comes to education and employment and representation in the public sphere, the dominant viewpoint is that equality should exist, and that both women and men share the same rights and opportunities (Trapezņikova et al. 2019: 27).

During the last 50 years in Latvia the number of children in families has decreased, while the number of childless couples has grown; in 2019 at the time of first birth the average woman was 28 years old, had a partner, higher education, and moderately high income, and lived in the capital, Riga (Trapezņikova et al. 2019: 32–46). The mean age of mothers at childbirth in 2019 was 30.7 years and the total fertility rate was 1.61, which is slightly above the EU average of 1.51 (CSB 2020: 62). The total number of live births in 2019 was 18,786 (whereas in 1990 it was 37,918) (CSB 2020: 66).

Lastly, researchers have concluded that the family and demographic policy in Latvia has been pronatalistic and is aimed at increasing the number of children, but that it has been unsuccessful and has failed to provide equal opportunities for both parents (Āboliņa 2016: 23-90). In 2021, according to the Latvia Ministry of Welfare, 89% of parents chose to take a 1–1.5-year-long parental leave, but the majority of these parents were women (LSM 2021, VSAA 2020). Thus, mostly mothers stay at home with small children (for 1–1.5 years), and even after they return to active paid employment the majority of childcare and household chores are stacked on their shoulders. The EU directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158) regulating that a part of paid leave is non-transferable to a partner, and thus both parents must take some leave

(passed in 2019) was introduced in Latvia with delay in 2023 and was accompanied by a discussion packed with arguments grounded in the 'intensive mothering' discourse (Lāma 2022a: 68), doubting the ability of a father to care for his child, expressing outrage at the mother being deprived of her 'vacation', and ignoring the long-term benefits of this particular policy.

Emotion work: 'surface acting' and 'deep acting'

Emotions are not just a private experience, detached from social processes, but are also a significant part of social activity and organisation (Barbalet 2006: 53). One of the pioneers of the sociology of emotions, Arlie Hochschild, coins the concept of 'feeling rules' and 'emotion work', exploring the relationship between culture, politics, and emotion, and researching the 'emotion management' that people who work in service jobs have to engage in (Hochschild 1983: 10).

Hochschild suggests that emotion is the most important biological sense, that, similar to other senses like hearing, touch, or smell, it helps us understand our connection to the world; emotion concerns both action and cognition (Hochschild 1983: 229). 'Emotional labour' requires a person to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others'; this kind of labour 'calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality' (Hochschild 1983: 7). Hochschild uses the terms 'emotion work' and 'emotion management' when speaking about the private sphere of life, leaving 'emotional labour' to characterise manipulations of emotions in professional settings. 'Emotion work' concentrates on the act of creating, summoning, or repressing a feeling, but it does not guarantee a successful result (Watt 2017: 2).

The basis of emotion management is a social model – namely, the 'feeling rules' that guide our emotions, expression, and even how we are paid and make payments with emotions. They act as unwritten moral codes that are acquired during socialisation in specific cultural contexts (Hochschild 1983: 18; Wang 2020: 5). 'Feeling rules' dictate the appropriate emotion, level of expression, and precise timeframe in accordance with what society expects; thus, the need for 'emotion work' may manifest itself not only in public but also in the family circle or even when a person is alone.

When experiencing the presence of a 'feeling rule' Hochschild distinguishes two main methods of emotion work Hochschild distinguishes two main methods of emotion work that people engage in when they are confronted with a 'feeling rule': 'surface acting' and 'deep acting'. The first, less invasive technique uses facial expressions and controlled body language, such as an acquired a forced smile or a 'controlled sigh', while the second method involves the manipulation of feelings and imagination (Hochschild 1983: 35–36). 'Surface acting' is a superficial display

of emotion, whereas 'deep acting' requires mental labour to conjure the actual feeling (Wang 2020: 5). These techniques may be used separately and together – for instance, Curran and McCoyd (2019: 9) found that women with a high-risk pregnancy may engage in 'surface' and 'deep acting' to create the illusion of being calm for the benefit of others (medical staff, family) and, for their own benefit, to reassure themselves of a positive outcome and to control actual negative emotions and stress.

The 'feeling rules' that guide a woman's journey into motherhood are partly rooted in the hegemonic discourse in society – namely, 'intensive mothering', which is anchored in neoliberalism and demands that mothers 'adopt the right kinds of feelings, such as positivity, confidence, resilience and aspiration', at all times (Auðardóttir 2022: 237–238). To communicate personal failures and emotions outside the positive spectrum, such as ambivalence or regret, means 'to disavow what is often considered a person's most natural and sacred role' (Moore, Abetz 2019: 391), and 'feelings of anger, insecurity and frustration […] are to be replaced with happiness, humour and positivity' (Auðardóttir 2022: 238). Therefore, mothers are left to navigate their 'surface' and 'deep acting' in private, while in public they must try to fulfil the unattainable ideal of a mother as portrayed, for instance, in the media (Chae 2022: 551); the disparity between reality and the ideal is then an added burden on the shoulders of mothers (Forber 2020: 64).

As Goffman has concluded, social interaction is a 'game', where the individual is aware of the possibility of failing and of the need to correct mistakes (Goffman 1956: 156); thus, 'emotion work' is closely related to gratitude. People may experience satisfaction when conforming to 'feeling rules'; however, as Schrodt (2019: 5) points out, emotion management is associated with 'negative psychosocial effects', such as 'stress and self-alienation', 'depression and cynicism', and a sense of 'powerlessness'. 'Feeling rules' are responsible for the sense of glee felt when the rules are successfully followed and the guilt experienced in the case of failure.

'Deep story': a 'feels-as-if' web of narratives

Hochschild's 'deep story' concentrates on feelings by speaking through symbols; it involves no judgement or facts as it speaks of pure emotions (Hochschild 2016: 135). A 'deep story' is a web of narratives that helps to capture the conflicting powers in a particular social context (Palmer 2019: 339–340), escaping rationality [leaving aside reason] and concentrating on how injustices are felt and maintained (Kantola 2020: 914–915). According to Palmer, a 'deep story' 'feels true to people, and helps them make sense of contending forces in their world. […] A deep story may not be rational or verifiable, but it resonates with peoples' identities and worldviews, and can shape their choices and actions' (Palmer 2019: 338). It expresses the underlying feeling felt towards a particular phenomenon, however irrational it may seem.

Hochschild designed the concept of a 'deep story' to understand and explain the behaviour of supporters of the Louisiana Tea Party, who voted (supposedly against their own interests) for Donald Trump in the presidential elections of 2016. Following diligent research, it was concluded that supporters of the Tea Party had voted 'emotionally', as they felt the future promised by Trump would correct the wrongdoing inflicted upon them by Barack Obama, who had created privileges for minorities (women, immigrants, etc.) and, thereby, had supressed the freedoms and stolen the rights of the majority – older white men – and made them 'strangers in their own land' (Hochschild 2016: 135). She uses various metaphors and other stylistic devices to illustrate the elements of a 'deep story', which starts with 'empathy walls', 'the great paradox', 'the keyhole issue', and 'the rememberers', leading to the 'deep story', which unfolds in scenes – from 'waiting in line' and 'line cutters' to 'betrayal' (Hochschild 2016). At the end, after diving in detail into the emotions and motivations behind the 'deep story', she also concludes that she 'had discovered that virtually everyone […] embraced the same "feels-as-if" deep story' (Hochschild 2016: 221). In recent years, the concept of a 'deep story' has also been employed in various kinds of research –for instance, to study the role of journalism in the United States (Palmer 2019) or the status of wealthy people in Finland (Kantola 2020). The 'deep story' is a powerful tool for exploring the source of emotional tension and otherwise hidden resentment.

Methods and research design

As there is a lack of a clear distinction in academic and socioeconomic circles as to how exactly to define a 'new mother', within the scope of this research a woman is considered to be a 'new mother' if she has a child under two years of age. This definition is drawn from Piaget's theory of cognitive development stages, specifically the first or sensorimotor stage (Piaget 1952; Babakr et al. 2019), and from Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (Erikson 1950; Sacco 2013), as well as from Labour Law in Latvia that ensures financial aid in the form of childcare support for the first two years of an infant's life (VSAA 2020).

Interviewees for the research were approached through an open call, distributed by the author on the social media platform Instagram. The post invited women whose youngest child was less than two years old to share their motherhood story in terms of their everyday life, emotions, challenges, and victories, which they could do anonymously in an approximately hour-long interview. The open call did not specify the number of children a woman had to have to qualify for the study, as the main focus of the research is on the emotions and experiences of mothers who are at home with their child on parental leave; however, the nuances and possible differences in

narratives were recorded and taken in account. Thirteen women responded to the open call and were included in the study in sequence; three later declined. All ten respondents who were part of the study agreed to share their story voluntarily and proactively.

As a 'deep story' needs to capture 'in metaphorical form the hopes, fears, pride, shame, resentment, and anxiety in the lives" of new mothers' (Hochschild 2016: 135), a phenomenological approach to the interviews is most suitable. Therefore, to gather data for the creation of a 'deep story', use was made of a 'phenomenological interview' or 'semi-structured, ethnographically inspired interviews' (Cope 2005: 176; Høffding et al. 2022: 34). Phenomenology truly captures the essence of an experience and its hidden meaning (Prikhidko, Swank 2018: 164). In order to stay true to the phenomenological approach and grasp the theme without subjective, superficial stereotypes, researchers must try to avoid bias and have to distance themselves from their own personal experiences and they must try to understand the phenomenon from 'within' (Cope 2005: 166), as the true form of a phenomenon will only reveal itself if researchers leave their expectations and assumptions behind (Champlin 2020: 375–396). Phenomenological inquiry also concentrates on the context of the theme in question, as the matter is of a subjective nature. This method is specifically qualitative and holistic, aiming to join different experiences into an interconnected model in the context of the 'lived-world' (Cope 2005: 171). While conducting a phenomenological inquiry, the researcher must take a neutral position and try to describe the phenomenon only through the eyes of the interviewee, while bearing in mind the phenomenological question that should pervade all the stages of the research (Champlin 2020: 375–396); the interviewer also needs to assume a 'second-person perspective' and an 'empathic position whereby that experience and understanding of interviewer and interviewee resonate' (Høffding, Martiny 2015: 541).

The interviews were done over a period of five weeks (in March and April 2020) in person or by telephone. At the beginning of the interview the interviewer introduced the project and the topics of interest (the daily life, challenges, and emotions of new mothers) and urged the women to speak freely, at their own pace, and without interruption. The women were asked about their communication with close relatives, friends, and support groups and their use of social media. The data gathering stage was concluded when ten interviews had been completed. All the women were then given assumed names to ensure their anonymity. All ten new mothers (*Table 1*) who participated in the study were Latvian, lived in Riga or an adjoining region, and had higher education.

Table 1: Interviews with new mothers: general information

No	Given alias	Age	Education	Nationality	Residence	Number of children (age)
1.	Inga	30	Higher	Latvian	Riga	1 (5 months)
2.	Kate	31	Higher	Latvian	Riga	1 (1 year 3 months)
3.	Līna	31	Higher	Latvian	Riga	1 (1 year 3 months)
4.	Elīna	38	Higher	Latvian	Ķekava (17 km from Riga)	2 (1 year 9 months, 4 months)
5.	Linda	32	Higher	Latvian	Riga	2 (3 years, 1 year)
6.	Elza	32	Higher	Latvian	Riga	1 (1 year 6 months)
7.	Magda	37	Higher	Latvian	Riga	2 (2 years 8 months, 1 year)
8.	Rita	34	Higher	Latvian	Riga	1 (1 year 6 months)
9.	Anete	27	Higher	Latvian	Riga	1 (1 year 6 months) and is pregnant
10.	Lita	33	Higher	Latvian	Riga	2 (8 years, 8 months)

Source: Authors.

Six of the respondents had only one child, while the others had two and thus had an older child as well (the oldest being 8 years old). All the new mothers were married, one of them remarried; they all lived in an apartment without grandparents or other relatives, thus representing typical educated urban mothers. Two of the new mothers had recently returned to work (working part time), others were at home on parental leave. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes.

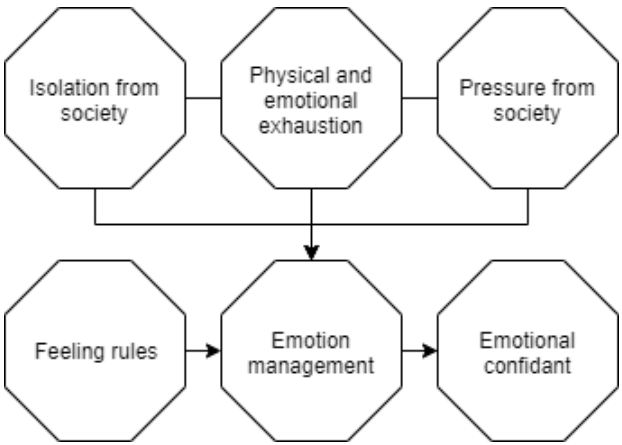
As the creation of a 'deep story' requires that the essence of the individual narratives become be tied together, narrative analysis was chosen as the method for data analysis. The phenomenological approach bears similarities to narrative research, but the latter focuses on how 'respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives' (Cope 2005: 172), which is crucial to this research in order to provide a holistic portrayal of the phenomena. The stories we tell help us grasp social life and praxis: as human beings are not simply 'actors' but also the 'authors' of their lives (Miller 2005: 8–11). Narrative analysis concentrates on revealing the experience of an individual through stories; thus, conducting a narrative analysis, one searches for similar themes and their relationships in order to create

a general narrative, based on empirical evidence, that embodies unique aspects of each individual story (Kim 2016: 189–195). The narrative analysis was conducted in stages. First, the transcribed text was read and reread, to distil the essence of lived experience (Champlin 2020: 375–396). Then, major themes and reoccurrences were identified and compared between narratives, to classify and sort the information. Lastly, a 'deep story', uniting elements of separate narratives, was created, revealing the phenomenon as a whole. The 'deep story' of new mothers intertwines the major themes identified in the narrative analysis (isolation from society, exhaustion, pressure from society), and illustrates the emotional world of mothers through an allegory, traces of which echoed in the narratives of the interviewees. According to Hochschild's approach, the 'deep story' tries to uncover the 'feels-as-if' side of motherhood, connecting the elements from 'behind the scenes' and other factors.

Analysis

There are several major themes that surface to various degrees in all the young mothers' narratives (*Figure 1*): isolation from society, physical and emotional exhaustion, and pressure from society regarding their behaviour and society's opinions about motherhood. All the research participants practise emotion management as well, employing 'surface' and 'deep acting' according to 'feeling rules' that guide them on the path to being a 'good' mother. Only a select sample of close confidants who share the mothers' trust are welcome to share the mothers' true challenges and emotions, which is otherwise taboo in broader social circles.

Figure 1: The main themes in the narratives of new mothers



Source: Authors.

Isolation from society

All the narratives reveal the mothers' self-inflicted or forced isolation from society to some extent, which is consistent with the findings of other studies (Lee et al. 2019: 1334–1335). Magda feels as if she 'has forgotten how to talk to grown-ups' and is alone even when her husband comes back from work, because he lacks the energy to converse. First-time mother Līna confesses that she had been expecting to 'participate in everything that is happening', but in reality she would like to 'build a wall around herself' because of the competition she feels; she would feel safe in public if she could grow 'thicker skin' to protect her feelings from judgement by strangers.

Other research participants practise self-isolation with the baby in order to avoid illnesses or feeling ashamed of their infants' behaviour in public. Social pressure to provide the absolute best for the child also guides this behaviour, which, Hallstein concluded (2006: 97), is consistent with the intensive mothering framework. Some narratives reflect the mothers' desire to avoid judgemental and unwanted scrutiny or comments assessing their ability to be a 'good mother', which leads the mothers to retreat from public spaces, even cafés and into their 'comfort zone' at home. Another issue is the lack of accessibility to various buildings that cannot be entered with strollers.

Only Anete characterises herself as an introvert and does not mind 'sitting at home', although the phrase itself is misleading as 'no mother just sits at home' and, as she points out, childcare is labour. Linda, on the other hand, had even decided to go on a trip abroad by herself with both her children to prove to herself she could manage it, though typically she spent her day 'within four walls'. Small escapes from routine, such as going to the swimming pool and having a 'date' with the husband, are mentioned in the other narratives as well, but all the mothers characterised these escapes as short and irregular.

Physical and emotional exhaustion

Isolation from society and the need to adhere to a strict schedule for the benefit of the baby lead to a predictable or even dreary everyday life for new mothers. All the narratives reflect some level of emotional and physical exhaustion from being 'stuck on a treadmill'.

Līna feels that being at home means 'work': 'I am still searching for a place for relaxation. Because it's not at home anymore.' Elīna confesses that all the days appear the same to such an extent that they blend together. Nevertheless, she sacrifices 'everything you have, from your body to your time, priorities, your ego, for your child'. These comments are consistent with the 'rules' of intensive mothering that call for mothers to provide the best-quality environment for the development of their child (Murray, Finn 2012: 44) and urge a woman to sacrifice herself.

Magda stresses that physical exhaustion is not as unbearable as emotional:

I miss that old friends never come visit and talk. Not about how I am now, but about the same things as always – you know, to chat, to gossip, to gab, to talk about a movie or the dumbest influencer.

Magda would love a break from speaking about motherhood and concentrate on 'grownup stuff', while Rita says that she cannot catch a break to feel like herself anymore.

Although prioritising infants' needs before their own seems natural to the research participants, some of them regret that no one tends to their wellbeing and they miss 'being mothered', something that has been highlighted also in other research (Dennis 2007: 497–498). Elza says:

While you're pregnant, everything's great […], but when the child is born, you drift into the background. […] I had an illusion that, as stupid it sounds, I would be cuddled, receive a pat on the head… Not like now, when the child appears, and I, as a human being, as a mother, disappear in a way…

The need to be 'mothered' is expressed also by Linda and Magda, who rather harshly said: '[When pregnancy is over], the child is king and you're a slave by his side, dirty, reeking, and hungry.'

Pressure from society

Most of the narratives reveal what the women described as 'pressure from society' that tells them to behave, think, and even feel in a certain way about motherhood in private and in public. Motherhood in Western European culture possesses an aura of sacredness (Miller 2005: 57), as mothers still face obstacles to revealing the true challenges and physical and social limitations of raising children. This 'pressure' does not seem to have clear boundaries or particular situations in which it manifests itself, but it is described as an overarching feeling like a 'feeling rule reminder'. For instance, Kate feels like she is being judged by some 'abstract person X', who is condemning her failures as a mother from afar: 'I am afraid to be convicted for not being a good enough mother, but I truly am doing the best I can.'

Anete feels pressure to hide her negative emotions, as 'staying at home with the kids is [supposed to be] relaxing'. Elīna, who gave birth just a few months ago and, in her own words, has not lost all the 'baby weight', feels pressured to look a certain way:

The thing I feel very uncomfortable with is my looks. I feel pressure from society. I try not to let it bother me and be rational, but I still want to look good. […] And it is exhausting emotionally, because others can find the time to work out, but I cannot.

When speaking, Elīna does not mention certain situations, but acknowledges a certain 'pressure' to present herself in a particular way and also feels forced to manage her life with two small children without any outside help, because 'others find a way somehow'. Līna speaks of the 'mom-sweats' she experiences in public spaces, when her child, for instance, is loud or is disruptive:

I guess I fear being condemned for not being a good enough parent. […] Or that I have not done everything in my power not to bother others. Like I and my child are bothering others – messing up their day.

These 'mom-sweats', she says, appear only in public situations when she feels the gaze of passers-by, because she feels that her child is expected to behave perfectly to be accepted in the public space. Lita considers society to be 'very disapproving' and she is scared of failing, and she feels she is being scrutinised for all the choices she makes regarding childcare and motherhood. Magda feels that she was being pushed to act in accordance with certain 'correct' norms and rules throughout her pregnancy and that she still is in motherhood. Kate perceives a certain attitude towards new mothers:

It's not hate, no. […] You are [supposed to be] hysterical, you have hormonal storms, you have 'milk in your brain', you are a psycho, just because you are [a new mother].

The research participants feel 'pressure from society' to behave a certain way, and that they have to defend their decisions and prove their validity, acknowledging the 'feeling rules' that are guided by and based in the 'intensive mothering' discourse. The mothers feel that there is no tolerance for mistakes and that any diversions from what is deemed 'normal' are not welcome and should therefore be hidden away. The research participants also feel that it is taboo to feel negative about one's experiences as a mother and to 'whine' about it, as previous generations 'had it harder'; other research has also brought to light that some 'contemporary mothers feel that a large part of society considers them "whining" and "fussing over nothing"' (Lāma 2022b: 133). The form of social pressure experienced varies between research participants, but all of them acknowledge experiencing it. Thus, some new mothers

isolate themselves, while others challenge the rules of society. Most of the narratives underscore how the mothers feel the need to escape their 'four walls' and the routine of sacrificing themselves and their grown-up life for the good of the child.

Emotion work – to behave in accordance with 'feeling rules'

All the research participants speak of managing their emotions so as to behave in accordance with 'feeling rules', when alone and/or with company. Their narratives bring to light that 'surface acting' techniques are employed mostly when dealing with remote family members, acquaintances, or strangers.

Anete holds back her annoyance at receiving unwanted tips on parenting, treating them as a 'gift' and just accepting them with a polite smile. Līna admits that she employs 'surface acting' to diffuse potential conflicts as it is easier to feign interest than to quarrel; she also tries to change the subject. Lita tries to take a neutral position: 'I also try never to give any advice if it is not asked for. […] I am easily offended; so, I do not participate in conversations that could hurt me.' Childcare as a whole, in her mind, is a sensitive subject.

The research participants use a combination of 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' in the privacy of their homes when trying to deal with anger towards their children or with fear. Rita remembers her husband advising her to be 'calmer and more patient' around the house. When experiencing frustration or even rage towards her infant, Anete tries to argue with herself: 'I try to tell myself – He's tiny, he doesn't understand. […] You have to take a breath and calm down.' Lita admits that she tries to hide her anger but has failed several times and 'exploded' in front of her child. Elīna says, she 'tries to put emotions aside' and be rational. Inga, who spent time with her new-born in the hospital recovering from whooping cough, explains:

> *I usually am very emotional […], but then it wasn't hard – I just tried to take a step aside. […] I tried to comfort him, I was beside him even during his episodes, gave him oxygen. But I forbade myself to panic.*

Although the home should serve as a safe oasis of authenticity, 'feeling rules', according to Hochschild, find their way in (1983: 69). Shielding children from strong emotions and family conflicts is common with other mothers besides Elīna as well; however, sadness is the one emotion none of the mothers try to 'surface act' over or hide. In public, the research participants feel the need to behave in a composed and calm manner.

Another emotion that occasionally needs to be dealt with is gratitude, as the dominant discourse of 'intensive mothering' dictates that mothers should find the work of childrearing continually satisfying and rewarding (Murray, Finn 2012: 44).

Inga remembers how feeling sad made her feel guilty: 'It felt wrong. […] We were so looking forward to having a baby.' Thus, she systematically employed 'deep acting' methods, trying to feel grateful for being a mother. Elīna and Kate have acted similarly. Kate has tried to summon gratitude by exposing herself to tweets on *Twitter* from women trying to get pregnant: 'I constantly try to force myself to be thankful [for my motherhood].' She admits even going to a play about the struggles of infertility to put herself through the necessary emotions. Elīna, who experienced problematic pregnancies, struggles with feeling exhausted:

> *Both of my children are gifts from God. And I am very, very, very grateful. The first two pregnancies were non-uterine […] I am very thankful, but being emotionally exhausted… It affects me more and more.*

Lastly, all the narratives encapsulate the guilt and 'self-shaming' new mothers experience both inside themselves and in public, and their eagerness to 'be better', which is consistent with the findings of other research (Dubus 2014: 50–52). Linda had felt stress in public places when her first child was born: 'When the baby cried, they would think that I am not parenting correctly.' With her second child she feels more confident and does not feel guilty when her children misbehave in public. Lita and Inga experience a sense of guilt for not 'trying enough' to provide the best possible platform for child's development. Elīna feels guilty when she needs to ask for assistance and cannot manage everything by herself: 'I try to remind myself that it's not so bad. […] It could be worse, others have it harder.' Lita reveals that occasionally she likes to read about difficulties others are facing: 'If someone else's life is harder, then you feel kind of lighter [*laughs*].'

According to Hochschild, guilt serves as a 'rule reminder' that a feeling is out of place, not in accordance with how one ought to behave (1983: 57–58). Mothers feel guilty when not complying with the dominant discourse of motherhood, when not behaving in private or in public as a good mother would – when facing struggles with childcare or household, or when feeling strong emotions, for instance, annoyance, anger, rage, emotional exhaustion.

Emotional confidants

All the research participants share the belief that negative experiences are not supposed to be discussed in public, which coincides with other research (Lee et al. 2019: 1334–1335). Inga says: 'Everyone's just talking about how happy they are, how happy and smiling the baby is.' Kate reveals that others share their struggles only when they have already been solved: 'Everyone is talking about it *post factum*.' She feels that the 'distorted representation' of the infant-mother bond has damaged her mental

wellbeing greatly. Līna thinks that negative experiences are a taboo topic. Magda feels that women are advised not to share their challenges so as not to 'frighten off' future mothers. Rita would like to 'go on a reality show' and reveal her inglorious everyday life, because she believes that the media is lying about the true face of motherhood.

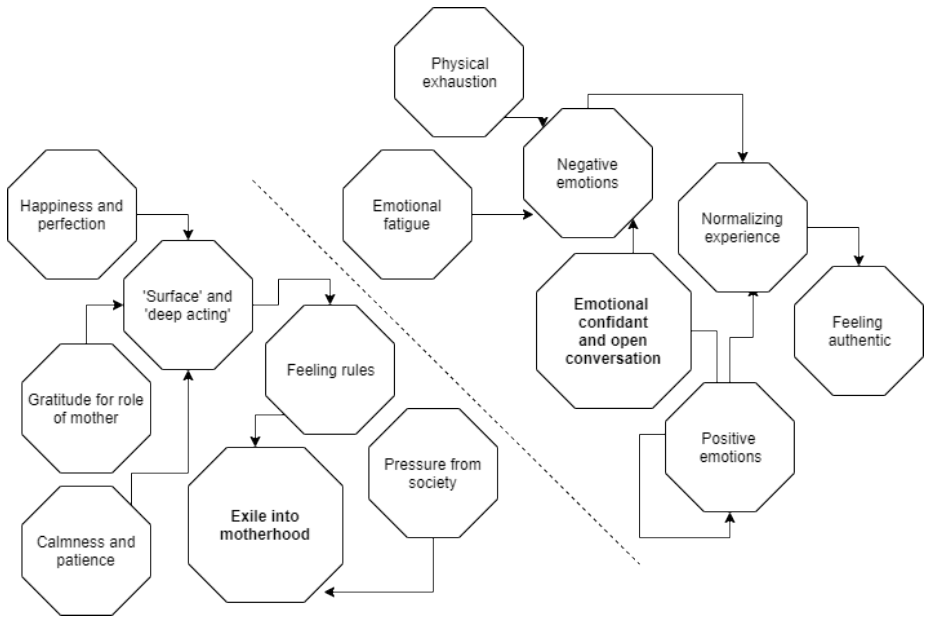
Every narrative includes at least one 'emotional confidant' to whom the research participant tries to reveal her true feelings and everyday challenges in order to feel 'normal' and gain justification of her experience. Most of them chose their husband for this role, because, as Lita puts it, 'It is so much harder to hold all the negative inside a family if you doesn't have a person to rely on.' Elīna says: 'It's such a wonderful feeling – I am not alone, my closest shares my experience.' Līna considers her husband to be a 'shield' against negative comments from others. Magda says her husband has given her the confidence to mother. Inga could not imagine 'acting' in front of her partner because she trusts him. Lita says: 'He is really the only person I reveal to how I feel during the day and how emotionally hard for me is to cope.'

Other women share their emotions and engage in heartfelt conversations with sisters, mothers, or best friends; however, Magda points out that she does not want to be a 'bother' and that it's useless to talk to people who do not have small children, as they won't understand. Linda, Kate, and Rita have also tried support groups and professional help in therapy. Although all the women learned about this study through social media and research indicates that social media may provide social support as well (Haslam et al. 2017: 2033–2035), none of the research participants use it for this purpose because of the distorted and 'way too perfect' image of motherhood it depicts and their inability to achieve it; other reasons include a desire to avoid 'judgement from strangers' and the 'competitive atmosphere', and the need to protect their family privacy.

A 'deep story' of new mothers in Latvia

The experience of motherhood is deeply subjective; however, the range of emotions and everyday challenges it brings resonate in the narrative of each new mother. Being a new mother may be compared to labour in a factory – it is an endless, extremely routinised, and emotionally draining shift, with brief epiphanies brought on by a sense of accomplishment, and with even shorter coffee breaks. Although the tasks seem easy, or even trivial, no mistakes are tolerated, and every failure is scrutinised by the mother or others. It is a lonely business, where mothers are urged to keep their struggles to themselves, occasionally forcing out a smile or nod, while concealing frustration, anger, stress, and mistakes from those who would not understand or might even condemn. The new mothers' workplace is solitary, conducive to their dedicating themselves to a single goal: sacrificing their mental and physical resources to raise a child as best as possible.

Figure 2: The 'deep story' of new mothers in Latvia



Source: Authors.

The 'deep story' of new mothers in Latvia (*See Figure 2*) shares two conflicting sides: exile into motherhood, forced there by pressure from society and by the feeling rules derived from the 'intensive mothering' discourse; and their desire of normalising the experience of motherhood and feeling authentic by revealing both the struggles and the joys of being a mother. Fearing failure as a 'good mother', the women hide their emotional fatigue and physical exhaustion from the eyes of society, masquerading behind surface and deep acting, displaying happiness, patience, and gratitude, and saving the full range of emotions they feel for only a selected few.

The key is open, considerate, present, and understanding communication, free from judgement or unwelcome generic comments. The seal of silence around taboo topics only drives women towards paralysing self-doubt or self-recrimination, while an opportunity to tell one's story to sympathetic ears provides comfort, ease, and a sense of 'normalisation'. New mothers want the chance to share the negative as well as the positive sides of their experience and to be 'mothered' by someone else, a husband, sister, mother, friend, or professional, and to justify and understand their own experience.

Conclusion

Motherhood as an experience is subjective; however, similar themes echo throughout these narratives of new mothers in the 21st century. The 'deep story' of new mothers in Latvia (defined here as a mother whose child is less than 2 years old) reveals the following picture: a self-imposed or 'forced' isolation from society, or even 'exile'; physical and emotional exhaustion, caused by a lack of sufficient time to compose themselves and recuperate from mundane, routinised everyday life; and pressure from society, directing women to 'sacrifice' their mental and physical resources for the good of the child and to manage emotions so as to conceal challenges and negative emotions. The destructive influence of the dominant narrative of 'intensive mothering' is evident, as women try to manage their journey into motherhood. The 'feeling rules' of new mothers are rather strict; constant self-observation and control over one's emotions is necessary.

New mothers, on one hand, search for emotional support and opportunities to normalise their experience and to feel authentic; they seek conversation without employing 'surface' or 'deep acting' techniques and a safe place to share their true experience. On the other hand, women fear being condemned for not complying with the dominant discourse and characteristics of a 'good mother'; they fear judgement – whether from other mothers or from an abstract entity (manifesting as 'pressure from society') – to a level that sometimes forces them to isolate themselves from the outside world. Thus, only selected individuals, emotional confidants, are entrusted with hearing about the sometimes inglorious details of everyday life, about the women's occasional lack of gratitude for their role as a mother, and about their real struggles – with self-doubt, stress, negative emotions, exhaustion, etc., – or, in other words, the topics that are taboo in broader social cycles, as they are incompatible with the ideology of 'perfect' motherhood.

The 'deep story', the intertwined narratives of all the new mothers, is about the endless and even selfless labour of love, and about trying not to fail as a mother. Therefore, this web of narratives expresses a significant conflict in how the world perceives motherhood, especially within the 'intensive mothering' ideology, and how motherhood actually unfolds – a reality unacknowledged the hegemonic discourse. This 'deep story' challenges the disinformation that exists in popular culture and is reproduced in the media. It is about the true struggles of motherhood in the 21st century, especially in the context of diminishing birth rates in Western societies. Although being a mother is not a 'gender fate' anymore, the rules, dictated by the hegemonic discourse, surrounding this phenomenon are rigid, and mothers feel their actions are under scrutiny. This 'deep story' provides a glimpse behind the curtain, revealing women's feelings of being unable to measure up to 'intensive mothering'

values, experiencing pressure, self-doubt, and other negative feelings, while the dominant discourse still promotes traditional gender roles and the 'ideal family' with the father as the main breadwinner and the mother as the primary caregiver, devoting all her resources to the wellbeing of the child and often neglecting her own needs and desires. Beyond the scope of this research, however, the grim notes in the women's narratives also raise a question about the true balance of equal opportunities for partners when a child is born.

This study is qualitative and, even though the demographics of the selected group of participants in the study coincides with the demographic profile of the average new mother in Latvia, the study reflects the 'deep story' of a specific group: educated, urban new mothers in a relationship and living in contemporary Western society. Future research should involve broadening the sample and including narratives from rural regions and mothers speaking Russian, who form a large minority in Latvia, as well as concentrating on the contrast between first-time new mothers and mothers with older children. A longitudinal approach and further research could possible changes in the 'deep story', as the children grow and the mothers become more accustomed to their role and re-enter the labour market, and could examine how the EU directive of non-transferable parental leave (designed to encourage partners to also take at least two months of parental leave) is affecting the core themes of women's narratives.

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