

# **The 'good' mother and the thriving, surviving baby's body: A psychosocial analysis**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on findings from a psychosocial study of maternal subjectivity of working mothers in a scarcely resourced community in South Africa. The study involved using the Free Association Narrative Interview method to interview six mothers to explore how and why maternal subjectivity is constructed discursively and defensively in their talk. The findings point to how these particular mothers employ an instrumental mothering discourse to construct 'good' mothering as ensuring the thriving and survival of the baby's body. Drawing on extracts from interviews we show how the mothers in this study emphasised the infant as primarily a physical body and the environment as dangerous and depriving. We demonstrate how this talk enables these women to position themselves as 'good' mothers on the one hand, but that this position is constantly under threat. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this talk can be understood as defensive, protecting mothers and the researcher from feelings of anxiety and loss. We also argue, however, that there is a danger of this psychoanalytic reading serving its own defensive function – a denial of the faults of the social system. The article ends by discussing the implications of these findings for psychoanalytically informed interventions in scarcely resourced communities.