Can we turn the anthropological gaze on the self rather than others? In this piece I discuss how, upon the birth of my first child, I began to view my life and experiences through an anthropological lens. ‘Auto-ethnography’ is the term most commonly used to refer to this method – using one’s own experiences as the basis for ethnographic analysis (Reed Danahay 1997). At heart, social anthropology seeks to access people’s intimate lifeworks. This can be seen through the methods we use: when doing participant observation, the anthropologist spends a lengthy amount of time immersing herself in the spaces, places and activities of the people she is working with; when conducting in-depth interviews, we speak to our participants with the aim of uncovering the modes of thought that accompany the actions and behaviours we have observed; and when using methods such as asking informants to keep diaries or take photographs we aim to access our participants’ personal views of their world. Who we study, then, is perhaps not as important as how we do it.

Given the disciplinary emphasis on accessing the subjective, it is not that surprising that anthropologists have widened their gaze from studying others to include the study of the self. Although it is recognised as valid, auto-ethnography is an underused technique in published anthropological work. Where it most often arises is in work in which the subjective position of the author is particularly important, such as ethnographies dealing with identity (for example, Matthew C Gutmann’s 1996 work on masculinity in Mexico, which also considers the relationship between the self and the parent). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the experience of new motherhood brought me to this technique as a means of making sense of my radically altered world. In this article I discuss the ways in which mothering a young infant has enabled me new insight into the power dynamics at play in different kinds of work – the unpaid and the paid – and into structured patriarchy in South Africa, where I live. Although the primary research participant here is myself, then, by using anthropological modes of analysis I am still able to speak to wider social processes.

I am a young anthropologist who has only recently become a professional in the field, and yet this is not the first time I have found it useful to examine my own life through the same anthropological lens with which I examine the lives of others when conducting research. Each time such self-examination occurred, my life had undergone a particularly jarring change, and anthropological methods provided a means for me to reinterpret my own world when it had become unpredictable or unexpected.
Methodological debates in anthropology have long highlighted the balancing act that is needed in anthropological research between retaining the more objective viewpoint of the outsider whilst simultaneously accessing the intimate, subjective view of the insider or local person (Kottak 2006). It is this same balancing act that makes auto-ethnography a useful tool both for the self and for social research – situated in a transitional space between one way of living and the next, I was able to access both the insider and the outsider position. The first time this occurred in my life was when I returned to my home country, Zimbabwe during a period of political turmoil. At the time I was a Master’s student in anthropology who had no intention of conducting fieldwork in Zimbabwe. Viewing my altered country anthropologically, however, was the only way I could cope with the political and economic difficulties I encountered in my home town upon my return, and I subsequently went on to study political and human rights issues in Zimbabwe for my Master’s and Doctoral degrees. The anthropological gaze, it seemed, was able both to protect me from that which I found emotionally difficult by allowing me to distance myself; as well as allowing me to access the intimate and conduct in-depth research into issues that were of anthropological interest. However, I would not consider those projects to be pure auto-ethnography rather, whilst being self reflexive about my own personal and emotional connections to the topic, I focused on the experiences and social worlds of others.

More recently, my life has been fundamentally altered once again – this time by the birth of my child. My son is not a research project and cannot possibly be approached as such – however, the topic of mothering has become of both personal and academic interest to me through his arrival in my life. As with my experiences in returning to Zimbabwe, when I became a mother I found myself both insider and outsider in a new social world, slowly shedding my previous personal and professional identities - married woman, young academic - and replacing them with, initially, that of ‘mother’ and, after time, that of ‘working mother.’ This position allowed insight into the ways in which processes of social construction take place; and the role played by wider social structures in the formation of individual subjectivities and experiences. In the discussion that follows I consider the social structuring of parenthood as I experienced it during maternity leave.

The hidden dangers of maternity benefits

The anthropological lens or gaze is used to question aspects of the social world that seem common place or set in stone, such that the structural or cultural conditions that underlie our assumptions can be unearthed. After the birth of my child I found myself wondering about the following: how does parenting become gendered? Or, more specifically, when a couple have an infant, how do the varied responsibilities of parenting come to be shared out between two people?

When my son was first born, I did not have a sense that as a woman I was somehow innately better at caring for him than was my husband. My husband stayed with our son and I during the first few days I spent in hospital recovering from childbirth, and in many ways was the primary caregiver: braver than I, my husband plunged with great enthusiasm into nappy changing, rocking our newborn to comfort him, and burping him after feeds whilst I, confined to bed following emergency surgery, stuck to breastfeeding and general cuddling. My husband and I felt very much a team, and when he left at night to go home and I was left alone with my baby, I felt terrified at the thought of parenting without another presence, at being the sole person in charge...
of such a small and precious being. Similarly, when we first took our son home we shared all the tasks that accompany caring for a small baby, as we always had done with other household tasks. In those early days, parenting was very much a shared endeavour, and thus did not seem to be gendered in any particular way. Of course, there were biological factors that ensured that, initially anyway, some tasks fell to me that my husband simply could not perform, such as breastfeeding. Nonetheless, most of the care that a small baby needed could be equally shared between us.

After a short while home, however, we were jolted out of our ungendered parenting style by an abrupt structural fact: the differing leave entitlements granted to mothers and to fathers by South African labour law. Whilst I was given five months of maternity leave by the university where I work, my husband was entitled to three days. After using his annual leave to spend a couple of weeks with us, he had to go back to work. This brought about some immediate changes to our roles as parents. I shifted to the social position of primary caregiver, a shift that had significant ramifications on the ways in which parenting came to be gendered in our household. Social anthropologists have long been interested in the ways in which social structures and institutions – for example, the family, the economy, or the legal system – affect the individual; here was an example in my own daily life of the impact of a gendered law upon family dynamics. The granting of extensive maternity and curtailed paternity leave directly shaped the way in which parenting came to be gendered in our household. Shared parental leave would allow fathers to focus on parenting as well. Furthermore, it is possible to bypass the biological obstacle of breastfeeding – through, for example, expressing breast milk as I did when I returned to work after five months, or by feeding one’s baby on infant milk formula. It is a testament to the power of the social world that it was quite plausible for us to work through this one biological hurdle that has the potential to gender parenting in particular ways – if mothers do the feeding, they are tied to babies in a way that fathers are not - but that it was not plausible for us to bypass the (socially constructed) legal hurdle. A system that allowed mothers and fathers to share parental leave between them would allow for parenting to be shared, which in turn would ensure that caring for children was not positioned as ‘women’s work’ (Bradley 1989). Children themselves would learn that such work was the work of both

Having a labour law that allocates leave benefits to mothers but not fathers does not necessitate that mothers take on the bulk of the responsibility for caring for children, but it certainly makes it a great deal more likely. My husband could have quit his job to stay home with our baby whilst I went back to work. But this assumes a level of financial and personal sacrifice and commitment not asked of a woman, who is entitled to maternity leave. Further, such a law is a heteronormative one, which assumes that all children have mothers: what of gay fathers who adopt? Gay marriage is legal in South Africa, but other laws lag behind. The allocation of leave to mothers rather than fathers is presumably based upon a biological as well as a patriarchal logic: the fact that I could breastfeed and my husband could not meant that it made sense for me to be at home in those first essential months. But this is no reason for leave to be exclusively allocated to mothers; shared parental leave would allow fathers to focus on parenting as well. Furthermore, it is possible to bypass the biological obstacle of breastfeeding – through, for example, expressing breast milk as I did when I returned to work after five months, or by feeding one’s baby on infant milk formula. It is a testament to the power of the social world that it was quite plausible for us to work through this one biological hurdle that has the potential to gender parenting in particular ways – if mothers do the feeding, they are tied to babies in a way that fathers are not - but that it was not plausible for us to bypass the (socially constructed) legal hurdle. A system that allowed mothers and fathers to share parental leave between them would allow for parenting to be shared, which in turn would ensure that caring for children was not positioned as ‘women’s work’ (Bradley 1989). Children themselves would learn that such work was the work of both
mothers and fathers, of men and women. South Africa, however, does not have such a system but rather assumes that mothers will look after children. Such a system is cyclical: a product of patriarchal values, it works to perpetuate those values. For all that we tried to step outside of this system, my husband and I increasingly found ourselves parenting in a particularly gendered way.

At first, this was not quite as apparent as it later became. In the beginning my presence at home while my husband was at work mainly served to highlight that parenting is not something that is easily done alone. Caring for my baby was a (largely) pleasant and joyful process when my husband or mother was around to share it with me. When I was alone, however, caring for a newborn shifted from a satisfying experience to a deeply frustrating one. Consider the following extract from my diary, written in present tense at the end of the day after my son had gone to bed (and with names removed):

This is what it felt like to be a mother today: it is five thirty in the evening and I am standing in front of the window rocking my baby. My back is aching, my feet are tired and I am bored. I have been pacing the house for forty minutes. He will not be comforted. I have been alone with the baby since my husband left for work and I find myself counting the hours he has been gone. It has been nine hours. I know he is due back soon and so I am at the window waiting and watching. Finally I cannot bear it any longer – I have to know how much longer the boy and I will be alone, how much longer I will be caring for this baby, alone. I phone him. He is in traffic, should be home in twenty minutes. I put down the phone and weep – half because I know soon I will be able to take a break, and half because that break is still twenty minutes away, a time that seems interminable.

It is worth considering two points here: firstly, that caring for young infants and children can be a very lonely and debilitating process if a person has to do it alone; and secondly that the person who is most often expected to do it alone is the mother. This is an issue of institutionalized patriarchal norms – women get leave, not men -and shared parenting thus runs the risk of becoming women’s work. Such work on the part of a mother is unpaid (although she may still be paid by the organization she is on leave from) and does not carry the same status as does work conducted outside the home. Children, too, come to see this work as the work of mothers, not fathers, and are thus socialized into a particular gendered worldview.

The issue here is not that such work is in some way demeaning or of lesser importance than paid work – it certainly is not - but rather that work conducted in the home is not considered in the same light as work conducted outside the home. Furthermore, men are not given the choice to undertake such work whilst being able to keep their jobs. If they want to be primary caregiver, they must stop working entirely rather than taking leave. My husband found this difficult – he would have liked to be able to look after our child full time for at least some of the time, but had no choice in the matter. And my position as full time caregiver ensured that our roles as parents began to shift after he returned to work. We only began to take full cognizance of the ramifications of this as regards the gendering of parenting as time went by.

Consider the following example: my son did not like to sleep during the day; ever since he was a few weeks old he strongly resisted being coaxed to sleep, even though he was miserable when he was overly tired. Alone all day with him, aside from when my own mother (and, much more occasionally, my father) came to assist me, I very quickly learnt various tricks and techniques to get
him to sleep more quickly. Babies do not stay the same for long, and his favourite way of going to sleep was always shifting: from being rocked whilst held upright on my shoulder to being rocked while cradled in my arms, from outside in the garden to inside with the curtains closed, from silence to song. Getting him to take naps was often the most exhausting element of my day, and I looked forward to weekends when I could take a break and my husband could take over. Very quickly, however, this stopped working: watching my husband rocking him, I would find myself thinking, “Well, that’s never going to work, he’s doing it wrong,” and either intervening or being handed the baby in despair. One weekend, (after my husband had given up and passed the baby on to me and I had eventually gotten him to sleep), I put him down in his cot, walked back to my husband and found myself shouting, “I cannot possibly be the only person who can put this child to sleep!” But, for a while at least, I was. I had become the expert and as such, many tasks that had been the tasks of the parents became exclusively the tasks of the mother. My husband and I worked very hard to make sure that this did not remain the case, but it would have been very easy not to. The structural pressure is therefore directed towards positioning childcare as women’s work; in largely patriarchal South Africa it seems likely that my relationship with my husband, which allowed for a re-negotiation of roles, is the exception rather than the norm.

The knock on effects of the state endorsing maternity but not paternity leave are also to be felt at the level of career development – in having a baby, I took five months out of my working life and thus did not publish in the first essential year following the completion of my PhD. This will have ramifications upon my career. Having a child did not have such an effect upon my husband’s career path. Were it mandatory that mothers and fathers be given leave, this gendered discrepancy would at least have the potential to fall away. Social structure here has knock on effects across other parts of social life.

Conclusion:
Motherhood and anthropology

In one way, being an anthropologist has fitted perfectly with being a mother, as it provided me with the analytical tools to make sense of my new identity and social position. In other regards, however, the kinds of work expected of mothers, and the kinds of work expected by academia, are close to incommensurate; and the social status attached to each carries very different entitlements. That, however, is a topic for another article. Anthropology seeks to explore the ways in which people make sense of their social works. I hope I have illustrated here, using my own life as example, that motherhood is not something that is fixed and unchanging across contexts but rather that it is molded by social circumstances. Like all things social, it is variable, with what it means to be a mother (the behaviours of mothers themselves, the expectations placed upon the mother by others and the attitudes held towards mothers) shifting dependent upon time and place. The above auto-ethnography serves to illustrate how, in my own experience, motherhood was made.

REFERENCES