Why a book on modern mothering? Motherhood and mothering are probably among the most researched subjects within various social sciences (such as sociology, psychology, anthropology) and inter-related subdisciplines (sociology of the family, the psychology of motherhood; anthropology of motherhood), yet the pace of social changes – transformations to women’s roles in society, changing structures of family, debates about gender equity in employment, societal attitudes towards reproductive politics, and changing parenting practices – necessitates constant updates on mothering as a social phenomenon and everyday practice. This co-edited book comprises international scholarly biographical perspectives on mothering in and across diverse social and cultural contexts, highlighting cultural nuances surrounding mothering and the complexity of ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’ mothering practices. Significantly, this book comprises contributions from western and eastern Europe, western Asia, Canada, Australia and Africa, illuminating the complexity of a range of inter-related factors (for example, socio-political, cultural and economic) that shape and reflect mothering practices in contemporary global societies.

The initial idea for this co-edited book on biographical approaches to modern mothering sparked intensive discussion between the co-editors and authors about the results of several research projects (international collaborative projects and individual research) and publications on mothering that the co-editors previously completed, and identified areas that required further intensive academic exchanges. The 2017–2019 international biographical study of mothers that was part of the EC Horizon 2020 ISOTIS project (Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society) was led by Lyudmila Nurse at the Department of Education University of Oxford. She worked in collaboration with Kateřina Sidiropulu-Janků (co-editor and author in this book) and Jana Obrovská (author in this book), who conducted their research in Czechia, and Katarzyna Gajek (author in this book), who conducted her research in Poland. Lisa Moran conducted biographical, narrative work with mothers of children who were in long-term foster care and residential care in Ireland and the UK, and interviewed mothers seeking asylum in the Republic of Ireland. These collaborations included intensive discussions about newly evolving topics of non-mothering with Joan Cronin (author in this book), mothering in economically difficult circumstances and the experiences of women whose voices are often marginalised from contemporary policy making and societal forums, including lone mothers, women who are divorced and/or separated and foster mothers of children who are in the care of child welfare systems internationally. Subsequently, we found that there was a distinct
niches for texts on biographical research methods as applied to mothering practices globally, which would bring together contributions from authors in majority- and minority-world contexts. This book, which encompasses dynamic biographical reflections on mothering as a socially constructed process and practice in diverse socio-cultural communities, countries and continents, fulfills this role.

Cooperation with colleagues from Europe in the European Sociological Association and the European Sociological Association’s Research Network 03 and across the Atlantic (Canada, US) through the Biographic Narrative and Life Course Research Network of the Sociological Association of Ireland provided a unique platform for knowledge exchange about the use of biographical approaches in exploring motherhood and mothering from the perspectives of women with children and those who actively choose not to have children. This book is therefore an important channel for sharing and advancing interdisciplinary achievements in this field and for building and maintaining cooperation with biographical scholarly communities in Europe, the Americas, Australia, West Asia and Africa, and constitutes a significant sourcebook for training future biographical scholars on mothering and motherhood internationally.

During these meetings with biographical scholarly colleagues, the main themes explored in this book evolved and are as follows:

• mothering as a complex everyday process and as a socially identified set of practices usually associated with bearing and rearing children from a bottom-up perspective;
• mothering, identities and processes of self-identification;
• mothering, individualism and agency;
• socially constructed assumptions about ‘successful’ and ‘failed’ mothering;
• religious beliefs and mothering;
• non-normative mothering;
• life choices, mothering and non-mothering;
• creative application of biographical approaches, research agendas and innovations.

These themes are subsequently discussed in the Introduction and further developed within individual chapters. The chapters in this book present women’s reflexive dialogues on the meaning of mothering from the perspectives of their own life experiences, life situations, life decision stages and circumstances. The biographical narrative materials presented in this book further demonstrate the complexity and layeredness of mothering and the importance of women’s own biographical experiences and narrations. In the following subsections, we categorize chapters according to the key themes that are explored further in this book. However, it should be noted
that these themes intersect and chapters regularly allude to and demonstrate intersections in thematic areas, further underlining how societal expectations of mothering and everyday mothering practices engender many different (and often competing) dimensions. The principal themes explored in this book encompass reflections and research observations on the following:

- biographical narratives of mothers, which are connected to wider, societal discourses of motherhood and societal and individual perceptions of mothering;
- cultural and social variances in what ‘mothering’ means;
- how ‘successful mothering’ is enacted from the perspective of mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds, low-income families, those who are self-employed and professional, and immigrant and ethnic-minority backgrounds;
- narratives of mothering in specific contexts and policy and practice responses;
- methodological innovations in biographical research on mothering from international research contexts.

The book opens discussion on mothering and care in modern societies from the bottom-up perspective. It aims to give voices to mothers and carers from often marginalised backgrounds, and to demonstrate the complexity of the meanings of mothering across cultures and societies. Although chapters in the book are based on different methodological approaches, they present a coherent picture of multidimensional meanings of mothering in the modern age.

Lyudmila Nurse, Lisa Moran and Kateřina Sidiropulu-Janků