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Mothering in the Ivy Tower

Interviews with Academic Mothers

From the outside a college faculty position looks like an ideal work environment for women who are mothers: a flexible schedule, autonomy, interaction with other adults, rewards for writing and researching topics of interest. Academic women, however, often perceive traditional faculty careers and research agendas to be incompatible with having and raising children (Harper, Baldwin, Gansneder and Chronister, 2001). The purpose of this study is to explore how academic women construct the meaning of motherhood. Is the meaning of motherhood constructed by academic mothers incompatible with academe? Do academic mothers construct motherhood differently than other employed mothers?

The social construction of motherhood

A number of scholars contend that the social construction of motherhood is revealed through discourse (c.f., Kaplan, 1992; Ranson, 1999; Uttal, 1996). Narratives reveal the internalization of ideologies and are the window to viewing the internal meaning systems individuals use to construct their identity and make sense of their experience (Billig, 1997; Bristor and Fischer, 1993; Gergen, 1985; Harre, 1995; Sherrard, 1997; Weedon, 1997). For mothers, internalized ideologies create expectations for identity construction (Bergum, 1997; Woollett and Phoenix, 1991). For employed mothers, mothering role construction is often in tension with the worker/professional role identity (Blair-Loy, 2001; Hewlett, 2002).

Through the analysis of employed mother's narratives, Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001) found that the meanings of motherhood were revealed through three discursive positions: accessibility, happiness, and separate spheres. The first discursive is that the psychological development and general well

being of the child is dependent upon the accessibility of the mother. This position creates expectations that mothers should be ever-present and available to their children (c.f., Ranson, 1999). The second position asserts that the happiness of the mother promotes the happiness of the child. This position allows mothers an identity outside of motherhood to pursue interests and vocations. On the other hand, it suggests that to be “only a mother” is not sufficient for the mother or her children (c.f., Peters, 1997). A mother’s need to meet her own individual needs often creates a dialectical tension with the first discursive position to be ever-present and accessible to children. The third position asserts separate spheres for employment and motherhood. The worker role is separate and independent of the mother role. Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001) found that employed women in Sweden attempt to balance all three of these discursive positions within a cultural framework of gender equality. Good mothers, at least in Sweden, are rewarded for being accessible yet finding fulfillment beyond their children.

Johnston and Swanson (2003) explored Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson’s (2001) three discursive mothering positions in the United States. Johnston and Swanson found that women construct these discursive positions differently based on work status. Whereas at-home mothers defined maternal accessibility in physical terms (e.g., “being there”), full-time employed mothers defined maternal accessibility in emotional and psychological terms. For full-time employed mothers, presence was not as important as the nature of the interaction when present. Whereas the at-home mother discursively defined her accessibility as always present, protective, and enveloping, the full-time employed mother defined her accessibility with boundaries—sometimes present, sometimes protective, and encouraging individuality. Full-time employed mothers use boundaries to develop children’s self-esteem, emotional expression, and independence.

Johnston and Swanson (2003) found that full-time employed mothers construct the happy mother-happy child discursive position by contending that mothers should have an identity outside motherhood. Yet, full-time employed mothers are not as happy as part-time employed mothers, not because of job stress, but because they feel they do not have enough time with their children. In contrast, at-home mothers construct an inverse position; they don’t talk about how a happy mother makes a happy child, but rather that a happy child is the *raison d’être* of a good mother.

Johnston and Swanson (2003) found that at-home mothers construct the third discursive position—separation of work and family spheres—in ways that exclude employed mothers from the definition of a “good mother.” By defining “good mothering” in terms of omnipresent accessibility, at-home mothers stake out a position whereby a “good mother,” by definition, has to select the family sphere and abandon the employment sphere. Full-time employed mothers try to justify their work decision by separating work and family spheres. However, in reality, they experience spillover between work and family: work

impinges on family time and family obligations impinge on work. They negotiate this definition by temporarily switching their priorities, energy, and attention from one sphere to the other. As a result, for full-time employed mothers, motherhood and employment remain in tension.

Academic mothers

Research on mothers who are also academics is limited to studies of career performance and career satisfaction (Allen, 1998; Bellas and Toutkoushain, 1999; Chamberlain, 1988; Cole and Zuckerman, 1987; Davis and Astin, 1987; Fox and Faver, 1985; Kyvik, 1990; Long, 1990). Overall these studies suggest that marriage and family do not account for the disparity in the publication records of men and women (Bellas and Toutkoushain, 1999; Chamberlain, 1988; Cole and Zuckerman, 1987; Davis and Astin, 1987). Blackburn and Lawrence (1985) conclude that sex differences in publication productivity disappear when institution, rank, and academic discipline are controlled.

However, there is some evidence that women perceive family as a hindrance to academic success (Chamberlain, 1988; Harper et al., 2001; Tack and Patitu, 1992). Whereas men see limited resources as the primary inhibitors to productive research and writing, women identify limitations that are the results of their participation in time-consuming activities, such as family, teaching, and committee work (Chamberlain, 1998; Harper et al., 2001; Tack and Patitu, 1992).

Research on academic women's job satisfaction suggests that women are less satisfied than men. Morris (1992) and Harper et al. (2001) found dissatisfaction and frustration among women at all academic levels. Much of this dissatisfaction may come from the extra expectations put on academic women. Women faculty, married or single, are expected to manage the institutional housekeeping—i.e., committee work, student recruitment, departmental social events (Cummins, 2002).

At best we can conclude that family is one factor contributing to women's real and/or perceived difficulty advancing in academe. Perhaps one of the reasons this research is so equivocal is that family roles are operationalized as demographic variables rather than constructed identities. We have little understanding of how academic mothers construct motherhood and how these constructions may impact their professor roles. The purpose of this study is to explore the accessible mother, the happy mother, and the separate sphere discursive positions (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001; Johnston and Swanson, 2003) in the discourse of mothers in academe. Are these three discursive positions salient for academic mothers? Do academic mothers construct motherhood differently than other full-time employed mothers?

Methods

This study is part of a larger research project on the social construction of motherhood based on interviews with 95 married, middle-class mothers of

preschool age children (Johnston and Swanson, 2003). The network sampling technique was used to identify mothers with at least one preschool age child.

A subsample of these interviews are women academics from two institutions in the United States: a small, liberal-arts college and a Midwestern state university. Sixty-five percent had Ph.D.s and 35 percent had M.A.s or M.F.A.s. The academic mothers were all married and had one to four children with a sample average of two children each. The average age of the mother was 38 years. The age of the children ranged from infant to seven years.

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. The recorded interviews averaged two hours in length and were usually conducted in the woman's home. Questions addressed issues of work decision, identity construction, social support, and reflections on cultural role expectations for mothers. For this study, the discursive themes revealed in the narratives of academic mothers will be compared to the narrative analysis of full-time employed, part-time employed, and at-home mothers reported in Johnston and Swanson (2003). Pseudonyms will be used to protect the confidentiality of the women in our sample.

The narrative data was first coded thematically (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Themes were analyzed for frequency, repetition, and dominance of discursive interpretations (Burr, 1995; Wetherell and Potter, 1988). The analysis of discursive positions involved exploring the images and metaphors employed in women's narratives, what is said, what is not said, and what discursive dichotomies are used to construct meanings of motherhood (Feldman, 1995; Scott, 1988; and Wall, 2001).

Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson's (2001) three discursive positions were prevalent in the qualitative thematic analysis of the data and were therefore employed as an interpretive framework for analyzing the results. Accessibility concerns emerged as a discursive position when we asked the mothers in our sample how they defined a "good mother," how they could be better mothers, and what they perceived to be the greatest stressor of being a mother. The construction of maternal happiness was revealed in women's reflections on how they made their work/stay home decision, the impact of their decision on themselves and their children, and their assessment of their own happiness with their decision and motherhood experience. Mother's construction of work/family spheres was revealed in responses to questions about the separation or integration of work and family, how the two spheres influenced and informed each other, and how often they overlapped.

Results

Accessibility as a discursive position

In the narratives of academic mothers, accessibility is associated with vigilance. Academic mothers appear to approach mothering with the same kind of intensity with which they approach a dissertation: "I'm a good mother that

tries to be really on top of all these things that are happening with my child,” explains Tracy, psychology professor and mother of two.

For academic mothers, good mothering is more than accessibility; it is responsibility. In fact, academic moms say that the greatest stress of being a mother is the tremendous responsibility of raising a child: “You try to do your best at everything you do to raise your kids, but there is no assurance against something you don’t know. There are many different ways of doing it and your way may work for you, but it may not be the best way. Knowing that, I think, is very stressful,” says Sarah, Education Professor and mother of two. Carla, English Professor and mother of four, talks about her hour commute and the panic that sometimes overwhelms her: “What did I get myself into? The hardest thing for me is watching these human beings I love grow up. I feel a different kind of responsibility for them than I do my husband. He was an adult already in my relationship with him. If he makes bad choices, I’ll be there, I’ll love him and I’ll pick him up, but I don’t feel the same kind of responsibility.”

Academic mothers do not define accessibility in physical (“being there”) or psychological (“esteem building”) terms. Rather, academic mothers consistently construct the meaning of accessibility in terms of intimacy. Marta, Education Professor and mother of one, cannot keep the delight out of her voice when talking about her young daughter, “She just knocks me out. She’s so sharp and delightful and funny. I think she knows how much we just *like her*. She knows we love her too, but we just really like her... We’re physically very affectionate and she responds to that.”

When asked if they were missing out on anything, academic mothers lament the possibility of missing out on developmental accomplishments: “[I worry about] missing out on the day-to-day changes, raising him the way I would raise him,” bemoans Molly, psychology professor and mother of one.

Academic mothers say they have adequate time with their children, but this kind of accessibility comes at a cost. Defining accessibility in terms of an intense sense of responsibility creates work for the academic mother. “I get very defensive sometimes about the fact that I’m the one that feels like I’m responsible for everything. Like getting her from point A to point B, or making arrangements for her to go to the doctor, or picking up at daycare. I sometimes feel that working full-time and then having the responsibilities of [my daughter] and the household is more than what I’m capable of handling,” sighs Anne, communication professor and mother of one. “[As a family] we try to balance all of our commitments. [Our daughter] is involved in so many things and [my husband] and I have our leisure activities that we do and then there’s church... [She] is in soccer and she’s starting basketball and she’s in her school play and she has Kid’s club through church on Wednesday and choir practice at church on Sunday evening and chemistry club. Chemistry club is a new one. [She] is just one of my three children and she’s already making bombs,” says Kelly, mathematics professor and mother of three.

Happy mother–happy child discursive position

When asked about their happiness, academic mothers talk about the tension between high job expectations and intense mothering expectations. Faculty mothers describe the threat to their self-identity that occurs with motherhood. Perhaps in reaction to the guilt of preserving an identity outside of motherhood, academic mothers compile intensive mothering expectations on top of already high work expectations. “There are some evenings when I come home and feel like I’m in a time crunch. She (my daughter) doesn’t have my full attention. I’m too tired to give her my best. I sometimes feel that there’s a lot of pressure being that I work, there are still things that have to get done at the end of the day... [Y]ou still have to come up with time for her so that she doesn’t feel like she’s being cheated. Sometimes I don’t feel like I’m 100 percent successful at doing that. In fact, hardly ever do I feel like I’m 100 percent successful at doing that,” admits Anne, Communication Professor and mother of one.

Despite the fact that academic mothers report work and family tension, faculty mothers are confident in their decision to work. Academic moms work because they love their professional identity: “I love my work,” “My identity is my work,” and “I never thought or considered doing otherwise,” say academic mothers. Academic mothers also believe that their employment benefits their children: “I am a role model to my child. I like the opportunities [my job] offers to my child. He does a lot of things socially that a kid would not be able to do in other settings. He’ll always be around people who are interested in education and like to travel abroad,” notes Celeste, Law Professor and mother of one. The fact that faculty mothers are not conflicted about their decision to work—despite the fact that they are stressed and not terribly happy—reveals the degree to which they embrace the position that to be only a mother is not good for either the mother or the child.

Maintaining separate spheres discursive position

Faculty mothers find it difficult to separate work and family spheres. Children are often in the office while mothers work. Mothers often work at home. Indeed, the flexibility of the academic schedule allows moms to transport children, attend school functions or stay home with a sick child during the workday. Conversely academic conferences, lecture series and campus events take mothers away from home on evenings and weekends. “Occasionally I will have to drag my son to school with me [when] he’s sick and I have to get that one lecture done or turn off an instrument or something,” admits Lauri, Chemistry Professor and mother of three.

Academic mothers say the spillover between work and home is stressful: “I drop my kids at daycare and I have to express my milk before I go to class. I run over to daycare to nurse at noon and then before I know it, it’s time to express milk again mid-afternoon. The first thing [my child] wants to do is to nurse when [he] gets home. And you know it’s really difficult going from

talking to a student to expressing milk in your office to opening the door and dealing with a student again or faculty member or writing a proposal or writing a test or something. Having that [my personal life and my work life] so intermixed is stressful. I am doing something pretty personal in a semi-public environment,” continues Lauri, Chemistry Professor and mother of three.

The integration of work and family roles is also, however, perceived as a strength for many faculty mothers. “I’ve become less distractible and more focused...I was spending seven days a week, 10-12 hours a day in my office ... and not really accomplishing as much as I do now [that I have children],” contends Lisa, Biology Professor and mother of two. Faculty mothers want to be recognized for the ways their mother role informs their professional role and the ways their professional role makes them better mothers. The bottom line is that faculty mothers want their institutions to recognize them as mothers. “In general I find that if you want people to recognize you on the level of ‘oh, I like the outfit you wore today’ then you can talk about your kids. If you want people to recognize you on ‘oh I like how you taught that class’ or ‘I like that piece of research you were talking about’ then it’s better not to talk about your kids at all,” laughs Carla, English Professor and mother of four.

Rather than separate the public and private spheres, academic mothers perceive that the solution to work-family tension is the integration of roles. They want to be recognized as mothers and as professors; they resent having to deny a part of their identity to be taken seriously by the academy. Carla, English Professor and mother of four, explains “[I get support] to the level where people say ‘oh your pictures of your kids are so cute’ but they don’t know my life with my kids. I mean I’m pretty sure that they would know each other’s pets and their pet’s habits better than they know my kids.”

Discussion

Success in achieving gender-equity in the academy is partly dependent on supporting faculty’s roles as parents. It is necessary to understand how academic mothers construct mothering in order to construct professional roles that support faculty who also choose to parent.

Faculty moms embrace an intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996). Hays describes intensive mothering as the “copious amounts of time, energy and material resources [expended on] the child ... [in this] child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive” (129) approach to contemporary mothering. Identifying academic mothers’ intensive mothering expectations helps us to understand why many perceive professor and mother roles to be incompatible (Harper, et al., 2001). This study reveals that academic mothers construct accessibility in terms of intensive vigilance and responsibility, and construct work and family spheres as integrated in a work environment that seeks to keep work and family separate.

Academic mothers construct mothering differently than other employed mothers. Like other employed mothers, academic mothers talk less about

physical accessibility and more about psychological development in defining a “good mother.” Yet, non-academic employed mothers seem satisfied with intermittent accessibility (Johnston and Swanson, 2003): e.g. I’m there if there’s a problem. And, since psychological development of the child is a long-term process, the benefits of outside caretakers and experiences in this process can be justified. Faculty mothers, however, describe additional expectations of vigilance, responsibility and intimacy. These expectations increase the tension between professional success and motherhood; these expectations are immediate, not long-term, and are constructed as the responsibility of a ‘good mother’ not another caretaker.

When asked if they were missing out on accessibility, academic mothers’ responses are most consistent with the responses of at-home mothers (Johnston and Swanson, 2003). Whereas non-academic employed mothers report wanting more time with their children (Johnston and Swanson, 2003), academic mothers, like at-home mothers, are much more specific in lamenting the possibility of missing out on developmental milestones.

When asked about their happiness, academic mothers did not talk about personal happiness. They talked about stress and tension. Academic moms attempt to fulfill full-time academic professional obligations and concurrently fulfill expectations more consistent with full-time at-home mothering. High accessibility expectations need to be reconstructed to be compatible with full-time employment. Keller (1994), for example, describes mothers’ reliance on economic justifications for working: I am a better mother because I provide financially for my child. Uttal (1996) finds that mothers construct daycare in ways that support their constructions of themselves as good mothers. Academic mothers do construct their professional role as beneficial to their child (e.g. providing intellectual and cultural opportunities) but this construction doesn’t go far enough to absolve them of the stress in meeting intensive mothering expectations.

Finally, this study suggests that academic mothers want their mother identities to be valued by the academy. The full-time employed mothers in Johnston and Swanson (2003) study did not mention this. Faculty mothers want to be recognized for the ways their mother role informs their professional role and the ways their professional role makes them better mothers.

Conclusion

Faculty moms embrace an intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996). Understanding academic mothers’ intensive mothering expectations (Hays, 1996) helps us understand why professor and mother roles are perceived to be incompatible by many academic women (Harper, et al., 2001). Hays (1996) describes intensive mothering as the “copious amounts of time, energy and material resources [expended on] the child ... [in this] child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive” (129) approach to contemporary mothering.

It is necessary to first understand how academics construct mothering in order to construct professorial roles that support women faculty who may also choose to parent.

Every employed mother we interviewed – whether an academic or employed in some other occupation – was highly invested in her children and her mother identity. Yet, non-academic employed mothers attempt some separation of home and employment spheres; they redefine accessibility needs and expectations around employment to relieve intensive mothering expectations and increase compatibility between the demands of employment and home. Keller (1994), for example, describes mothers' reliance on economic justifications for working: I am a better mother because I provide financially for my child. Uttal (1994) finds that mothers construct daycare in ways that support their constructions of themselves as good mothers.

Modified “good mother” expectations likely contribute to non-academic employed mothers reporting less stress and greater happiness than academic mothers. Academic moms construct mothering expectations that are more consistent with full-time at-home mothering, while concurrently fulfilling full-time professional obligations. In this study, non-academic full-time employed mothers, like academic mothers, defined good mothering in terms of psychological development. Psychological development of the child is a long-term process and the benefits of outside caretakers and experiences in this process can be justified. Faculty mothers, however, described additional expectations of emotional accessibility. These expectations increase the tension between professional success and motherhood; these expectations are immediate, not long-term, and are constructed as the responsibility of a “good mother” not another caretaker. In order to model self care, fulfilling work, and healthy relationships for our children, academic mothers may need to reconstruct both mothering and the academy.

While Hays (1996) acknowledges the benefits of intensive mothering in terms of valuing secure family relationships, involvement with children, self-esteem development, nurturance and affection, and an emphasis on emotional over instrumental support for the child, she concluded that there are many negative outcomes of this mothering ideal. Does intensive mothering model self-sacrifice of women, confuse dependency with intimacy, and teach love at the cost of respect? Can it lead children to develop a sense of entitlement, a lack of initiative, and a disregard for mutuality in the give and exchange of relationships?

Idealistic intensive mothering expectations might well be tempered by Winnicott's (1987) “good enough mothering.” According to Winnicott meeting a child's every need may not be best for the emotional and psychological development of the child. “Good enough mothering” frees mothers from the responsibility of meeting every need, yet still empowers mothers to be responsive, devoted, empathic and loving mothers. Thurer (1995) concludes that “Perhaps she needn't be all-empathic, after all. Perhaps she can be personally

ambitious without damaging her child. Perhaps she does not have unlimited power in the shaping of her offspring. Good mothering ... is a cultural invention," (300).

In addition to reconstructing 'good mothering' expectations, changes in the academy are needed to promote 'good parenting.' An academic career has no boundaries and is never done (Bailyn, 1993; Ostrow, 2001); there are always papers to grade, lessons to write, research journals to read, books to write, and lectures to attend.

Moreover, the traditional academic linear career progression is imposed on a non-linear process called life. Parents' scholarship may be characterized by spurts of productivity and creativity that wax and wane with demands of parenting. Whereas evaluation of scholarship has traditionally focused on early, continual, and increasing expectations of productivity, parents may need to be evaluated on non-linear and long-term contributions over the lifetime of a career. Moreover, while traditional scholarship has been characterized as an individual competitive endeavor, parents may benefit from cooperative research endeavors and research centers (Dickens and Sagaria, 1997).

Finally, this study suggests that academic mothers want their mother identities to be valued by the academy. This means that motherhood is integrated in the curriculum as an important area of scholarship (c.f. the mission of the Association for Research on Mothering). Maternal pedagogy (Green, 2002), as an extension of feminist pedagogy, must be valued by the academy. This means that mother-identity is recognized by the academy as an asset that can bring new perspectives and motivations to the academy. Harwood (2001), for example, writes about women whose mother-identity inspired them to become peace activists. At the very minimum, academics should not have to hide their mother-identity: "I like to think of my personal life as additional proof that I can juggle many tasks and a full slate of responsibilities—traits that are welcome and necessary for anyone who hopes to earn tenure" (Johnston, 2001).

Stressed and unhappy mother scholars cannot reach their full potential as scholars or mothers. We like to think we can do it all, but at what cost? Our health? Our children? Our identity as serious scholars? One could argue that academic mothers need to be more like non-academic employed mothers by changing their accessibility expectations and striving to separate the spheres of work and motherhood. Or, one could argue that the academy has an opportunity to value parenting and create a culture in which the responsibility of raising children is shared equally by mothers and fathers. Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001) find that despite fathers' support for gender equity, the reality is that mothers are the ones who adapt their professional life to meet children's needs. Changes in the linear academic career track could create a climate that benefits fathers, mothers and children. Parents' creativity and productivity—and children's psychological and emotional development—could thrive in an environment that supports both involved parenting and productive scholarship.

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