

Paid Work, Family Work and the Discourse of the “Full-Time Mother”

This paper emerged from research undertaken some years ago with an interest other than discourses of mothering in mind. At that time, my focus was on the educational choices and occupational experiences of the university-educated women in the study in which I was then involved. My goal was to explore the ways these choices and experiences articulated with decisions about family formation, and, for the mothers in the group, the decisions they made about paid employment and the necessity to balance “work and family” responsibilities.

I had been long familiar with the feminist-inspired research on the gendered (and inequitable) division of household and childcare labour, and gender segregation in workplaces. And I had read more recent feminist theorizing about motherhood and its social construction. But listening to women in many interviews, I came to understand that the ways they *spoke* about their lives at work and with their children, the terms they used to frame their own experiences and activities, and the models and ideals on which they drew, were also critically important. This talk, at the level of the individual, was a link to the bigger social picture that had always interested me. In the tradition of Gubrium and Holstein, whose emerging interest in “family discourse” sent them back to the task of “reinterpreting data originally gathered for other purposes” (1990: 32), in this paper I return to my interviews with mothers, and listen again to their talk. I try to “hear” what organizes it, and what effect this organizing has on what they do as mothers.

The interviews

The interviews which provide the data for my exploration of talk about mothering were conducted in late 1993 and early 1994 with 45 women who

had graduated from the University of Alberta in the mid-1980s. They represented a sub-sample of a larger group who had participated since their graduation in a panel study of the transition from school to work.¹ The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended; I was interested in gathering information about each woman's work and family history, the decisions she had made (or was in the process of making) about work and family, and the circumstances surrounding each decision. Of the interview group, 24 had children at the time I met them, and their mothering was playing out in a variety of domestic situations. In this paper I focus on nine of the mothers, three of whom were in full-time paid employment, three of whom were in part-time paid employment, and three of whom were "home-based" (a term to which I will return later). Eight were married (as were almost all the mothers in the larger sample) and one was in a stable, long-term relationship, all were white, and all had university degrees.

Conceptual framework

The interview tapes and transcripts revealed that many of the mothers shared a common frame of reference when it came to thinking and talking about being mothers. This frame of reference has a long pedigree in western industrial society. For most of the twentieth century, a model of motherhood (based heavily on the situation of the white, middle-class family) has been projected as universal. This model establishes one woman (the biological mother) as primarily responsible for mothering during her children's formative years, with the children constructed reciprocally as needing her constant and exclusive care (Glenn, 1994; Wearing, 1984). This model has been articulated more recently by Hays (1996) as "intensive mothering," in which mothers are urged to "give unselfishly of their time, money and love on behalf of sacred children" (97).

Ideologies such as this shape our perceptions of our activities. They act, in Kaplan's (1992) terms, as "master discourses" that organize not only how we think but what we do—our daily practices. One dimension of mothering discourse powerfully informed much of the talk about mothering that I heard. I have called this dimension the discourse of the "full-time mother." The thrust of this discursive position is that mothering, particularly when children are very young, is in effect a full-time job. The belief is that the best child care is exclusively maternal, and that mothers are obligated to supply it on an ongoing basis. This is certainly intensive mothering, in Hays' terms. But my focus here is also on the way "full-time" is interpreted both as ideal and in practice. This involves looking at the way *time* spent, or not spent, wearing the "mother" hat is used to shape, or judge, mothers' practices.

The nine women whose stories I share here all organized their mothering practices—or evaluated them—in terms of the "full-time mother" discourse. This happened in spite of the fact that their domestic circumstances did not always allow them to be "full-time mothers," whatever they understood that term to mean.

The "full-time mother" and full-time paid employment

Mothers in full-time paid employment are prevented by this employment from becoming "full-time mothers." But all of those interviewed expressed a wish to be working fewer hours, and most specifically wanted to be able to spend more time with their children. The three women whose stories I include here were quite explicit about their preferences for how to spend their time. No one articulated the discursive ideal better than Laura, the mother of a three-year-old; she worked because she felt her economic independence was an important safeguard in an unstable relationship, but she judged her mothering clearly in the terms of the "full-time mother" discourse:

I would just like to raise [her child] in the way I guess I was raised and my mom was always home with us kids. And I remember feeling so secure. . . It was just nice to come home at lunchtime during school, and just know that your mom was always around. And I would like for [her child] to have that . . . I just think back to the fifties, the sixties, the seventies where the moms were at home, and they were sewing and cooking and, that's the type of thing that I remember and that's what I would like to be like even though I'm not like that at all, I don't sew and I don't really love cooking. But that would be my perfect model.

For Helene, a teacher on maternity leave with her second baby at the time of the interview, feeling maternal corresponded to being at home. With her first baby, now three, she felt "non-maternal," and was impatient to get back to work. But the second maternity leave was different.

I was holding [the baby] yesterday morning, about seven o'clock, at the window. And people were brushing off their cars and getting ready to go to work. And it was just daybreak. It was beautiful, the snow was coming down. And I just felt overwhelmed with happiness, sort of, at being able to be home, and not having to go out. . . Feeling I guess maternal.

Bonnie, a teacher employed full-time, said she knew from personal experience where the expression "sick and tired" came from. She wanted to give up her job to be home with her children, but was also concerned about burning her financial and professional bridges by doing so. She told a powerful story from her childhood as she explained her thinking:

My mom was a teacher. She was married and had two children and stayed at home and then I was born, and apparently, I don't remember this, I was two years old, she had picked up a teaching job and she was teaching and my dad was working and they had a lady that would come in and look after me. . . . Anyways, the lady, caregiver, fell asleep on the chair. It was a September day, I went walking downtown. When the police finally found me . . . they

Gillian Ranson

*said, 'Where are you going?' and apparently I said, 'Looking for my mom.'
Now, I'm getting all emotional, but I don't even remember it.*

Unable to stay at home and be a “full-time mother” herself, Bonnie found a “full-time mother” substitute to care for her children. Bonnie described this woman as “kind of a stay-at-home mom” who worked part-time at night (and thus, as the next section will pick up in more detail, was able to create the illusion of “full-time mothering”). She had children the same age as Bonnie’s, and treated Bonnie’s children “like her own.”

As Uttal (1996) has noted, women whose paid employment precludes the kind of intensive mothering described by Hays, and elaborated here in terms of its time focus as “full-time mothering,” place different constructions on the kind of care their children receive from others in their absence. For some of the women in Uttal’s research, constructing themselves as ultimately the most important influence in their child’s life meant reframing the work of the caregiver as merely custodial. Others saw the caregiver as surrogate mothers, and others again saw themselves in partnership with the caregivers to provide “co-ordinated” care. Bonnie’s assessment of her caregiver’s role was probably as providing surrogate care. She herself wanted to be the woman at home:

*I don't know, I just feel for my kids and for me it is the right thing, you know,
it's just the right thing. I don't know if it's from something in my past, or,
it's just, I evaluate something and I say this is what it should be.*

The “full-time mother” and part-time paid work

The “full-time mother” discourse also framed the practices of the three women in more regular part-time employment whose stories are included here. Linda, a nurse with a 19-month-old baby and six months pregnant with her second child, said she was “horrified” at having to leave her child, then 11 months old, when she returned to work half-time. She shared a babysitter with a friend, and the arrangement worked well though she considered herself “definitely” the best person to look after her daughter.

*It's nice for her to mix with another little person and she enjoys the children
and so, it's been kind of a positive part of having someone else look after her.
I do have a definite problem with the control, giving up, I mean I like things
sort of a certain way sometimes ... I don't get bent out of shape but I just
recognize that I really like it to be just [her child] and I, we do things this
way.... I like her to spend time with other people, but not a whole day.*

As a nurse working shifts, she had some flexibility in organizing her work time. Her goal was a particular combination of day and evening shifts, and some weekend work, that would require only five or six days a month of childcare provided by someone else. In this respect, her paid work would become much

less visible, and her mothering time commitment would begin to look much more like "full-time" in practice. Much of the supplementary child care required by her evening and weekend shifts could also be provided by her husband, which she construed as "a kind of bonus."

Sometimes I feel like I'm missing out on family things. Like this weekend. I'm going to be sleeping [because she is working a night shift] and they're going to be toodling around doing something. But that's the same as me in my mind, is for her to be with Dad.

Garey's (1995) study of nurses working the night shift articulated exactly this practice. Like Linda, the women in Garey's study were aware of the symbolic importance of being "at home" during the day—even if they were at home sleeping, and even if they were home while their children were not.

Gail, a speech pathologist with a 14-month-old baby, worked three days a week at a paying job. There was no concealing this paid work through night shifts. And she found the need to share caregiving with someone else extremely painful—even though the caregivers in question were her parents:

I think the biggest thing was, it's that little bit of letting go, that somebody else can do the job, somebody else take care of him as well as I can ... The morning I left him to go to work ... I cried leaving, and I thought, My God, I am leaving him with my mother and I'm crying. What would I have done if I had left him with somebody else? [It] probably would have been horrible. I probably would have taken me days.

But if her job took three days, she was a "full-time mother" for four. Here the constantly available mother was reconstituted as the person who saw more of the child than anyone else did. She explained:

My job is important to me but my home life and my personal life is more important. And I didn't want to spend more time at work than at home... I thought to myself too how tired I would get working full time and, you know, the house and doing all these different things that I just thought it wouldn't be fair to everyone involved because I couldn't do it. I couldn't keep myself working well, doing things at home, being mom and wife and happy with everything. I just knew I wasn't the type to do that.

Initially, Gail's plan was to work four days a week, mainly for the financial benefit. Then she decided that would be "almost like working full-time." Three days at her paying job was "a nice even balance."

It was nice to be back at work. And probably not as much for the work as for the social, you know, being able to chat with people and being with

Gillian Ranson

people again without your attention being divided somewhere else.... And yet I still felt I was home enough that I wasn't, like so far I haven't really missed big events or big things, or really felt like I'm losing, losing out.

That Gail did not describe her *baby* as “losing out” by his mother’s three-day absence was explained by the fact that the baby was cared for in Gail’s absence by Gail’s parents. Other members of a devoted extended family lived nearby and visited often. Gail’s time at home was needed perhaps not so much to meet her baby’s needs as for Gail herself to stake her claim as a primary person in her baby’s life.

By these terms, Marie, the mother of three children aged eight, four and two, was a “full-time mother” for all but the two afternoons a week she taught elementary school French. She echoed the sentiments about the importance of time spent with children expressed by many of the other women as she gave the reasons for her choice:

I feel strongly that I should raise my children, not somebody else. And I guess I'm not that career oriented that I would do that.... I like to have some time to myself.... I like to be with my kids. I like to take (the four-year-old) swimming, when we want to go swimming. I think it is important for me to be around the children as much as I can. So it's like the best of both worlds.... I wanted my children so, I should raise them. But yet I like my career as well and ... if you can have a balance, I think it's the best thing.

The “balance” Marie was speaking of was the balance between “raising her children” and her career as a teacher. But her response to a question about other activities opened up a diverse array of other commitments, including school volunteering (as a teacher herself she was much in demand), community and church volunteering, time spent on crafts and in the garden, and membership in a country club which provided the venue for jogging and a tennis league. If “full-time mothers” are symbolically placed at home, for Marie the day when she was actually and uninterruptedly there was Thursday. Thursday was her day to “clean house,” to “stay at home,” and “rest up.”

The home-based “full-time mother”

Three of the mothers, Melanie, Jessica, and Lucy, were “home-based,” a term I use to describe the situation where women have chosen to forego formal, regular paid work, either full- or part-time, with one employer, in order to stay at home to care for pre-school children. Of all the women I interviewed, these were the ones for whom the “full-time mother discourse” was most likely to organize practices of mothering as well as talk. And two of the three spoke very passionately about the importance of the mother as the child’s primary caregiver. For example, Melanie stressed in her talk the importance of the constant physical presence of the mother for the child:

The Discourse of the "Full-Time Mother"

I think more than anything it's your instinctive mothering, or your mothering instincts or whatever become, they're primal and they're first and foremost. It doesn't matter if anything else is going on in the world, you're going to protect and look after your child before anything... I feel very—not possessive, but I think very close. I could be one of those African women that carry their babies around all the time.

... I like the scenario of women working with the children close by. I feel sad when kids are crying for their moms and they have to be dropped off somewhere. Even if the caregivers are excellent caregivers, I still think there is something about having Mom [close] by.

Jessica, a mother of two pre-school children and a former child-care counsellor, said she could see “no purpose in life other than raising a healthy individual.” There is a moral turn to her talk about full-time mothers. Exclusive maternal care is needed to counter the risk of children being contaminated by other contacts:

I'm not putting my child in a day care when I can't control the kind of employees that work there. Oh, yeah, there's some wonderful daycares but there's also some horrible ones, and unless I know absolutely every person in there that has contact with my child I'm not putting my child there.

... I need to know that what my children are learning is what my husband and I want them to learn, and their values and morals are what we think are important for them to know. And I don't know that you can always teach that from the time you pick them up from day care until the time that you put them to bed and on weekends. I think it takes more than that ... I mean, a lot of these kids that are in daycares learn more from the daycare people than they do from their parents.

Though home-based, Melanie and Jessica (like almost all the other home-based mothers interviewed) fitted a great deal more into their days than child-care, however. For both, “full-time mothering” *in practice* meant fitting other work around the needs of their children. In Melanie's case, her home-based art business meant that she was constantly on the phone to clients during the day. Though physically present for her child, her attention was often divided:

I'm on the phone a lot of the time. [Her child] is really wise to this now. So she takes things and just throws them at the phone cord, or—she doesn't like me on the phone any more and, it's difficult sometimes because the phone calls really do take up a lot of my time.

Similarly, Jessica, making and selling crafts from home, often worked till “one or two o'clock in the morning” in her basement.

By day, choosing supplies was what took some of her time.

Gillian Ranson

And that's the hard part to do with kids along. So a lot of times I'll leave my kids behind and let Grandma take care of them.

Lucy's story is included because it offers a slightly different perspective on the discourse of full-time mothering. Lucy, a business graduate, with two children aged five and three, was a full-time sales representative until the birth of her second child. Lucy moved to "full-time mothering" not out of moral conviction, like Melanie and Jessica, but because a combination of circumstances left her with what she considered to be little other choice. She had some health problems after her second pregnancy; her former employer was unwilling to accommodate her wish to work part-time; her husband's very demanding job meant that he was for practical purposes unavailable as a parent; and she found out that the baby-sitter she had trusted to care for her first child had, on at least two occasions, left children unsupervised in her house while she was absent. Lucy was structurally manoeuvred into the situation where "full-time mothering" seemed to be the only viable alternative. In Hays' (1996) terms, Lucy was following the prescription which required her to sacrifice her own interests to those of her "sacred" children. But in this case there was some awareness on Lucy's part of the political implications.

My life really does centre around the kids, and I think, sometimes I feel like I need that. Sometimes I feel that it is meeting my needs and other times I feel very frustrated by the whole thing, and say, you know, I'm a terrible mother, and what am I doing at home, and I should just let somebody else raise them.... I think that it's meeting my needs because I can stand back and say, this is why I'm doing it, and this is for how long I'm intending on doing it ... and really it's just a little niggle in my life, it's not going to be a big portion taken out of my working days.... Then there's other times when I really feel like my needs aren't ever being met, you know. This is too much for me.

For Lucy, as for Marie, and for other mothers who are home-based or working less than full-time in paid employment, family or volunteer work expanded to fill the time that might have gone into paid work. Time not spent in paid employment is often spent meeting, one way and another, other people's needs. Lucy did the books for her husband's business, mainly as an income-splitting strategy that gave her some money of her own. She also volunteered for several school and community organizations. And, as a firm believer in the importance of structure and routine, she spent much of her time meeting her children's busy schedules of school, music, swimming, skating and other programs. Though based at home, Lucy commented that she could "barely get out and do the grocery shopping." What *actually* constitutes "mothering," and how to separate the "mothering" from the welter of other activities home-based mothers engage in, become important questions.

Discussion

The experiences included above suggest two important points about the "full-time mother" discourse. The first is its power to inform thinking about mothering for women the majority of contemporary women who are not, and will never be, "full-time mothers." All the irony of this situation is expressed in the comments of Laura and Helene. Full-time paid work places both women on the other side of an ideological fence. From their side of the fence, they construct an ideal picture of motherhood which bears little relation to their own lived experience of it.

The second point is that this ideal picture *also* bears little relation to the lived experience of mothers whose domestic circumstances make "full-time mothering" more attainable. "Full-time mothering" offers the promise of exclusive and on-going maternal care. But exclusive maternal care, as the interview material shows, is not always what is on offer. "Full-time mothering" serves to structure and organize women's days in a particular way—but it does not mean that what they are "doing," full-time, is "mothering."

"Full-time mothering" serves to locate women, symbolically, in a particular place—the home. But in fact the women in this study who might identify themselves as "full-time mothers" are often anywhere but at home. And while many of the activities of these women—in school and community volunteering, for example—could be seen as contributing to the care of a much larger "family," their time away from paid employment is *not* always devoted exclusively to the needs of their own children.

Whatever "full-time mothering" might look like in practice, however, the fact is that only a dwindling minority of women—like the privileged, well-educated middle-class women in this study—are likely to engage in it. Why then does it retain its ideological force? The full answer probably lies well beyond the scope of this paper, in a particular social and economic climate of neoconservatism in which "traditional family values" now figure prominently.

But I suggest that any ideology also retains credibility to the extent that it has torchbearers. The "full-time mothers" in this study are very few in number, but their presence legitimates the activity. They are, in Stacey's terms, "propagandists and principal beneficiaries" of a view of family life that for most Canadian families is either unattainable or undesirable (Stacey, 1990: 252).

It is important then to deconstruct, as I have begun to do here, the *practices* of the "full-time mother" that accompany the talk. "Full-time mothers" are not always doing mothering. Some do home-based work for pay. Most have busy and stressful lives in the community. They are not "mothering" on a full-time basis. Perhaps those other mothers who are not "full-time mothers" need to know this.

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Gillian Ranson

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