

The Mothers' Club of Cambridge, 1878-1904

Reappropriating, Reconfiguring and (Re)presenting Expert Knowledge of Mothering

Expert knowledge such as prescriptions for motherhood devalues local/traditional knowledge, yet practitioners of local knowledges such as mothers may resist this, often through the reappropriation of expert knowledges. To illustrate the processes of reappropriation, reconfiguration, and representation of expert knowledges of motherhood, I present a case history of the Mothers' Club of Cambridge, Massachusetts, uncovering the process whereby this group of mothers created a space within expert discourse for reassertion of their own experiential expertise. The club functioned as a node between expert discourse and everyday practice by reviewing the childrearing prescriptions of established experts, reappropriating this knowledge by testing it experientially, and reconfiguring it to suit their local milieu. This reappropriation and reconfiguration culminated in the (re)presentation of expert knowledge as the members began delivering expert lectures to local settlement house mothers and published their own advice book. For the settlement house mothers, the Mothers' Club constituted an intermediary set of experts. For its members, the Mother's Club of Cambridge constituted a site through which generations of mothers supported one another in their mothering work by providing space in which to negotiate the tension between their local and experiential knowledge as mothers and expert knowledges of childrearing.

By the mid-nineteenth century, there was a broad Anglo-American consensus—an ideology Sharon Hays later termed “intensive mothering”—that the care of young children was an exacting, time-consuming, and important activity that should be at the center of women’s lives and that mothers were the most important moral educators of children (Hays; Rawlins). “Good” or socially appropriate mothering as constructed by intensive mothering is

child-centered, labor-intensive, and guided by professional expertise. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, physicians, academic experts, educators, philanthropists, reformers, and women's groups called for the reconstruction of traditional motherhood into what was viewed as scientific, rational, modern motherhood (Apple; Arnup; Grant). This reconstruction was to be based upon expert knowledge about raising children. Expert knowledge constructs motherhood as both powerful and potentially pathological. According to the experts, mothers need education and expert guidance in order to successfully negotiate the fine line that divides good mothering from bad mothering.

Paradoxically, the same ideology of intensive mothering that positioned mothers as ultimately responsible for installing a durable sense of conscience and self-regulation in their children devalued their traditional knowledge of mothering. Scientific prescriptions for childrearing rose steadily from the mid-nineteenth century (Apple; Arnup; Grant). Knowledge about the most basic, human activity of caring for a child was no longer considered part of the social stock of knowledge or maternal instinct, available to all mothers, but was becoming the province of specialized experts who made it their business to instruct and discipline mothers.

Advice literature functions as an expert system "disembedding" or lifting social relations out of their local contexts of interaction and restructuring them across indefinite spans of time-space (Giddens). The childrearing advice literature is such an expert system through which family and particularly mother/child relations may be disembedded from local contexts and reconstituted on a more or less global scale. Expert knowledge regarding childrearing is one form of the specialized knowledge/language/power that arises in the nineteenth century and increasingly intrudes into the realm of everyday life (Donzelot; Foucault). Expert knowledge and experts themselves devalue local/traditional knowledge (Geertz) and deskill its practitioners. Foucault refers to such knowledges, which have been classified by dominant discourses as naïve, inadequate to their task, insufficiently elaborated, and importantly as not partaking in scientific "truth," as subjugated knowledges.

As a consequence of the development of expert systems, practitioners of local or subjugated knowledges (such as mothers in this case) experience "deskilling," but they also engage in "reskilling," often through the reappropriation of such expert knowledges (Giddens). This process of reskilling or reappropriation of expert knowledges is poorly understood. Until Julia Grant's work in the 1990s, studies of childrearing advice literature generally did not investigate readers' responses. Previous studies typically depict an emerging class of experts in the service of the patriarchy, the state, and/or dominant classes imposing their ideas of proper childrearing upon mothers

(e.g., Ehrenreich and English). The readers of advice literature are, however, as much participants in its construction as its authors. With the exception of tracts published by state agencies, the childrearing advice literature, as any popular literature, takes its meaning and shape from the interaction of reader and author. Grant, for example, argues that American women as a consumer group demanded childrearing advice even prior to the establishment of a child-development profession. Indeed, since the mid-19th century, North American mothers have consumed vast quantities of childrearing advice manuals, written letters to magazine editors and book authors, and joined maternal associations such as the Mothers' Club of Cambridge to learn about and discuss expert knowledge on childrearing.

To illustrate the processes of reappropriation, reconfiguration, and representation of expert knowledges, I present a case history of the Mothers' Club of Cambridge, Massachusetts from 1878 through 1904, the year the club celebrated their 25th anniversary. From 1878 until 1942, a group of white, relatively well-educated, affluent mothers met as the Mothers' Club of Cambridge. (See Scott for a history of the increasing political and community engagement of the Mothers' Club of Cambridge.) The meeting minutes and other records of this group, held by the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, afford insight into mothers' approach to and consumption of advice literature as well as the process whereby the tension between expert and local knowledges is negotiated by readers of advice literature.

The members of the Mothers' Club of Cambridge formed their association with the intention of "putting their heads together and of quietly talking over the topics that interested them as members of the social union charged with a special class of duties" (Gilman 3), i.e., as mothers. Initially, they read from established experts. But the group soon mounted a critique of this expertise, triggering a resurgence of local knowledge as the members began preparing and presenting their own papers on childrearing issues to the group, which then discussed and debated their content. This reappropriation and reconfiguration of expert knowledges culminated in the (re)presentation of expert knowledge in two fields. On the local level, the members of the Mothers' Club began in 1894 to deliver expert childrearing advice in the form of lectures to less-privileged mothers at a settlement house in Cambridgeport (Mothers', Vol. 3). On the extra-local level, in 1884 Stella Scott Gilman, the club's first president, pseudonymously published *Mothers in Council*, a childrearing advice manual relating in an abridged fashion the papers and discussions of the group. In this paper, I uncover the process whereby this group of mothers created a space within expert discourse for reassertion of their own experiential expertise and the subsequent representation of themselves as experts in both local and extra-local fields.

“A Sense of Insuperable Inexperience:” Deskillng Modern Mothers

Expert ways of knowing the modern world tend toward fragmentation of that world into what come to appear as solvable, small, personal rather than public problems of everyday life whose resolution is ultimately the responsibility of the individual (Bauman). Yet it is also characteristic of modern life that the competence of individuals to resolve their personal problems is brought into question. Modern society therefore becomes a site of mediated action in which it is assumed that few daily tasks can be accomplished without the aid of specialized knowledge. The skills needed for the performance of everyday tasks are enclosed in tools or technologies or in sets of instructions, such as prescriptive literatures. By separating the performance of the task from the requisite knowledge, mediating expertise makes everyday life an arena of uncertainty and perhaps anxiety.

Whether referred to as doubt (Giddens), risk (Beck), or ambivalence (Bauman), uncertainty about everyday life tasks is presumed to permeate the modern experience. Expert systems offer solutions to individual uncertainties and anxieties about life tasks such as mothering children, having first equally authoritatively articulated such tasks as problems that require solutions and placed responsibility for seeking out such solutions upon individuals. Consumption of the advice proffered by experts constitutes a socially approved solution to modern anxieties or uncertainties about everyday life tasks. We might therefore expect the women who came together as the Mothers' Club to study childrearing advice to express some uncertainties or anxieties about their competence as mothers. However, no direct expression of uncertainty about their ability to be good mothers can be found in the meeting minutes from the first 25 years of the Mothers' Club. Indeed, according to a founding member looking back at the early days of the Club, their uncertainties revolved around their children, not themselves as mothers: “In those days there were no haunting doubts as to the desirability of the job and not many as to our ability to do it.... Not that we had no doubts or misgivings, but they were largely centered on the children. It was the children who were difficult” (Mothers', Folder 5).

While one cannot discount the possibility that their anxieties were glossed over for the public record, the tone of the Mothers' Club discourse as reflected in these documents is optimistic as regards members' competence in comparison to other contemporary documentation (e.g., in Grant). They were “a group of mothers seeking enlightenment and mutual help” (Gilman 4) or to improve upon a basic competency that was taken for granted. For example, one mother, in an attempt to cap off a debate regarding diet at a meeting in 1881, argued that many of the restrictions proposed by the other

members were needless and “that we should allow children a great deal of choice and be satisfied if they seemed well.” The secretary rejoined that such would be “an unworthy satisfaction and that the motto of the Society sh’d be continual aspiration, not ignoble contentment with our present achievements” (Mothers’, Volume 1).

Many late nineteenth/early twentieth century childrearing experts argued that while maternal experience may have been sufficient for grandmother, modern mothers needed their help to keep up with changes in expert knowledge of childrearing. In the third edition of her advice book, *Your Child Today and Tomorrow*, Sidonie Gruenberg reflected on the scientific and social changes she observed between her 1912 and 1928 editions. Gruenberg noted that childrearing standards had been raised and argued that mothers needed expert advice to successfully carry out normative childrearing or intensive mothering.

Every department of life has shown advances and improvement in proportion as it has made use of the methods and results of modern study. The care of children is no exception. Wise parenthood requires more than good will and traditional ideas. It requires understanding based upon the studies of experts. It requires steady application to the task of keeping up with the growth of knowledge, as well as the growth of children. (Gruenberg 8)

The childrearing advisors read by the Mothers’ Club and their contemporaries insisted that mothers needed expert advice in order to adequately raise their children and actively deskilled mothers. For example, Annie Winsor Allen began her 1907 *Home, School, and Vacation: A Book of Suggestions* with a chapter entitled “Parent and Expert,” in which she argued that parents could never be experts, because their experience was restricted to their own children and because “no one can collect statistics and deduce fixed principles from such a restricted number of cases” (3). According to Allen, “A sense of this insuperable inexperience is what makes most parents stand helpless before the array of conflicting expert advice which is proffered them to-day on all the problems of their children’s growth and guidance” (4). She also noted that mothers lacked the ability to adjudicate among the various knowledge claims.

Systems of accumulated expertise represent multiple sources of authority that make conflicting knowledge claims and present varying prescriptions. The Mothers’ Club of Cambridge was an associational approach that one group of mothers took toward negotiating the vast array of expert advice on childrearing. Together, this group of mothers created a space within expert discourse for reassertion of their own experiential expertise.

“Criticising Them in the Light of Our Own Lives”: Negotiating the Tension Between Local and Expert Knowledges

In *Mothers in Council*, Stella Gilman recounts a member's summing up of what the members of the Mothers' Club learned in their first four years of association as, "...it is by thus studying the records of the experience of others and criticising them in the light of our own lives that we grow, that we become better mothers..." (119). How did this group of mothers come to critique expert advice in this way?

Expert systems contribute to uncertainty concerning the appropriate solutions to the problems they claim to address even as they simultaneously promote the belief that an adequate remedy exists for each personal problem or everyday life task. Of the various remedies offered by expert systems, it is the individual's responsibility to seek, find, choose, and apply the best one. This responsibility can be experienced as burdensome, as laypersons often experience expert systems as impenetrable and find the adjudication of different knowledge claims difficult. The affluent, well-educated women of the Mothers' Club of Cambridge, however, expressed little difficulty adjudicating the various knowledge claims and competing advice they read, heard in lecture, or wrote and presented to one another.

In fact, the mothers often adopted an experimental approach to childrearing practice in which they judged the efficacy of various childrearing prescriptions by putting them into practice and observing the results themselves. For example, a member who wrote and presented an essay summarizing conflicting expert prescriptions about cold-water baths closed with the admonishment, "There remains no safe course but to experiment on the particular constitution in question" (Gilman 42). Looking back at the early meetings of the Club at its twenty-fifth anniversary, a founding member recalled with amusement how "there was a time when diet was to do everything!" and that when "experiment proved the change less marked than we had hoped ... hope sprang up again in the maternal breast ... that Posture was the only important thing" (Mothers', Folder 5). Another member experimented with allowances, varying her approach for providing spending money to each of her two sons and observing the results (Mothers', Vol. 1).

This experimental approach indicates the extent to which the Mothers' Club was successful in opening a space within expert childrearing discourse for the articulation of their own, experientially-based expertise. These women were committed to multivocality and rejected the universal application of received knowledge. As Gilman argued:

No plan that we can bring forward can be practicable for all of us, nor

can we hope to come to positive conclusions in our discussions. Our essayists may be positive enough—and it is to be hoped they always will give us thoughts that they have faith in—but we miss the object of our discussions if we expect that they can lay out for us a plan of action that can be dogmatically expressed and exactly followed. (56)

How did this group of mothers come to critique the very experts their association was founded to study? Initially, the women had met “merely to stimulate one another by readings from writers whose experience or reputation promised to afford them suggestions which might prove fruitful” (Gilman 3). They listened to other members read directly from such established childrearing experts as Harriet Martineau, John Locke, Herbert Spencer, Mrs. J. F. W. Ware, Jacob Abbott, and Dr. Horace Bushnell. The first meeting of the Club was occupied, “as became beginners, not in original discussions, but with readings from Miss Martineau’s *Household Education*, and we presented the spectacle of a body of mothers at the feet of a spinster, learning or trying to learn from one who never knew our joys, or felt the weight of our responsibilities, lessons of maternal duty and economy” (Gilman 15).

The first line of criticism in which the mothers engaged was just this lack of experiential knowledge on the part of some experts, namely bachelors and spinsters. For example, a sermon by Mr. Hall, the pastor of one of the members, was criticized on the grounds of his bachelorhood (Mothers’, Vol. 1). Recounting how the club had read from “the childless Herbert Spencer” on the physical and moral government of children and on diet, Gilman writes, “It is singular to notice how much we looked to spinsters and bachelors for our texts. Was it an unconscious tribute to the truth of the adage, ‘Bachelor’s wives and old maids’ children are always well governed?’” (36)

In addition to lacking experiential knowledge of childrearing, the experts the Mothers’ Club first consulted were extra-local, i.e., they were not from Cambridge: this became a basis of critique as well. Running throughout the records of the Mothers’ Club is a strong sense of the uniqueness of Cambridge and Cambridgians. The mothers found that in some cases “common-sense contraindicated the author” of expert prescriptions (Gilman 3). The common-sense referred to here was made up of local knowledge based upon the women’s experience mothering children in Cambridge. As Gilman writes, “it was felt that there were those in the growing club who were capable of treating practical subjects more to the edification of the others than any writer whose circumstances were likely to be far different from those of the club” (3).

By their second year of meetings, the Mothers’ Club had instituted the practice of discussing papers prepared and presented by the mothers themselves and seemed pleased with the results. For example, when a member prepared

a paper on children's companions in the Club's first year, it "lead to much discussion, for it was a live topic treated by one whose circumstances did not differ from those of the rest of us..." (Gilman 37). These mothers felt that they "derive[d] more benefit from the writing down of our own experience here in [Cambridge] than we should reading forever from the books of the wisest writers who lived in New York, Boston, London, or elsewhere, at the present day, or from the wisdom of the ancients..." (Gilman 37).

The members of the Mothers' Club did not, however, reject or resist all expert advice. To the contrary, in studying the minutes of their meetings I find experts quoted in every paper they prepared and the authority of physicians, physiologists, educators, pastors, and noted lecturers invoked during debate to support members' opinions. Gilman acknowledged that "nothing we have said at our meetings has the merit of novelty, that it has been uttered by others before, perhaps more powerfully than we could express it; but it is also true that not one of these utterances were as well adapted to our needs as the repetition of the similar thought by one of our number has proven to be" (119). These women valued their own maternal voices over those of the experts, even when the messages were the same.

"Going Down to Hold Talks with Mrs. Currier's Poor Women:" Becoming Local Experts

Experts mediate between the personal, subjective needs of individuals performing life tasks and the supposedly objective knowledge generated by expert systems by translating expert knowledges into practical advice for the layperson. Expertise is thus based not only on credentials or other qualities the expert may possess, but on the function the expert is perceived as performing by the recipients of the advice through making expert knowledge intelligible and practicable (Bauman). Through the process of preparing their original papers on childrearing issues, which as noted above incorporated much expert advice, the women of the Mothers' Club began to function as experts for one another as they reappropriated and reconfigured the expert advice they consumed into practical suggestions appropriate to the circumstances of these native-born, Protestant, affluent mothers raising children in the university town of Cambridge, Massachusetts. As Gilman put it, "What we want is the wisdom of others added to and moulded by the experience of ourselves, and thus prepared for use in the circumstances and emergencies which are ours" (119).

The members of the Mothers' Club began to extend their expert status beyond the confines of the Club in 1894, when acting upon a husband's suggestion of several years before they approached Mrs. W.W. Currier, the matron at the Day Nursery at the Cambridgeport Neighborhood House, to propose giving

talks to the mothers of the nursery children or in the words of the secretary, “going down to hold talks with Mrs. Currier’s poor women” (*Mothers’*, Vol. 3). The topics which the Mothers’ Club members chose to present to the “poor mothers” (as the Day Nursery mothers are always referred to in the records of the club) constitute much more practical, problem-oriented advice than the topics they were simultaneously presenting to each other at the Club meetings. For example, the “Old Catholic Missions in California,” “The Ethics of Taxation,” and the work being done at a “colored school” in Virginia were the topics over three meetings of the Mothers’ Club in the spring of 1894, while the Day Nursery mothers during the same weeks heard lectures from the Mother’s Club members on “The Bringing up of Little Boys and Girls together,” “Older Children,” and “a little talk on Ventilation” (*Mothers’*, Vol. 3). In the context of Progressive era classism and racism, it is no surprise that the Mothers’ Club lecturers emphasized sexual and domestic hygiene in their talks to poor immigrant mothers. These were typical concerns of middle-class childrearing experts and social reformers, as they meshed well with the discourse of mother-blaming and elided tensions of class and race privilege, transforming the material difficulties the poor and working classes faced in caring for their children into maternal deficiencies.

One of the ways in which experts establish themselves is through the articulation of problems in everyday life as well as the presentation of solutions to those problems (Abbott). The choice of topics the Mothers’ Club presented to the Day Nursery mothers is in line with this attempt to carve out areas of expertise through the articulation of problems. While poor women struggling to bring up children in the overcrowded conditions of the Cambridgeport slums most likely did not see such issues as the interaction of boys and girls and ventilation as their most pressing childrearing problems, these topics constituted problems with seemingly straightforward solutions that the experts of the Mothers’ Club could comfortably recommend.

While the members of the Mother’s Club validated one another’s experiential knowledge and mothering competencies, their commitment to multivocality and local knowledge did not extend to the mothers of the Day Nursery. The Mothers’ Club members were careful to maintain boundaries between themselves and the “poor mothers”. For example, by 1883 the Mothers’ Club had voted that the club “should not confine itself to strictly maternal or household matters but enlarge its range” (*Mothers’*, Vol. 1). They subsequently enjoyed addresses on travel and other “cultured” topics and prepared and delivered talks on such diverse topics as “The Errors of an Advanced Education for the Working Classes,” “Can Employers make Domestic Service any aid in Reforming Society?” and “The Growth of Luxury: Is it to be regretted, or is it a Means of Education?” Yet the Mothers’ Club members continued to

insist that the lectures they presented to the mothers of the Day Nursery be exclusively problem-oriented. When Mrs. Currier requested that the Mothers' Club provide some entertainment or amusement rather than only instruction to the Day Nursery's mothers, a Mothers' Club member promptly "asked if a talk on Tuberculosis would not be welcome—as she [was] anxious to reach as many as possible" (Mothers', Vol. 1).

Mothers in Council: The Mothers' Club as Extra-Local Experts

The reappropriation and reconfiguration of expert knowledges engaged in by the members of the Mothers' Club as they prepared and presented their original papers to the Club and to another, less privileged group of mothers culminated in the (re)presentation of expert knowledge when *Mothers in Council*, pseudonymously authored by its first president, Stella Scott Gilman, was published in 1884 by Harper & Brothers. The book is an account of the first five years of the Mothers' Club and contains the texts of papers prepared by members as well as representations of the discussions following their presentation.

The translation of expert advice into a form appropriate to their local circumstances becomes in *Mothers in Council* the basis for the Mothers' Club's claim to expertise. Recall that their critiques of other experts often hinged on their childlessness. Being mothers themselves and thus uniquely able to translate expert knowledges into practical advice is the main claim Gilman makes for the expertise of the Mothers' Club.

Mothers in Council does not appear to have been a successful advice manual. It was never reissued and by 1924, even the members of the Mothers' Club were mostly ignorant of its existence (Mothers', Folder 5). According to its author, it had "died a natural death" (Mothers', Folder 5). One reason for this may be the lack of concrete advice it contains, as one of the factors contributing to the successful establishment of expertise is the provision of effective treatments (Abbott). A mother reading *Mothers in Council* would find little advice she could put into practice and thus evaluate its effectiveness.

As an uncredited contemporary newspaper review of the book found pasted into the copy held by the Harvard Library notes, "it is rather more than sprinkled with the speculations and airy theories which are to be expected in anything of the kind which emanates from the vicinity of Boston." Comparison of the minutes of meetings and their representation in *Mothers in Council* shows that concrete, practical childrearing advice proposed by mothers during meetings was often omitted from the book, which tends to omit such quotidian subjects in favor of more abstract and "improving" subjects. For example, the printed version of a meeting addressing the topic of respect omits a discussion on teaching table manners, although the minutes record that one member's

concrete suggestion that “we taught too many items at once. In table manners for instance devote yourself to the fork one week, to the knife the next and so on” “was hailed with acclamation” by those in attendance (*Mothers’*, Vol. 1). A paper prepared by a mother on Christmas gifts that prompted lively debates about gift-giving to servants and children, allowances for children, and other financial matters (*Mothers’*, Vol. 1) is not included in the book at all, despite this being a topic often treated in other household management/childrearing advice manuals. The omission of the practical discussions of the *Mothers’ Club* is likely related to members’ concerns about breaching middle-class norms of feminine refinement and modesty: recall that the book is published pseudonymously and the members appear pseudonymously in the narrative. Philosophical discourse about children and childhood is much more consonant with nineteenth century middle-class definitions of femininity/motherhood than mothers’ talks about the mundane realities of daily childcare.

The key reason behind the failure of *Mothers in Council* and of the *Mothers’ Club’s* attempts to claim expertise beyond their local milieu may, paradoxically, have been their success in articulating that expertise through their own association. After finding that extra-local experts lacked experiential backing for their knowledge claims, the *Mothers’ Club* had adopted an experimental approach to expert childrearing prescriptions. In their meetings with one another, they talked about their successes and failures in childrearing and generated their own childrearing theories. In this way, they opened a space within the expert childrearing discourse for the articulation of their own, experientially-based expertise as practicing mothers.

The *Mothers’ Club* of Cambridge did indeed successfully function as experts for one another by translating extra-local expert knowledges into practical advice for rearing middle-class children in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Hence a newer member in 1891 submitted the following as a proposed topic for an upcoming meeting: “Will some of the older mothers tell us wherein their earlier Theories of Training or Education have been modified by their subsequent experience?” (*Mothers’*, Vol. 2) But this very success in reclaiming the voices of mothers as experts in their private childrearing discourse led to the failure of the *Mothers’ Club* claims to expertise in public childrearing discourse. The women’s multivocality and rejection of dogmatic childrearing prescriptions made it impossible for their childrearing advice book to speak with the authoritative, unified voice of the experts.

Expert knowledge such as prescriptions for motherhood devalues local/traditional knowledge, yet practitioners of local knowledges such as mothers may resist this, often through the reappropriation of expert knowledges. If their claims to expertise were not honored in the wider world outside Cambridge, the *Mothers’ Club* of Cambridge did successfully represent themselves

as experts on a local basis. For the Day Nursery mothers, the Mothers' Club constituted an intermediary set of experts, (re)presenting this reappropriated and reconfigured knowledge as authoritative advice to be received unquestioningly by women whom they considered their social inferiors. For its members, the club functioned as a node between expert discourse and everyday practice by reviewing the childrearing prescriptions of the most noted authorities, reappropriating this knowledge by testing it experientially, and reconfiguring it to suit their local milieu. For sixty-four years, by providing a means whereby its members, in association, negotiated the tension between local and experiential knowledge and expert knowledges of childrearing, the Mother's Club of Cambridge constituted a site of resistance through which mothers supported one another in their day to day work of mothering.

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