

Being a “Woman Woman”

Performing Femininity at the Intersections of Motherhood, Womanhood, and the Academy

Global trends of delayed motherhood, long-term postsecondary education, and the proliferation of assisted reproductive technologies have been associated with women who work in the academy as post-graduate students and professors. In 2015, I worked with postgraduate students at the University of Saskatchewan to explore how these trends affect students' imagined reproductive futures. In this paper, I examine the relationships among delayed motherhood, studenthood, and performances of femininity in the imagined reproductive futures of women postgraduate students. Whereas previous studies have focused on the disruption and (re)performance of gender within the context of infertility, I examine how in participants' imagined reproductive futures, it is their careers and education that they highlight as they negotiate gendered identities. I argue that by engaging with discourses and performances of “being a good mother” and the “superwoman” identity, participants repair the threat posed by academic and professional lives to their femininity, and they naturalize their imagined reproductive futures in which they are both academics, professionals, and mothers. In doing so, femininity is an assemblage enacted through participants' own actions, words, and performances. By examining how postgraduate students enact performances of femininity in their imagined reproductive futures, motherhood scholars can open a discussion on the tensions between the cultural norms of parenthood and student culture.

The relationships among delayed motherhood, studenthood, and performance of femininity in the imagined reproductive futures of postgraduate students demand attention. The lives of academic and professional women leave little room for the traditional feminine role of mother. Women pursuing long-term higher education and professional careers are often met with the cultural image

of the defeminized, older, lone woman (Evans and Grant). In light of such tension, both academic and nonacademic women increasingly engage with masculine traits valued by the academy and society itself. Through undertaking a larger project examining the relationships among long-term educational attainment, assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), and delayed parenthood, it became clear that women participants draw upon scripts of femininity to perform their femininity in the face of the competing tensions of the status as current nonmothers and academics. I coin the term “imagined reproductive futures” to refer to participants’ anticipated and projected understandings of the relationships among (in)fertility, ARTs, parenthood, school, and work. I suggest that participants enact an anticipated vision or expectation of their reproductive trajectory. They draw upon experience, cultural assumptions, and norms in order to inform an “imagined” future corresponding with their understanding of reality. I argue that by engaging with discourses and performances of “being a good mother” and the “superwoman” identity, participants bring together norms of motherhood, nurturing, and individuality as scripts of femininity to repair the threat posed by academic and professional lives, and they naturalize their imagined reproductive futures in which they are academics, professionals, and mothers.

Cultural Scripts and Femininity

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity, but an “identity tenuously constituted in time ... through a stylized repetition of acts” (140). In Butler’s conception of gender, femininity is not simply a static state of being directly tied to biology, but rather is a set of norms, values, ideals, and actions with which those who identify as women constantly and repeatedly engage. Scholars have suggested that those “acts” one must stylistically repeat in the performance of gender can be read through cultural scripts. These are the articulation of cultural norms, values, and practices in clear and precise facets. As suggested by Charis Thompson in her work on performances of masculinity within in vitro fertilization clinics, the scripts defining performances of gender (and other facets of identity) are generally most observable when they are challenged (118). Research into infertility, the separation of mothers and their children (Sykes), and representations of femininity within visual culture (Ussher), has identified traditional cultural scripts of femininity as rooted in conceptions of passivity, quietness, nurturing, unselfishness, and beauty (Ussher). By drawing scripts together, in particular contexts, motherhood scholars can thus understand gender not only as a guided performance, but as an assemblage of actions, meanings, understandings, and knowledges, which together bring a particular identity into being. We are women because we act

like women. By engaging with discourses and performances of “being a good mother,” and the “superwoman” identity, the postgraduate students with whom I work bring together norms of motherhood, nurturing, and individuality as scripts of femininity in order to enact femininity in their imagined reproductive futures as academics and professionals.

The Femininity-Mother Conflation

A script through which femininity is performed in Western society is one’s acceptance and performance of the identity of “mother.” Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey claim that the naturalness of this conflation is cemented in the fact that “when we think about the idea of mothering, we are immediately drawn to the incontrovertible fact of biology: of women bearing children” (233; also see Ireland 1). The tenacity of the mother-woman conflation is clearest when it is troubled or disrupted. As Cheryl Krasnick Warsh argues, “Motherhood in North America, as in virtually all societies, is considered to be an essential part of womanhood. Therefore, women who do not wish to have children are condemned as unwomanly, while women who cannot have children are pitied as incomplete” (16).

Although this conflation needs to be further problematized, it was clear in my research that the women participants believe motherhood is an essential part of being a woman. Every time a participant spoke of a mother, or being a mother, they seemingly assumed that they were referring to a woman. In several interviews, participants explicitly mentioned that in order to be a woman one must be a mother. For example, Leona¹ said the following:

There’s always pressure on women to be mothers. You’re not a woman unless you’re a mother. Society always tells you, either directly or indirectly, as a woman, you are a woman because you are a mother. . . . If you don’t have kids, then something is wrong with you. You’re not a woman woman.

Similarly, Hope felt that women graduate students are under particular pressure to have children because “you are expected to have kids as a woman.” These views, and similar ones expressed by other participants highlight the femininity-mother conflation within their imagined reproductive futures.

The Failure to Repeat: Academic and Professional Women

Studies conducted with postgraduate students and professors have suggested that academic life can be problematic to the femininity-mother conflation.

Elrena Evans and Caroline Grant argue that mothers in the academy “stand at a significant disadvantage to their childless peers as they try to balance the vagaries of academic life with the demands of offspring” (xix-xx). Many academic women feel that there is not time to have children among pursuing tenure, teaching, mentoring, publishing, researching, and attempting to maintain some semblance of normal work-life balance. Unsurprisingly, the majority of women pursuing academic careers actively postpone motherhood as children do not “agree with their current life situation” (Kemkes-Grottenthaler 216).

The choice to forego, or at the very least delay, motherhood in order to pursue an academic career can have a negative impact on women’s feminine identity (Gerten). In an eye-opening compilation titled *Mama PhD*, women discuss the continuing expectation to have children, and if they do not, then they are not really women:

It’s true that the academy structurally and financially rewards those who work eighty hours a week on their research, but there is still the assumption that something must be wrong with you if you don’t have kids: you are seriously, perhaps pathologically, career driven; you are inherently selfish or obsessed with material things that you don’t want to sacrifice; you are too unattractive to get laid (i.e., the sad old English prof with thirty cats); or you have biological “problems” that prevent you from fulfilling your biological destiny. (Warner 9)

It is important that in examining the intersections of the feminine script with both motherhood and academic life that we keep in mind that women are agentic in their performances of femininity. As Jane Ussher argues, “We are critical readers and viewers, actively negotiating and resisting the various representations of ‘woman’ which pervade our daily lives. We continuously sift and select from the different scripts we are offered, creating and recreating the story that is femininity” (10). To make sense of their experience, women do not simply follow the feminine textbook. They selectively draw upon culturally available discourses of femininity (Stoppard). Although motherhood remains one of the most widely available discourses, women, academics and nonacademics alike, can also alternatively evoke performances of nurturing, patience, softness, independence, and the “superwoman” identity (Liss and Erchull 139). Furthermore, performances of femininity tied to motherhood do not necessarily have to follow the established script word for word. In examining how employed mothers navigate these tensions, Karen Christopher argues that mothers engage with and construct scripts of extensive mothering “in which they delegate a substantial amount of the day-to-day child care to others and reframe good mothering as being ‘in charge’ of and ultimately responsible for

their children's well-being" (73). In so doing, they emphasize "the benefits of employment for themselves—not only their children" (73). By choosing to engage with various cultural scripts, and not others, women can find the space to perform femininity in the tensions among motherhood, womanhood, and paid employment.

Between April and August 2015, I conducted twenty one-on-one, semistructured interviews with postgraduate students at the University of Saskatchewan. These participants were recruited through an online network accessible only to the faculty, staff, and students of the university. The majority of the interviews took place in one of the private group study rooms on the ground floor of the main library. All interviews were audio recorded with the participant's permission, and later transcribed verbatim from the audio files. In the fall and winter of 2015, I spent considerable time in the Law Student Lounge, and developed relationships with a core group of ten law students. These students became the main informants of my participant observation. The information and insight I gained through my interactions and discussions with these students provided crucial insight into the extent to which reproductive futures were a focus in participants' everyday lives. A number of interacting themes emerged, including postgraduate students' notions of "being a good mother" and the "superwoman identity."

The participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and situations. Approximately half of these students were international students; the group included law, master's, and PhD students, as well as postdoctoral fellows studying a wide variety of disciplines. I partnered with both men and women. Although the majority of these students did not yet have children, seven of them were parents. Furthermore, these students ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty-seven. The diversity of the participant pool was intentional, as it was my intent to explore imagined reproductive futures generally and to focus on student culture. My research, analysis, and the discussion that follows, therefore, focuses on the shared cultural scripts participants engage with within the academy, rather than the varied experiences of their nonstudent lives and backgrounds. Moreover, this discussion primarily draws on women participants' imagined reproductive futures. Even with men participants, discussions of femininity and motherhood were much more common than those of masculinity and fatherhood. This may be due to the reported assumption that the tensions among education, careers, and parenthood are more negative for women (Gerson).

Being a "Good Mother"

In the Western world of varying types and definitions of mothers, simply being a mother, either biological or social, is not enough to fulfill the social

contract of womanhood. In order to “be a mother,” women are expected to engage with and fill the role of a “good mother.” In failing to be a good mother, a woman risks not only having her children removed from her care, but failing to perform as a mother and a woman. The amount of time that academic women devote to their education and work poses a threat to their good motherhood. They are unable to devote the extensive time to mothering that some believe is essential to be a good mother. The female participants of this research frame their imagined reproductive futures within a script of good motherhood. They unanimously wanted to be mothers and position themselves discursively as good mothers by drawing upon predominant “good mothering” ideologies of spending quality time with their children and focusing upon their children.

The participants unanimously agreed that a good mother spends time with her children, but they elaborated on what “spending time” with one’s children means in various ways. It was very important to Margo, who was entering her first year of law school, that she have time to be home with her children. Until she could do so, she did not want to be a mother. Despite this, Margo did not feel that being in the same room as one’s children, physically “spending time” with them, equated to being a good mother. She explained to me that a good mother focuses on her children: “There’s always compromises involved, and I have to be realistic that I can’t pretend to be a stay at home mom if I’m working, you know, eight or ten hours a day. But my priority as a mother would be to be a mother.”

By emphasizing the need to be with her children, Margo engages with a script of femininity, which suggests that good mothers are actively involved in the nurturing and upbringing of their children. She actively performs an imagined reproductive future which incorporates her femininity, despite her plans to pursue an involved professional career. Jenn echoes a similar view. By explaining to me that she does not want to have children until her schedule is “less hectic,” Jenn also engages with the ideal of a focused, good mother. She told me the following: “I still feel that I will get a very hectic schedule. And I wouldn’t want to have children who I’m not going to be able to give time to. So, I know myself, I’m not good at multi-tasking. If I focus on one thing, I just do that.”

To be a good mother, Bella feels she would have to find the time to spend with her children and nurture them. Planning a career in law, and knowing that she easily gets sucked into her work, Bella already anticipates the struggle to maintain both a career and motherhood: “One, I would want to be a good, involved, not too involved [mother]. I would want to be a dedicated mother.... It’s very easy for me to get into like research that I’m doing, or school stuff or work stuff, so I could see it would be difficult to maintain like enough time

for both sort of things. Or feel like it was even possible to do both ... so, it would be hard.”

In framing good motherhood as focusing on one’s children rather than simply being home with them, Margo, Jenn, and Bella evoke a script in which a woman does not need to stay home to be a good mother. In this conception of motherhood, the time a woman spends with her children takes on an important purpose, one of guiding and nurturing. The performance of such femininities in participants’ imagined reproductive futures creates a space for co-existing feminine-mother identities. By emphasizing a form of motherhood in which women are focused on their children and devoted to guiding and nurturing them, participants enact imagined reproductive futures in which they are good mothers, and thus feminine, despite spending hours each day away from their children.

The “Superwoman”

Although many women recognize the connection between motherhood and femininity, femininity is not a simple set of procedures one must follow to be a woman. It is a manuscript continuously edited, rewritten, and (re)enacted by the agency of the women who engage with it. Motherhood is not the only script women can perform to enact their femininity. The cultural script of the “superwoman”—the woman who finds balance between the boardroom and her family—provides an opportunity to preform femininity outside of the motherhood-femininity conflation. This trope allows women to maintain their feminine identities while engaging in careers by embodying the “woman who can do it all” persona. By being “superwomen” in their imagined reproductive futures, participants maintain space for their personal, possibly nonmaternal, feminine identities in those futures.

Eliana has been living in Saskatoon for the past six years as she nears the end of her PhD in clinical psychology. She has sacrificed a lot for her education over that time, and has missed out on sleep, and time with friends—she has been living, in her words, “under constant stress.” She sees her family and her fiancé just twice a year, and constantly misses them. Despite this, she would not change her life for anything. When she talks about her future, Eliana focuses on her love for clinical psychology, and her dreams to build a career in the field that she has been pursuing for so long. She said the following:

In five years, in an ideal world, I would be working in the Toronto area. That’s cause that’s where my family is, that’s where my fiancé is ... and I would be working in clinical practice, but I would want to be affiliated with a university, whether it be seasonal [sic] or... not

like a full time academic position; I don't think that's what I would want. But I also do like research quite a bit.

Eliana envisions a future in which she is not only a mother but also a fulltime, working clinical psychologist. She does not situate her future employment as something that would benefit her children, by providing financial support, but rather as something which would benefit her—her love for the discipline and the time and effort she invested in it. In doing so, she engages with the cultural trope of the superwoman, which highlights her projected ability to seamlessly balance an active career with a family life.

As with Eliana, Sophie enacts an imagined reproductive future in which she balances her future career with her family. After spending eight years studying at the university level, she knows what kind of lifestyle she wants: “So not like a Monday–Friday, nine-to-five kind of job. Not sitting in an office—if it incorporated a variety of tasks so I'm not always doing the same thing all the time. I'm really eager to get out and like learn some awesome skills and become a little more self-sufficient and well-rounded of a person. Like that woman in a suit with a family and a briefcase.” Sophie highlights how work is not only an integral part of many women's lives because they have invested in their education, but because it provides “an autonomous, individual identity which confers title, status, and prestige” (Markle 7). This script ties to the trope of the “superwoman,” in which the self-empowered, intellectual, and successful woman manages to maintain her self-identity by striking the balance between family and career. For these students, their field or career is an integral part of who they are. Thus, it is unsurprising that they draw upon their future careers when enacting their future performances of femininity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Social expectations, norms, and cultural scripts do not themselves inform a singular, static performance of gender; people perform gender by choosing and selecting particular scripts meaningful to them (Ussher). The participants in this research engage with cultural scripts of “good mothers” and “the superwoman” in their imagined reproductive futures in order to negotiate the tensions among femininity and the academy. In doing so, they highlight norms of student culture and their role in the constitution of their imagined reproductive futures.

Examining the performance of gender in imagined reproductive futures provides crucial insight into the saliency of particular cultural scripts. Although the participants draw upon cultural scripts in their performances of femininity, the norms they emphasize elucidate the framework of student culture; these enactments emphasize particular scripts salient to postgraduate students within

the context of the academy. Further research considering the enactment of imagined reproductive futures—while also acknowledging diverse constructions of race, class, education, kinship, and experience—is needed. What role does gender play in the imagined reproductive futures of nonheteronormative individuals? Of young people not engaged in the academy? Imagined reproductive futures draw upon individuals' lifelong experiences; as such, those experiences need to be given consideration.

By examining how postgraduate students at a Canadian university perform femininity in their imagined reproductive futures, motherhood scholars can begin to unpack their tangled identities as academics, professionals, mothers, and women in relation to reproduction. These women actively and simultaneously engage in cultural norms of parenthood and those of student culture. They successfully negotiate the tension between academic and feminine identities, and highlight the need for further discussion of these tensions within the academy.

Endnote

¹All names of participants are pseudonyms

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