JaneMaree Maher

Skills, Not Attributes

Rethinking Mothering as Work

The title of Elizabeth Reid Boyd's article (2002) about mothers who stay at home full time is "'Being There': Mothers Who Stay at Home, Gender and Time." Boyd notes that this description surfaces repeatedly in how women, and others, describe what it is that constitutes motherhood. This description with its embedded sense of presence, rather than any particular form of activity, epitomises what Patrice Di Quinzio (1999) has argued is the key defining account of mothering in public discourse and in many theorised accounts, where motherhood is an all-encompassing identity, or a "state of being" (xv). Di Quinzio is critical of this formulation (xii), as is Anita Ilta Garey (1999) who suggests that this formulation institutes a problematic and artificial distinction between being and doing (11-12). This notion of being, rather than doing, predominates in thinking about and understanding mothering. In calling for mothers to "be there," we institute an impossible requirement for omnipresence and the potential for the full satisfaction of the child's needs. Reid Boyd (2002) argues for "the possibility of change" by reworking the meaning of "being there" (468), but in this article, I examine whether a new formulation of mothering as a trade might counter some of these essentialized formulations of maternal identity and move the debate forward. If motherhood is a state of being, then the labour women do, and the skills they employ to mother are rendered invisible. By contrast, if we describe mothering as a trade, we foreground the skills and the labour of women. We assign substantial importance to the materiality of the exchanges between women and their children. I focus particularly on how women combine mothering with paid work as a useful site to examine how women understand and respond to images of motherhood as being and doing. I consider how women in paid work deal with the tension between mother as an all-encompassing identity and notions of motherhood

and their own experience of working at motherhood in conjunction with paid employment. I examine some indicative pieces of research that suggest that women may understand mothering as the exercise of skills, as well as many other elements. In "Skills, Not Attributes," I look at what this research might suggest about new ways to think about mothering and focus particularly on whether this research suggests that the formulation of mothering as a trade, where women are utilizing a set of skills acquired "on the job," might offer some new ways to theorize motherhood.

As numerous scholars have noted, contemporary motherhood is "contested terrain" (McMahon, 1995: 1). In *Engendering Motherhood* (1995), Martha McMahon argues that as the relationship between motherhood and adult femininity has been unsettled in contemporary Western societies, thinking about motherhood has become increasingly difficult. Lisa Brush's (1996) "Love, Toil and Trouble: Motherhood and Feminist Politics" documents the contests and conflicts of feminist scholars seeking to reconfigure motherhood. Angela Hattery (2001) has suggested that this formulation of motherhood as an impossibly conflicted site underpins most accounts of motherhood generated in both scholarly and popular domains (6). It is important to acknowledge the accounts of struggle offered by women who mother, and particularly the struggles of those who mother in "unsanctioned" ways and contexts. But I think it is worth asking what contribution the persistent conceptualisation of motherhood as inherently conflicted makes to the struggles women experience as they mother. Barbara Pocock (2003), for example, has suggested the conflicts related to mothering in part reflect the persistence of "unrenovated models of motherhood" and argues that women's current experiences of mothering and working are undergirded by guilt (1). Anne Summers (2003) describes mothers "almost going crazy from the guilt and the pressure of the workload" (67). But are women who undertake some form of paid employment really labouring under intractable burdens of guilt as they mother? Or are there indications that women are developing more flexible accounts of mothering, ones that recognise the skill continuities between the work of mothering and other work?

In exploring this question, it seemed appropriate to focus on mothers who also do paid work as a useful initial step for two reasons. The first is that the combination of paid work and mothering activity already suggests a *work focus* that was useful for my exploration. The second factor was that much of the description of role conflict in motherhood is generated at this intersection. The conflict for women around mothering is often understood as related to the movement of women with young children into the paid workforce in great numbers over the past 30 years and changed expectations about women's roles. In Australia for example, as Belinda Probert and John Murphy (2001) have noted, despite the prevailing social expectation that mothers should not work fulltime, at least 50 percent of mothers with young children *do* work fulltime. This phenomenon is replicated in other western countries as James Albrecht,

Pers-Anders Edin and Susan Vroman (2000), Suzanne Bianchi (2000), and Claire Etaugh and Cara Moss (2001) have identified. The consistency of this phenomenon indicates that, in practice, women are finding means to operate as mothers and workers simultaneously. As well as investigating the structures that make such combinations difficult, we need to direct attentions to the ways women successfully combine these spheres and activities and what we might learn from their practices and strategic engagements.

From the outset, I want to acknowledge that this conceptualization of mothering as a trade is only one possible way to think about mothering and motherhood. This formulation draws on research into practices and experiences of mothering in Western contexts for working women and, as such, is specific in its location. As Heléna Ragoné and France Windance Twine (2000) contend in the "Introduction" to their important collection, *Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood*, many women need to assert the essential and enduring nature of their maternal identity since political and social forces have systematically and often catastrophically interrupted their maternal practice (1). In Australia, for example, as detailed in the *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) children were stolen from indigenous women who have claimed their status as mothers against great odds and fierce resistance, even when their children have not been returned. In instances like these, the assertion of an essential maternal identity where a woman has a clear identity as a mother might be crucial and valuable. But generating multiple and more complex accounts of mothering, and moving beyond formulaic and limited images of working mothers in crisis seems an important avenue to pursue also. Thinking of mothering as a trade, one that can be practiced alongside other activities and composed of skills and activities, counters notions of mother as an essential identity, formed by the attributes of full time presence and self-sacrifice. It posits mothering as a skilled activity with skills that are transferable across to other life aspirations and activities.

The fault line of working motherhood

In all western countries, changing patterns of women's paid employment, changing fertility rates and changing social expectations have been reflected in the movement into the workforce of women with young children in substantial numbers over the past several decades. Suzanne Bianchi (2000) identifies this "as the most revolutionary change in the American family in the twentieth century" (401). Despite the prevalence of this change across Western countries however, conflicted understandings of women's choices and preferences around mothering and paid work predominate in public discourse. On one hand, women in these western societies can apparently "choose" whether or not to have children and when, to choose paid employment in either a full-time or part-time capacity or to be full-time mothers (Hakim, 1995, 2000). But women are said to be burdened by expectations of the ideal mother who prioritises her motherhood above all else, who is patient, completely dedicated to her

children's needs and always available to respond to their demands (Arendell, 2000; Hattery, 2001; Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995). Sharon Hays (1996) has claimed that these persistent notions of good mothering are substantial influences on how women make employment, reproductive and childcare decisions.

Teri Arendell (2000) focuses on this conflicted sense of motherhood in her account of the development of mothering scholarship, and charts a movement from the investigation of quality of mothering as it impacted on the child toward a focus on women's experiences and understandings. She also argues that there is much greater focus on "who does the relational and logistical work of child-rearing" (1192). But she later reflects, that despite attention to the activities and technical requirements of mothering, maternal identity continues to be a central focus in mothering scholarship. As Arendell notes, "with respect to identity, mothering is more powerful than either marital status or occupa-tion" (1196). The tension between mothering as work and as identity continues to impact in thinking and research about mothering. And this is revealed particularly in accounts of the tensions inherent in combining mothering with paid work, where maternal identity and working identity are assumed to be distinct. Carol Sanger (1999) has argued that, "despite the fact of mothers working [in the paid workforce], the ideology that they shouldn't work persists with surprising vigour" (101). For Sharon Hays in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), the persistence of the ideology of "intensive mothering," with its implication of "being there," intellectually, emotionally and physically, is intimately connected to the increasing participation of women in the paid workforce. New expectations of maternal interest and attention provide additional sources of conflict for women combining mothering with paid employment. This discourse of conflict surrounding mothers in the paid workforce has generated a substantial amount of media copy, and has also engendered some cautionary tales such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett's (2002) *Baby Hunger*, which suggests that women are being drawn into paid employment to the detriment of their mothering aspirations, and realising, often too late, that they have missed the opportunity.

Given the predominance of such accounts, it is little wonder that accounts presenting mothering and paid work as compatible or as a pleasurable combi-nation have received little sustained attention in public debates. Garey (1999), for example, identifies multiple "strategies of being" that are adopted by women to work through conflicts between paid employment and mothering activity (23-24). For the women in her study, "motherhood and employment are not incompatible activities in a zero-sum game" (Garey, 1999: 192). Lucy Bailey (1999) in her study of first time mothers noted that "the discursive construction of working identity had important continuities with the construction of mothering identity" in the accounts of her interviewees (342). While Bailey is focused on the language of identity, her conclusion that many of the women experienced a positive continuity of self in the transition to motherhood

indicates that women can simultaneously maintain a working identity and mother. In the next section, I focus more closely on an understanding of "work" as a crucial element of this possibility of combining the apparently antithetical spheres of work and mothering. In turning to work here, and maintaining a focus on the combination of paid work and mothering, I do not want to replicate what Fern Johnson (2001) has identified as the "problematic semantic notion of working mothers," (26) which she argues, reifies the separation of the public and private spheres and occludes the work done by mothers not in the paid workforce. But I am particularly interested in how ideas about transferable skills and capabilities might be utilized by women, the conventional accounts of juggling and balancing applied to mothers in the paid workforce do begin to open out such concepts.

The value of work as a conceptual tool

In *Constituting Feminist Subjects*, Kathi Weeks (1998) argues for the strategic value of work as constitutive. She argues that "the category of labour is ... intrinsically strategic ... its immanence and creativity cannot be separated from its practical value" (123). This formulation fits the work carried out by mothers. The affective and emotional realm, represented by the notion of "being" a mother and "being there" is constituted by the work that women do while they are being there. For the infant, the presence of the mother is indistinguishable from the provision of food, comfort and contact, all activities that are learnt and then performed by women. Although the forms of interaction change throughout the life course of the child, the labour of the mother continues to be crucial to the on-going development of the child and, simultaneously, to the constitution of her role as mother. For each child, the provision of such labour will shift according to the needs of the child and the woman, and the location in which the mothering is occurring. "Being" a mother is always "doing" things that mothers do. Weeks' formulation urges us to understand the constitutive value of the practical labour as integral to the formation of social relationships and experiences, rather than ancillary to them. In relation to mothering, this formulation directs attention to the activities that constitute interactions with children as central to motherhood, rather than the attribute of "being there."

This focus on labour moves forward and away from a discourse of attributes attached to the "mother." If we centralise motherwork, instead of maternal identity, this offers the opportunity to consider mothering as a trade, a set of skilled practices learned in situ, on the job. This paradigm shift allows for the generation of pragmatic and activity-focused descriptions of mothering that acknowledge the material work that women do and how integral this work is to experience of mothering. In the next section, I examine some recent investigations of working women and motherhood that suggest that this more flexible account of mothering as a trade is informing the attitudes and experiences of some women.

Suggestive research

In a number of recent research projects in which I was involved, where data on mothering experiences was sought from participants, I was struck by the absence of narrative references to "role conflict," guilt, or the intractable problems of combining motherwork with other forms of labour. Instead women in these studies presented accounts of "working" in a number of different spheres, very often using the same tools and strategies to successfully manage in each. Multi-tasking was effective at work and in mothering work. Children could be included in forms of work, and domestic management and mothering could be conducted in conjunction with paid employment.

This argument, that mothering work is always a contaminant of distinctions between maternal identities and other identity forms, and the public and private spheres, has found expression in a number of contemporary investigations of work and motherhood. In examining the following research, I focus on two particular themes. The first is the use of similar tools to manage aspects of mothering and working. Alison Morehead (2001) draws on her interviews with nurses in a Canberra hospital to suggest that simple dichotomies between work and family time need to be challenged and contested. Questioned about how time was managed and utilised, Morehead's respondents identified their mothering and paid employment as synchronous at times, as "they mother while at work, and some of their home time is permeated by work responsibilities" (356). They reported the use of the work telephone to "mother" while in their places of employment. Paige Edley (2001) explored the creative and resistant uses of communication technologies for women combining mothering and paid employment, suggesting that women could and did "use technology to achieve some balance in their complicated lives" (28), while acknowledging the potential for employer control that was also enabled by these technologies. The cell phone formed a crucial tool in how the women Edley interviewed managed both paid work and their mothering tasks.

The second theme identified was the creation of new landscapes where firm distinctions between mothering work and paid work were refigured. Ylva Elvin-Nowak and Heléne Thomsson (2001), in their study of the discursive construction of motherhood among employed Swedish mothers suggest that the women interviewed held potentially competing ideologies of gender equity and child-centred care in tension in their daily practices of mothering. Linda McKie, Susan Gregory and Sophia Bowlby (2002) suggest that the women they studied developed "caring scapes" as useful tools to identify the "demands of the everyday," and offer adequate "fluidity of time and space" (909) for the work they needed to do mothers and workers.

These new landscapes, created by the lateral use of skills, both technical and conceptual, across women's different spheres of responsibility, suggest new languages to describe the combination of paid work and mothering. They also suggest new ways to understand mothers' persistence in combining mothering and paid work. While Deborah Lupton and Virginia Schmied's (2002) study

of how women combine paid employment and mothering reports substantial issues for the women in their study, and indicates that "the dominance of the discourses that suggests that 'good mothers' should be devoted to their children to the exclusion of their own needs, and want to spend as much time as possible with them" (95), they did note that "nearly all of the women who had returned to work (and these were the majority of the women in the study) felt that they had gained a great deal from it" (106). In their study of twenty-six women who "creatively constructed their careers to maximize time with their families" (181), Aaron Jackson and Janet Scharman (2002) note that these women did not use the language of trade-offs or "either/or choice" (2002:184) in describing how they combined work and family. They coupled "passion and commitment with flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity" (183). Jackson and Scharman use subheadings like "Peaceful Trade-Offs" and "Pleasant Stress" to report their informants' experiences. As I earlier indicated, Lucy Bailey's (1999) informants felt that "there was a continuity ... between their conceptualisation of their mothering self and their conceptualisation of their working self" (342).

Daphne Spain and Suzanne Bianchi (1996) have argued that the gender dichotomy where women's family roles intrude on their work life, while men's work roles intrude on their family lives is one of the key difficulties for women in achieving balance between their competing roles (171). But a review of the findings cited above suggests that women may be developing strategic formulations that allow for an existence across both spheres that is not necessarily conflictive. The above research indicates that women can positively utilize this intrusion to develop their own structures to manage and integrate such demands without adopting commonly deployed dichotomies, between mother and worker, or presence and absence. Through the creative use of tools, and the development of transferable and pertinent skills, women operate effectively as both mothers and workers simultaneously.

These studies do not diminish the difficulties involved in combining mothering with other activities. But there are some indications that women may be working to renegotiate aspects of the culturally available, sanctioned images of motherhood as an all-encompassing identity that inhibits all other life aspirations. I suggest that following up on ways in which women devise creative and integrated programs of mothering work and paid employment, and focusing on the tools of this new trade might offer insight that could extend the terms of current public discussions and the "conflicted" and "contested" terrain of motherhood.

Conclusion

Brid Featherstone (1997), in the "Introduction" to *Mothering and Ambivalence* suggests that "little attention [is] given to the everyday practices that mothers carry out on behalf of, and with, their children" (7). Dorothy Roberts (1999) has identified judgements about mothers as underpinned by "omission liability" where one is always judged on what one has failed to do as a mother,

instead of what one has actually done (31). There is much more attention to the metadiscourses of quality, surveillance and identity around motherhood than there is to the activities that constitute it. But as Arendell (2000) has argued that "delineating what it is that mothers do ... [is] central in the conceptual work on mothering and motherhood" (1194), I suggest that women who mother may define many different types of activities as "work" and move across these activities without great conflict. Washing clothes, babies and cups at the office are all activities requiring the deployment of the same skill base. They can be understood as skilled tasks, rather than functions that belong to discrete identities of mother and worker. This use of the same capacities across a multiplicity of terrains suggests that mothers in paid employment may be practising a new trade, where their skills are exercised in a range of locations for different purposes. It can be argued that, in this combination of different types of work, the activities of mothering are rethought as skills, practices and capacities.

I am not suggesting in this formulation that being a "mother" is something one puts on or off. As Bonnie Fox (1998) has noted, women have "no choice" about accepting responsibility for their babies (165). Nor do I want to diminish the affective and intimate bonds women have with their children. But I am arguing that many of the attributes of motherhood are developed by motherwork, and that work is often transitory, temporally defined and activity based. The skills required to complete that work are also valid and useful in the pursuit of paid employment and many other activities. Nor should this formulation of mothering as skills be seen as applicable only where women are mothering in conjunction with undertaking paid work. Boyd Reid (2000) has argued that despite the apparent dualism between mothering conducted by women who are not in paid work and that done by women who are, there are substantial commonalities that need to be explored and understood; that caring for children almost always involves "spillover" between public and private spheres even if women are not in the paid workforce (468).

The construction of mothering as a trade, involving a set of transferable skills that have applicability across the endeavours of women's lives, does offer, in my view, some useful strategic advantages in current debates about motherhood. It focuses attention on the skills and strategies that women use to operate effectively across different spheres of endeavour. It promotes an understanding that "being a mother" is a more complex, pliable and active state than is commonly assumed. It directs attention beyond the identity model of motherhood to focus on the activities that comprise so much of the work and engagement of the mother. If maternal activity and not maternal identity can be understood as the most important aspect of mothering, many of the pervasive and reductive configurations of mothers who are not in paid employment as simply "being there" are contested, at the same time as images of working mothers endlessly battling intractable role conflicts are challenged.

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