

Debra Langan

Using Mothering at Work

Embracing the Contradictions in Pedagogy and Praxis

For the past five years, I have been researching, working on, and writing about ways of enhancing the teaching of critical perspectives, with the aim of getting students to examine dominant ideologies and taken-for-granted practices. My pedagogical approach combines a number of strategies, one of which is to bring my experiences as a mother, and the experiences of those mothers that I know, to the podium, in my practice of teaching sociology. The experience of mothering has profoundly informed my awareness of the extent to which we are socially ordered.

One example of how mothering changed my understanding stands out in my memory. About a decade ago, I read Amy Rossiter's book: *From Private to Public: A Feminist Exploration of Early Mothering* (1988). I remember reading, and re-reading what, in her words, was her central research question: "How does the way our society organizes mothering help to create the concept of 'Woman' as it exists in capitalist patriarchy?" (11). At the time, I didn't get it. And then, a year later, when I had my first child, Dylan, I got it! I understood that to be a mother is to learn a particular state of being because of the ways in which society organizes mothering; that the social arrangements of mothering dictate, in large part, a woman's experience of mothering. I then related to what Rossiter was saying:

When my first baby was born, it became less and less possible to ignore how I myself had been formed—was being formed—within a social context.... We can see mothering in the countless, minute interventions of power in daily life: to be isolated, dependent, "too fat," to have nothing to say, is to be Womaned through mothering. (Rossiter, 1988: 15)

As one invested in feminist perspectives, I saw, and resented, the isolation at home, the invisibility of my unpaid housework, and others' devaluing of my work as a mother. But at the same time, I enjoyed my social location because of the patriarchal structure: I loved being the one who should "naturally" be home with kids; only lecturing two days a week, and squeezing work in around that; being accessible to breast feed my kids for years at a time, because of the benefits of maternity leave, and of being home with them a lot after that; not being ostracized because I was the one who stayed home most with the kids.

Through feminist and postmodern social psychology, I came to understand that my "mixed feelings" were characteristic not only of my experience of mothering, but of social experiences more generally. Postmodernists argue that "people are constantly in the process of being formed and of producing themselves" (Rossiter, 1988, 22) such that "self" and identity are "fragmentary, inconsistent, and contradictory" (Gavey, 1989: 465). Kenneth Gergen's (1991) book, *The Saturated Self* provided wonderful illustrations of how in high tech society we live "multiphrenic selves" because of the multitude of possibilities as to who we might choose to "be" at any given moment. From this perspective, "people constantly reconstruct themselves as their personal circumstances and awareness change" (Unger, 1990: 141). Language is seen as the primary determinant of an individual's sense of self, or "subjectivity," "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (Weedon qtd. in Gavey, 1989: 462). Challenging the traditional view of language as "a neutral, blank transmitter of experience," (Potter et al., 1984: 158) the postmodern premise is that "language speaks through the person ... [who] ... becomes a medium for the culture and its language" (Kvale, 1992: 36). Language conveys discourses that perpetuate particular ideologies, "common sense assumptions which are implicit in the conversations according to which people interact linguistically, and of which people are generally not aware..." (Fairclough, 1989: 2). One dominant taken-for-granted assumption is that social life is coherent, as noted by Wendy Hollway (1989): "... [T]he principal of unitariness still underpins the vast majority of discourses, amounting to a dominant ideology which suppresses those recognitions of multiplicity and contradiction" (43-44). Hollway's critique pertains also to the social sciences, where the tendency has been to render invisible the contradictory and confused qualities of social life by paradigmatic assumptions of unity and coherence (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 36-37). Postmodern analyses deconstruct these assumptions and illustrate how contradictions in discourse foster contradictions in our lived experience, what Michael Billig (1988) calls "ideological dilemmas".

Influenced by postmodern insights and by my expanding repertoires of experience as a mother and a professor, I began to identify the contradictions not only in my *experience* of mothering, but also between my ideological investments and my everyday practices as a mother. Especially as my children grew and moved more and more outside the institution of the family, I found

myself in situations where I “hid” my investments in critical analyses, and refrained from doing what I wanted to do. Caught between a sense of myself as self-determining, and a sense of myself as socially structured, I related well to Billig’s (1988) concept of “ideological dilemmas.” Although then, and now, I see myself as a feminist mother, I would argue that this identity is not absolute for me or for anyone else. Rather than a fixed, stable identity, feminist mothering fluctuates according to situations and over time, either extended periods of time or within short-lived periods of time. Although I and other feminist mothers practice many forms of resistance to social devaluations of mothering, I recognize a disjuncture between my ideological commitments and my practices. For example, in play groups, I have listened to other mothers talk about taking on all the domestic responsibilities, and complain about their situations, and I have refrained from sharing my critical analysis of the ways in which gender structures social relations. As a parent volunteer in Kindergarten classes, I have watched the teacher talk to children about family structure by using only a heterosexual nuclear family model, and I have not suggested alternative models. When my son cross-checked another boy in hockey (what constituted an abhorrent act of violence, in my view), instead of pulling him off the ice, I dealt with him, and those involved, in the locker room. When my daughter goes out the door looking like Shaggy from Scooby Doo, I have encouraged her to refashion herself more like the other little girls in her grade one class (with pretty pony tails, and crisp, brightly-coloured matching clothing), all the while berating myself internally because I was focusing on her appearance (setting the stage for future anorexia), and because I was more concerned about how others would respond to her appearance (and blame me for it.) In other words, although I am invested in critical feminist analyses in my classrooms and in my home, I also find myself acting in ways that perpetuate the dominant ideology, as I carry out the roles of wife and mother in the context of community. This is not to say that I never challenge dominant, patriarchal ideologies or practices, but I am keenly aware of the times that I do not.

So, why have I not consistently been true to my feminist commitments? Because I am subject to the same social constraints as are many others. I live in a conservative community in Ontario. I don’t want to be marginalized by the other mothers, fathers, teachers, neighbours, etc. for what I know they perceive as “extreme” views; I want my kids to have other kids to play with; I want the teachers to like my child (and this is connected to liking the parent) and so on. Although I feel safe to let my feminist identity be known within academic communities, and with my partner and my children, in my domestic community my “feminist” identity and my views fall into the category of “radical” and can jeopardize social relationships. Practicing feminist mothering, in many social contexts, requires thoughtful management.

So, back to my classrooms. As I indicated earlier, my central mission as a sociology professor is to have students understand the complexity of their own, and others’, everyday experiences within the context of the larger social order.

Mothering provides endless, poignant examples of how various facets of identity (gender, race, class, sexual preference, age, ability) shape individual experience. Teaching critical analyses in my sociology courses is especially challenging, I would argue, because:

- The courses I teach are not classified as “women’s studies” courses (hence, they don’t come with a “Beware of Feminist Content” label).
- It’s a tough job to maintain student interest, generally speaking.
- Mothering as a topic is devalued by many.
- Feminist analyses, if named such, are often met with resistance and, at times, hostility.

One of my favourite articles to get students engaged in reflexive analysis that illuminates the contradictory nature of social life is by Margaret Wetherell, Hilda Stiven, and Jonathan Potter (1987) entitled “Unequal Egalitarianism: A Preliminary Study of Discourses Concerning Gender and Employment Opportunities.” They interviewed male and female fourth-year university students and asked them what they saw in their future with respect workplaces, careers and children. Students said that they believed in equal opportunities, and they emphasized the importance of couples sharing equally in things like careers and childcare responsibilities (“equal opportunities discourse”). But, during the same interviews, students stated that when it ‘came right down to it,’ the woman in the relationship would be the one to make compromises in her career so that she could stay home, do housework, and look after the kids (“practical considerations discourse”). What is especially interesting is that the students reproduced each of these conflicting discourses in a sense ‘at the same time,’ and they appeared to be unaware of the contradictions that were embedded in their depictions of the future. Their discursive productions serve to naturalize and justify inequality, while at the same time achieving positive self-presentation in terms of moral principles. The authors argue that as these kinds of unproblematic contradictions are perpetuated through discourse, they serve to reinforce *actual* inequalities between men and women in the workforce and at home.

My students’ responses to the Wetherell et al. (1987) article are mixed. It’s not fashionable in our society to be contradictory, for to contradict oneself is to be less-than-genuine, hence many students struggle when asked to apply this analysis to their own subjectivity. Research on student responses to critical pedagogy suggests that many others have experienced similar kinds of student struggle (Volman and Ten Dam, 1998; Lather, 1991; Bulbeck, 2001; Budgeon, 2001; Titus, 2000). While a number of explanations for student resistance have been posited, one of the reasons they wish to avoid affiliation with feminism is because it results in a disparaging identity (Langan, 1997; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Dietzel and Pagenhart, 1995; Horue et al., 2001) as “man hater” (Bulbeck, 2001; Letherby and Marchbank, 2001; Culley, 1985), “victim” (Kitzinger and Thomas, 1995; Volman and Ten Dam, 1998), “psychopath”

(Paquin 2001), or “lesbian” (Paquin 2001; Letherby and Marchbank, 2001; Culley, 1985). Student struggles, when manifest as resistance, often promote hostile classroom environments, and my experiences in this regard (Langan and Paquin, 2000) have been consistent with the reports of other women faculty and students who are invested in critical perspectives (Menzies and Chunn, 1991; Bulbeck, 2001; Kitzinger and Thomas 1995; Volman and Ten Dam, 1998; Titus, 2000; Letherby and Marchbank, 2001; Paquin, 2001; The Chilly Collective, 1995).

I have found that admitting to my own lived contradictions makes way for students to consider the contradictions in their own lives and feminist critiques more generally. While this approach is not a panacea for eliminating student struggles (which I believe are essential for the learning process), it is a way of teaching that grounds analyses in examples that I feel are accessible, both to me and to my students. My decision to share stories of my personal struggles with the compatibility of mother/feminist/professor identities and actions is in keeping with Dorothy Smith’s (1988) writings on “bifurcated consciousness”. She notes that the work of sociology has traditionally been an objective endeavour, one that is removed from women’s everyday lived realities. Smith points to the way that women who teach sociology experience a disjuncture between objective sociological information and their own social experiences. My decision to bring my personal experiences into the public realm of my teaching represents my attempt to reconcile, for myself and for my students, the sociology world and world of lived realities.

I’ve also involved other mothers and their experiences in my teaching project. For example, this past winter I drew on my mother’s experiences with dying. For a three-month period prior to her death, as her health deteriorated, and she made the move to a nursing home, I worked hard to be there for her (she lived four hours from my home) and there for my my husband and children, and at the university for my paid work. This situation made it difficult often to prepare lectures that were entirely grounded in the literature. During long drives through Ontario, I would apply sociological analyses to the struggles that my mother, and myself, were having with the medical institutions, as she sought individual recognition (with respect to how she wanted simultaneously, to live and die) in a depersonalized bureaucracy. I integrated these analyses into my lectures. I also engage guest lecturers to impart analyses that are grounded in their experiences as mothers, for example, experiences of perinatal loss and of lesbian parenting. On one occasion, a colleague brought her children to her guest lecture, and when her five-month-old began to fuss, she picked him up, and began to breastfeed as she lectured. In subsequent class discussions, students heatedly debated her actions, and I used their discussions to illustrate the idea of contradictory investments in discourse. In the following excerpt, one of these students celebrates the guest lecturer’s “success” in both the private and public realms. Still, she and others felt “unease” when those realms were brought together in the classroom:

We all agreed that it was empowering for us to see the image of... [the guest speaker] ... as a mother, academic and breadwinner. We were given the image of a woman who had conquered all of the domains of life. Yet, when she began to breastfeed some in our group expressed being uncomfortable with the amalgamation of her domestic and scholarly identities. One guy in our group felt uncomfortable because he felt there was a time and place for everything, he did not feel that giving a lecture was also a good time to be breastfeeding. I on one hand, thought it was good to see her doing both, yet I also felt like I was intruding on something private. Each of us felt a bit of unease. We were also upset by this unease. As feminist thinkers this was an excellent illustration of a feminist. Motherhood was not interfering with her scholarly life.... When Debra told us that contradiction is a part of feminism we were relieved because it said it was okay to be uneasy and still be a feminist.

The vast majority of York's undergraduate students have not been mothers or fathers, so their reflective analyses do not typically focus on their experiences in these roles. Instead, frequently they centre on their family relationships. When professors model reflection for students by analyzing their own experiences, it helps students apply these kinds of analyses to their own lives. In the next two examples, students talk about their relationships with their mothers through written assignments that called for the application of critical analyses to their own life experiences.

Example #1: "Mila" was born in a country with a repressive regime. Because her parents disagreed with the dictates of the regime and her mother was a "full-fledged feminist," they moved their young family to Canada when Mila was a child. Mila recalled an incident that happened soon after she arrived in Canada.

One incident that I remember clearly when first coming to Canada was when I saw a female bus driver for the first time. I was utterly shocked and in a sense of disbelief. I remember saying "Look mom, it's a woman bus driver, isn't that funny?" My mother not only did not find it funny but she was furious with me. She took it so personally that until this day, I could not figure out why.... Throughout the course it has gradually helped my view of life and also enabled me to find explanation for my past experiences.... I was now able to understand why my mother got so mad when I made that comment about the woman bus driver. I now realize how hard it has been for women to achieve what they have achieved and it is these hardheaded views of women's scripted roles that brought women down for many generations. [Through this course] I realize my culture of birth and early childhood did have an affect on me and on my views no matter how much of a feminist my mother was.... I live my life today as a feminist and am proud of it.

Example #2: “Tony” described how the critical analyses in class had led him to see the assignment of burnt steak in his family as having gendered significance:

My original thesis ... was that feminist issues were overblown.... There was one particular discussion in class which led to my period of antithesis. I was arguing that my mother would eat a burnt steak while leaving the good one for me because she was a parent who was sacrificing for her child, not because she was in a subordinate position to me with respect to gender. Then ... [I was asked if] ... I would let my father eat a burnt steak so I could have a good one. When I thought about my unwillingness to entertain the notion of making my father eat a burnt steak, the relationships within my family became coloured with “gendered particulars”.... This enlightenment led me to analyze my own reactions to see if I was perpetuating oppressive ideologies on the women in my family. By leaving the burnt steak for my mother, but not for my father, I was implying that her status is beneath mine and mine is beneath my father’s.... I only saw the burnt steak scenario as oppressive to women when its gendered particulars were pointed out to me.

Conclusion

As a working mother, both paid and unpaid, like countless others I can attest to the difficulties in juggling work in the public and private realms. At the same time, I have found that my work as a mother and my work as an academic inform each other in ways that are meaningful to me and to my students. Access to critical analyses has made it possible for me to make sense of, and embrace, the ideological contradictions that characterize my lived realities as a feminist who is also a mother. By including in my lectures examples of the complexities involved in mothering identities and practices, I model for students ways to apply sociological analyses to their own life experiences. Acknowledging the contradictory nature of mothering, and the contradictory nature of social experience in intimate relations more generally, provides critical frameworks for students to make sense of, and potentially change, their social experiences.

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**In Remembrance:
Andrea Reisch Toepell**

Toepell, Andrea Reisch, PhD. In Hamilton on July 09, 2004 after a prolonged illness, peacefully and surrounded by love. Dearly loved and admired wife, adoring, thoughtful, and imaginative mother of two precious, young daughters. Loving and devoted daughter; dearest friend; caring and interested sister, sister-in-law, aunt, niece, and cousin who will be missed by extended family members, colleagues and many friends in Canada, the United States, and Germany.

Andrea was born on September 29, 1959 in Toronto and lived her full and beautiful life in Toronto and more recently in Dundas. Andrea completed her doctorate at the University of Toronto and was an Associate Professor in Applied Health Sciences at Brock University. She was very much engaged in her work and her students' learning and intellectual growth. She always supported her colleagues and students and encouraged them to fulfil their goals and to follow their paths. Her professional pursuits included pioneering research in the area of HIV/AIDS in correctional settings. She held the position of Chair of Heart Health in Hamilton-Wentworth.

Andrea's curiosity and energy led her to sail the Great Lakes and the Atlantic, swim with the penguins of the Galapagos, and watch narwhals in the Arctic. She greatly loved her garden and joyously shared her knowledge and passion for nature's beauty with her family, friends, neighbours, and in particular she hoped to instill this joy in her daughters. Music always filled her home, her car, and her heart. Wherever she went she always treasured those whom she loved and cared for. Her laughter, unparalleled kindness, and love, will continue to resonate in our hearts and minds.

A funeral service for Andrea was held on July 12, 2004. She was buried at White Chapel Cemetery in Dundas. In lieu of flowers, Andrea's family kindly requested that friends plant trees in Israel in her memory. In Toronto, donors may call 416-638-7200 or by e-mail to <tor@jnf-canada.org> or www.jnf.org or 1-800-542-TREE (8733).