

# Mothering Under Duress

## *Examining the Inclusiveness of Feminist Mothering Theory*

*“Empowered mothers seek to fashion a mode of mothering that affords and affirms maternal agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity and which confers and confirms power to and for mothers” (O’Reilly, 2004: 15). This paper will apply this definition of empowered mothering to a series of publications to illustrate how many feminist mothering theorists are describing educated, financially secure women with substantial access to supports and resources as examples of feminist mothers. It will argue that while these cases are integral to feminist mothering literature, they produce frameworks for engaging in feminist mothering that are extremely difficult for many women to apply to their lives. Mothers who live in difficult social, financial, and relational circumstances are restricted in achieving states of agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity and thus in engaging in practices of feminist mothering as defined and illustrated by many feminist theorists. This paper does not claim that it is impossible for women under duress to mother in feminist ways; rather it asserts that feminist theorists have in many ways neglected this population of women in our theorizing of feminist mothering. To this end, we must extend our theories of feminist mothering to explore how mothers who are living under various circumstances of duress and those subject to “the gaze” of social support systems can mother in feminist ways. This must include extending our interrogation and analyses from the individual woman or single home, to the institutions that are regulating mothers and restricting them from engaging in feminist mothering.*

Feminist mothering theorists argue that dominant ideologies of mothering in North American culture, the paradigm of motherhood by which mothers are judged and regulated, are unobtainable and unrealistic. For instance, “good mothers” are socially constructed as:

white, heterosexual, able-bodied, married and in a nuclear family. ... [They are] altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful ... Good mothers put the needs of their children before their own ... [and] are the primary caregivers of their children ... And of course, mothers are not sexual! (O'Reilly, 2004: 4)

These dominant ideologies of mothering and motherhood are critiqued by feminist mothering theorists as disempowering and restrictive to women. Susan Maushart (2000) asserts that women hide behind a “mask of motherhood” which further perpetuates this construction of natural maternal ease and enjoyment by “keep[ing] women from speaking clearly what they know, and from hearing truths too threatening to face” (7). That is, by not openly acknowledging and discussing the difficulties of mothering, any concerns, worries, struggles, and fears that mothers have are not given a voice, further isolating mothers from each other and perpetuating the ideology that mothering is natural, enjoyable, and easy.

Sara Ruddick (2002) argues that this silence and subsequent perpetuation of societal assumptions of motherhood culminates in a loss of power and authority, which, in turn, necessarily results in a mother's loss of confidence, feelings of blame and guilt, and conflicted thinking. “Relinquishing authority to others, they lose confidence in their own values and in their perception of their children's needs” (Ruddick, 2002: 111) so that their “best often, in the long run, does not seem quite ‘good enough’” (Ruddick, 2002: 30). Because this ideology of a “good mother” being always self-sacrificing, cheerful, and loving is unobtainable for most, and because the “mask of motherhood” isolates and silences women, mothers are often in a state of internal conflict in which they lack confidence in their own thoughts and actions by comparing them to those of a “good mother.” “The gap between image and reality, between what we show and what we feel, has resulted in a peculiar cultural schizophrenia about motherhood” (Maushart, 2000: 7). In other words, this ideology of a “good mother” creates a constant internal tension between how a mother *does* feel and behave and how she is told she *should* feel and behave, causing feelings of blame, guilt and inadequacy.

Andrea O'Reilly (2004) offers a counter narrative to this social construction of “good mothers,” namely empowered mothers, who “seek to fashion a mode of mothering that affords and affirms maternal agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity and which confers and confirms power to and for mothers” (15). Rather than lacking agency, authority and confidence to make their own decisions about the well-being of themselves and their children, these mothers are empowered to provide safe and healthy environments of learning and growth for their children. Fiona Green (2004), Erika Horowitz (2004) and Juanita Ross Epp and Sharon Cook (2004) provide important descriptions of women who practice mothering with agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity; yet, the feminist mothers described in these works appear to be educated,

middle to upper-class women with access to financial and human resources to assist in raising their children. This article will outline how engaging in feminist mothering, as described by these theorists, is extremely difficult and in some cases impossible for many women. Mothers who do not have access to resources such as substantial finances and good childcare, or women who are mothering under other difficult circumstances,<sup>1</sup> such as an abusive relationship, illness or addiction problems, are likely to find it difficult to achieve agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity as described by these feminist mothering theorists. Further, women mothering under duress are often subject to the gaze of social support systems who monitor and regulate their mothering, which presents challenges for engaging in feminist mothering. To this end, we must broaden our scope of analyses to incorporate feminist and empowered mothering theories and practices that are applicable to a wider spectrum of mothers and that take into account the influence of the societal institutions that monitor and regulate the lives of many women.

### **Agency**

According to feminist mothering theorists, practicing agency, or being in control of one's life and having the ability to make choices and changes within one's life, is a condition of feminist motherhood. Within the patriarchal institution of motherhood "there is room for women to practice agency, resistance, invention and renewal" (Green, 2004: 35). Empowered mothers, such as those interviewed by Green (2004) "can, and do find opportunities within motherhood to explore and cultivate their own agency" (O'Reilly, 2004: 16). The women in Green's (2004) study are asserting their agency by "consciously resisting the restrictions placed on them by patriarchal motherhood" (36). One strategy of asserting agency is described in the case of Willow who consciously chose to birth and raise a child alone without any connection to a man. Other mothers choose to disregard housekeeping, allow their young children to choose their own mismatching outfits or teach their children to wash their own clothes and ignore the dirty or wrinkled clothes they wear (Ross, 1995). These are mothers who can face and resist the pressure of other people policing their mothering, and, in fact, gain confidence by doing so. Horowitz's (2004) account of empowered mothering asserts the importance of agency in the development of one's self-concept, namely that "seeing themselves as agents rather than victims led (the women) to experience a positive view of themselves as mothers and women" (55).

### **Autonomy**

Closely related to agency is autonomy, or self-sufficiency. In addition to having the agency to be in control of and make decisions in one's life, empowered mothers are autonomous or self-sufficient to do so. In the case of the feminist mothers described by Horowitz (2004), Green (2004), and Epp and Cook (2004), this most often presupposes access to sufficient financial

resources, resulting from the mother working or having a partner that works. In either case, the empowered mother has enough financial resources to raise her children herself, or hire someone to assist her with childcare and/ or housework while she working outside the home. Thus, an empowered mother's autonomy does not necessarily translate into caring for her children on her own. Being self-sufficient, however, does mean that the mother has the means—financial or otherwise—to exert her agency by choosing to stay at home to raise her children (because she has the financial means to do), or by choosing to work outside the home (because she either has a partner that stays at home with the children or she has the financial means to hire someone to care for them).

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity is the ability to be truthful and true to oneself, and involves mothers asserting and meeting their own needs and interests outside of mothering. Horowitz (2004) derived themes of authenticity from her interviews with empowered mothers who expressed that contrary to the dominant discourse of mothering that dictates that women only ever feel love towards their children, they don't feel loving to their children all the time. Furthermore, they felt that they were "unmasked" (Maushart, 2000) and breaking the silence about the negative aspects of motherhood. The women were also meeting their own needs and pursuing their own interests, recognizing that they need experiences outside motherhood to feel fulfilled. Again, these notions challenge the dominant discourse of motherhood that advocates sacrificial motherhood and asserts that women are fulfilled solely by motherhood.

### **Authority**

Having authority means having confidence that one's own voice will be listened to. This involves having authority within the family while interacting with or disciplining children, and outside the family when dealing with institutions such as schools, doctors, and community organizations. Authority presupposes that if a spouse or partner is involved in the family, the power and voice of the mother is recognized. In fact, some of the literature on feminist mothering both assumes that a father is involved and expresses the benefits of such. For instance, both Ellen Ross (1995) and Nancy Chodorow advocate for equal parenting, with the father participating in childcare, as the way to escape the oppressiveness of patriarchal motherhood and gendered social arrangements (Lawler, 2000). Furthermore, Epp & Cook's (2004) account of their own feminist mothering espoused the benefits of an "egalitarian partnership" with one's husband who is an "integrated parent," sharing housework and childcare. The authors assert that this egalitarian relationship permits feminist mothering to take place, and that paternal involvement results in children with stronger intellectual performance and an increased interest in other adults.

Empowered mothers often espouse the benefits of democratic mothering as a means of disciplining the children. That is, rather than using an authori-

tarian model of discipline, the mother “consciously shares the power she has as an adult and a mother with her (children)” (Green, 2004: 39). Epp & Cook (2004) assert that as feminist mothers they used “reasoned conversation” when interacting with their sons, and one mother interviewed by Green (2004) expressed that she created a world within her home where competition does not exist; she says, “(the children) have always known that they have the right to express themselves, that they have the right to say no, and that we could engage in a dialogue about the issue as opposed to me wielding power over them” (40).

### **Education**

Additionally, I would argue that the four conditions of empowered or feminist mothering rely upon access to education. When educated, women are more easily able to achieve autonomy, agency, authenticity, and authority in their lives. Green (2004) describes feminist mothers who

actively engage their children in critical thinking. For example, they use watching television, going to movies and seeing plays as forums to look at and discuss the power dynamics of the larger world. They also use situations in the media and in the lives of friends and acquaintances. (40)

Activities such as these require a level of education to be able to recognize and critique existing power dynamics within our society. Further, Horowitz (2004) describes feminist mothers as those who do “ideological work” by questioning the societal expectations placed upon them. This same point is expanded upon by Green (2004) in explaining that an interviewee

recognizes that to be able to subvert motherhood she needs to be aware of what patriarchy expects from her as a mother and to have an understanding of how she can effectively manipulate and challenge those same expectations to her advantage (38).

Thinking critically so as to recognize the need and desire to resist the dominant discourse in the way described by these feminist mothering theorists does not necessarily require that mothers are highly educated, yet it does presuppose an awareness that is heightened and enhanced by education, making the required “ideological work” of feminist mothering easier for educated women.

### **Women mothering under duress**

When framed in terms of feminist mothering, as the aforementioned authors do, the four conditions of empowered mothering are difficult to achieve for women mothering under duress. That is, mothers living lives that are not deemed acceptable by society, such as women who are of a lower class, women who have substance abuse issues or are in need of financial assistance from the

state, women in abusive relationships or with mental illness, would find it much more difficult to acquire states of authenticity, agency, autonomy and authority, as described by many feminist mothering theorists, than most educated mothers with access to needed resources.

### **Lack of autonomy**

For instance, these women living under duress are often involved with or receiving assistance from external agencies in order to ensure the well-being of their family. As a result, they are under the scrutiny or gaze of these external bodies which often view them as cases.

The mothers (are) subjected to a unifying, bureaucratic gaze that typifie(s) rather than individualize(s), reducing and simplifying the women and their lives... The problem with being a case is that it limits one's ability to be seen as a mother or an autonomous individual. (Greaves *et al.*, 2002: 100)

The autonomy of women mothering in difficult circumstances is constantly negated by the systems with which they are associated, as they scrutinize the women's lives and deem them to be cases rather than autonomous individuals. For these women then, the autonomy asserted by empowered and feminist mothers is much more difficult to achieve.

### **Lack of agency**

Additionally, agency is a difficult state to achieve for these mothers since they are often dependent upon external agencies or governmental bodies to assist them in raising their children. Thus, they have much less control over their lives, and the decisions within them, than women who have the means and resources to mother without governmental assistance. For example, women who are in abusive relationships "are increasingly held responsible by child protection authorities for putting their children at risk by remaining in abusive relationships where their children may witness violence" (Greaves *et al.*, 2002: 7). As a result, the agency required to make choices about where mothers and/or their children live is given to child protection authorities. In these cases, they then end up developing

a passive or even subservient response in the face of such power over the future of their relationships with their children. The women (come) to see that in order to maintain the bond with their child(ren), they would have to act in a particular way to maximize their chances of keeping or re-acquiring their child(ren). (Greaves *et al.*, 2002: 72)

This relationship with social service organizations clearly does not create an environment that cultivates agency.

Not only are women who are mothering under duress highly scrutinized and having their decisions made for them, they are also subject to a heightened degree of pathology than other mothers. Certainly all women are expected to mother as the patriarchal institution of motherhood dictates; but without the constant scrutiny and evaluation that mothers under duress receive, other women are able to “fly under the radar,” and by exerting their agency, engage in feminist or empowered mothering. For example, Green’s (2004) theory of subversive resistance outlines how women who appear to be “good mothers” by society’s standards, such as a woman in a monogamous, long-term relationship with the father of her children, can subversively enact strategies of feminist mothering. One woman stated,

someone can look at me on the surface and go, ‘O.K. There’s a woman who’s chosen to be a mother. Good, patriarchy likes that- Good, good.’ They don’t have a clue. I have the ability to transform what I perceive the role to be, to take it on, to claim it, and to just create it (Green, 2004: 38).

Yet, mothers on social assistance or mothers who are mentally ill, for instance, would not be deemed “good” for choosing to be a mother as in the case of the mother quoted above. For these and other women, “reproduction is stigmatized ... because it is considered morally irresponsible to have children at the public’s expense” (Roberts, 1995: 148). Thus, women mothering under duress are much less likely to be able to pass as a “good mother” while engaging in feminist mothering.

### **Lack of authenticity**

As a result, many women must deal with the label of “bad mother” far more intensely since they are overtly mothering against the societal standard of “good mother.” Their circumstances are positioned as “other,” pathologizing behaviours observed in these women and their children that would otherwise be seen as “normal” among other mothers and children. This constitution as “other” is often internalized by the mothers, making a state of authenticity very difficult to achieve. For example, being labeled “poor,” “addicted,” “abused,” or “ill” is not simply an objective position which one occupies, but becomes configured into the self (Lawler, 2000), so that the self becomes pathologized as lacking, wrong, or bad. Thus, rather than problematizing social systems of inequality, these women are blamed by the institutions by which they should be supported, and, in turn, blame themselves for their mothering and life circumstances. As a result, achieving a state of authenticity in which one feels true to oneself and at peace with one’s decisions is extremely difficult to achieve under these circumstances.

In addition, women mothering under duress are usually dependent upon the assistance of the very institutions that create the standard of a “good

mother.”

Societal attitudes and assumptions about “normal mothering” become crystallized in policy discourses that, in turn, structure women’s experiences of mothering under duress. Social, medical, and legal processes that define acceptable behaviour and label some mothers more adequate than others mediate women’s experiences. (Greaves, *et al.*, 2002: 61)

Women mothering under duress are often criticized by the institutions that are monitoring them if they are seen as putting their interests ahead of their children’s needs. Unlike the autonomous and authentic feminist mothers described by feminist mothering theorists, these women are required to comply with the standard of a “good mother” in order to ensure the survival of their family by means of receiving assistance, be it treatment, protection or financial resources. The consequences of not complying with the standard are dire; for instance, women may lose their children, be incarcerated, or refused treatment or financial assistance.

Further, the stigma and blame attached to women mothering under duress often prevents them from seeking assistance from the institutions that are labeling them as “other.” Felt stigma is associated with low self-esteem, poor physical and emotional health, limited social interaction, and lower quality of life (Fulford & Ford-Gilboe, 2004) and “has also been found to negatively affect health promoting behaviours, such as seeking preventive health care or screening, due to fear of harm or labeling by health professionals” (Fulford & Ford-Gilboe, 2004: 51). For example,

the public discourse on women as mothers as users of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco has been fundamentally judgmental, blaming and unsympathetic.... As a result, women often do not seek the care they need and deserve, with negative implications for their health and the health of their children (Greaves, *et al.*, 2002: 6).

What results is a self-perpetuating cycle of mothering deemed to be problematic, an internalized sense of blame and lack, a resulting reluctance to seek necessary help, and further pathologization of the mother and her mothering. In these cases, mothering against the institution of motherhood by not complying with the standard or by not seeking assistance is highly dangerous for these women.

### **Lack of authority**

With the lack of autonomy, agency, and authenticity afforded to mothers living under duress, it follows that these women would have little authority in their lives. They must often relinquish their authority to those institutions



which are providing them with assistance. As a result, their children are controlled by external regulations of societal norms and expectations of “good” behaviour and “good” mothering, rather than internal regulations authentically chosen by the mother. Women must demonstrate to social workers, courts and other social support services that they are a “good mother,” as defined not by the mother, but by the social institutions from which they are seeking assistance. Abdicating one’s maternal power over a child like the feminist mothers described above who espouse the benefits of a democratic mode of mothering, presupposes that one has the authority mentioned above to in fact abdicate.

Furthermore, given the prominent influence of power and regulation in their lives, the “democratic” practices of empowered mothering described by feminist mothering theorists may not be relevant or meaningful for many women mothering under duress (Lawler, 2000). Additionally, the feminist mothering theorists mentioned above discuss democratic parenting and relinquishing authority over their children in partnership with a spouse. Yet listing egalitarian partnerships, equal parenting, shared authority and shared parenting as a requirement of feminist mothering means little to many women who are single mothers or in relationships that are abusive or not long-term.

### **Conclusion**

Mothers who are living in difficult social, financial, and relational circumstances are at a disadvantage in achieving states of authenticity, autonomy, agency, and authority as described by Horowitz (2004), Green (2004), and Epp and Cook (2004) and thus in engaging in practices of feminist mothering as defined by the authors. I am not asserting that it is impossible for women under duress to mother in feminist ways; I simply feel that feminist theorists and academics have in many ways neglected this population of women in our theorizing of feminist mothering. We must extend our theories of feminist mothering to explore how mothers who are living under various circumstances of duress can mother in feminist ways. This must include extending our interrogation and analyses from the individual woman or single home, to the institutions that are regulating and largely preventing these women from freely engaging in feminist mothering.

The theorizing of lesbian and African-American empowered mothering has tended to explore ways in which women from lower socioeconomic groups and women in different familial structures are empowered mothers, but these women do not necessarily define themselves as feminist mothers. Additionally, third wave feminists such as those who told their stories in Ariel Gore and Bee Lavender’s *Breeder: Real-Life Stories From the New Generation of Mothers* (2001) are theorizing about ways to be feminist mothers that are perhaps much different than the feminist mothers of the second wave and seem to include women mothering under duress. For example, among others, the narratives in *Breeder* describe adolescent, student, and single mothers, mothers on social

assistance, mothers living with other mothers, and even a mother living out of a tent and traveling van. These are situations and circumstances which are very different from those in which the feminist mothers described by Erika Horowitz (2004), Fiona Green (2004), and Juanita Ross Epp and Sharon Cook (2004) are living. In conclusion, I assert that it would be of much value to further our exploration and theorizing of feminist mothering to explore how women in *all* life circumstances can engage in feminist mothering, recognizing the practices will vary, and perhaps be adapted and limited, yet will nonetheless be effective in challenging the institution of motherhood and its dominant ideologies of “good” mothers .

<sup>1</sup>While many of these women may not label themselves as “under duress” or “mothering under difficult circumstances,” given the limited scope of this article I will use these terms, recognizing that they are generalizations and do not accurately reflect the complexity of their life circumstances.

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