

Mommy Memoirs Feminism, Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature

This paper analyzes the current public discourse on gender, reproduction and motherhood using personal narratives in contemporary popular literature on motherhood. Drawing on recently published memoirs, essays and personal short stories, the study focuses on prevalent gender conceptualizations, interactions between social structures of reproduction, gender and motherhood, and gendering of motherhood and parenthood in American society. These narratives reveal a biological emphasis on the bodily experiences of pregnancy and childbirth and on the different natures of men and women in parenting and childcare, which together contribute to categorical and dichotomous gender conceptualization. However, the biological differences are reaffirmed through social practices, and result in the reproduction of gender inequality. The writers of the analyzed texts, women who became mothers at the time of increasing gender equality and many of them avowed feminists, felt mostly unprepared for the motherhood role; the ambivalence about their position as mothers mostly stem from the persistent myth of the “natural” mother and resurfacing of the traditional gender practices they encountered once they became mothers. Motherhood changed their social position in the gender structures and remained one of the main elements of gender inequality.

Among the most popular representations of motherhood today are maternal memoirs. They feature women of different backgrounds and with varied mothering experiences, many of them avowed feminists, who grew up and became mothers during a time of increasing gender equality. However, most of them were largely unprepared for the transformation brought to their lives by pregnancy and motherhood. Becoming mothers made them rethink and reevaluate their relationships, values and ideas about gender and their position in society.

This paper examines the relationship between motherhood and feminism from the perspective of gender inequality embedded in Western motherhood using a popular narrative form of memoirs about motherhood as my evidence. I see these autobiographical accounts as a window into the current public discourse on motherhood and gender and analyze them using several key feminist writings on motherhood, gender and reproduction.

Research topics, data and methods

More than 800 books on motherhood were published in the years 1970-2000, the majority of them after 1980 (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 8). While many of these are manuals, advice books, parenting books or academic analyses, many books focus on the author's own, often quite ambivalent, experiences with motherhood. Unlike academic studies of motherhood, these "mommy memoirs," written by mothers dealing with new joys and frustrations, are aimed at wide audiences and written in accessible language, emphasizing authors' subjectivity and experience. Differing in length, structure and method of presentation, these personal accounts claim to be confessions of imperfect mothers, surprised by the overwhelming nature of motherhood and changes it brought into their lives.

In this analysis I consider nine books featuring maternal autobiographical accounts, published between the years 2000 and 2004, and examine the authors' perspectives on motherhood and gender.¹ While these accounts are certainly not representative of the experiences of all American mothers,² their almost simultaneous appearance on the book market draws our attention to women's voices in the discussion about the enactment of the motherhood role at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The books analyzed are: Lisa Belkin's *Life's Work: Confessions of an Unbalanced Mom* (2002); Martha Brockenbrough's *It Could Happen to You! Diary of a Pregnancy And Beyond* (2002); Andrea J. Buchanan's *Mother Shock. Loving Every (Other) Minute of It* (2003); Susan Cheever's *As Good As I Could Be* (2001); Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work. On Becoming a Mother* (2001); Faulkner Fox's *Dispatches from a Not-So-Perfect Life Or How I Learned to Love the House, the Man, the Child* (2003); Ariel Gore and Bee Lavender's edited collection, *Breeder. Real Life Stories from a New Generation of Mothers* (2001); Lauren Slater's *Love Works Like This. Moving from One Kind of Life to Another* (2002); and Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions. Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (2001).

I analyze these memoirs to understand the authors' experiences and concerns and focus on patterns and concerns reoccurring within their writings. Most of the narratives bring to the forefront the ambivalence and unpreparedness the authors experienced once they became mothers and the dramatic life-changing nature and overwhelming character of mothering. However, this theme is intertwined with the strong emphasis on gender dichotomization, gendered character of motherhood and parenthood, and gender inequality perceived and presented by these narratives.

The goal of this paper is thus to examine gender conceptualizations, interactions between social structures of gender and motherhood, and the experience and gendering of parenthood in contemporary American society using the analysis of narratives in selected popular literature. To accomplish this, I focus on four topics. First, I look at the emphasis on gender dualism and gender differences in parenting. Second, I analyze the significance of the bodily experience for motherhood and social control over women's bodies during pregnancy and childbirth for naturalization of gender differences. Third, I consider the "natural mother" myth, which assumes women's superiority and ability as natural caregivers. Fourth and finally, I examine how the authors experience and challenge the changes in gender relations and practices once they become rearranged after the birth of a child. I combine this analysis of personal narratives with a theoretical understanding of gender conceptualization and gender practices.

Biological essentialism and social construction of gender in maternal memoirs

Motherhood and reproduction play a significant role in the definition and naturalization of gender differences and justification of gender inequality. The books included in this analysis often represent women's biological role in reproduction and childbearing as a cause for the gender inequality they experience. The biological essentialism³ is created by the prominent bodily experience related to childbirth, breastfeeding and early stages of childcare and often a disbelief in men's ability to care for children equally well as a mother. The closer connection of women to their bodies and thus nature also add to the perception of natural differences between men and women. Emphasis on biological differences and overall different nature of men and women thus contributes to the categorical conceptualization of gender in these maternal memoirs.

Such accounts stand in contrast to most feminist theories that demonstrated that gender inequality and gender relations are not causally based on biological differences between men and women but are instead a result of social and political processes (see, for example, Lorber, 1994, 2005; Connell, 1987, Scott, 1988, O'Reilly, 2004). It is not the biological differences, but rather the cultural definitions of these differences and the power relationships rooted in these definitions that are significant in the gendering of social structures. The natural character of gender practices does not create gender relations and "the practices of sexual reproduction are often quite remote aspects of social encounters in which gender is constructed and sustained" (Connell, 1987: 81). According to Robert W. Connell (1987), social practices reformulate, restructure and often exaggerate and distort the natural differences. By becoming mothers and fathers, social actors reaffirm their position within existing gender structures. Social expectations of nurturing, care, motherhood and fatherhood are the "[s]ocial practices that construct women and men into distinct catego-

ries by converting an average difference into categorical difference ... negate the major pattern of difference that occurs within sexes rather than between them” (Connell, 1987: 80). Biological essentialism, through which the “natural” abilities of women and men in reproduction and parenthood are emphasized and seen as essential and universal, is then used to justify gender differences in parenting.

While most authors emphasize the biological difference between women and men, they are also aware of the social context of gender differences and their social construction. This explanation becomes evident in their discussions of gender inequality and the position of mothers in society. The authors employ social constructionist explanations of gender differences in challenging women’s natural ability to care for their children and the gender division of childcare, although in most cases they simultaneously see themselves as more competent parents than their partners and are the primary caretakers of their children. Biological differences are reaffirmed and intertwined with social practices and together contribute to gender essentialism and categorical perception of gender differences.

The relationship between reproduction and gender inequality is thus one of the “paradoxes of gender” (Lorber, 1994). Judith Lorber argues that “gender inequality is located solely in the structure of gendered social practices and institutions. Procreation and sexuality are constructed as conditions of subordination within the social institution of gender” (1994: 285). Reproduction creates the basis for gender as a social process and at the same time the relations between men and women are largely defined through reproductive practices.

The analysis of the motherhood narratives suggests that biological essentialism and motherhood as a gendered social institution are fundamental for reproducing the existing gender inequalities in Western societies. By becoming a mother, a woman’s femininity is essentialized and the biological differences between men and women become critical. At the same time, differences in social positions and existing gender structures become more visible and relationships become less equal. Biological differences are thus reaffirmed through social practices in family relations, childcare and even work arrangements. However, the repetitive character of social practices leaves some space for variation in performance (Butler, 1993) and practices (Connell, 1987) and allows for challenge and transformation of existing social structures as shown by the authors’ experiences. I discuss these different forms of gender conceptualization in the remainder of the article.

Gender conceptualization in maternal memoirs

Gender differences in parenthood

It is part of the innate character of motherhood memoirs as a gendered form of writing that the stories they narrate are told from the female perspective. Transition to motherhood and parenting experiences are thus seen

through gender lenses. The categorical distinction between men and women is inherent in all of the books included but these distinctions are further supported by repeated observations and remarks about the different nature of men and women, their different reactions and behaviors in the same situations, or even by the absence of men performing parenting tasks. Naomi Wolf describes hers and her husband's reaction to the news of her pregnancy as follows:

... we reacted very differently. My husband needed to go for a run—and think; and I needed to sit still, and not think. Male and female, after our first amazement, we reacted spontaneously, like different elements. (2001: 15)

For Lauren Slater, a longtime depression sufferer, her pregnancy was a source of constant fear and ambivalence about having the baby. From the beginning, pregnancy made her aware of how different she and her husband were in dealing with fear about the future, feeling close and separate from him at the same time (2002: 18). Despite the fact that her husband is less ambivalent than she about having the child, in the middle of her pregnancy she feels that "... this baby has yet to take root in him" (47). Talking with her sister, Slater fights the idea that men are so different and hopes that "[h]e'll catch on". But her sister argues that motherhood and fatherhood are essentially different: "[h]e's a guy.... Fatherhood is something you do. ... Motherhood is something you are" (49).

Martha Brockenbrough's husband was very involved in her pregnancy and in childcare; he even added several chapters describing the events from his perspective, emphasizing the different views men and women can have on the same matter. Although she feels that having a baby brought them closer together, in some ways she also finds him different, something she had not noticed before (2002: 175).

Essentializing and generalizing pregnancy and childbirth, Rachel Cusk reflects on the experience of pregnancy and childbirth and sees them as creating the gender difference:

I did not understand what a challenge to the concept of sexual equality the experience of pregnancy and childbirth is. Birth is not merely which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves, so that a woman's understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. (2001: 6-7)

Bodily experience: Social control over body and loss of autonomy

Experience of the body is an inevitable part of the definition of motherhood and gender for the writers of these narratives. Although the interpretation, setting and significance of pregnancy and childbirth are socially determined, they are biological processes, and pregnant women and new mothers are

highly aware of their physical bodies.⁴ Changes of the body during pregnancy make women feel more feminine and signify their position in the reproduction processes and gender system. While most of the authors feel empowered by the ability of their bodies to produce another human being, they also understand that their pregnant bodies affect their reception in the society. Social control over women's bodies exercised during pregnancy and childbirth further reinforces gender differences between men and women on the biological level but also on the level of power and control.

Hormonal changes during and after pregnancy make a woman feel more vulnerable, looking for support and protection from her husband, writes Wolf. This change led her to rethink her feminist and social constructionist beliefs: "The ways in which hormones during pregnancy affected me called into question my entire belief system about 'social construction of gender'" (2001: 115). She goes on to describe her changing body, its shape, colors and changes in her temperament and emotions.

In Lauren Slater's book (2002), hormonal changes are used as the metaphor for many changes that a pregnant woman experiences. The book is divided into sections based on pregnancy trimesters with a short introduction describing the effect of the respective predominant hormone. Slater finds most of the hormonal changes quite unpleasant: mood swings, the return of depression, absentmindedness.⁵

In the later stages of her pregnancy, Slater uses her mind to make her feel less pregnant. In the progress of a lecture she delivers, she changes from "a squat, rolling woman in a poorly patched dress, the face of a teenager, the body of earth" to her image of an author "slim and tailored, with precise mouth and tapered fingers, slightly stained with ink" (2002: 93). She was thus able to escape her maternal body, so incompatible with her professional intellectual activity.

Many writers point out that pregnancy changes the way they were perceived by others and how they perceive the world. Pregnancy becomes a sign of increased femininity and intrusion of the personal into the public life, making women more vulnerable to status devaluation in a masculine public culture. Lisa Belkin writes about working while pregnant:

After spending careers trying to prove that we're professionals and that our personal lives won't intrude on our work, we find ourselves occupying bodies that scream otherwise. We fear that colleagues and clients will dismiss us as less valuable, and we also fear they might be right. (2002: 45-46)

Hiding pregnancy weight gain and feminine physical changes is then a part of being able to maintain the appearance of professionalism in the masculine culture (Belkin, 2002). The pregnant body makes people feel uncomfortable, unable to deal with a woman the same way they did before (Wolf, 2001: 67).

Wolf felt that her lecture audiences became more absorbed with her growing stomach than with what she had to say and, as she gained more weight, was shocked by the reactions of her friends and acquaintances that ranged “from the embarrassing to the offensive” (64-66). In a culture with beauty standards based on thinness, gaining weight during pregnancy becomes a conflicting issue for women who had struggled with weight before. Min Jin Lin (cited in Gore and Lavender, 2001: 26-27), remembers her feelings when she noticed her increased weight: “Having previously struggled with a weight problem ... I did not want to be fat again, *ever*. The idea of gaining forty pounds was devastating.”

The emphasis on the responsibility of a woman for her child’s well-being is another aspect of the bodily experience of childbearing and begins even before the baby is born. Most authors disliked the patronizing tone of pregnancy and parenting manuals telling them what to eat, how to act and what to avoid to make sure their babies are born healthy, but at the same time they tried to follow these instructions and felt guilty about each small mishap (Wolf, 2001: 24; Cusk, 2001: 26-30; Fox, 2003: 43ff).

The intense physical pain of childbirth and heightened awareness and sensation of the biological processes of the body is also a significant part of the motherhood experience. Most authors vividly describe the immense pain of childbirth as something for which they could not prepare.⁶ Cusk (2001: 12) describes her image of childbirth as an act of violence on her body similar to the image of Mexican piñata filled with candy, forced to give it up.

Management of pain in the hospitals, where most births take place, is according to Wolf geared toward medicalization of laboring women, making them passive and unable to actively deal with the childbirth process. Faulkner Fox puts the issue of pain and control into direct opposition. Just like Wolf, she saw the hospital and modern medicine as masculine institutions taking away women’s control over their own bodies. In order to maintain this control, she delivered both of her children at home, with the help of midwives, but without any pain relief: “I’m no masochist, but I eventually figured ... that people barking orders at me, or worse yet, just doing things to me ... would be worse for me than any physical pain” (2003: 64).

The before-mentioned safety of an unborn baby is also translated into numerous medical interventions during labor and delivery. As Wolf, Cusk, and Fox point out, these interventions aim to protect the baby, but are often unnecessary and disrupt the autonomy and confidence of the birthing mother, making her further dependent on the help of experts.

Clearly, for these writers, the bodily experience creates one of the main gender divides between men and women and explains the naturalness of their own motherhood. Reaffirmation of the biological differences through social practices and shared understanding of them as natural contribute to the dichotomous categorization of gender and gender essentialism. Social control over women’s bodies during pregnancy and childbirth is thus conducive to social structures of power in gender relationships.

The “natural mother” myth

The biological connection between a mother and her baby presupposes the ability of a mother to care for the baby without too much effort or learning. Most mothers writing these books though soon discover that mothering skills do not come naturally and it takes time and experience to become a mother. The socially constructed myth of the “natural mother” prevalent in American society (Cheever, 2001: 21) makes it more difficult for women to deal with their own failures and mistakes in caring for the baby. For example, breastfeeding, culturally perceived as a natural way to feed and bond with the baby, becomes a stumbling block for many new mothers.⁷ Even mothers without breastfeeding problems, who enjoyed the closeness with the baby, often feel conflicted about it. The cultural image of the bond between a nursing mother and her child and mother’s fixed attention on the baby become oppressive for some during hours of nursing on demand. Wolf and Cusk both describe the sense of loss of control over their bodies, this time during nursing:

It was not longer “my breast,” since it had become her possession, so I thought of it as “the breast”... Really it was ‘her breast.’ (Wolf, 2001: 267)

The story of my need is over.... Instead I have become a responsive unit, a transmitter. I imagine my solidity transferring itself to her, leaving me unbodied. (Cusk, 2001: 98)

Mothers who wrote these books do feel the physical connection with their babies and some describe a feeling of closeness and unity that transcended the physical level (Cheever, 2001: 20), but they also feel that babies’ needs replaced their own. They are quite open about feeling conflicted toward their children but they are mostly unhappy with the social position they find themselves as new mothers – isolated, exhausted and left alone with the baby for most of the day. They realize that mothering is not completely natural and are upset about being left with it alone and unprepared. Their ambivalent feelings towards motherhood are according to these writers inadmissible to others, even their partners, because of the culturally engrained image of a mother rejoicing over her baby (Wolf, 2001: 211-223). The socially constructed myth of the “natural mother” thus makes mothering even more difficult.

Gender divisions in childcare and transformation of gender relationships

Related to the idea of the naturalness of motherhood is the perception of the mother as the only person able to properly care for the baby. While most authors challenge parts of the “natural mother” myth, most of them are also the primary caretakers of their children, although the involvement of fathers in childcare varies. With few exceptions, fathers are more or less absent, appearing

at the time of birth and then playing a supportive role in the background. While Cusk (2001) purposefully omits her partner's role to focus on maternal experiences, the absence of fathers from the daily parenting tasks in other books remains mostly unexplained. Even if husbands are present, mothers usually adjust their lives to parenthood to a larger extent than their partners. This also contributes to the categorical differentiation between men and women presented in these books.

Many writers challenge these gender divisions in childcare and they do not easily accept the changes in their statuses to a mother, often accompanied by being a housewife. As professional women, who matured and had children at a time of increasing gender equality, the persistence of traditional gender practices in their family lives makes them unsatisfied and unhappy. Cusk was aware of the increasing status difference and gender inequality between her and her husband when she stayed home with their daughter, while her husband worked outside the house:

... after a child is born the lives of its mother and father diverge, ... before they were living in some state of equality, now they exist in a sort of feudal relationship to each other. A day spent at home caring for a child could not be more different from a day spent working in the office.... They are days spent on opposite sides of the world. (2001: 5)

The common and often unquestioned attitude of both mothers and fathers that it would be the mother who would take care of the baby changes the dynamics of the relationship between the parents. Even if both partners previously expressed their beliefs in gender equality and fairness, "with the arrival of the baby ... they [men] were slipping back into the cultural roles with which they had grown up." (Wolf, 2001: 235). Fox, whose husband was involved in the childcare more than other fathers (2003: 153), but not to the point of equality she desired, describes her feelings of injustice, inequality and lack of power. Consequently she felt resentful towards her life as well as toward her husband but also guilty for being selfish and wanting her work to be as recognized as fully as her husband's in their family circle. Once they reached a point of sharing the housework and childcare more equally, Fox was aware they would always have to work hard to maintain this delicate balance (134-164).

Gender practices, beliefs and ideologies have in the past thirty years become partially transformed towards increasing gender equality. However, on the familial level and in actual decisions made after the birth of the children, they switch back to the traditional, less egalitarian models. This becomes frustrating for most of these feminist writers because of their expectations of egalitarian marriage from the pre-baby time. Most of them also had careers and jobs which they put on hold to take care of their children. The lack of equality puts a definite strain on their marriages and highlights the gender differences

between men and women.

To deal with the discontent with the new family arrangements and the unequal division of labor, these women usually try to recover some parts of their pre-baby lives and establish a more equal division of household labor and childcare, looking for a compromise they perceive as fair (Wolf, 2001: 233-253; see also Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994; Hochschild, 1989). Through negotiations and challenges to existing gender inequalities, these new practices result in another transformation of gender relations.

Conclusion

The motherhood narratives analyzed in this article raise many issues facing contemporary mothers through first-person views of their experiences. Although it remains for future researchers to discover if the patterns discussed here are generalizable, these books provide a valuable source for the discursive analysis of motherhood and gender in contemporary American society. These memoirs present motherhood as a transformative experience for women and constitutive to existing gender structures.

I focus this analysis on gender conceptualization and find that gender is largely conceptualized in categorical and dichotomous terms. Rather than looking at the similarities between mothers and fathers and their parenting experiences, most authors stress gender differences resulting from biological processes and emphasizing the prominent experiences of the body for maternal experience. However, the biological differences are reaffirmed through social practices. While many social theorists have depicted social constructionism and biological essentialism in oppositional terms, I find that biological and social emphases in these motherhood narratives together contribute to gender essentialism and dichotomous categorization of gender (see also Fuss, 1989).

The authors of the texts feel conflicted about their positions as mothers mostly because of the persistence of the “natural mother” myth and traditional gender practices, which they challenge in their writings. Many authors notice the different approaches to childcare of themselves and their husbands, which constitute another aspect of gender differentiation. They become frustrated with the persistence of traditional gender practices in their family lives, leading to an increase of gender inequality in their relationships. They deal with this by recovering some parts of their pre-baby life and establishing a more equal division of labor and childcare, transforming the gender practices once again.

My analysis of the motherhood memoirs thus demonstrates that even today motherhood and parenthood are strongly gendered institutions. Motherhood changes the social position of women in both private and public spheres and remains central to gender inequality. With the lack of macro-structural support mechanisms for mothers and families with children, gender equality still remains at the stage of a stalled revolution (Hochschild, 1989). For these writers, who became mothers years after the results of the feminist movement were institutionalized and often taken for granted, this is largely unexpected.

¹The final selection for this study includes nine books. They are not a representative or random sample nor are they an exhaustive list of all books published on motherhood in the time period 2000 – 2004. Rather they represent all the books I found using the snowball method on the websites of the on-line bookstores Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com, which were published during this time and were written as personal accounts, memories or reflections on motherhood, thus excluding advice books, academic analyses and books of fiction or poetry. They vary in the scope and focus (from pregnancy and childbirth to raising teenagers), format (edited volume of short essays, memoirs) as well as by their authors (feminist activists, novelists, journalists, “regular” women).

²It is important to keep in mind that these are published accounts of mostly white middle-class or upper middle-class women professionals; working class mothers would probably perceive their position differently. The writers’ ability to hire help, pay for child-care, and go out to take jobs they enjoy might not be options realistic for women of different socioeconomic background.

³Dichotomization of gender differences, grounding them in the biological basis, talking about “women and men as such” and reducing differences among women and among men to a common essence are the most frequent critiques aimed at essentialism in feminist theories. Approaches criticized as essentializing also tend to generalize the experiences of one group of women for all of them and naturalize the social origins of gender inequalities. Essentialism in this form is quite prevalent in the motherhood memoirs and although most authors stress that they rely on their own experience or the experiences of few other middle or upper-middle class mothers, they do not escape generalizations about men, women, fathers and mothers.

⁴Adoption as a way of becoming a mother is mentioned only in one story in Gore and Lavender’s book (2001).

⁵During the first trimester, Slater stops taking her anti-depressants and experiences mood swings (2002: 17). But when her depression returns and she considers an abortion, her doctor connects her ambivalence about having a baby with her high sensitivity to progesterone, the hormone predominant during the first trimester. Hesitant and worried about the risks for the unborn child, which would follow her during the rest of the pregnancy, Slater gets on the anti-depressants again (25-34).

⁶In contrast, Slater and Wolf both notice that neither the best-selling pregnancy manual *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* (Eisenberg et al., 1996) nor childbirth classes prepare women for the level of pain they will experience, and pain is often referred to as “discomfort” or “pressure” (Wolf, 2001: 91-92).

⁷For example, Cheever thought that nursing would be an easy and natural process but when her daughter repeatedly failed to latch, she says: “I felt like a complete failure. I had no idea how to take care of my baby – the one being in the world I desperately wanted to care for. I couldn’t even feed her correctly” (2001: 22). She switched to formula and although later she realized that

breastfeeding does not work for all mothers, she still felt she failed her daughter. Wolf also noticed that women around her “saw nursing as a metaphor for being a good mother” (2001: 268).

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