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Changing images of mother/mothering

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This paper examines how representations of the mother and mothering practices have altered between a generation of mothers and daughters. It also discusses the varied configurations of mother/mothering which occur at different times in women’s lives, in other racial and ethnic situations, and which have been opened up by medical science through reproductive technology. Taking a broad definition of mothering, the paper points to the hierarchical divisions that have been created between women who pay, and are being paid, for the care and education of children in their early years. It argues that the difficult and complex task for early childhood education and care is to keep pace and to grapple with the ever-changing circumstances of those who nurture and care for the young.

Introduction

‘Mothering’, ‘mother’, and ‘woman’ are often understood and defined as historical monolithic structures in which mother/mothering are positioned as biological determinants of womanhood rather than socio-historical cultural constructions (Glenn, 1994). This paper aims to examine the concepts of mother/mothering and the way in which representations of mother/mothering change across socio-historical, economic, and racial locations. The mother, it is argued, refers to an imagined body, while mothering refers to the representation of a ‘culturally variable relationship in which one individual nurtures and cares for another’ (Glenn, 1994, p.3). That is, mothering is constructed as an experience, a lived reality, while the mother is imagined as a ‘natural’ feminine corporeal being.

This analysis of mother/mothering is based on the experiences and memoirs of Catholic women including my own mother, women I went to school with, and their mothers. The paper begins with my mother’s and her contemporaries’ tales of mothering in the 1960s and then moves into a discussion of some of the various positions available for women and mother/mothering in the 1990s. I do not aim to speak for all women and their experiences but to illustrate how representations of mother/mothering are variable.

In the end, I contend that practices and knowledges of mother/mothering are of central concern to early childhood education. As the concept of mother/mothering has changed between the 1960s and 1990s, it has also become enmeshed with commercialised practices of early childhood education and care. Shifting representations of mother/mothering raise a number of complex issues and concerns for early childhood education which centre on structures of economics, race, ethnicity, and hierarchical divisions between women.

In this paper, I acknowledge that there have also been changes in the representation of parent/parenting and father/fathering in the period between the 1960s and 1990s. Historical and cultural variations in these constructions are also pivotal to an analysis of the changing images of mother/mothering. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to create textual as well as material spaces to consider, and highlight, the feminine side of the story. There are many components of the story to be told, and this paper offers a partial explanation of the complex, multifarious tale of mother/mothering.

My mother’s tale of mothering

After their marriage my parents built a small, two-bedroom, red brick veneer home on an old market garden estate in Brighton, Melbourne. There they thought they would be happy to rear a large Catholic family. That was how the story was for
Catholic couples in the 1950s. My mother planted a window-box at the front of the house with pansies and as the flowers bloomed in the early spring of 1951, 11 months into her marriage, she gave birth to her eldest daughter, Bernadette. Mrs Kuranda tells a similar story in this conversation with her daughter and myself:

Mrs Kuranda—No, I was only a few months married and my eldest son was on the way.

Meghan—How many months?

Mrs Kuranda—Oh, two. Haven't you heard that story?

Meghan—I have heard that story.

Mrs Kuranda—After my first period arrived, after I was married, I burst into tears.

Anne—What happened?

Mrs Kuranda—I'd been married I suppose a month or so and I cried like anything because I wanted to be pregnant. I was 11 months married when my eldest son was born.

(Names are changed except for those within my own family. These narrative excerpts derive from a larger study on the Catholic mother-daughter relationship.)

For my mother, 14 months after the birth of her daughter a son was delivered, and 15 months after that another son arrived, and so the narrative goes on until there were seven of us—happy, healthy, lively Catholic children. My mother's full-time occupation was motherhood and it was a similar story for most of her friends. That was their way of life, as Mrs Fenwick explains to her daughter:

Mrs Fenwick—We didn't really think about whether we would have children and we didn't really think that much. Well, I suppose eventually we did get to think about how many we would have.

Caitriona—Mum, what would have happened if you hadn't been able to have children: did that ever occur to you?

Mrs Fenwick—Well, if it did, certainly not for very long. Well, I miscarried with my first pregnancy. I suppose that shook us up a bit as to whether we would be able to have children. But I became pregnant very soon after. Given the thinking at that time if we hadn't have been able to have children we probably would have adopted. There were more children available for adoption then and that was a fairly ... well, it wasn't what the average person did but it wasn't abnormal to adopt children in those times. You would remember that neighbours of ours adopted four children. Someone else I know adopted seven children. It was different then; it was expected that you would have a family and it was never considered that anybody would never want to have a family.

Marriage and motherhood was a seemingly natural, normative progression for Catholic women of my mother's generation, although there were always some women who took other paths. In those times life choices for Catholic women were limited and prescriptive. Motherhood was deemed the natural consequence post-marriage. If biologically mothering a child was not possible then adoption was the next-best option so that, as Mrs Fenwick notes, 'you would have a family'.

This period of the 1950s and 1960s is remembered in Australian history for mass migration to the suburbs, where young couples realised the Australian dream of owning a home and raising a family.

Even though motherhood was supposedly an innate destiny for women such as my mother, Mrs Kuranda, and Mrs Fenwick, there began to be a gradual increase in information which provided women with advice on 'how to mother' and rear their children. There were few kindergartens for children to attend in the newer suburbs of Melbourne (Curthoys, 1987); however, the ideology of early childhood education, such as teaching the whole child and developing their individual potential, had firmly established roots. My mother performed the role of early childhood teacher within the boundaries of her own home with the assistance of radio programs such as 'Kindergarten of the Air' and magazines such as the Australian Women's Weekly. On January 2, 1963, the Australian Women's Weekly published an article, 'When your child won't share', which provided mothers with information on how to teach their children to share their toys. So, as a preschool child, I was nurtured and taught by my mother in the family home in suburban Melbourne.
Contemporary patterns of mothering

Abortion rights, the ethics of reproductive technology and surrogacy, and welfare policies for single mothers are some of the most fervent and emotive social and political debates in Australia today. Marriage has been disrupted by de facto relationships and alternate sexual identities and configurations, and motherhood has been hijacked by medical science and technological innovations. Therefore, in vast contrast to our mothers of the 1960s, the daughters of the 1990s have a number of competing lifestyle options available to them.

There are many reproductive choices available for women in the 1990s. As a woman, I have the choice of whether or not to mother, and I can choose the context which I deem suitable for mothering. For example, I could choose to be a mother in a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship, or to be a single mother or a mother living apart from my partner, or I need not become a mother at all. Child-bearing is not a necessary imperative for me, yet if I choose not to mother it will not go unchallenged by family, friends, workplace acquaintances, and society. Popular culture and melodramatic representations of womanhood, as Ann Kaplan (1992, p.193) points out, still attach anxiety to the idea of women choosing not to mother. She suggests that such women are labelled 'woman who refuses to mother' or 'the selfish non-mother'.

Reproductive technology has called into question notions of mother/mothering. The law determines whether a woman is the child's 'real' mother or not, for example, in 'The Baby M Case'. The surrogate mother is labelled the substitute mother; that is, she is not the real 'social' mother even though she is the biological mother of the child. Women within discourses of bio-medical research continue to be constructed within the hierarchy of motherhood and therefore within binarist terms such as mother/substitute mother, biological/adoptive mother, motherhood/selfhood, mother/non-mother, fertile/infertile. It appears then that discourses of reductionist science construct 'woman' via identities of motherhood in dualist terms, which provide women with the illusion of an either/or choice. Reproductive technology is enmeshed in a range of competing and conflicting concerns. For instance, it gives the masculinist scientific mind control over the female body once more (Rothman, 1994), yet it does offer the potential to fulfil the very real desires of women who want to mother.

There is also the powerful and influential image portrayed by the catch-phrase coined in the 1980s, the 'biological clock'. Lim (1996, p.291) states that this term ‘... is a powerful image, inherently persuasive because it evokes a sense of the body as a gigantic timer in which an allotted chronology is inscribed, ticking down to atrophy, to barrenness, to death.' However, this image has lost its potency through recent innovations in reproductive technology. It is now possible to become a biological mother at a later, post natural child birth stage in a woman's lifecycle. In other words, as a woman, I am told by western medical science that my body's reproductive use-by date can be extended.

In addition, there are other racial and ethnic meanings of mother/mothering. African-American theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) offers a more community-oriented example of mothering. She argues that an essential element of the African-American family is that biological mothers share the role of mothering with other women in the community. Aboriginal writer Lilla Watson (1989, p.112) describes this relationship of 'othermothering' and 'community-mothering' in an Aboriginal context:

... children for Aboriginal people don't belong just to the biological parents. They belong to our kinship group and further, they belong to our community. We all have a responsibility for children in our community. I don't have any children. I have never borne any children, but at the same time I am responsible for a large number of children.

Furthermore, patterns of mother/mothering change during women's lifespans. Different forms and discourses of mothering, especially the mothering of a biological child, are still often perceived as a woman's natural role in life. However, other forms of mothering, different from the mothering of a biologically-produced healthy child, are often forgotten or taken for granted, as they remain.
hidden within the private world of the home or community. It is, at times, economically and socially convenient for government (particularly social service) discourses to name a range of forms of mothering as intrinsically fulfilling and natural for women, so that women's roles as unpaid or lowly paid social-welfare mothers is perpetuated. Other patterns of mothering which have the potential to fall into this category include foster mother, child-care mother, nurse mother, welfare mother, grandmother, the daughter-mother who cares for her elderly mother, and the mother of a child with a disability.

Child care and mother/mothering

So, representations of mother/mothering are complex and varied, and carry different meanings according to historical, racial, ethnic, and particular familial and community circumstances. Nevertheless, even though patterns of mothering shift during a woman's life-span, Anglo-Celtic culture has largely lost the concept of practices of 'communities'—holding material goods, property, and the responsibilities of caring in common. For example, the social kinships of collective child care and responsibility have been eroded and reconstituted in economic exchanges of paid child care. In such arrangements, women become economically divided hierarchically and bound to identities of mothering that tie them to their own children or the paid care of other women's children. Catriona Fenwick explains that to return to the workforce she, like many women, needed to consider and decide on surrogate care for her children:

Catriona—"I was desperate to get back to work after I had Louise ... I think I said to my husband one night, 'Oh Christ, I've got to get out of here. I can't cop this any more.' Then the next week I got this part-time job and snapped it up. I was very pleased that I did. I loved going back to work, I loved working part-time. It was difficult to organise the family and we had to clarify lots of issues about whose responsibility was what. I didn't feel too many qualms about leaving the children in child care because I researched it very carefully, different places. The concept of child care ... I thought part-time was fine. I was happy to leave the children with somebody apart from me a couple of days a week.

Ann Kaplan (1992) notes that there are several discourses on child care. In the 1980s, with the mass migration of women into the work force, concerns over the impact of child care on the young child's psyche resulted in a surge of psychological studies. The outcomes of these studies were varied and contradictory. Some research suggested the child would develop less secure attachments in its first 12 months of life, while other studies contested this loss of attachment (Belsky & Nezworski, 1988). In contrast, some feminist theorists have turned their attention to the socioeconomic imbalance between those who are the caregivers and those who leave their children in child care. The afflications, pay and conditions of work for women who are caregivers and community mothers have largely been ignored (Kaplan, 1992; Lyons, 1998; Nelson, 1994). As Alison Kelly, a child care teacher, (1998, p.5), writes:

... there are aspects to our job which are disheartening. Our award states that we work a 38-hour week, however the reality is more like 45 hours on the job ... our weekly wage is considerably less than teachers in other settings and we do not have the luxury of term breaks to rejuvenate and replenish our emotional resources.

Rosemary Pringle (1994, p.214) suggests that two trends are co-emerging in relation to child care. Work in the private domain, including care of children, is apportioned between men and women and hence there is an array of working arrangements. This results in a blurring of the gendered boundaries between public and private labour. On the other hand, affluent women are taking on masculine constructs of work and arrange for nannies and housekeepers, that is community mothers, to care for their children. This trend, Pringle (1994) suggests, supports class divisions around newly emergent gendered work patterns.

The practices, customs and knowledges of mother/mothering continue to be redefined, but, along with these revised versions, competing discourses confuse and confuse the positioning of women within oppressive hierarchical structures of socioeconomics. As discourses of child care show, the social construction of what it is to be a working mother is historically and culturally variable and
shifts in terms of material and cultural conditions and constraints. It is difficult, if not impossible, to be a white middle class working mother in the 1990s and not be bound by the paradox of the commercialisation of communal mothering.

**Conclusion**

Across two generations of women, of mothers and daughters, mother/mothering has taken on different meanings and connotations. It is still seen as a labour of love, yet it is no longer possible to deny that contradictory and unequal socioeconomic relationships exist among, and between, those who nurture and care for others. Maybe it is easy to romanticise and conclude that representations of white middle class mother/mothering were less complex in the 1960s, although I am sure that within the suburban dream there were unspoken, and less visible, variations of mother/mothering. In the 1990s, particular kinds of mother/mothering can be contested and debated. Indeed, it cannot be disputed that there is a plethora of fresh and diverse understandings and versions of mother/mothering. Perhaps the challenge for early childhood educators in the 21st century involves how to negotiate the possible conflicting views between, for example, working mothers and community mothers who care for their children; and how to encounter the ever-changing anxieties, desires, needs, material conditions, and inequities attached to representations of mother/mothering.

**References**


