

Mothering in the Ivy-Tower: Interviews with Academic Mothers

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From the outside a college faculty position looks like an ideal work environment for women who are mothers: a flexible schedule, autonomy, interaction with other adults, rewards for writing and researching topics of interest. Academic women, however, often perceive traditional faculty careers and research agendas to be incompatible with having and raising children (Harper, Baldwin, Gansneder and Chronister, 2001). The purpose of this study is to explore how academic women construct the meaning of motherhood. Is the meaning of motherhood constructed by academic mothers (AM) incompatible with academe? Do AM construct motherhood differently than other employed mothers?

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD

Construction of identity is an interactive process (Berger & Luckman, 1966). A number of scholars contend that the social construction of motherhood is revealed through discourse (c.f., Kaplan,

1992; Ranson, 1999; Uttal, 1996). Through the analysis of women's narratives, Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001) contend that the meanings of motherhood are revealed through three discursive positions: accessibility, happiness and separate spheres.

The first discursive position identified in Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson's (2001) sample of employed mothers in Sweden is that the psychological development and general well being of the child is dependent upon the accessibility of the mother. This position creates expectations that mothers should be ever-present and available to their children (c.f., Ranson, 1999).

The second position asserts that the happiness of the mother promotes the happiness of the child (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001). This position allows mothers an identity outside of motherhood to pursue interests and vocations. On the other hand, it suggests that to be "only a mother" is not sufficient for the women or her children (c.f., Peters, 1997). Meeting individual needs creates a dialectical tension

with the first discursive position to be ever-present and accessible to children.

The third position asserts separate spheres for employment and motherhood (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001). The worker role is separate and independent of the mother role. Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson find that employed women in Sweden attempt to balance all three of these discursive positions within a cultural framework of gender equality. Good mothers, at least in Sweden, are rewarded for being accessible yet finding fulfillment beyond their children.

Johnston and Swanson (2003) explored Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson's (2001) three discursive mothering positions in the United States. Johnston and Swanson found that women construct these discursive positions differently based on work status.

Whereas at-home mothers defined maternal accessibility in physical terms (e.g., "being there"), full-time employed mothers defined maternal accessibility in emotional and psychological terms. For full-time employed mothers, presence and being there was not as important as the nature of the interaction when present. Whereas the at-home mother discursively defined her accessibility as always present, protective, and enveloping, the full-time employed mother defined her accessibility with boundaries – sometimes present, sometimes protective, and separating to encourage individuality. Full-time employed mothers justify the boundaries as a means to develop children's self-esteem, emotional expression, and independence.

Johnston and Swanson found that full-time employed mothers construct the happy mother-happy child discursive position by contending that mothers should have an identity outside motherhood. Yet, full-time employed mothers are not as happy as other part-time employed mothers, not because of job stress, but because they feel

they do not have enough time with their children. In contrast, at-home mothers construct an inverse position; they don't talk about how a happy mother makes a happy child, but rather that a happy child is the *raison d'être* of a good mother.

Johnston and Swanson found that at-home mothers to exclude employed mothers from the construction of "good mother" construct the third discursive position – separation of work and family spheres –. In defining "good mothering" in terms of omnipresent accessibility, at-home mothers have to select the family sphere and abandon the employment sphere. Full-time employed mothers find it difficult to experience spillover between work and family spheres. They negotiate this position by swooping their priorities, energy, and attention toward one sphere and then the other. As such, motherhood and employment remain in tension.

ACADEMIC MOTHERS

Research on mothers who are also academics is limited to career performance and satisfaction. Considerable research has addressed women's and mother's academic research performance (Allen, 1998; Cole and Zuckerman, 19XX; Bellas and Toutkoushian, 1999; Chamberlain, 1988; Davis and Astin, 1987; Kyvik, 1990; Long, 1990). These studies indicate that marriage and family do not account for sex differences in academic publishing (Cole and Zuckerman; Bellas and Toutkoushian, 1999; Chamberlain, 1988; Davis and Astin, 1987). Blackburn and Lawrence (XXXX) further suggest that gender differences in publication productivity disappear when institution, rank and academic are controlled. However, there is some evidence that women perceive that family is a hindrance to academic success

(Chamberlain, 1988; Harper et al., 2001; Tack and Patitu, 1992); whereas men see limited resources as the primary inhibitors to productive research and writing, women identify limitations that are the results of their participation in time-consuming activities, such as family, teaching and committee work (Chamberlain, 1998; Harper et al., 2001; Tack and Patitu, 1992) Kyvik (1990) found that both men and women with young children (under the age of 10) reported problems balancing family responsibilities, yet the presence of young children is negatively related to women's research productivity (Fox and Faver, 1985) but not men's.

Research on academic women's job satisfaction suggest that women are less satisfied than men. Morris (1992) and Harper et al. (2001) found dissatisfaction and frustration among women at all academic levels (Morris, 1992). Much of this dissatisfaction may come from the extra expectations put on academic women. Women faculty, married or single, are expected to manage the institutional housekeeping – i.e., committee work, student recruitment, departmental social events (Cummins, 2002). Morris (1992) and Harper et al. (2001) found that full-time non-tenured faculty with doctorates, most of who are women, are the least satisfied of all.

Although a number of researchers note family as one factor contributing to women's real and/or perceived difficulty advancing in academe, we have little understanding of how academic mothers construct motherhood and how these constructions may impact their professor roles. The purpose of this study is to explore the accessible mother, the happy mother, and the separate sphere discursive positions identified by Elvin-Nowak and Thompsson (2001) and Johnston and Swanson (2003) in the discourse of mothers in academe. Are these three discursive

positions salient for academic mothers? Do academic mothers construct motherhood differently than other full-time employed mothers?

Methods

This study is part of a larger research project on the social construction of motherhood involving interviews with 95 married mothers of pre-school age children (Johnston and Swanson, 2003). The sample was stratified by work statuses to include women that were employed full-time ($n=30$, 32%), employed part-time ($n=26$, 27%), and were staying home with their children ($n=39$, 41%). The network sampling technique was used. The mothers range in age from 22 to 51. Seventy percent of the women have more than one child (sample average = 2.16 children), and the ages of their children range from 8 weeks to 23 years. The majority of the women comprising the sample are married and middle class.

A subsample ($n=17$) of these interviews are women academics (65% Ph.D.s; 35% M.A./M.FA.) from two institutions in the United States: a small, liberal-arts college and a Midwestern state university. All of the women were married at the time of the interview. For this study, the discursive themes revealed in the narratives of academic mothers will be compared to the narrative analysis of full-time employed, part-time employed and at-home mothers reported in Johnston and Swanson (2003).

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. The recorded interviews averaged two hours in length and were usually conducted in the woman's home. Questions addressed issues of work decision, identity construction, social support and responses to cultural role discourses.

The narrative data was first coded thematically (Glaser and Strauss, 1967;

Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Themes were analyzed by work status using NUDIST qualitative data analysis software and interpreted for frequency, repetition, and dominance of discursive interpretations (Burr, 1995; Wetherall and Potter, 1988). The analysis of discursive positions involved exploring the images and metaphors employed in women's narratives, what is said, what is not said, and what discursive dichotomies are used to construct meanings of motherhood (Feldman, 1995; Scot, 1988; and Wall, 2001). Due to the large qualitative sample (N=95) and the focus of the study on the comparison of mothers by work status, the validity of the themes identified in the discourse was further assessed by analyzing the frequency of the theme by mothers' work status and by academic/non-academic occupational status.

Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson's three discursive positions were prevalent in the qualitative thematic analysis of the data and were therefore employed as an interpretive framework for analyzing the results.

Accessibility is associated with the belief that the psychological development and general well being of the child is dependent upon the accessibility of the mother. Accessibility discourses emerged as a dominant theme in mothers' definition of a "good mother," how they could be a better mother, and reports of the greatest stressor of being a mother. The happy mother-happy child position is associated with the belief that the happiness of the child is dependent on the happiness of the mother. Mother's happiness may be dependent on an identity outside of motherhood. The construction of maternal happiness was revealed in women's reflections on their decision to continue to work after the birth of their children, how easy or difficult the decision was for them, and the benefits and stresses of their decision on their happiness

and the happiness of their children. Mother's construction of mother- and work-identity was revealed in discussions of the separation or integration of work and family, how she saw the two spheres influencing each other and how often the two overlapped.

RESULTS

ACCESSIBILITY AS A DISCURSIVE POSITION

Full-Time Employed Academic Mothers

Like other full-time employed mothers, faculty mothers talk less about physical accessibility and more about psychological development (e.g. development of individuality, development of self-esteem, independence, self efficacy, emotional expression) in defining a "good mother." Non-academic employed mothers seem satisfied with intermittent accessibility: "I'm there if there's a problem." In contrast, academic mothers describe a more constant attentiveness, responsiveness and involvement with the child; academic mothers place more emphasis on emotional accessibility.

"I'm a good mother that tries to be really on top of all these things that are happening with my child. I try to be a guiding force," Tracy, Psychology professor and mother of two.

When asked if they were missing out on accessibility, full-time faculty moms' responses are most consistent with the responses of at-home mothers. Whereas non-academic employed mothers report wanting more time with their children, full-time employed faculty mothers, like at-home mothers, are much more specific in lamenting the possibility of missing out on developmental accomplishments. Molly, Psychology professor and mother of one says, *"I was missing out on the day-to-day*

changes, raising him the way I would raise him.”

When asked what is the greatest stress of being a mother, full-time faculty moms' responses are again most consistent with at-home mothers' responses. The greatest stress is the responsibility of raising a child.

“You try to do your best at everything you do to raise your kids, but there is no assurance against something you don't know. There are many different ways of doing it and your way may work for you, but it may not be the best way. Knowing that, I think, is very stressful,” Tracy, Psychology professor and mother of two.

The secondary stress identified with academics is consistent with the primary stress of non-academic employed mothers: finding enough time and work-family balance. This intense sense of responsibility and lack of time creates stress.

“I get very defensive sometimes about the fact that I'm the one that feels like I'm responsible for everything. Like getting her from point A to point B, or making arrangements for her to go to the doctor, or picking the daycare. I sometimes feel that with working full-time and then having the responsibilities of [my daughter] and the household is more than what I'm capable of handling,” Anne, Communication professor and mother of one.

Part-Time Employed Academic Mothers

Part-time academic mothers describe good mothering as doing activities with their children and engaging in intentional interactions. For part-time academics, accessibility is quantifiable; it is physical accessibility (e.g., taking child to ballet, coaching soccer, painting), and communication accessibility reflected in regular and deliberate conversations.

“[As a family] we try to balance all of our commitments. [Our daughter] is involved in so many things and [my husband] and I have our leisure activities that we do and then there's church...[She] is in soccer and she's starting basketball and she's in her school play and she has Kid's club through church on Wednesday and choir practice at church on Sunday evening and chemistry club. Chemistry club is a new one. [She] is just one of my three children and she's already making bombs,” Kelly, Mathematics professor and mother of three.

Like their non-academic cohort, part-time academic moms said that they did not miss out on accessibility. *“Schedules, schedules, schedules. [It is stressful] just trying to make sure that we're being as fair as possible to everybody and everyone's schedule,”* reports Carla, English professor and mother of four. Yet later in the interview she confesses *“I'm really happy with the balance that I have now.”*

HAPPY MOTHER-HAPPY CHILD DISCURSIVE POSITION

Full-Time Academic Mothers

Faculty moms were less happy than other full-time employed mothers. One explanation for this appears to be the tension between high job expectations and intense mothering. Even more than other full-time employed mothers, faculty mothers describe their high career goals, the threat to their self identity that occur with motherhood, and how they resolve this threat by compiling mothering expectations on top of already high work expectations. Faculty mothers believe their children benefit when women are good role models; they talk less than other mothers about being a better mom because they have time away from their children. This is consistent with how they

define accessibility, and parallels at-home mothers responses.

“There are some evenings when I come home and feel like I’m in a time crunch. She (my daughter) doesn’t have my full attention. I’m too tired to give her my best. I sometimes feel that there’s a lot of pressure being that I work, there are still things that have to get done at the end of the day... [Y]ou still have to come up with time for her so that she doesn’t feel like she’s being cheated. Sometimes I don’t feel like I’m 100% successful at doing that. In fact, hardly ever do I feel like I’m 100% successful at doing that,” Anne, Communication professor and mother of one.

Full time faculty mothers are less conflicted than other full-time working mothers about their work decision. Despite the fact that academic mothers report greater job stress than non-academic employed mothers, faculty mothers are confident in their decision to work. Academic mothers believe that a mother needs to work to be a good mother. The fact that faculty mothers are less conflicted than other full-time working mothers about their work decision - - even when they are more stressed and less happy -- suggests they believe that to be only a mother is not good for either the mother or the child.

Part-Time Academic Mothers

Like other part-time employed mothers, part-time academic mothers report being happy or very happy with her decision to work part-time. On Beck’s Depression Inventory (1967), mothers who were employed part-time were significantly happier than either at-home mothers or full-time employed mothers, $F(2, 81) = 3.195, p = .04$.

Common answers were *“Oh, I like it this way. I don’t think I would like it any other way,”* (Kelly) or *“I would say very happy, very satisfied. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t*

do it,” (Carla). Although concerns regarding promotion and career come up in our interviews, it is obvious that part-time faculty mothers deliberately arrange for part-time work as a way to balance work and family. Happy mothers make happy kids.

“I can do something that I enjoy and then walk back and enjoy my kids too...If I were only at home, I wouldn’t enjoy my kids as much as I do now [working part-time]. I think I’d be sitting there thinking ‘so it’s your fault that I’m picking up this sweat suit one more time’...right now, financially, I get enormous amounts of satisfaction from my job,” Carla, mother of four.

MAINTAINING SEPARATE SPHERES DISCURSIVE POSITIONS

The mothers were asked about the separation of work and family, how they saw the two spheres informing each other and how often the two overlapped.

Full-time Academic Mothers

Some full-time employed mothers made a clear distinction between work and home. For them, work was work and home was home. For full-time faculty women it is difficult to separate the worker role from the mother role. Children are often in the office while mothers work, mothers often work at home, and the flexibility of the academic schedule allows moms on occasion to transport children, attend school functions during the workday or stay home with a sick child. *“Occasionally I will have to drag my son to school with me [when] he’s sick and I have to get that one lecture done or turn off an instrument or something,”* Lauri, Chemistry professor and mother of three.

Faculty mothers, more than other full-time employed mothers, want to be recognized for the ways their mother role informs their professional role and the ways

their professional roles makes them better mothers. The mother and professional roles are integrated and inform each other. Celeste, Professor and Attorney and mother of one, says, *"I like the opportunities [my job] offers to my child. He does a lot of things socially that a kid would not be able to do in other settings. He'll always be around people who are interested in education and like to travel abroad."* Likewise the mother role affects the worker role.

"I've become less distractible and more focused...I was spending seven days a week, 10-12 hours a day in my office ... and not really accomplishing as much as I do now," Lisa, Biology professor and mother of two.

The bottom line is that faculty mothers want their institutions to recognize them as mothers.

Part-time Academic Mothers

Part-time academic mothers acknowledge that there are expectations in the workplace to maintain separate spheres in order to maintain professional credibility in the academy.

"In general I find that if you want people to recognize you on the level of 'oh, I like the outfit you wore today' then you can talk about your kids. If you want people to recognize you on 'oh I like how you taught that class' or 'I like that piece of research you were talking about' then it's better not to talk about your kids at all," Carla, English professor and mother of four.

Part-time employed academic mothers separate work and home in ways that full-time academic mothers cannot.

"I'm glad I have that flexibility that I don't have such a big huge deadline hanging over my head that I can't stop to enjoy my kids and just go at a slower pace that I think is a little bit more moderate and healthy," Jennifer, English professor and mother of two.

CONCLUSION

Faculty moms embrace an intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996). Understanding academic mothers' intensive mothering expectations (Hays, 1996) helps us understand why professor and mother roles are perceived to be incompatible by many academic women (Harper, et al., 2001). Hays describes intensive mothering as the "copious amounts of time, energy and material resources [expended on] the child ... [in this] child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive" (1996, pg. 129) approach to contemporary mothering.

It is necessary to first understand how academics construct mothering in order to construct professorial roles that support women faculty who may also choose to parent. Every employed mother we interviewed – whether an academic or employed in some other occupation - was highly invested in her children and her mother identity. Yet, non-academic employed mothers attempt some separation of home and employment spheres; they redefine accessibility needs and expectations around employment to relieve intensive mothering expectations and increase compatibility between the demands of employment and home. Keller (1994), for example, describes mothers' reliance on economic justifications for working: I am a better mother because I provide financially for my child. Uttal (1994) finds that mothers construct daycare in ways that support their constructions of themselves as good mothers.

Modified 'good mother' expectations likely contribute to non-academic employed mothers reporting less stress and greater happiness than academic mothers. Academic moms construct mothering expectations that are more consistent with full-time at-home mothering, while concurrently fulfilling full-time professional

obligations. In this study, non-academic full-time employed mothers, like academic mothers, defined good mothering in terms of psychological development. Psychological development of the child is a long-term process and the benefits of outside caretakers and experiences in this process can be justified. Faculty mothers, however, described additional expectations of emotional accessibility. These expectations increase the tension between professional success and motherhood; these expectations are immediate, not long-term, and are constructed as the responsibility of a 'good mother' not another caretaker. In order to model self care, fulfilling work, and healthy relationships for our children, academic mothers may need to reconstruct both mothering and the academy.

While Hays (1996) acknowledges the benefits of intensive mothering in terms of valuing secure family relationships, involvement with children, self-esteem development, nurturance and affection, and an emphasis on emotional over instrumental support for the child, she concluded that there are many negative outcomes of this mothering ideal. Does intensive mothering model self-sacrifice of women, confuse dependency with intimacy, and teach love at the cost of respect? Can it lead children to develop a sense of entitlement, a lack of initiative, and a disregard for mutuality in the give and exchange of relationships?

Idealistic intensive mothering expectations might well be tempered by Winnicott's (1987) 'good enough mothering.' According to Winnicott (1987) meeting a child's every need may not be best for the emotional and psychological development of the child. 'Good enough mothering' frees mothers from the responsibility of meeting every need, yet still empowers mothers to be responsive, devoted, empathic and loving mothers. Thurer (1994) concludes that "Perhaps she needn't be all-empathic, after

all. Perhaps she can be personally ambitious without damaging her child. Perhaps she does not have unlimited power in the shaping of her offspring. Good mothering...is a cultural invention," (p.300).

In addition to reconstructing 'good mothering' expectations, changes in the academy are needed to promote 'good parenting.' An academic career has no boundaries and is never done (Bailyn, 1993; Ostrow, 2001); there are always papers to grade, lessons to write, research journals to read, books to write, and lectures to attend. Moreover, the traditional academic linear career progression is imposed on a non-linear process called life. Parents' scholarship may be characterized by spurts of productivity and creativity that wax and wane with demands of parenting. Whereas evaluation of scholarship has traditionally focused on early, continual and increasing expectations of productivity, parents may need to be evaluated on non-linear and long-term contributions over the lifetime of a career. Moreover, while traditional scholarship has been characterized as an individual competitive endeavor, parents may benefit from cooperative research endeavors and research centers (Dickens and Sagaria, 1997).

Finally, this study suggests that academic mothers want their mother identities to be valued by the academy. This means that motherhood is integrated in the curriculum as an important area of scholarship (c.f. the mission of the Association for Research on Mothering). Maternal pedagogy (Green, 2002), as an extension of feminist pedagogy, must be valued by the academy. This means that mother-identity is recognized by the academy as an asset that can bring new perspectives and motivations to the academy. Harwood (2001), for example, writes about women whose mother-identity inspired them to become peace activists. At

the very minimum, academics should not have to hide their mother-identity: "I like to think of my personal life as additional proof that I can juggle many tasks and a full slate of responsibilities – traits that are welcome and necessary for anyone who hopes to earn tenure" (Johnston, 2001).

Stressed and unhappy mother scholars cannot reach their full potential as scholars or mothers. We like to think we can do it all, but at what cost? Our health? Our children? Our identity as serious scholars? One could argue that academic mothers need to be more like non-academic employed mothers by changing their accessibility expectations and striving to separate the spheres of work and motherhood. Or, one could argue that the academy has an opportunity to value parenting and create a culture in which the responsibility of raising children is shared equally by mothers and fathers. Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001) find that despite fathers' support for gender equity, the reality is that mothers are the ones who adapt their professional life to meet children's needs. Changes in the linear academic career track could create a climate that benefits fathers, mothers and children. Parents' creativity and productivity – and children's psychological and emotional development – could thrive in an environment that supports both involved parenting and productive scholarship.

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