

The Reproduction of Mothering

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Discussions about the “nature” of mothering and the role of social forces in the reproduction of the values entrenched within it go to the heart of current debates about the position of women in the 21st century. In this context, the concept itself takes on a normative dimension which serves to construct gender power hierarchies. Nancy Chodorow’s 1978 book – *The Reproduction of Mothering* – explores these dynamics in detail, looking at how women learn to be mothers and how their actions reproduce the values associated with this function.

Chodorow seeks to uncover how the social function of reproduction defines social relations. Starting from the assumption that ‘women’s mothering is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labour’ (Chodorow, 1978: 3), she argues that that ‘women’s mothering as an organisation of parenting is embedded in and fundamental to the social organisation of gender’ (Chodorow, 1978: 34). Chodorow’s work poses a significant challenge to the accepted naturalness of women’s role as carers. Over the last thirty years, it has helped to uncover the function of social, political and economic institutions in constructing the norms associated with mothering. Ultimately, her analysis has helped feminist scholars to raise important questions about the interaction between the public and the private sphere, as well as the social construction of gender norms.

Adrienne Rich’s (1977) book *Of a Woman Born* also provides a narrative for the complex web of forces and interactions that are entrenched within the (political) institution of motherhood. She argues that political and economic institutions use the ideology of motherhood to define or limit women’s role in society. Through this process mothering becomes a vehicle for the reproduction of patriarchal structures. This ideological framework is in turn internalised by women, thus providing legitimacy to this economically and culturally defined interpretation of the role. As a result, it shapes women’s experiences and defines individual expectations of women’s contributions to society. As Rich (1977: 42) explains, ‘the institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children ...’, but the widely accepted view that the two are inextricably linked serves to normalise women’s experiences, thus helping to construct and maintain power hierarchies.

These two scholars present a powerful challenge to “traditional” constructions of women’s mothering and the role it plays in maintaining gender power structures. They draw attention to the fact that a number of social norms serve to constrain our understanding of mothering. Starting with the assumption that mothering occurs within the boundaries of the domestic sphere and that it requires a degree of self-sacrifice, Chodorow and Rich look at the link between the devaluation of care work and its construction as ‘labour of love’. What transpires is that the norms associated with women’s mothering support the interests of a particular socio-economic structure that is dependent upon women’s unpaid labour in the domestic sphere. The role of the mother as primary carer - for children and the elderly - relieves the state of the responsibility of providing for the needs of these groups.

Social and political institutions therefore have a vested interest in reproducing the values and norms associated with women’s mothering. In 1978 Chodorow drew attention to the impact of “exclusive mothering” on gender hierarchies in the family. If mothering determines that women are the primary carers in the family, then it follows that women should also fulfil this

function regardless of whether they are employed in the official labour market. Current developments in social and economic policies illustrate the dynamics that help to reproduce gender hierarchies and maintain traditional division of labour in the function of care.

The issue of reconciliation between work and family life rose to the top of the policy making agenda in the mid-1990s. Discussion about care policies have become more pressing in recent years, as women's participation in the official labour market continues to increase. The official aim of these policies is to help families to reconcile the demands of paid employment with the responsibilities of care (normally parenting). The principles that underpin this policy area have the potential to challenge gender divisions of labour by encouraging fathers to become more involved in the function of care. Reconciliation policies have adopted a terminology that is largely gender neutral, however their underlying aim is to allow women to reconcile the social function of mothering with employment in the official labour market. In this context, such policy developments far from challenging power hierarchies, they actually reinforce the norms that define the parameters of "good" mothering (Guerrina, 2005; Williams, 2009).

Whereas political rhetoric is increasingly calling for women's participation in the official labour market, social norms still construct the role of the mother as diametrically opposed to that of the full-time worker. The "good mother" might contribute to the family income, but not to detriment of her care duties. Discourses about attachment and the impact of maternal employment on children and family life play an important role in the reproduction of mothering. Despite the clearly normative nature of these concepts and ensuing processes, the repercussions of popular discourses on constructing women's identity are clear: a nurturing mother will sacrifice her ambitions to allow her children and family to flourish. The scientific undertones of the evidence presented by attachment theorists, ultimately creates a binary whereby the figure of the full-time carer mother ("the good mother") is opposed to the full-time worker mother ("the bad/selfish mother") (Kanieski, 2007). Pressure on women to fulfil their "natural" role is reinforced through social policies and low levels of political support for a reassessment of the (economic) limitation of paternity leave and parental leave policies.

The rise of dual earner families in advanced economies poses a challenge to the reproduction of these values. Lewis and Giullari argued in 2005 that this transition represented a shift from the traditional male breadwinner model to a more equitable adult worker model. Yet, the fact that the majority of dual earner families fall within some form of modified male breadwinner structure - whereby mothers work on a part-time basis to supplement the income of the main breadwinner - supports the argument that this is a mere variation on traditional carer-worker dichotomy (Haas, 2005). This economic set up ultimately reinforces deeply rooted assumptions about the natural link between women's biology and the social function of reproduction. As a result, far from achieving work-life balance, the policies crystallise women's double burden and fail to challenge unequal divisions of domestic and care work within the traditional family unit. Current debates about the nature of gender regimes push this discussion further look at women's mothering and the role of the family in the reproduction of the norms associated with it (Pascall and Lewis, 2007).

The analysis of reconciliation policies illustrates the role of norms in the construction of gender. The issue of mothering clearly defines the parameters of the debate because of the presumed naturalness of women's role within the social function of reproduction. By unpacking the values entrenched within the concept of mothering, it is possible to challenge the values that underpin and support gender power hierarchies. The processes whereby this

role is maintained and reproduced are based on accepting that the essence of motherhood is determined by women's biology rather than being culturally defined by women's position in the family. Recognition that mothering is performative allows us to move beyond biology to recognise that the reproduction of mothering is supported by an ideological framework that has a vested interest in maintaining particular set of social, political and economic structures.

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