

Not born a Mother, but Naturalized into One: Experiences of Motherhood, Reality and Challenges

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Abstract: *Motherhood is constructed as a biological outcome based on the assumption that when a woman becomes a mother, she is naturally equipped to be one, while its complexities are rarely highlighted. Feminist writers on the subject argue that motherhood is a social, historical and cultural construct rather than a natural consequence of the maternal instinct (Burman 1994a).*

Motherhood presents itself as a natural outcome because a mother's personal and unique experience of motherhood interacts to a large degree with the social and cultural representations of motherhood. To be a perfect mother is a natural disposition, requiring little or no effort because mothers work on instincts. Generally accepted notions about motherhood do not change quickly or easily because many of those who concern themselves with issues central to motherhood fail to acknowledge or even recognize that motherhood has this social and historical character (Atkinson 1991). Mothers are trying to live up to something that is placed on them by themselves or other significant people. There is quite clearly a gap between what we claim to know about motherhood and what mothers themselves experience as mothers. Women's experiences as mothers, their inner perspectives are rarely examined. As a result, little is known about how women experience motherhood. The lived experience of motherhood often, if not always, contradicts the glorified representation of motherhood. Mothers have never really been given the opportunity to express the complexity of being a mother and therefore there are hardly any personal accounts or narratives on how mothers engage in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings around motherhood, whether their everyday lived experiences contradict or are disjunctive to these ideal images

Mothering as a complex and diverse experience and living up to an ideal is problematic. This paper explores the experiences, confessions and personal account of the researcher by looking at the subject of motherhood from the point of view of her relationship with her own mother and mothering her children. There is discussion around ideal representation of motherhood, a mother's expectations and image of motherhood and how these are challenged as the researcher, engages in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings around motherhood.

Keywords: Motherhood, mothers, lived experiences, social construction.

Introduction

Motherhood is constructed as a biological outcome, a natural stage based on the assumption that when a woman becomes mother, she is naturally equipped to be one. Sociologists tend to use the term for the social expectations, experiences, and structures associated with being a mother. Motherhood differentiates the biological fact of becoming a mother, from mothering the latter refers to the practices involved in taking care of children.

To be a perfect mother is a natural disposition, requiring little or no effort because mothers work on instincts the complexities never get highlighted. Motherhood presents itself as a natural outcome because a mother's personal and unique experience of motherhood interacts to a large degree with the social and cultural representations of motherhood. Generally accepted notions about motherhood do not change quickly or easily because many of those who concern themselves with issues central to motherhood fail to acknowledge or even recognize that motherhood has this social and historical character (Atkinson 1991). In the opinion of Douglas and Michaels (2004: 3) the mothers are:

Subjected to an onslaught of beatific imagery, romantic fantasies, self-righteous sermons, psychological warnings, terrifying movies about losing their children, and totally un realistic advice about how to be the most perfect and revered mother in the neighborhood, maybe even in the whole country.

Feminist writers on the subject argue that motherhood is a social, historical and cultural construct, continuously redesigned according to changing societal and economic factors rather than a natural consequence of the maternal instinct (Burman 1994a; O'Reilly 2004). Similarly, the way motherhood is institutionalised results in the subordination of women and the reproduction of gender differentiation and hierarchy in family and work (Rich 1976; Firestone 1971). Simone de Beauvoir (1949) also highlighted biological difference and pregnancy which is responsible for alienating a woman from herself and prevents women from asserting their individuality and from being creative. Exploring the mothering role of women, Nancy Chodorow highlights that this role has a psychological influence on girls and boys affecting their ideas about masculinity and femininity and reproduces sexual inequality (Chodorow 1978: 11). These capacities for mothering are strongly internalised and psychologically enforced, and are built developmentally into the feminine psychic structure. Chodorow feels that there can never be equality between the sexes as long as women are held responsible for bringing up children (ibid: 39). Despite this, motherhood

is considered central to contemporary gendered expectations for women. The cultural expectation to bear and rear children is so strong that parenthood appears normative and childlessness deviant; in fact, it is considered a resource for some women (Ulrich and Weatherall 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). The naturalness of wanting and enjoying motherhood has been explored and challenged by several scholars who show the force of gendered expectations that conflate motherhood and femininity (Marshall 1991). However, some feminists like Rich (1976) does not believe that they would have to give up motherhood to assert their feminine identity; she felt that in a patriarchal set up, motherhood is not a choice for most women. Motherhood has been transformed from something which was necessary, but now shaped and governed by cultural gender norms. She further added that motherhood is an institution and therefore women should have control over their own body and sexuality to reduce control of this institution over them.

Mothers are constantly trying to live up to something that is placed on them by themselves or other member of society since little attention is paid to the socio-economic and cultural factors that work with patriarchy to define good motherhood. The insider perspectives of women are rarely examined, there is a significant gap between what we perceive to know about motherhood and what mothers themselves experience as mothers. Mothers have rarely been given the opportunity to express the views on motherhood and hence therefore there are hardly any personal accounts or narratives on how mothers engage in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings around motherhood. It is seen that the personal accounts on motherhood if not always, contradicts the glorified representation of motherhood

This paper explores the experiences, confessions and personal account of the researcher by looking at the subject of motherhood from the point of view of her own mothering experience. There is discussion around ideal representation of motherhood, a mother's expectations and image of motherhood and how these are challenged, as the researcher, tries to deconstruct and reconstruct the meanings around motherhood through her own narratives making it very special for her.

Conceptual framework

Phenomenological sociology aims to explore the role human awareness plays in production of social action, social situation and social world. It

takes up prior assumptions, or assumed truths and question them in order to better understand the way the world around us has been socially constructed. Phenomenologists stress that social reality should not be conceived as a fixed and objective external reality. Rather, social reality is essentially a product of human activity *inter alia* through the process of typification, we constitute a meaningful social world around us. This is obviously not the achievement of isolated individuals acting alone, most of our typical assumptions, expectations and prescriptions indeed are socially derived. The idea of social construction of reality is based on the thought that people interact by using symbols to interpret one another and assign meaning to perception and experience. Berger and Luckmann's (1966) concept of the social construction of reality focuses on how people and groups interacting in a social system, create, overtime, concepts and mental representations of each other's action and these concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by actors in relations to each other.

Social and cultural forces are instrumental in constructing the meaning of womanhood, men and women which guide and govern their lives and social activities. Cultural understanding of the categories "man" and "woman" have been done by Sherry Ottner (1974) in her nature/culture argument where she opines that women's physiology and reproductive functions make her closer to nature and men seek cultural means of creation and are therefore associated with culture. According to MacCormack and Strathern (1980) men are considered closer to culture because of their movement in social and geographical space and hence they are more aware than women and thus part of "public sphere". This constructed the gender roles in our society assigning women the position of rearing and caring. It is socially accepted that as a woman one should be nurturing, should have a desire to bear children and plan for them accordingly.

The ideology of motherhood differs according to the socio-cultural context, ethnicity, gender and class, (Rich 1976). The ideology of the West focuses on the fact that motherhood is based on instincts and intuitions; however, the concept of a natural mother is a construction, which needs discussion and deconstruction. In the patriarchal Indian society, mothers of sons have more respect. A woman is considered "complete" after she attains motherhood, not only does this assign her supreme status in society but it also helps to cement her marital bond (Phoenix et al. 1991). Motherhood establishes women's credentials as a woman, but at the same time the women finds herself under the influence of strong mothering ideologies which are further governed by patriarchal ideologies and patrilineal kinship patterns. The dominant mothering ideologies demand that the women should

relinquish their individuality, since it benefits the system of patriarchy and helps to confine the women to the private sphere. However, mothering ideologies are not fixed, rather fluid and they are representation of social, economic and cultural fabric of society.

My own-construction/deconstruction/ reconstruction of motherhood

The image of mothers when produced by experts and the knowledge they produce helps in cultural understanding of the subject and motherhood is one subject where knowledge is produced without consulting the mothers. Amy Rossiter addresses this discrepancy in her research on mothering and the perpetuation of patriarchy. She demonstrates that created by experts put pressure on women creating unrealistic definitions of motherhood. According to Rossiter,

... it was clear... that images of “mothers”, when produced by experts, come to define mothering –that is, to lay claim to all that can be said about mothering, to become final statement of how mothers naturally are. This process leaves mothers attempting to relate their experiences to such images, rather than themselves making images which conform to their concrete experiences (Rossiter 1988: 17).

Mothers are rarely consulted when a discourse is constructed around motherhood. The portrayal by media shapes the social construction of women, reinforces the stereotype of women, the wife and then mother, whether they want or not. For me the generalized other¹ was mediated through my family, friends, and adults. My view on having my own children was formed at a young age by these significant others and by the time I reached the game stage, me and my sister were already acting the ways these others were expecting us to act.

Me and my sister were socialized to believing that girls will always get married and bear children. As a child my plays and conversations revolved around this, I remember saying things like “when I will have my own children” or “when my children will get married”. It is strange but there was no ‘if’ about it, and for me there was no iota of doubt because I truly did not believe that there was anything else for me. We never played games about super heroes or women doing business, our games revolved around mothers and their children, going shopping or to video parlors to play games or eat ice-cream. I had heard conversation making references to some women in the social circle who did not have *bacche* (children) and because

of which their life was incomplete. This reiterated my belief about having children and how imperative they were for my existence.

Motherhood: Not Ascribed needs preparation

As I grew older and had my own children I began to question about the “ultimate fulfillment” (Marshall 1991: 68) motherhood had to offer. I presumed that a mother will bring me an experience of overwhelming love for my child as I was guided by the assumption that women are naturally ascribed to be mothers and are equipped to meet daily needs of their children. Bartlett (1994: 62) points out that there ‘... is an assumption that one does not need to learn how to be a mother, that the role is intrinsically rooted in a women’s nature.’ For me, there was no preparation to motherhood, although I had read some books on pregnancy and child care nothing prepares you more than bringing your own baby home.

... I cried from the moment we brought her from the hospital, these were tears of joy, anxiety or fear I could not comprehend. The baby looked so fragile and I was totally confused on how I was going to handle her. My body ached with the labour I had gone through, I felt weak, how was I going to handle this baby.

Motherhood is extremely tricky and women need to be informed what they are entering into, the lack of preparedness was taking a toll on me. I remembered those pictorial representations of mothers in media glowing and beaming with joy and here I was not even getting time to comb my hair.

... I kept blaming myself that I was not handling it properly, but no one had actually told me about it. I would stare at my child when she would cry because I could not address her needs, cleaning toilet and the smell was equally nauseating for me and the long hours of carrying the baby would drain all my energy.

Dominant mothering ideologies make mothers feel frustrated and overwhelmed. A mother is considered to be omnipotent and having institutive skills to meet the demands of her child. However, there is a gap between what we claim to know about motherhood and what a mother experiences, my lived experiences were totally contradicting the glorified representation of motherhood.

I had no idea what to do and unfortunately as long as my mother was around. I never felt the need to learn as well. It was only after

she left that I became a nervous wreck as I didn't know how to bathe her, or understand what she needed.

People assume that a mother knows what to do since motherhood is intrinsically rooted in her, however the assumption that motherhood happens instinctively is not correct and new mothers need a lot of advice and assistance. I panicked and called my mother to my residence, to learn from her and share my feelings with her and I was relieved when she said 'it will take time, but you will gradually learn' this statement was a breather for me, so motherhood did not come naturally.' Motherhood cannot be imagined without assistance. The twenty first century world seems to have made things easy for mothers as there are endless products like diapers, baby food, play stations, feeding chairs etc. but the reality is less rosy than what is being advertised. There was always this brigade of senior women who would conveniently make the statement 'you are so lucky to have these facilities; our days are over with nappy washing and drying.'

Mothers actually attempt to live up to ideal representations around motherhood, because a mother's personal and unique experience of motherhood interacts to a large degree with the social and cultural representations of motherhood (Parker 1996). Mothers are constantly trying to live up to expectation placed on them by others.

I was constantly being judged on how I was handling my baby, whether she was wet or dry and in public places if the baby kept on crying, people would give you dirty stares, making you feel inadequate. Apart from them, I had my own friends who had become mothers recently but they were now behaving like "champions", from feeding to toilet training to sickness, they had mastered Dr Spock. This made me feel guilty, insensitive and not good enough.

In speaking to mothers everywhere, Kitzingers has observed:

There always seems to be other mothers who are coping much better than we are, too. They are better organized, more contented, always consistent, calm and understanding. Their babies sleep four hours at a stretch from the very beginning, wake, feed, play and then sleep again. They have a regular routine. We are in a state of chaos. Motherhood is about trial and error and does not come naturally and this needs to be addressed (1994: 4).

The boundaries between what is natural and what you become is blurred for many mothers, it is only through the process of socialization that it becomes a part that is natural to them. Mothers do not feel immediately an incredible maternal bond with the child rather, motherhood is naturalized. The skills of motherhood have become relatively automatic as mothers actively engage with their children. Welldon (1988) proposes that such an ideal image leads people, including mothers, to believe that all mothers will be able to deal with motherhood with a kind of instant skill, precision and dexterity. Welldon (1988:18) says that most women in fact know very little about babies and that they often expect that a “...maternal instinct” will come to the fore and will perform miracles.’

According to cultural norms mothers do not experience any incongruent feelings, a mother has no negative feelings towards her child and is instead loving patient and caring. I was totally haunted by the unconditional love stereotype describing motherhood, there were parts of me who could never relate to this image.

I found myself loosing temper, I wanted my child to behave correctly when we went for social outings and may people had mentioned to me that anger and hatred for the child was totally unacceptable and against the ideal of maternity.

On the contrary, I found it difficult to accept how my friends children would behave, they would make the place dirty, throw things and I would look to their mothers expecting the same reactions like mine , but they seemed still looked so much in awe for their children, so were my emotions unacceptable?

I always wondered who are these good mothers, are they the ones who let their children do anything or are they the ones who guide their children, give them love and teach them social etiquettes. For me motherhood was overwhelming and not automatic and easy, as for some of my friends, there is nothing duplicate about motherhood, what works for me, may not work for another mother.

Motherhood: Not the only Identity

With the passage of time, I had now naturalized into a mother, I was spending good quality time with my child. In the mean time I was offered a job and decided to go to an office environment. I was chastised from nearly all quarters of society, made to feel guilty and shameful about taking this

decision. ‘*She is so heartless, leaving such a small child home and going to work*’, there were others who would come to my house in my absence and later tell me ‘*the baby was sleeping **alone** so we left a teddy with her*’. I began to wonder if motherhood is the only identity I am supposed to have. I come from a traditional family, clearly defined on the dichotomies of the bread winner and home maker; however, I felt that by actively pursuing my own goals I would be able to make my daughter independent and this action of mine would help her foster growth in the future. I decided to pursue my own goals, but the idea of leaving my child alone made me very guilty. Had my better half supported me, I would have lived with an exclusive identity of being a mother; he made me believe that I needed this for my own wellbeing.

By the time I went into my second pregnancy, which was after a hiatus of thirteen years, “motherhood” for me had become a deep personal issue rather than abstract concept and I incorporated all that I had discovered by my own personal style of mothering in raising this new bundle. After, availing six months of maternity leave I was back to work, happy to meet my students and prepare my lectures and do my research. Initially, I had guilt pangs but I was able to negotiate them better now. My children take pride in the fact that I am a working mummy and when my son tells me that I am the world’s best mother, I now have the courage to accept this statement without guilt or shame- I have achieved the status of a mother without losing myself in the process.

Conclusion

Dominant mothering ideologies that have been set up constantly subjecting mothers to scanners and surveillance. Destabilizing the dominant discourse surrounding motherhood allows women to refine their roles (O’Relly 2004: 47). Women should question the expectations that are placed on them by the society and the immediate surroundings and discourses. For some women motherhood empowers them while for the others it takes away their existence and this is due to the positioning of mothers in different social, economic and political positions. Mothers need to be supported, there are different views on what a good mother should be and we should not be using our biases to judge the behavior of others. The twenty-first century mothers have to deal with what Douglas and Michaels (2004) refer to as the “new momism”, which is a highly romanticized yet demanding view of motherhood, in which the standards of success are impossible to meet. In

standard Indian perception, the mother is expected to do all the things for all the people, take care of children, have a career and still prepare dinner for her family. This concept exists in the ideology of the family and puts extra stress and burden on the mothers. Therefore, women now need to plan mothering with intention, because the choices they make will affect their life deeply. Dominant ideologies around motherhood have been there for too long and they will not disappear. Modern mothers can question the archaic notions of motherhood based on patriarchal ideologies, but the new mother will need to navigate, explore and redefine the traditional notions of motherhood and make her choices and define and develop her own standards of an ideal motherhood.

Notes

1. Mead's theory of the emergent self helps explain how the self emerges from social interaction, responding to others opinion about oneself and how internalizing external opinions and internal feelings shapes ones and perspective of others towards our self helps in internalizing them as our own perspective.

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