

2018

Gender and Sexuality Portfolio Post One: An Introduction to the Special Interest Topic of Motherhood

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BA in Public Health and Biology, Minor in Biochemistry, May 2018

WGST 303-01

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Winter 2017/2018

GENDER AND SEXUALITY: MOTHERHOOD

Gender and Sexuality Portfolio Post One: An Introduction to the Special Interest Topic of Motherhood

As discussed in *Gender Stories: Negotiating identity in a binary world*, a gender binary system exists in our society, which appoints all people to one of two identities- male or female (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013). The authors conceptualize the gender binary system as a matrix that serves as the backdrop for our daily gendered experiences, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. From our gender identity and gender expression, to our biological sex and attraction to others, the gender binary matrix functions as an ever-present and pervasive system that influences each of the different components of our gender, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. The gender binary not only restricts the number of gender identities and sets males and females as opposites, but it also creates a hierarchy in which one category is more valued than the other and suggests that the distinction between the categories is natural and inevitable (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013). Even more, the gender binary reinforces distinct, normative roles for men and women and prescribes binary ideals of appearance, behavior, and personality (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013).

Starting in childhood and continuing throughout adulthood, we face pressures to conform to a socially-constructed “reality” of gender that is based on norms that are oftentimes impractical and unattainable. For many, this results in a constant and futile struggle to reconcile one’s complex and evolving gender with constraining norms, such as the “mythical norm” of “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure” (Launius & Hassel, 2015, p. 73). These gender norms are endorsed by the gender binary matrix yet are not necessarily enabled by it, given the complex intersection of gender with other micro-level identities (race, sexuality, class, age, etc.) and macro-level institutions (government and legal agencies, media, marriage structures, religion, educational institutions, etc.).

Through personal reflection on the gender binary matrix and the way it has influenced my behaviors and beliefs as an adult, I have identified motherhood as a special interest topic within the study of gender and sexuality due to the influence that my conceptualization of “motherhood” has had on my prospective career choices. I classify myself as a young, heterosexual, female minority of Hispanic ethnicity and low socioeconomic family background. Unlike many women of a similar ethnicity and socioeconomic status, I

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have been privileged to pursue a college education and I am now among the limited number of women who have the opportunity to pursue higher education and a well-established career. Specifically, I am an aspiring physician who envisions using an obstetrics and gynecology specialty to practice humanistic medicine that empowers disadvantaged women with the knowledge, support, and medical treatment that they need to take control of their health. Whether it comes to intellectual capabilities, passion, or the physical stamina and mental strength that is needed for this career, there is nothing that says I am not fit to pursue this career. On the contrary, I believe that my minority and low socioeconomic family status, Spanish ethnicity, exposure to substance abuse and mental health issues, and experience with public health work has equipped me with valuable competencies regarding the complexity of health that make me exceptionally well suited to pursue a career in medicine. Yet, in making my career choices, the seemingly impending challenge of motherhood almost served to dissuade me from choosing a profession that I feel is truly my vocational calling.

I am 21 years old, have yet to commence medical school (let alone meet a suitable partner), and I am already feeling pressure to prepare myself to balance my career with the responsibility of caring for a family and living up to the idealized expectations of a mother who is selfless, devoted, and the primary caregiver to her children. This pressure, and my previously unconscious connection between womanhood and motherhood, is the gender binary matrix at play. It is the unwarranted, yet internalized sense of binary gender ideals that dictates what I should value in life as a woman. This reflection has sparked my interest in exploring the intersection between gender studies and motherhood to better understand my own gender experience and the experience of the women that I hope to one day serve as an obstetrician/gynecologist.

I began my review of the gender studies literature by using search terms such as “shame,” “pressure,” and “career” in conjunction with “motherhood.” Each search received between 4 and 29 results- “shame” having the least results and “career” having the most. A wide range of approaches to studying the challenges of womanhood and motherhood were presented. More specifically, the research questions centered around understanding how binary ideals for women and motherhood affected either 1) their individual mental and general health outcomes or 2) their career outlooks and expectations. The

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methodologies included surveys with a snowball sampling technique, cross-sectional study surveys, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and analysis of online comments through feminist, discursive lens.

Overall, the results of the gender studies research I reviewed showed the importance of assessing both micro- and macro-level influences on women's gendered experience in order to create social policies that effectively enable women to have autonomy over their gendered experience. Many authors called for further studies addressing how women's micro- and macro-level influences interact. With a few exceptions, most of the authors were females associated with academic institutions. Applying an intersectional feminist lens (which seeks to understand how women's various identities intersect to influence their individual and institutional level experiences) to my own analysis of the literature, the articles can be compared and contrasted according to how they addressed the questions of "*What* about women?" and "*Which* women?" in relation to motherhood.

To address the question "*What* about women?" (i.e. *what* are women experiencing) with regards to motherhood, several authors acknowledged the socio-cultural context that has created a gendered nature of parenting where women carry the primary responsibility of caring for the home and children (Blithe, 2017; Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Dow 2016; Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2017; Watt & McIntosh, 2012). This gendered pressure experienced by mothers (and not by fathers) influences women's work and family decisions. Although the authors acknowledge that social changes, such as the women's right movement of the 1960s and 1970s, have granted women agency in the public sphere, they continually note that women face cultural contradictions between the public, work sphere and the private, home sphere (Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Dow 2016; Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2017; Watt & McIntosh, 2012). The economic need for families to have dual incomes in our contemporary U.S. capitalist culture, and the expectation that women be fully dedicated to their employment, conflicts with the expectation that women be intensive mothers who prioritize parenting and commit to caring for the family (Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Dow 2016; Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2017; Watt & McIntosh, 2012).

Two approaches were taken to answering the question "*What* about women?" by examining the effects of the binary ideologies and cultural contradictions revolving motherhood—the authors I assessed

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studied either 1) the mental health effects of the impractical binary expectations (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2017; Taylor & Wallace, 2012; Witvliet, Arah, Stronks, & Kunst, 2014) or 2) the consequences of the cultural contradictions in relation to women's careers and public sphere expectations (Blithe, 2017; Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Dow 2016; Hoffman, 2017; Jacques & Radtke, 2012; Mariskind, 2017; Watt & McIntosh, 2012). Henderson, Harmon, and Newman (2017) employed a feminist sociology perspective to do a macro-level analysis of how the intensive mothering ideologies and the resulting pressure to be a perfect mother adversely affect the mental health outcomes of women. They found that the "perfect mother" ideology resulted in negative mental health outcomes (such as stress, anxiety, guilt, and low self-efficacy) for all mothers studied, regardless of whether or not the mothers bought into the ideology. This research highlighted the importance of looking at the macro-level of dominant ideologies and helped to reframe idealized motherhood as a public social issue and not a personal choice (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2017). The theme of balancing macro-level analysis with micro-level analysis was also found throughout the literature that focused on the consequences of cultural contradictions in relation to women's careers and public sphere expectations.

Although all of the authors I reviewed sought to understand women's challenges with motherhood by asking about *what* women are experiencing, only a few tried to understand the nuanced lived experience of idealized motherhood by asking "*Which* women?". Contrary to Henderson, Harmon, and Newman (2017), Dow (2016) found that the same binary mothering ideologies do not influence all women. Dow's research showed that cultural expectations among African American mothers combine with structural and economic constraints to form the foundation of an alternate ideology of mothering that frames how women make decisions regarding motherhood (Dow, 2016). Dow connected a micro-level analysis of race with a macro-level analysis of ideology. Similarly, Hoffman (2017) asked "*Which* women?" by employing a micro-level analysis of class and its intersection with work and motherhood. Like Mariskind (2017), Hoffman's (2017) research also focused on assessing and enabling parental leave policies that help women deal with the transition to motherhood. Paid parental leave policies, although scarce in the U.S., can provide a way for mothers to integrate their roles as both workers and caregivers (Mariskind, 2017).

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In assessing the association between self-assessed general health in women, motherhood, and gender inequality, Witvliet, Arah, Stronks, and Kunst (2014) chose to include a micro-level analysis of the role of marriage status and found that lone mothers reported the highest odds of poor general health. Age, as a micro-level identity, was assessed by Crofts and Coffey (2017), as well as Jacques and Radtke (2012). Their research focused on young women and their internalization of cultural ideals of womanhood in light of the post-feminist and neoliberal discourses of autonomy and individualism (Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Jacques & Radtke, 2012). Both studies found that young women are still aware of and feeling pressured by binary motherhood ideologies, despite identification with the post-feminist and neoliberal discourses of “choice” (Crofts & Coffey 2017; Jacques & Radtke, 2012). The continued presence of binary motherhood ideologies is framed as a major obstacle to achieving equality in the workplace.

Although significant strides have been made with women’s right movements and feminist movements during the last two centuries, a gender binary matrix still exists and creates hegemonic ideologies that influence women’s work and family decisions. Women face a society that tells them that womanhood and motherhood are one in the same. They are expected to take on the responsibility of balancing their public and private spheres, but are set up for failure given the unrealistic and contradicting cultural expectations between their work and home lives. Contemporary women are told to “do it all”- be loyal and committed to your work but prioritize motherhood and be a selfless and devoted caregiver. Women even pressure one another to “have it all,” while propagating a facade of “choice” in the matter. The results are adverse personal health outcomes and inequality in the workforce.

To move forward with addressing the issues surrounding motherhood, idealized motherhood must be reframed from a “personal choice” to a public social issue (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2017). There are complex interactions between micro-level identities (such as race, nationality, class, age etc.) and macro-level ideologies and structural institutions that need to be further studied to understand women’s challenges with motherhood. By further exploring the topic of motherhood in gender studies, I hope to learn more about the micro- and macro-influences in women’s lives and how this understanding may be applied to enable women to construct their own ideals of good motherhood.

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