

UNDERSTANDING MOTHERHOOD: A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract

This article aims to map the sociological debate around the motherhood with a historical perspective. It would explore the social theories that analyse the women as mothers and how do these approaches engage with the social, cultural, and political issues around motherhood. It would pay attention to specific discourses around motherhood in theory as well in practice and what are the ways in which sociologists deal with them.



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Introduction

Motherhood is popularly considered as gendered determined cultural construct. It has become a contested terrain where various gender (dominant, marginalized, and alternative), practices discourses are being confronted. In many contemporary societies motherhood has achieved a site of confrontation of contesting cultural visions of politics and identity. Changing perspectives about motherhood, from motherhood as innate to motherhood as socially constructed, emphasize assumptions about motherhood and family life; they also parallel shifts in how social research has viewed gender. In the backdrop of women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, various scholars began to challenge essentialist arguments that considered gender innate and biologically determined. Rather than treating differences between women and men as bodily given, some scholars began to interpret gender as a socially constructed set of social expectations that are attached to a social status, male or female or others. More recently, scholars treat gender as a central organizing principle of social relations. The basic argument of this "gender as a power structure" perspective is that women and men behave differently because they fill different positions in institutional domains, which include the labor market and families.

Similarly, a different line of scholarly thinking maintained that gender is a (social) process; that gender is something individuals do and not simply have. Therefore, doing gender indicates the fact that we actively create, engage and reproduce the system of gender relations

in our everyday lives. One setting where people learn how to do gender is in the family, where people create, re-create, and maintain gendered identities as parents, fathers and mothers. It is also within the context of the family where family members evaluate one another's performances of activities in relation to the limits of what is appropriate behaviour for women or men. Sociologists thus point out that there is a strong connection between familial roles and conceptions of gender. Several scholars have also made this association, especially in terms of the connections between motherhood and femininity. Dominant perspectives of motherhood emphasize the relationship between a mother and her child, between mother-wife and father-husband. Related to this emphasis on children is the assumption that motherhood and family life are a separate sphere from society.

Looking at women's familial roles not only acknowledges motherhood as an experience, but as an institution. To understand motherhood as an institution means recognizing that it is controlled by systems of patriarchy and the economic and cultural relations into which it is embedded. Most importantly, to see motherhood as an institution involves seeing more than just caring relationships between mothers and their children, and actually a system of power and control. Historically women have been defined through their reproductive capacity. To connect the experiential and institutional aspects of motherhood, sociologists have examined the question of why women mother, how do they experience motherhood, how do they negotiate patriarchal structure as mothers. In other words, they question why the person who performs the activities associated with parenthood is most likely the mother. Basically, young girls develop their capacities and desire to mother through their relationships with their own mothers, a process known as the reproduction of mothering (more details in Nancy Chodorow's work).

Sociological Theories on Motherhood and Gender:

The writings of the founding fathers of sociology discipline have been explored by various scholars for their possible contributions to gender question and specifically on motherhood. These authors have not directly engaged with the question of gender as independent variable to analyse wider social phenomena, rather they were focusing on macro issues such as capitalism, bureaucratic domination, forms of solidarity and other similar processes.

Karl Marx has been considered as the most influential writer among the three who has shaped the feminist debates on gender problem. In spite of his lack of direct and detailed analysis of it, there are certain ideas which have been floating in the disciplinary debates. Marx

was primarily concerned with class question to understand the dynamics of capitalist system. His focus was on the contradiction between capitalists and workers and his work rendered the division based on sex and gender as invisible. He makes a passing reference to the gender during, in *The German Ideology* his description of how capitalist system is reproduced through the workers' means of subsistence. Marx's broader argument is that female sex experienced the weakening of their social status with the coming of private property under capitalist system. Patriarchal men threw away the matrilineal systems so that their son can be secured with all the resources they have accumulated. With the strengthening of private property men sought to control women's sexual and reproductive capacities in order to pass on their resources to the next generation.

Max Weber in his discussion on different forms of authority, laid out the *patriarchal form of authority*. According to him, this constituted the oldest forms of traditional power. Weber argued that under feudal system of domination, power rested with landlords who had control over land resources, males and thus shaped the family relations between men and women. As a head of household, males had power over women, children, animals and so on. In other words, the internal authority of households as organized under the wider network of power relations in traditional hierarchical societies. Weber did not have much impact on the feminist writings on motherhood, and his own work remains ignorant of gender structures of power in general.

Emile Durkheim with his functional approach saw society as an integrated system of constituent elements. In his work on *The Division of Labour in Society*, he discusses how society becomes divided economically as they progressed. With the unique process of specialization and social differentiation grows, the social roles of males and females also experience change. According to Durkheim, the sexual difference played a key role in the family bonding and social cooperation in general. In his work on *The Suicide*, Durkheim paid attention to marriage and gender variable to explain the variations in suicide rates. He argued that with marriage produces opposite effects in family life, where women have the higher chances of committing suicide because of the increased structural subjugation of women in comparison to married men. He also recognized the social imposition of dubious standards of monogamy on women than men.

American sociologist, Talcott Parsons (1949) followed the theoretical insights of Durkheim and analysed the differential role of husbands and wives in the family. According to

him, the differential roles contributed to integration of the society. He describes the strains within the instrumental ethics of industrial society and the emotive needs of the family institution in the context of these gendered roles. In such a scenario, the husband and father who works in the market with rational orientation of life, while woman as wife and mother focuses on the emotional aspects of family life and socialization of children. His argument is that single women has less opportunities to employment in comparison to men in modern societies as well. The reason according to him, is the presence of systemic asymmetry where women's family expressive roles are seen incongruent to market employment roles. Parsons explanation of the subordinate status of women in American middle class families reflected his general evolutionary theory of functional differentiation.

In other words, classical writings in sociology focused on macro issues of economics, politics, capitalism, religion and hence gender remained marginal and peripheral to their disciplinary concerns. Even when these thinkers engaged with the gender issues, some of them either promulgated a biological determinism which justified unequal status of males and females, or they remained ignorant to the socio-political developments of feminist movements across the world in their times. Many of these thinkers took it for granted (as *natural*) that men and women are unequally located in social structure. Even though Bourdieu's work does not cater specifically to the gender question, his theoretical model has openings to expand critical analyses of dominations structured around gender. Bourdieu (1990) argued that gender domination has perhaps its most substantial effect on the social institutions of modernity, where the cultural reproduction of the social order takes place. In this understanding, masculine domination is made possible and understood through historically inherited state formations and practices of cultural production.

Feminist Approach to Gender and Motherhood:

With the growing impact of feminist political movements, social theory embraced the gender much more emphatically around 1970s. A large number of scholars brought in new ideas about gender inequality and how the power operates in family has impacts for wider social institutions. These works sparked significant theoretical controversies and unsettled many assumptions of sociological debates.

For example a very provoking critique was provided by Simone de Beauvoir in her text *The Second Sex* (1949). It laid the foundation of a different, radical version of feminist thought. She focused on demonstrating how femininity was significant in shaping the women's condition

in different spheres of society. She emphasized the social character of womanhood than biological notions. According to her view, one becomes a woman and not born as a woman. Particularly interesting is her account of the women's depiction in myths and systemic oppression and objectification. She argues the popular image of women represented through nature and motherhood too is not devoid of oppression and subjugation. In her view, motherhood is the major aspect which renders women's position as 'other' in the social hierarchy. Women are made to see motherhood as their own destiny and aim of life.

Ann Oakley has been one of the well-known feminists to engage with the question of sex, gender, work in the domains of private and public. Her differentiation between biological definitions and socialization process based gender concepts became widely popular. She argues that gender is learned behaviour and notions of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed. In her work, Oakley (1974) talks about invisibility of women and women's issues in wider society. She criticized the mainstream sociology for not treating women's domestic work as wife or socialization of children as mother, as a form of work. She established the notion that housework must be treated as a work in itself and not merely an extension of mother's role. In other words, she challenged the biological determinist view that housework is the domain of women as reproductive beings. She focuses on the issues such as pregnancy, child care, postnatal depression as experienced by women as mothers in her text, *Becoming a Mother* (1979). She has analysed how do women experience motherhood, and with their lack of specialized training how do they handle pain, exhaustion, sleep deprivation and how mainstream sociological writings have not focused on theorising it from women's point of view.

Psychoanalytic theorists have examined the mother's unconscious actions, exploring her deep attachment to her children. Sociologists have attempted to trace the mother's actual experience of child rearing, identifying the way that society and culture have affected her behaviour and her attitudes. Feminists, especially since the beginning of the liberation movement in the late 1960s, have been concerned with the subordination of women in the mothering role and have offered impassioned and often contradictory ways of thinking about motherhood.

Nancy Chodorow (1978) argued in her work that different experiences of childhood orient boys and girls different development paths for their future social roles. She investigates the mother daughter relationship and stresses that women and daughter create their motherhood in a completely different manner than men. The central terrain for her work is how individual

psyche develops unconscious relations between mother and child, and also with the unconscious relation of self with the world. She highlights the significance of mother to understand the psyche of daughter and suggests that core interpersonal and psychological experiences for women can be understood through this mother-daughter relationships. Chodorow begins with the observation that infant and toddler caretaking is done overwhelmingly by women; that for young children of both sexes, their "primary love object" is female. Oedipal-stage boys must separate from their female love object in order to acquire a gendered self-identity. Similarly aged girls, however, can continue close bonds with their same-sex primary love object during the process of acquiring their gendered identity. The result is that girls grow into women whose primary concern is with interpersonal connection and nurturance, while boys mature into men who focus on individuation, deny affect, and strive to prove themselves through social achievement. Hence, Feminists position has been that reproduction becomes a burden in self-actualization for mothers, and their argument is that it should be a choice not compulsion. Feminist writers challenge the contradiction between portrayal and real condition of mothers, i.e. while motherhood glorification shows the exalted image but the real conditions of birthing, care shatters that imagery and indicates the vulnerable position of mothers. Similarly Socialist feminists articulate that since mothers produce children who later on become social persons, producers, professionals and workers, it's the society which should take care of mother figure.

Applying Garfinkel's ethnomethodological perspective and Goffman's metaphor of theatrical presentation, Zimmerman and West (1987) analysed how gendered selves are constructed. According to them, people constantly recreate their own and their interaction partners' sense of gender as they interact, and that's what is called 'doing gender'. According to West, Gender is always already present in the frame of reality and any action can be interpreted as exemplifying it. Specific definitions of masculinity and femininity vary (in ways and for reasons that are not theorized), but the notion that men and women are fundamentally different does not. The taken-for-granted view is that there exist only two sexes, and everyone is a member of either category. Berger and Luckmann's social constructivist approach primarily focuses on how the world is constructed and created, and how subjective meanings become realities in daily life. The social construction of women, as portrayed in the media and acted out by the majority in society, reinforces the stereotype that they will become mothers,

whether or not that is their main desire. Most television shows portray women who are seeking a man to build a family with.

Alice Rossi (1964) highlighted the connection of the mother to her children. Rossi advocates shared parenting in order to reduce the woman's involvement in mothering tasks so that she would be able to work outside the home. In her later work, she favoured the biological approach over social and cultural one by asserting that women were predisposed to the mothering role because of their unique ability to give birth and lactate (Rossi, 1983). Drawing on neuro-endocrinology and bio evolutionary theories, Rossi contended that the mother-child bond was hormonally regulated and crucial for the survival of the species. In Rossi's opinion, it was the devaluation of the biological role that minimized the mother's contribution to society and allowed men's intrusive technological interference in the birthing process.

Similarly, Jessie Bernard (1974) pointed out that the function of the institution of motherhood was to socialise girls to be mothers. According to her, images of the mother were glorified in the culture, particularly in popular religion and art. The media portrayed motherhood as inevitable and worthy, while childlessness was seen as deprivation. As well, women were subjected to governmental pressure motivated by the economic necessities of population growth and the need for individuals for the labour market and the military.

Many sociologists identified the pressures placed on mothers in the home or private domain, Sara Ruddick (1982) expanded her 'maternal thinking' theory into another direction, and explored how mothers function in the public sphere. She promoted the idea of an 'ethic of care', where mothers could work for world conciliation and the preservation of the life of all children. For Ruddick, mothering is a 'work or practice' separate from the act of giving birth. She believed this would break the structure of deprivation and stigmatization of women's creativity, and set them free from the suffering they encountered as potential mothers, and allow them to relinquish care of the child to other member of society as well.

Contemporary Issues and Debates

Ulrich Beck's concept of reflexive modernisation, articulated in his well-known 'risk society' thesis, defines the idea that modernity has come to examine and critique itself. Accordingly, individualisation involves the requirement that individuals must produce their own biographies in the growing absence of the structuring factors that previously constrained their choices and actions, such as the church, marriage, gender, employment, social class and so on. As part of individualisation, people are required to seek out information so as to make the best decision

about which course to take. The concept assumes agency and access to information, a willingness and ability to plan and take control of the vagaries of life. This idea is quite interesting to engage with in motherhood studies. Scholars have been exploring the relevance of Foucault's biopower to understand the production of mother self. This process constructs the maternal body via both private and public discourses and practices of self-care as well as care for the preborn and born child. The figure of mother must be responsible not only for herself, but the preconceived, pre-born or born entity that her body produces.

A growing literature on the body politics of contemporary maternity and on risk society, individualisation and parenting has demonstrated the increasing emphasis that has been placed upon pregnant women and mothers to take responsibility for the health and welfare of their children. The ideal female 'reproductive agent' is expected to place her children's health and wellbeing above her own needs and desires. Here the subject positions of the 'good mother' and the 'responsible citizen' merge, as they are produced through the discourses and practices of neoliberalism intertwined.

Sharon Hays in her recent work on cultural issues around motherhood modified the frame by including ideological concerns of mothering. Her conceptual term 'intensive mothering' highlighted the struggles of mothers who under the cultural demands succumb to inordinate time, labour and money into her children's socialization. The author provides the contradiction where society expects an individual to be rational, calculative and maximize one's own self-interest but expects mothers to dedicate their whole energies to care and nurture children. This is what expressed the term called 'ideology of intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996).

What has emerged in last few decades on motherhood is a body of scholarship that challenges any essentialization on the one hand while also focusing the specificities or cultural issues of motherhood as well. With the feminist approach of experience and stand[point] being challenged in the wake of poststructuralist thought, scholarly attention to class, gender, race, caste, ethnicity has demonstrated the diversity of ways in which women engage with motherhood. New modes of thought about self, body, subjectivity has opened up multiple issues of motherhood. In the backdrop of the above discussion, the following section would flag of some of the key themes of motherhood studies in contemporary times, particularly relevant to Indian contexts. These themes are not exhaustive, but they do help in mapping the possible research interests.

Firstly, the future research should set their agenda to investigate motherhood discourse in contemporary urban India particularly in the wake of neoliberal consumerist culture. Whether it's about commodification of mother figure or it is about categorization of female subjectivities, the sociological studies on motherhood can cater to highlight both theoretical as well experiential realities from the mother's point of view. In particular it would aid in disclosing socio-economic and cultural frameworks through which women's role are defined as mothers in both private domains and public arenas.

Secondly, drawing on the vast literature on sociology of gender and power, motherhood studies can reorient their analytical focus onto the question of cultural construction of ideal maternal figure and the simultaneous production of stigmatized image of mother. In other words, this would be significant to understand how the idealized image of women as mother survives along with the ever present violence inflicted on mother's body through patriarchal biases. Therefore, case studies must reveal how this paradox works. With the growing popularity of disability studies, one can ask how and when mothers are forced to deal with societal definitions of 'disabled bodies'.

Thirdly, in the context of cultural marginality of mother figure in family power structures, how do we understand women's agency and autonomy as mothers in patriarchal orders. This would become significant precisely because women as mothers have to resist the cultural imposition of a narrative based on notions of care-giver, service provider, emotional, affective roles while retaining their affirmative motherhood subjectivities. One can look for channels through which mothers articulate their affirmative subjectivities, whether through individual or group mediums.

The emphasis in these research themes highlight three broad areas of academic interest: representations of mothers in mainstream culture, politics and market; practices and experiential realities of family life, work life and public engagement of mothers, and lastly; contestations of gender regimes by mothers as social and cultural figures.

Conclusion

Towards the end it can be argued that sociologists should continue to critique patriarchal regimes and contemporary socio-political order of exploitation which organize divisions of capital and wealth, state and society interests, such ideologies which legitimize the ordering and justification of these regimes. As a whole we need to examine varying historical, regional, and global conditions of motherhood. The present day gender social structures privilege men

as an individual and as a group and exploits women as a class. It structures social practices which it represents as natural and universal and which are reinforced by its organizing institutions and rituals (e.g., marriage). As a totality, patriarchy organizes difference by positioning men in hierarchical opposition to women.

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