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Constructing Parenthood

Portrayals of Motherhood and Fatherhood in Popular American Magazines

Currently many family researchers view parenthood as a social construct (Thurer, 1994; Glenn, 1994; Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd, 1991). Social construction refers to the process by which parenthood (mothering and fathering) is culturally defined within social, economic, and historical contexts (Apple and Golden, 1997). This construction process is affected by the environmental and social contexts in which we live and varies over time and across cohorts. According to social construction theory individuals receive cultural messages regarding the roles they should assume and how these roles might be fulfilled. These messages form discourses, which are ways of representing phenomena in a visual, oral, or written form (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Social construction theory argues that the discourses represented in a society help construct the manner in which its members will think about and respond to a phenomenon. Thus, the meaning that people give to a particular phenomenon, in this case motherhood and fatherhood, is dependent upon the discourses portrayed within the culture.

Parenting is a topic commonly discussed in the media particularly magazines, books, and television. Parents use these resources to shape their image of what a “good” parent is, how a mother or father should behave, and how a “good” child behaves. They construct an image of mothering and fathering through these media portrayals. Parenting magazines are becoming an increasingly popular source for parents to receive advice and information. These magazines are readily available and commonly line an entire shelf in bookstores. Magazines have advantages over books as they are easy to read and they are inexpensive as well as concise (Luke, 1994). Parents often receive subscriptions from family members or friends and rely on the magazines for reassurance that they are parenting the “right” way.

Interestingly few researchers have examined images of motherhood and fatherhood in popular magazines. Noted exceptions include Abhik, 1998; Book and Penttinen, 1997; Kaufman, 1999; Luke, 1994; and Skill and Robinson, 1994. Abhik (1998) studied the image of mothers in Indian television commercials. He argued that advertisements have the power to shape the opinions and behaviors of individuals and therefore may play a part in what he termed social reinforcement. Abhik's findings suggest that commercials do portray the dominant value system of the culture and present the idea that, to be a good mother, a woman should uphold these values.

Luke (1994) examined the portrayal of childhood and parenting in popular culture. In her study she examined the images and text in American, Australian, and British parenting magazines. She too, argues that popular culture can reinforce behavior and values and that it can provide meaning to constructs such as motherhood and fatherhood. Luke's findings suggest that mothers are portrayed in a traditional role and fathers are rarely shown in a parenting role. Further, Luke found very few women and children of color pictured in the magazines. Similar to the Luke study, Book and Penttinen (1997) also found mothers and fathers portrayed in traditional roles in Finnish women's magazines. Kaufman (1999) analyzed television commercials and found that caregiving of young children was the most common activity for mothers and the least common activity for fathers. Further, fathers are still being portrayed in the traditional "good provider" role.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the cultural image of parenting portrayed by popular American magazines. Specifically, I sought to determine how mothers and fathers are portrayed in both advertisements and magazine articles. Second, I examined whether there is a discrepancy between portrayals of parents of color and white parents in American magazine culture. Lastly, I questioned whether there was a difference in images of mothers and fathers in parenting magazines versus popular men and women's magazines. Research indicates that images or ideals of parenting shape the expectations and experiences of parents. Little is known about the images themselves. The goal of this study is to gain further understanding of parenthood and identify the images of parenthood that are portrayed in magazines. The results of this study will give insight into the current cultural messages parents, especially new parents receive on what is considered good parenting.

Methods

Twelve American magazines were selected for analysis based on circulation rates. The top-selling seven parenting magazines, three women's magazines and two men's magazines were identified. I chose both parenting magazines as well as men's and women's magazines for comparison purposes. The September 2001 issues were purchased for the investigation both as convenience but also because fall magazine issues tend to be fuller/larger. Photographs and pictures, both in the advertisements and stories, were

examined for 1) activities engaged in by children and parents; 2) gender of parents; and 3) ethnicity of the children and adults. Obviously, trying to identify ethnicity in a photograph is fraught with problems. Ethnicity is more than facial features and not clear-cut; thus the research team needed to make some assumptions. Adding to this dilemma many models are probably of mixed racial/ethnic background.

After thorough analysis, all the magazine article titles were identified and categorized into the following parenting activities: engagement in household activities (cleaning, cooking), caretaking (changing a diaper, feeding a child, tying a shoe), passive (holding), nurturing (snuggling-type interactions), playing (indoor and outdoor games), and teaching/reading. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the most common portrayals of mothers and fathers engaged in these various activities.

The second area of analysis focused on the content of the magazine stories. I was curious as to what the focus of stories would be and what current parenting issues were discussed. These articles too reflect current parenthood dilemmas and shape cultural images. Thus the titles of all stories in the magazines were also categorized into common subject areas.

Results and discussion

There were several interesting and unanticipated findings in this study. First, mothers were by far the most commonly portrayed (69 percent of all pictures) as compared to fathers (27 percent) and grandparents (three percent). Please refer to Table A for the breakdown of activities by gender. The message from these magazines is loud and clear that parenting is mother's work. Further, women continue to be primarily portrayed in traditional mothering activities such as nurturing, passive, and caretaking roles. Past research findings indicate the tendency for couples to carry out more traditional marital roles as they transition to parenthood. Wives are responsible for doing a greater proportion of the household and childcare tasks while husbands remain in the breadwinner role (Hochschild, 1989; Aldous, Mulligan and Bjarnason, 1998). MacDermid, Huston, and McHale (1990) also found in their examination of the early years of marriage that wives spent more hours than their husbands doing housework and childcare activities and less time in paid employment. Conversely, there was no change in the time husbands spent in paid employment or housework.

I had anticipated finding many pictures portraying the new age dad, a man who is nurturing and engages in caretaking activities while maintaining his masculinity. However, I was surprised that the data indicates that overall there are considerably fewer fathers pictured than mothers pictured. Further, the fathers were portrayed in some nurturing roles but a much higher percentage of fathers were engaged in traditional roles of active play and sports (25 percent of the father pictures versus 8.6 percent of mothers). This perpetuates the myth of fathers being better equipped to engage in physical play while mothers are the nurturers and caretakers.

**Table A:
Mothers and Fathers Portrayed in Magazine Pictures**

| Activity | Mom | Dad | Grandparent |
|---------------|------------|-----------|-------------|
| household | 10 | 4 | 0 |
| caretaking | 47 | 8 | 3 |
| passive | 29 | 15 | 3 |
| nurturing | 78 | 25 | 2 |
| playing | 22 | 19 | 2 |
| teaching/read | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Total | 190 | 75 | 10 |

**Table B
Ethnic Distribution in Magazine Pictures**

| | White | Black | Asian | Latino | Native-Amer. | Unknown |
|----------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| Women's Magazines | | | | | | |
| Family Circle | 53 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Good Housekeeping | 80 | 12 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Ladies Home Journal | 64 | 8 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Men's Magazines | | | | | | |
| Maxim | 92 | 16 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 6 |
| Men's Health | 62 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Parenting Magazines | | | | | | |
| American Baby | 55 | 8 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Baby Talk | 44 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Baby Years | 35 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Child Magazine | 59 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Family Fun | 55 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Parenting | 109 | 25 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Parents | 114 | 19 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 822 | 126 | 49 | 15 | 3 | 15 |

Like the chicken and egg age-old question, I wonder if these magazine pictures *represent* a cultural ideal or do they *shape* the current cultural image of good parenting? I suspect both are true. Which leads me to question these cultural messages in an era when most women with small children work in paid employment outside of the home and many do not have a choice in this matter. How do women feel about their mothering? Past research indicates that most women grapple with issues of work, which is no wonder when they receive clear messages that they are the primary person to nurture and care for their children.

Gender ideology theory provides some insights into this dilemma. According to gender ideology theory, gender norms influence beliefs about the appropriateness of certain tasks and activities for women and men. Specific tasks are assigned according to these gender beliefs rather than the abilities of each partner (Aldous *et al.*, 1998). Men are traditionally viewed as the breadwinners and thus immune from household and childcare responsibilities. In contrast, women are responsible for maintaining the household and caring for children. In this theory women are viewed as having essential traits for raising children. For example, women are considered more nurturing and caring than men are. Thus, women are better equipped to mother. This extreme essentialist view does not allow for variation. It does not consider that some women are more nurturing than others or that some men may be more nurturing than some women.

Further, as Howard and Hollander (1997) point out, polarized gender ideology can be harmful in several ways. First, by viewing parenting as something only women do, men are not allowed to “experience sustained involvement and commitment to parenting” (34). In addition by assuming women are more caring and nurturing, women are set up to do all the parenting. They are assumed to know how to mother and to enjoy mothering. This gendered parenting stereotype contributes to a hierarchy disadvantaging both men and women.

Gender ideology has remained intact despite women’s entrance into the paid labor force (Hochschild, 1989). According to this theory, male participation in household and childcare tasks will increase only when there is a shift in the belief system, for example, when both men and women are viewed as being capable of caring and nurturing. Clearly the messages from the magazine pictures and articles studied indicated that parenting is gendered.

Another area explored in this study was to examine the ethnicity of people represented in the magazine pictures. Similar to Luke’s (1994) study, I also found that the images in the parenting, women and men’s magazines most commonly (80 percent) portray Caucasian people. See Table B for a breakdown of images by ethnicity. Of note, this study did not examine magazines specifically geared to minority populations, which presumably would have a much greater percentage of non-Caucasian images.

Lastly, I examined the titles of magazine articles in an attempt to discern the issues and concerns highlighted in the parenting magazines and to

investigate whether parenting was a topic discussed in the women's and men's magazines. I grouped the most common subjects found in the parenting magazine articles according to the following: 1) normal childhood development; 2) mother's health and fitness; 3) children's health and fitness; 4) cooking and food; 5) education and school issues; and 6) fashion, beauty and shopping. Of note, is that parenting was not a subject mentioned in any of the men's magazines but was a focus in all of the women's magazines. Magazine editors print what they perceive will help sell their magazines; clearly parenting is not a hot seller for men.

In an earlier study (Francis-Connolly, 1999) I found that new mothers are often overwhelmed by parenting and are searching for the "right" answers. The women in that study lacked confidence in their mothering skills and sought reassurance from others that they had made the right parenting decisions. They actively sought the advice of trusted friends, family members, and health care professionals and regularly consulted books and subscribed to parenting magazines. From examination of the most common topic areas portrayed in the magazines, it is evident that child development, mother's and child's health are the areas of concern for women.

Some limitations of this present study include that the data obtained from the magazines only represented one month. Thus, topics discussed in these magazines may show greater variation over time. It would be useful to study several months worth of magazine article topics to get a broader representation. However, I suspect pictures/images may have changed over the past several years and decades but we would see less variation over a period of a few months. As discussed earlier in this article, the researcher subjectivity in defining ethnicity of images portrayed in the magazine could be problematic.

In conclusion, the images and content of popular magazines carry strong cultural messages about parenting. Clearly the group of people that read parenting magazines are especially vulnerable to the cultural messages portrayed. This study provides insight into the cultural messages people receive from popular American magazines. It is evident that there is a clear message that women remain the caretakers while fathers are less visible and enjoy the fun aspects of parenting young children, such as playing games and engaging in sport activities. These images remain despite women's entrance over two decades ago into the paid labor force, and the second wave women's movement.

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