

Mothers and Sons

The Importance of Feminist Maternal Practice and the Potential for Doing Gender with Boys

This article reviews the importance of feminist maternal practice for providing the theoretical potential for maternal agency and considers what this may mean when integrated with the idea that gender is relationally produced. The experiences of Australian feminist mothers raising boys are used to highlight the importance of the maternal subject as agentic and capable of repositioning both her own and her sons' gendered subjectivities. Although the ideas put forward are authoritative only from and within the specified locale of urban living—predominantly white, able-bodied, cisgender, and heterosexual Australian women—this does not mean the knowledge is ahistorical and noncontextual. Rather, this means women's lived experiences are affected by and continuously enact and interact with (among other things) wider social narratives about gender and about mothers and sons. This article argues that feminist maternal practice reinvigorates the potential for the maternal subject to enact change in gender relations from within the mother and son relationship.

Introduction

This article reviews the importance of feminist maternal practice as a theory that establishes potential for maternal agency and then considers what this may mean when integrated with the idea that gender is relationally produced. Qualitative research into urban, predominantly Anglo-Australian, cisgender, heterosexual, and able bodied feminist mothers' experiences of raising boys is used both to highlight the importance of conceptualizing the maternal subject as agentic and to justify the relationship as a location for changing problematic masculinity practices. The article argues that feminist maternal practice reinvigorates the potential for the maternal subject to enact change from within

the mother and son relationship.

The relationship between feminism and motherhood has been both long and contested. With theoretical turns and major conceptual leaps, this contested site has been wrested away from a patriarchal construct toward a woman-centric understanding of the motherhood experience. Consequently, feminist theory about motherhood forms part of the wider body of research, activism, and thinking about gender relations at large.

The mother and son relationship has been examined as a site for feminist examination of patriarchy and male power. Feminist research about the mother and son relationship has been a vehicle to query the role *and* potential of feminism in resisting and transforming normative masculinities and the subordination of women. The shift from structural to poststructural understandings about power, gender, and subjectivity has also contributed to the reframing of the way feminist scholars understand mothers and motherhood in the twenty-first century. Such a shift is reflected in the movement away from describing the motherhood experience as oppressive toward considerations of maternal agency. But what has been less scrutinized—and what is taken up within this article—is the convergence between ideas about maternal subjectivity and a mother’s agentic capacity for interrupting and potentially repositioning both her own and her sons’ gendered subjectivities.

The Patriarchal Narrative about The Mother and Son

A review of the literature demonstrates that the relationship between an Anglo-American mother and son is embedded within Anglo-American ideas about the “nature” of masculinity and the role of the mother. Described by male authors in biblical texts and Greek and Roman mythology, the mother and son relationship has developed over a large period of time. Within the biblical and mythological narrative, the mother and son connection is either ignored and hence devalued (Koppelman) or she is considered an obstacle to her son’s survival and the mother is thus erased (Dooley and Fedele). The field of psychoanalysis has paid particular attention to the development of masculinity through its focusing on a boy’s break from his mother during the Oedipus stage (Freud; Silverstein and Rashbaum). This theory entrenched the premise that the mother’s strong hold over her son has the potential to emasculate him (Backes; Chodorow; Koppelman; Rich; Smith).

More recently, writers have adopted the central themes from mythology, ancient customs, and psychoanalytic theories to produce popular texts about manhood, boys, and the mother and son relationship. Patriarchal perspectives about the relationship demarcate inherent gender differences in parents and campaign for the specific and vital role of the father in making men (Biddulph;

Bly; Lashlie; Marsden). Gender difference discourse then becomes the foundation from which the mother is edited out of her son's life as he moves into "manhood" (O'Reilly).

Feminist Narratives about The Mother and Son

The feminist mother and son relationship brings together what has, throughout feminist history, been a particularly fraught and contested union (Backes; Chodorow; Koppelman; O'Reilly, "In Black and White"; Rich; Thomas). As the feminist movement began its second wave of political activity in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the mother and son relationship attracted attention. The problem of raising boys was seen in the light of women's barriers to equality within marriage and in sharing domestic labour. Mothering became a large focus for feminists as they struggled with issues of childcare, unpaid domestic labour, and the revisioning of mothers as independent people within the family unit. Feminists voiced their concerns that raising boys within a patriarchal societal structure oppresses women (in part through motherhood) and that this serves against women's best interests (Rich). At the time, Judith Arcana asked whether mothers of sons are "contractors rather than architects, following specifications not of our own design?" (115). This then painted a grim outlook for the mother and son relationship.

As the third wave of feminist activity began, a renewed focus on the mother and son relationship emerged. Informed by Rich's critique of motherhood as institution and in response to the focus on motherhood as experience, feminist writers and researchers looked at the *effect* of mothering sons within a patriarchal narrative. In 1993, Ms Magazine devoted a portion of their November-December issue to raising sons, and in 1998, the then Association for Research on Mothering ran a conference titled "Mothers and Sons Today: Challenges and Possibilities." Important third-wave feminist research studies were conducted (Abbey et al.; Rowland and Thomas; Smith), and the Wellesley Centre for Women ran workshops for mothers and sons in the United States. In 2010, Griffin and Broadfoot contributed a book chapter that reflected on their own experiences as feminist mothers raising sons. Third-wave feminists reject the warnings to disconnect from the development of their sons' masculinity (Doolley and Fedele; Griffin and Broadfoot; Rashbaum and Silverstein). And, as a result, women, as mothers, were wrested from an essentialized and powerless position (Horwitz; O'Reilly, "In Black and White"; Ruddick).

Recent feminist writings about the mother and son relationship recognize the contextual conditions in which women mother. Each woman is located within culture, tradition, and history; she interacts with ideology and discourse, in which the mother and son relationship is ongoingly constituted (Muhonja and

Bernard). Consequently, the emergence of maternal subjectivities is contextually contingent upon the presenting mothering demands from which differently located women enact their maternal practice. For mothers of sons, normative masculinity presents a challenge in different ways across cultures, class, ability, and race. For example, although the white, able bodied, heterosexual, and predominantly urban women this article draws knowledge from try to enact a maternal practice that keeps their sons' male privilege, this is not necessarily the case for women mothering in different sociocultural and economic contexts.

Black mothers face different, often deadly, imperatives in which their sons' masculinity, rather than being valorized, can be a stigma and put them at significant risk. The consequences for black mothers' sons can be deadly. In the United States and Australia black mothers are tasked with passing on information about survival (Ferdinand) in a society that incarcerates and murders black men at disproportionate numbers (ABS; AIC). Within the Australian context, there is no singular way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers "grow up" (raise) their children. However, many First Nations peoples see the young man that their baby or child will become. They consider where the child will be positioned (within family and community) as well as within the outside white Australian society where they are at significant risk. Renata Ferdinand argues that black mothers are "double tasked" (94) as they also seek to nurture their sons and instil them with black pride (Ferdinand; O'Reilly, "In Black and White").

As contemporary feminist scholarship about mothers and sons has come of age, scholars now examine the multiple locations from which women mother and the ways that this informs their maternal practice (Muhonja and Bernard). Feminist's writing about maternity theorize the different and compounding consequences of multiple contexts that constitute both the maternal subject and the specific mother and son relationship (Muhonja and Bernard). However, within diverse and multiple feminist narratives, maternal theory has coalesced to privilege the maternal voice and to position the mother as central in the work towards gender equality (O'Reilly, "In Black and White").

Feminist Maternal Practice and the Emergence of the Maternal Subject

Feminist maternal practice as an area of study fits within and forms part of the development of feminist theory. In an assessment of these developments, Claire Snyder suggests that the third-wave feminism proposes a "tactical approach ... to some of the impasses that developed within feminist theory in the 1980s" (175). The second-wave action for women's liberation had established a social and political movement that sought to unite women in solidarity to agitate for change. The feminist engagement with motherhood was a part of this movement

and had looked to female solidarity being forged through the shared experiences of motherhood as one of these tactics (Umansky). However, solidarity pushed led to critiques from marginalized women who were unaccounted for by second-wave feminist narratives of womanhood (Snyder). Although identification with a community, even an oppressed one, can promote a sense of connection and hope, it can also be an obstacle to making sense of the individually lived experience. The dominant motherhood story of second-wave feminism did not accurately measure the reality of many women's lives (Snyder).

Contemporary feminist maternal practice does not stand in opposition to second-wave and structural feminism but is rather a response to the above critique and applies poststructural feminist ideas to the notion of maternal practice. For example, motherhood is a contested site and as such should resist definitions that are universalizing and totalizing or that attempt to measure mothering. Poststructural theorists describe this shift as a break with the search for singularity or truth, which is considered an important theoretical turn because it opens social theory to unlimited freedom, tolerance, and innovative understanding about the world (Seidman). Feminist maternal practice rests on a similar theoretical foundation and is interested in exploring the multiplicity of women's mothering experiences. Women make choices and exercise values and ideals in and through their interactions with their children and in response to diverse sociocultural contexts (Muhonja and Bernard).

Another critique of second-wave feminist engagement with motherhood has been the structural positioning of the mother within an oppressive and a static location. Critics have understood this view as both essentializing the mother and prohibiting her social location as anything other than passive and fixed (Arcana). However, contemporary feminist maternal practice attempts to deregulate maternity and position both motherhood and the mother as culturally relative. The "mother" is constituted through the motherhood discourse at the same time as being in relationship to it and/or the ideals, values, and norms this discourse sustains and creates. Understanding women's positionality in relation to ideals and norms about mothering also creates theoretical space in which alternative discourses about women, mothers, and mothering can become visible and can be engaged with.

In this space, feminist researchers and theorists have explored if and how feminist mothers draw on and engage with feminist ideals and values in their interactions with their children, partners, and surrounding social worlds. Feminist maternal practice offers a feminist standpoint as a framework that women who engage in mothering can use to normalize, validate, and understand their experiences of motherhood as an institution (Green). This standpoint supports women, who are mothers, to draw on and justify feelings, hopes, and experiences at odds with dominant mothering discourse. Working from a

feminist foundation that considers women as agentic and capable of supporting one another, Andrea O'Reilly argues feminist mothering has come to mean a lived resistance to normative expectations and construction of motherhood and femininity. Feminist maternal practice seeks to requalify motherwork as culturally valued through doing alternative practice that renders it as such (Jeremiah). Requalifying motherwork can destabilize motherhood discourse because it exposes the inconsistencies in dominant motherhood discourse by introducing alternatives (Horwitz).

Feminist mothering is a reaction to traditional motherhood (Jeremiah; O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*), whereby women are making non-normative choices about how they practice mothering (Jeremiah; Horwitz; O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*). Feminist mothers recognize myths of motherhood (Johnson) that hold women accountable in ways that devalue their individuality, essentialize the role of mother (Everingham), and critique assumptions about mothers and mothering (Kinsler). Feminist mothers charge these standards as ensconced in misogyny and gender inequity (Green; O'Reilly, *Feminist Mothering*). Feminist mothers consider their maternal practices as “an essential strategy for contributing to positive social change” (Green 166). In *Feminist Mothering*, Andrea O'Reilly describes feminist mothers challenging “male privilege and power in her own life and that of her children” (9). In fact, she argues that feminist mothering must be defined by its challenge to patriarchal motherhood because this institution “constrains, regulates and dominates women and their mothering” (10).

The Maternal Subject

Theorizing feminist maternal practice allows for the maternal subject to inform relations of power by reconsidering structural accounts of autonomy. Christine Everingham argues that autonomy can be configured to include maternal activity or “the agency of women carrying out nurturing activity” (6). She theorizes autonomy as a form of subjectivity “constructed in relation to another’s claim to autonomy, in concrete social situations which are imbued with power” (6). Autonomy in this context can be understood as an emancipatory form of subjectivity because it is actively constituted within the particular sociocultural mother-child context.

As with Everingham, Emily Jeremiah tracks the shift in feminist thought from essentialist constructions of motherhood to the more poststructural terminology of mothering. She argues that motherhood is no longer taken as fixed or biologically driven but conceptualized as a set of ideas and practices that change across time and context. For Jeremiah, the maternal subject first emerges through a consequence of engaging in maternal practice—that is,

she becomes a maternal subject as a “consequence of decision-making on the part of the individual woman, that is, of a decision to become a mother” (26). Just because a woman may make a decision, however, the consequences that ensue may not be connected to her intention. The materiality of the human subject must be acknowledged. As such, the agentic choice of women may be materially constrained in some situations (Muhonja and Bernard).

The maternal subject interacts with and is conditioned through a number of different contexts; the mother and son relationship is one of these. Within this context, the maternal subject is perpetually interactive and responsive, constituted both in the moment and as a result of past constitutive actions (Butler). The recognition of agentic action in this location can generate new possibilities both for understanding and activity. Without such attention to the constitutive and interactive subject, the mother is at risk of being universalized and marginalized once more (O’Reilly; “In Black and White”).

Adrienne Rich’s notion of motherhood as experience has been a pivotal concept in understanding the maternal subject as being in relationship to and constituted by multiple ideologies and discourses about maternity (Jeremiah). The maternal subject is culturally and contextually conditioned. The maternal subjectivities of feminist mothers of sons, for example, are constituted through discourses about gender difference and masculinity as well as about motherhood, disability, race, and sexuality. This does not mean that the maternal subject must remain subjugated, however. What is interesting is that feminist mothers’ accounts indicate that they explicitly utilize feminist discourses to constitute maternal subjectivities that are removed from any essentialist foundation. This is an empowering experience for women. Feminist mothers of sons speak about making choices, all the time, to resist and discard patriarchal ideas and language about their roles as women and as mothers of sons (Epstein, *Making Women*). Working to reject the discourse about the mother supports women to establish the necessary critical distance that offers strategies for raising sons. The emphasis in feminist maternal practice is the mother’s agency that works to disrupt motherhood discourse, which means that the mother’s experience has authority and her agency is legitimated. Rather than mothering being a response to anything innate, fixed, or socially prediscursive, the concept of the maternal subject represents a shift in thinking because she is constituted through activity and practice.

Mother and Son as Legitimate Location for Maternal Agency

Feminist theorizing about motherhood considers the private domestic domain as a valid location for disrupting dominant discourse (Horwitz; Kinser). Rather than being sequestered from the public domain, the arena in which power is

held and exercised, feminist maternal practice draws on poststructural notions of power as dispersed—it is everywhere and relational. In this way, the exercise of maternal practice within the private domain is not exempt from relations of power; rather, maternal practice is in response to and forms part of the relations of power.

Relational power considers the agentic activity of all subjects—the mother and son included. The reconfiguration of power in this way fits well with the reconceptualization of mothering as activity. Maternal practice is a combination of performance and action and is likely to be varied (Jeremiah; Muhonja and Bernard). Judith Butler argues that this variation is an effect of agentic activity and constitutive of subjectivity. Although it is the private sphere in which agency is enacted, mothering practice is still context bound and historically specific. The reason for action may be taken from a response to basic necessity: feeding, changing nappies, or picking a child up from school. When mothering is relegated to meeting basic requirements alone, this activity can be considered as responsive and passive role. However feminist maternal practice draws on ideals, values, and aims of feminism, which are given expression through interaction and activity enacted with children (Ruddick). From a feminist perspective, maternal activity traverses the personal and political, the ideological and philosophical, the private and the public domains. Maternal practice moves the mother “into focus as a subject (and) a creator of cultural meanings and human value systems” (Everingham 7).

Although dominant discourse may expect mothers to transmit dominant values, feminists researching maternity have shown that mothers cannot be relied on to do this ‘properly’ (Green; Horwitz; Epstein, “Making Women”). According to Heather Fraser, narratives can be used to both reinforce and contest dominant social practices. She suggests that “whether it is by accident or design, individuals do not always take up the types of narrative that they are ‘meant’ to” (180). It is possible that individuals do not take up dominant narratives properly or as well as they could. It is also possible that alternative narratives are introduced. Although all may be affected by dominant discursive practices, not all may subscribe to the inherent beliefs and expectations. In the process of navigating ourselves within dominant discourse mothers may try to unravel and resist the effects and inherent ideas all at the same time. Certainly feminist mothers describe drawing on alternative discourses that support them in this resistance to dominant discourse.

Feminist mothers’ also describe the conscious decisions they make in direct response to their feminist intention and the contextual demands they believe are attributable to having sons. Feminist mothers choose not to be accountable to the dominant discourse about motherhood or about mothers and sons. Rather, they choose to be accountable to feminist discourse about choice, equality,

freedom, and opportunity (Epstein, “Making Women”). It is this decision making and interaction that constitutes feminist maternal practice with sons and enacts alternative maternal subjectivities.

Mothers of sons try to make the lives of women and girls visible to their sons. To this end, they consciously occupy multiple subject positions, which can include the mother but not exclusively so. Feminist mothers of sons contest the idea of selflessness through motherhood and believe that attending to their independence is paramount to effective maternal practice. They also work to make unpaid labour within the home visible and seek to educate their sons about the embodied experiences of women. Feminist mothers privilege women’s experiences by bringing these particularities into their sons’ everyday lives (Epstein, “Making Women”).

Feminist Maternal Practice as a Precursor for Doing Gender Differently

In order to consider the potential for feminist mothers to enact change in gender relations, a theory of feminist maternal practice fits best because it is within this theoretical space that women’s agency is recognized and configured. If maternal agency is established, then feminist maternal practice with sons can be explored from this foundation. In addition to this, however, I argue that it is through ideas about gender as socially constructed that maternal agency can come into effect.

I have stated earlier that feminist maternal practice can be considered within wider poststructural feminist theory. Feminist activists, theorists, and practitioners problematize the meaning and truth about gender difference (Belsey; Butler; Davies; Deutsch; Fenstermaker and West). They challenge the positioning of women as hostage to a feminine essentialism. Acknowledging that the idea of gender as relationally constructed and enacted has the potential to release the mother and son relationship from the confines of gender essentialism.

Although feminist maternal practice establishes the agency of the maternal subject one of the ways that the mother/son context can be considered as a location for social change is through application of Candace West’s and Don Zimmerman’s notion of doing gender. They posit that gender rather than an innate attribute of the individual is something that is accomplished through social interaction, which means that gender is fundamentally about relationship. Gender is done through interaction and relationships to the social world. Gender is done through the activity “of managing situated conduct in light of normative expectations of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West and Zimmerman 127).

Categorization practices are how normative gendered behaviour is learned. In children “this is a part of the desire for social acceptance” (West and Zim-

merman 141). Subjects monitor their own and others' conduct with regard to the consequences for gender accountability (142). West and Zimmerman suggest the following:

If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)... Social change, then, must be pursued both at the institutional and cultural level of sex category and at the interactional level of gender. (21-22)

The relevance of doing gender means that any interaction location is imbued with expectations of and depictions for doing gender (Fenstermaker and West; West and Zimmerman).

I want to consider the mother and son interaction as a site in which the consequences of doing gender as a theoretical formulation can be played out. If the mother and son relationship can be configured as a cultural matrix, then within this location gender is done according to established and traditional norms. It is reasonable to think that sons strive to achieve gender in their encounters with their mothers and vice versa. And what if these norms and standards place expectations on sons to do gender differently?

Feminists theorizing social change in gender relations suggest that it is possible for social movements, such as feminism, to provide the ideology and impetus to question and transform existing arrangements (Fenstermaker and West). At the institutional level, legislative and policy changes have weakened and may continue to “weaken the accountability of conduct to sex category, thereby affording the possibility of more widespread loosening of accountability in general” (Fenstermaker and West 21). It may also be possible that at the interactional level, in particular the domestic and familial level, feminist maternal practice is working toward contesting and thus hopefully weakening accountability to sex category.

Women in their position as mothers draw on wide ranging social and cultural contexts as they enact maternal practice (Muhonja and Bernard). Mothers also draw on their own identities and experiences to make sense of gendered decisions, encounters, and practices. Through their interaction with external context, imbued with values and norms about men and women (and mothers and sons), women simultaneously enact their maternal subjectivity in response to and in defiance of externally imposed measures of accountability. Feminist mothers rely on a feminist ideology to do this and draw on the feminist matrix of ideas to impose additional and alternative standards of accountability in their

interactions with their sons (Epstein, “Mothers and Sons”). They constitute gendered subjectivities as do their sons. This autonomous interactivity may open possibilities for the social transformation of gender relations.

Feminist mothers of sons believe it is possible that their maternal agency has the ability to inform gender practices through affirming or critiquing gender norms. Research with feminist mothers of sons reveals their intentions to flout normative gender expectations based on their critique of normative masculinity that is informed by a feminist analysis. These standards are in opposition to the standards and behaviour of normative masculinity ideals. A feminist lens is used to assess, establish, and validate their sons’ gendered activity. Feminist mothers introduce non-normative masculinity practices and expectations designed to destabilize gender difference discourse and undermine male entitlement (Epstein, “Mothers and Sons”).

A feminist mother is conscious that her son is male; she tries not to collude with grand narratives and instead works to redefine masculinity beyond the scope of normative parameters through actively developing boys’ domestic and emotional independence and fostering empathy within them. These feminist mothers also use language to displace gender difference discourse and take up their sons’ curiosity and questioning as an opportunity to have a conversation (as practice) that builds awareness about gender, male privilege, and power. Ultimately, it is important for these mothers to support their sons to notice gender and to understand that gender matters (Epstein, “Mothers and Sons”).

Conclusion

In summary, contemporary feminists’ theorizing about motherhood places an emphasis on women’s experience as the standpoint from which to explore maternity and make a distinction between motherhood discourse and the practice of mothering. Motherhood then is not a fixed state but rather a set of ideas and practices that are responsive, contextual, and ahistorical (Ruddick; Muhonja and Bernard). The concept of maternal practice gives form to feminist mothers’ description of the responsibilities that they believe are theirs in raising sons (and daughters) and to the feminist intent of the decisions they make every day.

This article signals the shift in feminist theorizing about the mother and son relationship. Feminist maternal practice with boys is an ongoing relational activity of which a large component is the circulating of non-normative ideas about maternal and gendered subjectivities. Within this relationship, the feminist maternal subject is positioned in relation to discourses that disrupt essentialized and powerless notions of motherhood. Simultaneously, by doing gender, the relationship is a location where non-normative masculinity

standards of accountability are demanded, validated, and externalized. The maternal subject enacts agency to establish the mother and son relationship as a social and cultural context that generates social change at the interactional level. Feminist maternal practice within the private domain works to interrupt, contest, and shift oppressive practice, which repositions the maternal subject as an emerging agent of power.

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