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A narrative analysis of one mother's story of child custody loss and regain

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to illustrate how existing theoretical concepts may be used to advance understanding of the maternal identity of mothers who lose and regain custody of their children. The study subject was a fifty-five-year-old African-American single mother of three. She consented to an interview with the author regarding her experience with mothering, seven years after reunification with her children. The interview was a general interview guide. It was audio-taped and transcribed following standard transcription practices. The 76-page text was analyzed with a form of structural narrative analysis that allowed identification of the surface and deep manifestations of her maternal identity. Findings are evaluated in relation to child welfare research and practice.

1. Introduction

A mother's loss of custody of her children and their subsequent placement in foster care calls into question her ability to conform to cultural expectations of mothers; exposes her to stigmatizing experiences within the child welfare system; may engender shame and associated rage and self-defeating behavior; and undermines a sense of personal control, a dominant if illusory goal in North American society.

This condition, combined with the debilitating poverty of most mothers with children in foster care (Lindsey, 1992; Wells & Shafran, 2005), renders it unsurprising that a substantial proportion of mothers with children in foster care fail to reunify with their children (Wulcyzn, 2004). Understanding the maternal identities of mothers who *do* regain custody of their children in this social–psychological context is important to developing policies and practices to promote family preservation. However, we lack substantive knowledge on this point.[1]

In recognition of the current state of knowledge of this issue, this study was undertaken and designed as a case study. *It examines how one such woman characterized herself explicitly and implicitly as a mother, in short, how she constructed a maternal identity in discourse.* Her account is a retrospective one, and it is shaped therefore by the meaning that she assigns to reunification with her children at the time she relayed her experiences with mothering to me (Mishler, 2006).

The intent of this study is not to produce findings that could be generalized necessarily to other mothers who have reunified with their children or to develop a new theory of the process through which reunification occurs but rather to illustrate how existing theoretical concepts may be used to advance understanding of an important phenomenon (McAdams & West, 1997). As such, this study is similar in intent to case studies completed early in the past century in which, for example, Freud used emerging psychoanalytic concepts to illuminate understanding of a patient who had a problem from which others suffered.

As one form of biographical research, this study also highlights ways in which individuals' discourse is connected to the social context of which they are apart because language contains inevitably the embedded assumptions and patterns of reasoning that characterize a narrator's society (Wengraf, 2001). Thus, biographical case studies of the type reported in this paper may be used to "re-story" or to re-conceptualize public child welfare policy and practice (Rustin, 2000).

2. Background to the problem

2.1. Motherhood

Despite diversity in family forms and roles (Collins, 2000; Featherstone, 2004), mothers perform the majority of the physical and emotional work of caring for children (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). This work is sheltered by the dominant motherhood ideology in North America that may be described as "intensive mothering" (Arendell, 2000; Hays, 1996), an ideology that declares mothering as emotionally-involving, time-consuming, and fulfilling.

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[1] The most extensive studies of parents' with children in foster care (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Festinger, 1994; Jenkins & Norman, 1975) were conducted prior to child welfare and welfare reform. These investigations showed the majority of parents of children in foster care at that time were poor, relied on some form of public assistance, had emotional problems, and a significant minority struggled with mental illness. We do have relatively current knowledge of the themes that characterize mothers' reports, themes such as the importance of motivation, family support, and housing (Marcenko & Striepe, 1997, as well as having a case worker able to work collaboratively with them (Dumbrill, 2006), of the things that helped them to regain custody of their children.

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Women's experiences as mothers vary (Josselson, 1996); yet, the identity is powerful and salient. Arendell's (2000) review of empirical investigations of motherhood underscores several points: Motherhood does require intensive emotional work but no single emotion dominates. Mothers experience both positive and negative feelings toward their children. Second, mothers receive limited social support for the mothering that they do, and they must improvise—that is, they must find private solutions to the conflicts they experience between mothering and work. Third, mothers experience more distress than do fathers. Fourth, poverty looms large in the experience of especially unmarried African-American mothers whose rate of poverty is about 35% (U. S. Census Bureau: http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs). Fathers are now reported to be less involved in the lives of their children than at any other time in American history (Arendell, 2000). Thus, there is a gap between the ideology of intensive mothering and mothers' actual experiences (Hays, 1996) thereby preparing the ground for cultural and intra-psychic conflict regarding motherhood.

Contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives on motherhood (Hollway & Featherstone, 1997) help to clarify the nature of the conflict. By attending to unconscious motivations in relation to familial identities, they argue that the "idea of mothering…arouses anxieties which may be managed through defenses which, reproduced at a cultural level, are manifested in the idealization and denigration of mothers—neither set of images faithful to reality (Featherstone, 1997, p. 1)."

Parker's (1997) analysis of maternal ambivalence is especially useful. She argues that feelings of love and hate toward one's children may be manageable, allowing insight into the complexity of caring for and nurturing children; or, it may be unmanageable. Under the latter circumstance, mothers may experience their children as demanding and punishing and or themselves as highly punitive. In both cases, she argues ambivalence is the product of complex interactions between internal and external realities and must be considered within a specific social–cultural context.

Thus, knowledge of motherhood underscores the centrality of the maternal identity to women (Carlson, Smith, Matto, & Eversman, 2008); the distorted cultural images that constrain social interactions around mothering especially in a North American context; and the role that ambivalence may play in women's experience of mothering.

2.2. Mothers and the child welfare system

Not surprisingly, the intensive mothering ideology is reproduced within the child welfare system. Mothers are held responsible, when their children are neglected or abused (Appell, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Roberts, 1999). The latter occurs even when fathers are present; indeed, within child welfare practice, the strengths of and dangers posed by fathers, especially minority fathers (Reich, 2005), are generally ignored or marginalized (Coohey & Zang, 2006; Strega et al., 2008).

Once a mother is identified as maltreating, the child welfare system casts her primarily in relation to a set of risk factors that has to be managed and a set of professional discourses that construe her as an object of corrective treatment (Brown, 2006). Mothers must submit to monitoring and public accounting of their risk status, decide how much to disclose as to their real circumstances, and participate in multiple services in order to have a chance of regaining custody of their children.

Indeed, workers view mothers' compliance with their case plans as evidence of mothers' motivation to care for their children, and both child welfare workers and mothers view mothers' involvement in the child welfare system as punishment (Smith, 2008). Detailed examinations of workers' conversations with mothers show the strenuous efforts workers make to construct mothers as having failed their children (Hall, Jokinen & Suoninen, 2003). Mothers must show signs of or "perform" deference to the authority of the state in order to reclaim custody of their children (Reich, 2005).

2.3. Stigma and shame

As a result, prevailing child welfare discourses and practices provide opportunities for mothers to be stigmatized and to experience shame in relation to the neglect or abuse of their children. Stigma, which may be defined in relation to loss of status and social exclusion in response to deviation from cultural norms (Link & Phelan, 2001), has been demonstrated experimentally to increase aggression and self-defeating behavior, as well as to reduce intelligent thought and pro-social behavior (Twenge & Baumeister, 2005). Negative behaviors may be especially dominant, when the individual believes she lacks the resources to cope with the demands associated with stigmatization (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Therefore, mothers who lack hope as to restoration of custody may express rage in ways that work to undermine their abilities to reunify with their children. Mothers who regain custody may have to harness such rage in the service of the goal of reunification.

Shame, which may be defined in relation to the wish to "escape the eyes of the onlooker" due to social disapproval (Buss, 2001), indicates a strong sense of self as social object. It is linked to the sense of humiliation regarding aspects of the self that are open to public observation. Its consequences are a sense of worthlessness, but the effects are variable depending on how well the individual may buffer its effects through, for example, devaluing the attributes on which one is stigmatized (Major & Eccleston, 2005).

Responses of mothers to stigmatizing experiences and to shame may be further complicated by the presence of psychiatric disorders (Marcenko et al., in press') including substance dependence that undermines mothers' abilities to sustain a stable (and non-addicted) identity (Denzin, 1987). As a result, mothers who lose custody may devalue the importance of their identities as mothers at a given point in time in order to ward off feelings of worthlessness associated with the shame of custody loss, and mothers who regain custody may have to fight hard against adoption of this stance.

2.4. Costs of custody loss

Knowledge of the actual emotional reactions of mothers who lose custody of their children placed in foster care is limited. Knowledge from studies of custody loss under other conditions is suggestive, however. Studies of mothers who relinquished custody "voluntarily" show they experience feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt, and anger, and that they engage in self-destructive behavior (Hollingsworth, 2005). Studies of mothers separated from their children due to psychiatric hospitalization show how societal discourses regarding mental illness, specifically that the ill are violent and dangerous, make it difficult for mothers to maintain the position that they are competent mothers (Savvidou, Bozikas, Hatziegeleki & Karavatos, 2003). Studies of mothers who lost custody of their children due to divorce show how departure from normative expectations for mothers may trigger a profound sense of inadequacy and destabilize identity. As Kielty (2006) explains, when mothers cannot fulfill the duties associated with being a good mother, their 'moral self' comes under threat as 'good mother' tends to be synonymous with 'good person' (p. 86).

Thus, the belief that one is living a moral life, that is the conviction that one is living in relation to what one considers right (Kleinman, 2006), is tied closely for women with children to how they view themselves as mothers, that is, their maternal identities.