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Mothering for discipline and educational success: Welfare-reliant immigrant women talk about motherhood in Sweden

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SYNOPSIS

This study is based on 16 immigrant welfare-reliant women's discourses on motherhood in five focus groups. The women connect their mothering strategies for promoting discipline and their children's educational success with living on scarce finances: welfare dependence, children's education, and discipline are intertwined and recurrent themes that the interviews prompted. A dominant argument is that discipline diminishes the risk of school failure and deviant behaviour. Educational success is imperative for the children's chances to obtain employment and self-provision as adults; deviant behaviour must be stifled to avoid criminal activities, school failure, and future welfare dependence. The women argue that Swedish society obstructs their mothering through lax discipline in school, a disregard for parental authority, and restrictive welfare stipulations. They desire better support. This study widens our understandings of immigrant women's experiences of mothering on welfare, and informs political decision-makers and professionals in their work to develop supportive services for migrants.

Introduction

Motherhood is a social, relational, and embodied status, connected to certain practices and attributes that depend on the situation and context. Mothering entails the mother's practices in relation to the child and/or what she does to provide, foster, and care for the child. Mothering is intertwined with motherhood; it is formed by the social, cultural, material, and political environment. In turn, mothering practices evolve through the strategies individuals adapt in relation to these contextual factors. Migration to a new country means that the mothering must be adjusted to novel circumstances—this involves a melding of previous experiences and customs with new social structures and ideals (Awad, Martinez, & Amer, 2013; Tummala-Narra, 2004; Wu, 2011).

The present study explores Swedish-Iraqi, long-term welfare-dependent women's discourse on mothering in the process of resettlement due to forced migration. More knowledge is needed about acculturation strategies and experiences of migrant parents (Dimitrova, Bender, & van de Vijver, 2014). This study contributes to such knowledge. Processes of resettlement in relation to motherhood have been scarcely explored, and Scandinavian research on the topic is nearly non-existent. While previous studies predominantly explore migrant mothering among women in paid employment or husband-supported stay-at-home wives, this study involves mothers whose families depend on social assistance. Migration is studied within a number of scientific disciplines, and the research field of migration is interdisciplinary. The present study is inspired by previous research on migrant mothers' experiences, emanating from a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, women's studies, psychology, psychotherapy, and sociology. Feminist work has informed the theoretical departure and analytical conduct.

Consequences of migration

Migration entails positive and negative outcomes on life and self; certainly, it entails change in many aspects. Acculturation—the 'process of cultural and psychological change (…) following intercultural contact' (Berry, 2007, 69)—is formed by the societal structures of the new country, as well as by the experiences obtained in the country of origin. It also depends on individual characteristics and strategies (Castles, 2003; Sam,

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2014). Thus, the outcome of acculturation is complex, and requires empirical investigation (Berry, 2007).

Class and socioeconomic status appear to have great influence on the experiences of migrant mothers. It has been suggested that upper-class women have the means to sustain their pre-migration life with a high material standard, including nannies, housekeepers, and travels abroad (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). This can also be the case for highly skilled professional women (Manohar, 2013). Women of middle-class background, on the other hand, often experience downward social mobility and unfamiliar mothering challenges due to migration. Leaving a middle-class position as a stay-at-home wife or a professional in their country of origin, they are often faced with full-time, low-paid occupations and less time to care for their children and household. The ideals of mothering they had practiced pre-migration as well as those predominant in middle-class parenting in the Western context are difficult to pursue (Kim, Conway-Turner, Serif-Trask, & Woolfolk, 2006; Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005; Park, 2008; Wu, 2011). Liamputtong (2006) applied the concept of 'double burdens' to suggest that immigration involves additional strains on mothers: the transition to motherhood is a challenge in itself, but becoming or being a mother in a foreign country involves further burdens.

The loss of the support system provided by the extended family network adds to the strains of immigrant motherhood (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). The 'role of local sources of support in combating loneliness and isolation as well as providing practical assistance' must not be overlooked (Ryan, 2007, 297; see also Boyd, 1989). Migrant women who receive practical and emotional support from nearby relations appear to find employment and maternal duties easier to combine satisfactorily, while those with less support risk feeling disempowered as mothers, socially isolated, and lonely (Benza & Liamputtong, 2014; Park, 2008). From an American perspective, Llerena-Quinn and Pravder Mirkin (2005, 94) have argued that: 'Many of the functions fulfilled by the kin system in the countries of origin are replaced in the United States by distant, impersonal, governmental institutions. Although social supports are needed, immigrant mothers report a sense of fear, confusion, and disempowerment when their values clash with the agencies that are meant to help them'.

Cross-cultural mothering and resettlement processes involve specific aspects of motherhood. Non-Western migrant mothers often face the dilemma of embracing the Western ideal of independence, while continuing to value the family unit and the interdependence that characterize many non-Western cultures (Awad et al., 2013; Tummala-Narra, 2004). While it is not uncommon for migrant women to disregard some of the ideals found in the new culture, deviating from the majority norm can have consequences. Dominican mothers living in Spain had to face a situation in which 'their shared cultural ways of correcting and punishing children became labelled as mistreatment by social workers' (Jimènez-Sedano, 2013, 171). Majority childrearing has been defined as lacking discipline and respect for adults, for instance by Mexican and Korean working-class mothers living in the United States. The women argued that they, through firmness and discipline, provided security and kept their children away from drugs, criminality, and gangs (Bermudez, Zak-Hunter, Stinson, & Abrams, 2014; Kim et al., 2006). Many migrant families are faced with living in deprived neighbourhoods on scarce finances. In addition, they face the challenge of trying to protect their children from discrimination and prejudice while also imparting to them that future goals and upward mobility can be achieved through an adaptation to the majority culture and educational achievement (García Coll & Pachter, 2002).

Migrant mothers emphasize the importance of educational success for their children's future prospects. Education that enables the child to obtain a well-paid occupation can be a motive for migrating. Although labour migration for middle-class mothers renders downward social mobility, their child's educational success promises regained social status: it is the means to a better future (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005; Wu, 2011Llerena-Quinn). However, parents' insufficient mastery of the majority language can be a barrier to adopting strategies that could support their children's school achievement (Kim et al., 2006; Liamputtong, 2006; Park, 2008). Tsai, Chen, & Huang (2011, 95) state that 'many felt that the responsibility for ensuring that their children receive appropriate education and develop proper behaviour is too heavy and difficult for them due to the language barrier and their own low education'.

Although migration certainly entails change in several ways, change can be conceptualized as being connected to notions of continuity, in accordance with Gedalof's (2009) theoretical outlining. Immigrant mothers adapt strategies that aim at ensuring stability in terms of finances and prosperous futures for their children. Thus, 'new' is not necessarily connected to 'different' but rather to continuity; that is, to the continuous mothering work done to foster, care, and organize life in order to create beneficial circumstances for one's offspring (Gedalof, 2009).

Purpose of the study

The acculturation strategies of forced migrants have been under-researched (Castles, 2003), as have those of migrant parents (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Furthermore, there are very few studies on immigrant experiences of long-term welfare dependence (Bergnehr, 2015). The overall purpose of the present study is to narrow this gap, by exploring the discourse of Swedish-Iraqi mothers whose families are or have been dependent on social assistance for several years. The research questions in focus were: What recurrent topics and themes about mothering does the women's talk entail? How do the women depict their mothering strategies, and future aspirations for themselves and their children? In what ways is welfare dependence connected to their mothering?

Women in context

It appears imperative to outline some of the characteristics of Swedish society in order to present overarching structures that influence its residents, including migrants. Approximately 16 per cent of Sweden's population were born in another country. Of this group, half were born outside Europe, the largest group by far in Iraq. Iraqis have been granted residency in Sweden as refugees, beginning during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and continuing with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and onwards. Recent figures show that the average age of Swedish-