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Editorial

Special Issue of Women's Studies International Forum: Choosing mothering? The gendering of agency

Introduction

This special issue is a collection of manuscripts gathered in response to a Call for Papers on the topic of “Choosing Mothering? The gendering of agency.” As a group of feminist scholars, we have striven to meet our aim of developing an international forum through WSIF within which to pose and debate issues relating to agency and choice surrounding mothering. The inclusion of the question mark in the Issue title signals a recognition that there are a myriad of ways in which women both position themselves and are positioned by others in relation to choice and motherhood. Whilst, we aimed to bring together writings on choices made as a mother, we were also keen for the issue to represent the differing realities of motherhood and mothering including choices not to have children, to have children by surrogacy and adoption, and to have children within non-heterosexual couples or as a single woman. The intersections of motherhood with culture, class, gender, sexuality, and ability are prominent in feminist writing, and it was important to us that the issue encouraged scholarly work that acknowledged these historically situated contexts. We were excited about the level of interest that the Call provoked among an international audience of scholars, and we are confident that the final selection of papers in this issue represents some of these current key areas and concerns.

In the current neo-liberal context of Western cultures, “choice” is offered as a panacea for differential access to power. However, challenges posed by choice-making at the intersection of feminisms and maternity for women are prevalent and increasing. Such challenges may be about acceptance or rejection of the insertion of the “expert” voice into the relationship between mothers and children, or of the scientific authority that shapes discourse about what constitutes “good mothering,” among others. The expectations that mothers seek advice, research and make the “right choices” with regards to their mothering practices raises questions about the constitution of agency in relation to choices about entering or not entering motherhood, practicing motherhood and accounting for different approaches to mothering and motherhood.

Confrontations and outcomes of these challenges inform, and are informed by, the ways in which women position themselves and are positioned by others, often in relation to the negotiation of these discourses around womanhood and motherhood. This special issue aims to foreground and address some of these challenges through a diverse range of provocative papers.

Focus

The idea for the special issue initially arose against the background of presentations and discussions at the annual conference of the 2012 Psychology of Women Section (POWS) of the British Psychological Society and from one of the guest editor's involvement in the *Handbook of International Feminisms* (Rutherford, Capdevila, Undurti, & Palmari, 2011). The papers contained in this special issue extend, critique, collate, and develop knowledge presented in those fora whilst also considering newly emerging work in this arena.

We invited manuscripts that discussed ways in which interpersonal, cultural, and social contexts impact on how women engage with the choices “offered” to them, how the status of “mother” is implicated in these, and the ways in which choice is, and can be, negotiated by women. Overall, we were interested in research about how such negotiations can serve to facilitate, constrain, or otherwise impinge on agency, to inform understandings of mothers, non-mothers and mothering, and thus constructions of gender.

In the Call for Papers, we asked authors to consider questions such as the following:

- How is women's agency in maternal choice-making constituted within and across different cultural, social and interpersonal contexts?
- How are understandings of (non)maternity implicated in the negotiation of agency for women?
- Is choice-making without consideration of maternal status attainable?
- What challenges do conceptualisations of mothering pose for

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theorisations of agency in designing and conducting feminist research?

We also encouraged authors to go beyond these to include other relevant topics and concerns.

In the selection of papers, one of our key concerns was to seek out worldwide geographical representativeness. As feminist scholars based in the UK, we are keenly aware of the dominance of culturally constituted discourses and expectations about motherhood, and of the over-representation of Westernized thinking about mothers and motherhood, in academic literature. We purposefully sought out authors and reviewers from countries in Africa, Australia, and Asia, predicting (correctly) that the majority of manuscripts submitted would come from Europe and the USA. We are pleased to have been successful in recruiting a wide range of both authors and reviewers, representing diverse geographical areas. We are disappointed that the final selection of papers in this issue does not, however, include a contribution from either Africa or Latin America. Similarly, we were keen to be able to include presentations in non-conventional writing styles, making this explicit in the Call. Very few were submitted and we wonder if this is related to the demands of the increasing focus on the quantitative assessment of research in higher education, in which researchers are required to evidence their research impact by publications in high impact academic journals, most of which still adhere to the traditional scientific format of research presentation. We raise again the need for qualitative and critical research to have platforms for different presentational styles.

Introduction to the papers

The papers discuss the constitution of agency in relation to choices about issues such as entering and not entering motherhood, being a mother, practicing and performing motherhood, and accounting for different approaches to mothering. Individually, they address a number of interrelated themes, including the positionality of mothers and non-mothers, researching mothers, the role of paid employment, and the transmission of parenting advice. Together, the papers intersect with the differentially and multiply determined practices of mothering and motherhood in themselves so that expectations of class, culture, normative discourses, and research evidence are raised and challenged throughout this issue. For these reasons, deciding on an order for the papers was not an easy task. In the end, we agreed to focus on four shared contexts around which the papers seemed to coalesce: access to motherhood, everyday mothering, intersectional mothering, and assessing motherhood. We will introduce each in turn.

Agency and accessing motherhood

This set of three papers take as their focus alternative approaches to accessing motherhood, explicating how these processes might inform our understandings of gendered agency. In the first paper in the collection, Bokek-Cohen brings us a critical feminist engagement with the positioning of the aspiring mother in the context of sperm donations and sperm banking. Based on an analysis study of 180 donor profiles across six U.S. sperm banks, the author argues that this industry

reproduces male symbolic capital by reinscribing a heterosexual social order and manipulating those women who challenge it. For Bokek-Cohen, thus, what is presented as an agentic position for women who might otherwise be unable to become mothers locates both the woman and the child as victims of symbolic violence.

van de Wiel similarly examines the role of medically assisted conception for aspiring mothers through her reading of a filmed documentary *Eggs for Later*. In her paper, she draws on featured medical, political, and personal discourses to interrogate how they shape the affective states and anticipatory terms through which women's age-related fertility is conceptualized. She problematizes the suggested alternate readings of egg freezing as either an extension of fertility or the postponing of childbearing. Instead, van der Wiel suggests that what is maintained is the futurity of potential motherhood. She argues that this anticipation of body futurity constitutes a key component of egg freezing as a cultural and clinical practice.

Nandy juxtaposes the adoptive mother with the surrogate mother against the backdrop of India's pronatalist ethos that fetishizes biological motherhood as natural and "real." Nandy identifies the quest of both these mothers for legitimacy as ethical maternal subjects, asking whether these complicated subjectivities can serve to dismantle naturalized motherhood. The larger aim, however, is to look at the field of non-western, non-hegemonic motherhood as a rich analytical terrain for conceptualizing agency and subjecthood in the face of essentialist motherhood. To this end, Nandy recommends a shift from the feminist preoccupation with choice, towards an acknowledgement of the intersectional structural realities that trigger and limit agency.

Agency and everyday mothering

Doing motherhood involves engagement in choices in relation to a range of practical activities, a key one being feeding, with biological discourses positioning mothers as largely responsible for providing sustenance. Feminists have argued that the responsibility for early nurturing and nutrition lies predominantly with mothers (e.g., Lupton, 1996; Murphy, 1998), highlighting a number of historically located and contradictory socio-cultural constructions and practices which frame women's "choices" when negotiating infant feeding (see Johnson, Williamson, Lyttle, & Leeming, 2009). A key focus in the feminist literature has been very early infant feeding "decisions," namely, breast vs. formula feeding. However, more recently, further focus has been on weaning which is represented in two papers presented in this issue. Cheresheva and Locke each consider solid food introduction practices engaged in by mothers, Cheresheva by analyzing the content of childrearing internet fora and Locke by examining the presentation the Baby Led Weaning by the media.

Locke finds key themes in two main areas, in which babies were agentic in their eating behaviours and constructions of maternal identities that resisted "good motherhood" in press portrayals of Baby Led Weaning. Highlighting that in this age of "intensive mothering" new mothers are flooded with information, Locke picks out the ways that rather than offering choice about how to wean their baby, mothers are directed to right and wrong ways of doing this. Does mother really know best? Not in the eyes of the UK press it would seem.

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