



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif)

## Food for thought: A comparative analysis of online narratives of maternal practices of infant feeding in Hungary and Bulgaria

Irina Cheresheva<sup>\*,1</sup>

Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, Nador utca 9., Budapest, Hungary

## ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxxx

## SYNOPSIS

This paper examines the narratives mothers construct about their solid food introduction practices. Feeding a baby is a deeply gendered act which establishes a performative relation between culturally specific gender ideologies and the everyday mother-work of women, through which they agentically construct their maternal subjectivities. I draw upon data from the most popular Hungarian and Bulgarian childrearing Internet forums. Using the tools of critical discourse analysis, I present a contrasting comparison of the 'good mother' construct in the two postsocialist societies in question: a 'choosing mother manager' in Bulgaria and a 'mother-domestic-angel' in Hungary. The differences in my findings are attributed to the historically conditioned ways in which the hierarchical relationship between the value of 'productive' and 'reproductive' work is continuously re-negotiated in women's narratives about everyday life.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

## Introduction

This article examines how the image of the (good) mother is in part shaped through the practices of providing food for her baby. More precisely, I focus on the period of introducing solid foods to the infant. As DeVault has argued, feeding the family is a deeply gendered act (in the vast majority of the cases it is women who do the work), which "makes use of food to organize people and activities" (DeVault, 1991, p. 78).

Using Saba Mahmood's (2005) critique of Judith Butler's concept of performativity, in the first part of the article, I argue that apart from perpetuating a certain (bourgeois) family model, the work of feeding also produces a particular type of (nurturing) mother, constructed as existing to satisfy the needs of others (DeVault, 1991). Such definitions of motherhood are of course closely related to gender ideologies delineating conventional femininity.<sup>2</sup> The performative relation women establish between such ideologies, their everyday practices and their subjectivities as mothers is at stake here.

After discussing the methodology used and its ethical implications in the second section, the article presents a comparative discourse analysis of some of the most popular online childcare forums in Bulgaria and Hungary where parents (in the vast majority of cases, mothers) share their opinions and look for answers concerning childcare. I explore the differences in beliefs about what is considered proper in introducing solid food to infants and the role of the mother in the process in the two countries, thus showing how a variety of (macro) factors, often having very little to do with the actual nutritional needs of infants, can shape the understanding of (good) mothering.

My analysis is structured according to two categories I find salient in the Bulgarian and the Hungarian discussions: first, the construction of good mothering vis-à-vis the debate about homemade versus jarred baby food and, second, the negotiations involved in managing the financial side of feeding a small child in relation to being on leave from one's paid work. While these two themes are analytically separable, it is at their interconnection where the historically contingent figure of the good mother emerges.

Using what van den Braembussche (1989) calls contrasting comparison, a further key purpose of this article is to show how different ideological climates can produce very different

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [Cheresheva.Irina@ceu-budapest.edu](mailto:Cheresheva.Irina@ceu-budapest.edu).

constructions of proper motherhood/femininity. These constructions, I argue, operate with a notion of (female) subjecthood which is directly related to the multiple ways in which the hierarchical relationship between the value of “productive” and “reproductive” work is continuously re-negotiated in women's narratives about everyday life (Hays, 1996).

My findings show that while homemade baby food is unquestionably the norm of healthy infant feeding in Hungary, in Bulgaria what constitutes an appropriate feeding option is the ability of the mother to have made a ‘rational’ and relatively free of financial concerns choice. These differences are largely due to the position housework occupied in the respective gender ideologies of Hungary and Bulgaria's late state-socialist regimes.

### Theoretical considerations

I first delineate Mahmood's (2005) critical engagement with Butler's (1990, 2004) performativity, and its implications for an understanding of agency beyond doing and undoing norms. Through the work of DeVault (1991) and Dunn (2004) among others, I look at the continuous task of providing food for a baby within this framework: a series of performative acts through which (among other childcare practices) maternal subjectivity is agentially constituted. Eventually, before going into the methodology section of this article, I point to the cultural conditioning of the work involved in feeding, and with it the production of both familial sociality and (good) motherhood.

#### *Performativity, subjectivity, motherhood*

According to Miller (2007) and Mahmood (2005), crucial for Butler's conceptualization of performativity is a Foucauldian understanding of power. Power, in this paradigm, is not a possession of particular individuals and institutions but operates within discourses and as such structures all social relations. This notion of power as constructive rather than restrictive entails the so-called “paradox of subjectification” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 17) – the subject is conjured by the very same circumstances and disciplines that ensure his/her subjugation. As Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

When the subject is said to be constituted that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules, precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency”, then is to be located within the possibility of a variation to that repetition (Butler, 1990, p. 145).

Two analytical insights are salient here. First, the subject (or their “gender”) is produced through a chain of citations, the consistency of which provides the illusion of expression of some core. In fact, Butler (1993) argues, it is the exact opposite: through the continuous enactment of (heterosexual) norms, both sexual difference and sexed subjects in their materiality are (re)produced. The Freudian ‘compulsion to repeat’ is explained

through a Foucauldian understanding of discipline. Social regulation takes the form of self-discipline as in case of failure to ‘fit’ a set of punishing apparatuses get activated. Yet what is termed ‘agency’ is the deconstructive failure or intentional parody of the chain-of-repetitions to fully assimilate the excess of subjects. This excess, or *jouissance*, is nevertheless itself a product of the law and not its precedent: through a discursive practice this repressed/original desire is constituted precisely as such and thus made part of the functioning of the law. Acts of parody then, being exaggerated failures of gendered repetitions to feign attempts to approximate a non-existing original, pose the question of agency as a question of re/signification. What is at stake is a critique of identity politics as an essential precondition for political organization. Through assuming the category of *woman* as the subject of feminism, according to Butler (1990), feminists limit the very possibility of subverting the law of social norms which oppresses ‘women’ in the first place. Agency in this perspective therefore becomes synonymous with resistance and not intentionality.

However, according to Mahmood (2005), viewing the subject's relation to norms either as being repressed by them, or, in one way or another succeeding in subverting them, is not only dichotomous but also linked to liberal notions of freedom as the ‘natural state’ of a human being – an understanding Butler supposedly rejects. Thinking the subject along the lines of doing and undoing norms follows a binary logic, which obscures the “multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15). Therefore, Mahmood rethinks agency as a “modality of action” (2005, p. 157) which establishes some performative relation between a subject and a norm. That is to say, the relationship between a disposition, which within a western paradigm is conceptualized as ‘inner’,<sup>3</sup> and a performative succession of acts is turned around: desire is the result of performative behavior and not its cause. In the case of Mahmood's analysis of the mosque movement in Egypt (a context that explicitly defines itself against liberalism), the performance (enactment) of norms aims at decreasing the juncture between the (idealized) norm and its inherently-prone-to-failure realization. Religious piety here is not an inner moral/emotional state of a person – it is a disposition one acquires, laboriously, through enacting the rituals of piety. Emotions in that sense are embodied and do not stem from a person's ‘core’. Failure to ‘feel’ pious, then, is only a sign that someone has to work harder on their constitutive performance, and not an indication of being a ‘fake’.

I would like to place the continuous task of providing food for a baby within this framework: a series of performative acts through which (among other childcare practices) maternal subjectivity is constituted. A (good) mother is not revealed through her performance of inherently superior childcare decisions: she is made through the repetitive enactment of socially constituted and culturally specific, classed, raced and gendered childcare practices, conceived at the intersection of various discourses such as those of medicine, women's employment, welfare, healthcare and so on.

As Sharon Hays has argued, motherhood (at least in the present day US but I would add in liberal societies in general) is often conceptualized as a counter discourse to dominant modes of personhood, which are defined as “competitive”, “self-interested”, “efficiency-minded”, “profit maximizing”, and “materialistic” (Hays, 1996, p. 9). Still, the women commenting

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6852868>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6852868>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)