



Choosing motherhood? Agency and regret within reproduction and mothering retrospective accounts



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SYNOPSIS

Based on in-depth interviews with 23 Israeli-Jewish women who regret becoming mothers, this article seeks to broaden the body of knowledge that challenges Western contemporary discourses that tend to move within the range of two poles: “you have no choice” and “you are totally free to choose.” The article suggests that the emotional stance of regret may serve as a lens through which we can view, from a different angle, the interplay between subjectivity, agency, and social order. It calls into question the ‘no-choice/choice’ binary by looking into other notions in the field of reproduction and motherhood, such as ‘will,’ ‘desire,’ ‘orientations’ and ‘consent’. In addition, it is suggested that the inclusion of regretting motherhood in the human terrain of regret and the inclusion of regret in the human terrain of motherhood, meaning, in the subjective repertoire of mothers’ experiences, enable us to view regret as “after the fact” agency.

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Introduction

A review of the scholarly literature on reproduction and motherhood suggests that Western contemporary discourses tend to move within the range of two poles: “you have no choice” and “you are totally free to choose” (e.g. McMahon, 1995; Meyers, 2001). The former speaks in the name of ‘nature.’ According to this language, women have no choice but becoming mothers, since motherhood is their biological destiny and their *raison d’être*. The latter speaks the neoliberal, therapeutic, consumerist and post-feminist language, according to which, an ever growing number of women have the right to choose whether or not to have children. Hence, the fact that most of them do become mothers is presumed to evince their agency and to prove that they do so of their own free will.

Yet, during the last decades numerous writers deepened our understanding of the interplay between culture, agency and subjectivity and the way in which power works within the neoliberal, therapeutic and consumerist era. These writers point out that historical and socio-political conceptualization and analysis cannot remain within the realm of a binary categorization which distinguishes only between ‘choice’ and

‘no-choice’ (e.g. Gill, 2008; Himmelweit, 1988; McRobbie, 2009; Meyers, 2001). According to Lahad (2014:258) for example, such a binary categorization is insufficient as it tends to obscure more subjective and turbulent experiences, often intertwined with uncertainty, hesitations, confusion, contradictions, mixed feelings, luck, and randomness. Furthermore, such categorization camouflages the moral bodies of knowledge, social forces, and power relations affecting us and the decisions we make.

This approach opens new perspectives on the realm of reproduction: Although notions of ‘choice’ assume an ever-growing number of women now to be masters of their own fates, that assumption is not necessarily valid for all groups of women nor for all situations in which fertility decisions are being made. Whether or not children are born occurs under the auspices of discourses related to the political and national contexts, to technology, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, sex, gender and class (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991; Himmelweit, 1988). Moreover children are born within different kinds of inter-subjective relationships that shape prior to negotiations on the matter (Fennell, 2006; Morison, 2013).

The generalizing assumption of a woman’s ability to master her own fate is not only questionable with regard to

the pre-motherhood period. A growing body of knowledge shows that from the moment a woman becomes a mother she is continuously living under authoritative knowledge systems of gender, class, ethnicity, and heteronormativity, which join forces in order to maintain the image of 'the good mother' – an image that limits her room for maneuver (e.g. Collins, 2007; Hays, 1996; Hooks, 2007; Park, 2013; Ruddick, 1989).

One of the many criteria for being a 'good mother' is evaluating motherhood as worthwhile. Whether mothers face conflicts, ambivalence, deprivations and distress – they are not expected nor allowed to feel and think that the transition to motherhood was an unfortunate move.

The criterion of evaluating motherhood as worthwhile derives from several intersecting cultural logics, including among others the following four: First, according to the language of nature, motherhood is women's *raison d'être*, and therefore they have no choice but to adopt the fixed 'female identity' befitting maternity and to give themselves to their biological destinies without any option to weigh the subjective implications motherhood entails for them. Second, there is the widespread child-centered Western idea that children – which are economically useless yet emotionally priceless – are a 'blessed burden' to be desired and appreciated at all costs (Zelizer, 1985). Third, the 'feeling rules,' that is, the "rules about what feeling is or isn't appropriate to a given social setting" (Hochschild, 1990:122), for 'good mothering' do not allow women to feel that motherhood is unworthy. Since such an emotional regulation frequently offers social rewards such as honor and esteem (Hochschild, 1990), women cannot afford to be labeled as 'unfit' mothers and to be exiled from the realm of acceptance. Fourth, relating to motherhood as superfluous does not correspond to the temporal logic according to which a linear progress of time will inevitably lead to a linear progressive development of positive feeling toward motherhood (Shelton & Johnson, 2006) evaluating it as worthwhile. While it is not only legitimate, but blessed to 'time travel' toward the future and imagine motherhood as a promise, it is considered a breach of the rules to 'time travel' to the past without confirming the worthiness of motherhood.

In light of these rigid cultural logics which sketch an allegedly singular temporal–emotive road on a single map, this article aims to chart alternative temporal–emotive lanes and maps by relating to the emotional stance of regretting motherhood. The discussion is based on in-depth interviews with 23 Jewish–Israeli women who regret becoming mothers; that is, mothers – some of whom are already grandmothers – who say that if they could go back in time, bearing in mind the knowledge and experience they have today, they would not have had children; as Tirtza, a mother of two in their thirties, and a grandmother, puts it:

Every time I talk to my friends I tell them that if I had had the insights and the experience I have today, I wouldn't have created even a quarter of a child. The thing that is most painful to me is that I can't go back in time. Impossible. Impossible to repair.

Following accounts of regret, the article suggests that this emotional stance may serve as a lens through which we can view, from a different angle, the interplay between subjectivity, agency, and social order, as well as the different ways in which

mothers from different ethnicities and classes try to navigate these woods.

Following McMahon (1995), the first part of the article aims to move from the prevalent stance on motherhood in Western societies, one that is always satisfied with the *outcomes* (the mere existence of motherhood), to an analysis of *processes* which look at the diverse paths through which women become mothers and their subjective/retrospective interpretations of their experiences. Thus, this section relates to some of the paths followed by the participants of this study in their transition to their maternal relationships. I suggest that all these paths call into question the 'no-choice/choice' binary and thus allow looking into other notions in the field of reproduction and motherhood, such as 'will,' 'desire,' 'orientations' and 'consent.'

In the second part of the article it is suggested that the inclusion of regretting motherhood in the human terrain of regret, and the inclusion of regret in the human terrain of motherhood, meaning, in the subjective repertoire of mothers' experiences, enable us to view regret as "after the fact" agency. In other words, women who regret becoming mothers might undergo a hindsight experience of agency as they 'travel' through alternative temporal scenarios, applying judgments, calculations, and assessments to their inter-subjective maternal relationships throughout this 'journey.'

Regretting motherhood: societal and theoretical contexts

Addressing the emotional stance of regret cannot be taken for granted given the pronatalist social climate prevalent in numerous countries, including Israel. Total fertility rates in Israel are the highest in the developed world,¹ and it is a global superpower as far as reproduction technologies are concerned since it makes greater use of them than any other country (e.g. Gooldin, 2008; Remennick, 2006).

The literature teaches us that motherhood in Israel has held a place of honor in the public discourse from the pre-state period to the present. The obligation to be a mother is present in religious commandments, such as "be fruitful and multiply," which have been given secular ideological validity as well, and in the militaristic, nationalist, and Zionist ideological imperatives. The cultural belief systems relating to Jewish women's reproductive abilities are deeply rooted in the memory of the Holocaust and a consciousness of conflict and wars. Within such a social climate, most Jewish women's reproductive abilities are exploited by the state to advance a nationalist plan, and their wombs are perceived as a 'national womb' to be recruited for the greater Jewish good (Berkovitch, 1999).

The cultural context within which women in the current study became mothers and regret it, can be summarized by saying that the cultural imperative to have children in Israel is tenacious to the extent that the intended outcome is ensured since it is supposedly clear in advance that any woman will prefer the status of motherhood to any other status.

Yet addressing the emotional stance of regret cannot be taken for granted in relation to feminist scholarship either. While the experiences of mothers are the focus of intensive inquiry in gender/queer studies, regret, as a rule, is hardly ever mentioned as a legitimate topic in the interdisciplinary theorization of reproduction and motherhood. In addition, since the 1980s the very obligation to become a mother was – broadly speaking – 'pushed aside' to the margins of feminist

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