A Historical Analysis of Mothering Research in the Field of Family Studies:
The Evolution of Feminist Mothering

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In the paper, I will explore the ways in which feminist theory and methodology have shaped the field of family studies and more specifically I will focus on the historical and contemporary literature and research on mothering. First, through a historical analysis of the field’s conceptualization of motherhood, I will illustrate the ways in which feminist theory and methods have played an integral part in existing family research. An analysis of this extensive body of research indicates that there is a need for a more broad based, active, and accessible approach in our attempts to understand the diversity of the experiences of “motherhood and mothers”. Second, I will incorporate a critical analysis of feminist family praxis. Third, I will examine current trends in the field. Fourth, I will explore from a standpoint perspective, mothering across the generations. Finally, I will provide my own interpretations of the evolution and future of the field of feminist family studies and its exploration of what it means to be a mother.

In an evolving interdisciplinary collaboration of theory, research methods, and activism, feminist theory and epistemology provide the social sciences with a framework to question, discuss, explore and share the experiences of people in the context of gender, sex, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability, nation and age. Feminist theory and research is driven by intellectual philosophy and political commitments to address social problems, ask unanswered questions, and empower individuals, families and groups. One
of the primary goals of feminist theory is to end the social and political oppression of marginalized populations. As such, feminist scholars and scholarship serves as a catalyst for social change. Feminist methodologies provide a discursive analysis of the impact of power inequalities. They provide a framework enabling researchers to recognize and acknowledge their identity and power and utilize the unique intersections of the self to shape and critique their own work.

**A Historical Look at the Social Construction of Motherhood**

Feminist scholarship focusing on mothering and the family was established in the latter part of the 20th century. Since the 1970’s feminist scholars have developed a variety of approaches to the study of the women’s experiences. Early researchers faced considerable obstacles from traditional quantitative family studies scholars. The gradual development of and increased access to feminist works began with the inclusion of feminist qualitative work in journals, such as the Journal of Marriage and Family. This, in turn, has led to a broader and more creative exploration of the experiences of mothers and families. In order to gain an indepth understanding of the nature and experiences of families, feminist family researchers have utilized theoretical constructs that specifically explore the symbolic meanings associated with social constructs. For example, postmodern feminist theory and research embraces change and fluidity in the ways of knowing, while simultaneously calling for increased actionoriented research building support and empowerment for women (Stacey, 1996).
Working from a feminist theoretical perspective leads researchers to analyze and critique social structures, while centering gender. In the discourse and analysis of inequities, power dynamics, there have been conflicting intellectual traditions affecting how researchers give meaning to social phenomena such as motherhood (Wood, 1995). Motherhood has traditionally been conceptualized as a biologically based, exclusive, and private role (Thompson & Walker, 1989). The social construction of this role has only recently been explored. For example, the nature of research focusing on motherhood has created debate regarding the perception of a dichotomy between the private and public world. This polarized understanding of public and private sphere as it relates to mothering has been examined by feminist family scholarship in the areas of reproductive and productive work, access to social supports, and the role of public policy. In addition, the traditional cultural images of mothers and families that have been assumed to be static in the field historically are now being re-examined through a feminist lens that recognizes a changing social and economic context, rich cultural transformations such as industrialization and globalization.

In a socio-historical analysis of the social construction of motherhood and family the 19th century, Michelle Adams (2009) examines the role of the “pro-family” campaign which sought to reinforce the concept of family and gendered roles as natural. Adams illustrated how this anti-feminist movement supported and oppressed women’s opportunities, roles, and relationships in the family structure. More recent studies have shifted the focus to the experiences of mothers in relationship to the special construction of motherhood. This traditional symbolic imagery of mothering centralizes mother-child
relationships, the connection between this relationship and maternal identity, the self-worth of mothers, and a view of work and family life as an oppositional dichotomy.

At odds with so-called “pro-family” campaigns, the discourse associated with the second wave of feminism questions the construction of women’s roles and motherhood, resulting in a debate over women’s role as full-time homemakers versus full-time career professionals (Friedan, 1963). As the rate of employed mothers across all socio-economic statuses increased, the debate continued for decades, as the proportion of employed mothers with young children continued to climb (Casper and Bianchi, 2001). These social trends energized the ongoing debate about what it means to be a mother, what roles should be prioritized, and how women should perform motherhood (Walzer, 2004). The view that motherhood was a “natural” gendered social role which needed to be maintained in its traditional form was associated with patriarchal views and linked to the oppression of women. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Chodorow’s (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering* focused on mothers’ investment in mothering their daughters as a result of limited options.

Although motherhood is biologically as well as socially constructed and maintained role associated with essentialist understanding of woman in contemporary societies, the experience of motherhood is subjective and unique for each woman. Much of the Western research on motherhood has been linked to second wave of feminisms and has thus been criticized for its middle class interpretation of motherhood, both Friedan and Chodorow faced such criticisms.

The late 20th and early 21st century resulted in an increased focus on and understanding of the diversity and complexity of the experiences of motherhood. Studies
from a postmodern framework addressed the varied and multi-dimensional influences of the experience of mothers. However, despite diverse perspectives, the emphasis on mothering as a central and exclusive role continues to exist today for many women (Margolis, 1984).

In contrast to post modern perspective, functionalist ways of understanding the family are rooted in positivist family structures which have historically pervaded the field of family studies. Structural functionalism posits that roles in the family are gendered, static and provide a framework which maintains “equilibrium.” These functionalist roles and the assumption that family roles are “naturally” achieved by specific sex categories have been challenged by feminist family researchers (Osmond, 1987). Critics of this perspective have also drawn attention to the oppressive nature of idealizing the “benchmark” white middle class heterosexual nuclear family and called for a more diverse and inclusive way of understanding the family (Thorne, 1982).

One component of the feminist postmodernist methodological innovation is the use of “reflexivity.” In order to promote information that is representative of women’s experiences across stratification levels and across the globe, in a historically patriarchal and privileged white Euro-centric field, feminist methodologists incorporate a reflexive role into their work. This process is useful for researchers in order to avoid potential biases. Reflexivity places the researcher as well as the process under scrutiny. This is an attempt to avoid a Western middle-class in the generation and interpretation of research findings. Non-reflexive research practice tends to be exploitive rather than empowering to marginalized populations (Baca Zinn and Dill, 1994). Therefore, by utilizing reflexivity, researcher’s identity, privilege, and stance are overtly examined, critiqued,
Another component of feminist post-modernist research, introduced by women of color, is the standpoint theorists’ use of “multiple lenses” to understand “lived experience”. Collins (1990) is an advocate of standpoint theory, which illustrates the importance of a person’s position within a particular culture as a determinant of the way they perceive themselves and others. From the vantage of standpoint theory, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and social class are seen as determinants of an individual’s subjective values, beliefs, and life experiences. These socio-demographic variables, in turn, interact to influence the ways in which a person will know and understand the world. The applicability of the theory is underscored by research focusing on ethnic similarities and differences in the understandings of motherhood. Standpoint theory also incorporates an analysis of privileges and oppressions and the ways in which these influence various life choices such as the decision to become a mother.

Contemporary feminist scholarship challenges Eurocentric white, middle class interpretations and understanding of mothers by exploring the experiences of international women from a socio-cultural framework. One way of understanding this socio-cultural framework is to explore the identity and symbolism that is a central and driving force in the construction of motherhood. Focusing on women living in poverty, Edin and Kafeles ((2005) explored conceptualizations of motherhood and the meanings associated motherhood in their book Promises I Can Keep. In this ethnographic study, Edin and Kafeles provide an in depth illustration of how mothers in poor urban communities may postpone choosing marriage, but embrace motherhood. Many of the women interviewed constructed motherhood as an empowering life choice. This approach contradicts more traditional assumptions that lead to what is called a deficit
perspective on family—that non-nuclear families are “broken” or “dysfunctional”. In addition, this approach influenced the academic and social discourse associated with mothering, marriage, family structure, and social location.

As a result of these various movements, contemporary Feminist family studies not only examines the ways in which information is gathered, it also encourages researchers to include subjective experiences and to honor the voices and perspectives of participants. By incorporating voices of marginalized groups in academic scholarship, researchers can help bridge the power gap between academia and the real world. Examples of this empowering method of study include, April Few’s (2007) research on how race/ethnicity and Black feminist theory contribute to consciousness-raising and activism. Similarly, Sara Ruddick (1983) focused on motherhood by discussing the humanistic and caring nature of mothers in responding to the needs of others in her work *Maternal Thinking: Towards politics of Peace*. By framing motherhood as a form of activism in the community contributing to politics of peace Ruddick presents an empowering approach to the historically oppressive roles of motherhood and how these roles can translate into social movements.

While Family Studies was born in the Progressive Era, a time when families were experiencing an array of social problems and extreme poverty, the complexity of feminist family praxis and delineating its position in today’s field is a exigent task. For example, feminist family studies has taken an active role in addressing inequities for various structures of families in diverse socio-economic contexts, but critiques have questioned how these studies have been applied to support and better the everyday lives of the participants. A significant piece of feminist family literature explores the experience of
single female headed households in challenging economic conditions, however, single mothers continue to be more likely to live in poverty, engage in disproportionately higher levels of primary caretaking activities, be less educated, and are more likely to be unemployed in comparison to married mothers.

**Contemporary Feminist Theories and Methods Shaping Meanings of Motherhood**

Despite considerable social and cultural change, a hierarchal heterosexual ideal of the family continues to exist in much of the world, even in Western societies. Nevertheless, a growing body of research has provided ways to tackle monolithic assumptions by incorporating queer theory into the analysis of families. Judith Butler (1990), for example, suggests that a traditional rigid framework that reinforces dichotomous and imbalanced constructions of gender supports the inequitable distribution of resources, devalue of paid and unpaid work, and privileges heterosexual partners. Her valuable work provides researchers with tools to deconstruct heteronormative ideals that have permeated the field. Queer family theory challenges heteronormativity and the symbolic meanings it reinforces. This framework has mistakenly been perceived as solely dedicated to the understanding of gay and lesbian families, however, queer theory can be useful in understanding any resistance to and reinforcement of hetero-normativity (Oswald, 2002).

People’s experiences are culturally imbedded. In an effort to incorporate an understanding of motherhood positioned in discussion of culture, power, and privilege, it is essential to strive for a multi-cultural analysis of mothering. Recently, feminist family
researchers have challenged essentialist constructions and used transnational feminist frameworks to examine the experiences of women and mothers. Transnational feminism emphasizes gender, class, and structure in relation to geographies of power (Pessar and Mahler, 2003). This theoretical framework is useful in exploring global diversity in family and motherhood, including the experiences of a growing number of mothers who cross borders for work, to seek political asylum, or to leave environmentally devastated or war-torn regions of the world.

The transnational feminist framework examines the experience of marginalized groups in the context of migration, dominant cultural narratives, and social class hierarchy (Mahalingham, 2007). This perspective incorporates an intersectional lens on transnational families. This lens explores the interaction of social and geographic locations in relation to the construction of gender and power across the globe.

Immigration and migration put extra stressors on mothers already pressured by economic, environmental, or political factors. Some mothers leave children behind in the care of family members while they immigrate to foreign lands. Some mothers immigrate with children, leaving partners behind and leading to negotiated new roles of parenting responsibilities in new cultural contexts. Immigrants and migrants not only cross geographic boundaries, they also cross social and psychological boundaries. For example, while dominant white middle class cultural images of mothering provide contrasting representations of motherhood, mothers who immigrate to the U.S. maintain their own cultures’ ideal concept of motherhood that maintains positive and resilient beliefs about mothering practices. These practices are often grounded in their “native” culture and incorporate cultural narratives that empower women regardless of social location and
mobility (Espin, 1994). In a recent study of first generation Indian immigrant women in
the United States revealed that these women maintained culturally linked identities of
mothering and positive perceptions of their role as a mother, regardless of unattainable
contrasting cultural images of motherhood dominating the U.S..

The analysis of cultural narrative has also been used as a critical component of
ethnic identity and cohesiveness in a growing body of cross-cultural research. Margaret
Manoogian, Alexis Walker, and Leslie Richards explore the how mothers experience
genocide from a socio-historical perspective in their qualitative study of the family legacies
transmitted across the generations by older Armenian mothers (2007). As illustrated in
their work, incorporating a gendered lens is an integral, but incomplete process in the
feminist analysis of power our understanding of individual and family’s experiences.
Stemming from standpoint theory, intersectionality provides researchers with a
framework that explores the influence of multiple layers of identities, while examining
how these identities have a unique and collaborative influence on the lived experience
and social contexts of families. Intersectionality has been recently applied to the
discourse on feminist praxis. Incorporating a complex analysis of the role of researcher
in the lives of research participants, can provide a useful but challenging tool that helps
generate new knowledge and contribute to empowerment for all involved (Allen, 2000).

Feminist family research has historically incorporated a work-and-family
discourse in an effort to challenge the traditional separateness of public and private
spheres. For example, Garvey (1999) challenges social construction of productive and
reproductive work in her proposal of a weaving framework, suggesting that women have
worked in the paid and unpaid labor force throughout time and integrated both roles in
their experiences as mothers. The negotiation and balancing of mother’s work continues
to present challenges to women. These challenges are described in Hochschild’s concept of the second shift (1989). In an effort to represent mothers work across race/ethnicity, class, some studies have addressed the ways in which women struggle to manage their multiple roles of mother, worker, household manager. Feminist family researchers have explored paid and unpaid work negotiations and distribution in egalitarian heterosexual marriages, urban single female headed households, and mothers receiving public assistance (Edin and Lein, 1997). Contemporary discussion on work, choice, and motherhood has come to the forefront of motherhood discourse. Stemming from third wave feminist discussions, tensions between choices relating to opting in or out of motherhood (Richards, 2008), a trend towards less “intensive” mothering and the influence of capitalism, globalization, and a gendered construction of work have begun to shape our understanding of opportunities and obstacles for working mothers.

A Critical Analysis of Practice and Visions of Future Feminist Family Studies

The challenge in feminist praxis is positioning these findings in policy reformation and in turn influencing social change. As feminists advocate for a more inclusive family perspective in the field (Allen, 2000), a lack of dissemination of research findings on the challenges many families face along with the strengths of single mothers living in poverty, leads to the failure to connect scholars with policy makers and the community to collaborate for social change. Marriage initiatives fail at leveling the opportunity structures for single mothers in poverty and do not eliminate the disadvantages children face. Therefore, the call for policies promoting and supporting
economic stability, educational opportunities, and child caretaking support has been suggested as more useful approach (Heard, 2007).

In their review of the field, Wills and Risman (2006) suggest that family studies and feminism are not mutually exclusive; yet they call for a more of an integration of questioning, discussing and exploring the family with a feminist lens. Discussion of the experiences of families and mothers have taken place throughout history, however, we have only recently developed an adequate theoretical and methodological perspective that is inclusive of all families regardless of gender, sex, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability, nation and age. Feminist epistemologies have provided the field with ways to frame our investigations of social phenomena to ensure scholars incorporate an analysis of the role of the researcher, the symbolic meanings that individuals and families give to their lived experiences, the context of the constructed social structures these experiences take place, and the reflexive and active role of the participants and researchers.

Research on motherhood is an example of how research questions and methods have been shaped by both feminism and the field of family studies. As a new feminist, new scholar and new mother, I have been disappointed at the disjointed nature of the three areas that shape my personal identity as well as my scholarship. While I believe the field of family studies has grown to embrace feminist theory and methods in exploring the experiences of marginalized families, I feel that the only way we are going to promote equal access to resources, knowledge and power is to use the tools we apply in feminist works examine influential and dominate groups in order to gain an understanding of their role in reinforcing privilege and unequal power structures. I have met family scholars that do not identify as feminists, nor do they use common feminist practices in research, however, most of these scholars work with intentions of gaining a better understanding of
the family experience and in turn provide a new voice to a new family. As a feminist I
hope to have the opportunity to hear these voices and participate in an exchange of
knowledge through collaborative discourse. I believe it is through this continued
cooperation my roles of family studies academic, feminist and mother will be embraced
as a strength, allowing me to voice one of many meanings and interpretations of
motherhood in family studies. In conclusion, I look forward to incorporating and
drawing from accomplished and influential scholars in the field, while practicing feminist
research methods, using a critical feminist eye to interpret my subjective observations in
hopes of contributing to the theoretically rich and diverse understandings of the family.

As a feminist and a scholar, I feel that it is essential to incorporate an analysis of
the intersecting identities of age, gender, culture, education and family in an effort to
demonstrate the importance of reflexivity in feminist works. By illustrating the role of
reflexivity in this paper I hope to deflect a one-way exchange of information, which
commonly reifies imbalanced power structures in an attempt to avoid contextual
stripping. By challenging my objectivity, reflexivity incorporates an upfront and overt
analysis of the role of my own self and identity in the writing process.

A Reflexive Analysis of Motherhood: Intersecting Generation, Culture, and Education

It is difficult to critically analyze the contributions of feminist scholarship without
personalizing the direction of the research. Feminist research has added multiple
dimensions and richness to social science scholarship. Research which has focused on the
experience of motherhood has added depth and breadth to our understanding of the live
experiences of women. For myself, as a mother, daughter, friend, student, and teacher, reading and conducting scholarship from this perspective has guided my understanding of the ways in the structure of my social roles have been shaped by the social and cultural context in which I have lived my life to this point. Feminist theory and research has validated the subjective and diverse experience of what it means to a mother in contemporary societies. Differential access to economic resources has always been a factor in the choices women have. Feminist scholarship has successfully challenged traditional views of women as vulnerable because of their ability to bear children in their desire to rear and care for children. Nevertheless, in most parts of the world women are still not allotted a choice in taking on the role of a mother.

My grandparents were socialized during difficult economic times, the depression and WWII. These traumatic events shaped their lives and the choices they were able to make. My grandmothers came from very different parts of the world. My paternal grandmother spent her entire life in Alabama. She was an early feminist, advocated choices for women, divorced an alcoholic abusive husband, hired help, and went to work as a bookkeeper and supported her family. When she did have a free day, not often, she indulged in her passion, community theatre. She made her own choices, but it was not an easy life, had she not had the support of four sisters, she would have been a lonely women.

My maternal grandmother married at seventeen, spent her much of her married life in Iran, bearing seven children and subjugating her passion for painting to the expectations placed on her by her husband and his family. Only in her seventies was she able to live a life of choice, but the choice came with a price, twenty four hours a day of
care giving for her husband who has Alzheimer’s. Nevertheless for the first time she can
decide how to spend some portion of her days. A choice she appreciates daily. My
mother's early socialization was in the Middle East, she was raised to expect and arranged
marriage to a relative. Exposure to Western choices in adolescence resulted in
questioning and challenging the plans made for her. She challenged an arranged
marriage, studied psychology in an attempt to more fully understand the lives of women
and families around the world, she attempted and still struggles to chart her own way.
Feminist scholarship has offered insight into the experiences of immigrant women. The
growing traditional of narrative analysis has been utilized to examine the lives of
immigrant women (Espin, 1996). This scholarship has helped my mother better
understand her struggles and life experiences. It is also an area which deserves further
study; we still have not fully explored the transitions and stresses of immigrant women.
My mother also spent her childhood and adolescence caring for her younger siblings, a
care she resented and disliked, an obligation that is placed on girls in most parts of the
world, giving them early responsibilities, in essence robbing them of their childhood.
This is another area scholarship which has not been addressed sufficiently by feminist
scholars. The subjugation of older siblings, almost exclusively older female sibling, has
forced millions of young girls into early responsibilities and into the roles of early
surrogate motherhood. My mother managed to put aside this role, after several years, at
the same time she became a young mother herself and struggled with the double shift of
mothers in contemporary western societies, working, studying, caring for her children,
and maintaining a household. She speaks of years of struggle and loneliness while
attempting to fulfill these multiple demands of multiple roles. In an attempt to chart her own course, she gave up much of the support of her extended Middle Eastern family.

Women everywhere make difficult choices between individual freedom, marriage and commitments to family life and motherhood. In some cultural contexts, however, if a woman exercises the freedom to seek love, choose her own partner, or pursue a career, the choice sometimes carries a high price possibly leading isolation from family, community, and culture. Doing what is “expected,” on the other hand, could potentially result in personal costs that may outweigh the benefits of familial support. The burdens of the double shift have resulted in considerable threats to the health and happiness of contemporary mothers. This is an area of scholarship which could be addressed more comprehensively. I was socialized by liberal parents who encouraged to chart my own course, I was given choices, choose a partner or not, marry or not, motherhood or not, career or not. Despite these outward choices, I felt constrained and was influenced by the pervasive cultural messages about what it means to be a women and a mother. Despite my understandings of the social construction of how “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) contributes to the cultural image of motherhood I feel compelled to followed well charted paths, which did not work for me. I was able to change course, but not without difficulty and pain for myself and those close to me.

Feminist writing has provided me with tools that have supported and enriched my experience as a process mother. It has encouraged exploration and clarity in my journey. Feminist theorists and researchers focusing on women’s experiences have noted that women’s identity is influenced by an ongoing collaboration between individual needs, the drive for connections with family and community and culture contexts (Irandokht,
Sadeghi, & Vasudeva, 2006). My family’s life experiences illustrates this point and my writing articulates the constant and life long struggle for the connection of social thought, acquired knowledge, and socially constructed symbolic influences, a struggle that multiple mother’s face and I hope many more have the opportunity to voice.
References


