Motherwork in Academe: Intensive Caring for the Millenial Student

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Social critics and scholars argue convincingly that contemporary trends toward intensive interaction are spinning motherhood out of control (Douglas and Michaels 1-27; Maushart 171-212; Warner). Those same trends, I argue, are creeping into many academic institutions in the forms of increased expectations for responding to the “new millenial” student. To advance this argument, first, I trace the trends in contemporary society that frame motherhood to place mothering in context. Second, I argue that shifts in mothering expectations impinge upon and shape expectations of female professors, especially in the small college environment.

Contemporary Motherhood in Context

Attitudes about mothering are connected to changing beliefs about the nature of childhood. Mintz argues that the 1990s carried a “grossly inflated and misplaced sense of crisis” about the welfare of children (326). In contrast to an historically sturdier image of the resilient child, children now are seen as easily breakable, innocent, and in need of protection (Stearns); or, relatedly, as easily led astray and therefore potentially dangerous (Mintz 337-8). According to Stearns, contemporary views posit children as emotionally vulnerable (threatened by sibling rivalry, bullying, failure), physically vulnerable (threatened by inadequate nutrition, bad posture, improper hygiene, childhood diseases), sexually vulnerable (threatened by religious clergy, predators on the Internet, AIDS), and mortally vulnerable to accidents that may cause death in the simple course of everyday living. In this philosophical turn, moral panic has ensued, and “parental obligations [have] increased immeasurably” (Stearns 25).

As philosophies toward children shifted, definitions of mothering intensified (Douglas and Michaels 85-109). In the early 1900s, motherhood was considered akin to a biological trait: Mothering, according to Roth-

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man, “was not something women did, it was something women were” (22). Unfortunately, this problematic discourse that essentialized women was exchanged for another problematic discourse that is burning women out. Rothman among others noted this change in discourse about mothering: “The new language saw mothering as an activity, as service, as work—and children as the product produced by the labor of mothering” (Rothman 23; see also Medved and Kirby 456). Under these new rules, if we’re good mothers, we produce good and healthy children. If we’re not, we don’t. The stakes are very high.

The current “mothering as labor” era carries a particular burden of expectation in the amount of private and public labor that is required. Spockian parenting ratchets up what it takes to be considered a good mother, falling into what Hays calls the ideology of intensive mothering, a model of socially appropriate mothering that explicitly “advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (x). Mothers often report feeling compelled to do and do and do—because in mainstream parenting, labor is translated as love.

Central to that caring/labor is an expectation for interaction between mothers and children. Middle-class American mothers are told constantly to interact with their children lest grave consequences ensue. Warner noted this pressure and its effects:

The New York Times, What to Expect, and my mother, an educator, all issued ringing endorsements: read! talk! sing! And so I did. I talked and sang and made up stories and did funny voices and narrated car rides and read at meal times until, when my daughter turned four and a half, I realized that I had turned into a human television set, so filled with twenty-four-hour childrens’ programming that I felt as though I had no thoughts left of my own. And, as I listened to the maddening chatter of the playground moms around me in America, I realized that I hadn’t been alone in my excess. (114)

American mothers worry that if they do not interact constantly, their young children will not thrive. If we do not care, they will not live happy, satisfying lives.

As a result of mothers’ alleged responsibility for their children’s every success or failure, “Mother-blame is pervasive in our society” (Chase and Rogers 47). Without much help from outside social structures, however,
mothers find it impossible to afford their children a caring environment at all times. Though attention has been paid to a lack of structural support, blame, in US culture, is levelled individually, within the rhetoric of choice.² Moreover, the tendency to blame both other and self is pervasive (Peskowitz).

As a consequence of so much blame, mother-guilt has come to be the norm. In his analysis of parenting over the last century, Stearns said that since the 1970s, the

most obvious [change for parents] was the guilt reaction, the fear that, whatever one did, it would be inadequate to help the child through its sea of troubles. The goal of happiness and success for children was not new, but now it was clouded by the understanding that its achievement was not automatic, that more than childish self-help was essential. And who was at fault when the goal proved elusive? (55)

Although Bettelheim, partly in an effort to allay such a trend, wrote A Good Enough Parent, the title of which was derived from D.W. Winnicott’s concept of the “good enough” mother, such efforts unfortunately did not drown out the narratives that drive mothers to go to Herculean lengths to ensure their children’s success. Warner argues that now it is considered “normal that motherhood should be fraught with anxiety and guilt and exhaustion” (15). Many children presumably grow up considering those child-focused efforts to be normal, too.

Intensive Mothering in Academe: The Mandate to Care

These children are now our students, whom we still are mothering. The vulnerable-child parenting philosophy and its resulting intensification of mothering practices has made its way into our student-centered classrooms. A shift toward intensive mothering influences college policies and programs, especially on the small college campus, as many academic institutions compete for each new crop of young people with increasing expectations that we care about them and their personhood. Even prospective students’ on-campus visits increasingly involve personal contact with professors, with students rating such availability as an important part of their college decision-making process (Ashburn; Winzenburg).
Is it therefore just as “normal” for mother-professors to be guilt-ridden, “fraught with anxiety and guilt and exhaustion”? Indeed, to be told that some interaction with some students is not enough, that every student, like every child, ought to have one-on-one attention in order for him or her to develop to the fullest capacity? Communication scholars have long noted a greater expectation of emotional labor and explicit relational caring from females as compared to males (Wood). The mandate to care for our students, then, is likely to be felt and practiced differently by men and women. Mothers, of course, are keenly aware of what it means to care, as cultural discourses incessantly punish mothers deemed to be “uncaring” (Rothman).\(^3\) The mother-professor becomes a role with very high expectations.

Much data on the new millenial student have indicated that students currently desire, even expect, a tremendous amount of communication and guidance in educational institutions and the workplace (Holtz). Students want “caring” teachers who spend time with them, helping them solve problems both in and out of the classroom (Jaasma and Koper, “Relationship”; Jaasma and Koper, “Out-of-Class”; Teven and Gorham; Teven and Hanson; Teven and McCroskey). And educators, like the mothers reported on in multiple works, often expect the same from themselves. Similar to the goals of new mothering, the goal of many academic institutions is for educators to “produce” a successful and thriving student (Stephenson).\(^4\)

The intense interaction so highly valued in middle-class parenting is now the professional norm for many teachers and professors in small schools (“Sizing Up Colleges”; “Small Colleges”). When she moved to the US, Judith Warner recognized a strange shift in her parenting style reflecting the pressures she felt in this cultural parenting environment (“I had turned into a human television set”). That style is uncomfortably familiar in academic hallways. How often do we hear our colleagues say, “I had to do my song and dance to keep the students’ attention” (“read! talk! sing!”)? New millenial students are used to being sung to (“And so I did”). In dutiful responsive fashion, teachers find themselves performing—singing, entertaining, drawing in their otherwise-distracted audiences. These are the children we have mothered. Many of us are still mothering, not our own children, and not out of choice, but because it has become a professional expectation (Teven and Hanson).

Unfortunately, caring both is and is not considered part of the job. Caring tends to be hidden labor, strongly expected but not explicitly rewarded (Wood 56-7). Stone writes primarily about physical caregiving,
but her point applies to other caring professions and roles, too: “In every walk of caring, caregivers distinguish between ‘doing the job’ and ‘caring,’ between the physical tasks and the emotional relationship, between the technical quality and the moral value of what they do. In fact, they often describe good care by invoking technically good task performance as its opposite” (Stone, “Caring” 95). The pressure as teachers is to be both technically good and relationally caring. However, chatting with students in relaxed settings is not on our pre-tenure or merit review lists—it is considered akin to being a good sport, or a cooperative team player. Yet, the expectation for interaction in the small college environment is explicitly linked to caring behaviors.

Even if mothering is increasingly expected in academe, is it valued? The shift to interactive, caring education has not typically come with a concurrent shift in resources to keep intensive faculty-student relationships in place. In discussing care as a cultural practice, Benner and Gordon note:

The duty to care is imposed on the individual with no social support. When caring is studied at all, it is turned into personal attributes, such as attitudes, beliefs, abstract sentiments and intents and observable, isolated behaviors. The technical promise is that caring can be produced by identifiable, discrete caring behaviors, that we can provide it without paying for it or supporting it . . . . [Viewed as technique, caring] thus becomes a free choice made by human beings who are depicted as rational choicemakers . . . . We tend to view care and caring practices as yet one more set of choices, until of course, we find ourselves in the position of caring or needing care (Taylor 1989). Then, we may realize that we ‘had no choice,’ that care always implies situated or bounded choice. (50)

When we find ourselves in caring situations, our choices are limited, and on many campuses, there’s no tangible reward for these maternal practices. In fact, caring could hinder some promotions if such caring (emotional expertise) compromises one’s scholarly productivity (technical expertise). Stories abound of new faculty leaving because of work-life balance issues and their perceived lack of choice inside the profession (Williams).5
In short, the emotional work that we do at home is expected in many academic settings, especially the small college environment, so it is essentially uncompensated (Waggoner). I have focused much of my personal and professional life on caring relationships, and, amazingly, I find myself arguing for less care, as care has been traditionally defined. As a community, we simply must find a way to redefine professional caring in ways that do not produce burnout.

Academic conversations on mothering and professing suggest that we are living a model that is not sustainable. Unfortunately, many women may reach the conclusion either that they are not very good at mothering or teaching or that they must not care enough about parenting or teaching—that they have to compromise to be the “good enough” parent and the “good enough” teacher, while feeling in their hearts that such compromise is too costly. Because it damages our vulnerable children, any “compromise” may seem selfish. So many professor-mothers do their best not to give in; they do their best to mother all the time. Both roles, of mothers and of professors in the small college environment, carry tremendously high expectations for one-way interaction. To be both a good mother and a good teacher, according to currently dominant narratives, borders on an unbearable load. Personal discourses that suggest our work and family lives should be enjoyable further complicate the burden (Douglas and Michaels 1-27; Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, and Shepherd).

The Good Enough Professor or An Academic Village?

How can we work together to change these overly demanding and isolating discourses? Common solutions or advice given to the nearly burnt-out is to become, at base, “A Good Enough Professor.” This argument suggests we should better manage our personal resources to enable work/life balance (see Greenblatt). We may receive advice to close our doors more often, spend time working outside of our offices, or be intentionally “unavailable” for last-minute concerns of students. We could start docking points off students’ grades when they ask questions that could be answered if they had read the syllabus or we could refuse to construct new course schedules when students come to advising sessions unprepared. We might request that the advising distribution be public, so that every professor in the department has an equal number of advisees.

Some of these “solutions” can help us respond in the immediate. But this kind of proposal still assumes individual responsibility for the nur-
turing of a student, doing nothing to change the structures within which professors operate.

At a recent conference panel on mothering in the small college environment, a colleague who herself is a mother-professor noted, "If it takes a village to raise a child, perhaps it takes a village to teach a student" (Garland). Our efforts must first focus on working together to educate others on the contradictions involved in professionalizing motherwork. Part of that educating process involves having the courage to share our personal/professional experiences in public. In campus environments where such advocacy is deemed "whining," our rhetorical challenge is great. But the implications of silence about these pressures are grave. In the end, burned-out parents and professors do no good to anyone, and individuals working alone will not effect change.

Notes

1See Buxananell and Liu.

2This individualistic bent toward blaming individual mothers serves a definite social purpose according to Chase and Rogers: "Bad" mothers function as scapegoats, as diversions from the horrendous social problems of our time: persistent poverty, and pervasive racism, sexism, and heterosexism" (47). Focusing on a lack of caring instead of on a lack of support for working families blinds us to possible solutions that could help many people. The difficulty of parenting in our current cultural environment suggests a grand shift in priorities away from family-oriented policies. “Contrary to all the conservative rhetoric about families shirking their responsibilities, most families are making heroic efforts to care for themselves in the face of huge obstacles society puts in their way. The entire system of paid work is hostile to family responsibility. Rigid schedules, long hours, changing shifts, mandatory overtime, the near-universal lack of leave time to take care of sick relatives—all block workers from caring for their families” (Stone, “Why We Need” 13). It is easier and far more convenient to blame bad mothers rather than flawed child care, educational, and health care systems. Unfortunately, without support systems, it is rather easy to be considered a bad mother.

3Because uncritical cultural discourses posit stay-at-home moms as caring and professional mothers as selfish, some professional mothers report working doubly hard. Stephanie Coontz reported on a variety of responses to the work-life balance dilemma, including those from women who “felt so guilty about working that they produced more dependence in their children, doing too much for the kids in an attempt to make up for going off to work” (66).

4Stephenson notes six key characteristics of extraordinary teachers. Extraordinary teachers: (1) have great passion for their work; (2) know what to teach, how to teach, and how to improve; (3) excel at creating exciting classroom environments; (4) connect exceptionally well with students; (5) challenge students to reach their full potential; (6) get extraordinary results.

5Williams quotes a 2003 study at the University of California: “Nearly 60% of faculty members who are married moms are thinking of leaving the profession.”

6See Maushart on why American mothers are “disturbingly unprepared to discuss those challenges [of motherhood]” (xxi).