Final Project Letter of Intent

The Social Construction of Motherhood: Implications and Interventions

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Problem Statement

Adrienne Rich (1976) wrote “all human life on the planet is born of woman” (p. 11). The simplicity of this statement would lead one to believe that the task of mothering which follows birth would unfold with a similar simplicity. However, the social construction of motherhood has had a tumultuous history and it is fair to assume a tumultuous future will continue to follow at least in the near-term. The role definition of motherhood has passed from patriarchal systems for much of history through to the rise of feminism where attempts are being made to reduce and eliminate ideas of ownership and imbalances of power, as well as of hierarchical and dualistic thinking which have previously dominated the definition of motherhood. Kirkley (2000) has suggested that although women’s organizations and feminist theorists have established women’s right to participate in defining motherhood these advances have not simplified the process. What has resulted is a polarization of theories pointing to biology as either oppressive or liberating with variants of feminist ideology spread across a continuum in between those two points of view.

Mothering can be a difficult journey to navigate and this process of navigation often has devastating effects on women’s psychological and physical health. Allan (2004) posited that a mother’s role is perhaps “woman’s most enduring role in the Western world” (p. 57) and that because the definition and resulting expectations are constructed and reconstructed with each passing political, social, and cultural wave women often opt to experience the difficult aspects of motherhood in isolation rather than risking the consequences of having publicly failed in their role as mothers.
Within this letter of intent, I will propose a final project aimed at exploring the social construction of motherhood over the past thirty years. The implications which have resulted from these constructions have had direct results on the identity development of women in their role as mothers. Although a significant amount of literature exists which addresses this topic it has only recently been acknowledged that women’s identity development is different from that of men. Result from this acknowledgement Greene (2003) suggested that it is essential that a new perspective on the identity development of women be recognized in a framework which acknowledges and emphasizes the temporality, emergence, and human agency which are intricately woven into the lives of women. This project will be conducted with a focus on literature which best represents the aforementioned topics from a feminist perspective but will also canvas non-feminist writings that involve concepts of the social construction of the roles of motherhood. This project will also be restricted to literature written mainly from a Western cultural perspective.

In this project I propose to: (1) conduct a literature review which explores the social construction of motherhood over the past thirty years (1977-2007) although brief discussions of motherhood in the 1950s and 1960s may be relevant; (2) investigate and connect identity development in women with their role as mothers from a feminist perspective; (3) outline the implications that the social construction of motherhood has had on women with particular regard to mothers’ mental health; (4) discuss intervention strategies for counsellors and other helping professionals who work with women experiencing difficulties in their roles as mothers; and (5) develop a pamphlet that will incorporate findings of this project in a practical and usable format that will be accessible to women and available in counselling agencies, healthcare facilities, or other organizations commonly accessed by women seeking support.
Definitions

In this project the terms and phrases *social construction, role definitions, mothering, motherhood*, and *postmodern theories* are central to the body of this work and as such require definition. For the purpose of this project the term *social construction* will refer to ideological constructs which have been established, adopted, and institutionalized by participants in Western culture who act together within a social framework following a set of conventional rules and behaving as if the rules have been agreed upon and are immutable (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The phrase *role definitions* will be used as a means of addressing the socially constructed rules, either in those rules institutionalized or personal variations and as such rules are applied to the duties of motherhood. The term *motherhood* will be used in reference to the institutionalization of this term which historically has been constructed in systems dominated by patriarchal perspectives and therefore carries an oppressive connotation. The term *mothering* will refer to the agency of women in their role as mothers and is therefore regarded as having the potential for empowerment (O’Reilly, 2006).

The theoretical foundations that will inform this project will primarily be based on *postmodern theories* and the counselling therapies which have resulted from postmodern ideology. Postmodern theories and their commensurate counselling interventions share an understanding that “beliefs, laws, social customs, habits of dress and diet – all the things that make up the psychological fabric of reality arise through interaction over time” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 23). Postmodern theories place an emphasis on the social construction and determinacy of meaning and language which forms those meanings. Postmodern counselling interventions share this focus and aim to assist clients to construct new meanings by rescripting the stories of client’s lives (Faiver, Eisengart, & Colonna, 2004).
Rationale

Motherhood as an institution has been the topic of a large body of work both by feminist scholars and other authors writing on the subject of motherhood and women’s identity development. Johnson and Ferguson (1990) suggested that most cultures have specific rules that define the role of motherhood thereby institutionalizing mothers’ roles. In addition, women internalize and personalize the institutional definition based on individual experiences which serve to ensure a multitude of role descriptions. Regardless of whether the definition is institutionalized or a personal variation, one aspect of motherhood agreed upon in the 21st century regardless of the ideological position of the writer is that motherhood is an idealized role (Hays, 1996; Dally, 1983; McMahon, 1995; Rabuzzi, 1988; Rubin, 1984; Sebald, 1976). Dally (1983) described idealization as:

A feeling of love towards something or somebody towards whom one actually has feelings of both love and hate. The hate is ignored and so kept from consciousness. The love is unrealistic because it is separated from the hate which it is inextricably connected.

(as cited in Tardy, 2000, p. 437)

The idealization of motherhood is a concept which has followed the historical social constructions of the definition and continues to persist today. Rubin (1984) suggested that motherhood was a symbol of an “untainted humanity so powerful as to infatuate a century of European writers, philosophers, and thinkers—an inspiration to such men as Freud, Darwin, Marx and Engels” (p. 50). In the 1960s with the advent of birth control mothering became more of an option for women. This option challenged women to examine their choices in relation to identity development and mothering as well as adding to the complexity of the role definition and identity development of women (Reger, 2001). Resulting from the availability and reasonable
effectiveness of birth control society has been grappling with the issue of determining if a woman who chooses not to have children could still meet the standards of what it means to be a real woman (Kirkley, 2000). A more current controversy regarding the idealization of motherhood focuses on women who stay at home verses those who work. Gorman and Fritzsche (2002) noted that a “good mother” is now typified as one who remains at home and makes the primary focus of her world the development of her children. This belief persists regardless of the increasing number of women who work outside the home.

The polarities inherent in the definition of idealization have resulted in the creation of standards which are impossible to describe and therefore unobtainable in regard to motherhood. However, a need to simplify and synthesize the literature which explores how and why these idealized notions of motherhood have come to exist, and continue to exist, is critical to developing an understanding of the implications which have resulted from these socially constructed idealizations.

Reference to the Literature

A tertiary review of the literature reveals that these idealized concepts of motherhood have served to pit women against each other rather than unite women in opposition to the organizations and institutional structures that have created and maintained these ideals. This division is in addition to the negative psychological and physical health implications which may result in the lives of women who struggle to understand and define their role as mothers. Jackson and Mannix (2004) suggested that the behaviours and actions of women as mothers are subject to scrutiny in ways that do not occur for men and fathers. Mother blaming results when women are perceived as having failed at maintaining or achieving the idealized norms which exist in the institutionalization of motherhood or in the internalized variations of those constructs. Current
trends in parenting such as lone parenting, working mothers, lesbian mothers, and other mothering situations which fall outside the traditional definition of motherhood, have further complicated the process of role definition. Arendell (2000) referred to these developing trends in motherhood as the “deviancy discourses of mothering” (p. 1192) and suggested that these groups of women are often subject to extreme forms of mother blaming, including being held responsible for, at least in part, the deterioration of modern society. Sarafino (2006) posited that marginalized mothers are at a greater risk of developing chronic health conditions such as chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, depression, anxiety, and other stress related disorders.

The idealization of motherhood has forced many women to face the difficulties of trying to achieve the elusive and dynamic standards of motherhood in isolation. Greene (2005) has suggested that postmodern feminist theories, such as those posited by Jordan (1997) and Gilligan (1982), have contributed to recognizing the importance of women’s relationships with the significant people in their lives and how these relationships impact the development of the female identity. Other postmodern theorists (Joy, 1993; Ricoeur, 1991) have encouraged a hermeneutic approach to female identity development which views the interpretation of identity as open to revision. Ricoeur (1991) suggested that “such a conception of self allows a recovery of identity in the sense of a core identity, a distinctive self, but in a form which is perpetually developing and changing” (p. 105). Although postmodern theories have attempted to reduce women’s isolation by recognizing the need for women to be understood in the context of their relationships as well as through the narratives which form the stories of women’s lives, Goffman (1959) eluded to the increasing trend in Western societies to have one set of language and behaviours that represents the individual’s performance in public and another set of language and behaviours that occurs out of public sight. Tardy’s (2004) research supports Goffman’s
contentions by producing research results which conclude that any topic not reinforcing the standards of what it means to be a good mother continues to remain in the private world of women which then serves to perpetuate and maintain women’s suffering in isolation.

Doka (2000) posited that disenfranchised grief is a specific form of complicated grief that an individual suffers when the experience or loss they incur cannot be “openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (p. 4). When a woman perceives herself as not having achieved the standard of what it means to be a good mother, regardless of how the role is defined, the result is feelings of guilt, blame, shame, and marginalization (Allan, 2004). Smith (1997) contended that the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief is increasing for women as a result of the idealization of motherhood, the disintegration of the family, and a deterioration of mental health services and support networks targeted at helping women. With increasing rates of depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, and other stress related illnesses in women’s health, comes the recognition that sociocultural factors, such as the social construction of motherhood, are contributing to the deteriorating psychological and physical health of women (Sarafino, 2005).

Understanding the historical path of the social construction of motherhood and identifying the negative consequences such as disenfranchised grief which may result from striving towards idealized conceptions of motherhood provides a bridge between the academic research and the practical application of that research. However, crossing the bridge requires offering women, counsellors, and others working in helping professions guidance and strategies that will bring the resulting difficulties out of the private world of women into the public arena. Faiver, Eisengart, and Colonna (2004) suggested that postmodern therapies, such as narrative therapy, feminist therapy, and solution-focused therapy, “share an emphasis on the social construction of meaning and the importance of language in determining the way people think,
feel, and behave” (p. 75). Given that social construction is responsible for having shaped the idealization of the role of motherhood it seems logical that social construction is also the way to breakdown those same problematic idealizations. Postmodern therapies combined with feminist principles and practices can provide the guidance required to lead women out of isolation and back into communities of support.

Procedures

The procedures forming the structure of this project will follow the suggestions outlined in Mertens (1998) recommendations for conducting a literature review. A comprehensive search of both qualitative and quantitative research data will be initiated using databases such as PsychInfo, Academic Search Premier, Journals@Ovid, PsychLit, and Francis. Search terminology will include motherhood, mothering, social construction, mother identity, and history/motherhood. A review of postmodern and developmental theories will be conducted using the additional databases of Medline, MDconsult, Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Collection, Blackwell/Synergy, and Embase. Search terminology will include feminist developmental theory, narrative theory, hermeneutics, postmodern developmental theory, self-in-relation theory, identity development, and women and identity. Texts on the topics of motherhood, postmodern theory, identity development, and counselling interventions will be examined and reviewed. Texts will be located and accessed through the Alberta Public Libraries inter-provincial loans system as well as purchase through amazon.com.

Information will be drawn from a cross-section of academic disciplines and will be examined for relevance, content, and quality of research conclusions. The organization of literature will be established using a time frame focused primarily on the past thirty years and then further sorted by decade and relevant themes within each decade. Once the literature review
results have been critically analyzed and a draft of the project has been composed, the final step will be the creation of a pamphlet designed to summarize and highlight the most relevant aspects of this project. The pamphlet is intended to be approximately 8 panels in length and will attempt to outline the most significant aspects of the social construction of motherhood, the implications which have resulted, as well as offer women and persons working in various helping professions ideas and intervention strategies designed to assist in alleviating some of the negative affects which occur as a result of women’s striving towards an idealized version of motherhood.

*Implications*

Current researchers have provided a body of work which is helping to outline the historical evolution of the social construction of motherhood. The literature spans numerous genres including psychology, sociology, feminist theory, developmental theory, cultural studies, and healthcare to name a few. Unfortunately, little has been done to synthesize this information into a framework that can be readily accessed and understood. An additional problem revealed as a result of my preliminary literature review is that the research typically concludes without identifying implications or recommendations that can be of assistance to women who are facing complications as the result of the social construction and idealization of motherhood. The purpose of this project is to create a pamphlet that will bridge the information gap which currently exists between research and application. The pamphlet is intended as an educational tool for mothers, counsellors, and other helping professionals on the topic of the social construction of motherhood. The pamphlet will provide a brief historical understanding of the role of motherhood, identify the implications which may result as a consequence of the idealization of motherhood, and outline interventions and strategies which may help to prevent,
reverse, or reduce any adverse affects that have resulted from women’s perceived failure to meet or achieve the currently idealized construct of motherhood.
References


