CULTURE, SHAME, AND MOTHERHOOD

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DEVELOPING THE MOTHERHOOD IDENTITY

One model is based on the traditional Rites of Passage model

- Preparatory phase (pregnancy) - there are rituals given and special care is offered to the pregnant woman.

- Initiatory threshold (delivery)

- Liminal Space (the time after delivery when mother is developing her maternal identity)

- Incorporation (community and society recognizes the woman as a mother and the woman steps into her new identity)
DEVELOPING THE MOTHERHOOD IDENTITY

A modern model developed by RN Mercer and Rubin show some similarities

- Pregnancy - a period of time when they fantasize about who they are going to be as a mother

- Acquaintance - learning about how to care for the baby and physical restoration (2 to 6 weeks)

- Moving to a new normal (2 to 4 months)

- Achievement of the identity (around 4 months) New research indicates that mothers can build their identity until the child is 16.

MOTHERHOOD IDENTITY - DEFINED

In the achievement of maternal identity, the mother has established intimate knowledge of her infant such that she feels **competent** and **confident** in her mothering activities and feels love for her infant; she has settled in. A new normal has been reached in her relationships and her family. The woman experiences a transformation of self in becoming a mother, as she has expanded herself to incorporate a new identity and assumes responsibility for her infant and her infant’s future. - Mercer
MATERNAL COMPETENCE

- The Mother can perform the activity regardless if she believes that she can or that she is performing the activity good enough.

MATERNAL CONFIDENCE

- Confidence means that the mother believes that she can perform the function/task
- The belief is subjective
- This subjectivity is fluid - it can come and go
MATERNAL CONFIDENCE

- Official Definition: The **perception** mothers have of their ability to care for and understand their infant. Maternal Confidence is closely related to maternal identity and maternal role attainment - Mercer

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

- One aspect of obtaining the Maternal Identity is Maternal Role Attainment

- Maternal Role Attainment: A complex cognitive and social process which is learned, reciprocal, and interactive. Maternal Role Attainment involves confidently enacting the culturally defined behaviors associated with the maternal role. - Mercer
SOCIAL INFLUENCES

- During pregnancy magazines and media start to inform mothers of their roles and responsibilities.
- During the acquaintance stage (or liminal), it has been shown that mothers seek models and closely adhere to these models until they find their own way.
- During the beginning phases of the development of the maternal identity, it has been shown that mothers are most susceptible to social influences.

SHAME AND MOTHERHOOD

- Shame is a tool that culture can use to have people conform to certain social standards.
- Shame can come from an external evaluation of how one is doing as a parent.
- Shame can come from an internal evaluation of how one is “stacking up” to the prescribed way of performing a task.
- Shame is humbling, crippling, and can destroy feelings of self-worth, self-confidence, etc.
SHAME AND MOTHERHOOD

- Culture has a long history of shaming mothers for not doing the “right thing.”

- Currently there are a lot of ideologies that make strong claims about how mothers should be with their child.

- Attachement Parenting, Simplicity Parenting, Free Range Parenting, Natural Parenting, Baby-Wise Parenting, Unparenting Parenting...

RESEARCH QUESTION

- In what ways does the shame that Western, postmodern parenting ideologies can evoke in mothers impact the development of the maternal identity?
RESEARCH METHODS USED

- Qualitative approach
- Data was analyzed using the condensation and narrative analysis

FINDING ONE:

Loss of the Maternal Line

- Mothers stated that they craved knowledge about how to care for their child[ren], none of the mothers in this study actively sought or appeared to trust information from their own mothers.
**FINDING ONE**

Loss of the Maternal Line

- “I think that so much has changed over the generations. We can’t maintain this maternal line that you are talking about. I can’t ask my mom, ‘Hey Mom, when did you give me my first cell phone?’ There are so many things like that. You really can’t. Information has changed...things are toxic now that weren’t toxic before. I think that really kills the maternal line.”

**LOSS OF THE MATERNAL LINE**

- “My mom [n]either, but she was having all these experts telling her to leave my brother and I to cry or we are manipulating her...Just like watching all these experts back to back, I have heard all of these things, and they have impacted me as a parent. It makes me feel kind of sad that I need all these experts that I don’t even know. I don’t know their motivations, [but] they are the ones who have shaped my parenthood. It is not my family, my own mother, aunts - it is not a loving circle guiding me and showing me. People I don't even know...I wonder what role they are playing in breaking up the generations.”
FINDING TWO

Are You My Mother?

- With the loss of the maternal line, media, books, blogs, and a barrage of professional advice can become many mothers’ surrogate Mother.
- “I am really grateful to have all these resources...I get my information from books about attachment parenting, nutrition, and the culture at large informs me.”
- “I connect with a lot of it...because that [the images in the videos] is the mom I want to be.”
- After the attachment video, a mother responded that she had “invested so much time in reading that stupid, f...ing book, I stayed up all night worrying about how the process was going to work. You [the author of the book] told me to try this thing, and I did, and when it didn’t work...”

FINDING THREE

I am not the Martha Stewart of Motherhood

As Mothers interact with external sources of information, instead of gaining confidence in their abilities to care for their children, they may paradoxically experience a fundamental decrease in their confidence.
I am not living up to the image of a loving relationship with my own family, or the image of Maggie Gyllenhall, who portrays an image of a mother who is very confident and self-secure which seems to spill over onto her children.

This work was really more about self-esteem and growing self-esteem. From the first time we met, a lot of my self-esteem was based on this unobtainable image of some kind. I kept feeling horrible, like a failure that I could never do the thing in those images...

Not the Martha Stewart of Motherhood

I know with a lot of these videos, I just feel bad. This is what works and when you try it, and it doesn’t work, then I ask myself, ‘What is wrong with me?’

I do feel like I have ended up in a place where I am not successful

I just want the feeling that I am doing a good job... I keep just hearing the experts and what they are doing to me... It is making me so f...cking hard on myself.
When Mothers do experience a decrease in their confidence to meaningfully care for their children, they adapt their behaviors in ways that can lead to potentially negative outcomes.

- They found themselves at a loss as to how to creatively improvise solutions to problems and to how to parent as they would naturally.
- They attempted to try harder, which lead to a paucity of self-care.
- On an emotional level, mothers experienced fatigue and emotional dissatisfaction, feel confined to just being a mother, and feel such a level of ambivalence towards their children that they have the fleeting sensation of not wanting to be a mother any more.

"I am struggling right now to have all of this [pointing to her collage]... Sometimes, it would be so much easier if I didn’t have a baby."

"I keep saying that I should take care of myself. But I can’t." In her communications she expressed struggles in asking for help because of the shame she felt. When I asked her what it felt like to ask for what she needed, she said, "Like a bitch, demanding, pushy...My mom thinks I am type A, not going with the flow enough. So if I say I needed something, I feel judged because she didn’t need anything." At a later point, she shared, "I couldn’t ask for help. I wouldn’t know what to ask for anyway because no one else could do the Attachment Parenting. I was really lost for myself, and I definitely had some crazy points. I knew I was on really shaky ground."

"I felt a lot of grief, anger, injustice, and confusion about my ideal versus reality." In a different journal entry, she wrote, "I’ve felt for a while that I may be experiencing a low level of depression...I have a hard time putting into words what I’m going through, it often comes out as anger."

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**FINDING FOUR**

When the Bough Breaks

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WHAT TO DO

- First is to understand our roles in the Maternal Identity Building Project.

- If there is the absence of the maternal line and Moms are looking to professionals for information, then we should know that this is part of our role.

- If we go with the Rites of Passage model, then we are part of the group of people who are helping her in her liminal space and welcoming her into her new role as Mother.

WHAT TO DO

- Have them realize the ways that culture influences the choices they make and the ways it can potentially shame them.

- The underlying theory is that when one starts to identify with unconscious motivations, then one can start working on it.
WHAT TO DO: ACTIVITY

- Pick five to 10 images that best describe what it is to be a good mother.
- Arrange the images in a way that makes sense to you.

WHAT TO DO: JOURNAL

- Why did you choose these images?
- What do these images mean to you?
- What was the significance of how you arranged the images?
As you watch this video notice who it affects you. This can be repulsion, excitement, sadness, longing, boring.... Simply track how you are being affected.
REFLECT

- How did the video affect you?
- In what ways was the video different or the same as your collage?
- In what ways do you think you are not living up to these images?
- If you do not live up to these images, what do you imagine would happen to your child?

WHAT TO DO

- The two key theoretical components behind this are
  - You are having your clients realized that they are effected by culture
  - You are having your clients express the ways that it does effect them
  - You are starting to understand the structures that underlie the beliefs
WHAT TO DO: FAMILY OF ORIGIN

- A reaction is a unit of expression punctuated by biography
- A.C.E. study: Adverse Childhood Experience study
- In what ways does your family origin inform the decisions that you are making now?
- Doing an expressive arts piece called the “River of Life.”
- Have them write their story as a myth

COMING INTO CREATIVE ACTION

- Developing the ability to respond
- Working with expressive arts.
- Voice Dialog - having the client dialog with their different selves that they have identified with - the critic, the pusher, the pleaser…
MATERNAL SELF-COMPASSION

Maternal Self-Compassion is the process where mothers gently turn towards one’s reactions to nonjudgmentally and objectively explore one’s perceived failures and inadequacies in order to gain an expanded point of view.

It is a process of developing the skill to objectively look at the facts of the situation, understand where one made a misstep and be compassionate towards oneself because it is normal to be imperfect.

If I can accept myself as I am, then I can change. - Carl Rogers

QUESTIONS