

Trading in the Good Mother: work, embodiment, mothering and motherhood

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Introduction

The myth of the good mother is a persistent one (Thurer 1994). This paper explores how the concept of the good mother can be a helpful framework for trying to understand the experiences of mothers who work in physical male dominated trades. I also explore how discussions of the body at work and in mothering can provide unusual counterpoints to the image of the good mother. The ways that different women chose to incorporate their trade into their mothering bodies provided interesting commentary not only on the body of the good mother but the body of the good heterosexual, the good partner and the good homemaker.

I begin by positioning this paper within literatures on mothering, trades and embodiment. I then address a number of ways in which women have experienced trade work and mothering. Before I conducted this research I assumed that because my interview participants weren't conforming to ideas around being a good woman worker, they would also challenge ideas around being a good mother. I assumed that these women would have ruptured gender relations in their relationships in order to engage in such unconventional work and that this rupture in their domestic arrangements would have followed through to their experiences as mothers. I found, however, that the persistence of the good mother myth often made such ruptures difficult. I explain this by looking at the intersection of the good mother and heteronormativity and by exploring how mothers feminise trade work. I did, however,

find that if women had recourse to feminism, the notion of the good mother could be more easily ruptured by trade work.

Method

This chapter emerged out of a larger study I am doing on the gender, embodiment and labour processes of women who work in male dominated trades and IT. For this broader study, I conducted 14 life history interviews with women who work in physical trades, six of whom, it turned out, were mothers. Life history interviews are in-depth, open-ended interviews in which, through story telling, ‘people turn themselves into socially *organized biographical objects*’ (Plummer 2001: 43). I find this method particularly useful when exploring a concept like the good mother as rather than imposing the concept on an interview participant, the concept emerges as a social condition through which the participant may relate their life. I also find life-history interviews particularly useful when looking at gender and embodiment as life stories trace a history of an individual and social body; life history ‘forces one to recognize that the social is present in the person – it does not end at the skin’ (Connell 1994: 34).

Four of the six mothers I interviewed were in their late thirties to early forties and had children from a few months to 11 years old. Two of the women were retired and in their early sixties, they reflected in their life histories on working in their trade and having children of pre-school and primary school ages.

The mother and the good mother

The construction of the mother, particularly the good one, is central to the organization of the gender order and divisions of labour. Indeed, Connell sees gender

as defined by social relations to the reproductive arena (Connell 2002: 10). In Australia, perhaps more than other countries, these social relations have been significantly institutionalised by the state using the site of the family as a way to regulate the labour force (Deacon 1985); the 1906 'family wage' made men breadwinners and women dependent, justifying their social role as domestic care givers (Ellem 1999: 48). Chodorow, (1978) in her famous psychoanalytical attempt to explore this link between gender and mothering, argued that the gendered division of childcare produced and reproduced gender through gendered modes of attachment with the mother primary care giver. Feminists in the late 70s would contextualise this division of labour and construction of gender, recognising motherhood as a patriarchal construction which limited women's access to public life and personal fulfilment (Friedman 1963; Rich 1976). Adrienne Rich made the distinction between motherhood as an oppressive patriarchal institution and mothering as female centred and empowering (O'Reilly 2004). Similarly, Ruddick (2002) attempted to explore mothering as a form of thinking separate from the woman as birthmother as a way of valuing the kinds of work mother's do within broader social contexts of peace.

Despite feminist attempts to liberate women from their identification with motherhood and to construct empowering discourses around mothering, '[a] sentimentalised image of the perfect mother casts a long, guilt-inducing shadow over real mothers' lives.' (Thurer 1994: xi). In Thurer's history of the good mother myth, she explains that while changeable and elusive, central to the good mother is that the mother and her care and love are largely responsible for the child's development. The child is therefore dependent of the mother's unfailing presence, love and support. In contemporary society, in which most mother's need to engage in paid work, their presence is interrupted but, Mary Frances Berry (1994: 5) argues, compensated for by

the emergence of a new feminine mystique of the ‘Superwoman’ carrying baby, briefcase, purse and wearing a cape.’ In Australia, Barbara Pockock’s (2005) analyses of changing work/care regimes of contemporary women explores the contemporary challenges facing women attempting to conform to a good mother myth. This has particular implications for my study which looks at women in male dominated work and workplaces and how this work relates to care and being a good mother.

Trades

Manual trades (such as carpentry, plumbing and cabinet making) are traditionally male dominated. This domination is maintained through women being excluded from what it means to be a tradesperson. Central to this is the idea that hegemonic masculinity is yoked to the male body (Connell, 1995/2005) and that it is its strength, skill and violence which are necessary in manual work and trades (Donaldson, 1992). The knowledge of technical processes and technology involved in trade work are designed by men for men (Wajcman & MacKenzie, 1999) and these knowledges are passed from men to boys in what was traditionally a paternal guardianship, the apprenticeship. While women have been encouraged by feminist interventions to enter trades, men still control the institutions and organisations that allow access and support work in trades – technical education, trade unions, associations and group trainee scheme employers. So trades are not only dominated by men but are places where men produce and reproduce a kind of masculinity in which the male body is used to justify exclusion. Women entering trades then enter a world which is structured around men and a hegemonic masculinity of the strong, the capable and the

tough. Despite this masculinised industry some women do work in trades. Some of them are mothers.

Embodiment

Looking at mothering has provided a useful framework to help think through definitions of gender, embodiment and labour processes, particularly because the body of the tradie and the body of the good mother are under constant pressure and scrutiny. In looking at embodiment and gender I find Connell's discussion of gender as a social practice particularly useful as it highlights the constant reflexivity between the body and the social; '[g]ender is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do.' (Connell, 1995/2005, p. 71).

Heteronormativity

Women who choose unconventional work are not always engaged in non-normative embodiment. Both Saskia and Maria worked in manual trades because they enjoyed being 'one of the boys.' While their female bodies could be seen as intervening in work reserved for the sanctity of the male body performing hegemonic masculinity, both women describe their male colleagues preferring to ignore their gender and sexuality, expecting them to join them at boy's nights and strip clubs. Neither, Saskia nor Maria resisted this, they were complicit in the macho and sexist talk in the workplace and enjoyed their colleagues blindness towards their gender. That is, until they became mothers. Unquestioning and uncritical of the gender order, Saskia and Maria have found it difficult to be both 'one of the boys' and a mother.

While Sasika's family of origin had a normative gender regime, Saskia's adult life was marked by a resistance against the constrictive gender embodiment she enacted as

a child. Saskia became a punk. She described making her body an exhibition piece through piercing, tattoos, hair and dress. Saskia worked as both a chef and then a carpenter, both male dominated jobs and workplaces. She liked being ‘one of the boys’ and describes getting on better with boys because they get in there and do things. Saskia’s active work and her identification with the punk community through her appearance made her feel good about her body. Part of her enjoyment revolved around the fact that her body was not doing or being what it was expected to. She took pleasure from being looked at and from being different. She was not being a good girl, as she had been growing up, she was being ‘bad’ (in the Michael Jackson sense of the word). Embodying ‘bad’ also meant using heroin. For nearly a decade the enjoyment Saskia took from her resistant body was marred by a sense of shame, embarrassment and disappointment she had around being a drug user. Saskia stressed that she maintained fulltime employment due to her strong work ethic and the support of her partner. While Saskia loved looking transgressive and her punk identity and drug use made her on the margins, she was adamant that she wouldn’t break certain social codes; she wouldn’t steal to buy drugs nor would she take unemployment benefits. The notion that she could and should work was central to her sense of self and during the interview it was clear from her tone that her pride in having worked during that period eased some of its shame.

More powerful even than the institution of work was that of the good mother. To be a good mother Saskia saw it necessary to completely change her body and her work. Saskia discussed the body of the good mother explicitly in her interview:

I don’t want people to look at me and think she is a bad mother...which some people probably do.’

When she found out she was pregnant she immediately came off heroin, quit her carpentry work and changed her appearance. For Saskia being a good mother meant

having a good maternal body. Not only did that body need to be clean (of drugs) on the inside, it needed to be clean on the outside. She began dressing differently, choosing clothes that covered her tattoos. She toned down. New Zealand human geographer Robyn Longhurst's excellent book *Maternities* (Longhurst, 2008) discusses how this fear of embodying the bad mother during pregnancy is encouraged in women by the readiness of images and voices in society to represent what the good pregnant body should be doing. Longhurst's pregnant participants describe the high levels of surveillance they experience in public places and how openly people will voice their opinions about their pregnant bodies and how they are consequently treating their baby. Her pregnant body also gave away the fact that Saskia was a woman at work, pregnant she couldn't be 'one of the boys,' she could no longer perform the 'masculine masquerade' (McDowell, 1997, p. 197) often performed by women in masculinised professions.

For Saskia being a good mother is clearly linked to being a 'normal' heterosexual woman with no resistant past. Despite years of resistance, in mothering, Saskia reverts back to the conventional embodiment she grew up with. Her family even moved back to her childhood home:

When I found out I was pregnant with Matt I knew that was a sign, this is our time to you know move on and yeah we just lead a normal life now, two beautiful children and we got married last October after being together for thirteen years.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that while Saskia altered her body to be that of a good mother, she has never been so unhappy in her body as she is as a mother. Saskia said she is 'repulsed' by her body. She hated her pregnant body and she doesn't like her stretch marks. She is generally uncomfortable in her body now. Saskia says that it is only now that one of her children is school age that she is meeting a few other women who also feel a disjuncture with the image of the 'good mother.' She is now starting to

feel a little more comfortable about showing her tattoos, knowing that these other mothers are also marked with pasts that don't fit within the good mother's outline.

While in order to be a good mother with a normal family Saskia left her unconventional body and work behind, Maria utilised her mechanical skills in her mothering, in so doing, threatening her male partners' sense of masculinity and importance. Maria became a mechanic at 17 because she loved cars. At the time of the interview she had left mechanics, retraining in IT. Maria describes parenting in words a mechanic might use; she has 'streamlined' it so that she is most 'efficient.' However, Maria sees her domestic capability as a challenge to her heterosexual relationships. Maria can do everything: she is the uber super mum. She fixes the car and the spa and when I arrived for the interview she had danishes in the oven and had just come back from a run which she'd done after dropping the kids off to school and after taking a conference call from Sweden. Her first husband and father of her two children found her capability and energy too much and Maria claims that this was one of the reasons they divorced. Her current husband feels similarly inferior and like Maria is 'taking over.'

The skills Maria gained as a mechanic clearly challenges the division of labour not just at work but at home. Maria is highly capable at manual, technical and technological skills usually associated with masculinity and therefore of traditional fatherwork. Interestingly, while she is partnered to a man who is not particularly manually or technically skilled, her partner has not compensated for this by being skilled at another area in the domestic arena. Being a good mother for Maria, therefore, means being responsible for the whole domestic space. She finds this frustrating and is continually shocked by her male partner's lack of skill. There was a sense during the interview that while she talks about it with her husband and they try

to work through it that this is a very old discussion. Not only does Maria do domestic labour usually done by many women, she also does domestic labour stereotypically done by men (mending the car) and a full time job. This is a triple shift not just a double one and while this is the plight of many single mothers, Maria has the added pressure of not only being a good mother but a good wife. Maria worries about undermining her husband's masculinity; she was concerned that he would be threatened when she earned more than him and feels somehow responsible for maintaining his role as man in the house when she can do the work usually associated with masculinity.

Neither Saskia nor Maria considered their choice to go into a trade as a feminist one. Instead they did it because they enjoyed physical work and preferred to work with men. Both women described themselves as being 'one of the boys' and reflect on their time in male dominated workplaces, despite the sexism and difficulties they experienced, as being very rewarding and fun, Maria frequently referring to it as the best time of her life. Neither Saskia nor Maria experienced masculinised workplaces as testing or problematising their gender, therefore when their gender was tested by their need to perform the role of the good mother the experience was unfamiliar and required change and negotiation. The following section will look at two women who found that their experiences in male dominated workplaces informed their feminism and helped them develop a critique on gender relations. This critique dramatically informed their relationships and their perceptions of the good mother.

Doing the good mother differently: trading in the gloves

Lisa did a four year indentured carpentry apprenticeship when she was 17 and found the work culture so sexist and homophobic that she left the job and carpentry as soon

as she could. While Lisa hadn't practiced carpentry for years, having had her baby she found building things at home a fantastically fulfilling alternative to the repetitive and invisible tasks involved in parenting a new born. Lisa and her partner had recently been married and bought a house so Lisa's building was in part about nesting and making a home for her family:

I'm better at it [carpentry] now than I used to be and I'm pleased with that...and you know Sally [wife] loves it and I like to do it to make her happy...I do enjoy it.

In many ways this narrative is heteronormative (marriage, house, baby, nesting), but the disruption comes in how Lisa is nesting. She's building kitchen cabinets while pregnant and while nursing a new born. Here I think of the *pieta*, one archetype of the good mother; the mother immobilised through caring for her child. Instead, Lisa is mobilised in her care. She is not only mobilised, she is active in a way usually thought reserved for the panicle of strength and manly capability.

For Simone becoming a mechanic was directly bound to her feminism and her work as a social mother to a group of children. Simone was a member of a feminist housing co-operative in 1970s in London in which she, like all members of the collective, took responsibility for mothering its child members. Simone explains that the community needed transport for the children but had no money so she went to learn motor mechanics as a necessary part of her motherwork. Simone explains that she

wasn't particularly busting to do motor mechanics or anything...but it came out of that feminism...so that was how it really started for me, really through a movement that already existed before I arrived [in London] the housing movement and childcare and grass roots community organization really.

Simone's decision to be a mechanic and her work as a social mother was informed by her feminism. Learning how to be a mechanic also fed her feminism by demystifying knowledge previously reserved for men and by teaching her that the knowledge, skills

and strengths involved were not only attainable but easy. In the women's collective, Simone and other feminists created a counter community, one in which care was shared and in which mechanical and technical skills were actually integrated into a framework of care and motherwork. In order to care for the children we need to move them around, to move them we need a car, to have a car we need a mechanic, to be a mechanic is to care for the children. While the syllogism seems obvious in a small self sufficient community, the direct significance of acts are often lost in a larger one. In Simone's case it is impossible to separate her work from her feminism from her mothering. This integration of herself as an activist and herself as a carer fits a number of definitions of feminist mothering in which mothers self consciously interrupt patriarchal narratives through such things as sharing care and being a mother activist who provides role modelling and social education for their children (Green 2008; O'Reilly 2008). The kind of integrated feminist mothering Simone was engaged in in London is facilitated by a strong and supportive feminist community, other studies showing that it is this lack of support that feminist mothers often struggle with (Green 2008). Indeed on her return to Australia Simone was disappointed to find that the Australian lesbian feminist movement was not a supportive or nurturing place for mothers, but instead they were excluded from many events.

Making trades women's work: Feminisation of Work

Four of the six mothers, those who were self-employed in their trade, found the flexibility of trade work was very suitable to mothering.

Eva is a particularly good example of this, only becoming a cabinet maker full time with the birth of her first child. Eva's training in interior design in Denmark had

included a years full time apprenticeship in a cabinet making workshop. When she moved to Australia she was employed full-time as an interior designer before she had her first child. With the birth of her first daughter she found cabinet making particularly suitable to mothering, in part because she was self-employed and therefore flexible and in part because she worked building kitchens in her local area for other women – usually mothers. The women who employed her found Eva's availability to work outside peak motherwork periods (before and after childcare/school) matched their needs to have a renovation free home when their children arrived home from school.

Eva's story as a kitchen designer and installer also introduces another way in which trade work is feminised: there are certain kinds of trades work that women are thought to do better than men. Her women clients thought that Eva's gender was a benefit. They thought that she could make better kitchens than a man because as a woman she would have spent more time in one. In a sense Eva's clients saw her work as an extension of her domestic role as a woman and mother in the kitchen. Eva didn't mention that her husband did the cooking; a domestic arrangement the couple referred to playfully as Denmarkation, (presumably because such divisions of labour (or domestic chores?) were seen as just as foreign as Eva to most reword the second half of this sentence). Both builders and Eva's female employers found that Eva being a woman made her easier to be around and a moderating influence on male tradespeople.

While you can see that much of this gendering was done by the employers, some of the mothers I interviewed also gendered their skill. Eva believed she was a better cabinet maker because as a woman she was more maternal and nurturing and therefore took more care with her work, a sentiment repeated by a number of other

interviewees. I find this essentialist sentiment particularly interesting in Eva given her awareness of gender roles as a construct as seen through her unconventional division of labour with her husband. It makes us return to Connell's definition of gender as a set of reproductive distinctions that help us make sense of ourselves.

Conclusions

Women who work in male dominated trades, who are therefore practicing a gender at work which seems bad or at least subversive, are not necessarily agentic in resisting the gender order nor are they necessarily going to subvert notions of the good mother, the good heterosexual or the good wife. When Saskia and Maria worked in trades, despite using their bodies to do work usually yoked to masculinity, they did not rupture the gender order. They didn't want to be a woman in a man's world, they wanted to be 'one of the boys.' When they became mothers this masquerade was over and neither woman had developed the resources to be reflexive about their gender and thereby resist the heteronormative gender regimes that are made salient by the notion of the good mother. For Saskia having the body of a good mother meant abandoning her subversive embodiment as a punk and a carpenter, she felt she had to be normal and do normal (house) work for her children's sake. Maria was unable to abandon her technical skills but their deployment in the domestic sphere has challenged her heterosexual relationships and requires constant mediation in order that being a super good mother doesn't compromise her being a good wife.

For resistant work to be reflected in resistant mothering, women need to have critical skills around how gender is practiced and resisted. Simone, Lisa and Eva all had university education in the humanities and social sciences before becoming mothers. Their integration of their mothering and their trades skills was both practical and

political. They had a critical understanding of the good mother myth and they knew that in doing trade work their bodies were disobeying it. That said, even these feminist mothers felt like they couldn't avoid how mothering forced their bodies into unsafe and unsustainable physical processes, physical processes they would have criticised as senselessly macho in a trade workplace. Similarly, even feminist mothers such as Eva took advantage of her employers assumptions about her as a good mother carpenter to improve their business.

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