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Children, Work, and Family:
Some Thoughts on "Mother Blame"

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how to study, talk, think, and write about children in studies of work and family in ways that are sensitive to the situations of both children and their parents. We ask, "Is it possible to put children in the center of our research without contributing, even if inadvertently, to the cultural tendency to blame mothers for `child outcomes'?" To address this problem, we argue for research that incorporates a feminist constructionism and the insights of a feminist sociological imagination.

The idea for this paper, and the need to write it, grew out of our early discussions about research we were each beginning at the Berkeley Center for Working Families. Our earlier individual research projects had focused on mothers and divorce (Arendell 1986), fathers and divorce (Arendell 1995), and employed mothers (Garey 1999), but our new research was going to focus on the care of children. We were well aware that the topic of children's care and well-being, as it is currently constructed in the United States, is inextricably linked to the conduct of mothers (Caplan 1998; Hays 1996; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998). We thus faced the problem of how to study, talk, think, and write about children in the work-family nexus in ways that were sensitive to the situations of both children and their parents. Was it possible to put children in the center of our research without contributing, even if inadvertently, to the cultural tendency to blame mothers for "child outcomes"?

Others, particularly feminist scholars, have been concerned with these same issues (see, for example, Flynn and Rodman 1989; Jacobs 1990; Presser 1995) and with how to confront the oppression of women within families while both recognizing the importance of the care that often takes place in families and resisting the trap of a narrow individualism (Thorne 1982, 1993a; Tronto 1989). Presenting an earlier version of this paper at a "Children, Work, and Family" session of the 1998 Work and Family Conference held in Boston[1] provided us with an opportunity to pull these ideas together as we considered the research projects we were beginning.

Mother-blame is not a new phenomenon. In the 1940s and 50s, mothers were held responsible for autism (McDonnell 1998), schizophrenia, the emotional breakdowns of young soldiers, and homosexuality (Terry 1998; Thurer 1993). In the 1960s, mothers were held responsible for the rebelliousness of youth – for their political protests, drug usage, sexual activity, and fondness for rock'n roll. A study of 1970, 1976, and 1982 clinical psychology journals found that "mothers were blamed for seventy-two different kinds of problems in their offspring, ranging from bed-wetting to schizophrenia, from inability to deal with color blindness to aggressive behavior, from learning problems to 'homicidal transsexualism'" (Caplan 1998: 135). Mothers are blamed for children's poor school performance, low self-esteem, and poverty. Today, children's problems – or children as problems – are often linked to the social situations of their mothers – poor mothers, unmarried mothers, divorced mothers, employed

mothers, and so forth (Arendell forthcoming; Garey 1999: 29-41; Smith 1987: 167-75, 1999).

The critique of mother-blame has been well presented by other scholars (Chodorow and Contratto 1982; Garcia Coll, Surrey and Weingarten 1998; Jacobs 1990; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998). In this paper, our concern with mother-blame is not to document or to critique it, but to discuss how to avoid it in our own research. Before we address that question, however, we want to emphasize that by trying to avoid mother-blame, we are not claiming that individual mothers never affect their children negatively or that all mothering is desirable. We are concerned with the general indictment of a group – mothers. Mother-blame assumes that mothers are impaired or inadequate in their child rearing and that their influences on children are determinative and damaging (Thurer 1993). Philip Wylie (1942), who coined the term "momism" to describe mothers' behaviors that he labeled as overprotective and domineering, is the classic example of this, but he is only one of many. In response to this view, Jerome Kagan, psychologist and child development scholar, argues

> No scientist has demonstrated that particular experiences in the first two years [of life] produce a particular adult outcome in even, say, one-fifth of those exposed to that experience. Attendance at an infant day care center does not produce children who are very different from those raised at home, if the children come from the same social class and ethnic background. (1998: 112).

Mother-blame not only puts a tremendous burden of guilt and anxiety on women with children (Caplan 1998; Thurer 1993); it also deflects attention from social solutions for ensuring the well-being of children.

Our thoughts on how to approach research about children while avoiding the pitfalls of mother-blame are grounded in two, often overlapping, literatures: feminist thinking on families and, more generally, sociological thinking that emerges from C. Wright Mills's notion of a "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959). Feminist thought delineates and critiques the material and ideological systems of gender stratification and reminds us to be sensitive to the power relations and differences within situations and relationships, to question the conventional terms of analysis, and to avoid over-generalization in our analyses. A sociological imagination points us to the patterns that emerge from the

intersection of individual lives with the larger social, political, economic, and historical contexts within which they are situated. We separate "feminist thought on families" and "a sociological imagination" only in order to talk about the historical roots of what are, for us and many other sociologists, inextricably linked into a coherent feminist sociology.

We suggest that we can avoid falling into mother-blaming in our research by drawing systematically on a feminist sociology. Four themes are especially significant. Firstly, families are composed of individuals with both common and diverse interests. Secondly, our ideas about children and families are historically and culturally situated. Thirdly, families are economically and culturally situated and may vary accordingly. And fourthly, the care of children is a public issue that is connected to larger social and economic forces.

Diverse Interests Within Families

Feminists challenge the idea of a monolithic family and push for the recognition that family members occupy different positions within the family and hold divergent as well as common interests (Bernard 1998 [1981]; Hertz 1986; Hochschild and Machung 1989; Morgan 1985; Thorne 1982). Examining the institution of the family from the perspective of its differently positioned members was a breakthrough in the study of family life. The growing focus on children's social worlds is a significant step in the effort to see children as active agents in their lives (Briggs 1992; Cahill 1987; Martin 1996; Orellana et al. 1998; Prout and James 1997; Solberg 1997; Thorne 1987,1993b). Bringing children to the center of sociological inquiry is long overdue, and the study of children as players in the work and family nexus has been particularly limited. Even the large and expanding literature on child care treats children, for the most part, as passive and vulnerable dependents, often as burdens on both parents and employers, and as impediments to workers', particularly mothers', efficiency and productivity. Can we put children in the center of our research on "children, work, and family" without blaming mothers, in general, and mothers who are employed, in particular, for real, imagined, or constructed social problems?

To avoid gratuitous or unintentional mother-blame, we suggest that it is essential to consider

carefully how "parental care of children" is framed in our research. Our concern with the position and interests of children need not obscure the situatedness of other household members. When we ignore or understate the gendered nature of parenting, we render women's mother-work invisible. Women perform the large majority of the physical and emotional work of providing the hands-on care of dependents (Bond, Galinshi, and Swanberg 1998; Hochschild and Machung 1989). Using the terms "parent" and "parenting," rather than "mother" and "mothering," serves to obscure social reality: "parents" is a neutral term with a differential impact (Fineman 1995). Studies that focus on care of children must be clear and explicit about how various constructions of children's care and needs differentially affect mothers and fathers (Presser 1995). Admonishments to "parents" are, in effect, castigations of mothers. Moreover, when we contribute to the processes of mother-blame, we uncritically accept and even add to the oppression of a group that is already subordinate in a gender-stratified society.

Examining Assumptions About Children and Families

Conflicting interests among family members are sometimes based on normative ideas about individuals' needs. Women's various activities and identities, most particularly employment and mothering, are repeatedly characterized as being in opposition, rather than as interdependent dimensions of constructed lives (Garey 1999). Employment *does* pull parents away from their children for specified and regularized periods of time. So, too, the educational system pulls children out of their homes and into the public realm. As long as we hold to the notion that children can be nurtured and cared for in healthy and ideal ways only by women engaged in "intensive mothering," women's employment will continue to be framed as being in conflict with children's needs (Hays 1996). Where are the fathers in this framework? Where is the organized demand for more family-oriented social policy and structural change aimed at accommodating family care needs (Presser 1995)?

Jerome Kagan argues that, in the upheavals of the post-World War II United States, the contemporary focus on security and attachment in the child's relation to his or her mother serves a "therapeutic function" by addressing the uncertainty and uneasiness people feel in response to the rapid

social changes of the period. Other ideas about children's needs have performed therapeutic functions in other eras (Kagan 1998: 95; Prout and James 1997). Kagan notes that whether or not there is some validity to the idea that a child needs a secure attachment to his or her mother or primary caretaker – and he questions much of the research in this area – the point is that this idea is historically situated. He argues that assumptions, rather than scientific evidence, underpin the *popularity* of attachment theory (Kagan 1998: 94-96). Research on children, work, and family must examine, from a critical stance, ideas about what children need or what parents should provide (Solberg 1997). We need to take into account the historical specificity and variability of those ideas. One way to avoid mother-blame is to assess the assumption that the sole or primary responsibility for children's care belongs to mothers, or to individual parents, in the first place. Challenging the assumption that it is mothers who are primarily responsible for children opens up new possibilities for meeting the social and developmental needs of children.

Diversity Between Families

In addition to challenging the idea of the monolithic family, feminist scholars, particularly feminists of color, call attention to the diversity of families and assert the need to de-center the norm of the white, middle-class, two-parent, nuclear family (Baca Zinn 1991; Collins 1994; Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994). These same considerations belong at the center of our study of children. We must ask "*which children are we discussing?*" Children are not generic; they occupy social and economic, racial-ethnic, regional, and other social locations (Orellana et al. 1998; Prout and James 1997). And so do their mothers (Garcia Coll, Meyer, and Brillon 1995; Lamphere et al. 1993).

Sixty percent of American children will spend some time in a single-parent family (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Martin and Bumpass 1989). Most of these families are mother-headed. Nearly half of the children currently living with single mothers are poor, even though most single mothers are employed (U. S. Bureau of the Census 1999). Further, the numbers and proportion of children living in poverty are likely to increase in the wake of the late 1990s implementation of stringent welfare-to-work requirements (Flores, Douglas, and Ellwood 1998). Even as popular discourses lament the loss of

childhood and the parental neglect of children, the mothers of poor children confront conditions of increasing economic hardship and material deprivation (Edin and Lein 1997; Sidel 1996). While mothers perform the great measure of the work of child rearing, they do so in conditions typically not of their own making.

Families differ in ways beyond economic and class situation. Children, and families, are culturally embedded – the particular behaviors that meet the needs for appropriate interaction, attachment, trust, and development of self, for example, are dependent on the shared understandings in which that behavior takes place (Orellana et al. 1998; Weisner 1996). Research on the care of children, therefore, must be clear both about which children it is centering and about the culture in which those children are embedded. Researchers are also culturally situated. Sociologist Anne Marie Ambert cautions that, "The western emphasis on mothering and intense emotional bonding between parents and children results in Western biases in constructs which affect research paradigms" (1994: 529). That a middle-class child in the United States, for example, does his or her own laundry may be categorized by a researcher as a deprivation and a lack of maternal care, but the child may experience and understand it as a sign of competency and responsibility. Research paradigms and findings also affect public law and policy. In her research in southern Africa, for example, Garey found that family policy and child support laws in Botswana, which are based on European family law, do not take into account the culture in which Tswana families are embedded. Thus, they have unintended negative consequences for the individuals and families such laws are meant to assist (Garey 1996; Garey and Townsend 1996).

Public Issues in Local and Global Context

Sociologist C. Wright Mills noted that "What we experience in various and specific milieux . . . is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux we are required to look beyond them" (1959: 10). Specifically, with respect to the study of childhoods and child rearing, we must remember that children are located not only within individual family units and specific cultures, but also within the larger socioeconomic context. Their situations are influenced continuously, as they are for all of us, by powerful social and economic forces. Therefore, studies that

center children and children's agency need to examine more than the dyadic relationship between parent and child. We must examine the connections between the situations of children and the structural arrangements and ideologies of capitalism and patriarchy that are at the very core of our society (Orellana et al. 1998).

The examination of the connections between individual lives and social contexts is an empirical issue. Grounding our research in carefully conducted empirical studies helps us to avoid contributing to mother-blame. Too often, social problems are rhetorically linked to social statistics or to changes in social life, as if the mere coexistence of both problem and pattern indicates association, if not cause. In a critique of the literature that purports to describe the "erosion," "disappearance," or "obliteration" of childhood and adolescence, Patricia Lynott and Barbara Logue point out that many of those works locate the source of the problem in rising divorce rates, the resultant increase in single-parent families, and the increasing proportion of mothers employed outside the home (Lynott and Logue 1993: 473). Trends in divorce and women's employment *do* point to major social structural changes but, in themselves, do not indicate a causal link with other social phenomena. Lynott and Logue (1993: 487) found that the literature on the erosion of childhood not only ignores the history of childhood and romanticize the family of the past, but also ignores the weight of empirical studies that look at children's well-being in relation to divorce, to working mothers, and to child care. The leap to linking public issues of children's well-being with selective structural changes simply assumes the connections it claims to establish. It is vitally important that in our studies of children, work, and family, we do not fall into these same well-worn groves.

Mills posited that public issues arouse in people the feeling that some common value is being threatened and that "often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it. This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary men" (1959: 8-9) or, we would add, of women or of children. To restrict our research on children to their familial or school-based environments, or to restrict our analyses to the interactions that occur within those environments, is to commit the errors against which Mills and others

warned. As Dorothy Smith reminded us: "The determination of our worlds by relations and processes that do not appear fully in them are matters for investigation and inquiry, not for speculation" (1987: 99). We need contextually-based empirical studies that do not abstract people from their local and particular situations but that also make the connection between those situations and national and global forces.

We conclude that, by incorporating a feminist constructionism (Arendell 1997) and the insights of a feminist sociological imagination (Garey and Hansen 1998), we can achieve a centering of children in our research without contributing to mother-blame. This requires examining our own assumptions as well as the assumptions of the larger culture, paying attention to power dynamics and asymmetry within situations and relationships studied, taking into account differences and diversity between people and groups, situating the people we study in the cultures in which they are embedded, and placing our research in its local and global context.   As we strive to do these, we will not only avoid blaming mothers, but also, in the process, be better able to understand the intersection of children, work, and family. And that, after all, is the point of our research.

Notes

1. This paper is a revised version of the paper: Terry Arendell and Anita Garey, "Some Thoughts on 'Children's Needs' and 'Mother Blame,'" presented at the conference, Work and Family: Today's Realities and Tomorrow's Visions, November 6-7, 1998, Boston.

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