

# Mothers and Wives: Naturalized Constructions

## 母親と妻：定着の構造

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### 要 旨

この論文は、妻と母親の矛盾したイメージと現実、歴史的・文化的環境の中における母性の多面的な意味に焦点を当てる。文化の恣意的役割と、歴史的な特殊のものを表面的には“自然”な、そして陳腐だがあらゆるものを包み込む一般論へと変形させたパワーに対する、繰り返されてきた認識の欠落について議論する。この重要な差異に関する意識の欠如が、社会的なマザーリングと生物学的なそれを融合させたありふれた誤った考えを生み、これら二つの異なった役割を混同させた単純な古くさい還元主義へと導く。

キーワード：女性の役割のバリエーション、マザーリング、エスノグラフィック・歴史的研究

### A B S T R A C T

This article focuses on the contradictory images and realities of wives and mothers, and the multifaceted meanings of motherhood in historical and cultural milieus. It discusses the persistent lack of recognition of the arbitrary role of culture and the transformational power of the historical and specific into superficially "natural" and all encompassing, albeit banal, generalities. The absence of awareness of this crucial distinction results in the common fallacy of fusing social and biological mothering, conflating these two distinct roles into a lackluster reductionism.

Key Words: variation in women's roles, mothering, ethnographic and historical research

Four things necessary in a house are a chimney, a cat, a hen and a good wife.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, women in Colonial America were equated with useful animals and other things necessary to have a well functioning home. By the 1800's, economic conditions forced working class and poor families to adopt a more flexible sexual division of labor to facilitate the busy schedule of women working outside the home. However, middle-class men were quite sur-

prised, when they faced the reality of men performing household labor and caring for children.

In the 1880 s, when the first modern investigations of working-class family life were undertaken by the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics, one of the findings that most shocked and dismayed the middle-class male investigators was that working-class men would cook, clean and care for the children while their wives were at work.<sup>2</sup>

The juxtaposition of the above quotes reflects the theme of this article regarding the contradictory images and realities of wives and mothers, and the multifaceted meanings of motherhood in historical and cultural milieus. The term "mothering" can be used to refer to someone who takes care of others; it is based on nurturing and can be used without reference to sex. Thus, anyone who gives nurturance, whether it is a woman or man, a friend, a relative or paid caregiver is doing mothering work.

In considering issues within this fundamental and deeply emotional arena of life, questions regarding the nature of motherhood, care of children and the household division of labor repeatedly arise. In this context, it is enlightening to consider the following:

The biological appearances and the very real effects that have been produced in bodies and minds by a long collective labour of socialization of the biological and biologicization of the social combine to reverse the relationship between causes and effects and to make a naturalized social construction ("genders" as sexually characterized habitus) appear as the grounding in nature of the arbitrary division which underlies both reality and the representation of reality and which sometimes imposes itself even on scientific research.<sup>3</sup>

Bourdieu makes the above statement as part of his analysis of the Berbers of Kabylia. He characterizes Kabylia as a "living reservoir," of the Mediterranean-based cultural tradition of Western societies with remnants, which still exist today in the United States and Europe.<sup>4</sup> The androcentric vision of the culture of Kabylia is represented as neutral and natural in societal discourse, but actually forms a very unnatural and inflexible division between women and men in every dimension of their lives. Bourdieu attempts to reveal the hidden processes, which led to the extreme divisions and cultural representations of gender differentiation; he then explores the materialization and naturalization of arbitrary ideologies by society.

In reality, there is only one naturally obvious fact that links women and children. This fact is, of course, that women go through conception, giving birth and all that these processes physiologically entail. The myth of women as "natural mothers," turns on the assumption that nurturing by the biological mother is essential for the physical survival of the infant, and through this care-giving the mother and child form an immutable emotional bond initiated when the child is in the womb:

thus establishing a kind of maternal essentialism with its underlying assumption that motherhood is reducible to biology.<sup>5</sup>

The argument advanced in this article does not deny the physiological process of human reproduction, but rather questions the assumptions and meanings that different cultures and societies assign to women as wives and mothers. Women cross-culturally and historically have sometimes practiced infanticide and abortion, given children up for adoption, used nannies to raise their children and hired wet nurses to feed infants. Women in recent times (e.g., Susan Smith's particularly calculated and cold-blooded murder of her children in 1994 in the U.S.), and women in not so recent times (e.g., *Medea* in the classic Greek play of the same name) have exhibited behavior, which is decidedly not in keeping with our loving, altruistic maternal ideologies.<sup>6</sup> Such cases occur not only when the mother is incapable of nursing or raising a child, but also when she simply does not wish or does not want to be bothered with raising children.

Contrary to Fox<sup>7</sup>, we must recall that humans have been able to control procreation by various means and have the ability to prevent and/or terminate unwanted pregnancies. Additionally, women have served as surrogate mothers and egg donors for money, as well as for other reasons, advertising their services on the internet and displaying information regarding intelligence, looks, coloring, body type, and educational record, etc. These facts suggest that the myth of the unbreakable womb-based mother-child bond is simply that, just a myth, which can be summarily shattered.

Raising children to adulthood, feeding and cooking meals for them, and cleaning the house is not natural for women anymore than it is natural for men; women choose to do this work and in many societies there is great pressure for a woman to make this particular choice. However, taking care of children is a social act for which society also has a responsibility and duty. As such, it is important work, but there is no necessary condition requiring that only women perform this labor. At the crux of the issue is the unfortunate and unyielding lack of awareness of the arbitrary role of culture and the transformational power of the historical and specific into "seemingly," natural and all encompassing, albeit banal, generalities. The absence of the recognition of this crucial distinction results in the all too common fallacy of fusing the roles of social and biological mothering conflating these two distinct roles into a lackluster reductionism. Thus, we continue to be inundated by literature regarding naturally altruistic "mothering females," and naturally "competitive, aggressive males,"<sup>8</sup> and these reified ideas are solidly entrenched in popular literature, television, movies, and even in college curricula.

Rather than facilely accept these "naturalized constructions," this article reviews ethnological and ethnographic research, as well as sociological and historical studies, in order to break the spell-bound visions presented to us through stereotypical gendered roles blandly offered up by society. An examination of past, present and cross-cultural anthropological research, reflects the rich plethora of meanings, images, and roles of women, as well as illustrates the naturalization of disparate constructions of wives and mothers.

### Ethnographic Views of Mothers

Anthropology has long manifested an interest with variation in sex roles, marriage and the family dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since that time, there have been many contributions to the ever-expanding research on the roles of women and men in the family. Friedl<sup>9</sup> investigated the sexual division of labor and illustrated that there is much diversity in familial roles. She argued that women who are biological mothers are not the only people associated with the household, as caretakers of children and sole performers of household related tasks in many cultures.

Draper<sup>10</sup> and her research on !Kung women, showed that women were responsible for child care, but they also were obligated to build huts, and on occasion men helped out with both jobs reflecting the typical flexibility of roles practiced by foraging people. Among the !Kung people, relationships between men and children are relaxed and playful without any expectation of deference or stylized respect from children. Shostack's<sup>11</sup> research has further shown that !Kung women traditionally provided approximately sixty to ninety percent of the total amount of calories consumed by family members, and older women carefully managed household food distribution. Women also had access to game brought home from group hunting forays mainly via natal kin redistribution networks not, as commonly assumed, through those based on affinity. This is a critical point, since meat was frequently used as a political tool in buying support and favors, rather than a reliable source of provisions for a wife and children. Thus the image of a lone male hunter bringing home wild game and ceremonially handing it over to his waiting by the fireside wife is a flawed one reflecting Western stereotypical perceptions of proper gender roles.<sup>12</sup> One of the interesting hallmarks of many foraging societies is the reliance of women on their natal kin network.

Even before Friedl, Kaberry<sup>13</sup> had clearly elucidated the variations in women's roles and, perhaps most tellingly, in women and men's perceptions of those roles among aboriginal peoples in Australia. Among native Australian women, childbirth had a religious connotation: pregnancy and giving birth were mythically grounded events linking present-day women and their female totemic ancestors. Childbirth rituals were secret and children, younger women, and all men were prohibited from witnessing the actual birth. Kaberry described this clearly:

The whole of the ritual surrounding pregnancy and lactation has its sacred and esoteric aspects which are the most vital aspects to the women and which are associated specifically with female functions. They are believed to be a spiritual or supernatural guarantee from the Totemic Ancestors that a woman will be able to surmount the dangers of childbirth.

Malinowski<sup>14</sup> had also shown that biological kinship and its social or cultural conceptualizations were different. It was not the physical bond that was important, but the social acknowledgement and interpretation of the relationship.

Among the Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea, births were witnessed and attended only by a

woman's closest matrilineal kin. It was from the mother's matrilineal identity that an infant received its' name, usually that of a deceased member of her matrilineage. It was believed that a child was formed from an ancestral spirit of the mother's family and the mother's blood. Thus, a woman's own deceased natal kin were regenerated spiritually, as well as physically.<sup>15</sup>

Turnbull's<sup>16</sup> study of the Mbuti of Northeast Zaire in central Africa illustrates the plurality of mothers that existed for all children. Children were under the control and received instruction from all adult women in the group, and children referred to all of these women collectively as "mother." Discipline, ridicule and open criticism was also given by all mothers to individual children as conditions necessitated. Again, in this study, food was managed and used as a weapon by adult women who, as gatherers, were the main food providers. If males abused or exceeded their authority in any way, woman simply withheld food in order to control men's behavior.

In these cases, becoming a mother and raising children transcended any simple functionalist view or ideological image of motherhood, but encompassed deeper meanings of mythic connections linking birth, death, ceremony, rites of passage, transition and incorporating the sacred meaning of a woman's seemingly supernatural power to produce life. It was not only the biological function that was recognized, but the interpretation of this function, as it was connected to ancient ancestors; women bridged the gap between the real world and that of the supernatural. Even now, women are frequently called on to serve as mediators in rituals of death, memorial ceremonies, and births, through their roles as wives, mothers and widows.<sup>17</sup>

Assumptions regarding the "natural" roles of mothers and wives or the primary importance of the wife/husband relationship should finally be laid to rest. The most important familial relationship may not be limited to the usual husband and wife pair, in which a woman's prestige and economic support is based on and limited to that of her husband. It has long been the case that a woman's prestige may come through her natal family and through the contribution that she makes to support her family. It is the more recent development in capitalist societies, which has fostered middle-class and upper-class wives' economic dependence on husbands, shifting the locus of independence and power from women's ancestral roles; these multifaceted roles included those of productive gatherers and farmers, as well as reproductive work. These varied roles were not limited to the work of reproductive care-giving duties reliant on the financial support of husbands.

### Historical Constructions of Motherhood and Wives

The position of wives and mothers in the early history of the English colonization of North America was, from its very inception, mediated not only by gender and class, but also by race. The new society was constructed with white male heads of households, especially large landowners and men of wealth, actively controlling "naturally," dependent women and slaves. Women were not spoken to, as much as they were spoken for, in political, economic and legal affairs and seldom appeared in American law, with the exception of when they had children or if they became pregnant out of wedlock. Throughout New England, women were severely penalized if they became preg-

nant without the formality of marriage and were subjected to court proceedings, fines, and whippings for such offenses.<sup>18</sup>

When the early English settlers arrived in eastern North America, they were shocked at the sight of native Algonkian women working as farmers and performing general agricultural tasks, since this type of work was clearly masculine as defined in English culture.<sup>19</sup> In colonial America, women were considered necessary, as workers in the home, but mothering was not considered the necessary and all-encompassing role it is now. Poor families routinely sent young children and teenagers to live in other people's homes as servants, apprentices, or simply as dependent kin. In the early 1900's, thousands of children worked in mines, mills, or factories located far away from their mothers and fathers: other children spent the majority of their time on the streets, rather than in the family home being tenderly cared for by their mothers. Expectations regarding wives, mothers and children were quite different in these families with many children and numerous household tasks, where older children performed significant child-care duties, as well as other labor.<sup>20</sup>

*Exclusive child-care by mothers and absent from the home breadwinner fathers are actually quite unusual in history. Conceptualizations of the meaning of childhood and work, as well as ideas regarding sexual activity and marriage were surprisingly different from our present-day expectations. The earliest child labor laws dating from the 1840's set very low ages at which children could be employed. In 1866, Massachusetts defined "child labor," as work done by children under ten years of age. A clear example of the change in defining women as wives and mothers is the variation in the minimum legal age of marriage and the age of sexual consent for children. According to British common-law during the Colonial Period, the acceptable age of sexual consent for girls was seven years old. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this age slowly rose with some states setting it as high as fourteen. In 1886, only the state of Delaware retained the common-law age of sexual consent at seven, while twenty-five states had upped the minimum age of consent to ten.<sup>21</sup>*

Motherhood has seemingly endless cultural meanings and invokes deeply-held cultural ideologies in the United States; however, not only is there much cross-cultural variation in these meanings and ideologies, but even within the same culture, class, race and gender interact, as capitalism transforms and society naturalizes the roles of women and power-based hierarchies.<sup>22</sup> Upper-class women can afford to have a nanny, a governess, expensive day-care service or an in-home cook or helper. In other countries, such as Japan, women who could afford to do so hired *komori* (usually poor children who worked as babysitters or nursemaids) to take care of children, allowing these privileged mothers to perform other household duties and the time for entertainment and pleasure.<sup>23</sup> The experiences of upper-class women as mothers include choices, freedoms and options that are very different from those of women dependent on low wage-labor jobs and from many women of color, who can afford none of these amenities. Thus class and race differences alter the roles of mothers and wives within society, as well as in the household, making naturalizations of familial ideology clearly inaccurate.

## Conclusion

The familial ideology that wives and mothers should always be there for husbands and children without fail, and that a mother's primary and self-defining role is to tend and nurture family members is so deeply entrenched in many cultures that we no longer question this thinking. The hidden processes of naturalizing that which is historically specific and culturally dependent makes "breaking the spell" surrounding images and ideologies of mothers and wives terribly difficult. Very few women, who are also wives and mothers, can escape guilt about not doing their job as society has prescribed it: and they find it difficult to freely enjoy their lives without worrying about the outcome of their collective choices.

Cultural and historical constructions regarding the meanings and images of wives and mothers are quite varied, as anthropologists have argued for many years. However, despite the on-going tirade of debates regarding family life, culturally linked familial ideologies of what constitutes a wife and mother have changed very little over the last twenty years in the U.S.<sup>24</sup> Mothers and wives are still generally responsible for parenting and caring, which means they are on-call twenty-four hours, seven days per week, as providers of care-giving, bodily maintenance work, and emotional nurturance of family members that has remained steadfastly "women's work." Mothers are held accountable for children's failures, successes, emotional stability or lack of it, and how well they do in life.

The notion of "a good wife and mother," in the U.S., reached its' zenith after World War II with the realization of "mothering" as a full time occupation for women. However, this neat division of household labor along gendered lines has come under pressure in the U.S., as financial necessity precipitated by endless restructuring and ubiquitous downsizing, forces women to seek work, outside the home, in order to make economic ends meet.

Many women now feel that they must contribute their share to the family economy – a trend that some men readily welcome. However, in return for this contribution, women rightfully believe they are entitled to their husband's full and compliant participation in household labor and child-care. Of course, while men may happily partake of the income from their wives' paid work outside the home, some of them do not so happily engage in accepting the role of becoming an active partner in doing work inside the home. Even more important than men's lack of participation in household labor are the questions of whom, in the final analysis, is responsible for getting the household labor done? Who is just "helping out," when the mood strikes them or when the wife "nags," and who is actually defining household work and child-care as a "duty" for which they are held accountable and by which they are judged?

For women who chose to be wives and mothers, these choices are part of many roles, which they may enjoy, much like men who are husbands and fathers, as well as workers outside the home. Women have historically been excluded from other societal roles, in almost every culture, solely because of their sex and because of traditional and naturalized constructions of women's "proper" place. What this proper place is has been defined and re-defined, along the lines of race,

gender and class.

One of the most moving historical testaments to the indisputable fact of the fallacy of naturalizing the roles of women, as mothers and wives, is the following excerpt from a speech by Sojourner Truth. Sojourner Truth was born in 1795 as a slave in New York State, and became a famous anti-slavery speaker and advocate for women's rights after gaining her freedom in 1827. One of her most famous speeches, *Ain't I A Woman?*, was given at a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851, and fortunately was recorded by Frances Gage, a feminist activist.

Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear de lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in this case, the biological fact of giving birth and establishing bonds of family relationships were judged, not as sacred, but as nothing more than simple physical reproduction devoid of any motherly or wifely ideologies. Such ideologies were constructed for white women of upper-class families and were not applied in the same way to poor women working in factories or to women eking out a subsistent living in backwoods, rural Appalachian areas; and most certainly, these ideologies were not applicable to slaves.

The roles of mothers and wives are primarily based on relationships that occur within cultural, political and historical contexts. As this article has illustrated, what those proper roles for women are varies through time and space, but are always supported by unyielding societal justifications. Even at the dawn of a new century, many women still struggle to re-conceptualize images and meanings of wives and mothers according to their own needs, realities and desires

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 46, citing John Florio.
- <sup>2</sup> Stephanie Coontz, "Working-Class Families, 1870-1890," Stephanie Coontz, Maya Parson and Gabrielle Raley, eds., *American Families: A Multicultural Reader* (Routledge, 1999), 94-127.
- <sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Polity Press, 2000), 3-6.
- <sup>4</sup> Bourdieu's original research on Kabyle society, located east of Algiers in North Africa along the



Mediterranean coast, took place in the early 1960's. However, his recent analysis of this culture argues that knowledge of the objective and cognitive structures of a well-preserved androcentric society provides valuable insight regarding the deeply buried similar structural relationships, which remain in Western capitalist societies. Once these structures are clearly exposed, we can then ask what are the historical and cultural mechanisms responsible for the "dehistoricization and eternalization" of the sexual division of labor, roles of women and men, and reified images of women.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Fox, *Reproduction and Succession: Studies in Anthropology, Law, and Society* (Transaction Publishers, 1993), 121-2; Janice Raymond, *Women as Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle Over Women's Freedom* (HarperCollins, 1994), 36-41.

<sup>6</sup> Marjorie Shostak, *Return to Nisa* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 157-158; Kristin Luker, *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 10; Richard Lee and Irven DeVore, eds., "Problems in the Study of Hunters and Gatherers," in *Man the Hunter* (Aldine Publishing, 1968), 3-12; *Medea* is one of Euripides' plays, which was first performed in 431 B.C.E. in Athens. It tells the story of a so-called "foreign barbarian" princess Medea, who falls in love with Jason. Jason was the main character in the famous story of *Jason and the Argonauts* and the quest for the Golden Fleece. Medea was a mythic figure noted for her sinister magical powers, which she used to help Jason steal the treasured Golden Fleece from her own father. Jason and Medea then escaped to Corinth, but Jason eventually betrayed her by secretly marrying the daughter of the King of Corinth. Medea was exiled, along with her two sons fathered by Jason. She killed both of her children in order to exact a blood-chilling revenge on Jason for his infidelity. The plays of Euripides are of particular interest because of his use of female protagonists, which was highly unusual. He was severely criticized by his contemporary Greek playwright Aristophanes for revealing the state of Athenian realities and affecting the behavior of real women. After all, women, particularly respectable mothers and wives of Athenian citizens (not including female slaves or foreign women), were expected to stay in the women's quarters, to avoid speaking with non-relative males, and to make certain that their names were never mentioned in public conversations. Interestingly, Medea and other witches in Greek myth tended to be destructive mothers and hostile to children, and many of these ancient myths provided the basis for Western fairy tales. See Ruby Blondell, Mary-Kay Gamel, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, Bella Zweig, eds., *Women on the Edge* (Routledge, 1999), 149-169, and Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife* (HarperCollins, 2001), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Fox, *Reproduction and Succession*, 68-69.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, "Preface, 1999: On Raising Darwin's Consciousness," *The Woman That Never Evolved* (Harvard University Press, 1999 [1981]), xiv-xxxii.

<sup>9</sup> Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 6-9.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Draper, "Kung Women: Contrasts in Sexual Egalitarianism in Foraging and Sedentary Contexts," in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Monthly Review Press,

1975), 77-109.

<sup>11</sup> Majorie Shostack, *The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Harvard University Press, 1981); Francis Dahlberg, ed., *Woman The Gatherer* (Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Natalie Angier, *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (Anchor Books, 1999), 243-244.

<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Kaberry, *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1939), 242-245.

<sup>14</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines* (University of London Press, 1913), 182.

<sup>15</sup> Annette Weiner, *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea* (Harcourt Brace, 1988), 54-55.

<sup>16</sup> Colin Turnbull, "Mbuti Womanhood," in Frances Dahlberg, ed., *Woman The Gatherer* (Yale University Press, 1981), 205-219.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah McDowell Aoki, "Widow's Rites in Japan: An Interpretive Study of Women's Participation in Memorial Rituals and the Transformation of Family Practices," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 18 (2000): 84-106.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (Alfred Knopf, 1996), 144-5.

<sup>19</sup> Eleanor Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross-Culturally* (Monthly Review Press, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Coontz, "Historical Perspectives on Family Studies," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62(2000): 283-297.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 283-297.

<sup>22</sup> Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, eds., *Naturalizing Power* (Routledge, 1995), 1-22.

<sup>23</sup> Mariko Asano Tamanoi, "Songs as Weapons: The Culture and History of 'Komori' (Nursemaids) in Modern Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50, Number 4(1991): 793-817.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Folbre, *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (The New Press, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 2nd ed., Vol. I (Charles Mann, 1889).