

Exploring self sacrifice, role captivity and motherhood

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Night Feed

Evan Boland

....I crook the bottle.
How you suckle!
This is the best I can be,
Housewife
To this nursery
Where you hold on,
Dear life.....

The few lines from Boland's poem about a night feed encapsulate the tensions of motherhood, the profound joy, the satisfaction of giving, the unique intimacy of breastfeeding, the challenges involved in raising a child as well as all the other domestic care and housework involved. The line '*this is the best that I can be*' seems both to sanctify the value of motherhood, while also exposing its vulnerability and the feelings of anxiety and inadequacy that accompany it. Much of the current literature on mothering is engaged in this discursive struggle, where cultural constructions of the ideal mother are important not least for how women define themselves as good mothers but also in shaping their identities as women (Arendell, 2000)

The ideology of 'intensive mothering' is the increasingly common notion that 'good' mothers should first and foremost be caregivers, that they should invest their time, money, emotional labour in their children and, further, that in order to maximise this provision they should reduce or eliminate paid work (Hays, 1996). The concept of total self-sacrifice for your child (and its implicit message of emotional fulfilment) has been widely criticised as being white and middle class focused, 'frivolous and excessive', for its negative impact on maternal psychological wellbeing and, not least, because intensive mothering is both physically and emotionally draining and not even necessarily in the best interests of the child (Warner, 2006; Gunderson and Barrett, 2015). What's remarkable, however, is the tenacity of dominant values and cultural ideologies about motherhood that persist regardless of race, ethnicity or social class or the constraints faced by mothers in terms of structural inequality and poverty.

For example, in a study of low income black single mothers the role of self-sacrifice and protection was repeatedly emphasised as the belief of what “good” mothers do for their children (Elliot, Powell, Brenton, 2013). Of course most mothers, rightly, do strive to protect their children and often put their children’s needs ahead of their own but as Rich argues there are differences between motherhood as an institution and an experience and between cultural and gynaecological conceptions and it is the former that concerns us here (Rich, 1976).

This chapter explores the cultural subsuming of self-sacrifice and motherhood focusing in particular on the concepts of choice and role captivity within households with children. Feminist theorists have long argued that the family acts as a central mechanism in the reproduction of gender inequality. The tendency for women, especially mothers, to channel their extra resources into household consumption has significant effects in terms of the differential levels of deprivation experienced by men, women and children within the same family. In their evidence review about the links between personal relationships and poverty Corlyon *et al.* (2013) argued that gender is an inescapable aspect of families, in view of the centrality of mothers (and grandmothers) in both experiencing poverty themselves and alleviating that of others. Reviewing the results from different data sets from the UK and our own two studies from Ireland, we look at the role of women within household managing scarce resources often at their own personal cost and why this is often seen as a “badge of honour” or personal empowerment rather than deprivation at an individual level or inequality. We also look at how mothers reluctantly assume the role of consumer within and for the family – a type of role captivity where the strain related to consumption is shouldered solely by mothers and legitimised as an extension of their caring responsibilities. We find that not only are mothers more likely to “go without”, but that this is implicitly sanctioned within a hegemonic family discourse which sees the welfare of the children as the primary responsibility of the mother, and which normalises the idea that the mother should make sacrifices to this end.

Intra household differences in standards of living

Over the last twenty years numerous studies on intra-household poverty and distribution have attempted to open the black box” of sharing within the household (Bennett, 2013). These studies have mainly focused on gender inequality exploring how differences in distributional outcomes and financial control are related to power imbalances between men and women. Such power differentials can also impact on children’s living standards within households

and various studies have found that where women have more control over household finances, a greater proportion is spent on children (Goode et al 1998; Middleton et al, 1997; Daly 2012). A central insight of the emphasis on internal household processes is that this power differential in the household can be translated into gendered differences in standards of living. The tendency for women to channel their extra resources into household consumption, especially when compounded with the financial arrangement which gives the woman primary responsibility for household management but restricted access to household resources, has significant effects in terms of the differential levels of deprivation experienced by men and women within the same family (Rake and Jayatilaka, 2002).

Data from the most recent nationally representative poverty and social exclusion survey (PSE) in the UK demonstrates that for a significant minority of children living in households where there is poverty, they themselves are not directly exposed. That is, either some (or all) of the adults in the household are poor, whilst the children are not poor. These children are living in households whose incomes and resources are insufficient to maintain the material living standards of all members but the children's are maintained or ameliorated, through adults prioritising spending on children's needs rather than their own. (Main and Bradshaw, 2014b). This finding reinforces earlier surveys in both the UK and Ireland that suggest that adults shelter children from the worst impacts of poverty by going without themselves (Goode et al, Middleton et al, 1997; Ridge, 2002, Watson et al., 2013). A key finding, however, in Main and Bradshaw's study is that "whilst a significant proportion of adults in households (where some adults are poor but children are not poor) are likely to be going without, not **all** adults in these situations are going without". This finding echoed a seminal study from over a decade earlier which found that were women more likely than men to "go without" (Goode, Callender and Lister 1998) and clearly implies that intra-household distributions are not evenly distributed. While they tend to work in favour of children versus adults, the burden of going without is not evenly distributed between adults. Gender, and particularly primary caring responsibilities, is a key variable with mothers more likely to go without and to favour spending on children over spending on themselves.

Our study of intra household resource allocation in Ireland also explored the relative position of spouses and children in relation to living standards and material deprivation by analysing the responses of about 1,124 couples to questions specifically designed for inclusion in a separate ad hoc module in the Living in Ireland Survey (Cantillon et al 2004). The questions

related to levels of consumption and material deprivation using standard deprivation measures including use of heating, food consumption, and access to social activities and to personal spending money. These items were specifically pursued as a number of previous qualitative studies had shown their sensitivity to gender differentiation (Cantillon and Nolan, 1998). For example, Graham cites personal fuel consumption as an item in which women facing budget constraints felt there was scope for savings. The cutbacks in consumption were not however evenly spread amongst family members with excerpts from Graham's interviews poignantly illustrating the case (Graham, 1992; 219-220).

“I put the central heating on for one hour before the kids go to bed and one hour before they get up. I sit in a sleeping bag once they have gone to bed.”

“I turn it off when I am on my own and put a blanket on myself. Sometimes we both do but my husband does not like being cold and turns the heating back on.”

Likewise Delphy and Leonard found that the distribution of food reflected the differences in status of family members with high status foods such as meat reserved for the head of household. Another aspect in relation to food consumption is the issue of self-denial where a woman may “choose” a smaller portion, or none at all, in a situation when there is not enough for everyone. Delphy and Leonard argue that self-sacrifice for women is second nature and not something noticeable or worth reporting:

The mistress of the house takes the smallest chop without thinking, and if there are not enough for everyone, she will not have one at all. She will say she is not hungry, and no one is surprised, least of all herself, that it is always the same person who “doesn't want any” and “doesn't mind”. (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; 150)

In our Irish study we also found that where there was a difference between spouses there was a consistent, albeit not very dramatic, imbalance in favour of husbands across all the selected non monetary deprivation indicators. In relation to food consumption, the results showed that the wife is consistently more deprived than her husband in relation to skimping on her own meal to try to ensure that the rest of the family have enough. In about 4.5 per cent of all couples in the nationally representative survey the woman skimps and the man does not. The greatest differences between husbands and wives showed up in relation to social and leisure activities and in relation to spending money. Nearly 30 per cent of couples gave different responses in relation to having a leisure activity and in about two-thirds of these it

was the husband who had, and the wife did not have, a regular leisure activity. A high proportion of wives who did not have an activity where their husband did, cited lack of time (due to household or childcare responsibilities) rather than lack of money as the reason. Likewise in relation to the socialising question, childcare is given as the reason by 9.4 per cent of wives, and 2.9 per cent of husbands, for not having had an afternoon or evening out over the previous fortnight (cantillon et al, 2004). A separate aspect to differences in material living standards was the issue of control over resources. Several UK studies both small scale and large nationally representative surveys have explored different allocative systems for managing household resources and their implications for the living standards of individual members (Main and Bradshaw, 2014). A key characteristic of control over resources is the distinction between financial control and financial management with the latter translating as women in poorer households having the added burden of responsibility for stretching scarce resources. So not surprisingly, the results showed that in relation to managing scarce resources the burden falls disproportionately on women. In response to the question in our survey as to who takes the main responsibility for trying to make sure money, when it is tight, stretches from week to week, approximately 56 per cent of couples saw it as a joint responsibility. The remainder, about 34 per cent of the sample, saw it as the sole responsibility of the wife. In low-income households, those below the 40 per cent poverty line, joint responsibility was less common and about 46 per cent of wives said they took sole responsibility for making scarce resources stretch. The results for this Irish study corroborate of the consistency of this theme. Over and over, qualitative and quantitative research reveals women as being more likely to manage the household budget in low-income families – when this is likely to be more of a burden than a source of power (Goode *et al.* 1998; Daly and Leonard 2002; Bradshaw *et al.* 2003; Maplethorpe *et al.* 2010). Very few studies have explored the intersecting relationship between intra-household inequality and the individual mothers' experiences of stress. The second Irish study we draw addresses this link, revealing that consumption-related stress and differential well-being are rooted in the intersecting structural contexts of gendered and intra-household inequality (Hutton, 2015).

Consumption, choice and role captivity

Our second study examined the female experience of stress generated by consumption responsibilities and in particular, how a group of low-income mothers coped with such pressure. It demonstrated a tendency for women, especially mothers, to channel their extra

resources into household consumption, using material items as a conduit for social acceptance with respect to their dependent children (Hamilton, 2012). The psychological burden associated with trying to please all family members' consumption-related demands, perpetuated power inequalities, as different individuals within the same household experienced different levels of well-being and deprivation. The cost to mothers' health was particularly evident as they sacrificed their own well-being to buffer the effects of scarce resources. Feminist scholars are especially vocal about the stress experienced by individuals based on social categories such as gender or socio-economic status, suggesting they must cope, not only with the chronic stress that arises from belonging to a relatively less powerful or stigmatised group but with the daily experience of disproportionate role strain involving children, adults and the juggling of economic resources (Belle, 1990; Hall et al. 1985; Meyer et al., 2008; Zwicker and DeLongis, 2010). For women, the gender-related power differentials and demands tied to mothering erodes feelings of personal efficacy as they endure the daily demands of role strain occupying too many roles for too long (Belle 1990; Downey and Moen 1987; Ennis et al 2000). The following exchange reveals how women articulate role captivity, as unwilling incumbents as it specifically relates to multiple household demands:

Joanne *I have to, not just make sure there is money in the house, but running the house and bringing up the children and even relationship-wise, I'm like the foreign minister in the home....*

All *Yes, we're the mediators!*

Kate *We are the administrators!*

Joanne *We are the cook!*

Joanne *..different roles at different times....*

Kate *...no not at different times. You are doing these roles at the same time,*

Beth *You have a variety of roles you're like the teacher, the nurse, the jailer, the educator, the consumer, the whole lot!*

These private, invisible realities of mothering draw attention to how the family system as a structural site, reinforces emotional injustice for most mothers but especially those who are already economically and socially compromised (Hutton 2018). The most dominant

theoretical orientation regarding gender, strain and inequality explains women's disadvantage in terms of the problems that arise within the boundaries of social roles such as motherhood (Grove and Tudor 1973; Meyer et al. 2008; Pearlin 1989). Indeed both our studies reveal how women recognise the gendered and captive nature of their role as mothers:

I think there's a socialisation a lot of us went through as well, where we were encouraged, even bullied into not thinking about ourselves. You know women, we're taught to be nurturing, we're taught to be caring (Beth)

More specifically our studies highlight how women reluctantly assume the role of consumer within and for the family, where the strain related to consumption is shouldered solely by women and legitimised as an extension of their caring responsibilities. In particular the anxieties and pressure arising from child-related spending and demands suggests that sacrifice is an expected consumption skill and responsibility of mothers. Commenting on how consumption is a taken-for-granted activity within the family, Delphy and Leonard (1992) propose that differential family status is part of the way in which actors perceive and realise their own and other people's relative statuses within this intimate sphere. We have found that for women in heterosexual relationships, the burden of responsibility for household consumption decisions is often reinforced by children and male partners telling women that they "like shopping" and are "good at it" (Hutton 2015). Indeed intra-household economic behaviour normalises consumption, consisting of commitments which cannot be quickly laid aside once they have been accepted. The consumption domain is therefore a site of conflict and inequality resulting in intra-household stress derived from managing the expectations and demands of family members in low income households. Scholars suggest that mothers' positive response to children's requests can be viewed as a rational choice as it makes better financial sense to purchase food and clothing that children will eat and use to avoid wastage (Hamilton 2009; John 1999). In addition, feelings of guilt encourage parental cooperation, what McRobbie (1997) refers to as "giving in," indicative of all the conflicts and anxieties around consumption.

The traditional view of conflictual family consumption suggests that disagreements only arise during the decision-making process, i.e. during the purchasing stage, as family members strive to meet competing needs in line with available financial resources (Hamilton 2009). However this assumes that family decision-making roles are always in transition, depending on the nature of the product/service under consideration for purchase. Alternatively, our studies reveal that the role of consuming is fixed for women. Family

discord does not centre on decision-making per se, but on the outcome of that decision as appraised by other family members. In other words, women as mothers are implicitly sanctioned within a hegemonic family discourse to make the primary sacrifice labour, financial and consumption-wise for the family (Hutton 2015). This conformity and sanctioning, applied by other individuals in the household uncovers how gender and role strains are acutely intertwined. We therefore suggest that differences in stress experiences for mothers arise, at least partially, from patterned role circumstances which demand that women self-sacrifice and which directly reflect the effects of social inequality on allocations of resources, status and power (Turner et al. 1995). The burden of self-sacrifice is therefore not randomly distributed in society, but distributed based on power and related to structural, economic and political processes (Brooker and Eakin 2001). In the context of a consumption-led culture, the role of the mother as *the consumer* in the family is naturalised; a type of role captivity where the stress related to consuming activities is shouldered solely by them. As Pearlin (1989) observes “the various structural arrangements in which individuals are embedded determine the stressors they encounter as well as their coping resources” (p.167). The invisibility of mothers’ differential social status and associated role strains are bound up with their disadvantaged position of managing scarce resources within a household context.

Conclusion

The cultural construction of the ideal mother, conveniently for the state, is a version of privatised mothering such that balancing work and care commitments become individual choices and negotiations almost, always and everywhere, accompanied by feelings of guilt stress. The greater the constraints perpetuated by structural inequalities, income and other resources, the greater the stress, burden and hardships faced and the greater the invidious and false dichotomies that arise between stay at home and working, married or single, good and bad mothers. Both of our studies demonstrate that self-sacrifice is implicitly sanctioned within hegemonic family discourses which sees the welfare of the children as the primary responsibility of the mother and which normalises the idea that mothers should make sacrifices to this end. Furthermore, the impact of this responsibility increases as family income decreases, such that mothers from low-income families are even more likely to experience personal deprivation in order to make ends meet.

Chant (2003) argues that this feminisation of responsibility can be detrimental if low-income mothers lack a notion of personal power because their identities are too closely tied to the interests of the household. If there is little opportunity for control over a situation then changing the meaning of it may increase the individuals sense of control. That is the ability to reframe obstacles are important resources for resilience. We have seen the evidence of self-sacrifice of mothers in relation to compromising their food intake and other material indicators as well as others aspects of daily life including social activities and personal spending money. However, rather than framing this ‘doing without’ as self-deprivation, we find it employed as a coping strategy and one that finds resonance in the socially acceptable role for mothers so that “it’s not just poor moms who put themselves first” (McIntyre et al 2003). Yet the possession of resources is instrumental in resilience as an individual’s well-being is dependent upon their access to resources within their particular ecological niche in order for them to feel empowered (Hobfoll, 2002; Kelly, 1966). For the women in our studies, financial management was often the most common resource to draw when dealing with constraint - one which was tied to feelings of competence and empowerment but yet involved a great deal of self-sacrifice in terms of time, and the juggling of the consumption effort and expectations of family members. A second source of mothers’ resilience stemmed from actively managing the survival of social supports such as family and friends through relational coping or caring for others. In short, mothers actively rejected more individually beneficial coping strategies (Banyard 1995), choosing instead to redistribute the experience of hardship particularly within the family setting (Heflin et al. 2011). Our studies therefore highlight how self-sacrifice *and* empowerment co-exist as narratives of motherhood in low-income families. Mothers use sacrifice and empowerment as dynamic resources in the absence of economic means - both serve as functional and valuable means for surviving hardship, which in turn, can have additional emotional benefits for women (Hutton 2016). The seemingly conflicting narratives point to both the cultural construction of motherhood and to the structural inequalities that make adherence to that discourse so much more difficult for some mothers.

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