

The value of amazing things: Ethnic mothers' work of care, regeneration and reproduction

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Disclaimer: while I position this think piece on a mothering perspective and biological reproduction pertains to mothers, by nature, people of other sexes, ages and relationship status contribute immensely to care, regeneration, and social and cultural reproduction work.

The androcentric value framework

My son is a source of inspirational quotes. A week ago, researching the life of a Nobel Prize winner for his school assignment, he told me in disbelief: "Nobel Prize is such a hard thing to get. Look, mum, you are doing so many amazing things, and still you didn't get a Nobel Prize yet".

Now the amazing things in my 11-year-old's world relate less to my paid work or research life, and more to cooking his favourite food, looking after him when he's sick or well and other mothering work of reproducing my Romanian culture and his Māori heritage in his day-to-day life. Besides the fact that the Nobel Prize gender imbalance gives me low statistical chances from the start, there is no Nobel Prize for the things he thinks I may deserve one for.

Because the genuine narrative of a little human being whose needs are met is lost in the androcentric dominant narrative of motherhood, in which production and reproduction are gendered: traditionally men produce and women reproduce, care and regenerate. This status-quo entails different status for men and women, therefore the work that they perform is deemed of different value, with more value attached to production and less value to reproduction, including mothering (Waring, 1988). Mothering happens in private spaces, and the skills, energy and effort invested are not considered work. Transferring the same skills, energy and effort in the public space for the same outcomes, i.e. caring for a child in childcare, is considered work and rewarded, but at a lesser value than production work.

Mothering and social and cultural reproduction

Reproduction is not only biological, but also social and cultural, and extends beyond birthing. For example, within mothering, food represents cultural reproduction, from the significance of bonding through breastfeeding, to the first solid foods offered, whose taste and texture shape future nutritional habits. There is then the potty training and the games and fights and Tooth-fairy stories for (correctly!) brushing one's milk teeth, part of establishing future self-care routines. There is then multiplying repetitively one set of tasks: such as preparing two or three or four lunches, or tying two or three or four pairs of shoelaces and relearning grammar and maths, not because you've forgotten, but because of new educational methodologies.

Time limitations are balanced by multitasking. Above all, there is modelling care and love, respect and civic participation, manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga, to be reproduced in neighbourhoods and other interactional settings, as societal standards of what it means to be a New Zealander.

The performance of the social and cultural reproduction varies amongst mothers, according to the time and resources they have to invest in this work. The difference perpetuates inequality.

Ethnic mothering narratives of care, regeneration and reproduction

Social and cultural reproduction is more evident when studying immigrant mothers: as mothers, they take on the responsibility of social and cultural reproduction work, as immigrants, they negotiate between two or more sets of cultural models to find congruent pathways for their children.

Ethnic women bring to their mothering a set of values, a way of doing things, a world view, and their own narratives of mothering. In raising children in another country, aspects related to the use of maternal language, cultural rituals, life events, celebration, require a degree of negotiation. Cultural intergenerational learnings are more likely to be questioned, negotiated, revived in their inner strength or abandoned.

Ethnic mothers invest in the reproduction of cultural celebration from their country of birth while actively participating in the New Zealand celebratory calendar; they invest in the reproduction of their maternal language while assisting their children with English spelling, and invest in the reproduction of ethnic food while competing with mainstream culinary narratives.

Mothers take on willingly, sometimes passionately, the effort of reproducing a culture that is not their own: in my research on Interethnic Mothering, ethnic mothers parenting children with Māori heritage invested in the reproduction of food practices, te reo me te ona tikanga. They encouraged their children to learn Te Reo Māori, some enrolling them in kura kaupapa, and they undertook Māori classes to support their children's educational pathway, contributing successfully to their children's identity development (Davis, 2017).

Reproduction of culture through celebrations, language and food

The ancient Greeks imagined time through two deities: Kronos – the chronological, sequential time and Kairos - the cyclical time of celebration. Mothering chronological time, marked through child-rearing routines, achieved or expected growth milestones and anchored in birthdays on a narrative timeline, is complemented by the celebration time.

While the chronological time is linear, quantitative, in charge of the past, the present and the future, the celebration time is cyclical and consists of symbolical repetitive celebrations (Rusu&Kantola, 2016).

A celebrations calendar is part of a cultural heritage. For Samoan mothers I interviewed for my research Sunday is church time, for Jewish mothers from Friday evening to Saturday evening is Sabbath, and for other ethnic mothers specific dates in calendar are saved for the Chinese New Year, the Orthodox Easter or Diwali. All other life activities are ordered around this cultural prioritizing of time. In a process of reproducing their own culture, ethnic mothers have to negotiate their celebratory calendar with the New Zealand celebratory calendar, in whose celebrations they invest as well, as part of reproducing the culture of the host country for their children.

Celebrations entice particular rituals and cultural practices, meaningful within the space they've been created, unimagined in the new space of the host country. In their cultural reproduction work, ethnic mothers recreate these celebrations in the host country, bringing within unfamiliar territories familiar sounds, colours, tastes, and aromas, and contributing texture to New Zealand's multi-ethnic landscape.

Reproduction of maternal language and ethnic food are other valuable forms of cultural and social reproduction. Ethnic mothers translate the world in their own language for their children, opening them to a new universe of knowledge. Through this, they contribute to their children's identity construction.

Language connects children to cultural values and ritual, and it is through language that people negotiate a sense of self. It allows children to develop a meaningful relationship with family members from their mothers' countries of origin, and also, "knowing a second language influences both the learner's sense of self and possibilities for self-representation through language use" (Benson et al, 2013, p.1).

While ethnic mothers may be successful in creating linguistic settings in their homes, their efforts are rarely validated outside of this specific setting, rendering their task futile. For many immigrant mothers, introducing their maternal language to their children becomes yet another chore in the busy time of mothering, and most often there is simply no time to invest in it.

Preparing food is another important dimension of social and cultural reproduction: through eating, children embody not only nutrients but also cultural values (Vallianatos, 2016). Many ethnic mothers broker distance and build bridges to introduce their children to food they grew up with.

Within mothering, food represents intergenerational continuity, through bringing history, experiences, and memories to the table. It is a cultural marker with potential to identify ethnicity appurtenance, as particular ingredients, dishes and practices around food formulate belonging to a specific culture. As other reproduction work, reproduction of ethnic traditional food in a migration space is time-consuming, even more time consuming is negotiating the significance of ethnic food with one's own children and their landscape: I remember my children asking to have 'normal' lunches at school like their peers had.

Beside a celebratory calendar, language and food negotiations, ethnic mothers invest time in negotiating other important aspects of social and cultural reproduction, such as educational ideals, values, safety.

The success of these negotiations is paramount for an inclusive, cohesive New Zealand society, and it shapes who we are as a nation tomorrow. However, there is little attention given to ethnic mothers' work, invisible, un-acknowledged, possibly unimagined. Beatson (2013) commented that ethnic mothers are presented with conflicting definitions of mothering "while negotiating their experiences from being mothered in a different culture and how to mother for a 'new' nation" (p.74).

In territories of immigration, mothering is performed in another language than the one in which mothers performing it have been mothered. In this reproductive work, immigrant mothers are distanced from their extended family and networks of support (Foster, 2013) and ethnic mothering is often seen as a threat to the mainstream narrative of motherhood (DeSouza, 2011). Some ethnic

mothers face discrimination, even racism, some are aggrieved by their children's experiences of racism and/or by their children's choice to forgo their ethnic background to "fit in" in the safe mainstream landscape.

Complexity of time in care, regeneration and reproduction

An important factor of care, regeneration and reproduction is the time investment. Mothering time evolves not only as aspect (temporality), but also as concept (theme). As a concept, mothering time is a cultural invention: value-added (certain rituals benefit from the length of necessary time invested in preparations), a constitutive part of the social fabric hierarchy (in some cultures there is a set-aside time for parents, and a set-aside time for children), recovery ingredient (time to regenerate from birthing) or inevitability.

As aspect, mothering time is a social construction: in some cultures, time belongs to people, in others, people belong to time, creating a tension between controlling or being controlled by this non-renewable resource, time.

Mothering time is fragmented by children's needs and child-rearing chores, and controlled by many factors, such as the time allocated by institutions and agencies involved in children's education and wellbeing (I'm writing this think-piece with the voice of my children in the background and interrupted by parenting responsibilities, schools, doctors' appointments, and paid work that contributes to the family budget).

As an essential dimension of mothering, valuing time goes beyond counting the hours invested in care and reproduction. This is because definitions of time and the process of valuing time are culturally different, because mothering work of reproduction is not necessarily sequential, but overlapping, and because mothering time has different intensities (all mothers will remember the excitement or fright of the first time a mothering action was performed, or the fatigue of repetitive things that seem to take over all the time).

Wrapping up: an inclusive value framework

Care, regeneration and reproduction are vital economic mechanisms as production is, and overvaluing production over care, regeneration and reproduction, as it happens within an androcentric master narrative of motherhood, is not fair, equitable, nor sustainable.

The definition of value is misleading as well, because the framework that supports it doesn't allow for the multitude of perspectives present in our society. Their narratives may give different answers to what constitute the amazing things life is based on, and how to value them. In the search for an inclusive solution to value the care, regeneration and reproduction work, we need to open the value-framework to allow for different standpoints and world views, and to orchestrate in the process of defining value the voices of mothers and children, of carers and people cared for.

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