Mothering is linked with notions of femininity and gender (Arendell, 2000). For this reason, changing notions of gender and equality are necessarily linked to the meaning and practice of motherhood. This study examined how the experiences and meanings of motherhood were constructed and maintained within the context of ongoing interpersonal interactions between mothers, fathers, and children. We focused in particular on motherhood in the context of marriages with varying levels of gender equality.

Motherhood in context

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Early studies on motherhood tended to focus primarily on mothers as instrumental to the development of their children (Gerson, Alpers, & Richardson, 1984). More recent studies focused on mothers' experiences and examined motherhood as a set of social interactions that arise within a gendered set of relationships and social institutions at a particular time and place (Arendell, 2000; Baber & Allen, 1992; Glenn, 1994; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Mothering as a natural activity has been deconstructed to reveal cultural ideologies that hold it in place (Baber & Allen).

Chodorow (1978) and Ruddick (1980) challenged the idea that women were born mothers. Chodorow posited that because women do the child care, girls remain connected to their mothers and develop an orientation toward nurturing through attachment and identification processes. Ruddick believed that mothers take on a nurturing identity as a result of the caregiving work they do, rather than as a result of identification via attachment. As mothers interact with their children, they create deep emotional bonds that influence maternal and connected ways of thinking.

Though interest in the development of maternal attachment and identity continues (e.g., Kretchmar & Jacobvitz, 2002; Smith, 1999), these kinds of studies have been critiqued for emphasizing an essentialist or unitary view of women and mothering (Arendell, 2000; Baber & Allen, 1992). Attachment and identity studies tend not to explain the diversity of motherhood experiences or to consider how motherhood evolves in varying relational and family contexts (Gerson et al., 1984; Glenn, 1994).

Other studies have a more macro focus in terms of the origins of the ideology of motherhood and how it manifests in practice (e.g., Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994; Hays, 1996). These studies conceptualize the ideology of motherhood as a potent force in shaping the lives and experiences of women. Such an approach emphasizes how the ideology of motherhood is related to power structures within social contexts and frames mothering in terms of historical time and place, race and social status, and constructions of gender. A recent analysis of the context for mothering outlines unattainable ideals for "moms" that "seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 5).

Couples, equality, and the division of labor

Research shows that, despite some changes in fathers' involvement in child care, mothers are generally considered the experts regarding children (Glenn, 1994), and the work of taking care of children is still primarily done by mothers (Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason, 1998; Coltrane, 1996; Zimmerman, Haddock, Ziemba, & Rust, 2001). This holds true even when couples report a preference for shared parenting and when mothers work outside the home (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005). If this division of labor were based on a rational allocation of time and resources, the disparity would be changing more dramatically as women enter the workforce (Thompson & Walker, 1989; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998). Examining couple's interactions around these issues helps explain why these inequalities persist.

Previous studies suggest that motherhood is salient in the lives of women and is deserving of increased study (Arendell, 2000). As noted above, how motherhood is experienced depends on the context within which it occurs. Though there are studies of shared parenting (e.g., Deutsch, 1999; Dienhart, 1998), studies of motherhood within the context of intimate parental relationships have been limited.

Methods

A qualitative design was used to understand motherhood through the lived experiences of the women and men in this study. At the same time, we did not presume that the meaning in our data existed independently of our views (Charmaz, 2000). As feminist scholars, as well as wives and mothers, we sought to make visible the ways that gender structures and organizes lives and how equality and the meaning of motherhood intersected within the context of intimate couple relationships.

The analysis drew on 50 interviews collected as part of a larger, ongoing study of how contemporary couples are adapting to and defining their intimate and family relationships within a changing social and economic context. The first analysis from this data set examined how couples create equality (see Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005). In conducting that analysis the notion of motherhood seemed central to how couples responded to questions about child care. We wondered how ways of understanding motherhood were related to the issues of equality. In keeping with the notion of flexible data collection of Marshall and Rossman (1999), subsequent interviews specifically asked about the meaning of parenting roles. The answers generated the same kinds of information we were already getting spontaneously. We checked for demographic differences between the earlier and later interviews and found them very similar.

Participants

Sample selection was based on the notion of theoretical sampling of Strauss and Corbin (1998), which involves the selection and inclusion of participants who could best provide the information needed to answer the research questions. To ensure that participants were in the thralls of integrating marital and parental responsibilities and relationships, all participants were married, heterosexual couples with children no older than 5 years. In order to determine whether the emerging ideas about motherhood and gender equality would still hold true when examined across diverse relationships, the sample purposefully included White, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Eastern European men and women. Participants also represented a wide range of educational and occupational backgrounds, with less than half holding college degrees. Mothers who worked outside the home and mothers who did not were included.

Interviews

Partners were interviewed together regarding whether equality was important to them, how they determined household and family responsibilities and made decisions, whether they thought their relationship was fair, and how they communicated with and attended to each other. The format was open-ended to allow the interviews to focus on the issues of particular salience to the couples.

Coding for couple type

In grounded theory the analytic categories are not predetermined. However, researchers bring sensitivity of the previous literature to the coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The coding of couple type drew on a definition from previous research (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005) that was based on how gender was used to organize couple relationships. *Postgender* couples assumed all tasks were shared and appeared to have consciously moved beyond gender as a mechanism for organizing their relationships. *Gender legacy* couples did not cite gender as the basis for their division of responsibilities but appeared to use it by default and operate with hidden gender-based power structures. *Traditional* couples consciously advocated and maintained a gendered division of labor and said each "role" (their term) was equal.

In total (*n*= 50), 16 couples were classified as traditional, 22 as gender legacy, and 12 as postgender (see Table 1). Though these three groups were generally comparable demographically, the postgender women were somewhat older, were more likely to work outside the home, and had more years of education than other participants, including their husbands. Postgender couples had been married for a shorter period of time, had fewer children, and appeared to have married at a later age. Conversely, traditional mothers had been married the longest, had the most children, had the least education, and were less likely to work outside the home. Though a higher percentage of traditional women held a minority status, the postgender and gender legacy categories also included a diverse group of participants. For the fathers, level of education and percentage of minority status were nearly the same in each group.

Analysis of mothering

Because we began with the observation that the construct "mother" was important to the women and men interviewed for the contemporary couples study, our goal was to understand mothering and to identify the interpersonal processes that account for variations as it relates to gender equality. Thus, the focus of this study necessarily reflects the privileging of mother by the participants as they spoke about children and family relationships. Our goal was first to comprehend the meaning and experiences of the couples' lives as they described them and then to move from their individual experiences to a higher, more abstract level of explanation. Our application of the method was also informed by the social constructionist view of grounded theory of Charmaz (2000) in which researchers do not presume that their systematic methods will lead to the discovery of an objective truth.

We began with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), going through all 50 interviews line by line and giving each incident or idea a name that describes what is happening, for example, "mother knows what to do,""she breastfeeds, he burps," or "conscious decision to break old pattern." If an item appeared to be an example of something coded previously, it was given the same label. If not, a new label was created. This constant comparison process means that categories arise from the data and are not determined a priori by the researchers.

Next, we used axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to group these labels and identify categories among them and name them at conceptually more abstract levels such as "experiences of mothering,""separate-sphere belief," or "connection with child." Naming the categories helped us have a way to work analytically with the data. We identified two major themes related to the experience of mothering that became central to our analysis: tasks and relationship. *Tasks* referred to the work involved in taking care of children. They ranged from routine daily care such as diaper changing and cleaning up after children to ongoing preoccupation and worry about children, finding daycare/babysitting, and teaching good habits, values, and skills. *Relationship* referred to the evolving emotional connection between parents and children. It included feelings of closeness, a sense of understanding and knowing their children, enjoyment of time spent with children, and a physical bond that was often expressed through touching.

As our analysis proceeded, we refined the categories and examined how categories were related to one another. We found a circular relationship between doing childcare tasks and mothers' relationships with their children. We also found that this task-relationship spiral played out differently depending on gender equality. We identified two different models of motherhood and created an explanation, for example, grounded theory, regarding how varying couple processes created and maintained these models, and how they were linked to gender equality. We designed a set of diagrams to illustrate these relationships that are presented in the Results section.

During the course of our research we were mindful of issues related to confirmability or trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of the analysis depends in part on whether our interpretation of the data accurately explained the varying experiences of mothering (Flick, 2002; Morse & Richards, 2002). Systematic use of the constant comparison

method to reflect and shed light on hidden assumptions and patterns helped ensure that our findings were credible and transferable to other similar situations (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Transferability of this analysis should be viewed in the context of the developmental issues associated with caring for very young children in two-parent households.

Results

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Two models of mothering

Our discussion of the results focuses on the processes that perpetuate two different models of mothering young children: (a) mothering as a gendered talent and (b) mothering as conscious collaboration. In each model, childcare tasks are carried out, and the relational connections between parents and children are developed and strengthened. What distinguishes postgender mothers from traditional and gender legacy mothers is not their feelings of positive connection with their children but the extent to which both tasks and relational connection are shared between parents. Among both traditional and gender legacy couples, the belief that mothers are uniquely connected with children is integral to the processes that maintain mothering as a gendered talent and result in an unequal division of the tasks associated with child care, even when this is not the couple's intention.

Figures 1 and 2 show how the tasks of parenting young children were part of different relational patterns depending on gender equality. We first examine the processes that shaped the two models of mothering and then conclude with a discussion of the link between doing childcare tasks and the development of relational connections with their children and how this relates to couples' equality.

Processes that maintain mothering as a gendered talent

Four processes seemed to maintain mothering as a gendered talent (Figure 1): (a) partners believed that mothers had natural connection and knowledge, (b) fathers stepped back, (c) mothers organized time around children, and (d) mothers took continual responsibility. As a result, mothers of young children established stronger relational connections with their children than fathers did, which, in turn, perpetuated the processes described below.

Partners believed that mothers have natural connection and knowledge. Most gender legacy and traditional couples suggested that women had access to special knowledge about caring for young children. They believed that because women give birth, they automatically had a natural connection with their children and intuitively knew what their children needed. Believing in this natural connection was related to the idea that mothers were most able to do this job. Ron, a gender legacy father, described this belief, "I think women have this certain connection with their child; it's a bond that is amazing." Some of

the postgender couples also believed that mothers had a natural bond with children but attempted to de-emphasize it in order to allow fathers to be more engaged.

The belief that mothers had an innate connection with their children was related to the idea that mothers, not fathers, were essential to children's well-being. Amer noted the burden this placed on his wife, "It's hard on Tasha … when we are sleeping, when she hears a cough, she wakes up. I guess that's mother's instinct." Tasha took on this task with the belief that her child specifically needed her, "The mother is needed more now … kids need their mom." Similarly, Karina highlighted the nurturing capacities that mothers hold, "My role as mother is important because when your child is having a difficult time, usually that's who they want, because a mother is, should be, compassionate, loving, and understanding."

Fathers stepped back. In contrast to the idea that mothers instinctually know what to do, fathers reported feeling incompetent, being fearful, and not knowing what needed to be done. Ramesh explained that he stepped back because he did not feel competent in his abilities with the children, "Most of the time, the kids seem better off in her hands." Fathers repeatedly described backing away from childcare tasks. According to Pablo, "I tend to leave the basic things up to her, to feed him, to bathe him, to clothe him … I just back off and let her do it." The more men left these tasks to mothers, the less in touch they were with what needed to be done, which created a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts.

When fathers remained in the periphery, children were often less responsive to them, making fathers feel less able to engage. Steve described his children's focus on their mother, "When daddy gets home they still cry, 'ma, ma, ma.' They don't never say daddy." When children did not engage with fathers, fathers tended to back off, and mothers deepened their sense of emotional connection with their children. Darrell accepted this discrepancy, "She'll cuddle up with Shelly more than I will. … That's fine with me." As fathers stepped back, the idea that mothers have a natural connection was perpetuated, and mothers were subsequently more likely to take on child-related tasks.

Mothers organized their time around children. Many couples say that who takes care of the children depends on who is available. However, as fathers described stepping back from childrearing tasks, mothers spoke of organizing their time around children's needs. Susan, a new gender legacy mother, described learning to organize around the baby, "I would have to go run errands. I wanted to get together with some friends and realized that I couldn't because of the baby." Even when mothers are working outside the home, they are likely to schedule around the children.

Mothers also reported that the time they spent with their children brought satisfaction. One mother Lilia said, "I've given up a lot of my own time. … I invest a lot of time in Joshua, but I get a tremendous amount of enjoyment out of it, too." Though fathers speak of retaining personal time, traditional and gender legacy mothers seldom do. This discrepancy was irritating to Alice, "He's out playing golf and I'm still at home working … you don't play until the work is done and my work is never done." When mothering is gendered, women perceive less entitlement to time. Scott noticed this in his wife, "You

don't feel the freedom to take advantage [of personal time]." Anika, his wife, countered, "And I don't have it."

Gender legacy couples frequently expressed an ideal of equal time with the children, but in practice it did not seem to happen. Michael stated his ideal, "We both split time equally with our son on the days off." But his wife Mara corrected him, "Not. That is so not true." Michael credited their job situation, "Because you have more days off than I do." According to Mara, who organized her job around their child, "And that's not equal." Fathers spoke of wanting more time with their children, but traditional and gender legacy fathers prioritized their time around work. Tyronne is an example, "I would like to spend more time with Dixon, but I'm just too tired." His wife, Wanda, agreed, "He spends 12–14 hours a day at work." Steve, another gender legacy father, summed it up, "She's more around than I am. My role is more of a backseat driver."

Mothers took continual responsibility. Traditional couples intentionally divide family labor such that mothers assumed responsibility for thinking about, managing, and executing childcare tasks. However, among gender legacy couples, responsibility for children falls on women without explicit decision. For example, as women, but not men, organized their time around children, they also assumed responsibility that was reflected in a continual focus on their children's needs and what had to be done, no matter where they were. Gloria described this focus, "I'm always thinking of Kyle and his wants to be met." Even when tasks were assigned to fathers, mothers often took responsibility for seeing that he did them. For example, Janice orchestrated her husband's involvement, "If I'm really tired, I'm going to tell him, 'you're going to get up … get up and help me get the kids ready.'"

When women were responsible for child care, fathers supported mothers. If mothers were home, they were in charge of the children. Nina observed, "If he's been home with the baby, he's like, 'Okay, here, take the baby'… generally I do most of the work with the baby." Maureen described her husband's helping role, "When Larry comes home, he's there just to help me out and give me a break." Support from fathers is not just with tasks, but is also emotional. Mark, a traditional father of two children, explained, "I see my role as someone that will back or support the mother, wife, in anything that she is trying to do with the children … be there as not only support, but the person standing right next to her the whole time." Thus, when mothering was gendered, fathers' involvement with child care was primarily something they do in response to mothers' needs, more than children's. As a result, mothers developed a direct relational connection with their children, whereas fathers' relationships were more indirect, through mothers.

Processes that maintain mothering as conscious collaboration

Though couples in all three groups said that equality was important to them (see Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005) and wanted fathers to be involved, postgender couples took active steps to ensure that fathers also developed the same kind of task-relationship connection with their children. We called these equality-creating tactics "conscious collaboration" (Figure 2). They included the following: (a) partners assumed responsibility is shared, (b) they compensated for biological differences, (c) fathers took

on tasks without mothers' instructions, (d) fathers were open to learning, and (e) mothers did not intervene. As a result, both mothers and fathers developed direct relational connections with their children.

Partners assumed responsibility is shared. Postgender mothers and fathers assumed that responsibility for children was shared. Miguel and Rosa illustrate how this assumption makes sharing tasks almost automatic for many of these couples. According to Miguel, "It's all shared naturally." Rosa agreed and noted, "Some things with us I don't think we even need to talk about … we just both do it."

Compensated for biological differences. It was important to collaborative parents that biological differences do not interfere with equal parenting. They seemed to devise strategies for sharing the tasks. Cindy, a postgender mother of a newborn explained, "So I breastfeed and the minute I finish one side Martin gets him, and he burps him and he checks the diaper, and then I get him back." Collaborative parents also actively took steps to engage fathers in nurturing, "Miguel loves to hold and cuddle with the baby, so we both do that kind of stuff. We both share in the nurturing."

Fathers took on tasks. Postgender fathers saw themselves as responsible for childcare tasks. Carlos put it this way, "I see myself as equal to her, us both having the same responsibility … not being the 'man' or being the 'wife.' We both have to go and take care of the baby or take care of each other." The consciousness of this expectation was articulated by Rosa:

I think the father should have a significant part of the child's life. Often the mother ends up being the primary caregiver … in our relationship Miguel does a lot and is very active. He spends more time caring for the baby than I do.

Miguel agreed, "There is no way I would let her take all the responsibility for taking care of the baby, just because she's the mom." In contrast to the gendered mothering couples where men made no similar comments, Miguel described a sense of responsibility that extended beyond the time he is at home, "Even at work I am thinking about her and the baby."

In collaborative parenting, mothers were not responsible for managing fathers' child and household participation. Martha, a postgender mother, noted her husband's responsibility, "When Everett comes home and he sees something needs to get done, he does it." Miguel reflected a similar sense of responsibility, "I am not going to let her clean the house and sit on my butt." Mothers in collaborative households shared responsibility for children with the fathers. Lorraine, another postgender mother with a young daughter, explained, "Taking her to daycare, bringing her back from daycare, etc., that's his responsibility. He is responsible for breakfast and lunch." Men also monitored their own responsibilities and did not look to their wives for direction. In-Soek, a postgender father born in Korea, illustrated this point, "I have to remind myself that this is my house, these are my dishes, this is my baby, just as much as hers."

Collaborative parents consciously allocated time equally. For example, both Carlos and Katie set aside personal time for exercise and recreation, "We'll split up the week, you have Monday, Wednesday; I have Tuesday, Thursday, and that's pretty fair." Fathers, as well as mothers, planned their days around their children and family. Juan, a Mexican American postgender father, contrasted himself with his friends, "The guys say 'let's go someplace'… [but] I plan my day to be around them [wife and children]." Juan did not see his involvement as optional, "My job is to be part of it and do my part." Equal allocation of time meant that postgender mothers experienced more entitlement to personal time than other mothers. Cindy credited her husband's active involvement for her free time, "Martin participates in so many ways that it makes it much easier for me to run an errand or go out with a friend for a manicure or pedicure."

Open to learning. Collaborative parents often spoke of what they were learning. Rather than stepping back from child care because they did not know what to do, postgender fathers sought to learn. Carlos, described by his wife as a "super dad," said, "I'm learning on the job." The learning was not only around child care. Many husbands spoke of learning to be more emotionally attentive and communicative in their relationships with their wives. According to Juan, "She's taught me through the years to talk and get it out." Like Juan, postgender fathers appeared open to learning from their wives. In-Soek described his learning, "When we first got married I thought I could make the decisions on money. But I quickly learned we need to talk things over." Postgender mothers also spoke of learning. Katie explained learning to be more assertive, "I'm learning from Carlos to use my voice and speak out sometimes, where I didn't before."

Openness to learning makes it possible for couples to develop new nongendered skills and competencies and to learn from trial and error. Cindy explained, "We kinda come up with things and if it works, we stick to it, and if it doesn't work you change it and make it work."

Mothers did not intervene. Though postgender parents collaborate and learn from each other, these mothers are comfortable letting fathers parent without monitoring or intruding, and fathers were willing to take on the tasks. Cindy trusted that her husband was able to care for their infant, "I don't know that most husbands are that comfortable letting their wives go when they have a 15-day-old baby." Judith, like several postgender mothers, spoke about not intervening in their husbands' parenting intentionally, "Thomas is spontaneously taking care of her and I don't jump in and tell him how to do it." Deanne deliberately fostered the relationship between father and child by consciously giving them time alone, "I try to stay in bed and let Ron do the first hour … he feeds her, plays with her, watches Sesame Street for awhile with her … and that's kind of become a stabilizer."

When mothers did not monitor and intrude and fathers took direct responsibility for childcare tasks, men developed more direct connection with their children. Deanne's husband Ron described building emotional connection with his daughter, "I love spending time with Emma. And I love being alone with her. So if Deanne stays in bed that gives me more time with Emma." When fathers participated in childcare tasks, they

reported a sense of satisfaction and emotional connection. Greg noted satisfaction growing out of his caregiving, "It gives you a sense of satisfaction, too, I mean, like when you take care of something."

The task-relationship cycle and equality

Doing the tasks of child care helped create, maintain, and cultivate a continually growing emotional connection between parents and young children. There was a recursive, circular connection between doing childcare tasks and developing relational connections. As mothers connected to their children through caregiving, they also developed and honed the skills of child care. Therefore, they were more likely to do the work because they knew how. Frank, a traditional father, explained this bond between mother and child, "Judy knows what Sam eats, when he eats, and how much he eats." Judy described how the pattern continued, "So it's easier for me to do it. By the time I explain and tell Frank, I could have done it all myself. And the baby wouldn't be crying anymore." Mothers' competencies became part of the cycle that perpetuated a separate-sphere, natural differences view of mothering.

When fathers participated in the tasks of child care they also were more likely to develop connection with their children. A traditional father expressed his awareness that because he was not doing the work of child care, his emotional connection with the child would be less, "Mavis takes care of Adam. She knows what to do. … I know Adam will love her more than me." In contrast, Martin and Cindy allocated most child and household tasks to Martin, a stay-at-home father. In this interview it was primarily Martin, not Cindy, who talked about connection and their child's needs. He described becoming more and more involved as he engaged in child care:

For as long as we can, I am going to try to be here to raise Jake without child care at all. I just want to stay very involved with child raising. I have a lot of ideas about what to do and what not to do. Talking about it is one thing, but doing it is another.

Magno, a postgender father whose wife, Maria, was a stay-at-home mother, described how doing child care increased his connection with his daughter, Anna, "When I get home, it is my turn to bond with my daughter. I'll feed her, I'll bathe her. … I'll just go ahead and do it, because I didn't want to lose that connection with her."

In the traditional and gender legacy couples, the ongoing connection between task and relationship resulted in mothers developing childcare skills, their automatic assumption of most childcare tasks, and or their directing and monitoring fathers' relationships with their children. Motherhood was a gendered talent that left fathers on the outside, even when partners reported that gender was not the basis for their division of childcare responsibilities.

A number of mothers perceived this imbalance in parenting as unfair. Nancy, a gender legacy mother, reported, "I don't wanna feel like I am the only parent. I don't wanna be the parent and you the provider. For it to be fair and equitable we need to be team parents." Unfairness was particularly a problem when the traditional or gender legacy

mothers were also working outside the home. Felicia complained, "It's not fair. I have to get up with the kids, get the kids ready for school … then I have to be at work. He doesn't have no responsibility."

In contrast, postgender mothering was part of an equal couple relationship in which child care was a collaborative endeavor that distributed the work more equally and resulted in a direct relational connection with the children on the part of both the mothers and fathers. These couples let go of the assumption that women were supposed to be the primary caregivers and consciously compensated for any biological differences. Fathers assumed responsibility for childcare tasks and sought relational connections with their children. This required openness to learning and the development of new skills on the part of each parent. As fathers developed relational connections and mothers did not intervene, notions regarding both mothering and fathering changed. These roles, though still salient to the parents, were no longer experienced as gendered but were seen as part of a collaborative parenting effort.

Discussion

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In this study, we responded to a call for research that examines motherhood in its interpersonal location (e.g., Arendell, 2000; Gerson et al., 1984; Glenn, 1994; Hays, 1996). We explored mothering as a relational, rather than internal, process. The analysis shows how beliefs in mothers' natural childcare abilities and connections become translated into practices that perpetuate separate-sphere mothering even among couples who do not endorse traditional gender roles. As in other studies (e.g., Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998, 2005; Zimmerman et al., 2001; Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmeige, & Hall, 1996), these results help explain how gender inequality persists despite ideals to the contrary.

These results suggest that the idealization of motherhood is part of the reason why inequity continues. Couples in this study began with beliefs that idealized motherhood, then responded to childcare tasks and demands in ways that maintained an unequal workload, deepened mothers' connections with their children, and encouraged fathers to step aside. This self-perpetuating cycle is an important mechanism that maintains the idealization of motherhood as a unique and natural bond and also serves to sustain gender inequality.

In order to change the unequal distribution of labor, parents of young children have to consciously work against the prevailing motherhood discourse. Yet, we were surprised how naturally some of the parents in this study appeared to be moving into collaborative parenting. It is not that they did not report any conflicts. Rather, the ability to address conflicts is important to the creation of equality (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998, 2005). Unresolved conflict appeared to be present among a number of the gender legacy couples where old patterns of gender and power collided with their ideals of equality.

It is also important to note that the meaning and practice of motherhood is intricately related to how fatherhood is constructed. To better understand parenting as a collaboration, it will be necessary to continue to study fathers and how fathers and mothers create each other (e.g., Matta, 2004). This study also sheds a somewhat different light on the notion of maternal gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The processes that maintained gendered parenting were interactive, involving both the mother and father. As fathers step back and mothers step forward, men are often left out unintentionally. Collaborative mothers consciously did not monitor or intrude into fathers' parenting.

Implications for practice

Blume and Blume (2003) note that families must manage multiple cultural discourses related to gender. This study suggests that many couples hold contradictory ideologies related to parenting. They want fathers to be involved, but the ideology of mothering as a gendered talent perpetuates separate-sphere parenting and gender inequality. Though this dynamic can be a major source of marital stress, issues related to equality are seldom addressed in couples' education courses (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2000). Couples of all types can benefit from education and clinical interventions that raise consciousness about power and gender and promote equality and shared parenting. Blaisure and Koivunen describe a program that takes a proactive stance against power and gender inequalities, informing couples about the costs of inequality and teaching them strategies for building equality in their relationships (i.e., mutual empathy, self-monitoring, sharing responsibilities, and conflict management).

Though gender legacy mothers—those who say gender is not the basis for allocation of childcare tasks but still end up carrying the burden—are most likely to experience unfairness and inequality, traditional and postgender couples are not immune from conflicts and tensions regarding fairness (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2000; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2005). Because gendered ideologies regarding parenting and relationships are so prevalent, postgender couples also need conscious attentiveness in order to avoid falling into hidden gender traps (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1999; Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998). When women have less voice in relationships, maintaining collaborative parenting is difficult. Teaching strategies that empower women would put them in a better position to negotiate with their partners. For example, therapists can help partners validate women's experiences and skills and encourage women to utilize and maintain their voices in therapy sessions.

This analysis suggests five important goals for educators and clinicians: (a) help couples examine their ideologies regarding gender and mothering, (b) make visible and address issues of power and gender, (c) provide information and discussion that expands the possibilities available to couples, (d) help couples make conscious decisions regarding how they want to share parenting responsibilities, and (e) help couples develop the strategies that support and maintain collaborative parenting and equality.

For men to take on the tasks of child care, they may need help overcoming feelings of incompetence and developing new abilities. Traditional models of masculinity make this learning position difficult (Meth, 1990); yet, men who are able to do this develop the

relational connections with children that are most commonly associated with mothering (Coltrane, 1996). Further, new evidence suggests that tending to children may actually change men's hormonal systems (Taylor, 2002). According to Taylor, there is a decrease in testosterone that allows other, more affiliative hormones that foster relationship to surface. Thus, though collaborative mothers report deep relational connections with their children, mothers no longer have exclusive hormonal license to this experience and may need help learning how not to manage fathers' relationships with their children automatically.

Previous studies have also shown that women's rates of depression are highly associated with whether or not childcare tasks are shared (Lennon, 1996; McGrath, Keita, Strickland, & Russo, 1990). Thus, gender inequality in child care continues to be an important social and mental health issue. Clinicians must be sensitive to the division of childcare labor among their clientele. Because gender and childcare activities often fall within a taken-for-granted realm that remains largely beyond conscious awareness, clients seeking help for depression or other stresses may not raise childcare issues automatically. Asking specific questions about how childcare decisions are made and encouraging conversation on this topic may help couples move toward greater collaboration.

Future directions

This article adds to efforts to explain why the division of labor remains inequitable, despite changes in women's participation in work outside the home (e.g., Wilkie et al., 1998; Zimmerman et al., 2001). However, it focused only on mothering among heterosexual married couples. Future studies should examine how the idealization of motherhood and equality play out when parents are not married and among divorced and same-sex partners. Fathers' connections with their young children also need much more exploration than this study of mothering could explore.

As in other studies (e.g., Risman, 1998), postgender mothers had more years of education, were somewhat older, and appeared more committed to their careers. However, the research presented here suggests that collaborative mothers may have more power, but could not detail why some couples were more able than others to devise conscious strategies that fostered collaborative parenting. Research in this area may help identify other possible points of education and intervention. Because postgender parents were older, but had been married a shorter time, the impact of delaying marriage may also merit future study.

This article focused on mothering as an interpersonal process. How these processes were influenced by the larger social context was not a primary focus. Though the processes identified in this study applied across a very diverse sample, the interviews did not probe how couples draw on ethnic, religious, and racial experiences in creating the nuances of mothering. Also, the study did not include the very poor or very rich. It was limited to parents of children under 5 years and did not examine later life stages; thus, it is unclear how mothering and shared parenting arrangements might change over time as children get older. Research in all these areas of diversity is needed if our scholarly models of

mothering are to reflect the range of variations in mothering experiences and to provide a more inclusive understanding of mothering processes.

Finally, the study described here highlights the centrality of motherhood notions to parenting practices. However, a study of mothering should not be equated with a study of parenting. As researchers seek to understand new, more collaborative models of parenting, we need to ask questions that move beyond gender as an organizing principle.

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