Working Mothers and their Multivoiced Self

Las Madres Trabajadoras y la Polifonía de su Self

As Mães Trabalhadoras e a Polifonia de Seu Self

LEILA SANCHES DE ALMEIDA

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Abstract

Since the 1960's, work has been a goal for Brazilian middle class women. In contrast, mothers of lower-income groups have always needed to work. This qualitative study investigated the meaning of motherhood, child care and work among 28 working mothers of different social classes. In order to do so, interviews and focus groups were conducted. Results show that women attribute exclusively to mothers the child care function. In addition, being a working woman has different meanings for each of those two social classes. There are voices in the self that represent the positions of mother and worker. They act on the meaning systems and they can lead to contradictory attitudes in a similar context.

Keywords: motherhood, child care, female work, working mothers, *self*.

Resumen

El trabajo femenino se convirtió en un objetivo para las mujeres brasileñas de clase media, especialmente a partir de 1960, pero las madres de clase baja siempre necesitaron trabajar. Por medio de entrevistas y grupos focales, el presente estudio cualitativo investigó el significado de la maternidad, de los cuidados infantiles y del trabajo, con 28 madres trabajadoras de diferentes clases sociales. En general, las mujeres atribuyeron la función de cuidar a los hijos únicamente a las madres. Adicionalmente, ser mujer trabajadora tuvo un significado diferente en cada clase social. Existen voces del "self" que representan las posiciones de madre y de trabajadora, que actúan en los sistemas de significación y pueden llevar a actitudes contradictorias para una misma situación.

Palabras clave: maternidad, cuidados infantiles, trabajo femenino, madres trabajadoras, *self*.

Resumo

O trabalho feminino se converteu em um objetivo para as mulheres brasileiras de classe média, especialmente a partir de 1960; no entanto, as mães de classe baixa sempre precisaram trabalhar. Por meio de entrevistas e grupos focais, o presente estudo qualitativo pesquisou o significado da maternidade, dos cuidados infantis e do trabalho, com 28 mães trabalhadoras de diferentes classes sociais. Em geral, as mulheres atribuíram a função de cuidar dos filhos unicamente às mães. Adicionalmente, ser mulher trabalhadora teve um significado diferente em cada classe social. Existem vozes do "self" que representam as posições de mãe e de trabalhadora que atuam nos sistemas de significação e podem levar a atitudes contraditórias para uma mesma situação.

Palavras-chave: maternidade, cuidados infantis, trabalho feminino, mães trabalhadoras, *self*.

FEMALE LABOUR has always been part of the social history of lower class Brazilian families. However, from the nineteen sixties on, middle class women have taken more interest in finding a job. Thus, a new class of workers has faced a situation that was already known by lower class women. The woman who works must adjust the household tasks to a new daily routine. This can be a difficult situation for a woman who is also a mother.

The family is a social institution which reflects the economical and political structure of a given society (Casey, 1992; Henriques, Feres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2006). In addition, it is known that the construction possibilities of people as subjects and citizens are concentrated within the family (Amazonas, Damasceno, Terto, & Silva, 2003). Therefore, a brief look at the social history of the family will show us the roles and characteristics attributed to women, to child care and to female labour.

In Brazilian history, patriarchal families in Colonial times were very large. They included blood-related and other members, such as employees (Freyre, 1975), in family life. The father was the unquestionable authority in the family, while the mother was in charge of the education of the children, the administration of the household and supervision of the house staff. There was no question about the submission of women to the authority of men.

In the midst of the nineteenth century, there was a change in the family structure, and families started to be basically constituted by parents and children. Their social exchanges were limited to immediate relatives —grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins (Frota, 2003). In the new family structure, the mother should not only take care of the children but also behave as a good wife, providing the necessary support for the husband to work outside the household. Work was an exclusive responsibility of men.

Today, it is still commonly accepted in Brazilian society that child care is basically an exclusive responsibility of the mother. In spite of it, middle class mothers with children under 24 months of age, participate in the labour force. This fact makes necessary for middle class working mothers to find the means to carry out these two tasks: to have a job and to take care of children. For this reason, they have to rely on grandmothers, aunts, baby-sitters, day-care centers and schools in general, to be able to respond to their dual responsibilities (Dessen, 2010).

On the other hand, combining work with child caring is not a recent challenge for lower class women. In the beginning of the 20th century, 42% of them in Southern Brazil already had a job and had their children taken care of by grandparents and other people (Fonseca, 1989). Currently, child care is still shared with members of a wider network of relatives or with neighbours (Almeida, 2004; Sarti, 1995). Quite often it is the oldest child who takes care of the other siblings (Amazonas, Damasceno, Terto, & Silva, 2003).

There is a great contrast between lower and middle class women with regard to female work. Among middle class women, having a job is an individual project (Velho, 1987) and, therefore a gratifying activity. In post-modern times, having a job has a meaning and is an important element in the construction process of the identity of middle class women. Although middle class women have conquered the right to professional work and education, they are still expected to be submissive to men and to be responsible for the household, the care of children, among other activities (Biasoli-Alves, 2000). For that reason, they feel guilty for the undesirable changes and events that take place in their families. In other words, the women themselves assume the whole weight of household and child care tasks. As a consequence, the conflict between work and motherhood is even more conspicuous. Women roles as mothers and workers involve multiple and contradictory identities in constant change (Hall, 2001; Louro, 1997). This conflict between work and motherhood, however, is not a specific

matter of Brazilian middle class women. Folbre and Bittman (2004) state that American women have increased the time they devote to paid work far more dramatically than men have increased the amount of time they devote to family care.

In the lower class, female work means, above all, benefits for the family rather than the fulfilment of personal goals (e.g., Petrini et al., 2012; Sarti, 1996). Working is a duty. Female work brings improvements to the whole family's life style. It gives women hope of a better future for the family. It is interesting to remark that the majority of Brazilian lower class families are not configured as nuclear ones. Nevertheless, the nuclear family remains as an ideal in the lower class population (Bilac, 1995). It is how they represent the family in the everyday life (Szymanski, 1997).

From these considerations, we can see that the role of a mother involves home and child care, whereas the role of a worker usually involves activities outside of the household. Thus, this study aimed at investigating the meaning of motherhood, child care and work among 28 Brazilian working mothers of different social classes; women who participate in two distinct environments —the household and the workplace— in a configuration that creates rising of simultaneously competing demands for them.

I assume that meanings and senses act as voices in the self. Based on Vygotsky (1991), meaning is the idea represented by a word. Its characteristics are precision and stability. The sense of a word is a more extensive phenomenon. It is dynamic and flowing. The sense refers to the psychological events which arose in our mind in a specific context, so the same word can assume different senses – even though its meaning can be known by everyone because it is stable.

Method

Participants

Qualitative research is defined by Patton (2002) as a kind of research that produces findings collected from real-world settings where the "phenomenon of interest unfold naturally" (p. 39). Consequently, Davies and Dodd (2002) claim that the rigor criteria must be different in qualitative and quantitative strands of research. In qualitative research, rigor must be associated with the exploration of "subjectivity, reflexivity, and the social interaction of interviewing" (p. 281). So, the credibility of qualitative research depends on the ability and effort of the researcher (Golafshani, 2003).

This qualitative study investigated the meaning of motherhood, child care and work among Brazilian working mothers of different social classes. Child care is defined here as the daily care of children provided by a person or an organization while the mother is at work. So, it is related to diverse types of arrangements that have in common the goal of providing care for the children during working hours.

This research was developed in five day-care centers. One of them was located in a public university and the others were situated in slums. To recruit participants, the researcher approached mothers who were picking their children up in the institutions and explained to them the objective of the investigation. A total of 28 women participated on the study. All the participants provided written informed consent for study participation consistent with APA standards.

Among 28 participants of the study, four were middle class working mothers and twenty four were lower class participants. Women were 21 to 40 years old (M=26 years old). All of them had at least one child and one of their children was enrolled on a state-owned day-care center. In the two social classes, there were women who did not live with their husband. Middle class mothers had college degrees in different areas whereas lower class women, in general, have only completed the elementary education – the mandatory level of education in Brazil. With respect of labour, the middle class participants worked in activities that required a

college degree while low class mothers generally worked as house-maids.

Lower class women only could be interviewed when they picked their children up at the day-care center. For these reason, we combined the use of two qualitative methods for collecting data. We conducted individual interviews with middle class women and carried out focus groups with lower class mothers. According Morgan (1997), focus groups, participant observation and individual interviews serve as a primary means for collecting qualitative data.

It is necessary to clarify the definition used here to differentiate middle and lower class participants. Brazilian middle class was defined as the social class in which citizens have a monthly combined family income between R$1,000 and R$4,000, whereas in Brazilian lower class citizens have a monthly combined family income lower than R$1,000 (Brazil's Secretariat of Strategic Affairs of the Presidency, SAE, 2010).

Instruments and Procedure

Four semi-structured interviews and four focus groups were conducted focusing on the following topics: motherhood, child care and work. These topics were established from the literature review. Using these topics as general guidelines, mothers talked to the researcher or to the members of the group about family structure and organization, children, caring, health, work and social networks. They presented their personal experiences and their points of view. The data was collected at the day-care centers. Middle class mothers were interviewed. Lower class mothers participated in focus groups. Each group was composed of six women. After finishing an interview or focus group, the researcher made personal notes about the situation (Corsaro, 1981).

The data collected from interviews and focus group were audio recorded and transcribed, preserving all grammatical errors, the use of colloquial expressions, pauses, emphasis, hesitations, and expressions denoting emotion (e.g., crying, laughing), among other things. After reading the interviews and focus groups transcripts several times, we highlighted all descriptions that were relevant to the topic of inquiry. Using this procedure, we selected relevant excerpts from the collected material. The excerpts were distributed in the following categories of analysis (themes): Motherhood, child care and work. We obtained a total of 95 excerpts: 41 from interviews (15 related to motherhood, 11 related to child care, and 15 related to work); and 54 from focus groups (21 related to motherhood, 16 related to child care, and 17 related to work).

Results

The results will be presented in line with the topics following the data collection and the categories of analysis. In the next section, the excerpts associated to the categories of motherhood, child care and work will be presented aiming at describing the subjective experience of working mothers in the two social classes included in this study.

Motherhood

The first analysis carried out was about the meaning of motherhood. All 28 working women associated motherhood with child care. The four middle class mothers stated that it is the mother's responsibility to take care of the children and that the father does not really help with this task. Curiously, two of them stated that they prefer to assume the full responsibility of child care, instead of sharing it with their husbands. One of these mothers said that she is the only one that is capable of taking adequate care of the child at home, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

> "My husband is completely unfit for that task because that was the first time he was going to take care of a child" (mother 1).

All lower class mothers also considered that the care of the child is the mother's responsibility. One of them, for example, answered:

> "...Talking, counselling, establishing limits, providing comfort and affection, rearing and playing with the children" (mother a).

Child Care

The middle class mothers considered that the process of adapting to the day-care center and the separation from the children was painful and they felt guilty about it, especially during the first month of the child in the institution:

> "Her adaptation was much easier than I had expected. [...] We imagined all sort of horrible things. [...] Those things my mother used to say about day-care center [...] and that, somehow, I kept in my mind" (mother 1).

> "Unfortunately, I have to go to work" (mother 2).

> "When we get there and, for example, they say "she had no problems staying with us" ...then you ... you don't know if you should be happy or not. Because, wow, she did well without me!" (mother 3).

> "I got there and I saw she was OK That she had survived! Well, then, somebody else can take care of her" (mother 4).

The children of lower class working mothers who participated in this study were also attending a day-care center. Before that, some of those mothers had left their children with a neighbour, using a collective system in which a person takes care of the neighbourhood children. Although, this choice was considered a reasonable option, mothers expressed a general preference for using the day-care centers;

> "My neighbour has already taken care of my son. I work and I can not miss work. Now, my son is enrolled at the day-care center" (mother e).

> "[...] the day-care center is completely full and has no more vacancies ..." (mother f).

Work

Regarding the kind of work mothers had, the first important aspect is the tendency to have traditionally feminine occupations: They were teachers, secretaries, caregivers, house-maids, and so forth. We noticed that when they have to look for a job, these women tend to select activities that have been attributed to women by traditional standards: care taking, rearing of the children, submission to authority, and so on. Despite the nature of their jobs, all middle class women felt overwhelmed when they resumed their professional activities after the birth of their children:

> "I have so much to do... have so little time to do it all! [Laughter]" (mother 2).

They were always in a hurry after work to pick up their children at the day-care center. Three out of the four middle class mothers considered their job as an individual project. One of them said that she tried to enrol her child in a day-care center to make sure she would not have to quit her job in order to stay home and take care of the child. On the other hand, all lower class mothers stated that their job was a necessary complement to the family income:

> "With my contribution we manage to survive" (mother b).

To none of them the job represents an individual project:

> "I believe there is no appropriate age to get a job. There is a time when it is necessary" (mother c).

Finally, all middle class mothers in this study reported some difficulty to integrate their roles as mothers and workers. Two of them reported:

"I thought that I could never leave the baby in a day-care center in order to get back to work" (mother 1).

"We must always get back to work. There are women who quit their job …but that is not good. We must not deny our personal satisfaction. But the baby … it's very important that she is OK I can't picture myself without a job" (mother 2).

Among the 24 lower class mothers there were a small number of complaints about the difficulty to conciliate motherhood and work. One of the mothers said:

"Sometimes I feel I neglect my family a little bit …One of these days they said to me at home that I only care about my job that I didn't care about them anymore" (mother d).

Discussions

We noticed that there is a meaning of motherhood that is shared by both lower and middle class women; a meaning that includes child care and rearing. As we have mentioned before, these attributions have always been related to the female figure since colonial times in Brazil (e.g., Biasoli-Alves, 2000; Frota, 2003). This result indicates that motherhood has a socio-historical meaning. This meaning acts as a voice and crosses their network of meanings (Rossetti-Ferreira, Amorim, Silva & Carvalho, 2004). It is intrinsic in the sense that the meaning of motherhood is formulated by each woman (Almeida, 2003). Hermans (2001), in the same way, postulate that collective voices organize and constrain the meaning systems that emerge from dialogical relationships.

The meaning of work also has a historical component. For a long time, work has been considered one of men's duties in the Brazilian middle class. So, despite their work, working mothers remain as the figure responsible for everyone's

well-being at home (e.g., Rocha-Coutinho, 2003; Wagner, Predebon, Mosmann, & Verza, 2005).

We consider that the meaning of motherhood, child care and work act like voices in the self of the working mothers. Sometimes, these co-existing voices lead the women to carry out different roles at the same time. It can cause co-operation and competition between these voices.

In his theory of personal and cultural positioning of the dialogical self, Hermans (2001) considers that the self moves in multiple inter- and intra-psychological positions. Some dialogical situations cause changes in the self´s position. Consequently, the self can speak various social languages that express collective voices. Marková (2006) proposes that these "collective voices in the self" (Hermans, 2001) characterize an internal dialogue which involves different kinds of symbolically and socially represented inner alter. It expresses the dialogicality of subjective experience. In accordance with Marková (2006), the term dialogicality presupposes understanding a phenomenon in its complexity and multiplicity. The dialogicality involves the triad ego-alter (including inner alter)-object (Marková, 2006).

We have seen that among lower and middle class women alike the meaning of motherhood co-existed in a conflicting manner with the meaning constructed around work. In many cases, it generated a feeling of guilt in relation to the care given to their children. This kind of emotion has already been reported in middle class women by Biasoli-Alves (2000) in her study about the role of Brazilian women in the 20th century, especially in the family context.

The few complaints among lower income mothers in this study is probably due to the fact that these women had their children in a day-care center, which is not always easy for the majority of poor women. There is an insufficient number of public day-care centers in Brazil. Nevertheless, we are inclined to think that these women experienced difficulties in combining

motherhood and their professional activities outside their homes.

We know that working mothers experience both benefits and stress from that role. In our study, several times women in general seemed unable to integrate in the self the roles of mother and working woman. Unfortunately, like it occurred in the decade of 80 in the USA (Silverstein, 1991), there is not currently in Brazil an effective policy aimed at helping families to cope with the different demands of work and family. The establishment of public policies aimed at attending this population is an issue that requires immediate attention in our country. Data from the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development conducted by the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development NICHD showed that the majority of mothers working part time have reported less conflict between work and family than those working full time (Buehler, O'Brien, & Walls, 2011). These data lead us to think about the importance of increasing Brazilian research about female work and child care. We need to point out the difficulties faced by women who are workers and mothers. Do these problems relate to the difficulties to find a day-care center? Or are they associated with the limitations to afford a good day-care center? What do they think about the effects of maternal employment and day-care on children? We ought to conduct studies that explore the factors contributing to quality care.

Foreign literature on child care has especially brought some of these questions up for discussion and investigation. Herbst and Barnow (2008) studied the relationship between female work supply and the geographic supply of child care in Maryland using census data and child care provider information. The results revealed that women tend to work in regions where non-parental child care is available. Consequently, the state of Maryland and other American states invested on child care supply, in a policy that included low-income neighborhoods.

Family proximity is another aspect that is determinant on the work supply of women who are mothers. From two large American datasets (U.S. Census and the National Survey of Families and Households), Compton and Pollack (2011) pointed out that 4- 10% of mothers who are employed and participate in the labor force live in close proximity to the babies' grandmothers. The mothers rely on the grandmothers´ support to provide irregular child care, whenever it is necessary.

These two remarkable studies indicate the importance of generating essential data for elaborating public policies. In a similar fashion, we think that our investigation can influence public policy directed to working women, in different aspects such as the duration of maternity leave, the length of time at work, and other important elements. According Folbre and Bittman (2004), it is important that policies take into consideration the consequences they have on family life. They state that public policies can impose significant constraints on individual choices. One remarkable situation occurs when women have to counterbalance their professional opportunities with an increase in the costs of family responsibility. It can be a source of conflicts.

There will always be voices in the self and they will cause satisfaction and conflicts. But, certainly, this battle in the selves of working women will be easier if they feel supported by protective working laws and measures. It is important that middle class working mothers can carry out part of their working tasks at home. With respect to lower class working mothers, it is essential not only to increase the number of public day-care centers, but to ensure that public day-care centers operate for twelve hours a day – like it occurs in private day-care centers.

The present study has some limitations. The most important of all is that it included a very small number of Brazilian women. We did not have as purpose to study a statistically significant sample of all lower and middle class working

mothers in Brazil. We intended to understand the meaning of motherhood, child care and work among these women. So, the thematic analysis of this qualitative study cannot be generalizable in the traditional sense. Kuhn (1962) has already mentioned that there is more than one way to generate knowledge. Certainly, qualitative research is one of them. Besides, nowadays qualitative research methods are very used in educational and psychological research.

Finally, we will do a brief comment about affectivity. Rey (2003) postulates that affectivity plays a very important role in the construction of subjectivity. According to this psychologist, memory of affections integrates the different meanings internalized by subjects. So, we think that a sense is an emotional experience of a phenomenon. It expresses a synthesis between the meaning and the affection that was created by that meaning in that situation. In our study, women talked about their lives with emotion, making evident that the affections were part of their sense of motherhood, work, and child care.

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