Constructing Motherhood on the Night Shift: "Working Mothers" as "Stay-at-Home Moms"

Anita Ilta Garey

Based on in-depth interviews with hospital nurses, this article examines the way in which employed women with children use the night shift to support a construction of motherhood which closely resembles that of mothers who are not in the labor force. Interview data reveal that a salient function of night shift work is the reconciliation of some of the structural and conceptual incompatibilities of being "working mothers." Night-shift nurses construct themselves as "stay-at-home moms" by limiting the public visibility of their labor force participation, by involving their children and themselves in symbolically-invested activities, and by positioning themselves in the culturally-appropriate place and time: at home, during the day. All of these strategies work to highlight their visibility as mothers.

KEY WORDS: motherhood; shift work; nurses; working mothers; sleep deprivation.

Cultural definitions of a good mother typically conflict with cultural definitions of a good worker, and images of motherhood and job or career are constructed in opposition to each other (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1982:34-36; Coser 1991:123; Etaugh and Study 1989; Gerson 1985; Moen 1992:6). This conflict of images continues despite the fact that more than half of women in the United States with children under six years of age are in the labor force (U. S. Bureau of the Census 1990:385). While

An earlier version of this article was presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, August 13-17, 1993, Miami Beach, Florida. Funds for this research were provided in part by the University of California and by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Direct correspondence to Anita Garey, Department of Sociology, Horton Social Science Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire 03824-3586.
the popular literature uses such terms as "balancing" or "juggling" to describe the way in which working mothers structure their time, the scholarly literature talks about the "role strain" experienced by employed women with children and focuses on the stress created by the oppositional demands of work and family. Coser (1991) argues that the demands underlying work roles and family roles are different for men and for women and that these respective demands represent different, and contradictory, value systems. "Professional women are expected to be committed to their work 'just like men' at the same time that they are normatively required to give priority to their families" (Coser 1991:114). Research on people's perceptions of mothers found that "employed mothers were seen as simultaneously less dedicated to their families and more dedicated to their careers, as well as more selfish and less sensitive to the needs of others" (Etaugh and Study 1989:67). The inability to conceptualize for women the integration of a commitment to work and a commitment to family means that employed women with children are seen both as less committed to work and as less than fully-committed mothers. Because the individual concepts that are fused in the term "working mother" encompass images of "worker" and "mother" that are defined in opposition to each other, "working mothers" face the dilemma of reconciling this conceptual incompatibility, both internally and in their presentation of self.

This article is based on a larger study of how employed women with children construct themselves as "working mothers" (Garey 1993). The women I interviewed talk about their employment as an essential part of their lives and identities. Accomplishment, self-sufficiency, dignity, self-worth, and the notion of "doing something," are the concepts invoked by the working mothers I interviewed to explain the meaning of their employment. Numerous studies have documented the non-economic rewards of employment cited by working mothers, from Mirra Komarovsky's study of 1950s blue collar marriages to contemporary studies of women in both working class and professional employment (Komarovsky 1967; Rollins 1985, Walker 1990, Zavella 1987). In this article, however, I focus on the way in which these employed women construct themselves as mothers.

Motherhood is historically and culturally constructed, and therefore variable. However, there were common themes that emerged repeatedly in the interviews. This similarity in expressed values about motherhood and parenting among working mothers is something that other studies have also found (Lamphere, Zavella, and Gonzalez 1993; Segura 1994; Walker 1990). These shared themes became signposts in my interviews to hegemonic cultural norms about motherhood. Women confront these cultural norms from varying social locations, and they respond by adopting, modifying, or reinterpreting them. In other words, people are "doing motherhood" in the