Rethinking stories of transnational mothering in the context of international study

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Abstract

Women's migration has facilitated diverse understandings of both mothering and motherhood. Despite this, transnational mothering tends to be understood in narrowly defined terms, largely associated with economic necessity, with alternative motivations for women's migration and transnational mothering largely absent from existing literature. This research aims to contribute to literature about transnational mothering by drawing on research with mothers in the context of postgraduate international study to explore the different ways in which mothers reproduce, negotiate, contest and diversify narratives of 'good mothering'. We also bring greater visibility to stories of transnational mothers and illuminate the other interests and aspirations that transnational mothers evoke with regards to their migration. We argue that rethinking stories of transnational mothering allows us to hear about and to value a diversity of mothers' lives, so these mothers do not have to inhabit the margins and periphery of stories of either motherhood or international student life.

Key words: 'Transnational motherhood', 'International postgraduate student', 'Narrative', 'Feminism', 'Good mothering'.

Introduction

Mothers who migrate for the purpose of study often have to negotiate the roles of being a transnational mother and an international student (Kibelloh and Bao, 2014). Despite recognition that gender is a central organising principle of migration and transnational life (Millman, 2013; Paciulan and Preibisch, 2013), existing research in relation to the migration of international students rarely offers a gendered exploration (Saxena, 2014). However,

scholarship on transnational migration has increasingly provided important insights into practices of transnational caregiving and parenting, as well as the lived experiences of children living apart, including the ways transnational families maintain and reproduce a sense of parenthood across nation borders (Baldassar et al, 2007). Building on existing research, the aim of this paper is to bring the stories of transnational mothers in the context of postgraduate international education to the centre of discussion. We adopt a feminist narrative approach to understand the way in which motherhood and mothering identities are constructed and reconstructed through storytelling in light of new experiences, challenges and understandings.

Consistent with Somers (1994, p. 606), this research is based on the assumptions that 'it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities'. As such, narrative approaches do not generalise but rather highlight 'difference and diversity' (Thomas, 2012, p 212). Consequently, narrative approaches often utilise small samples to facilitate in-depth interviewing and analysis to achieve a richness of depth which larger samples are unlikely to yield (Chataika, 2005). Utilising a narrative paradigm, we suggest that by telling and listening to stories, individuals draw on narrative frameworks that are currently circulating, which are both culturally and historically specific (Woodiwiss et al, 2017). Narratives cannot represent reality in any objective way but can either constrain or enable certain stories at particular times. Therefore, within a narrative paradigm, accounts of motherhood vary over time, between and within cultures, and what is seen as good mothering very much depends on the construction of motherhood that is in operation. As such, in this paper we explore the way in which women negotiate the meanings and practices of motherhood and mothering to accommodate their status as postgraduate international students and living apart from their children. We highlight that, in telling their stories,

the mothers reproduced, negotiated, contested, and diversified existing narratives of 'good mothering'.

Storying motherhood and mothering

The subject of motherhood and mothering has long been a central concern of feminism (O'Reilly, 2004). Feminist scholars have aimed to deconstruct the meaning of motherhood and mothering. Motherhood is considered to be an 'institution' that encompasses a set of rules and regulations imposed upon and internalised by mothers (and others) that dictate not only how to mother but also who is a 'good' and who is a 'bad' mother (O'Reilly, 2004). 'Mothering' on the other hand refers to women's own understanding and constructions that can be empowering. Therefore, the 'maternal issue' is understood as both a point of oppression and of strength for female identity (Rich, 1976).

Feminist scholarship has often sought to emphasise the ways in which storied accounts of motherhood and mothering can enable women to make sense of their situations and (re)negotiate their roles as mothers (Lockwood, 2017, 2018). Such stories implicitly communicate something about the tellers' identities as mothers; stories are chosen to convey how the teller wants to be understood and the ways in which they hope their lives will be recognised (Miller, 2017). Telling stories helps us to make sense of our lives in relation to the world around us and can be used to turn personal uncertainty into coherence and order (Frank, 1995). However, the articulation of stories is both informed and constrained by the narratives available at the time of telling, making some stories easier to tell than others.

Culturally, politically and socially contextual, dominant narratives shape what we know of and what we can tell of motherhood and mothering (Lockwood, 2017, 2018; Miller, 2005). Dominant narratives of mothering vary across and within societies and are constantly changing over time (Miller 2005; O'Reilly 2010, 2014). Western narratives of 'good

mothering' are largely predicated upon the concept of 'intensive mothering', identified as a selfless state, 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996, p. 8). Constructing mothers as the most 'qualified' people to parent, the narrative of 'intensive mothering' has shifted collective, social and personal expectations from 'good' to 'exceptional' mother, creating unrealistic and unachievable expectations that impact women's experiences of mothering (Green, 2015). Despite many cultural contradictions and diverse parenting arrangements and practices, intensive mothering remains the normalised cultural and political standard by which Western motherhood, mothering and mothers are evaluated (Miller, 2005).

The rich body of interdisciplinary work on Black motherhood has emphasised that race makes a considerable difference to understandings and experiences of mothering (Hill-Collins, 2000; Reynolds, 2005). In contrast to narratives of 'intensive mothering', collective mothering has long been an intrinsic element of Black motherhood, with 'othermothers' within communities often sharing responsibilities of child-rearing (Hill-Collins, 2000; Reynolds, 2005). Exploring the intersection of race with gender and class, Hill-Collins (1994) suggests that, for Black women, motherhood can be a powerful rather than oppressive institution, providing legitimate routes to adulthood, resistance to societal racism and challenges to dominant ideologies that serve to characterise their familial identities and experiences as inferior (Hill-Collins, 1994; Reynolds, 2005). Yet, Hill-Collins (2005) and Reynolds (2005) caution against the glorified narratives of Black motherhood including the 'superstrong' or 'valiant' Black mother and reifying stories of devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love, which can be disabling and often fail to acknowledge the issue of poverty and struggles faced by some Black mothers (Hill-Collins, 1994; Reynolds, 2005).

Many studies have also shown that mothering in different societies diverges from the hegemonic narratives of intensive mothering in many Western societies. For example, Finch and Kim (2012) note that Korean motherhood has historically been embedded in a

'Confucian ideology'; with childrearing responsibilities allocated to mothers, Korean women are expected to have strong emotional bonds with their children. However, as noted by Finch and Kim (2012) and Lee (2010), with the reconfiguration of Korean motherhood in late twentieth century, mothers are now also encouraged and expected to pursue the interests of their children with 'aggressive single-mindedness' (Finch and Kim, 2012, p. 494). This is also echoed in the work of Peng (2015) who notes that despite the increased economic contribution of women in China to the family, their gendered roles as primary caregiver has not changed and remain largely predicated on providing a secure and loving environment for children. Peng (2018) goes on to note that mothering in China has been influenced by economic advancement and therefore the maintenance of social status and upward mobility has also become a core element of 'good mothering' narratives.

Narratives of 'good mothering' may be defined differently in particular societies or cultures. However, there is a strong expectation to be a 'good' mother, despite the diversity of ways in which that may be storied and understood (Pederson, 2016). As such, women's accounts of mothering often serve to emphasise their commitment to cultural, political and social norms (May, 2008) as violating these expectations can be strongly sanctioned (Paciulan and Preibisch, 2013). Therefore, negotiating what it means to be a 'good mother' and the ability to tell recognisable and coherent accounts of mothering is a necessary feature of storied motherhood (Lockwood, 2017, 2018; Miller, 2017; Millman, 2013; Smith, 2017). Often having little correspondence to mothers lived social realities, available narratives can exclude some women from what is considered 'good' or 'normative' mothering (Gustafson, 2005). A hierarchy of mothering is then created that serves to 'other' and stigmatise particular groups of women, constructing them as less capable and inappropriate mothers (Lockwood, 2017, 2018). Where women's mothering role is inconsistent or incompatible with cultural, political and social expectations, storytelling becomes a tool which enables women to actively shape and account for their situations, allowing them to present

an acceptable self (May, 2008). As such, the meanings attached to motherhood and mothering are continuously being shaped and emerging within a complex set of hierarchical structural relations.

Transnational motherhood and mothering

Feminist scholarship stresses the importance of paying attention to the multiplicity of mothering circumstances. This includes respecting the overlapping social locations and cultural contexts of mothering, in order to enable theorisations of motherhood and mothering to evolve (Arendell, 2000). Even within diverse contexts, the ethics of care for children remains pivotal to mothering narratives (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Parreñas, 2001), with mothers constructed as maintaining primary responsibility for arranging and managing the care of their children even if sharing daily tasks with others (Hoang et al., 2015, Pederson, 2016). As such, the concept that mothers and their children live together in the same home (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Parreñas, 2001) is central to narratives of good mothering.

Renegotiating motherhood to accommodate migration, transnational mothering is an increasing phenomenon (Madziva, 2016; Parreñas, 2005). Exploring the stories of transnational mothers enables alternative and diverse narratives of motherhood and mothering to emerge. However, literature about transnational mothering tends to largely focus on gendered patterns of international migration, such as women domestic workers migrating from the Global South to the Global North. This body of literature highlights a global care chain of mothers who live apart from their children (Hochschild, 2000), in what Parreñas (2001) has called the 'globalization of mothering'. Within this context, the need to secure family prosperity has become central to the way in which women's migration is positioned and understood. For example, Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck (2012) suggest that in South America and the Philippines the migration of women for family prosperity is often valued

and supported. Moreover, research in this area shows that attitudes and beliefs about the migration of women can vary greatly across the globe. A study by Peng (2018) reveals that first-generation migrant mothers from Southern China perceive good mothering as helping their children to start their own families and establish careers. Good mothering in this cultural context therefore prioritises economic support for children's life endeavours as the main expression of maternal love and care. However, Zontini's (2010) research with transnational families revealed that the migration of women from Morocco can be met with disapproval and constructed as contrary to the social norms of their communities. Furthermore, there are legal and financial constraints imposed by immigration policies in receiving nations that shape the understandings of mother's migration and further affect the capacity of mothers to migrate with their children or as a family (Smith, 2017). These constraints can influence whether mothers subsequently bring in family members, even to visit, once they have moved to a new country (Kofman, 2004). Indeed, the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe highlighted a dramatic increase in the numbers of mothers (as well as fathers) separated from their children across the world (UNHCR, 2016).

Existing scholarship has argued that international migration can facilitate the renegotiation of motherhood (Hoang et al., 2015). With women increasingly becoming key to the financial stability of their families, the structure of their households is often reshaped (Molina, 2015). Transnational mothering can also change the patterns of care that would have taken place between a woman and her child, her partner, her extended family and friends, and her community (Hochschild, 2000). However, although the migration of mothers generates varying degrees of change (Hoang et al, 2015), existing literature indicates that gendered divisions, inequalities and hierarchies are often maintained (Parreñas, 2005; Millman, 2013). With remaining fathers often resisting the redistribution of roles and responsibilities (Parreñas, 2005), women tend to bear the moral and practical burden of transnational parenting (Paciulan and Preibisch, 2013). As such, the conventional

gendered division of labor is not completely transformed and women often continue to have much of the responsibility for managing the care of their children even after migrating (Chib et al, 2014; Molina, 2015).

Sending remittances back to their family in order to continue to care for their children can be central to the ways in which transnational mothers participate in 'good mothering' (Ho-ang et al, 2015). Equally, long-distance communication, such as telephone, email and social media, often become a part of a mothers' day to day role (Madziva, 2016; Molina, 2015). Despite the diversification of mothering roles through migration, dominant narratives continue to cast separation in opposition to 'good' mothering (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). Consequently, transnational mothering can be particularly stressful for women, with acute feelings of anxiety, guilt, inadequacy and self-doubt (Millman, 2013; Paciulan and Preibisch, 2013). Research suggests that high levels of emotional strain and stigma can be a social factor in the lives of transnational mothers, as well as increased risk of depression, social isolation and higher than average parenting stress (Bohr and Whitfield, 2011).

International postgraduate study and mothering

In recent decades, increasing numbers of students travel outside their home countries for education (Myers-Walls et al, 2011; Saxena, 2014). Diverse motivations for this migration have been highlighted, including access to better quality education and improving chances at professional success (Saxena, 2014; Ye and Edwards, 2015). Available research indicates many discrepancies in the expectations and lived reality of being an international student, with a general consensus that international students face more adjustment problems in relation to universities in host countries than do their native counterparts (Maudeni, 1999). Various negative outcomes include challenges with cultural adjustment, anxiety, isolation, financial difficulties, poor academic performance and high dropout rates (Lefdahl

-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Maudeni, 1999; Myers-Walls et al, 2011). Whilst these and other challenges may be considered an unavoidable aspect of international study, experiences are intrinsically gendered and therefore women students may have different motivations and face specific challenges (Saxena, 2014). For example, existing literature suggests that the decision of women to study abroad is often linked to conditions in their home countries and the desire to pursue a different life (Ye and Edwards 2015). Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) note particular difficulties negotiating the cultural differences in the role and treatment of women between their home and host countries.

Limited attention is paid in existing research to transnational parenting, particularly mothering, in the context of international study. However, there is an emerging body of literature that explores mothers accompanying their children to study abroad whilst the father remains in their home country providing financial support. With a strong desire to maximise their children's opportunities, the decision is often initiated by the mother rather than the child (Finch and Kim, 2012; Huang and Yeoh, 2011). Whilst available literature identifies challenges, including adjustment stress and impact on relationships, these were justified in the maintenance of middle-class status and upward familial mobility (Lee, 2010).

Myers-Walls et al. (2011) and Kibelloh and Bao (2014) explore the experiences of parents who migrate *with* their children (and often spouses) for their own educational attainment. These studies identify complex negotiations of often conflicting roles as student and mother; participants told of experiencing guilt, role strain, external disapproval, feelings of exclusion and marital stress (Kibelloh and Bao, 2014; Myers-Walls et al, 2011). Kibelloh and Bao (2014, p. 468) go on to suggest that 'cultural adjustment stressors may vary with time and diminish with duration of stay', yet stress related to the disruption of their

mothering role remains a persistent concern for women students throughout their academic period. Negotiating the roles of mother and student can create tensions for some woman (Springer et al. 2009). As Moghadam et al (2017, p. 1) argue, 'combining motherhood and studying without compromising the activities of either one is a great dilemma for student mothers'; being an international student may further exacerbate these tensions. This paper builds on existing literature, bringing attention to the stories of international students living apart from their children.

Listening to mothers

The research on which this paper was based is predicated on feminist narrative principles of bringing the stories of often marginalised groups to the centre of discussion. The project was underpinned by the principles of respect for the dignity, rights, welfare and safety of the research participants; informed consent and voluntary participation were negotiated, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality and avoidance of harm (BSA, 2017). The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2017) and was approved by the University ethics committee.

Access was sought and negotiated at a University in the North of England at which all researchers were employed at the time. Criterion for participation was women who self-identified as mothers and international postgraduate students living apart from their children. Women were recruited via email invitation and leaflets distributed across the University campus in key locations (interfaith reception, library, on-campus cafes, student post-trays and the language support centre etc). Participants were given the choice of a one-to-one interview, an online questionnaire or focus group. In this paper we draw specifically on the in-depth interviews with five women. Interviews typically lasted about one hour and with the women's consent were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Through their engagement with the postgraduate research community at the University,

the research team was already known to some of the participants, helping to establish rapport. Every effort was made to reduce barriers of access for participants; women were invited to meet with the team in advance of the interview to discuss the research and were enabled to negotiate time, day and location of interviews. Consequently, all of the participants had met with one or more of the researchers prior to the interview.

All participants in the one-to-one interviews were post-graduate students, working toward completion of a doctorate and came from two different continents, Africa and Asia. All of the women indicated that they were financially supported by their employers and most anticipated returning to their existing jobs on completion of their doctorates. Each of the women identified as being married to men. There were diverse care arrangements for their children, for example: paternal grandparents alongside the children's father; a live-in nanny; boarding school; with some children having multiple carers at different times, including neighbours, friends and their father. The numbers and ages of children varied greatly from infancy to adulthood and included a combination of birth and fostered/adopted children. The women each chose a pseudonym: Triplet, a mother of five, worked for local Government; Sarah, a mother of two school-aged boys was a university lecturer; Mary, a mother of a pre-school boy was a university lecturer; Fonmart, birth mother of one and carer of four other children was a university lecturer; and Karendi, a university lecturer and a birth and adoptive mother.

Interviews were facilitated via a series of prompts which encouraged mothers to narrate stories of before, during and beyond studying abroad. A feminist narrative method of analysis, the Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) was then adopted. Through four sequential listenings, the Guide locates women's stories within broader social structures enabling the exploration of the way in which the women constructed transnational mothering in the context of postgraduate international study. The first reading is a reflexive reading of plot. Reading for 'I' statements, the second listens to how women speak about themselves. Focusing on how the women talked about interpersonal relationships, the third reading recognises narrated subjects as part of networks of relations (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008).

Locating the women's stories 'within broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.132), the fourth reading attends to the link between 'micro-level narratives [and] macro-level processes and structures' (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 406). The question of why and how women tell their stories was central to the analysis and enabled an understanding of how particular dominant narratives informed and constrained (some) women's stories. Having completed the readings for each transcript, we returned to the data set as a whole, highlighting similarities and significant differences between the stories (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998).

Stories of transnational mothering

Bringing the stories of transnational mothers in the context of postgraduate international study to the centre of discussion, three relational stories emerged from the analysis; 'Stories of choice and control', 'Stories of negotiating mothering' and, 'Stories of managing relationships'. These stories differently reproduce, negotiate, contest and diversify available mothering narratives, highlighting some of the differences in our understandings of transnational mothering, particularly in the context of international study.

Stories of choice and control

Migrating for international study is often not a single event but a complex, multi-layered process based on many different factors. Women plan their departure, negotiating work commitments and relational responsibilities. With dominant narratives positioning the mothering role as central to familial structures and the well-being of children (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011), the women who participated in this study used their stories to explain their circumstances. Their stories varied dependent upon their perceived choice and control in their circumstances. Some women, such as Triplet, actively sought out opportunities to study for a PhD. Triplet spoke of how she had taken responsibility for her siblings from a young age; 'we lost our parents…, I am the first born in the family…, so I have to take care

of them'; and also, how she took on the child-rearing of children in her extended family; 'there is a lot of problems, so you just get them…, that is what we do in Africa'. As discussed by Motha (2018), in the traditional African extended family system there is an obligation to take in orphaned children, even though a family might not have the resources to do so. Triplet told of how she had responded to and managed the cultural expectations of her mothering role; 'I have had a lot of responsibility from an early age, I have always been the breadwinner for the household'. For Triplet, her international study related to the assertion of her aspirations and needs beyond those associated with her mothering role and she told of how she worked hard to secure funding to be able to study abroad; 'I need my career now… My ambition in life is to be a social scientist, a researcher, to attain PhD… I look every day for scholarship'. Triplet stories herself as an active agent with her own ambitions, diversifying existing narratives of migration in which the needs and desires of mothers are often only able to be voiced in relation to the positive impact on mothering.

Unlike mothers who migrate out of economic necessity, migrating for study was largely constructed as an 'opportunity' and a 'privilege'; as identified by Sarah: '[I] have had opportunity, privilege, you know, to have a scholarship and study abroad'; and Mary: 'Not everyone they have the opportunity to study abroad…, It's a choice, I know it. An opportunity'. When telling of their choices to embark on a PhD, women told of the ways they were creating opportunities for their children, as suggested by Sarah: 'if I don't progress in my career, when my kids need me most financially, I won't be able to support them when they grow up'. Similarly, Triplet told of the way in which through her education she was creating opportunities for her children: 'you study and your children you will be a role model for them…, so they will also be inspired to go to school'. Reproducing existing transnational mothering narratives, the goal of migration was primarily constructed in relation to the betterment of family and as part of a strategy for social mobility.

The women's stories often illustrated the importance of the context within which choices to study abroad were made. For example, migration was not always constructed as instigated by themselves, as illustrated by Fonmart:

> So, my coming here [UK] it was by accident…because I was the highest-ranking officer in my own area [university department]…I was asked to come to do a PhD in the area, then I can upgrade the younger ones when I come back (Fonmart).

Both Fonmart and Karendi story their migration around the aspiration of their employers, rather than their own ambitions. In doing so, responsibility for separation from their children is placed with their employer; this reinforces their own commitment to good mothering narratives that prioritise the proximity of mothers to their children. However, women also suggested that the financial support provided by employers afforded them increased choices in balancing their life in the UK and mothering apart. This is highlighted by Mary; '[University] also gave me some money, salary for do this study... flights, visa, rent, house, other things'. The investment of their employer in the attainment of their PhD, sometimes created additional burden. Triplet spoke of a sense of ongoing obligation to her employer;

> they have supported me for five years, to be here with full pay and to pay my rent and my study, sometimes I think I have to give them something back, so I rush back home so that I blend the two areas, so that I don't lose the job (Triplet).

Therefore, stories of relationships with employers were often conflicting; some women constructed their employer as both the instigator of separation from their children and equally a primary support in maintaining contact; for others the collective investment in their doctoral studies created an additional sense of responsibility that impacted their level of engagement with their studies.

Whether migrating to study in the UK was within their control or not, for all of the women, it involved decisions about living apart from their children. Some women's stories emphasised the commitment required to complete a doctorate and the need to do so in isolation from other work and family responsibilities. These stories often differed from those of mothers whose migration and consequent separation from their children is constructed as an investment for family betterment (Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2012). For example, Triplet spoke of not being able to concentrate if she were to study in her home country alongside her family responsibilities. Similarly, Sarah recognised that to complete 'a PhD back home', alongside her paid work and parenting commitments would take her '10-15 years'. Sarah emphasised that her economic situation was no barrier to migrating with her children; 'Not that we couldn't have afforded it, we both worked at the university, we could have done it'. Sarah constructs her decision to study abroad and apart from her children as enabling full commitment to her studies, without the distraction of other responsibilities. Consistent with existing scholarship, these stories illustrate the constraints of mothering in relation to higher education (Pillay, 2009); yet, valuing the educational opportunity, they equally contest available narratives that prioritise proximity to children and position the teller as a committed student in order to argue the legitimacy of their living apart.

Whilst the women made decisions about living apart from their children, all of the women suggested they had not anticipated such sustained periods of separation. Consequently, one of the difficulties frequently described was the emotional challenge of the often unanticipated and ambiguous separation from their children, as illustrated by Sarah: 'It was difficult…, I didn't realise I was going to be separate from them for a number of years…, they were denied visa'. The difficulties and the distress caused by attempts to gain a visa for their children to visit was a reoccurring story. Immigration policies shape the capacity of mothers to bring their children to live with or visit them once they had moved to the UK,

resulting in increasingly long periods of unanticipated separation. For example, Fonmart told us 'when they applied with my husband, they refused it, they said there is no relationship between me and my daughter… so I applied again, but my husband said he will not apply again. Only her, I applied for her again, without her father'. Stories of the effort exerted in repeated attempts showed that lengthy periods of separation were not indicative of mothers 'abandoning' their children (Gustafson, 2005).

The storied struggle of mothers separated from their children through various circumstances (such as divorce, imprisonment, chronic illness) often enables a sense of determination and can lead to an increased awareness of personal agency (Kielty, 2008; Lockwood, 2017). However, this can be particularly difficult to reconcile with the constraints and complexities of life as an international PhD student, in which autonomy can be restricted. Whilst some women told of aspiring to bring their children to the UK, ongoing concerns for their own visas led some women to be tentative in their challenge, as highlighted by Karendi; 'we are from another part of the world, we really dread to have our visa cancelled, you are an illegal and it is not nice'. Therefore, for many women there was an unanticipated loss related to their migration as they lived with ongoing uncertainties of when and how they would get to see their children, exacerbated by the assumed precariousness of their visa status. The motivations and aspirations of transnational student mothers were challenged by the increasing immobilities of immigration that can compromise choice and control about separation from children.

Stories of negotiating 'good' mothering

Given the specific responsibilities and expectations attached to the mothering role, the ability to produce culturally acceptable mothering stories is vital (Pederson, 2016). Central to these stories were changes and challenges to the mothering role due to migration,

international study and separation. When arriving in their country of study and academic institution, international students often have to establish themselves and adapt to the new environment. Mothers potentially face the additional challenge of negotiating shifting roles, responsibilities and relationships from the distance of their country of origin, creating new roles and identities whilst maintaining and negotiating existing ones (Chib et al, 2014). As illustrated by Triplet, transnational mothers in the context of postgraduate international study can feel 'divided' (Mas Giralt and Bailey, 2010) or that they are occupying 'multiple spaces' (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Pillay, 2009). Consistent with available literature, many of the women spoke of the way in which their studies were compromised by their maternal responsibilities; 'sometimes when I am here my mind is back home…, I cannot fully concentrate because I have a lot of distraction and family responsibility' (Triplet).

Women also spoke of the way in which their mothering was impeded owing to their studies. As with findings from previous research with women separated from their children through other means, such as illness or homelessness (Schen, 2005), some of the women who participated in this research spoke of missing out on mothering activities, which represented a significant threat to their sense of being a good mother. Sarah told of missing the day to day activities: 'I've been really worried because I've never been with them, so I don't know how they eat, what [their] bedtime'. Fonmart told of missing a significant rite of passage in her daughter's life: '[when daughter started her period] she did not call me, she called her father…, as a woman, I want to speak with her. Very, very difficult'. Telling of her perceived exclusion from the gendered transitions in her daughter's life, Fonmart illustrates a loss of mothering role that represents a direct threat to her sense of being a 'good' mother. Such stories indicate that despite the diversification of mothering practices, dominant narratives of good mothering and a commitment to cultural, political and social norms are maintained and reproduced in transnational spaces as women continue to bear the moral burden of motherhood.

Focusing on the long-term benefits of migration is a narrative strategy often adopted in the stories of transnational mothers in order to manage the apparent discontinuity between living apart from their children and their self-perception as a 'good mother' (Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2012). Transnational mothers may draw upon their contribution to family finances to find a larger purpose in the separation (Schen, 2005). However, economic provision as a model of separation is not always available to postgraduate international students who can experience reduced income and increased expenditure associated with their studies (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015). This was expressed by Fonmart who explained; 'It is very difficult to live here financially'. Equally, whilst some women's visa requirements enabled them to gain paid employment, available work was often constructed as unskilled labour; 'I can work 20 hours, but where is the work, the only work that is available is cleaning' (Fonmart). The low or unskilled work opportunities were at odds with the women's stories about their histories and future aspirations as professional women. With limited alternative opportunities for paid work, even with the financial support of their employers, some women spoke of financial challenges; compounded by struggles in adapting to shifts in social standing from their home to their host country, some women questioned their decisions; 'if you know what I have left to come to this study, I ask myself why did I come?' (Triplet).

The long-term prosperity and social mobility of their family was a primary motivation for the migration of most of the women who participated in this study. However, concerns about the immediate impact of their absence on their children, regardless of the longer-term strategy, was often a source of worry, as illustrated by Karendi:

> The high school years were very difficult, every day I'm wondering what are they going to tell me..., I think she was missing mama..., I would be told many times, "she is getting into trouble with the teachers", "she is not obedient" (Karendi).

Often negotiating complex emotions of guilt, some women were also concerned that the changing and sometimes problematic behaviour of their children was a result of their absence. Associated feelings of guilt can be difficult to appease, leading to negative evaluations of self, as illustrated by Triplet: 'I just feel lonely and hate myself…, I always miss them, I always feel like bad mother'. Being unable to mitigate the immediate impact of their absence can make it particularly difficult for mothers to focus on the larger purpose of their separation. These stories indicate a threat to mothering identities, in which mothers are caught between contradictory narratives of familial proximity, social mobility and personal ambition, alongside student obligations, which can be difficult to reconcile with stories of 'good' mothering.

The women often spoke of the way they negotiated their mothering roles and relationships in order to minimise the physical distance and maintain emotional ties with their children. Consistent with existing research in relation to transnational mothering, communication technologies (Chib et al, 2014: Molina, 2015), such as Skype, social media and telephone, were often used to maintain contact with their children and mother from a distance. Karendi told of the significance of maintaining contact with her children: 'we talk every day [via Skype], that is what kept me going, I have updates and I talk with the children'. Contact through such technologies served as a way to keep informed about their children's well-being and facilitated an ease of continued participation and involvement. However, unreliable communication technologies or restricted access to them, regularly disrupted contact. As noted by Karendi, constraints owing to unreliable internet and cost were common: 'they [family] don't have the facilities, the phone has to be good enough and you also have to afford air time'. Consequently, reduced income, owing to their status as international students, impeded the ability of some women to maintain contact with their children. Communication technologies can also play more of an ambivalent role; on the one hand, enabling contact, on the other hand, reinforcing distance, as illustrated by Sarah:

> when I spoke to him [son] he eventually said "Mum, are you not my mum?" I said "Of course I am your mum". "But the voice does not sound like your voice". I am now sounding like you guys, I wept...I'll never forget that (Sarah).

Therefore, whilst ongoing contact was a mechanism to cope with emotional stress and participate in mothering, it equally brought to the forefront anxieties of separation and reinforced their absence.

Stories of managing relationships

The migration of a family member generates varying degrees of disruptions and changes, affecting the structure and interactions of familial relations (Hoang et al, 2015). When women live apart from their children owing to migration, family support can be crucial in shaping their stories (Bohr and Whitfield, 2011). Each of the women in this research had to incorporate other people into their children's care. The question of who will care for their children can be an immediate challenge presented to mothers who migrate alone. Stories of arranging and managing the care of their children illustrated the diversity of the women's social contexts and served to illustrate that their children were well cared for, and they were committed to their mothering role. Unlike transnational mothers in different contexts, the financial security and prosperity of those who participated in this research enabled care arrangements that are unlikely to be available to mothers migrating for economic reasons. Fonmart told of how her daughter was in boarding school and Triplet told of the paid support in place for her children; 'My salary back home is taking care of my children…, the maid is in charge of the children, the house boy is in charge of the house-keeping'.

Maintaining responsibility for arranging and managing the care of their children, some women expressed how 'happy' and well cared for their children were: 'you know, the grandpa and the grandma maybe spoil the boy [laughs]' (Mary); 'she [daughter] was OK, when I came back she didn't want to come back [laughing]' (Karendi). Telling positive

stories of their children's care was important to the women's construction of being a 'good mother'. Although child-care varied considerably between the mothers within this study, their stories enabled a demonstration of how they managed the care of their children and emphasised that they had not abandoned them (Gustafson, 2005). The quality of the relationships between the mothers and those caring for or facilitating the care of their children was significant in the mothers' stories of living apart. Triplet articulated the importance of having an effective support network when embarking on postgraduate study as an international student: 'it is good to do both [research and family], if you have a happy hand, if you have a supportive husband, supportive parents, supportive family, it is good to do both'. For Triplet, such support was core to the role of a collectivist family; 'that is what we do in Africa. The family will come around you to offer support'. Similarly, Mary suggested; 'My father and my mother support me…in China it's a role'.

Telling of networks of support enabled the mothers to frame separation from their children positively and reassure the listener (and themselves) that their children were in a supportive environment. However, the nuances and complexities of changing familial roles often became apparent in the mothers' stories, highlighting a range of other important issues such as shifting relationships and the role of women in their communities. Mary spoke of the support of her mother: 'I can telephone much easier. It's easier and I hear all the message about my boy, about all my family and I feel better. I also appreciate it. Appreciate that my mother take care of me'. Karendi spoke of the positive relationship she had with her sister who was caring for her children and the impact this had on her own well-being during separation: 'I think we have become closer…, I trust her [sister]…, I am completely OK with it…, that is what keeps me going'. Such stories of 'othermothers' (hill-Collins, 1994) help to diversify understandings of 'motherhood' and 'mothering', however, subtle emotional tensions were also highlighted in these relationships. Karendi suggested that she appreciated the effort and continued commitment of her sister in caring for her

children, yet continued by stating: 'I have to listen to everything that she has to say'. Indicating a loss of her own mothering autonomy, she went on to say that her sister has 'taken [her] place'. Karendi was tentative in asserting her own mothering role through respect, appreciation and reliance on her sister's commitment to her children. Along with restrictions on her own role, she also recognised the limitations on her sister: 'sometimes I feel sad for her because she has to do like I would do'. Therefore, although both women were contributing to the mothering of Karendi's children, in carefully trying to manage their relationship with each other, both were constantly [re]negotiating their 'mothering' roles.

As with many women living apart from their children for a variety of reasons, the quality of the relationship between mother and carer were significant to the mother's stories and often dependent upon whether the care-takers approved or disapproved of the mother being apart from the child. In cultures where multiple models of separation and reunification exist, women had access to different narratives to enable others to understand and support their migration (Falicov, 2007). Traditions of 'collectivist care' had enabled some of the mothers to have previous periods of separation from their children. Triplet spoke of having lived in twenty-two different countries and both Triplet and Fonmart spoke of previously studying abroad whilst living apart from their children. Yet, not all extended families were supportive of transnational mothering and some families regarded a woman's move abroad to study as failing in their mothering (and marital) roles. Such fixed societal attitudes often contributed to mothers' distress about their maternal separation. Some mothers told of strained relationships with carers, as illustrated by Sarah:

> they [children] were with their paternal grandma…, I was deprived talking to them after they [grandparents] felt that the woman's place is in the kitchen, "why would she go off for a PhD, the dad doesn't have one?" (Sarah).

When transnational mothering is located outside of existing models of migration, separation from children can be seen to pose a threat to existing patriarchal familial structures. Not only are women judged for failing in their maternal duties but also for disrupting established hierarchies between 'mothers' and 'fathers' (Zontini, 2010). The changing roles and responsibilities between women who migrate and their partners can lead to 'relational stresses' (Falicov, 2007, p. 157). Several women spoke of the impact of their studies on their relationships with their partners. Fonmart spoke about the increased stress experienced by her husband, owing to her absence, and the impact on her marriage;

> It also making my husband to drink, he cannot be in the house without everyone is there…, every night he is looking to finish work and drink…, You only hoping that when you finish [PhD], [relationship] will go back (Fonmart).

The migration of mothers can often disrupt familial structures, with ongoing negotiations leading to tensions, and sometimes a restructuring or weakening of ties (Hoang et al, 2015). However, whilst the stories of some women reproduced dominant gendered narratives in which the role of mother and wife is central to the well-being of the family, others, such as Sarah, contested these ideals:

> [husband] was not that supportive…, I think he is just believing the world just revolve around him and nobody else…, I have to sacrifice my marriage also for the programme…, he married a lecturer, so he wouldn't be expecting me to put down my career just to worship you and just to be domestic (Sarah).

The diversity of mothering strategies was expressed through the assertion of Sarah's own role as a student and as a mother and therefore, her personal development was constructed as worth the sacrifices made. This highlights that the quality of the relationship between mothers and different familial structures can be crucial in shaping stories of transnational mothering.

Conclusions

Listening to transnational mothers in the context of international studies diversifies existing gendered narratives of migration, whilst enabling us to consider the pervasiveness of dominant mothering narratives. However, women are not free to tell any story (Woodiwiss et al, 2017); stories are both facilitated and restricted by the availability of dominant narratives. Exploring the way in which narratives are reproduced, negotiated, contested, and diversified within storytelling of transnational mothers in the context of international study, this research highlighted three key and interrelated stories.

Stories of choice and control were multifaceted; some women's stories reproduced existing narratives of transnational mothering by positioning their migration in the collectivist needs of the family. Others consciously contested established narratives of 'good mothering' by asserting their aspirations and needs beyond those associated with their mothering role. Crucially, these stories highlighted the individual tensions that emerged as mothers negotiated their sense of choice and control.

Stories of negotiating good mothering illustrate complex negotiations of multiple (and often conflicting) roles, as mothers and international students. Stories highlighted how such negotiations impacted women's sense of self and wellbeing, as well as their ability to study. Some stories suggest being a 'good mother' and a 'good student' were irreconcilable. However, women also told of how they negotiated these tensions to reclaim good mothering whilst studying and living apart from their children.

Stories of managing relationships highlight the significance of relationships in shaping stories and transnational mothering. Some relationships were enabling, particularly when good mothering was a collective endeavor that included family support for women in their studies. Yet mothers also told of the tensions that emerged owing to the complexities of changing familial roles and responsibilities. The significance of the role of women in their

communities, existing patriarchal familial structures and shifting relationships posed a threat to a number of the mothers' situations and contributed to anxiety and distress about their maternal separation.

The three interrelated stories of this research highlight that understandings and meanings of 'good mothering' are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated within transnational contexts. 'Intensive' mothering, as a Western concept, is largely premised on the notion of close proximity between mother and child; however, this research suggests that women living apart from their children continue to mother intensively across and within transnational spaces, whilst also giving value to the notion of 'collective mothering', whereby families and communities share the responsibilities of child-rearing.

Given the paucity of research in this area, alongside the increase of international students to UK universities, we undoubtedly need more research that focuses on the lived experiences of transnational mothers in the context of international education. Available narratives are often inadequate to frame these mothers' stories and consequently their stories remain absent, overlooked or misunderstood. More stories need to become tellable and hearable to enable and support transnational mothers in diverse contexts. This would facilitate an awareness of the dominance of certain narratives and the influence these have on the stories mothers can and cannot tell. Rethinking stories of transnational mothering allows us to hear about and value a diversity of mothers' lives, so these mothers do not have to inhabit the margins and periphery of stories of either motherhood or international student life.

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