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A Motherwork Challenge to Dominant Discourse: A Review of Immigration, Motherhood, and Parental Involvement: Narratives of Communal Agency in the Face of Power Asymmetry

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Abstract

In Lilian Cibils dissertation-turned-book, *Immigration, Motherhood and Parental Involvement: Narratives of Communal Agency in the Face of Power Asymmetry* (2017), the stories of seven Mexican immigrant mothers provide insight into what motherhood looks like outside the mainstream ideology of parental involvement. Using a critical feminist lens, Cibils employs the concept of motherwork as an alternative to a cultural deficit approach for understanding Mexican immigrant motherhood.

Keywords

Narrative Inquiry, Motherwork, Women Immigrants, Parental Involvement

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*In Lilian Cibils's dissertation-turned-book, *Immigration, Motherhood and Parental Involvement: Narratives of Communal Agency in the Face of Power Asymmetry* (2017), the stories of seven Mexican immigrant mothers provide insight into what motherhood looks like outside the mainstream ideology of parental involvement. Using a critical feminist lens, Cibils employs the concept of motherwork as an alternative to a cultural deficit approach for understanding Mexican immigrant motherhood. Keywords: Narrative Inquiry, Motherwork, Women Immigrants, Parental Involvement*

Writing about feminist theory, bell hooks (2015) notes that the feminist movement's revived interest in motherhood has positive implications for research on female parenting, so long as mothers are not lauded as inherent nurturers. In her recently published book, *Immigration, Motherhood and Parental Involvement: Narratives of Communal Agency in the Face of Power Asymmetry* (2017), Lilian Cibils interrogates dominant understandings of parental involvement through the stories of seven Mexican immigrant mothers in the rural southwest United States. Her book thoughtfully reveals themes within their narratives of immigrant motherhood while avoiding the pitfalls hooks warns against. Pulling from previous feminist literature for her analysis, Cibils shares the stories of Brenda, Luisa, Norma, Patricia, Sandra, Silvia, and Susana and their implications for the education system's treatment of immigrant mothers.

The book is divided into four parts, with the first two setting up Cibils's methodology, her theoretical framework, and the discursive context in which her study's analysis is centered. The latter half of the second part begins Cibils's analysis of her participants' narratives, with the third and fourth parts wholly devoted to detailing themes from the data, such as power asymmetry, linguistic agency, and physical mobility. Throughout the text, Cibils provides a theoretically grounded analysis that portrays immigrant motherhood through the lived experience of real women without either romanticizing or victimizing their accounts.

Using an intersectional, critical feminist lens, Cibils sets out to challenge a dominant discourse: the deficit understanding of immigrant mothers and their involvement in their children's education. This deficit understanding portrays immigrants' cultures of origin as detrimental to achieving involved parenting. To do this, Cibils uses the narrative data of seven Latina mothers, collected from 2008 to 2010, to problematize the deficit understanding of immigrant motherhood. Importantly, Cibils conducted her in-depth interviews in a multilingual context. Her book provides excerpts of transcripts in the original Spanish spoken and analyzed, with English translations for reader convenience. Although she acknowledges her privilege as an educated, bilingual, and white Latina, Cibils is able to connect with her participants as an Argentinian immigrant and mother and interpret their stories with recognizable empathy and diligence.

Pulling from Black and Chicana feminist work (e.g., Collins, 1994, 2000; Hurtado, 1996, 2000), Cibils employs Collins's (1994) conceptualization of motherwork to help interpret her participants' narratives. As motherwork's themes—the significance of survival,

the importance of strong identity development, and the value of community—arise in stories of her participants adjusting to life as immigrant mothers in the United States, Cibils looks for the juxtaposition (Andrews, 2004) of support-for and challenging-of master narratives about the ideal mother. In addition, she remains wary of ventriloquation (Wortham, 2001) of dominant expectations for parental involvement speaking through her participants' accounts of engaging with school meetings, forms, and agents. Cibils's investigation is admirably rigorous, with thematic claims that are well-cited, demonstrated across multiple interviews, and appropriately bounded to avoid essentializing Mexican immigrant motherhood.

The use of motherwork as a conceptual framework made Cibils's analysis intuitive for readers to follow. Its three-pronged composition—survival, identity, community—makes motherwork a simple yet powerful alternative for understanding mothers' involvement at the intersection of gender, race, and class. We see survival in the mothers' emphasis on the importance of free meals provided at schools; identity in the *consejos*, or advice, mothers give their children on managing discriminatory teachers; and community in the supportive, resourceful networks the mothers form to teach each other how to navigate their new host country. I do wonder if other themes might have arisen that did not fit within the bounds of motherwork; however, as a white, European-American woman without any children, I am hesitant to speculate as to what such themes might be.

As all critical feminist scholars should, Cibils concludes her study with recommended scholarly implications and suggested practical remedies for the disparities found in her participants' experiences with the United States' education system. Drawing on Fraser's (2005) conceptualization of social justice, Cibils calls for the removal of obstacles to inclusive parental involvement through the provision of appropriate linguistic resources and transportation access. She also challenges deficit thinking and advocates for school administration, public policy, and other relevant parties to value the "ingenuity and strategic communal agency" that immigrant mothers bring to the education system (2017, p. 269).

There were two areas that warrant limited criticism. First, a clearer chronology of when, within the two-year study, certain interview excerpts were collected would have been beneficial for readers to organize the participants' stories. Because of the non-chronological, thematic presentation of the interview excerpts, it felt that each excerpt had to be read individually and was difficult to place within a complete narrative. The second is that no clear information was provided about the recruitment of the participants. To caveat this second point, it is possible Cibils left her recruitment methods ambiguous to preserve anonymity. In addition, she did explain that the participants "chose to share their stories because they wanted to make a difference" (2017, p. 269). This simple but powerful statement provides insight into the motivation behind participants' involvement.

As a primarily qualitative, critical feminist scholar in the communication studies discipline, I would recommend this book to several specific groups. First, education administrators, policy makers, and other parties interested in immigration, motherhood, and parental involvement should read this study both for its practical advice and as an exercise in empathy. The recommendations made in the study's conclusion—to provide linguistic resources, reconsider forums for decision-making, and "engage immigrant mothers as the resourceful and active members of the community they prove to be" (Cibils, 2017, p. 269)—seem doable.

Second, the study is an excellent example of rigorous, theoretically grounded qualitative work for anyone interested in methods outside the positivist tradition. Cibils describes her overarching method as critical narrative inquiry, and defines specific methods of analysis as necessary. I was introduced to the concepts of juxtaposition, ventriloquation, and prosodic markers—voice changes signaling the unspeakable (Cibils, 2017; Riessman, 2008)—through this study.

Third, feminist scholars could benefit from seeing the book's incorporation of theory from various traditions to an intersectional critical feminist analysis. For example, although Cibils is expressly taking a critical feminist approach, she employs both Foucault's (1984) concept of normalization—associated with the poststructuralist tradition—and Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence—associated with the praxeological tradition—in her theoretical setup for analysis.

Finally, critical cultural scholars would benefit from reading the book as a case study on community cultural wealth and acculturation. The narratives found in the book would work well as alternatives to cultural deficit approaches that would portray “the arrival of Latin@s with their linguistic and cultural differences [as] a problem and a burden” (Cibils, 2017, p. 13). Overall, I found Cibils's study to be engaging, accessible, and conducted with tenacity and integrity. Her conviction in both presenting a meticulous academic analysis and relating her participants' stories with authenticity and respect is commendable.

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Author Note

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