Maternal love as nurturing. Devices, myths and ideologies

Luisa Stagi

Abstract

Maternal love is one of the myths founding ideologies about motherhood. Ideologies about motherhood change over time depending on the social and economic system of which they are devices. "Intensive motherhood", the ideology that has appeared since the eighties, creates the figure of the good mother as responsible for the healthy mental and physical development of their children. Specularly to this figure emerges mother blame, a discursive device around mothers considered responsible for disorders and deviant behaviour and conduct of their children.

In this paper, we analyse how in an individualised and neo-liberal society, mother blame finds a privileged operating territory in food. Nourishment, which has always been considered one of the cornerstones of maternal love, in food modernity, characterised by gastro-anomie indeed takes on very relevant meanings.

Key-words: Maternal love; Nurturing; Mother blame

Being nurturing, which has always been one of the elements on which maternal ideology is founded, has become today one of the main cornerstones around which one builds the "good mother" model. Mother blame, as a specular device and thus reinforcing mother-valour, strikes, by contrast, mothers who have children suffering from eating disorders: anorexia for example, but especially obesity. An obese body, in fact, in current neo-liberal society is one of the main targets of social stigmatisation, a symbol of a failure in self-control and self-monitoring.

What does one mean by a good or bad mother? In every period of history or culture what you would expect from a mother in terms of nursing activities, value orientation, social and economic behaviour varies greatly, showing that motherhood is a construct based on ideologies functional to maintaining a certain social order (Badinter, 1980/82; Rich, 1976/2000).

Maternal love, which in its most deterministic variation becomes "maternal instinct", is one of the foundations of the system of expectations shared by different

ideologies about motherhood. It was Simone de Beauvoir (1949/61) who first analysed the myths founding ideologies of motherhood, functional to maintenance of the patriarchal system, identifying maternal instinct as one of the key factors to the division of economic and social roles: of the division of labour to that between public/private space. According to this perspective, the myth of motherhood as an instinct is a device used by patriarchy to enshrine the role by strengthening social expectations.

Myths are deep-rooted ideas, based on a system of values rather than a logical-rational one, which govern practices, facilitate judgement and actions, hiding the ideology of which they are a device. The myth of maternal instinct serves to make women feel responsible by concealing the historical and social factors of motherhood:

> *"The building blocks of ideologies are myths. Barthes (1972) defined a myth as an uncontested and unconscious assumption that is so widely accepted that its historical and cultural origins are forgotten. As such, myths of motherhood are presented as "natural", "instinctual", and "intuitive" as opposed to "cultural", "economic", "political", and "historical" (Johnston and Swanson, 2005: 22).*

Like all ideologies, indeed, even those on maternity are based on the construction of social expectations: because ideologies are highly systematised or integrated around one or more authoritative values, a dominant ideology supports cultural hegemony through the creation of specific social expectations for particular social groups.

> *"For instance, a prolonged loving bond between mother and child has been identified as a core value around which current ideologies of ideal motherhood revolve". (Lynch, 2005: 32)*

Since its outset, with Emile Durkheim, sociology has tackled the division of gender roles and the importance of the complementarity of the division of tasks for solidarity in functionalist terms, which the French sociologist considers the foundation of society. According to Durkheim, with the progress of civilization men and women have become increasingly differentiated both at the biological level and at the functional level. This progressive differentiation between the sexes is considered functional by Durkheim for "conjugal solidarity", founded on the difference and complementarity of the two sexes:

> *"[…]the separation of the sexes was a milestone event for the evolution of feelings, because it has made possible what is perhaps the strongest of*

the disinterested inclinations" (Durkheim, 1893/1962: 79).

In the name of "solidarity" the division of labour between the sexes becomes standard; the specialisation of female affective functions and of male intellectual functions thus takes on a moral value, because it serves the cohesion and stability of society. Durkheim is aware that this specialisation in "sweetness that is now one of the distinctive attributes of a woman" (Durkheim, 1893/1962: 81), means marginalisation for her, withdrawal into the private, however, it justifies everything being functional to the preservation of social stability.

On a line of substantial continuity with Durkheim's elaboration, Talcott Parsons also analyses the differentiation of gender roles in line with his general theory: the construction of a conceptual framework utilisable for the analysis of any type of society; his interest focuses in particular on the conditions for the maintenance and functioning of the system. One of these conditions consists of the effectiveness of the socialisation process, which takes place mainly in the family, whose main task is to be "a child socialisation agency" (Parsons, 1964: 61), organised on the basis of the division of duties of the husband-father and the wife-mother.

Parsons, like Durkheim, far from regarding industrialisation as a reduction factor for the importance of the family, highlights the changes in functions, also pointing out like Durkheim that "specialisation in affection" that becomes all the more possible as the family becomes nuclear. In an industrial urban society, the love of a mother fulfils a function of reassurance for the child projected towards an uncertain future, with a previously untracked and protected path as happens in a traditional society. Family roles are derived according to Parsons from "[…]a differentiation along two axes, one of hierarchy and power and one of instrumental function contrasted with expressive function" (Parsons-Bales, 1974: 49).

The instrumental function, carried out mainly by the husband-father, concerns the relations of the system (family) with its situation on the outside, with satisfaction of the conditions of preservation of equilibrium. The expressive sector, mainly managed by the wife-mother, regards the state of things inside the system, the maintenance of supplementary relations between its members, the adjustment of the models and the tension levels of the members that compose it, the internal relations of the members with one another and their states of "emotional" tension or insufficiency in their roles in the group (Parsons, 1964: 61). Simply put an instrumental role for the father-bread

winner and an emotional instrumental role for the mother-care giver – angel of the hearth (Parsons, 1965: 54). From these functions learning takes place within the family of the "roles by the children, which will push males to take on more technical, executive and judicial roles", and females more supporting roles, of "integration and management of tensions".

The premise of this functionalist approach is that the biological differences between the sexes are determinants in the division of gender roles: giving birth to children and providing them with the initial care sets up, on a presumptive basis, a net primacy of the relationship of the mother with the small baby boy, which in turn establishes the presumption that a man being free from these biological functions is to specialise in an alternative direction, that is the instrumental one (Parsons-Bales, 1956/74: 29; Parsons, 1964: 60). Therefore, culture would intervene not so much to determine the gender roles, but rather to limit and articulate the scope of a variation, in their essential natures that are defined biologically.

Quinn has argued that cultural ideas about gender and family roles have motivational force because they are expressed in explicit socialising messages that "depend upon cultural assumptions about what is moral and what is natural" (1992: 121). To this extent cultural ideas about mothers do not simply represent a possible interpretation of the social world, but a powerful socialising force that begins in childhood and continues throughout adulthood (Singh, 2004).

Mothering ideology has been viewed as distinctly oppressive, and recent research has focused on reporting mothers' conflicts and ambivalences about mothering in an effort to present a more complex reality to mothering and to engage with the ready potential for cultural judgement of mothers (Singh, 2004). However, DiQuinzio (1999) notes that the feminist critique and analysis of mothering experiences must include an analysis of the extent to which these experiences "are determined by the very ideological formations that feminism means to challenge" (26). Because mothering ideology is often experienced at an unconscious level, where ideals and expectations are simply part of "common-sense" knowledge, such analysis has the potential to surface the relation between mothering ideology and dependent or contingent cultural practices (Singh, 2004).

Feminist scholars have linked the phenomenon of *mother-blame* to a

pervasive mothering ideology that contains essentialised and idealised notions of mother and mothering behaviours (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998).

Today, the concept of mother blame, an expression born in the context of North American literature in reference to the construction of the figure of the "bad mother", regards the dissemination of the discourse around the mothers considered responsible for all behaviours of children defined as socially deviant. According to this perspective, eating disorders or sexual orientation and even autism are all outcomes of maternal errors: stifling attitudes in the first two cases, non-affectivity - the so-called "refrigerator mothers" - in the last one (Campani, 2012).

This type of bad mother characterisation takes its meaning from the current construction of the good mother, since "the mother-valour/mother-blame binary holds mothers responsible for families and future citizens, maintaining this "natural" care at the centre of normative femininity" (Blum, 2007: 202).

The image of a "good mother" is a socially constructed notion subject to historical and cultural influences, with a contemporary emphasis on an "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996) paradigm. Under this ideology, today's mothers are expected to devote limitless time, energy, and resources to their children's development while disregarding any self-interest that may conflict with their children's needs and desires (Sousa, 2011).

Conventional wisdom presents images of the good mother as a self-sacrificing paragon of virtue protecting her vulnerable children from the evils of society (Sousa, 2011). The modern dimension of this good mother concept is a normative standard that obliges mothers to maintain intensive parenting methods on behalf of their "innocent and priceless" children (Hays, 1996:152). In doing so, mothers seek out professional advice that helps discern the depth and complexity of children's varied needs, supplanting mothers' self-interest in favour of cultural child-rearing values (Sousa, 2011).

Construction of the "intensive mothering" model and feeding responsibility

After Simone De Beauvoir, there were numerous feminist studies aimed at revealing the socio-cultural construction and the myths founding the ideologies of motherhood (cf. Businaro, 2010). These analyses showed that the ideologies on maternity mutate over time, following the needs of the social and economic system in

which they are inserted.

The format of intensive mothering was outlined at the end of the eighties (of the twentieth century). According to this ideology, in order to be a good mother, a woman had to give priority to the wishes and needs of her child, whether boy or girl (e.g. Warner, 2006) and was the only person responsible for a healthy physical and psychological development of her children. This model was "child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays, 1996: 8) and became dominant when the aspirations of women began to emancipate themselves from the reproductive role, producing a series of contradictions falling solely on women's individual responsibility.

In this context, particularly interesting are the studies that have attempted to trace the rhetorical discourse of this kind of motherhood in self-help manuals, in those of childcare and promoted through the advice of experts. But it would mainly be studies on advertising to show how the "intensive mothering model" has been built and strengthened by marketing within consumer promotion policies (Businaro, 2010).

The study by Lynch (2005), analysing the American press from the 1950s to the present day, identified five major maternal models: the "domestic mom" – around the fifties, a housewife whose attention is directed above all to the house and her husband, and child care is part of the housework – "Uncertain mom" - in the sixties where the role of mother and wife begins to separate and child care becomes more than just domestic work - the "Efficient mom" - in the seventies mothers are depicted with their infants, especially in their arms, to demonstrate the centrality of maternal care in their identity - the "Nurturing Mom" - with the eighties the space increases for expert knowledge on product recommendations for the health and feeding of children and the woman becomes she "whose care and nurturance of children in is a natural extension of her biological role" - the "Expertise-guided Mom" - appears in the nineties when the role of expert knowledge is increasingly important especially for the use of medicinal and food products.

From the nineties onwards, the responsibility of mothers in the care of their children is also increasingly encouraged and above all through the purchase of products useful to the child's welfare. That is, mothers are induced to show the workings of their maternal instinct through consumerist practices. The more maternal love is presented as

instinctual, the more care practices must be driven by the expert knowledge that guides them in the care and development their children (Businaro, 2010).

In particular, in this context, care through attention to nutrition takes on great importance: if initially this thrust is related to the advertising of pre-packaged foods, later it changes into attention to good healthy and unadulterated food. Indeed, one of the strategies implemented by advertisers to induce mothers to buy already prepared food was to build communication strategies inducing doubt about the mother's ability to cook the right food. In order to overcome resistance towards pre-packaged foods, in fact, they spread communication strategies that made mothers feel responsible about their ability to have the time and knowledge to cook properly, but above all risk was constructed around food choices. The strategy of fear - to endanger one's own son/daughter and of not knowing how to be "good mothers" - was functional to creating consumption that could offer a remedy by buying the right product. However, in the long run, these advertising strategies helped to create that "intensive mothering" hyper-empowered towards the health of the boy/girl, a follower of expert knowledge, because inserted in a society of risk and uncertainty. Food thus becomes a key area to show a mother's love, or, conversely, to show their inadequacy. Thus it happens that one of the prime targets of mother blame becomes the improper feeding of children.

Representations of maternal love as food

In general, food advertisements still used today show ideal figures who embody different gender models based on sexual and sexist roles and stereotypes.

Gender asymmetry, represented in roles and postures, can also be found in contemporary advertising, even though declared in the various themes of advertising and through new communication techniques; indeed it would seem possible to say that the analytical categories identified by Goffman in his famous text *Gender Advertisements* (1979) are still applicable.

If the woman basically represents passivity, nourishment and is placed in the private sphere, the man, inserted in the advertising space, is represented as active and assertive.

According to the typology used in Francesca Calamita's (2014) analyses, female models in advertisements can be grouped into two types: on the one hand, there are the "angels of the hearth" who feed the family with healthy food, and on the other

"living dolls" whose appetite wishes to imply other appetites, for example, a sexual one. Similarly, according to this classification, male models usually revolve around three roles: the "breadwinner", the creative chef (whose competence is unquestionable) and what Calamita has defined as a "postmodern Adam", a man who gives in to the temptation of gluttony if led astray by a bewitching woman. The food is thus matched with the same dichotomy as female models: a "saintly" woman corresponds with food-nutrition, while the "temptress" is made to correspond with food-enjoyment.

Recent research (Aarseth, Olsenm, 2008; Hook, 2010) showed that, despite the spread of discourses on gender equality and more and more frequent access to the public sphere, women still do most care work and feel responsible for family nutrition, with variations that depend on the national context and the type of family life project. The idea that cooking is a woman's task is a variation of the genderised hypothesis that maintaining family health is a natural, female aptitude and that cooking for others is part of a female culinary identity that reproduces itself from generation to generation through gender socialisation (Beagan *et al*, 2008; Bugge, 2006).

There is a vast literature, especially of feminist bent, which has tackled thinking about how the social and cultural meanings related to food and nutrition serve to perpetuate unequal gender relations. According to the heteronormative paradigm, naturalisation of the link between nutrition and femininity is one of the territories to build the division between public and private spheres. In the now classic study *Feeding the family*, Marjorie De Vault (1991) starts exactly from the premise that the work of feeding-care is central to the production of a heteronormative family model; according to this author, cooking as care is a way of "doing gender" in which "a woman behaves according to a recognisable femininity"

From the year two thousand on, the studies that have dealt with tracing connections between food and gender have become numerous and varied, but it should be noted that this kind of thinking was only inaugurated starting from the seventies; until then, in fact, the link between gender and food had not been the subject of specific analyses (Cairns, 2010).

One of the earliest and most important works, which connects the history of food and nutrition and the relationship between genders, is *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* by Laura Shapiro (1986). Later, the meeting of

these early reflections with intersectional and post-colonial approaches, starting from the nineties, produced an important development of a new analytical perspective on these issues.

From an anthropological point of view, however, thanks to the work of Marcel Mauss, food within family relations was analysed according to the concept of a gift (1925/2002). Following the perspective of this author, gift-giving relations are important to create and reproduce social relations between family members and friends. Considering the division of domestic work, food as a gift is often prepared by a woman in the role of wife and mother: "since the food is consumed - symbolically and physiologically - it is the ultimate gift that nourishes both body the psyche" (Lupton, 1999: 82).

The idea of nourishing or being nourishment still remains today and, with its latency, affects the search for female identity coherence. The idea of having to take care of and check on what her family members, but especially children, eat may represent a value or, as claimed by Susan Bordo, an ideology that makes women feel gratified.

Even the recent promotional project *We - Women for Expo* for the Milan-Expo 2015 was built exactly on the rhetoric woman/nourishing: "Every woman is a repository of practices, knowledge, traditions related to food, the ability to feed and nourish themselves, to "take care". Not only of themselves but also of others [i]. According to some of the slogans used, but also in the words of the promotional video [ii], women are supposed to be custodians of female practices (knowledge, skills and female attitudes) that are essential not only to the care of children, parents and family but also the entire planet.

Another significant aspect of food in the family context is the ritual dimension of being together at the table "as a moment in which the relations of authority within the family in different social classes are played" (Barbagli, 1988). Even when changing the ways and places, in all walks of life and in different eras, the meal time is an opportunity in which members of a family "stay together longer and interact more"; for this reason, meals are "one of the most important rituals of domestic life" that serve to emphasise belonging to the group, to highlight the differences and hierarchies of members and in general represent the appropriate forum to socialise values and forms of behaviour. According to this perspective, the food served in the family is therefore

not so important as the ritual of sitting and eating. In this respect, the family meal and the dining table are powerful symbols of the family itself.

Research on sexual stereotypes found in children's albums of 2004[iii] found that an image still recurring in the representations of sharing the family meal is that of the mother who serves at the table with a soup bowl. According to interpretations of this work, the soup bowl would appear to represent an ostensory (or monstrance), a symbol of the offer that the mother, officiating the ceremony, brings to the family.

The gesture is all the more significant considering that the soup bowl is an accessory that is now obsolete, that probably most children have never seen in reality. The dramaturgy of this moment is also emphasised by the posture of the mother: in the representations, she is often portrayed standing in front of the table in a gesture of oblation that seems almost liturgical.

Mother blame and feeding

Food, therefore, has always represented an area for the putting to the test and recognition of maternal love, especially in the sense of food as a gift; in contemporary society, however, care through a healthy diet for mothers takes on an even more specific value. Indeed, modernity in feeding makes what one eats part of the project of construction and presentation of the self because it shows the subject's ability to move around in a territory full of contradictions. On the one hand, it is necessary to know how to respond to the pressures of consumerism with the ability to control oneself, on the other hand it is necessary to be a competent consumer in society with food risk. In this context, a slim body becomes an indicator of good citizenship because it shows the ability of the subject to be able to manage his/her health at the individual level. On the contrary an overweight body speaks of a deviant who has no ability to self-monitor body boundaries and who is irresponsible with respect to conduct considered healthy.

In this scenario, a good mother becomes the one who is able to educate her children to become good citizens even through diet and exercise, some of the major moral imperatives of individualised and neo-liberal society (Stagi, 2016). Maternal love has to pass through a healthy diet and dedication to sport. There are more than just a few complications: a working mother is not always able to take care of food or even to have time to support her children in extracurricular activities. In Italy, for example, after the latest educational reforms have cut the time spent at school in the afternoons,

many pre-teens and teens spend a lot of time at home alone, with no possibility of food control and with great difficulty in playing a sport, not having the chance either to be taken there, or easy access to expensive sports facilities. But also in Italy the blame for the increase in childhood and adolescent obesity rates falls primarily on mothers who are considered the only people responsible for the body weight of their children. For a long time eating disorders, especially anorexia, were seen solely as a problem of the relationship between mother and daughter (more recently, with the spread of this disorder among males, between mothers and sons).

Psychoanalytic readings have always seen, in the emotional boundaries that pass through food (administration/intake), a problem of too much or too little maternal affection (Stagi, 2002 and 2008). If up to the middle of the noughties mothers ended up in the dock of the accused for being the cause of their daughters' anorexia, today they increasingly suffer mother blame for the obesity of their children. Such blame is partly a result of some very common rhetoric which by revisiting and simplifying some analytical perspectives, especially of Lacanian inspiration, consider the mothers responsible for having weakened the paternal containment role. For example, to explain the dysfunction of an anorexic-bulimic family the figure of the "crocodile mother" is used: "a devouring mother that lays down the law and does not allow the father to perform his function as regulator of desire" (Recalcati, 2002, pp. 280-293).

Expert knowledge thus represents a key resource for the purpose of orientation in food modernity. The weight of individual responsibility, emphasised by the paradigm of mother intensive, indeed, urges mothers to feel in need of rules and guides in order to operate properly, or to seek help when they fail in their duty as correct feeders.

The media have intercepted this need and offer an abundance of formats that provide expert advice and examples of good practice. The most significant in this sense are the makeover formats, or transformations, where a number of experts try to show through the correction of the bad habits of some participants, what is wrong and how you can do it the right way. According to an analytical perspective of Foucault matrix, makeover formats show disciplining technologies through the rehabilitation of persons out of the norm.

The programme *SOS Tata* (Fox Life and La7) is a lifestyle/makeover format,

an Italian adaptation of programmes like *Nanny 911* (USA) or *Super Nanny* (UK), attributable to the sub-genre "transformation of relations"; the subject of the conversion intervention, indeed, is the family nucleus, i.e. the relationship between parents and children (Giomi, 2014: 167, 171). It is a show with a strong regulatory function, "the expertise of nannies is constructed, first and foremost, as the ability to impart a severe discipline" (Giomi, 2014: 173). The scheme is similar and common to many makeover formats: a pre-processing phase where the life and home of the protagonists is inspected, with some confessional moments aimed at tracking down the "psychological truth" and showing their pedagogical inadequacy; a diagnosis phase, with the proposal of a set of rules; then the testing and final evaluation of the transformation. This type of format is increasingly aimed at righting the poor dietary habits for which much of the blame was put on mothers, held responsible for the dietary discipline of her family and children.

In *Tesoro salviamo i ragazzi (*Fox TV*)*, an adaptation of *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* (broadcast by the BBC), for example, the researcher-chef Marco Bianchi enters the obese children's homes to help families solve the problem.

The structure of this programme closely resembles that of *SOS Tata*: the expert initially remotely monitors the educational mistakes, then fixes the objectives that must be achieved and assesses the results reached. The rules, as in *SOS Tata*, are so simple as to seem trivial - healthy food, exercise, etc... - but the emphasis with which they are exhibited, for example in the form of slides that resemble corporate motivational training (team work often appears among the slogans), gives the whole a certain solemnity. The parents called to order, show themselves in behaviours and postures that express a deep sense of guilt. However, the most important reminder of the parental responsibilities is made in another - equally solemn – moment i.e. when it is shown, through the technique of *morphing*, the projection of what the child will be like as an adult if he/she does not change lifestyle.

Through this operation is underlined the responsibility of parents on their children's future - the programme's slogan is "change the future of your son/daughter" - a future that is full of health risks if bad eating habits continue. In order to build images with the *morphing* technique, in fact, the boys are subjected to a series of physical and psycho-aptitude tests, the results of which will be used to sustain the "truth" of the projection. The images of the boys and girls at the age of 40 show unkempt and fairly

unattractive people, created to emphasise a fate of unhappiness. In the English version, the presenter at this point even tells the parents that their incompetence "is killing their children".

The Italian version is undoubtedly more toned-down, but the conversational style through which the food issue moves toward the health one is similar to the English version and many other programmes of this kind. The moment of diagnosis and communication of the rules to be followed and the objectives to be achieved (in the next two weeks) takes place in an all-white setting that resembles the atmosphere of a clinic. Parallel to the "medical diagnosis-prognosis", a "psychological diagnosis-prognosis" is then constructed: in episode 4, for example, the narrator - through some slides describing the possible consequences of misconduct - says that the eating lifestyle of Chiara, based on foods too rich in saturated fats and sugars, can lead her to developing physical ailments such as gout, kidney stones, cardiovascular disease, while her physical fitness, which already leads to her low self-esteem, will encourage the development of disorders such as anxiety, social isolation and depression.

In a few episodes of the second series a psychologist was also inserted who helped put the diagnosis together. In episode 8, for example, by analysing the case of Mimmo - defined a lover of "TV, mother and refrigerator" - the psychologist asserts that "he must be helped to direct his drives not so much on food needs but mainly on more complex needs: his autonomation from her mother, his growth as an individual separated from the parent figures". In this episode, the emphasis on the inability of the parents to limit and build the desire - passing through the symbolic dimension of free access to the fridge and television - seems perfectly to trace the discourse of Lacanian matrix that was mentioned above.

In general, the figure targeted by this type of programme is the mother, with continued emphasis on her maternal responsibility for the work of care and feeding and her symbolic role as the bearer of the nation's moral values (Skeggs, 2005): the main female characters are usually defined by their role as mothers, while the main male characters are defined by their occupations.

Even many slimming makeover formats are focused on children and their families; in the narratives used you can often trace a sense of maternal guilt, according to the mother blame perspective.

One of the best known is *I Used To Be Fat (Teenager in crisi di peso)*; also in this format, one reproduces the same sequences as other makeovers: pre-transformation, transformation and moment of revelation. The pre-transformation, however, has a particular style: the narrator - that accompanies the series of images on bad habits - is the voice of the protagonist himself who usually talks about one of his passions which, because of his weight, he cannot follow (dancing, baseball or football). The slogan that the main characters are got to pronounce at the end of this phase is "I want to become the man/woman I always wanted to be". The programme mostly concerns boys and girls who have to go to college and will spend the summer before (110 or 90 days) to become adequate for the important appointment. In the post-transformation of the slimmed-down protagonists will say that can finally do what they always wanted, for example, to continue their studies, taking for granted that with an unsuitable body they could not have done it.

In the diagnosis phase, a part of the pre-transformation, they go over the history of the protagonist in search of the cause of obesity. In episode 14/1 (first series), for example, they try to track down the trauma, which would bring the protagonist to lose control of their body weight, in an earlier period of the disorder - and therefore the absence - of the mother. In episode 13/1, Latrice, the protagonist, has started to eat because her mother has gone to live in another state, abandoning her. In a good three episodes (12/1, 15/1 and 9/2) explicit reference is made to the parental separation as a cause of being overweight: "her parents divorced when she was young and she took comfort in food"; "her parents' divorce made her quit sport and start eating too much". Even in this type of relationship, the part of the discourses on the *mother blame* is easily recognisable, therefore for what concerns above all the discourses of women's guilt for family breakdown.

In episode 19/1, however, being accused is the food lifestyle of a family of Latin American origin, but especially targeted is the mother, who opposes the normalising work of the coach, saying: "why isn't it alright as it is? She is like us and we are not wrong".

The reference to gender expectations also appears rather apparent: various coaches, depending on whether the main character is male or female, use a number of stereotypes linked with the gender they belong to, both as an incentive (masculinity and seductiveness as values to be achieved), and as a threat at the time of failure ("be

strong", "don't be a sissy" for males, or a call to perseverance and self-control, for females).

Jamie's Ministry of Food is instead a programme in which the conductor goes to reform the eating habits of the British working class. This figure, embodying the function of food educator for a social class that has lost all knowledge about a proper diet, represents a "moral entrepreneur" for consumption. The bourgeois viewers identify with him and legitimise his role as a moral entrepreneur, considering it necessary in a society in which the food anomie is a sign of disintegration and social pathology (Hollows & Jones, 2010).

The moral message conveyed by this programme is that in a society of uncertainty and risk the subject must shoulder the responsibility for his health through the right choices in consumption. However, some groups in society do not have the right skills to succeed and for this need to be supported with those techniques of the self of which the main character in *Jamie's Ministry of Food* is the bearer: he is a *lifestyle mediator* who teaches the use of food as a practice expressive of lifestyle. Again in this programme the mother, who is blamed in her role as an educator, is often the subject of food rehabilitation.

Mother blame, indeed, is a functional device to the definition of normative maternity but also, in the intersectional perspective, to the distancing between the mother valour, often white and middle-class women, from *chav* mothers, who do not have appropriate economic, social and symbolic capital. In the area of healthy and sound nutrition, mother blame is therefore a powerful device through which some social groups of mothers are evaluated and seen as inadequate, deficient and in need of improvement.

Concluding remarks

Mother blame is a device that, by blaming mothers for physical, psychological or social discomforts of their children, brings out and reinforces the ideology of a good mother. Mother blame was in fact created in the context of the paradigm defined Mother Intensive, where a good mother is the one who devotes care and attention to the psycho-physical well-being of her children, making use of expert knowledge. A good mother is committed to bringing up a child who is competent and who shows he/she is a good citizen in an individualised and neo-liberal society. The

competent consumer and the good citizen in contemporary society is a subject who can handle at an individual level the contradictions generated by risk and uncertainty and who knows how to show his moral capacity through skills such as self-control and self-monitoring. These manifestations are put on display and so become visible through a slim body as a synonym for a healthy body. In a society of individual responsibility and with the end of the welfare state, indeed, a healthy body is an indicator of good citizenship and successful socialisation while obesity is the subject of strong social stigmatisation and the construction of a moral panic.

Feeding lovingly, always one of the priority tasks for mothers and basis of the ideology of motherhood, in contemporary society, defined by *gastro-anomie*, means building for their children a healthy diet, even using expert knowledge which act as a guide in the complexity of food modernity, characterised by medical, hedonistic and health motions in stark contradiction. Anyone who fails in this fundamental task is the subject of great social stigma, mother blame. The technologies of the self to rehabilitate those left out of the norm are made available by the media through formats of makeover television, which increasingly are turning to women and mothers who have failed in their educational task. Their failure is also useful as a warning to others, especially to the bourgeois classes in the functional perspective; through deviance, they strengthen the boundaries of normality and morality. The standardisation format of poor dietary behaviours and overflowing bodies find in mothers belonging to the bourgeoisie a privileged public, since, through the vision of these programmes, which arouse disgust and create distance, one produces a sense of reassurance for those who painstakingly pursue the right behaviours, and also because:

> *"Ideologies shape individual action by sanctioning and rewarding particular roles and behaviours. Foucault (1978) and Gramsci (1971) described how cultural hegemony is preserved by establishing expectations that can be successfully fulfilled by the dominant cultural group, but ensures the failure of others" (Johnston, Swanson 2006: 510)*

References

Aarseth, Helene and Olsenm, Bente. 2008. "Food and masculinity in dual-career couples", *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol.17, N.4, pp. 277-87.

Badinter, Elisabeth. 1982. *L'amore in più: storia dell'amore materno*. Milano: Longanesi - édition original: 1980. *L'Amour en plus : histoire de l'amour maternel (XVII-XXe siècle)*. Paris: Flammarion.

Barbagli, Marzio. 1988. *Sotto lo stesso tetto*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Beagan, Brenda. *et al*. 2008. "It's just easier for me to do it': Rationalizing the family division of foodwork", *Sociology,* Vol. 42, N. 4, pp. 653-71.

Blum, Linda. 2007. "Mother Blame in the Prozac Nation: Raising Kids with Invisible Disabilities", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 21, N. 2, pp. 202–26.

Bugge, Annechen Bahr and Almas, Reidar. 2006. "Domestic dinner: Representations and practices of a proper meal among young suburban mothers", *Journal of Consumer Culture,* N. 6, pp. 203-228.

Businaro, Chiara. 2010. *Donne tra natura e cultura: la riproduzione del ruolo materno nella pubblicità. Annunci italiani e spagnoli di prodotti per l'infanzia*. Tesi di dottorato in Lingue, culture e comunicazione interculturale, ciclo XXII, Università di Bologna.

Cairns, Kate *et al*. 2010. "Caring About Food: Doing Gender in the Foodie Kitchen", *Gender & Society,* Vol. 24, N. 5, pp. 591-615.

Calamita, Francesca. 2014. "Voracious Dolls and Competent Chefs: Negotiating Femininities and Masculinities in Italian Food Advertisements of the 1990s-2010s", *g/s/i*, 1, http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Calamita-Voracious-Dolls.pdf.

Campani, Giovanna. 2012. *Madri sole. Dalle concubine romane alle single mothers*, Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.

de Beauvoir, Simone.1961. *Il secondo sesso*. Milano: Saggiatore- édition original: 1949. *Le deuxiéme sexe*. Paris: Gallimard.

De Vault Marjorie. 1991. *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of CaringWork*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

DiQuinzio, Patrice. 1999. *The impossibility of motherhood*. NewYork: Routledge.

Durkheim, Emile. 1962. *La divisione del lavoro sociale*. Milano : Edizioni di comunità- édition original:1893. *De la division du travail social*. Paris: Alcan.

Giomi, Elisa. 2014. *Pedagogia o spettacolo dell'oppresso? Uno sguardo sociologico sull'azione normativa della makeover television attraverso l'analisi di cinque programmi*, in Innocenti V., Perrotta M. *Factual, reality, makeover. Lo spettacolo della trasformazione nella televisione contemporanea*. Roma: Bulzoni.

Goffman, Erving. 1979. *Gender advertisements*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University

Hollows, Joanne and Jones, Steve. 2010. "At least he's doing something': Moral entrepreneurship and individual responsibility in Jamie's Ministry of Food, European". *Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 13, N.3, pp. 307-322

Hook, Jennifer. 2010. "Gender inequality in the welfare state: Sex segregation in housework, 1965-2003", *American Journal of Sociology,* Vol. 115, N. 5, pp. 1480-1523.

Johnston, Deirdre D. and Swanson, Debra H. 2003. "Invisible Mothers: A Content Analysis of Motherhood Ideologies and Myths in Magazines", *Sex Roles*, Vol. 49, N. 1/2, pp.21-33.

Johnston, Deirdre D. and Swanson, Debra H. 2006. "Constructing the "Good Mother": The Experience of Mothering Ideologies by Work Status". *Sex Roles*, N. 54, pp. 509–519, DOI 10.1007/s11199-006-9021-3

Ladd-Taylor, Molly & Umansky, Lauri. (Eds.). 1998. *Bad mothers: The politics of blame in 20th century America*. New York: NYU Press.

Lupton, Deborah. 1999. *L'anima nel piatto*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Lynch, Danna Karen. 2005. "Advertising Motherhood: Image, Ideology, and Consumption", *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, XLIX, pp. 32-57.

Mauss, Marcel. 2002. 1925. *Saggio sul dono*. *Forma e motivo dello scambio nelle società arcaiche*. Torino: Einaudi- édition original: "Essai sur le don", in *Année Sociologique*.

Parsons, Talcott and Bales, Robert. 1974. *Famiglia e socializzazione*. Milano: Mondadori- édition original: 1956. *Family Socialization and Interaction Process*. NY: The free Press.

Parsons, Talcott. 1964. *Social structure and Personality*. New York: Free Press.

Quinn, Naomi. 1992. *The motivational force of self-understanding: Evidence from wives' inner conflicts*. In R. D'Andrade, & C. Strauss (Eds.), *Human motives and cultural models*, pp. 90–126. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP.

Recalcati, Massimo. 2002 .*Clinica del vuoto*. *Anoressie, dipendenze, psicosi*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Rich, Adrienne. 2000. *Nato di donna*. Milano: Garzanti- édition original: 1976. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, NY and London: Norton.

Singh, Ilina. 2004. "Doing their jobs: mothering with Ritalin in a culture of mother-blame". *Social Science & Medicine*, N. 59, pp. 1193–1205.

Sousa, Amy. 2011. "From Refrigerator Mothers to Warrior-Heroes: The Cultural Identity Transformation of Mothers Raising Children with Intellectual Disabilities", *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 34, N. 2, pp. 220-243.

Stagi, Luisa. 2002. *La società bulimica*. *Le trasformazioni simboliche del corpo tra edonismo e autocontrollo*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Stagi, Luisa. 2008. *Anticorpi*. *Dieta, fitness e altri prigioni*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Stagi, Luisa. 2016. *Food Porn*. *L'ossessione per il cibo in Tv e nei Social media*. Milano: Egea.

---

[i]   http://www.expo2015.org/it/progetti/we-women-for-expo

[ii]   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4W2b0SOG3rY#t=21

[iii]   The research can be found at the following address:
 http://www.comune.torino.it/quantedonne/documenti/guida_alla_decifrazione.pdf

Biography

Luisa Stagi, PhD in Sociology, is senior lecturer in Sociology at DISFOR, University of Genoa (Italy).

Her research topics are gender, the body and food. She is co-director of the international journal of gender studies, AG-About gender (http://www.aboutgender.unige.it/ojs/index.php/generis) and co-founder of the Laboratory of Visual Sociology in Genoa (http://www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it)

.