

Parenting, partnerships & a pandemic. In conversation with Abi Locke

Jo: *Hello Abi, I am truly happy to speak with you again. Your wonderful keynote at POWES conference, was one of my most favourite presentations. Shall we begin with a summary of what you talked about?*

Abi: Hello! I was looking at the way that mothers and fathers are constructed in terms of their caring responsibilities. I was discussing constructions of parenting, which are usually synonymous with constructions of motherhood. Fathers, even those who are really hands on in their parenting practices, are somehow ignored by society. I also considered how in the pandemic everything seemed to be breaking down again.

I have been interested in fatherhood and stay-at-home dads for quite a few years now and have seen men doing much more caregiving. Yet, in the pandemic, the mums seemed to be picking everything up, even in those households with stay-at-home or hands-on dads. I wanted to explore how and why this is happening.

Jo: *Have you found the answer?*

Abi: I have not found the answer. It is bizarre how even with these hands-on fathers all of a sudden, the women are the ones bearing the brunt.

Jo: *It is fascinating. Ann Dally in her book, *Inventing motherhood* (1982) talked about how **mothers** have always been, but **motherhood** has been a social construct. I grew up believing that mothering was something natural, instinctive, and universal. Now I have learnt how much of it is built on social norms and social expectations. What is your understanding?*

Abi: A lot of it is socially constructed, I think. This gets into bigger arguments, in terms of issues around embodiment of mothering and parenting. But there is a huge amount that is socially constructed, that decides what we do every day. I remember, when my kids went to school, they both were suddenly into pink and princesses because all their friends were. And I was thinking, where the hell did this come from? I remember one of them, who wanted a French plait, actually said to me: “Why can't you be like other mums?” And I remember laughing that I was failing at motherhood already. I was working full time and researching motherhood, but apparently, I could not do a French plait. So, I was a failure!

Jo: *Your research demonstrated that even in those families, in those partnerships where the roles were less traditional, the kids were still expecting mums to do ‘what mummies do’. The*

kids go out to the world and bring those social norms back home. They are really fed with them in the nursery, in school, everywhere else.

Abi: Yes, I remember when my kids were at infants' school, when we first moved up here and I was working full time, my husband became stay-at-home father. The personal really is political. We have both lived and breathed this family structure.

At the infant school they did not have a Father's Day assembly because not everyone had a father, but they had the Mother's Day assembly, and the same song was sung every year: "My mum hugs me, my mum cooks for me." I looked at my partner and said: I think that they might be singing this song for you. I remember having a conversation with the head, who was a fantastic head teacher, about trying to stop reinforcing the stereotypes around those gendered norms of caring.

Jo: *Also, the concepts of motherhood and fatherhood are historically and culturally located. For instance, the huge unemployment in the 50s and the 60s meant that women could or **should** focus on childrearing. Child-centred gender roles were created and are still dominant. In your keynote, you talked about Hays' (1996) intense motherhood, the overzealous mother (Badinter, 2012) and Wolf's (2010) total mothering.*

Abi: I am guessing it is all bound up with power in society. The societal discourse about women expects them to be good mothers.

Jo: *But then the times have changed, and more mothers than ever work. Forbes, Lamar and Bornstein (2020) talked about 'the inexorable motherhood situation', Elvin-Novak (1999) called it 'illusory freedom of choice'. If women choose to 'just' mother, they are not good enough because they do not contribute to society. But if they choose to work and leave caring to someone else, they are considered negligent. If you are an uncaring mother, what kind of woman are you?*

Abi: And you are completely accountable if your child does anything wrong. It is absolutely fascinating to me. When both my kids went to school, my husband was a stay-at-home dad and I worked full time. And yet, if the kids were ill, they (the school) would always call me first. It is just the automatic presumption that the mother is key.

Jo: *As a critical and feminist psychologist, do you think it is our role to change it? Psychology has been held responsible for constructing theories which have fed the social norms and social expectations. Is it our responsibility now to convince the society to leave the*

mothers alone? They enjoy motherhood, but also want to work, get dads involved. Should we do more? Should we be more vocal about it?

Abi: Quite a few of us are already vocal about it. However, with the societal pressure in place, it is hard to know what needs to be done. I interviewed stay-at-home dads just before shared parental leave came in. The dads were saying how they really wanted to be more involved, they wanted more time with the kids. Conversely, there are a lot of studies about how shared parental leave has not really been taken up and exploited as much as it could have been. Taking parental leave is somehow seen as not being fully committed to the workplace; it also has the money issue attached to it. All the things that mothers have faced for years. If it comes down to who can take the salary cut in the house, it does tend to be the mums because of the gender pay gap. It is all pretty complex.

Jo: *And again, it goes back to the system which does not appear to value women's/ mothers'/parents' work. If you take time off from work, you do not earn, you stay behind. So, it is best that dad carries on working because he brings home more bacon.*

Abi: Yes, that is how things are put together, so it is knowing how to change them. Also, the ideas of femininity do tend to be bound up with the maternal, whereas masculinity is not bound up with parenting. It might be bound up with fathering and that is where it gets really complex. You can be a father and still carry on with most of your life. There is no presumption that you are always going to be responsible for childcare. Fathers are responsible for providing, but monetary providing, not in terms of hands-on caring. There are a lot of societal norms to break down there.

Jo: *Once you become a mum, society sees you primarily as a mum. Femininity means being maternal. How about masculinity? Does masculine mean manly and strong? Is being a dad masculine? In the keynote, you talked about 'bumbling assistants', the dads who help here and there. But on the other hand, we do start seeing dads carrying babies, changing nappies which society seem to find attractive. Does it mean that the understanding of masculinity is changing?*

Abi: The traditional masculinity is still there. I also wonder if different communities, different parts of the country see it differently. For example, in the cities you quite often see men walking around wearing babies in the baby carriers. Maybe in the traditional rural communities, you do not get that as much. I think it differs depending on where you are.

I also noticed, being a working mum, but also with other mums at academia, if you have children, you do not make a big deal out of it at work, because you show that you can do your work **despite** having kids. I noticed some of the dads I come across are really displaying their fatherhood: “I am a dad today and I am doing this”. The mothers in the workplace for years have gone: “Nope, (children) not affecting me.”

Jo: *Yes, it is out there on social media, when a dad and a mum do the same thing, they get very different response from society. If dad brings the fast food, he is cool, if mum brings the fast food, she is lazy. If you see a crying child with the dad, they say, oh look, he is trying so hard. If you see a child having a tantrum with the mum, people say, oh she obviously cannot manage very well. So, the expectations are very gendered.*

Abi: The whole thing around masculinity is so complex to break down, in and outside of parenting. I find it really patronising that, for example, if you want to talk to men about something health related, then go to the football ground. Well, not every man likes football. I really struggle with these sweeping statements of what is ‘manly’. So many presumptions. Not all men want to talk about football and cars!

Jo: *In your keynote, you were also talking about choice. You discussed your two studies, the social media representation of fatherhood and the interviews with stay-at-home dads. Interestingly, the dads were saying that they chose to stay at home. In the social media it was rarely constructed as their choice.*

Abi: Yes, in the media it was very much put down as purely financial decisions or unemployment.

Jo: *The mancession?*

Abi: Yes. But with the men I interviewed it did appear to be through choice for pretty much all of them. One dad talked in real personal terms about why he became a stay-at-home dad. He had three children and a high-powered job. He was flying around the world all the time and fell ill. He was lying in hospital and thought: “This could be it, why am I not with my family?” It was at that point that he got home and reconsidered everything. He had a big conversation with his wife and said: “I am going to be there and care for the kids.”

Jo: *His illness made him want to do it.*

Abi: Yes, he just did not see the point of working all the time and being away from home. He questioned everything: “Why am I doing this? What am I doing this for?”

Jo: *Is this the new type of masculinity? I remember you also described a dad whose wife or partner suffered from postnatal depression. I really liked that one because it was about partnership and making that decision together. What do **you** think? If only we could shift the meaning of the word ‘parenting’, so it does not mean ‘mothering’ but ‘taking care’.*

Abi: It is ridiculously complex. I am not sure if we could solve this today, but it is something that really does need unpacking. Jane Sunderland in her 2006 paper observed that in most parenting texts, if the word ‘parenting’ is replaced with ‘mothering’, it still makes sense. However, if ‘parenting’ is replaced with ‘fathering’, it makes absolutely no sense at all. I think that is really interesting.

Jo: *I was hoping to ask two more questions. Firstly, reflexivity. Where did stay-at-home dads come from?*

Abi: A lot of people become interested in issues around parenting when they are thinking about becoming parents themselves. This is where the personal does become political. I started to look around parenting from 2003 onwards when I was wanting to become a parent and then I was pregnant at the end of 2003. The idea of caring was of interest during the pregnancy. Working out what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. How do we make all these decisions? From that point, I started questioning the presumption that the mums are automatically the ones that give up work.

I was also very interested in advice given to parents and I am still researching that now. How do parents decide what they are doing? When you are pregnant, how do you decide what to eat, what not to eat, what to drink; issues around feeding. It is very interesting.

Jo: *As an academic and a parent, I find it fascinating.*

*I have recently read Frost’s and Holt’s paper (2014) on researcher’s identity and positionality. Nollaig Frost was a mum and Amanda Holt was not. And they were both researching motherhood. I found their discussion very interesting. How present are **you** in your research?*

Abi: I think we are all present in our work. There is this whole myth of objectivity. We are all present and putting our interpretive lens on it. I think it depends how much you share with

others during interviews. I do not tend to share in interviews unless I feel like I need to. A few years ago, I did lots of interviews on infant feeding. Half the sample had breastfed, half the sample did formula or mixed feeding. The interview criteria were that they had all wanted to breastfeed. Many of the health professionals that I had discussed this with before said that women formula feed because they do not actually want to breastfeed. And I thought it was not quite that simple. In all the eighteen interviews that I conducted, at some point, the participants were trying to suss me out: am I pro breastfeeding? Am I pro formula feeding? Where am I sitting? And so, when it became relevant, I would divulge a little bit, but not until they had already been speaking for a long time and had built some rapport with me. Because I was not coming from a position of pro- one method over another. I have had my own experiences, but those were my own experiences. I do not think that they would determine the way that I see data. This is how I see reflexivity.

Another example, in terms of my fatherhood work. I have been a breadwinning mum and my husband has been a stay-at-home dad. I think that I am very aware of the nuance and complexity in it. We are always there in our data, but it is actually a place of starting to understand the nuance and complexity of the issue, not putting a particular version across. Does that make sense?

Jo: *Absolutely. I love the feminist idea of reflexivity, disclosing who you are, why you are doing this research. And equally, trying the hardest to stay humble and unassuming.*

Abi: The point I have always made with fathering and parenting, and I do get raised eyebrows on this, is that I do not see a huge difference between men and women, the capabilities they have to do things with regards to caregiving. Obviously, breastfeeding is one aspect that mothers do, but every other act can be done by either a mum or a dad. It does not need to be one or the other. I probably am saying that from my own personal setup because my partner is as good as I am. I am probably more organised than him, so I am the diary! My brain is the diary. But the actual hands-on, it does not really sit with one or the other of us anymore. It is whoever is there. We can both just pick up where we are, that complete partnership, and tag team throughout. But I also appreciate that lots of people do not have that.

Jo: *So, what is coming next? Is there a change happening despite the roles still being gendered?*

Abi: I think we have moved back a little bit, actually. My work with stay-at-home dads was before shared parental leave came in. It was like the big, bright new future, the men getting this time, and it has not happened on the ground. The pandemic has really shown that we appear to be moving backwards. There needs to be a bigger conversation as to *why* we are moving backwards on this. The previous big growth in stay-at-home dads was put down to the big global recession. What I do notice about family and policy, our norms and how we are told what to do, is very much reliant on what is happening externally. So, what are the external societal pressures? What are the messages that are being dropped down to us? The pandemic impacted on mothers more than fathers. I think it is probably a wakeup call to us.

Can I just say one final point, I am very aware that this data is heteronormative. I did manage to interview a couple of fathers in gay partnerships. But a lot of this work around parenting is still very heteronormative. There is some fantastic research; Susan Golombok has done lots of work about parenting in the same sex partnerships.

Jo: *You did mention the gay dads in the keynote. Their children had different expectations from the person who stayed at home and from the one who worked. So perhaps the (parenting) roles are gender free but society assign them automatically to mothers and fathers.*

Abi: Yes, it is absolutely fascinating.

Jo: *Unfortunately, we are running out of time. I wish we could go on.*

Abi: We could. Let's continue the chat soon.

Jo: *I would love to.*

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