**Somali Diasporic mothers navigating state sanctioned motherhood in British and American schools.**

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**Abstract**

Recently, researchers are increasingly becoming aware that school-community engagement scholarship needs to consider community-based epistemologies and worldviews. Yet, conceptions of family and community are mainly based on Western understandings, without considering the impact of colonization that continues to undermine the role and experiences of marginalized parents. Drawing on Black feminist thought, African feminist scholarship, and anti-racist literature, we explore the experiences of motherhood in relation to schooling among a group of Somali immigrant mothers in the UK and the US. We examine how the historical construction of motherhood in both African and Western cultures influence Somali mothers’ relationship with their children’s school and community. Our analysis show traditional knowledge on family and community is central to motherhood, with implications for research, educational practice and community engagement, and for Somali community.

Keywords: Motherhood, Somali, African, immigrant mothers, school-community

**Introduction**

Somali immigrant women in Western contexts negotiate many aspects of their identities with both public (education, health, and the labor market) and private (family) institutions. Regardless of class and educational level, African women's experiences of social and family institutions are influenced by colonialism, imperialism, and modernity both in the diaspora (Bokore, 2013; 2016) and in the continent (Oyěwùmí, 2016). For Somali immigrant women, the effect of colonial domination in the diaspora is ever present as they are racialized and gendered in their encounter with Western institutions (Abdi, 2015; Albrecht & Upadhyay, 2018) Yet, we know despite the imposition of raced and gendered identities on African diasporic women, there are embodied conceptions of self and communities that reflect remnants of traditional epistemes and ethos (Nzegwu, 2012). Indigenous African epistemologies, which offer a different worldview of gender relations and dynamics, continue to influence and shape everyday family and community practices, including gender roles and maternal practice that constitute motherhood (Oyěwùmí, 2016).

As raced and gendered subjects in transnational contexts, where family and community ties span across different geographies, identity categories such as woman, mother, Muslim, immigrant, and low income come to the fore as Somali women move between dominant culture, social institutions and that of Somali community in the diaspora. Therefore, Somali women’s navigation of and negotiation with Western institutions as women and as mothers happens at the nexus of these various discourses and epistemic stand points.

In this paper, we center the experiences of motherhood of twelve Somali women of first, second and 1.5 generation immigrants, in two working-class communities. One is in London, the United Kingdom, and the other in a midwestern city in the United States. In particular, we want to understand how Somali women’s own conception of their role as mothers differs between first, and 1.5/second generation in shaping how they relate and negotiate their children’s education in the UK and the US. In the educational literature, current conceptions of school-community relation, which shape the women’s experiences, are mostly based on a Western understanding of family dynamics and organization, even when we consider critical research that seeks to center the voices and experiences of communities of color (Green, 2017; Lo´pez, G. R., Scribner, Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Ishimaru, 2013). If we are to address the persistent marginalization that low income and working-class communities of color experience in school, then we need to center those communities' epistemologies and worldviews in our research and practice. It is our hope that this and similar research will begin to address this gap.

**Theoretical and methodological commitments**

This study utilizes critical phenomenology (CP) as a methodology, which centers “experiences of marginalization, oppression, and power to identify and transform common experiences of injustice that render ‘the familiar’ a site of oppression for many” (Weiss et al., 2019, p. xxxi). Critical phenomenology as a methodology is used by feminist, race, disability, queer, and trans scholars, as it is helpful in exploring and centering the perspectives and the lived experiences of those marginalized.  Specifically, critical phenomenology draws on the phenomenology of race (Fanon, 2008; Weheliye, 2014; Yancey, 2003) and gender (Lugones, 2010).

In this study, we wanted to understand how the historical backdrop (of race, and gender) that contributes to how Somali immigrant women experience motherhood both as an institution, and as an identity, shapes their maternal practice in their encounter with Western educational institutions. In addition, we want to explore how the women experienced motherhood as a living, breathing and adapting phenomenon. But also, motherhood as a concept that has deeper historical and social implications that shape women’s lives in relation with their children, with their communities and with the larger society. This last point speaks to motherhood as a site of competing interests and conflict for some women, but also motherhood as a site of extreme joy and self-actualization for some women, and sometimes within the same woman (Collins, 2005).

**Research Method and Contexts**

**Design and Data Sources**

This research was part of a larger critical phenomenological study that examined the school experiences of Somali parents and students in three European countries, the United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United States. Study is based on focus group methods, which used a semi structured and open-ended questions (2002). It involved focus group discussions, and interviews with twelve immigrant Somali mothers in two schools serving working-class community in the UK, and the US. While the mothers’ experiences differed contextually between the UK and the US, there were some similar themes that run through our data. First, all the mothers in our study shared experiences of marginalization in their children’s schools. Secondly, while the UK group was highly organized in their effort of dealing with school, the mothers in the US were not organized in their responding to school’s oppressive practices. In both contexts, the mothers varied in age, occupation, and immigration status. The initial focus group discussion was semi-structured and was guided by an open-ended question (Johnson, 2002). First focus group discussions lasted around for 2.5 hours (Uk), and 3 hours (US). Each focus group was followed up with subsequent focus group or/and individual interview.

Focus group discussion explored two interconnected and related issues. First, the participants experiences and relationships with the institution of school, as Somali immigrant women of working-class background. Second, how the participants navigated and negotiated motherhood in their families, communities, and in society at large.

**Findings and conclusion**

The mothers’ stories speak to two broader themes that a) reflect the demands and expectations that the state puts on immigrant mothers, and b) demonstrate the collective work mothers engage in their effort to negotiate, navigate, and resist through community building. First, we examine how state sanctioned motherhood is experienced by Somali women of different immigrant generation based on the degree to which they encountered with school. Second, we highlight the various ways that the mothers negotiate different ideologies of motherhood in their relationship with the state, family and their community as it relates to the maternal practice and care they provide for biological and non-biological children in the community.

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