

Normative motherhood, patriarchal motherhood, and intensive mothering: An interview with Andrea O'Reilly

Maternidade normativa, maternidade patriarcal e maternagem intensiva: entrevista com Andrea O'Reilly

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With a Ph.D. in English from York University, Canada, Dr. Andrea O'Reilly is internationally recognized as the founder of Motherhood Studies (2006) and Matricentric Feminism, a feminism for and about mothers (2016). She is a full professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University, founder/editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* and publisher of Demeter Press. She is the co-editor/editor of more than thirty books and author of four monographs.

This interview was conducted online by Maria Collier de Mendonça in March 2026.

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What are the definitions and perceptions of ‘Good’ Motherhood?

O'Reilly: I open my Mothering and Motherhood course at York University by asking students to define good motherhood in culture: What does a good mother look like? What does she do or not do? Students usually comment that good mothers, as portrayed in the media or popular culture more generally, are white, middle class, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, married, and live in a nuclear family with usually one to two children. Such words as “altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, and cheerful” are frequently mentioned. For the students, good mothers put the needs of their children before their own, are available to their children whenever needed, and should the mother work outside the home, her children rather than her career should be at the center of her life. Good mothers are the primary caregivers of their children: care other than that provided by the mother (*e.g.*, daycare) is viewed as inferior and deficient. Children and culture at large do not see mothers as having a life before or beyond motherhood.

However, we know that mothers come from all races and ethnicities, that mothers are both young and old, that mothers are both urban and rural, straight and queer, that many women mother with disabilities, that many mothers are poor or working class, that most mothers work outside the home in paid employment, that social and political activism is a part of many mothers' lives, that women mother older children as well as young children, that some mothers live apart from their children, that many women raise children with whom they have no biological relation, as in adoption and blended families, and finally that all these mothers are good mothers who raise their children with love and care equal to that of the normative and idealized good mother. We also know that normative motherhood, though representative of very few women's lived identities and experiences of mothering, is considered the normal and natural maternal experience. Mothers who, by choice or circumstance, do not fulfill the profile of the good mother — because they are too young or

too old, or they work outside the home or live apart from their children — are deemed bad mothers in need of societal regulation and correction.

How are Motherhood and Mothering defined in Motherhood Studies, and what are the differences between normative and patriarchal motherhood?

O'Reilly: In *Of Woman Born*, Rich (1986, p. 7) distinguishes “between two meanings of motherhood, one super-imposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution — which aims at ensuring that that potential — and all women — shall remain under male control”. For Rich (1986), the term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, whereas the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering and is female-defined and -centered, and potentially empowering to women. In other words, whereas motherhood operates as a patriarchal institution to constrain, regulate, and dominate women and their mothering, mothers’ own experiences of mothering can, nonetheless, be a site of empowerment. Patriarchal motherhood, thus, centers on how mothers and their mothering are defined and controlled by patriarchal culture, whereas normative motherhood expands upon this to consider how the concept of good motherhood is not only derived from patriarchal culture but also formed in and through racism and classism. Under normative motherhood, the good and idealized mother is white and middle-class, and her dichotomous other is the bad and demonized racialized and working-class or poor mother. Thus, racialized and working-class/poor mothers are uniquely and specifically oppressed by the institution of motherhood in its normative constructions along with its patriarchal ones. Judgment, surveillance, and regulation are also central to normative motherhood and are explicitly enforced and enacted in the construction of racialized and poor mothers as de facto bad mothers.

How does Sharon Hays (1996) define the concept of Intensive Mothering?

O'Reilly: Intensive mothering as enacted in normative motherhood is oppressive not because children have needs but because we dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them, that children's needs must always come before those of the mother, and that children's needs must be responded to around the clock and with extensive time, money, and energy. Intensive mothering emerged in the late 1980s in response to changing demographics of motherhood in North America. Today, for the majority of middle-class women, motherhood is embarked upon only after a career is established and when the woman is in her thirties. Often, these professionals, who are unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable with the devalued, invisible work of mothering and domesticity, fill their days with public activities that can be documented as productive and visible work. And when these professional women return to their careers, intensive mothering, as practiced in the evenings and on weekends, is the way a working mother, consciously or otherwise, compensates for her time away from her children and addresses the ambivalence and guilt she may feel about working. Intensive mothering's emphasis on enrichment — toys, books, games activities, programs, camps, holidays, theatre — has also emerged in response to mothers earning an income of their own and having a say in how household money is spent. Mothers today are having fewer children, which makes intensive mothering possible. They can devote all their time and attention to one or two beloved children. Whatever the economic or social explanation may be, the ideology of intensive mothering measures good mothering in accordance with the amount of time, money, and energy a mother spends on childrearing.

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