

Maternal Objectification: An Argument for Expanding Objectification Theory



We aim to:

1. Describe the concept of maternal objectification and the literature that illustrates this phenomenon.
2. Explain why maternal objectification needs to be further developed beyond what is currently written.
3. Explain why objectification theory should be expanded to include maternal objectification.

Maternal objectification (MO) highlights the societal subjugation of women and the tendency to reduce them to maternal objects, evaluated primarily on their adherence to gender roles, sexuality, and parenting practices. Our review of the literature identified four primary elements of this phenomenon:

Biological Essentialism: Mothering is seen as innate and natural for women



- Women are seen to naturally possess traits that make them better at childcare, e.g. warmth, nurturance, empathy, selflessness (Chrisler, et al., 2013, Fiske et al., 2002). Motherhood is thought to amplify these traits even further (Russo, 1976).
- Because the gender binary views men and women as entirely different, men are seen as naturally lacking these same qualities, leaving them to be perceived as inept at childcare in general, especially compared to women (Gaunt & Pinho, 2017).

What about... How biological essentialism of MO is also racist? And how does the biologism within maternal objectification impact queer women/femmes and trans/non-binary people?

False Tropes: Womens' role is in relation to sexual and reproductive needs of men



- MO relies on the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy (MWD) to illustrate women as for the sexual gratification of men and for procreation with men, two mutually exclusive but equally objectified categories (Neff, 2021).
- Motherhood is seen as the primary identity and other identities are erased, leading to desexualization and limits on non-maternal aspects of oneself (Laney, 2015; Krane, 2007).

What about... BIPOC mothers, who are always seen as their race first? How do false tropes show up for BIPOC women? And for queer women/femmes and trans/non-binary people?

Ambivalent Sexism: Motherhood is glorified but the woman remains subordinate



- Pursuing motherhood is seen as approaching an ideal gender identity for women (Russo, 1976).
- Dominant mothering ideologies divide mothers into "good" or "bad" and prescribe what it takes to be the "best" mom (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Chae, 2014).
- Not conforming to the motherhood norm or dominant mothering ideologies invites hostile sexism beyond that of other gender-norm violations (Szekeres et al., 2023).

What about... Marginalized mothers, how are they included and left out of these dominant mothering ideologies? How does competition between mothers reflect neoliberal principles/values?

Agency: Motherhood strips away agentic attributes and augments passive ones



- Becoming a mother is seen to further reduce agentic traits men are seen to naturally possess, e.g. leadership, competency/intelligence outside of domestic (Neff, 2021).
- Intensive mothering requires mothers to be willingly boundary-less, self-sacrificing, and all consumed by mothering (Hays, 1996).

What about... The role that parenting/medical experts play in diminishing authority/agency of mothers? What happens when a mother is "too agentic?" How are mothers similar to other adults who have restricted agency?