

Chapter 3

The High Bar: Using Storytelling to Define a Childless Mother's Identity

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ABSTRACT

This article utilizes storytelling through the use of vignettes to share the experiences of an administrator subjected to disrespect and the condescending nature of mainly students' mothers because she did not give birth to a living child. This author shares her personal story of experiencing motherhood at each phase of a child's life from birth to adulthood. Motherhood experiences occur through nieces, students, teachers, co-administrators, and neighborhood youth. Historically, the term assigned for a woman with no children is childless, barren, nullipara, voluntarily childless, and intentionally childless. I chose to coin the term mar-maternal for those women who did not choose not birth a living child but were still able to be a mother to others who needed motherly love. The paper explains the origin of the term and concludes with my reflections on a lifetime of being called various versions of "mother" and the memories attached.

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THE HIGH BAR: USING STORYTELLING TO DEFINE A CHILDLESS MOTHER'S IDENTITY

“If you don’t have children of your own, then you have no idea what I’m going through.” That parent might as well have slapped me in the face. As an administrator over the years, the various principals I worked under often called upon me to manage the more difficult parents. I was able to make connections with parents to have a civilized conversation and agree upon a resolution that the parents would be pleased with and that the campus could agree on. In the name of peace and tranquility, I felt compelled to lie when asked if I had children. Without hesitation, I would provide an anecdote leading them to believe the answer was “yes.” I convinced myself that if I never used the word “yes,” I was not lying. Depending on the situation, my nieces either became my two daughters or the young men who stayed in my back bedrooms for a short time became my two sons. I had a story for every situation thrown my way. Reflecting upon my need to lie and allude to children as my own, I am reminded of the power of storytelling to delve deeper into understanding my identity as an educator and a woman unable to bear children of her own. My career decisions were mine and I have no regrets, thus I wish other female educators unable to bear children of their own would understand that their identity was theirs to create for themselves.

IDENTITY THEORY

Examining a person’s identity requires understanding the various defined identity theories that contribute to one’s identity. The broader literature of identity theory focuses on possible selves theory and the ideal self. Possible selves theory was introduced in 1986 by Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius in an article entitled *Possible Selves*. They define possible selves as representing:

individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation. Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats, and they give the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics (p. 954).

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