

Analysis of Parenthood:
The Difference between Mothering and Fathering

What do we know about the parenting roles of mothers and fathers? Traditionally, mothers have been the primary caretakers of children. Fathers have conventionally been cast as the breadwinners who provide for the child's material needs but are not involved in daily care. The traditional roles have been challenged as mothers of young children have entered the labor force and taken on the provider role. Fathers have been urged to become more involved and active in their children's upbringing. We as a society continue to think of families in traditional terms and to assume that households that differ from the "normal" two-biological-parent model generate problems for their members. The assumption that families should conform to the "man as provider, woman as nurturer" model has been somewhat devalued as time goes by, or as I like to think, as women have become stronger and more independent. Furthermore, suggested aspects of psychosocial development are hypothesized as deeming it 'naturally' challenging for men to mother.

From a psychoanalytical standpoint, the reason that women are mothers is because they are anatomically female. Freud presumed that the notion of motherhood rests solely on a foundation of anatomy and desire. He assumed a biological determinism of the natures of men and women, asserting the likely development of a young girl toward femininity and the wish to have a baby (based on the universal superiority of the penis). In a less essentialist understanding, Nancy Chodorow utilizes an object relations structure to examine the reasoning behind mothering. She deals with processes of identification and internalization, and frames her arguments around a gender model of heterosexuality in a two-parent nuclear family. In this middle-class nuclear family, traditionally feminine mothers give birth to and care for the children who are fathered by traditionally nonnurturant masculine men. Schwartz (1994) notes that within an object relations realm of thinking, the emphasis is on the power and manipulative influence of early caretaking dyads, which are not necessarily gender-specific. In these dyads, internalizations evolve that are dependent on the convergence of mothering styles and the needs of the children. Other object relations theorists examine the differences between 'mothering'

and ‘fathering’ on the basis of the parenting work that is done by each caregiver. According to Winnicott, the mother cares for the children, while the father cares for the mother by protecting her. He does not emphasize issues of gender or sexual difference. A more recent critique of the construction of mothering and fathering suggests that the classification of ‘mother’ is a created subject based on a category of gender. This is a suggestion that motherhood is a matter of relation. The very indication of motherhood with women becomes obliterated here, as the term ‘mother’ might “signify a feminine male body or a masculine one just as it might signify a feminine female body or a masculine female body” (Schwartz, 1994). Yet another view concerning this issue supports the concept of mothering as work that transcends gender. Under this light, a mother is a person who takes on all necessary obligations for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a considerable part of her or his working life. This position urges that mothering is potentially work for men *and* women; in turn, the concept of fathering is not an important or relevant issue to be considered. It has also been suggested that the very difference between mothering and fathering work lies in the subjective experience of the individual parent (Schwartz, 1994). In other words, males and females may have unique mothering styles, and the differences between them might surpass or unite with individual differences; but, being a mother is a *subjective experience* rather than an objective category of classification.

From a traditional viewpoint, many people think of women as naturally nurturant, who possess a built-in instinct for mothering. The emphasis on “innate maternal instinct” and a “natural maternal need” place strict defining barriers to the mothering role. Thus, the instinct has provided a foundation for female caregiving behavior, leading many to see motherhood as a woman’s most important function in life. Motherhood is assumed to be a woman’s calling, and a woman’s significance is appraised by her devotion to her role as wife and mother. The “motherhood mystique” is portrayed as a collection of romanticized feelings about motherhood that has influenced women to feel

blameworthy or inadequate if they decide against having children or if they do not devote themselves completely to their children. It tells us that women are “naturally” good at parenting (even though facts tell us that most women are not well prepared for child care). This mystique insinuates that only by having a child is a woman able to achieve the definitive meaning in her life. It also encourages them to feel guilty if they find motherhood uninteresting or if they try to combine the job of mothering with their other goals. This myth has paved the way for the institution of motherhood, or “the set of social prescriptions and norms that limit women’s choices and shape their experience of motherhood” (Lips 2005). In our society, this institution of motherhood has established that mothers are understood to have primary responsibility for children, and in turn are expected to experience nothing but accomplishment as they live out this role. A similar traditional viewpoint recognizes that a man’s duty to his family is best served by his success in the job market and his capability as a wage earner to support his wife and children. In the same light, men are seen as substandard parents who are typically less involved with their children and lack adequate child care participation. The amount of time that fathers spend with their children is significantly less than the time mothers devote to parenting. Furthermore, fathers are more likely to be engaged recreationally with the children, and mothers are more likely to be feeding, changing, dressing, or bathing them. Fathers who are secure in their role as breadwinners generally do not worry about the impact of their absence or relative lack of involvement in the upbringing of their offspring.

Feminists, who have seriously criticized the traditional family, reject the basic notions of mothering and fathering. From this perspective, women are seen as deprived of autonomy, and the biological family is basic to women’s oppression. “For women to be free within a reconstituted nonbiological family, they must reject their biologically given childbearing role” (Cohen & Katzenstein, 1988). This assumes that women must reject mothering as it traditionally relates to fathering, and restructure motherhood to be free of all relics of patriarchal control. Feminists accept

the notion of biology, but react to it in a way as to preserve women's autonomy. Their visions of the family are far more diverse than the vision that is idealized by traditionalists.

From an economical point of view, relationships between parents and their children are seen as being conditioned by gender-role ideology and the power differences between women and men. Gender differences in parental behavior can be partially understood with reference to learned social roles, social expectations, and access to power. Through the socialization process, female's attachment to children is strengthened as the male's attachment is minimized; the feminine and masculine directly influence the responsiveness that each parent gives to the young. The social arrangements that support these traditionally feminine and masculine roles make it difficult for parents to equally distribute caregiving responsibilities. For social scientists, it is assumed that the difference between mothering and fathering doesn't lie in biology, in lies in the position to enforce preference (Polatnick, 1982). Full-time childrearing responsibility restricts one's capacity to participate in most other activities. A childrearer cannot be the family breadwinner. This is the job that men prefer as their primary family responsibility (*their* definition of fathering), as it offers important power advantages over the home-based childrearing responsibility. At most, for the proper "masculine" upbringing of boys, the father is the 'strong male role model' who is not too actively involved in childrearing. It is supposed that a child whose father performs the mothering functions may easily adopt a distorted image of masculinity and femininity. Respectively, since it is *because* women are 'most interested' in children, they must make most of the adjustments and sacrifices required to raise them. Therefore, fatherhood is less important to men than motherhood is to women because childrearing causes severe limitations on the childrearer's activities. The "on hand" nature of mothering responsibility restricts any kind of sustained obligations to other activities. To the extent that breadwinning attains money and family power, economic responsibility is preferable as "fathering", in power terms, to "mothering"

responsibility. Mothers are obliged to subordinate their personal objectives and practice selfless mothering behavior when it comes to the family.

There are aspects of psychosocial development that make it challenging for men to mother. From a gynocentric perspective, Chodorow (1989) suggests that mothering is the outcome of a developmental process in which major features of social organization of gender are transferred by families through parents who are themselves gendered. She rejects the mothering instinct, and accepts that it is a socialization and learning process (even though task performance is not substantial or effective in mothering). The core of Chodorow's argument rests on the notion of primary love. Primary love is the primary identification with person(s) who provides emotional support, satisfaction and attention. Women want to mother because they are raised by women; a woman can re-establish the emotional fulfillment from her relationship with her mother by having a baby. Men can't mother because they are raised by women. It was the primary love for his mother that spawned his "unableness" to mother. A little boy has to completely disown his first love – his mother (this is the worst heartbreak he will ever know); consequently, he disidentifies himself from her. The disidentification with female identification in which he had to undergo – to disidentify with his mother and reidentify with his father – forced him to deny, repress, refuse, and reject all aspects of femininity. In turn, from that point forward, males cannot 'get in touch' with their feminine sides because it is so psychologically damaging. Since all feminine qualities are suppressed, the basic caregiving functions (which require some feminine qualities) cannot be performed by men. Men themselves, because of their own development and socialization, develop while rejecting their own and other's needs for love, care, and compassion. Thus, the masculine personality which women's mothering produces causes the emotional inferiority of men to women, which further suggests why it is difficult for men to mother.

Supplementing Chodorow's emphasis on disidentification, Hudson (1991) notes that it is this task that accounts for the problems from which the adult male suffers. A subsequent act is postulated,

counter-identification, which is independent of disidentification and allows a boy to completely identify with his father. The disidentification determines the boy's separateness, and the counter-identification confirms his maleness. "It is these two developmental processes in combination which we call the male wound" (Hudson, 1991). Supposedly, the direct consequences of the wound will inherently be stable across a male's lifespan, which indicates that he will never be capable of re-identifying with the feminineness needed to be a caregiving 'mother'. His permanent identification with maleness and masculinity will make him resistant to changes in patterns of child-raising and family life. In other words, he will always be the secondary, insensitive parent. So, it is revealed by these two theorists specifically that the patterns of unbalanced parenting reproduce women who mother and men who do not because the men have repressed the relational-nurturant aspects of themselves that are female identified.

Yet another viewpoint, which is more biologically supportive and traditionalist in nature, about the difficultness of mothering for men is introduced by an essentialist belief. In this examination, biological sex differences create gender differences in parenting. The natural experiences of pregnancy produce a strong, instinctual drive in women to nurture. In the lack of these experiences, men do not have an instinctual drive to nurture infants and children. Essentialists suggest that because a man's involvement in reproduction is restricted to the moment of conception, active and reliable parenting on the part of men is generally difficult to achieve.

It is complicated for me to find a clear-cut point of agreement or disagreement. There are aspects of every idea that I have presented in which I have somewhat the same opinion or oppose. But my oppositions and agreements are based on my personal feelings as a growing, developing woman and individual. I am whole-heartedly against the presently idealized, socially driven institution of motherhood. The responsibility of powerlessness in this institution is a heavier burden than providing a living for oneself, which is to be done simultaneous to mothering. I get angry at the mere thought

that a female's very character and status as a woman are questioned when she decides against the traditional ways of mothering, or when deciding not to mother at all. I agree with the fact that parents in nontraditional families sometimes try harder to develop the appropriate skills of mothering and fathering. I decline ideas of the 'motherhood mystique' and an 'inborn maternal instinct' as they, to me, are only excuses that women fall back on as they submit to men in parental arrangements, giving way to male dominance in our current patriarchal society. I do not think we are born with that "innate" yearning to mother; if I am wrong, then I am defective, because I - as a woman - do not have it. The feelings of guilt that women are subject to, just because they want a career - or an education - or a life aside from the family, instill very ill feelings about the notions of motherhood in me altogether. I agree with Chodorow's emphasis on the psychosocial developments that impede men's ability to mother; but I also agree with Polatnick (1983) in the assertion that men don't rear children because they do not *want* to rear children. It is to men's benefit that women are assigned childrearing responsibility in today's society (not to mention in their best interest to keep it that way). When faced with the questions "Will mothering get you ahead in the world?" and "Does it even get you power in the family?" I am not hesitant to scream No! In my mind, mothering gets you nowhere - it gets you no money - it gets you no power, not within a family, or a job, or anywhere else one might seek it. In our culture, mothering is not important, yet women everywhere want to do it. It takes a profound and sustained vigilance to care for a child all day, every day; of course, women are the only capable one's for this job, but why would anyone want that for themselves knowing they are in the 'parenthood rollercoaster' alone?

For a minimization in the differences between 'fathering' and 'mothering' women must call for a redefinition of fathering and a reconstruction of the masculine role. Fathering needs to come to imply nurturing as well as providing. If connection with others became part of the gender role for men, masculinity would become less oppressive for men as well as for women. Parenting would

become less oppressive for women as well. Obviously, the differences in the meanings of the mothering role and fathering role are dispersed and vary greatly depending on whose meaning is being referred to.

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