

Jocalyn P. Clark and Camillia G. Clark

Studying and Sharing Mother and Daughter Learn Academia

An earliest memory for me was my mom's convocation day when she graduated with her master's degree in psychology from the University of Regina. It was a celebratory occasion. I still have a picture in my mind of the excitement in her eyes and the glow of her cheeks, a memory secured by a photograph taken of my mom and me and my younger sister on that special day. At the time I did not fully appreciate the significance of convocation as a culmination of years and years of her hard work, completed while also raising two small children during a time when others were enjoying the freedom of their early twenties. Nor did I anticipate that the completion of my own master's degree, and the subsequent pursuit of doctoral degrees for both of us, would find us at a place where we would be sharing a similar journey through academia, although at very different life stages.

The mother-daughter relationship is complicated, unique, and often emotionally charged (Basoff, 1988; La Sorsa and Fodor, 1990; Smith and Smith-Blackner, 1981). While it is considered to be one of the strongest bonds throughout life, most literature refers to the influence that the mother has on her daughter. Very little has been written about the daughter's influence on her mother's emotional and psychological development and even less has been discussed regarding the process between a mother and daughter when they enter academic studies at similar times. This article describes some of the dialogue undertaken between a mother and daughter who have begun to share their similar and different experiences in academia. Although twenty years apart in age, we have found an important source of support in the mother-daughter relationship as both the challenges and successes of our academic studies are shared.

We each knew that we were well-suited to academic careers. Both of us

have long recognized our curiosities about the world of ideas and our desires to be continually challenged, for which academia seemed a desirable profession. Friends and family had often commented on our aptitudes for living the “student life.” But we have also maintained very different lifestyles, each with its own constraints and opportunities to pursue our individual goals. The generational and socioeconomic gaps allowed one of us virtually unrestricted freedom to embark on academic endeavours, while the other faced financial obstacles and a social and cultural environment with more traditional expectations of women. While one of us grew up in an environment consisting of a mother who combined professional activities with marriage and family, the other grew up with few examples of women academics, and many fewer role models that successfully combined higher education with motherhood. Most striking is the similarity of our experiences now, pursuing graduate degrees, in different countries but in similar fields, with different life constraints but similar aspirations, and beginning to recognize that because of this experience we are connected in ways that are profound, endearing, and sustaining.

The daughter of us cares deeply about her academic study. It’s undeniably a most central aspect of her self-identity, provoking her with constant challenges and new goals and providing opportunities to build knowledge. Acquiring knowledge is seen as the means to secure an independent and stable future in an increasingly tumultuous and competitive economic environment. Learning and understanding others’ diverse experiences also forms the basis for her political action. The mother of us too cares deeply about academics. The desire to complete her doctorate has been a life long goal which encompasses her needs for achievement and personal success. The difference however, is that she has a husband and children about whom she also cares deeply. For mother, social and cultural influences prepared her for the roles of wife and mother but not as much for student. Expectations that one would get married were very clear and although she was an excellent student with marks well suited for university, she considered her future in terms of marriage and family, with much less emphasis on academics and career. For the daughter, the expectations were very different, in fact quite opposite. Emphasizing independence and individuality, pursuing higher education was consistent with the expectation of putting off family until a career was established. Although combining career and motherhood has become increasingly normative for Canadian women, the demands of this double duty lifestyle were seen as compromising to a successful academic career and avoiding these challenges was promoted as a choice the daughter was fortunate to make. While as mother and daughter we were nurtured by very different values that influenced our choices of career, working in academia has presented each of us with similar challenges for which we have both needed support. Our sources of support over the years have also reflected what was previously seen as divergent experience, but has culminated in a recognition of ourselves as role models to each other and as valuable sources of mentorship and encouragement.

Pursuing her academic goals, the daughter of us had many woman role models and teachers. Increasing numbers of women in a traditionally male-dominated setting provided camaraderie and shared experience that enabled her to build confidence in her goals and abilities. She pursued a feminist-oriented academic study that exposed her to a critical analysis of women's experiences in academia and how those experiences differ for diverse groups of women. While she learned to expect a variety of obstacles and struggles as a result of being a woman, her academic studies and involvement with women's organizations gave her valuable support and guidance. She also had financial support from her parents that her mother never had. On the other hand, she has lived many miles from all her family since she began university at the age of seventeen. Living apart from family supports required her to develop considerable independence and self-sufficiency that has at times been very challenging. She learned to draw support largely from friends from school, many of whom continue to study and provide encouragement. The academic environment has been a special place to build friendship and solidarity but its emphasis on achievement and competition continues to isolate and at times overwhelm her.

Mom had a different set of supports and encouragement. Her encouragement to pursue academics came first from a single mother who wanted her daughter to have opportunities that she did not have. A university education meant new opportunities and a "career," although the type of career was not identified in any way except to suggest that the humanities rather than science was an appropriate education to pursue. No other women in the family had accomplished a university education, thus most of the role models available were of women as wives and mothers. Introducing the idea of pursuing academic studies and having children was new and viewed skeptically. However, hard work and resilience characterized women of her extended family who had laboured to make a living in the Canadian prairies. Combined with the feminism of the 1970s and 80s that promoted women's equal access to academic opportunities, the hard work and determination served mother well in pursuing her goals. She came to rely on support from other women, especially academic and professional colleagues. Feminist organizations and groups also became strong influences and provided a sounding board for finding ways to balance career and family responsibilities.

Mother's recent return to academia and her experiences and struggles during this time have provided the impetus for our sharing. We have begun a dialogue that points out similarities in our endeavours for knowledge, achievement, and academic success, a dialogue that has culminated in recognition of opportunities to support each other in our academic experiences. Much of this has derived from what we have come to know is a demanding and at times unrelenting work environment; the demands of academia seeming especially evident since we are women. For mom the process of returning to school after many years in professional practice was particularly daunting. But the daugh-

ter's years of university training has provided valuable experience on which the mother can draw for support.

One of mom's struggles involved having to write an aptitude-type exam designed for undergraduate students. She studied and prepared for the GRE in order to be considered for doctoral programs resentful that she had to take an undergraduate exam after years of clinical practice. The day that she received the results, a phone call from her daughter helped her deal with what was in her mind a failed attempt. She was extremely disappointed with the just average results and was devastated that this reflected her abilities and readiness to do doctoral studies. Having a daughter to provide support helped her put these results in perspective, including owning her own competencies and skills in spite of this external evaluation. She was quickly reassured that an aptitude test was not indicative of her abilities and that years of experience and knowledge would hold her well in academic pursuits. In turn, the daughter was given an important opportunity to offer reassurance and support that mirrored endless times her mother had provided encouragement over the many years of her schooling.

The tremendous support we have begun to recognize from each other is important because it both enriches our individual experiences in academia and reinforces the influence we can have on each other. The commonality of graduate studies provides the backdrop for our mother-daughter relationship to develop in new ways. In spite of the different social and cultural influences that have shaped our journeys through academia, the similarities of our experiences soften the demands and struggles along the way. An important element of our reciprocal support is the reminder we can offer to each other that each is competent, capable, and fully adequate. Besides providing emotional support and reassurance when a competency is challenged, our mother-daughter support continues in the form of discussing shared reading, editing each other's papers, and giving gifts of journals and books.

Our experiences in academia represent a parallel process, that is two women in a family, at different life stages, experiencing a similar developmental process. From a feminist perspective, the developmental process is one of self-definition. The reciprocal support promotes self-definition within our relationship as well as strengthening the relationship bond. The relationship process is akin to "relationship-differentiation," which viewed from the perspective of the "self-in-relation" model, emphasizes attachment and connection rather than separation as the basis for self-experience in female development (Jordan and Surrey, 1986). Differentiation is seen as a dynamic process of growth within the relationship rather than the more psychoanalytic perspective of separation- individuation which implies separation from the relationship. Our current experience of shared academia has allowed us to develop our relationship in a supportive, reciprocal way, consistent with this feminist perspective of self-development in a relational context.

We continue to pursue our academic goals, enjoying both the successes and

challenges of our studies, and the mutual mentoring and modeling that has developed through studying and sharing. Our current dialogue illustrates the possibilities for mothers and daughters in academic environments. It has truly been an enriching experience for both personal and relationship development for this mother and daughter.

References

- Bassoff, E. 1988. *Mothers and Daughters: Loving and Letting Go*. New York: New American Library.
- Jordan, J. V., and J. L. Surrey. 1986. "The Self-in-Relation: Empathy and the Mother-Daughter Relationship." *The Psychology of Today's Woman: New Psychoanalytic Visions*. Eds. Bernay and D. Cantor. Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press. 81-104
- La Sorsa, V. A., and I. G. Fodor. 1990. "Adolescent Daughter/Midlife Mother Dyad: A New Look at Separation and Self-Definition." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 14: 593-606.
- Smith, M. O., and D. Smith-Blackner. 1981. "The Mother-Daughter Relationship: A Dialogue Continued." *Clinical Social Work Journal* 9(1): 57-68.