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Motherhood and Management

Motherhood is a perpetual topic of public discussion in the United States. From the colonial period, when the duty of the Republican mother to raise sons fit to serve the state was stressed, to the nineteenth century, when women claimed their moral prerogative as mothers gave them the right to advocate for abolition and suffrage, the way mothers do their job has frequently been linked to the state of the nation, and everyone feels free to weigh in on the topic. Occasionally, however, the mothers respond, as in the nineteenth century, daring to suggest that, rather than conform to social needs and expectations, society should conform to maternal needs and expectations. This is demonstrated beautifully in Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1986 [1852]) abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. At one point, the fugitive slave Eliza and her son stop over in a Quaker settlement, governed benignly by Rachel:

“Mother” was up betimes, and surrounded by busy girls and boys ... who all moved obediently to Rachel's gentle “Thee had better,” or more gently “Hadn't the better?” in the work of getting breakfast; for a breakfast in the luxurious valleys of Indiana is a thing complicated and multiform, and, like picking up the rose-leaves and trimming the bushes in Paradise, asking other hands than those of the original mother.... Bards have written of the cestus of Venus, that turned the heads of all the world in successive generations. We had rather, for our part, have the cestus of Rachel Halliday, that kept heads from being turned, and made everything go on harmoniously. We think it is more suited to our modern days, decidedly. (222-223)

This passage is widely regarded as Stowe's model of how a society should

be governed: according to maternal principles. Rachel Halliday's calming presence, gentle methods of influence, and delegation, serve to promote individual well-being in the context of the communal good.

Today, as women become a fixture in the workplace, a workplace that moved away from the home during the Industrial Revolution, the question of motherhood is being rephrased: how can women be mothers and workers at the same time? Ann Crittenden's *The Price of Motherhood* (2001) speaks eloquently of the economic factors disadvantaging mothers, inside and outside of the home. Popular culture devotes a great deal of time to telling women that they cannot have it all, or even, it seems, much of "it;" this usually falls under the category of "debunking the superwoman myth."¹ Most of the popular books that deal with motherhood and work regard the two as in conflict; some authors, like Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2002) in *Creating a Life*, bemoan the choices many women have made (she is particularly troubled that women often postpone childbearing, or, sometimes have no children at all). Most popular books, however, bear titles like, *It's Not the Glass Ceiling, It's the Sticky Floor* (Engberg, 1999), and warn women about the difficulties of combining work and family, but also offer a modicum of hope—it may be difficult, but women do seem to be able to combine these two parts of life.

The optimism of popular reading is countered by scholarly research in the realm of business and management, which is pretty grim regarding the likelihood that a woman will be able to combine motherhood and management roles. Indeed, motherhood and paid work are often regarded as downright incompatible. As explained by Rita Mae Kelly (1997), "Women have been expected to fit in to the male model of work" (153), which does not accommodate involvement with one's children. Statistics indicate that, in 1999, although 71 percent of mothers (with children younger than 18) work, "60 percent of top women executives have no children, while only 5 percent of men in top management are childless." (Crampton and Mishra, 1999: para 12). Susan Wells (2001) observes that difficulty reconciling work/life issues has reduced the number of women in leadership roles, and even resulted in some women leaving such positions (paras 1-3). Clearly, many working women have gotten the societal message about motherhood and work, not to mention management: they don't mix.

Other writers focus on the ways that work can be made more family-friendly. Rather than stress the changes each individual woman must make, some suggest that perhaps society, or the way we work, ought to change, going so far as to suggest that such a change might benefit men as well. This is the implication of Crittenden's (2001) work, and of much of what one reads in *Working Mother* magazine, which compiles its own annual 100 list, judging companies based on issues like flexible scheduling, women's advancement, and leave time for new parents ("Making It: How We Choose the 100 Best Companies for Working Mothers," 2002: 64). Jayne Buxton's (1998) *Ending the Mother War: Starting the Workplace Revolution* simultaneously debunks

myths (particularly the Earth Mother myth) and argues for the creation of family-friendly workplaces. Although Jane White derides women who struggle to reconcile their work and home duties, insisting that the problem is that “most working mothers don’t earn enough to afford... live-in nannies, carry our meals, and cleaning services that that would ease their workload on the ‘second shift’” (9), she calls for wage parity rather than day care availability.

Scholarship in the field of business tends to focus on the same conflict between motherhood and management that is prominent in the popular literature, delineating the ways in which motherhood prevents women from advancement, as Veronica Nieva (1985) does in “Work and Family Linkages”:

Because women still tend to retain major responsibilities for the home whether they are employed or not, it is inevitable that home and family factors affect whether women decide to work, the jobs women take, the satisfaction they receive from working, their salary, and a host of other job-related behaviors and attitudes.... Many ‘women’s jobs’ can be characterized as having the same service components as the wife and mother roles, and have been seen as extensions of women’s primary home roles of providing nurture and support. (171-172)

Alternately, some scholars are concerned with the feasibility of various methods of accommodating business and family concerns, including corporate involvement, social programs, and increasing the husband’s share of work in the “second shift” of housework and child care. Janet Chafetz (1997) addresses these concerns in her “I Need a (Traditional) Wife!': Employment-Family Conflicts,” endorsing such varied innovations as flex-time and telecommuting (120-121), suggesting improvements to family leave laws (121), proposing that pediatricians establish evening office hours (122), and “begin(ning) to take men’s domestic and familial responsibilities as seriously as women’s” (121).

Sally Helgesen (1995), in her landmark work, *The Female Advantage: Women’s Ways of Leadership*, approaches the problem of motherhood from a managerial perspective:

Increasingly, motherhood is being recognized as an excellent school for managers, demanding many of the same skills: organization, pacing, the balancing of conflicting claims, teaching, guiding, leading, monitoring, handling disturbances, imparting information.... As Barbara Grogan put it, “If you can figure out which one gets the gumdrop, the four-year-old or the six-year-old, you can negotiate any contract in the world.” (31-32).

Helgesen (1995) is far less concerned with weighing the conflicting claims of motherhood and work, but in how the experience of motherhood prepares one for managerial work. What skills are required for both roles? To what

extent do they overlap? Are mothers indeed uniquely prepared for management roles?

This interesting and unique perspective—that motherhood is management—could be usefully applied to issues regarding the conflict between the two roles. If motherhood is regarded as a form of management, then a woman who takes a six-week childbearing leave or even goes “off-track” for a few years to attend to pre-school children might be regarded, not as “atrophied” (Crittenden, 2001: 6), but as entering a particular type of management training program. Indeed, the converse phrasing—management is motherhood—could lead to wider acceptance of programs designed to help employment and family co-exist. If management is motherhood, then flex-time and childcare options seem less objectionable. Perhaps motherhood ought not to be regarded as a managerial liability; rather, it is a positive and useful phase of a woman’s working life.

In addition, regarding management and motherhood as consisting of complementary skill sets can smooth over some of the anxiety associated with the ideas of “masculine” and “feminine” management styles. Most scholarship in leadership studies seems not to be clear on the distinction between sex and gender and to rely upon culturally-constructed notions of what women, in particular, are like.² The Bem Sex-Role Survey, for example, purports to determine the masculinity, femininity, or androgyny of one’s leadership style by determining the degree to which one identifies with adjectives like “Cheerful... Loyal... Sensitive to the needs of others... Gullible” or “Defends own beliefs... Assertive... Analytical.... Willing to take a stand” (Pierce and Newstrom, 2003: 99). The first set of adjectives is associated with the feminine sex; the second, with the masculine sex. Clearly, considering the issue as a set of behaviors useful in the performance of these two jobs can help avoid some of the problems that arise from more essentializing approaches. There are, indeed, many practical and philosophical reasons to pursue Helgesen’s (1995) interesting comparison.

Unfortunately, the most important ingredient of such a study—a practical model of motherhood—appears to be unavailable in the scholarly literature. Popular literature is certainly full of books and magazines that scold mothers, idealize mothers, and advise mothers, but there is very little literature available that simply describes what it is that mothers do. Perhaps this seems too simple, too obvious, or too insignificant a topic to merit research; some, however, would argue that the traditional invisibility of women’s work is a more plausible explanation for the lack of such scholarship (Crittenden, 2001: 2). The “selective inattention to the trivia of work and everyday life” (Jacobs, 1994: 21) prevalent in academia has resulted in the neglect of many aspects of experience. Clearly, the project at hand would be greatly aided by such focused scholarship, but there is not even a companion piece to Judy Syfer’s (2003) famous “Why I Want a Wife” essay. This is not to say that the universities have been completely silent on the topic of motherhood. In her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as*

Experience and Institution, Adrienne Rich (1986) tries to distinguish between the way motherhood is constructed by social forces and the way motherhood is lived out by individual women. Rich, however astute her observations and perceptive her analysis, is a poet, not a social scientist, and her work is aimed at helping individual women sort out their own experiences of motherhood; it does not provide a working model that will be helpful in this study. On the other hand, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's (1999) *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species* investigates the motivations behind maternal behaviour (frequently regarded as "instinctive") from the point of view of an evolutionary psychologist, influenced by John Bowlby's "attachment theory," which posits that "babies are genetically programmed to seek and form an attachment to a trusted figure ... (which) is an essential aspect of emotional development in humans" (cited in Hrdy: xiii). Hrdy's scientific perspective enables her to regard the elements of motherhood with some detachment: "The fact that most of us equate maternity with charity and self-sacrifice, rather than with the innumerable things a mother does to make sure some of her offspring grow up alive and well, tells us a great deal about how conflicting interests between fathers and mothers have played out..." (12). Those "innumerable things a mother does" are the tasks that befit her for management.

Beyond the most essential biological tasks of conceiving, gestating, birthing, and lactating, Hrdy (1999) postulates a variety of "Maternal Effects" (69) based on research among animals and humans.³ Among them, she suggests that mothers "can facilitate or impede adaptation to new conditions" (70), communicate information to children (76), provide the young with resources (80), develop the offspring's social environment (80), schemingly maneuver to promote the careers of their children (84), rely upon the assistance of allomothers (supportive colleagues) to raise their young (91), and demonstrate concern for the infant's well-being (95). As she argues that "competitiveness, status-striving, and ambition" are compatible with motherhood (110), Hrdy enters the fray on the question of how mothers combine their work and family roles. Although she concedes that women's status-seeking has become separated from their child-rearing (112), she acknowledges that maternal ambition is a powerful force to be contended with, and that modern women are finding new ways to deal with problems that have been dealt with before in our history as a race (and, she would argue, by humanity's evolutionary forebearers). Foraging women in tribal societies, for example, have had to balance the demands of child care and foraging—certainly toting a suckling child for several years can impede one's ability to forage efficiently (100-101, 109). Hrdy expresses the situation in evolutionary terms:

...each of us constantly makes myriad small decisions on a daily basis that in ancestral environments would have been correlated with reproductive success. Like it or not, each of us lives with the emotional legacy and decision-making equipment of mothers who acted so as to

ensure that at least one offspring survived to reproduce. Prudent allocation of reproductive effort and the construction of an advantageous social niche in which her offspring could survive and prosper was linked to ultimate reproductive success. (1999: 114)

Hrды's description is interesting because she considers both "reproductive efforts" and activities reflecting the mother's ambition (social and, in terms of access to food, economic ambition) to be part of motherhood.

Hrды's (1999) research provides a working description of the job of motherhood as a set of skills engaged in to promote the survival of both the mother and the offspring, promoting a view of motherhood as a series of complex decisions and choices. Thus, mothers "manage" their children, training them, teaching them, providing a collegial atmosphere for them, networking on their behalf, and caring for them emotionally. This perspective results in a form of decisive management that is designed to promote the subordinate's independence and even eventual promotion.

This view contradicts some stereotypes about motherhood and management. Deborah Tannen (1994) attributes some male difficulty responding to women in power to the fact that, in Western culture, our primary social construct of female power is motherhood. Thus, a male subordinate whose female boss requests that he talk to her before proceeding on a new project sees this request as insulting—he is expected to "ask Mommy for permission" (Tannen, 1994: 161). However, Tannen reports that women managers sometimes use the maternal image for themselves, "if they watched out for those who reported to them" (161). These women see motherhood as a supportive form of management.

Although motherhood itself has not been studied from a management perspective, these practices which seem to characterize motherhood certainly have. At the end of his *Leadership in Organizations*, Gary Yukl (2002) lists what he believes to be the most important functions of an effective leader:

1. Help interpret the meaning of events....
2. Create alignment on objectives and strategies....
3. Build task commitment and optimism....
4. Build mutual trust and cooperation....
5. Strengthen collective identity....
6. Organize and coordinate activities....
7. Encourage and facilitate collective learning....
8. Obtain necessary resources and support....
9. Develop and empower people....
10. Promote social justice and morality. (439-440)

Many of these activities find parallels in the list abstracted from Hrды's (1999) study;⁴ others might resonate with those who have mothered or observed mothering closely.

One might surmise that, if this mothering approach is a way that women find natural to lead, it might be a way to lead women as well. As Hrды points

out, it is in the context of maternal care and the community of allomothers that one learns executive skills and decision-making (143). Modern mothering managers certainly could benefit from the influence of allomothers—in this case, not substitute parents, but mentors. In *Women and Work: A Psychological Perspective*, Veronica Nieva and Barbara Gutek (1981) indicate that women rarely benefit from the informal and formal sponsorship networks that function in many businesses (57). Suzanne Crampton and Jitendra Mishra (1999) refer to the dearth, not only of available mentors, but of sponsors, role models, and supportive networks, as factors that can hinder women as they seek to climb the corporate ladder (paras 16-21). In academia, the cultural and generational gap between the few older women and the younger women (Toth, 1997: 80-82) have led many of those young academics to resort to a paper mentor, in the form of Ms Mentor's advice column; her stated goal is to get women tenure: "She⁵ wants women to have power in academia NOW" (Toth, 1997: xi).

Indeed, scientific research indicates that gathering together with other women is a healthful female alternative to the fight-or flight syndrome. The human hormonal response to stress includes oxytocin (a hormone which is suppressed by testosterone and enhanced by estrogen), which prompts the woman under its influence to "tend children and gather with other women... When she actually engages in this tending or befriending,... more oxytocin is released, which further counters stress" (Isaacson, 2002: para 9-10).⁶ Clearly, a community of professional women helping one another is necessary to the development of a new view that connects motherhood with management.

Motherhood is a phenomenon and practice deserving of increased study. To truly establish the linkage between mothering and managing that Sally Helgesen suggests, further research is required, along the lines of the diary studies that she herself uses to discover how women lead organizations and people. Although her initial assertion that motherhood is *already* recognized as management training might seem overly optimistic, there is research that indicates that women's effectiveness as managers is gaining some recognition. Brian S. Moskal (2003) claims that, "Women Make Better Managers," citing survey and statistical research that indicates that women excel at a variety of managerial skills. Other research indicates that women discipline subordinates more consistently than men (Bellizzi, 2002: para 1). Yet more scholars conclude that, "Women managers reduce costs because of the unfortunate and disturbing fact that they continue to command relatively lower wages" (Stites-Doe, 1997: para 6),⁷ and are thus a benefit to the company's bottom line.

Jean Elshtain (1981) expands our notion of motherhood beyond mere corporate applications, suggesting that motherhood could be constructed as a moral guide for feminists:

For women to affirm the protection of fragile and vulnerable human existence as the basis of a mode of political discourse, and to create the terms for its flourishing as a worthy political activity, for women to

stand firm against cries of ‘emotional’ or ‘sentimental’ even as they refuse to lapse into a sentimental rendering of the values and languages which flow from ‘mothering,’ would signal a force of great reconstructive potential. (336)

This reconstructive force has a place in the political realm and in business; hopefully, as such principles gain wider acceptance, the longstanding enmity between work and family will cease. Regarding motherhood and management as complementary skills will make it easier for women to do both jobs, making “everything go on harmoniously,” as Harriet Beecher Stowe (1986 [1852]) predicted more than a century ago.

¹No one seems terribly worried about the superman myth, but that’s another topic.

²I have found one excellent exception: Marie-Thérèse Claes (1999) builds her “Women, Men and Management Styles” upon a carefully structured distinction between gender and sex.

³These “Maternal effects,” the tasks that mothers engage in, are what I mean here by “motherhood.”

⁴Hrdy’s (1999) “facilitate adaptation” links to Yukl’s (2002) #1,2,5; Hrdy’s “communicate information” links to #1,7; “provide resources” links to #8; “develop social environment” links to #1,3,6; “maneuver” links to #2; “rely upon allomothers” links to #2,4; “demonstrate concern” links to #3,10; Yukl’s #9 closely approximates Hrdy’s general definition of motherhood.

⁵Ms Mentor, like Miss Manners, always prefers to refer to herself in the third person.

⁶Oxytocin is also the hormone most strongly associated with lactation and nursing.

⁷None of these studies indicate how many of the women referenced are mothers—mothers are lumped together with all women.

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