
The Changing Role of the Mother

ESTHER R. GREENGLASS

Plus que jamais, on exige trop des femmes. Quoiqu'elles viennent à bout de leurs nouvelles tâches, il est temps que les hommes prennent, eux aussi, leurs responsabilités à la maison.

Superwoman gets up in the morning and wakes her 2.6 children. She then goes downstairs and feeds them a grade-A nutritional breakfast, and . . . then goes upstairs and gets dressed in her Anne Klein suit, and goes off to her \$25,000-a-year job doing work which is creative and socially useful. Then she comes home after work and spends a real meaningful hour with her children, because after all, it's not the quantity of time, it's the quality of time. Following that, she goes into the kitchen and creates a Julia Child 60-minute gourmet recipe, having a wonderful family dinner discussing the checks and balances of the government system. The children go upstairs to bed and she and her husband spend another hour in their own meaningful relationship, at which point they go upstairs and she is multi-orgasmic until midnight (Goodman, 1979).

Sound unrealistic? Maybe, but these are the demands that are being placed on women — by others and by themselves. Probably at no other time in history have there been so many pressures on women — they must perform in multiple roles as never before.

In the past few decades we have witnessed some dramatic changes in the role of women. Today, for example, it is not unusual to find women simultaneously raising a family and holding outside employment. More married women with children are holding outside employment today than at any other time except perhaps for wartime. In fact, in 1977, married



Esther Greenglass and her daughter Linda

women represented almost two-thirds of the female labour force. These trends are matched by others which show that college women's aspirations are changing towards the goals of combining career and family. For example, in 1964 one American study showed that 65% of incoming freshmen women, when asked what they would like to be doing in 15 years, replied that they wanted to be a housewife and mother. In 1970, only 31% of a comparable sample gave this reply. The percentage of young women wanting to be married career women doubled, going from 20% in 1964 to 40% in 1970 (Cross, 1971). And, in a study my students and I conducted recently, 85% of mainly freshmen women at York University expressed a wish to have both a family and a career in the future (Greenglass and Devins, 1979).

The trend today is toward equalitarian roles so that wives can pursue a career as their husbands do. However, studies of women holding dual roles point to the continued existence of role conflict, which

is frequently at the expense of the woman's personal identity and professional performance. Since many women accept as inevitable that they will bear the main brunt of child care and domestic organization, usually the result is greater strain on the wife's than on the husband's career. Interestingly, studies also show that when women who are wives and mothers also hold outside employment, on the average, they spend three to four times as many hours working in the home and doing related activities as men (Robinson, 1977; Pyke, 1977).

Despite the fact that so many women with small children hold employment outside the home, our society still regards as ideal the situation in which the mother remains in the home where she is the full-time caretaker of her small children. The source of many women's guilt about working outside the home can probably be traced to the pronouncements of many psychiatrists and other experts regarding the presumed damaging effects of maternal absence — anything from tics to autism. In the same vein, it is interesting to note that although we have been aware for some time of the effects of paternal deprivation on the developing child, there have been few exhortations coming from the (mainly) male psychiatric profession to men to abandon their careers and care for their children on a full-time basis (at least while they have small children). Another aspect of the problem which is frequently overlooked is the well-documented vulnerability of women to the voice of the male authority. Women have been far more likely to take the advice of the male over the female authority — even when they have the same qualifications. When it comes to learning about how to be a good mother, it is no accident that the major books and manuals telling women how to raise their children have been written by

men. This leads to the somewhat amusing conclusion that even though the women have the babies, men have the maternal instinct (Stannard, 1970).

But I think it is important to remember that motherhood, as we experience and know it in recent times, is a surprisingly new and unique institution (Bernard, 1974). Most societies cannot afford to spare able-bodied women. They are needed to carry on the day-to-day activities, that is, tilling the fields, fishing or gathering. As Bernard (1974) points out in her book, *The Future of Motherhood*, by assigning sole responsibility for child care to the mother, cutting her off from the help and support of others in an isolated household, and requiring constant love and care, we have selected the worst features of the motherhood role — both for the child and the mother. For example, research in cultures where women were given the heaviest load of child care shows that these women were not only more changeable in expressing warmth than women in other cultures, they were also more likely to have hostilities unrelated to the children's behaviours (Minturn and Lambert, 1964). Research also shows that there is a relationship between the extent of child care assigned to the mother and the degree of maternal warmth: the greater the burden of child care, the less likely the maternal warmth. Not surprisingly, when there was a grandmother present, maternal warmth was more likely to occur. Likewise, maternal instability decreased when others undertook some of the child care and when there were relatively few children needing care (Minturn and Lambert, 1964).

Nevertheless, there are those who maintain that it is only 'normal and natural' for women to want to stay at home and care for their babies on a full-time basis, and that this motivation is due to the maternal instinct — that all-pervasive, irrational force which is supposed to take over when a woman has a baby and which presumably motivates even the coldest woman towards full-time motherhood. Is there a maternal instinct in human females? Just what is the evidence either for or against it? While evidence from animal studies supports the concept of a maternal instinct in subhuman species, as a general rule, human motives and behaviour cannot be explained on the basis of physiological factors alone because of the importance of learning in all that the human does. Research findings support the concept of a maternal instinct in rats in that female sex hormones associated with pregnancy and parturition seem to be implicated in the ontogeny of maternal behaviour. For example, Rosenblatt (1969) reports that when blood plasma is taken from female rats that have recently given birth and is administered to virgin females, these animals exhibit increased maternal behaviour such as retrieving, nest-building

and licking pups.

There is another important factor to consider when discussing maternal behaviour. In many cases (including the human), early and continued exposure to the newly-born animal seems to be a requirement for eliciting caretaking behaviour, regardless of the hormonal component. For example, in the Rosenblatt study, it was found that the stimulation from the pups during the first few days of life was crucial in establishing and maintaining maternal responsiveness. If a mother is separated from her pups just after delivery, for a period of two to four days, she will not effectively rear a substitute litter. Rosenblatt found that with sufficient exposure to newborns, virgin females and males will show 'parental' behaviour such as licking, crouching over the young and retrieving them. However, contrary to the female that has given birth, and who thus may be considered hormonally 'primed,' 'parental' behaviour in males and female virgins was not readily aroused and appeared only after several days of exposure to the pups. Evidence would seem to imply that hormonal factors operate in concert with the eliciting properties of the young pup so that its presence acts to maintain maternal behaviour. But it is also interesting to note that 'maternal' behaviour can appear in animals who lack the hormones associated with pregnancy. The presence of the young seems sufficient to elicit this behaviour. Thus, animal evidence suggests that, while the presence of hormones may facilitate the arousal of maternal behaviour, they are not necessary for the appearance of 'maternal' behaviour.

Our present state of knowledge tells us very little about the potential of adult humans for nurturant behaviour toward infants. From what is known about infrahuman species, it is possible that the hormones associated with pregnancy, childbirth and lactation may contribute to a readiness to care for a young infant on the part of a woman who has just given birth. For instance, in the period immediately after birth, mothers may be particularly sensitive to the needs of their babies (Bowlby, 1969). Nevertheless, since little is known about the role of hormones in initiating and maintaining maternal behaviour in humans, the suggestion that they are important is, at best, speculative (Lamb, 1975).

The assumption of a universal maternal instinct in females implicitly suggests that (any) female is better equipped (for biological reasons) to care for the young than is a male. Recent research evidence suggests that, even with little experience with infants, the human male may have more potential for nurturant behaviour than was previously thought. In one study, for example, parents (male and female) were observed and recorded with their newborn in hospital wards. The newborn

was brought in by a nurse who asked which parent wanted to hold the infant. Records were made of which parent initially took the child, and of the amount of nurturant interaction (looking, touching, rocking, holding, smiling) between the infant and each parent. When both parents were present with the baby, fathers were found to engage in more nurturant interaction with the infants than were mothers (with the exception of smiling). The study also involved observations of the newborn infants with fathers alone and with mothers, when fathers were not present. Here, too, the fathers engaged in as much or more nurturant behaviour, by comparison with the mothers — surprising findings in view of traditional attitudes towards the female maternal instinct.

It is possible, then, that someone other than the mother (in this case, the father), is capable of nurturant behaviour towards a newborn. Recent research also suggests that the responses or skills needed to satisfy an infant's basic needs can be developed in a caretaker other than the mother. Studies by Thomas *et al.* (1963) and Bell (1971) demonstrate the way in which the infant actively initiates social interaction and is capable of modifying the behaviour of the person who cares for it. So, contrary to earlier assumptions about the instinctive quality of maternal behaviour, research suggests that the behaviour necessary for infant caretaking is shaped and modified to some extent by the infant itself. And it follows that caretaking behaviour can be developed and shaped in someone other than the mother.

What is the future of the motherhood role? I think that what we are seeing now are changes in the motherhood role, as modified by women themselves and reflecting the plurality of our society. In our recent past, if you were a woman, you had babies and it was your exclusive responsibility to raise them. More and more women are rebelling against the narrow way in which motherhood has been defined. With greater accessibility of birth control measures, many women (and men) are choosing to remain childless. Others are opting for smaller families than those of their parents and grandparents. Increasing numbers of women are emerging who want to combine career and motherhood. Many of these women are establishing themselves first in their careers and then having children when they are older. More and more women want to share child rearing with others, especially with their male partners. They do not want to be isolated in the home, even for a few years, cut off from the outside world simply because they have become mothers. For them, motherhood is one more of the many roles they have chosen to pursue simultaneously. For the woman who wants to continue working outside the home after she has become a mother, it is crucial that her partner take

The Origin of the Family

Where my parents canoed
on Sunday afternoons
before coitus
before I was conceived

the river flows on
seventy years after
without a trace
of his paddle's grace
or her low laughter

It's all in my head
their conversation
their efforts at
conciliation —
the nagging question:
are we in love
or not?

Because, at long last
September 1, 1908
they went to church, took the train
to the lake and
a borrowed honeymoon cottage
mice scuttling over their faces
and in the morning
as he cooked the eggs and bacon
he swearing like a trooper
(because he had decided she wasn't a virgin
she never knowing till twenty years later
why he resented
her body and her ways
and how she had no chance
ever to declare to him
her essential innocence)

Now that I am here,
a life they joined in making
I bear their burdens:
Her guilelessness, his guilt.
I am the wishbones's centre
made of their two-pronged
rivalries.
To be free I must push out
into a new world's proffering
I must go down and enter
that darker cave
with only my burnt hands
as offering.

Dorothy Livesay

This poem originally appeared in *Fiddlehead*.

equal responsibility in child rearing. It is no longer sufficient for the male to simply help out with child and domestic responsibilities. This attitude implies that the main responsibility for children remains with the woman. Fathers too are capable of nurturing and warm behaviour, just as mothers are capable of independence, strength and achievement in the outside world. Rather than dividing personality traits into two parts and assigning half to women and the other half to men, the tendency today is for each to combine both kinds of characteristics. Only in this way will it be possible for women to have the opportunity for real fulfillment of all facets of their personalities. We tend to hear how difficult these times are for women — they are difficult for men too. We've seen how women are capable of developing their independence — the question we may raise now is, do men have the strength to cultivate their potential for warmth and nurturance?

This presentation was made to The Rights of Parents and Children: Exploring Alternatives Conference of the Childbirth Education Association of Toronto and the International Childbirth Education Association, Toronto, June 29, 1979.

References

- Bell, R. Q. 'Stimulus control of parent or caretaker behaviour by offspring.' *Developmental Psychology*, 4 (1971), pp. 63-72.
- Bernard, J. *The Future of Motherhood*. New York: Penguin, 1974.
- Bowlby, J. *Attachment and Loss*, Volume 1. London: Hogarth, 1969.
- Cross, K. *Beyond the Open Door*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1971.
- Goodman, E. Excerpted from a speech given at the Association of National Advertisers. Cited in *Ms. magazine* (March 1979), p. 54.
- Greenglass, E. R., and Devins, R. 'Factors related to marriage and career plans in unmarried women,' to be published in *Sex Roles* (1979).
- Lamb, M. 'Physiological mechanisms in the control of maternal behaviour in rats: A review,' *Psychological Bulletin*, 82 (1975), pp. 104-119.
- Minturn, L., and Lambert, W. *Mothers of Six Cultures: Antecedents of Child Rearing*. New York: Wiley, 1964.
- Pyke, S. 'Selected characteristics of the female psychologist in the labour force,' *Canadian Psychological Review*, 18 (1977), pp. 23-33.
- Robinson, J. *How Americans Use Time*. New York: Praeger, 1977.
- Rosenblatt, J. 'The development of maternal responsiveness in the rat,' *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 39 (1969), pp. 36-56.
- Stannard, U. 'Adam's rib, or the woman within,' *Transaction*, 8 (1970), pp. 24-35.
- Thomas, A., et al. *Behavioural Individuality in Early Childhood*. New York: New York University Press, 1963.