

Challenging the Connection

A Deconstruction of the Discourses

BY SHELAGH ROBINSON AND LINDSAY ROBINSON

Une mère et sa fille ont écrit ce texte qui vise la déconstruction théorique et personnelle de chacun des deux discours communs aux relations mère-fille. Les origines, les prétentions et les implications du discours culturel sont soulevées dans le but de lier la théorie à l'expérience.

My mother and I are tearing apart our relationship; it is an act of deconstruction.

She and I have agreed to examine elements of the alliance we share as mother and daughter: the discourses, or messages from our culture that influence how we understand our relationship. We anticipate that our open discussion of these myths will expose subtleties in their meaning and consequence, which, in turn, may lead to their deconstruction and reduce their influence upon our relationship. While a deconstruction of all the dominant discourses of mothers and daughters is beyond the scope of this article, examining two of the best known affords the three-fold consequence of a) revealing the essence of influential and destructive discourses; b) demonstrating how discourses are linked in their construction and thus, may be deconstructed as a system; and c) affording us the opportunity to create a space of connection and understanding between us, an outcome deliberately subversive to the divisive nature of many discourses.

In the context of mother-daughter relationships, discourses are stories that create a communal understanding of power in relationships, and appropriate rules of conduct (Belenky *et al.* 1986). Ostensibly, they exist as generalizations, often perceived as stereotypes or myths to be accepted or rejected, yet frequently

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interpreted as possibilities and thus internalized.

Because discourses are often so entrenched in a culture as to be invisible, one may grow up not realizing that a great deal of what one assumes is real is actually a culturally created myth. Both my mother and I were raised to believe in the truth of numerous discourses, particularly those describing what it is to be female. It is only now when I stop to consider my own socially constructed nature that I realize that I might have unwittingly incorporated discourses which negatively influence my understanding of mother-daughter relationships in general, and my own relationship with my mother in particular.

Discourse deconstruction consists of distinguishing between socially constructed truths and those which exist independent of culture. Deconstruction does not only consist of determining the veracity, or the falseness, of discourses in a personal context. To merely say, "This has/not

been my experience" neglects the covert power of discourses, addressing only overt surface awareness. Evidence for the power of discourse lies not in the realm of the explicit, but in the implicit, in the silent, generally unarticulated realm of meaning, reached only by the most candid of realizations and conversations.

Neither is deconstruction of discourses limited to their sources and modes of perpetuation. Suggesting "culture" or "patriarchy" as their origin prohibits specification—they are too broad phenomena to be held accountable: naming them risks dismissal of the entire endeavor. Rather, deconstruction is most effective when it reveals the veiled assumptions and implications inherent in the discourses (Crawford and Maracek). This may be done through reflexivity, or the deliberate appraisal of the personal significance of discourse systems in our own lives. Caplan suggests that when we separate our personal stories from the myths, we may illuminate their influence, thus exposing them as constructions rather than truths, and compromising their power.

Relationships are both the targets, and perpetuative agents, of discourses. Familial alliances are particularly strong conduits of myths of gender, right and wrong, obligation and ambition (Caplan; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule). Not only do mothers and daughters struggle with myths which emphasize the independence so stressed in western cultures, dividing parents from children, but they must also negotiate myths which set them against each other, enforcing internal misogyny, and undermining a potentially powerful alliance.

of Mother-Daughter Relationships

Discourse I: "mothers and daughters are rivals"

The notion of mother-daughter rivalry, created and framed as essential human behaviour by Freud, has become a common discourse in western culture (Caplan), and embodies a number of cultural assumptions. One assumption is that mother-daughter rivalries exist as fundamental truths in and of themselves, and not as products of our culture. As well, the discourse assumes that mothers and daughters unconsciously or deliberately, and inevitably, compete in a variety of cultural arenas. Finally, it is assumed that mothers and daughters are consumed with tallies of each other's challenges and accomplishments, thus neglecting other aspects of their relationship.

Through their assumptions, discourses establish expectancies about relationships. In turn, the implications of discourses steer thoughts and behaviors that shape the nature of the interactions. The rivalry discourse embodies many such behavioural guides. It is implied that mothers and daughters consistently monitor their own, and the others' actions and reactions, a vigilance that may result in the constant questioning of personal motives with the question: "How will my mother/daughter react to this?" Further, the rivalry discourse implies that mothers and daughters do not take authentic satisfaction and pride in the successes of the other, for it is tacitly understood that if one succeeds, then the other cannot. Finally, the rivalry discourse implies "winners" and "losers," thus ensuring that whomever is successful will be regarded as superior, and whomever is not successful will suffer a loss of status.

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Lindsay

In healthy relationships, I do not think that mothers and daughters are rivals. But I can think of all sorts of instances where there is rivalry—this says more about the health of our culture, and its expectations of mothers and daughters, than the health of the relationships.

We live in a culture which has certain expectations regarding competition and power, and there are tremendous differences between people regarding access to, and opportunity to exercise, influence. I believe that families, as important cultural systems, are places where people learn about competition. When we combine the values of an individualistic culture, and that of competition between women, it makes sense to me that sometimes mothers and daughters get set up as rivals.

It is assumed that discourses exist to serve a purpose. I wonder if female rivalries, whether between mothers and daughters or not, are subtly main-

tained to stimulate a dynamic of mistrust and competition between women. If women are positioned as adversaries, there may be less cooperation and more antagonism. Women divided are much less a threat to the status quo than women united. Maintaining mother-daughter and female rivalry myths contributes to a culture in which competition between women comes to be seen as inevitable, and female relationships as unstable and petty.

I also suspect that rivalries raise the desirability of the object of competition, lending it, and its winner, status and power. In western culture, women have traditionally competed for the attentions of men. It may subtly serve the purposes of men to maintain this discourse—romantically, rivalries lead to competition for men; in families, mother-daughter rivalries may take the form of vying for the attentions of the father.

I have felt rivalries at times—I am not immune to them, but in the context of our relationship, a rivalry with you, my daughter, is not something I recall. Certainly you and I had our struggles, but I remember them more as battles of will. I do not remember them as "rivalrous" in the competitive sense, for people or for objects. I recall defiance, and feeling frustrated by a lack of cooperation ... was it rivalry, or were you attempting to assert yourself?

I suspect that self-esteem, or feeling good about oneself and one's capabilities, is an important component to many rivalries. "Winning" a rivalry may shift feelings of inadequacy to adequacy. I, however, would feel less adequate were I to enter into a rivalry with you, or feel threatened by your accomplishments, because

that would suggest my own accomplishments are not sufficient. I think an important aspect of our relationship is that our senses of self are tied to different aspects of our lives, different kinds of accomplishments, different definitions of success. This means that we can both feel success at the same time. In general, I feel happier when I can think of your successes and feel pride rather than envy. And in areas in which we do have common interests, I think that we are generally sensitive to each others' strengths and weaknesses. I have taught you, and now I can learn from you, and you from me—this is nice, not something to struggle over.

Shelagh

When I consider the notion of the mother-daughter rivalry myth in my own world, I am aware of a feeling of vague discomfort. I do not want to consider us as rivals, regardless of the reason or context. I find I am reluctant to think about, nor talk with my mother about it, for doing so may make the myth "real," giving it legitimacy, and potentially damage our relationship.

I think that mother-daughter rivalries are rooted in feelings of insecurity, and jealousy, which, I agree with my mother, seem to be less relevant in the relationship that she and I share. This is not to say that these emotions are foreign to me, but that, if competition is a learned response to feelings of low self-esteem, my mother never taught me this response in the context of our relationship.

In my experience, my mother has been my teacher and my guide; I cannot think of a single instance in which I recall a "rivalry" as it is commonly defined. Rather, I recall tremendous support for my errors, and sympathy with my failures, just as I remember elation at my successes. There definitely was an awareness of "unconditionality," even when she and I struggled. I feel great harmony and calm when I think of the relationship I have with my mother; I

attribute this to her strong interpersonal skills, her talent as a parent, and the security of her own sense of self.

Yet, the difficulty with discourses is that they are invisible, and operate on a very insidious level. Caplan suggests that employing reflexivity to understand the impact of discourses in our lives will allow us to under-

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stand how we "have been duped and divided against each other by the myths" (11). I begin to question my motives: why did I ask my mother to contribute to this paper? Why have I persisted in academe? Why do we both love to cook so much? Ultimately, I see the mother-daughter rivalry discourse reflected in my ideas about our relationship if not in my actual communications to my mother. That, I suppose, is where the disconcerting power of discourse lies: in its ability to shape our thoughts and fantasies and thus our realities. Separating us. The scrutiny and communication are good because it takes the discourse out of the implicit and makes it explicit. If we were truly rivals, we would not have embarked upon this process. Instead, I see us as allies, shifting "mother and daughter" to "companions," pursuing a different type of relationship. This would not be a possibility were my mother not so secure in *her* sense of self, and been able to transmit *this* value to me.

Discourse II: "good mother equals perfect daughter"

Caplan describes a number of mother-daughter myths including one that suggests that a mother's status and "goodness" are dependent upon the degree to which her daughter conforms to cultural expectations and proscriptions of "daughterliness." A woman's "success" or "failure" as a person, therefore, is primarily dependent upon her adequacy as a mother, rather than on any of her other identities. Despite arguments that the "rivalry" and the "perfect" daughter discourses contradict one another, they do, in fact, co-exist, a paradox which may adversely contribute to perceptions of the volatility of mother-daughter relationships.

This "perfect daughter" discourse contains a number of assumptions, the most important of which may be its existence as a cultural truth. That it is even considered a possibility in the mother-daughter dyad renders it powerful because it sets up notions of mirroring and culpability. The "perfect daughter" discourse also assumes that a daughter's measure reflects good *mothering*, rather than good *parenting*. In turn, it also assumes that daughters, as opposed to sons or children, are accurate mirrors of mothering skills. Additionally, the "perfect daughter" discourse assumes a culture wherein a mother's primary status is derived from her child's, rather than from her own, accomplishments.

The implications of the "perfect daughter" discourse are diverse and powerful. Foremost, it implies that mothers must raise daughters to behave in culturally prescribed ways in order to avoid shame, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the dominant gendered discourses. The discourse implies that daughters must be eternally vigilant in their comportment in order to not compromise their mothers' aura of "goodness." It implies that daughters who are not "perfect" guiltily bear the brunt of their mother's resulting lack of status. There is also the mirror implication that if a

daughter succeeds, it is at least in part due to the mother; this sets up mother-blaming if the daughter does not succeed. Additionally, the “perfect daughter” discourse implies that mothers need not have ambitions or goals, since the only aspirations worthy of pursuit are those inherent in raising successful daughters. Finally, there is the implication that mothers possess such little ego and so few aptitudes that they may feel pride only if their daughters succeed on their behalf, reliving their own lost dreams.

Lindsay

To me, there is some accuracy in this discourse. I do not know if the “perfect daughter” myth is a cultural artifact, or a “truth.” I do see, though, how the “perfect daughter” myth could be instrumental in the maintenance and perpetuation of traditional cultural values and beliefs, thus ensuring the status quo.

Traditionally, and to some extent, currently, I think mothers, more than fathers, are responsible for the raising of children, and for the passing on of “culture.” There is, consequently, the notion that if cultural beliefs and values are not appropriately transmitted to the next generation, the mother may be to blame. It stands to reason that if a child conforms to culturally agreed upon standards of conduct, the mother will be perceived as having appropriately performed her “duty,” thereby increasing her status.

To this extent, I suspect that there is an ego-component to the “perfect daughter” discourse. If a daughter does not act in accordance with her culture, her mother may experience the frustration that she has not done a “good job,” but may come to question and/or defend her own adherence to cultural rules.

As your mother, I think that my interpretation of a “perfect daughter” both conforms to, and slightly deviates from, popular notions of perfection. While I understand the desire for children who positively reflect my efforts as a mother, I may

not define “perfection” in the same way that our culture might.

I do take notice of, and pride in, your accomplishments, but I have, over time, come to separate your successes from mine. I have learned to “let go,” to a certain extent, recognizing that there are limitations to my influence, and that, ultimately, how

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you choose to live has more to do with you than me. I have come to this understanding, in part, because, at times, I did worry and feel guilty that I was not a good mother.

As a daughter, you were not always easy on me. At times, I did wonder what part I played in your behaviour, both privately and when my friends and I came together and talked about our children. If a “perfect” daughter is defined as one who is quiet, docile, and obedient, it is true that you did not always conform to this definition. Over time, however, I came to shift my understanding of “perfection” to include a great many more attributes that you possess.

As you have grown, I think that you have taken more responsibility for your own temperament and actions and have had successes—in its many forms—as a result. And my perception of my influence in your life has changed accordingly. I see “success” for you as doing what you want to be doing, achieving in the way that you want to achieve. I think

that success also implies a “learning” mode, continuing to grow intellectually. I also see success as pursuing and achieving financial independence. Success doesn’t necessarily mean marriage and children.

By these standards, I see you as very successful, and there is some sort of pride. Mothers are not above a little boasting and I enjoy being able to say that you are doing well. There is a degree of reflected glory. However, I do not accept that every success of yours implies something about me and my capacities as a mother or as a person. I am happy to be a part of your success, but I cannot be responsible for it, just as I do not want to be blamed if things do not go so well.

Shelagh

It gladdens me to know that my mother is so flexible with regard to her definitions of my success, and thus of her own role in my accomplishments, and my difficulties. If a daughter’s merit were defined in traditional terms, my mother would not be seen as having done her job properly. I was not the best mannered little girl: I was headstrong and stubborn and loud, and often in trouble with the “law” of the household. I was not an athlete, or a musician. Nor was I considered a scholar. I am not married. I may not give her grandchildren. My mother was clearly a failure. Unless one redefines success—as she has.

The discourse, as a cultural “truth” bothers me greatly. The notion that Lindsay may be branded with the label of “bad mother” solely as a function of my actions bothers me. It would be a diminutive offering to a woman whose worth is vast, in so many ways unconnected with mothering. I believe the fact that she is a fantastic mother is noteworthy, but I do not see it essential to her measure as a woman. It is a burden that my mother might be judged against petty and misogynist standards, especially when they are linked to my performance. I am an invalid measure of my mother’s goodness.

Conclusion—Lindsay and Shelagh

Together, we chose to take on this project, knowing that it would necessitate a very different kind of communication. For both of us, this collaboration contains both personal and political motives. We understood that, if we could complete the dialogue required to write about and with each other, our relationship would necessarily become that much stronger. Our concern was that the endeavor would touch us too deeply, or be too difficult to complete, thus weakening our connection. We are both proud to have been able to listen to, and communicate feelings never before shared, which, as a result, has enhanced our love and respect for one another.

Politically, we think that it is important to attempt to deconstruct these harmful discourses. That we choose to do it in a public forum emphasizes our commitment to take personal responsibility for their dismantling, recognizing that we cannot ask others to do that which we are not prepared to do. We also hope that our work might become a model for other mothers and daughters. During the writing of this article, many people said they would not attempt the same conversations with their own mothers and daughters for fear that one or the other might not be able to "handle" it. We suggest that, while that risk may exist for some mothers and daughters, others may find that their relationships are stronger than they know. Attempting such candid conversation can result in positive revelation, thus moving discourse deconstruction out of the realm of the theoretical and into the personal.

In the interests of locating ourselves in this exercise, I believe that it is important that my mother and I be explicit with regard to our cultural backgrounds as white, middle-class anglo-Canadian women.

Lindsay Robinson is a woman possessing multiple identities, not simply that of mother of three daughters. She is a

public health nurse, championship squash player, grandmother of four granddaughters, civic activist, wife, semi-professional gardener, and dog trainer. She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and is extremely proud of the different successes of all her daughters and granddaughters.

Shelagh Robinson is currently completing her Doctorate in Counseling Psychology at McGill University. While she pursues a variety of research interests, currently she is particularly interested in changing the world—at present, discourse deconstruction appears to be a reasonable way of doing so. Of her many identities, Shelagh considers being a feminist, an idealist, and a daughter to be among the most important.

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