

# Mothers, Daughters, and Others

## *Some Personal Reflections on*

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*Les auteures ont assisté à la conférence Mères et Filles, tenue en septembre 1997 et rapportent leurs impressions.*

This paper is autobiographical. In it we reflect individually and together on our experience of the "Mothers and Daughters: Moving Into the Next Millennium" Conference held at York University, September 26–28, 1997. We met just before the conference dinner, sat together that evening and spent much of the last day of the conference together. Although we live in different countries, have different types of work, different backgrounds and experiences, both of motherhood and daughterhood, we found that we have a lot in common. Although we all enjoyed the conference we each felt that there were gaps. Here we each tell our "own story" and reflect on what the conference meant to us.

### Gayle

I am a 39-year-old English, hetero-

sexual, white woman. I work as a Senior Lecturer at Coventry University (United Kingdom) teaching Sociology and Women's Studies. I am an only child and was happy to be so whilst growing up. My father died when I was 20 years old and my already good relationship with my mother grew closer and stronger and remains so. In 1984 after 15 months of "trying" I became pregnant, but at 16 weeks I miscarried. To my knowledge I have not been pregnant since. I am now in a different partnership and John's two teenage boys live with us. Recently I finished a doctoral study in which I was concerned to explore the experience (predominantly women's) of "infertility" and "involuntary childlessness." Following my miscarriage and for 10 or so years I struggled with definitions of myself as "infertile" or "childless." For the last five years "biologically childless" and "parent" have both often felt simultaneously appropriate. More recently still I have begun to wonder whether my biological childlessness is becoming "voluntary" rather than "involuntary." I continue to debate with my inner voice as to how I really feel and how to define and present myself. Politically, I remain committed to striving for a feminist space for women like me and others who don't meet conventionally defined "ideal" identities.

I enjoyed the conference very much, particularly the celebratory atmosphere expressed not least in the often highlighted fact that there has never been a conference concerned solely with the experience of mothers and mothering, daughters and being mothered before. For me the autobiographical approach used by many women resulted in powerful presen-

tations grounded in personal experience as well as empirical work and feminist theory. Many of the presentations made me smile or laugh and a couple made me cry. Not all conferences produce such strong emotions in me. However, from my perspective there were also many gaps in the conference. Specifically for me and in relation to my personal and work experiences there was little attention given to non-motherhood. There was little serious consideration given to the fact that motherhood/non-motherhood is a significant difference in women's lives. A couple of presenters argued that as women we could not fully understand our own mothers until we became mothers ourselves. For me this reflects general pronatalist views that suggest motherhood is the only way women can become adult. The conference convinced me that motherhood and non-motherhood is a significant difference between women and that non-motherhood remains at best under-theorized and at worst ignored.

### Deborah

On the final day of the conference, a weather-perfect early fall afternoon, the three of us sat under a tree eating lunch and discussed the tensions between the social roles we define as "mother" and "non-mother." While I was the only conventionally defined mother among us, my graduate work in sociology as well as personal experience with non-motherhood left me feeling that, while the conference was filled with a fertile feminist synergy unlike any I had the good fortune to experience before, the lack of discourse on non-motherhood, further stigmatizing it as a "non-role." This

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left me feeling wanting. The session which had been titled "Infertility," in which Gayle and I were the only presenters, was attended by just a few, albeit enthusiastic, participants. Even the assigned session chair stayed away.

As a white, sexual woman, and a mature student who returned to academe after a long hiatus, during which I fulfilled the traditional wife and mother roles, having lived in and loved Toronto for 16 years, I was also the only "local" among us. And while I have officially been a mother for over 18 years, my road to this socially recognized and ideologically validated position has been a rocky one. Like Gayle, the impetus for my research has been personal experience. Over 20 years ago two of my pregnancies ended with the premature births and deaths of my babies. They were my children; I was their mother. And yet, because of the way pregnancy loss and infant death are dealt with, or more accurately, not dealt with in this culture, these babies were not accepted as my children; rather, they

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were abstract replaceable potentials. Thus, I was not accepted as "mother," but rather as an abstract, potential mother. My work in sociology, broadly defined, is women and reproduction gone wrong—unachieved motherhood, non-motherhood.

My interest in reproduction gone wrong, in protecting fertility, in understanding "fetus" as "baby" when so defined by the pregnant woman/mother of that fetus/baby, is thought by many within feminism to be suspect because it forces us to grapple with issues of how fetal personhood is constructed in tension with women's bodily integrity and juridical autonomy in pregnancy. Contemporary feminism, only recently out of its own pregnant state, has been invested in the important cause of reproductive choice. While feminism's fight has been to control fertility, releasing women from the constraints of their biology and their socially mandated role, feminism's fright, I suggest, has been the fear of facing challenges to it from a discourse of reproduction gone wrong. Whereas feminism has been admirably grounded in women's rights to reproductive choice, so must it now rise to include the women for whom the protection of a fragile fertility is their reproductive choice.

**Patricia**

For my part of this process I would like to address the disenfranchisement inherent in definitions of mothering when one is not a biological mother, and the impact of feminist education on broadening definitions of motherhood.

I have taught "Mothers and Daughters" in the Women's Studies Department at Vermont Colleges for 12

years. I am a 43-year-old European American lesbian, one of four daughters. I have taken on a mothering role in my family and in life work, and the significance of teaching a course on mother/daughter yet having no children myself (and an ambivalent relationship with my own mother) is not lost on me. I clearly need to learn what I teach. Women of all ages also seem hungry to explore the complexity and uniqueness of the mother/daughter relationship. I am astonished that the class has filled every semester. Students are initially apologetic when confessing either bad, ambivalent, or best friend mother relationships; and unerringly pleased at the end of the semester by what they have discovered. As the course is taught from a feminist framework that explores the "invention" of motherhood, most women seem to come away with a honed sense of herstory and role choice that they never knew existed. It never occurred to them that their mothers might also be women!

And so I contemplate my own role as an educator sharing the impact of socialization on the mother/daughter experience. Many colleagues suggest that what I do is a kind of mothering. Yet how to feel included in current definitions?

At the beginning of the semester I ask students to create a one sentence definition of "mother." The impact of Women's Studies is increasingly evident in definitions that are not biologically limited. And the intensity with which students create their own sense of mothering is impressive. The most important things that students name in their evaluations are being able to recognize limiting stereotypes about mothers, and

choose healthy mothering of self alongside the mothering they bring to their relationships.

What fascinated me about the conference at York University was the earnestness and honesty transcending the confines of an academic setting. Yet, there seemed to be covert assumptions about the nature of motherhood, as most of the proceedings focussed on biological motherhood. I found myself increasingly disenfranchised by such exclusive messages for a most complex identity.

If, as Jean Baker-Miller points out, women's relational traits are indeed foundational for humanity, how then can we broaden our definition of mother? A feminist conference can be a tremendous vehicle for not only exchanging investigations of role, definition, and intention of what mothering was, is, and can be.

I was fortunate to meet up with women at the conference who shared my sense of disenfranchisement. I was particularly moved by Gayle's work on "infertility" and "involuntary childlessness" and Deborah's work on DES (diethyl-stilbestrol, an old reproductive technology which had reproductive health consequences for offspring exposed in utero), and was struck by the limited attendance at their presentations. We speculated that these issues just aren't "sexy" enough. Feminism at its root is simply the validation of women's experience. We felt included, but not validated. It was our conversations about this shared sense of feeling disenfranchised that sparked the idea to advocate for inclusiveness of non-biological definitions in the ongoing feminist discourse about motherhood.

### Final thoughts

This article has not been too easy to write. Communicating across continents, whilst coping with various personal and work-related demands and distresses, we have tried to express in writing the issues that dominated our discussion during our first (and hopefully not our last) lunch together. Despite the limitations of our work-

ing situation—i.e., the fact that we can't sit together and share tears, laughter, and frowns as we write this—we have done it. In an early draft of her individual contribution Patricia wrote that one of the things that particularly moved her about the conference was "meeting up with women who serendipitously shared" her sense of disenfranchisement. This feeling is shared by us all and has strengthened through the process of writing this piece. Overwhelmingly we feel that it is time that feminism, as Deborah has put it, "face the challenge" of non-motherhood and of different mothering identities. That is, feminism needs to recognize motherhood/non-motherhood as a difference that needs to be integrated in feminist research and theory alongside other more "acknowledged" differences.

*Patricia Fontaine has taught a "Mothers and Daughters" course at Vermont Colleges for the past twelve years. As a*

*daughter she has an ambivalent relationship with her mother and although she does not have children, she has taken a mothering role in her family and through her work. Gayle Letherby is a researcher and teacher who lives and works in the United Kingdom. As a daughter and as a biologically childless woman she has lived with her partner's two sons for the past six years. The lives of women who mother and those who don't continue to occupy her empirical and theoretical work. Deborah Whatley is a student in the Graduate Programme in Sociology at York University. Her work focuses on women and reproduction gone wrong and her biggest accomplishment as a mother is her friendship with her 19-year-old son.*

### References

Baker-Miller, J. *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

## SHARRON CHATTERTON

### Her Handmade Gloves

Your hands belong in these,  
Your baby fingers tapered now  
Like dancer's legs,  
Conductors' wands,  
The slender tips  
That side by side lay  
Children in the snow  
To fan and flex, snowangels  
In the kid, for fit,  
Will hold them up like mirrors  
Catching sundogs in the East  
To find the flaw,  
The line of beads,  
An emerald felt,  
A parchment welt  
Pulled tight against the cold,  
To keep a walking woman warm  
However far  
On winter's eve.

*Sharron Chatterton is a Yukon teacher and wilderness canoe guide who has published prose and poetry in various Canadian literary journals.*