

March 30, 2004

PARENTING

Read: Collins: Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood
Cowan and Cowan, Becoming a parent
Mannis: Single mothers by choice
Mason, Fine, Carnochan: Family law in the New Millennium: For whose families?

- I. Brief review of attitudes toward parenting in America
 - A. Cycles and shifts with regard to which parent should play the primary role
 1. And in attitudes about causes of pathology (who's to blame)
 - B. Colonial period
 1. Father was the "moral overseer"
 2. Mothers did most of the childcare, but fathers were seen as more important for child's character, etc.
 - a. A child who is a failure indicates failed parenting on the father's part, not the mother's
 - b. Discuss: current attitudes about this?
 3. Children were seen to come into the world sinful and woeful condition
 4. Mothers were seen as too indulgent to provide proper parenting
 5. Women in general seen as too irrational, too "passionate"
 - a. The root of *testimony* and *testify* is "testes"
 - C. 19th century: Mothers prevailed

1. Because of “purity” and moral superiority: a total reversal of colonial ideology
 2. For the first time in case of divorce custody came to be seen as properly awarded to mother (Mason et al.)
 - a. “In the best interests of the child”
 - b. Earlier, father had rights to children, which were seen in terms of economic assets—children’s value as laborers
- D. 20th century
1. During first half: fathers came to be seen as increasingly distant from children
 - a. Breadwinner role seen as the main role
 - b. Strong split between public and private, “instrumental” vs. “emotional” parenting
 2. But accompanied by significant ambivalence about the effects of increased authority of the mother on the child
 - a. Notions about “suffocating” (overprotective, over-involved) mothers
 - b. Popularity of Philip Wylie’s book *Generation of Vipers* revealed anxiety about this issue
 - c. Can find lots of evidence of women’s ambivalence towards full-time mothering, as well
 - c. The anti-mothering literature depicted a mother who:
 - 1) Avenges her own frustrations on a small helpless child

- 2) Tyranny
 - a) Smothering affection
 - d. Specter of homosexuality—notion that the overprotective mother produces it in boys
 - e. No one seemed to care much about girls
 - 1) Daughters were simply absent from the literature except as juvenile delinquents
 - f. No literature whatsoever on mother-daughter relationship
 - g. For the 1st time since the colonial period, discussion returned concerning fathers being necessary as parents, not just as breadwinners
3. The role of “experts” and their advice
 - a. Colonial period: advice came from moral authorities, religious
 - b. 19th century: advice in secular form began to appear: in magazines, etc. (religious sources of advice continued)
 4. The field of clinical psychology began in 19th century
- E. Complex and interrelated underlying causes of such shifts
1. For example: demographic: extremely important
 - a. An article I used to use in this course was a historical investigation of mothers’ attitudes toward infants in eras of high infant mortality
 - 1) Author looked at diaries, letters
 - 2) Much less emotional investment in the infant, and

less emotion at the loss

- 3) Reactions of students was to blame the mother
 - 4) But maternal feelings are affected by the degree of confidence a mother can have that an infant will survive
 - 5) A low probability of survival throughout society will influence what all parents feel
 - 6) We can't see them only in terms of individuals who are lacking in feeling, using our present-day values
2. Example: the Industrial Revolution
 - a. We have discussed many of the changes
 3. Example: World War II
 - a. Big increase in women working outside the home
 - 1) Greatly increased participation in labor market of women with young children
 - b. Divorce rate at an all-time high; happens with wars
 4. Example: new reproductive technologies that challenge our most basic beliefs and values
 - a. Surrogacy, etc.
 - 1) "That woman's carrying my baby. Isn't she supposed to be my wife?"¹

¹ Quote from Helena Ragoné, 1997: "Chasing the Blood Tie: Surrogate Mothers, Adoptive Mothers, and Fathers." In Louise Lamphere, Helena Ragoné and Patricia Zavella, eds., *Situated Lives*. New York: Taylor & Francis, Inc./Routledge, Inc.

II. Beginning of 21st century: why is being a mother or a father so difficult in America?

A. Shifting roles, resulting confusion

1. Problems with the traditional arrangements?
 - a. Difficult for many families to live on one paycheck
 - b. Cowan and Cowan article
2. New arrangements in childcare, new values
 - a. Pioneer couples trying for “egalitarian” marriages, including childcare duties
 - b. Couple faces disapproval, doubts, incomprehension of parents, boss, friends, etc.
 - c. What do you do if you and your spouse disagree about childrearing philosophy and you’ve agreed that each parent is 50% responsible?
 - d. The new father: participation in parenting is his right (seen to be a fulfilling role) as well as duty
 - 1) Earlier: father had rights in his children (seen as economic assets), but notion of a “right” to become a father or not is a new concern
 - 2) Earlier: becoming a father accompanied marriage, or a sign of irresponsibility if the mother is unwed
3. Shifting conceptions of what it means to be a man, a woman make an impact as well
 - a. Men, masculinity
 - b. Mid-century (and continuing) discussions about the

negative effects of an “absent father” (seen to result in juvenile delinquents, homosexuals)

- 1) This theory derives from anxieties about the male role in general
 - 2) For example, anxiety about men’s jobs no longer being “masculine”
- c. These anxieties displaced onto developmental psychology: boys seen to have a great deal of trouble achieving manhood, male identity
 - d. Boys seen to need a “present” father in order to be able to develop into a normal adult male
 - e. A heightened concern with maintaining distinctions between father and mother role because previous distinctions were breaking down
 - f. First half of 20th century: father should have an active, but limited, role in childrearing
 - 1) Strongly challenged during the 1970s and after

B. Contradictions that are built in:

1. Mother?
 - a. “Told it’s their most sacred duty, while on the other hand keeping them on a level of unpaid drudgery”—this was a feminist critique
2. Father?
 - a. A deep-seated ambivalence about this role is readily apparent in popular culture
 - 1) Discuss: Westerns, other movie genres

C. Learning how to be a parent

1. How to produce a successful child begins to be greatly debated in the 19th century—for the first time, doubts, uncertainty appear
 - a. Unknowns are especially numerous today
2. Preparation for parenting?
 - a. You can't really learn except by doing many of the things you need for family life
 - b. Because of birth patterns, most parents' previous experience with their younger siblings was not when their siblings were infants
 - c. Experience with infants?
 - 1) Men in particular little experience
 - d. You can learn a bit during pregnancy
 - 1) But this can be confusing because of all the child psychology books, etc.
4. And the transition to parenthood is abrupt
 - a. And, of course, occurs when the infant is most needy
 - b. Vivid depiction of this in Cowan and Cowan

D. Difficult to evaluate success along the way

1. Children go through “phases” (e.g., stealing)
2. Why we're so interested in school reports or pediatrician's assessments

E. Lack of societal support

1. USA is one of the few countries without a family policy
2. Lack of adequate parental leave when babies are born
3. Lack of flexible work hours (“flextime”) programs in US corporations
4. Lack of access to reasonably priced, competent child care
5. Lack of governmental support for families that want to adopt the traditional stay-at-home mother model

III. Social role of father as compared to that of mother

A. Distinction between biological father and social father

1. Remember distinction between Latin terms *genitor* and *pater*?
2. But no socially important equivalent distinction between 2 kinds of mother, except in cases of adoption
 - a. Maternity was seen to always be certain, paternity not
 - b. Paternity tests were needed, not maternity tests²
 - c. And challenges: “give the child a name,” etc.

B. But with new reproductive technologies, there is currently a huge debate about motherhood

1. Cultural assumptions are revealed in the current debates about who is THE mother?

² Except royal births that required an official witness to confirm that the infant emerged from the woman. A practice in the United Kingdom until Princess Diana’s 2nd child was born.

2. The one who contributes the egg? The one who carries the fetus to term? The one who adopts the child? The one who “arranged” for the child to come into existence by entering into a surrogacy contract with another woman?
3. With DNA testing, paternity is much easier to establish than maternity; a reversal
4. Fatherhood: rights to the child when contested; ability to participate in decision-making regarding pregnancy
 - a. Marriage increasingly seen as providing the father with rights to the child that could be contested if the parents remain unmarried
 - 1) Reversal of earlier concerns about unwed mothers, “give the child a name,” “make an honest woman of her”
 - 2) Mason et al. call this issue “unwed fathers”
 - b. Example of a court case involving a woman whose husband dies suddenly; she wants to have a child by him by harvesting his semen, even though he hasn’t given explicit permission³
 - c. Should she be able to?
 - d. Headlines: “Court blocks embryo use over ex-husband’s rights: Decision finds woman needs his consent”⁴
 - e. Or: “British women lose court fight over possessing frozen embryos”⁵

C. Ties in with rise in number of women choosing to get pregnant even

³ Bill would regulate sperm of dead men: Removal would require specific written permission from donor. *New York Times* March 7, 1998.

⁴ *New York Times* May 8, 1998.

⁵ *New York Times* Oct. 2, 2003.

though unmarried (Mannis).

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