

PARADIGM CONFLICT: MOTHERHOOD ON THE FAULT-LINE

In 1995, nine years ago, I attended a two day conference at the University of New England: 'Marrying Work and Family Responsibilities'. I was in the early stages of research for a PhD in Conflict Resolution, originally designed to discover and describe the conflicts experienced by women that arose as a result of becoming mothers.

By the time I arrived at the conference I was no longer asking whether women were experiencing conflict, but why they were encountering it to the degree they were reporting and what the underlying cause of such widespread grief, disbelief and anger might be. Motherhood, after all, is the single most essential foundation to the continuation of the species (as Australia's Federal Treasurer has recently made so clear). It made no evolutionary sense that women should be finding that the transition caused them the levels of stress and depression I was recording.

I set this conference as my starting point because it was here that I began to understand that the difficulties my respondents were reporting were not an individual phenomenon but a collective one and that the inequities they experienced fell into a blind spot in the debate.

Day one of the conference was spent detailing the legislative, industrial and social achievements and shortcomings of Affirmative Action, EEO and the moves afoot to assist women who were mothers to participate in an equalitative manner in the paid workforce. The information was well received. However, when day two began in the same vein, I was interested to hear those around me beginning to grow restless, asking in murmured tones questions such as, 'What about the lack of support for women who don't want to return to paid work?' 'Where is the equality for the women who cannot make their passion for and commitment to their babies fit into the demands and structures of paid work?' 'What about women who are mothering children with special needs?'

As Kagan once noted, 'During each historical period there is a dominant philosophical view that most scholars try to avoid confronting – an intellectual electric fence' which causes research to have more to do with the questions that are asked and the way they are asked [and answered] than with objective facts. It appeared that our only response to the inequality, per se, that women still experience was to facilitate their move from home and family into the paid workforce as soon as possible after having their babies.

The Disparity Between Public And Private Concern

The first person to step across the electric fence was the Human Resource Manager sitting next to me who stated that some women did not want to go back to work because they wanted to care for their children full-time. He asked for information regarding what was being done to support them in their choice and to enable their return to paid work, perhaps years later. Firmly turning up the voltage, the speaker dismissed him with the statistic that 50 percent of women returned to paid work, at least part-time, by the time their first child was five years old. It was as though the other 50 percent and the intervening five years did not exist and were not valid territory for consideration.

In this debate there was no acknowledgment of the fact that women return to work for many reasons after having their children, not always happily and, as my own research has shown, often unwillingly and painfully. My respondents said they returned to work because they could not tolerate or adjust to:

- the poverty of motherhood

- the isolation and loneliness
- the emotional drain, physical demands and tedium of full-time, unsupported motherhood
- being dependant on their partners for financial, emotional and social support
- the control this gave their partners over their lives
- their lack of status as 'just a mother'
- the social perception that they were doing nothing and were uninteresting
- their inability to 'achieve' or 'succeed' in a manner valued by their society
- the fear that if they did not remain engaged in paid work they would be left behind making it difficult to return at a later date
or they:
- enjoyed the work they did prior to becoming mothers
- believed they had something of value to offer in their paid workplace capacity

Only 3.6 percent returned to paid work to further their ambition for wealth or power. With the exception of those who occupied the last two categories, the vast majority said that had the social structures surrounding them immediately post motherhood been more accommodating of their needs for community and support and had they had the financial wherewithal to make the decision, they would have chosen to stay at home with their young children, at least until they reached school age. Every woman stated that her children were her primary concern regardless of whether or not she believed she would again choose motherhood if she had her time over, regardless of her professional commitment to her career, regardless of her aspirations for her future.

The Cost:Benefit Ratio

During the conference panel discussion I made the following assertion by which I still stand. In my observation most women who arrive at the top of their professions appear to do so without cost to themselves, their children, their immediate and extended families, relationships or community. They have a tendency to be, at best, not open and, at worst, less than honest about those costs. Nor do they tend to be open and honest about the levels of personal support they have had and/or the degree of economic resources they have had at their disposal to supplement or purchase that support.

This leaves those who are struggling in their positions further down the professional and economic ladder feeling as though they are somehow inadequate when, lacking those same resources, they are unable to juggle the double demands of parenting, maintaining relationships, housekeeping *and* paid work. When they discover they must make serious compromises that diminish their ability to mother their children as well as they would like, develop their career, feed their relationships, take time out for themselves, many assume that there is something wrong with them – as people, as women and especially as mothers. As one respondent, Margaret, said,

I resigned from my teaching job because I found mothering and working to be incompatible roles. I am just not a very adequate person. I knew I could not do it all. I knew I would be a pretty rotten mother if I worked.

There is little in the public arena that would correct this misperception regarding 'adequacy'. Equally, therefore, there is little to inform leaders in the political and economic spheres of the costs of trying to marry family commitments with paid work. Nor is there any incentive for them to make the effort in terms of the time, energy and resources required to restructure the workplace in such a manner as to take into account and alleviate these obstacles.

Fortunately, the keynote speaker at this conference interrupted the moderator as he tried to ignore my comments. She proceeded speak at length, telling the delegates that there had been many times on the pathway to her professorship that she had wondered whether the time and energy she was investing in her career were worth the costs, that there had been many occasions when she wanted to walk away, many times her children wanted attention she had been unable to give – and that she could not possibly have achieved what she had without the absolute support of her husband and her own mother.

The really interesting outcome of this exchange was that for the remainder of the conference *every single person* who spoke from the podium or from the floor prefaced their comments with what their career had cost them in terms of their relationships, especially with their children, what help they had or had not had, and what impact these dynamics had had on their self-esteem, economic viability, career, health and social standing. During the ensuing luncheon and afternoon tea a continuous stream of women sought me out to tell me their stories of support or lack thereof, the costs and the heartaches, the regrets and the guilt – and their anger at their society's dismissal of their lived reality – that as long as they were 'only' mothers they were not considered equals and their concerns were treated as invalid.

As long as paid work is placed at the centre of the debate with family the secondary consideration, it will always be family that must twist itself into a pretzel to fit the demands of the paid workforce and not the paid workplace that must make the sacrifices.

The Silenced Inequality

I returned home that evening knowing that this was too an important issue to be buried on a university bookshelf and that the other side of the equality debate urgently needed to be made available to women everywhere. I set aside my academic aspirations to write *Naked Motherhood: Shattering Illusions and Sharing Truths*. In the course of researching the conflicts of motherhood, publishing *NM* and submitting my thesis, I received poignant, even heart-breaking letters from many readers and spoke to thousands of women in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote Australia who confirmed the validity of my contributors' concerns.

A conflict, a problem, an inequality as universal as that which mothers are experiencing cannot be resolved while those who are suffering its consequences believe that they, alone, are unable to cope, to 'adjust'. It cannot be resolved while those who are not directly affected deny the existence of the inequality and blame those who are suffering for whingeing, being inadequate, not trying hard enough. And it cannot be resolved when those who have suffered in the past, but have moved past that suffering, refuse to admit to the costs and consequences in their own lives. Until such time as both those who are directly involved and those who are not accept that it is not individuals who are dysfunctional, but a dysfunction of the social structure, there can be no inclusive debate and, therefore, no resolution.

When the sectors of a society most burdened by its dominating norms are unable effect change in a manner that enables them to meet their needs, they will ultimately turn against each other in an attempt to justifying their choices, while those who are truly responsible for their inequality escape scrutiny. Throughout my research and still today, I encounter a constant outcry from women who have chosen Motherhood as their primary profession that they are no longer seen to be making a contribution to their society, but as lazy, lacking ambition and a drain on public resources – and that their greatest critics are woman in the paid workforce. Federal baby bribes are highly unlikely to alter this opinion. Equally, those women who have chosen Motherhood *and* paid work find that their most vociferous critics are full-time mothers who assume that their 'selfish' motives deprive their children of 'essential' and 'irreplaceable' full-time mothercare. Down this conflictual dividing line Kagan's blind spot thrives and the arguments oscillate

around *it*, not the structural inequalities at the core of the problem.

Investment Choice

The fact that is often overlooked is that the only investment capital we really have is ‘time’ – a finite 168 hours per week. How we each choose to invest those hours will:

1. determine the level of the rewards or punishments our society affords us according to current values domains and
2. define those areas we will, perforce, compromise or ignore because we have no capital left to invest in them.

Increasingly, the time investment that produces the greatest rewards is that which results in financially measurable outcomes. Individuals who engage in producing quantifiable, income-producing commodities – whether cigarettes or homes, prescription drugs or banking services, teen idols or sports marketing machines – are deemed to be investing their capital in endeavours that are worthy of reward. These returns on investment enable them to purchase those goods and services that meet their children’s and their own needs and provide them all with future security.

However, when an individual chooses to invest her time capital in the less easily quantifiable domains of producing and caring for a baby and future adult, building quality relationships and communities she is unlikely to be rewarded to an equal degree. She will, therefore, be less able to meet her needs and provide for her family’s future security. Wilber states that the domination of this goal oriented paradigm has caused quality to be reduced to quantity, significance to be reduced to size and value to veneer.

The current political climate presents a perfect example of Wilber’s assertion. Coercion and bribes to produce quantities of children are made without an equal consideration for the quality of their lives or the significance of quality healthcare, education and relationships in producing children who feel valued and who want to engage with their society in a contributive manner. There is increasing pressure on mothers to return to work with little consideration of the infrastructures that might enable them to do that without injecting undue time stress and anxiety into their relationships with their children. The last thing this nation needs is more children who arrive on the doorstep of adulthood feeling dispossessed, depressed, angry or suicidal because they were treated as though they had no value, no significance other than to populate the country – and it is the last thing most women want for their children. Nancy, a physiotherapist, commented:

I keep thinking, “Wait a minute, one lifetime.” When you talk to older people or someone who’s dying they look you straight in the eye and tell you to look to what’s really important — and it always comes down to family, love, yourself, close friends. If your job is part of your self-concept then that’s important. But make sure you’re not just driven by a society that tells you that you should be working, that you should have what consumerism says you should have.

All debate regarding the family/paid work conflict is couched in semantics that place ‘work’ in the dominant position, family in the secondary. ‘Work’ refers only to paid work, unpaid work remains invisible, unacknowledged, unaccounted; family is reduced to responsibility, never a commitment much less the primary concern or a passion. If the semantics were reversed and the parameters of the debate defined as ‘Marrying Family Commitment With Paid Work’, the emphasis would more accurately reflect the order of importance of these divisive issues as defined by the majority of full-time and paid working mothers who participated in my research and with whom I have since discussed these issues.

Personal Or Structural Pathology?

If a single individual fails to make the adjustment to the norms of the dominant paradigm, it is she who holds the problem, the pathology. However, when significant numbers in a particular sector of a society find the adjustment to be onerous, it is likely that the pathology resides in the paradigm that dictates the norms and value domains. Burton notes that wherever there is a 'resigned acceptance' that nothing can be done to rectify the non-fulfilment of fundamental human needs, it is because there is an unwillingness to alter the sociopolitical structures at the base of the conflict. This lack of willingness is justified first by blaming the problem on 'personality abnormalities' and then by requiring the affected individual/s to 'adjust' and undergo educative processes that will bring them into line with the existing social and institutional structures. Such practises effectively prevent any debate that suggests the structures, themselves, may be the source of the abnormalities.

Motherhood, as it is currently constructed in Australia, is a victim of such a social pathology. Mothers stand on the fault-line of the conflict between the dominant paradigm that acknowledges and rewards quantifiable achievement and the subordinate paradigm that is based upon the creation and maintenance of quality relationalism. This is generating an epidemic of stress and depression amongst mothers of such proportions, with such long-term consequences for them, their children, their relationships, health and their society that were it a virus, it would be being treated with a very high degree of concern, even alarm.

Perhaps that is why political parties of both persuasions are attempting to address these difficulties by offering families a payment of \$3,000 for every child they produce and supporting 12-14 weeks paid maternity leave. Admirable though these measures maybe, they are generated by and primarily designed to meet the values of the dominant paradigm of quantifiable achievement. The quality of the parents' and children's lives does not enter the debate. Subtly these measures reduce children to the status of a moderately expensive commodity. I cannot help but wonder from where will come the funds to maintain these children once the down payment runs out.

Similarly, and perhaps unintentionally but nevertheless to have done so, the benchmark for acceptable full-time babycare has now been set at three months. For those able to afford to take the further nine months in unpaid leave, the acceptable parameter remains at 12 months. To mother a child on a full-time basis beyond this limit it to increasingly expose one's self to criticism since one is not conforming to the dictates of the dominant paradigm. These measures may, therefore, serve to exacerbate the difficulties women experience in being pressured to return to paid work before they are ready and into workplaces that do not meet their needs or ameliorate their concerns – unless they go on producing commodified children.

Repairing the Paradigm Fault-Line

Until such time as there is a widespread recognition of:

- the true qualitative value of a full-time mother (parent)
- the difficulties adults encounter when they parent full-time
- the costs of coercing parents into investing their time capital in ways they cannot adequately manage
- the costs to parents, their children and the nation of requiring parents to separate from their children for long periods each week in pursuit of the rewards essential to the fulfilment of their needs but which can only be earned within the value domains of the dominant paradigm structure

there will never be any incentive to alter the social support and paid workplace structures in such a way as to support parents and their children in maintaining quality relationships – whatever their choices. And there will certainly be no incentive for men to take up an equal share of caring for their children.

If the depth and severity of the conflicts I uncovered in the course of my research and beyond were acknowledged and their validity recognised it would be clear that the funds now being invested in baby production would be better spent strengthening existing and developing new social support structures that nurture women with young children, create the community the majority say they crave after becoming mothers and honour babies and young children as the precious beings they really are.

Women who are already trapped in poverty, who are undereducated and whose access to interesting, rewarding paid work is limited may initially be seduced into producing more children ‘for the country’ in spite of the lack of backup from their society. Those whose circumstances enable them to access more rewarding paid work, whether they choose to do so or not, are highly unlikely to be coerced into having even one more child than they originally intended given the inequality of their status as mothers and the fundamental lack of social support they receive in the role.

If the value of motherhood were placed at the centre of the debate and paid work stood as the secondary consideration, it would be clear that if we genuinely want to engage and benefit from the resources women offer, the values and structures of commercial and public paid workplaces, tax laws and government policies will need to:

1. Embrace paid maternity leave and support its extension across the board.
2. Provide genuinely flexible work practises that include consideration for children who are ill, require parental support in their schools, are on school holidays.
3. Provide childcare in close proximity to, if not within, the workplace enabling would-be parents to engage with the carers before they have their babies and so feel comfortable leaving them at an early age in someone else’s care; where they can drop off their babies and toddlers, breastfeed them throughout the day, see them during breaks, be there if they are hurt or become ill during the day, and pick them up – all at little time cost to themselves or the organisation.
4. Ensure that high quality, paid childcare is universally affordable and available, not just for mothers who are in the paid workforce, but also for those who require respite from full-time mothering if they have no other social support. Discovering that they can access childcare without severe consequences to their children may support mothers in choosing to make the transition back to the paid workplace sooner than they might otherwise.
5. Ensure that parents are able to have time off during school holidays.
6. Provide holiday care for school age children and before and after school care for those whose parents work full-time.
7. Add childcare and the expense of employing a nanny to the list of legitimately deductible expenses essential to the fulfilment of paid employment.
8. Provide significantly greater financial support for women who are mothering full-time.
9. Implement universal and affordable retraining opportunities for women that are designed specifically to close the gap between their knowledge and experience of their chosen field of endeavour prior motherhood and the demands of the paid workforce they are reentering.
10. Ensure that part-time paid workers, whether casual or permanent, have equal

access to pro rata benefits and opportunities for training and career advancement as their full-time counterparts.

11. Cease insisting that, as a nation, we cannot afford 1-10 above. The fact is we can muster the billions of dollars required to fight external terrorists – these same billions would alleviate pretty well all the demons that are threatening to tear apart our society from the inside. It is all a matter of focus, what we choose to see and value, what we choose to cram into the blind spot and ignore.

After nine years of researching and discussing these issues with women in both formal and informal settings, the conflicts of motherhood have not altered – indeed, they have escalated. While the paradigm of achievement increasingly subsumes our only available investment capital those who choose to invest their time in the paradigm of relationships are increasingly penalised. Far from having improved, it now appears that the only way to survive in the postmodern world is to jump ship, desert the relational playing field, embrace the paradigm of quantifiable achievement, cross our fingers and hope that we will be amongst the few who can have it all at no cost to ourselves or our families. This is not the equality that we are selling to our young women.

If the nation wants to draw on the talents and energies of its mothers, we must first acknowledge that their commitment to their families is their primary concern and then design the paid workplace to accommodate their needs. The onus to figure out how to reenter the paid workforce after becoming a mother *and* still adequately care for their children should never have been the sole responsibility of individual mothers, one-by-one-by-one. The costs to them, their children and the nation have been, and still are, far too high.

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