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# **“Mothers and Sons Today Challenges and Possibilities,” September 25-27th, 1998: A Review”**

*Students in Professor Andrea O'Reilly third year Women's Studies course, "Mothering and Motherhood," York University, attended the "Mothers and Sons: Challenges and Possibilities" Conference, September 1998, (Toronto, Ontario) at the start of their academic year. They were required to attend at least three sessions and write a five page review of selected sessions or plenaries. One review would be selected for publication in the inaugural issue of the journal of the Association for Research on Mothering. The following review by Janet Maxyman was selected from the 50 reviews received.*

Feminist mothers face a challenge: how do you educate sons about the issues of gender equality without alienating them from their male culture? By being sensitive to sexism, sons face potential rejection from the masculine culture that bestows inclusion, esteem and privilege to “masculine” men. Feminists strive for gender equality, yet as mothers, they tend to fear that their sons will suffer and be displaced in the patriarchal society. The York University conference, “Mothers and Sons Today: Challenges and Possibilities,” provided a forum for women to examine these and many other important questions about the mother-son relation. This paper will review the first and second keynote and one concurrent session.

Speakers in the first and second keynote addresses, and in the session “Reconstructing Masculinity at Home” examined how feminist thought has affected the mother and son relationship, challenged the belief that mothers must distance themselves to allow the masculine development of the sons, called into question the cultural definitions of masculinity, and finally shared with participants alternative modes of mothering. In the opening paper of the first Keynote Plenary entitled “Mothers, Sons and Feminism, Babette Smith

equality. She called for a better understanding of the construct of masculinity and argued that feminists, by maintaining an anti-male perspective, have misunderstood their sons needs and discounted the male culture. Smith suggested that it is not that sons lack emotion, it is that we have little awareness of the consequences that they face when they appear vulnerable to their male peers. When sons become emotionally distant, mothers may tend to accept this behaviour, believing it be the romanticised image of what a man should be—strong, silent, self sufficient. This relationship reinforces the stereotypical relationship of the remote male and the passive female, and perpetuates gender inequality. Smith went on to argue that women tend to underestimate boys capacity for emotional maturity and do not tend to challenge, and hence heighten, their sons emotional maturity in the same way they challenge their daughters. Smith sees this as a crucial dynamic. Unless men become emotionally responsible, they cannot fulfil their own needs, nor the needs of their partners and children. Smith concluded that men must play a role in gender equality; solutions cannot be imposed from without by feminist ideology and by achieving emotional maturity, men have the means by which they can begin to sort out problems within their specific male culture—a culture, which she points out, we, as feminists, have made assumptions about.

Babette Smith's theories came as a relief to me but I could also see how her stance may affront others. My seven year old son's school yard bravado has puzzled me; I have viewed it as aggressive and I can't eliminate it. It seems that Smith's message is that I can't stop the "wolf pack" mentality, but I should not surrender to it. Smith is short on concrete advice, admitting that the construct of masculinity needs feminist enquiry, but her strong belief that sons must be challenged, must be brought into the emotional spectrum instead of being allowed to drift away without accountability, overrides my anxiety and confirms my suspicion that masculinity can be damaging to males too. However, for women who have been damaged by male violence, Smith's call for understanding of the male culture may be too much; I would imagine that these women would want to distance their sons from the male sphere instead of monitoring their participation in it. I also believe that feminist ideology can be of help to men; challenging a construct can be an overwhelming task when it envelops you and a non-hostile feminist viewpoint could stimulate, even in very subtle ways, a male reassessment of "masculinity."

In the second paper of this plenary "Tuck Me In: Redefining Attachment Between Mothers and Sons," Marni Jackson shared her experiences of the "negotiation of distance or space" that occurs in the mother-son relationship, and she challenged the cultural assumption that maternal "over involvement" of mother inhibits male development. Jackson asked, "At what age do you stop tucking your son into bed?" What is the appropriate distance or amount of attachment between mothers and sons? Surprised by her lapse into conventional ideas of "motherhood" and unhappy about tensions that had arisen between her and her 15-year-old son, Jackson critiqued society's Freudian

obsession with sexuality. Jackson claimed that we are “oversexed in fears and under-eroticized in behaviour.” In our society “sex” must be kept outside of the family circle and the intense love for our sons seems inappropriate. By confusing touch with sex, we withdraw physically and emotionally from our teenage sons but this withdrawal, deemed necessary for male development, can seem to boys that they are being pushed away at a time when they need trust, closeness and warmth. Instead of just focusing on the growth or development of the son, Jackson advocates a perspective that emphasizes the mutual growth of both mother and son. Instead of viewing “motherhood” as a set of rules to be applied, Jackson stresses that the mother-son relationship is a dynamic relationship: stay close and negotiate the terrain as you go.

The third speaker, Mary Kay Blakely shared her experience of mothering and challenging the rules of “motherhood” in “American Mom: Reflections of an Outlaw.” Blakely’s feminism grew from her experience of the pretence of “motherhood” versus the realities of mothering. She talked about the “bad days”—the long days of caring for small children when she felt unhappy with the person she had become. The strictures of motherhood demanded a pretence of continual confidence and capability that eluded Blakely, as it does for most, if not all, mothers; she was comforted by the “reality” stories of frustration, fatigue, fear and anger that she privately shared with other mothers. Mothering within the institution of motherhood is a powerless responsibility; mothers are to carry on rules that have been determined by philosophies external to the mother/child relationship. It is a political job and Blakely urges us to question the “laws” and determine how we want to mother—will we be inside the laws or will we become “outlaws?” It is always a relief to hear in public what you yourself have experienced and I valued Blakely’s call for a realistic discussion of motherhood. Dispelling the myth of innate mothering capabilities would eliminate the guilt and tension that mothers feel when the job overwhelms them, and would stop that bitter cycle of inadequacy that attacks women’s self esteem.

The first keynote address gave me a sense of relief, and validated the sense of uneasiness and conflict I have felt about observing the “rules.” Smith, Jackson, and Blakely didn’t provide pat answers but they imparted a powerful message: challenge the rules of motherhood that manipulate your relationship with your son. By challenging, it is possible to maintain a close and respectful relationship, it is possible to attain gender equality and it is possible to alter perceptions of the “norm.” In the second keynote address entitled “Mothers and Sons: Race, Sexuality and Ability,” speakers related the challenges and benefits of mothering modes that stand outside of the white, heterosexual and patriarchal society. In “Lesbians Raising Sons: Bringing up a New Breed of Men,” Jess Wells asked the audience to consider lesbians as a “people beyond sexuality.” She listed the challenges lesbians face in parenting, the largest being the prevalent belief that only men, and not women, can make men. Lesbians parent in a “village” context, and Wells argues that male role models don’t need

to “sleep in mother’s bed”; men in the extended community provide models for sons of lesbians. The initial fear of raising a son who is, by virtue of his sex the “other” or the “oppressor,” was replaced by the hope that lesbian mothers can socialise their sons to become a new breed of man. Family arrangements allow sons to see women in “non-gendered” roles, demand self sufficiency and negotiation in the face of violence, and encourage acceptance of all emotions. Not pre-eminent in patriarchy, these values encourage respect for women. Wells believes that the concept of gender is a constructed reality that limits individual growth and she used clothing as an example. Not wishing to confine her son to imposed gender boundaries, Wells bought her two-year-old son a dress and, according to her, he revelled in the sensation and felt confident wearing it in public until the age of five. I became tense (as I suspect much of the audience did), knowing this to be a cultural transgression. Influenced by my personal feelings and Babette Smith’s address, I wondered how much consideration she had for the consequences he would have to deal with. How much of “her” was she enforcing upon him? I sensed he was a “test case” for her personal beliefs and I disapproved. However, this story released a sadness within me because I had become the gender enforcer, censoring my son’s use of nail polish and pantyhose. For his own protection, I was banishing him from the female realm because, essentially, patriarchy reviles homosexuality and rigidly defines masculine behaviour. My experience reinforces Well’s theme that gender becomes enmeshed with concepts of sexuality.

Black women are not only subject to the rules of institutionalised motherhood, they are mothering in the violent context of racism. In “Black Mothers to Sons,” Carolyn Mitchell discusses how the struggle for black mothers is different from that of white, middle class mothers. The African American mode of mothering is determined by racism as mothers focus on keeping their sons alive in a predominately white culture. The black matrifocal system, judged by the Moynihan Report to be the cause of damage to black men, is misunderstood by white society. The mother network strengthens African American society by perpetuating culture and protecting children. White sons have domain in the larger community, but black sons become “suspect.” Mitchell informed the audience that the American Constitution historically regarded the black male as three-fifths of a man and she argued that the perception persists, citing the media’s distorted focus of black crime as an example. She draws our attention to the re-enslavement of the black male body. The high number of black prisoners provide economic profit for white owners of privatized prisons, thus diminishing the incentive for racial equality. Clearly, the goal of gender equality pales in comparison to the challenge of defying the institutional racism that threatens African American boys. In “Native Perspectives on the Mother and Son Relationship,” Jeannette Corbiere Lavell describes her experience of spirituality and sense of community in the Manitoulin Island Ojibway Reserve. She points to the position of respect that women have traditionally occupied within her culture: the grandmother’s duty to name the

child, the communal caring for children, men's deference to women based on the native belief that the Earth is a Mother to her people. The pow-wow celebrates the community and the reserve is a collective home; Corbiere Lavell related, that despite the fact that she and her son lived in southern Ontario, Manitoulin Island is where they "belong." Oppression by government and church has eroded traditional skills and ceremonies, and "home" is where the process of healing and reclamation occurs.

Jacqueline Haessly is a peace educator and adoptive parent of four special needs children, three of whom are boys. In "Mothering Sons with Special Needs: One Peacemaker's Challenge," Haessly emphasizes that the act of nurturing, instead of solely being a mother's responsibility, should be a group dynamic. Haessly's personal experience of family abuse and her work as a psychiatric nurse motivated her to become involved in programmes for non-violence. Her commitment to the creation of a peaceful environment in which differences are appreciated, needs and feelings are shared, and conflicts are resolved in a positive way enabled the growth and development of her challenged children. In an atmosphere of mediation, skills are passed on to children and they in turn take responsibility for problem solving and the well being of family and community. This approach decreases the expectation that it is mother's responsibility to be the mediator, or emotional caretaker, of the family. By developing these skills (which tend to be idealized as female virtues), sons are empowered and can effect positive change.

The Session "Reconstructing Masculinity at Home" was well attended and provoked a great deal of discussion. In "How to be a Feminist Mom," Catherine MacGillivray, challenged the premise that an "essential maleness" exists and rejected the idea that feminists should mother their sons with this belief. Rather than viewing children as male or female, all children should be viewed as human beings and should be socialised in the same manner in order to encourage common values such as empathy and tolerance. MacGillivray warns feminists that they are capitulating their goals by accepting a notion that she considers is a means of assigning rigid gender roles and naturalising aggressiveness. She recognizes that feminist mothers fear sons will be alienated by their peer group and offers an analogy that she believes is helpful. She considers that the challenges of feminism and racism are parallel, and feminists could help their sons cope with their "distinction" in the same way that racial minorities do: using coping techniques to help with not "blending in." She suggests that the challenges of feminism and racism are parallel. However, Carolyn Mitchell's earlier address indicated that the challenges of racism are much more threatening than the challenges of feminism and with this in mind, I wonder whether such an analogy is applicable.

In "Neither Wimps nor Warriors: How Do Mothers Mediate Masculinity for their Sons?," Alison Thomas discussed the social construction of male gender and assesses the concerns of feminist mothers today. In this century, father's absence during the work day meant mother had to impart the values of



*From left to right, Nancy Mandell, former Director of the Centre for Feminist Research, Andrea O'Reilly, Founding President, A.R.M., Marilyn Lambert, Acting Master of McLaughlin College, Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, keynote speaker, and her son, Nimke Lavell. Photo: Terri Urovitz*



*Participants at the conference, "Mothers and Sons Today: Challenges and Possibilities," held at York University in September 1998. Photo: Terri Urovitz*

“masculinity” to the son. Thomas acknowledges other influences such as media and school existed but essentially, boys learned to be masculine by not being like Mom, who defined the “feminine.” The feminist movement produced a “new kind of woman” who valued involved, communicative men, and women attempted to impart these values to their sons, hence developing a new construct of masculinity. Domestic responsibility and awareness of patriarchy were the goals of the new masculinity, but some sons reported that this knowledge made it harder to fit in with their friends—they had been made into wimps. Further results of an informal survey revealed that mothers risked their relationship with sons by critiquing their actions and attitudes, hence jeopardising the notion of unconditional love. Thomas suggests that, in the ongoing process of negotiating masculinity, feminists need to examine “masculinity,” involve men in the process, and critique without undermining our sons.

This session was attended by a significant individual, the infant son of Catherine MacGillivray. Despite his inability to comment, he seemed to bring our sons into the room as we grappled with “masculinity”—how we view it and how it defines our sons. Many women talked of the emergence of specific behaviour in sons despite their efforts to socialise them otherwise. An artist described her growing appreciation of hockey; another mother observed her double standard of wanting her daughter to play soccer to encourage assertiveness and her reluctance to have her son play because of the same reason. One mother stated the “boys will teach you who they are” and it was a reminder that, despite mother’s attempts to mediate “masculinity,” a son, by virtue of his personality and his circumstances, will determine that too.

In conclusion, the strength of this conference was the diversity of the participants. The varying perspectives of the speakers had to have challenged the assumptions of each member of the audience at some point. While there was not always agreement, there was consensus that the mother-son relationship needs to be further explored by feminist study. More male participants would have provided interesting viewpoints, such as the inside experiences of “masculinity.” I left the conference with a sense of possibility. I was fortified by the call to be aware of the forces of “masculinity” in your son’s life, to challenge the “rules” that persuade you to retreat for the development of “healthy” masculinity, and I gained insight and strength from women who mother in models not approved or promoted by patriarchy. It was a privilege to attend.

*Selected Papers from the conference will be published in Mothers and Sons: Feminist Perspectives, edited by Andrea O’Reilly, forthcoming from Routledge, Spring 2000. As well, the Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering will publish an issue on this topic.*