

Maternal Personality, Evolution, and the Sex Ratio: Do Mothers Control the Sex of the Infant?

Valerie J. Grant
London: Routledge, 1998

Reviewed by Laura Lynn Mielke

In *Maternal Personality, Evolution, and the Sex Ratio: Do Mothers Control the Sex of the Infant?*, Valerie J. Grant suggests that indeed the mother does control the sex of the infant. Her “maternal dominance hypothesis” runs as follows: Women who score high in dominance on a personality test are more likely to give birth to boys than women who do not. This is because dominance is linked to higher levels of testosterone in the mother’s blood, and testosterone affects whether the female reproductive system favors the X- or Y-chromosome-carrying sperm. In addition, stress can increase the amount of testosterone in a woman’s bloodstream. Thus, the mother’s personality and responsiveness to her environment are connected to her tendency to conceive a boy or a girl. This hypothesis makes sense in the evolutionary scheme, implying that mothers give birth to the children they are most suited to raise and at the appropriate time. The hypothesis also helps explain sex ratios (the ratio of males to females born in a given population) of populations under stress (higher than average). Grant suggests that if her hypothesis is correct, each mother “may be contributing to a kind of grand-scale psychological homeostasis which both sustains and limits psychological difference between men and women” (5).

Grant weaves examples from fiction and history and thought-provoking questions into her accessible synthesis of scientific studies. She carefully explicates research, evaluating each experiment’s design and relevance to her hypothesis. Grant claims she “gathers all the relevant information” from the research, and as a result, her book incorporates work in bio-statistics, reproductive physiology, animal behavior, developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, and bio-ethics (1998: 4).

Maternal Personality, Evolution, and the Sex Ratio repeatedly considers evolutionary order and the problems that arise when humans meddle with nature’s prescriptions. Of particular interest is the final chapter that discusses the social effects of technologies that determine, and perhaps one day control, the sex of any given fetus. Grant concludes that if a woman conceives a child of the sex she is most suited to raise, she should not attempt to preselect its sex. She believes that recognition of and respect for the maternal role in infant sex determination will correct the “son preference” in some societies.

Grant raises troubling questions surrounding developing technologies for manipulating the sex ratio. She also leaves us with troubling questions about the

role of scientific discourse in reinforcing dominant masculine power structures. Grant is aware that her linking of maternal dominance and the sex ratio not only (re-)naturalizes sex roles many feminists have sought to deconstruct but also identifies mothers as the “natural” perpetrators of those sex roles: “There may be an irony here,” she writes toward the end of the book, “in that it appears that women themselves, by their very nature, are the ones who maintain psychosocial sex differences” (180). As a result, she encourages women “to develop those potentials that are unique to women,” to embrace their psychological-social-biological role in evolution (196). In the maternal dominance scheme, differences in mothers’ personalities “ensure the continuation of psychological sex difference, thereby laying the foundations for interpersonal relationships and maintaining the basic structure of human society” (198). This “basic structure” seems to be women’s dominance in the family and men’s in society. At the heart of Grant’s hypothesis lies unspoken, politically conservative assumptions about the role of women in human society as well as in human evolution.

Going to an Aunt’s: Remembering Canada’s Homes for Unwed Mothers

Anne Petrie
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998.

Reviewed by Jeanne Marie Zeck

Feminists, sociologists, and historians will be pleased to know that Anne Petrie has researched a significant and often neglected phenomenon: homes for unwed mothers. Petrie’s book is a social history of such homes in Canada focusing on the period from 1950-1970. Balanced, intelligent, and well-researched, this book offers a view of the sometimes well-meaning, but often judgmental and punitive culture that found it necessary to hide unmarried pregnant women. This is a well-integrated study: Petrie draws on the work of historians, sociologists, and psychologists; she cites documents and administrators from the homes; and, most effectively, she interviews the girls themselves. Petrie’s greatest offering is the voices of these women, some of whom have never before told their stories. Nearly all of the dozens of women Petrie interviewed were coerced into giving up their children for adoption. In her book, Petrie focuses on seven women, including herself. She tells each story sequentially beginning with the relationship that resulted in pregnancy through to the days and months after each baby’s birth. Theirs are powerful voices of