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# **Social Work, Motherhood, and Mothering: Critical Feminist Perspectives**

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## **Mothering as a Social Worker: The Gifts and the Tyranny**

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*This autoethnography wanders into one academic social worker's reflections on her doctoral training some twenty-five years previously and how her exposure to certain theories and literatures impacted her maternal thinking and mothering role. Through an analysis of gathered data from doctoral course syllabi and other documents of reflection, three areas of theoretical contribution and deep influence were identified as the primary influences that helped to shape and make sense of the author's unfolding maternal and social work professional identities. The article describes and elaborates upon John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's work related to attachment theorizing and subsequent categorization. The anxieties identified in mothers who parent to these theoretical formulations are considered, along with the often impossible demands this theorizing makes upon mothers as they strive to embody the behaviors necessary to ensure a secure attachment bond. In contrast, the work of Jerome Kagan, Stella Chess, and Alexander Thomas that identifies an infant's temperamental predispositions at birth challenges infant attachment as fostered exclusively within a maternal responsiveness and orients thinking towards infant temperamental predispositions that innately construct attachment relatedness in a certain way, regardless of maternal responsiveness. These opposing nurture vs nature views are considered. Finally, the article considers the work of Jean Baker Miller and her contributions to understanding the forces of structural inequity at play that marginalize and devalue women's maternal role as situated in the existing patriarchy of the twenty-first century. Miller's work proves instrumental in validating the writer's own experiences of maternal devaluing.*

### **Introduction**

The act of mothering is a gift and a curse. I can think of no other role that shapes you more profoundly. One's maternity ensures encounters with a

remarkable capacity for loving and selflessness—capacities that may sidle alongside opposing thoughts and actions of a bleaker nature. It is a role that will inevitably have you encounter the best and the worst of yourself. If somehow the “voice” I am tethering to this article is encountered by a reader, let me welcome you to my thoughts not only about mothering but also about mothering as a professional social worker. Here I consider the aim of understanding life’s complexity in the construction of my professional social work and maternal identities. I write this as a middle-aged woman who has been professionally identified as a social worker for over thirty-five years. I write this also as a mother, whose mothering of a twenty-five-year-old daughter and twenty-two-year-old son has shifted dramatically, as these young adults take on the independent responsibilities of their own lives and move forward to postsecondary and employment encounters that are self-directed, save for their occasional requests for additional monetary funds. When I look back at my mothering experiences from their births to today, how I mothered, the time we spent together, and what I saw as important and necessary to cultivate in mothering were substantively influenced by my professional identity as a social worker. The shaping of one’s maternal self was also inextricably linked to the thinking that was cultivated by the numerous theoretical and research literatures explored, debated, and ultimately integrated as part of my doctoral social work education.

This article is an autoethnographic contribution, which is a research process that gives those who engage in it an opportunity to interrogate, define, and ultimately craft a telling of their own story, whatever that story may be—that of mothering as a social worker in this case. It offers a focus on one’s subjectivity and lived experiences; for me, it allows for the construction of one story that can then be woven into the ever-evolving tapestry of maternal lives. I was guided by Heewon Chang’s book *Autoethnography as Method* to answer my personal research question: How did my doctoral social work education and ongoing professional life influence my mothering? I gathered personal data in an attempt to address this question; I also used doctoral course syllabi saved from my on-campus years, reread seminal articles and books assigned from those same syllabi, and reviewed personal journals, which chronicled my early mothering and working experiences. These items became my sources of data that were then analyzed using a line-by-line coding process. This coding analysis was both iterative and repetitive and served to facilitate an identification and enlargement of initial nodal categories. Then, a process of data refinement was engaged with, which narrowed and condensed these nodal categorizations to three emergent sub-themes, which were identified as the theoretical contributions that most shaped my own thinking about, and consequent actions related to, mothering as a social worker. These three subthemes were attachment theory, infant temperamental predispositions, and structural

inequity contexts. Many of my thoughts about, actions, and felt experiences of mothering were deeply influenced by these academic literatures—the links to which will now be elaborated upon in this personal writing. The theoretical contributors of these three subcategories include the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's writing on infant attachments. In contrast, the theoretical contributions of Jerome Kagan, Alexander Thomas, and Stella Chess focus on the innate temperamental predispositions of infants from birth (which challenges attachment theory as an absolute truth). The writings of Jean Baker Miller are also considered here for their influence in shaping the navigation of the sociocultural maternal landscape, especially related to how her academic offering gave shape to my personally felt experience of mothering as horribly disenfranchised within the social confines of a prevailing patriarchy in the twenty-first century.

The first two years of my social work career were spent as a child protection worker for a local Children's Aid Society. I then transitioned to the role of a counsellor/therapist at a local family service organization upon the completion of a Master of Social Work degree. I remained at this family service organization providing individual, family, and group counselling for an additional ten years while also pursuing doctoral education. During these twelve years, I encountered what I consider to be the best and the worst in the human condition. These years taught me about the crushing effects of poverty, the self-destruction of addiction, the insidious prevalence of physical and sexual violence, and the structural forces in Western society that oppress those that find themselves outside of traditional and dominant ways of being. The work could be depressing on certain days; however, I cannot stress enough how deeply gratifying it was to reach towards one's fellow human travellers and feel like one's presence and the emotional work navigated together created a difference in another's mental if not physical wellbeing. Participating in a human encounter where people entrust to you with the narratives of their lives was an enormous privilege to receive along this journey we all call life.

Following the first twelve years of my social work life, the next eighteen years were sculpted by a voracious need to create some distance from the deep listening and attentive witness of the therapeutic encounter. As much as I felt deeply honoured to be entrusted with others' wellbeing and life narratives, I found it increasingly difficult to be attuned emotionally to the degree the work required as my fulltime working years accumulated. I began doctoral studies in my efforts to reintroduce rigorous intellectual stimulation and to encourage a personal growth edge that would move me out of my heart and more into my head. The doctoral pursuit, I hoped, would be a good counterbalance to the emotional demands of my life's work. During my doctoral training, I became pregnant with our first child. Our daughter's subsequent birth and my transition to motherhood also influenced my emotional responsiveness to

clients' needs. The transition to motherhood, with its Mount Everest-sized learning curve, demanded so much physical and emotional responsiveness to infant needs that I noticed another marked drain on my professional empathic and emotional resources. I had to personally reconcile that my occupational role as a counsellor/therapist was having a difficult time harmonizing with the demands of the work and my newly acquired role of mother.

The doctoral goal, the pursuit of which was an enormous privilege, allowed me to be one of ten doctoral candidates admitted to Smith College School of Social Work in 1995. This school of social work, situated in Northampton, Massachusetts, has a history that dates back over one hundred years to its founding as a school that trained social workers to respond to the psychological and human needs of “shell-shocked” veterans returning from the First World War. It is well known as one of the oldest schools of social work in North America and has an excellent reputation for training social workers in various direct practice orientations. This is where my story of the influence of these social work theoretical orientations on my mothering begins. I was submerged in academic readings that rigorously considered such intellectual considerations as psychiatrist Daniel Stern's work, a brilliant man who considered psychodynamic theory and practice as it applied to the experience of babies. His original theory of how infants create a sense of themselves and their relation to others was required reading (Stern 5). Exposure to Stern's work, along with the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, shaped my understanding of the infant-caregiver bond. Contemplating notions of infant attachment, trust, and dependency from the perspective of these great minds was engaging. Such learning also deepened my understanding of narratives that clients had previously shared. The learning solidified my understanding that themes of interpersonal trust, responsiveness, and dependency remain issues to negotiate for all people throughout their lifetimes—themes that may have their genesis in our earliest attachment encounters.

Studying infant attachment at the same time I was creating an infant attachment was a recipe for intense maternal self-scrutiny if not tyranny. It was difficult for me to separate this learned knowledge from my active attempts to be the kind of attuned and responsive mother these works insisted would create security in a primary attachment relationship with our children. I totally drank the Kool-Aid and believed that the quality of the relationship I created with our infant daughter, and then our infant son, could ultimately influence our children's experienced satisfaction in human relationships throughout their lifetimes. No pressure! Believing in attachment theory as truth, I set standards for my new mothering self, which in retrospect, were fuelled by a deep need to eradicate the pervasive feelings of incompetency that transitioning to motherhood presented in me. Follow the yellow brick road of attunement, responsiveness, and selflessness and all will be maternally well.



## Theoretical Influences

### *Attachment Theory*

For those of you who may not be intimately familiar with the work of John Bowlby (1907–1990), he was a notable British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who researched the effects of separation between infants and their primary caregivers. He stressed in his writing that all infants form enduring emotional bonds with their care providers, with the formation of these secure bonds being sensitive to critical periods within the first years of life (24-34). Bowlby believed that in infancy, a child would initially form only one primary attachment and that this attachment figure would act as a secure base for exploring the child's widening world. He believed strongly that a child has an innate need to attach to an attachment figure in infancy and that ideally this individual would provide continuous care for the first two years of life, and optimally the first five years (304-07). He then asserted that the creation of these secure bonds had the power to shape certain positive characteristics of emergent personality in the young child.

Building on Bowlby's work, Mary Ainsworth identified and subsequently detailed the features of three infant attachment styles: secure (contact maintaining) attachment, insecure-resistant attachment, and insecure-avoidant attachment (347-56). Through her research, she concluded that variation in infant attachment bonds were the result of the quality and type of responsive early interactions with the mother. Infants that were securely attached were easily soothed by the attachment figure when upset, used the attachment figure as a safe base to explore their environment, and showed distress when separated from their primary attachment figure, seeking proximity to her when under duress (311-14). This attachment style was considered ideal.

Both insecure attachment styles were likely the result of mother's caregiving responsiveness, which was less ideal and sensitive towards infant cues (314-16). Specifically, insecure-resistant attachment in infants seemed to be associated with inconsistent primary care, in which the infant's needs were sometimes met and sometimes ignored by the mother. Insecure-resistant children seemed to adopt an ambivalent behavioural style towards the attachment figure; they commonly exhibited clingy and dependent behaviour that could then become rejection of the attachment figure when engaged in interaction. These infants had difficulty moving away from the attachment figure to explore novel surroundings, and when distressed, they were often difficult to soothe and were not comforted by interaction with the attachment figure.

An insecure-avoidant infant attachment style was also associated with unresponsive primary caregivers who would respond to their baby's cues incorrectly or who were impatient or ignoring of their baby's cries. These

children seemed to come to believe that communication of needs had little influence on the mother. They did not seek contact with the attachment figure when distressed and were identified as being independent of the attachment figure both physically and emotionally for soothing emotional distress (316-21).

Being introduced to these academic works over the course of my master's and doctoral training, I was indoctrinated into thinking and behaving in ways that reflected the mothering ideals espoused as those that would create security in attachment. I would always respond to our infant daughter's cries and did my best to settle her according to whatever seemed to be causing her outwardly expressed distress. I would consistently attempt to be a presence for her that would reassure and calm her agitated states. I would emotionally bind my own feelings of mothering confusion and anxiety, with the hope that I would not transfer my anxious feelings to her. I had a difficult time leaving our first child with others, even when leaving her would restore some balance to my own life, so I took her everywhere I went in my efforts to reinforce this responsiveness and availability. Feeling exhausted yet? What I didn't see then, that I do see now twenty-five years later, is that I had bought into this attachment theorizing about mothering as the vital contributor to children's wellbeing as a singular truth. This so-called truth in its operationalization, however, demanded a selflessness that created in me a pervasive internalized conflict about fulfilling my own needs. The way the theory was presented at the time—placing responsibility solely on the maternal relationship—was one that was psychoanalytically rooted in Freud's ideas about early life, which included the idea that infants prior to the age of three are best served by one primary relationship only. An infant that had to accept care from someone that was not their mother was less than optimal, including fathers as well as outside caregivers who had a hand in contributing vital attachment experiences that forged trust and security. I can look back on those early transitional mothering years and say without exception that where our daughter was concerned, my husband was more able to settle her unsettledness than I was. He was much more skillful in being able to hold her in a way that was soothing to her distressed infant states. His attunement and goodness of fit as a new parent to an infant was often more effective than my own, but there wasn't a lot of room in Bowlby's or Ainsworth's work to enthusiastically embrace the fact that in the arena of maternal responsiveness he was better suited to some of the maternal tasks.

Having the luxury of time and reflection, what I can say about “mothering meets social work attachment theorizing” is that I did my best to be responsive and attuned, and I sacrificed myself and my needs a lot. By the time our second child, a son, was born three years later, my enthusiasm for pushing myself as a supermom was waning, and I started to settle into being less influenced by the great minds of attachment theorizing and leaned into an expectation that my

day-to-day mothering had to simply be “good enough,” as elaborated by Donald Winnicott (57). I lowered my standards to save my mental health, and I stopped looking for answers outside of myself about how to be a good mother and tuned into myself. I gave myself permission to just be in it—to just be our children’s mother—and to remember to put myself into my mothering in a way that was accountable to the self I was, a person with needs, too.

### *Infant Temperament*

Further into my doctoral education, theories about infant temperaments were introduced that expanded notions of infant attachment beyond maternal responsiveness, attunement and sensitivity. They suggested that the placement of attachment security was a function of an infant’s inborn constitutional temperament—a temperament that was often present from the infant’s birth. Jerome Kagan suggested that the innate temperament of a child may reflect Ainsworth’s primary attachment classifications but that these reflections are temperamentally and innately predetermined and may have little to do with what primary caregivers do or don’t do in response to infant need presentation (57-64). He suggested that some children were temperamentally vulnerable to anxiety states from the beginning days of life and that biological characteristics have “influence on vulnerability to fear in the Strange Situation, and therefore on the attachment group to which one is assigned” (Kagan 60).

Psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas’s infant temperamental classifications suggested three basic types or clusters of infant temperaments: easy, difficult, and slow-to-warm-up (Chess 5). Jerome Kagan suggested that Chess and Thomas’s “easy” baby—described as “having regular biological rhythms; drawn to novelty, adaptable to change, and in a fairly good mood most of the time” (Chess 5)—was a baby that could also be considered securely attached according to Ainsworth’s categorization. “Difficult” infants were those who tended to have “irregular rhythms, withdraw in the face of novelty, adapt slowly to change; and often seem to be in a very bad mood” (Chess 5); they exhibited similar behavior to children that evidenced insecure-resistant attachments according to Ainsworth’s categorization. “Slow to warm up” or shy children tended to withdraw from novelty and adapt slowly to change; their emotional reactions were often negative but of low intensity, and they were likely to exhibit insecure-avoidant attachments (Chess 5). The discovery of Kagan’s work was liberating to me, since it decentred the centrality of mother and placed the infant’s temperament at the centre of unfolding attachment constructs. In his view, these small beings, who are entrusted to our care, come into the world uniquely themselves; they had already formed their unique temperamental predispositions, which would then influence their attachment constructs. Security in attachment had less to do with what mothers did or didn’t do and more to do with an infant’s unique temperamental



constitution (57-64). I started to learn that for every truth there was another truth that would turn the first one over. Such is the world of academia and academic research, in which one must develop a tolerance for holding and honouring multiple truths in one's remarkable quest for human understanding.

### *Mothering and Structural Inequity*

Finally, I was personally influenced in my social work and mothering roles by Jean Baker Miller's seminal book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. In this book, she discussed the interrelationship between women's psychological patterns and social roles (like motherhood) that contribute to women's social subordination in present-day patriarchal culture. Her writing was my first encounter with thoughts about female development that suggested that women's attenuation "to the vicissitudes of another persons' mood, or the pleasure and displeasure of the dominant group" (Miller 39) was rooted in women's socially subordinate position (assigned to them) in patriarchy. Her work suggested that socially "subordinate persons may become more attuned to persons in the dominant group than they are to themselves, to the extent that they are unaware of their own needs" (Mullaly 176). Mullaly writing about Baker Miller's work further described, "consequently, they may act (and are expected to act) in ways that serve the interests of the dominant group but that negate their own interests" (176). This academic work profoundly influenced my own mothering life, because Baker Miller's articulations were so consistent with my felt and lived experiences as a woman, a social worker and a mother. I did seem to know more about what other people needed, (my partner, growing children, extended family members, and my professional clients) than how to respond to the needs of myself. Her writing inspired in me an analysis of the minutiae of my socialization experiences as a female situated in patriarchy, an analysis that when thoughtfully considered was replete with hundreds if not thousands of examples of socialization processes over my lifetime which demanded compliance, agreeableness, and a responsiveness to others' needs.

Miller's writing also offered the ideas of internalized oppression to explain women's lived experiences. She illuminated the complication of expressed anger in women's lives – suggesting that women, being in a subordinate social position encounter feelings of anger frequently because of this subordination (Mullaly 177). This felt anger however has no social escape route since exhibiting such negative emotion can lead to "social ostracism, financial hardship, and even violence" (Mullaly 176). Commenting on Baker Miller's work, Robert Mullaly states the following:

Ideology makes it appear that subordinate people have no reason to be angry at the dominant group (only at themselves) and in the case of women, it is against their nature (gentle, feminine) and ascribed

social role (caring, nurturing). Consequently, the anger of subordinate persons (in Miller's work, particularly women) becomes transformed into depression, ambivalence, or hysteria. (Mullaly 177)

I can honestly say that encountering the thoughts of Baker Miller throughout the many years of my social work education assisted me in making sense of my experience of being a mothering woman navigating my life in present times. Her academic contribution allowed me to understand some of the reasons for the anger I felt in mothering—not anger directed at our children, but an anger at the social devaluing that I experienced in the mothering role itself. There was no recognition, congratulations, or financial remuneration for the countless personal sacrifices made in fulfilling the mothering role. I came to understand deeply how thankless mothering can be and that a mother must reach for some other source of mothering motivation (shall we call it love?) to steel herself against the social inequities and marginalization of the maternal role. I express here a deep appreciation for the academic literatures I was exposed to in my social work education and training that added the discourse of structural inequity to help me understand my early lived experience of mothering.

### **Final Thoughts**

I hope I have been successful in conveying to you how navigating my mothering role for the past twenty-five years in concert with my professional identity as a social worker has not been an easy harmonization. The tyranny in this marriage is that once you are committed to this profession, you are educated to consider much psychological theory and research that informs how you see and understand mothering in today's world. As you attempt to integrate and master the plethora of educational knowledge provided, you understand the search for instructive absolute mothering truths is elusive and one has to be satisfied with the fact that many truths must be embraced in order to illuminate even the most faintest of lights on our quest for understanding the many factors and nuances that influence this dynamically interdependent relational maternal role.

As I learned personally, the role of professional responder to human need is a role that demands much of those who practice it. Combining this caring professional role with the caring demands of responsive and attentive mothering demands a lot of any person who finds themselves carrying both commitments to heart. I do believe that my turn towards academia allowed me to recover my emotional footing and provided me with a more balanced emotional life. I share this perspective to normalize these feelings for other mothers who are also social workers. I want them to know that carrying the emotional demands of both responsibilities may eventually become a challenge

and to encourage them to find their own personal ways to accommodate a commitment to caring at work and caring at home, according to their unique needs and personal dispositions.

The gifts of this marriage of being a social worker and a mother lie in the engaging theoretical orientations that a social work education provides. Students learn to deconstruct the social and cultural forces that continue to subjugate the feminine and continue to marginalize women's unpaid mothering contributions. It is a profession that trains students to consider their subjectivity deeply, given that this construct we call the "self" is the instrument that students use to conduct their work. This self-reflective training comes in handy when analyzing mothering actions and understanding the emotional responses of children. Every moment in human interaction can be a moment of self-understanding if one quiets themselves and casts a line for one's insights. I wouldn't think this way if I had not become a social worker. I wouldn't think this way if I hadn't become a mother, and for this I am deeply grateful.

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