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Maternal Activism on the Neighbourhood Level

The Ethic of Care as Motivation to Act

It has been well documented that in the North American context, women make a greater contribution to the well-being of others through acts of social responsibility than men (Almerida, McDonald, Havens and Schervish, 2001: 135; Fleeson, 2001: 85; Rossi and Rossi, 1990). Women's acts of caring are highest in their late 40s (Fleeson, 2001: 87) and include caregiving and emotional support to family members, friends and others, as well as volunteer activities addressing issues related to youth and health (Rossi, 2001). When examining their level of social responsibility, Joan Tronto (1993) suggests that women's roles as mothers, wives, and daughters predispose them to "hands-on" caregiving due to the social expectations placed upon them in their roles (132). She further suggests that caregiving becomes their fate, rather than a personal choice or desire.

Prior to entering the academy, I worked for over 20 years as a practitioner in community development on the neighbourhood level. It was with curiosity that I repeatedly observed that it was mothers who were the key leaders in any neighbourhood initiative. These initiatives typically addressed issues pertaining to recreation and social services and often required involvement with local government. These women—many of whom worked full-time in their homes—had no prior experience in neighbourhood activism, yet they accurately defined the issues, analyzed the political response required, and with great frequency managed to succeed in their political advocacy efforts. These mothers—who often felt unempowered in other parts of their lives due to poverty, lack of education, and minimal or total lack of spousal support—were successful in addressing issues for their children, their neighbours, and themselves.

In an effort to understand this phenomenon that I saw repeated in

neighbourhood after neighbourhood, year after year, I conducted a case study of a grassroots initiative led by four mothers in a southern Ontario neighbourhood. My interest in the neighbourhood initiative was to examine the role that women played, and their motivations to engage in maternal activism on the local level. River Valley (a pseudonym chosen for the neighbourhood under study) is a downtown core neighbourhood in a mid-sized city. The neighbourhood had experienced negative impacts resulting from the business activities of drug dealers and prostitutes. River Valley had become stigmatized by the larger community, and the streets felt unsafe for the residents who lived there. The four mothers who lead the neighbourhood were intensely involved in trying to restore a livable balance to their neighbourhood at the peak of its problems from 1989 to 1996. It was this time period that I examined in my study conducted in 2000-2001.

One of the emergent findings from the data analysis was that these mothers acted to protect and defend a) their own children and families; b) other children and families; c) the values they held as parents and community members; and d) the neighbourhood itself. The River Valley neighbourhood was their *home*, and the relationships they had with each other were familial. 'Community' was understood as the connections and relationships between people. As such, these mothers acted out of a moral imperative to protect and defend the *human* community.

River Valley case study

The purpose of this article is to report on an emerging finding from the River Valley case study: the influence of mothering on women's social activism on the neighbourhood level. As noted above, this case study was an in-depth qualitative exploration of a mother-led grassroots neighbourhood initiative. The case study was intrinsic (Stake, 2000: 437) by nature meaning that the intent of the exploration was to garner an understanding of the particular neighbourhood initiative that was undertaken in River Valley—the role that the women played, their motivations to act, and the strategies they used to address the issues in their neighbourhood.

The River Valley neighbourhood is located adjacent to the downtown core of the city. Demographically, the 1991 and 1996 census data (Statistics Canada, 1991, 1996) indicated that the educational level of the residents in River Valley was low when compared to the rest of the city, as were the income levels. The ethnicity of the residents indicated a fairly diverse neighbourhood, with the major ethnic origins reported as German, Vietnamese, Portuguese, and Polish. There were also smaller representations of Spanish, Yugoslavian, Croatia, and Jewish.

Until 1989, the neighbourhood had been relatively stable in regards to home ownership and property maintenance. By 1989, however, residents became increasingly concerned with the number of rental units owned by absentee landlords, their lack of adherence to property standards regulations,

and the transient nature of the rental tenants. By 1992, the prevalence of crack cocaine and prostitution was evident to both the homeowners and the police, particularly as the neighbourhood was experiencing an increase in drug-related crime. A neighbourhood meeting, initiated by one of the female residents, was held and an informally structured neighbourhood group was formed. The residents most actively involved and demonstrating leadership in the group were four mothers, two of whom were full-time homemakers, and two who also worked outside the home. All four women had children, had lived in the neighbourhood for some time, and of note, were in intact marriages with their original partner.

The research design reflected a feminist perspective (Harding, 1987; Olesen, 1994: 166; Reinhartz, 1992). At the root of this perspective is a concern for gender equality. Every attempt was made to ensure the inclusion of women's voices and their stories in the data collection and analysis. The four mothers who were active in the neighbourhood initiative agreed to act as community advisors to the study. As such, they were active in guiding the data collection process by offering suggestions of study participants, and by acting as gatekeepers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 252) to introduce the study to potential interviewees. The community advisors were also invited to include issues of interest to them in the data collection activities (Olesen, 1994: 166) and they provided extensive input into data interpretation (Reason, 1994: 334).

Data collection activities consisted of four focus group interviews with the community advisors as well as individual interviews with the community advisors, municipal government officials, police services personnel, and other residents who lived in the neighbourhood. In all, 20 individual interviews were held. In addition, documents such as memos, reports, and meeting minutes were reviewed to provide a chronological account of the activities of the neighbourhood group, the issues addressed, and the strategies used to address these issues.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed for use during the interviews (Fontana and Frey, 1994: 364) in that open-ended questions and probes were used to obtain the data. All data were audiotaped and transcribed using verbatim transcriptions. N-VIVO, a data organization and management system was used to manage the data. Data analysis was organized around *processes* (i.e., resident mobilizing approaches) and *issues* (i.e., prostitution, drug dealers) (Patton 377). A process of coding, identifying themes, making comparisons and contrasts, and clustering assisted with the analysis (Creswell, 1994: 154; Guba, 1978; Huberman and Miles, 1994: 432). The use of detailed coding assisted in distilling the data into themes and proved to be a useful data reduction technique in my attempts to illuminate the central meanings of what the various study participants were saying. Lastly, having the four categories of informants (community advisors, municipal officials, police services personnel, and neighbourhood residents) provided the opportunity to conduct cross-category analysis to determine the different perspectives on the central issues

of the study (Huberman and Miles, 1994: 435; Patton, 1990: 403) and to triangulate (Denzin, 1989: 236-241) the data.

Findings

Two key themes emerged as a result of the data analysis procedures: a) mothering as a motivator for social activism; and b) protecting and defending as motivators for social activism.

Mothering as a motivator for social activism

The four mothers who gave leadership to the neighbourhood initiative were motivated to address the issues in their neighbourhood due to their roles as mothers. When asked why she thought it was the women in the neighbourhood who led the grassroots initiative, Marilyn (2000), the most active mother with the neighbourhood initiative said,

It's fear for our family.... We have nothing else. We can talk about our houses until we're blue in the face. They take one of our houses away, yeah, we'd be upset about it. Would we die? Never. But you take one of our kids away...or you hurt one of our kids. We couldn't survive. We know that.

One of the police officers who acted as an ally to the four mothers by offering support and assistance with the neighbourhood initiative said:

...Ya' know, maybe it's just a ... a male thing ... work is more central to men in some respects, and house is something they go home to.... What women have become is very much part of their world ... their nest. They want to make sure for their children it's safe and there's a quality of life, and that's... that's somehow more inherently important to women. It's a supposition on my part, but there has to be some reason that it's always been women that ... that have driven both the community perspective and the COPS [Citizens on Patrol] programme ... it's always been women. (Keith, 2000).

In a similar vein, one of the male residents in the neighbourhood who participated in some of the programmes or public protests planned by the four mothers said:

Why is it the women? Because they're the ones who make the babies and their children are threatened by all the bad that will come about in the community if they don't. Maybe it goes back to the natural instinct of being a mother. I don't know. I've always wondered this myself. Why has it been the women? Why is there not one strong man leading this instead of Marilyn or besides Marilyn? ... There are a number of men but they're all more quiet, laid back people. I'm probably as outspoken as any man in our

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*community is, and I'm not all that outspoken, I don't think. Coincidence?
I don't know. (Jake, 2000)*

As can be noted above, it is their roles as mothers that appears to be the motivator for the neighbourhood activist activities. Keeping their children safe and maintaining a quality of life that supported a “*family-based neighbourhood*” (Angela, 2000 [Municipal bureaucrat]) were the concerns that prompted these women to act.

Protecting and defending roles as a motivator for social activism

The findings also showed that these mothers were motivated to act due to their mothering roles as protectors and defenders. Not only were they protecting their own children and families, they were protecting other people's children, other people's families, their sense of values, and their community.

As mentioned above, Marilyn talked about acting out of a fear for her family and needing to protect her children. In a further discussion with Marilyn and Gwen—two of the mothers who led the neighbourhood initiative—they described the importance of their families being “whole and together.” They said that without their families being intact, they would be unable to survive. For them, family was defined broadly: “as all relationships that really matter” (Gwen, 2000b). In their views, it is not the houses or the buildings that allow societies to survive, it is the people, and it was the people in the neighbourhood who were their primary concern.

Over the years, the women in River Valley developed a system of social support that consisted of things like sharing child caring responsibilities, celebrating family holidays together, as well as offering support and consolation in times of stress and fear. When the activities of the drug dealers escalated to levels of violence, information was quickly shared with each other, with offers to help if the need arose. Children were moved out of the immediate vicinity where risk was most likely to exist, to be cared for and protected by women who lived a couple of blocks away from the “hot spot” (Sue, 2000).

The people that the women were protecting and defending extended beyond their own families, neighbours, and neighbourhood friends. They were also concerned for the prostitutes and their children, and the johns' wives and their children. While the women residents were appalled and at times disgusted by what the prostitutes were *doing*, there was also a strong sense of compassion, understanding that the prostitutes were substance-addicted and working to feed their habits. At times, the residents would call the police in an effort to protect the prostitutes after they had been beaten up over drug deals that had gone bad. The ethic of the four mothers was that the prostitutes were treated like anyone else in River Valley (Marilyn, 2000), and they were protected from the name-calling and threats to their personal safety that were common in an adjacent neighbourhood.

In regard to the wives and children of the johns, the residents involved in

the River Valley initiative were often conflicted as to how they should manage the information that they had about these men. On one hand, they wanted to shame these men to get them out of their neighbourhood, but in doing so, the residents would also shame and hurt the wives and children by disclosing the information that they had. The residents were also concerned that the johns would carry sexually transmitted diseases home to their families. In describing how the neighbourhood group wrestled with this conflict, Marilyn's husband discussed the differing reactions between the males and females who lived in the neighbourhood:

I remember many times the discussion as to whether or not—especially when the doctors and dentists went by—as to whether or not we should phone the wives. And I think that the males would have. Like “Yeah. Let’s do it. The sons of bitches.” But it was always the women that would say “No. It’s gonna’ be devastating to the wife and the kids.” In other words, the side effect was you’d hurt the loved one also, so that was the topic of discussion a lot. And we could never get ourselves to come to grips with that, ‘cause ya’ know, as much as we discussed it, we always moved on because we could always ... we always saw other ways. (Brian, 2000)

In addition to protecting the individual people who were impacted by the events in the River Valley neighbourhood, the women involved in the neighbourhood initiative were protecting and defending their fundamental sense of community. Jane (2000a) talked about the terror that she felt whenever she thought that one of her friends would become defeated by the entire situation and decide to move out of the neighbourhood. For Jane, the River Valley neighbourhood provided a secure place for her to live. All of these women had their young families together and their children had gone to the same schools. As she said, “This is what makes my life possible is the fact that I’ve got a solid base here and if anyone attacked that—if that gets taken away from me, I’d have to create that world all over again. I *can’t* even think about that.”

The women were also protecting their homes. When they defined “home,” it was apparent that they were not merely referring to their own four walls. Gwen’s home consisted also of Sue’s home, and Marilyn’s home, and Jane’s home (Gwen, 2000a). For these women, their homes extended into their neighbourhood and the community as a system provided their experience of “home.” One of the other residents who participated in the study said that her home was her sense of peace—her sense of place—and when she had dealers pulling knives on police officers in her back yard, her sense of home was threatened (Eva, 2000).

Finally, these women were protecting the values that they wanted their children to learn as part of their family upbringing. These women were concerned that if they treated the dealers and the prostitutes with a lack of dignity and a lack of humanity, what were they in fact modeling for their

children? If they simply packed up and left the neighbourhood rather than discuss the problems, and deal with the problems head on, what would they be teaching their children (Jane, 2000a)? These women believed that it was by watching their actions, their children would learn about their values; to act in accordance with their values was to teach.

Discussion

As can be noted above, 'community' for these women was defined in human terms—as the human relationships that existed in River Valley. The style of leadership demonstrated by these women consisted of facilitating networks and connections and as such, echoed the way in which they defined community as a human community and the relationships that exist there (Dominelli, 1995: 136; Stall and Stoecker, 1998: 744).

In her work on moral development, Carol Gilligan (1993) found that women defined themselves within the context of their relationships—as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a lover etc. (29). What was particularly interesting was that not only did women articulate their personal identity as the role they played in their lives, but they also attached to this identity a judgment related to their ability to care. The study participants in Gilligan's study believed that if they were to lead a moral life, they had a responsibility to care, not only for themselves and their own families, but also for people in general.

This ideal of care sees individuals connected as a human community—a collectivity—requiring care and nurturance. So was this the case with the mothers in the River Valley study—the women who gave leadership to the neighbourhood initiative found their location or position in the world through the familial-like relationships and the human community that they defined as 'home'. In order to maintain these relationships, they experienced a moral obligation to protect their children from harm, to teach their children their values about the importance of all people, and to defend the human community and the relationships that existed there. As identified in Gilligan's (1993) work, these mothers developed an *ethic of responsibility* that emerged out of their *ethic of care*. As such, these mothers had the ability to move their concerns from the individual to the community, from the personal to the political. As such, they were able to focus on broader societal issues and impacts.

In support of Gilligan's (1993) finding, Jo Reger (2001) found that feminists involved in the Cleveland chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) understood motherhood to include a mandate and responsibility to care for all members of society (93). In particular, these mothers felt a responsibility to save the rights of their children and the future generations of women. The data analysis from the River Valley case study examined in this article reported similar findings.

There are two further issues that need to be addressed. First, the River Valley case study is not a story of women who have been marginalized finally finding a voice. As Jane—one of the mothers active in the neighbourhood

initiative said, the educational level of the initiative's leaders was not highly sophisticated, nor were they financially secure. These women did, though, enjoy a degree of social privilege grounded partly in the solid marital relationships that they had. Their marriages afforded them some flexibility, financial support, assistance with childcare, etc. which allowed them to be active in the issues impacting their neighbourhood. As Jane (2000b) said, "We've come from a position where of course you say your mind. That's what you do! You're a participant in this world like everybody else and you do your thing. It's not a coincidence that we're all women. I'm not saying that's an issue. Just be careful how you capture us, because I suspect we're women of privilege in some respects."

The second question that must be asked is whether these women would have acted if they had not been mothers, but simply women who happened to reside in this neighbourhood? The four women who led this neighbourhood initiative clearly identified that they were acting out of a need to keep their children safe, and to sustain a neighbourhood stability that enabled them to live there with their families. But do women necessarily need to have children in order to be involved in maternal politics on the community level? Could they, as Sara Ruddick (1997) maintains, simply be deploying a maternal identity (372)? This question requires further consideration and study.

In closing, it can be confidently said that the women who took leadership in the River Valley initiative were acting out of their roles as mothers. They accessed their passion for protecting and defending their children and the human community that surrounded them to engage in community politics on the neighbourhood level. While their motivations to act exploit our cultural understanding of motherhood (Ruddick, 1997: 372) in a somewhat stereotypical way, these ordinary mothers achieved extraordinary success in restoring a livable balance to the space they call home for themselves, their families, and their friends.

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