Mothering: Letting Go of the Past Ideal and Valuing the Real

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Images of motherhood often draw up idealized pictures of June Cleaver or Harriet Nelson baking cookies as the children come home from school or cozy family dinners with everyone seated around the dining room table. These cultural icons of 1950s motherhood are still prominent in our thinking today about what mothers should be and do (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). Stay-at-home mothers were considered the ideal in a recent Los Angeles Times poll (Decker, 1999), although the majority of respondents answering the survey were working outside the home. However, for 80% of couples, it is not possible to rely on only one wage earner and make ends meet (Barnett & Rivers, 1999). Although women may value staying at home to raise children and work partly out of financial necessity, working mothers are happier, less depressed, less anxious, and more happily married than their 1950s counterparts (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). Therefore, difficult decisions often must be made by parents who are torn among their parenting ideals, their own needs, and the financial realities of life.

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Mothering, or maternal work, is considered the bedrock of our society, instilling social values in new generations of members; however, at the same time, it is taken for granted. In many ways, mothering as societal bedrock is an apt metaphor for viewing mothering and its importance in our current society. Bedrock provides a sturdy, solid foundation that is covered by topsoil and, therefore, not visible, yet it is a reliable constant in daily life. Floods or storms may erode the topsoil—which may be likened to shifting societal and economic forces on the family—but the bedrock remains unperturbed, except by earthquakes that force fissures and gaps in this foundation. Political pundits suggest that mothering has indeed become fractured, rather than merely weathering storms, leading to many societal ills.

At the same time, however, political policies are only beginning to support maternal work. The fact that the Family and Medical Leave Act (Public Law 103–3) was only passed in 1993 suggests that the interests of businesses rise above family interests in U.S. policies, despite the political rhetoric of family values. Another explanation for the lack of broader cultural support for maternal work may be that although society values the outcomes of maternal work, the process and efforts of caregivers are viewed largely as innate and natural. Because mothering is expected and viewed as caring, its nuances and sophisticated nature remain unappreciated.

Understanding the historical roots of the mother’s role in the family assists in understanding these assumptions of innateness of the caring, dedicated, selfless mother who naturally understands and provides for her family’s needs and desires. Several sequences of events led to social developments that created our current maternal archetype. In the early 1800s, the advent of industrialism created a division of labor and work sites in the family. Men went off to work while women stayed at home creating a “sanctuary” from the cruel world where order, peace, and a selfless devotion to other family member’s needs existed. In the “cult of the home” rhetoric of the period, women were believed to be morally superior to men and preserved the home as a safe, secure, and pure environment (Gillis, 1996). In this era, women were believed to be naturally imbued with morality, selflessness, and devotion to family. Along with the move of industrial time-efficiency strategies to the home to maximize the management of the household, women began to create a new kind of family life through emerging family events and rituals that countered the changing nature of family created by industrialization. Because families were no longer simply together in time and space within the home, specialized time or the beginnings of “quality time” began to emerge (Gillis, 1996). Women became responsible for creating family time through Sunday dinners and drives and celebrations of birthdays, christenings, and annual holidays. Before this, annual events and Sundays were often communal days rather than family-centered ones. Gillis (1996) argued that these rituals re-created the family stability that had slipped away with the dispersion of family members to different realms. Women were charged with being custodians of time, efficiently managing the home, and being responsible for creating special sacred time that created belonging and a sense of family. These historical precedents formed the groundwork for the maternal work of today.

Although mothering may be viewed by society as a crucial cultural bedrock, there is also an assumption that mothering is a natural and innate set of skills that simply emerge in those persons charged with maternal work. Historically, ideas about maternal work have been formed by changing social conditions that have led to the current view of mothers as naturally devoted, self-sacrificing, loving maternal figures. In addition, the close connection of maternal work and caring have led women to equate one with the other (DeVault, 1987). Loving or caring, which is expected of good mothers, is considered the same as doing the occupations of family caregiving. For example, mothers caring for children with severe disabilities were found to face a painful conflict when they asked for assistance in child care; these mothers feared that not caring for all their child’s needs would be interpreted as not caring about the child (Traustadottir, 1991).

Maternal work in the current society has become distributed in a new way that challenges mothers’ and society’s beliefs about what mothers should do. Mothers may no longer be able to do it all, like the mothers of the 1950s. Although mothers, or those who do maternal work, still bear the ultimate responsibility for managing family life, out of necessity, caregivers may choose to purchase services in lieu of performing family care occupations themselves. Working both a first shift at paid employment and a second shift at home (Hochschild, 1989), mothers may be torn between creating the desired family life, meeting the competing demands of work, and making best use of time and resources. There are rival concerns for mothers who choose to put their child in day care: the practical considerations of time management versus the assurance that their children will receive the care and attention necessary to foster their development. Mothers recognize that workers outside the family may not be invested in this caring work in the same way that they are. Mothers may be unwilling to turn over to others child care or household occupations that have meaning in creating family life.

DeVault (1987) was among the first to describe the complexity of maternal work in her research on feeding the family by writing about the sophistication with which mothers plan and manage meals. In planning meals, mothers must balance the conflicting tastes of family members, and select satisfying and healthy menus while adding an interesting variety of foods. Management of the meals included creating a family routine often similar to the one
that the mothers grew up with, managing children’s behavior for harmonious interactions and desired behaviors, setting a good example of good manners, and encouraging positive family interactions. In feeding the family, mothers combine the maternal tasks of keeping children healthy through a good diet while also fostering socialization. This “invisible” aspect of maternal work could hardly be considered trivial or lacking in value, especially because it provides the valued family experiences that our society believes is essential to creating healthy, well-behaved children.

Our understanding of the nature and sophistication of maternal work has lagged our belief of the importance of maternal work for society. Even though mothering is a “cultural bedrock” of society, it is in fact little understood, still unrevealed beneath the topsoil. The grouping of articles in this issue of The American Journal of Occupational Therapy is focused on bringing to light the intricacy and depth of maternal practices in creating family life and fostering child health, development, and socialization. Insight into maternal work has implications for occupational therapy intervention. Serious consideration needs to be given to mothers’ construction of daily life and the meaning of the mundane but essential routines that create a family’s daily life. Dismantling or revising of daily routines for the insertion of intervention requires a deep understanding of family routines and their meaning to family members.

Featherstone (1981) gave an example of a potential intervention that began as a suggestion for a benign change in the family routine but that was considered overwhelming and appalling by the mother:

I remember the day the occupational therapist at Jody’s school called with some suggestions from a visiting nurse….The nurse had noticed [the overgrowth in Jody’s gums due to his Dilantin and recommended, innocently enough, that Jody’s] teeth be brushed four times a day, for 5 minutes with an electric toothbrush….Although I tried to sound reasonable on the phone, this new demand appalled me. I rehearsed angry, self-justifying speeches in my head. Jody, I thought, is blind, cerebral palsied, and retarded. We do physical therapy daily and work with him on sounds and communications. We feed him each meal on our laps, bottle him, change him, bathe him, dry him, put him in a body cast to sleep, launder his bed linens daily, and go through a variety of routines designed to minimize his miseries and enhance his joys and his development. (All this in addition to trying to care for and enjoy our other young children and making time for each other and our careers.) Now you tell me that I should spend 15 minutes every day on something that Jody will hate, an activity that will not help him walk, or even defecate, but one that is directed at the health of his gums. This activity is not for a finite time but forever. It is not guaranteed to help, but "it can’t hurt."….Well, it’s too much. Where is that 15-minute activity that is added, one has to be taken away. (pp. 77–78)

In this selection of articles, authors contribute to the development of a body of explicit knowledge of maternal work in everyday occupations. In this endeavor, we aspire to create a greater valuing and appreciation of the sophistication of maternal work in the designing, organization, orchestration, and performance of everyday family occupations through which meaningful family life is generated.

**References**


