

# *A Priori* vs. Experiential Models of Parenting in the Assessment of Mothering

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines parenting paradigms that influence decisions in child protective services and the assessment of mothering. These perspectives are defined as *a priori* and experiential. The discussion highlights how each paradigm impacts the assessment of mothering. Recommendations include using mothers' perspectives on mothering to provide insight for assessment purposes.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie les paradigmes de l'art d'être parent qui influencent les décisions prises par les services de protection de l'enfance et l'évaluation du maternage. Ces points de vue sont définis comme *a priori* et expérientiels. La discussion souligne l'impact que chaque paradigme a sur l'évaluation du maternage. Les recommandations comprennent l'utilisation du point de vue des mères sur le maternage pour fournir un aperçu aux fins d'évaluation.

This article seeks to define and contrast the primary and competing paradigms of parenting that affect the assessment process in child protection services. It examines the conflicting duality of parenting paradigms that simultaneously influence the assessment of mothering. Mothering assessments have important implications since the results influence decisions as serious as whether mothers maintain custody of their children.

This critique is part of a larger project which examines the decision-making processes and experiences of mothers in the United States (US) whose children experienced periods of state-instituted protective custody. Many of those mothers expressed anger at what they perceived was an unjust process that led to the removal of their child from their care. The study attempted to classify themes of mothers' perceptions of events and how those experiences impacted their relationships with their children. Such themes would be useful to further understand families in crisis.

At the beginning of the analysis, a need to examine the assessment paradigms used by child protection workers emerged. The present examination is an attempt to further define the perspectives used in assessments of mothering. It is based on two popular, and contrasting, mother archetypes that appear in the child welfare literature and popular culture, defined as *a priori* and

experiential models in this critique. It further examines the implications of these paradigms on mothering assessments.

*A priori* models of parenting are defined for the purposes of this article as rational, analytical models that assume causal relationships. They are examined as they appear in popular and academic culture. These models speculate that an "ideal" parent archetype consists of certain traits of interaction, discipline, and behavior. Experiential models assume parents are complex entities who are shaped by sexual, cultural, developmental, and social factors. In addition, they assume that parents interact with life experiences to varying degrees, altering the course of growth and creating transformed identities that influence mothering. The discussion highlights the impacts these paradigms have on the assessment of mothering and suggests using mothers' perspectives on mothering to provide insight for assessment purposes.

## MOTHERING ASSESSMENTS

In North America and the United Kingdom (UK) child protection services were established to safeguard the needs and interests of children. One of the primary functions of these agencies is to protect children from abuse and prevent further incidents in cases where children have already been harmed (Lockhart and Issac 2000; Zastrow 2003).

At the heart of the assessment process, however, is the evaluation of mothering (Davies and Krane 1996; Waters 1998). This belief rests heavily on the societal role of women as key care takers of children (Featherstone 1999; Waters 1998) and on analytical approaches that promote the needs of children often "at the expense of women" (Featherstone 1999).

The nature of assessments by child protection services is of more concern than a plain academic debate. The US government requires that all states conduct child protection assessments in response to reports of children being neglected or abused by caregivers (Camasso and Jagannathan 2000). Canadian child protective agencies are also implementing initiatives to adopt methods of identifying families at risk of abusing their children. For instance, both Ontario (Trocme et al. 1999) and British Columbia (BCIFV 2002) have adopted structured models of evaluating a child's risk of future abuse. Therefore, much of social welfare policy involving child abuse and families in North America and the UK involve some aspect of assessing mothering.

Through assessments, child protection workers determine whether the care offered to a child is sufficient to assure the child's physical and emotional well-being (Lockhart and Issac 2000). To some extent, findings from these assessments can impact which family keeps custody of their children, which family is supervised by state workers, and whether the mother or other family members raise the children (Zastrow 2003). Therefore, these decisions have a critical effect on the lives of children, families, and communities.

While making an assessment, child protection workers pay special attention to the family, what events precipitated the crisis, family interactions and conditions, and the family's perceived needs (Zastrow 2003). With such understanding, child protection workers can more adequately assess risk to the child or children (USHHS 2001b). Factors outside the family also impact the assessment process, including legislation as well as the policies and procedures of the agency (Howe, Dooley and Hinings 2000). As a result of these pressures, the assessment information is often collected under the direction of agency checklists and manuals (Krane and Davies 2000; English and Graham 2000).

The scope of the potential impact of child protection services and their assessments on families can be far reaching. The US government reported that in 1999 there were over 625,000 instances of children considered to be neglected or maltreated. Primarily the perpetrators were found to be a parent, generally the mother, in almost 489,000 cases (USHHS 2001a). Those figures indicate that in almost 78 percent of the cases where there was a finding of neglect the person responsible for the maltreatment was the parent, typically the mother.

### MOTHERING IN FEMINIST AND POPULAR LITERATURE

This section will examine common perceptions of mothers to improve understanding of current models of assessing mothers in child protective services. In particular, "good mother" archetypes and the contrasting "mother blame" phenomena are examined.

Since mothers are the principal focus in the assessment of risk for child abuse, it is relevant to examine the portrayal of mothers in literature and popular culture. Popular beliefs influence child abuse assessments as workers in the child protection system are members of the society at large and likely influenced by social portrayals of mothers. In the early 1900s Jane Addams (Addams 2002) supported this notion when she characterized the relationship between social workers and popular culture. Her work reflected on the actions of social workers during World War I in the United States. She suggested that social workers were a reflection of the community, and should not be expected to have beliefs that differ substantially from social norms.

The archetype of the "good mother" is strongly enforced by an array of social practices (Coontz 1992). She is typically a white, middle class, monogamously hetro-sexual and married mother, who sacrifices herself for her children. This archetype is typically reflected in the fictional character June Cleaver, presented in the mid-twentieth century American network television series "Leave it to Beaver." Meyerowitz (1994) suggests that the June Cleaver myth represents the fantasy created by American men of post-World War II American women. The myth presents women's lives as if they existed within the walls of

their enchanting suburban kitchens - that women played out scripts which determined their socially defined gender, class, racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, and political roles (Braceras 2001; Meyerowitz 1994).

Chodorow suggests that the concept of the ideal mother became popular as a result of labour divisions which divided households to the extent that women stayed home while their husbands worked (Chodorow 1978). She suggested the model of ideal mother included assumptions about women's responsibilities toward their husbands beyond managing the household. In particular, she argued that as well as being moral role models to their children and caretakers of the home, women were moral guides for their husbands to contrast the immoral, competitive world of work.

In contrast, women who do not comply with the social expectations of mothering are often blamed for their failures. Among the most frequent victims of "mother blame" are lone mothers, lower-income mothers, minorities, and lesbian families. Others (McNab and Kavner 2001) have identified the roots of mother-blame in our culture as resting in psychological theory that suggests that mothers are responsible for the ways their children develop and behave. They further suggest that majority groups use shame to marginalize mothers who do not conform to ideal models.

Feminist theorists (Arendell) move beyond critiquing images of motherhood toward proposing alternative constructs of mothering. These perceptions of motherhood attempt to replace socially defined roles with the experiences of real women. To this regard, emerging conceptualizations of motherhood assume that mothering "carries multiple and often shifting meanings" (Arendell 2000, 1200). This reliance on what is characterized as personal ways of knowing reflect women's perceptions of conditions related to life events. Others (Tangenberg 2000) connect the emerging feminist paradigm of motherhood to social work practice as a means of making communication with mothers more meaningful by grounding knowledge in the context of their lived experiences.

## ***A PRIORI* PARENT ARCHETYPE IN CHILD WELFARE LITERATURE**

For the purposes of this critique, *a priori* theories are considered those that arise from deductive reasoning often using mathematical or other rational methods of prediction. They assume a principle and then speculate cause and effect relationships based on those principles (Bothamley 2002). In the case of mothering models, *a priori* theories speculate assumptions about mother-child relationships and reason from those principles to create ideal mothering models. These models typically speculate that an "ideal" parent archetype consists of certain traits of interaction, discipline, and behavior. They frequently conform to the "good mother" image defined and criticized by feminist theorists.

Childhood education literature reiterates the assumption of the ideal mother model. Communication theories rationalize that fixing the parent will correct many of the problems with the child (Dinnebeil 1999). One example states its assumption as "the optimal parent child relationship is responsive and reciprocal, where both the parent and the child come into the relationship with certain communicative abilities. Parents need to be encouraged to recognize, interpret and respond appropriately to the cues of their children" (Dinnebeil 1999, 169). Under this model, early intervention programs aimed at parents are necessary to improve children's functioning and require improving parenting abilities, particularly those of the mother to effectively interact with her children.

Developmental perspectives share the outlook that mothers play a central part in assuring normal child development. In addition, such theories assume that children follow a universal sequence in development and those mothers who have sufficient time available to teach their children will meet the targeted developmental milestones (Goldbart and Mukherjee 1998). Such developmental arguments have been tied, historically, to the rationale for behavioral training techniques that assist parents in acquiring the skills necessary to assure their child's normal development (Haffey and Levant 1984).

The flagship curriculum that endorses the ideal mother archetype is represented in the

literature as the "positive parenting" model (CWLA 2002; Dinnebeil 1999; Sanders and Markie-Dadds 2000). Such models not only specify a "good mother" archetype, but they often provide tips for women who aspire, either through internal or external pressure, to be ideal mothers. Tips include to avoid showing disappointment to your child, have respectful family rules, get your head physically on the same level when you talk to your child, and use plastic dishes and satin finishes on the walls so you can clean them easily. Mothers are also considered the medium for conveying moral messages in the "positive parent" model. Here, mothers are encouraged to use positive phrases to model moral behavior and when appropriate let children solve their own moral dilemmas. Also, mothers are encouraged to have family rituals that model moral behavior, like volunteering at a soup kitchen or some other place of gathering for people who lack adequate mothers.

### EXPERIENTIAL PARENTING

The experiential model that is used in this article goes beyond merely linking mothering to communication and behavior by connecting mothering, like all learning, to change through integration. It is based on the understandings of modern learning theorists who perceive learning as growth that involves integration of multiple meanings and experiences (Vygotsky 1978). The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that all social and psychological functions play a fundamental role in the development of understanding. He states: "Every function in development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the person (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (1978).

Since growth is like a learning process, forms of learning are included in the understanding of experiential mothering. As in other forms of learning, the individual allows new experiences to open possibilities and expand realities (Dewey 1996). Dewey believed, as did Vygotsky, that individuals learn from their experiences and tie

them to settings to make meaning. According to learning theorists, the role of the teacher is to develop opportunities that guide and facilitate a child's learning (Giroux 1988). Therefore, teachers and other facilitators encourage learners to combine their prior knowledge with new understanding of their reality (hooks 1994).

In the context of this critique, integration is defined as the creation of new understandings based on combining old with new experiences and information. Through integration, prior truths merge with insights gained from life experiences (Dewey 1916; hooks 1994; Sheehy 1993). This article expands the application of integration in learning to mothering. In mothering, integration begins with the transition from childless woman to mother. Transformations then evolve as mothers interact with new realities and experiences. Transformation occurs while they interact with the world through their maturing realities as mothers.

From this perspective, growth is like a learning process. Like other forms of learning, the individual allows new experiences to open possibilities and expand realities (Dewey 1916). Likewise, mothering is the process of developing opportunities that guide and facilitate a child's learning (Giroux 1997). Therefore, mothers encourage their children to combine their prior knowledge with their new understanding of their reality (hooks 1994). The experiential mothering model relies on the mother to create a setting that provides both mother and child with opportunities to experiment with and create new understandings of their realities.

An important aspect of the experiential model; like feminist mothering models, is the change in perspective through which mother-child relationships are viewed. From this perspective, growth occurs within the context of relationships and shapes the realities of everyone concerned. Feminist therapists (Goldberg 1995) support the idea that a mutuality, or process of reciprocity, exists between mother and child. Mothers are seen, then, as collaborators in their children's growth to the extent that they make available a relationship that nurtures mutual growth rather than being responsible for producing an optimal level of the children's development through behavior and communication processes.

## IMPLICATION ON ASSESSMENT OF MOTHERING

The assessment method based on the *a priori* model differs significantly from that of the experiential model of mothering. In North America and the UK, the trend over the last ten years has been for child protective services to rely on standardized processes for detecting and managing cases of abuse and neglect, closely following an *a priori* model (BCIFV 2002; Krane and Davies 2000; Trocme et al. 1999). The result is the use of formalized assessments by child protection workers. These instruments are expected to provide child protection workers and court representatives with data to sort out which children are living in "high risk" family settings (English and Pecora 1994).

The central processes in *a priori* assessments are mothers' behaviors and communication patterns. Factors that determine the child's risk vary (English and Graham 1994; Krane and Davies 2000; Simpson et al. 2000). In general, these factors include the type of problem area, the degree of variation from the ideal model, and the mother's willingness to change. Specifically, factors often considered in determining the risk of abuse are the mother's physical/mental/emotional impairment, the child's developmental or behavioral issues, and the family socio-economic factors such as stress and social support (English and Graham 1994).

Observations of each family are recorded, often using standardized check-lists created by the child protection agency. The worker may also interview several parties in the extended family, social system, and school for information about their perceptions of the mother's behavior and communication (Lockhart and Issac 2000; Zastrow 2003). These data provide the foundation for evaluating the child's risks. Risk evaluations include matching findings from *a priori* assessments to ideal mother standards. The areas where the actual mother varies from the ideal mother are indicated as problem areas. Intervention plans are designed to assist the mother in gaining the skills to change her behavior to better match the ideal mother model. Meetings are established on an on-going basis with the family to address the family's needs as identified on the risk assessment check-list (Lockhart and Issac 2000).

Though heavily used in the US and other countries to identify children at-risk, in general, risk factors used on check-list assessments have not been proven to produce causal relationships with child abuse (Krane and Davies 2000). In fact, the percentage of cases where high risk factors were present yet no abuse or neglect occurred has been found to be around 50 percent (Pecora 1991). This failure rate can be attributed to the false assumption that abuse can be "identifiable, predictable, and preventable" (Krane and Davies 2000).

A review of *a priori* risk assessment tools indicated that the measurement tools are substantially flawed, thus causing errors in identifying cases of neglect. For instance, instruments have been found to fail to adjust for a variety of factors that are correlated with incidences of abuse, such as duration of foster care, other living arrangement, race, and gender. This may lead to misperceptions of safety or risk (Simpson et al. 2000). In another study, (English and Graham 2000) researchers found that there is little correlation with child risk factors associated with developmental or behavioral issues, or socio-economic factors such as stress and social support. Results of another recent study show that risk assessment instruments exhibit high levels of measurement error and increasing stability over time, which limit the instrument's capacity to predict new allegations of abuse and neglect (Camasso and Jagannathan 2000).

In contrast, it is not possible to define an ideal mother archetype using an experiential approach since each relationship rests on the interdependency of growth between mother and child. To the extent that mutuality is the central process between mother and child, then the mothering assessment process involves identifying mutuality. That requires examining the mother, listening to her perceptions of reality, and examining the child, its experiences and realities, then working with both members of the mother-child dyad to understand their relationship's strengths. The results of experiential assessments will not produce absolute measures of "good parenting," rather they produce insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the parent child relationship as seen by all parties.

The process of identifying realities and consequently a family's needs rests on the openness that exists between the child protection worker and

the mother-child dyad. Mothers who interpret child protection workers as adversarial are less likely to remain open through the assessment process. Therefore, the challenge to both the mother and child protection worker is to establish a relationship of trust. But it is difficult for workers and mothers to forge a trusting relationship since child protection workers generally enter a family following a complaint of abuse or neglect. Logically, if the family is defensive and the child protection worker is suspicious, it will hinder the experiential assessment process.

Other factors inhibit the success of experiential assessments. Since assessments are completed amidst a myriad of political and policy red tape, there are many barriers to completing an accurate assessment. Some barriers are state-regulated limits on the length of time between initial report and the completed assessment, a regulation that may force workers to make hurried recommendations. In addition, when workers are required to complete many standardized forms, it is less likely that they will have time to complete both an experiential assessment and the agency's required paperwork. Consequently, such barriers often prevent child protection workers from completing experiential assessments, thus potentially compromising the quality of the report. The child welfare system is further compromised when decisions regarding the safety of children and whether to keep a family together are based on faulty assessments.

#### **IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH IN REDEFINING MOTHERING ASSESSMENTS**

The experiential perspective, as a theoretical approach to conducting mothering assessments, has a great deal of appeal to feminists, therapists, child protection workers, and mothers. It presents caseworkers with a number of opportunities that link the mother to her situation, offers new insights into relationships, and promotes cooperative relationships between child protection workers and families. Experiential models of assessment also promote a balance in the relationship between caseworkers and families, which advance the assessment process as well as the profession. Finally, this type of assessment

model can provide a therapeutic experience, often with the added benefit of facilitating advocacy on behalf of the family.

However, the experiential model is not without its challenges. Real mother-child relationships can be messy and unpredictable. Coontz honestly addresses the complexities of parenting: "I don't know many parents, in any kind of family, who are confident that they've got it right." She further argues that blaming the family is not the solution for resolving disruptions. Rather, disruptions may be attributed to a combination of human interactions and social factors, such as low wages for women, failures of the welfare system, corporate greed, and inadequacies in child support and maintain systems (1992).

Thus experiential assessments draw the child welfare worker into the complex dynamics of numerous interwoven human and social relationships. This process generally requires extended time and extra resources to complete the assessment. This requires sufficient funding and cooperation from the collateral agents that connect with child protection, such as family courts, child support enforcement, criminal investigators, and other public agencies.

In addition, child protection workers are not always a welcome presence in family circles. This sense of hostility may be based on a history of negative encounters with child protection agents in their family or their general community. If child protection workers are to take the lead in addressing such problems, action must begin at their point of initial contact with families, the assessment phase. Experiential assessments of mothering, as practiced from a feminist approach, offer a means for addressing these problems in an egalitarian manner.

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## The Singing

the artist's song comes  
green, blue and red  
with her name  
in one corner

she turns the palette  
to sing a picture  
    only for me  
in yellow and white

*Joanna M. Weston*