7.5: Personality Theory in Real Life

The Experience of Mothering

When Helene Deutsch wrote the first books devoted entirely to the psychology of women, the second volume was devoted entirely to *Motherhood* (Deutsch, 1945). She described motherhood as providing a wonderful opportunity to directly experience a sense of immortality. She distinguished, however, between *motherhood* and *motherliness*. Motherhood, according to Deutsch, refers to the relationship between mother and child, which varies from individual to individual and from culture to culture. When Deutsch wrote of motherliness, she referred to both a quality of character that pervades a woman’s whole personality and emotional phenomena related to a child’s helplessness and need for care. In a motherly woman, one’s own need for love is transferred from the ego to the child, and this maternal love has the chief characteristic of *tenderness* (Deutsch, 1945). Of course, no two women experience motherhood in exactly the same way. Deutsch recognized two primary types of mothers. The first type is the woman whose world is opened to a new reality by the birth of a child. She feels no loss, and she develops her own personality fully only after having a child. The second type of mother feels restricted and impoverished by her children. Such women, according to Deutsch, have spent their emotionality on other pursuits (such as sexuality, or a career), and they lack sufficient libido to withstand the emotional burden of children:

The woman’s relation to her husband and family, her economic situation, and the position of the child in her existence, give a personal color to each woman’s motherliness. (pg. 55; Deutsch, 1945)
Deutsch had several miscarriages in the early years of her marriage, causing her a great deal of anxiety during the pregnancy that finally gave her a son named Martin. In her autobiography, she speaks both fondly and proudly of her only child, as well as of the wonderful relationship he shared with his father. With regard to being a busy, working woman during her son’s childhood, Deutsch wrote that this could only be worked out on individual basis, and with some necessary compromise (Deutsch, 1973).

Although fathers play a role in parenting, only a woman can really understand what it’s like to be a mother. Two entertaining books written by mothers about their relationships with their children are good-enough mother (Syler, 2007) and Mother Shock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of It (Buchanan, 2003). In addition to stories about the joys of raising children, they also discuss the trials and tribulations as well. In accordance with the work of the Stone Center group, they also talk about how important it is for mothers, as women, to have meaningful relationships with friends both in and beyond their families. In a chapter entitled mommy needs a playdate, Syler writes:

…behind every good-enough mother is another good-enough mother with whom to commiserate, shop, or just hang out and have a crab-fest. It’s a healthy dose of friendship that fuels us to fight another day. (pg. 189; Syler, 2007)

But what happens when a woman is not a good mother? Christine Lawson has studied the mothering abilities of women who suffer from borderline personality disorder. In Understanding the Borderline Mother (2000), Lawson has identified four types of borderline mother: the waif (characterized by helplessness and hopelessness), the hermit (characterized by perfectionism and worrying), the queen (characterized by demanding attention and feelings of emptiness), and the witch (characterized by a desire for power and the very real threat of being physically abusive). The tragic challenge for the children of borderline mothers, according to Lawson, is that our mother is the first thing any of must understand in our lives, and our survival depends on understanding her. Although borderline personality is highly resistant to treatment in therapy, as with any personality disorder, therapy can help women with borderline personality disorder to avoid passing on the condition to their children.

While it is understandable that mothering would be difficult for women suffering from psychological disorders, it also appears to be true that no such thing as a “maternal instinct” exists. Anthropologist Sarah Hrdy, who has been elected to both the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has studied infanticide in different cultures and other primate species. She found it quite surprising that some mothers (human, ape, and monkey) will contribute to the death of their own child (or children), and in some cases then mate with the male that killed them. While this is a complex issue, covered by Hrdy in a rather lengthy book entitled Mother Nature (Hrdy, 1999), she raises some profound questions. For example, if women instinctively love their children, why do
so many women directly or indirectly contribute to their deaths? Since fathers contribute equally to the genetic makeup of the child, why haven’t fathers evolved a greater interest in and commitment to caring for their children? And perhaps most interestingly, “just why did these little creatures evolve to be so plump, engaging, and utterly adorable?” (Hrdy, 1999).

Consider your own mother and your relationship with her. Do you consider her to have been a good-enough mother? Whether you are a man or a woman, how has your relationship with your mother affected your relationships with others (especially if you have children)?

Discussion Question \(\PageIndex{1}\)

Chodorow proposed that women desire to have children in order to recreate the intimacy they had with their mother when they were a baby, and to balance their relationship with their husband in a manner similar to how they first experienced their father. Does this suggestion seem reasonable, or do you think there may be a more fundamental biological drive toward bearing offspring?