Rethinking Mothers’ Nature

Motherhood was once assumed to be a safe topic. But no longer. The belief that mothers instinctively nurture their offspring—one of the West’s most cherished ideals and a view widely accepted even in scientific circles—has been receiving bad press of late.

Social philosophers argue that mother love is a socially constructed attitude. They point to the high proportion of eighteenth-century European mothers who sent their babies away to be nursed by strangers. Some anthropologists reflect on whether mother love is a bourgeois luxury. They cite desperately poor women in third-world shantytowns who distance themselves from their doomed young. A rash of poetry and psychoanalytic commentary has also emerged, registering objections to what poet Adrienne Rich terms “the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood,” with its impossible ideal of mothers who not just willingly but “naturally” punch in for twenty-four-hour, lifelong shifts of unconditional love.

The debate between social constructionists (who view a mother’s attachment to her infant as a learned, even indoctrinated emotion) and essentialists (who assume females are genetically programmed to be nurturing) has become so muddled that no one in either camp has paused to remark that in the real-life animal kingdom, not only is the essentialists’ Empress of Maternal Instinct wearing no clothes, but she was never absolute ruler of the kingdom to begin with.

Some have glimpsed a silver lining in challenges to conventional wisdom. If, they argue, women are not programmed to nurture their young, then the parent with the XX chromosomes is no more innately equipped for childrearing than the father is. Hence, why shouldn’t the bread-winning dad, just as well as the bread-winning mom, be expected to skip work when a child is sick? Furthermore, mothers need no longer shoulder so much blame when things go amiss. Gone then would be what Adrienne Rich so vividly identified as the dreaded “judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt”—perhaps the real “G spot” for mothers.

But what would such a reformation of the concept of motherhood mean, apart from creating a world safe for mothers to leave babies in day care and return to work? Is there any biological basis for a mother’s attachment to her infant?

The answer, of course, all depends on what we mean by “biological basis.” Much lip service has been paid to “biology,” “instinct,” and “natural laws” without a great deal of attention to how maternal behavior unfolds in the natural environments in which mothers live. Nurturing in mammal mothers can vary tremendously, depending on maternal condition as well as environmental and social circumstances. A mother dog that abandons some infants right after birth may hours later nurture and raise the rest. A mother mouse who kills her young in one phase of her life may make a model mother during another. As we consider the variety of conditions that confront human mothers, it might be useful to bear in mind that there is no universal maternal response—and there never has been.

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

From Conception to Delivery, by Sono Kochi Hasegawa
National Library of Medicine, Bethesda