

It is often easier to become outraged by injustice half a world away than
by oppression and discrimination half a block from home. --Carl T. Rowan

No More Talking: A Call to Action From the Heart!

by Jill A. Kuhn, Ph.D.

My heart has been heavy for quite some time. I want something remarkable to be done for Psychologist mothers! Mothers or mothers-to-be in psychology are regularly ignored, shamed, derided and subjugated to discrimination. We have done little to create a work world that is equitable for them. The majority of Psychologist women are or will become mothers, yet our voices are only heard as small sound bites, if at all. The lack of voices in psychological organizations is a catch-22. Often mothers who could contribute a lot do not because these very organizations do not meet their needs. If we really want to make big changes, we need all hands on deck!

It is common for female Psychologists/Interns/Post-docs/students to have to re-invent the wheel at work when they consider becoming a mother. They are asked to develop a brand new guide for their programs on dealing with pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-partum period and mothering in general and how it will be integrated with work. Who of us has the time for that? Why are many of us treated like we have created some huge strain for our workplaces and now must create a contract of sorts for choosing to be a parent? How ironic that psychology itself cannot seem to figure this one out, without putting undue pressure and work on the employee.

There is no standard or set of ethical guidelines in place to address ways to help students, interns and Psychologists with the huge role and identity change that they will go through if they are pregnant, or adopt a child and also “balance” work. The word balance is in and of itself very hurtful because it implies that individual women can and should achieve it. The term emphasizes the individualistic nature of our culture while completely ignoring the systemic obstacles that really cannot be overcome by one person.

I wrote a two-part column in 2006 about the unbelievable oppressive experiences Psychologist mothers experience. In last quarter's TFP two articles appeared that again demonstrate how poorly we are doing as a profession and a division at setting high standards and demanding fairness for women who are mothers. Both Jessi L. Smith (The Journey of Creating a Family Friendly Campus One Box of Stuff at a time) and Ginger Clark, Ph.D. (Striving for Mediocrity: Accepting with Gratitude the Death of my Dreams) talked about dealing with “higher-ups,” changing the way we work with families and the huge change that parenting brings. Several years ago I approached a “higher-up” in the division and asked about what resources were available within the division to support Psychologist mothers. I was told to read “Working Mother” magazine. I hope that's not all we have to offer as a division.

Division 35 has done a fantastic job of creating 5 Sections, numerous Committees, 3 Task Forces, Publications, Listservs, a Forum, scholarships and space at conventions for oppressed groups. But mothering is not included. I've also requested, on several occasions, that those with some power integrate mothering into the heart of the division. Something has to be done! Yet,

nothing changes. Are women scared to tackle mothering discrimination, because it separates us too much from men? It is probably the only topic where you cannot equate us with men, because they cannot bear children. Are we falling into the individualistic trap by ignoring the systemic nature of oppression? I know I don't want to keep reading and writing about Psychologist mother discrimination! It has to stop!

How refreshing it would be to see a person's decision to embrace parenting as something to be celebrated? I don't mean by a baby shower or a signed card by everyone in the office. I mean solid "stay policies." That is, how do we help families adjust to parenting and also let them know that we want them and value them as employees? That in fact, parenthood is a one way to add to the positive rounding out of experiences of Psychologists? Many organizations outside of Psychology have figured out how to value their employees who have children. They have developed creative solutions including breastfeeding/pumping rooms, on-site daycare and variations in the typical work day or location of work. Some psychology work places do include these givens, but most do not. Most seem to give lip service to family friendly policies, but the attitude still is often contradictory and begrudging. Mothers are shamed in a way that is patronizing for daring to have children. Co-workers can add to this by assuming parents are getting some type of "special treatment." Similarly many people view parenting as an individual choice and as such feel entitled to discriminate against parents. It goes something like this, "well you chose to add a child into your life and you knew you had a job...." When are we going to have family friendly workplaces? Where being a parent is treated as a vital role in raising the next generation?

I'd like to see Division 35 create a task force and formally recognize mothers as a group that faces oppression and currently has minimal rights. Without formal policy, mothers or mothers-to-be are left wide open to being exploited. I'd also like to see our division create guidelines regarding work for women who become mothers and represent our interests to APA. There is well established research on discrimination, cognitive biases, role strain, identity crises, and unfriendly workplaces for women. I have cited this research in past columns and past guest columnists have done so as well. There are also books that deal with mother discrimination in general. Now we must use all this available information for positive change.

I don't have a position within division 35 (except as a columnist on feminist parenting) so I don't have the power to institute some of the ideas I noted above. But many of you reading this DO. Many of you reading this have raised children to adulthood or want to have children some day. We need your help. We need your experience! We need your voice! We need equality for our Psychologist mothers! Will you help us?

Jill may be reached at kuhngale@earthlink.net. Please contact me especially if you have ideas to "get the ball rolling" so to speak. Maybe there are things I can do or our readers can do IF we are only told what needs to be done.

When my next column comes out, early in 2010, I hope to be able to share that the division is making formal changes to alter the current oppressive work conditions of many Psychologists.