

Mother's Day

Arise then...women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!
(Howe, Mother's Day Proclamation, 1870)

In the mid-1800's Ann Jarvis created Mothers' Work Days in an attempt to address a variety of social ills. Some years later Julia Ward Howe started a Mother's Day for Peace movement as a reaction to the bloodshed of the Civil War and Franco-Prussian War. Jarvis' daughter Anna spent years trying to establish a nationally observed Mother's Day in honor of her mom. Howe also continued to work tirelessly on women's issues until her death in 1910, just two years before Mother's Day became an official U.S. holiday. Although women now have many more opportunities than in Jarvis and Howe's day, they still face discrimination on numerous fronts.

Mothers face immense social stigma, particularly in their work lives. Susan Fiske and Anne Cuddy have conducted research on cognitive biases and found that when women become pregnant, return from maternity leave, or go to part/flex-time work (because of care giving responsibilities) they are viewed as being similar in intelligence to the mentally retarded. In addition, mothers' perceived competence goes markedly down. However, fathers' competence does not change. This is important particularly because perceived competence is related to whether an employee will be hired and promoted. In addition to this negative societal perception, women still bear the brunt of child and homecare responsibilities. Economically, it is well known that women in general still face a wage gap, but it is less known that mothers also face a "child tax." For each child they have they will earn 5% less than employees without children. On the other hand, men with children will earn 10-12% more than employees who do not have children.

Our current patriarchal driven work world model does not favor families, especially mothers. It is an archaic holdover from when men worked outside the home, and women stayed home as wives and mothers. It is set up for men who do not give care giving a priority. Joan Williams, Director of Work Life Law at American University Law School, argues that the "ideal worker norm" is a gendered norm. It is not truly compatible with women's bodies (e.g. time for or childbearing, recovery, breastfeeding) or for parenting realities (sleep deprivation, children's schedules and needs). Williams further argues that one of the solutions is to deconstruct the ideal worker norm and replace it with a balanced worker norm that includes both work and family responsibilities. We need to truly hear caregivers' needs and allow for them to have a true range of available work and family choices. Williams also insists that the gender roles for both men and women also need to be deconstructed so that women are not disproportionately responsible for child and home care. Certainly, a large part of the solution is holding male partners (for those who have them) responsible for participating equitably in child and home care (i.e. giving up their male privilege), yet that alone does not solve the unique dilemmas of work life.

I have heard both employers and employees lament that mothers chose to have children, so why should we give them time off, create a flexible work schedule, or somehow change the rules to accommodate their care giving responsibilities? This attitude is precisely the problem. We live in an individualist society where each person's "issues" are seen as individual concerns and not social or community concerns. I have to admit to being perplexed by this attitude. Are we so short-sighted as a society that we do not think about future generations? Why would we as a society, and especially within psychology, not wish to assist those who are nurturing the next generation? Furthermore, as feminists we need to stop fighting amongst ourselves, regardless of one another's life choices, and instead attack the real problems of patriarchy.

Certainly there is not a "one size fits all" solution. Some families do not want or could not survive on a part-time salary. Some families have only one parent. However, increasing flexible work options for parents is a good start. The 9to5 National Association for Working Women recently released a study conducted in Wisconsin on part-time work options. They found that when women were able to work part-time hours their employers benefited because employees were more likely to stay at their jobs, had higher morale, efficiency and productivity and better customer service. We as psychologists need to advocate for these options and create more family friendly work environments, both for psychologist mothers and for all mothers. Past APA president Diane Halpern recently implored psychologist employers to consider offering part-time tenure track positions and to be mindful of the fact that many women in our profession wish to have children at a point when their careers are just taking off (often in a woman's mid-30's).

I believe that as today's mothers, we feel pulled in so many directions that it is difficult to imagine adding activism to our already overflowing schedules. Yet, we cannot ignore our own plight and the plight of countless other mothers. Like Jarvis and Howe, we have to continue to make the personal political and the political personal. If you are interested in becoming part of a caucus on mothering issues, please e-mail Dr. Diane Hall, the co-coordinator, at dmhall@gse.upenn.edu for further information.

Happy Mother's Day!

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The next two columns will be written by guest columnist, Dr. Misty Hook. She is an assistant professor at Texas Woman's University and will be writing on the advantages of having mothers in academia.