

FEATURE

The impact of patriarchy on *mother-daughter relationships*

After 100 years of awareness of their importance, are therapy trainings and therapeutic practice continuing to overlook the significance of mother and adult daughter attachment?

**WORDS**

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A century ago, psychoanalyst Karen Horney¹ identified the distinct relationship between mothers and daughters, and shortly after, Murray Bowen² discovered multigenerational family-of-origin patterns. Horney challenged the male-dominated theoretical approach, while Bowen emphasised transgenerational family patterns. However, these two insights were not immediately linked together to identify the transgenerational significance of mother and daughter attachment. Despite mother

and daughter attachment being widely discussed throughout most of the last century, it is not yet widely recognised as a unique form of attachment behaviour, essentially because it remains camouflaged within the very nature of our patriarchal society.

I believe the acknowledgement and investigation of a mother and adult daughter attachment model must become an essential tool for therapists working with either mother-daughter couples, or single women who may have been adversely affected by transgenerational mother-daughter behaviour.

While sitting in the presence of the late sage Ramesh Balsekar (1917-2009) at his home in Mumbai, he once mentioned that neuroscientists had discovered that human brains contain neural pathways, from the ends of which small electrical signals transfer information and generate 'thoughts'. He added that these scientists later observed

that the 'thoughts' came first, and the electrical reaction followed.

Similarly, there is significant evidence that not only do the thoughts come first, before the brain reacts, but, more importantly, emotions come first before the body reacts. Therapists working with PTSD are aware that the body reacts involuntarily to pre-existing emotional trauma when triggered by an unconscious reminder of the original event.

Just as the adult responds to trauma with either the flight, fight or freeze options, the child only effectively has the freeze option, which is to suppress their needs when in conflict with significant others. The freeze option is described by Peter Levine³ as frozen energy, where the internalisation of emotions leads to an insecure attachment style.

Although the well-known works of John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott have added enormously to our understanding

of how our biopsychosocial environment influences the way in which individuals construct their perception and understanding of the world around them, we must remember that such studies were carried out by men who mostly observed women with their children. We also need to appreciate that

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Bowlby was raised in an upper-middle-income family as one of six children in the British fashion of his class structure at that time, and that he and his siblings were raised by a hired nanny; that role being unquestionably allocated to a woman.

Omnipresent patriarchy

All of which brings me to the often unseen and unspoken effects of our patriarchal societies on the attachment style of most of our world's population, whether through overt patriarchy – as in ethnic and religious groups from the Taliban to Hasidic Judaism – or covert patriarchy, from the Appalachian mountains to the film studios of Los Angeles, and from governments around the world to almost every workplace and rural village. The intergenerational passing on of female versus male roles is so deeply embedded in society that we grow up believing the myth

that men are from Mars and women are from Venus.

In the 1980s, Paula Caplan touched on the patriarchal myths regarding how '...girls and women are far more likely than men and boys to learn to be emotionally expressive and sensitive to the feelings of others. (As a general rule, males are more likely to suppress, ignore, or deny many of their feelings).'⁴

REFERENCES

- 1 Horney K. *Feminine psychology*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Co; 1967.
- 2 Bowen M. *Toward the differentiation of self in one's own family*. In: Fram JL (ed). *Family interaction: a dialogue between family researchers and family therapists*. New York: Springer-Verlag; 1967 (pp111-173).
- 3 Levine P. *In an unspoken voice*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books; 2010.
- 4 Caplan P. *Don't blame mother: mending the mother-daughter relationship*. New York, NY: Harper and Row; 1989.

“ Across most societies, women continue to be seen as, and comply with expectations to be, sexualised objects in generally subservient or supportive roles

Just as the body-mind organism reflects what it is thinking and feeling, so each person raised within a patriarchal system reflects the inherent values of patriarchy that were normalised within their biopsychosocial upbringing. Across most societies, women continue to be seen as, and comply with expectations to be, sexualised objects in generally subservient or supportive roles. This can lead, on the one hand, to women being coerced into wearing shapeless black robes, with eye slots for vision, as a result of male fears of erotic transference – Afghan women having the lowest life expectancy in that region and highest rates of maternal death.⁵ Or, in contrast, to women being encouraged to sexualise themselves by wearing alluring clothing and makeup, injecting Botox, or undergoing surgical implants, all in the name of ‘being more attractive’. Both deny women’s rights to self-actualisation and to achieve their highest psychological potential.

Origins of mother and daughter attachment

At the turn of the last century, the importance of the mother-daughter relationship was acknowledged by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. Interestingly, and perhaps like Bowlby, Freud’s father was a relatively remote and authoritarian figure, leaving the task of nurture and emotional availability to his wife. Between 1922 and 1937, Karen Horney¹ investigated the mapping of trends in the behaviour of women, who at that time were seen as being objects of charm and beauty, noting that this was at variance with Abraham Maslow’s understanding that every human being had the intuitive objective of self-actualisation. ‘Psychoanalyst Friedman (1980) stated that to become a mature woman, a daughter must establish a positive relationship with her mother. Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983) asserted that in a patriarchal society, women are left to nurture children. They identified more with female children because of shared gender and projected their feelings of neediness on them. Thus, girls grow up not having their own needs met, but instead learn to decipher the feelings of others. Society reinforces this pattern by assigning roles to women that have to do with constantly being aware of the feelings and needs of others while continuing to repress one’s own.’⁷

Library pictures, for illustration

Later, attachment theory emphasised the importance of mother-daughter relationships and provided insight into the bonds formed between mothers and their children. Bowlby coined the term ‘mother figure’ and introduced the importance of social and economic context. In her dissertation, *Adult Daughters’ Perception of the Mother-Daughter Relationship: a cross-cultural comparison*,⁶ Mudita Rastogi explored the additional influence of culture in mother-daughter attachment bonds.

Although the intergenerational patterns that exist in families were noted by various authors in the 1990s and showed how a child’s attachment to a parent related significantly to the parent’s reconstruction of their own attachment history, the specifics of the grandmother-mother-daughter relationships were not identified.

Manifestation of mother and daughter attachment

Intergenerational mother-daughter attachment is often witnessed when a client tells me they were diagnosed with postnatal depression following the birth of their child and told that childbirth can upset hormone balance. Antidepressant medication is frequently offered to counteract the first reaction. If, however, like Ramesh Balsekar, one believes that the hormone system is not causing the imbalance but is the manifestation of an underlying body-mind imbalance, then the remedy lies in treating the cause and not the resultant symptom.

A new mother, who only weeks before was, for example, pursuing her chosen profession, is now deprived of those professional challenges, as well as their rewards. They may be deprived of daily interaction with co-workers, travel to and from the workplace, interaction with clients or customers, freedom to vary their routine, or to pop into a gym, café, bar or restaurant. Instead, they are housebound, manacled to their new offspring, unable to go out, obliged to meet the constant demands of a hungry child or the replacement of a soiled nappy, feeling obliged to put on a happy face, as well as to meet the expectations of neighbours, friends and family to be overjoyed by their new motherhood role. It’s hardly surprising that postnatal life seems to lack so much of their prenatal existence.

“ ...mothers and daughters are people first, and ... their needs and beliefs have historically been contained within society’s patriarchal edicts



Paula Caplan explains that for grandmothers of her generation ‘...even more than for most of us, society expected, first, that they would become mothers and second, that they would try, without asking why or wherefore, to fit the self-sacrificing, uncomplaining pattern that was the motherhood mould’.⁹ The absence of support from society, community and partner often contributes towards postpartum depression, distorting the new mother’s expectations of herself, and increasing her sense of failure.

The mother and adult daughter attachment model

The amazing work of Carolyn Spring⁷ and others has recently helped identify the now emerging classification of ‘infanticidal’ attachment, which results from life-threatening childhood traumatic experiences. Similarly, the work of Mudita Rastogi and others is now helping to identify ‘mother and adult daughter’ attachment as the result of intergenerational trauma passed down through families living in an unrecognised patriarchal society. It is, in essence, the failure of society to hitherto recognise the impact of patriarchy on growing children – comparable to Bowlby’s recognition of the effects on children of abandonment – that has allowed generations of women to grow up with their emotional needs suppressed.

By looking at the history of a client’s mother-daughter relationship through this patriarchal lens, we can unravel the historical suppression of women’s needs and reveal the negative effects of this abuse on their own

relationships. Whatever the modality of the therapist, their way of working with mothers or daughters will be enhanced through an informed awareness of the mother-and-adult-daughter-attachment-model (MADAM).

My own way of working over many years has focused on the inner child and the traumas the growing child experienced many years ago. For example, the lack of emotional nurturing and the effects of being raised by emotionally unavailable parents. Horney recognised this as the ‘basic evil’, an experience of parental indifference or lack of warmth and affection. The writings of Jonice Webb⁸ and Lindsay Gibson⁹ on emotional neglect, have greatly informed my practice, and although the unveiling of emotional neglect is part of the healing process for many clients, there are specific requirements when working with mothers and daughters who have evolved their own unique attachments.

Maternal jealousy and mother blaming

Caplan saw mother-blaming as ‘...a cornerstone of the current structure of our society, because it perpetuates the unequal distribution of power between men and women’,⁴ adding that: ‘After all, if we stopped blaming our mothers for all our problems, we would see that in order to combat many of our problems, we would need to make some major changes in our society (eg pay equity, respect and pension for housewives), and we women would find it easier to band together to press for those changes. So, even when we are tempted to praise or appreciate our

mothers, supporters of the status quo [patriarchy] find ways to keep us stuck in mother-blaming.’⁴

This patriarchal power imbalance perpetuates the feeling that mothers in ‘...paid employment may feel valued in our work environment but often wind up feeling unappreciated for the enormous weight of our double load. Mothering tasks, after all, are still believed to require little or no skill or effort. And hand in hand with mother-blaming goes a taboo against father-blaming’.⁴

Alice Miller explains how ‘Women, too, are born with instinctual programming to love, support, protect, and nurture their children and to derive pleasure from doing so. But we are robbed of these instinctual abilities if we are exploited in our childhood for the substitute gratification of our parents’ needs’,¹⁰ recognising the mother’s intergenerational need to see her daughter follow in her own tradition.

Intergenerational acquiescence

One client, whom I’ll call Linda, had stopped speaking to her mother following a disagreement over the mother’s protective approach regarding her brother’s arrest resulting from his physical assault on his wife. Linda was clear with her mother that physical abuse was unacceptable under any circumstances. However, her mother offered excuses to justify her son’s behaviour. This was a re-enactment of the times when they were children and the son was always the chosen one, and could do no wrong, but the daughter was criticised, as well as being charged with looking after her younger brother, her often stereotypical role being

5 Gerntholtz L. Beyond the burqa. [Online.] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/07/02/beyond-burqa> (accessed 27 November 2021).

6 Rastogi M. Adult daughters’ perception of the mother-daughter relationship: a cross-cultural comparison. [Dissertation]. Graduate Faculty of Texas Tech University; 1995.

7 Spring C. [Online.] www.carolynspring.com (accessed 30 January 2022).

8 Webb J. Running on empty: overcome your childhood emotional neglect. New York, NY: Morgan James Publishing; 2014.

9 Gibson L. Adult children of emotionally immature parents. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications; 2015.

10 Miller A. The drama of being a child. London: Virago Press; 2007.

11 Gough T. All you need is love. Thresholds 2012; spring: 34–37.

to care for others but not expect them to care for her.

It transpired that Linda's father abandoned the family when she was four and her mother often left her in charge of her younger brother while she was out working. Additionally, Linda's grandmother had been married to an aggressive and physically abusive husband, who was an alcoholic as well as emotionally unavailable. There was an intergenerational pattern of women in the family acquiescing to a supportive role in return for no emotional support from the men in the family.

It appears on the surface that this mother-grandmother relationship is perhaps all too common and that Linda's mother learned to sacrifice personal desires to become the carer of her abused mother, creating issues of maternal jealousy, as her own daughter now moves ahead through a successful professional career outside of the 'motherhood' role expectations. Caplan observes how mothers and daughters can be '...driven apart by the daughter's promotion because high-powered paid employment and difficult, unpaid household work are not equally valued'.⁴ Linda's pursuit of a career, and not meeting her mother's needs to be supported regarding her son's behaviour, being experienced as rejection and abandonment by her mother.

Working from an inner child perspective, for example, there is much scope to explore the daughter's feeling that her mother devoted her attention to her brother and how this may have disallowed her needs and feelings, causing feelings of abandonment and isolation.

Similarly, exploration of the mother's feeling that her daughter gives all her attention to her career and new life, and how that makes her feel unloved and resentful. Whatever the therapist's approach, an awareness of the underlying mother-daughter paradigm is arguably essential to a good outcome.

Being an only daughter, like being the eldest daughter, would have increased generational pressure for the daughter to be the mother's carer, as well as the carer of her brother, and resentment surfaced in Linda's early teens, because she was beginning to find her voice. No longer a child with only the freeze/suppress-her-needs option, she was now able to fight and/or flee.

Summary

One of the greatest learning potentials that arise from recognition of MADAM in the counselling room is that mothers and daughters are people first, and that their needs and beliefs have historically been contained within society's patriarchal edicts, giving rise to false selves who co-create conflicting relationships with each other. Liberation from this essentially patriarchal conditioning, shows mothers and daughters that they do have their own experiences, ideas and beliefs outside of the society's expectations, and that it can be safe to listen to each other, to accept each other's perspective and agree to differ without feeling loss.

By exposing the underlying conditioning, and unpicking established mother-daughter attachment behaviours, the therapist can

shed light on how conflicts have arisen and how those conflicts have replaced any chance of unconditional love between mother and daughter, with closed hearts and closed minds. Only by allowing minds and hearts to open, can relational healing occur, and I passionately believe that '...unconditional love in the therapeutic relationship, as in life generally, is the necessary condition for healing of any kind to occur'.¹¹

While governments and politicians discuss issues including climate change and pandemics, working from the top-down, therapists can work from the bottom-up, changing the harmful effects of patriarchal societies on mother and daughter relationships. In the words of Wayne Dyer: 'As you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.' ●

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