

THE INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-TIME MOTHERHOOD
FOR CAREER WOMEN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My motivation for exploring the motherhood experience through this research endeavor rests on a long standing intrigue concerning mothering which has been both personal and professional. Personally, I was raised to think that I would someday become a mother although I was also encouraged to succeed educationally and professionally, and to pursue other personal satisfactions first. As time progressed, I found myself very involved in my career and successful in my efforts to function independently. In fact, my view of myself became that of a career woman. By the time I was chronologically of the age to start a family I, instead, entered the Institute's Ph. D. program. The women in our class affectionately labeled each other as "Phallic Women" which left me feeling somewhat uncomfortable for I had not yet found a way to integrate my desire to fulfill my motherhood goals with my career interests.

Inadvertently I made an effort to resolve this conflict by pursuing various dissertation topics which openly reflected my own personal evolution regarding this struggle. These dissertation topics ranged from "Surrendering a Child for

Adoption," to the "Decision Making Process of Whether or Not to Have a Baby," to "The Struggle in Balancing Career and Motherhood Interests," to finally, "The experiences of first-time motherhood."

The juncture of first-time parenthood seemed like an ideal developmental period to explore women's perceptions of their career and motherhood in that it is a time when women are faced with having to integrate (or to choose not to integrate) these two major roles and undertakings: as a mother and as a career woman.

Professionally, this dissertation topic interested me because most women do choose to become mothers. It was my initial intention to explore professional women's subjective experiences, attitudes and coping patterns as they relate to these two expectations: "individual strivings" (as reflected in professional work outside the home) and "feminine responsibility" (as reflected in professional work inside the home) and to explore how they impact each other.

At the time, it seemed perplexing that so little was known about the internal and external dynamics (or the interplay of these) impinging on the contemporary women's experience of themselves and their life situations. My frustrations with the available literature concerning contemporary women's experiences of motherhood motivated me to pursue this dissertation effort with great enthusiasm.

The focused aim of my study was to better understand the subjective experience of first-time motherhood for career women who claimed to have placed great importance on their careers during their childless years. This endeavor was easily accomplished as the new mothers in this study were more than willing to share their personal experiences with me. What was most surprising, however, were the results. While as a researcher I tried to remain open-minded, I expected the women to emphasize their struggle in balancing career and motherhood interests. Surprisingly, the subjects instead emphasized the profound significance that motherhood has had for them personally and developmentally. The struggle in balancing career interests with motherhood interests certainly exists and the women studied will tell you so. However, this struggle was not found to be central to the motherhood experience. The findings suggest that this is because the experience of motherhood becomes so important, that all other people, endeavors and interests become secondary to their number one priority--their child.

Personally, the results of the research resonate with my own experience in having a child. While first-time parenthood was initially disruptive both externally and internally, a positive change occurred in me which I believe broadened and strengthened me not only as a person but as a woman. This dissertation research, along with my own experience in becoming a mother, has also helped me to become keenly aware of the complexity of the female

experience. Indeed, there are strengths specific to women and positive personal outcomes to be gained from their "common" experiences. These common experiences have not, until recently, been nearly well-emphasized and valued enough by our patriarchal society. I hope that this research helps to enhance our understanding of the contemporary female experience and to underscore the importance of research so as to re-examine existing theories in order to provide a more accurate and resonating portrayal of women and their present-day experiences.