Mothers Matter

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Women, who were once solely relegated to roles of nurturing and homemaking, now excel in all areas of society. They are leaders in education, science, medicine, business, and politics. Their accomplishments are rightly lauded as they climb corporate ladders and break glass ceilings. However, their contributions as leaders in the home are too often demeaned and discredited. It is time for society to recognize that to fully give women the credit they are due, it must include rather than discount the influential role of the mothers who lead, inspire, and encourage the rising generation.

Leadership provided by mothers within their own homes often goes unnoticed but does indeed matter, in spite of societal disregard or diminution of motherhood. Though "literature on family leadership is limited," as Galbraith and Schvaneveldt (2005) asserted, "Good leadership is not only needed within organizational settings, it is needed within families" (pp. 220-221). After providing a contextual setting for the argument, this essay will look at some examples demonstrating parental leadership's significance both to children and society, that it can be learned and developed, and that mothers play a significant role in the leadership of families, as well as in their professional pursuits.

According to government reports from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 marked the year in which a higher percentage of women possessed a bachelor's degree than men. The educational attainment of the younger

female generation began trending in this direction in 1996 (Baumin & Ryan, 2015), and now among those from twenty-five to thirty-four years old, 37.5% of women have a bachelor's degree or higher, while only 29.5% of men do (Feeney, 2015, para. 4). This is quite an accomplishment considering that historically, a woman's opportunity for higher education has been extremely limited. With greater academic access and advancement, women who once were solely relegated to roles of nurturing and homemaking now excel in all areas of society. They are leaders in science, medicine, business, and politics—all professions that were previously dominated by men. Women serve in the nation's highest court, in the halls of Congress, and in boardrooms across the country. Their accomplishments are rightly lauded as they climb corporate ladders and break glass ceilings.

Much of this progress in the U.S. can be attributed to the feminist protests of the 1960s and 1970s, commonly referred to as second-wave feminism. This movement necessarily "challenged and changed the political and cultural landscape" (Roth, 2006, p. 1). It holistically considered the experience of women in areas such as sexuality, politics, work, and family (Burkett, 2019). Second-wave feminists viewed the idealized domesticity that permeated the media following World War II (Knuttila & Magnan, 2008) as stifling and advocated for women's reproductive rights and for the rights of women to work outside the home.

Unfortunately, one of the negative consequences of the second-wave feminist movement is the continuation of what Fraser and Gordon called "the occlusion and devaluation of women's unwaged domestic and parenting labour" (as cited in Marks, Little, Gaucher, & Noddings, 2016, p. 773). While the African American and Chicana women's movements honored the roles of women *within* the family and viewed them with a sense of pride, the mainstream feminists identified stay-at-home motherhood as a considerable source of women's oppression (Marks et al., 2016). Responding to this, in 1987 Polly Toynbee said, "Feminism is the most revolutionary idea there has ever been. Equality for women demands a change.… It means valuing parenthood as much as we value banking" (as cited in Heath, 2013, p. 22). Over thirty years later, however, it is difficult to make the argument that our society has achieved this type of equality. Feminists have been effective in focusing on the benefits of

economic independence through participation in the paid labor force as the primary means of improving women's lives (Marks et al., 2016). As a result, our nation has made great strides in the advancement of women in the workforce. Women have more opportunities than ever before and are recognized alongside their male counterparts as capable leaders and contributors in many disciplines. However, our society now seems to dictate that women demonstrate their worth in a setting outside of domesticity. In this sense, the feminist movement may have inadvertently colluded to diminish the value of something that has always uniquely belonged to women: motherhood. Too often, society views leadership within the home as irrelevant.

It is not surprising that even highly educated women who have consciously made the choice to prioritize motherhood often feel like their work as mothers is discounted by society. Rubin and Wooten(2007) conducted a qualitative study of ten women who chose to leave their successful careers to devote themselves full-time to the raising of their children. All the women had at least a masters-level degree of education; four were JDs and two were MDs. The study found that each woman made the decision to stay home with her respective children based on an emotional desire to spend more quality time with them. For these women, the choice to stay home and focus on mothering was, and continues to be, influenced by perceived benefits to themselves and their families. However, even while recognizing the value and importance of their newly chosen vocation, they do not feel validated by society. As one mother put it, motherhood is a "position in society [that] isn't…considered…real work" (Rubin & Wooten, 2007, p. 341). At times, it has made them question the worth of what they were doing and wonder if they were living up to their potential. Some have felt embarrassed that they were not working and contributing knowledge and skills to the whole of society. Rubin and Wooten reported that to assuage "their discomfort with being 'just a mom,'" many of the women "let others know that they were professionals rather than identifying themselves as simply stay-at-home mothers" (p. 341). The mothers spoke of feeling discounted and treated as if they were invisible by working professionals "until they found out they had a certain degree behind their name" (pp. 342-343), suggesting that the work of parenting is somehow viewed as less valuable because "any woman can be a mother…and one

does not need an education [to do so]" (p. 343). This is consistent with Zimmerman's (2000) findings that stay-at-home parents feel their work is not respected, appreciated, or supported by society (p. 343).

One wonders if the devaluation of motherhood is indicative of the value our society places on monetary wealth and material accumulation, as if the size of one's paycheck is the best measure of one's societal contribution. However, it is difficult to believe that the peers of these stay-at-home mothers would have discounted their work if they had been engaged in philanthropic endeavors away from home. Society would likely find it commendable if women were donating their time and energy—using their skills and education—to organize charity work in underdeveloped nations, even if they received little to no monetary compensation for doing so. They would likely be lauded for leading efforts to provide food, water, and other basic needs to indigent families in developing countries. One would expect them to be equally praised for spearheading efforts to improve literacy or to mentor young people in inner cities closer to home. In fact, the subjects in the Rubin and Wooten study (2007) expressed that while they felt disregarded in their work of mothering, they did find validation when engaging in community service (p. 342). It seems it is only when work is performed *within* the home that it is deemed societally insignificant.

In addition to the antagonistic mantras led by some branches of feminism, there are also other popular trends implying that, beyond their genetics, parents do not matter much at all. In *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*, Judith Rich Harris (1998) asserts that the behavior of children is more strongly influenced by teachers and peers than by parents, suggesting that parents are not the primary socializers as much of social science has indicated for so many years. Additionally, her research indicates intelligence and personality formation are a result of nature (DNA) rather than nurture. The conclusion the reader is to draw from her book is that parenting is somewhat inconsequential. A popular buzz line from this reasoning is "Parents matter; Parenting does not." This implies that a child needs a good sperm and egg donor, but beyond that, his or her parents are irrelevant. This line of thinking further suggests, "Step aside, Mom and Dad. Society will take care of the rest." This does little to affirm the work of motherhood. However,

while social science may do well to consider issues of heredity in its own assumptions when considering correlational evidence, it seems research by behavioral geneticists does more to help us understand developmental differences within a family than to account for all differences *between* families (Mekertichian & Bowes, 1996). There is plenty of research and anecdotal evidence indicating that the quality of parental leadership in the home can, indeed, have a positive effect on the welfare and development of the child, which in turn impacts society in positive ways.

Developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind conducted extensive research on various parenting styles and the effects they have on children (Biscontini, 2017). She found that an authoritative style of parenting is correlated to many positive outcomes, whereas permissive and authoritarian parenting are not, suggesting that parental leadership style matters. According to Baumrind, authoritative parents effectively incorporate a reasonable balance of "nurturance, discipline, and respect" (Heath, 2013, p. 29) into their parenting practice. They offer love, warmth, acceptance, and support when they respond to their children's needs, but they also have high expectations for their children. Authoritative parents demand responsible behavior and provide structure by setting limits and rules while still explaining the reasons for them, rather than expecting unquestioning obedience. Their interactions with their children are guided by mutual respect, and they recognize and encourage their children's unique personalities and individual interests (Heath, 2013). Citing an abundance of research, Heath indicates that the children of authoritative parents enjoy several advantages and positive outcomes: high levels of familial interaction and family cohesiveness, high levels of academic achievement, higher levels of conscientiousness, higher self-esteem, improved cooperation with peers, as well as higher levels of psychosocial maturity, resourcefulness, reasoning ability, empathy, and altruism. While these are certainly advantages for the individual children, qualities of empathy, altruism, and resourcefulness must also be recognized as great benefits to larger society as well. Interestingly, Heath also cites a 2003 study by Bednar and Fisher, stating that contrary to the assertions made by Harris, "…parents who use authoritative parenting patterns have more influence with their children and adolescents than do peers." In fact, "adolescents whose parents were authoritative were

more likely to refer to their parents when making moral choices and also were more inclined to rely on their parents for information on which to base their decisions" (Heath, 2013, p. 30). It would appear, then, that what parents do and how they parent may matter after all.

It must be understood that worldwide, more than 90% of children are raised in non-Western places, where there are different notions of what is optimal in development. The anthropological work of Robert Levine, an anthropologist and emeritus professor of education and human development at Harvard, and his wife Sarah, a former research fellow at Harvard, suggests that on a global scale there may not be one "best practice" approach to parental leadership. He asserts, "Parents in every culture at a given moment think they are doing the optimal thing for their kids. But their concept of what is optimal is extremely different from another culture and even from another generation in their own culture" (as cited in Friedman, 2016, para. 8). One style of parenting may be better suited toward successful child development in one culture than it is in another. For example, authoritarian parenting, which tends to favor "…punitive, forceful measures to curb […] children's willful nature[s]" (Heath, 2013, p. 31), is correlated to negative outcomes (such as lower psychosocial maturity, lower achievement, and an increased risk for delinquency, substance abuse, and crime) in Western societies. However, in non-Western traditional families, a similar strict parenting style is associated with many more positive outcomes because the parenting is also balanced by greater closeness and responsiveness (pp. 42-44). Because of this, Levine wants parents to understand that while everything they do may not become a part of their child's psychology, "parents matter in a different way—that parents are sponsors of their children's development" (as cited in Friedman, 2016, para. 30) regardless of their culture.

One way parents become sponsors of their children's development is by becoming actively involved in their academic environment. Lest one assume that parental success or failure is written in one's genetic code, predestining them to be a good or bad leader in their home, research indicates parenting skills can be learned and applied in families just as leadership competency can be practiced and improved in other settings. One study by Cunningham, Kreider, and Ocon (2012) evaluated

whether parents' leadership capacity and practice would be improved after participating in a parent leadership program. The program in question, Parent Services Project's Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute (VVFLI), relied on principles common to community organizing and family support such as recognition of strengths, shared power, equity, and mutual respect. Participants were instructed in topics such as leadership qualities, goal setting, and family support principles and strategies. Recognizing that "Decades of research point to the many benefits of family engagement in children's learning on student academic achievement" (Cunningham, Kreider, & Ocon, 2012, p. 111), parents received training in how to become more effectively engaged. The study indicates that the parental training was, indeed, effective, having positively influenced "…parents' leadership capacity in terms of their identity as a leader, their general leadership and communication skills, and their skills specific to school- and community-based settings" (Cunningham et al., p. 121), which help to enable them to be better advocates for their children and facilitate their academic success. By learning and implementing these leadership skills and increasing their family engagement, these families can expect reduced rates of alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior among their children (National PTA, 1998, as cited by Cunningham et al, 2012). Clearly, it seems that parenting matters.

Not only does parenting matter, but specifically, the leadership of mothers within the home matters. A study conducted by Kevin Galbraith and Jay Schvaneveldt (2005) compared the relationship between family leadership styles and family well-being, with 231 two-parent families used in their sample. They found that favorable family outcomes are associated with "leadership that is active, or transformational, in comparison to leadership that is passive" and that the families scoring most positively on the family well-being variable and lowest on the family discordance variable were those that had a mother with a transformational leadership style (Galbraith & Schvaneveldt, 2005, p. 230).

Transformational leadership is characterized by one who serves as a mentor, strengthens relationships, motivates others to work toward their full potential, and provides meaningful service opportunities. Transformational leaders possess idealized attributes and demonstrate

idealized behaviors. They provide inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration as they help others to reach toward their true potential. In the Galbraith and Schvaneveldt study, it was clearly "The mothers in the transformational-mother cluster [who] played an important role in the well-being of the family. It appears as though favorable outcomes were, to large degree, related to the active leadership style of the mothers" (Galbraith & Schvaneveldt, 2005, p. 231).

With the understanding that leadership makes a difference and can be learned, that parenting matters and affects outcomes impacting individuals and societies, and that the leadership of mothers in the home has been specifically identified as a key to the strength of a family, we need not wonder any longer if mothers matter. Clearly, they do. Whether they are single mothers, working mothers, stay-at-home mothers, or otherwise; whether their efforts are recognized and appreciated or not, the work they do within their own homes is at least as significant as the work they do outside of it. As Elizabeth Corey (2013) concludes,

> Modern women are right to think that both the pursuit of excellence and the desire to care for others are part of a fully flourishing life. Excellence in a particular field requires persistence, self-confidence, drive, courage, and initiative. These are eminently admirable qualities. On the other hand, serving or loving another requires the even more admirable qualities of attention, focus, care, patience, and self-sacrifice. The accent we place on them, and the way we put them into practice, is a matter for all of us to figure out for ourselves. (Corey, 2013, p. 51)

A woman should be able to pursue mastery and accomplishment in any area of her choosing. However, it is time for society to recognize that to fully give women the credit they are due, it must include, rather than discount, the influential role of women who choose to be the mothers leading, inspiring, and encouraging the rising generation.

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