

Chapter 5. Intimate Combat: The Responsibility for Child Rearing

Women everywhere raise children. Men everywhere have greater power than women. These fundamental social patterns must be causally linked. But what is the nature of those links?

Both scientific theories and popular culture use women's commitment to children to explain and to justify gender inequality. When a couple have children someone must care for them. But we should not take women's responsibility for child rearing for granted.

We must ask *why* women do most child rearing. Or, even more, we must ask *why men do not*. In brief, social opinion, internalized expectations, rational calculation, and the imbalance of spouses' resources used in conflicts all thrust that responsibility on women. Because women and men are socialized to accept the prevalent definition of female and male roles, they anticipate women's responsibility for children. They do not contemplate the possibility of other arrangements that might be preferable. They discredit any signs of deviance in themselves and others. Should a couple consciously examine the desirability of the prevalent division of labor, they quickly recognize that the man's employment brings greater income and his career holds greater promise for the future. Should they fight over the issue, the man is in a strategically superior position to reject responsibility. His superior employment and the general status of men in society generally award him dominance in the family. She is much more vulnerable to social reproach for rejecting responsibility for child rearing.

These social causes of the sexual division of labor do not get wide recognition. Popular beliefs in this and other societies glibly attribute sex differences in behavior to people's abilities or motives. Women and men (or people of different races or the poor and the rich) have divergent fates because they are different sorts of people. Why are they different? Religions blame (or credit) the fortuitous choice of omnipotent aliens (the *will of God*). Those who prefer their metaphysics grounded in the observable world point to the irrepressible effects of biology ordained by *nature*. And when emergent conditions become more appealing than inherent differences, we come upon references to differences in childhood indoctrination based on adults' understandings of gender.

Realistically, the relationship between child rearing and inequality defies any simple analysis. Regardless of the value of children--emotional or practical--there

are costs involved in their care and rearing.⁹⁸ Time spent caring for children cannot be used for other pursuits. The effort of child tending is effort regardless of how willingly it is embraced. The question is why women so regularly contribute most of this effort.

The Role of Biology**The Social Explanation of Mothering**

An explanation of women's childbearing responsibilities must solve two problems. *First*, it must identify the ongoing social processes that lead women to care for children and destine men for other activities. *Second*, it must show what social structures or social needs produce and sustain these processes. We can provisionally specify several social conditions that can direct women toward child rearing and men away from it:

- (1) the typical circumstances of childhood development that ensure women expect child rearing obligations and accept them as legitimate while men do neither,
- (2) the limitations on women's opportunities to follow other paths in life (and the incentives offered men by such opportunities),
- (3) sanctions brought to bear on women who do seek and try to pursue alternatives (or on men who aspire to spend their time rearing children), and
- (4) ideology that supports and legitimizes the allocation of child rearing responsibility to women (and others to men).

Three distinctive social explanations try to account for women's child rearing responsibility. *First*, the *sex role socialization* approach emphasizes the creation of divergent feminine and masculine identities in children. It contends that parents, teachers, mass media, and the surrounding culture impose different expectations on girls and boys. *Second*, the *psychoanalytic-functionalist* approach emphasizes the creation of different male and female personalities that make women a better choice for rearing children. This approach assumes men and women acquire different personality profiles because their early emotional relationships with parents differ. Social processes within families and other institutions then direct both sexes toward the roles fitting their personalities. *Third*, the *power and conflict* approach argues that women accept responsibility

⁹⁸This focus on the responsibility for child rearing ignores but does not deny that children can bring joys to adults. The emotional bond between parent and child and the experience of participating in the development of a human personality can bring enormous pleasures. Many parents, and mothers in particular, would claim that the rewards of having children surpass the costs. This is not the issue.

for child rearing because they have no choice. Men have higher status and political ascendancy and they use their power to keep women at home. We want to consider each of these approaches.

Sex Role Socialization

Every society has culturally defined *sex roles*. These roles attribute different ways of thinking and acting to men and women. They also associate different social obligations and privileges with men and women. In societies like our own, women have been expected to be passive, nurturing, deferent to men, and committed to child rearing. Men have been expected to be assertive, controlled, authoritative, and committed to providing income through employment.

Most men and women conform to these expectations without conscious consideration of alternatives. If forced to assess them, most people would claim that the role expectations are natural and legitimate.

Yet, two well-known characteristics of sex roles suggest a paradox. First, the specific definition of what is feminine or masculine varies widely across cultures. Second, within any culture most people believe their particular gender identities are natural, necessary, and appropriate. How can people everywhere believe that their peculiar definition of male and female characteristics in an obvious, unavoidable reflection of nature?

Socialization makes sense of this apparent paradox. As people everywhere are inherently the same biologically and psychologically, some process must give them the gender identities characteristic of their society. And this process must make that identity seem natural.

CIVILIZING INFLUENCES

Sex role socialization refers to the ways families, schools, and the surrounding culture indoctrinate children so they act out masculine and feminine roles through the remainder of their lives.⁹⁹ According to sex role socialization theory, adults benignly teach gender roles by differentially rewarding (or punishing) gender appropriate (or inappropriate) behavior. Adults also restrict children to gender appropriate opportunities to learn skills and develop interests. For example, adults give girls and boys different toys, dress them differently, and allow them different degrees of independence.

As a result, men and women conform to different standards of thought and behavior. Both women and men become committed to preserving sex differences. These internalized differences display themselves throughout the spectrum of behavior--public and private, important and inconsequential. In particular,

⁹⁹Weitzman 1984.

women and men both expect wives to provide most child care, especially during the early years.

Both sexes generally resist living out the opposite arrangement. Men and women trying to behave like the opposite sex--men forced to stay home and care for children or women placed in positions of unexpected authority--often feel awkward and resentful. Most people also feel considerable discomfort around others, like transvestites, who flaunt their rejection of sex role customs.

The recognition of socialization's importance motivated the *consciousness raising* groups characteristic of the first decade of the modern feminist movement. They tried to *undo* women's internalized gender prescriptions induced by their social surroundings.

In short, while growing up men and women acquire emphatic and effective conceptions of sex roles that guide their adult behavior. Women's responsibility for child rearing is an essential component of these sex roles.

LIMITS OF SOCIALIZATION THEORY

As an explanation of women's exclusive responsibility for child rearing, however, sex role socialization falls short for several reasons. To be complete, it must rely on an untenable assumption that socialization produces insurmountable and unambiguous outcomes. It also cannot account for the content of sex roles. This gives socialization processes a confusing relationship to inequality and social change. Furthermore, socialization theory does not distinguish learning to accept roles enforced by structural circumstances from adopting an identity that persists without external supports. Thus, it confuses legitimation with determination. Let's consider each of these shortcomings at greater length.

Ambiguity Socialization is normally ambiguous and often weak. How, then, can it explain outcomes that are consistent and strong? Explanations that attribute the sexual division of labor to sex role socialization tend to exaggerate both the clarity and power of socialization.

For example, socialization theorists argue that boys receive greater rewards for assertiveness and independence while girls get more rewards for nurturing and passivity. Research shows these differences are real.

Yet, they are not absolute differences and may not even be large. Boys often suffer punishment for aggressive behavior. Girls do get praised for displays of initiative.

You can easily overestimate the significance of sex role socialization *differences* if you contrast them with an ideal standard of perfectly equal treatment. Schooling provides a good example. Numerous studies have shown that children's schoolbooks depict boys and girls differently, teachers treat the sexes differently, and schools guide children toward different courses according

to their sex.¹⁰⁰ It is reasonable to criticize this differential treatment as morally repugnant and to suggest it reinforces sex role differences. Yet, if we compare conditions in the United States to those of the past or to those in other nations, it is more notable how similarly schools treat boys and girls.

Girls and boys go to the same classes, have similar access to knowledge, and are judged by similar standards of achievement. Girls began to get an education much like boys at the elementary level in the nineteenth century. Slowly but steadily this pattern progressed upwards through secondary schools, then college, and, recently, post-graduate education. As a result, the twentieth century American educational system probably did a better job at making women expect equality than preparing them for a secondary status.

Similarly, adults do not hold girls and boys to starkly contrasting ideals. They ask boys to watch over other children and they punish boys for displays of aggression. They ask girls to excel in all kinds of competitive conditions. Thus, parents and institutions do treat boys and girls differently, but the differences are limited, inconsistent, and unpredictable.

Sex role socialization is also often less tenacious and enduring than people assume. Socialization gives children skills, expectations, and beliefs about what is right. It does not dictate behavior. Most of us frequently defy lessons about courtesy, legality, and morality, although we may suffer some guilt or anxiety as a result. Indeed, as we adopt adult roles and adapt to new circumstances in life, we must abandon behavioral tendencies learned through childhood socialization.

In truth, adults in modern societies usually live at odds with the dictates of their childhood socialization. For example, during the last several decades, most American youths abandoned the sexual standards taught to them by their parents. Most parents find that their children abandon one or another significant component of their socialization, such as religious feelings, political allegiance, or career aspirations. Childhood socialization, therefore, carries ambiguous lessons that adults can, and do, reject when conditions demand it. Such a variable and unpredictable process cannot account for the almost universal allocation of most child rearing responsibilities to women.

Process vs. Content Efforts to interpret sex role socialization as a cause of gender inequality also founder because they cannot accommodate historical changes in the positions and social identities of the sexes. We can see this by considering two questions that appear to demand contradictory answers from socialization theories.

First, why would women actively perpetuate the system of gender inequality by the lessons they teach as child rearers (especially since women appear to

¹⁰⁰E.g. Weitzman et al, 1972.

possess autonomy in rearing children)? For socialization to contribute significantly to the persistence of sex role differences, it must do more than produce sex appropriate adult behavior. It must also consistently cause adults to socialize their children just as they were socialized by their own parents. It is not enough that women's childhood leads them to pursue motherhood. They must want and expect their own daughters, but not their sons, to become child rearers. This has to be true if socialization effectively causes women to rear children and men to do other things.¹⁰¹

Second, as gender roles change in this and other modern societies, where have the new elements of sex role identity come from? It seems that people redefine sex roles in response to changes in the social environment. New economic, political, and cultural conditions require corresponding changes in sex roles. As the tasks required of adults and the means for legitimizing privileges and obligation change, so must the division of labor between men and women.

Consider an example. In the pre-industrial era women and men worked together as part of the family production group. After industrialization men took jobs outside the home. Most women reared children and took responsibility for other domestic tasks. Industrialization therefore severely altered the definition of sex roles. But if adults acquire their orientations toward adult role obligations through socialization and those roles change over time, then the content or objectives of socialization must change. In short, social conditions must wield greater influence over socialization than adults' childhood experiences.

Now we see the contradiction. For socialization to effectively perpetuate sex roles, it must cause adults to socialize their children just as they were socialized when young. By itself, socialization theory is inherently conservative, because it contains within itself no mechanism of change. To allow for change, however, current social conditions must dictate the content of socialization. To avoid this contradiction, we must connect socialization to both the past and present.

As they socialize their children, parents adapt them to the demands of the surrounding world as much as they link them to the beliefs of their grandparents' generation. In general, adults in the family and other institutions educate children based on the adults' current understandings of what is desirable and practical. This means that the adults' commitment to pass on the lessons from their childhood socialization depends on the degree that they find these lessons still

¹⁰¹It will not work, as it might appear at first glance, to suggest that other social conditions cause women to socialize their children in conformity with cultural expectations about gender. For if women are not internally committed to the content of gender roles, why are they committed to accepting responsibility for rearing children? If we assume socialization accounts for the latter, it must also cause the former.

useful in their own lives. Most people will probably first try to conform to the expectations learned during their childhood socialization, abandoning them reluctantly. Even though the socialized expectations do not fit the new opportunities of a changing society, many people will be too fearful, ignorant, or rigid to discover or adopt new roles. Therefore the average content of socialization will lag behind the trends of structural change. However, adaptive role content will tend to replace maladaptive role content throughout the society over the long run.

Thus, even if socialization were much more consistent and effective, it could only be the instrument of the causal process determining adult roles, not the composer. Without the socialization process, to be sure, adult adaptation to social expectations would be considerably more difficult and unpredictable. Rebellion would be more frequent, sanctions probably harsher, and social patterns less stable. Socialization adapts people to social conditions. Sex role socialization prepares children to conform to societal expectations. It helps them to adapt to structural circumstances during the remainder of their lives skillfully and without conscious calculation. It does not, however, determine the conditions it prepares people to accept.

Determination or Legitimation Socialization ensures the legitimacy of roles more than it instills divergent motives or capacities. In an environment of persistent structural inequality, the content of socialization teaches people to adapt to their statuses. Largely lacking an autonomous community, women have been unable to formulate a distinctive ideology. They therefore socialize their young not only to adapt to inequality but to accept it as legitimate. Mothers do not simply want to replicate their own upbringing, but they are unable to throw off the influence of the ideology sustained by male dominance (See Chapter ? on ideology). And the simple, but obtrusive, experience of women as exclusive child rearers communicates the propriety of gender roles to children at least as well as any efforts by adults to reinforce gender appropriate behavior.

A LINK IN THE CHAIN

Inequality causes culture and culture determines the content of socialization. Socialization determines neither culture nor inequality.

Socialization cannot explain women's child rearing responsibility, but it does reflect gender inequality and thereby helps to sustain it. Socialization is not nearly consistent and effective enough to account for women's overwhelming responsibility for rearing children. Moreover, the objectives of socialization combine cultural expectations of previous generations with the current adult generation's practical experiences. Sex role socialization, therefore, reflects more than it determines women's childbearing responsibilities. Sex role socialization

helps to sustain an untroubled reproduction of gender roles and relations across generations, it gives women some child rearing skills commonly withheld from men, and it legitimates women's responsibility for child related tasks.

The Social Selection of Personalities

The psychodynamic approach to explaining the allocation of child rearing responsibilities emphasizes the familial experiences of children as does the socialization perspective, but it focuses on the creation of unconscious emotional structures as a result of the quality of parent-child relationships rather than the adoption of societal expectations as a result of parental reinforcement. Basing their work on various offshoots of Freudian theory, authors who adopt this perspective assume that women and men (at least in modern societies) consistently diverge in their deepest psychological makeup. The differences are significant, unconscious, and subverbal. Advocates argue that parents do not create these differences by conscious intention, but as an unanticipated consequence of the parent-child relationship. Similarly they contend that the power of these psychological differences to compel behavior and their resistance to change is considerably greater than that of lessons acquired in a straightforward learning environment directed by parental reinforcements.

While a few authors have attempted variations on this approach, most share a common basic logic (Chodorow, Dinnerstein, Firestone, Mitchell, Rubin). They argue that differences between men's and women's adult personalities result from consistent differences in the psychosexual development of boys and girls. Put crudely, because mothers and fathers have very different relationships to children, and because sexual identification and sexual attraction are crucial aspects of development, boys and girls confront discrepant emotional demands and supports that shape contrasting personalities. These differences endure and cause the sexes to adopt different roles in adulthood.

The most thorough and influential theoretical effort in this tradition is Nancy Chodorow's book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Like other psychodynamic theorists, she focuses on the distribution of motives and individual capacities as a means of explaining social organization. She diverges from others in her strong reliance on the ideas of the *object relations* school of psychoanalytic theory and those of the sociologist Talcott Parsons. On the whole, her work represents the best thinking in the recent psychodynamic literature on mothering, and I shall therefore focus on her analysis to simplify our task.

CHODOROW'S THEORY

Women's greater desire and capacity to mother, according to this approach, explains the modern division of labor for child rearing; her theory is suppose to account for this unequal distribution of motives and abilities. It "has unquestionably been true," according to Chodorow [7] that "women have had primary responsibility for child care"; that "women by and large want to mother, and get gratification from their mothering;" and that "women have succeeded at mothering." The key problem, Chodorow states, is to explain the reproduction of mothering across generations.

An Earlier Focus on Men Both Talcott Parsons, from a politically conservative perspective, and the Frankfurt school of *critical analysis*, from a leftist perspective, have attempted a similar task regarding men. They tried to explain why men fulfilled cultural expectations that they seek jobs and earn an income for their families. Both sought an explanation of men's active conformity in the psychological dynamics of childhood experience and early family organization. They focused on men's motives as problematic, but treated women as if their contrasting motives to raise children needed no explanation. Men's occupations in modern economies are so obviously different from men's roles in pre-industrial societies, and men's acceptance of employment is so crucial, that it appeared important to explain men's conformity. Women's domestic responsibilities did not seem to demand similar concern because they looked (deceptively) unchanged. Arguing against any assumption of the naturalness of women's mothering, Chodorow sought to supply a complementary analysis for women's roles.¹⁰²

The Childhood Issues of Identity and Sexuality Psychodynamic theories, as represented by Chodorow's work, argue that men and women possess distinctive personalities because they are forced to resolve two critical emotional and

¹⁰²Chodorow justifies her effort by arguing that no other type of theory is capable of answering the problem. She argues, accurately, that biological theories have no empirical support and lead to predictions proven false by modern social conditions. More important, socialization theories and theories emphasizing power inequality (discussed further below), have no power to explain women's capacity for *good enough* mothering [30-33]. *Good enough* mothering is a concept borrowed from psychoanalytic theory that argues children need a minimal amount of dependable nurturing and communication from some mature person(s). According to Chodorow, this implies much more desire to mother by women than socialization or power theories can explain. Analogously, she claims that such theories are too dependent on an assumption of individual intention--e.g., by socializers or men striving for power--while the institutionalized pattern of women's child rearing is independent of individual intentions [34]. Only a psychodynamic account, according to Chodorow, can overcome these difficulties.

relational problems of development in divergent ways. The two problems are gender identification and heterosexuality.

According to psychodynamic theories, children gain a gender identity by identifying with the same sexed parent. If a child possesses heterosexual parents who conform to the prevalent cultural expectations for their gender, then a daughter can acquire the desires and the skills assigned to females by internalizing the relationship of her mother to her father and to the rest of the world (and similarly for sons). While there are diverse interpretations of the precise meaning of identification, most theories assume that the child incorporates the (romanticized) image of the same sexed parent as an ideal; the parent is *internalized*. By identifying with her mother or his father, a child becomes emotionally committed to the parent's gender identity.

Psychodynamic theories also argue that children must acquire their sexual orientation, because infants begin life with diffuse sexuality--they are bisexual or, more generally, polymorphously perverse. According to psychoanalytic theories, children gain a heterosexual orientation by taking the opposite sex parent as a sexual object choice (largely within fantasy and play behavior).

Asymmetric Parenting and Sex Differences Male and female children must go through different experiences to solve these developmental tasks of identification and sexual object formation. Both sexes begin life in an intimate relation with a woman, their mother, and both find the most important man, their father, to be distant. For both sexes, early intimacy with mothers is a precursor of identification and sexual object choice. But thereafter boys and girls have contrasting needs to be filled in their relationships with their parents. Boys find gender identification difficult, because it requires they distance themselves from their mother and identify with their father; since heterosexuality requires boys simply to continue their *sexual* relation with their mother it is easier. The opposite is true for girls. Since they must continue to identify with their mothers, girls find identification less of a problem than do boys; since girls must switch their sexual object fantasies toward their fathers, they find the development of heterosexuality more difficult.¹⁰³

The absence of personal relations between fathers and children also produces differences between the sexes in the quality of identification processes. A

¹⁰³This account contains Chodorow's major points but considerably simplifies her analysis which considers more complex patterns of children shifting between parents and more ambiguity. She is never, however, able to give theoretical import to the numerous details and variations in these patterns that she discusses, and I shall therefore ignore them. Chodorow also discusses in passing the effects of capitalism and other social issues, but these are excursions that are not part of her theory.

daughter will identify with the mother personally, while the son will identify more with the father's male role than the father himself.

Because of these developmental differences, according to Chodorow, women's adult personalities possess a greater *relational capacity* than do those of men. The key is the identification process. (Despite the extensive discussion of heterosexual object formation, Chodorow does not successfully link differences in the acquisition of sexuality to adult child rearing.) Because boys must (?) distance from their mothers and identify with a remote father, they gain limited emotional capacities and a simple inner mental world of objects (i.e., the psychological representations of human relationships). Girls, on the contrary, retain a capacity for primary identification owing to their continuous identification with their mothers, and they develop a richer, more complex inner world. Women therefore define and experience themselves through their relations with others more than do men. Women consequently both have greater emotional capacity and they need more involvement with others than do men. Therefore, compared to men, women want more have relationships with children, they get more gratification out of such relationships, and they have greater psychological and relational capacities to parent well.

In short, women gain greater motives and greater capacities to mother than do men, because women of their parents' generation had almost exclusive responsibility for mothering. And, apparently, society gives roles to the people best prepared and motivated to take them. Structural or social conditions propelling women toward motherhood are entirely irrelevant to this argument. Chodorow discusses past and current circumstances, such as economic discrimination against women, but her interest in such processes is of no consequence to her theory. She argues that an institution of family life that accords exclusive responsibility for child rearing to women, becomes self-reproducing through inherent and inescapable psychodynamic processes, operating without any reference to the social conditions that might originally or continuously relegate women to the role of mothers.

THEORETICAL ERRORS

Unfortunately, the psychodynamic efforts to explain women's responsibility for child rearing all fail, because they are based on false assumptions and built on logical errors. Such theories are popular nonetheless, because they reinforce popular beliefs, they have the appearance of theoretical sophistication, and they can bolster their claims through the powerful rhetoric of Freudian theory. But they are wrong. In particular, the psychodynamic explanation of women's child rearing contained in Chodorow's work, the recipient of much attention and praise, is a disastrous theoretical failure. Some of the flaws in Chodorow's analysis are

peculiar to her work but most reflect common fundamental errors characteristic to psychodynamic accounts.

Serious conceptual errors undermine Chodorow's psychodynamic explanation of women's child rearing. Her statement of the initial problem is implausible. Her interpretation of developmental differences is unconvincing and methodologically flawed. Her theory leads to numerous false empirical assertions.

Untenable Assumptions The psychodynamic account offered by Chodorow starts wrong by assuming popular ideas that are false. Women, she claims, have a greater desire nurture to children, get more gratification from nurturing, and have greater psychological and relational capacities for nurturing [e.g. 206]. These assertions, meant to describe deep and consequential personality patterns, are largely unsupported reflections of common ideology. This is particularly true of the third assumption, that women have a greater capacity for nurturing, which is also the most crucial for Chodorow's argument. Simply put, there is no evidence that men who raise children do any worse or better than women. Chodorow confuses relational capacities with relational obligations.¹⁰⁴

A Functionalist Fallacy Like other accounts that attribute child rearing responsibility to women's distinctive motives and capacities, Chodorow commits the fatal error of assuming that personal traits determine the assignment of social position. This is a common functionalist fallacy. The explanation of women's child rearing requires a psychodynamic approach, according to Chodorow, because the sexes' divergent personalities determine that women do more child rearing than men. No reasonable person, however, can hope to sustain the belief that spouses allocate child rearing responsibility between themselves by rationally calculating which parent has a greater capacity to do a good job of it or which will more enjoy it. Rather, exactly the opposite is true--women have the responsibility in all families regardless of the couple's particular personalities. This is why the explanation of child rearing responsibility requires explanation.

While a functionalist assumption that the distribution of individual traits determines the distribution of social positions is almost always specious, here, because child rearing is a position of low status, the logical blunder is beyond any

¹⁰⁴This fundamental error of circular reasoning is common in psychodynamic explanations of women's child rearing responsibilities. First, a difference in motives and capacities is inferred from observed differences in the sexes' nurturing behavior. This inferred difference in personalities, i.e. the desire and capacity to mother, are applied to explain the differences in behavior, i.e. mothering. But differences in behavior cannot function both as the evidence for personality differences and be explained by those personality differences within a theory. The pitfalls in such reasoning are revealed in cases like this where the inferred personality differences--particularly relational capacity--do not stand up to independent scrutiny.

hope of defense. This becomes evident by comparing, for example, the distribution of occupations in the economy. Now, some have argued that motive and ability decide who get important jobs because this contributes to the functioning of the society (Davis and Moore) while others have disputed this claim. Regardless of the validity of this hypothesis, however, it concerns desirable jobs that people compete over. This is not true of mothering. Instead, for an appropriate comparison we must consider undesirable jobs. For example, does it seem sensible to argue that sanitation, janitorial, or typing jobs go to the people who have the highest abilities and the greatest motivation? Hardly. They go to people who cannot get better jobs. Similarly, women and men do not compete to get the responsibility of child rearing; men have not suffered defeat owing to women's advantages.

Where Do Differences Come From? Moreover, like other psychodynamic theorists, Chodorow never provides a compelling theory to explain why girls and boys would follow significantly different paths of development. Chodorow is well aware of the need to explain the developmental processes and she consistently assails past psychoanalytic accounts for their failure to do so. She argues at length that psychodynamic theories offer no coherent explanation of why children chose the opposite sex parent as a sexual object. Similarly, but more critically for her objectives, Chodorow also argues that there exist no convincing theoretical accounts (in the psychoanalytic tradition) to explain why boys and girls *switch* their identification differently. Her critique is compelling. Ultimately, however, Chodorow cannot provide any better explanation for these differences. They remain attributed to the differential treatment of boys and girls by their parents.

In short, Chodorow contends that the differences in development occur because women mother and men don't and because parents expect (and reinforce) gender appropriate behavior.¹⁰⁵ In essence, after spending most of her work

¹⁰⁵A fundamental flaw at the heart of most psychoanalytic accounts of child development is their tendency to attribute the important psychological events to the children rather than their parents and to assume implausible inferences by infants. Why, for example, should children identify more with the parent of the same sex? That is, why should sex be the decisive criterion rather than hair color, emotional warmth, or anything else? The obvious alternatives are either that parents (and other adults) enforce same sex identification or children do not consistently identify with the same sex parent. (In the Ego and the Id, Freud resolved this problem by assuming that all children identified with both parents and that an emphasis on one parent over the other must be attributed to unpredictable constitutional differences.) Moving back one step, how is it that children come to recognize gender at all? For an infant, the discovery of gender discrimination and the knowledge of one's own gender is a complicated task that requires time and considerable influence by others. From the

criticizing others for not explaining these differences adequately, Chodorow implies that it is the consequences rather than the explanation of these developmental differences that matter most.¹⁰⁶

Empirical Failings In addition, Chodorow's explanation of mothering leads to false empirical predictions. Chodorow's theory, like most psychoanalytic accounts, contends that women's greater child rearing propensity results from the peculiar interpersonal dynamics of severely *traditional* families. Fathers are both absent at jobs most of the time and emotionally distant when at home, while mothers are always present and persistently nurturing. The theory implies that all men will prove incapable of rearing children and all the women will chose to rear children if they have the opportunity. However, men who are forced to rear children by circumstance (or who chose to do it) appear just as effective as women. And women who have wealth, careers, and social acceptance of their behavior often hand responsibility for child rearing over to others. Indeed, the modern voluntary mass movement of women out of households into the economy seems completely out of step with the theory's expectations.

THE ATTRACTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

Regardless of its theoretical failings, Chodorow's psychodynamic analysis probably satisfies many readers. It appears to correspond to the experience of child rearing and it exalts women's inherent worth. Chodorow's book can be read as an effort to explain why women want to have and care for children more than men even when neither ideology nor restrictions on women's opportunities can account for the difference. Her account suggests that we seek the explanation in deep psychological differences impervious to the equalization of opportunity or the adoption of egalitarian ideology.¹⁰⁷ Psychodynamic accounts generally fit the widespread belief that women are more enthusiastic and skilled caretakers of the young. Chodorow's account also functions to relieve feminists who want to rear children, because it appears to eliminate any suspicion that they could chose otherwise but are insufficiently feminist to do so. It forcefully argues that women

infant's initial vantage point, each parent is an individual, who cannot be identified as representing any larger class.

¹⁰⁶Adrienne Rich has noted the theoretical deficiency in Chodorow's fundamental assumption that heterosexuality is an unexplained but assured developmental outcome. (Rich 1980)

¹⁰⁷It is irrelevant whether Chodorow personally had this goal and inappropriate to suggest that her aims were any other than she explicitly stated. My point is that feminists compose a large proportion of the audience who made this book popular and they could interpret its analysis with respect to their private dilemmas.

rear children because they have desirable characteristics that make women better, if less powerful, than men. They have more complex inner lives and are more capable of good relations with others.

A FAILED EFFORT

Nonetheless, the psychodynamic effort to explain women's child rearing remains a theoretical failure. It begins with a flimsy formulation of the problem based on specious assumptions about women's supposedly higher capacity and greater desire for child rearing. Despite its vivid, knowledgeable criticisms of previous psychoanalytic accounts, Chodorow's account offers no compelling alternative explanation to replace them, so that her assertions about developmental theory remain an empty promise. Moreover, the theory requires an illogical and theoretically untenable, but essential, premise that the distribution of psychological traits, capacities and motives, could explain the social allocation of exclusive child rearing responsibilities to women. And the theory implies mistaken predictions that childhood in *traditional* families must lead to the creation of equally *traditional* families in adulthood and a *non-traditional* childhood must equally lead to a *non-traditional* parenthood. In short, this psychodynamic account begins with invalid assumptions, fails to supply a theoretical explanation of the psychological processes it claims are critical, uses a fallacious logic to infer social consequences from psychological states, and leads to predictions that are demonstrably wrong.¹⁰⁸

At most, the psychodynamic perspective, like the socialization perspective, concerns social processes that reinforce and ease the continuance of gender inequality in child rearing responsibility. It cannot, however, provide an adequate explanation for the universality or persistence of the practice.

¹⁰⁸I must emphasize that this rejection of psychodynamic theories of child rearing responsibility is not based on any disregard for psychoanalytic theory. Rather, this is a critique of the misuse of psychoanalytic thought. Whatever the faults of Freudian theories, they offer unmatched analyses of how people internalize ambivalence and conflicts around psychological issues because of the emotional relationships in their childhood environment. Freudian theory is, however, a hopelessly inadequate means for understanding the social organization of inequality.

The Power to Avoid Child Rearing

A third perspective on the determinants of child rearing emphasizes the opportunities available to women and men over their expectations (socialization theory) or their motives and nurturing capacities (psychodynamic theory). According to this perspective, the allocation of child rearing responsibility is a consequence of the distribution of power in society. While several writers have adhered to his position, Margaret Polatnick has expressed it most incisively, and I shall use her formulation as the basis for discussion. It is an example of what sociologists call conflict theory.

CHILD REARING WORK

The conflict approach regards child rearing as a form of labor. This does not mean that it denies the pleasure possible from rearing children. But many forms of work may bring enjoyment to people. Nonetheless, the defining criteria of labor--whether in child rearing or other pursuits--are that it requires effort, demands a commitment of time, and prevents other activities. The conflict approach considers child rearing responsibility as part of the societal division of labor.

This leads conflict theorists to compare the social value of women's work to men's work and to ask what determines unequal access to the two kinds of careers. Child rearing, and domestic work in general, gains a person fewer rewards than a paid occupation. Paid jobs give a person money, status, and, possibly, power. Child rearing gives none of these. Therefore since most people in our society greatly value money, status, and power, they would value also a paid job over unpaid child rearing. Men, however, have possessed a relative monopoly on opportunities for paid jobs that give power and privilege.

MAINTAINING A MONOPOLY OF PRIVILEGE

The conflict perspective generally disregards the origins of men's favored position. It focuses on explaining how men's privileged avoidance of child rearing reproduces itself across generations.

The conflict approach argues that their greater social power allows men to avoid child rearing, and that men seek to preserve their privileged freedom from child rearing responsibilities. Men seek to avoid child rearing responsibility because they want to use the opportunities that offer them money and greater

status. They are able to avoid the responsibility because they can rely on women to fulfill the need.¹⁰⁹

Privileged freedom from child rearing duties has not, however, fallen to men as an unanticipated or accidental consequence of social conditions. Women, according to the conflict perspective, accept the responsibility for child rearing because they lack the opportunities available to men. But it is men who restrict these opportunities. Male employers discriminate against women, male workers oppose the hiring of women as competitors in their labor markets, and men in their personal lives oppose the employment of wives and daughters.¹¹⁰ Thus because of male economic dominance in the previous generation, men are born into circumstances that grant them opportunities for jobs, and the resources they imply, considerably greater than women receive; the intrinsic value of these advantages motivates the new generation of men, in turn, to protect and sustain them, and the resources they provide allow men success.

Once women have assumed the responsibility for child rearing, it further restricts their capacity to use the limited opportunities available to them. Child rearing requires a great investment of labor over many years. If pursued full time it eliminates the possibility of employment as long as there are young children in

¹⁰⁹Some writers have men's desire to benefit directly from the dominance and exploitation of women, commonly referred to with the pejorative term *patriarchy*, as the primary means of explaining the household division of labor that leaves women responsible for child rearing (e.g. Hartmann 1981). Undoubtedly, men frequently enjoy the possession of power over their wives, and I even suspect that the strategy of getting wives pregnant to keep them subordinate has been consciously adopted by men more frequently than we can know.

I have, however, emphasized the competition over opportunities to participate in the economy in my formulation of the conflict theory explanation of women's child rearing responsibility. This is because it permits a more plausible causal analysis. The desire to dominate a spouse varies considerably, it is frequently offset by the intimacy between spouses or a husband's need for emotional support, and because it is located within individual households it is not endowed with a self-contained mechanism for its consistent reproduction. Moreover, since the desire to dominate is presumably as widespread among women as men, within an analysis emphasizing direct conflicts over dominance, women's universal submission to the lower status responsibility of child rearing appears to imply universal incapacities among women, because the approach provides no theoretical basis for men's consistent victories. An analysis focused on the value of employment avoids these deficiencies. It is probable that the desire for status and resources is almost universal, and men's relative monopoly of good employment does provide a plausible mechanism to reproduce itself (see Chapter 7 on the economy).

¹¹⁰A full analysis of the relation between the economy and gender will appear later.

the household. Even if partial child care is used, it commonly restricts the commitment and time a woman can give to a job and thereby limits her to less desirable positions.

OVERCOMING THE THEORY'S FLAWS

Two problems encumber efforts to explain child rearing responsibility as the consequence of conflicts over power and status. Conflict analyses do not consistently distinguish the actions of men (or women) as individuals from their actions as a group. Sometimes they imply that the locus of conflict is within households. Husbands, they suggest, impose the responsibility for child rearing on their wives. Sometimes conflict theories attribute inequality to large scale societal processes directed by men who govern the state and economy and control culture. Moreover, conflict theories often imply men have an implausible degree of clarity, concern, and unanimity of opinion about the value of avoiding child rearing responsibility.

The theory need not, and should not, require that all men and women make conscious calculated decisions whether to devote their careers to child rearing or to paid jobs. If the fit between socialized expectations and opportunities is close enough, most people will only occasionally and superficially recognize that they could chose to live differently than their socialization leads them to expect. When inequality is established as a system it produces an ideology that *explains* and justifies that inequality, making participation in it appear natural, necessary, and good (see Chapter ? on ideology). This means that most people never enter open conflict over the fundamental issues of inequality, although they may engage in numerous disputes about its exact implications. Its institutional completeness eliminates both the knowledge and resources to challenge it for most people.

In this context, the socialization perspective (discussed above) can be readily joined to the power and conflict approach. Conflict theory and the unequal distribution of opportunities explain how men are in a position that lets them avoid responsibility for child rearing. Socialization theory explains why both sexes accept their social positions without continuous open conflict over the issue. Sex inequality reflects women's and men's unequal resources in the competition for social opportunities. Sex inequality shapes the content of socialization. Socialization in turn stabilizes men's economic advantages in the conflict over opportunities and obligations. It minimizes challenges to this system of inequality.

The conflict approach argues that women's acceptance of responsibility for rearing children is analogous to poor men taking low paid, undesirable jobs: both cases show members of subordinate groups allocated tasks in the division of labor avoided by dominant groups. In both cases, the activities of the dominant group

have a higher status and bring its members superior rewards. In both cases, members born into the dominant group have a near monopoly of access to privileged positions in the division of labor. Membership in the dominant group gives individuals greater resources and the organized support of the dominant group. The dominant group erects general barriers to prevent entry by members of the subordinate group. It supports an ideology justifying the inequality as natural, necessary, and good.

By arguing that men's exemption from child rearing tends to reproduce itself over generations, the conflict approach may appear to use a model resembling Chodorow's account of how women's child rearing responsibility reproduces itself. But the conflict theory approach uses a completely different conception of causality. The conflict model assumes that the key is competition for privileged positions while Chodorow's psychodynamic account implies that the capacities and desires for the lower status position, child rearing, are decisive. The conflict approach argues that the social resources derived directly from the privileged position of employment explain the capacity of men to sustain their position. Chodorow's account invokes ill-defined, doubtful psychological processes to explain how women pass on the motives and capacities to nurture. The conflict approach constructs a considerably more persuasive analysis.

Adaptation and Resistance

To fully understand how the child rearing responsibilities of women emerge during their lives, we must grasp how they come to terms with the possibilities and expectations they confront as adults. Throughout the past half century a progressively larger proportion of women in the United States have spent more of their adult life in employment than in child rearing. While women have continued to bear major responsibility for children, they have not been limited to domestic pursuits. Some women spend little or no part of their life remaining at home to rear their young. Thus the amount of labor and commitment devoted by women to children varies greatly, and we must account for this variation.

In her study *Hard Choices* (1985), Kathleen Gerson suggests that we should conceive the construction of women's adult commitments as a strategic response to the opportunities they discover both for child rearing and for employment. Childhood experiences and the surrounding culture give women expectations that they try to fulfill as adults. Still, these expectations are ambiguous and circumstances typically fit none of them particularly well. Moreover, the requirements of child rearing and employment are such that any commitment in one realm limits the available options in the other.

According to Gerson, women respond to the opportunities and constraints of adult life with calculated, practical decisions. They try to get as much enjoyment, security, and sense of self-worth as possible. Admittedly, their decisions are vulnerable to grave errors. They do not understand their circumstances or themselves completely. Moreover, the future often brings unexpected events. Thus women's choices bring unintended and unanticipated consequences that require further rounds of choices. But choices they are nonetheless.

Several conditions bear on a woman's decisions about her commitment to child rearing, according to Gerson. She demonstrated the importance of each of these conditions through an intensive study of working and middle class women in the child rearing years who had made a wide range of commitments to families and careers. First, a stable relationship with a man who welcomed children and was eager to help raise them made child rearing appear much more desirable. Second, a stable career at an enjoyable job with the experience of past promotions and the promise of more in the future led women to place much more emphasis on their work life. The absence of these experiences and opportunities caused them to look more for satisfaction in domestic life. Third, for women in a stable marriage, the ability of their husbands to provide a good family income relieved them of a sense of responsibility to seek employment. Otherwise, women felt they had to work regardless how unattractive the job. And fourth, regardless of their prior expectations, if they bore children women experienced considerably varied feelings of satisfaction or distaste when caring for them. Those who disliked it sought means to escape while those who enjoyed it tried to preserve it.

In short, the presence of conditions that would make either child rearing or employment attractive alternatives vary greatly. Women attempt to make reasonable decisions that will give them a decent life. Women do not choose the conditions under which they live, Gerson suggests, but they do choose how to respond to the opportunities and constraints facing them.

Women's movement away from an exclusive commitment to child rearing toward active and persistent employment therefore is an adaptive response to new, expanded opportunities. As Gerson suggests, declining marital stability, reduced capacity for men's income to meet expectations about living standards, and diminished cultural expectations that women devote themselves to children all make women willing to use the employment opportunities that have become available. But higher divorce rates, a standard of living requiring two jobs, and greater legitimacy for women committed to jobs are themselves all determined in good part by the rise of female employment in the past half century. (Why more jobs have become available to women is a complex question that must await the analysis of economic processes in Chapter 7). The opportunity for employment

in a society that measures status by income and devalues unpaid labor has decisively reduced women's obligation to devote themselves to child rearing.

So far in modern life, women's release from prolonged obligation for child rearing has not been based on a rise in men's responsibility. Instead, paid, mostly female child-tenders, in homes, child care agencies, and schools, have accepted part-time obligation over children. In the remaining time, mothers continue to have most of the responsibility for rearing their children, especially when they are young.¹¹¹

Burdens and Opportunities

The divergent social implications of unpaid and paid labor require us to interpret child rearing as an obligation and employment as an opportunity while neglecting the attractions of caring for children and the hardships of jobs. The explanation of women's child rearing regards it as a burden, ignoring the reasons people might want to care for children to focus on its costs. In a complementary fashion, throughout the theories analyzed above, men have been described as enjoying the privilege of occupational opportunities, when, alternatively, it could be argued that employment and the responsibility to provide a family income in industrial societies has been a major burden carried by men. The theoretical choice to emphasize one interpretation over the other is owing to the very different consequences of child rearing and paid occupations: one brings dependency while the other contributes to status and power. Both employment and child rearing involve a complex mixture of enjoyable activities and distasteful demands on a person. The inherent appeal of the two kinds of activities (each extremely diverse) varies widely among individuals of both sexes. But employment brings income, status, and further opportunity while child rearing does not.

Thus, while some women may have gratefully embraced motherhood as an escape from the distasteful rigors of employment at grim jobs (and some men may

¹¹¹This supports the argument that it is men's competitive advantages in employment and the desire to keep them that best accounts for women's child rearing responsibility, rather than men's aspirations to dominate their wives (although this is one privilege that results from men's economic advantages). Men's efforts to avoid child rearing, which would limit their employment, have apparently been greater than their efforts to keep their wives restricted to children. The modest rise in men's child care activities in families where women work also supports the argument that men's liberty to avoid child care depends on women's lack of economic opportunity. The trend in child care to be expected from greater gender equality, therefore, is a large decrease in the time children spend in the care of parents coupled with ever more equality between parents in the responsibility they share for that reduced, remaining period of parental child care.

have wished they could discover a means to evade the responsibility for providing a family income) these motives add little to the explanation of women's responsibility for child rearing. The inherent attractions and drawbacks of child rearing, and of employment, apply equally to both sexes. Given an equal opportunity to concentrate on either responsibility--equal in every sense including social acceptance--it is likely that some members of each sex would chose only employment, some only child rearing, and most a mixture of the two. That those women who would prefer to avoid employment could do so does not require explanation. That the many women who would like good jobs with treatment equaling men's could not fulfill their desires does demand explanation. Moreover, employed men could usually expect to participate in many of the joys of parenthood, if they so wished, during their time at home. But, unemployed women committed to rearing their children could not hope simultaneously to gain the pleasures and rewards of a good job.

Thus the division of labor forcing obligation for child rearing onto women has had unsymmetrical effects on the sexes. It is true that both child rearing and employment are mixed experiences, each an opportunity for fulfillment and an obligation to endure hardships. But the gender division of labor has protected men from the hardships of child care while allowing them to enjoy its pleasures. On the other hand, however, it has denied women the rewards of good jobs and careers while leaving them only the tribulations of low paid, undesirable jobs.¹¹²

To meet theoretical requirements, the greater capacity for men's control of economic opportunities to reproduce the sexual division of labor than for women's child rearing opportunities to do so is even more important than the imbalance in the experience of women and men owing to that division of labor. Men's economic position gives them individual competitive advantages and collective power that allow men individually to beat out women in the labor market and collectively to impose institutionalized discrimination. Child rearing supplies no equivalent means of reproducing itself across generations.

¹¹²Men in the lower classes may have been stuck with poor jobs, insecurity, and a debilitating sense of defeat, while privileged women in affluent homes could avoid the worst aspects of child rearing. But these have been the consequences of class.