

From **Woman Confined** (1980)

Chapter 9 'Losses and gains'

...Since the primary meaning of first-time motherhood is loss of identity, there is a bias towards poor maternal outcome. One sign of this is the figures for 'postnatal depression', less than 'good' feelings for the baby and medium/low satisfaction with motherhood given in chapter 5. Another is the tendency for some women to note negative aspects of their new role. Asked whether becoming a mother had affected their views of the position of women, 49 per cent of the sample said it had, making them more critical of existing social arrangements. Table 9.1 lists answers to another question about the 'disadvantages' of motherhood noted by the sample women. Two-thirds of the women felt they were treated differently as mothers, a third felt economically dependent and a quarter felt restricted by the baby. Another critical parameter of the identity changes associated with first-time motherhood is that a mother's working conditions do not simply replace her job conditions as an employed worker: they are decisively different. Thus, we must add to the total picture the facts presented in Table 9.2. The transformation of identity from woman to mother, insofar as it is seen as a drop in status, is, then, accompanied by changes in life-style that tend to be felt as restrictive in character.

TABLE 9.1 Aspects of motherhood

Aspect	% of women noting
Treated less favourably as mother	69
Economic dependence	30
Practical difficulties (e.g. shopping)	20
Being tied to the baby	24

N= 55

TABLE 9.2 Mothers' working conditions

Condition	% of women noting
Social isolation*	36
Monotony*	40
Excessive pace*	66
'Tied down'	80
No time to self	67
Changed (restricted) interests	55
Baby has 'changed life completely'	67

N= 55

*These questions were asked at the five week interview only.

Over a third of the sample women reported social isolation and monotony, four-fifths described themselves as 'tied down' in general, two-thirds said they had no time to themselves, complained of excessive pace in their work or said their lives had been 'changed completely' by the baby. (This change was described as restrictive, though it was not necessarily resented.) There are thus close connections between the sense of a lost identity and the experience of deprivation as a worker. It is important to realize that the possibility of interpreting the transition to motherhood as loss in these terrains of identity and life-style is not explicable in terms of previous work careers. Previous employment status and perception of poor postpartum working conditions (monotony, social isolation, etc.) were not associated in this sample. This reflects the conclusion other studies have come to that the attribution of 'class differences' to women's employment motivations conceals the basic competing attractiveness of almost all employment work occupations in relation to the social isolation of domestic work...

In this computation of the losses and gains of motherhood I have, in talking of roles and identities, omitted what many people would see as the primary gain - the child itself. Reproduction is production, not only of a worker (in the Marxist schema) but of an entire new person with whom one will be in close contact for the rest of one's life. The magic of this, the miracle of biology and uterine labour, the daily joy of rearing one's own child: surely these are sufficient to counterbalance motherhood's deprivations? I would contend that the only reason why most women do not break down irremediably after childbirth is that they *are* sufficient. I mean this not in the sense that 'aren't children wonderful!' is a cultural epithet that labels children as a specific and separate class of being (Davis and Strong, 1976), but in terms of the reward that is gained by *human* beings in a context where the result of their labour is the love, development and growth of another *human* being. The biological connection may be an added bonus, or an irrelevancy: the point is that in all philosophies of human action facilitating such growth is seen as intrinsically self-gratifying:

I just enjoy her. She's more interesting than I thought a baby would be. I find all her little developments fascinating ... It's like a chrysalis, like watching a butterfly coming out. (Sophy Fisher)

I feel as though I've done something useful if I can turn her into a nice person and put her into the world. I'll feel that I've really achieved something. (Angela King)...

I have also said that the greatest protection against breakdown after childbirth is the child itself 'A baby of one's own' provides an alternative source of reward to counterbalance those that are, or may have been, lost: the satisfaction of a job well done, social interaction with workmates, the sense of physical and emotional intactness that is often broken or suspended by the act of birth. In the long run this seems to be evidently true. Weeks, months or, in some cases, years after childbirth there is a feeling of recovery from the trauma of becoming a mother that expresses the successful imposition of a new pattern of meaning on life. (This is one meaning of 'adjustment' as a measure of outcome, of course.) What was lost is seen as balanced

by what has been gained, the 'depressing' qualities of motherhood as outweighed by the joy of loving a child. But it takes some time for this process to happen. First of all, birth is experienced in a direct physical way as loss - the loss of the baby within, which, until it is recognized as an independent person, is bound to be experienced as part of the mother's body. Also, in the short run many babies are not found rewarding: crying and refusing to sleep or to be comforted are common sources of parental anguish in the early weeks. In terms of work, and in terms of physical energy, most first babies turn out to be far more demanding than their parents anticipated they would be. To the exhaustion of childbirth is added the deprivation of broken nights; against the image of the mother as omnipotent satisfier of the baby's needs is set the depressing intransigence of the newborn's refusal to *be* satisfied.

These (usually temporary) difficulties are compounded by a further problem. To find the baby rewarding, a mother has to develop an attachment to it. Emotional attachment to the baby is not an automatic consequence of the pre-birth physical association between mother and child. The physical 'gain' of producing the baby is not a gain at the level of emotional reward until the relationship between mother and baby has been established some days, weeks or months later. In the Transition to Motherhood project, some indices of these immediate postpartum difficulties are: 70 per cent of mothers did not love their babies at first, 77 per cent said that looking after a baby was harder work than they imagined, 100 per cent found the first weeks tiring, some to the point of physical exhaustion. Table 9.4 shows some ways in which the triumph of becoming a mother may be undermined by a sense of not having gained in personal terms.

TABLE 9.4 Loss versus gain in early maternal care

Mothers' reactions	% of sample
Not interested in the baby at birth	70
Disappointed with baby's sex	25
Babycare harder work than expected	77
Felt angry/violent towards baby	70
Cannot get enough sleep	100
Feeding problems	73
Felt very anxious about baby	45

N= 55

In most cases these difficulties were eventually resolved, though they might be neither easily nor rapidly overcome. The painful character of the process is better appreciated when it is realized that one important principle involved is that, as Marris has put it, 'loss cannot be made good merely by substitution' (Marris, 1974, p. 91). Grieving for a lost person, object, identity or relationship resolves itself not through substitution but through a reformulation of meaning. Hence the vacuity of responses that urge a bereaved person to re-invest her/his energies in new domains, to 'forget' or 'count your blessings'. Such exhortations make no sense when what is felt is the

profundity of loss and an empty hopelessness that asserts disengagement from society as the correct response. They only begin to seem relevant when out of the conflict of meaning generated by loss the new attachments are already emerging and it genuinely seems to the bereaved person that all is not lost and something can be, or has been, gained: a revised identity, a new strength, a vision of alternative roles and relationships...

References

Davis AG and Strong PM (1976) 'Aren't children wonderful?' A study of the allocation of identity in developmental assessment.

In Stacey M (ed.) *The Sociology of the NHS* Sociological Review Monograph 22, University of Keele.

Marris P (1974) *Loss and Change*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.