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“The (M)other We Fall in Love With Wants to be There’’: Reply to Commentaries

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Inspired by the three insightful commentaries, I reflect on the tension between descriptive and prescriptive agendas in my book *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life* (2004). My primary goal was to theorize the desire to care for children, an area I argue has been relatively neglected in psychoanalysis and feminism. But my own passionate conviction about the value to a mother of time with her children occasionally limited my scope. Engaging Clements’s critique, I analyze the tendency of discussions about motherhood to become polarized, and I offer a Kleinian perspective on these dynamics. Finally, I broaden the book’s purview to consider clinical cases where the defensive or narcissistic functions of maternal devotion interfere with a woman’s ability to relate to her child and her partner.

It is a rare privilege to have my work so thoughtfully considered by three such distinguished writers. I am deeply grateful to Muriel Dimen; the *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* editorial board; and most of all to Rachel Conrad, James Herzog, and Marcelle Clements for giving me this opportunity to think anew about *Maternal Desire* (2004) and the issues it explored.

The title of this response paraphrases a quotation from Virginia Goldner’s (2004) critique of Stephen Mitchell’s book, *Can Love Last?* (2002): “Instead of the housebound mother who *has* to be there, or the exciting father who *happens* to be there, the (m)other we joyfully fall in love with over and over again *wants to be there*” (Goldner, 2004, p. 392). This last phrase evokes the essence of what I was trying to convey in my book. The book’s premise was that shared pleasure and satisfaction is a basic building block of healthy growth and human flourishing for *both* baby and (m)other. My goal was to theorize the mother’s *own* desire to “be there” in terms of its value for the child, certainly, but more focally, in terms of its significance and value to her. In addition, I aimed to help make the emotional experience of “wanting to be there” more accessible to more mothers. The book thus had two purposes: to describe maternal desire and to make a case for its emotional, relational, and social value. It is the relation between these two purposes that I reflect upon in this discussion.

As both Conrad and Clements point out, I interwove my descriptive and prescriptive agendas throughout the book. For example, I offered therapeutic suggestions for processing one’s conflicting desires regarding motherhood, but often with an emphasis on evoking an experience

of pleasure in mothering with which I hoped the reader might identify. Or, I described the general fact that women use social norms defensively to cope with internal conflict, but I focused more heavily on defenses against maternal desire. I wrote, “Whereas the ideal of maternal self-sacrifice used to obscure mothers’ desires for things other than motherhood, today’s ideal of ‘staying on track’ obscures mothers’ desires to be transformed by motherhood” (de Marneffe, 2004, p. 125). Yet as Jennifer Stuart (2007) rightly notes in her recent article about work and motherhood, “both ideals—maternal self-sacrifice and professional progress—are alive and well, and equally available today to women’s individual uses of them” (p. 446). My book’s likely constituency was educated, coupled women who experienced themselves as defended against, or conflicted about, deriving enjoyment or a sense of meaning from caring for children. The book was less likely to be helpful to women defensively overvaluing their maternal role as a way to avoid dealing with other issues in their lives. Women able to integrate motherhood and work with minimal conflict could well perceive my book as much ado about nothing. And those who believed their lives gave little room for choices based on their own desires might feel the book did not speak to their concerns.

I posed maternal availability as a condition for pleasurable relatedness between mother and child. This sometimes took the form of favoring a social role for mothers in which taking care of children was central. Thus, at times I treated “the mother who wants to be there” as synonymous with the stay-at-home mother. When I collapsed the two, I limited my own ability to think flexibly about the many different ways in which universal needs for attachment and autonomy can be constructively managed. I also implied an optimal mothering context, which could be construed to negate variations in economic necessity, paternal desire, social class, couple dynamics, and a host of other factors affecting the lived reality of any given mother-child dyad. In these ways, I risked suffusing my psychological and cultural analysis with an argument for traditional social roles.

Each commentator saw the book’s descriptive analysis as weakened by its prescriptive aspect. Conrad observes that at times I “distract[ed] readers by hewing too closely to particular prototypes of a mother ‘really leaving’ or really staying with her child” (p. 14). Herzog wonders, “Why then a book?” and surmises that my “postulation of a care-taking desire and [my] ardent wish that a whole host of disciplines might support such a desire” (p. 22) arose from personal struggles and concerns. Clements feels I buried my most interesting point, “that women wish for a maternal connection for their own sake, not just the children’s” (p. 6), in favor of a partisan position that alienates readers who are not part of the addressed constituency.

Conrad’s exploration of this difficulty is as intellectually generous as it is creative and stands as a valuable contribution to the study of mother-child intersubjectivity in its own right. Informed by both developmental psychology and relational psychoanalysis, Conrad argues for the need to “consider mothers’ and children’s subjectivity in tandem” and underscores the central insight that “we are fundamentally talking about two subjectivities that are formed in relation to one another” (p. 14). With this move, she explores what the involvement of two subjectivities actually “looks like” in the daily back-and-forth of relating and reminds us that the quality of the mother-child relationship is a product of “the construction of minds in relation to one another” rather than concrete realities (p. 14). Her discussion of children’s and parents’ differing experiences of time and its implications for parenting practices—work schedules, sleeping arrangements—exemplifies beautifully the theoretical and therapeutic possibilities that are opened up by her approach.

Whereas Conrad focuses on the implications of *Maternal Desire* for psychological theory, Clements explores its relation to contemporary cultural images and social discourse. She offers an eloquent account of her own reaction to the book's descriptive-prescriptive tension, pointing to a variety of areas where she felt my approach foreclosed or derailed useful explorations. With some of these I agreed (the truncated maternal head on the paperback's cover, as I argued to my publisher, was not the best way to represent the importance of relatedness) and with some I did not (I felt I seriously engaged de Beauvoir's work), but the general point—the way discussion of mothers' roles and identities deteriorates so readily into unproductive factionalism—is important and begs for further social and psychological analysis. Such analysis is important not only to deal with distortions of facts (Belkin's whole “opt-out” premise has since been utterly discredited; Graff, 2007) but also as part of the broader project of understanding polarization in political and religious discussion (e.g., Nields, 2003).

At times, Clements's generally sympathetic critique seemed to overflow the limits of her tolerance, resulting in what I experienced as not altogether fair attacks on my persona. Given that certain of her comments displayed the same tendency toward “sniping” (p. 6) and “criticism couched as analysis” (pp. 8) that she perceived in my book, her discussion and my book together present a valuable *in vivo* opportunity to examine the dynamics that underlie the “Mommy Wars,” a mode of engagement we both consciously reject. In my clinical work with mothers, I have begun to think about these dynamics along Kleinian lines. It occurs to me that Klein's ideas can also lend insight into the occasionally uneasy coexistence of prescription and description in *Maternal Desire*.

As Clements observes, mothers' “subjective experience is replete with anxiety” (p. 2) and often of a particularly persecutory kind. Kleinian theory is illuminating with respect to this quality of persecution. The psychological positions Klein described, the paranoid-schizoid and depressive, represent two major organizations of anxieties and defenses (Klein, 1935; Segal, 1981). The positions are “modes of generating experience” in Ogden's terms (1989, p. 46), and in normal psychological life there is continual movement between the two. In the paranoid-schizoid mode, anxieties are managed via splitting and projective identification in an effort to “keep apart” idealized and persecutory internal objects (Steiner, 1987). Not uncommonly, thinking is characterized by concreteness and fixed meanings. In the depressive mode, previously projected parts of the self are integrated, and objects are related to as whole persons, with the concomitant experience of ambivalence. Thinking is more flexible and meaning is experienced as created rather than fixed.

In a 1996 article, Annie Sweetnam demonstrated that people's experience of gender shifts between fixed and fluid modes. She described a woman patient who felt that “men are just entirely the opposite of women” (Sweetnam, 1996, p. 438). Due to her experience of her family relationships, the patient's desire for independence was coded as masculine and seen as dangerous to her nurturant side, coded as feminine. The paranoid-schizoid cast of this fantasy constellation was evident in her sense that her “masculinity” could destroy her “femininity.” Sweetnam contrasts this “fixed” experience of gender with the more fluid and integrated experience of gender characteristic of the depressive position. In the latter, there is space to create and alter meanings of gender rather than a fixed equation of certain physical characteristics with certain psychological dispositions.

Sweetnam's (1996) concept is useful for understanding the experience of maternal identity as well. A binary opposition of “working” versus “stay-at-home” mother involves, among other

things, an anxious attempt to create firm boundaries between these two identifications; concrete thinking about the qualities that each possesses; and projection and splitting in order to keep them separated into devalued and idealized categories. A more integrated experience of motherhood involves toleration of ambivalence and acceptance of different parts of oneself. A mother may still feel anxious about putting together career and mothering roles, but she will not feel compelled to solve it through splitting.

Motherhood involves strong emotion, regressive potential, and anxieties about identity and psychic survival—vulnerabilities that can lead to a posture of certitude and a heightened sense of “rightness” as a way to defend against confusion and anxiety. A characteristic feature of Mommy Wars discourse is the mutual headlock of complementary positions of “rightness” that rely on splitting and the resultant devaluation and idealization. This realm is not defined by strongly held points of view per se but by the qualities of mutual objectification, willed oversimplification, and the shutting down of space for reflection or interpretation. The stance can include a paranoid insistence that “underneath” one’s opponent’s claims, she is “really” saying this or that, and an exaggerated sense of perceived attack.

In this connection, Clements was right to question whether my sense of the “pervasive devaluation” of motherhood was inflated. I think it was. Motherhood tends to be devalued *and* idealized, with both tendencies rooted in the projection of one side on an internal conflict, such that voices of self-doubt are transposed into external criticism. In places such as my discussion of maternal ambivalence, I tackled this conflict head-on, arguing that dichotomous, “us versus them” thinking is usually a clue that one is denying or ignoring some part of one’s own feelings. But in other places, I too readily treated this aspect of psychological reality as social reality.

Psychic functioning is never simple, for as Sweetnam (1996) points out, the clear and distinct categories generated in the paranoid-schizoid mode are often adaptive during phases of life when people are struggling with new experiences of themselves, such as consolidation of gender identity or maternal identity. This may be the mode wherein we experience a sense of deep, irreducible conviction—that feeling of “I don’t know why I think this is right, I just do.” It takes the perspective of the depressive position not to mistake this subjective sense of certitude for a universal truth. But in something so central to identity as motherhood, people may feel tempted, if not justified and even duty bound, to universalize their personal convictions. At times, that state of mind characterized my writing in *Maternal Desire*. The state imparts an energetic, “mother bear” sort of protectiveness toward one’s cherished point of view and toward one’s imagined constituency. But its very certitude is not necessarily conducive to dialogue.

In addition, as Ogden (1989) argues, the paranoid-schizoid mode, somewhat paradoxically, provides “the necessary splitting of linkages and opening up of the closures of the depressive position, thus establishing the possibility of fresh linkages and fresh thoughts” (p. 30). Sweetnam’s (1996) case material suggests that the integration that characterizes the depressive position can be used defensively in an attempt to avoid the chaos—and opportunity—of allowing new experience to change oneself. In my clinical observations with prospective mothers, a woman’s former integrations can work “too well” in that they allow her to avoid “opening up of the closures” and making room psychologically for how having a child might change her. One purpose of my book was to provide a safe space, a container of sorts, for the process of sifting through previous identifications and considering one’s desires in light of new circumstances.

Maternal Desire is laced with an awareness of conflict, ambivalence, and the inevitability of loss, and to that extent it is suffused with what might be called a depressive position sensibility.

The almost wistful tone of much of the book, interpreted by Clements as indicative of how quiet and peaceful my childrearing years must have been, was directly related to my central message with respect to loss: given that everything is ephemeral, childhood passes in a blink, and the reciprocally felt intense need of mother and child is relatively brief—given all that, how does one most want to live this period of one’s own life?

All in all, my answer came down on the side of spending as much time as one can with one’s babies and young children. That was my partisan point of view because, in the end, not being as fully involved as possible in early opportunities for relating with one’s child was the loss that was most searing for me to contemplate. This cast of mind undoubtedly mingled anxieties and gratifications from every stratum of my psychology and was probably both exaggerated and adaptive to a certain phase of parenthood. In any case, it was basic to what Herzog would call my “Now System.” I wrote the book in something akin to an extended period of maternal preoccupation, and that fact led to both its bias and its conviction. It was my fervent belief that someone had to write *from that state*—that is, to make an intellectual argument that encompassed the subjective experience of what was important about being in that state *for the mother*. At the same time, there is no such thing as “the mother”; there are only individual mothers. My own conflicts, identifications, history, temperament, and circumstances drew me to a certain practical arrangement, but that arrangement does not begin to cover all the forms through which a happy early motherhood might be approximated. Only as my children and I have grown older have I fully decentered from the feeling that fueled the book. I look at the maternal dilemmas I outlined with a less partisan eye, but I am simultaneously aware that a certain kind of intense engagement with my children is also less available to me now.

To reiterate, I believe *Maternal Desire* would have been a stronger book, as all three commentators suggested, if I had more evenhandedly analyzed the impediments to a mother’s experience of relatedness with her child from both the “work” side and the “stay-at-home” side. My more recent work has begun to address this imbalance, looking at the defensive functions of maternal devotion and examining the way that a woman’s maternal identity can become narcissistically invested and interfere with her ability to relate to her child as well as to her partner (de Marneffe, 2006). These investigations were prompted by several couples in treatment who were in distress following the birth of their first (or only) child. The relationship between the two partners was frozen in a collusion where the wife insisted on an extreme, exclusive, and overprotective relationship with the child, and the husband accepted this as her irrefutable maternal prerogative, which he felt powerless to influence.

In such couples, it seems to me that the outward inability to adjust to the introduction of a third person (the baby) partly reflects an inward difficulty in negotiating triadic relationships. The mother’s litany of rules (what baby can eat, the frequency of feedings, how much quiet is required during nursing, what visitors can come to the house, etc.) is often so tight and inflexible as to suggest an attempt at omnipotent control in the face of intense anxiety. Britton (1989), following Klein, suggested that “the Oedipus complex develops hand-in-hand with the developments that make up the depressive position” (p. 83). Both require relating to (ambivalently) loved objects who are outside of one’s control. Often in these couples, it feels as if the wife-mother has jumped tracks from a dyadic fusion with the husband-father to one with her child, unable to work through the depressive and oedipal implications of relating to husband and child each as a separate person with relationships to each other as well as to herself. The father enacts the same dynamic but from the position of the excluded third.

This brings me to Herzog's (2005) work. He has written that the "child who is possessed by one parent as the needed or seduced other, or by each parent separately in that manner, is deprived of the protective and facilitating experience of being recognized and loved by the parental couple together" (p. 1048). Clearly in the couples I have just described, this is a danger. *Maternal Desire* celebrates the mother-child relationship and argues that women should have access to the fullest possible pleasure within it. But insofar as the book appears to support a fantasy of the self-sufficiency of the mother-child dyad, it may unwittingly give short shrift to the developmental capacity for what Herzog has called triadic reality. This capacity relates to the ability to take perspective on oneself and truly apprehend alternative points of view. I hope in this response, I have managed to convey the need, as fragile as it is necessary, to relate to ourselves and each other in three dimensions. In being a mother or in thinking about motherhood, this is a continual challenge—for patients, clinicians, and writers alike. I am grateful to the three discussants for helping me to push myself further in this direction.

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