

Rethinking Motherhood and Career: Maternal Deconstruction and the M-Power model

Dr. Yael Bankirer & Tal Breier Ben Moha, The Central School of Social Welfare, England

What can we learn from reproduction about the process of production? What can we learn from maternal labor about the market labor? What can maternal experience teach us of our professional life?

Abstract

Current theoretical and practical conceptions refer to the family-work relation as two separated dimensions. These perceptions sketch a dichotomous division which is also organized, as is usually the case under patriarchal law, in hierarchal order. The maternal arena is considered a biological essence that has no value outside the mother-child relationship. In this paper, contrary to discourse emphasizing conflict, we would like to outline the ways in which maternal experience can provide a meaningful basis for professional development. Connecting the lines between theoretical and practical, we will present the M-Power model: a practical method that enables to integrate insights from the parental experience within a professional framework. We will then move to explore its theoretical grounds and offer a concept which is rooted in the maternal corporal and mental experience: Maternal Deconstruction. This concept provides an image of a creative position that strives to remain open to new meanings and to find innovative solutions when encountered with the changing reality of the developing professional world. As we will argue, both the M-power model and Maternal Deconstruction theoretical framework offer a shift from a fragmented perception of the self in the working environment to the empowerment potential of creative development.

Introduction

Current theoretical and practical conceptions refer to the family-work relation as two conflicting dimensions. These perceptions are rooted in the bi-spherical social structure that goes back to the 18th century separation of the “public sphere” from the “private sphere” (Bassin and Kaplan, 1994). The construction of a dichotomous bi-spherical social order establishes the relation between family and work as two separated worlds, inherently conflicting. But not only does it formulate social structure, it also provides the basis for the way people recognize themselves as professionals, shaping the social identities of a “parent” and a “career person” as colliding roles. As such, an employee’s family is perceived as foreign to, and conflicting with her or his work. Specifically, the “burden” of child care is considered a distracting factor inhibiting the development of the parent’s career. Women who are both, mothers (or primary caregivers) and career women are considered disadvantaged and compromised professionally (Correll, 2007; Williams, 2000)¹.

This dichotomous division between the spheres, is also organized - as usually happens under patriarchal law – in hierarchical order. The maternal is framed within the narrow borders of the mother’s body as a natural activity, a biological instinct or essence without any social significance. It is reduced to an instinctual, pre-human nourishing aspect of the mother’s body, an emotional, personal and material dimension that holds the inferior side of the binaries that lie at the heart of western culture² (Derrida, 1976). The maternal body is reduced to a pre-subjective, natural aspect of being and the maternal experience is not considered to entail valuable knowledge that can contribute to social growth or enrich the public sphere. On the contrary, it is regarded as a platform that only its negation can lead to cultural growth (Irigaray, 1985). Feminist theoretical discourse uncovers the gendered organizational perceptions that draw their validity from this division between the private and the public spheres. The feminist project seeks to expose the roots of gender inequality in the public sphere, to reveal the gendered perception of the ideal/normative employee as one that is based on an image of a man (Williams, 2000) and to challenge the existing concepts of the relation between family and work (Frenkel,2008).

Recently, a new feminist theoretical approach has been emerging; a concept that is called- the Dual Agenda (Rapoport, 2002). This radical perception of personal-professional integration³ challenges common views of the spherical division as separated and inherently conflicting. The Dual Agenda notion establishes a different perspective for the relation between the two spheres and presents an alternative approach that creates parental work and career work as integrative and synergistic. Feminist methodologies that follow the Dual Agenda concept argue that supporting the “personal” needs of the employee and his/her family also leads to business and financial benefits and is not only a social advantage (Rapoport, 2002, Perlow, 2012). They emphasize the fact that raising gender fairness and equity within a company results in increasing its financial effectiveness.

This article's theoretical prism falls within this framework, which strives to redefine the relation between the home and the work-place. But contrary to the Dual Agenda concept that attempts to promote gender equity within organizational practices and social conceptions, we focus on the parental and personal-life experience – specifically the maternal - and posit that it is a valuable resource for managerial and work development.

In what follows, we will introduce an innovative method - “the M-Power model”, within which maternal experience becomes an important and valuable component of professional growth. Moving back and forth between theory and practice, we will rethink the personal and the professional, connecting the - not really separated- two spheres. In the second part of the article, we will present the concept of “Maternal Deconstruction” (Bankirer and Breier Ben Moha, in press) as an image rooted in the corporal, mental and practical experience of mothers. As we will explain, this imagery symbolizes a wide human potential for creative movement between different ways of thinking and thus, represents a valuable resource for professional development of both women and men. We will demonstrate the manner in which the M-Power technique reveals the practical manifestations of using deconstructing ability to rethink existing professional concepts. As we will argue, both the M-Power model and the Maternal Deconstruction theoretical framework represent an alternative conception of the self in a working environment and offer a shift from a fragmented perception of the self to the empowerment potential of creative development.

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As an organizational consultant, I have noticed that many times managers (both men and women) mention their personal lives and their experience as parents during discussion sessions regarding work. But whenever such issues are raised they are regarded as "small talk" or "friendly discussions", which are unrelated to the professional dilemma they have brought. Furthermore, it is usually regarded as a distractive factor. Being a career woman and a mother myself, I gradually recognized the consistency and relevance of those experiences, and found the empowerment potential hidden within them. This understanding led me to the foundation of the M-Power model.

-Tal Breier Ben Moha

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Introducing the M-Power model

The M-Power model is a practical method that demonstrates the synergetic relation between family and work and shows the way in which maternal and parental knowledge and experience can become useful for organizational and professional development (Breier Ben Moha, 2010, in Hebrew). We will first demonstrate the M-POWER model through the story of Ruth⁴.

Ruth is a successful business manager, a Vice President of operation in an industry that produces snacks. The company she was employed at was composed of several factories scattered in Israel. One of those factories was located in the north of the country while its manufactured products were designated to be transferred to the center of Israel, near Tel Aviv. In order to increase the product supply, Ruth made a decision to rent external storage space. That way, she could have enough room to store the manufactured products until they would be delivered to the central storage warehouses. But a few months later she realized the expenses of this external storage were significantly above what she had expected. She consulted with the local management but could not find a solution.

During an M-Power consultation process, while trying to find the analyst's reports between all the piles of papers on her desk, she recalled something else she had lost - something very important. Just a few days earlier, her daughter had gotten lost. She was playing with a friend in a large community-center, under Ruth's supervision. The girls ask her for orange juice so the three of them went into a grocery store. The girls were holding hands and Ruth was just a few steps ahead. Suddenly she realized that her daughter was gone. She immediately handed the other child to the salesperson in the grocery store to look after her while she was running around the stores in the community center calling her name and asking the people and salespersons if they had seen her.

Then, she had an idea. She remembered she "deposited" the child, her daughter's friend, in the hands of the owner of the grocery store, without even asking her what had happened, and if she had seen her daughter. She went back to the grocery store, and found the girl joyful, holding a bag of candy. She asked her if she knew where her daughter was. "Of course", she answered, "she just went to eat pizza in the next door pizza place". Telling this story Ruth couldn't help wondering why she had not asked her daughter's friend at the beginning whether she knew where her daughter was. After all, she was right next to her when she disappeared and she had asked everyone... everyone besides her.

During the consultation session, Ruth elaborated her story and was encouraged to contemplate on her thoughts and feelings about the incident. She was then, able to connect it with the professional dilemma that was preoccupying her. Ruth realized she hadn't asked her daughter's friend just because she was small and she didn't take her for someone who has knowledge. Going back to the warehouse dilemma, she elaborated on the list of people with whom she had and had not consulted. It turned out, that one group of workers whom she did not consult and that could give her the answer was, as in her daughter case, invisible. She called in the porters, the people who loaded the trucks at night. She conferred with them and found out that many times the trucks were going out to the storage house half empty.

Ruth's story about her daughter's disappearance held the key to a wider understanding of her managerial difficulty. She could rethink her professional dilemma, using her maternal knowledge, because she was encouraged not to put aside this part of her life.

The M-Power methodology

As demonstrated through Ruth's story, the M-power model enables personal and managerial development through the ability to associate insights from the parental experience when encountering a professional dilemma.

This model provides an alternative approach to the interface between motherhood and career, when maternal experience becomes an important and valuable component of the working process. The letter M represents MOTHER and MANAGER. The M-Power stands for: MOTHER- MANAGER- POWER. "Mother" represents the roles and experience in the private sphere, whereas "Manager" represents the public sphere - specifically, professional experience. The term indicates the empowerment potential entailed in breaking down the boundaries to our meaningful personal lives and holding it as an essential dimension of our career, including but not only parenting. Thus, assembling these aspects produces a synergistic empowerment of both the maternal and professional roles.

The M-Power in five stages

The M-Power model offers a structured methodology for connecting the two -not really separated- dimensions of life, for both women and men in order to enhance their creative abilities (Breier Ben Moha, 2010, in Hebrew).

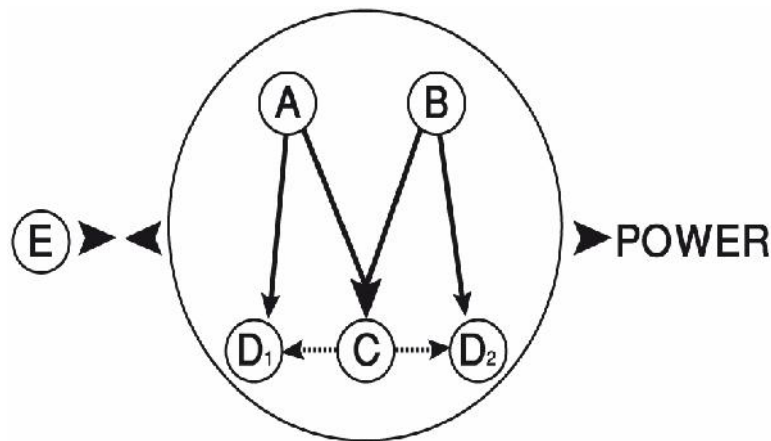


Fig. 1: the M-Power methodology

A-ask. The first stage is when we formulate a dilemma which preoccupies the consulted.

B-buddy. In the buddy stage, the second stage, she or he finds a matching story from the "other" sphere. If the first story is, as is usually the case, something that concerns the employee's professional life, the buddy story will be something with which they are preoccupied in their personal life. In Ruth's session she associated, without realizing, her managerial problem of the warehouse over-expenses with the experience of losing her daughter in the community center.

C-connection. In the third stage we find a connection between the two stories and draw from the personal, which are usually maternal (or paternal) experiences and insights that can facilitate rethinking professional dilemmas. Finding a concrete connection between two different aspects of our lives demonstrates our holistic existence and therefore enhances our sense of cohesion. In Ruth's case, she realized there were certain people who she considered as "people who has knowledge" and others that were not perceived as such. The knowledge was there, yet she had to rethink existing patterns of where it could be found in order to reach it. The story of her

daughter's disappearance enabled Ruth to recognize her own thinking templates and allowed her to expand the range of possible solutions.

D-doing. In the fourth stage, we actively find solutions to the professional dilemma. Ruth convened the truck porters and made a routine of consulting with different groups of people in order to expand her perspectives of knowledge.

At first, though being an experienced manager, within the stress of the demanding professional situation, Ruth lost "her (inner) child"⁵, and reacted according to an automated protocol. Just as she ran without stopping from one store to another, looking for her daughter, she confronted the warehouse over-expense problem by organizing management board meetings that couldn't have brought a solution. Ruth was able to change her actions and find an answer to her professional problem as a result of identifying a link to the maternal experience of finding her daughter. Only by reconnecting with her personal experience, with her inner knowledge and creativity, her inner child, she found a different way of dealing with the situation.

E-empowerment. Finding synergetic insights demonstrates the connection between the different parts of our existence, and is therefore empowering. Through this method, workers, professionals and managers can recognize their personal lives - specifically the maternal - as a meaningful experience which is not only conflicting but empowering for professional development, not only a threat but also an opportunity⁶

As was the case with Ruth, many professionals often apply their experience and knowledge from their personal lives without acknowledging it as a valuable dimension. Collective patterns of thinking about the relation between the spheres cause a continuous separation and repression of these experiences and thus, prevent recognizing their significance. In order to relocate maternal and parental aspects, out of their peripheral position at the fringe of the "non productive" part of society, and to situate them as an important dimension of our professional existence, we will proceed with a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the impact of the maternal facet for professional growth.

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My experience and knowledge as a mother played an important part in most professional decisions I have made. During my residency in a psychiatric hospital, being a mother was my ethical compass. It enabled me to rethink orthodox psychiatric decisions and in many cases to determine otherwise, simply by applying a word I hear a lot from my children: the word why?

-Yael Bankirer

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Maternal Deconstruction: Getting out of the frame

The M-Power model provides the basis for theorizing maternal experience and redefining its potential within professional life. It illustrates a creative potential that is formed through integrating the personal life, specifically the maternal, within professional framework. If Ruth was able to rethink her previous conceptions, if professionals would be able to apply the M-Power model and to reanalyze professional dilemmas it is due to a deconstructing movement that arises from the hub of the private sphere- maternal physical and mental experience.

In order to understand the creative potential demonstrated through the M-Power model, we offer to draw on a concept we have sketched elsewhere: Maternal Deconstruction. (Bankirer and breier Ben Moha, in press). This concept, rooted in the maternal corporal and psychical existence provides an imagery of deconstructing potential that illuminates the creative growth ingrained within the ability to open the door to the maternal within professional environment.

Maternal Deconstruction is an image drawn from various aspects of the maternal: from the physical image of changing boundaries during pregnancy and from the emotional and mental position of the mother towards her child. Within the mother-child relationship it is the ability to remain an open witness- curious, constantly questioning, not knowing what the future would bring; what answers will come forth. The mother's position towards her children has been described as an "openness" that enables the transformative becoming of both the child and the mother. (Irigaray, 1996; Rozmarin 2006). On the basis of these conceptualizations we argue that maternal responsibility for the child's indeterminate future is an active refusal to commit to one meaning and one narrative. This position of staying committed to an open future is an active stance of deconstruction that allows a transformative process of creative development to take place not only in the child's life but in any arena that allows encountering the maternal.

Many studies describe the transition to motherhood as a chaotic change in a woman's life that entails a process of physical and mental dissolution (Benedek, 1959, Caplan, 1960, Yalom et al, 1968, Obeman & Jusselson, 1996). Psychological descriptions of mental processes that take place at this stage emphasize feelings of loss and fragmentation (Shereshefsky & Yarrow, 1973, Leifer, 1980). At this time, a woman is confronted with the loss of her previous identity; she experiences physical and psychological changes that require a complete reorganization of her life. A lot of her previous conceptions dissolve. Preconceptions of accepted templates, patterns structures and, social meanings are deconstructed and new meanings emerge.

As we elaborate (Bankirer and Breier Ben Moha, in press), this dialectical process of assembly-disassembly is not only a mental fragmentation and deconstruction in the negative sense. It is also a developmental process leading to a renewed balance of personality (Palgi-Hacker, 2005). It has the potential for uncommitted movement between different ways of thinking- a deconstruction ability, which stands in contrast to the phalocentric approach that seeks to hold only one essence and one meaning. This physical and psychological position entails a growing ability to incorporate various emotional states and experiences, an ability to endure changes, a potential to deconstruct and rethink existing concepts, which is a valuable resource for work and professional growth in a rapidly changing world.

Maternal Deconstruction is thus, a concept rooted in various aspects of the maternal- in the emotional and mental position of the mother within the mother-child relationship, in the bodily image of pregnancy transformations and in the reorganizations that occur during these stages in the lives of mothers. Indeed, this imagery draws its validity from the mother's corporal and psychical recurrent experience of deconstructing the "one monolithic essence". However, this image is meant to sketch a wide human potential of creative ability. Drawing an image of the maternal is both a theoretical and a political concept that is intended to describe a deconstructing ability through identification with an image taken from the repressed world of motherhood⁷.

From this perspective, the reorganization that occurs in the multiple arenas of the mother's life is a valuable potential for rethinking existing organizational and professional concepts. As we argue, Maternal Deconstruction provides the basis for deconstructing perceptions of work and organizational structures and entails a significant dimension for professional growth.

From surviving the workplace to creative development

The ability to deconstruct existing templates of thinking is manifested in the M-power model and arises from opening the door to the viable creative part of the maternal, allowing it to become a meaningful aspect of professional development. But not only professional life is improved by the ability to associate between the different aspects of existence. This connection reshapes the maternal experience and enhances a sense of cohesion with a common thread of meaning bounding together different aspects of life. Exploring the influence of realigning the multiple dimensions of the self and reinstating the maternal as a significant potential within professional life goes beyond the scope of this article. Acknowledging that, we would like to suggest that connecting these aspects provides the basis for facilitating a transition from a discourse of survival struggle and endurance towards a perception of continued creative growth.

Currently, accepted discourse of connecting the maternal and the professional is focused on helping mothers (and parents) to survive what is considered to be two conflicting aspects of life (Williams 2000, Acker 2004). This perception is demonstrated by referring to this interface as "work-family balance" or the in popular term - "work life balance"⁸. This expression illustrates a dichotomic division between the two dimensions, with a scale image of constantly striving to maintain a delicate balance between parental and professional aspects of life. This image entails the notion that investing energy (e.g. time, money) with one aspect would inevitably reduce the potency of the other. This concept also provides the basis for a narrowed perception of the self in a working environment. It assumes inherent difficulty in connecting the multiple dimensions of life and promotes a preferred strategy of splitting that only through which professional or personal development could come forth. Thus, it reduces personal development into an ability to survive the workplace and enforces a sense of incompetence and guilt with regards to the maternal and parental experience.

The M-power model and the Maternal Deconstruction theoretical framework provides the basis to rethink the working self as inherently connected and empowered by the personal maternal experience. It offers a shift from a divided perception of a fragmented self that aims to survive the workplace to a discourse of potential empowerment. It suggests a conception of the self as integrated rather than fragmented and presents the potential of creative development ingrained within the ability to encounter the maternal image. This different perception, as we argue, represents a transformative movement from family-work balance to the potential of personal-professional empowerment.

To summarize, we have shown that breaking down spherical division is not only a practical project of redesigning the structural relation between financial organizations and the personal lives of people, it is also a theoretical and practical project of reestablishing new conceptions of the self in a working environment. The M-Power model and Maternal Deconstruction aim to connect the theoretical and practical in redefining the relation between the personal and professional. Specifically, it provides recognition and acknowledgment of the maternal as a valuable aspect of human life that goes beyond the mother-child relationship for both women and men. Just as Ruth was able to deconstruct and rethink existing concepts of knowledge, find answers in places where it was not expected, so does this article, in highlighting the maternal arena, aim to broaden accepted understanding of professional knowledge and growth.

Trying to rethink the maternal in the context of professional life has to start by breaking down spherical division and dislocating the maternal out of its marginal position in the fringe of society. This has to be done, on the one hand, without mystifying the maternal image as an all-powerful one-dimensional symbol and on the other hand without once again creating the maternal as a

body image that confines all women in their biology. Feminist theoretical literature contains many images drawn from maternal experience⁹ and many attempts to redefine the relation between the spheres. But despite those efforts, understanding of the maternal remains hidden, silenced outside professional boundaries. To our understanding, maternal experience and knowledge continue to be a repressed dimension and fail to become an imagery of professional importance, partly due to the difficulty to shift between theoretical understanding and practical realization. Thus, this article has been moving back and forth, connecting the strings between theory and practice. Just as the maternal experience is intertwined with professional development, so is the practical and theoretical dimensions inherently connected through a circular movement that empowers their potentials. Indeed, the M-Power model is only one manifestation of the Maternal Deconstruction theoretical concept and Maternal Deconstruction is only one theoretical formulation of the M-Power practical method. However, the ability to tie them together enhances both their potentials and keeps them, as is implied within the hidden promise of the maternal, constantly in motion - transforming, growing, developing.

Notes

¹ Correll et al. (2007) found that gender based discrimination regarding parenting exists. They found that while fathers mostly benefitted from their parenting, mothers were penalized.

² Jacques Derrida, (1976) describes Western thought in terms of binary oppositions, in which one of the two terms governs the other.

³ Rapaport et al. (2002) suggested the concept of personal-professional integration, which holds the full diversity of personal- life arrangements in the work place (including people without children).

⁴ The story is based on a personal consulting session that took place as part of an organizational consultation process with an Israeli commercial company. Identifying details have been changed to maintain client confidentiality.

⁵ C.G Jung describes the inner child as the part of the self that is “always becoming is never completed...that is the part of the human personality that wants to develop and become whole” (Jung, CW 17, p. 286). It is the part of the self that represents creative development. According to Jung, only through connecting with this aspect of the self can the person abandon the collective conscious position and commence a creative process of individualization.

⁶ It is of note that the word “crisis” that many women use to describe the interface between family and work, in Chinese consists of two words- “danger” and “opportunity”. In Hebrew, this word has similar meaning: The word crisis -“mashber” is also the place where the mother crouches to give birth. This is one of the most painful, agonizing moments but it is also a place of creation, a place of renewal and empowerment.

⁷ Maternal deconstruction is not an essence of motherhood and surely not the meanings of femininity. Nor does it eliminate the creative deconstructing ability of men. On the contrary, this concept is meant to encourage both men

and women to appeal to their resourceful deconstructive ability through identification with an image taken from the maternal.

⁸ The phrase "work life balance" implies that work is not a part of life. The phrase "family-work balance" suggests an obligation to live according to heteronormative standards- and have a family, and does not take into account people who chose not to have children, or not to live as part of a family. As we previously mentioned, Rappaport et al.(2002) offer the concept of personal-professional integration .

⁹images of the maternal and feminine can be found, for example in the work of Chodorow (1978); Gilligan (1982); Benjamin (1988); Sarsh Ruddick (1989); and Ettinger (2006). Their conceptions have expanded theoretical understanding of the significance of the maternal.

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