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Paternal and Maternal Gatekeeping? Choreographing Care

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Abstract

Feminist scholarship has continued to map the multiple ways in which practices of caring and paid work sustain gender inequality. A recurrent focus has examined how caring and paid work “choices” are made and their corresponding gendered effects, particularly for women in the home, work place and beyond. In spite of shifts in education, employment and equality-focused legislation, the sharing of familial caring responsibilities for children has been particularly resistant to significant change. One attempt to explain this obduracy has been through the concept of “maternal gatekeeping” developed in the 1990s. This concept typically describes and measures maternal behaviours that “block” paternal involvement and so apparently “protects” maternal privilege/power. However, as societal ideals — and some practices — of involved fatherhood shift, a more critical engagement with the concept of “gatekeeping” as a singularly maternal practise, is timely. Drawing upon findings from two comparative UK based qualitative longitudinal studies, this paper urges a more critical examination of practices of maternal and paternal gatekeeping as parental choreographing of caring practices and responsibilities unfold.

Keywords: Motherhood; fatherhood; parenting; caring; gatekeeping.

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1 Background

Concerted research efforts have mapped the now predictably familiar terrain of gender inequality, as “long marches,” “stalled revolutions,” “motherhood penalties,” apparent “preferences,” “double shifts” and “triple burdens” have continued to characterise the organisation and practice of caring and paid work (Budig & England, 2001; England, 2010; Thébaud, 2010; Gerson, 2009 & 2011; Gerstel & Gallagher, 2001; Hakim, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Ruddick, 1989 & 1997). As Hauser has observed, “the literature on gender and childcare is tediously consistent” (2012, p. 34). Even so, some change in men’s involvement in practices of caring for their children has become increasingly discernible as more women work outside the home (Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Doucet, 2017; Levto, van der Gaag, Greene, Kaufmann, & Barker, 2015; Shirani & Henwood, 2011). However, in most countries and households, changes that would approximate to *equality* in mothering and fathering caring choices and paid work are yet to be achieved. The explanations for this are historical, cultural and political, drawing upon aspects of structural power and imperatives and associated contexts in which particular practices of gendered agency are possible or permissible: essentialist assumptions lurk here too (Deutsch, 2007; Miller, 2011; Risman, 2004). One key explanation for why more equal choices in relation to caring for children in households has been hard to achieve, has focused on women “blocking” and limiting men’s involvement through so-called “gatekeeping” behaviours (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; De Luccie, 1995). This paper takes a longer and, micro-focused view, of how caring work and practices and “gatekeeping” behaviours unfold and shift in heterosexual, couple households, overtime. Using data from two qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies conducted in the UK, it critically engages with the concept of gatekeeping as a uniquely maternal behaviour and considers paternal practices, which it is argued can have the effect of “gatekeeping” too. These relational practices can be seen as forms of resistance or “self-blocking” in relation to parental competency.

The concept of maternal gatekeeping was first discussed in the 1990s in attempts to identify and label mother’s behaviours which were seen to affect fathering, by limiting the development of more egalitarian, shared caring practices (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, p. 200; De Luccie, 1995). In its initial conceptualisation, which has since been further developed, maternal gatekeeping was characterised through three areas, which included; standards and responsibilities; maternal identity validation; and differential family role identification (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The combination of these beliefs and behaviours was seen to “ultimately inhibit a collaborative effort between men and women in family work by limiting men’s opportunities for learning and growing through caring for home and children” (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, p. 200; De Luccie, 1995). Maternal gatekeeping was operationally defined and psychological measures established to examine variables related to mother’s satisfaction with a father’s involvement. Estimates of the percentage of women who engage in (“heavy” or “rigid”) gatekeeping practices were also made, along with “predictors” of “gatekeeping tendencies” and their “antecedents” and “psychological correlates” (Gaunt, 2008, p. 373; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, Sokolowski, 2008; Hauser, 2012 & 2015; Kulik & Tsoref, 2010). In their highly cited work, Allen and Hawkins (1999) estimated the percentage of mothers who gatekeep at 20% of all mothers. But practices which could constitute maternal gatekeeping in some form is recognised as a much more common activity: even though it’s argued that “gatekeepers are mostly unaware of their gatekeeping behaviors and the potential consequences of these behaviours for father involvement” (Gaunt, 2008, p. 392; Hauser, 2012).

In the intervening 30 years since Allen and Hawkins work, challenges to the concept of maternal gatekeeping as a purely “blocking” and limiting/inhibiting set of behaviours and attitudes have been made and the “facilitative” potential and “gains and losses” have been noted (Hauser, 2012 & 2015; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). So too, the recognition that “gatekeeping isn’t a simple phenomenon” (Ranson, 2010, p. 143; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). In addition, the largely quantitative body of psychological research has slowly begun to be augmented by qualitative studies from other disciplines. This has added further insights into practises of gatekeeping behaviours, for example beyond the home and in cases of family separation and divorce (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015; Trinder, 2008; Pruett, Arthur, & Ebling, 2007; Ranson, 2010; Hauser, 2015). Crucially, more recent research has problematized the apparent “motives” and “causal direction” of maternal gatekeeping and why and how such practices may arise (Gaunt, 2008; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015; Hauser, 2012 & 2015).

Even so, in theorisations of gendered caring practices, maternal gatekeeping has continued to be singularly associated with mothers “assuming primary responsibility for childrearing,” and engaging in negative practices such as “criticizing the father’s parenting behaviour” or in other ways restricting or reducing male partner involvement (Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008, p. 502; Hauser, 2012).

In reality of course, the ways in which “control” and practices of maternal and paternal agency operate in the multifarious practises and responsibilities of childrearing is complex and contested. Explanations are not helped by over-simplified notions of power and maternal agency: even though this is one domain where assumptions of maternal privilege continue to be recognised. To date, practices of maternal gatekeeping have mostly been associated with attempts to protect maternal identity and power, through which maternal privilege is reinforced and reproduced. Others might interpret the practices and assumptions associated with motherhood as a “burden” and recognise the ambivalence, conflict and “cultural contradictions,” which are etched through maternal thinking and practise (Hays, 1996; Miller, 2005 & 2007; Ruddick, 1989 & 1997). But whatever the standpoint taken, this is still only one side of a “gatekeeping” story. Why has gatekeeping been conceptualised and theorised only as a maternal practice? What about paternal practises which involve self-blocking through forms of resistance, and so can be seen to constitute “gatekeeping” in relation to childrearing/ caring behaviours and limit maternal “choices” in the paid work sphere? As increased father involvement in the hard work of caregiving is gradually documented, why would behaviours which inhibit practices of parental agency only be maternal in origin?

This article extends the lens which has focused almost exclusively¹ on maternal practices to rest on the interactions between father’s and mother’s attitudes and behaviours, which constitute forms of gatekeeping, especially in relation to “standards and responsibilities.” Drawing upon the findings from two qualitative longitudinal studies conducted in the UK, *Transition to First-time Motherhood* (2005, 2007 & 2017) and *Transition to First-time Fatherhood* (2010, 2011 & 2017) the interplay between men’s and women’s practices of caregiving and attitudes to competency and “natural” abilities are examined. Importantly the temporal dimensions of longitudinal research, facilitates an unfolding view of patterns of caring as responsibilities and activities are first anticipated, taken on, honed, monitored and eventually reflected upon.

2 The Studies

The study of maternal gatekeeping has been dominated by quantitative research and the need for longitudinal and qualitative data has been noted (e.g. Gaunt, 2008; Hauser, 2015). The two UK based qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies which are drawn upon here have focused on women’s and men’s transition experiences as they became parents for the first time and has followed later, unfolding experiences of family lives, caring and paid work. The initial *Transition to first-time Motherhood* study² followed women through a year in their life as they became mothers for the first time (Miller, 2005, 2007 & 2017). The participants were interviewed by the author on three separate occasions; before the birth, in the early weeks following the birth and at a later interview when the baby was approximately 9 months old. More recently it was decided to go back to the women in the original sample as their first-born child reached 18 years old of age to capture later and retrospective accounts of mothering experiences and family/working lives (Miller, 2017).

The companion QL *Transition to first-time Fatherhood* study was commenced several years after the motherhood study. This study followed the same research design as the Motherhood study, but an additional (fourth) interview was conducted with some of the fathers, when their child reached their second birthday (Miller, 2010) and a fifth interview when their child reached primary school age (5–6 years in the UK) (Miller, 2017). In each (unrelated) study the sample consisted of 17 white, heterosexual

1. One exception is found in Ranson’s study *Against the Grain* in which she helpfully notes that fathers can also gatekeep “and mothers can be sidelined in the process” (2010, p. 143). However, this was not a major focus in the study.
2. A third study is currently being conducted, which repeats the original design of the Motherhood study with a new generation of women becoming mothers for the first time.

women and men, some of whom were in ethnically mixed partnerships/marriages. Both samples were recruited from dual-earner households and were employed in a wide range of skilled jobs that would mostly position them as middle-class, but not all. At the time of the first interview the women in the Motherhood study had a mean age of 30 years (ages ranged from 21 to 36 years) and in the Fatherhood study the men had a mean age of 33.7 years at the time of the first interview (ages ranged from 24 years to 39 years). Across the two studies over 200 hours of interviewing has been carried out in 125 interviews.

3 Caring Practices and Responsibilities: Who's Gatekeeping?

The findings from these studies show that hopes and plans envisaged during the prenatal period often do not neatly overlap with the reality of first time parenthood (Miller, 2005 & 2010). For the women becoming mothers, notions of birth being “natural” and caring being “instinctive” are soon revised (Miller, 2007). For the new father's, intentions of sharing caring “equally” and “split down the middle” are similarly revised as the hard work, undervalued and invisible aspects of caring and parenthood are experienced (Miller, 2012 & 2017). The potential for disruption to gendered norms, which was apparent in the prenatal data in the Fatherhood study, does not occur to the extent envisaged: even so, generational change is apparent as the fathers are more involved in caring practises than their own fathers. Across the longitudinal data it is possible to trace how caring and paid work responsibilities are felt, become practised and can change overtime. It is also possible to examine in a detailed way how thinking about care — the mental labour — and practices are taken on, developed and or rejected (Walzer, 1996). The development of a sense of “competency” in meeting the new baby's changing needs is gradually developed, both with regard to different caring practices and levels of “success” by the mothers and fathers (Miller, 2007 & 2012). But structural features, including different lengths of paternity (2 weeks) and maternity leave (up to 52 weeks) in the UK at the time of the early phases of the studies,³ ensured that the mothers were more able to become practised and attuned to the baby, with the fathers returning to (mostly full-time) paid work following their 2 weeks statutory paternity leave. And so, the mothers come to take on the primary caring role and become the “expert” in anticipating and responding to the growing baby/young child's needs. This includes becoming proficient at being able to “*hold it all in my head*” and carry the all-encompassing mental load, which can discourage fathers from sharing: or confirm there is no need to do so (Miller, 2017). Others have noted that “mothers sometimes contribute to inequalities in the area of parenting” (Hauser, 2015): but the reasons for this are complex and the contested terrain is etched through with gendered precedents.

Most women who are also mothers will recognise in their actions practices which constitute gatekeeping. However, even though maternal gatekeeping has more recently been theorised as potentially “facilitative,” there has been a lack of attention on paternal behaviours which also form part of this relational and interactive dynamic. For example, Fagan and Barnett have noted that “mothers are more likely to restrict the father's involvement with children when she perceives the man to have low parenting competence” (2003, p. 1039). But time and practice are required to become competent at most things. Even so, research shows that fathers can engage in behaviours which reinforce maternal primacy thereby reducing expectations of their own engagement in caring activities. Given that caring can be repetitive, isolating, boring and undervalued, perhaps this is little surprise: some mothers too, would want to escape the mundane aspects of care work. But such co-construction of maternal responsibility as primary also serves to inhibit mothers' activity in other domains, including in career development and workplace success.

Over the years, research on aspects of gender equality has noted practices in the home and workplace, which challenge and “undo” ideas of fixed “differential role identification” as described in earlier iterations of gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Deutsch, 2007). But one area of gatekeeping which continues to be particularly germane, relates to “standards and responsibilities” and mothers' perceptions and attitudes towards father “competency” in relation to these: which includes “criticising the fa-

3. Shared parental leave legislation was introduced in the UK in 2014: <https://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay> and has limiting eligibility criteria and so far, very low rates of take-up. See: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/article/2017/united-kingdom-low-take-up-of-shared-parental-leave-scheme>

ther's parenting behaviour" (Cannon et al, 2008, p. 502; Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Hauser, 2012 & 2015). However, data collected in the Fatherhood study across the five interview phases (from pre-natal to the child reaching 5 years of age and beginning school) reveals the father's perceptions of their paternal competencies, which includes their *own claims* of incompetency. It is these claims of incompetency in relation to various aspects of childrearing including feeding, clothing and anticipating the care needs of their baby/young child, which are of particular interest here and are explored further through data, below. Are claims of incompetence a form of paternal gatekeeping? Certainly, they can reinforce maternal primacy, positioning men as secondary/ supporting figures only.

The positioning of mothers as "indispensable" in relation to caring for children, has been described as "a gain" (Hauser, 2012, p. 51), but this can also be a burden. For example, in data from a final interview in the Motherhood Study (Miller, 2017) Gillian reflects back over 18 years of mothering in the following extract. She now questions her behaviours, which actively positioned her in indispensable ways. She has recently separated from her husband and both parents now share equally, the care of their two teenage daughters, across two households:

It's just you always, you know with hindsight, you think oh "did I do that right." Like with the responsibility thing that is the first thing I said to you *I think maybe I've taken too much responsibility*, maybe I could have *shared the responsibility more* and I don't know if that was me [...] So I think if I was doing it again, I would certainly watch that and might have handled that a bit more, a bit differently. *I would have given away some of that responsibility* I think because I think *that weighed me down in a way that I felt was essential at the time*, but with hindsight I'm thinking *why did I feel quite so weighed down* by it, *why did I not share that* [...] So yes I was always on standby for them if you see what I mean, I would always be, if there was ever a request for a parent to do something, you know like parents' evening, or cycling proficiency... it would always be me, unless for some reason I was double booked or one child needed to go in one direction and the other in another, then you'd have to ask for help. *But other than that, no he (ex-husband) did things when he wanted to* [...] Yes and I think *he always had the capacity, but he didn't have to*. (Gillian, *Motherhood Study*, 18 year interview. Emphasis added).

These extracts convey a sense of Gillian being "weighed down" (burdened) by the responsibilities, which were taken on and held close as part of what she saw as "essential" in being a "good," selfless mother, while her husband she says, had preferences ("*he did things when he wanted to*"). Societal expectations of fathers at the time (18 years earlier) were not the same, and still there is a tendency for them to be positioned as peripheral rather than primary caring figures. But post-separation, Gillian has observed her ex-husband competently caring for his daughters: even if this is done in different ways to how Gillian would do things (Miller, 2017). In this extract we can see how, as Hauser has observed, "maternal gatekeepers, metaphorically, keep their male partners unemployed in the home" (2012, p. 54). Gillian has taken singular and primary responsibility for everything and so even though she says her husband "always had the capacity," to care for his daughters, "he didn't have to." Impending divorce has changed behaviours and competencies, which have always existed, but are only now practised.

In relation to maternal gatekeeping behaviours, it is clear that historical precedents and complex social and political arenas have configured such practices. Mothers too can "sometimes contribute to the maintenance of a gendered division of parenting responsibilities" (Gaunt 2008, p. 375). A sense of heightened surveillance and the intensification of motherhood (and fatherhood) have done little to dispel such practices (Hays, 1996). But by examining maternal gatekeeping overtime, practices of paternal gatekeeping come into view. Indeed, couldn't paternal gatekeepers metaphorically keep their female partners under-employed in the paid work sphere and/or limit career development? Because parenting practices develop in response to a growing baby/child, relational gatekeeping behaviours also shift. At the same time, caring needs to be quickly achieved once a first baby is born and gendered practices can rapidly become entrenched as perceptions of competence are gradually acquired (by both parents) and then further honed. In the data collected in the Fatherhood study across 5 years of interviews, claims of apparent incompetence, interactionally acquired and confirmed, were narrated by the men. This was in relation to clothing ("*So I think that looks interesting to put on and then it's invariably the wrong thing*"),

feeding and taking on the mental load (“*it is easy to feed the baby, but knowing what to feed her tomorrow is difficult*”), which involved anticipation and longer-term planning of aspects of caring. In the following extracts the fathers narrate their caring involvement in ways which imply a level of incompetence, either self-perceived and/or confirmed by wives and partners,

Because one of the roles that Anna, one of the things that she does regularly is she gets his food ready for the next day. So (she) goes into the freezer, gets out a cube of whatever, puts it all into pots [...] it’s something she does every night. I should probably do it but I never do [...] I think you know it’s always said to me that blokes can switch off a little bit more (Gus, *Fatherhood study*, interview at 1 year following the birth)

In general terms I consider myself very confident with my daughter, qualified by my inability to pick the right clothes for her to wear still and maybe not provide her with the right food [...]. Left to our own devices I think each of us (parents) would just get on with (our daughter) in slightly different ways and I think we’d just make it happen. There’s a, probably a good tension otherwise, because there is always a little bit of pushing and pulling and whereas I would have allowed Alice to eat a sweet or something, [wife] may say well she doesn’t need that she just had a you know something and I say well I didn’t know she just had that [...] [Later] But you know I’m allowed to sort of dabble in it on occasion (William, *Fatherhood study*, interview at 5 years following the birth)

If wife leaves me with baby [9 months old] for a morning or afternoon at the weekend, whatever, you know I do feel a little that I’m getting things wrong and not doing them at the right time and that kind of thing [...] she gives me a list of what to do and when or tells me what to do and when but of course baby may decide to do something different that morning so the list may not entirely apply (Ian, *Fatherhood study*, interview at 9 months following the birth)

When Ian (the father in the final extract above) is interviewed when his baby is 2 years old he describes how he and his partner share the care of their son. I ask him if there is any aspect of caring that he does not do and he calls to his partner (sitting in the next room) to check. She replies, “*packing his bags for Brenda*” (their childminder). The following exchange between Ian and Polly then unfolds:

Polly: “Yeah I tried to get Ian to do that (pack the bag), I decided, when I was ill at the beginning of the year I said right ‘you do a Monday’ and I had a list. But my list was all scribbled on and then Monday maybe he’d be out and so we haven’t kept that up. But we ought to do that again. But I suppose the only thing I can think of (that he doesn’t do) is choosing what (their son) wears. It’s partly again because I have a system and he has, if he wears disposable nappies, he wears smaller trousers than if he’s in bigger bulky washable ones. So I know which trousers to put on and I’m saving that for this occasion and Ian doesn’t know. So he might get his head bitten off if he chose the wrong thing!”

Ian: “Yes so I think that looks interesting to put on and then it’s invariably the wrong thing”

Polly: “Or I say ‘why have you changed to that’.”

Ian: “So...”

Polly: “You don’t have confidence in doing that do you?”

Ian: “No”

Polly: “I also I tend to be responsible for the washing as well so I’m aware of what (son) needs and what he’s wearing and what fits him and again because I’m responsible, I tend to be responsible for the change bag as well, I pack that (pause) Yes and I buy them as well”

Ian: “Yes and if I get involved it does sometimes make it more difficult because Polly then has to throw what I’ve done [...]” (laughing).

Polly: “Poor Ian!”

Ian: “Disputes about how many washable nappy outers have been used.”

Polly: “Were there any clean ones?”

Ian: “They can be reused on a short-term basis and whether they get reused or whether new ones get got out”

Polly: “You see I have systems.”

This exchange (which will be instantly recognisable to many parents) illustrates how practices and behaviours are taken on and become part of the gendered, accepted and daily-ness of routines of caring. But even if Ian doesn’t always pack the bag with the “right” things, couldn’t he develop confidence and competence by packing it differently to Polly (who has “systems,” which could be seen as a form of gatekeeping)? But Polly also asserts her responsibility for several aspects of care (washing their son’s clothes, choosing what he wears and knowing what is being saved for another, future occasion) and has taken on a primary overview of their son’s care needs. The competing perceptions of “sharing” care is also of interest here, but so too the ways in which interactive gatekeeping practices, bound up with assumptions about competence and knowledge and incompetence/confidence play out.

Interestingly, when Ian is interviewed again when his first-born child is 5 years old, he alludes to physical presence and the mental load,

[On] Saturday we both, I think we are equally involved on Saturdays. I perhaps have slightly more things that I do out of the house than Polly does, so the balance might not be quite as I think it is, because when I’m not there, I don’t take that into account (Ian, *Fatherhood study*, 5 year Interview)

Ian has clearly been an involved and caring father, but while *physically* being there is noted by Ian, it is the possibility that when he is not physically at home he does not “see” or at least can be unaware of aspects of caring work (“*I don’t take that into account*”). The taking on of the all-encompassing, 24/7 thinking responsibility and future-oriented care planning, is not taken on by the fathers.

By juxtaposing parental narratives of care-giving overtime it becomes clear that both parents are able to care and to exert forms of control or behaviours which “block” resist and/or facilitate caring. For example, paternal gatekeeping can be defined through behaviours and attitudes which involve not taking on/ avoiding longer term planning and thinking (“*I just deal with the here and now, maybe a week ahead planning, but nothing years ahead*”), prioritising “fun stuff” and declaring incompetence in relation to some activities and not “seeing” others. These forms of gatekeeping of course have implications for how mothering and fathering become taken on and how caregiving becomes choreographed in couple households by *both* parents — and some one needs to care for a new and then growing baby. It is also important to note that any “reading” of paternal gatekeeping (“*getting it wrong*”) is likely to be through a maternally etched lens: is getting it wrong, just doing something differently? Even so, it is hard to imagine “incompetency” being claimed by men in the workplace in relation to workplace practices (“*I just can’t get my head around the routine*”), or being an acceptable discursive tool in such an environment. The expectations and assumptions “attached to women and men because of their gender category” (Risman, 2004, p. 432) continue to be particularly obdurate in relation to how we organise and practise childrearing and care.

4 Conclusions

This article has problematized the one-sided, singularly maternal focus taken in conceptualisations of “gatekeeping.” As involved and intimate fatherhood becomes more normative, it is timely to ask why

behaviours which inhibit practices of parental agency and the choreographing of caring in couple households, would only be maternal in origin? Even though the “causal direction” of maternal gatekeeping has more recently been explored, practices of paternal gatekeeping have been largely absent, from debates. The relational, interactive and gendered dimensions of caring practices is well trodden terrain. However, as data accumulates on fatherhood and fathering involvement in these spaces, it becomes possible to examine practices of paternal and maternal agency in more nuanced ways. For example, what are the effects of claims of lack of competency as a form of paternal gatekeeping? Does this maintain patriarchal privilege in other areas of the social world, or require that mothers accept differently constituted and embodied masculine practices of (“satisfactory”) caring, or both? Certainly, surveillance of parenting is still much more likely to focus upon mothers.

The research has shown how relationships and caring practises unfold and become practised in (usually) less equitable ways than originally intended. The reasons for this can be multiple and are inter-related, operating at the interpersonal and broader structural, political, policy and cultural levels. A baby or dependent child has needs to be met, but not necessarily by the mother. Even so parenting is undertaken and choreographed in highly gendered and politicised contexts and only gradually are socially constructed care arrangements being challenged and reconfigured. It is also apparent that men’s understandings and practices of parenting do not mirror exactly those of women, but this makes them different and differently embodied, rather than wrong (Rehel, 2014; Doucet, 2017; Ranson, 2015). The need for a more critical engagement with dimensions of the powerful and fluid concept of maternal gatekeeping, in conjunction with paternal gatekeeping behaviours and attitudes has also become clear. At the heart of these matters, sits the assumed *singularity* of a primary responsibility. For all the sharing, it is this singularity — so obdurately attached to constructions of motherhood and “good mothering,” which demands our continued critical attention. Men can care too.

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