

THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN CHILD & YOUTH CARE

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Note to the reader:

This paper is a personal reflection on the profile of women in child and youth care. While my thoughts are still evolving, it is, nonetheless, a public commitment to action.

Testing 1 . . 2 . . 3 . .

1. List three well-known figures in the field of child and youth care.
2. The last time you were planning a state/provincial or national conference, whose names came forward as potential keynote speakers, from either a political/advocacy position or as a visionary in child & youth care practice?
3. Whose names come to mind when you think of professional communication in the field of child and youth care, including authoring and editing of books and journals, chairing of major conferences?
4. Whose names come to mind as those "seen to be holding expertise" in the field, i.e., as individuals recognized as articulating theory and models of practice, as providing vision, direction and challenge within the field?

I suggest that our responses to the above questions are as follows: (1) you and I identified many more men than women; (2) of the women identified, the *same* women were mentioned over and over again; (3) women were more likely to be thought of in regard to politics/advocacy and least likely identified as individuals seen to be holding expertise in the field. I thought of the following: Frank Ainsworth, Jerry Beker, Larry Brendtro, James Garbarino, Mark Krueger, Henry Maier, Arlin Ness, Fritz Redl, Al Trieschman, Harry Vorrath and James Whittaker. Bright individuals, each of whom undeniably in my opinion has inspired and challenged the field; shared wisdom and practicality with practi-

tioners and the profession; taken the field down new paths. Where are the women?

It is not my position that women are or have been without influence in the field. Women such as Vicki Bruce, Lorraine Fox, Donna Lero, Martha Mattingly, Sue Pratt, Frances Ricks and Karen Vander Ven are not unfamiliar (or are becoming increasingly familiar) to many within the field and, upon reflection, have left and are continuing to leave their unique imprints in Child & Youth Care education, research, and professional development. Furthermore, women's impact can be expected to rise if the impression indicates that more women are training for and moving into positions of administration, becoming politically active, continuing to form a notable constituency as teachers, and assuming more political/advocacy roles as they pursue the preceding mandates.

On the other hand, it has also been my experience that, despite potential and identifiable contributions, the sphere within which women in Child and Youth Care carry out their influence is more likely to be in the immediate or local practice realm, in middle rather than in top level management, or as co-venturers in endeavors rather than as independent pioneers. Unfortunately, there is also both theoretical and empirical support for this view. The literature on leadership, socialization and personal style differences between genders, including studies in social psychology, clinical psychological and emotional development in women, and organizational psychology, consistently describes women as immediacy based in their tasks, motivated by altruism at the expense of self, co-operative, and relationship-oriented rather than competitive; whereas men are described as more abstract-based in their goals, more comfortable working in an autonomous fashion, and stimulated by competition (Dinnerstein, 1976; Maccoby, E.E. & Jacklin, C.N., 1974; Piliavin, J. A. & Unger, R.K., 1985; Underwood, B. & Moore, B.S., 1982).

The position being taken:

My position is that, while women in Child & Youth Care may be wielding increasing influence on the quality of service delivery and training, and, in so doing, are having strong impact on the lives of the children and youth, their impact at the level of the image makers (those "seen to hold expertise") is limited. Thus, I remain distressed by the existing (and likely future?) notable gap at the "official imprint level" on the field, i.e., in the influence of women as indicated by their recognition as visionaries and holders of expertise. Is this then a matter

of style, an issue of marketing, or is there under-representation and under-achievement?

Believing as I do that “having vision” and “holding expertise” are not inherently gender-based characteristics, I ask: why this skewed profile of male and female influence? — especially since, in sheer numbers, the field of Child and Youth Care favors women, and the potential to contribute exists, in terms of having adequately skilled and knowledgeable women within the field.

I suggest that:

- the scarcity of women named in answer to my four original questions of “Who’s Who” in Child and Youth Care is, unfortunately, an accurate depiction of the configuration of power within the field,
- this configuration is explicable and distressing,
- the concepts of under-achievement and vulnerability are central to understanding this configuration.
- the literature on the impact of early socialization differences on the readiness of men versus women for success in business/professional realms in our culture, and on resiliency in at risk populations, forms a practical and strategic base from which to address the challenge of realizing the potential of women in the field of child & youth care.

Scrutinizing the position

- **Underachievement and Vulnerability:**

Are men better visionaries than women? Are there more male than female visionaries? Are we women “doing the best we can?”

The view that we as women are underachieving and are at risk for such under-achievement in our professional careers is not difficult to support. The arguments and data for the position that women are less well-prepared in general than men in their value systems, and their work and presentation styles has been advanced in both popular and formal literature (Eds. Belenky, M.F. et al, 1986; Frable, D. & Bem, S., 1985; Gilligan, C., 1982; Maccoby, E.E. & Jacklin, C.N., 1980). Most notably, there has been a strong case made for consistent differences in early socialization experiences between girls and boys. Common conclusions are that boys are directed more toward competition and girls toward cooperation. Boys are encouraged to be autonomous

and comfortable in the limelight, while girls are directed toward a conjoint style. Boys are encouraged toward mastery and task completion, while girls are reinforced for development of insight and human connections through attention to task process. This literature also notes early and continuing differences in subtle reinforcement for assumption of leadership roles. For example, formal studies are now being reported showing what many professional women know through experience, that the contributions of boys/men are more likely to be attended to and recalled by boys/men and women than those of girls/women; that there is an absence of a women's mentor network; that the media reinforces the unlikelihood of women's achievement by framing high-achieving women as extraordinary amongst their peers rather than as role models of what is possible; that society is slow to endorse the advancement of women through the assurance of needed supports (e.g., daycare); and finally, that groups focused on legislative change are generally reactionary and conservative.

Further, the literature on moral development focuses attention on the values that drive the behavior of men versus women. In brief, Gilligan (1982) argues that there are two central concepts in human moral development, justice and caring. She suggests that these are highlighted differently in the socialization experiences of boys and girls. Essentially, while boys in working and middle class North American culture develop their sense of "right and wrong" based on the concept of fairness, girls develop theirs on the concept of caring. Thus, as men mature, they review situations as to the fairness of outcome and as women mature, they review situations as to the opportunity to care for the needs of others as well as the needs of themselves.

While Gilligan's perspective and data base have been criticized, both the popular literature and my personal experience suggest that the concept holds some validity in the world of professional women. With regard to the current question of why women are under-represented at the level of high profile influence in child and youth care, I suggest that many of us are still grappling with attaining the balance between meeting others needs and our own. Specifically, we meet the immediate program, educational or direct care needs before (and often ultimately at the cost of) writing that article. Or we might feel guilty about needing recognition and so (unconsciously) fail to promote ourselves or are slow to take initiative. From this perspective, it is understandable that women take the second place and do not engage in more high profile (and perhaps unconsciously seen as self-advancing) activities, such as publishing and public speaking.

You'll note that I did not ask the question "Why and how do our male colleagues squelch us?" This is because, while it has been well

and often outlined in popular literature, it directs attention away from my general question which is, what can I do to reposition myself for success? By leaving blame aside and adopting the belief that women are as bright as men, I admit that underachievement is the issue and that I, as a woman, am central to the resolution of the issue. This is not comfortable, but I believe it is the best position to take.

Resiliency in at-risk populations

The literature on resilient individuals (e.g., Werner, 1989) directs our attention to strategic action or how women's vulnerability might be addressed or compensated for. Although this literature stems from studies on coping in children, adolescents and adults from "troubled families," I find that its focus on a survival rather than a victim perspective is helpful.

The central principles of the resiliency model are: (1) there are resilient individuals or survivors who, despite major risks and stressors, cope much better than would be expected; (2) a survivor's coping ability does not seem to depend as much on the intensity of risks and stressors, as on the presence of positive elements that counteract the influence of risks and stressors; (3) risks, stressors and compensatory factors may be characteristics of the individual and/or features of the environment; and (4) key compensatory factors that contribute to the resilience of some individuals include the opportunity for a meaningful relationship, strong solid problem solving and social skills, a positive life outlook, and a feeling of being in charge. In extracting the basic themes expressed in the principles of the resiliency model, following are the key questions: To what degree do women in Child & Youth Care possess the personal characteristics identified as compensatory factors in resilient individuals? To what degree is the professional environment in Child & Youth Care supportive/not supportive to high profile achievement in women?

While I do not believe that inherent gender differences in cognitive or personality features are strong determinants of the under-representation of women in high profile positions, I have noted the impact of early socialization experiences of boys and girls on the development of their value systems, goals and personal styles. In general, little boys are better prepared for career achievement in the professional world than are little girls. Thus, the basic premise that women in working and middle-class North American culture are an at-risk population is a reasonable position. Further, while one might argue that the situations described in the literature are outdated, survey data on young adults today indicate a swing back to these more traditional values in

family and work. Further still, the women in the field of Child and Youth Care, who are current candidates by age and experience for wielding high profile influence, were socialized in those very times described in the literature.

What about the existence of stressors, elements in the present situation that serve as negative factors that lessen one's ability to cope? Among those identified in the traditional resiliency literature, severe family dysfunction and multiple placements seem paramount. For the purpose of this discussion, these stressors can be understood to involve basic themes such as a lack of continuity in the primary learning situation, an absence of opportunities for appropriate learning from modelling by significant others, and the absence of a supportive and safe personal environment in which to grow. With these generic themes in mind, I offer the following responses. First, as noted earlier, there has been much written in both the popular and formal literature about the discontinuity of experience that the majority of professional women find between the world of business (social service or otherwise) and the world of their earlier socialization. Thus, in terms of having the requisite professional/business social skills and style, women are at risk. Second, problems caused by the nonexistence of women role models is obvious. For example, I have modeled myself in many respects after those men mentioned in my list of visionaries and experts. However, given the gender difference between my models and me, and the fact that this pattern seems to be a general rather than a unique case, I have been limited in my ability to identify success at this level with women. Thirdly, I suggest that the world of professional exchange is one often filled with tension/stressors for women. These stressors are often subtle yet frequent in nature. For example, consider the impact of being the one woman on a professional board (where everyone else still follows the football scores, worries about Valentine's day, etc), and of having your ideas recognized only after they have been repeated by a male, etc. These small, everyday occurrences constantly challenge one's self-esteem to say nothing of one's energy! While I would not argue that this is the equivalent situation to living with a psychotic or otherwise seriously ill family system, there is a parallel between trying to cope in situations where the rules are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable and support is spotty.

While the resiliency literature has identified a meaningful relationship as critical in those individuals who are resilient, it has been rather general about the particulars of such a relationship. I have often explored this concept in workshop sessions with professionals in child and youth care. A meaningful relationship seems to include a basic validation of the individual or one's self-worth. The relationship is

identified as meaningful to the extent that the individual is seen to be interested on a noncontingent and voluntary basis, worthy of my respect, and openly acknowledging of my potential. While I have received recognition and support, this has been from men and so there is always that element of validation left somewhat incomplete. Of course, there is a vicious cycle and it does little good to whine about the fact that until there are more women role models, we are disadvantaged and we are disadvantaged as long as there are too few women role models. The fact is we need to seek out and promote role models, to create opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop.

What about some of the other compensatory factors? Do women in Child & Youth Care have the opportunity to develop as people who feel in charge, as people who see a career future, as effective problem-solvers, and as individuals with the social skills repertoire necessary for success in the professional business world?

My assessment here is rather distressing. If the current image is male, then how can my future look female? There is also a further complication in considering women in the context of the particular profession of Child and Youth Care, a profession which is in the midst of dilemmas regarding self-validation. Many articles are still arguing for the development of Child and Youth Care as a distinct (worthwhile) profession. Surely this is not a safe, supportive or reinforcing environment to develop a sense of being in charge or a personal positive outlook! On the positive side, Child and Youth Care is one of the best places to develop problem-solving skills, since its primary therapeutic mode is everyday living tasks. It is a profession steeped in the practical realm, the realm of problem-solving.

The resiliency model summary seems to be a worthwhile avenue to pursue in systematically identifying the supports needed to resolve the current situation of underachievement of women in Child and Youth Care. It offers insight into the personal characteristics of women and characteristics of their professional environment that need to be challenged.

In closing

I am left with the following thoughts:

yes, women are underachieving

yes, there are explanations and concrete corrections for this situation

yes, the environment for change is less than desirable

AND

the decision to act or remain acted on rests with me.

I am reminded of a female role model from my early childhood:
 There seemed to be no use in waiting by the little
 door . . . (and as the) bottle was not marked "poison,"
 Alice ventured to taste it . . .

Louis Carroll
 Alice in Wonderland

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