

Don't *blame* the mother



The complicated relationship between mothers and daughters can only be fully understood in the wider context of women's experience of sexism and misogyny, writes *Rosjke Hasseldine*



The mother-daughter relationship is complicated – and often characterised by conflict. The conflict is sometimes attributed to women’s hormones, be it a daughter’s adolescent hormones or the mother’s menopausal hormones. Or, it is put down to generational divide and misunderstanding.

I have worked with women as a mother-daughter therapist for more than 25 years and, to my mind, these ‘explanations’ are sexist and outdated. There is now a growing understanding that mothers and daughters do not relate in a cultural vacuum, that the relationship dynamics between mothers and daughters tell the story of women’s lives. As I write in *The Mother-Daughter Puzzle*: ‘Women’s generational experience with sexism and gender inequality is the root cause of why mothers and daughters fight, misunderstand each other, and emotionally disconnect.’¹

‘Mothers and daughters do not relate in a cultural vacuum’

Understanding the dynamics between a mother and daughter involves understanding what has happened in the daughter’s life, the mother’s life and the grandmother’s life. It involves understanding the sociocultural environment that the daughter, mother and grandmother live or lived in, which includes their family, cultural beliefs and gender norms about femininity, motherhood and daughterhood, and how these are passed down the female line. And it involves understanding the emotional and relational impact of women’s generational experience with sexism, gender inequality, misogyny and violence.

My research and clinical work with thousands of mothers and daughters from different countries and cultures led me to devise the mother-daughter attachment model (MDAM), as I believe that we have to explore the

attachment with the mother in order to appreciate our female clients’ lives, and the root causes of their mental and emotional issues.

The MDAM explains why mothers and daughters fight, misunderstand each other and emotionally disconnect. It also explains the psychological harm that generations of sexism and patriarchy inflict on women, girls, mothers and daughters. The MDAM allows therapists to dig below the emotional, mental and relationship issues that their female clients present in the counselling room and uncover their sociocultural causes. Or, to describe this therapeutic process another way, the MDAM helps therapists to connect the dots between the behaviour, belief system and self-belief of their female clients and how they have been treated.

It is important to note that the MDAM is non-blaming and non-pathologising. My clients have taught me that blaming mothers and daughters for causing their relationship problems does little to explain and heal their conflict. Rather, it feeds patriarchal censure of mothers for failing to live up to unachievable standards of availability and nurturing. Paula Caplan writes in *The New Don’t Blame Mother* that a review of published articles in major, mental health journals showed that ‘...mental health professionals overwhelmingly indulged in mother-blaming. In the 125 articles, mothers were blamed for 72 different kinds of problems in their offspring’.²

My clients have also taught me that treating women’s maladaptive reactions to sexism, blame, shame, invisibility, violence and emotional silencing, as if they stem from their own pathology, rather than society’s pathological treatment of women, does little to relieve their emotional and mental struggles.

Mother-daughter attachment

To illustrate how all roads lead to the attachment dynamics between mothers and daughters, I will share my work with Sharon, whose name and identifying details have been changed. Sharon was a 25-year-old woman who was referred to me by her doctor because she was suffering from social anxiety. It had become increasingly difficult for Sharon to go out with her friends and interact with others. She was petrified of

upsetting people and being misunderstood. Sharon's doctor had prescribed medication and had suggested that she see me for assertiveness training.

Sharon lived in England and was the only daughter and eldest child in a family of three children. Her mother worked part time in a local supermarket and her father was a security guard. After graduating from university, Sharon found work in a childcare centre, which she enjoyed. She said: 'I love looking after the little ones, especially the toddlers. I love watching them learn about themselves and their environment.' Sharon had recently moved out of the family home into a shared flat with two girlfriends, which had caused some problems at home, because her mother relied on Sharon to help take care of her siblings.

I worked with Sharon on Zoom. During our first session, she told me that her doctor had advised her that she needed some assertiveness training to help her feel less anxious about speaking up with her flatmates and her parents, as well as her colleagues and the parents at the childcare centre. When I asked Sharon what she wanted, she was startled and confused by the question. Eventually she said: 'I don't know. I'm not sure. I think that I should have some assertiveness training because that's what my doctor wants me to do, and I have an appointment with her in a month's time and I want to show her that I've improved.'

'Blaming mothers and daughters does little to heal their conflict'

In my experience, assertiveness training has value, but it lacks the necessary depth to uncover why Sharon felt unable and unentitled to speak up for herself. Sharon needed to understand how the women in her generational family advocated for themselves or silenced themselves.

Sharon presented as a young woman who had learned to follow other people's commands. If she was to learn how to speak her emotional truth, she needed to understand how women's voices were treated in her family, culture and society. As I write in *The Mother-Daughter Puzzle*: 'When we delve into the often-confusing dynamics between mothers and daughters, something wonderful happens. Women learn about who they are. Women learn about why they believe what they believe and why they make the choices they make. Women learn about their female history, including how patriarchal thinking and sexist beliefs restricted their mother's and grandmother's lives, limited their powers and harmed

their emotional wellbeing. We learn how women and families internalise these sexist beliefs and pass them on from mother to daughter.'¹

When I asked Sharon how her mother requested what she needed, Sharon immediately said: 'Oh, Mum never says what she wants. She does what Dad says, and she hates it when people are upset with her.' I responded: 'So, you're a little like your mother?' Sharon looked surprised when I made this observation and, after some time, said: 'I guess so. I haven't thought about it like this. I just thought that Mum was a doormat and, to be honest, I get angry with her sometimes when she doesn't stand up to Dad and just does what she's told. But I guess I'm doing the same. I don't like to admit this, but maybe it's true.'

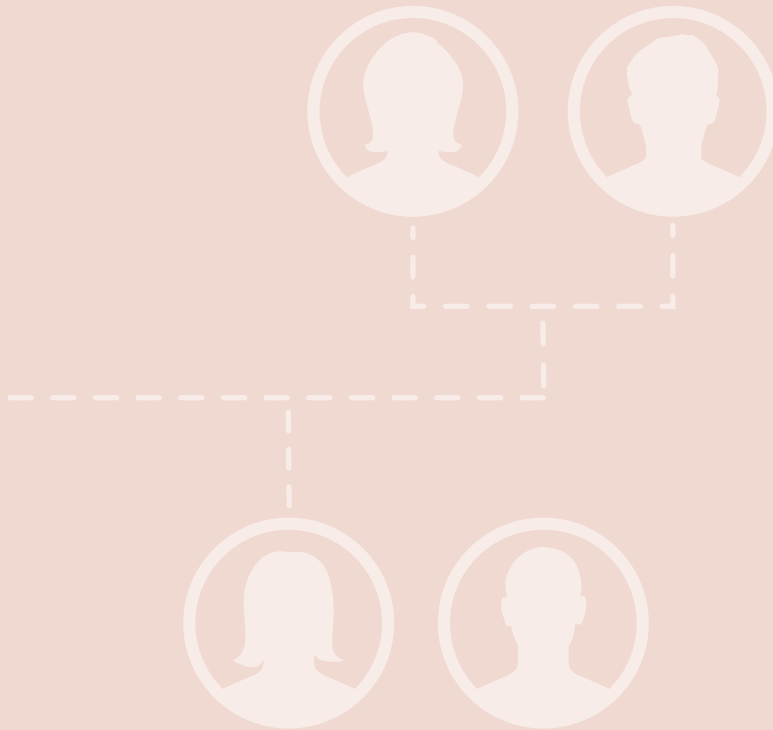
History mapping

As with all my clients, I mapped Sharon's mother-daughter history to discover why she had learned to believe that she should follow other people's commands. The mother-daughter history-mapping exercise is the MDAM's diagnostic tool that charts the lived experience of the three, main women in the family – the daughter, mother and grandmother – their relationship with each other and their generational experience of sexism and patriarchy.

As we mapped Sharon's, her mother's and her grandmother's age, education, jobs, the gender roles they were expected to play, how they voiced or silenced their thoughts, needs and desires, and how the men listened to and emotionally supported, stifled or neglected their wives and daughters, it became clear why Sharon was so afraid to speak up. Every female in her generational family was highlighted as silent. In Sharon's family, women were not asked what they thought, felt or needed; belief in the 'culture of female service' reigned supreme. It was as if the language that sought to understand and honour what women felt, thought and needed was missing in Sharon's generational family.

The 'culture of female service' is a term that I coined to describe the normalised, patriarchal belief system that expects women to be care-providers, not care-receivers, and mothers to selflessly look after their family. And Sharon's mother and grandmother had completely internalised this gender role stereotype. They had learned to prioritise their husband's and family's needs over their own. Sharon consequently had little understanding of what her mother and grandmother wanted for themselves or who they were as people and women, outside of their caregiving role.

When Sharon and I talked about how she didn't remember her mother ever doing anything for herself, she said: 'Selfless caregiving is like a badge of honour in my family. And now that I think of it, I had forgotten about how my



mother won't disagree with Dad. About a year ago, Dad was angry about some political thing that had happened. I can't remember exactly what had upset Dad, but what I do remember is how Mum refused to disagree with him, even though I know she did. I remember arguing with her afterwards about it and she didn't understand why I was frustrated with her for not speaking up. It happened a lot. At dinner, Dad would talk and talk, and Mum would never disagree with him. And if I did, and Dad got angry with me for disagreeing with him, Mum would get angry with me for upsetting Dad.'

Suddenly Sharon started to cry, and I could see that she had made a new connection in her mind. Through her tears, she said: 'No wonder I feel tongue-tied when I have to speak up. There is no model, no script, no entitlement in my family for women speaking up. Where could I have learned how to speak up for myself? Not from Mum and Grandma. And not from Dad, either. Mum and Grandma haven't learned to speak up for themselves. They act as if they don't have a single thought of their own. They act as if they only need what other people need.'

Sadly, Sharon's generational experience of emotional silence and of women prioritising men's thoughts and needs is still common, even after decades of feminist struggle. The language that speaks and enquires after what women feel, think and need is still missing in many families and in many societies, as the #MeToo movement has revealed. Sharon's mother-daughter

history map showed how families silence women's voices by shaming and criticising women who speak up for themselves. Sharon's family described women who weren't afraid to speak their truth as 'uppity', and Sharon's mother and grandmother had been shamed into not being 'uppity'. But the price of this shaming was high. It had cost Sharon her emotional and mental wellbeing. It had cost her mother's and grandmother's relationship with themselves, and it was costing Sharon's relationship with her mother.

As Sharon started to claim her voice, her relationship with her mother became increasingly difficult. Unfortunately, Sharon's mother did not adjust well to Sharon's new-found assertiveness. It threatened what her mother had come to believe about herself as a woman, how she had learned to keep herself safe by staying quiet, by not acting like an 'uppity' woman. Sharon's new-found voice was also an uncomfortable reminder of the voice from which her mother had disconnected. The daughter's honesty might have reminded the mother of moments in the past when she might have yearned to speak up or even scream, but didn't, which can also be a source of conflict between mothers and daughters.

At first, Sharon blamed her mother for teaching her to be afraid of her truth and for believing that she had to follow other people's commands. But, during our work together, Sharon started to see her mother with 'soft eyes', an MDAM term for empathy that reflects the understanding



that most mothers do the best they can with the resources they are given. Sharon saw how her mother had not been taught to advocate for herself and how her mother was often blamed in her family for things that were beyond her control. Sharon's mother had not been given the resources she needed to claim her voice and rights as her own person, and it was cruel to blame her for this lack.

'She needed to understand how women's voices were treated in her family'

Sharon also learned to see her father with 'soft eyes'. Though Sharon's mother and father are responsible for their own behaviour, Sharon came to see that her father, just like her mother, was a product of his gender, family background and generation. As Terrence Real describes in his book, *I Don't Want to Talk About It*,³ Sharon's father was the result of his patriarchal environment. He, too, had been shamed into silencing and disconnecting from his emotional self. And he had been taught to believe that his masculinity hinged on being in charge and the definer of the truth. His job as a security guard only helped to reinforce this toxic, patriarchal belief system.

When we place our female clients' issues within the larger sociocultural context from which they stem, the harm that sexism and patriarchy inflict on women is brought to the surface. Understanding the attachment dynamics between mothers and daughters is central to this powerful process. Revealing these underlying attachment dynamics is key to understanding the emotional reality of women's and girls' lives, healing mother-daughter conflict and connecting the dots between how women are treated and the emotional and mental health issues that they bring to therapy.

Information about mother-daughter attachment training for counsellors and psychotherapists can be found at www.motherdaughtercoach.com



Rosjke Hasseldine is an MBACP accredited counsellor, who has specialised in mothers and daughters for 25 years. Rosjke is the author of *The Mother-Daughter Puzzle* and *The Silent Female Scream*, creator of the mother-daughter attachment model and founder of the training organisation, *Mother-Daughter Coaching International*.

References

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