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THE NEW *Don't Blame* Mother

Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship

PAULA J. CAPLAN, Ph.D.

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The New
DON'T BLAME MOTHER

Mending the Mother–Daughter Relationship

Paula J. Caplan, Ph.D.

Routledge
New York London

Published in 2000 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Caplan, Paula J.
The new don't blame mother : mending the mother-daughter relationship / Paula J. Caplan.
p. cm.
Rev. ed. of: Don't blame mother. 1st ed. 1989.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-92630-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Mothers and daughters. 2. Women—Psychology. 3. Motherhood—Psychological aspects. 4. Intergenerational relations. I. Caplan, Paula J. Don't blame mother. II. Title.

HQ755.85.C355 2000
306.874'3—dc21

99-054697

ISBN 0-203-90195-9 Master e-book ISBN
ISBN 0-203-90199-1 (Glassbook Format)

For my parents,
Theda Ann Karchmer Caplan *and* Jerome Arnold Caplan,

and my children,
Jeremy Benjamin Caplan *and* Emily Julia Caplan,

with all my love

Except for those who have given permission to appear in this book, all names and identifying details of individuals mentioned in this book have been changed. In some instances, composite accounts have been created based on the author's professional expertise.

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Preface to *The New Don't Blame Mother*

When you write a book to point out the mistreatment of an entire, enormous group of people, you hope that the book will quickly become irrelevant, that people will recognize the injustice of that mistreatment and put a stop to it. That is what I hoped for when I wrote *Don't Blame Mother*. Not for a moment did I believe my book alone would do the trick, but I believed that the burgeoning awareness of the unfair treatment of many groups of women would lead to a critical mass of work and revelation. I was optimistic enough to believe that, as Anne Frank wrote, most people are really good at heart, and that wholesale blaming and condemnation of mothers continued only because most people were not aware that they participated in it or that it was so unfair and did so much harm.

All these years later, as the new millennium dawns, far more books and articles, opinion pieces and systematic research reports, have been published on the subjects of mothers, and mothers and daughters—but, sadly, mother-blame remains pervasive and powerful.

Feminists have struggled to stem the tide of mother-blame even though they have simultaneously had to fend off the criticism that by doing so they were showing themselves to be radical feminists. How poignant this is, because feminism is aimed to ensure freedom and respect for people regardless of gender or parental status, and indeed it would be a radical change ("radical" coming from the Latin word meaning "root") if mothers were not automatically scapegoated.

When I began work on *The New Don't Blame Mother*, I found from a computer search of "mothers and daughters" that 737 books and articles on the subject had been published since the original edition of my book went to press nearly twelve years ago. Another computer search revealed that only about half that number had

been published in the previous twelve years. "Mothers" as a topic had moved closer to the forefront of people's awareness, it seemed. And, as I shall describe later, a great deal of superb work has indeed been done. However, little of that work has been about the mother-daughter *relationship* and how to mend it when there is a rift (rather than, for instance, about such correlational questions as "Are alcoholic mothers likely to have alcoholic daughters?") and another computer search showed that even less has been specifically about mother-blaming, its scope, the harm it does, and ways to stop it. But happily, there is a growing richness of research on various groups of mothers, especially those marginalized by the dominant culture and subjected to even more condemnation and blame than middle-class, Anglo, able-bodied, heterosexual, married mothers.

In the following chapters I have incorporated a great deal of that new work, as well as thoughts and experiences I have had and changes that have taken place in the world since I completed the first edition. I have retained all stories from the first edition that illustrate something that still happens today, as well as references to earlier research when no recent research has superseded it.

In this preface, first I relate some of my experiences directly related to *Don't Blame Mother*—including letters from readers following its publication. Next, I address some of the recent, profound social changes that have affected the institution of mother-blame. Finally, I want to tell you enough about some of the new writing to give you a flavor of the deepening and broadening of the work on mothers and the mother-daughter relationship, so that you can see where to look for further reading. (See Bibliography)

New Developments since the First Edition

Early Conference Revelations

During the series of speaking engagements beginning in 1989 when I talked about *Don't Blame Mother*, I began to understand in a new way why mother-blaming is so powerful and so resistant to change, and I address that in chapter 3 of this edition. I believe this understanding is important; the more insight we have into the nature and use of mother-blame, the better will be our chance to reduce it.

In 1988, after my book went to press, Phyllis Chesler, Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, Janet Surrey, and I presented a panel on mother-blame at "Woman-Defined Motherhood: A Conference for Therapists," held at Goddard College. As far as we knew, this was the first major conference on mothers, and our panel the first public presentation on mother-blame, and we were amazed and deeply touched by the feelings it called forth. When I first wrote my book, I hoped it might get a few people thinking, but I had no idea how much women needed to discuss these issues.

One of the conference organizers, Jane Price Knowles, wrote that the panel on mother-blame "came as a stunning revelation . . . that shocked us into the recognition that it is almost impossible to think without mother-blaming. . . . I believe even the panelists themselves were surprised at how disturbing, painful, and ultimately powerful this panel proved to be. One woman said later, 'I felt overwhelmed by the sense of having been present at one of life's truly historic moments.'" Knowles also quoted two other women's responses to the panel and the conference. Melissa Meth described "learning how to forgive myself for not wanting to be a mother under the current definition of motherhood. I now understand it is okay to love myself and my mother instead of hating us both for being ourselves"; and Etta Bender Breit said, "Tears have washed my eyes throughout the weekend, as thoughts of myself as mother and of my mother replace what the experts have taught, wrongly."

What had the panelists said to inspire such feelings? Phyllis Chesler spoke about how young women wipe out of consciousness the knowledge of what their mothers—both biological mothers and "mothers" of feminism and scholarship—have done to pave their way, and about how devastating this is for literal or figurative mothers. Janet Surrey said therapists are trained to produce allegedly objective but in fact deeply blaming descriptions of mothers; she bravely listed adjectives she had used to describe patients' mothers in her own case reports: "engulfing," "controlling," "intrusive," "enmeshed," "seductive," "overprotective," "narcissistic," "unavailable," "ineffective," and "depriving." Applying her "self-in-relation" theory to mother-daughter relationships, she urged therapists to spend part of their time focusing on the joy and mutual growth that often arise from mother-daughter relationships.

Rachel Josefowitz Siegel said that old women are mistreated because every negative assumption about mothers is projected onto them while at the same time people expect them to be constantly giving. Siegel said, "When an old woman walks into the room, she reminds us of who we might become. She could be our mother, she could be our grandmother—she is not me, not us. *Old woman* is *mother* and *mother* is *old; old woman* is other. *Old woman* is a role, an image, a stereotype—she is not a person. . . . *Old woman* is not me; *old woman* is not what I want to be." Siegel also raised the question of why it is insulting to say, "You sound like a mother" but not to say, "You sound like a daughter."

I had proposed the panel, but I was completely unprepared for the richness of what these women said, the audience members' responses, and the depth and complexity of my own feelings. It seemed that mother-blame was much more powerful and multifaceted than I had even dreamed when I first wrote my book.

Soon after that conference, I spoke in northern Ontario about mothers and daughters and learned from some Native Canadian women there how, as children sent away from home to residential schools, they believed that their mothers *wanted* to send them away. Only after many years did they learn that their mothers had been threatened with imprisonment if they refused to send their children off, and the mothers had not spoken about this, for fear of worrying their children—heartbreaking evidence of the harm that politics and racism at the federal level have done to mothers and daughters. I wonder how many more such stories remain to be told.

Mothers and Daughters and Phil Donahue

The first interview for my book tour was television's *Donahue* show. A producer asked me to suggest other people who might appear on the panel, and one of the people I suggested was my mother. "She's bright, honest, and very funny," I said, "and she's a psychologist, too." The producer seemed uninterested. Perhaps everyone wants their mother to be on the show. I urged the producer to ensure that the show would not deteriorate into yet another mother-bashing session. I suggested that the most important and interesting thing we might do would be to talk to mothers and daughters who had overcome some of the problems between

them. I also told her my parents were going to be in New York the day of the show for my father's college reunion at Columbia University, and I asked if they could sit in the audience. I was told that they would have to sit backstage in the Green Room.

Just before I was to leave for New York, the producer called and said, "Tell me again about your mother." I did, and she asked for Mom's telephone number. I replied that she had left home and was in another city visiting my brother on the way to New York, so I gave her his number. Later the producer called and said, "You were right. She's amazing! And she's agreed to be on the show." Mother said the producer had interviewed her and then asked if she would appear on the show. Mom, tongue in cheek, said, "When I packed my suitcase I didn't know I was going to be on *Donahue,* so I didn't bring anything appropriate to wear. If you'll take me to Bergdorf's and buy me a dress, I'll be on." The producer, wrongly assuming Mom was serious, said, "Oh, I'm afraid we're not allowed to do that. Is there anything else I can do for you?" Mom replied that she would appear if my father could sit in the audience, and the producer readily agreed.

The day of the show, the producer pulled me out of the makeup room in a panic. "It's your mother!" she said. I asked what was wrong, and she said, "I just tried to talk to her, and she didn't respond at all." I went to the Green Room and told Mom what the producer had said. "Oh!" she replied, "I have my hearing aids turned off. I didn't want to run the batteries down before the show started."

Just before the show began, both a producer and Donahue himself came into the Green Room and urged us to remember that time would fly once the cameras were on and that we might need to speak right up, get Donahue's attention, and grab the chance to say what we considered most important.

When we walked into the studio, a mother with her two teenage daughters was on the panel, as were a mother and her thirty-something daughter, who had recently returned to live with her mother while starting her own business. I had appeared on *Donahue* before and greatly admired Phil's keen intelligence, his wit, and his perceptiveness about social and political issues. That day, though, for what seemed like hours, he let the two teenagers and their mother spat about trivia, without bringing his or his

audience's usual insightful commentary or analysis to bear. When he got to the adult daughter and her mother, they said that the two of them were living on their own; the daughter cooked, and the mother did the laundry. Members of the audience groaned, rolled their eyes, and said the mother still treated her daughter like a child by doing her laundry and a "role reversal" had taken place because the daughter was cooking for the mother. I pointed out that if we knew that two people—just people in the abstract—were living together, and one did the cooking and one the laundry, we would say, "Isn't that nice? They share the work." But when one of those people is a mother, we jump to pathologizing everything that happens.

Donahue then turned to my mother, who, in her first-ever media appearance, said that she wished other mothers would "get 'hep' the way I did years ago when I realized I'm not going to take the blame. I'm going to take the credit." Donahue asked about our relationship. She brightly replied that it was good, but sometimes I annoyed her, as when we argued about how loud she should turn up her hearing aids. The audience fell in love with her because of her courage in talking so easily about her hearing problem.

The show continued, filled with mother-blame, and about three-quarters of the way through, Mom called out, "Phil!" in the tone of voice she used with me when I was misbehaving. Donahue was at the back of the audience and did not hear. She called out two more times, getting louder, and he turned and said, "Yes, Mrs. Caplan." Mom looked straight into the camera and paused. I knew the producer was worrying about wasted air-time and assuming Mom had gotten confused or scared into silence. But I suspected her pause was for dramatic effect. She said forcefully, "This is an awareness hour. What should we be aware of? Everybody thought that with the feminist movement, mothers don't get blamed any more. That's not true. The research that Paula has done shows mothers are still getting blamed too much, and we've got to STOP IT!" In a few words, she had focused and encapsulated the point of the whole show. The audience cheered.

In the following months, as I waited in Green Rooms all over the country, the following scene often occurred. Another guest on the show would ask why I was going to appear. I would mention *Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship*, and

they would pause, then say, "Oh! I saw you on *Donahue.* You were good. Your *mother* was *terrific!"* Mom finds that difficult to believe, but it is true.

My Daughter and I Speak Together

In 1992 I invited my daughter Emily, then sixteen, to present a workshop with me on mothers and daughters. I had planned to talk about the material in my book at the first international conference on Judaism, feminism, and psychology in Seattle and thought it would be good to have a young daughter's perspective. Although Emily had always been supportive of my writing, she had not read *Don't Blame Mother*. We talked about her reading the book and giving her opinion about it. She was worried, because if she didn't like something in it, she wouldn't want to say that publicly. I told her that open discussion and debate were healthy and mattered a great deal to me. We agreed that she would not tell me ahead of time what she planned to say. In Seattle, I summarized the ideas in the book, and then Emily spoke. With delightful candor she said she thought that the book was not particularly useful to girls her age, who were understandably working hard to cope with all the teenage things they were going through. She told wonderful stories to illustrate her points, and the audience gave her a standing ovation. I thought every word she said was true, although I continue to believe in the importance of making children and teenagers aware of the existence and power of mother-blame, just as we point out the sexism in traditional fairy tales. They may not be ready to do much about it until they are older, but the knowledge will stand them in good stead as they grow.

Mother-Blame Takes the Stage

In the mid-1990s I returned to my early interest in theater as both an actor and a playwright. My first play, *Call Me Crazy,* dealt with the questions Is anybody considered normal? Who gets to decide? And what happens to people who are labeled abnormal? My friend Pat Hegnauer suggested that Sigmund Freud's mother might appear in the play. I loved that idea; in all the decades that Freud has received attention for his theories, in many of which he blames, demeans, and dismisses mothers, we've never heard what his mother thought. So Amalia Freud appears in *Call Me Crazy,*

finally speaking her mind about how her son's views of women in general and mothers in particular made her—the mother of five daughters—feel. The audience hears her anguish as she struggles to decide whether she raised Sigmund right or overindulged him—after all, he was brilliant, she says, but maybe he had too much.

Letters from Readers

One of the most interesting consequences of writing a book is hearing people's reactions to your work. Both in letters from readers and in their remarks at book signings and lectures about mothers and daughters, the two most prominent themes were daughters' and mothers' longing to mend their relationships and joy when they did so, and the pain caused by mother-blame, especially from therapists.

In a particularly beautifully written example of the letters in the first category, a fifty-year-old woman wrote, "My relationship with my Mother has been revolutionized." They followed some of my suggestions about going over the mother's life history. Previously, wrote the daughter, "I had simply labeled her a bitter, angry immature woman"; but now, "for the first time, I was able to regard my mother as a person, an individual, a woman with feelings, problems, hopes, and expectations. I actually found qualities to admire, something which I never thought possible." Both she and her mother felt "elated" after doing that work. She said that, as her mother has grown older and developed health problems, her "guilt has grown because she and I have always had such a difficult time getting along. I knew that when she died I would feel unbearably sad that we had not been closer. Because of the strides we have made in this last year I will forever be grateful that she and I have grown closer and gained a better understanding of one another. Neither of us are easy people, and we both recognize this, but now, at least, we have a better basis from which to work and, even more important, a markedly improved attitude."

Another woman wrote that she had "begun to think that no one in a professional capacity would say a good word for mothers. [My husband] always blames me for [problems with the children] and gives me no emotional support whatsoever. I guess this contributes to my sorrow when I feel that my daughter is treating me the same way her father does."

Readers' comments about therapists' mother-blame were filled with a sense of pain and helplessness. One woman wrote, "Therapists do mother-bash. . . . I will send your book to my daughter and tell her to pass it on to her therapist. She tells me that he tells her to 'resign' from our relationship." Another writer, the mother of a psychologist-in-training, said, "This past decade [with my daughter, who is now forty] has been a continuous path of pain watching her absorb every myth you describe in your book. She is studying for her Master's degree in Psychology and continues to mother-blame with regularity, not only with her therapist once a week but also with her co-dependency group." Susan Davis, the book review editor of *New Directions for Women* magazine, who published a review of *Don't Blame Mother,* sent me the review with a note: "Because the reviewer I picked was a clinician, she didn't see the valuable message your book contains."

Not all clinicians blame mothers for everything. Therapists have become increasingly aware of the pressure put on us from the beginning of our training (in most, but not all, programs) to do knee-jerk mother-blaming. But mother-blame is still rampant, as will become clear in the following chapters.

Recent Changes: New and Intensified Dilemmas

Blame the Mothers or Blame the Brain?

The massive publicity surrounding the recent spate of horrendous mass murders committed by young people has had disturbing consequences. Although many experts report that national violence has in fact been on the decline, school shootings such as the one at Columbine High School have provoked desperate questions: What causes such horrors? How can they be stopped? *Who* can stop them? Unfortunately, the answers from both experts and laypeople fall into two categories. One is that the parents must be to blame. This means that mothers are more likely to be implicated; they are disproportionately the ones who are still expected to love children enough that they will not feel insecure and desperately angry, and to teach them safe ways to deal with their anger. This is the latest in the long history of blaming mothers for every social evil.

The other answer is that homicidal kids must be mentally

ill. Never mind that the term *mental illness* is used by therapists to explain behavior ranging from stuttering to reading disability, to feeling irritable and craving chocolate just before your period starts, to "still" feeling sad two weeks after a loved one has died. Even if no one has ever come up with a good definition of mental illness, to some people it seems easy to conclude that Columbine and the like were caused by "bad brains" or brain diseases. Although it would be comforting, and would take some pressure off mothers, if we could assume that frightening behavior is caused by brain disease, the truth is that people diagnosed as seriously mentally ill are *not* more likely to commit violent acts than other people.

If we limit our choices to blaming parents (mothers) or blaming the brain, we fail to recognize the significant contributions to violence made, for instance, by the availability of guns and the pandemic sense of alienation and loneliness. If we want to reduce the frequency and virulence of mother-blame, we need to be vigilant about its invocation as an explanation for every social evil.

More Social Changes

My children, who were in their teens when I wrote the first edition, are now in their mid-twenties. During the years in between, the frequency with which people their age do unconventional things to their hair and pierce and tattoo their bodies has dramatically increased. As a friend my age said about his daughter's pierced tongue, "I guess it's our turn not to understand." There have also been enormous changes in both the openness with which sexuality is discussed and the freedom with which is it practiced. Paradoxically, this has happened even as the fear of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) has increased. When I was a teenager, beginning in the early 1960s, no girl I knew wanted her mother even to know that she did anything more than "let" a boy kiss her. Now mothers regularly struggle with such questions from their fourteen-year-olds as "Why *can't* my boyfriend spend the night here? You bought me condoms, so you know what we're doing. Wouldn't you rather have us do it here than in the park at night or the backseat of a car?" On a more encouraging note, where my generation used to worry what a boy would think of us if we did—or did not—let him kiss us or touch

our breasts, with the focus on the boy, I more frequently (though not frequently enough) hear such comments from teenage girls as, "I didn't let him do that because I didn't feel ready," with the focus on the girl's own feelings. Since, as we shall see in later chapters, most of the work of dealing with these issues continues to fall to mothers, they can provoke ever more mother-daughter conflict and, therefore, more mother-blame.

Mothers have in recent years joined the paid workforce more frequently and more prominently, and the dilemmas posed by this double workload have made it necessary for me to add to my list of major myths that lead to mother-blame and cause or intensify mother-daughter problems. In chapter 5 you will find Myth Ten: Both stay-at-home mothers and mothers with paid jobs are "bad" mothers.

Other recent developments that further intensify and complicate expectations and assumptions about motherhood include:

- The burgeoning industry in reproductive technologies, which on the positive side has allowed some women to bear children when they otherwise could not have done so, but on the negative side has put enormous pressures on women to endure endless physical invasions, pains, and financial expense in order to bear a child that is "biologically theirs." Also on the negative side is that the women who are most likely to be able to use these technologies are "white," heterosexually married, and financially privileged.
- The increase in cross-national and cross-"racial" adoptions.
- The increase in the proportion of single mothers, as well as the move toward calling never-married ones "single mothers" rather than "unwed mothers," which was used when more of them were likely to be African-American or otherwise "nonwhite." This increase brings with it such major dilemmas as how to handle one's sex life and the children's questions about it while being a mother.

The Latest Theory and Research

As I mentioned, my computer search turned up 737 books and articles about mothers and daughters that have been published

since the first edition of *Don't Blame Mother* went to press. Clearly, there is an explosion of interest in the subject. I'll start with the good news. Many of the pioneers of work on the experiences of mothers and mother-daughter relationships—Carol Gilligan, Judith Jordan, Alexandra Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey—have continued to produce glorious work in these fields. A great deal of that work is included in the bibliography of this book.

Canada is a hotbed of new work. Sharon Abbey, Andrea O'Reilly, and their colleagues organized the first international conference on mothers and daughters in 1997, and this was followed by conferences on mothers and sons, mothers and education, mothers in the African diaspora, and lesbian mothers. A number of excellent books based on presentations from these conferences have been published or are now being prepared. In 1998 Abbey and O'Reilly founded the Toronto-based Association for Research on Mothering (ARM), and in 1999 they began to publish the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering.* (For information write to 726 Atkinson, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3, or send e-mail to arm@yorku.ca.)

Also in Canada, the journal *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la femme* published a wonderful special issue in 1998 called "Looking Back, Looking Forward: Mothers, Daughters, and Feminism."

Other examples of the enormous variety of new work are:

- Mariana Cook and Jamaica Kincaid's *Generations of Women in Their Own Words,* a splendid book of photographs of daughters, mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, as well as their remarks about their relationships with each other.
- Phyllis Chesler's honest, compassionate *Letters to a Young Feminist*, in which she tells the next generation lessons she has learned and shows where we and they still need to go.
- Maureen Reddy's perceptive *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture.*
- *Sunbelt Working Mothers: Reconciling Family and Factory,* by Louise Lamphere and her colleagues.
- Shari Thurer's historical survey of motherhood myths, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother.*

- Alix Kates Shulman's *A Good Enough Daughter,* a richly detailed description of, among other things, Shulman's efforts to find the realities of her mother's life among the myths.

Marginalized Mothers

A great deal of writing has appeared in the past decade that deals with groups of mothers previously little studied because they are marginalized, considered not "good enough" mothers because they do not fit the dominant ideology, according to which the ideal mother is heterosexual, at least middle-class, "white," able-bodied, neither too old nor too young, born in the country where she resides, and not imprisoned, as well as having children to whom she gave birth and being married to the children's "white" father. An invaluable resource is the new book *Mothering against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers,* edited by Cynthia Garcia Coll, Janet Surrey, and Kathy Weingarten, which includes chapters on a huge variety of marginalized mothers.

In the following chapters, as in the first edition, although much of the research I mention and many of the stories I tell relate to marginalized mothers and daughters, the primary focus is on the similar ways that mothers are treated and mistreated. In this preface, I shall give some summaries of part of the recent work on these marginalized women. Computer searches from 1988 to 1999 turned up many books and articles (see Bibliography) on adoptive mothers, African-American or "Black" mothers, Asian mothers, biracial children's mothers, Hispanic mothers, immigrant mothers, Jewish mothers, lesbian mothers, mothers of children with disabilities, mothers with disabilities, mothers in prison, Native American mothers, old mothers, poor mothers, single mothers, and welfare mothers. To find anything at all on some of these groups was reassuring, and in some categories I found a substantial body of work, such as the 54 listings for "Black" mothers and the 317 for single mothers.

Several themes ran through the work on most or all of these groups of mothers. One was how the members of each carry the added burdens of fending off wrong, hurtful, and pathologizing assumptions that are often made about them. For instance, any mother not classified as "white" struggles with racist assumptions

about what "Black" or Hispanic or Asian mothers are really like, especially ways they are assumed to be inadequate—in the case of African-American mothers, "too powerful," and in the case of Asian mothers, "too passive." Women with disabilities or illnesses are often told they shouldn't even try to become mothers—though a wonderful antidote to this is the how-to book by Judi Rogers and Molleen Matsumura for mothers-to-be with disabilities. Lesbian mothers and mothers who are single for any reason are often at best considered unable to cope without a father figure in the house and at worst to be raising their children in unhealthy, even immoral environments. Adopted children are often assumed to be destined for trouble, since their birth mothers are considered deficient or damaged and their adoptive mothers deeply troubled by their inability to conceive their "own" children. Mothers of children with disabilities or illnesses—who are found in increasing numbers as physicians find ways to keep extremely premature, very disabled, and seriously ill children alive longer and longer—struggle in the education and medical systems against a vast array of prejudices about the disabled and the ill. Poor, homeless, and teenage mothers are assumed to be lazy and inadequate mothers.

For these and many other reasons, mothers from these groups are in greater danger of losing custody of their children. They are widely believed to be unable to raise happy, well-adjusted children. Thus, an important recent development has been research showing that, for instance, the children of lesbians and of homeless women are no more likely than other children to have impaired or disturbed attachments to their mothers or to have emotional and behavioral problems.

Authors of the new work document in moving detail the practical difficulties with which these mothers struggle. Mothers with disabilities, for instance, are often unable to take their children to physically inaccessible educational or cultural events—and even publicly funded special transportation must usually be ordered well in advance, making it difficult, for example, to take suddenly ill children to the doctor.

The most encouraging trend in the work on marginalized mothers is the increasing frequency with which the women tell their

own stories either directly or through interviews with the authors. A few examples are Patricia Bell-Scott's *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters*; Elaine Bell Kaplan's *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood*; bell hooks's *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, a jewel-bright, nuanced description of the wide variety of feelings she had about her mother as she grew up in the South; Kelly Williams's *Single Mamahood: Advice and Wisdom for the African-American Single Mother*; the forthcoming book of first-person accounts of Jewish mothers, edited by Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, Ellen Cole, and Susan Steinberg-Oren; Hamilton McCubbin and Elizabeth Thompson's *Resiliency in Native American and Immigrant Families*; Anne Adelman's work on women survivors of the Nazi Holocaust and their relationships with their daughters; and Joonok Huh's description of her relationships with her Korean mother and her daughter, now that she lives in North America.

Another encouraging trend is research focused on revealing strengths of mothers and children in these groups. This includes the findings that African-American mothers with HIV focus on their children's needs and act as educators of the wider community about HIV's dangers; that mothers with disabilities are happy to be mothers; that mothers diagnosed as mentally retarded who neglect their children have been able to learn and maintain child-care skills that eliminate the neglect; that many mothers of children with disabilities love keeping their children out of institutions and at home, where they "derive companionship, household assistance, and a sense of stability and continuity from their continued caregiving"; and that single-mother family members have more social interaction at dinner than members of married families. A particularly vibrant and growing body of literature is addressed to the strengths of African-American mothers. Beverly Greene describes how those who bore and reared children were highly valued in precolonial Africa and says that this respect for mothers has persisted in the United States, in spite of the horrendous ways African-Americans have been treated. She also discusses the ways that African-Amerian mothers have learned to teach their daughters the realities of racism and sexism and how to cope with them without being overwhelmed, while protecting them as

much as possible and trying to instill sufficient self-confidence to fortify them in making their way in this world. Robert Strom and his colleagues found in their research that poor, African-American mothers derive great enjoyment from being mothers, and Patricia Hill Collins and Melvin Wilson describe the support that mothers receive from the African-American tradition of "othermothers," of many women within the family and the wider community sharing the tasks of child-raising.

New Work That's Cause for Alarm

In recent writing some deeply disturbing trends have appeared. In two enormous bodies of research, one on father-daughter incest and one on females with eating disorders, most work was based on the notion that mothers were primarily to blame. I address the work on incest at some length in chapter 3. With regard to eating disorders, in the vast majority of clinical studies and case reports mothers are the only possible causes of the disorders that were studied. This was regardless of patients' "race," even though for African Americans there were clear suggestions that both the daughters' and the mothers' attitudes about eating and weight were healthier than those for "whites." In some studies, the title of the article includes the word *parents,* although the study is only about mothers. It is obvious that if one only explores one of a huge number of possible causes, one will never understand the problem, and it makes me wonder what the reviewers and editors of these so-called scholarly journals are thinking when they publish articles with such sloppy logic.

How encouraging it is to discover work by authors who call these practices into question. Judith Rabinor criticizes therapists for "explaining" to eating-disordered girls and women how their mothers caused their disorders and then choosing interventions aimed at "fixing" the mothers. This mother-blaming can seriously damage the mother-daughter relationship, reducing the mother's ability to support her daughter. Rabinor finds this particularly unconscionable because, when therapists actually listen to mothers, they frequently hear that the mothers' husbands and fathers shamed them about their weight, often in front of their daughters. Isn't it understandable that a mother who has been mocked

because of her weight will try desperately to protect her daughter from the same fate? Clearly, the problem does not originate in the mother. Further, since the media's obsession with undernourished females is well documented, it is surely irresponsible to disregard the enormous pressures placed on both mother *and* daughter to be exceedingly thin. Rabinor suggests that women's appearance "is often the most obvious or the only socially condoned form of power openly afforded her," and so it might be better to help the eating-disordered woman and her mother explore healthy ways to experience power.

I thought of Rabinor's work while watching a recent broadcast about singer Carnie Wilson's major stomach surgery, which was intended to allow her to lose a great deal of weight. The mother of this splendidly talented, accomplished woman said she hoped the surgery would allow her daughter to become "skinny" and "wonderful." It's understandable to feel furious at this mother for her value system; if only she had instead said that her daughter already *is* wonderful, and that she wished her daughter hadn't had to grow up in a society that condemns people it considers overweight. But it is also tragic for both mother and daughter that the mother has been so damaged by those values.

Similar patterns of only asking, How is mother at fault? rather than What various factors might be at fault? appear in articles about kids on drugs, about "borderline personality disorder" (the label often given to the emotional consequences of incest, which is usually perpetrated by a man), about nonsexual abuse and neglect of children, and about other problems. Elizabeth Hutchison points out a particularly troubling aspect of the blaming pattern. Welfare and other government agencies are more likely to investigate and blame mothers for abuse and neglect than to find out what kinds of services (money, food stamps, Medicaid, adequate housing, day care) might help them provide better for their children and treat them with greater patience.

Sometimes, my heart leaps, when somebody with some power finally seems to have gotten the point. That happened when I saw the April 5, 1998 special issue of the *New York Times Magazine's* title, "Mothers Can't Win." But as I read every word of that issue, I realized that, despite its promising title, it included only

minuscule consideration of *why* mothers can't win and of what concrete steps could be taken to change this.

As you read *The New Don't Blame Mother* I hope that you will be inspired to take those concrete steps—not just for the sake of yourself or your relationship with your mother but for mothers everywhere.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Phyllis Chesler, Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, and Janet Surrey for their early and ongoing, warm and enthusiastic support of the work on this book; my Routledge editor, Ilene Kalish, for believing in the importance of this subject and for her intelligent, perceptive suggestions and strong support; Janet Byer Barker for her wonderful hospitality and great company; the members of the Pembroke Center for Research and Teaching on Women for providing me a welcoming academic home; the Brown University Rockefeller and Science Library staff—including but not limited to Beth Coogan, Yvonne Federowica, Hans-Dieter Gomes, Jeanette Gomes, Frank Kellerman, Debra Nelson, Andrew Pereira, and Cynthia Soares—for their immense and irreplaceable practical help on a mammoth scale; my father, Jerome Arnold Caplan, Jacqueline Cook, Fran Goldscheider, Rachel Rosenfeld, and Walter Marshall and Bill Lohan of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics for help with specific information; and, as always, my dear parents, Theda Ann (Tac) Karchmer Caplan and Jerome Arnold Caplan, and my dear children, Jeremy Benjamin Caplan and Emily Julia Caplan.

Acknowledgments for the First Edition

A book like this cannot be written in isolation. I was blessed to be able to write it from within a rich web of relationships.

I want to thank my agent, Connie Clausen, and her assistant, Guy Kettelhack, for setting me on the road to writing this book, and my editor, Janet Goldstein, for her brilliant, thoughtful, and painstaking work in helping me learn how to write this kind of book. Thanks also to Guy for keeping my spirits up when the going got rough.

My gratitude goes to many other people who have helped in various ways—to the memories of my maternal grandmother, Esther Shana Milner Karchmer, and my paternal grandmother,

Gertrude Dorothy Gorbach Caplan, for their love, their stories, and their inspiration; to my children—Jeremy and Emily, and my parents—Tac and Jerry, for their love, support, patience, and involvement in many ways in the writing and editing process; to Catherine Gildiner, Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, and Betty Jane Turner for carefully reading and sensitively commenting on the entire final draft; to Susan Gilbert Carrell, Jennifer Chambers, Margaret Grant, Donna Sharon, and Wendy Whitfield for reading and commenting on sections of the book; to Phyllis Chesler, Maureen Gans, Amy Hanen, Maria Matias, Kathryn Morgan, Frances Newman, Heather-jane Robertson, and Janet Surrey for providing warmth, suggestions, and/or helpful information; to my secretary, Julie Fung, for her kindness and her help with the typing and administrative work; to Chris Devon, Frieda Forman, Peggy Bristow, and the library staff at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, for help with the references; to Carola Barczak and Daria Love for teaching me how to keep up my stamina; to Janet Stickney for allowing me to use the title of her wonderful Don't Blame Mother conference as the title of this book; and to the students in my courses on mothers and my other women's studies courses, as well as the many other friends, patients, and former strangers who allowed me to interview them or who wrote to tell me their stories for this work. I also want to thank my family and friends for their patience in the face of my limited availability while I was involved in this project.

Since I failed to know my mother, I was denied the gift of knowing the other women who would cross my path.

—Pat Conroy, *The Prince of Tides*

1

Getting Started

> How are we to be the mothers we want our daughters to have, if we are still sorting out who our own mothers are and what they mean to us?
>
> —*Letty Cottin Pogrebin*

> [In the story of mothers and daughters] the plot is not entirely of our own making. We may be free to unravel the tale, but we have not been free to create the social relations upon which it is based.
>
> —*Marcia Westkott*

You're reading a book called *The New Don't Blame Mother,* so chances are, no matter how sad, upset, or angry you are at your mother, you'd rather improve your relationship with her than simply stay upset. This book is an offering to you, to let you know what has helped other mothers and daughters resolve their difficulties.

If you're busy blaming your mother or wishing you could "divorce" her, you are caught in a psychological prison. You can't get free, and you can't really grow up. There are practical problems. For example, you dread family parties: Your mother might not like what you're wearing. Or she might love what you're wearing and say to everyone, "Doesn't my daughter look gorgeous?!"—and you'd be mortified.

That kind of practical problem is a symptom of the fact that mother-blame limits your freedom: you can't be an adult who freely considers all of life's possibilities. You restrict yourself to certain activities, interests, and friends to prove how different from Mother you are. You can't look honestly at who you are, because you might discover ways that you are like her! Frantic to avoid what you consider her failures, you overreact, throwing