CHAPTER 1

Becoming Mothers and Fathers

ONE OF MY PEAK MOMENTS AS A NEW MOTHER happened during a car ride with my baby. Alex was in front on the passenger side, strapped into his rear-facing infant seat (the advised procedure at the time). I was watching the road very carefully, nervous about having him in the car. When I stopped at a red light and turned to check on him, his eyes were already on me. I was so moved that during the silence of our drive, he had turned his big baby head on his little baby neck to gaze at me.

This book is not about moments like that. It's not about the wonder of holding and touching and smelling and laughing with babies. It's not very much about what happens between babies and parents at all. Rather, this book is primarily about what goes on between women and men who become parents together, and how their negotiations as new parents grow out of their experiences of being women and men in our society. This book is about why, even though mothers and fathers encounter many of the same pleasures with babies, they frequently have very different

stresses in becoming parents—differences that strain their relationships with each other.

During a recent discussion with some of my students about the tendency for women in dual-earner marriages to do a disproportionate amount of housework, one person said, "But hasn't that changed? That's not really happening anymore, is it?" As other students talked about what they observed in their own households while growing up, their responses reflected the complexity that has been captured in recent scholarship about family work divisions: that they tap into how we define work and love and masculinity and femininity; and that they are changing and not changing at the same time.

This ambiguity is present in academic interpretations of parenting arrangements as well. While the line between mothering and fathering is beginning to blur (Coltrane 1996), longitudinal studies of transitions into parenthood suggest that they are marked by increases in differentiation by gender (Belsky and Kelly 1994; Cowan and Cowan 1992; Sanchez and Thomson 1997). My students' confusion about what's *really* happening in families was present in my interviews with new parents who, on one hand, spoke as though definitions of mothering and fathering were supposed to have shifted, and on the other hand, couldn't necessarily illustrate that change with their own stories.

I've thought of this book as a way of continuing these conversations and have written visualizing new parents and students as the audience—along with academic colleagues and other people interested in families and gender. There is a sense among the general public and in some scholarly work that motherhood and fatherhood are being redefined, yet there is much old news along with the new. This book is in large part about the old news, which is the power of gender as an organizing feature of the social world.

One new mother that I interviewed, whom I will call Laura, told me about a couple she thought I should talk to because "the dad is like the mom and the mom is like the dad": "She's the one that says, 'Oh I've got to go now,' you know? And he's like, 'When will you be back, dear?'" Implicit in Laura's commentary is the

notion that "the mom" is different from "the dad": the dad traditionally goes out into the world while the mom and the baby wait for him. Although this pattern was not literally true for Laura (she and her husband were both teachers), this imagery nevertheless captured Laura's perception of what happens to men and women who become parents together.

In Laura's view, her life had been transformed by motherhood and her "freedom" lost, while her husband Stuart's life had not been affected. She quoted herself as saying to him: "You have no clue what this is like. Your life has not changed one iota." Laura talked about feeling that she had to check with Stuart before making plans that did not include their baby, while Stuart did not check with her first. She described herself asking him, "Can I do this in three weeks?"

Stuart disagreed that his life had been unchanged by the birth of their baby: "I know she doesn't think that it changes as much for the man as it does for the woman . . . but you know, you don't get to go bicycling as much, you don't get to go running. I don't know if I'll play softball this year. I played ball every summer my whole life."

Laura perceived that Stuart's leisure activities still continued, if in reduced form, but hers had not: "He always tells me, 'Oh you could do that, you could do that too. Just tell me when you want to do it.' Well it doesn't fit. Unless I want to do something from midnight to three in the morning."

Stuart didn't buy this: "I've said lots of times, 'Just do it and Nicky and I will be fine.'" He thought that Laura's personal philosophy of baby-raising kept her more physically accountable to the baby than he was, and, Stuart suspected, more than she needed to be: "Sometimes I say, 'He's fine, he's fine,' but he's not fine enough for her." The differences that Stuart and Laura perceived in their lives and identities as new parents as well as the tensions that these perceptions created in their relationship are among the issues that I explore in this book.

I interviewed twenty-five couples about their experiences of becoming parents together to understand more about the polar-

ization between women and men that has been identified in previous empirical studies about transitions into parenthood (see Belsky and Kelly 1994; Cowan and Cowan 1992). According to this research, women and men who create and care for a baby become increasingly unlike one another and differentiated in their work and parenting arrangements, despite their intentions. Women's senses of self merge with caretaking while men find themselves focusing on their "breadwinning" abilities (Cowan and Cowan 1992). Along with these inner changes, women's and men's roles change externally as well, particularly in relation to their divisions of labor (Belsky and Kelly 1994; Cowan and Cowan 1992; Sanchez and Thomson 1997). Men tend to do more paid work after the birth of a baby, while women do less. Women tend to do more domestic work, while men (continue to) do less. These trends toward more stereotypically male and female roles occur regardless of wives' employment status, educational level, and couples' preexisting division of labor or gender attitudes (see studies cited in Belsky, Lang, and Huston 1986 and Sanchez and Thomson 1997).

The division of infant care is often more traditional than either partner expected it to be (Cowan and Cowan 1987). Fathers tend to believe that they should be directly involved with their children, but often they are not (LaRossa 1988). Although today's fathers are more involved in the lives of their infants than their own fathers were, mothers spend more time interacting with babies, planning for them, and taking care of "custodial activities." Fathers tend to act as helpers to the more directly involved, primary parent—the mother (see Belsky and Volling 1987; Berman and Pedersen 1987; Dickie 1987; LaRossa 1986; Thompson and Walker 1989). "The only thing fathers do more frequently than mothers," Belsky and Volling (1987: 59) comment, "is read and watch television."

The changes that new parents experience generate conflict in marriages in a way that does not happen to couples who are not parents (Cowan and Cowan 1992; Crohan 1996). It is not the fact of change that is the problem, but the increased differentiation

between women and men (Cowan and Cowan 1992). Women are especially affected by the transition, both in terms of decreases in their marital satisfaction (Cowan and Cowan 1988a; Harriman 1985; Miller and Sollie 1980; Waldron and Routh 1981) and in the level of personal change—both positive and negative—that they experience in the transition to parenthood (Feldman and Nash 1984; Harriman 1983; McKim 1987; Miller and Sollie 1980; Ventura 1987). But there are also indications that some men react to the transition with depression, and men as well as women experience declines in marital quality after having a baby (Cowan and Cowan 1995).[1]

Given that gender differentiation during transitions into parenthood strains many individuals and relationships, why does it happen—even to people committed to avoiding it? This question is answered diversely by the researchers whose longitudinal studies have most recently documented these patterns. While some assert that the tendency for new parenthood to polarize men and women is "natural and normal" (see Belsky and Kelly 1994: 5), others question parents' "innocence" in falling into gendered arrangements, arguing that divisions of baby care represent not necessarily conscious choices made by parents: "It's not just that couples are startled by how the division of labor falls along gender lines, but they describe the change as if it were a mysterious virus they picked up when they were in the hospital having their baby; they don't seem to view their arrangements as *choices* they have made" (Cowan and Cowan 1992: 98).

These commentaries tap into eternal questions about nature and nurture, free will and social structure, that underlie much analysis of human experience and social life. Is our behavior biologically innate or learned in our environment? Do individuals exert control in the social world or are we constrained by it? Returning to our more specific dilemma: Are we programmed to behave in gender-specific ways with babies through evolution or through our individual family experiences, or both? Or are parents free to choose the ways in which they will take care of their babies?

I have posed these questions as if they have yes or no answers, but there are few people who would respond in this way. Even those social scientists who argue for the relevance of biological sex differences in understanding how men and women approach parenthood suggest that different societies will ascribe more or less meaning to these differences. Alice Rossi (1985) suggests in her biosocial approach, for example, that biological and cultural factors interact in determining male and female parenting arrangements. The story that this book tells is about the cultural part of this equation. It is about the role of social processes in new parents' transitions into fatherhood and motherhood (see also Rossi 1968 and LaRossa and LaRossa 1989); and it is about the social construction of differentiation between women and men.

This book is not about how people's individual backgrounds influence their experiences of parenting (although I believe they do). Nor can I resolve the question of whether mothers and fathers bring inherent biological differences to parenting.[2] Whether this is true or not, it does not explain why mothers experience significant stress in entering a role considered to be "natural" for them or why many marriages experience conflict when they function in a division of labor by gender that is also considered to be "natural." A primary goal of this book is to add a sociological piece to this puzzle: to bring the social contexts within which new parents make the transition into parenthood more clearly into view, and to look at parenthood as it intersects with gender.

When I talk here about gender, I am not just talking about a characteristic of individual human beings, but about what Cecilia Ridgeway (1997: 219) describes as a "multilevel system of differences and disadvantages that includes socioeconomic arrangements and widely held cultural beliefs at the macro level, ways of behaving in relation to others at the interactional level, and acquired traits and identities at the individual level." To express this in slightly different words: We associate particular aspects of ourselves with being male or female; this is gender on an individual level. We also express maleness and femaleness through the ways that we relate to each other; this is gender on an interactional