

Book Reviews

Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns

Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly, eds.
Toronto: Second Story Press, 1998

Reviewed by Brigitte Harris

The 18 chapters in this engaging, multi-authored book present diverse ways of investigating and making meaning of “mother,” “mothering,” and “motherhood.” Qualitative methods—autobiographical, biographical, ethnographic, phenomenological, historical, case study, and participatory research—elicit women’s stories. These stories demonstrate the complexity of women’s experience and their meanings of mothering. Each chapter presents women’s stories and a lucid discussion of the literature, providing a basis from which to question, criticize, support, refine, and rethink existing theories. Reading the book engaged me in an active reflective process.

The reflective process, both collaborative and individual, is illustrated throughout the book. For example, Andrea O'Reilly describes how her course leads students to “dismantle” the patriarchal mother-daughter estrangement narrative to build a new relational narrative. Elizabeth Diem engages in participatory research discussions with mothers of problematic adolescent daughters which allows them over time to “unravel” the disempowering myth of the perfect mother. Martha McMahon reflects on how the loss of her mother brought insight into her choice to not have children, questioning conceptions of motherhood by examining her subjectivity as a non-mother. Her use of “creatively reconstructed letters to a friend” is a particularly effective means of allowing the reader an “in” on her deliberative process. Rishma Dunlop questions patriarchal assumptions negating the embodied knowledge of female experience and demonstrates the power of writing, especially poetry, to capture and examine women’s lived experience.

A particular strength of this book is in the insiders’, outsiders’, and marginalized voices it presents. Motherhood issues are examined from the perspectives of mothers: academics, teachers, and foster mothers. Those who are not

mothers provide an outsider's perspective: adolescent and grown daughters, and the legal and medical establishments. Of particular interest are chapters dealing with those whose stories have not been, or are not often, told. A lesbian mother reflects on her daughter's coming to terms with her "different" family. A researcher describes the dynamic between mothers and daughters in families with a disabled parent. A filmmaker reclaims her historical roots by telling the stories of black mothers in their Nova Scotia communities. Another researcher recounts black women's experiences of motherhood to counter the pathologizing of these families in the "male" literature. A white mother reflects on the role of family narratives in her black daughter's identity formation. All of these voices demonstrate the richness and diversity in the experience of those mothering and those mothered.

The editors facilitate this reflection process in their organization of the chapters into four sections. The first section deals with issues of socialization and education, the second with maternal values and identities, the third with personal and historical narratives, and the last with public and state policy. As such the book flows from the social to personal to public themes, providing a conceptual map accessible to students.

The editors also provide helpful and specific suggestions to instructors for promoting reflection in course activities: through reflective journals, case studies, and thematic research projects. This section includes guidelines for assignments, evaluation, and how certain chapters can be used.

As I pointed out earlier, to read this book is to engage in an ongoing inner dialogue, comparing and contrasting one's own stories and rethinking one's theoretical understandings. The book is alive with the voices of mothers and daughters. It delineates issues in fresh and engaging ways and it models reflection. This book makes an engrossing read and an excellent course text.

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