

Book Reviews

tivity is cited in many of these essays. The difficulty of articulating this maternal subjectivity, whether in the therapeutic setting or within feminist discourse, has left the experience of mothering and all its contradictions in the hands of others, to be described, yet again, in the most idealistic or denigrated terms. As these writers argue, it is only by recognizing the mother's subjectivity—her autonomy, her sexuality, her ambivalence—that the institution of motherhood will ever change. It is imperative that feminists rejoin the debate about the changing institutions of motherhood and the family. As Susie Orbach argues in an interview compiled in this volume, "We ought not to keep relinquishing ground and letting the Right run the debate on this" (91). At a time when conservatives on the Right seem to have all but taken over contemporary discourse on the family, this book provides a useful intervention.

Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-Transformation in Women's Lives

Martha McMahon
New York: Guilford Press, 1995

Reviewed by Erin E. MacDonald

Martha McMahon's book is based on her Ph.D. research as a feminist sociologist. Using a social interactionist approach that emphasizes qualitative data, her findings are based on what participants told her about their lives. From 1988 to 1989, she recorded both on paper and on microcassette the experiences of 59 full-time working Toronto mothers of preschool-aged children, both those with and those without partners. Although her original intention was to explore the balance of work and childcare in these working- and middle-class mothers' lives, McMahon focused her attention instead on the identity-transforming influence of having children, because the mother-child relationship was considered of the greatest value to the participants. Including a wealth of charts and statistics to support her findings, the author presents a convincing and thought-provoking new study of an old theme. While past feminists tended to concentrate on the oppression of women as housewives, she turns her attention to the symbolic and real importance of the mother-child relationship in these women's lives. Her book moves through an analysis of "the social processes through which women became pregnant and sustained their pregnancies through to motherhood" (McMahon, 1995: 15) to an analysis in the final chapters of "the processes whereby these women developed conceptions of themselves as mothers" (McMahon, 1995: 15).

McMahon found that in spite of the non-traditional situations of the mothers and the fact that each woman experienced her transformation to motherhood differently, “what emerges from this study is that women, pursuing what they experienced as their private and personal choices and decisions, reproduced many of the gendered patterns of their culture” (McMahon, 1995: 16). Even though “womanliness” and “motherhood” are today recognized as socially constructed roles rather than essential identities, the experience of raising a child seems to reinforce many of society’s naturalized conceptions of these roles. However, McMahon also stresses that factors such as race and class play an equally important part in the process, and cannot be separated from the experience of mothering. Using modern gender and sociological theories and comparing them to the psychologically based theories of the past, McMahon successfully applies theory to her research in clear, revealing ways.

Her detailed descriptions of the reactions of working- and middle-class women to motherhood demonstrate her point that “the personal and political in motherhood cannot really be separated” (McMahon, 1995: 29). In an interview setting, McMahon discovered that while numerous similarities existed between the experiences of both groups of women, class did make a significant difference. With less financial constraints on their lives, middle-class women tended to wait to have children until they felt they had achieved the “right” relationship, career, and personal sense of self. In contrast, “working-class women’s accounts suggest that many of them saw themselves as achieving maturity *through* having a child” (McMahon, 1995: 91). While in both cases, women’s own lives and identities were dramatically transformed after giving birth, middle-class women seemed to be far more surprised by the changes. Contrary to common belief, alone mothers saw their new identities as redemptive even though the culture of liberal individualism “carries the historical class and gender priorities of liberal democracies and is empirically unachievable by many women and minority persons” (McMahon, 1995: 127). As one middle-class mother, Anna, puts it “I think [without a child] I would have viewed myself as an administrator/teacher instead of—now I view myself as a *human*” (McMahon, 1995: 147). In general, when asked questions about the daily realities of having children, most women responded in terms of feelings, suggesting further the deeply rooted connection of motherhood to self-transformation.

In the end, McMahon stresses that we must learn to see social relationships, not biology, as the primary cause of cultural experience. Motherhood represents a fascinating opportunity for researchers and enthusiasts alike to explore the complex political, social, and personal phenomenon of identity transformation in the modern woman’s life. According to the author, “Social transformation is the responsibility of everyone” (McMahon, 1995: 277), not just mothers.