

At the end of her account “Basketball and breastfeeding” Mandy Cohen comments “Final tally on this trip: Times walked in on—two; Security issues—one; Awkward moments—nine; Blushes induced—12. Not too bad. And lucky me, I get to do it all again next week. Bring it on!” This is the crux of what the book is about: she has to travel because she works in TV covering an Americanised sport. She has babies but isn’t at home with them. The humour is the reaction she provokes from male peers. Is she proud or embarrassed by pumping breastmilk? Like most mums, it seems that she wants to be congratulated, and commiserated with, at the same time. It’s good that she is able to tell her story, replete as she is with power to negotiate lactation breaks. Maybe less privileged mums will be relieved that they can compare their experiences with glamorous professionals. Some mothers will connect, and laud, her efforts to pump milk for her baby. But it makes me glad that when I was breastfeeding, I mostly stayed home.

Understanding Family Meanings: A Reflective Text

J. Ribbens McCarthy, M. Doolittle and S. Day Sclater.

Bristol: Policy Press, in association with the Open University, 2nd ed., 2012.

REVIEWED BY VIRGINIA THORLEY

The purpose of the authors is to provide a reflective text for students of sociology, to fill a gap in teaching texts in the area of family studies. This text is divided into three parts, research; theories and concepts; and contexts; with some overlap. There is a link in the front of the book to online transcripts and audio discussions with leading authorities, including one of the authors.

At every step of the way the reader is challenged with readings and examples to re-examine preconceptions and enter a discussion of personal biases, in an exploration of what ‘meaning’ and ‘family’ mean. The readings and excerpts from transcripts are interspersed with comments by the authors.

The place of definitions, a vexed question in family studies, is explored throughout, so that an understanding of the complexities of ‘meanings’ and ‘families’ is fostered. As meanings ‘constitute the interface between culture and individuals’ (35), they are important in regard to human lives. The importance of understanding different concepts of ‘family’ and different types of families is demonstrated by discussions of situations where ‘family’ is defined for official purposes such as social security and family law. Social policy, the authors point out, seeks a model or models (31). Yet, no matter how well intentioned, this can lead to lead to generalizations and misunderstandings.

'Family' is a contested terrain with moral or political undertones, whether in reports of family decline in the mass media or in visual images of 'the family', which idealize a harmonious middle-class family of two parents and their children. Whatever image is offered as normal may provide a sense of belonging to those who fit it and leave those whose family is outside the parameters feeling marginalized. So individuals may provide or withhold information in order to match external expectations. The authors have not neglected the existence of hidden or private aspects of family. They have mentioned, and chosen not to explore, the family as the setting for abuse and dark secrets.

The meaning of 'family', particularly in a multi-cultural, pluralistic society, involves social, as well as biological, bonds and individuals are aware of who is in and who is not. Yet in the same conversation, an individual may use 'family' in two contexts, the inner core and the broader family. The authors conclude 'that the meanings of family, while never fixed and stable, are not completely arbitrary' (277).

Taking Care: Lessons from Mothers with Disabilities

M. Grimley-Mason and L. Long-Bellil.
Lanham: University Press of America Inc., 2012.

REVIEWED BY MARÍA VELÁSQUEZ-MULINO AND LUCY E. BAILEY

This encouraging text introduces the reader to qualitative data from twenty-six mothers with disabilities whose lives challenge enduring views of "disability" and "motherhood" as incompatible. Despite negative social discourse regarding disability, the mothers the text represents confront society, their families and their self-perceptions with courage and self-determination. The stories portray mothers as challenging and negotiating social expectations of "good mothers" as "perfect" and "natural care giver[s]" (xi). Mason, a professor emerita of English at Emmanuel College and Long-Bellil, an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts, focus on women's experiences and resilience, closing each chapter with general "lessons to share" for other disabled mothers, counselors and health professionals.

The book is structured into six chapters. The first four chapters explore issues women face in each stage of the "mothering cycle" (xi) while Chapter Six considers key policy issues. Throughout, the authors highlight several