

Mothering Occupations Challenge, Agency, and Participation

Susan A. Esdaile and Judith A. Olson, eds.
Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 2004

Reviewed by Wendy Cater

Mothering Occupations is a wonderfully readable book to be savoured at one sitting or dipped into regularly for its many pleasures. Editors Susan Esdaile and Judith Olson describe their aim—to investigate mothering “through the lens of the helping professions from a feminist phenomenological perspective”—and argue that “the authors in this text do not speak for mothers, but they speak out for mothers.” Each chapter comprises an introduction, stories about the various experiences of three mothers/mothering experiences which pertain to the chapter content, a succinct explanation of the theoretical context of each section, a description of the challenges raised by the chapter, and anticipated outcomes for readers.

In “Mothering in the Context of Unpaid Work and Play in Families,” for example, Loree A. Primueau anticipates that readers will achieve the following outcomes after studying the chapter: readers should be able to a) define mothering; b) discuss the literature and research findings related to divisions of unpaid work in families; c) distinguish between traditional and nontraditional gender ideologies and gender practices; d) identify work and discuss two types of parental strategies used in mothering in the context of unpaid work and play in families; and e) describe parental participation in play within household work.

Mothering Occupations is an antidote to books that tell mothers the “right” way to do things. It includes the stories of five families and their respective experiences of play and work within the home that range across the spectrum of traditional and nontraditional approaches to family life. Moreover, the book validates a mother’s individual commitment, as Sara Ruddick suggests, “to meet three universal demands of children for preservation, nurturance and training to take their place in society irrespective of gender, biology or social role.”

The volume traces the lifetime continuum of mothering that women embark upon from the moment of conception through, for example, to caring for children with disabilities. It also considers mothers who are physically debilitated or mentally ill. The authors’ inclusive language enhances a reader’s awareness and understanding of the possibilities of mothering. The chapter “Mothering across the Lifecourse” is particularly insightful as it acknowledges that mothering is a tenured position. Each chapter concludes with a list of suggested readings that is especially useful. I found *Mothering Occupations*

readable and informative and would recommend it to professionals working with families, parents, and parents-to-be.

Women and Children First *Feminism, Rhetoric, and Public Policy*

Sharon M. Meagher and Patrice DiQuinzio, eds.
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005

Reviewed by Tatjana Chorney

This collection of twelve essays is an important contribution to feminist scholarship and contemporary cultural and political discourses shaping how we see mothers and children in the context of citizenship. The essays use a variety of feminist theoretical frameworks to analyze the rhetoric of heretofore unexamined American and Canadian public policies proposing “to put women and children first.” The essays reveal the paternalistic and “masculinist” logic underlying these policies whose real effect is disempowerment—sometimes harm—to those they ostensibly seek to protect. The book demonstrates in compelling ways that individual realities are linked to wider social realities, and advocates greater critical scrutiny of how the discourses of modern liberal individualism often obscure this crucial interdependence.

The collection is divided into five sections. Part one, “(Mis)Representations of the Domestic Sphere: State Interventions,” features discussions focused on the co-optation of feminist discourse in the rhetoric of American homeland security and defense against terrorism; the oppressive and exclusionary nature of the heteronormative family ideology in public policy as manifested in the Census; and the use of international human rights discourse in domestic violence cases whose rhetoric erases power differentials, reinforces constructs of middle-class motherhood, and calls for increased surveillance of poor families.

Of the two essays in part two, “Medical Discourses and Social Ills,” one documents through cases studies the tragic effects of the promotion of a rigid conception of sex and gender for parents of “intersexed” children; the other analyzes depression in women as a “social” rather than an individual phenomenon, finding its causes in contemporary culture whose persistent patriarchal values continue to devalue and debase women and mothers in ways that “colonize psychic space” (100).

The essays in part three, “Subjects of Violence,” reveal how a culture with traditional masculinist values celebrates violence when used “properly” in the service of protection, without acknowledging that “protection and predation are intimately linked to one another” (123), as well as remind us—by uncovering