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# Motherhood: Making meaning

**Book review**
Kaplan, M M (1992) **Mothers' Image of Motherhood: Case studies of twelve mothers.** London: Routledge.

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This is an interesting study that does not, however, deliver as much as it promises. Perhaps psychologists will make more of the theoretical discussion, the methodologies employed and the very detailed (yet somehow opaque) case studies themselves. As a sociologist/historian with a particular interest in gender relations, I found the study too limited to contribute much to an exploration of the meaning(s) of motherhood theoretically. The empirical findings, too, are interesting but slight, and ultimately of a negative rather than positive value. They prompt questions about the validity of other studies, notably Nancy Chodorow's highly influential work, **The reproduction of mothering** (1978), but they do not lead the author to alternative theoretical claims or even hypotheses. After 200 pages, half of them describing her twelve case studies in great detail, Kaplan emphasises the value of "small-scale, systematic qualitative research" for "exploring and building theory" (p203), but then concedes two pages on, in her concluding paragraph: It would be difficult to know how to generalize from these twelve women to all mothers."

For me the most valuable aspect of the study lies in the way it formulates the research topic. The author's project is "to explore how mothers themselves make meaning of motherhood and to focus on their images of motherhood, their desires, and their experiences" (p2). Given that so much of the attention to motherhood has either been from the point of view of the development of the child, or has conceptualised it as an institution imposed upon women, whether through biology or socialisation, Kaplan's emphasis on the meanings women themselves attach to their experience is salutary. Mothers' reflexivity is given explicit recognition in the research design; women are not simply the passive objects of history/psychology/social structure and/or biology, but are active agents, capable of making choices and defining as well as initiating changes in their socially sanctioned roles. At the same time, Kaplan's approach recognises the psychological dynamics that inform the women's recounting of their experiences of being mothered and of mothering, pointing to the location of motherhood in a complex web of personal and not simply social meaning. But while this is valuable, a reluctance to theorise the relationship between the personal and the social - to link the psychological and sociological beyond identifying them as significant domains - weakens the study.

Kaplan's primary concern is to explore to what extent there may be a disjuncture between societal expectations and understandings of motherhood and mothers' own constructions of their experience. Noting that there have been enormous changes in the popular conception of "mother" in the United States in the past 20 years, as more and more women with children have entered the labour market (including many women for whom it is not a basic economic necessity), Kaplan asks to what extent this has involved a reconceptualisation of the image of the "good" (as opposed to the actual) Mother. How significant in the self-understandings of contemporary mothers are "traditional" ideas about the good mother as totally submerged in the wellbeing of her child, as advocated by the influential psychoanalysts Bowlby and Winnicott in the 1950s and 1960s? Are such ideas more tenacious than the contemporary proliferation of working mothers - "mothers with briefcases" in Adrienne Rich's suggestive phrase (cited p3)- might indicate? And, following Nancy Chodorow, have some feminists been too hasty in dismissing the Bowlby ideal as misplaced "social myth"? To what extent might the "myth" of the all-giving mother be embedded in "early experience and deep psychological wishes" (p7), structuring not only the child's demands of and need for its mother, but also women's own desire to mother?

If one accepts that the child's earliest experiences are significant in shaping his or her adult self (including gender identity), and that this does, therefore, have implications for individual and societal decisions about how we raise our children, then these are important questions. To explore them, Kaplan adopts a qualitative methodology, combining two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with her respondents and a number of psychological tests, including the Thematic Apperception Test. Her interest in qualitative rather than quantitative data underpins the small sample of women, who were also chosen from broadly similar - and in this case privileged - backgrounds. All were white, upper/middle class, and well educated. They were also drawn from the relatively new but socially influential phenomenon of older, first-time mothers (the average age at delivery was 36) - women who had remained career-oriented and were now juggling the demands of employment with that of being mothers of toddlers. Kaplan's choice of women with small children rather than babies was deliberate, to broaden her study beyond the more common research focus on mothers and infants. (Yet toddlers, she is at pains to remind us, "are not fully socialised beings" (p22) - a phrase that reverberated for me as my own three-year-old banged intermittently but ferociously on my study door during the writing of this review.)

Kaplan is at pains to stress that, as a result of the women's specific social location, no generalisations can be made from them to "women" at large. She does suggest, however, that despite the limits of her sample, the social and cultural power of the category of women she interviewed should not be overlooked. Not only is the image of the working mother by now well-entrenched in the popular images of women depicted on television and in women's magazines. The class location of these women is also important: "While not all fit the image of 'yuppie' equally well, they are among the group that Ehrenreich (1989) contends has been 'taken as a social norm' in the United States and has been the group 'against which all others are measured'" (p2). This insight is not, however, developed in analysing the significance of her findings. This is where a stronger grounding of the case studies in the sociology of motherhood in contemporary North America would have benefited the study.

Kaplan concludes that the women she interviewed are engaged in a process of reformulating motherhood for themselves. Raised in the 1950s when the image of the self-sacrificing, home-centred mother was dominant, themselves the daughters of women who were fulltime homemakers, her subjects reject much of what their mothers stand for and have redefined the notion of mother to incorporate employment as legitimate. At the same time, and in contrast to what Chodorow argues concerning women's "relationality" and identification with other women, most of them do not show evidence of strong relationships with other women, either in a political sense or as a primary source of emotional and practical support. Instead, they "feel particular affiliation with their husbands and express confusion over whether their own dramatic experience as parents is a female experience or not" (p202). They thus exemplify a strong commitment to the nuclear family and individual solutions to managing their domestic and work responsibilities. Kaplan notes the political implications of this:

"These privileged women are not focused on the lack of social support for families. They see their decisions about working in personal terms. ... they did not consider that their career decisions were affected by problems in the structure of work, by the lack of services to help families meet work demands, and by the asymmetrical gender arrangements that made it likely that they, rather than their husbands, would have the primary child rearing responsibility. They are unlikely to identify themselves as parents or to join with other parents in arguing for increased services ... Their image of the Mother is modern enough to accommodate the Mother's needs and career interests but reinforces maternal isolation. She is to take care of herself as well as her child with no help from spouses, friends, or social institutions." (p205).

Rather than theorise her findings, Kaplan is more concerned to use them to put Nancy Chodorow's object-relations analysis to the test - to enquire how far the evidence from her study supports Chodorow's thesis concerning "the reproduction of mothering". Although cautious in her conclusion, she argues that on the whole her study does not support Chodorow. While a couple of her mothers do "present their mothers as the nurturant, caring, responsive women Chodorow and others describe" (p184), the majority "express feelings of anger, frustration, and loss" in relation to their own mothers "rather than the blurring of boundaries Chodorow describes" (p185).

Kaplan presents two major criticisms of Chodorow. The first is that Chodorow's thesis assumes that the mother-child relationship is essentially a benign one, with the mother embracing her nurturant role in a positive way. In fact, Kaplan proposes, there is evidence of conflict and disengagement in the practice of actual as opposed to idealised mothers - it is therefore incorrect to categorise women as investing in relationality as a result. The second criticism is that Chodorow lays too much stress on the reproduction of motherhood, i.e. on the ways in which the institution is perpetuated from generation to generation, and ignores change and rupture within the institution. Chodorow is, in effect, working with a particular idea of motherhood - an ideal that is no longer dominant and was in any case never realised to the degree that she assumes.

How well does the study work as a critique of Chodorow? I think Kaplan diminishes the nuance and sophistication of Chodorow's psychoanalytic argument. Chodorow asks: why do women (generally) want to mother? Her rejection of both biological imperatives and simple role theory models leads her to a psychoanalytic explanation which emphasises the earliest experiences of the infant in relation to its primary

caregiver, who is usually and significantly a woman. It is the femaleness of the mother figure that is significant in terms of the child's development of its core gender identity and, in the case of girl children, the reproduction of the desire to become mothers themselves - to recreate that earliest fusion with the maternal object. What is appealing to me as a sociologist is precisely Chodorow's attempt to relate the psychological and the sociological dimensions of gender identity. Although she has been criticised for taking the white, nuclear, western, heterosexual family as a universal, in fact she does recognise that family forms are culturally and historically specific and that this is crucial for understanding the reproduction of mothering it its different forms. What she argues (1978: 53) is that while certain psychic capacities can be considered innate to all humans, their "form and mode of operation" are not; her preoccupation is with the reproduction of mothering within a specific context in which western (not necessarily white) nuclear heterosexual families are the norm.

It also seems to me that Kaplan is not exploring exactly the same terrain as Chodorow. Kaplan's study contributes to an understanding of how her sample of women construct meaning and in particular understand themselves as mothers, in a world in which motherhood is one of several and not always smoothly compatible identities and sets of responsibilities. What is explored are their adult perceptions of actual experiences. Chodorow is concerned with the unconscious dynamics of why women desire to become mothers and how they become (for the most part) psychologically prepared to take on and invest in the role of primary nurturer in relation to children - at least, more so than men. She is not, as I read her, concerned with how particular adult women recall their actual experience of being mothered or might explain and try to deal with the conflicts and problems in mothering their children in the world.

Although something of a growth industry in North America and Europe, feminist studies of motherhood are few and far between in South Africa. Here most attention has thus far been directed at the ideology of motherhood as a patriarchal construct and its deployment in political organisations. The emphasis on women's own representation of their experience in this study is therefore refreshing and does suggest some avenues for research here. It it is not, however, easy to see how one might extrapolate from either its findings or its methodological tools to the study of motherhood in South Africa, with its very different cultural, historical and political mix.

Of course the work was not undertaken to throw light on the experience and meaning(s) of motherhood in South Africa. However, it is not clear how much light it throws on motherhood in North America either. I have no problem with small-scale and indepth studies of the kind the author undertakes - I would agree that the study of meanings is best accessed through qualitative and therefore necessarily small-scale research methodologies. But I would then expect more discussion of the findings and analysis of what they do reveal about the central research questions, rather than with what they do not. In the end Kaplan gives us little more than tentative suggestions for an expanded research agenda. It feels a compromising and unsatisfactory conclusion to so detailed an account. Would an article summarising her findings and detailing her methodology not have been more appropriate than a full-length book?

**REFERENCES.**
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