

Carol Smart, Bren Neale and Amanda Wade.
The Changing Experience of Childhood: Families and Divorce.

Polity Press, 2001, 232 pp.

\$US 29.95 paper (0-7456-2400-6), \$US 64.95 hardcover (0-7456-2399-9).

This book belongs to the recent tradition of studying children as social actors, from their perspectives, and in their own words. It presents the results of a qualitative study of 117 British children and youth aged 4 to 22 whose parents had divorced several years earlier. The chapters contain reviews of the literature on topics ranging from the social construction of children to family policy and parenting after divorce. The analysis is intellectually honest in the sense that it does not fall into the trap of subscribing to a particular ideology of what is "in the best interest of the child" concerning parental divorce.

The first chapter visits several social constructions of childhood while the second reviews some of the themes pertaining to family policy and "narratives of harm." The remaining chapters, while also being grounded in discussions of the literatures, present the children's narratives, that is, their conceptualizations of their lived family experience.

In Chapter 3, the authors focus on children's values surrounding care and mutual respect as the key elements that distinguish a good family life. For the children interviewed, relationships are more important than family structure and a "proper" parent is someone who loves the child but is also able to listen and understand him or her. In Chapter 4, we see how children deal with separation and manage or co-manage their family relationships. Many of the children felt that, in the process of managing post-divorce lives, they had become more independent from their parents and were less subject to parental oversight. These data to some extent join those of the outcome literature which shows that, at least at the beginning of separation, children are less well monitored than is the case in two-parent families.

Chapter 5 focuses on children's moral reasoning on post-divorce family life while, in Chapter 6, the authors turn to the issue of children's rights and citizenship, particularly within the context of family life and divorce. Chapters 7 and 8 respectively examine children's experience of co-parenting and the different perspectives of parents and children. One reads insightful children's descriptions of the practicalities involved in having two homes, for instance, and children's perceptions of various types of parenting, such as using children as friends, as allies, and as objects to be dominated and manipulated. The last chapter on implications presents a critical and well-balanced analysis of the role that professionals play, particularly with respect to custody arrangements. The authors ask, "So, is it always good to talk to children?" The Appendix and the Notes are helpful.

This book is a must-read for scholars in the domains of the sociology of childhood and the effects of divorce on children. However, scholars interested in the latter should not expect traditional data on children as outcomes. This book will certainly also be useful to psychologists and legal experts in the field of divorce who are willing to read through several discussions that at times may appear to border on the theoretical. The authors raise several important issues such as "whether the methods used in research are portable into other professional practices"(p. 155).

The context in which children are more or less forced to talk to professionals may not provide a representative picture of the children's feelings, needs, and agency.

The limitations of this study mainly stem from the fact that several parents did not allow their children to be interviewed. A certain level of selection occurred. Thus many problems facing children after their parents' divorce may have been underrepresented in these narratives. Children with fairly serious difficulties (in terms of the literature on outcomes) are rare in this research and, as these children are the most likely to be the object of intervention, the book is not as helpful in this respect as it could be. However, the qualitative data, analysis, and discussions more than amply compensate for this gap. Overall, this is a very interesting and thought-provoking book.

Anne-Marie Ambert
Department of Sociology
York University

Anne-Marie Ambert's current research interests in the domain of the family can be accessed at <http://www.arts.yorku.ca/soci/ambert>.

<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/cjscopy/reviews/childhood.html>

January 2003

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online