

for “half-orphans,” poor houses, “little mothers” (i.e. the use of young girls as child-minders), day nurseries, infant schools, crèches, kindergartens, children’s shelters, and homes for infants. Michel is scrupulous in linking developments in the childcare arena to forces at work in the larger society, such as industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and war. She places each child care-related “development” or innovation within a specific historical and ideological context.

Sonya Michel is a history professor and director of women’s studies at the University of Illinois. Scholars will appreciate her rigorous research, attention to detail, 84 pages of endnotes, and detailed index—all of which weighs heavily in this publication’s favour. However, this is one of the most poorly designed books I have read in some time. Both type and margins are too small, sub-headings too few, and most of the illustrations and photographs are too small to be of any use—all of which detracted severely from my enjoyment of the book.

Constructing Lived Experiences: Representations of Black Mothers in Child Sexual Abuse Discourses

Bernard, Claudia.
Burlington: Ashgate, 2001.

Reviewed by Sara Collings

Claudia Bernard’s research into black women’s experiences of mothering children who have been sexually abused is an important addition to feminist literature which explores the blame and responsibility that is placed on non-offending mothers of sexually abused children. To date, the particular dilemmas that black mothers face in such a crisis have received little attention.

Bernard’s qualitative interviews draw on the experience of thirty black mothers who self-identified as black British of African Caribbean origin whose children were either abused by a family member or by an adult who was known to the family. These women spoke about their coping strategies and their experiences with seeking help. Bernard’s interviews suggest that these mothers faced particular stresses as they cared for their children, stresses that arose as they attempted to mother in a racist society. Bernard is particularly concerned with understanding how “divisions constructed around race and social class create a very different set of circumstances within which [black mothers] respond to the abuse of their children” (1).

In general, the participants described a range of strong and contradictory feelings about their child's abuse and they spoke about a lack of supportive outlets for the expression of their emotions or their needs. While they often felt anger toward their abusive partners and a strong desire to protect their child, they also felt conflicting feelings of loyalty toward the men whose abusive acts might be ascribed to their racialized experience. Some women also said that they or their relatives believed that talking about the interfamilial sexual abuse might be seen as a betrayal of the family—a potential site of refuge from the daily effects of racism. Further, with the added burden experienced by some mothers to conform to the image of the “strong black woman,” these feelings were often internalized, exacerbating the women's feelings of self-blame. Bernard points to the damaged mother/daughter relationship that can result from this silent suffering, and suggests that daughters may develop a similar coping method so that their needs might also remain unexpressed and unmet.

Many of the women interviewed mistrusted social workers and Bernard carefully explores this mistrust. Black mothers, she suggests, already are more likely to be scrutinized by child protection workers, and many of the mothers interviewed explained that they thought of child protection agencies as racist institutions. The mothers had little reason to believe that the particular stress they faced as black women would be acknowledged by child protection workers.

Bernard devotes a chapter to how child welfare agencies might better respond to the needs of black mothers and their children. She draws on theories of anti-oppressive social work, suggesting that social workers need to reflect on their own social location and to consider black mothers' needs and actions within a context of race and gender. In particular, she encourages social workers to consider the divided loyalties that many black mothers experience in the face of a child's sexual abuse. Instead of focusing on deficits, Bernard recommends that child welfare workers look to black mothers' coping skills as a resource for working together and developing an allied relationship. Interestingly, Bernard also touches on a need to bring black men into the picture. She suggests that social workers who do not focus on men in their interventions with children run the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes and she explains that black fathers and mothers are subjected to distinct forms of racism and blame. Black men often are seen as dangerous or uninvolved in their children's lives, while black mothers are charged with the responsibility for their children's protection and care. Bernard's proposal to include black men in child welfare assessment is intriguing and worth considering more thoroughly.

What makes Bernard's work especially valuable are her analyses of the ways in which racism and gender oppression can both harm the mother/child relationship and can leave children less protected from sexual abuse. This book likely will be of interest to social workers involved with children and families, particularly those who are concerned with child welfare. It also will be valuable to readers who are interested in a largely unexamined aspect of the mothering experience.