

Angela Davis, *Modern motherhood: Women and family in England, 1945-2000* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012).

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*Modern motherhood* is an ambitious study of the lives of mothers in the second half of the twentieth century. Davis's primary source is a series of oral histories that she conducted with 166 women, a cross-section of mothers from their late fifties to nineties, living in rural, suburban, and urban Oxfordshire. At the time they were raising their children, all the interviewees lived in Berkshire or Oxfordshire. Keenly aware of the benefits and pitfalls of oral history, Davis places her research in the context of examples and conclusions from studies conducted by other historians and sociologists, as well as material from Mass Observation. Through these details, Davis is able to tell us much about how over the decades these mothers experienced changes in community structure, where they "learned" what it meant to be a mother, the types of direct and indirect education they received about child care and mothering, and the effects of shifting economic and social issues such as increasing paid employment of women outside the home and the rise of single-parent and unmarried households, and then how women reflected on and reacted to these familial and cultural factors.

It is critical that we listen to the voices of mothers through collections such as this in which we can place historical change on context. Davis presents this material in series of six thematic chapters, a structure that enables her to compare similar experiences among different women but not to trace the lives of individual women. For instance, one chapter deals with antenatal care and postnatal care. Because we do not follow the experiences of any one mother, we cannot see how these practices affected, interacted with, and shaped different aspects of a particular woman's life.

One of Davis' most powerful findings is the importance of relationships in constructing women's memories of their maternal events. Historical studies of modern motherhood often concentrate on the increasing medicalization of childbirth, the move into the hospital, the intervention of medical professionals. Yet, the women Davis interviewed do not emphasize the instrumentalities surrounding their birthing experiences. They instead discussed memories of emotions and interactions with persons surrounding them. Davis also discusses how the experiences of mothers were critically shaped by the "locality and type of community in which women lived" (p. 207). She is able to demonstrate this because her sample is composed of a diversity of interviewees representing a wide range of socio-economic groups and different family structures.

Listening to mothers' voices, Davis draws two significant conclusions. Firstly, throughout the second half of the 20th century, mothers expressed ambivalent feelings about motherhood. Despite cultural images of the devoted and happy housewife and mother, the women Davis interviewed saw the complexities and the difficulties with the maternal role. Secondly, Davis found that women used the common experiences of mothers to construct informal and formal social networks. It would be interesting to see if these conclusions are unique to the 20th century or represent continuities with previous periods. But that is another study.