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# Book Review of Mothers and Daughters: Complicated Connections Across Cultures

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# Book Review of Mothers and Daughters: Complicated Connections Across Cultures

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*Mothers and Daughters: Complicated  
Connections Across Cultures.*

Alice H. Deakins, Rebecca Bryant Lockridge,  
and Helen M. Sterk (Eds.). New York, NY:  
University Press of America, 2012.

346 pages. \$80.00. ISBN: 978-0761859154.

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As both a daughter to a mother and a mother to a daughter, I have lived, and pushed against, and been formed by, the profound truth about mother-daughter relationships suggested by this book's title: *it's complicated*. I came to my reading of this book with both interest and trepidation. A book on motherhood is always going to pique my interest, but a book about mothers and daughters connecting (or not) initially felt less like a promising exploration of researchable theory and data and more like a prompt for a challenging exploration of my own complex relationships with my 72-year-old mother and my 20-year-old daughter, which are differently joyful and painful in ways that lift me up and weigh me down. This book offered both explorations for me.

The editors have put together a collection that will prove to be a useful resource for feminist scholars who do family or motherhood studies and in particular for those interested in how relationships and identities, and personal and interpersonal meanings, are negotiated communicatively. The research represented in the book's thirteen chapters employed a range of methodological approaches including narrative, focus groups, depth interviews, surveys, participant observation, historical textual analysis, and literary analysis, among others. They look at an array of contexts for exploring how communication functions to create, develop, sustain, and trouble mother-daughter relationships as "situated, implicated" (p. xiv).

One of the most compelling features of this text for me as a motherhood studies scholar is its ability to move us beyond sacralized images and meanings of motherhood while steering clear of mother-blame. Culturally, we have a hard time with managing these two positions. Mothers so often are viewed as pure in motherly motive, irreproachable, on the one hand. But then when familial outcomes fall short of someone's expectations, which they seem to do as a matter of course, mothers are centered, though voiceless, in the inquiries about what went wrong. Neither the sacralized nor the demonized image represents mothers as human; both presume super-human maternal power that I suspect no woman possesses and both ultimately lead us to mother blame. Academically, even in focused feminist analyses, including perhaps some of my own work, we see mothers and mother figures heavily implicated in the shaping of human beings. Such work thus perpetuates maternal power myths, or, in an effort to push

against those myths, staunchly defends maternal choices, whatever they may be, thus bringing us back full circle to the pure and irreproachable mother, until the next time that someone's expectations aren't met.

*Mothers and Daughters* lifts us out of this frenetic spiral and sets us down in a space where we can think differently. In this space, we can conceive of mothers and othermothers and maternal figures in relation to others; we can see that mother-child relationships are neither given nor maternally determined but are rooted in assiduous and relentless communicative negotiations between mothers and others and, in this case, between mothers and daughters specifically. Individual and familial meanings and identities are intersubjectively accomplished, not just between mothers and children but between them and a host of other persons and values and meanings that are always in play and in flux.

In this space, we can dare to talk about maternal ambivalence and dominance, as Miller-Day's chapter does, and about daughters' frustration with their mothers' lack of competence, as in Sterk and Feikema's chapter on daughters' transitions to motherhood; we can then explore how mothers and daughters navigate such tough terrain. We can dare speak of the possibility of miscarriage as a 'miracle,' as in Rajender Kaur's literary analysis of an Indian novel. In reading Barbara Pennington's chapter on the mother-adolescent daughter relationship; Jaasma, Jeffries, and Nainby's chapter on mothers and daughters in academic careers; and Deakins' historical textual and iconographic analysis, we can admit that the management of dialectical tensions like autonomy-connection or attachment-separation not only is a process that is interminable, but also is one that can be deeply painful, even if not always so. In reading Lockridge and Lockridge's chapter on women whose carework crosses between child care and elder care in the Global North and the Global South, we can reconceive of the experience of simultaneous care for children and parents in ways that replace the squashing image invoked by the language of "sandwich generation" with the agentive image of a bridge; we can reimagine the women positioned between the different needs of children and parents as "bridge women" whose backs, and backing, connect family members to each other and to better functioning in their larger social world. And in reading Meyers' chapter on mother-daughter connections through feeding work, we can dare to locate mothers and daughters in the kitchen and at the table, where we can ask what meanings they are making and serving up in there, rather than render their continued work there invisible.

*Mothers and Daughters* is a refreshing read that opens up space for considering questions that are complicated, about connections that are complicated, across a range of cultural contexts. The collection offers important contributions for studies of family, parenting, mothering, and identity, and highlights the central and defining role that communication and change play in human relationships.

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