

McDonald-Harker, Caroline. (2016). Mothering in Marginalized Contexts: Narratives of Women who Mother in and through Domestic Violence. Bradford: Demeter Press.

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“Mothering in Marginalized Contexts” by Caroline McDonald-Harker is a focused qualitative study on the effects of domestic abuse on mothers and the experiences that go along with it. Incorporating all aspects of being a mother while attempting to withstand all forms of abuse, McDonald-Harker puts a spotlight on the prejudice forced upon these women in the societal eye. With the goal in mind as to dismiss any notions of stigma, McDonald-Harker allows the women to tell their own story without any preconceived notions involved. Out of the twenty-nine women interviewed, McDonald-Harker places seven of these women as the collective face of mothers under these circumstances. While rejecting previous theories in regards to the effects of mothering while within an abusive relationship, this synthesis allows the women to speak for themselves rather than them being spoken for. Utilizing her opportunity to speak with these women face-to-face, McDonald-Harker allows them to define their own definition of “mother” and gives them the platform they need to vouch for themselves and to reject the limited research done in the past. This book weaves seamlessly from the discussion of prior research into the experiences of these women while simultaneously putting an emphasis on the perception of what a “mother” truly is.

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Beginning the book with acknowledging that a “mother” is simply a woman with children who is loving, caring, and nurturing, McDonald-Harker challenges that assumption. She acknowledges that there is more than just one concrete definition of the word and challenges this false notion. McDonald-Harker places her attention on three main areas within the study: 1) abused women’s perceptions of the standards and expectations of mothering that all mothers are held to as well as those that abused mothers in particular face; 2) the ways that abused women view and construct themselves as mothers and what discourses they draw from, resist, and negotiate in constructing their mothering identities; and 3) the ways that intersections of the abusive social context, gender, race, and social class shape abused women’s constructions of their mothering identities (p. 97). Analyzing the research of O’Reilly, Levendosky, Holden, Ritchie, and multiple other theorists, she is able to see how each woman’s experience lines up or opposes these ideas. Once the women had the chance to discuss their experiences with McDonald-Harker, she was able to analyze their definitions of a “good mother” and compare them primarily to O’Reilly’s “mothering against patriarchal motherhood” in order to debunk the stigmas behind what a woman has to do for her child versus the typical excused absence and ignorance of the father.

Using the contrast of “good mother” versus “bad mother”, McDonald-Harker allows the women to discuss their interpretations of the word, even in the midst of backlash from outsiders. The common misconception that mothers who are abused are bad mothers that are bound to place the abuse they received onto their children is greatly disproved. While talking with one of the

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mothers, McDonald-Harker includes their own interpretations within the study. For example, one of the mothers, Shyan, had this to say when questioned if she considered herself a “loving mother”:

“I’m a loving mother cuz I take care of them and make sure they don’t get hurt, you know what I mean? I just try to protect them the best way I know how or can. I try to get along cuz I never want to be hitting any of them cuz I’ve been hit lots all my life and that’s why I’m like that. So I give them the loving I never had and was never shown.” (p. 192)

McDonald-Harker places focus on breaking free of these societal barriers presented to abused mothers and allowing them to tell their own story, as seen by Shyan. Abused mothers are not likely, at least within this qualitative study, to abuse their children as a result, contrary to what prior research says. McDonald-Harker ensures that the message put across is not of negative connotation to these women, as they do not deserve to be belittled as much as they already have been.

While looking into research common to this study, McDonald-Harker analyzed that “the abused women’s social location based on gender, race, and social class affected the way that they personally constructed themselves as mothers” (p. 225). Not only do these women feel obligated to adhere to their cultural values or traditions, but that stark stereotypes, such as those placed upon Aboriginal women, can force an individual to think negatively about themselves and become hyper aware of their every move. Having to be conscious of every action, these women are then compelled to try to act in the highest manner to be looked at as equal due to this prejudice. Throughout her study, McDonald-Harker ensures that the reader is aware of any preconceived

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notions they may have and that they have the capability to alter them. Cultural, religious, and spiritual customs may force women to believe that they are inferior or have to deal with abuse of any kind, but this is shown to be vastly untrue throughout this study as we learn about each individual's story.

McDonald-Harker's intended audience for this study, namely those who are within "family law, criminal justice providers, child protection and social welfare practitioners, child, youth, and family services, domestic violence shelters and services, health services, social services, and policymakers" (p. 30) will find this text insightful and considerate. McDonald-Harker also makes note that educators and students would find this text useful, which rings true in regard to increasing awareness and preventative measures. This study and its intimate focus will allow for those who read it to become more aware of the warning signs of domestic abuse and will allow for increased sensitivity within the topic. McDonald-Harker emphasizes that the concept of a "good mother" does not have a singular definition, but that it changes based on the circumstances. "Good mothering" does not mean that they have to have large capacities of resources or luxury, but that they are there for their child and will unconditionally love and protect them. The women presented in this study exemplified this and showed that even in the face of abuse, they are "warrior mothers".

The intimate focus on this topic by McDonald-Harker allowed for the women to share their individual voices, but it does not take into account other geographical locations around Canada or even the world. If there were an in-depth quantitative lens on this topic, it would bring more widespread awareness of the idea that this abuse is all around us. This study stopped at these women's place in the shelter and how that is where they currently reside, but a glance at the time

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ahead for these women would be beneficial. This would allow for the reader to realize that there is hope if they are experiencing or are suspecting domestic abuse and to know that they have a future without being bound to the abusive individual. McDonald-Harker's text stops at the present time, but a look into future plans or goals would be beneficial.

This synthesis is one that is bound to strike a nerve with multiple demographics because it is more common than one might think. Whether it be financial, mental, emotional, physical, or psychological, the effects and prevalence of domestic abuse are excessive and awareness can help with preventative measures. I would recommend "Mothering in Marginalized Contexts" to anyone who wishes to learn more about the personal effects of abuse and to educate themselves that it does not matter where one comes from, it can happen to anybody. This synthesis does an exceptional job of allowing the reader to feel a personal connection to the topic at hand and to know that it can be prevented and that it is not a helpless case.