

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Markella B. Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required: Private Freedom and Public Constraints for Parents and Children*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011, 208 pp, \$25.00 paper, (978-0813551494).

Adult Supervision Required makes the reader think twice about the freedom that parents have in making decisions about their children's upbringing and the degree of autonomy that children have within these decisions. Markella B. Rutherford, through a content analysis of mainstream parenting magazines from 1910–2009, examines the cultural messages that American parents have received regarding setting rules and boundaries for their children while simultaneously teaching them independence. While US parenting magazines are the main source of Rutherford's data, she enhances this analysis with interviews conducted with thirty parents, observations at parent support group meetings, and historical trends in parenting.

A thought-provoking introduction includes a quote from one of Rutherford's participants who echoes the sentiment "different rules for different families" (p. 2). This perspective is woven throughout the book as Rutherford discusses the freedom of choice that parents have regarding advice about child-rearing. While parents may have freedom in how they selectively choose from the plethora of parenting advice promulgated, they often make these choices within constraints. Even as children negotiate their own boundaries with their parents, they do so within constraints as well. The trade-offs made between both greater freedom and greater constraint for both parents and children are the main focus of Rutherford's analysis.

The chapters in Rutherford's book take the reader through a journey of parenting advice in the United States throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. This begins with an outline of how parenting advice shifted from the professional advice of those who would be specialists in the field of childrearing, such as physicians and psychologists, to the less authoritative advice-givers in the field. Parenting advice is in abundance but parents understand that they have a greater amount of freedom in choosing what works for their own family. Within this freedom, there is the notion that others may judge those that do not fall within mainstream parenting norms in addition to feeling more subject to state regulation.

At the same time that parents have gained autonomy as individuals they have lost some of their solidarity as a social group ... find it difficult to trust other parents ... [and are] more subject to the impersonal supervision of the state. (pp. 151–52)

Amid the advice given to parents is the notion that children should be encouraged to take ownership of their own behaviour (e.g., learn to manage their own emotions and regulate their school work), to negotiate rules, and to voice their disagreement with parents as a part of expressing themselves. The trade-off here is that as children receive more freedom to negotiate boundaries with parents and gain a more prominent voice within the home (no longer “seen and not heard”), other parameters inside and outside the home are decreasing. Safety concerns that include travelling to school, peer relationships, and regulating media content and technology are among the factors that Rutherford explores in examining children’s dwindling autonomy. Therefore, as children receive more autonomy within the home, they are increasingly under constant surveillance in the public sphere by parents and other significant adults in their lives.

Giving children the freedom to negotiate their boundaries suggests that parents are typically allowing children to take more responsibility — whether in their schoolwork or their friendships with their peers. However, Rutherford presents a dichotomy between the messages that children receive regarding the responsibility that they should have in various aspects of their lives versus the limits that are placed on that independence. Children’s obligation to their schooling is one example of a duty that requires them to take ownership. Despite this parental expectation, a pervasive message disseminated in popular parenting advice is the understanding that parents should teach their children responsibility but “should maintain relatively low expectations about children’s capabilities and that ultimately parents shoulder responsibility for children’s work” (p. 92). This conveys the idea that the onus is on the parent to make sure tasks such as homework and chores are done correctly.

The phenomenon of emotional agency promoted by experts in psychology is also considered in the book. Rutherford notes that parents are advised to encourage their children’s emotional growth so that children can express their individuality. In this, parents model to children how to handle their own emotions, the emotions of others, and difficult moments in day-to-day activities so that children will learn how to handle and communicate their own emotions. Therefore, children have obtained autonomy as “private, emotional agents” but they have also lost auton-

omy by the constant supervision and guidance that they receive from their parents (p. 152).

Methodologically, Rutherford justifies the importance of using magazines to survey the discourse of parenting in mainstream media. However, I think Rutherford's study would have been much stronger had she broadened her sample of interview participants to include a wider range of diversity such as ethnicity, family structure (e.g., single parents, blended families, same-sex parents, etc.), and social class. While her analysis is primarily of parenting magazines, the interviews enhance Rutherford's discussion by demonstrating the extent to which parents take the advice presented in magazines to heart. Rutherford acknowledges that her sample is mainly white, middle-class mothers and that this represents the majority of those who would read parenting magazines for advice. Yet she also concedes that magazines are most often used by parents of young children and even then they only serve as a "touch point" or "barometer" of trends (p. 37). Consequently, I feel that a greater number of interviews along with more diversity in the sample would strengthen the validity of the analysis.

Nonetheless, it is a thought-provoking examination of the pervasive messages regarding parenting and childhood that are inculcated in mainstream cultural products such as parenting magazines. The categories that Rutherford includes in her discussion flow in a logical progression. Further, the inclusion of trends through a historical analysis tells a story of the messages of parenting advice through the years. Even though her focus is within the United States, the analysis could easily be extended to a North American context. The writing is clear, completely accessible, and would be a useful addition to advanced undergraduate and graduate courses on the sociology of the family and childhood.

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