

Book review: Like Mother, Like Daughter? By Jill Armstrong

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This book explores the influence of full-time working mothers on their daughters' career aspirations and ambitions. It is based on a solid sample of 88 interviews with 30 mother-daughter pairs, interviewed separately and together. All mothers worked in professional and senior managerial careers, and most of the daughters also worked or were at university. The book is well-structured with eight chapters focusing on specific themes; take-away points at the end of each chapter and a succinct summary of the main findings in Chapter 9. Each chapter offers an interesting analysis; although at times I was wishing for more 'juicy' quotes that could add richer detail and showcase this fascinating data. The book offers captivating insights into the process of inter-generational transmission of values and attitudes towards career ambition, showing how it is culturally embedded. This review will focus on several themes related to the book's findings.

Firstly, one of the main findings - that would, no doubt, make a lot of professional working mothers breathe a sigh of relief - is that Armstrong finds no support for the popular guilt-inducing myth that mothers working full-time have a negative effect on their children. The book shows that, while some of the mothers felt concerned, the daughters felt well-mothered. Armstrong also shows that mothers have primary influence over daughters' career choices as well as offer direct help. Unpacking these relationships gives a rich insight into how integrational influences shape the gendered and classed career paths and identities. Mothers transmit their middle-classed values around the meaning of work and its connection to one's self-concept, for instance, that work should give a sense of self-worth, be enjoyable and intellectually stimulating. But mothers are also instrumental in (re)producing a rather gendered version of ambition - a 'quiet ambition' (p. 95), which means they downplay their success; they also encourage the daughters to see success as making a difference and producing quality work rather than as a linear progression to the top. While part of me found this alternative ambition strangely appealing in the era of individualisation and aggressive competition, as Armstrong highlights this 'quietness' is gendered and lends itself to much critique - especially if mothers do not pass the same idea to their sons. What Armstrong finds is that mothers are both models and mentors in shaping their daughters' work aspirations; yet,

modelling alone is not enough and what matters for success is explicitly discussing career ambitions and presenting success as achievable and desirable (p.114).

Another fascinating finding related to unveiling the extent of the intergenerational influence shows how the process of value transmission about careers is not straightforward and is profoundly embedded in the cultural context. Despite admiring their mothers' full-time working and feeling well-mothered, the majority of daughters expect and want to work part-time and significantly reduce their work hours when they have children, thus (re)producing what Armstrong calls the discourse of the 'best of both worlds'. She shows how these decisions are shaped by an array of complex social pressures, including the millennial generation's desire to work less and not wanting to 'live in the office' (p.69), but more so, the pressures of the contemporary script of intensely responsible motherhood and the postfeminist rhetoric of 'balancing' work and life rather than 'having it all' (p. 127) that means that the 'moral high ground is against the working mother' (p.132). Hence, the daughters' behaviour is more similar to their generation than their mothers. This finding is fascinating but also somewhat disheartening; young women acknowledge the harmful effect of reduced hours on their careers but, despite some expectations of more egalitarian parenting, they still see themselves and express the desire to be primary careers of children. This is not surprising given the increased cultural pressures and the disturbing lack of structural change.

Continuing from the last point, what came through strongly for me, but could have been probably emphasised more in the book, is how this dynamic of intergenerational value transmission about career ambition is profoundly embedded in the structural context. For instance, it is interesting that Armstrong found that 'pragmatic' vs 'idealistic' attitude of mothers impacts on parenting experience, particularly the amount of socially-induced guilt felt by mothers. But what struck me, were the mentions of the structural incapacities of contemporary society that timidly cropped up in participants' accounts. For instance, suggestions that it is not the working *per se* that is stressful, but working around the childcare system (which remains unfit to accommodate a dual-career arrangement) or the inflexibility of work arrangements. Or the fact that a few negative experiences reviewed in the book came mainly from single mothers, but it was not their singleness that was the problem, but the lack of organisational flexibility and structural support that made their experiences harder. In the case of the daughters, it was striking that they did not feel they would do as well as their mothers due to economic changes and the gendered barriers they still expected to face. As Armstrong mentions, the daughters' accounts need to be seen against the background of

postfeminist cultural rhetoric that foregrounds profound individualisation of responsibility. Yet, it felt that this critique could be even stronger. The younger generation of women seem to be stuck between the new oppressive motherhood ideal and the intensified pressures of work. Given the lack of adequate structural changes and the relentless postfeminist 'regime of self-responsibilization' (McRobbie, 2009) that has taken away the language of collective change and challenge, scaling down on ambition and interpreting it as a personal choice is, unsurprisingly, the main way for young women to deal with their circumstances. What makes further structural critique more important is that, the book focuses on a middle-class cohort of women who pursue relatively interesting and rewarding careers, and may be able to afford to 'opt out' of full-time paid employment, so I did wonder about the kind of pressures that those without this option would endure.

Overall, I found the book very interesting, and providing excellent empirical insights and a solid contribution to literature. I read the book with a lot of scholarly and personal interest, and I would definitely recommend it.

References:

McRobbie, A. (2009) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London: Sage.