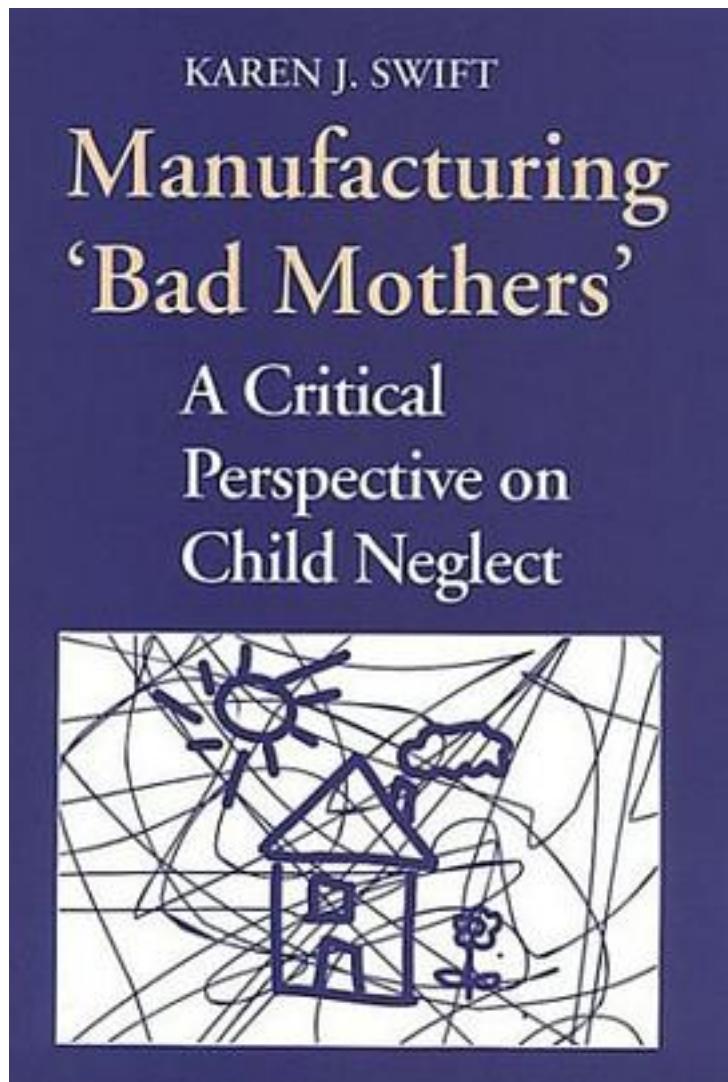


Manufacturing Bad Mothers



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Child neglect has been characterized over the past century as a problem of deficient care of children by mothers. A complex and punitive child welfare system has emerged, based on a view that the children of these mothers require legally sanctioned rescue by those better suited to care for them. Karen Swift challenges both the accepted view of child neglect and the present official response to it. Beginning from a critical theoretical perspective, she argues that our usual perceptions of neglect hide and distort important social realities. This distorted perception only serves to reproduce the conditions of poverty, marginalization, and violence in which these families live. The current child welfare system, far from rescuing neglected children, helps instead to ensure the continuation of their problems, and the outcome is especially dramatic and damaging in Aboriginal communities. Swift explores the historical, organizational, and professional dimensions within which child neglect becomes a visible social reality. Also examined are relations of class, race, and gender embedded in our usual understanding of child neglect. The discussion shows how these relations are continually reproduced through ordinary, everyday work practices of social workers and others who deal with mothers accused of child neglect. The 'good parent' model, through which help and authority are apparently merged, continually indicates that the mothers are unworthy of help. Their own experience disappears as they are faced with procedures designed to examine their present suitability for the job of parenting. The same procedures produce children as actually being helped through the exertion of state authority over their parents -- but most of the help provided children is theoretical, and some of it is quite damaging. Swift also looks at both current and alternative notions of helping families. Finally, she argues that each of us can help to transform oppressive social realities.

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