Recalling the Traumas: Review of *The Little Trials of Childhood*


Every now and then a social scientist writes a book that can best be described as charming. Such is the case with Fran Waksler’s latest creation. Waksler, already known for her pithy style, witticisms, and lively prose, has given us a little gem. The book essentially is about the microsociological issues that children face, but it has a message that ranges far beyond the minute details of everyday life.

Drawing on her background as an ethnomethodologist and symbolic interactionist, Waksler provides a theoretically driven understanding of how children deal with the problems that face them. The data she used, drawing on a piece that she first published in this journal in 1986, were taken from papers that were written in a freshman seminar she conducted at Wheelock College. She asked her students to provide recollections of past experiences, and gave them, progressively, a list of projects that required them to reflect back on their own childhoods, recall hard or embarrassing times that they had, and provide strategies for how they dealt with these situations. Waksler deliberately chose to use this type of retrospective interpretation method because she finds that interviews with children *in situ* are often contaminated by an adult’s presence or may require young children to think about harsh realities they may not be prepared to discuss. As she readily admits, this method may fail to take full account of how adults come to later frame their childhood experiences. While these methods can be faulted for not isolating the phenomenological moment when children experience these tribulations, Waksler ably defends her choice of methods. Like it or not, the result is a perceptive compendium of accounts that speak to children’s emotional epiphanies.

The bulk of the book is divided into the critical areas that Waksler delineated as she coded the students’ accounts. Readers will relish each episode, hauntingly recalling their own youthful transgressions or guiltily reflecting on their own parental styles. In chapter 2, Waksler explores control over the body and its functions. Food, a central feature of young people’s lives, is given center stage. Admonishments about eating hated foods, eating what’s good for you, or finishing your plate resonate loudly in these recollections. Food is used as a
reward, too, as people remember the desserts proffered or withheld for good and bad behavior. Requirements about sleep are also recalled, though the chapter comes into full focus in its discussion of bodily intrusions. A host of bathroom rituals are elaborated that lead to discomfort, pain, and embarrassment for young children. Reminiscent of Goffman’s notion of selfhood, these recollections remind us that, to an adult, children are powerless beings who have little say in personal matters.

Goffman, too, is evoked in chapter 3 as Waksler’s respondents are given voice to tell their stories about the presentation of self in childhood. Clothing, hair style, piercing, and other appearential issues are discussed. In each case, we once again see that parents take tight control over the images children are allowed to project to others. This type of impression management offers adults yet another way to control children, while at the same time presenting images to other adults that they are competent, involved parents who fit into normative expectations about childrearing.

In chapter 4, children’s activities are explored. Most critically, young adults remember being denied access to participation in desired activities or being required to engage in unwanted activities. The accounts richly illustrate the frustration that children feel about being made to do something that did not interest them or being forced away from coveted events to fulfill some familial obligation. Reading these accounts reminds us how distressing these times can be. Similarly, in chapters 5 and 6, respectively, emotions and knowledge are explored. The range of emotions that children project, and their inability to control them, turns out to be a source of great anguish. Frustrated by their powerlessness, children lash out, express fears, or become upset by what, in adults’ terms, may be considered trivial matters. By minimizing the importance of children’s values, adults create a chasm between themselves and their offspring. Knowledge is also something that is withheld from children. Not dumb or unaware children understand that they are being denied access to information that others have. People report that, as children, being lied to was a common perception. The case of Santa Claus as a prevailing myth is used as an example in chapter 7 to further illustrate how children react to misrepresentations made to them. The book continues in this vein by discussing teachers and school, and crying and temper tantrums, in the subsequent chapters.

Beyond the empirical significance of these stories, in the hands of a theorist as accomplished as Waksler the book takes on profound meaning in its conclusion. At a time when the influence of parents on children’s lives is being hotly debated (see Harris, 1999), The Little Trials of Childhood reminds us why it might be that peers offer a safer haven for children than families. One need only read this book to find out how denigrated, degraded, and demeaned children are in the context of familial relations. While parents present themselves as doing things for children’s own good, Waksler reminds us that