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## **Review of *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. Nel Noddings. Reviewed by Diane M. Johnson.**

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understanding the rich narratives that play out between workers and clients. These narratives contain all the motifs of our culture: gender, class, race, and so on. Perhaps a better title for this book would be "theories *about* practice," as the symbolic interactionist perspective renders a worker who is more reflective, more aware of the multiple influences and meanings that construct the worker-client interchange. However, this same worker also has to know what to do, has to have guidance from experience and research about what helps a client in a major depression, or what contributes to bonding between a parent and a child.

Clearly social work practitioners need theories about practice, as well as theories for practice. It is important, though, for the field to maintain clarity about the strengths and limits of different theory groups. This reviewer was not convinced that symbolic interactionism provides a useful root language for understanding the multiplicity of practice theories. The comprehensive survey of symbolic interactionist thought that Forte provides would be very useful in a doctoral course in a sociology program, or in a joint sociology and social work program. In its breadth of scope, and careful delineation of different intellectual movements, this book would be a useful reference for doctoral students and other scholars. Most MSW students and MSW practitioners, however, would stumble over the density of theoretical material and would be skeptical of the practical utility of the theoretical material.

Daniel Coleman  
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Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002. \$35.00 hardcover, \$19.95 papercover.

Since Carol Gilligan first put forth an alternative theory of the moral development of women and girls in 1977, the field of feminist ethics has mushroomed. Indeed, as a result of the groundbreaking work of Gilligan and educator/philosopher Nel Noddings, the concept of a relationally-based ethic of care today stands in juxtaposition to traditional theories of moral philosophy focused on rights and justice. Thanks to Gilligan, Noddings and many others, developmental theory has had to make room for

theories of moral development that value interconnectedness, responsibility and caring for others, as well as individual autonomy. Nevertheless, feminists and feminist theorists do not all speak with one voice, and it is into this arena that Nel Noddings has stepped once more with *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. One of Noddings's goals in this book is to answer those who have criticized care theory as "a fine 'domestic' theory" (p. 1), but one that is largely irrelevant when discussing large-scale (macro) issues and the policies necessary to address these issues. She succeeds overall toward this end, but not without triggering debate along the way.

Noddings has chosen to come at the question of care theory's relevance beyond the domestic arena in a way which, as she notes, "reverses a long philosophical tradition" (p. 1). Instead of beginning with a description of what an ideal society would look like and then arguing for particular changes in existing institutions in order to create this ideal, Noddings instead argues that we have much to learn by "starting at home." Indeed, Noddings' main thesis is that the origins of care, both "caring for" and "caring about," have their roots in the domestic arena and in the parent-child relationship. Her hypothesis, that all humans have a need to be cared for, establishes the importance of this experience if one is to learn to care for and about others. According to Noddings, it is this ability to care about others that fosters the ability to take a global view and to develop of sense of social justice. Therefore, argues Noddings, if we are to put forth truly effective social policies, we must acknowledge the central role of an ethic of care and turn to the domestic arena in order to learn how to effectuate workable solutions to some of our most challenging social problems.

Noddings builds her argument carefully and deliberately, rooting it in and expanding upon the work of moral philosophers such as Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas, while at the same time, challenging the primacy of the Kantian ideal of an ethic of justice. She argues that current social and political theories, especially liberalism, have not provided a satisfactory theoretical base from which to formulate effective social policies. Noddings then presents her concept of "self," arguing against the usefulness of the concept of an autonomous self and positing instead the idea

of a relational self. Next, Noddings moves from the theoretical to the developmental, devoting the middle portion of the book to a detailed discussion of the development of the relational self in the context of the home environment. From here, Noddings moves into the arena of public policy and, drawing on the principles of an ethic of care, demonstrates how social policies can be developed that respond to both the expressed and inferred needs of those seeking assistance.

There is much to like about this book. It is literate, intellectually stimulating and well-argued, drawing from sources as diverse as Kant, Rawls, Dewey and Orwell. Its scope is extremely broad-ranging, covering everything from the emphasis of Enlightenment philosophers on rights and justice, the philosophical underpinnings of care theory and developmental theory to the formulation of social policy. In addition, Noddings's writing is direct, and she does not dodge difficult or controversial issues. For example, Noddings takes on squarely the issues of abortion, euthanasia, infanticide and capital punishment and demonstrates how an ethic of care allows the debate to move out of the realm of rights and into a place where the needs of all those included in the web of care can be considered. Hers is not a position likely to please those on either end of the spectrum. Her discussion of women who have been victimized is likewise provocative. She argues that part of interdependence is being able to share responsibility for injuries inflicted upon us, including battering and sexual abuse. While Noddings states clearly that she is not arguing that women have responsibility for bringing these events on themselves, still this is a very tricky argument to make, in a society where the prevalence of sexual and physical abuse, as well as domestic violence provides evidence of a climate condoning violence against women.

Noddings has successfully made the link between applying the lessons of the ideal home to existing social problems, and she challenges us to think "outside of the box" in order to create policies and solutions which effectively meet the needs of those designed to be helped by these policies. As such, this book makes a strong teaching tool for those in all the helping professions. Yet, Noddings does not take her analysis to the next level, that is, questioning the political economic system which has given

rise to these social problems, as well as legitimating policies which are clearly deficient in addressing the most basic needs of human beings. Expanding her analysis would necessitate a discussion of needs versus interests, as well as a discussion of the role of conflicting interests in obviating efforts to inject caring as the standard for successful social policy promulgation. Such an addition could only strengthen her argument for policies based upon an ethic of care.

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