
Book Reviews

Lives on the Edge: Single Mothers and Their Children in the Other America. By Valerie Polakow. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 222 pp., \$22.00.

Lives on the Edge applies a gender lens to *The Other America*: described by Michael Harrington (New York: Macmillan, 1962) in his landmark book on the rediscovery of poverty. An academic turned storyteller, Valerie Polakow tells us about the lives of young single mothers and their children. An associate professor of educational psychology and child development, Polakow is deeply concerned about social policy's negative impact on these the highly vulnerable groups. After interviewing 15 young single mothers and observing preschool children in various Michigan classrooms from 1989–1991, Polakow offers powerful portraits of young mothers and moving narratives of children in Head Start-type classrooms. As she intended, the struggles of the young resilient mothers contradict popular myths about women, welfare, and poverty. The stories of daily life in the preschools illustrate how poor children suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. As such they create an impetus for educational reform. The portraits give effective voice to those rarely heard by the powers-that-be; and provide a human face to current debates about abortion, welfare, health care, education, and crime by introducing us to the women and children most affected by the outcomes. The book should be of interest to policymakers as well as educators, mental health professionals, and social scientists from various disciplines.

Polakow reminds us that povertization of women is hardly new. She reviews well-known poverty data and the less well-known idealized versions of motherhood and childhood that concealed the nation's historical maltreatment of women and children. Lurking beneath romantic vision of the family as a "heaven in a heartless land" lie wife-beating, incest, and meager public aid. Likewise, public support for slavery, child labor, inadequate schools, substandard housing chronic hunger, and grinding poverty belie idyllic notions of childhood.

The romantic images of women, mothers, and childhood also caused single mothers, especially if poor or non-white to be defined as deviant

and undeserving. Since colonial times poor single mothers have been constructed as “other” for failing to fulfill the class and race biased expectations of proper motherhood and family life. Reflecting this, social policy has historically defined women as deserving and undeserving of aid based on their compliance with prescribed wife and mother roles. To this day, most programs treat unmarried women far worse than their married sisters. In addition, women, especially mothers, are often blamed when things go wrong. From the schizophrenogenic mother to the welfare queen, social policy—often backed by social science—has conveniently scapegoated mothers rather than acknowledge the political and economic causes of the nations problems. Most poor women survive against these odds, but pay a high price for being part of what Polakow calls “the other motherhood.”

In many ways, *Lives On The Edge* is an exposé of the failure of society to care. Polakow’s brings this message home most effectively by showing what it takes for (and from) poor women and children to survive in affluent America. The moving stories of Joey, Toni, Anna, Sara, Tara and Mary reveal six Black single mothers’—“scarred but fighting young women who actively sought help, who struggled to work, to go back to school, to provide their babies with something better.” Despite enormous odds and uneven outcomes, Sara still has “her dreams,” and Anna her “high hopes” (p. 78). Justice, Christy, Lori, Becky, and Jenny—five young White single mothers—also suffered abuse, unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, despite the benefits of being white and greater access to jobs. Both Black and White teen mothers faced intrusive public assistance policies and harassment at the welfare office, although in some cases the White women fared a bit better. The desires of the women to better their lives were repeatedly frustrated by lack of income and services and by the scars of poverty and want.

In an era when the public is told that social programs do not work, Polakow shows otherwise. The often chance encounters with responsive social services made a difference in the lives of the deeply deprived, but undefeated young mothers she met. The help of a sensitive teacher, a teen-parent center, a public health nurse, and a caring social worker made some change. The importance of these relatively small interventions suggests what could be achieved with a stronger safety net, an expanded social service system, and a job-rich economy. Polakow argues that for social policy to operate differently we need to stop demonizing the victims of poverty and deal with its underlying causes. U.S. social policy has never been very generous, but Polakow’s interviews conducted at the end of the eighties, shed a piercing light on the devastation that is wrought by a budget driven rather than a need-responsive social policy. One cannot read this book

without thinking about the punitive measures that are currently being enacted in the name of “welfare reform.”

The second half of the book moves from the lives of poor women to children in public pre-school programs like Head Start. Here, too, public attitudes toward the poor and poor public policy have taken a their toll on children. Sadly, Polakow finds that many preschool teachers have internalized society’s negative views of the poor as deficient and undeserving and that this has shaped their responses to the children under their care. The practice of blaming the individuals without taking “the system” into account extends from the family into the classroom where teachers express a deep distrust of poor women’s ability to raise their children properly, and assume in advance that children “living in the projects” or from “welfare homes” will be disruptive and unable to learn. Marginalized by the very schools set up promote their development, the children manage to keep hope alive, but their palpable anguish marks one’s conscience.

Polakow is especially concerned about what she call’s the pedagogy of the poor. Most of the teachers she observed gave top priority to classroom “law and order.” Seeking to prepare the children for compliance with future school and work norms, the teachers favored standardized, often rote, activities; recasted playfulness as deviancy; and penalized creativity. It is heartbreaking to learn that teachers put eager children in the corner for asking questions, moving around, not staying in line, doing something different or wanting more detailed or personal instruction. In the name of providing “structure” believed to be missing from the children’s homes and communities, the teachers tended to punish normal childlike transgressions and to dismiss inventive play and expressions of need. Difficult children, readily labeled as emotionally impaired or learning disabled, were referred to special programs that only furthered their sense of isolation. The emphasis on classroom management was troubling not only because it stymied the children but also because Polakow lets us see the children’s readiness to learn and their pain at being turned away. She also lets us know that it could be different by including several examples of teachers who value development over obedience and who encouraged children to thrive.

Polakow condemns the pedagogy of the poor for turning early education into a limited and stressful experience. But because she does not fully analyze its source, she risks blaming the teacher for a much more complex problem. Polakow does, however, decry the two-tiered pre-school educational system for segregating children by race and class, having low expectations of the children, and providing them with inferior education. The system, she says, seeks to “compensate [the children] for what their families have failed to give them, not for what we have taken away from them” (p. 130).

The telling portraits of young mothers and children at school force us to join Polakow when she damns public policy for its role in creating poverty, punishing poor women, and exploiting children and then tolerating the devastating impact of these outrages on the human spirit. But Polakow is more interested in the resilience of poor women and children than in their oppression. The energy, spirit, accomplishments, and resistance of the poor women and children she encountered actively undercuts the negative images of the poor as passive and dependent that are driving today's public policy.

While it may be too late to protect the children seen by Polakow from the abuse of poverty it may not be too late, "to prevent further ravages" or to "begin to understand the impact of living on the edge" (p. 164). To these ends, Polakow recommends a standard but still unachieved package of liberal reforms: universal health care, child allowances and parental leave, and a national childcare system. She also wants a pedagogy of equity to replace the pedagogy of the poor detailed in her book. Beyond these important measures Polakow draws on Paulo Freire and calls for a new praxis in which society takes responsibility for the harrowing destitution of poor mothers and their children and "refuses to acquiesce in the continuing construction of private greed and public squalor" (p. 164). If public policy constructed inequality, Polakow optimistically concludes, it can also unmake it.

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Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology. By Rhoda Unger & Mary Crawford. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, 706 pp., \$34.72.

Not only is this a very fine textbook, it is an enormously-satisfying reminder of the volume of empirical research that has been generated about women and gender since I was a student. The authors have summarized and integrated the literature in many different areas within psychology; there are, I think, two striking features of the way they have done this.

First, the book not only takes a feminist perspective, as its title announces, but it helps the reader understand what makes a perspective feminist (for them, that it "places a high value on women" and "recognizes the need for social change...to benefit women" (pp. 8-9). Without trivializing

some readers' worries or doubts about feminism, and without making feminism the exclusive province of some ideologically-privileged readers, Unger and Crawford show how a feminist perspective can be inclusive in its substantive concerns as well as the methods used to produce knowledge, and can serve as a constructive starting point for generating new knowledge in many subfields in psychology.

Second, the book makes a serious attempt to discuss race/ethnicity, social class, age and sexual orientation as critical "dimension[s] for classifying humans and allocating power" (p. 22). While there is not always a rich database to draw on, Unger & Crawford consistently raise questions about the differences among women in their experiences, needs, responses, and life circumstances. This effort makes theoretical sense and feels organic to the book's basic stance, given the authors' adoption of a definition of gender that underlines its nature as "a system of power relations" (p. 19).

The first six chapters of the book focus on conceptual issues in studying women and gender. These include discussions of personality theories, the traditional focus on sex differences as a strategy for studying women, cultural images of women, distinctions between sex and gender, and the biological features used to differentiate the sexes, and characterizing women. In all of these chapters the authors both present key theoretical ideas, and provide critical perspectives on those ideas. The reader is helped to see both the usefulness of powerful insights, and their limitations.

The remaining chapters take a loose life-span perspective, mixed with some more topical chapters. Thus, there are chapters on childhood, adolescence and "Midlife and Beyond." Between adolescence and midlife, chapters on "Sex, Love, and Romance," "Long-Term Relationships," "Mothering," and "Work and Achievement" are included. The last two topical chapters (after the midlife chapter) focus on "Violence Against Women" and "Psychological Disorders." The coverage is quite comprehensive, and the structure should serve the purposes of those who organize psychology of women courses in terms of the life course as well as those who organize it more topically.

The book is written in a clear, accessible style; the tone is professional, with none of the "cuteness" that is often assumed to appeal to undergraduate readers (but irritates me). There is a helpful *Instructor's Manual* (prepared by Mary Crawford, Rhoda Unger, & Amy C. Stark), which includes chapter summaries, identification of key concepts, suggestions for classroom discussions and activities, as well as videos and films, in addition to exam questions and recommended assignments. These seem to grow very directly from Crawford and Unger's extensive experience teaching these topics and should be useful for both those new to psychology of women courses, and those eager for new things to try.

This book is ideally designed for courses that focus on the "psychology of women." It would not be appropriate by itself for those courses which attempt to cover the "psychology of gender" with equal attention to men's and women's lives. Even so, some chapters (particularly "The Meanings of Difference: Sex, Gender and Cognitive Abilities," "Doing Gender: Sex, Status, and Power," and "Biological Aspects of Sex and Gender") would be quite useful in such courses as well.

This is clearly an excellent text for teaching. I recommend it, too, for two other purposes: as an antidote to the feeling that those of us studying the psychology of women have accomplished little or nothing in the field; and as a model of writing that is critical, scholarly, broad in its coverage and appreciation of contemporary research, and at the same time comfortable with its feminist perspective.

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Rape: The Misunderstood Crime. By Julie A. Allison and Lawrence S. Wrightsman. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993, 307 pp., \$21.95 (paper).

This book was written to provide a more comprehensive understanding of rape by examining and synthesizing rape research from a psychological perspective. The primary goal of the authors is to educate professionals and students of psychology on this topic in order to dispel the myths that surround rape and its survivors. Presumably, this is why they titled the book *Rape: The Misunderstood Crime*. We, however, found this title to be confusing and ambiguous. One is left to wonder if the crime of rape is "misunderstood" because the rapist is really not as monstrous as we all believe. As feminists, we are very concerned that people might in fact jump to this conclusion.

Our prime objection, however, is that the contents of the book are as devoid of feminist concerns as the title is insensitive to them. The authors state that it is their intention to avoid any theoretical biases in their analysis of the literature. We would argue that simply by claiming to be "objective" and "scientific" that the authors are indeed embracing a particular viewpoint. This traditional scientific way of thinking stresses objectivity and value-neutrality. Feminist theorists have pointed out that it is impossible to remain truly objective and value-free. The kind of research

that is done on rape is motivated by the subjective interests and values of those who carry out and fund research, such as that reported in this book.

The most worrisome shortcomings of the traditional scientific method when viewing rape through these lens are that it tends to be removed from a social context by being individualistic, as well as removed from women's experience by being patriarchal. Rape is a social phenomenon and to ignore the social and historical circumstances surrounding it is negligent at best. Following traditional scientific thought, this book does tend to be individualistic (as evidenced by the chapter "Preventing Rape," summarized below). Societal implications are often neglected with the absence of a specifically feminist viewpoint. By claiming to take an objective, scientific stance, which the authors describe as being atheoretical, they fail to analyze in any depth the implications of rape as a serious social problem. This, combined with the style of devoting most of the text to research results and "facts," contributes to a sense of superficiality.

The book covers a wide range of issues within the field of rape research. A good overview of the book is given by simply examining the chapter headings. The book opens with "Why Study Rape?," an introductory chapter explaining the premise of the book as a vehicle to debunk myths about rape and the approach that the authors take in doing so. Chapter Two, "The Rapist," presents the "typical" characteristics of a rapist. "Stranger Rape" examines the myth and reality of the stranger as rapist. "Date Rape and Acquaintance Rape" follows with incidence rates and a discussion about the etiology of rape in social interactions between men and women. "Spousal Rape" is also addressed, focusing on the historical and current laws regarding this manifestation of the crime. "Attitudes Toward Rape and Rape Victims" looks at the current beliefs that people have about rape and rape survivors. In "Explaining Negative Reactions Toward Rape Victims," the authors use general concepts in psychology to explain the specific negative reactions that many people have to the crime of rape and its survivors. "The Reactions of Rape Victims" again offers psychological explanations for these reactions which are based upon more general theories of behavior. "The Rape Victim at Trial" describes the process of bringing a rape allegation to trial and its effects on the rape survivor. "Rape and the Law" gives a brief history of legal sanctions against rape and the scope and success of current laws. "The Treatment of Victims and Rapists" describes the most important elements in treatment for rape survivors, and this is lumped together with current treatment modalities for rapists. This rather offensive pairing suggests that both survivors and rapists need our empathy as they both are in need of treatment. The final chapter in the book is titled "Preventing Rape" and offers 11 pages of

ways the individual woman can avoid rape and two pages of ways in which our society should reform in order to prevent rape.

The style of presentation consists of reporting "facts" about rape, highlighted by case vignettes and supplemental information boxes. The information boxes contain some of the most valuable insights found in the book, but their appearance has the effect of interrupting the flow of the writing. It would have been preferable for those points to have been incorporated into the general text. The case vignettes certainly engage the reader, consisting of vivid accounts of rape, and current events which most people will remember. However, the most subtle effect of these case vignettes is to ultimately desensitize the reader to the horror of rape. The research findings that are presented would be very valuable to the reader who is looking for references in the literature on rape, or for the person who is looking for a quick "fact" about rape. Unfortunately, although the book is largely research oriented, the authors often did not address methodological problems of the studies cited. This leads to the impression that all of the research was accepted and reported unquestionably and without critical examination. In addition, much of the research cited is outdated; of the first 50 references, only 20% were published in 1990 or more recently.

Despite our misgivings about the book, the authors do a fine job of presenting data on a wide range of important issues and offering varying viewpoints on each of these. However, their goal of synthesizing the data is notably unmet. The authors assume that disseminating the objective data on rape will increase awareness and initiate change. We would argue that knowledge alone will not change things, but rather a critical analysis of the social and cultural traditions that perpetuate the myths and misconceptions surrounding rape. In this regard, the book is not a valuable contribution to "academic discipline" or to gender research.

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