

Life Without Father: Single Mothers in the New America

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Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage. By Katherine Edin and Maria Kefalas. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. ISBN 0520241134, \$24.95 cloth, 293 pp.

Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family. By Rosanna Hertz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. ISBN 9780195179903, \$26.00 cloth, 273 pp.

The Social Economy of Single Motherhood: Raising Children in Rural America. By Margaret K. Nelson. New York: Routledge, 2005. ISBN 9780415947787, \$24.95 paper, 252 pp.

In the conclusion to her book, *The Hearts of Men*, Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) poses the following question with some trepidation: “Are we acquiescing to a future in which men will always be transients in the lives of women, and never fully members of the human family?” Current statistics on family structure show that, whether or not Americans have acquiesced to this state of things, a significant proportion of women and children live, at least for a time, in a world without men. In 2005, the U.S. Census reported that more than ten million women lived with their children in single-parent households, up from three million in 1970. This means that 28% of children live in mother-only families. Whether formed by divorce, desertion, widowhood, or childbearing or adoption outside of marriage, families headed by a single mother are a significant portion of the social landscape.

Conservative rhetoric condemning single mothers has packed a powerful policy punch, leading to the “death of welfare as we know it” under the Clinton Administration and continuing with “marriage initiatives” and other punitive social and economic policies under the Bush administration. Various scholarly and ideological explanations have attempted to account for the rise in single motherhood: the rise of no-fault divorce in the 1970s, a decline in family values, government benefits that reward those who avoid marriage, the vanishing manufacturing sector and a concomitant decline in employed,

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marriageable, working-class men, the rise in the male prison population among African Americans, as well as the social and economic gutting of the inner-cities. These hypotheses are targeted primarily at one stereotypical single mother: the young, inner-city African American woman who has given birth outside of marriage and grows up to become what Ronald Reagan famously termed a “welfare queen.”

The books reviewed here tackle this political and scholarly rhetoric and turn it on its head, presenting single mothers in their own words as remarkably diverse group who have arrived at single parenthood through divergent, and often class-segregated paths, and who share middle-class American values and struggle to embody them, often at significant cost to themselves. They also show how single mother families struggle to survive in the absence of any meaningful financial assistance from the state or from men.

Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalis take on the stereotype directly, documenting the lives of young urban women from pregnancy through birth into single motherhood and ultimately, for some, marriage. The authors chose three neighborhoods based on their economic and ethnic composition: all poor, one predominantly black, one predominantly white, and one predominantly Latino. They and their research assistants interviewed 50–60 women from each ethnic group, for a total of 162 women, while spending untold hours “hanging out” with them and their families. Three-quarters of the women they interviewed had borne their first child in their teens. The book that emerges from this painstaking work is a masterpiece, and topples many long-held assumptions about single motherhood among the urban poor.

Perhaps the most striking finding emerges from the authors’ core question: why they so seldom marry, and why they have children at all when supporting them is such a struggle. The women they interview hold mainstream ideals about family, marriage, and self-sufficiency that lead them to “shuffle” their career/marriage/childbearing life trajectories to fit their social and economic conditions. The women in this study value children highly, so much so that they rarely consider abortion or adoption. Childbearing is the route to social adulthood in their world, and most of them use becoming a mother as a motivator and a “springboard” into responsibility. This finding overturns the assumption that poor women would do better to finish education and start work before having children. In truth, very few of the women interviewed here found a reason to “turn their lives around” *until* they had children. Their lives do not become easier, but they do become more meaningful and productive.

As seen through the eyes of their female partners, men’s experiences of early childbearing differ significantly from women’s, leading them to drift away from their children’s mothers in most cases. While motherhood creates a new social role with both burdens and pleasures, new networks of friends, and a new status within the family, many of the men described in this study find that fatherhood is all demands and little fulfillment. Their partners expect them to become responsible parents, yet the regular paycheck that is the sine qua non of the responsible “breadwinner” father often eludes them.

The pressure on men to provide a stable financial base for their new families in an economy that offers them few employment opportunities is a significant barrier to stable relationships. However, Edin and Kefalis argue that other issues, such as male criminality, incarceration, intimate violence, infidelity and drug and alcohol abuse contribute as much or more than financial insecurity to the end of relationships. Since most of the women in the study find incentives to leave adolescence behind in becoming mothers, they expect no less of their partners: “I changed, now *you* have to change,” is the unfulfilled demand.

The women in *Promises I Can Keep* also hold mainstream views about marriage, thus the title. They count the promises they make to their children as those they can keep, unlike

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the promises young adults make to one another about eternal love and stable relationships. Because they value both marriage and parenthood, but realistically assess the former as risky and the latter as a “promise they can keep,” the women Edin and Kefalis interview plan a life around their children first, building career security second, and marriage or romantic partnership last. Given the ratio of women to unincarcerated men in their communities, and the poor economic prospects of even the most responsible men they know, choosing to avoid marriage until they are financially stable as a single parent unit is not only reasonable, but wise. Counter to the image that poor women do not value marriage enough and therefore require marriage “classes,” Edin and Kefalis demonstrate that they value it highly enough to avoid it until they feel reasonably sure that it will work.

Margaret Nelson takes on another set of stereotypes—that single mothers are predominantly urban dwellers, and explores the survival strategies of single mothers who are white and live in rural settings. Although this is a less typical group, they have a great deal to teach us. The social and economic hardships faced by the 68 women Nelson interviewed are informed by geography: car ownership is necessary for rural life. Everything rural mothers need to get by, be it food, friends, family, children’s school or their own workplace is farther away and thus requires access to a car and intricate coordination. It is not surprising then, that Nelson chooses to focus on the coordination of what she terms the “social economy” of their lives.

Nelson’s development of the concept of social economy provides a framework for her research and offers its greatest contribution. As part of her interviews, she asks mothers to draw conceptual maps of their networks of friends and family, including arrows indicating the direction and nature of assistance exchanged. Rural single mothers draw on networks of friends and kin, as well as on employment and government support to cobble together an infrastructure for their children’s lives. For example, many of the women Nelson interviewed described actively creating relationships of exchange with men who could give rides, repair cars, and chop wood. They also create social networks of other single mothers to whom they can turn for moral support and for exchanging favors like babysitting or rides to the pediatrician. While demonstrating their resilience, Nelson’s description of their use of social networks also speaks to one of the many paradoxes in these women’s lives.

Rural single mothers are doubly-disadvantaged because they need to participate in the networks of exchange and mutual support that sustain poor families, but often cannot reciprocate. Hard-earned friendships with other single mothers provide networks of reciprocity in which all participants are equal, and no one is judged as “deviant”; however, these are also “communities of need,” (p. 68) in which, because of their shared hardships, single mothers have little to offer one another in terms of time, money or favors. As one mother noted, “*this sounds really bad*, but if I need to leave my kids with someone or if I need something from someone, I basically figure out who the last person I asked was and move on to someone else. I try not to overwhelm one particular person with too much” (p. 184).

As a result of the difficulty balancing their needs with their friends’ scarce resources, many of the single mothers Nelson interviewed report relying on more advantaged friends and family members for support. This strategy has its own costs: mothers describe being grateful for the help with housing, childcare, rides, and education costs that they receive primarily from their parents and siblings. At the same time, they acknowledge that these gifts come with burdens, whether it is “being willing to exhibit deference” towards others or “endure surveillance” (p. 183) from others, or by listening to unsolicited and unwanted advice, or sacrificing their position of primacy by allowing other adults to become central figures in their children’s lives. These complex social negotiations demonstrate the emotion

work, guilt, and anxiety that single mothers must endure to make ends meet in the absence of public or spousal support.

Reliance on state support is in some ways even more complex. As Nelson notes, “public morality matters to single mothers, and it especially matters because of the sharp awareness that their family form is subject to denigration” (p. 181). One quarter of the women Nelson interviewed received some form of public assistance at the time of the interview, and an additional one third had previously received welfare support. Receiving public assistance shifted the realm of stigma from the private sphere of family and friends to public shame. Mothers describe the humiliation of using food stamps or of having to explain why they are not in the labor force, accounts that are particularly difficult for them to make because they share the belief in the ideology of self-sufficiency that brought AFDC to an end. They often share the negative opinion of welfare recipients that dominates public discourse: says one, “They’re lazy. That’s my take....I got a stereotype for them too and I’m one of them” (p. 97).

At the same time, the mothers who received assistance prior to welfare reform argue that mothering is worthy work and should be compensated, referring to the state as an inadequate husband-substitute. They also argue that advocating for their children and provisioning their families through public programs IS a form of self-sufficiency. After welfare reform, however, the argument that the state should support mothering as a right shifts to one advocating that the state should assist single mothers in attaining a living wage. Here, too, public assistance falls short, cutting women off from childcare and housing subsidies before women have achieved economic stability.

Nelson contributes to policy debates by drawing on the analysis of her interviews. Clearly, marriage initiatives are useless in cases where the father is violent or irresponsible. Employment initiatives are equally useless if they fail to provide living-wage jobs or the childcare women need in order to go to work. She points to the women’s own solutions: community-supported drop in-child care and after-school centers; health insurance for all; and most importantly, public ideologies and policies that recognize that all family forms deserve support that enables them to care for their dependents.

Hertz uncovers a new and growing group of single mothers: those who choose to become mothers without a partner. They may become parents through a known or unknown sperm donor, through adoption, or through sexual relations with a man they don’t intend to live with. The 65 women interviewed for this study choose these routes to parenthood as Hertz describes, “reserving marriage only for love, they no longer reserved motherhood for marriage” (p. 19). Having maximized their career potential, they find themselves without partners and with a loudly ticking biological clock. They choose to become “single mothers by choice.”

Like the women described in Nelson’s study, the single mothers Hertz interviews draw on family and social networks for support. However, unlike the women in Nelson’s study, these women have the financial resources to hire a network. They create social supports through their childcare workers. They find emotional support, extra income, and a helping hand by renting out space in their homes. They also turn to their parents for assistance, but because they come from more affluent families, they receive help in the form of the down payment on a house or in assistance with adoption or in vitro fees.

While economically advantaged, the women Hertz interviews are relatively socially disadvantaged. As middle-class women, they view single motherhood as a “daunting step” and feel more pressure than the other mothers described here to account for absent fathers. For example, in choosing a prospective father, they are torn between competing needs for family privacy and control over access to their children that an anonymous donor or

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international adoption would provide, and the semblance of normalcy that a known bio-dad would represent. Hertz provides a fascinating analysis of this tension, demonstrating the exceptional power of the heteronormative family model in these women’s lives. Women create “imagined fathers” through anonymous donor records, attributing through a process of elimination which of the child’s characteristics must have come from the donor father. Similarly, mothers who conceive via anonymous donors or who adopt internationally construct “sibling” relationships for their children through donor databases and through affiliation with children from the same orphanage.

Hertz provides an account of “Murphy Brown” and “Friends” stories as they play out in real life. Because she interviews at least half of the women 5 years after the initial point of contact, she offers unique insight into how these family arrangements play out over time. “Ultimately,” she argues, rather than an aberration, “building families from a mother-child core is the future” (p. 197). Given the evidence, it would be difficult to disagree.

The similarities among the women from very different social locations remain the most striking aspect of these studies. Edin and Kefalis, Hertz, and Nelson, all find women for whom motherhood is mandatory, while romantic relationships are optional because they are both risky and rare. The question of how to incorporate men and other romantic partners into their lives becomes more complex as women move forward into new romantic relationships. Having separated childrearing from romantic partnership, all of the women want to avoid the three pitfalls they describe in relationships with men: fear that the partner will become an additional child, desire to avoid male control over their lives, and concerns over making their children vulnerable to a potential “social dad” when the “bio-dad” is long gone. In fact, a failed marriage is much more frightening to these women than the prospect of no marriage. A respondent in *Promises I Can Keep* summed up the prevailing sentiment: “I’d rather say, ‘Yes I had my kids out of wedlock’ than say, ‘I married *this* idiot” (p. 207).

Clearly, Ehrenreich’s ambivalent prediction has come to pass, at least for a significant minority. Motherhood simultaneously confers a sense of identity, honor and purpose in these women’s lives. It is a master status in the way that the role of “wife” no longer is. However, this fact raises other questions: what about the family members who are silent in these narratives? What about the men? Why are they so absent from their children’s lives?¹ What about the children? Although the mothers discussed here go to great lengths to provide their children with positive, long-term relationships with men and other living adults, is it unreasonable to ask young children to serve as the emotional core of their mothers’ lives? Even if their mothers eventually do settle on a partner, children with a stepfather often suffer more than those living with a single mother (Edin and Kefalis p. 215).

Finally, in a society in which family benefits are distributed through marriage, what would it look like to re-structure social policy so that mother-child families are similarly supported? In fact, legal scholar Martha Fineman (1995) has argued that because responsibility for dependents falls on the family, the legal “family” should be re-defined based on caregiving relationships rather than on sexual or romantic ties. These outstanding monographs demonstrate why her proposal is not as far-fetched as it might have once seemed.

¹ Katherine Edin and her colleagues have already begun to address this question in a nationwide study based on interviews with 400 “absent” fathers.

References

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