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BOOK REVIEW



FACES OF POVERTY: PORTRAITS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON WELFARE, Jill Duerr Berrick. *New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 214, \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN: 0-19-509754-8.*

Discussions surrounding welfare recipients, female-headed families, and poverty are routinely overshadowed in the United States by stereotypes, political rhetoric, and shallow perceptions. When realities are discussed, policy makers and academics often reduce such truths to statistics, losing sight of the faces behind the numbers. A most welcome exception to these tendencies is a book by Jill Duerr Berrick, *Faces of Poverty: Portraits of Women and Children on Welfare*.

Berrick begins her book by providing a brief history of the welfare system from 1935 to the present, along with a review of some of the more common myths surrounding welfare reciprocity. She then turns to the heart of her analyses. Within each of the next five chapters, the life story of a woman who has used welfare is described. Four of the five cases were drawn from a larger quantitative study that examined the effects of the GAIN program in California. The five individual women were selected for this book in order to illustrate a variety of situations and circumstances encountered by female-headed families.

The titles of the chapters describe the key themes for each woman: "Ana: Caught in Circumstances Beyond Her Control," "Sandy: Working but Poor," "Rebecca: Motivation and a Fighting Spirit," "Darlene: Complex People, Complex Problems," and "Cora: A Portrait of Dependency." In each case, Berrick insightfully unfolds the individual's life story. Through extensive interviews, the five women recount their histories and current situations. The interview material is supplemented with the au-

thor's qualitative field work, as well as information from broader research studies, in effect placing these women's experiences into the overall context of what we know regarding poverty and welfare reciprocity. As Berrick writes at the conclusion of the methods appendix, "These women's experiences should not be seen as 'average.' Indeed, a sample of five women cannot be generalized to the larger population; they and their experiences are offered only as a complement to existing quantitative studies and are meant as an illustration of the effects on women and children of living in poverty" (166).

The final chapter reviews a number of the more recent welfare reform ideas, and reflects on the merits of these proposals. Part of that reflection juxtaposes such reforms with the circumstances of the five women and their children described in earlier chapters.

There are several real strengths to this book. First, it allows the reader to take an in-depth look into the lives of five different women and their families who are struggling to survive on welfare. These portraits puncture many of the familiar stereotypes surrounding welfare, and in some cases confirm them. It is thus a complex picture that we get of these women. This complexity is too often absent in our discussions regarding welfare recipients.

Second, *Faces of Poverty* allows one to better appreciate the overall context in which welfare reciprocity has occurred. Often in our haste for quick answers, we lose sight of the various events that have led up to impoverishment. Even in the case of Cora, who has become highly dependent upon welfare and therefore fits the stereotypical image of a welfare recipient, we are able to understand and appreciate how she wound up in the situation that she has. Rather than simply casting blame, Berrick's skillful descriptions allow us to arrive at a deeper understanding of the twists and turns that befall many of these women.

Third, the book is very well written and highly engaging. It is a rigorous academic book which is also hard to put down. The author is to be commended for her insightful yet highly accessible writing style.

The major fault I have with the book, however, is that it fails to go beyond its descriptive nature. The author has missed a golden opportunity to reflect deeply on these women's lives and conceptually attempt to grasp the underlying dynamic. There is a noticeable lack of theoretical substance to this work, leaving many important and interesting questions not only unanswered, but unasked.

Yet despite this drawback, *Faces of Poverty* is a must read for anyone interested in the topics of welfare, poverty, and female-headed families. It is an insightful and riveting view of the welfare system by the true experts

in this country—those women and their children who have faced the daily difficulties of surviving on welfare. Berrick has provided an invaluable service by bringing such seldom heard voices to life in the midst of the fundamental changes occurring to the welfare state.

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