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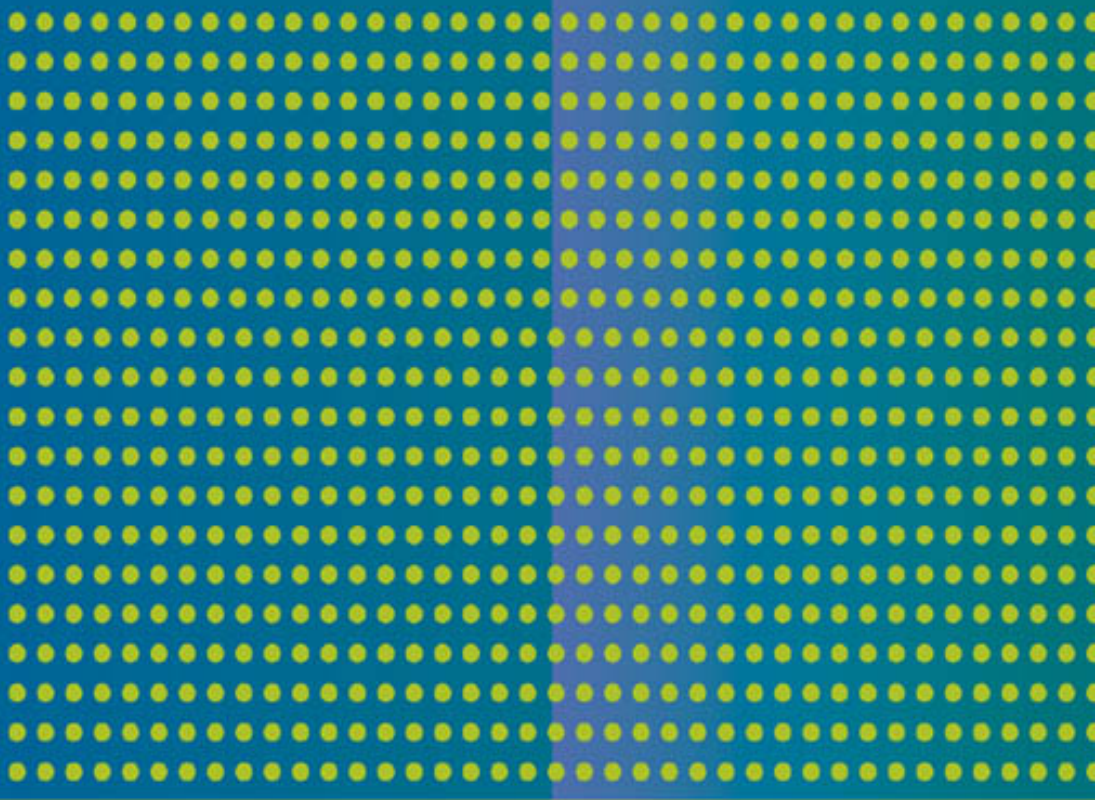
Diversity in Families

Baca Zinn Eitzen Wells
Ninth Edition



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struggle in low-wage jobs even though they may have been better off on welfare. Over a 12-month period, Edin and Lein found that both welfare mothers and low-wage working mothers experienced devastating hardships. Both groups faced the same fundamental dilemma each month, and they relied on similar kinds of survival strategies to generate the additional money they needed to bridge the gap between their incomes and their expenditures.

> These survival strategies were dynamic rather than static. They resembled a continuously unraveling patchwork quilt, constructed from a variety of welfare- and work-based income; cash and in-kind assistance from family, friends, absent fathers, and boyfriends; and cash and in-kind assistance from agencies. Though welfare- and wage-reliant mothers drew from the same repertoire of strategies, wage-reliant mothers were less likely to rely on supplemental work because they had so little extra time. For the same reason, they relied much more heavily on their personal networks to meet household expenses. Although maintaining this web of social relations took time, the "work" fit more flexibly into working mothers' schedules. (Edin and Lein, 1997:224–225)

This study highlights both the hardships and creativity of poor, single mothers. With the high rate of unemployment and limited social opportunities, poor families must do whatever it takes to survive. Even though they were clever at devising strategies to make up their budget shortfalls, these strategies took a great deal of time and energy. They were highly unstable and sometimes illegal (Edin, 2000b).

In a new study of motherhood and marriage, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas ask the question "Why do poor women have children outside of marriage?" Their findings show how marriage patterns are closely tied to class factors. Neighborhoods without economic stability or community supports make it difficult for childbearing and marriage to go hand in hand. Poor women value both children and motherhood, but they see them differently. For the women in this study, children are a main source of identity and well-being. Yet they avoid marriage to men who do not meet their standards for financial and emotional security. According to Edin and Kefalas, they take marriage so seriously that they are unwilling to risk failure (Edin and Kefalas, 2005).

Since welfare reform was enacted in 1996, many mothers have been dropped from welfare rolls without any other form of financial support. Those who do obtain employment are often in low-earning jobs and find that employment is not necessarily a ticket out of poverty (Hays, 2003; Murray et al., 2002:112). Even full-time work is no guarantee of livelihood for many U.S. families. A recent national study has found that 71 percent of low-income families work, but they earn such low income that they are struggling financially (Waldron et al., 2006). Karen Seccombe summarizes the effects of poverty on families: "Impoverished families face a higher degree of stress, disorganization, and other problems compared to more affluent families. Yet poverty is not simply about money. The effects can be far-reaching and devastating within a variety of realms, including work, family, home, health, schools, and their neighborhood" (2007:51) Low-income immigrants who have higher poverty rates than natives are especially vulnerable to these problems (Marks, 2006:52). For families in poverty, survival often means expanding their family boundaries in order to stretch and sustain the few resources they have (see Box 2).

BOX 2

Inside the Worlds of Diverse Families

How Single Mothers Survive in Poverty

Two studies provide a window on the lives of single mothers living in poverty. One, by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low Wage Work* (1997), interviewed mothers prior to welfare reform enacted in 1996. The other, by Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (2003), examined mothers after welfare reform. Each study poses different questions. Each offers different perspectives on single mothers in poverty. Yet they both challenge conventional narratives that blame poor mothers for their own plight. Most single mothers in these studies shared a desire to be working, self-reliant, citizens and parents. Each study highlights a range of behaviors women use to make ends meet. Both studies force us to rethink common stereotypes of poor single mothers.

In the following passages, from *Making Ends Meet* (pp. 143–144), Edin and Lein emphasize what they call "survival strategies":

> These survival "choices" were not entirely up to the mother, since other factors, including her personal characteristics and the characteristics of the neighborhood and city she lived in, often limited the range of options available to her. Despite these constraints, however, most mothers said they still had a range of strategies to try.
>
> Some mothers relied on the father of their children or a boyfriend for help. Others relied mainly on their own mother or other family members. In cases where neither a child's father, a boyfriend, nor a relative could help, mothers often relied on an off-the-books job. Some sold sex, drugs, and stolen goods. Still others moved between informal and illegal jobs. When these strategies failed, many went to churches or private charities to get help to pay the light bill or the rent.
>
> Mothers who did not have supportive friends or relatives had to find some kind of side work. But some mothers told us they could not do side work because they had no one to watch their young children. Others could not get a side job because they were disabled, still others did not have the know-how to get an off-the-books job without getting caught by their welfare caseworker; and others lived in small, tight-knit communities where a side job would be hard to hide from authorities.
>
> Mothers who could get neither network support nor side work were the most dependent on churches and private charities. Not surprisingly, these mothers invested a lot of time learning about the range of public and private sources of help available in their communities. Some mothers had a relatively easy time finding out about agencies because members of their social networks offered them guidance or because such services were well publicized. Other mothers lived in neighborhoods or cities with poor service environments, making agency help more difficult to obtain.

Like Edin and Lein, Hays studied how single mothers survive in poverty. Her book, *Flat Broke With Children* reports on the impact of welfare reform on the lives of poor women and their children. She discovered that despite the challenges of the new laws pertaining to work, women went to great lengths to provide for their families.

Because neither welfare nor work provided a wage adequate to support all the needs of their families, some women were forced to reduce meal sizes for themselves and their families. Some women reported stealing in order to obtain the resources necessary to support their families. Beyond these tactics, many women sought supplemental income by taking second and third jobs. Some single mothers were limited in their ability to work because they lacked the skills to perform the work. Among those who worked, it was also common to work graveyard shifts, weekends, or off hours.

Single mothers often turned to their friends or families for help both with children and finances. In addition to borrowing money from family members, they sometimes moved in with sisters or parents. They also relied on the fathers of their children or boyfriends for support. Single mothers also leaned on the assistance of friends or family to care for their children. At times, they worked out reciprocal arrangements where they watched each other's children during opposite working hours. Some women employed paid caregivers or leveraged after school child-care programs although the added financial demands of these solutions made them less prevalent. Overall, single mothers struggled to secure jobs that provided adequate wages, benefits, and flexibility to allow them to pay for necessities, care for their children, and raise themselves above the poverty line. As a result, they invested time in learning about the variety of public and private services that were available to support them. And they turned increasingly to private charities, churches, food banks, homeless shelters, or housing assistance programs.

References

Edin, Kathryn, and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low Wage Work.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997, pp. 143–144.

Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Source: Brower, Tracy. Department of Sociology, Michigan State University 2009. This essay was written expressly for *Diversity in Families*, 9th ed.

BLUE-COLLAR FAMILIES

Working-class families are the largest single group of families in the country. As Rubin described the working class in the 1990s,

> [t]hese are the men and women, by far the largest part of the American work force, who work at the lower levels of manufacturing and service sectors of the economy; workers whose education is limited, whose mobility options are severely restricted, and who usually work for an hourly rather than a weekly wage. They don't tap public resources; they reap no benefit from either the pitiful handouts to the poor or from huge subsidies to the rich. Instead, they go to work every day to provide for their families, often at jobs they hate. (Rubin, 1994:30–31)

Blue-collar families depend on hourly wages, which makes them susceptible to layoffs, plant closings, and unemployment (Rapp, 1982). These economic pressures move working class families even farther from the idealized nuclear family model. Of course, working class families have always been vulnerable to economic fluctuations. Their class position offers little economic support for economic dislocations. As their jobs are downsized or disappear, many working class families must at one time or another live on a combination of wages, unemployment insurance, and social security benefits (Bridenthal, 1981). Like those in the lower class, they may depend on government assistance, food stamps, and various sectors of the irregular economy. For minorities and women in the working class, economic pressures are compounded by racial discrimination and sex discrimination. Minority groups and women heading households are disproportionately found in this category.

Working-class families continue to be stereotyped as "traditional." However, many blue-collar families keep themselves above the official poverty line through wives' employment. By the end of the twentieth century, wives in blue-collar families were likely to be employed outside of the home. Classic studies of working-class families (Komorovsky, 1962; Rubin, 1976) and more recent examinations by Judith Stacey (1991) and Lillian B. Rubin (1994), reveal consistent themes of financial stress and marital strife. Studies conducted in the first decade of the twenty-first century found that family life took place amid precarious financial conditions (Dodson and Bravo, 2005; Hansen, 2005). The current economic downturn has put families at even greater risk "where any unexpected event such as a child's illness or a brief layoff threatens their financial stability. Moreover, divorce is splitting many working-class families" (Perry-Jenkins and Salamon, 2002:198).

Families in this class location struggle creatively, often heroically, drawing on whatever resources they can to sustain the family. Support from kin turns out to be one of the most important solutions to social and economic pressures. Working-class reliance on extended kin is not new. Practically every study of working-class families shows that they interact more with kin than do middle-class families. For example, Mirra Komorovsky's classic study, *Blue Collar Marriage* (1962), revealed that kin relations were the main experience of group membership.

Herbert Gans's study of "urban villagers," Italian American workers in Boston, also painted a kin-based picture of working-class families (Gans, 1962:245). And Lillian Rubin's classic study, *Worlds of Pain* (1976), described the extended family as the heart of social life. Rubin exclaimed that "even in mobile California, the importance of extended kin among working-class families is striking" (Rubin, 1976:197). The classic literature on working-class families shows that the kin network helps

families reduce financial stress (Perry-Jenkins and Salamon, 2002). Recent research also highlights strong kinship ties in the lives of working class families (Lareau, 2003). Of course, living in the context of a large and supportive kin network can have both costs and benefits. On the one hand, kin can provide support when times are hard. On the other hand, they also require assistance, and they can be the source of family conflict.

MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES

The middle-class nuclear family is idealized in our society. This form, a self-reliant unit composed of a breadwinning father, a homemaker mother, and their children has long been most characteristic of middle-class and upper-middle-class families. Middle-class families of the new century are quite different from the television stereotyped family of the 1950s. Today, many families sustain their middle-class status only through the economic contributions of employed wives (Warren and Tyagi, 2009).

Middle-class families generally receive salaries rather than wages. Their salaries provide them with a stable resource base, a factor that differentiates them from those below. Even more important, the middle class exerts power and control in relation to the working class. Those in the middle class can control their working conditions in a way that the working class cannot (Vanneman and Cannon, 1987). According to Randall Collins (1988b), this power position distinguishes the middle class from the working class. In his distinction, members of the middle class are "order-givers," while members of the working class are "order-takers." This is a useful way of thinking about class as a social relationship. However, gender complicates matters because paid work gives women and men different connections with society's opportunity structures. Some women's jobs seem to be in middle-class sectors, but Collins argues that, in fact, most women's jobs are "white-collar working-class" because they take rather than give orders:

> Secretaries, clerks, and retail sales positions are order-takers, not order-givers. Many of them are also manual workers, operators of machines (telephones, photocopiers, typewriters, word processors) within an office setting. Nurses, who are conventionally classified as professionals, nevertheless tend to be clerical workers within a medical setting and assistants who perform manual work for physicians (although they may sometimes have some order-giver power vis-à-vis patients). Of the most common female occupations, only schoolteachers (5.3 percent of the female labor force) would be considered genuinely middle class by the criterion of order-giving and order-taking. (Collins, 1988b:30)

Gender can create class inconsistencies in middle-class marriages because many middle-class males have married downward to white-collar working-class women.

Families in which both mother and father are breadwinners must find ways to provide care for their children. How families in different class locations do this in the twenty-first century is the subject of a new study by sociologist Karen Hansen. Her research challenges the myths that middle-class families are self-sufficient and disconnected from kin. Even if they are middle class, families with two breadwinners must build social networks to help them care for children. In today's world, they have increased their reliance on kin. Hansen concludes that structural changes have given rise to middle-class families that are "not-so nuclear" (Hansen, 2005).

But even if middle-class families are less kin-oriented than those in the working class, their "autonomy" is shaped by supportive forces in this class location. When

exceptional resources are called for, nonfamilial institutions usually are available in the form of better medical coverage, expense accounts, credit at banks, and so on (Rapp, 1982:181). These links with nonfamily institutions are precisely the ones that distinguish the family economy of middle-class families. Class distinctions are often complicated by race:

> Two main things tend to distinguish black middle-class people from middle-class whites. One is the likelihood that many more of their relatives will come to them first for help. The other is that they tend to lack the resources of people who started in the middle class. (Billingsley, 1992:284)

FAMILIES OF PROFESSIONALS

Families in the professional class are likely to merge the spheres of work and family. Leisure activities often revolve around occupational concerns and occupational associates. Studies of corporation executives and their families reveal a strong corporate influence. For example, Rosabeth Kanter's classic study found that both executives and their wives were closely tied to the corporation. Here is her description of "corporate" wives:

> At a certain point in their husbands' climb to the top [these wives] . . . realized that friendships were no longer a personal matter but had business implications. Social professionalism set in. The political implications of what had formerly been personal or sentimental choices became clear. Old friendships might have to be put aside because the organizational situation makes them inappropriate, as in the case of one officer husband who let his wife know it would no longer be seemly to maintain a social relationship with a couple to whom they had previously been close because the first husband now far outranked the second. The public consequences of relationships made it difficult for some wives to have anything but a superficial friendship with anyone in the corporate social network. Yet since so much of their time was consumed by company related entertainment, they had little chance for friendships and reported considerable loneliness. (Kanter, 1984:116)

In many professional homes, family life is subordinate to the demands of the husband-father's occupation. Family can be a respite, "dad's place of leisure" (Larson and Richards, 1994). Family can take a backseat to the male involvement in work, success, and striving. Corporate relocation is commonplace. In many cases employers subsidize moves by paying for moving expenses. Commonly, professional employees are relocated repeatedly, "sometimes as often as every two or three years and on average every five to seven years" (Eby and Russell, 2000:4).

Moving to a new community for a job change affects family members in a variety of ways. There may be some benefits from the move, but there are also costs. An employee's family members must give up their previous home, including the physical dwelling and the surrounding community with its offerings of arts, activities, stores, scenery, and so forth. Also, they give up a sense of familiarity, and they give up close proximity to individuals and organizations with whom they were connected and from whom they drew varying levels of resources such as companionship or support. In some cases, this effect is large. In other cases it is small. And the effect often differs for different members of the family (Whitaker, 2005:89). (See Box 3.)

BOX 3

Emergent Family Trends

Women Pay a High Price for Corporate Relocation in Today's Global Economy

The United States has a national job market for employment, especially professional or managerial employment. As more and more companies become national or global, employment possibilities within a company are geographically widespread. People are expected to relocate to other areas of the country or the world in order to take a job, keep a job, or advance in a job. In fact, more than half of all moves in the United States are believed to be work-related, and promotions, new job responsibilities, and even mere job retention are sometimes attached to geographic moves (Hodson and Sullivan, 2002).

Corporate relocation has different implications for men and women. Although the movers are primarily professional middle and upper-middle class employees, this form of work-related family migration is disproportionately male-centered. According to *MOBILITY Magazine,* the monthly publication of the Employee Relocation Council, a trade association for relocation professionals, 83 percent of domestic corporate transferees and 87 percent of international corporate transferees are male (Marshall and Greenwood, 2002). Most are married (84 percent of domestic) and most have children (about 60 percent of each).

We often think of wives in professional middle-class marriages as both privileged and educated and therefore immune to gender discrimination and gender disadvantage. Employee relocation today is one area that refutes that image and where being a woman can exact a high price. To understand how corporate relocation affects women, we must consider gender role expectations. Productive activity, or paid labor, is treated as men's domain while reproductive activity, unpaid labor necessary for the reproduction of everyday life, is treated as women's domain. Even when women work outside the home, they are still responsible for most family and household work. While relocation maintains or improves the situation in the productive realm, it requires that a family forfeit many of the resources of the reproductive realm. Relocated families must give up their homes and the surrounding communities. Also, they must give up a sense of familiarity and the close proximity to individuals and organizations with whom they were connected and from whom they drew varying levels of resources, such as companionship or support.

To study the relationship between families, work, and community in the new millennium, I talked with 10 women who had been moved for their husbands' jobs (Whitaker, 2005). We spoke about the decision process that preceded their move, the changes they underwent with regard to home and place, and the process of reestablishing a family in a new community. Although the women spoke in terms of "opportunity," it was clear that pressure and guilt influenced them to "go along" with the move. The pressure came from their feelings of vulnerability in the precarious global economy and from the sense that they didn't have the right to stand in the way of their husbands' aspirations. The following statement is representative of the sentiments of several women who followed a transferred husband:

> For me absolutely [there was a time we considered not taking it], but not for him. We talked a lot about it, but at this time I was a stay-at-home mom and the guilt was overwhelming. What exactly did I have to stay in [city] for? Just pretty much because I didn't want to be away from friends and family was the only reason. It was my husband's career, and I didn't have a career then other than being a full time mom. . . . Ultimately this is his career and if I was going to follow him up the corporate ladder then this was what we had to do.

While transferred husbands are engaged with their careers and are immediately immersed in work activities and work communities, their wives are charged with recreating and then maintaining the private aspects of life, the very aspects that are a hidden cost of relocation. One relocated wife said this when she thought about what she was giving up by moving to allow her husband to advance in his career:

> I really loved where we lived. It was a perfect fit. It wasn't right on top of my family but close enough to see them. And the town, they'd just made so many great improvements. It is just a great place to live and I hated to leave. To leave the town, our friends. [My husband] and I, that was like our little family. (Whitaker, 2005)

About half of these professional, educated women gave up their own jobs in addition to taking on the responsibility of reestablishing their families with new networks of support and companionship. Overwhelmingly, the women said that a move was successful only when

(*continued*)