



March 1999

Through my Own Eyes: Single Mothers and the Cultures of Poverty. Susan D. Holloway, Bruce Fuller, Marylee F. Rambaud and Constanza Eggers-Pierola.
Reviewed by Jill Duerr-Berrick, University of California at Berkeley.

Jill Duerr-Berrick
University of California at Berkeley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Duerr-Berrick, Jill (1999) "*Through my Own Eyes: Single Mothers and the Cultures of Poverty.* Susan D. Holloway, Bruce Fuller, Marylee F. Rambaud and Constanza Eggers-Pierola. Reviewed by Jill Duerr-Berrick, University of California at Berkeley," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol26/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



and impact of oppression and discrimination against people with disabilities worldwide. *Nothing About Us Without Us* is a critical analysis of the disability rights movement. The book gives the reader a good grounding in the history of the international disability rights movement and where it is today. The author leaves the reader with many question about where the disability rights movement will go in the future. Wherever the movement goes, Charlton is clear, nothing about us without us. The future will depend upon people with disabilities determining the course of their destinies and claiming their power against formidable economic/political and sociocultural barriers.

Stephanie Brzuzy
Arizona State University

Susan D. Holloway, Bruce Fuller, Marylee F. Rambaud and Constanza Eggers-Pierola, *Through my own Eyes: Single Mothers and the Cultures of Poverty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. \$35.00 hardcover.

In an era of welfare reform, when poor families' lives are being transformed by large-scale public policy, it is easy to lose track of the personal stories and lived experiences of women and children in poverty. Federal and state policymakers have attempted to fashion a new approach to income support that reflects changing public sentiments about government's role in the lives of families, while also imposing obligations on adult women to look for work, find work, and exit the welfare roles promptly. How women will respond to these new requirements is as yet unknown, in part because we understand little about the struggles low income families already face coping with crushing poverty, dangerous neighborhoods, few steady work opportunities and limited child care resources. More important, we know even less about women's personal perspectives on the joys of raising young children while coping with the challenges of doing so in poverty. *Through my own eyes* attempts to give voice to women whose considerations on child rearing, child care, and other broad-ranging issues are too infrequently heard in the clamor of debate about welfare reform.

The book uses ethnography to capture the personal experiences and viewpoints of 14 low-income women. In doing so, the

authors follow the qualitative methods of others who have also attempted to convey life on welfare from an intensely personal experience. Other books such as, *Lives on the Edge* (Polokow, 1993, University of Chicago Press), *Living on the Edge*, (Rank, 1994, Columbia University Press), and *Faces of Poverty*, (Berrick, 1995, Oxford University Press), all attempt to add humanity to an otherwise colorless and faceless debate about the fate of millions of poor women and children. The authors' goal in composing *Through my own eyes* varies little from these previous titles. They write:

In writing this book we are motivated by a singular aim: to ensure that mothers and their young children living at the edge of poverty will no longer be faceless strangers. This book is an invitation to get to know fourteen of these women and to learn about their lives (p. 2).

Having introduced the reader to the general framework and methods (chapters 1 & 2), the authors utilize the women's narratives and their own augmentations to describe common concerns regarding motherhood (chapter 3), children's behavior, child rearing, and discipline (chapter 4, 5 & 6), education (chapter 7) and child care (chapter 8). An additional chapter written by Bruce Johnson-Beykont, describes preschool educators' perspectives on education based on his interviews with 37 teachers. And the final chapter summarizes the implications of the authors' research for policy change, community practice, and scholarship.

The book is based upon a convenience sample of 14 low-income women with at least one child under the age of five, living in Boston, Massachusetts during the early 1990s. All of the women had used AFDC for several months at some point during their young child's life, and most were working by the time the study began. The study was conducted over a three year period and included semi-structured and unstructured in-person interviews along with women's entries in written journals.

The authors use the term "cultural models" to describe women's tacit experiences of raising their children. These models may be thought of as common sense practices, or notions of parenting largely influenced by the context of friends, kinship networks, and important others in one's community. Using this

cultural model, the authors attempt to explain parenting choices made by women in poverty—parenting choices that sometimes maximize children’s well-being, and choices that are sometimes lost in the other exigencies of life on the edge. Some parents, when offered assistance and information from others outside the cultural context, may consciously form alternatives to their cultural script—developing a “declared model” of parenting that stretches beyond the confines of community context.

The authors’ framework of a cultural model is best used as a descriptive tool for conveying the meaning behind poor women’s choices; it is less useful as an analytic device for leveraging policy and community practice, however. The cultural model may help to explain parenting choices (even choices that are not always in children’s best interests) but it leaves the reader uncertain about how public policies can help promote new models that optimize child development under extremely distressing circumstances, and how community practitioners can effectively offer alternative scripts to parents who might benefit from a different approach.

While providing very useful information about the daily practicalities of life in low-income households, and doing so within a sound theoretical framework, there is little in the way of a research base to support the authors’ work. Women’s eloquence in describing the struggle to be both mother and provider could have been strengthened using the body of research on role strain from the sociological literature. Throughout the volume there is little quantitative data to support the authors’ fine qualitative methods. The inclusion of such an empirical backdrop would have provided an added dimension to the volume.

Nevertheless, *Through my own eyes* is a thoughtful book that adds to our knowledge about poverty in America. By utilizing women’s voices throughout, the volume offers a rich texture of ideas that is both compelling and creative. The book is a useful addition to the field of education, social welfare, and social policy and adds special meaning to one of the most challenging issues of our time.

Jill Duerr Berrick
University of California at Berkeley