



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 40
Issue 3 September

Article 15

2013

Review of *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*.

Kathryn Edin and Timothy J. Nelson. Reviewed by Helen Glikman.

Helen Glikman
Salem State University

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



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Glikman, Helen (2013) "Review of *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*. Kathryn Edin and Timothy J. Nelson. Reviewed by Helen Glikman.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 40: Iss. 3, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3756>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol40/iss3/15>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

“spotty implementation and non-universalist reach undermine the structural changes necessary to eradicate social injustices” and “welfare demands are not a perfect substitute for worker demands” (p. 196). However, as she qualifies:

...at the moment, however, India’s informal workers are attaining more success by mobilizing members and attaining state attention based on their welfare demands. We must remember that conventional approaches, although more ambitious, had failed to protect the vast majority of informal workers. To this extent, new informal workers movements warrant our attention. (p.196)

Nonetheless, the gains Agarwala describes are an antidote to common “mourning” about neoliberalism. In particular, the struggle of informal women workers to meet reproductive (health, retirement, education) needs suggests that bringing work into the home can politicize the needs of the home; and the success of the labor-welfare strategy that Agarwala describes results in expanding the welfare state during a period of contraction in Western developed countries that has been characterized by demands for austerity and continued stigma of benefits and beneficiaries will stand out to many *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* readers. For those interested in the possibilities for social unionism, development centered on empowered poor women, and organizing for a responsive welfare state, this book is a must read.

Jennifer R. Zelnick

Touro College Graduate School of Social Work

Kathryn Edin and Timothy J. Nelson, *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*. University of California Press (2013). \$29.95 (hardcover).

Ever since Eliot Liebow’s ethnographic classic *Tally’s Corner* (1967), researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have—from time to time—tried to understand the experience of low-income men living in the inner-city. Much of the public opinion surrounding these men—especially as they take on the father

role—has been negative: poor fathers have typically been seen as “deadbeat dads” who do not care about their children. But is this really true? It is thus that we come to the extremely important work of Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson’s *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*. Kathryn Edin, long a well-respected researcher devoted to understanding inner city family life, continues in the strong ethnographic tradition of Liebow while also taking things one huge step further. In this book, she and Nelson do extensive interviews with 110 poor fathers in two cities, Camden and Philadelphia, over seven years. They take a clearly relational approach to their work—both in the in-depth nature of their interviews with these fathers, and in the fact that they actually move into one of these inner-city neighborhoods themselves to live alongside these men and really understand their lives. This ethnographic approach represents research at its very best.

Edin and Nelson begin their work by noting that “conventional wisdom” tends to blame poor outcomes for inner-city children on their often absent fathers, who are generally seen as uncaring. They wondered if this was true. This, in turn, led to a broader research question: what does fatherhood really mean in the lives of low-income inner city men? The authors begin by looking at how these men and women come together and find that news of a pregnancy is typically met with overwhelming joy. Fathers talk about how having a child gives them something to live for, it helps them feel that they have accomplished something, and it also helps them feel less alone. Living in a poor neighborhood where they have not had many opportunities to feel good about themselves, this is a moment when they really do, and they savor it.

But, once the baby is born, things start getting complicated. Bonds to the mother often start to weaken, while bonds to the children often prevail, as these men speak over and over again of how they want to be committed and responsible fathers. They talk of the father ideal of being a good provider and role model. Although many realize they cannot fully provide financially for their children, they feel they are nevertheless “doing the best they can” as they take on the father role. They also and importantly do some redefining of this role, turning to the “softer side” of love, communication, and quality time. These

are things that poor men, despite economic realities, can do for their children.

These findings lead the authors to describe a “new package deal” where these men, unlike fathers of a different time, prioritize the relationship with their child over that with the mother. They also redefine what it means to be a good father, putting the relational aspects of fatherhood right alongside the financial aspects. Although some try to be good fathers and fail, the authors see strength in many of the fathers they have interviewed. They say that “what is most surprising about our story” is indeed how many of these inner-city men are eager to embrace the father role and have found some way to do so.

Not that this way is always ideal. These fathers often end up performing tasks more consistent with that of a favorite uncle: being present when they can, paying as much as they can, and especially valuing quality time. But they are generally not equal partners in parenting. Furthermore, if there are multiple children involved, which is often the case, they are more likely to dote on their youngest child, a behavior that provides a focus and a chance to feel like a success as a father.

These may not be ideal ways of being a father, but they are ways of being there. Edin and Nelson close their book on a policy note, arguing that society “must find a way to honor fathers’ attempts to build relationships with their children,” as many are indeed doing the best they can.

This is an absolutely wonderful book: very well-written, richly textured with the life stories and the men’s actual voices, and presenting in-depth interview data and analysis. Two things really stand out as one reads the book. First of all, Edin and Nelson firmly root their work in the context of neighborhood poverty—it is in this difficult environment that these men were raised and in which they try to take on the father role. And secondly, the authors take a solidly relational approach to their work, carefully listening to the voices of an often marginalized group of men, living among them, and understanding how it is in relationship itself—specifically that of a father and his child—that a poor life can come to have some meaning.

Helen Glikman, School of Social Work, Salem State University