

Nov-2008

Book Review: Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage

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Recommended Citation

Brooks, Kinitra D. (2008). Book Review: Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(2), 234-235.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss2/20>

Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage.

Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas. 2005. Berkeley: University of California Press. 293 pp.
Maps, charts, two appendices. \$19.95. Paperback

Reviewed by Kinitra D. Brooks¹

Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage is an attempt to parcel out the reasons why “childbearing and marriage have become so radically decoupled among the poor.” (4) Edin and Kefalas’ research proves successful because it illuminates the rich complexities that influence the maternal and matrimonial decisions of women of this specific socioeconomic status. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 162 women who are representative of the urban poor of Philadelphia, PA and nearby Camden, NJ. The women were culled from enclaves that meet specific socioeconomic criteria highlighted by the authors. The ethnicity of the women is almost equally comprised of three distinct groups, African American, Puerto Rican, and White. This investigative method elucidates the work’s greatest strength and most glaring weakness. The use of these specific neighborhoods was not only geographically convenient to the researchers; it provided an evenly distributed sample of multi-racial yet socio-economically congruous women. Still, this specificity, an admitted necessity in qualitative research, kept the study’s results particular to the Northern, urban poor.

Chapters are arranged centrally around the experiences of one mother taken from each racial group, and how her life highlights the specific themes of that chapter. The chapters follow the “chronological” order of the relationships these women develop in their youth that go on to define their adult lives. The first chapter begins with tales of courtship and is subsequently followed by those centered on pregnancy, the collapse of relationships, and ending with how motherhood has changed these women’s lives. The themes usually spread from the central story and expertly cover the myriad of experience of the other women.

The most exciting information the researchers discover is poor mothers’ incredible reverence for marriage. This is in sharp contrast to the conventional ideas, i.e. stereotypes, held about women of this specific socioeconomic class. The majority of the women want to be married and most include it in their list of lifelong goals. The researchers also reveal that 70% of the women do eventually do so. But for them, marriage must occur once economic and relationship stability is achieved. The interviews reveal common economic requirements of well-paying jobs that allow for mortgage payments and the ability to pay for a “proper” wedding. The women must also contend with fragile relationships with men that often reflect the pressures experienced by the inner-city poor. The ravages of drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activity on the part of the males, and the general immaturity of both parties often plague these relationships as they so often enter into parenthood at such young ages. It is only when these factors are considered manageable and potential partners have reached an acceptable level of social and financial maturity that the possibility of marriage is broached.

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The success of their research is best seen in Chapter 4, titled “What Marriage Means.” Middle class women see marriage as beginning the entrance into adulthood and as an institution in which they hope to grow and develop; whereas the researchers reveal that many poor women see marriage as an endpoint for their dreams of social mobility and maturity. It remains an ultimate goal to be reached at the end of their youth. The chapter also reveals the mothers’ sometimes pessimistic view of the state of matrimony; its lack of independence and general vulnerabilities for the women. Still, this pessimism fails to dishearten their idealistic enthusiasm for eventually entering the marital institution. Their beliefs remain refreshingly conservative. Many women state that they delay marriage to make sure they only do it once and reveal a disdain for those couples that marry only because of pregnancy. These high standards for marriage remain a stark contradiction to the mothers’ requirements for motherhood, which prove far more pragmatic.

Edin and Kefalas provide an arena for these women to speak and reveal a specific agency in their decisions and the deceptively simple thinking that supports them. Thoughtful organization and arrangement allows each revelation to center around their own words and stories. The only instances of the researchers’ intrusion of voice occurs in the beginning, when discussing research methods, and in the final chapter when drawing conclusions. The included interview questions optimize the chances of capturing the true essence of the women’s ideas.

Edin and Kefalas’ work places itself as necessary reading for any scholar or student who specializes in the family dynamic. Specific chapters demonstrate an incredible usefulness in the classroom for examining the psychology of poor mothers in the creation of their families. Its strengths in providing a thorough exploration of the familial ideas of poor women outweigh its weaknesses of remaining within a specific geographic location. In fact, the researchers have created a sound foundation for the expansion of their study to poor mothers of other geographical regions of the United States, most specifically the South and the West. Scholars must also investigate if poor rural women hold similar beliefs about marriage even though it may skew the racial socioeconomic balance Edin and Kefalas worked so hard to achieve.