

**Single mothers and their children
Disposal, punishment and survival in Australia**

Shurlee Swain, with Renate Howe
1995, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne

Single mothers and their children examines the lives of single mothers and their children and places them in historical context. As such, it provides an important contribution to both feminist and welfare history. The book traces the experience of single mothers and their children in Victoria from the separation of that colony from NSW in 1850 until 1975 when the legal status of illegitimacy was abolished and the supporting parents benefit became available to mothers who had not been married. While the data on which this book is based comes primarily from Victoria, the authors assert that the "story" can be applied Australia wide.

The underlying thesis of the book is that ex-nuptial pregnancy was far more common than has been suggested: single motherhood was a normative condition, a risk faced by virtually every sexually active woman. The stigma it attracted was a powerful one, with lifelong effects on both mother and child, and could be seen as one means by which a patriarchal society policed the behaviour of all hetero-sexual women. While accepting that illegitimacy is both a legal and a social construction, the focus of this work is on illegitimacy as a lived experience.

Swain and Howe note that the "problem" (single motherhood) is well documented. The single mother (as the "object") has been endlessly described and her "deviance" endlessly explained. It is only recently, however, (due to the secrecy and shame attached to this phenomenon) that her voice has been heard. This study seeks to capture single mothers from their brief moments on the public stage and reconstruct life behind "the problem". The authors note that the

tendency has been to focus on those aspects of that experience which make it problematic and hence invisible, for example, maternity homes, adoption and relinquishment. Such a focus, they argue, has tended to segment the phenomenon by both time and place and, in so doing, disguise its universality. In contrast, this work seeks to piece together individual lives while also examining the social contexts within which these lives developed.

This book takes a life cycle approach, moving through pregnancy, birth and infancy into adulthood, identifying the challenges which all single mothers had to face and their many different responses. Because it argues for the "commonality of such lives", this framework is useful for emphasising points of continuity in the experiences of single mothers and their children across time. The influences of demographic and ideological change are noted with the authors providing critical analysis of stereotypes attributed to single mothers.

The introductory chapter delineates the purpose and scope of the work and outlines some of the possibilities and potential problems associated with the diverse and inevitably fragmentary sources used in the study. These sources of "women's voice" include data obtained from informants recruited via self-help groups and newspaper appeals; written sources; and a content analysis of the "problem pages" of two magazines.

In keeping with the experience of single mothers and their children across the life cycle, Chapter 2 introduces the women who became single mothers and examines the circumstances of conception, while Chapter 3 looks at early decisions which all single mothers

had to face: breaking the news to family and friends, and exploring possible escape routes, abortion and marriage. Pregnancy and birthing options are then explored before an analysis of the "choices" mothers faced in "disposing" of their children: death or separation through abandonment, boarding out or adoption. Consideration of the situation for mothers who resisted pressure to dispose of their children then occurs and the final chapter of the book assesses the experience of children of single mothers and discusses women's activism from the 1960s onwards.

The strength of this work lies in its simplicity (but not over-simplification), its readability and comprehensiveness. The mix of qualitative and more comprehensive statistical material assists the authors in presenting a solidly researched and scholarly account of "the experience" of single motherhood in Australia. Moreover, the utilisation of an oral history approach provides a voice from single mothers and the opportunity for them to tell their stories. Significantly, the work suggests that the contemporary construction of single motherhood has many continuities with the past.

It is suggested by the authors that this historical account may help single mothers today understand the prejudice and hostility they continue to encounter and that it may also have the potential to inform those who are in positions to defuse such hostility. This work also challenges the reader to consider the processes of social exclusion and marginalisation in that it tells the story of single women and children and of the lives which they were able to construct,

lives "not in accord with the law". As such, it would provide useful material for social work educators and students as social work often focuses on people on the margins of society and on the processes involved (the creation of deviant identity, stigma, exclusion and marginalisation). *Single mothers and their children* would also be of interest to readers interested in public policy in

that it provides an excellent illustration of policy failure, that is, the failure of deterrent policies directed against children on ex-nuptial conception rates. Such policy failure and the authors' critical analysis of stereotypes attached to single mothers are timely, given the recently reported changes to welfare policy concerning single mothers and their children in the United States,

changes which are purported to overcome what is seen as America's "moral decline". ☉

Reviewed by:

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Manufacturing 'bad mothers' A critical perspective on child neglect

Karen J. Swift
1995, University of Toronto Press, Toronto

I had several immediate reactions to reading this book. The first was a welcome relief to find a contemporary book taking a critical approach and warning about the dangers of 'child saving'; the second was a similar relief to find a serious contemporary consideration of neglect which seems to have been crowded out by a plethora of writings about physical and sexual abuse over recent years; and thirdly, an overriding reaction of *deja vu* in having seen the broad arguments rehearsed many times before.

What is clear though is not that the arguments are old hat or out of fashion; on the contrary, they remain compelling (with some sensible caveats). The broad proposition about the construction of 'bad mothers' resonates with some of the labelling literature from the 70s, and the implied social policy response would be to direct supportive (non-judgemental, non-stigmatising) resources to women whose marginal performance as parents can, overwhelmingly, be attributed to the social experiences directed to them because of their gender, poverty and race.

What is different about making these arguments in the 90s is the danger that the removal of neglect as a focus of protective state services may not necessarily lead to progressive outcomes. Within the present political economy, one can already discern a trend toward neglect coming to be seen as a lower order abuse (potentially even its eventual removal from the discourse of abuse), but with the crucial difference that the removal of stigmatising and often inappropriate protective services would not necessarily see their replacement

with *any* (more appropriate) supportive services.

Child neglect has constituted one of the more durable categories in professional social work and for more than a century it has been characterised as a problem of deficient care by mothers. Swift's main challenge to this accepted view of child neglect lies in the fact that such approaches hide and distort important social realities and, in so doing, reproduce the poverty, marginalisation and violence which have always characterised the lives of far too many families. Both historically and currently, child welfare has dealt with the poor and marginalised, yet the 'myth of classlessness' depicts a level playing field upon which all families carry out their child rearing activities.

The 'good parent' model, in condemning many mothers as unworthy of help, negates their experience. Moreover, as anyone with a practical knowledge of the field knows, the help which is directed at their children is all too often inadequately helpful in practice.

Swift, who is from the School of Social Work at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, is not just arguing that those who develop policy or practice in child welfare should be suspicious of the neglect formulation, and recognise the need to keep the blaming of parents (women) to an absolute minimum; she is suggesting that incremental change is not enough, that neglect should be discarded as a child welfare category, and that we need to improve welfare and stop policing families.

Her depiction of the practice system in Canada seems to find a parallel here in

Australia, with child welfare providing probably the last area of work still primarily controlled by social workers, and neglect still providing the largest, and always increasing, category of child abuse. Swift argues forcefully that child welfare organisations do not seem to be improving the desperate and unhappy lives of many women and children. Chronic underfunding and case overload condemn the system to just rolling along, with children often placed in many different foster homes, long-term foster care, or returned to parents and a poverty-ridden existence.

The book is organised in three parts: *Constructing knowledge*, which offers a critical sociology of child neglect; *Child welfare work processes*, which covers the organisational production of cases; and *The response system*, which carefully dissects current practice. The structure of the book has some minor problems; some sections may be characterised as too abstract and academic despite some of the theoretical discussion being a bit 'undercooked'.

On balance, though, the discussion holds together well, and Swift has written a passionate book which, although intended as a critical text on child neglect, has much to offer practitioners. Indeed they might get more from reading *Manufacturing 'bad mothers'* than from reading any number of child protection policy and procedure manuals. ☉

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