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Book Review: Bachrach and Turner, Sugar's Life in the Hood: A Story of A Former Welfare Mother

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achievement rather than an accident of nature. Second, the physical trajectory of aging is not a linear function of time. Rather it is a product of social actions.

The author makes an additional contribution to anthropology research in her application of innovative research methodology. It features surveys and interviews as the primary data collection instruments, which are considered unorthodox in the field of sociocultural anthropology, which relies heavily on ethnographic method. Bledsoe did not simply borrow these tools from social science researchers. She redesigns them in ways that help her to achieve the premises essential for sociocultural research. She uses cultural analyses to understand survey results and to improve survey questions. She applies open-ended questions in survey interviews. Additional advantage is added through using Epi Info, an epidemiological data entry and analysis program developed by the Centers for Disease Control. Epi Info has the capacity to store numerical responses, as well as commentary variables. Individual variants out of group patterns can be quickly detected, and the narratives of particular respondents can be readily heard. In the process, as Bledsoe describes, quantified demographic data are transformed into personal experiences in the complex moral economy of social relations. In sum, *Contingent Lives* is an excellent book that provides the reader with an impressive and comprehensive analysis and assessment on the subject of fertility, time, and aging.

Sugar's Life in the Hood: The Story of a Former Welfare Mother, by **Sugar Turner** and **Tracy Bachrach Ehlers**. Austin: University of Texas, 2002. 243 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-292-72102-1.

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"Trying to put oneself in the place of the other lies at the heart of the social contract and of social life itself" (Liebow 1993: xv). As a contributor to ethnography, I believe in its humanitarian promise, and at the same time, I am challenged by persistent questions about its value as social science. *Sugar's Life*

in the Hood raises these questions anew, because it aspires to fulfill one of the greatest promises of ethnography—giving a voice to individuals and cultures—but it does not acknowledge or interpret fully its construction of that representation. The story of a remarkable African American woman told largely by herself, the project began as a post-welfare reform study of poor African American women. The book is about a pleasant surprise—an unlikely friendship and collaboration, quoting Molly Ivins' Foreword, between "a black ho, hustler, and welfare mother, and a white feminist college professor of slightly daunting intelligence." That friendship led to the book's unusual structure and style: Sugar Turner speaks for herself, unmediated and with little interpretive commentary by Bachrach Ehlers.

The introduction is comprised of parallel essays by the coauthors reflecting on their friendship and the unlikely book project. Together they emphasize that *Sugar's Life in the Hood* is not a "welfare book." The interwoven first person and fieldwork narratives in each subsequent chapter bear witness to the possibilities for connection and understanding across racial and class divides, as Sugar and Tracy explore and discuss aspects of Sugar's life. Over the course of chapters written by Sugar about her life—relationships with men, welfare and prostitution, her faith and her family—we are given a rich and seemingly nonstereotypical perspective on poverty. Because Sugar is more energetic, resourceful, and smarter than most of us who will read the book, her story is entertaining and her prose winsome and accessible.

This is a good book, with material that students will find both interesting and challenging. Sugar's descriptions of her life are refreshingly honest, strikingly articulate, and often insightful. The egalitarian manner in which the book was produced places Turner in a position to speak for herself, and there is almost no second guessing or interpretation by her collaborator. Although subject and scholar disagree, for example, over Sugar's judgment about men, their disagreements are part of a discussion between them, not a matter for detached second guessing by the scholar. Bachrach Ehlers' fieldnotes do provide helpful context, cross-references to other parts of the book, and occasional comments on the behavior or motives of oth-

er individuals, but not about Sugar. Readers will confront the blend of weaknesses and strengths that make Sugar a whole person. Unmediated self-description personalizes without making Sugar a heroine, and reveals her to be likeable without being nice, and admirable without being a moral model.

Sugar's Life in the Hood should also raise an important concern for teachers who, like me, use ethnographic readings to teach about poverty. Though the authors demur, the book is indeed about poverty, welfare, and welfare stereotypes. Though the vehicle is Sugar's complex and unpredictable life, Sugar is still a subject framed by a scholar's project. Chapters focus on the most troubling aspects of race and welfare stereotyping. The anthropologist's fieldnotes and interview excerpts remind the reader of the purpose for Sugar's self-descriptions. The scholar inserts comments on Sugar's narratives, but there is no occasion for similar comments by Sugar on her coauthor's life. Bachrach Ehlers' is the voice a student would retain, with her scholarly asides, her attempts to take us from "here" (the white, college educated, affluent environment of typical readers) to "there" (somewhere close to Sugar's life). The stereotypes about Sugar remain the implicit subject of the book.

Yet Sugar is also a subject who surprised the researcher by becoming a friend. Her surprising relationship with Bachrach Ehlers suggests that she may be quite different from other poor women. And that renders her story problematic, for it is far from self-evident what lessons we learn about race, class, or welfare stereotyping. But these, of course, are problems that persist in all ethnography that attempts to present stand-alone narratives.

I admire *Sugar's Life in the Hood* as an attempt to offer a principled representation of a subject's narrative, but I would argue that such narratives have to have more, not less, context. They are presented for a purpose; they are intended to have an impact on ways that readers think about the world. At the highest level of abstraction, ethnography interacts with theories intended to organize experience and expectations. Narratives such as this can have an important role in reshaping the implications of theory, whether informed by cultural and ideological preferences or by the cumulative insights from pri-

or research. I think this interaction is most helpful when it is explicit and systematic.

The obvious response to my concerns is to teach to them rather than assume that ethnographic representations can stand alone. Sugar's life choices and preferences are surprising: she chooses disastrous relationships, she exposes her children to damaging influences, she strongly prefers her 'hood to seemingly better neighborhoods, but she has, in the end, chosen a path that leads to college. Her story leads to an important cluster of interrelated questions: how choices were constructed, perceived, and understood, and how identity, opportunity, and action evolve over time. Students must confront what it means to make a "bad" choice: to become a prostitute, to do drugs, to choose an abusive partner. Poverty contains a world of bad choices and is populated by people who may know little else from personal experience. Ethnography provides data. Like all data, ethnographic descriptions and narratives should be interpreted in light of theory and research that will enrich our understanding of what these encounters might mean.

Finally, the book's symbolic (if not entirely realized) egalitarianism provides an opportunity for explicit consideration of the relationship between the book's authors and its influence on the representation of Sugar. Here the discussion requires a great deal more contextualization than the authors offer. How did such a friendship arise across lines of race and class and what are its limits? Although the two women are frank about their own unconscious stereotyping, we do not see the risky side of the relationship, the dead ends, the potential for terrible misunderstandings, or the forces that make their friendship such a triumph in a world of failed attempts.

Reference

- Liebow, Elliott. 1993. *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. New York: Basic Books.