

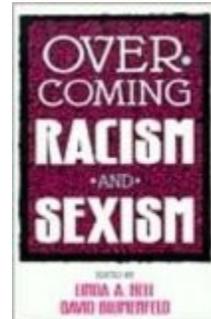
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda A. Bell, David Blumenfeld. *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8030-6; \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8031-3.

Cardell K. Jacobson, ed. *American Families: Issues in Race and Ethnicity*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995. vii + 518 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8153-1959-7.

Reviewed by M. Rini Hughes (Michigan State University)
Published on H-PCAACA (January, 1996)



The first of these books is a collection of essays by sociology scholars intended to present specific insights into the condition of families and family values in a number of ethnic and racial groups in the U.S. The second is the published proceedings (plus five additional essays) of a conference sponsored by the Department of Philosophy at Georgia State University in 1992. Although these two books deal with related subjects, they are far from similar in approach and content. Where *Overcoming Racism and Sexism* deals with the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of two persistent social ills, *American Families* concentrates on intensely personal approaches to a related social problem: race and ethnicity as treated in America. I can add little to Steve Schroeder's excellent review of the Bell and Blumenfeld book; agreeing with his primary points and finding no bone of contention with what he wrote, I defer to his scholarly judgment. *American Families: Issues in Race and Ethnicity* is another matter. There is no reason to question the integrity or scholarship of any of the authors; there is, however, reason to scrutinize some of the conclusions. Allowing that intense personal concern can be a powerful tool in the service of social criticism, it can also interpose a set of principles that obscure as much as they illumine. So long as this caveat is observed, *American Families* is a useful tool for scholars interested in the state of family in America.

The book is a collection of idiosyncratic sociological essays about the state of family in a number of minority communities—not physical communities but ethnic and racial groupings that have apparent significance to the authors of the articles. Some of the articles are supported

by statistical research and others are library research essays; all of them represent particularistic positions about the state of the family in, not America, but the specific ethnic communities of concern to the authors of the articles. For the most part, the authors lament changes that they cannot control and lay the blame for changes they disapprove of on external forces such as the media or the “dominant culture.” Generally, the authors discuss the powerful forces outside the ethnic communities they represent as threats to what they consider valuable in terms of family and social structure. While all of these highly individualistic and focused studies have valuable information to impart, taken as a group they glorify diversity in such a way as to create a maze of walled cities which only the chosen (by birth) may enter.

The greatest strength of this collection of essays is its stress on positive elements in the groups being studied. Rather than focusing on problems, the writers adopt strategies to redefine the terms by which problems are identified and to redefine problems as different modes of coping with assorted social and cultural stressors affecting the racial and ethnic communities they describe. There is little question that many of these things should be redefined. As Stauss aptly suggests, an extended, even non-blood related, family can offer advantages not available in even the best normative nuclear family. And Staples' position that black teenagers who have babies out of wedlock are, in fact, trying to take control of their lives gives a new perspective. However, there is no suggestion that other aspects of these behaviors are counterproductive. An extended family can—indeed often does—

offer advantages that a nuclear family cannot, but Stauss presents no convincing evidence that the extended family is a better means than the Anglo norm he questions for preparing a child for the rigors of life outside the family. Nor does Staples convince this reader that children having children is a “good” way to challenge an inequitable social system.

The breadth of coverage in *American Families* is impressive; the depth is not as great as might be desired in a text of this sort. Each article is worthwhile in its own right, but each is not equally useful for “advancing our thinking and propeling us to engage more actively

in the resolution of those contradictions and dilemmas that keep our society from reaching its potential” (fly-leaf). While this goal, expressed by Garland’s series editor, is worthy indeed, this particular text does not rise to the occasion as well as might be hoped.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: M. Rini Hughes. Review of Bell, Linda A.; Blumenfeld, David, *Overcoming Racism and Sexism* and Jacobson, Cardell K., ed., *American Families: Issues in Race and Ethnicity*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. January, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=280>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.