



WOMEN

FAMILY, AND CLASS

The Lillian Rubin Reader

Edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Amy E. Traver



Women, Family, and Class

Classics in Gender Studies

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*Women, Family, and Class:
The Lillian Rubin Reader*

EDITED BY
MICHAEL S. KIMMEL
and AMY E. TRAVER

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Introduction: From “Worlds of Pain” to a “World of Choice”— Lillian Rubin’s Worlds



One of the more striking features of a recent collection of autobiographical essays by well-known sociologists was the reluctance on the part of virtually all the authors to see their lives sociologically—that is, to see the role that structured opportunity as well as chance played in their rise to the pinnacle of their profession.¹ With only a few exceptions, the twenty eminent sociologists actually seem to have believed they were the “authors of their own lives,” as the title of the book had it, as though the facts that they had been raised in academic families and had doors opened for them by the famous and famously connected had played no part at all. Justly famous were these scholars, perhaps, but strangely, and sadly, also somewhat myopic when it came to a distinctly sociological understanding of their own lives.

One of the few exceptions (and, in our reading, the only male exception) was John Gagnon, the lone proletarian, who, like one or two of the four female authors, saw his career as the result of chance, of luck and pluck. Gagnon titled his essay “An Unlikely Story.”

Lillian Rubin’s story is equally “unlikely.” She was hardly to the academic manor born. Indeed, had you told her at age twenty-five that she would be the first person in her family to get a B.A.—let alone a Ph.D. in sociology and an advanced degree in psychotherapy—she might not even have known enough to laugh at how preposterous that prospect was.

And just as surely, Lillian Rubin is the author of her own life. Born to a poor Jewish family in the Bronx in 1924, she grew up somewhat religious and very

rebellious. Her father died when she was young, and her brother was an unreliable shield against a tyrannically harsh mother. Restless and curious, she was a constant thorn in her mother's side—for which she paid dearly.

She learned early to question authority, whether doctrinal or familial. She recalled in an autobiographical lecture that when she was eight years old, she decided to test God. On Yom Kippur, a day of mandatory fasting, she searched her neighborhood for an open candy store “so I could find out if God would strike me dead if I ate a candy bar.” He didn't, “but the beating my mother visited upon me was worse than any of my childish imaginings about God.” And then, characteristically, she adds, “Nevertheless, I found out what I wanted to know.”²

She always felt marginal—whether in her family or in a society that didn't seem willing to embrace or accept her for who she was. That marginality defined her childhood, and she took it as a template for her self-authorship. She originally titled her book *The Transcendent Child* (1996), a group portrait of children who had overcome terrible, violent, or painful childhoods, after the old expression “Fall down seven times, get up eight.” She was clearly talking about herself. Hers is a story of transcendence, yes, but one so utterly grounded in the social realities of class, race, and gender that it can also serve as a model for others.

As a young woman, Rubin's rebelliousness and restless curiosity led her, as it would so many of the contemporary founders of U.S. sociology (Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Howe, Norman Podhoretz, and David Riesman, to name but a few), to progressive politics in New York City. (Most, unlike the disgracefully apostate Podhoretz, stayed there.) As Rubin states, it was “a natural home for one who felt marginal and who also hated the racial and economic injustice of our society.”

But even here, she felt marginal—or, rather, marginalized. There simply wasn't a place for a woman political organizer who was the equal of any of the dedicated leftist male organizers she met. She moved to Los Angeles in 1951, and struggled to be a good wife in the 1950s mold and mother of a young daughter (Marci was born in 1948). But she soon found herself immersed in local politics. By 1960, she was the campaign manager for Norman Martell's congressional campaign, and she also managed Jerry Pacht's campaign for Congress in 1962. And she felt alive and like she was making a contribution, living and breathing politics for sixteen, eighteen hours a day.

Thus, long before she received her Ph.D. in sociology, she was temperamentally a sociologist—sensing that in her marginality lay the keys to understanding her experience and an angle of vision of social dynamics those in the center could only understand, at best, by projection.

One could argue that Rubin was “premature,” or before her time, in several other important ways as well. She was a “premature” feminist—a feminist before there was even a name for it. She entered the 1960s a “premature” divorcee—long before divorce was trendy or, at least, commonplace, at a time when people still expressed dismay and compassion for her daughter growing up in a “broken home.” And in 1962, she met and married Hank Rubin, himself a “premature antifascist” who had enlisted with the Abraham Lincoln Brigades to fight for the fragile fledgling Spanish Republic in 1936.

Soon after her move to the Bay Area to join Hank in 1962, Rubin became a most “mature” undergraduate student at the University of California–Berkeley—at the ripe old age of thirty-nine. Such structural marginality—she was the age of most of her undergraduate cohort’s mothers (literally: her daughter, Marci, would soon enter Berkeley as an undergrad just as Lillian was graduating)—was heightened as she entered the graduate program in sociology at Berkeley in 1967. At the time, the reigning paradigms of the field were what C. Wright Mills had called “grand theory” (Parsonian functionalism) and “abstracted empiricism” (doctrinaire quantitative research) represented in the department by Neil Smelser and Charles Glock, respectively.

For Rubin, both perspectives seemed too grandiose and too removed from real people’s experiences. “What [people] think or feel, how they respond to the social forces that seek to mold them, how they interpret their behavior and attitudes—in essence, what *subjective* meanings they give to their own experiences and how those affect their relationship to both self and society—these are of minor concern to the sociologist,” she would later write.

As a result, even before she finished her dissertation, Rubin enrolled in a graduate program in clinical psychology. And although she finished that program and became a licensed therapist, her sociological imagination put her at odds with that field as well. Clinicians seemed “so concerned with the particular and the individual” that they would “lose sight of the social context within which human life takes place” and thus “fail to comprehend the ways in which society and personality live in a continuing and dialectical relationship with each other.”

For her entire career she straddled both fields, never completely fitting into either. At times, it’s been convenient for psychologists to claim her, especially when her books on male-female relationships (*Intimate Strangers* [1983] and *Just Friends* [1985]) were climbing up the best-seller lists, but in general, as she says, psychologists “complain that I give too much attention to the social forces that frame people’s lives and not enough to the internal dynamic ones that may also lock people in.”

Sociologists wonder, however, whether all this concern with internal dynamics is really sociology. Rubin is clear, however, about where she truly lives. As she writes of one of her books, *Families on the Fault Line* (1994): “The fact that the central argument of the work is a sociological one—that is, that the family is a social institution whose socially structured internal arrangements have a profound influence on human development—is somehow lost on these critics who complain about its psychological focus.”

This effort to balance psychology and sociology, the larger structural forces and the voices of individuals navigating their way through those structures, as well as her continued, even self-nurtured marginality, forms the core of Rubin’s innovative, signature methodology. The conventional wisdom in sociology is that quantitative data focus the eyes downward from above, providing the broad outlines in black and white, the patterns that are the essence of social structures. Ethnography and fieldwork, by contrast, put the ear to the ground and hear people’s voices, adding nuance, subtleties, texture and color, the lived experience, to the broad patterns of the large-scale dataset.

Rubin's interview technique focuses on both structure and the people who live within it. By interviewing targeted individuals, she not only observes the texture of people's lives but enables the reader to understand the way social structures are inhabited by the very people whose lives are also circumscribed by them. Her subjects are active agents in their own lives, perhaps even "authors" of their own lives, while they simultaneously feel buffeted by forces outside of their control.

Such engaged and empathic interviewing was embraced initially by feminist researchers as a corrective to the misguided efforts at "objectivity" counseled by other qualitative methodologists. This embrace dovetailed with trends in anthropology, championed by James Clifford and others, in which the researcher was beginning to insert him- or herself into the narrative of the "other culture" to make explicit the dialogic relationship between interviewer and subject. In sociological works by Rubin, Arlie Hochschild, and several others, the empathic, focused, and structured "snowball" interview was developed within sociology.

Substantively as well as politically a feminist, Rubin also sensed that her story was not *only* her story—that her own experiences of navigating the world mapped out for her by tradition and male prerogative were shared by many women of her generation. And, like other pioneers such as Betty Friedan, she wrote her own experiences on a much larger canvas. But Rubin has always managed to touch a sore point in the zeitgeist, to bring up an inconvenient truth—her own.

When the second-wave feminist movement had begun to be written entirely by white middle-class women, Rubin's breakthrough book, *Worlds of Pain* (1976), reminded them that their self-congratulatory tone excluded the voices of white working-class women. When younger women were reclaiming their bodies and themselves, Rubin discussed the impact of feminism on older women in *Women of a Certain Age* (1979).

When her feminist friends and colleagues had described male-female relationships—sexual and romantic, and even friendships—as utterly overdetermined by patriarchy and gender inequality, Rubin responded with three works of her own—*Intimate Strangers* (1983), *Just Friends* (1985), and *Erotic Wars* (1990)—that deftly married structural dynamics of gender relations, economic shifts, and family changes to the *pas de deux* (or, perhaps as likely, the *folie à deux*) that often characterized Americans' fumbling attempts to relate to the opposite sex.

And when multicultural feminists' insistence on racial difference seemed to tear apart the fictive unity of the women's movement, Rubin's *Families on the Fault Line* (1994) reminded readers that race and class are so intimately intertwined in U.S. society that one often serves as a proxy for the other (when Americans hear the word "poverty" most of them often conjure up the image of a black person). Moreover, class and race are also inextricably joined to gender (the black person imagined was probably a woman).

In that sense, Lillian Rubin was the first intersectionalist. From *Worlds of Pain* in 1976 to her most recent forays into political journalism with articles such as "Welcome to the World of Choice," she has managed to juggle race and class and gender by neither subsuming one or two under the reductionist rubric of the third

nor diluting them so they cease to bear any singular identifying characteristics. It has been Rubin's great achievement as a social scientist to explain the gendered politics of racial and class resentment, the racial politics of class and gender resentment, and the worlds of pain of specifically white working-class women.

And it's obviously struck a nerve. When American Sociological Association president Herbert Gans compiled a list of the best-selling sociology books of the second half of the twentieth century, two of Rubin's books appeared in the top ten (*Worlds of Pain* at no. 8 and *Intimate Strangers* at no. 9; *Just Friends* was no. 33). Equally significant, she was the only sociologist to appear twice in the top ten, and the only woman in the top fifteen.³

Her work struck that nerve, we think, in part because her vision was intersectional before feminist social scientists had a word for it. For what is intersectionality other than a constant—and constantly shifting—focus on marginality? No sooner does one angle of vision emerge than it must be interrogated, decentered, and the event seen from other, multiple, perspectives. Lillian Rubin advocated intersectional analysis not because it suited her political or professional ambitions but because for her there was little choice. Intersectionality is the perspective of restless marginality.

Looking back at her work more than a decade ago, Rubin commented that her marginality—class, age, or profession—was among the defining features of her life. It's had its downside, to be sure—there is always an emotional cost, the pain of not feeling like you fit in, especially when you want desperately to fit in. But there are benefits as well, she notes: "Being outside the system has allowed me to do the work I wanted to do without interference or worries about the judgments of its gatekeepers."

NOTES

1. Bennett M. Berger, *Authors of Their Own Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

2. All quotations from Rubin, except where noted, are taken from a 1992 speech delivered to the faculty at Queens College as she took up the position of distinguished professor on that City University of New York campus.

3. Herbert J. Gans, "Best-Sellers by Sociologists: An Exploratory Study," *Contemporary Sociology* 26, no. 2 (1997): 131–135.

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PART I

*ASKING LIKE
A THERAPIST,
LISTENING AS A
SOCIOLOGIST*



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Up from the Immigrant Ghetto



I started out to do a paper entitled “Family Values and the Invisible Middle Class,” which argues that the national discourse on family life that has so engaged this nation in recent years is a discussion in a vacuum. For as family values advocates frame it, the family itself *becomes* the context, as if families were atoms afloat in space, unconnected to the social and institutional life in which they’re embedded.

Class plays no part in this discourse. Yet it’s obvious to anyone willing to stop and think about it for even a moment that the class status of a family is the single most important element in determining where and how it fits into the social and institutional life of the community. Which means that it determines the experiences of every family member—from the schools children attend, to the kind of work parents do, to the financial and social resources available to them, to the issues that preoccupy and engage them.

But since I’ve just finished a memoir in which my own background as an immigrant working-class girl figures very largely, I thought I’d rather do a more personal kind of telling here because it’s so perfectly reflective of the often invisible ways immigration, class, and gender affect the course of a life. And also how hard it is to put those experiences behind us—even when, in adulthood, our lives are very far removed from them.

Not, mind you, that I knew the words *working class* when I was growing up. I knew we were poor, of course, and that my mother worked in a factory—and I very early on learned to be ashamed of that. And I knew, too, that my teachers saw me and my immigrant family as some kind of savages that had to be civilized as quickly as possible. But in all the years I went to the NYC schools—from first grade through twelfth—I never heard the word *class*.

I was born in 1924, just ten months after my parents and brother (then six months old) arrived from Russia and settled in Philadelphia, where my father had family. My father died when I was five years old, leaving my mother, a twenty-seven-year-old illiterate immigrant who spoke only the most rudimentary English, with two

small children to support and no way to do it. She looked for work cleaning other people's houses, but in 1929, the beginning of the Great Depression, there wasn't much call for her services. As she cast about desperately for alternatives, one of my father's brothers urged her to come to New York and try her luck there. Within a year after my father's death, we moved away from the family and community I'd known all my life. By then I was nearly six years old; time to go to school.

Yiddish was the language of the home I grew up in as well as the tongue of most of the Philadelphia community in which we had lived. It was in my first grade classroom, therefore, that I had my first serious brush with English. But none of the programs that so commonly ease the way for immigrant children today were available then. Our teachers—often young women just a generation away from their own immigrant experiences—helped us with a word when we got stuck, but turned a deaf ear when, in frustration, a child broke into a foreign language, whether Yiddish or Italian—the other large language group in the schools I attended. The rules were clear and unrelenting: We were to speak only English while our teachers inducted us into American ways with a fervor that suggested we were embarrassing reminders of a past they wanted to leave behind.

But giving up the language that frames our world from infancy through early childhood isn't easy. I don't just mean that it's hard to learn a second language. That's true, but far easier than the psychological feat necessary to abandon our mother tongue. For a language is more than its words and syntax; it's a way of thinking about the world, of meeting it, of being in it. When we learn a language, we absorb its aura—its rhythms, its color, its emotion, its lightness and darkness, its subtleties of expression and meaning. To give it up means relinquishing a part of ourselves, the part that experienced the world through that language.

A word learned in early childhood carries with it an accumulation of associations that give it its emotional power. The same word translated later into the new language is stripped of its internal resonance. So, for example, even after I could understand the meaning of the word *tree*, the word had no evocative power. It was a word without pictures, a word sundered from the thing it was meant to represent. It took a long time before I could associate it internally with the vibrant, changing, living *boim* (the Yiddish word) whose leafy branches shaded me on a hot summer day.

Children in non-English-speaking immigrant families also often have difficulty with English because of the split between their private and public worlds—between the family language, with its familiar, welcoming warmth, and the public language, with its cold, unfeeling words that are so strange on the tongue.

For me, learning English was easier partly because I had so little to hold on to from the past. Whatever safety and comfort existed in my family life were shattered by the death of my father and our move from the familiar neighborhood in Philadelphia to the Bronx in New York. My mother and I had a difficult relationship even before my father's death; afterward she became more embittered and rejecting. In defense against the anger she acted out on both my body and my soul, I did what I could to distance myself from her. If she embodied the old ways, I would reach for the new. If she spoke Yiddish, I would speak only English.

As both the internal and external pressures toward Americanization increased, I became more and more shamed by our foreignness and more alienated from my family. True, my troubled relationship with my mother escalated that, but even in families where parents and children live more harmoniously, some level of alienation is one of the uncounted costs of the prejudice immigrants meet when they come to this land of their dreams. As their children endeavor to become *real* Americans, to be accepted by the world around them, they adopt the public attitudes as their own and try to protect themselves from the barbs and jeers by distancing themselves from their heritage and shrinking from any public expression of their difference.

By the time my first year at school was over, I was well on my way to fluency in my new language. My mother knew some English by then, but not enough to make her way easily in the world. So my brother and I became her teachers.

This reversal of roles—children as teachers—is one of the more agonizing issues in immigrant family life. Talk about a generation gap! In immigrant families it's more like a canyon. As children become increasingly comfortable in the public world, they not only distance themselves from the family culture, they become their parents' guides through the social and institutional maze of the new land.

But a child's help comes at a price. For the child who is also a parent's teacher is less likely to give unreflective assent to parental knowledge and authority—a shift in the dynamics of the family that's rarely spoken about but that's felt, even if not openly acknowledged, by all.

It's easy to see why and how this reversal of roles between parents and their children is so hard for the adults. But it's equally fraught for the children. Until I became her guide in the public world, my mother seemed huge to me, a powerful woman whose word was law, even when I violated it; the woman who controlled my world, even when I fought her so tenaciously and won an occasional battle.

When it became clear that there were important ways in which she couldn't navigate the larger world as well as I could, that changed. She seemed smaller, diminished—a vision that, given the difficulty of our relationship, was at once relieving and frightening. There was something satisfying in seeing her cut down to size while, at the same time, it was anxiety-provoking, since it shook my belief in her strength and power—a belief a child needs if she's to feel safe in the world.

It was common in those years for poor immigrant families to take in lodgers or boarders, or for one poor family to rent space to another. So for the first year or so after we arrived in the Bronx, we moved into a series of apartments that were already too small for the family that lived there. Sometimes there was a bathroom in the apartment; sometimes it was in the hall outside. My mother, brother, and I lived and slept in one of the rooms and had what were called *kitchen privileges*. Which meant my mother was allowed some space in the ice box and could cook our meals at specified times.

It wasn't until my mother found her way into New York's garment industry that we were able to move into an apartment of our own. The building we moved into—one of the many dreary, red brick, six-story walkup buildings that lined the neighborhoods we lived in—was no different than the one we left when we lived with

others. Our apartment was on the fourth floor—a tiny one-room studio with a bed in one wall, a cramped little kitchenette along another, our very own bathroom, and a window that faced a brick wall so close you could almost reach out and touch it. It was dark and cold in the winter, dark and hot in the summer, but it was ours. My mother and I slept in the bed; my brother was on a cot. I was seven years old.

Later, when I was eleven and my brother nearly thirteen, my mother decided we should no longer be sleeping in the same room, and we moved to a one-bedroom apartment—the only one of the many moves we made throughout my childhood that I ever appreciated. After years in a single room, an apartment with a real kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom felt nearly palatial to me. I still shared a bed with my mother at night, but for the first time it was possible—during waking hours at least—to find a corner where I could retreat behind my book without being in sight and sound of her, without having to listen to her complain, “You think you’re smarter than everybody else with your nose always stuck in a book.”

At work, my mother took her place among the dozens of women who sat hunched over their sewing machines in a large, noisy, dank, and airless room. Eight hours a day on Monday through Friday and four on Saturday they sat there, their hands and feet flying, an occasional shrill scream punctuating the air when, in their haste, they didn’t get a thumb or forefinger out of the way of the machine’s needle. They were piece workers, these women, paid a few cents for every garment they sewed. No benefits, no overtime, just the privilege of working long hours in abominable conditions for subsistence wages.

Although my mother worked in several different places over the years, those I saw all looked alike to me—the same dirt, the same noise, the same lint-clogged air, the same foul smell, the same cold in the winter, the same oppressive heat in the summer, and the same row upon row of women doing the same repetitive task, hour after hour, day after day, year after year.

I hated the look, feel, smell, and noise of those places. I hated the women in the office who treated the factory workers with such disdain—women who themselves were no more than a few years away from the factory yet who, when they had to come onto the factory floor, sniffed and picked their way through, holding their skirts tightly to their sides so as not to be sullied by contact with anything or anyone there.

For those of us whose lives revolved around the garment industry, there were five seasons of the year instead of the usual four: winter, spring, summer, fall, and the dreaded *slack season*—as real a part of our lives as the winter snow and the summer sun. As each regular season waned, so did the work, and the workers were sent home to wait for the next season and worry about how their families would make it until then.

The anxiety of those times still lives in my bones. My mother, one of the world’s most frugal women, usually managed to have some savings to help tide us over the slack season, a feat she accomplished by foregoing most small comforts during the months when she was bringing home a paycheck. We still had no radio; we wouldn’t see a telephone in our house for years; leaving an electric light on beyond what was absolutely necessary was a crime of high order; even a subway ride, then only a nickel, was taken only when it was impossible to walk.

As the weeks of unemployment piled up, we hunkered down into a real subsistence level. But even this stripped-down life usually didn't keep us from running out of money before it was over.

We were saved from disaster by a \$2,000 life insurance policy my father bought a few years before his death. It was common then for such insurance policies to be sold door-to-door, especially in poor neighborhoods. There, where people knew firsthand about all kinds of hardships and calamities, including early deaths, it wasn't hard for a salesman to convince a man that his family needed the security a life insurance policy offered. The terms were easy—ten or fifteen cents a week. And they didn't even have to go anywhere to pay their money; the salesman came around regularly to collect.

My mother tapped that insurance money carefully and only when she had no choice—when she ran out of money for food, when we were threatened with eviction. But even that small cushion would soon be lost in the bank failures of 1932.

For my mother—and for the millions of others whose life savings were swept away with a turn of a key in a lock—the unthinkable happened. Hundreds of banks all over the country simply closed their doors. I don't remember how she heard the news, only that she flew out of the house in a panic, with me following closely behind, as we raced the few blocks to the bank.

Hundreds of people were already congregated there by the time we arrived. Some were so shocked they could only stand there silently, not believing what they saw. Others were shouting and pounding on the locked doors while the few bank employees who were still inside peeked out helplessly. Like a wild woman, my mother pushed through the crowd and joined those who were demanding entry. I can still see her, her fists beating furiously on the closed doors, her eyes wild with terror, her lips calling down the wrath of God with every Jewish curse and invective at her command.

I stood at the edge of the crowd—a frightened and bewildered eight-year-old child. I wanted to go home, to run from the terror and rage that filled the air. But I was afraid to move, afraid to leave my mother, afraid I'd never see her again if I did.

Finally, the police came and, threatening the crowd with their night sticks, quickly broke it up. Defeated, my mother turned and walked slowly home, all the while talking as much to herself as to me. How could a bank simply close its doors? This was America; such things didn't happen here. The bank, she had been told, was the one safe place for her money. Now it was gone. What could she ever believe in again? For a woman who already looked so suspiciously at the world, the bank closings confirmed for her that she could trust nothing or no one.

Every autobiography is a construction built on our need to develop a life story that's not only coherent but that reflects who we are—or at least who we want to believe we are—as well as our unique way of filtering and internalizing experience. That's why it's so common to find members of a family who, having lived through the same events, record and narrate them differently.

In my own narrative of the events that stand out as crucial turning points in the life of my family, the year 1932—with its bank failures and the election of Franklin

Delano Roosevelt—is high on the list, although I certainly didn’t understand it that way when it was happening. FDR’s famous National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA), which became law in 1933, included a clause that gave renewed life and energy to the trade union movement. For the first time, the United States government guaranteed the right of unions to organize. Which also meant that workers couldn’t be fired for joining a union.

When the law went into effect, only a small fraction of New York’s garment workers were members of the ILGWU. Now, with the law on their side, the union called a general strike of garment workers in New York City. Seventy thousand workers shut down the entire industry.

The strike was a triumph that solidified the union’s power over the industry and changed the working conditions—hence the lives—of garment workers forever. By the time the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional in 1935, the union’s power was firmly entrenched and the garment factories of New York were closed shops, meaning that a worker had to be a union member to get a job.

For me, living through the organization of New York’s garment workers, experiencing firsthand how the union movement touched and changed my family’s life, was the beginning of my political understanding, providing an education in the power of collective action I would never forget. Many years later, when I became a political activist and organizer, it was the lessons I learned as a child about the importance of collective action in bringing about social change that fueled the energy and conviction I brought to my work.

But even with the gains made by the union, the life of a garment worker didn’t become a walk on the sunny side of the street. True, wages and working conditions improved dramatically, extra hours meant overtime pay, grievance procedures were set in place. But the really big difference in our lives came when—partly due to union agitation and partly because of the extensive suffering wrought by the depression—the Roosevelt administration cobbled together the New Deal legislation that provided a safety net for families in need.

It was then that what we now know as the modern welfare state came into being, first with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), later with Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), the first national program designed to assist widows with young children. Until then there had been poor relief, meaning subsidies administered capriciously by local jurisdictions to people they defined as “the deserving poor.” Now, for the first time, the federal government joined the cities and states in assuming some share of the responsibility for poor families who couldn’t make it on their own.

For my mother these new federal programs provided the first small bit of security she had ever known. Later there would be unemployment insurance to tide her over the worst effects of being out of work. But in the first years of the New Deal there were only these public assistance programs to which my mother could turn when slack season rolled around.

When I listen to the mean-spirited discussions about welfare now, to the endless talk about the value of self-reliance by people who will never know the shame of

being in need no matter how reliable you have been, I want to shout, *How dare you? What do you know about being relegated to the lowest paid work this society has to offer? What do you know about working to the point of exhaustion and still not earning enough to feed and clothe a family? What do you know about being called out of your fifth grade class by a social worker who has come to check on the story your mother has told?*

It's unforgettable for me—the agony of that walk to the front of the room with all eyes upon me, the humiliation when I saw my teacher's obvious concern, the tears that stung the back of my eyes as I struggled for control, the fear that everyone would know my shame. School, which had been my haven, my place of retreat, became, in that moment, my hell.

My mother had warned me that this might happen—warned me and coached me to be sure I was ready with the right answers. Like so many poor women seeking welfare, she sometimes did some sewing on the side to supplement the inadequate dole. My job, if I was asked, was to know nothing of these activities, to say only that she was unemployed.

Lying, however, has never been my strong point, and I did it even less well as a child. So I was frightened by the whole idea and pleaded with her not to make me do it. But she was determined to collect her due, even if she had to bend the rules to get it. There was no way out for me.

Later I came to understand how poor people who feel abused and victimized by society can find it hard to play by its rules. I understand, too, that for my mother, there was an element of retribution every time she foiled the system in some way. When she lost the money from my father's life insurance policy in the bank failures of 1932, she was left with a deep-seated sense of injury, a conviction that the system had failed her and that, therefore, she was entitled to wrest from it what she could.

I don't know what image I'd conjured in my mind as I walked to meet the social worker in the principal's office, but when I finally sat down before her, I was surprised by her soft, gentle voice and the warmth and kindness she displayed. But the questions! "Is your mother working?" "When was the last time she worked?" "What does she do all day?" "What did you eat for dinner last night?" They left me squirming with guilt and dread.

What were the right answers? Nobody told me she'd ask what I ate for dinner. Or what my mother did all day. I didn't know exactly when she last worked. What if I made a mistake? What if I slipped and told that my mother earned some extra money by sewing things for other people? What would happen to us? What would my mother do to me?

I must have gotten the answers right because we were approved for relief. But it took quite awhile before I was comfortable in school again, before I could stop wondering what the other kids knew, what my teacher was thinking. And I was well into adulthood before I was able to put behind me the stigma of those years when we would fall out of the working poor and onto the welfare rolls.

Partly because of my immigrant family, partly because I felt like such a misfit in that family, and partly because most of my classmates were either in or heading toward the middle class while we were always one short step away from poverty (that

is, when we weren't in it), I was a lonely and isolated child. The fact that I was a very accomplished student didn't help much either at home, at school, or on the street.

At home, my mother and brother complained endlessly that my head was, in their words, "always stuck in a book." And no matter how good my grades, my mother's response was always, "Your brother's really the smart one; you just get good grades because you study hard." A claim I believed for many years despite all the evidence to the contrary.

As an adult, their response to my accomplishments became something of a joke, although one that carried its own edge of pain. My brother's only comment about any of my books was, "At least the sex part's not so boring." My mother sniffed dismissively when I got my doctorate, "You can't give me a prescription, so what kind of doctor are you?" and shrugged indifferently at each new book I published, "Other daughters take their mother to lunch every week; you write books." But she retained bragging rights in public and boasted to neighbors about her "daughter, the doctor." Not, mind you, without adding the lament, "Some people are lucky, they have a son a doctor, I have a daughter."

It would be easy to write such behavior off to a personal vendetta, unique to my family. And certainly there was some of that. But the hostility was at least partly related to the fact that the difference between us was threatening to them—a common theme in working-class families where parents fear they'll lose their children to a life they don't understand. And where, also, they suffer a sense of inadequacy in the face of a child's accomplishment that so far surpasses their own.

I've heard the same story often in my research, my clinical work, and from students who are the first in their families to go to college: fathers who humiliate and brutalize their sons out of fear that they're slipping from their grasp; mothers who find all kinds of creative ways to subvert a daughter's attempts to move out of their narrow working-class confines. Parents who, like my mother, brag publicly to whoever will listen while privately treating their children and their achievements with contempt and hostility.

Hard as my family situation was for me, it was at least as bad, if not worse, among my peers. At school, where I was nearly always the best student in the class, my teachers showered me with approval while my classmates taunted me with the words *teacher's pet*.

The street was no kinder, since my mother's habit of moving house every year meant that I was always the new kid on the block, trying to find my way into a street world that had been doing just fine without me. Even now the lives and friendships of working-class children are largely neighborhood-bound. In the Bronx of that era, it was the block that determined social life, and moving even a few blocks meant the end of a friendship. Not surprisingly, therefore, my brother and I hated those moves. But our pleas to stay put fell on deaf ears.

It wasn't until many years later that I came to understand that, while my mother's restless searching for something I'm sure she couldn't have named played a central part in the peripatetic life we led, there was another piece to the story. Depression-strapped landlords, hungry for tenants to fill their vacant apartments,

offered one month's free rent to anyone willing to sign a year's lease. By moving every year, therefore, she not only momentarily assuaged her restlessness but saved a full month's rent.

Adding to my problems in making friends was the fact that, in those days, the only thing the New York City schools could think to do with very bright children was to let them skip grades. By the time I entered high school in the ninth grade, therefore, I was only 11 years old, three years younger than most of my classmates—a gap so wide that it would have been a tough challenge for a child far more socially skilled than I was. For me, it was an unbridgeable chasm. No matter which way I turned, I couldn't find a place where I fit. Intellectually I was too far ahead of children my own age; socially and emotionally I was too far behind the classmates who should also have been my peers.

So I remained apart, a child who was in the world but not of it, the one who was the observer of life rather than a participant in it. After a while, I was so accustomed to being left out that it was hard for me to come in even when I was invited.

Although I graduated from high school at fifteen, college wasn't an option for a girl of my class. My task was to get a job as quickly as I could so that I could help my brother go to college when his turn came. Never mind that my brother, who was a year-and-a-half older than I, was a semester behind me in school. Never mind either that he didn't have much interest in going to college. He was a boy; I was a girl. That said it all; no other explanation was needed. "You don't have to go to college; you'll get married and your husband will take care of you," my mother declared each time the subject arose.

It seems wholly improbable now that, given my mother's own experience, she made such an assumption. But so powerful was the ideology about gender roles that she took for granted that for me work would be temporary, only until my real life as a wife and mother would begin. Or at most, it would be discretionary, something I would do to keep busy or "help out" should, God forbid, the need arise.

In truth, however, my mother's plan for me wasn't so different from my own. I had no objection to her expectation that I would marry well, which meant a man who would provide me with all she never could. The difference between us was that I wanted to go to college until that happy day arrived, while for her it was enough that I worked in an office at a nice, "clean" job.

It would be many years before women would make it to my list of the oppressed. I knew that women had a hard road to walk; I had only to look at my mother's life to understand just how cruel the path could be. And even as a small child, I had already noticed that men always had the better jobs in the factories where my mother worked. Just as they did in the offices I worked in later.

I didn't have words like *gender discrimination* to describe what I observed, but in the inchoate and inarticulate way in which we often know such things, I understood that it existed and knew it was unfair. But it didn't seriously occur to me to protest, partly because at the immediate level—that is, the level of my daily life and feelings about it—I was pleased to be working in an office. It was the "clean" work my mother had raised me for, and I was proud that I could do it well.