

Organization LUND UNIVERSITY	Document name DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
	Date of issue 1995-03-18
Department of Sociology Box 114 S-221 00 Lund, Sweden	CODEN: LUSADG/SASO - 95/1093
	Sponsoring organization
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Title and subtitle
NOT A PIECE OF CAKE
 Ambivalence about Female-Headed Families

Abstract

The main part of the dissertation consists of a qualitative in-depth study of seven American female-headed families. Its primary aim is to let women who have chosen to head their families present themselves, their lives and their thoughts and feelings about single-handed household management and parenting. Focusing on the family arrangement itself rather than social problems, the study emphasizes differences between the reality of these families and predominant assumptions about female-headed family life and the causes and effects of female headship prevalence. The methods employed are conversational interviews and participant observation.

Popular and scholarly preconceptions about female headship are discussed. While conservative views are considered, particular attention is devoted to misgivings and inconsistencies as manifestations of ambivalence in the accounts of such advocates of single mothers in poverty who do not on principle subscribe to the traditional ideology of family and gender. "Ambivalence" is understood in the Freudian sense, i.e. as a state of mind which combines feelings of love and hate toward the one who dominates in an unequal relation. Through the formation of a female-headed household, its founder defies the family ethic, which prescribes as natural male leadership and female nurture. On this basis, it assigns to the family the maintenance of the social order. It appears that ambivalence arises at the point where the presumed essentials of gender and domination are challenged.

The construction of the female-headed family as a social problem contains elements of essentialism. While the material does not support assumptions as to any inherent dysfunctionality of female headship, it shows that the women question or reject essentialistic assumptions and act accordingly. They find traditional family life less than entirely compatible with their self-image as women, their quest for self-determination and their child-rearing goals. Like their middle-class observers, they express divided feelings. However, their misgivings pertain to different aspects of their family situation. They tend to be ambiguous rather than ambivalent.

Key words
 Female-headed families, single mothers, social problems, family ideology, gender, authority, independence, discrimination, ambivalence

Classification system and/or index terms (if any)

Supplementary bibliographical information	Language English
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ISSN and key title 1102-4712	ISBN 91-7966-313-3
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Recipient's notes	Number of pages 352	Price SEK 312:-
	Security classification	

Distribution by (name and address) Lund University Press, Box 141, S-221 00 Lund, Sweden

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