

Telling Our Stories

**Culturally Different Adults
Reflect on Growing Up in
Single-Parent Families**

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Culturally Different Adults Reflect on Growing Up in Single-Parent Families

edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Donna Y. Ford

A little over 5 decades ago, upon its anniversary, I was challenged to reread the Moynihan Report (1965). I did so for professional and personal reasons. The report has had far reaching implications for policy, practice, and thinking. The report has been accepted as the proverbial Bible on single-parent status especially for Black mothers. Then and now, I take issue with much of the content, which smacks of deficit thinking, blaming the victim, myth of meritocracy and, thus, a blindness to or almost total disregard for how systemic racism and social injustices contribute to family structures.

I recall being professionally and personally offended by interpretations of single-parent families, which were often negative and hopeless. Moral development, criminal activity, poor educational outcomes, poverty, and apathy of many kinds were placed squarely on the shoulders of these families, especially if the families were/are headed by Black mothers. Eurocentric and middle class notions of “real” families like those depicted on TV shows and movies dominate, then and now, what is deemed healthy in terms of family structures—with the polemic conclusion that nuclear families are the best and sometimes only structure in which children must be raised. Clark (1983) helped to tell a different story as he examined the educational outcomes of families; also influential is the works of McAdoo (e.g., 1999, 2001, 2006). These scholars railed against silence and letting others speak for us and tell or mis-tell our stories, which ooze with trials

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and tribulations imposed by systemic racial and class inequities. Racism—more than lack of motivation and will—is a critical and impactful culprit that results in massive unemployment, underemployment, and low salaries. Those who have never been poor and who adhere to the myth of meritocracy deny such pervasive injustices and, instead, blame the victims. These victims look like so many of the contributors in the book, including myself, who defied the odds, who somehow made a way out of no way, and decried that “my zip code and family’s status are not my destiny!”

Colorblind, economic blind, and racist blind studies, reports, theories, and folktales have failed to do justice to the families in which there is one caregiver. Their views of woe and mayhem make the news, and guide policies and procedures. Those writing about children and families who grew up in single-parent homes are disconnected—there are judging others as outsiders rather than insiders. How dare they speak for us. The stories and lived experiences of children who have been resilient have been unheard and silenced, they have been underreported and relegated to the status of “exception to the rule.” Perhaps they are exceptions, but there are more exceptions than we may know.

This book is and was envisioned with those stories of resilience, grit, and success in mind. The book is not an attempt to glorify single-parent families, but such families are prevalent and increasing. High divorce rates are impactful. And some parents have chosen to not marry, which is their right. While not glorifying single-parent families, we are also not demonizing them or telling their stories void of context. Yes, income will often be low(er), time will be compromised when divided between offspring, work, and other obligations. Likewise, we are not glorifying two-parent families as being ideal; their context matters too. How healthy are married couples who don’t really love or even like each other? How healthy are those parents who have separate sleeping arrangements/bedrooms? How healthy are those families who have oppositional parenting styles and goals for their children?

This book came to mind during the 50th anniversary of the Moynihan Report (1965). I am the product of a single-parent home headed by my mother. I also became a single mother at age 18. I know the challenges mothers, fathers, and other caregivers confront doing the most important “job” on the world—parenting. My two sisters and I have been successful, all have at least a master’s degree and have “white color” careers. My mother also earned her MEd and even took classes with me and my younger sister. Barring racial prejudice, we are now living the proverbial American Dream, despite abysmal predictions and deficit thinking imposed on children, especially Black children, growing up with one parent. Our children have been successful as well (e.g., high school graduates, college attendance and/

or graduation, full-time employment). Our family has broken through the so called cycle of poverty, but we are not unique. We are not an anomaly. I want others to share their stories of resilience and grit; their trials and tribulations. I want educators, sociologists, and policymakers to *listen and learn*.

I am concerned that another 50 years will pass that fails to balance out the stories of single-parent families, mainly those whose children succeed and defy the odds so often unexpected of them. I agree with Cohen (Hayes & Cohen, 2015), coauthor of the updated report: “The preoccupation with strengthening marriage as the best route to reducing poverty and inequality has been a policymaking folly.” Further, 50 years after Moynihan (1965) released the controversial report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, a new brief by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) and the Council on Contemporary Families (CCF) titled, “Moynihan’s Half Century: Have We Gone to Hell in a Hand Basket?,” finds that the changes in family structure that concerned him have indeed continued, becoming widespread among Whites as well, but that they do not explain recent trends in poverty and inequality. In fact, a number of the social ills Moynihan assumed would accompany these changes in family structure—such as rising rates of poverty, school failure, crime, and violence—have instead decreased (see <http://www.streetinsider.com/Press+Releases/The+Moynihan+Report+at+50%3A+New+Report+Finds+that+the+Rise+of+Single+Mothers+Does+Not+Explain+Poverty+Rates+Fully/10344482.html>)

The authors in this book chime in on the timely and timeless discussion. Like me, they have taken time to tell another version of our journey, one that defies stereotypes and gives credit to those who do triumph living with one parent. This book is dedicated to my son, Khyle L. Ford, my mother, and my family.

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The links below show how controversial, polemic, and entrenched views are about single-parent families, in particular those who are Black:

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/50-years-seeking-educational-equality-the-coleman-report.html?cmp=enl-enl-eu-news1>

<http://www.occupydemocrats.com/jeb-bush-unwed-mothers-should-be-publicly-shamed-to-teach-them-a-lesson/>

<http://www.jbhe.com/2015/03/children-raised-in-single-parent-homes-are-less-likely-to-complete-college/>

<https://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse/videos/10153436210419238/?pnref=story>

<http://dcpols.com/ben-carson-children-raised-by-single-parents-end-up-poor-and-become-criminals/>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rasheena-fountain/black-single-mothers-are-_b_9619536.html?

<http://www.intellectualtakeout.org/blog/two-parent-households-all-time-low>

http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2016/01/the_impact_of_absent_fathers_on_the_mental_health_of_black_boys.2.html

<https://www.jbhe.com/2016/01/racial-differences-in-parenting-behavior-and-concerns/>

[http://hellobeautiful.com/2016/02/25/illinois-single-mothers-birth-certificate-laws/-](http://hellobeautiful.com/2016/02/25/illinois-single-mothers-birth-certificate-laws/)