

LePage-Lees, Pamela

From Disadvantaged Girls to Successful Women: Education and Women's Resiliency. Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers.

184 pp. ISBN 0-275-95752-7. \$49.95 Reviewed by Laurel Parrott

The subject matter of Pamela LePage-Lees's new book is clearly close to her heart, and she brings an insider perspective to her study of women who have overcome barriers to achieve academic success. From the very first page, where she remembers the feelings associated with accompanying her mother to receive government surplus cheese, it's clear that the author identifies with the subjects of her study. She acknowledges that the decision to explore such a personal subject is a departure for her. Fearing that her colleagues in academia would question her "objectivity," she had avoided such personal subjects in her research until she realized that "my experience was absent" in the literature. Not only did most accounts of the disadvantaged ignore those persons who went on to succeed, most were written by academics who either had privileged backgrounds or hid their own disadvantaged roots. "I now believe," she says, "that certain groups have been shut out of the academic process because people from the traditional majority subtly communicate that it is inappropriate for people from marginalized groups to reflect on their own experiences. In many ways they suggest that only the 'objective outsider' can truly conduct a scientific study" (p.3). With this book

LePage-Lees quite successfully challenges such notions. Because of my own involvement in a current study of "disadvantaged adolescent girls, I jumped at the chance to read and review this book. I turned to the book looking for answers to such questions as "What elements of school and family life make some disadvantaged girls succeed?" "What can society -- particularly schools -- do to foster their resilience?" A book based on a two-year qualitative study of twenty-one women who overcame multiple barriers to achieve academic success seemed likely to answer these questions. Each of the women studied met three criteria for disadvantage: they had lived as children in either a poor working-class or lower-class family, they were first-generation college students, and their childhoods had been marked by the stress of familial dysfunction or childhood trauma. Also, each woman either had gone on to attain a post-graduate degree or had been

involved in graduate study for at least two years.

The author situates her study in the literature on "disadvantage" and describes her participants, giving us an understanding of their demographics, the types of stressors each faced as a child, and the academic success she ultimately achieved. She also presents compelling stories of five women selected, she says, to "demonstrate the diverse range of ages, occupations, achievement levels, ethnic backgrounds and geographic origins among the women I interviewed" (p.12). The sheer length of the list of "stressors" for some of her participants is startling in and of itself, but the gripping details of the often monumental barriers these five women faced while growing up are what hook the reader. LePage-Lees weaves a rich tapestry of disadvantage by presenting in some detail both the early lives and the later success of five of the women, allowing us to meet them as real women with remarkable stories. I was disappointed in later chapters that the stories of Helen, Joy, Maria, Toni and Janus lost their prominence, as their voices became indistinguishable from those of the other women.

The author finds fault with some traditional notions of resilience, particularly those asserting that resilient individuals are in some way invulnerable to their disadvantage. LePage-Lees asserts that the women in her study were indeed "deeply affected by their misfortunes" (p. 18). Noting that in studies of resilience "often individual personality is ignored or underplayed because people like to place blame on family functioning," (p. 18) she explores the personality traits of these women who overcame disadvantage. She shows how the women in her study shared attributes -- independence and maturity, benevolence, perfectionism, and perseverance -- which often worked both for and against them in their struggles. For example, the fact that these women, perhaps in part as a result of the troubles they faced as youngsters, had always been independent and mature was an important factor in their ultimate success. At the same time, these traits worked against the women when counselors and potential mentors ignored them because they appeared not to need help. Certainly their perfectionism helped them succeed; but it made them uncomfortable with teaching strategies that favored trial and error over direct instruction, led them to please the teacher rather than learning for the sake of learning and led some to turn away from classes and majors (often science and math) when they found themselves earning less than top grades. As a group, the women struggled with self-confidence. "Most of the women seemed ... to have a high opinion of their abilities in some instances and serious doubts about their abilities in others" (p.22), and they "had difficulty understanding the difference between

confidence and arrogance" (p. 24).

LePage-Lees finds it perfectly understandable that many of the women questioned their status as "disadvantaged" and that most were reticent to talk about their disadvantage. After all, she says, there's always someone more disadvantaged, the term "disadvantaged" has been linked so often to low achievement, and the term has taken on racist connotations. Interestingly, these women were accustomed to hiding their disadvantage, particularly in the academic environment, and they believed that this subterfuge had been important to their ultimate success. At the same time, they believed their disadvantage ultimately helped them in their careers by strengthening them and giving them insights and motivations others lacked. The author points to the consequences for the women of their decision to hide their backgrounds. In college, they perceived themselves to be different from those around them; they felt out of place, viewed themselves as imposters, and thought they were less well prepared than the other students whom they perceived to be more advantaged than themselves.

What role did school-based adults play? LePage-Lees found that although the women were able to adapt to a variety of teaching styles, they tended to value caring and attentive -- as well as challenging -- teachers who recognized their special talents. Surprisingly, the women also tended to be disappointed in their female professors in college and graduate school. These professors were less supportive than the women had hoped they would be, and the professors often weren't "like them" in terms of SES, ethnicity, or disadvantage. Most of the women reported having never had a mentor and they put forth little effort to obtain this type of assistance. In the words of Shirley, one of the participants, "I think there might be problems with people who have experienced trauma to the extent that they can't reach out to other people. They're really handicapped in the mentorship area. People reach out, but you reject them. You don't see as opportunities, things that are opportunities" (p. 47-48). The women wanted similar things from a potential mentor as they wanted from a teacher -- someone who genuinely cared about them and believed they were smart and special, someone who viewed the relationship as reciprocal and collegial, someone who was like them in terms of ethnicity and social class.

School life was very important to these high-achieving women, providing them with a "way to build self-confidence, a secure place away from negative home situations, and an extended family" (p. 65). School offered the opportunities, and the women had the personalities to take advantage of them. The positive attention and high grades they

received in elementary school empowered them. Particularly in college, the women felt "satisfied with their schools when they were given the opportunity to have voice, made to feel welcome in the schools [particularly as non-traditional students], and provided with curriculum that touched on personal experience" (p. 64). But schools worked against these women, too, and they believed their progress was unnecessarily difficult, particularly in higher education. They often found institutions hostile to non-traditional students. They encountered sexism. Most alarming to the author, the women suffered from the arrogance and elitism of higher education, perhaps experiencing more difficulty with such factors than more traditional students do. LePage-Lees explains that since many of the women "did not experience a normal and positive chain of command in their families, they [did] not recognize or accept a hierarchical chain of command [in school]" (p. 73). Failing to attend to the complex power relations in higher education, the women suffered the consequences of being seen as unappreciative and non-compliant.

Combining the work of scholars who have explored women's development (Gilligan, Chodorow and others) with those who have explored differing types of intelligences (Gardner, Goleman), LePage-Lees suggests that "resilient girls develop what has been described as 'emotional intelligence, or inter-and intrapersonal intelligence' which is grounded in attachment and affiliation" (p. 81). She argues, however, that the women's higher-level thinking skills often went unnoticed by teachers whose practice was to have students jump through the hoops of basic skills training. Focusing on trivial details rather than on concepts and ideas, these teachers failed to appreciate the talents of these disadvantaged students. Furthermore, the women believed they had been shortchanged by the instruction they received, both in content and in the cultivation of critical thinking. Many of them considered their precollegiate education deficient, especially in comparison to that of their peers in college and graduate schools. The author contends that the schools -- driven by the need to teach basic skills and to make a good showing on standardized tests -- undervalued the special knowledge that these women gained from their personal experiences. The women tended to do better in the experiential environments of social science and humanities than in the "carefully constructed environments" of math and science where success comes from trial and error (p. 87). In reflecting on her informants' experiences, the author questions whether theories of women's development have "considered carefully enough ... the complexities associated with class and race" (p. 93) and she characterizes as sexist and classist the notion that learning patterns based on personal experience and feelings are evidence of a lower level of cognitive development. LePage-Lees seems to view these non-traditional

women as round pegs being forced into square holes and suggests that non-traditional women need to be "taught how to communicate their novel ideas in ways that traditional people can understand and accept as opposed to being forced to make their ideas conform to traditional models" (p.94). Even more important, schools must recognize "critical thinking" skills or "emotional intelligence," which can be easily overlooked when students lack basic skills.

LePage-Lees explores the varying degrees to which the women were supported by those with whom they had personal relationships, particularly their families. Not surprisingly, in light of the varying nature of the stresses faced by the women, LePage-Lees found considerable variation in the ways family members reacted to -- and whether they supported or hindered -- the women's ambitions and ultimate success. Families were often skeptical when these first generation college students chose not only to attend four-year colleges but also to attend graduate school and pursue academic careers. In some cases mothers provided significant help and support -- even more than educators provided -- but fathers were mostly absent from the conversation. In most cases the women in the study became more successful and were more resilient than their siblings. They felt their siblings resented them. The chapter makes clear that the women who had male partners were much more often hampered by, rather than supported by, these partners. Those who had children were motivated by them to succeed, but they were often burdened by the dual role of mother-student. Finally, members of a wider community of friends, extended family, and others outside the immediate family were often enormously important in supporting these women on their road to success.

The final two chapters summarize and extend the lessons learned from the resilient women, and it is here where this reader was left wanting more. Simply restating the findings of her study, the author concludes that these disadvantaged women succeeded because they "adapted and assimilated to the majority culture," hiding as much as they could the truth of their backgrounds along the way. They turned to school as a rewarding refuge and excelled, particularly because of the higher level thinking skills they may have gained as a result of childhood stresses. The rewards of elementary school success gave them the confidence to carry them through the more difficult high school and college years, where they worked harder to meet the higher standards. Graduate school was a place to use their critical thinking skills, to once again receive more individual attention, and to be more independent, and it was where the women blossomed. Motivated by attention and rewards and the chance to use their intellectual

abilities, they achieved highly, but the process was enormously difficult, alienating, and often unpleasant.

The author makes three recommendations for transforming education to better serve disadvantaged girls and women while at the same time acknowledging the difficulties involved in achieving any of the recommendations on a broad scale: that teachers take the time to know and understand their students as individuals; that teachers strive to understand, accept and reward differences, including different kinds of intelligence; and that academia eliminate hierarchy. She acknowledges that teachers are hampered by a number of factors, not the least of which is the tendency of students like those studied here to actively hide their backgrounds. Also, caring relationships take time and skill to establish and nurture, and teachers are provided neither the time, the training, nor the rewards to encourage such involvement. Neither are structures in place to help teachers strive to understand, accept and reward the different strengths brought by individual students. LePage-Lees seems nearly to give up on her final recommendation—eliminating patriarchal hierarchy—even as she states it, acknowledging the entrenchment of hierarchy in our society and the vested interests to those in power of maintaining it.

I think it's fair to say the stories of twenty-two women actually are represented in this book. Just as the personality traits of the women she studied had both positive and negative consequences for them, LePage-Lees' status as an insider both strengthened the study and served as an occasional distraction, causing me to wonder if certain ideas she was expressing were more hers or her participants'. A challenge of qualitative inquiry is to satisfy the reader that the author is accurately portraying the perspectives of the persons studied while acknowledging her own biases. From the beginning, the author acknowledges her sisterhood with the subjects of her study and admits "I have included my own feelings and experiences alongside those of women represented" (p.4). For those used to reading the works of self-styled "objective outsiders," this can be a bit disconcerting and at the same time liberating. The author describes the pains she took to share her writing with the participants and elicit feedback from them, and the results of a feedback questionnaire indicate that the eleven women who responded were generally satisfied that she had told their stories. The decision to include an entire letter from Helen (one of the five women profiled early in the book) in response to the feedback questionnaire was a good one because it serves to strengthen our understanding of the give-and-take between author and participant and supports the way LePage-Lees told the women's stories. Just as the early look at Helen's story was crucial in illustrating the

extreme disadvantage faced by some of the participants, her letter strengthens our understanding of the stressors she faced and the challenges she encountered in overcoming them.

LePage-Lees set herself an ambitious goal--to examine the lives of her participants in a way that would add to our understanding of resiliency. Readers accustomed to educational literature dealing with only one "level" of education (whether elementary, secondary or higher education) might be distracted by such an all-inclusive examination. For example, my feeling that she emphasizes too much the college and university experiences of these women and not enough the early years may relate to my own bias and interest in adolescent girls; after all, it is hard to care much about what girls will encounter in graduate school when one is concerned with the forces that may be driving them out of junior high! On the other hand, the emphasis on higher education may relate to the fact that this ultimate stage of education was most important to the daily lives of the author and her participants at the time of the study.

I return at last to the questions I hoped this book might answer about resilience of disadvantaged girls and women, and how schools can help them. As for resilience, I was left with the impression that some disadvantaged girls are lucky enough to be born with the personality traits to allow them to succeed despite the barriers erected by family, school, and society, and that the recommendations the author makes would simply make their journey more pleasant. In the end, I thought the book was most successful in meeting a perhaps secondary goal identified by the author -- providing "successful women who have faced stress...some hope, some advice and some validation" (p.1). It was important to the author to show that some women do overcome disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve success and that they do so in many cases despite the very institutions that ought to be helping them.

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