

References

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From Disadvantaged Girls to Successful Women: Education and Women's Resiliency by Pamela LePage-Lees. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997, 170 pp., \$49.95 hardcover.

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Few studies explore the reasons children from disadvantaged homes become successful achievers. Pamela LePage-Lees's study adds to the limited research literature on this topic by detailing the results of a two-year qualitative study on the experiences of women considered disadvantaged as children who later became high achievers. In her study, high achievers are those women who have pursued advanced study in academia. Another goal that propels the study includes explaining why "only a few women from this particular population ultimately succeed" (34).

Motivated by personal reasons to conduct this study, the author—whose own background was plagued by transiency, a history of mental illness, and physical abuse—was compelled to conduct a study of which she was an integral part. It was important to her to offer her own voice along with those of her colleagues and peers who participated in the study. Though she includes her own opinions, she makes a remarkable effort to represent the participants' viewpoints in an unbiased way. She presents their stories and other information that she has gathered through lengthy individual interviews, questionnaires, and school records.

Twenty-one women representing a number of different ethnic groups and various age groups comprise this study, with the majority of the volunteers being Caucasian. All, however, are classified as disadvantaged for the purposes of this study because of the following common characteristics:

- a. They lived in either a poor working-class or lower-class family as a child.
- b. They were first-generation college students
- c. They experienced at least one type of familial dysfunction or traumatic childhood. (8)

LePage-Lees thoroughly discusses the definition of *disadvantage* and explores its relationships to the women in the study. The term has long been associated with dysfunctional African American families and has

historically been considered racist; hence, many women perceive that describing themselves as disadvantaged would cast them in a negative light. In addition, they often question whether they could truly be classified as disadvantaged. LePage-Lees aptly points out that recognizing disadvantages or differences validates the spectrum of human experiences, especially of those children who have been reared in stressful environments.

LePage-Lees's study raises important questions whose answers provide implications for successfully educating and promoting resiliency in women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such questions include the following: What kinds of teachers and teaching style are essential to these students' success throughout their educational careers? What effect does negative school experiences have on disadvantaged high achievers? How do race, class, and gender affect the achievement and learning of this population?

Effectively conceived and designed, this study measures what it purports to and adheres to the principles of a good qualitative study. For the most part, questionnaires clearly elicit the information central to the goals of the study. Wording of some of the questions, however, could have been aimed at producing more precise, consistent answers, although using interviews and verbal discussions probably helped in achieving clarity. For example, the author asks if respondents "got nervous when they spoke aloud in class" while in high school, in college (as an undergraduate), or in graduate school (148). The question assumes that the respondents become nervous in all classes: it does not allow for those who become nervous in only one or a few classes. To ensure the rigor of the study, the author cites several measures from an interpretivistic paradigm used to judge qualitative studies as opposed to those from a positivist paradigm traditionally used to judge quantitative studies (138). By weighing the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of the study, she establishes what is akin to reliability and validity in a quantitative study emphasizing causality (138).

Those unaccustomed to reading behavioral science studies might find the style of writing somewhat dull, but LePage-Lees manages to brighten a usually lackluster style of reporting by interspersing the women's narratives within the text. The women's stories powerfully shine through with candor, wit, and sensitivity. By conducting this study, the author has not only helped women to learn more about themselves and the process of education, but has helped lend credibility and value to what is considered a woman's way of deriving truth and knowledge.

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