

## Using intersectional theoretical lenses to study low-income parenthood: Implications for the “Diaper Dilemma”

An interview with Dr. Jennifer Randles conducted by Dr. Casey Scheibling

This piece is part of a new series of digital features from the Journal of Family Theory & Review Digital Scholarship Board entitled *Theoretical Perspectives on Current Events*. In this series we present excerpts from interviews conducted with family scholars about the ways they utilize various theoretical lenses to research, interpret, and make sense of contemporary events, issues, or challenges impacting families. Our inaugural piece features:

**Dr. Jennifer Randles, Ph.D.** Associate Professor & Chair,  
Department of Sociology, California State University - Fresno, U.S.A.

**Casey Scheibling, Ph.D.** Postdoctoral Fellow,  
Department of Sociology, McMaster University, Canada.

### What are your main research subjects and theoretical lenses?

Using critical gender, race, and intersectional theoretical lenses, I study low-income parenthood and policies that help parents meet their family-formation goals and children’s needs. As a qualitative researcher who primarily uses in-depth interviewing and ethnographic methods, I seek to understand how family policies are implemented on the ground and whether they resonate with parents’ perspectives and lived experiences.

### Why are these lenses relevant and important for these subjects?

Attention to how gender, race, class, and other axes of inequality intersect in the lives of marginalized families is necessary to create and implement policies that best meet parents’ needs as they, themselves, understand and experience them. As practitioners and family scientists, we must inform programs and policies that reflect how families really are, not how policymakers wish for them to be. This requires careful empirical and theoretical attention to the various inequalities that shape parents’ lives.

### What do critical gender and intersectionality perspectives add to contemporary family science research?

Understanding the larger social and economic context of family relationships is crucial for crafting programs and policies that meaningfully address the challenges marginalized parents face in caring and providing for their children. These challenges are both cultural and economic, and critical gender and intersectional perspectives draw necessary attention to how ideas and material constraints interact to undermine parents’ best intentions. For example, in my first book, *Proposing Prosperity: Marriage Education Policy and Inequality in America* (Columbia University Press, 2017), I detail how marriage promotion policies targeting poor, unmarried parents have generally missed the mark because they did not account for how financially insecure couples ideologically associate marriage with already being middle class.

## What is the “Diaper Dilemma”?



**1 in 3 U.S. mothers lack sufficient diapers to keep a baby dry, comfortable, and healthy.**

45% of children younger than three live in low-income families that cannot easily afford enough diapers. Diaper need can lead to many problems for babies, including infections and rashes, as well as challenges for parents, such as the inability to access childcare and go to work, and higher levels of stress, guilt, and anxiety and lower levels of parental self-efficacy. Another diaper dilemma is the almost complete lack of public support for diapers, as no wide-scale, needs-based policy covers diapers. Parents cannot use WIC or food stamps to buy diapers, and the value of cash assistance is often too low to cover diaper costs. The average monthly diaper bill of \$75 would alone use up between 8 and 40 percent of a family’s cash aid check—and only one in four U.S. families in poverty receives any cash benefits at all. A third dilemma is how the conditions of poverty make using potentially cheaper and more environmentally friendly cloth or reusable diapers prohibitively difficult.

### How can an intersectional analysis deepen our understanding of the diaper dilemma?

Diaper need affects over five million U.S. children, disproportionately children of color, those from immigrant families, and those whose parents lack a high school diploma or are unemployed. It both reflects and exacerbates other intersecting inequalities, including racial discrimination and lack of access to high-quality education and living-wage work. I have found in my research that mothers of color suffer more from having to manage diaper need by sacrificing their own basic needs such as food and clothing, spending enormous amounts of mental and emotional energy stretching limited diaper supplies, and performing physical and practical labor to earn money to buy diapers.

Moving forward, my research agenda will focus on low-income parents’ experiences of diaper need, the growing national diaper bank movement, and diaper-related policies. My third book, *Diaper Dilemmas: Invisible Inequalities and the Politics of Diapering* is a social history of diapering as a class-based phenomenon in the United States.

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See our special issue on crafting theory-informed public policies at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/17562589/2019/11/1>