



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 22
Issue 2 June

Article 12

June 1995

Review of *Critical Issues in Child Welfare*. Nora S. Gustavson and Elizabeth A. Segal. Both books reviewed by Terri Combs-Orme, University of Tennessee.

Terri Combs-Orme
University of Tennessee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Combs-Orme, Terri (1995) "Review of *Critical Issues in Child Welfare*. Nora S. Gustavson and Elizabeth A. Segal. Both books reviewed by Terri Combs-Orme, University of Tennessee.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol22/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



and how to promote dialogue and transfer practice innovations among countries.

Overall, the book is humanistic in tone. The writers are able to criticize in scholarly and meaningful ways that are not derogatory, but on the contrary, invite the reader to creatively explore avenues to improve the profession. They also do not merely criticize; they articulate alternatives, often a far more arduous exercise.

There appear no demonstrable weaknesses, though this author feels that social work's current emphases on clinical work appears mainly due to the availability of employment in this area, a point which generally, the authors do not seem to fully appreciate. Perhaps social work professional and other organizations ought to find ways to incorporate holistic, developmental, and other strategies to enhance social justice into job descriptions. Despite this apparent minor weakness, the book is an excellent contribution and must reading for those wishing to understand and improve upon critical issues in social work.

Joseph Wronka
Springfield College

Richard P. Barth, Mark Courtney, Jill Duerr Berrick and Vicky Albert, *From Child Abuse to Permanency Planning: Child Welfare Services Pathways and Placements*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994. \$41.95 hardcover; \$19.95 papercover.

Nora S. Gustavson and Elizabeth A. Segal, *Critical Issues in Child Welfare*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994. \$17.95 paperback.

The timing is perfect for the publication of these books, as child abuse reports and foster care placements continue to increase. Both books examine some of the critical issues facing child welfare agencies, and thus the social work profession, in the 1990s; but they represent very different perspectives on the issues.

From Child Abuse to Permanency Planning examines the "stall" of the permanency planning movement in recent years and asks

some questions that have not been asked as well before: How do children go from abuse reports to wards of the state? When children do enter care, what influences how long they remain? What explains differences in foster care experiences for children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds?

The authors use several types of large California data sets, including a large survey of foster parents and agency personnel. Their use of administrative data (such as child abuse reports) is most interesting, particularly when they combine child welfare data with others, such as drug arrest and birth statistics. The authors make a good case for the use of such data, including the capability of using large samples and thus examining interactions that can seldom be tested with small clinical samples. Indeed, seldom before has child welfare research taken advantage of sophisticated statistical procedures, which have rich possibilities when used with such large data sets. It is particularly noteworthy that the authors have described their methods in ways that most well-trained MSW-level social workers should be able to understand.

Barth et al. give us much to be alarmed about: high numbers of infants placed in group placements; fewer and less timely adoptions for minority children; and the increasing use of kinship care without agency support and supervision, among other issues. It is only through this type of empirical examination of the problems, however, that the profession can probe deeply enough into such issues to be begin to understand and remedy them.

Critical Issues in Child Welfare discusses a broad range of issues related to children. The first section covers the "status" of America's children on a broad range of fronts, including legal rights, health, and education. Certainly the challenge of any such broad-reaching text is to avoid over-simplifying issues that are extremely complex. In many instances, this book fails to reflect the complexity of the issues in an effort to cover a lot of ground. For example, the discussion of adolescent pregnancy neglects to mention the role and responsibilities of males in the issue; the relative importance of early sexual activity as opposed to contraceptive use; and the fact that the pregnancy rate

is increasing among white adolescents and decreasing among African-Americans. Although this type of survey text certainly must sacrifice some depth in the cause of breadth, some of the omissions here may lead the naive reader to misleading or even mistaken conclusions.

Moreover, there is some repetition among sections in discussions of programs such as Medicaid and AFDC; this space could have been used to expand the discussion. Among the significant material that is missing is a discussion of the expansions in Medicaid and the EPSDT (Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment) program that have broadened coverage to many working poor women and children in the last few years.

It is interesting that Section 2 of the book on residual services uses some of the statistics shown by Barth et al. to be faulty at worst and misleading at best. Again, although it is not possible for a text such as this to address all the many related issues, some of this material is so over-simplified as to present a misleading picture. For example, the section on foster care and adoption over-emphasizes the extent of abuse by foster parents (based on the amount of space devoted to it) and under-emphasizes the critical role played by foster parents in caring for foster children, as well as the failure of child welfare agencies to fully support this vital resource for children.

The third section deals with some of the contemporary issues that threaten children, including HIV, exposure to drugs, homelessness, and violence. Although again rather simplistic, this section presents some provocative material for the undergraduate social work student.

It is in the last section of the book, which purports to link research and practice, that the simplistic approach of the book is most troublesome. The discussion of assessing infants and children in chapter ten, for example, briefly describes the use of several well-known assessment instruments. Missing is a discussion of the importance of standardization in the assessment process, the meaning and role of reliability and validity, and the consequences of poor assessment techniques.

The authors list areas for future research in this section, but seem unaware of much of the existing research on some of these

very issues. Indeed, the title of this section does not seem consistent with what has been presented, and much of it seems to be repetitive of previous sections.

In conclusion, although this book examines some important issues for undergraduate students, in many areas it falls short of demonstrating the complexities of those issues. In pursuit of the laudable goal of covering a lot of ground, the authors have oversimplified some complicated issues. If used as an undergraduate text, the book should be accompanied by classroom discussion to fill in these gaps.

Terri Combs-Orme
University of Tennessee

Ann Hartman *Reflection & Controversy: Essays in Social Work*, Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers Press, 1994, \$21.95, papercover.

Royal museums in foreign countries hold a certain fascination for me. I am especially drawn to the crown jewel collections. I am attracted not by the value of the individual gems which is usually enormous but rather by the history that these collections represent: the history of the country and its kings and queens. I mention this because I was recently impressed by another collection but this time the gems were literary ones. I am referring to *Reflection & Controversy: Essays in Social Work* by Ann Hartman.

Reflection & Controversy is a collection of essays: twenty-three editorials written by Ann Hartman during her four-and-a-half year tenure as editor-in-chief of *Social Work* and two essays commissioned by Hartman, one by Caitlin C. Ryan on the role of social work in AIDS; the other by Liane V. Davis on violence in families. The diversity of topics makes this book truly a collection of intellectual gems. As Carel B. Germain notes in the foreword: "The essays cover a wide range of issues from homelessness to political correctness, from children in a careless society to aging as a feminist issue, from health care to war and peace, from narrative theory to revolution and backlash in our gay and lesbian communities" (p. viii). And the list of gems goes on and on.