lives "not in accord with the law". As such, it would provide useful material for social work educators and students as social work often focuses on people on the margins of society and on the processes involved (the creation of deviant identity, stigma, exclusion and marginalisation). *Single mothers and their children* would also be of interest to readers interested in public policy in that it provides an excellent illustration of policy failure, that is, the failure of deterrent policies directed against children on ex-nuptial conception rates. Such policy failure and the authors' critical analysis of stereotypes attached to single mothers are timely, given the recently reported changes to welfare policy concerning single mothers and their children in the United States, changes which are purported to overcome what is seen as America's "moral decline". ☼

Reviewed by:

Cathy Davis
Lecturer, School of Social Work
Australian Catholic University, ACT

Manufacturing 'bad mothers'
A critical perspective on child neglect

Karen J. Swift
1995, University of Toronto Press, Toronto

I had several immediate reactions to reading this book. The first was a welcome relief to find a contemporary book taking a critical approach and warning about the dangers of 'child saving'; the second was a similar relief to find a serious contemporary consideration of neglect which seems to have been crowded out by a plethora of writings about physical and sexual abuse over recent years; and thirdly, an overriding reaction of deja vu in having seen the broad arguments rehearsed many times before.

What is clear though is not that the arguments are old hat or out of fashion; on the contrary, they remain compelling (with some sensible caveats). The broad proposition about the construction of 'bad mothers' resonates with some of the labelling literature from the 70s, and the implied social policy response would be to direct supportive (non-judgemental, non-stigmatising) resources to women whose marginal performance as parents can, overwhelmingly, be attributed to the social experiences directed to them because of their gender, poverty and race.

What is different about making these arguments in the 90s is the danger that the removal of neglect as a focus of protective state services may not necessarily lead to progressive outcomes. Within the present political economy, one can already discern a trend toward neglect coming to be seen as a lower order abuse (potentially even its eventual removal from the discourse of abuse), but with the crucial difference that the removal of stigmatising and often inappropriate protective services would not necessarily see their replacement with *any* (more appropriate) supportive services.

Child neglect has constituted one of the more durable categories in professional social work and for more than a century is has been characterised as a problem of deficient care by mothers. Swift's main challenge to this accepted view of child neglect lies in the fact that such approaches hide and distort important social realities and, in so doing, reproduce the poverty, marginalisation and violence which have always characterised the lives of far too many families. Both historically and currently, child welfare has dealt with the poor and marginalised, yet the 'myth of classlessness' depicts a level playing field upon which all families carry out their child rearing activities.

The 'good parent' model, in condemning many mothers as unworthy of help, negates their experience. Moreover, as anyone with a practical knowledge of the field knows, the help which is directed at their children is all too often inadequately helpful in practice.

Swift, who is from the School of Social Work at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, is not just arguing that those who develop policy or practice in child welfare should be suspicious of the neglect formulation, and recognise the need to keep the blaming of parents (women) to an absolute minimum; she is suggesting that incremental change is not enough, that neglect should be discarded as a child welfare category, and that we need to improve welfare and stop policing families.

Her depiction of the practice system in Canada seems to find a parallel here in Australia, with child welfare providing probably the last area of work still primarily controlled by social workers, and neglect still providing the largest, and always increasing, category of child abuse. Swift argues forcefully that child welfare organisations do not seem to be improving the desperate and unhappy lives of many women and children. Chronic underfunding and case overload condemn the system to just rolling along, with children often placed in many different foster homes, long-term foster care, or returned to parents and a poverty-ridden existence.

The book is organised in three parts: *Constructing knowledge*, which offers a critical sociology of child neglect; *Child welfare work processes*, which covers the organisational production of cases; and *The response system*, which carefully dissects current practice. The structure of the book has some minor problems; some sections may be characterised as too abstract and academic despite some of the theoretical discussion being a bit 'undercooked'.

On balance, though, the discussion holds together well, and Swift has written a passionate book which, although intended as a critical text on child neglect, has much to offer practitioners. Indeed they might get more from reading *Manufacturing 'bad mothers'* than from reading any number of child protection policy and procedure manuals. ☼

Reviewed by

Dr Gary Hough
Dept of Social Work, RMIT
Melbourne