

L Waterhouse (ed), *Child Abuse and Child Abusers*

Jessica Kingsley, 1993, ISBN 1-85302-133-4

A collection of essays on child abuse is always topical; perhaps unduly so. This book is part of the United Kingdom "Research Highlights in Social Work" series. It bears the stamp of its Scottish editor and the focus on sexual abuse at that time: Australia's Robin Clark is the only non-British contributor out of a dozen chapters, and little attention is given to physical, emotional or systemic abuse. Despite this imbalance, it provides a rich source of scholarly reviews of the international literature, and some overdue challenges to glib orthodoxy.

One of the important insights is that child abuse is a complex phenomenon, marked by conceptual diversity (Hallett p142), and differences in perspectives of professionals, adults, and children (Roberts and Taylor p34). Hallett argues that the very concept of child abuse has reached its use-by date: it seeks to cover too diverse a range of conduct and conditions, and should be unpacked. Abuse is a "political (small 'p') or moral (but not necessarily moralistic) judgement", she writes (p142; see also Gough p209). Class and race influence professionals' assessment of stylised case vignettes (p143), and congruence between professional and lay perceptions is taken for granted.

Even so, natural parents, relatives and step-parents — rather than strangers — are overwhelmingly found to be the real threat to children (Dobash et al p120 and p125–6), in line with local research. However, undue focus on the incident which brings a child to notice, and the risk of injury, can deflect attention away from underlying needs (Pitcairn et al p87). Professional perspectives can also become too dominant. Voluntary self-help groups often receive too little support (or too little autonomy of action) (Lloyd p191ff). Work with perpetrators is also a neglected area (p201).

Casework intervention practice can be problematic too, as Farmer points out in a revealing discussion of how professional suspicion may discourage the formation of alliances between non-abusing parents and the interests of the child (p43). Such suspicion can also shut parents and children out of case conference discussions which then end up validating professional perceptions at the expense of alienating those the conference is supposed to assist (p48). Rights conferred by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* for children and parents to fully participate in all discussions and proceedings were found to be rather grudgingly extended, at great cost to the quality of practice and social outcomes.

More formal responses are also problematic. Hallett (p139ff) identifies the challenges of getting different agencies and professionals to "work together" with the military precision and certainty often demanded by lay commentators, politicians or "child death enquiries". Indeed, coordination strategies may be dependent for their success on retention of well resourced public sector health and welfare services (p150); privatisation and lower taxes may exacerbate levels of abuse.

The balance between criminal justice and welfare approaches is also too little explored (Hallett p146). Clark joins in this expression of concern that the child protection registration is being distorted to become "the main response to general concerns about parent-child relations" (p181). Christopherson's discussion of European models which place initial weight on collaborative family based planning, before statutory intervention takes over (p156), provides an interesting counterpoint to analysis of then recent UK legislation enshrining similar principles to that in much of Australia at present. The formulation of statutory definitions of harm, the emphasis on planning for the future of the child, and the

degree of reliance on courts rather than service networks (p158), all carries lessons for local policy-making.

Clark shares this interest in breaking out of a situation where “governments continue to spend large sums of money on a short-term investigative service focused on abuse which is not the main problem for most of the families referred” (p184). Thomson defends the Scottish hearing system which was responsible for the “Orkney” case (of inappropriate removal of children); but he unintentionally ends up strengthening the case for not placing too much reliance on the law in achieving a balance between prevention and intervention (p176).

Gough’s hard-headed assessment of “prevention” is an appropriate closing contribution. Given the complexity of the phenomena, competing theories of multiple causation, limited evidence of amenability to change and lack of agreement about the contribution of individual and structural factors (p208–13) — it is unsurprising that he is cautious about the real value of prevention. Such favourites as educational strategies (p215–7), general social support and more specialised agencies (p224) all receive very guarded endorsement. His cautious scepticism about the ultimate contributions made either by the remedial child protection services or general preventive schemes, implies that we should all take more seriously the plea to define the objectives of such programs and to conduct rigorous research into the degree to which those objectives are achieved.

Such messages are cold comfort to lay (and some professional) commentators who yearn for a quick fix program (or law). Good researchers know that this is not possible. This is why this collection holds valuable lessons for an Australian readership.

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