

Book Review

Culturally Competent Public Child Welfare Practice

Author: Krishna Samantrai. Brooks-Cole/Thompson Learning, 2004. 184 pages. \$50.95 paperback

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A former Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau, division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, once stated, "If we care about families and children, we have an ethical imperative to make culture and cultural competence central to everything we do" (Williams, 1997, cited in Weaver, 1999, p.14). This unofficial mandate underscores the inevitable action of cultural forces within the arena of mental health and social services to clients, as well as the fundamental rights of children and families to receive culturally competent services. Advocating for this culturally conscious "ethical imperative," Krishna Samantrai's latest work, *Culturally Competent Public Child Welfare Practice* (2004), represents a timely, practical explication of culturally competent services for the modern child welfare field. Samantrai's writing reverberates with the authority of an administrator, the compassion of a clinician, and the hands-on familiarity of a public service consumer. Her pragmatic, well-versed style evidently draws from her own experiences working as a clinical social worker, supervisor, administrator, and consultant, before attaining her current post as Professor Emeritus at Smith College School for Social Work, an institution whose anti-racism stance itself echoes this author's commitment to working within multiple cultures and worldviews.

Based on her seven years of experience in developing a specialized child welfare curriculum at the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), Samantrai's latest literary work proposes a new model of child welfare practice that draws from clinical theories of human behavior and uses a "goodness-of-fit" perspective in the assessment of family functioning, based upon the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF) (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). In acknowledging cultural factors as central to the treatment of clients in the welfare system, this text is consistent with a movement recognizing and promoting multiculturalism and culturally diverse social work practice that has developed largely in the past two decades, and a growing body of scholars who have eschewed an "ethnic minority" focus in favor of a focus on "human diversity" at multiple levels (Lum, 2000). In contrast

to the former focus, which many social workers believe actually perpetuated harmful stereotypes of inadequacy and powerlessness associated with ethnic minority groups, the latter focus appeals to social service providers for its widespread recognition of the strength and uniqueness of individual histories and cultures (Pinderhughes, 1989).

Notwithstanding the suitability of this text to a field that demands culturally competent practice for its clients, some critics may question what new information this book contributes to the social work profession's knowledge base. At first glance, this book represents yet another example of a literary work that identifies the issues involved with culturally competent practice, as well as children and families in the welfare system. The social work field is one in which research, policy, and practice centering on child welfare, abuse, and neglect currently abound, and in which multicultural themes have predominated in the past few decades. In addition, the field is replete with practice models, particularly the ubiquitous mental health model, which is most consistently utilized in both academic and clinical arenas. Moreover, many practice models are based on the diagnosis of clients in clinical settings, routinely viewing them in terms of "problem" behaviors or "negative" health risk factors—remnants of an earlier era in social work in which the medical model of practice dominated the field.

However, existing cultural values, perspectives, and accepted models of practice in which social work students have traditionally been instructed, such as the mental health model, have come under scrutiny in recent decades. Given that these models and values draw from a historically Eurocentric viewpoint (Weaver, 1999), many in the field perceive them to be inappropriate and insufficient in addressing the diversity of clients served in the public sector, and find that they poorly prepare social workers to face the challenges within the child welfare system. Samantrai herself observed that the mental health model, specifically, lacked applicability to the field of child welfare: "The mental health model of practice prepared students for private practice of therapy but

not for the realities of public child welfare practice” (2004, p. xii).

The straightforward title of the current book belies the profound depth and applicability of the text itself to the area of child welfare, an area that the author correctly identifies as lacking suitable educational materials, particularly a comprehensive, integrated, and practical textbook. Clinicians past and present working in the field of child welfare undoubtedly would agree that there is a severe discrepancy between the clinical challenges they face daily and the academic responses available to help guide them. Having worked during my own graduate school internship years in a public child welfare system, I know that I would have benefited from a relevant textbook to help me integrate my knowledge and offer a more appropriate practice model that would allow me to work more effectively with my clients.

What distinguishes this textbook from others in the social work field is that it effectively allows the reader to (1) review key concepts and theories, (2) learn a new model of practice and integrate knowledge, and (3) apply this new found knowledge directly to practice within a culturally competent context. Part One, “The Philosophical and Legal Context of Practice,” is dedicated to establishing the evolution of sociopolitical ideas and rulings, informed by clinical human behavior theories, underlying the current field of public child welfare. This portion of the book is underlaid by the author’s pertinent acknowledgment of the reality that sociopolitical, economic, and legal structures are responsible for delineating the boundaries of clinical practice. Part Two, entitled “The Skills of Practice,” represents the core of the book, in which the author presents her unique, new model of practice, the *Goodness-of-Fit* model. Finally, Part Three, entitled “The Organizational Context of Practice,” rounds out the three-part structure of the text, providing readers with concrete interventions and ideas for working within frameworks ranging from bureaucracies to neighborhoods and local communities.

The *Goodness-of-Fit* model presented here essentially serves as a proxy for cultural competence. In lieu of distinct paragraphs encapsulating separate ethnic groups, imparting broad-based, group-specific (i.e., African-American, Latino, Asian-American) facts, accompanied by a disclaimer expressly warning against stereotyping, the author takes a new approach to describing cultural diversity. Samantrai’s definition of “culture” does *not* equate race and ethnicity; this parallels the way that the McMaster Model, which inspired the author’s practice model, avoids defining “normality” as the statistical average, or family

“health” as a lack of negative characteristics (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Echoing the sentiments of postmodernism, this text defines culture and cultural competence along multiple dimensions and in different ways, moving beyond a cultural understanding limited by the boundaries of traditional ethnic groups.

The *Goodness-of-Fit* model also diverges from the assessment and diagnosis of families based on traditional “deficit” models, which share a tendency to view clients in terms of risk factors or negative qualities. The author’s model prefers to treat families from a strengths perspective, identifying the extent to which parents are able to successfully meet their children’s needs at any given point in time. Furthermore, this practice model assumes that clients are capable of change, and it prescribes a dynamic, continuous assessment process that responds to changing client needs over time. The assumptions of this model of practice complement other research on traumatized children, which also suggests that parents’ own recognition of their strengths and their ability to support their children is a powerful, decisive factor in such families’ success in overcoming traumatic hurdles (Groves & Zuckerman, 1998; Osofsky, 1998). Recognizing the potential benefits—emotional, psychological, and clinical—to clients reaped by using a strengths perspective model of practice is an indication of the author’s deep empathy for children and families in the welfare system. This stance has also been taken by many clinicians working with other vulnerable and oppressed client populations, such as ethnic and racial minority groups, women, and adolescent parents, to name a few (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993; Lum, 2000; Rasheed & Johnson, 1995; Rhoden & Robinson, 1997; Simon, 1994).

In this text, Samantrai takes the reader, step-by-step, from the “front end” of a family’s entry into the child welfare system through their exiting the system from the “back end,” focusing specifically on assessment and case planning. Laudably, the author manages what would otherwise be an extensive synopsis of theory and history with natural fluency and brevity, rendering a large quantity of information palatable to even the newest social work student. Another helpful aspect of this text is its use of case studies, accompanying each stage of the assessment/case planning process, to help the reader integrate theoretical knowledge and clinical data with applied real-world scenarios—a good exercise for beginners as well as more sophisticated clinicians.

Too often, in the field of social work, we are exposed to numerous texts and journal articles that

highlight *problems* with culturally sensitive practice, outline *difficulties* within various systems of social services, or identify *considerations* in therapeutic work with abused and neglected children and their families. In addition, many “culturally competent” models of practice highlight general, broad indices, such as *knowledge*, *skills*, and *values*, and are most often theoretical or conceptual in nature (Weaver, 1999). However significant the bulk of this information, it is rarely integrated into a hands-on, practical guide to help students and practitioners address the challenging tasks involved in the public child welfare system, such as the assessment and case planning required in crisis intervention and case management. Because of financial constraints and organizational limitations, practitioners in this field may often feel ill-equipped to handle the tasks set before them; they may be staffed at agencies with disproportionately large caseloads, and they may receive little or inadequate supervision and specialized training. Administrators and supervisors also face their share of challenges in terms of answering organizational questions, maintaining protocol, and upholding their ethical obligation to practice cultural

competency. The merits of this text therefore extend to all social workers in the public child welfare sector, ranging from students to practitioners to upper-level management, particularly those who acknowledge and sympathize with the difficulties faced by participants in the public child welfare system.

In writing this textbook, Krishna Samantrai demonstrates a solid knowledge base and an innovative strategy to help readers successfully integrate their knowledge into the service of clients in the welfare system. Furthermore, she sheds light on a particular niche of clinical services, which is deserving of more specific, intervention-focused strategies. Above all, the author honors the families she sets out to serve, with a strengths-based, culturally relevant practice model which ensures that children and their families, who may feel the weight of the world upon their shoulders, will be respected and helped to find strengths within themselves.

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