

BOOK REVIEW

[Schwalbe, M. \(2007\). *Rigging the game: How inequality is reproduced in everyday life*. New York: Oxford University Press.](#)

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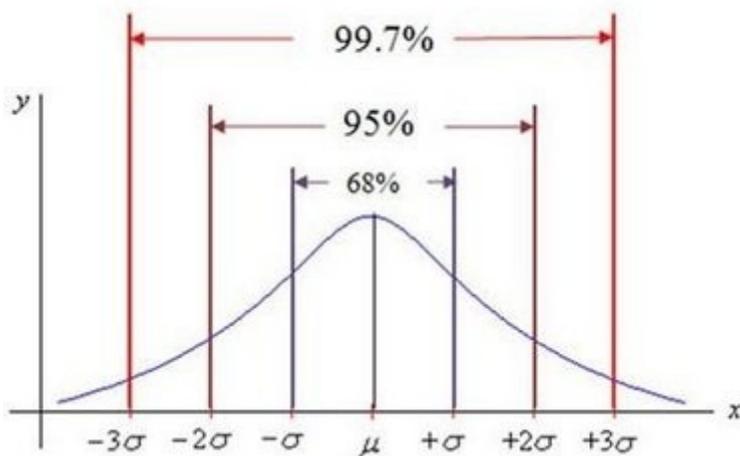
Michael Schwalbe is a master of the written word. I suspect that he could become another John Grisham. Instead of writing novels about legal issues, Schwalbe could write stories with sociological insights. Within *Rigging the Game*, he employs stories to explain complex sociological concepts. I seriously doubt that there is a better writer within social science. He must be applauded for his artistry of the written word! I suspect that all of us would love to have Schwalbe's writing talent. Schwalbe's intended audience includes those who are beginning to study sociology or those professionals or academicians who have an interest in the study of social inequality. Thus, many readers of *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics* would be intensely interested in this work. Social work professors will want their students to read this book.

His main objective is twofold. First, Schwalbe elucidates a theoretical perspective on socioeconomic inequality. He explains how it emerges and how it is maintained. *So What!!!* Thousands of books have been written with this objective! Schwalbe's major contribution is that he makes conflict theory immediately understandable and *even* enjoyable to read. There are many novel-like qualities to this bit of scholarship. Second, Schwalbe follows a Marxian tradition of setting up a call to action. That is, he proposes solutions to the "rigged

economic system." Thus, in many ways, it is a manual for the practice of macro social work.

Two points of particular interest can be made to help one decide on adopting this book for a course. First, Schwalbe's portrayal of the "rigged game" is a theoretical concept. He presents patterns within the capitalist economic structure to support the position that in the USA we have economic predestination. He begins with the assumption that the system is rigged, and demonstrates support by employing numerous observations. In other words, "pulling up one's own boot straps" is not a reflection of reality. Some of his observations are profoundly compelling, and others are not. *However, that's not the issue!* "Is the game rigged?" turns out to be an empirical question. It is a testable hypothesis.

We know enough about the nature of our social and physical environment to acknowledge that some people can beat the rigged system by dumb luck. This is no surprise – for this is what three standard deviations from the mean often signify. The statistical question is this: Are the game-winners merely products of dumb luck or is the pattern of winning systematic? Probability theory suggests that approximately 2.5% of any population will beat a rigged game by luck, as illustrated in figure 1.



Here would lay the theoretical proportion of subjects who won a rigged game: 2.5% of the population.

In the end, we can test the existence of a rigged social stratification system by employing a 1-tail null hypothesis. The research hypothesis would read something like this:

In a random sample of people over the age of 60, only 2.5% should move up two levels within a measure of socioeconomic strata.

If the results are statistically significantly ($p < .05$), then the game is rigged or not rigged – depending on how the null hypothesis is articulated. Nevertheless, Schwalbe has offered a major contribution by laying out a conflict theory that is testable.

Second, as most readers are aware, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) made a substantial change in curriculum standards. The “population-at-risk” (PAR) sector has been deemphasized. This reconfiguration has led to many heated discussions among social work faculty. Traditionally, the PAR curriculum placed greater emphasis on group rather than the environment in which the group exists. For example, because of the emphasis on PAR, social work education had deemphasized the study of poverty. Those

who are distressed about the de-emphasis on PAR fear that ignoring a group that has faced a history of discrimination is problematic. Although Schwalbe is not a social work educator, he provides the best framework for understanding why CSWE pursued the change. In addition, and what makes this book valuable to social work educators, Schwalbe lays out the perfect balance between studying PAR and the environment in which these groups exist. Faculty should examine how this book can be a valuable asset for reconfiguring their curriculum to comply with the new CSWE standards.