

**Secombe, K. (2011). *So You Think I Drive a Cadillac? Welfare Recipients' Perspectives on the System and its Reform*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.**

Reviewed by Peter A. Kindle, Ph.D, CPA, LMSW  
The University of South Dakota, Sioux Falls, South Dakota

How is it that I could earn an MSW and a Ph.D in social work without being required to read this book? Karen Secombe, Professor of Community Health at Portland State University, provides an invaluable resource by providing a platform for the voices of women who have been on welfare to speak. Based on her interviews with 47 AFDC leavers in Florida in 1995 and her longitudinal study with 552 TANF leavers in Oregon in 2002-2003, this study may well be without peer in its ability to challenge white, middle class values related to work, welfare, and poverty.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the author's perspective, which is both critical in that it assumes that power relationships favor the dominant (i.e., male) group and feminist in that it assumes that women's experiences are devalued and neglected. The voices of these welfare leavers blend to form an uncomfortable chorus that insists that the plight of women on welfare cannot be easily distinguished from the common plight of all women, that the presumptions of welfare reform are false, that the real problem is low wages (not welfare), and that these voices must be heeded if social solutions to poverty are to be found.

Chapter two provides a brief history of welfare and a sketch of the explanations for poverty along a dimension running from Individualism to Social Structuralism. This historical and theoretical framework is then

challenged by the voices of the welfare leavers in chapters three through six. In chapter three, their voices echo middle class biases against welfare; in chapter four, seven "exceptional circumstances" are explored to explain why these women were on welfare; in chapter five, the financial "monotony of poverty" is explored; and in chapter six, they describe the formal and informal systems they used to survive on welfare. Each chapter confronts common middle class assumptions. Welfare mothers do not approve of welfare. None of the "exceptional circumstances" differ from the same financial and familial pressures exerted on every woman in America. From budgeting to the coping mechanisms used to bypass welfare restrictions, these women show time and again that they are doing what everyone does – the best that they can in difficult situations. Only a modicum of imagination is required to see oneself emulating their actions and decisions.

Chapters seven through nine turn in the direction of solving the problems these women face. Their perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the current welfare system undergird the author's conclusion that the problem is the instability of low wage work without secure benefits (chapter seven). The risk associated with moving off of welfare is highlighted in chapter eight, and the reader is confronted again with the harsh truth that the security welfare supports represent may make the risk of leaving welfare untenable. The concluding chapter argues for more resources

to be devoted to the safety net and compares the inadequacies of the safety net in the United States to other countries.

In many respects, this book is without flaws. The central purpose, to help us hear the voices of women who have been on welfare, is a *fait accompli*. The author's ear has been so well-tuned to their voices that she does not always seem to appreciate how these voices might resonate in the ear of the readers. This is a book I would like every social work student to read and discuss, but it is also a book that I would like to hide from my more conservative friends.

In order to broaden her reading audience, I believe the author needs to address three things that are not adequately covered in this book. First, I suggest that she include an analysis of the impact the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) may have on the transition from welfare-to-work. Even a modestly aware critic of the welfare safety net realizes that it is a hodgepodge of programs. Why not simply include a table describing the financial impact TANF, food stamps, low wage work, Section 8 housing, transportation vouchers, child care support, Medicaid, and EITC might have on a typical family? Without explicitly informing the reader in this manner, the author allows the reader to invoke the iceberg principle – that she is hiding something that is larger and more important than what she is telling us.

Secondly, I suggest that the author more clearly distinguish between welfare (a product of dependency) and poverty (a product of scarce resources). One may escape dependency without escaping poverty, but the

author continues throughout this text to conflate the two. In fact, she fails to acknowledge that there may be a qualitative improvement in a family's life when employment replaces welfare, no matter how poorly the work pays.

Thirdly, I suggest that the author more critically evaluate her solutions in chapter eight. This reviewer is unconvinced that the history of job training programs, for example, warrants endorsement, or that court imputation of child support on unemployed or incarcerated fathers has proven an effective solution to the absent father problem. "The simple truth is that not all adults are psychologically, intellectually, and physically capable of financially supporting themselves and their families" (p. 165) seems to indicate that social investments in human capital will never solve the problem of dependency. Accordingly, while this reviewer endorses the criticisms of the low wage employment sector recorded here, he is not convinced that the "problem with welfare is the structure of low-tier work" (p. ix). This is part of the problem. The other part is that our society has failed to face the realities of dependency.

I loved reading this book and recommend it highly to all social work instructors and students. I will definitely be using it in my classes. Practitioners need to hear these voices and reflect on their meaning. Those who do so will be enriched by the experience.

Reviewer Contact information:  
[peter.kindle@yahoo.com](mailto:peter.kindle@yahoo.com)