

Catching a Case: Inequality and Fear in New York City's Child Welfare System. By Tina Lee. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016. Pp. v + 245. \$25.00 (paperback).

The Criminal Justice System and the Child Welfare System are parallel to each other, as they both formally and informally punish minority groups. Even though they do not have equivalent punitive practices they are similar in ways that these institutions meant to “serve”, and disservice disadvantaged groups of society—People of Color, women, and immigrants as these practices actively affect the education system while increasing fear through surveillance. Both systems control the outcomes of the perceived crimes and continue to cycle stratified reproduction. In *Catching a Case: Inequality and Fear in New York City's Child Welfare System*, Tina Lee uses the term *stratified reproduction* to explain how particular parents are cherished and supported in raising children while some are not. She views reproduction (raising children) through a political lens, which illustrates the connections of power inequalities of race, class and gender for Mothers of Color. Lee highlights how poverty is directly linked to the involvement in the Child Welfare System, which most of the time is linked to neglect. Furthermore, Children of Color are placed through “the system” at much higher rates than their white counterparts (Church II. et al., 2005). For poor inner city communities “catching a case” with the system is a fear. For women it is the fear of removal of children through the Child Welfare system and for men this often takes place through incarceration and involvement in the Criminal Justice System. While the hyper-criminalization of Men of Color experience is clearly marked in research in the school- to- prison pipeline literature, little has illustrated the vicious cycle Women of Color and their children fall into. Therefore, this book is essential for educators seeking to understand how institutions perpetuate inequalities for disadvantaged mothers and children.

Lee's analysis of the Child Welfare System is compelling; she takes a multi-methodological approach and provides the perspectives of the mothers targeted and the professionals involved (judges, social workers, and lawyers). She interviewed 24 parents in New York, conducted 28 informal and formal interviews with judges, defenders/attorneys, and caseworkers. She conducted a survey for 42 parents and followed many cases. Through extensive observation, she sat through court hearings and attended public forums, hearings, rallies and meetings to learn about the child welfare system in New York City. Additionally, she attended conferences for lawyers, and kept herself updated with news from the system through newspapers that presented stories about child welfare. Lee provides a detailed account of the entire process of a Child Welfare case- from explaining the cause and effects- to defining terminology, agencies and professionals involved. Her operationalization provided a holistic and insightful understanding about the ways in which the Child Welfare System operates; methodologically she captures various aspects that other studies fail to encapsulate.

In chapter 1, Lee's introduction establishes the connections of race, class and gender in the Child Welfare system thus illustrating how *stratified reproduction* is recreated for poor Mothers of Color. In chapter 2, while trying to present these connections, Lee provides a historical context of the Child Welfare System in New York City, showing how the system often targets urban poor immigrant groups and Families of Color. In chapter 3, Lee goes into depth and discusses a detailed process for those involved in a Child Welfare case, from initial report to removal or reunification¹. In chapter 4, she examines the fear and crisis in the system that happens due to overload of cases which creates a Child Welfare system overwhelmed with consequences for decision makers that cannot contribute quality time per case and parents that are affected by this. In chapter 5, she explains fear that parents have for “catching a case” in more detail, demonstrating how the surveillance and policing of mothers is confounded in race, class, gender background. In chapter 6, she moves on to discuss various viewpoints about neglect, its connection to poverty and presents the argument that caseworkers and family court officials are influenced by discourses of stereotypes. In Chapter 7, she investigates the power dynamics that exist in the system, and provides examples of the vulnerability of parents and children in the reunification process

¹ In the child welfare system *removal* occurs when they system removes children from parents and *reunification* is when the court grants parenting rights back and reunites parents and children.

that forces them to comply with institutions that have their life at play. In chapter 8, Lee concludes by highlighting how all of the aforementioned information leads to *stratified reproduction*, cycles of poverty and inequality for poor families of color, and calls for change in the Child Welfare system.

The connection that Tina Lee finds between poverty and neglect is the epitome of a society dominated by stereotypical images of the disadvantaged. She conducts eye-opening radical research that challenges color-blind racism by presenting the complexities and challenges of living as a poor mother based on deficit views that criminalize this population. The popular views of proper parenting coming from dominant white standards creates stereotypical notions for the way poor Mothers of Color raise their children. This produces pressure to follow the status quo embedded in fear because they are punished when they do not fulfill the standards. The problems faced by poor mothers are rooted in larger systems of inequality. However, the Child Welfare System sees only individual acts of “bad parenting” unconsciously formed through larger discourse of stereotypes placed on poor Women of Color. Consequently, institutional racism and discrimination dominate educational and public settings that continue to place People of Color at the margins of society. For this reason, communities with high rates of poverty undergo surveillance and policing at higher rates. Lee suggests, that due to the intense connection between neglect and poverty poor parents are more likely to experience this fear of “catching a case.”

The Child Welfare System blames Mothers of Color for being poor. Their inability to obtain certain resources to meet “middle class standards” pushes caseworkers to remove children rather than meeting the parents and children's needs. For example, there was a case where a family did not have enough food. That was enough evidence to remove the children and make assumptions about the entire family's life. This shows the direct impact of class background in the *decision making* process of the Child Welfare System. As Tina Lee shows, these cases actually worsen poverty. For instance, in one case a woman left her children at home alone when she was called into a mandated Welfare-to-Work job that threatened to terminate her benefits if she did not attend. She could not find childcare but also did not want to lose her only income. Those with economic instability, have a heightened fear that they might lose cash aid benefits because that is their only source of income. While the system is meant to help the families, it polices them instead. As Lee highlights, education is crucial to creating strong families, but her analysis does not direct educators on how to aid and support families undergoing poverty.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in the future of children and future generations—Educators of all age groups are an audience need to read this book because they interact and work with children on a daily basis. It exemplifies the reality, the challenge and the crisis of being insiders (e.g. social workers, family lawyers, judges) and outsiders in the Child Welfare System. Not only will Child Welfare professionals gain important knowledge and insight from this book but anyone directly working with children, (i.e. teachers, medical professionals, psychologists, therapists, law enforcement) and anyone who has the duty of reporting abuse or neglect- *mandated reporters, should read this book*. This book provides the reader with tangible information regarding the current urgency to provide comprehensive policies that serve the needs of mothers and children. Additionally, this work serves as a road map to begin to imagine simple ways to create meaningful change. From changing stereotypes one has about poor mothers, to protecting children from abuse and/or placing them in the system, the book positions the imaginary of the reader in the front lines of the contemporaneous issues that afflict the lives of families in the United States. There is a desperate need to deconstruct all the topics that Lee brings up in this book. Institutions meant to serve families actually do a disservice by separating families, pushing them into further poverty, and causing life-harming mental trauma on both parents and children.