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Brush, Lisa D. *Poverty, Battered Women, and Work in U.S. Public Policy.*

New York, N.Y. : Oxford University Press, 2011. 197 p. ISBN 9780195398502 (hardcover : alk. paper)

Reviewed by Mildred Bates, D.S.W., Professor, Rhode Island College, School of Social Work.

This is an ambitious, rewarding and frustrating book. No topic could be more contemporary or more central to the lives of all women as this: the intersection among work, subjection to male ‘coercive control,’ and social policy’s formulation based on myth and conventional wisdom. And, as a back drop to her own empirical research on the intersections of being poor, on welfare, battered, and a woman in the context of ‘welfare reform’ (1996) and the Violence against Women Act (1994), Brush reviews popular and feminist analyses of poverty and battering and assesses the social policies put into place by ‘neo liberals’ (among whom she includes both Republican and Democratic regimes) to affect those issues-- I won’t say ‘to end’ poverty or battering since it is unclear that our social policy actually has any such intent. In the course of her analysis, Brush reviews a broad range of recent feminist scholarship in these areas, including scholarship based in economics, social welfare, sociology and, to a lesser degree, mental health. I enjoyed reading most of this book and learned a tremendous amount from it. Much of the bibliography in my copy is marked with ‘must read’ items, some of which I have not waited to read. However, Brush has set herself a very high goal for this slender (140 pages) volume, a goal that I do not believe she fully met.

As a professor of social work, a woman, a former activist in the battered women’s movement, and a mental health clinician working with poor women who have been or are battered, I recognize the women Brush describes, and I recognize their many binds. They are three-dimensional, complex human beings in three-dimensional and complex situations, and Brush takes pains to present them this way, neither as heroes or villains (p. 89), especially in the chapter “Welfare recipients talk back.” (In the service of action research that hopes to influence the political discourse, this is a presentation that I am not sure has any chance of persuading anyone who is not already convinced of the value of these women). In her chapter “Conventional wisdom and its discontents,” Brush uses a “feminist structural analysis” (p.31) to critique social policy and to define battering in a broad context: the context of our nation at this time where poor women are battered by myths of social autonomy, “the politics of disgust” (p.29), and social policies created to serve the interests of capital rather than people; the context of race/racism and gender/sexism; and the context of the “stalled revolution” (p. 38,’ a concept from Evan Stark) of the battered women’s movement. Brush’s analysis of ‘domestic violence’ relies heavily on the work of Evan Stark, a social worker and activist, against abuse and his conceptualization of “coercive control,” as distinct from incidents of physical violence, as the central form of battering women in the U.S. today. Her review of welfare policy and the market position of women is succinct and effective. This chapter is extremely useful to any scholar or activist concerned about women.

Brush collected qualitative data, from two sources, and quantitative data to empirically explore “the question that motivates this book: How do we understand battering...as a factor in women’s poverty, in women’s compliance with welfare eligibility requirements, and in women’s progress toward safety and solvency through waged work?” (p.4). She uses a times-series analysis of both kinds of data to tease out the effects of policy on a woman over time. Brush centers women’s own experience in two ways. She obtained qualitative data on a 40 member cohort of women newly entering workfare in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania in 2001, at a time when the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 was just implemented programmatically. Using quarterly interviews with 31 of these women during their first 12-18 months on ‘workfare,’ she explored their retrospective, present and prospective views on “what happens when abusers follow women to work?” (Thirty-five per cent of the 40 women in the total group had ever been in relationships where they filed orders of protection and 13% were currently in such relationships). Brush also joined with a teacher of writing (Lorraine Higgins) to work over time with eight other local poor women on welfare as they developed narratives of their experiences with welfare and life. This should have produced a wealth of “thick” data, from the workfare women on “how welfare recipients understand conflicts *over work* in their relationships, abuse that *interferes* with their working, and what happens when abusive men *follow*” women to work (p.19) and from the writing project women “on the conditions and constraints that shape the lives of poor people” (p. 139). One of my frustrations was wishing for more of the testimony of the women in the welfare to work cohort.

Also, Brush analyzes data collected administratively by the county to assess the differential impact of welfare policy on battered women (operationally defined in that analysis as women who have utilized an order of protection). This is a promising approach to understanding what Brush effectively presents throughout the book as a complex feedback loop of causality among poverty, battering and social policy. As Brush describes the field, “[n]o *national* U.S. studies go beyond estimating prevalence to document or explain the difference ‘domestic violence’ makes in women’s experiences of poverty, work, and welfare. The data simply do not exist on a national level.” (p. 71). Thus, her own purposive sample of women in one county contributes to the field in a uniquely important way and offers a model of how to explain that difference. Brush does rely on the work of Ruth Brandwein, another social worker, whose analysis of data from a Salt Lake City sample speaks to some of the same issues.

But Brush’s findings are not the persuasive component of this book. Brush’s research conclusions appear foregone, dictated by her (also my own) antecedent analysis. I wanted to be more persuaded by the data, but she does not make the case from the data. Frustratingly, Brush does not even tell us the impact of the meeting between the writing project’s participants and the welfare workers and administrators to whom they presented their painstakingly developed narratives designed to influence program and policy. Her quantitative data analysis is sophisticated, perhaps beyond what the data can actually tell us. Brush herself notes in her

conclusion that the relationship between battering and welfare is “basically still unmeasured” (p. 123).

Brush concludes that the relationship between work and the well-being of poor women on welfare is complex, neither “the” solution and nor to be dismissed as unhelpful either. This is obvious. That work-first policies can place women in danger just as likely as help them out of danger is less obvious and therefore a more important point made by her review of other scholarship and in the testimonies of the women she interviews. Brush also concludes “that poverty and battering are both issues of human rights and social inclusion” (p. 116). This is a significant ideal for public policy. Again, this principle flows more from her ideological stance and the totality of the feminist scholarship she reviews than from her own research as presented here. Brush refers to “the challenges to the conventional wisdom she has documented in this book” (p. 116). As many of us are prone to do, and as many before us have done, Brush confuses her own conviction with having convinced the target: conventional wisdom about welfare and battering has been presented to the general public and to policy makers many times. Disproving the idea that work is the cure to battering and poverty has been attempted repeatedly over the history of welfare. Brush illuminates more than has been done some aspects of the relationship between battering, welfare and work, but it will take a lot more to actually change the power imbalance that produces such punitive and contradictory social policies and to enable the organizations operated by well-intentioned welfare and ‘domestic violence’ workers to more humanely serve the women who need them.

What is delightful about this book? As mentioned, the excellent review of a wide range of scholarship influencing social policy on violence against women and on poverty. Also, many hidden gems of which one example is this from the final chapter: Brush reports the responses of women in the writing project to “envisioning change: ‘what if...’” (p. 116). They arrive at their visions through their process of “rivaling.” Rivaling, developed by Flower, Long and Higgins, is a procedure with which I was unfamiliar (and a process I hope to adapt to use in social action, teaching and clinical work) in which the women “talk back” and offer a rival perspective to those who would take a dominant worldview to criticize these women’s lives. Rivaling gives each woman an opportunity to engage in analysis of her situation from the perspective of conventional wisdom and to articulate her response from a perspective centered in her own experience. It is empowering in the best sense of the word. Another delightful aspect of the book is the consistency with which the author implements a feminist approach to social policy and research, including incorporation of complexities and embracing of contradictions. This is not an “ideological” book in the sense of excluding rival interpretations at all. I especially appreciated her footnoted point: “The shattering physical and emotional pain of being abused by a current or former partner and the stress, distress, vulnerabilities and indignities of low-wage work, poverty, welfare dependency, and social exclusion are real. They are probably best met with a combination of every means at our disposal for alleviating both painful symptoms and their probable causes.” Also, I liked: her illumination of some of the absurdities of IRBs, her

footnotes (not the index from which many key terms were missing), and the Acknowledgements, a fun read that places Brush in context and as a three-dimensional person herself. And most delightful, Brush's championing of women who are poor, on welfare and battered and her effort to help them champion themselves.