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**Review of *Adoption, Identity and Kinship: The Debate over Sealed Birth Records*. Katarina Wegar. Reviewed by Terri Combs-Orme, University of Tennessee.**

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## Book Reviews

Katarina Wegar, *Adoption, Identity and Kinship: The Debate over Sealed Birth Records*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997. \$22.50

In recent years, much has been made in the popular media of the adoptive "search," wherein adult adoptees (and sometimes birth parents) find and reunite with their families of origin. At the same time, and partly as a result of pressure from searchers, controversy over state laws prohibiting opening records in adoption cases has simmered in many states, with social workers on both sides of the issue. This book uses these two phenomena, the adoptee search and the sealed records controversy, to launch a discussion of adoption that purports to focus on the broad sociological and cultural constructs of adoption, but also spends a good deal of space on a more individually-focused perspective, for example, the "differentness" attached to families constructed by adoption rather than birth.

Indeed, the author's own experience as an adoptee (discussed directly but briefly in the introduction) comes through clearly, despite the somewhat ponderous sociological jargon that characterizes the tone of the book. There is often a bitter undercurrent directed at social workers and adoption agencies, both of which she believes to promote their own interests in the adoption process. Indeed, she seems to dismiss whether science and scientific expertise have a role to play in the adoption process at all.

While it is probably impossible for a researcher's life experiences and biases to be completely absent from his or her scholarly work, the personal seems overdone in this time, although this may be a matter of personal taste and different perspectives of the author and this reviewer. For example, the author's concern for unwed birth mothers is apparent and appropriate, but her fears that the disadvantages of single parenthood are overstated are not balanced by an appreciation for the empirical evidence of the very real disadvantages of children who are raised in single-parent homes. Similar and unacknowledged biases emerge in several other topic areas.

Perhaps the greatest weakness in the book lies in the author's failure to maintain a sociological distance that would seem appropriate. For example, she finds fault with society's emphasis on biological ties as the only means of constructing "real families," to the detriment of adoptive families. Social workers can certainly sympathize with this position, but her criticism seems to extend to all official involvement in adoption. Most social workers would recognize society's stake in adoption and family in general, even if they question specific adoption laws and agency practices.

Social workers in the field of adoption need to be knowledgeable about all aspects of adoption, including adult adoptees' and birth parents' perspectives. This book, while presented in a sociological framework that may not be familiar to most social workers and despite some flaws, provides background and data for social workers that broadens the base of knowledge for practice. For example, it provides a good review of the portrayal of adoption in the media, including television talk shows, movies, and books. The author also calls attention to the lack of valid data on the numbers of adoptive searchers, reminding us not to over-estimate their number based on the volume of their voices.

Adoption workers might take this book as a cautionary tale. If nothing else, it provides incentive to the profession to question practices that imply adoption to be a second-rate way to build a family and adoptive parents to require therapy during the application process. It is a lesson worth learning.

Terri Combs-Orme  
The University of Tennessee

Norma K. Phillips and Shulamith L.A. Straussner, *Children in the Urban Environment: Linking Social Policy and Clinical Practice*. Springfield, IL. \$57.96 hardcover, \$43.05 papercover.

*Children in the Urban Environment* is an edited collection which deals with children living in those endlessly fascinating enclaves which we call cities, with all their diverse population, noise, activity, cultural opportunities, violence, overcrowding, social programs, pockets of wealth and power, and wastelands of poverty. Growing up safely and happily in these bustling centers of humanity is challenging at best, devastating at worst.