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Naomi Glenn-Levin Rodriguez explains the role of the key players in the foster care system in San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico, including social workers, local and federal government, foster families, and biological parents. The focus of this book is on Latina/o families who become a part of the foster care system. From 2008–2012, Glenn-Levin Rodriguez conducted ethnographic research as an intern with Esperanza Foster Family Agency in San Diego, an agency that specifically works with Latino/a families in the foster care system. Her ethnographic data comes from participant observation and 60 interviews with “lawyers, judges, legal advocates, social workers, and current and former foster parents” (p. 5). Ethical concerns in terms of separating her role as intern and researcher are addressed early in the book, although it would have been interesting to have additional discussion of how the author employed methods of reflexivity throughout her research to ensure that any possible bias she had in terms of working at Esperanza were considered. This book provides an overview of the literature on the international and national child welfare system, including such subjects as boundaries of belonging, worthiness, best interest, and knowledge through observation data and examples from interviews.

“Boundaries of belonging” is used as a conceptual framework in this book, beginning with the idea of the “illegal immigrant,” and the troubles this designation creates, as many Latina/o families coming to the United States may be experiencing.
poverty, which can be labeled as neglect for their children. Poverty alone, however, is not a substantial reason to remove a child from a family. Because of the power given to social workers in determining best fit and a gap in cultural understanding, this can occur. Additionally, non-U.S. citizen children, specifically from Latin America in this book, are deemed “worthy” or “unworthy” depending on who is able to speak up for a child and frame their situation in terms of being a victim. Being a victim makes a child worthy of the aid of the United States, while economic migrants are less worthy.

This places the future of a foster child from another country in the hands of whoever is advocating for a child and that advocate’s ability to frame the child as a victim who needs to be “rescued” (p. 43). Belonging is also discussed in chapter two in terms of the structural inequality that Latina/o families face due to the assumption that children are “better off” in the United States, rather than in Mexico or another county (p. 73). Belonging can also extend to the process by which children are placed in foster families, as collaboration between social service agencies in the U.S. and Mexico can be complicated, based on varying legal definitions and subjective ideas of best interest depending on a social worker’s background and experience. This concept of boundaries of belonging is all framed in a historical context, examining immigration policy and labels placed on families, such as “good” parent, “abuse,” “fit,” or “unfit” (pp. 12–13).

Belonging influences the topic of worthiness. In the foster care system in San Diego, children, biological parents, and foster families are each determined to be worthy or unworthy at some point in the foster care process. Children are deemed worthy based on their citizenship status, as international children are deemed worthy of receiving aid from a U.S. social welfare agency or a placement with a U.S. foster family if they encountered abuse, neglect, or were trafficked. Children in the U.S. for other reasons who lack citizenship are often sent back to their country of origin. This closely resembles how the United States frames worthy and unworthy adult immigrants, as those seeking asylum in the U.S. often see smoother paths to citizenship when compared to those who are deemed illegal immigrants.
Biological parents’ worthiness is determined by social workers and judges. Child-rearing practices have a cultural component, so social workers who have a cultural understanding of Latina/o families may determine a family worthy that a social worker with a different cultural experience may determine to be unfit to be parents. A social worker’s case notes, which are often rushed based on a large case load, as well as the opinion of a social worker, influence a judge’s decision of a parent’s worthiness. Finally, the worthiness of foster families is determined much in the same way that the worthiness of biological parents is determined, as social workers have the ability to largely determine if a foster home is worthy of housing additional children.

“Best interest” is the term used to describe the best situation for a child and the state in terms of the child’s future well-being. At face value, it is used to assess the likelihood of consistency and long-term fit for a child in terms of home placement, whether that leads to becoming reunited with biological parents, remaining in foster care, or becoming eligible for adoption. This relates to the idea of knowledge, as the knowledge of individual family situations largely depends on previous cultural knowledge as well as simply the time that a social worker has available to spend on a case. It is suggested that rhetoric such as “best fit,” is loose and subjective, which gives unbalanced power to social workers and government entities without taking cultural factors into account. This lack of a consistent framework for governments and social workers to work within leads to differential treatment and reproduced inequalities in the foster care system, especially for Latina/o families.

This book concludes by suggesting that one consistency in the child welfare system in San Diego and Tijuana is that it is considered in the best interest of a child to be removed from parent(s) of color living in poverty. Government views on immigration reproduce inequalities, and make it difficult, if not nearly impossible, for non-U.S. citizen families to regain custody of their children. This book presents a possibility and potential for legislators, social workers, and judges to examine the foster care system and ensure fair processes for all families as well as look for opportunities for collaboration with bordering countries to ensure that no child slips through the cracks.
Fragile Families provides a comprehensive historical framework of the child welfare system from a social work perspective while also providing compelling and specific examples of each theme presented. The researcher presents a unique perspective in that she was able to observe the child welfare system over several years and is able to provide first-hand examples of each theory or concept she presents. There is room to provide connection to interdisciplinary theory, such as connecting discussions of structural inequality and life chances to theorists, such as Max Weber and his discussion of life chance. It would also be helpful to have further discussion of the funding that a non-profit agency such as Esperanza receives, and how that contributes to their services, as neoliberalism has largely influenced non-profit funding in recent years. Overall, this book has encouraged a discussion of child welfare policies, which is relevant to the current political climate in the United States in terms of immigration.

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The United States of America is composed of people from many different backgrounds, worldviews, and social classes. In this new book, Richard V. Reeves (Senior Economics Fellow at the Brookings Institution) explores the class divisions in American society, divisions involving money and wealth, to be sure, but also the resulting gaps this creates in education, occupation, health, and family. Americans like to think of themselves as a ‘classless society’ and that privileges and status within society are justly earned. Reeves convincingly demonstrates that class, wealth and status are handed down in families generation after generation, proving that privileges of class are largely inherited rather than earned.