

Book Review

Title: *Disability Rights and the American Social Safety Net*

Author: Jennifer L. Erkulwater,

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Cloth, ISBN: 0-8014-4417-9, 272 pages

Cost: \$42.50, USD

Reviewer: Karin F. Brockelman

Disability Rights and the American Social Safety Net is aimed at an audience educated in disability or political issues. Erkulwater adds to existing knowledge by contributing a political perspective on social, demographic, and political dynamics that have shaped disability rights and Social Security legislation in America. She describes how the emergence of the social model of disability attracted disability organizations and advocacy groups focused on different disabilities. The social model views disability as the result of unaccommodating social and physical environments, whereas the medical model places disability within the individual who does not conform to social and physical norms. Instead of competing for funding, “disability organizations saw themselves as all having a common stake in ending the discriminatory treatment that all people with disabilities confronted, whatever their impairment” (p. 30).

The author highlights the momentum that Social Security Insurance (SSI) provided for deinstitutionalization in the 1970s, and the subsequent bungling of the promise of community mental health care and integration. Institutional care is much more expensive than supporting individuals to live, and receive care, in the community. These anticipated cost savings were a powerful incentive, but when people moved from institutions back to the community, many community mental health centers did not materialize, leaving individuals without services. Erkulwater explains the effects of individual federal court cases on how the Social Security Administration determined an individual’s disability certification.

The information and explanations in this book are interesting, but the author’s terminology is distracting at times. “The disabled” is used throughout the book. I also had trouble with the terms, “the mentally disabled” (p. 7), and “persons with mental disorders” (p. 9). Mental disability is used in reference to people with mental retardation, people with mental illness, or both groups. Since people with mental retardation are one of the three main groups on which this book focuses, I would recommend not using “the disabled.” Self-advocates with have been clear about wanting to be acknowledged as people and not as “the mentally retarded.” Two alternative terminology options are, “intellectual and psychiatric disabilities,” or, “mental retardation and mental illness.” “Mentally disabled,” is confusing because it does not accurately describe anyone. My understanding is that many do not want to use “mental retardation” anymore either.

I found chapter 8 especially informative. The chapter starts with a description of people feigning cognitive and psychological disorders to get SSDI benefits. This fraud was widely exposed by the media in the mid-1990s. Before reading this chapter, I knew about some of the

factors contributing to the American public's suspicion of people who say they have hidden impairments, such as anxiety disorders, learning disabilities, and fibromyalgia. After reading this chapter, I want to learn more about the impact of economic and political dynamics on attitudes toward people who have hidden disabilities.

Disability Rights and the American Social Safety Net addresses issues of interest to those in fields related to disability and political science. Because of its richness and complexity, I think this book would be particularly useful as a text in graduate and upper level undergraduate courses.

Karin F. Brockelman, is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has a Master of Science degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology. Karin's research interest is in facilitating the success of people with psychiatric disabilities in postsecondary education, careers, and community life.