

Reporting on Child Welfare and Adoption Policies

An author and advocate contends that journalists are missing *the* story.

By Elizabeth Bartholet

As an academic interested in social reform, I appreciate both the media's power to influence change and the complexity of their role in reporting on tough policy issues. This appreciation is something I've gained during the past decade as I've talked with a lot of members of the print and broadcast press in my efforts to promote changes in child welfare policy. Reporters often call me for comment when stories relevant to my work emerge in the news, and I have chosen to respond to their inquiries and to engage in ongoing public debates about the issues I care about. Despite the occasional frustration I experience when I read, see or hear the product of our conversations, it's important to me to continue to work with members of the media. I know that significant changes in public policy occur only when there are fundamental shifts in the mindset of policymakers and the broader public. I also recognize the unique and critical capacity of the press to inform and educate each of these audiences.

In general, I have been impressed by the commitment of many of the reporters I have dealt with over the years to delve deeply into the issues and to wield responsibly their considerable power to shape public opinion. I am fully aware that reporters should not "take sides," but instead should gather the facts and report them fairly, giving those in their audience the opportunity to assess for themselves the interpretations of the facts and different advocacy positions. But I have been frustrated by the tendency of some reporters to reduce the multifaceted and complex reality of policy debate to a thin two-sided coin. Too often, reporters assume that once advocates of

"both sides" of a particular issue have been identified and quoted, the full story will have been told. The risk in this all-too-familiar reporting technique is not only of undue simplification but also of distortion: The two-sided story may not simply omit some of the richness of the full picture, but may project a false image.

I have two books coming out this fall dealing with issues that illustrate these problems. "Nobody's Children: Abuse and Neglect, Foster Drift, and the Adoption Alternative," and "Family Bonds: Adoption, Infertility, and the New World of Child Production" (originally published in 1993 and now being re-issued with a new preface), will be released by Beacon Press in October. My interactions with members of the press regarding the issues I write about show how difficult it can be to communicate information about new policy perspectives, particularly when the facts are complex and the ideas run against the tide of conventional thought.

"Nobody's Children" constitutes a challenge to the orthodox views that undergird today's child welfare policy. In this book I question whether it is appropriate to think of and treat children as belonging essentially and ex-



Elizabeth Bartholet with her sons Christopher and Michael.
Photo by Lilian Kemp Photography.

clusively to their kinship and racial groups and as a result to lock them into what are often inadequate biological and foster homes, where they suffer harmful abuse and neglect. I call for the elimination of racial and other barriers that prevent children from being placed in appropriate adoptive homes. I contend that our policies should be changed to encourage child welfare workers to look not only to the local "village" but also to the broader community to share responsibility for child rearing. I envision a society in which

abused and neglected children who are born to biological and racial “others”—those now seen as “nobody’s children”—are embraced as belonging to each of us.

The politics of these issues are complex. During the past decade, those identifying with the left (including many liberal advocacy groups) have tended to promote family preservation policies—policies that place an extremely high priority on keeping a child with his or her original family. They have tended to regard the parents accused of child maltreatment as the primary “victims,” at risk of further victimization by having their children removed and their parental rights terminated. My view—emerging out of my own leftward leanings—is very different. I argue that those on the left should focus on the children as the primary victims and should apply lessons learned from the battered women’s movement as they consider battered children. I question why family preservation ideology still reigns supreme when it is children rather than adult women who are being victimized.

The left has also tended to oppose adoption generally and transracial adoption in particular. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) has for more than two decades taken the position that black children who need to be placed outside their homes should stay within their racial group rather than being placed across racial lines. Liberals have generally deferred to NABSW and assumed that it speaks for the black community and for black children. But there is no reason to think that NABSW’s position in fact represents any “community” position, and no evidence that adoption across racial lines injures children. Indeed, the studies that have been done demonstrate overwhelmingly that it is the racial matching policies advocated by NABSW that injure black children by limiting placement opportunities and thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be denied permanent adoptive homes.

I have found it difficult to get my views and this debate reported in an

accurate and comprehensive manner. Advocates for family preservation and racial matching have often succeeded in positioning their critics as “anti-family,” “anti-poor” and “anti-black”—as part of the conservative camp, engaged in a general backlash against those at the bottom of the socio-economic heap and against anything smacking of affirmative action. By mischaracterizing the debate in this way, they have succeeded in silencing potential critics and stifling the emergence of new ideas from within the liberal camp. Those who see themselves as committed to social justice don’t relish being attacked as right-wingers and racists. And they may question their own judgment when liberal leaders seem to speak with one voice. (That some conservatives also condemn family preservation excesses and take policy positions favoring adoption exacerbates the risk felt by some liberals of guilt by association should they dare to express similar views.)

My other book, “Family Bonds,” takes on comparably complex territory. Again I present a liberal challenge to the orthodox liberal view. Feminists and others on the left routinely characterize adoption as being an essentially exploitative institution because it usually involves the transfer of children from poor women from racial minority groups and Third World nations to privileged white couples in rich nations. I argue that adoption is better understood as an arrangement that benefits not only children but also their birth parents. Ideally all women who become pregnant ought to be in a position to raise their children if they want. However, given that far too many women’s lives are characterized by circumstances that are anything but ideal, adoption, like abortion, gives pregnant women a choice that may be better for them than being forced to parent, and better for their children.

Adoption also gives infertile women an option that may be preferable to spending years trying to force their bodies to produce a pregnancy by using the intrusive and financially burdensome high-tech infertility treatment methods that our culture now condi-

tions women to pursue. I contend that feminists should expand their concept of reproductive rights to embrace adoption as a way of promoting “choice” for both pregnant and infertile women while at the same time providing children with the nurturing homes they need. However, adoption critics have again been able to silence many potential opponents and contain the liberal challenge by positioning those who support adoption as part of the conservative camp.

Members of the press can easily fall into traps laid in this area by clever advocates. It’s easy to find people to voice either the boilerplate “left” or “right” position, to quote them and to move on. It’s also tempting for those who think in terms of getting “both sides” of the story. But reporters who take this route may contribute to the effective silencing of debate that, in my view, limits understanding and affects the quality of public policy decisions, when they could instead illuminate the issues for the general public and for policymakers. They will also miss out on the important story that needs to be told—a more subtle but also more substantive story. This story has to do with the debate that lies within the liberal camp about ideas that have the potential to create new political understandings and alignments. ■

Elizabeth Bartholet is a professor at Harvard Law School. She is also author of “Nobody’s Children: Abuse and Neglect, Foster Drift, and the Adoption Alternative,” and “Family Bonds: Adoption, Infertility, and the New World of Child Production,” to be published by Beacon Press in October.