

considering the current political climate. While these solutions may not be practical now, this book can inspire us to fight for social change.

On the whole *Lives in the Balance* takes a very critical look at what are considered some of today's most distressing social problems. The approach the author adopts allows readers to hear students' voices, giving the text life and making it quite engrossing. It also mixes research findings from numerous fields, giving the reading audience a multitude of insights into these issues. While her doctorate is in educational psychology, I find her analysis surprisingly sociological.

It is in the few places that the author drops the critical sociological approach that I feel uncomfortable. In these instances she seems to lose sight of the context in which these issues are taking place. The most disturbing instance of this is in regard to families. Throughout the book reference is made to dysfunctional families, quite a loaded and ambiguous term. Along with challenging other misconceptions and stereotypes Diver-Stamnes should challenge this label that is often applied to families simply because they vary from the "traditional" middle-class family form. She also argues for "a shift in values" (Diver-Stamnes 1995:130) as part of her plan for improving the lives of inner-city youth. Again, I find this notion quite unsettling. When we begin to argue whose values should dominate we are discussing who has the power to define what is good and bad. In a world where having children is one of the few positive aspects of everyday life, it is hard to image that stigmatizing teenage mothers would be a positive shift for either young women or their children.

While I find these few instances problematic, they are exactly that, a few instances, and should not overshadow the wonderful aspects of this work. The text is very well written and is both easy to understand and to read. The book's length and subject matter seem quite appropriate for undergraduate classes and especially well-suited to sociology courses in areas such as social problems, social stratification, education, and minority group relations. This examination of Watts would compliment courses considering or using Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* or MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It*. *Lives in the Balance* challenges us to see beyond the stereotypes of inner-city youths and empowers us to strive to make a difference.

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References

- Kozol, Jonathan. 1991. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York, New York: HarperPerennial.
- MacLeod, Jay. 1995. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspiration & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Lives in the Balance: Youth, Poverty, and Education in Watts, by Ann C. Diver-Stamnes. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995. 172 pp.

This is a timely book because it gives concrete meaning to the current debate about proposals to cut spending on social programs in order to "balance the budget." In the book, we see in concrete terms why such social programs are needed by Watts high school students and their families. The clear implication is that such programs are needed to compensate for the absence of opportunities for Watts residents and others at the bottom of America's increasingly elongated social and economic ladders. The reader is left with the uneasy conclusion that the cost to society of not opening opportunities to them will be increasing signs of race and class antagonism of the sort that occurred in South Central Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict.

Ann Diver-Stamnes is a Professor of Education at Humboldt State University who, before assuming that position, taught at Medgar High School (a pseudonym) in Watts. She chose to do so because she considered the experience "...my apprenticeship prior to applying for a position at a university. If I were to become a teacher of prospective teachers, I felt I had to become the best classroom teacher I could be, and I wanted to be tested and forged in as challenging and meaningful a teaching environment as possible; Medgar High fit that description." *Lives in the Balance* is based on her experience at Medgar High. But the book is far more than simply a descriptive first-person account of the experience. The author has done social analysis in the tradition of what C. Wright Mills called "the sociological imagination," in which the analyst shows the capacity to (in Mills' words) "shift from one perspective to another--from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to ... national budgets...between 'personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure.'"

At the outset, Diver-Stamnes sets the tone of her social analysis approach by critiquing the "blaming the victim" approach to social problems, which is all too common in this society. She says,

"A basic premise of this society is that individuals can succeed given sufficient effort; in other words, a common view is that people can 'make it' in the United States if they try hard enough. If they do not succeed, their failure is viewed as having been caused by lack of effort, and so those who are the least successful are blamed for the failure."

In contrast, Diver-Stamnes proposes (as one of her former Medgar High students implored her do) "tell people how it really is here." She proposes to analyze the causes of the plight of inner city residents like her students and their families. These reside in the conditions of society which generate inner city poverty. By skillfully shuttling back and forth between stories about her students' life experiences and data about the school system, the inner city economy, etc., the author analyzes the causes of six kinds of Millsian "personal troubles of milieu" which afflict Watts residents. These are academic failure,

dysfunctional families (by dominant culture standards), adolescent maternity, child abuse, substance abuse, and gang affiliation.

The troubles related to academic failure at Medgar High are vividly epitomized by the case of Wally, a ninth-grader who read at the second-grade level. He refused to do his work, i.e., became a troublemaker, in order to hide the fact that he was unable to read. The case was not unique. Diver-Stamnes says that the combined average reading levels of students in her ninth, tenth, and twelfth grade English classes was the sixth-grade level. Additional indicators of the dimensions of academic failure at Medgar are a high rate of dropping out before graduation (45%) and a very high drop-out rate of those who do go on to college. Of the many environmental factors causing academic failure identified in the book, a root cause is one of negative labelling, rooted in racism and classism. Says Diver-Stamnes, echoing the theme of the motion picture *Stand and Deliver*,

"Under-education, which Schools in Watts and other inner-city communities all too often offer to their students, can begin in elementary school, where students who do not respond in ways deemed consistent with the dominant culture are often ignored and placed in groups of other like students and are labeled slow learners or low achievers."

A moving chapter on Watts families is made real through the stories of Medgar High School students Anita, Mari, Tasha, Miguel, Aracely, Henry, and Colette, whose family lives impact their school performance, often in negative ways. Diver-Stamnes says the internal family dynamics illustrated by their stories are rooted in stress. The generational role blurring, alcohol and drug abuse, and violence experienced in their families are all responses to stressors in the external environment of the families. Among the many environmental stressors affecting the lives of inner city residents, unemployment and underemployment are cited as directly or indirectly responsible for a great deal of family trouble in the communities where Medgar High students live. Diver-Stamnes portrays the situation vividly.

"In South-Central Los Angeles and the surrounding communities, 70,000 manufacturing jobs were lost between 1978 and 1982. These were jobs that offered people a viable chance at supporting their families. The jobs that are available now pay less than minimum wage at textile sweatshops."

In American society, the holy grail of "success" is defined largely in terms of jobs and job-derived income. To lack "success" in America is to experience discredited or demeaned self-worth which may lead to self-defensive reactions including explosive anger and retreatist behavior (including substance abuse). South-Central Los Angeles is so lacking in opportunity for "success" that it is perhaps predictable that many individuals living there manifest forms of angry

and retreatist behavior which lead to the family troubles described by Diver-Stamnes.

South Central Los Angeles is a community filled with anger. One on-going pattern of expression of that anger occurs in the form of gang rivalry and predatory gang violence. The chapter on gangs in *Lives in the Balance* is filled with reports of personal experience with gang violence and, especially, fear of gang violence. Diver-Stamnes implies that gangs play a significant role in the very high rate of death due to homicide among African American males (19% of African American male deaths result from homicide). It also appears that the lives of all community members alike--gang members, students who are not gang members, and adults--are impacted by the *fear* of gang violence. The fear seems to create a perceptual framework of suspiciousness between age groups and racial/ethnic groups which has impacts on people's lives *independent* of the impact of *actual* danger. To illustrate, the author tells the following story about her own fearful reaction to a group of teenagers who "looked" like gangbangers.

"As I walked down the street one day ..., I noticed a large group of young men walking toward me, dressed in gangbanger attire. As (they) drew closer, I forced myself to keep walking and to refrain from crossing the street, although I was very nervous. When they drew up in front of me, I gasped as one young man separated himself from the group and launched himself at me. He threw his arms around my neck, and yelled, 'Dr. Stamnes! How are you doing?!' In an instant, this frightening group of 'gangbangers' was transformed into a group of laughing kids, one of whom had been a favored student of mine the previous year. Mingled with my relief was a profound sense of shame that I too had not seen beyond appearances."

The book's causal analysis of the reasons people join gangs focuses on the theme that gang membership furnishes an *alternative* means of being included and successful in an environment where opportunities for conventional "success" are severely limited. The point is clearly illustrated in a conversation quoted by Diver-Stamnes in which gang members explain

"...gang involvement as an inner city version of their white, wealthier peers' affiliation: 'Say, we're white and we're rich. We're in high school and we been buddies since grammar school. And we all decide to go to the same college. Well, we all on the same street, all those years, and we just decide to...join the gang.'"

The anger rooted in self-defensive reactions to the lack of opportunities for "success" which pervades South Central Los Angeles erupted in the 1992 uprising after the Rodney King verdict, which resulted in deaths of 52 people and property losses totalling \$700 million. Ann Diver-Stamnes' chapter on this episode of civil unrest portrays it as an angry reaction to what community members perceive to be degrading treatment by representatives of the dominant institutions: police, media, financial institutions, retail stores, schools, medical institutions, etc. Furthermore, the author suggests that this pattern existed in

the 1960's in Watts and caused the 1965 Watts riots. She says, "Conditions in these communities have not changed for the better; they have, in many ways, only become worse." The 1992 Rodney King uprising was also worse than the 1965 riots. It was a louder wake-up call telling those in charge of our society's dominant institutions that restructuring is needed. Programs are needed that send to the community the message that they are valued members of American society.

Summing up her final chapter on suggestions for change, and summing up this book's vitally important message to our society's policy makers as they discuss cutting social programs, Diver-Stamnes says that such programs could stimulate a cycle of community health rather than community disease. Programs creating jobs, safe housing, adequate medical care, quality education, and child care options could lead to increased opportunities for inner-city residents. In turn, communal pride and individual self-esteem would increase, stimulating a decrease in the self-defensive troubled behavior listed in this book: gang membership, adolescent pregnancy, violent acts, and substance abuse. With a decrease in these behaviors which tear the fabric of communal bonds, businesses and services which have left the inner city (because of the signs of social disorder and decay inherent in these behaviors) will return. The result of the infusion of business will be to create more jobs, continuing a spiral "toward health and hope rather than decay."

In my opinion, *Lives in the Balance* is an excellent example of causal social analysis of the troubles of the residents of South Central Los Angeles and of inner city residents generally. But it does more than just present good causal analysis. The book also shows that good causal analysis of social troubles (as opposed to the more typical blame analysis) is eminently *useful*. Social troubles, if analyzed in the manner of Ann Diver-Stamnes, can be solved. As she implies, the reason many social troubles have seemed so intractable in America is that they are typically addressed through punitive, blame-affixing approaches. Such approaches (like LAPD's Operation Hammer which targeted individuals wearing gang-related clothing and actually may have strengthened the gang affiliation and prestige of those individuals arrested) are not only ineffective but may also exacerbate the troubles.