

Reviews

Critical and Radical Debates in Social Work, Ferguson, I. & Lavalette, M. (series eds.)

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Poverty and Inequality, Jones, C. & Novak, T.

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Children and Families, Garrett, P.M.

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These two books are part of the series *Critical and Radical Debates in Social Work*, edited by Iain Ferguson and Michael Lavalette. They are strong and deeply felt books that describe the current overwhelming sense of betrayal felt by so many citizens in this age of austerity and increasing poverty. Both texts claim as inadequate the response of the social work profession. The impact of the global economic crisis, the overwhelming sense of despair and anger for so many because of the 'extraordinary disparities in wealth and income' as compared to the 'conspicuous greed and consumption of the rich as their own living standards and wellbeing decline' is well captured by Jones and Novak.

They are right to compare this position with the challenge that social work faced in the sixties, when poverty was, as it were, 're-discovered'; and there was a sense of enterprise and even radical intervention that motivated many to become social workers. The Kilbrandon and Seebohm Reports laid the foundation of major institutional change in favour of social work in Scotland and England and Wales respectively. Local authorities, such as Strathclyde and Coventry, became great exponents of reaching out to those in need through extraordinary investment in people and resources and seemed to achieve much. Ultimately, over time, they only served to become institutions of the state, reduced through cuts and austerity, and became a part of the problem, according to the authors. However, in the opinion of this reviewer, Community Social Work achieved much in the eighties in terms of developing user-led services in localities, achievements which the authors ignore.

The popular perception and political expectation of the role of social work, as described by the authors, was seen to be to deal with the inadequate behaviour of people in poverty; and this was solely an issue of personality and deficiencies in personal behaviour. Perhaps the authors miss the fact that so many direct services for adults, particularly the vulnerable, have become in demand across all sectors of society, not just those in poverty. The continuing constriction of adult care services and the impact of inadequate community care now affects most families in Europe at some time or other, whatever their socio-economic background.

Part Two is a series of responses where broad comparisons are drawn by contributors between the perceived inadequacy of the response to poverty and inequality in the UK by social workers and social work responses to what is happening elsewhere, for example in Greece, Latin America, and North America. The shift from Welfare Capitalism to the Neo-Liberal agenda, through reductions in expenditure, and the attempt to dismantle the welfare state in the USA and Canada, are well described by Mimi Abramovitz in her paper 'Which side are we on?' The attack on public sector jobs and unions, with implications especially for women and people from ethnic minorities, is also well described.

The principal authors offer a Marxist-Leninist analysis and a view that social work, in the main, has been conspicuous by its cowardice in the face of these changes: but this is nevertheless quite narrowly argued. The example cited of the resistance of Greek power workers, refusing to cut off electricity supplies to the poor, is all well and good; but social work does not quite aspire to, never mind achieve that potential! I wish that Ferguson and Lavalette had given more concrete examples to their other contributors, perhaps updated from their own sources, especially '*International Social Work and the Radical Tradition*', published by Venture Press (2007). Venture Press is a BASW imprint, which is ironic, in view of the criticism made here of

the lack of action by the profession as a whole in the UK. BASW is growing in membership and clearly has a better possibility of campaigning than before. Alongside this, the sense of vulnerability that social workers feel, particularly in work with children and families, is a clear motivation for belonging to a strong protective body.

Social work with children has long been castigated in the public imagination, and seriously challenged in the age of neo-liberalism, which is the basis of Garrett's book. There have been 'significant and transformative changes to the welfare systems and to child protection regimes' in both England and the Republic of Ireland. Garrett's lead essay offers a critique broadly influenced by Antonio Gramsci. The argument is that political society (the state, various institutional organs, the legal system, etc.) adapts its hegemony by appearing to absorb the concern for vulnerable and abused children, whilst civil society (the family, service users, social workers and their representatives, whether trade unions or professional groups) attempts to represent their needs and concerns, but is continuously compromised by the former. The argument is that the latter, effectively, should empower themselves and organise their own services – or at least that is how this reviewer interprets the approach. Garrett goes on to analyse the service changes taking place and their impact on social workers and service users.

The commentaries, as before, offer a view of Garrett's essay from a range of perspectives across Europe and North America. The discourse is fascinating and offers a more direct analysis of what the impact of welfare changes and child protection transformations has been across nation states.

The additional argument, on the influence of key personalities, in both England and Ireland, on the so-called modernisation agenda, is well detailed. Also the review of legislation undertaken in the New Labour era is strongly argued here as an attempt not only to rebrand children's services but to give them a more corporate business appearance. Using terms such as 'Every Child Matters' and 'Quality Protects' did nothing to reassure the social work profession and people left in droves.

The delineation by Garrett of the characteristics of neo-liberalism serves to reinforce the sense of depression and strengthen the description of a profession fighting on all fronts to protect children and save their services in the face of both governmental dictats and public scepticism. This was illustrated by the failure of the Blair and Brown administrations to defend social work faced with the outcry following the deaths of Victoria Climbié and, then, Peter Connelly. The outcry often ignored the fact that child murders had fallen substantially; and England and Wales had one of the lowest rates in the Western world.

The whole 'anti-social behaviour' attitude (neighbours from hell, etc.) was easily absorbed by the subsequent coalition government. Notions of the 'big society', of volunteers helping troublesome families, and the Troubled Families Project, were simply rationalisations to force the dismantling of the state. The 'long march through the institutions', to borrow Rudi Dutschke's phrase, has continued – fast track entry into social work of unemployed Oxbridge graduates, more and more reductions in benefits, lower wages for those who can get into the job market, increased child poverty, a housing crisis, and cuts to social work services. The perspective offered is certainly not out of date!

The analysis of the situation in Ireland is equally apt, giving a historical background which will be new to many readers. The impact of the economic crisis and the reduction in services has been formidable. The relationship of public services to the historic role of the (Catholic) Church means that there have been additional power and public confidence struggles. The impact of the child sexual abuse scandals concerning the Church and other institutions has an obvious resonance in the UK. Perhaps one major distortion in the paper, and in the book overall, is the perception that the child protection agenda is solely about the poor. The examples of the recently publicised child sexual abuse scandals in institutions and by organised groups of adults show that the oppressors are not just the poor. Most social workers have experience of

dealing with abuse within middle class families and the issue of sexual politics in all this is not addressed.

Rona Woodward, in her response, agrees with much of Garrett's description of the 'relentless nature of the neo-liberal advance' and perceives social work to be both 'oppressive and conservative' at the same time. She acknowledges that many families see social work as little more than surveillance and control. This is not a revelation and sometimes one wishes that the papers at least acknowledged the good work that goes on, with much success for the children and families concerned. Woodward cites what has seemingly been achieved by the SNP Government in Scotland; but the cost has been to see heavy cuts in local authority expenditure and a social work profession equally under pressure in tackling child abuse as anywhere else in the UK. Arguably, the SNP has simply pursued a softer form of neo-liberalism under the guise of nationalism.

The remaining responses in Part Two give views from other national experiences, especially in terms of the failure of social work to ally itself with its clients in the face of austerity and the demise of welfare. We are offered a UK and Ireland solution, based on the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) and its radical campaigning. There is a lot to take in, and argue with, which is fascinating and absorbing in fewer than 80 pages.

Social work has always stood in the divide between the body politic and the worst of our feelings. It runs the paradox of defending us from popular instinct, whilst highlighting what must be done to address the issues at hand, both for the individual service user and the community as a whole. It is the true existentialist profession; and it is best when it occupies the territory of its own contradictions through its values and understanding. It can truly live the Gramscian concept of the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will. Both the above books stimulate a debate for social workers on how to position themselves in the contemporary world; but perhaps they miss the point that social work is not only about the structural impact of the socio-economic landscape but also about its interaction with the human personality.

Serge Paul – Consultant and past Chair of BASW

Social Work with Troubled Families: A Critical Introduction, Davies, K. (ed.)

London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015

ISBN: 978-1849055499, £22.99 (pbk.), pp. 192

Keith Davies, at Kingston University, has marshalled a range of practice, policy and research insights into England's Troubled Families Programme (TFP), which particularly focuses on a social work approach to intensive 'whole family' work. We learn early on that the original target population of 120,000 troubled families (a contestable figure and indeed concept, as we learn later), is to be expanded to 400,000 families after a favourable National Audit Office report about the programme's impact. Given this commitment, the book is timely in examining some core elements of TFP such as the role of the dedicated worker, the ethics of a challenging intervention and the virtues of a whole family approach.

The introduction by Davies locates the essence of TFP around hands-on outreach work that draws on motivational and problem solving theory and in which the worker is supported by a network of professionals and projects. We glean quickly that the criteria for inclusion within and exclusion from TFP raise questions about equity, whilst at the same time those people selected may risk being simplistically labelled as 'problem families'. Davies and his contributors recognise that quite what or who is 'family' resists straightforward definition. Hence the re-moralising ambitions of TFP, to engender responsible citizenship amongst those deemed anti-social but also marginalised by poverty or poor opportunities, constitutes a complicated if not inchoate agenda. Also the TFP sub-text of 'tough love', of 'turning families around' via a more assertive and controlling engagement, does not sit easily with traditional social work: yet there

are affinities, in relation to the key worker role, intensive enduring engagement, systems thinking and crisis work. And it is social work's relevance to TFP that features throughout the book.

First, in Chapter Two, we get a view from David Holmes, Chief Executive of Family Action – a family support provider delivering TFP for seven local authorities. Holmes is enthusiastic about the expansion of TFP and its payment by results (PBR) approach; but he is clear that PBR, as crafted towards outcomes such as employment, school attendance, and improved behaviour, may unduly restrict the focus of intervention and insufficiently reward work in critical areas such as drug misuse, mental health, and parenting capacity. He urges a more thoughtful and social work oriented outcomes regimen that recognises process too and, not inconveniently, offers his agency's own multi-dimensional tool (Family Star Plus) as a model, using which providers and government can capture a more rounded preventive encounter as well as deal with crises.

Dr Sadie Parr, from Sheffield Hallam University, delves into the emergence of family intervention projects and particularly the nature and role of the key worker. She considers the emotional and cultural world of practice in tackling problems that TFP seeks to remedy, and compares a social work family project (supportive, non-confrontational, befriending), with a housing project engaged with similar issues but where tenancy sanctions and assertiveness are part of the service. The different roles and identities in the projects are explored and make for fascinating reading especially on the varied occupational personae that might bear upon effective engagement (or not) with families.

Chapter Four, by Professor June Thoburn at UEA, provides a compelling and persuasive process evaluation of a Family Recovery Project (FRP) run by Westminster's Children's Social Services Department. The FRP is located unambiguously in a social work model with links to specialist services and positioned alongside child protection and locality teams. What is distinctive here is how family work is shared between an outreach worker and a lead worker for the child(ren), usually from one of the children's teams. Thoburn's mixed method analysis of 100 completed cases and an intensive examination of 33 families generates a rich description of key activities (referrals, visits, types of intervention, meetings, participants, case duration and closure). Two family case studies are offered to illuminate the flexibility and responsiveness of FRP, which utilises psychosocial casework, mediation, and advocacy. The key features likely to help families are documented. As for effectiveness, Professor Thoburn makes it clear that while a majority of families improved on some measure, 12% demonstrated no positive change; and only a third could be said to have had a successful overall outcome. It is clear that the deep and enduring complexities of some family problems resist resolution; nonetheless the chapter argues cogently that schemes such as this FRP can make a real contribution to TFP and should be integrated to provide the additional benefits of a distinct social work orientation.

Carol Hayden and Craig Jenkins, at the Institute of Criminology at Southampton, return the reader directly to TFP and a large sample of 196 children living in a city of 200,000, and deemed troubled or troublesome and who entered care or custody. Most (81%) were in care. The key features of the cohort and their parents are analysed in respect of demographics, home locality, social need, and service involvement. The multiple adversities that sit beneath the stigmatising terminology of being troubled or troublesome are excavated; and the disobliging facts of poverty, entrenched inequalities, mental health difficulties, service deficiencies, and environmental decline, are seen to amplify or complicate the problems that families have and raise awkward questions for those less sociologically aware adherents of TFP.

The penultimate chapter, by Ray Jones, Anna Matczak, Keith Davies and Ian Byford from Kingston University and St George's, University of London, outlines key findings from a qualitative study of a Family Recovery Project – with location and participants anonymised. Their small scale study is based on audio interviews with 20 referred families (mainly mothers) and 20+ practitioners from various relevant occupations. This very welcome view from service

users is presented in rich detail. In talking about their difficulties, the prominence of the mothers' mental health (often single parents) was notable, as was the behaviour of a child. Children often failed to attend school because of concerns for their mother; poverty, debt and housing also featured. The clustering of acute and chronic problems that simply wore down families was evident; and what they liked about the service was the emotional and practical support and the structure and friendship it provided. The intensity of the service was also viewed positively: but as professionals noted, their 'Team around the Family' approach, while popular with families and other service providers, was a specialist and separate scheme; and unless it became part of the mainstream was unlikely to reach the multiple families where upset, depression and disadvantage takes its inevitable toll. The chapter relies on the data alone to convey the story; and while many insights are offered, the absence of any clear conceptual or theoretical development of the model seems to be a missed opportunity.

The final chapter, by Nigel Hall at Kingston University, offers a valuable summary of a global view on family support schemes. A reflective treatment of concepts and evidence across cultures provides us with a range of family strengthening models and objectives. Differences and commonalities make for interesting reading; but at root there are some obvious shared features in relation to common difficulties: economic disparities; loss of extended family and neighbourhood support; intra-family and community violence; working with men in families. The list can be extended, but at root is the family and thus family based practice as the basic building block of change. The chapter considers learning issues for social work practice and the need to embed more deeply family and community strengthening in professional training. Overall, the book succeeds in delivering what it says on the cover: it is an introduction to the matter of TFP and social work and it is not uncritical of their uneasy relationship. It is revealing and accessible, deserves reading closely, and clearly intends to be the start of a research-informed discussion and definitely not the last word.

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Vulnerability and Young People: Care and Social Control in Policy and Practice, Brown, K.
Bristol: Policy Press, 2015

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Kate Brown has crafted a stimulating and accessible multi-disciplinary and research-informed exploration of 'vulnerability' that draws on the life experiences of a small sample of young people. The concept is exposed in Chapter One to some testing examination to reveal its multiple meanings and relevance to human services, particularly those for young people. While for most of us the term denotes at a common-sense level some impulse of care and empathy for those not well placed to handle adversity, there is a veritable mosaic of alternative meanings that signify a more contested set of understandings – practical, moral and political. Drawing on sociology and social policy the author introduces some of the possible identities and ontologies of 'being vulnerable' in the contemporary UK, (England mainly). The chapter also introduces her case study of 25 young people living in a large northern city, deemed vulnerable (*viz.* – as young carers, or as involved with drug misuse, sexual exploitation, or anti-social behaviour, or with significant school problems, or being homeless/refugees/runaways) and receiving various services. Drawing on techniques of immersive ethnography, the author engages the young people in interviews, life mapping and vignettes about the way they see their lives as vulnerable (or not); interviews and vignettes are also used to engage key professionals about how they too understand vulnerability.

Chapters Two and Three take us efficiently across major conceptual and policy domains to demonstrate how vulnerability is used differentially as the rationale for intervention. A 'politics of vulnerability' is drawn out in relation to bio-ethics, feminism, behaviourism, and economic liberalism. These large discursive fields are examined and re-ordered to show how vulnerability can be linked to more negative states of disempowerment, difference, weakness, being deserving (or not), and ultimately to wider notions of governmentality and social control. The

connections between 'vulnerability', 'need' and 'risk' are critically treated in Chapter Two where there is a helpful table of key definitional sources of vulnerability. Chapter Three links, with a policy review that delineates the rise of vulnerability in many statutes promulgated by New Labour and the coalition government, in regard to, for example, housing, mental health, offenders, older people, disability, victims of crime, and children and young people. A tour across these statutes reveals subtle differences between groups and their identities that generate varied notions of vulnerability. In some cases these may convey clear sympathy and just desert; in others conditionality and expectations about behavioural change, justifying stronger controls. Accordingly, the author argues that vulnerability has consequences for the relationship between the citizen and the state, particularly in conditions of economic liberalism and public service retrenchment – in that vulnerability tends to individualise and group people and to prioritise their particular circumstances, and in doing so may obfuscate rather than challenge the questionable general adequacy of resources.

Chapter Four takes us into the world view of professionals (frontline and commissioners) and we quickly comprehend the 'real world' as more messy than policy and theory and the depictions these give about who or what stands as 'vulnerable'. Kate Brown uses interview excerpts to show how vulnerability and risk often intertwine and how behavioural and psycho-emotional aspects are often invoked to account for interventions; but that professional discretion and gendered common-sense constructions also demarcate those who can be included as vulnerable and those to be excluded. For example, sexual exploitation of young women is likely to be designated a matter of vulnerability, whereas troublesome offending young males are more likely to be excluded.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven provide intimate and harrowing accounts of family breakdown, and abuse, and their consequences, from the perspectives of the 25 young people. Their dislocated lives, often spiralling into further abusive contexts and crime, contrasted markedly with the aspirations of many of them, one day, to go to college and get a good job. The normative and positive nature of their imagined futures whilst leading such vulnerable lives is explored in Chapters Six and Seven. Here the young participants are reported to discuss ideas about being vulnerable; and most grasped its meaning in relation to some personal weakness or deficit. In so doing they discussed vignettes about others' vulnerable lives in sometimes judgemental and moralising tones, suggesting people should take responsibility for poor choices and the consequences that flowed from them. In short, they tended to think being vulnerable was something that could be stigmatising and happened to others, not them. Their resistance to being defined as vulnerable indicates something of a battle over identity between young people and professionals; evidently the 'top down' labelling that is (official) vulnerability had no clear legitimacy for these young people. In Chapter Seven a wide range of official interventions are identified as being experienced by the young people as well as their views being given on what aspects worked best for them, or not. The lessons to be learned here for professionals are outlined regarding relationships, the timespan and timeliness of interventions, and the suitability of action taken.

Chapter Eight concludes a rewarding journey through policy, theory, practice and young people's perceptions. This final chapter is more geared to critical policy discourse than operational practice; which is fair enough, given the disciplinary focus of the book. Thus for the reader as frontline worker, or manager, or commissioner, the many nuggets of practice wisdom throughout the book need to be plucked out from a familiar and sometimes repetitive sociological chant about economic individualism and the divisive instincts of the neo-liberal state as the sources of all our unhappiness – itself an enveloping abstract concept which fails to grasp the complexity of some enduring social ills. With that reservation, this is nonetheless a really illuminating book on the contentious notion of vulnerability, and it should be read, debated and brought to bear on service design and development.

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