

Reviews

In Whose Interest? The Privatisation of Child Protection and Social Work Jones, R.

Bristol: Policy Press, 2019

ISBN: 978-1447351283 (pbk), £19.99, pp.387

Social work has had to wait a long time for a book like this. This is a lengthy, value-driven but forensic analysis of the evolution of children's services increasingly privatised by successive governments in England, most notably starting with Margaret Thatcher's rejection of the welfare compact of post-war Britain. It casts a bleak eye over the claims made for market disciplines in welfare and observes its real-world consequences. The book traces the tumultuous changes ushered in by Conservative administrations of the 1980s and 1990s, and to varying degrees continued by the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, that experimented with all manner of outsourcing, franchising and commodification of care. More recently, the pace and direction in which England's privatisation agenda has moved towards the possible commercialisation of child protection and social work far outstrips that under any other UK administration. The book echoes the alarm of many in social work and beyond at how the human rights of children to be safeguarded, and parents' rights to a family life, are to be entrusted to unelected trusts, private sector corporations or other third party organisations such as the charitable offshoots of private companies, whose 'bottom-line' interests and accountabilities are profoundly dissimilar to those of the local state and the vulnerable citizens they serve.

The long post-war journey to England's contemporary children's social work is portrayed as created by a sequence of sceptical governments keen to control a profession they deem troublesome, and with a local government forever cast as inefficient. Children's social work in England has been subjected to the cherry-picking of corporate raiders, the carpet-bagging of management consultants, the collusive agenda of particular self-serving policy elites, a punitive regulatory system, and of course an antagonistic press, apart from the ever-faithful *Guardian*.

Such seems to me to be the overarching narrative of this 300-page critique, with its further 80 pages of dense notes, references and index. It is a sizeable and unrelenting exposure of some very dubious financial interests, questionable political motives, and muddled policy networks seemingly composed of the conflicted if not the downright morally suspect. Feelings are not spared in this sometimes muscular treatment of familiar politicians and 'key players' active in the policy world that Professor Jones holds up to his own test of probity. But the book is very much more than a 'knock-about' of the usual suspects, for there is conspicuous marshalling of evidence of the failure of marketized initiatives, as indicated by their own unmet criteria. In many ways this is a tour of the English social work world over the last 50 years, viewed from the prism of personal professional experience, considerable distaste for privatisation and a deep belief in the virtues of a properly funded local state.

For the already converted this will be a form of comfort reading, confirming that private is often bad; and public, wherever it can be delivered well, is usually better. But for those who find the world sometimes more contradictory than they might wish, there may be aspects of the Jones narrative that don't always square with alternative perceptions of market arrangements. Indeed, had the book contained more analysis of the mixed market and its key features, say in foster care and residential provision, we might have better explored the idea that good and fair-priced services can be commissioned from honourable businesses and third sector providers, and that not all are driven by greed. Any brief conversation with those running the independent fostering world will almost always include their insistence that their overheads are more transparent, and not dissimilar to a local authority's, were the latter to really identify their true costs. Of course, there are too many examples where a seller's market position is exploited shamelessly; and one has to ask why consortia of local authorities have not come together and got a grip on their regional commissioning, as those in some other services have.

That some local authorities have been complicit in their surrender to the corporate world, as described by Jones, is not in doubt. Too many authorities, of different political hues, after some major scandals and with stringent budget pressures, relinquished to Mammon their own children's homes and foster services. This was in return for holding fewer risks themselves, and in the guilty knowledge that those staff working in the private sector that they procured (subsequently more cheaply than they were when employed in-house) would often have employment terms and conditions inferior to those in local government. Indeed, many small private residential businesses do struggle to survive when local government's dominant impulse, predictably, is cost avoidance. It can be said, too, that carers in those small well-run foster agencies that pay decent fees and always respond promptly to calls for help are deeply loyal, and they would not easily transfer to what some have experienced as large, distant and unresponsive local authorities.

In short, there is a more contested and troubled history surrounding social services performance over recent decades, exacerbated deeply by austerity no doubt, but one which did not surface in the book as much or as often as might be expected. Likewise, the exposure of Morning Lane Associates (child care consultants), the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, and a prominent professor of social work to what appear to be uncomfortable questions of association and motive did not seem to be accompanied by any record or comment (if there is such) of rebuttal or clarification by the relevant parties. More generally, the possibility of other more complicated stories other than the cash nexus, to account for sharp commercial conduct by those out with the local authority, did not always seem to accompany an otherwise trenchant and closely referenced critique of (often big) business malpractice in children's social care. Yet, in contrast, there are large numbers of adult self-funders who seem content with their private sector care, and all manner of social enterprise entities that collaborate with local authorities in good quality residential and day services for older people. Of course, children's services stand in some contrast to these more 'steady-state', albeit often stressed, services: but the point being suggested here is that the market can be made to operate responsibly, at least in some spheres; and doubtless this is true for some children's care. The mixed market is here and seems enduring, and it cannot simply be wished away. The big issue is how we rebalance commitment back to local authorities and away from an unhealthy over-reliance on some specific providers, without damage to children's lives. Such a discussion might have occupied more of the 43 pages of the concluding chapter of what is nevertheless a rattling good read.

Ray Jones is spot on with regard to his core contention and value position, in my opinion. Child protection and social work should never be outsourced to private or third sector entities. Vulnerable families need a 'wraparound' service that can, of course, buy in additional services from other providers: but the essential engagement must occur through an accountable and visible line between the local state, the family and child. The local authority can connect families to a range of provision that is simply not available to independent operators. Corporate parenting as a commitment has at its heart the collective authority of social services, health, education and their multiple links to legal services, housing, family courts, and other significant networks. This cannot be reproduced at scale by any single agency, private or voluntary. Worryingly, statutory regulation in England currently allows for the commercialisation of child protection and social work. Good sense, recent experience in some outsourced services, and international precedent would suggest, however, that interventions in family life that might entail the removal of children should only be conducted directly by the local state and licensed social workers. The case for both child protection and for social work, and for their approval and full support by government in England is made by Jones with passion and precision. Whether Prime Minister Johnson's new administration will take the same view is yet to be seen; but all good offices should be brought to bear upon that possibility.

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Working with Asylum Seekers and Refugees: What to Do, What Not to Do, and How to Help

Crowther, S., *London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019*

ISBN: 978-1785923173 (pbk), £19.99, pp.269

Awareness of policy, expertise in asylum procedures, and knowledge of services and benefits which asylum seekers and refugees can receive under current legislation, requires not only professional handling and know-how by specialist lawyers. Increasingly, this requirement extends also to those working directly with asylum seekers and refugees (mainly in voluntary organisations), but also working in other social welfare fields like health, education and children's services.

There's an ongoing need, not only in the UK, for workers to help asylum seekers and refugees settle into their new homes, to find work and continue their lives as normal. But what do we, including workers and volunteers, actually know about refugees and asylum seekers, their day-to-day lives in the UK, living in shared accommodation, about job opportunities or the current legal situation? Can we even imagine what circumstances force people to leave their homes?

Working with asylum seekers and refugees therefore poses challenges for professionals and volunteers. This is due both to the technical complexity of the subject area of migration, refugee, asylum and human rights, and the often emotionally stressful fates of the people concerned. On home turf, it can be easy to forget to think about where these individuals are coming from, and the cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences that can create significant barriers and challenges for many refugees.

This new book is steeped in and benefits from the personal experience of the author, making it convincing and authoritative. Sarah Crowther is the Director of REAP (*Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership*), and a Founding Trustee of HEAR, London's Voluntary and Community Sector network of equality and human rights organisations. She explains that her professional background and the people she met over two decades have influenced the way she approached the task. The book draws equally on experience, material from REAP, and personal contributions by herself and others, including refugees themselves.

She mentions three intentions. First, to broaden awareness and provide information, sources of expertise and ideas to help practitioners and others (including volunteers), to respond effectively to working with refugees (p.17). Second, to give practical assistance to help work with refugees, within the real-life world of sometimes reluctant organisations (p.19), and finally, to do her bit, so we can make this society a more meaningful place of refuge for people who have lost so much (p.21).

The book is full of advice and encouragement. Examples show how hands-on workers and volunteers are forced into a contested space, where wider social tensions are played out. This pragmatic book will inform new hands-on workers and other professionals in consulting or advisory services. Or, if you are already in this field and want to improve, to be up to date or more confident in your expertise or know-how, the book will have an impact.

There are twelve chapters organised into two parts, including a list of acronyms, a glossary of specialist terms, appendices with lists of relevant organisations, sources and potential evidence documents, a list of references and a page-related index. Each chapter starts with an introduction and ends with a summary and/or conclusion, which makes it a great manual, as it can be read by chapter. Key points are repeated, such as the importance of workers not giving legal status immigration advice unless they are licensed to do so, despite this often being the most pressing issue for refugees they are working with.

Following an introductory chapter setting out the rationale behind the book and the central concept about who refugees are, Sarah Crowther explores not only the question why refugees should be supported, but also the differences between supporting refugees and supporting other service users.

Her explanation here draws attention above all to a value system. She recognises the equality of all people regardless of their nationality or migration status. This pushes towards the dismantling of discriminatory social conditions – as well as to direct work. Therefore, she points out, there is not only a statutory duty to support refugees, but also it is important that every service user should get the right help. She argues that this is obligatory, regardless of immigration status, nationality etc., by focusing on a client-based service (responding to the acuteness of need).

Working with asylum seekers and refugees requires the examination of and/or knowledge of a variety of legal bases, which have a significant influence on the advisory skill of workers and volunteers. These include, among other things, key legal processes and definitions, notably the Human Rights Act. Practitioners need to be well informed about current migration law and other relevant legislation, and they need to keep up to date. This links to two questions: who are asylum seekers and refugees?; and why do some service providers cut them off from services, by saying “*we do not do refugees*”? This is when not only are they obliged to treat people equally under UK law, but also when refugees have the same acute needs as other service users supported.

It is important to recognise that the people who are perceived as refugees are regarded primarily as refugees because we have labelled them so. Chapter 2 provides a good discussion. The author puts it in a nutshell: *‘Refugees are migrants, but not all migrants are refugees’* (p.36). Choice or push factors of movement make the difference between a (voluntary) migrant or a refugee (forced migrant).

Both these chapters remind readers to bear in mind day-to-day work life. Sarah Crowther reminds us that supporting refugees isn’t just an issue of need in the UK, or in the rest of the world. It is a contemporary and hotly debated social and political issue. The chapters successfully navigate through the complex policy and ethical terrain.

Chapter 3 covers three different types of definitions of refugees and practical entitlements. The first is a subjective definition based on people’s experiences, followed by an official definition from the Home Office, and finally popular and political definitions. The chapter provides essential points on how to read and use the different definitions in day-to-day work, and on the key ethical and practical challenges faced when using different terms. As a reader of this book, I was curious to see if her definitions from the Home Office were literally from immigration law or were her own words, which should have been made clearer.

Working with asylum seekers and refugees involves a variety of cross-cutting tasks that cannot be accomplished without successful participation in functioning local networks. This requires dialogue with organisations that may be critical of the reception of refugees or even restrict their services for refugees. This dialogue should not be purely moralistic or instructive, but must aim at persuasion, which requires not only patience but also appropriate expertise.

Chapter 4 gives the reader ideas on how to use the Equality Act 2010 for this type of advocacy lobbying. It is mostly from a legal policy perspective, though well illustrated by examples. Anyone looking for material about how to convince organisations not to exclude refugees from their services needs to read Chapter 7, which covers who to network with in advocating for refugees. From my ‘experiential’ point of view, and from practice in this field, I can confirm that expertise is required, along with negotiation and communication skills, and a great deal of patience and persuasion. Supporting refugees directly means mainly giving various kinds of advice. This requires action guiding procedures and methods for taking steps in the advisory process.

In Chapter 5, the author goes on to practical work with refugees: how to access, how to engage and build a professionally based relationship. She describes this as being 'Friendly? Yes, but not friends.' Using plain language or professional interpreters, and not using other family members (e.g. children) to translate is an important point, which is discussed in the next chapter. In both chapters she explores the role, the nature of work with refugees, and has a specific focus on trying to maximise productive intervention.

By this stage I was hoping to get more information about the competence profile of a hands-on worker in the refugee field. Perhaps I'm not the only one to be curious as to what kind of formal basic qualification someone needs to work directly with refugees. The book does not clearly discuss this. Work directly with vulnerable people like refugees requires a range of professional competences (e.g. intercultural working, psychosocial skills) and personal skills (e.g. psychological resilience, competence in contact with "difficult" clients). With a clear competence profile, the reader could get an orientation and assessment, as the author strives to show in Box 1.3 (p.26) in which the reader him/herself can monitor their own learning.

The following four chapters concern practical topics in supporting refugees. Chapter 8 is about shelter and housing, money and providing money. Chapter 9 is about health, physical illness, mental and emotional health, and disability. Chapter 10 is again about language, at this point more about learning and educational possibilities, and training and employment. Chapter 11 focuses on refugee children and young people, with and without families. In summary, the author discusses topics which are faced in day-to-day work with asylum seekers and refugees. In each chapter the reader will find helpful information.

I make two concluding points.

First, the reader needs to have a good and up to date knowledge of the UK's social security and legal system, and about day-to-day life in the UK itself. Not then for most refugees themselves!

The second point is to acknowledge that the book doesn't explicitly claim to be a textbook, or structure it and use cited references in that direct way. References are in fact rare.

It seems that most of the book is the hard-won fruit of the author's experience, plus her strong commitment. 'You and the refugee have agency and can bring about change... by making services work better for refugees you make them work better for everyone' (p.236). On its own terms, this works as a generous guide to thinking and working in a fraught and somewhat stigmatised field.

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