

Mark Hughes and Michael Wearing 'Organisations and management in social work: Everyday action for change', 3rd Ed. 2017. Sage: London. ISBN 1-978-4739-3451-1 233 pages. Paperback

The starting premise of this book is that social work practice is almost inevitably organisational practice for most practitioners and thus skills for working in organisations are essential. Organisations and management sit behind practitioners creating the systems that resource and support practice. The authors take the view that it is unhelpful to position social work practice 'against organisations as monolithic impersonal structures' as to do so undermines social workers' usefulness. This is not to say that they advocate an uncritical perspective. Rather they argue for an ethical and strategic approach to competence in working in the human service organisation. The focus is on change with the best interests of service users in mind.

From that position three propositions are outlined (pp. 4-5) that underpin the ethos promoted throughout the book. The first is that an analytic approach to organisations is a 'politics from below'. A narrow focus on technicalities of management is to be avoided in favour of a broad consideration of the actors in organisational life- internal and external- and the myriad factors of influence. The second proposition is that depoliticisation must be avoided in the analysis of organisations and management. This means keeping a critical policy analysis to the forefront when thinking about organisational practice. The third proposition is that 'there is a pervasive political amnesia in social work and social work education in liberal Anglo democracies about the politics and sociology of organisations' (p.5). From this observation, they argue that social workers will benefit from re-examination of the sociology of organisations in the critique of organisations.

These propositions seem reasonable and offer a promise of a critical approach. The authors don't nail their colours to the mast however and I wasn't sure at all at the beginning of the book where they stand. This left me with some questions. What is the role of social work in relation to the state? The role of social work in NGOs? Hughes and Wearing's aims for this book are quite broad and it encompasses many aspects of organisational life, including management, supervision, ethics and accountability and the all-pervasive focus on risk. This is a comprehensive text and largely does what it says it will. For social work students, it will provide an excellent overview of organisational and management theoretical perspectives with sufficient examples of practice and many brief introductions to a wide array of additional reading. It is well written and clearly organised.

Writing as they are in the Australian context, liberal Anglo social work has a painful history in its development against a backdrop of colonisation and near genocide of indigenous people, as do many other former European colonies. A future edition might benefit from the inclusion of references to contemporary Indigenous research and scholarship. Many would also argue that in the neoliberal regime social work has been forced back into very narrow individualised practice- often far too closely associated with disciplining the poor. The application of market philosophies to public services and burgeoning privatisation in so many countries threatens the independence and mission of NGOs and grassroots social services, leading to greater coercion of service users and workers (Baines & van den Broek, 2016). These problems are of central importance if organisations and management are to be understood in the political context of social work. This text canvases many of these issues.

There are some limitations that, for me, coalesce around the absence of some very contemporary concerns. I was surprised to see a detailed discussion of the 'Orkney Islands' case from the United Kingdom in the discussion of accountability (pp.153-155). This case is from another era and while interesting, is very dated. The analysis minimises the role of politicians and media in manipulating both public opinion and professional reactivity. Contemporary readers would be better served by reference to the Peter Connelly case, where several texts have interrogated the far from innocent roles of people and professions other than social workers (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2015). A discussion of technology could be expanded to explore the increasing use of data from welfare benefit, justice and other systems to target 'vulnerable' and 'troubled' families for muscular state intervention (see for example Crossley & Lambert, 2017 and Keddell, 2014).

While it could be argued that these are matters in the social policy domain, frontline workers and their managers are caught up in the implementation of such interventions, raising issues of complicity and reluctant compliance.

This book will continue to feature as a useful text in undergraduate and postgraduate qualifying courses in social work and would best serve students if supplemented with some additional reading of the growing rich critique of social work and social work organisations in the present era.

References

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