REVIEWS

THE BOUNDARIES OF CHANGE IN COMMUNITY WORK

edited by Paul Henderson,
David Jones and David N. Thomas
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An historical overview of current practice and current dilemmas in community work in the United Kingdom is provided in this well structured and very readable book.

Many of the questions it poses are relevant to the Australian scene and should help Australian community workers focus critically on what they are on about. However, it should be remembered, as the book points out, that most of the community workers now employed in Britain are working for large local government bureaucracies, whereas the Australian situation is much more diverse with community workers employed by local government, community health centres, ethnic groups, child care organizations, neighbourhood centres, resident action and pressure groups concerned with the environment, transport etc, and in positions in community arts and community education.

Perhaps it is the current employment base in Britain which leads to the book's concentration on what the editors call "interjacence". The concept is explained in this way: "The task of organising people into a collective has to be achieved by the community worker whilst he or she stands between people and organisations, rather than being of them. Like mortar, their structural position is always one of interjacence, carrying out their work on the boundaries of groups and organisations in the community. Community workers have to be with the people, whilst not being of them, and have to develop the additional skill of being able to equilibriate between the various individuals, groups and organisations that make demands upon them". P.2

The authors argue that it is this interjacence which produces many of the boundary issues which confront community work practice.

Yet in Australia many community workers would argue their position is not one of interjacence; but one of complete identification with the group with which they are working. Perhaps therefore the degree of interjacence or identification is determined partly by who pays the workers' wages?

The book explains that in the interjacent position, the community worker is pushed and pulled by a number of forces which come from groups, bureaucracies and from the worker's own attitudes and those of others working in similar positions who raise questions of policy, co-option and professionalisation.

The question of the influence of other professions in deviating community workers from their true paths seems to be of real concern. It is another feature of the boundary position of community work that it takes what is relevant from other disciplines. Some of the discussion in the book, around this whole area, reminds me of earlier equally tedious but necessary debates about whether, or not, social work was, or was not, a profession.

Perhaps it is a stage through which any emerging specific work group must proceed? Students of community work courses will probably find the debate quite relevant and stimulating and should enjoy the final chapter by Teresa Smith, "Community Work: Profession or Social Movement?".

However, one hopes that the conclusion will not be for community workers to argue a unique position in which they zealously work away at the micro level, organising people, whilst ignoring the wider society and the forces of the establishment which are, after all, the fundamental determinants of our lifestyles.

The book argues that culture of community work is other centred (that is, its business is to serve others and help enhance the group's power, autonomy and responsibility); that the process is worker centred (that is, much depends on the worker's personality) and that the method of change is we centred (that is, the values of and instruments of change are essentially those that involve egalitarianism, fraternity and potency of the collective).

The consequential effect on community work of these three combined aspects of culture, practice and change is a tension for the worker who is on the fringe. She or he is not part of the group with which she or he identifies and not part of the agency which is the employing body.

The primary hypothesis of the book is that community work is dynamic, influenced by a number of forces; but that community workers should not become incorporated either by the people or by the organisations that employ them, "At best, community work and community workers will be anchored to the boundaries of community groups, organisations and professions, and the degrees of externality that are associated with this boundary role may be seen as necessary for the survival and effectiveness of community work". P.7

This boundary role of community work and the influencing, enabling and educating roles of the workers are elaborated upon.

The presentation of case material explores the different degrees of externality experienced by workers, when of the same ethnic background as the community, and when employment of the community worker is directly by the community groups.
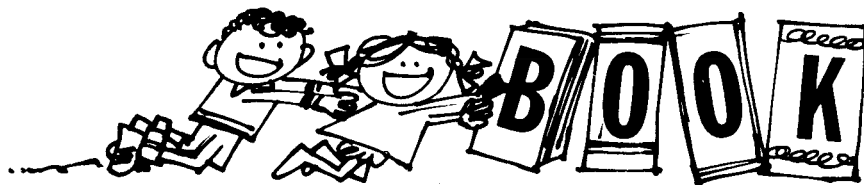
The complexity of the community worker's role is examined in that whilst being external to the group she or he needs to be accepted, trusted and valued by the employing agency in which the community workers job is to influence change.

The editors point to another complexity in what they see as a necessity for the community worker to be viewed as neutral when trying to facilitate co-ordination between organisations.

The emphasis on the boundary nature of community work is perhaps explained when the editors state — "The community work task has to remain external to community groups and to service organisations because it is an operating condition that supports the survival and distinctive contribution of community work. The community worker is a marginal person and an intermediary precisely because that is what he or she is and what he or she has to be in order to be an effective change-agent within a pluralistic community environment of interests". P.11

A pluralist view is essentially a consensus one and an analysis of community work from a more radical stance would, I consider, raise different concerns and different preoccupations. However, that is not to say that the writers do not recognise different ideologies; but they argue the importance of diversity ot value positions stating, "It may be that the emergence of a definable and widely accepted value position (whether defined morally or politically) in community work would work adversely against the ability of community workers to equilibriate between community interests and thus to carry out their fundamental task of helping people in communities and agencies to organise" P.14 and "what is being asked for is that an occupation whose practitioners are intimately concerned with the effect on communities of major social, political and economic

forces refrain from developing a uniform occupational ideological 'position', that is applied doctrinally to these issues. . . Interjacence fortunately provided the opportunity for a wide variety of people to enter community work, and this fact sustains the pluralism and openness necessary in the occupation for its workers to equilibriate between community interests in an attempt to organise them for collective action". P.15

It seems to me that the above is an attempt to have two bob each way. The question that is raised by this stance, is the question which all those working at community levels must ask themselves and this is the question of long term goals, i.e. what are we community working for?

The case studies and other contributions are valuable in confronting us with the dilemma faced, by needing to get on with the job, whilst at the same time needing to examine what the job is about, and why.

I found the chapter, "Making Sense of Theory" by Jalna Hanmer and Hilary Rose, particularly interesting as it presents a history of different theoretical and political approaches to and influences on community work.

They raise the issue of women in community which of course raises the range of questions about the role and status of women in society. They argue that analysis from a feminist perspective challenges women community workers to question how they work with women.

Those of us working in child care, community education, refuges, etc. could do well to ask ourselves, "whether we are helping to generate liberating experiences with women or whether we are subtly reinforcing the social relations which determine women's secondary position in society". P.84

Following on from the three contributed chapters in part one, "The Context of Community Work Practice", the book has seven case studies

and then a third section on "Influence, Organisation and Professional Growth". Each section has an introduction and there is a final concluding commentary which leaves us with a number of pertinent questions to examine.

I have only touched on a few aspects of the book which covers the history, philosophy and theories of community work and analyses the growth of community work, its influence on other professions and its future. Because of its range it should be of interest to both students and those working in the many areas of personal health and welfare services, as well as those submerged in community work jobs.

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