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Book Review: The Social Work Business

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Newman's book has 16 pages of closely printed references; Mark Priestley's book has 36. Even so, the virtual impossibility of comprehensively reviewing the mass of literature available can be illustrated. Newman covers the point that because their children may be seen as at risk, disabled parents may not seek the help they need. Priestley quotes an interesting reference on this (Thomas, 1997) that Newman hasn't found. Similarly, Priestley discusses whether persistent historical and contemporary attempts to kill off disabled people constitute 'genocide', without acknowledging a primary source for this idea (Wolfensberger, 1992).

Both books are well structured. Newman writes in short sections each making a succinct and logical point. I would have liked an index to the book, but its list of contents enables the reader to find key material. Priestley's book is specifically structured to help students; it has a good index and is interspersed with summaries of learning points. Overall, both books are extremely useful and instructive contributions to our understanding of disability issues. They would benefit students, teachers and researchers, as well as being of interest to the general reader.

References

- Thomas, C. (1997) 'The Baby and the Bath Water: Disabled Women and Motherhood in Social Context', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 19: 622–43.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1992) *The New Genocide of Handicapped and Afflicted People*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Training Institute.

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John Harris

The Social Work Business

London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 220 pp. (incl. index), £16.99 (pbk), ISBN 0415224888

John Harris has written a timely and thorough critical appraisal of how the business culture has shifted the nature of social work so fundamentally in the UK over the last 25 years. He details how this process was begun by the Conservative administration during the 1980s, particularly by its changes to community care, but that this has been taken even further by the much stronger regulatory framework and audit culture introduced under the guise of *modernization* under New Labour in recent years. What I found particularly insightful was the way in which he draws upon elements of the *McDonaldization thesis* (Ritzer, 2000) to argue that there are many parallels with the introduction of *franchising*, which has become so common in the corporate world of business. In this analysis, the vision of modernization is translated through strong central government control of the agendas to be implemented. Like the

corporate headquarters of a modern business, New Labour has defined social work's objectives at a national level: these are achieved locally, usually through the local authority, and central government monitors the results closely by a variety of performance indicators and targets. The emphasis on local leadership, entrepreneurialism and this strong performance culture with regard to standards and quality, is pinned to these targets by central government. In this model, franchise holders, although legally independent, must conform to detailed standards of operation designed and enforced by the parent company, in this case central government. Such a model has implications not only for local authorities, but also for universities and others involved in the delivery of training, as well as for the independent sector in the guise of voluntary and commercial providers. This culture, then, impacts in the way clients are reconfigured as consumers, and social workers as care managers.

The analysis and arguments are convincing and detailed. However, as Harris recognizes, much of this has been developed from his detailed knowledge of the community care sectors. I am a little surprised that his focus is so explicitly on social work as a professional activity. While the analysis certainly holds in this respect, in many ways – as he recognizes by implication – the analysis very much reflects the move towards the emphasis in the sector as being characterized as *social care*. It is surprising that this development and the notion of social care itself, as opposed to social work, does not receive more attention in the book. In many respects, the emergence of the notion of social care is emblematic of the changes he addresses.

A major part of these changes has been premised on the recognition that social work has been constructed as an activity that has failed. Of course this failure, certainly as far as social work is concerned, is much more evident in the criminal justice and child care fields, which receive no explicit attention. More particularly, the impact of various public inquiries has been a central *modus operandi* of the changes in social work, but of course these emanate primarily from the child care and child protection fields, rather than the more specific arena of community care, which is Harris's focus here. On one or two occasions he clearly recognizes this. So while the move to this business culture is central to the changes in social work and social care over recent years, the changes have also been crucially influenced by the high-profile failures which have been seen to characterize criminal justice and child care. In this respect, of course, social work is no longer seen as appropriate to probation, for example, and this is a story which is very important to understand the changing nature of social work over the period. In many respects, however, it is the area of child care and child protection that is still seen as the pre-eminent field where social workers should operate, as opposed to community care where a variety of other occupational groupings are now centrally involved. It is a shame that just a little more space could not have been given to these issues.

The other area that barely figures is the articulation of alternative models and conceptions of social work practice that can be seen as resistant to and

critical of this business culture. It is only in the final two pages, by way of conclusion, that Harris hints at what these might look like. It is a shame that some of these more *transformatory* visions and practices could not receive a little more attention. These critical points aside, however, this remains an important contribution to the literature, which brings together in one place significant material that both students and teachers will find invaluable.

References

Ritzer, G. (2000) *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

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Helen Buckley

Child Protection Work: Beyond the Rhetoric

London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003, 222 pp., £15.95 (pbk), ISBN 1843100754

Jeff Fowler

A Practitioner's Tool for Child Protection and the Assessment of Parents

London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003, 250 pp., £17.95 (pbk), ISBN 1843100509

These two books, though dealing with the same subject matter, child protection, have very different aims and objectives. Buckley's study of child protection practice in Ireland in the mid-1990s looks at how social workers construct and process child abuse cases from the wide range of child care concerns that are referred to them. It demonstrates that such work is an uncertain business, subject to a whole range of complexities and contradictions that do not figure in formal discourses about child protection. Fowler's book provides a child protection assessment framework to help social workers make important decisions about the futures of children who have already suffered significant harm. In contrast to Buckley's work it is a practical guide and, as such, is not concerned with raising questions about or analysing the process of child protection work.

Buckley's study is based upon a detailed examination of 72 child abuse referrals made to a social work health board over a six-month period. Using file material and interviews with social workers, their managers and service users, she carefully analyses the process by which the vast majority of referrals are filtered out of the system, resulting in only a small number (14) becoming cases which receive closer attention from social workers and related professionals. Buckley argues that in the initial stages of intervention social workers are as