

BOOK REVIEWS

Social Work: The Membership Perspective: HANS FALCK
New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1988
Price: \$27.95

As a part of our teaching of social work practice, we use a case outline of a social worker helping a woman whose male partner has just committed suicide. His parents visit the woman and want her to go to live with them. The response of the students is unfailingly predictable: they try to discourage the parents from contact and they return to a focus upon the woman. They could have recognised that the dead man's parents would also be struggling to cope with grief and might need the social worker's help; and they could have hypothesized that these three people, whatever their past relationships, might in this current crisis have good things to give one another. But they do not do so.

Falck's book makes much sense of these responses. His starting point is that the central philosophy of Western culture and of Western social work is individualism. His aim is to refute this philosophy and he does so with powerful and clear logic.

His definition of individualism includes self-realization, self-determination, self-fulfilment, self-sufficiency and (personal) access to power and resources. He shows how most social work theory has supported this view and he attempts to replace it with the concept of membership. He believes that this concept represents an irreducible aspect of human existence and sees us all as members, even if our membership is experienced as one of alienation or oppression.

Falck illustrates how far-reaching is the unconscious influence of individualism upon all aspects of social work practice and theory. In his view 'self-determination' has to become 'social self-determination' with a clear recognition that each person's behaviour always has consequences for others. He includes a section on seen and unseen groups. The seen group is the one in front of us, whilst the unseen are *the groups to which the clients belong that are not directly visible to members of the seen helping group*. In Falck's view, the client and social worker cannot screen out their responsibility for the unseen groups:

If the membership perspective contains one prescription for social work practice, it is that all decision-making . . . must take into account the client and the meaning the client's decisions have for other people (p. 72)

Whilst this book is not especially about work with groups, every aspect of it has relevance there. Many of our usual perceptions become transformed. The usual distinctions between individuals, groups and communities 'go out of the window' because the first of these does not exist and the other two are actually a short-hand for 'groups of persons' and 'communities of persons'; their common

factor is membership. Human freedom is 'defined by simultaneous concerns for oneself and others'. And separation by death or divorce does not end a relationship because internal work on the relationship continues.

It becomes clear in the membership perspective that individualism is very different from individuation and that autonomy is not the same as independence. Both individuation and autonomy are integral to relationships. He critiques systems theory on the grounds that the individual is usually portrayed as the basic unit of analysis, although it seems to me possible to link the idea of membership to many systemic concepts. Perhaps to do so, we will have consistently to replace the word 'system' with 'system of members'. That these differences are not just pedantic ones is shown by the radically different responses to the case outline with which I began this review.

In spite of the wish of many of us in the helping professions to avoid the market philosophy of the New Right, reading this book made me realise that many of my unconscious assumptions support it. If you would like your Western defined self to be threatened, read this book.

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Working More Creatively With Groups: JARLATH F. BENSON

London: Tavistock Publications, 1987

Price: Paperback £11.95. ISBN 0-422-79570

I found this a straightforward, readable and convincing guide to working with groups. It is not overloaded with jargon, references, name-dropping or quotations. It is written simply, but is not simplistic. It tackles the work with groups in a sequential manner, looking at beginnings, middles and ends in that order, and with clarity and common-sense. In exploring the issues of inclusion, control and affection the author acknowledges a debt to Schutz, but also draws on Assagioli and Angyal in his presentation of what he calls *the urge to be attached* (the love principle) and *the urge to be separate* (the will principle) which is reflected in the polarities of behaviour in all human groups. Understanding these polarities, and learning to help group members understand them and manage them is tackled with enthusiasm and commitment. This is the heart of the book, with early chapters on planning and setting up a group, and an introduction to group dynamics and processes in groups.

Later chapters explore the foundations of creative groupwork, by way of examining paradoxes about the work (groupwork is rational – groupwork is intuitive) and paradoxes about the worker (separate – involved), and examination of the damage done by groupworkers struggling to control, to compare, to achieve perfection, and to sustain an inappropriate neutrality. The closing chapters look at skills and methods to be considered in a range of different group situations, and some practical ways of *keeping your practice going* including a *resolve to build in a consultative dimension for your practice which will enhance but not replace your responsibility for keeping your practice going*. I fully endorse his view that using a consultant *is not a substitute for hard work*.

The book is, in my view, eminently useable, both by beginners and by those more experienced, who wish to find ways to use themselves more creatively in group situations. The author's practice of formulating questions, listing major factors, and summarising by enclosing the material in boxes is valuable as an *aide-memoire*, though it unavoidably breaks up the flow of the reading. But this is a *worker's* manual. Yet it is not merely a textbook on 'how to do it' because as the author points out *ultimately vision is more important than techniques and methods*. The vision he seeks to share in this book is of *belief in the power and creativity of fellowship, mutuality and reciprocity*. He shares the vision, and conveys it in this exciting and highly practical book.

It is possible to make carping criticisms, but not to overshadow the merits of the book as a whole. My one major regret arises from the disclaimer that *no sexist slight is intended* by referring to all members and leaders in the masculine gender throughout the book. This decision will reduce the enjoyment and profitability of the book for many readers. Even 'the wise person' on page 218 is male! If the practice is, as stated, *purely for convenience* then whose convenience? If groupworkers are urged to consider the group member first, should not writers and publishers consider the reader first, rather than another's convenience?

To end on a positive note, here are four of Jarlath Benson's rules for survival as a groupworker . . . *avoid crucifixions* counsels against the dangers of being over-protective; *don't push the river upstream* points out the unwisdom of telling people what to do; and *wait until the mud settles* indicates a need for patience. Since he regards groupwork as *a difficult and demanding craft* there is the need to *learn to forgive yourself* since *if you cannot permit your own frailty . . . you will really be unable to allow it in your group*. All most excellent advice. A book that will indeed help male and female workers in search of creativity in their groupwork, and a most useful addition to the groupwork library.

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