

BOOK REVIEWS

WORKING WITH HUMAN SERVICES ORGANISATIONS

Fiona Gardner

Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2005

The human services sector has waited for over a decade for a text of this nature. Not since Jones and May published *Working in Community Services Organisations* has a book so highly relevant to the sector been produced in Australia. From the outset, this publication engages the reader and speaks to the individual seeking to work within and understand human services organisations.

The book is divided into two parts with the first addressing 'Current Issues and Approaches' and the second focussing on 'Integrating Practice'. Both sections of the book employ case scenarios drawn from the author's experience as a practitioner and encourage reflection on issues through the use of reflective practice exercises. In addition, a variety of examples illustrating aspects of organisational functioning are located in Part 2 and provide quite substantial material from real-life situations. The latter encompass both Australian and overseas experience and this is helpful because the reader is able to link Australian situations to those beyond our shores. It is also important because, while all countries have differing histories, cultures and developmental trajectories in their human services sectors, there remain many commonalities in how organisational dynamics play out.

In Part 1 of the text the focus is on theory relevant to organisations in contemporary Australian society and frames the issues while promoting understanding of organisational dynamics. Any sense of 'dryness' in this material is avoided due to Fiona's style which has a conversation clarity that carries the reader along. For instance, in opening a short discussion about learning styles on page 117, she says: 'People have preferences for how they learn and not training institutions and organisations understand this.' Such a straightforward approach is immediately reassuring, enabling the reader to consider his/her learning style in relation to those used by organisations in activities like orientation, supervision and training. It is the encouragement to discover what lies within such relationships that is so valuable. Strong referencing to contemporary authors specialising in the topic under discussion provides further links for the reader to follow up. The tensions for workers as professionals employed within human service organisations are made explicit, but a positive approach is maintained ensuring that the tensions and difficulties faced by practitioners are considered in a balanced manner.

In part 2, Fiona turns to the integration of practice with organisational contexts. She explores the connections that

lead to holistic and flexible responses to clients and their issues. Chapter 7, in particular, provides both diagrammatic depictions of the dimensions of integrated practice together with six examples that act as illustrations which are analysed. This is followed by exploration of skills and knowledge required by professional staff when working in agencies (Chapter 8) and a short discussion of some of the tools and strategies that can be used to bring about change (Chapter 9). The book concludes with a sense of optimism that workers in human services organisations can be active agents to bring about change and achieve more integrated practice through the dynamics of being an organisational member.

This book will be useful in teaching at a tertiary level, in continuing education and training and as a daily reminder that the difficulties we experience in our organisational lives are part of a complex, dynamic system that is always subject to change. Practitioners, supervisors and managers will also find much to ponder in this volume. As a teacher there are two areas that could have been explored which are not mentioned. The first of these is governance and its implications for leadership and strategic direction in service delivery; the other relates to what I believe is a difference in 'distance from community' of regional and rural human service organisations which affects the culture and roles of professional in these agencies. However, every author and publisher must draw a line somewhere and, fortunately, this leaves ground for others to explore on another occasion. In the meantime, I expect to see this book in evidence on a regular basis for some time to come.

Reviewed by:
Dr Jennifer Lehmann
La Trobe University

The following reviews are for books published by the prolific British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). They are clearly written, using language which can be understood by a wide range of readers. Their appeal tends to be enhanced with first person accounts by consumers in the out-of-home care system, as well as by professionals. The books are also generally well referenced and well laid out.

In terms of the relevance for Australian readers, there are clearly some areas in which they are not relevant – for example, in the area of legislation and some policy and practice. Nevertheless, much of the content of these books is highly relevant for the Australian context.

Dr Cas O'Neill
Research Fellow, School of Social Work
University of Melbourne