

Book Review

Blame, culture and child protection

Leigh J. (2017). **Blame, culture and child protection**. Palgrave Macmillan. Hardback, ISBN 978-1-137-47008-9. 255 pages. GBP £89.99. Aust \$161.98 as at 27 July 2020.

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In the UK, social workers employed in child protection services have in recent years been vilified by members of the public who were egged on by the media and politicians whenever there has been a child death. As indicated by the title of this book, social workers are blamed for the death of children, with a widely held view that every child death is preventable if social workers were to do their job properly. This narrative diminishes and threatens the professional identity of social workers.

In many ways, the 'blame culture' in England commenced with the 1973 inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (Butler & Drakeford, 2012). In this book, Leigh traverses this and other child death inquiries, such as Baby P, since that time (Jones, 2014). This background informs the study that follows.

Leigh, as a social worker/child protection worker, set out to explore this issue by way of an observational study of her Department and of the colleagues with whom she worked. The study is framed by auto-ethnographic theoretical concepts that are used to understand how individual professional interactions are influenced by an organisational culture. An organisational culture which, in turn, is shaped by hostile media reporting and the allocation of blame to the Department by politicians for any child death.

To add to this perspective, Leigh compared the UK agency situation with the situation in a child protection agency in Flanders (Belgium) using the same observational data collection process. She found that social workers in the UK child protection services

grasp at defensive modes of practice, which Leigh illustrates by way of case examples. Defensive practice is about being risk averse and always covering your back by way of extensive recording.

This approach to practice was the subject of negative comments by Munro (2011) who noted that child protection involves risk and that child protection services must take carefully balanced risks in order to provide much needed services to vulnerable families. A 'no risk' approach would mean denying these families the needed services and result in the removal of a disproportionate number of children from parental care.

But as Leigh shows in Flanders, child protection social workers are not vilified, and their professional identity is supported by the Flanders population. Consequently, defensive practice and back covering is less evident, and appropriate services can be provided to vulnerable families.

This book has a similar tale to tell as that told by both Gibson (2019) and Warner (2015) from the UK and by Gainsborough (2010) from the USA. These authors, like Leigh, paint a less than complementary picture about child welfare/child protection services.

Reading the Leigh book caused me to ask the following question. Does the UK scenario reflect child protection services in Australia? I believe the answer from many long-term observers of these services, in all states and territories, would be a big YES.

References

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