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Book Review

Task-Centred Social Work
by Mark Doel and Peter Marsh
Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 1992, 136 pp.

In today's climate, human service agencies are under increasing pressure to demonstrate, rather than assert, the outcomes of their programs. In conjunction with this, many services are now delivered on a short-term or time-limited basis. What is needed is a clear outline of how to do such short-term, outcome-oriented intervention. This concise book fills this need, for it is a comprehensive handbook on task-centred social work. This is a model of practice in which there is an agreement between client and worker on the former's problems, the tasks to be jointly undertaken to deal with these problems, and the goals that should be reached at the end of an agreed time limit.

The book briskly outlines the research basis and ethical issues involved in task-centred practice, and then proceeds with a lucid discussion of how to do task-centred practice. Included is a discussion on defining problems, negotiating a written agreement of tasks and goals between worker and client, undertaking the tasks and assessing outcomes. This discussion is illustrated by an on-going case study that threads through the five main chapters. In the appendix is a helpful checklist for practitioners and a bibliographic guide to the task-centred practice literature.

The task-centred practice model contains much that is useful. The emphsis on clear outcomes will appeal to agencies under increasing pressure to systematically monitor their programs and document specific outcomes of their services. In addition, those interested in client empowerment may find considerable appeal in the approach. Doel and Marsh note that the task-centred model enables clients to set goals for themselves and rejects the 'pathology' context that has hitherto characterised much of social work assessment. But the model is not appropriate in all circumstances. How well it would work with many involuntary clients, who may well not agree with a human service agency's view of their problems and indeed resent being compelled to use such an agency's service is open to question. Further, social workers are often confronted with clients undergoing repeated crises, circumstances which would cause difficulties in reaching agreed goals.

Nonetheless, this book should prove an invaluable aid to practitioners and administrators concerned about successful social work practice. It should be of particular interest to those working with children and families, where the task-centred model of negotiating goals to be met in time-limited intervention should have particular appeal for agencies under pressure to show the outcomes of their programs.

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