Book review

Analysing community work: theory and practice
second edition


This new edition of an important community work text will be welcomed by both teachers and students of community work. The book is substantially updated, within the context of contemporary Britain, and retains many of the positive features of the first edition some twenty years ago. It is a clear, well-presented text, accessible to student readers, which nevertheless resist the temptation of over-simplification of what is inevitably a complex and contested field.

The first point to be made is that this is a British treatment of community work. It is strongly located in the British context, and is aimed at students and practitioners in the United Kingdom. There is some relevance for readers from outside Britain, especially in the theoretical chapters, but non-British readers will need to provide their own context.

Following a general introduction to community and community work (Chapters 1 and 2), Chapters 3 and 4 do an excellent job of contextualizing contemporary British community work, within the changing social and political narratives of British society. The story outlines the origins of community work in the Settlement House and Charity movements, and traces its development as it has adapted to the war years, the post-war welfare state, Thatcherism and the ‘new right’, Blair and ‘new Labour’, and finally the virulent strain of neoliberalism that has dominated recent political discourse. This is very important in understanding community work in context, and its changes over time in engaging with different ideological narratives and social movements.

The two chapters (5 and 6) on theories for community work are the highlight of the book. A wide range of theoretical perspectives that have been used by community workers is presented, including Marxism, feminism, environmentalism, and others. The work of a number of important theorists, such as Gramsci, Freire, Castells, Foucault, hooks, Lukes, and Sen, is
summarized in a way that makes key elements of their work accessible, and highlights their importance for community work. These two chapters could represent the core teaching in a community work course. However, there are some significant omissions. More attention could have been given to postmodernism, as a number of community workers have found it a useful framework for addressing complexity, diversity, and the contradictions and general chaos of the communities with which they work. Other theoretical perspectives that could well have been included are postcolonialism, radical ecology, liberation theology, and alternative economics, all of which have been seen by community workers as important theoretical contributors to their understandings of community and community work.

Chapter 7 presents a typology of ‘models’ of community work, such as community care, community organization, community development, and community action. This gives a good perspective of the breadth of community work, but these approaches to practice are discussed only briefly, and it would have been good to see more detailed consideration of them, and their particular strengths, weaknesses, issues, and dilemmas. The chapter includes brief discussion of community economic development and environmentalism, but a notable omission is the field of community arts and community cultural development. This is an important area of practice, and is being used throughout the world in bringing communities together, consciousness-raising and challenging dominant narratives. It can significantly enrich community work in many contexts.

Chapter 8 discusses important issues of the practice context of community work, and raises important questions that students and practitioners need to address. This is followed by Chapter 9 on international community work, which presents only a very brief discussion and a single case study, and is in my view the weakest part of the book. There is no treatment of the two central concepts for international community development, namely colonialism and globalization; each is discussed very briefly in earlier chapters, but they really need to be foregrounded in a chapter such as this. Globalization reshapes our understanding of both international and local work, and a thorough treatment of colonialism is necessary if we are not to repeat the tragic mistakes of past (and indeed current) coloniser practices.

The final chapter (10) is an important chapter looking at community work into the future. It identifies a number of important trends that community work will need to address: technology and social media, increasing inequality, managerialism, political disillusionment, environmentalism, etc. These are important issues, and represent serious challenges for community workers. My disappointment was the lack of coverage of the multiple crises facing humanity in the coming decades: environmental crisis, economic crisis, resource crisis, political crisis, etc. These will require more
radical measures than can be achieved within the existing order, as a matter of urgency. The need to question the obsession with growth, the challenge of transitioning to some form of post-capitalism, and the need to rethink anthropocentrism all challenge community work into the future, and many writers see strong communities as perhaps the only way out of the multiple crises facing humanity in coming decades. The challenges, but also the potential, for community work are far greater than envisaged in this chapter.

In summary, this is a good book on community work, and will serve well as an introductory text in the British context. The theoretical basis is particularly strong. But it is a starting point only, and needs to be supplemented with more detailed analysis and discussion of the areas that are raised. It is an introductory, rather than a comprehensive, text, and seen as such it serves its purpose well.

Jim Ife
Emeritus Professor, Curtin University, Perth, Australia;
email: jimife@ioinet.net.au
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