

New Approaches to Child Protection

Dorothy Scott and Di O'Neil, Beyond Child Rescue: Developing Family-Centred Practice at St Luke's, Allen & Unwin in association with the Institute of Public Affairs, Sydney, 1996

Reviewed by Agnes-Mary Brooke

As *Beyond Child Rescue* shows, child welfare in Australia, as well as elsewhere, is in a state of crisis. Different countries, with their many enquiries, reports and reorganisations, are enduring scandals and a chronic shortage of resources. Changes in government and in policy have altered guidelines and the specifications about which programs will be funded and which cut. Government welfare workers, while frequently criticised, often juggle 'seemingly untenable responsibilities' (p. vii), while their clients' perception of both government and non-government agencies is characterised by a suspicion of all involved in the climate or context of welfare intervention.

The authors note that problems arise with the very notion of helping people 'since "helping" is something that one person does to another' (p. viii). Requesting an individual to change implies that something is wrong with that individual: which may itself lessen the chances of achieving a change in attitude or behaviour. However, although modern social workers prefer to see themselves as 'empowering' people rather than changing them, any notion of intervention inevitably rests on ideas of teaching, training or modifying. The concept of empowerment has 'spawned procedures and approaches that seek to be more cooperative, that involve clients and seek their opinions' (p. ix).

Agencies which have sought to develop less coercive practices exhibit a new willingness to work with people in their own homes and living contexts in order to help them avoid serious welfare intervention. However, the authors argue that such services may end up as just 'more of the same'. Talk about cooperation and about not imposing normative views of health and functioning is merely facile as long as 'the grim reality in the welfare field is that the issues of child protection — literally life and death concerns — cannot be diluted' (p. ix). The authors argue that high ideals about cooperation and 'empowerment' must be balanced against the reality that high-risk situations for children necessarily elicit a response from a position of authority, and must, if necessary, give way to protective interventions.

Nevertheless, St Luke's Family Care, a leading Australian non-government child welfare agency, sees a cooperative, non-adversarial relationship which values what families say they want as the key to fulfilling statutory obligations to ensure children's safety. The authors maintain that this calls for an extraordinary detachment from the common beliefs which underlie most welfare work, including notions of a family's 'deficits' or shortcomings. In contrast, 'practice which begins from a different stance, which does not include notions of deficit, requires a fundamental change in how we think about what we do' (p. x).

I found this the weakest section of the book. The authors claim that no matter how hard agency workers try to be different, practice which begins from ideas about families' 'deficits' or shortcomings will inevitably become adversarial. But attempts to be 'non-judgmental' are impracticable, since without a notion of deficit — of children or families at risk — no grounds exist for intrusion by government or non-government agencies into people's lives. To expect social workers to exclude all notions of deficit is unrealistic, when it is society's concern about harmful deficits in attitude and behaviour that justifies the giving of assistance.

That said, I could find little else to question in a book detailing procedures so obviously based on common sense that one would take them to be standard until one remembers how uncommon this commodity is. The book is for the most part simply written: almost a lost art in specialist areas. Notions of victimhood on the grounds of gender, class or ethnicity are refreshingly absent.

Beginning with the idea (certainly not a new one in terms of Christian philosophy) that the agency should 'value' the families with whom it works, St Luke's feels it has emerged with a completely different way of conceptualising its work. While the claim may be exaggerated — building on individuals' strengths is not a new idea — the approach has produced interesting results, as the agency's case-notes illustrate. St Luke's has embraced simple but significant policies such as allowing families to convene meetings with protective service workers. It is committed to the view that, rather than construing clients' actions as annoying, manipulative or 'passive-aggressive', it should utilise strengths that clients bring, no matter how obscure these may seem to the agency. Rather than seeing this as simply a 'positive' focus, the agency believes that, while not denying clients' shortcomings (this, interestingly enough, contradicts its claimed 'non-deficit' assumptions), its ideas about why a family is in a difficult situation are less relevant than the family's own understanding, which is thought to provide a more productive means for trying to do something about it. In a case study of a dysfunctional family, the Williams, the agency's emphasis on the family's understanding of themselves as capable gave them the courage to take risks and attempt change.

The state of crisis or near crisis in which so many families now find themselves constitutes a grave threat to social stability. As the drug problem worsens, and as people with an intellectual or psychiatric problem are now more likely to be living in the community and having children, the ability of state welfare programs to cope with problems of chronic neglect and abuse is coming into question. It could be that the approaches adopted by St Luke's and other non-government agencies will prove to be more effective. And yet, given the moral malaise that has followed in the wake of the mainstream churches' abandonment of their role to awaken individual conscience — a necessity if social values and stability are to be safeguarded — how much can realistically be expected of any child welfare agency?

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