

BOOK REVIEW

Human Service Organizations in the Disaster Context

Kate van Heugten
Palgrave MacMillan, New York, US 2014
ISBN: 978-1-137-38960-2, pp.209, Hardback. AUS \$91.89.

In *Human Service Organizations in the Disaster Context*, Kate van Heugten provides a detailed analysis of the recovery work that occurred in the wake of the earthquakes that occurred in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2010 and 2011. This timely book effectively sets out the personal, professional and political experiences of human service practitioners as they seek to understand and respond to a significant disaster event. It is a very useful resource for human service managers, policy advisors and analysts, community workers, social workers and students whether preparing to work in, or currently involved in, the disaster recovery field.

A major strength of van Heugten's book is that it provides an intricate theoretical framework which draws together primarily sociological knowledge including Bourdieu's concept of social capital, Foucault's governmentality and Weber's socio-political theory. These theoretical concepts provide the basis for van Heugten to link the subjective accounts of human service workers and managers and attend to the ways they negotiated the political agendas that influenced their recovery response practices. Viewing disaster recovery as a site of power relations poses questions of the New Zealand government's promotion of community building initiatives which, in the Christchurch context, failed to meet expectations due to a lack of long-term commitment and resourcing. Van Heugten deftly maps out the effects of these kinds of governmental objectives including the ways in which they facilitate competition between human service organisations and the problem of funding capture. In doing so the book calls into question governmental commitment to the aims of collaboration and partnership in disaster management arrangements in relation to neoliberal strategies of management "from afar" whilst simultaneously divesting the provision of welfare services and community engagement to non-government organisations.

In its focus on the political work of human service practitioners, van Heugten's book offers a unique perspective which eschews the tendency of welfare approaches to disaster recovery to primarily focus on the provision of short-term relief for disaster survivors and to psychologise social issues. Further, the concept of resilience, which is thoroughly embedded in disaster management discourse, is interrogated for the ways in which it is used to responsibilise

those disaster-affected individuals and groups, including human service workers, to be positive and take care of themselves in the face of inequality and disadvantage. In contrast, the discourse of vulnerability is promoted as a preferred frame for understanding and addressing the needs of survivors who are considered marginalised and disadvantaged by disasters including those living in poverty, the elderly, and children and women. However, presenting the vulnerability lens as an antidote to the depoliticising and individualising effects of resiliency-focussed approaches does not seem to adequately appreciate the continuity and complementarity between these two discourses. As McGreavy (2016) observes, in disaster recovery contexts, resilience and vulnerability are often co-constructed.

Vulnerability tends to be understood as survivors' essential affectability and thus characterises them as in a state of helplessness whilst resilience is about adaptation to change. The relationship between these two dominant representations of disaster effects can work to position those people considered vulnerable as weak and as a threat to the resilience of communities. McGreavy (2016) argues that this relation emphasises their need for management, promoting the provision of predominantly therapeutic interventions to reduce helplessness and enhance their coping skills. Nonetheless van Heugten clearly advocates for vulnerability to be addressed as a human rights issue providing a moral argument for public administrators and policy-makers to address the needs of people who are marginalised as a pre-condition of the disaster and/or as a result of post-disaster management decisions.

The book outlines the ways in which human service workers can act as 'boundary spanners' to manage the complex disaster recovery environments and their work with disaffected people. The concept of the boundary spanner recognises the human service worker's role in disaster management services in connecting with multiple stakeholders and working within varied objectives of public, non-government and private services. These intermediary roles are positioned as an asset for human service workers to negotiate and advocate for survivors adversely affected by inequality in the disaster context. Van Heugten also advocates that human services draw on their networks with community organisations, and local and national governments to encourage genuinely participative and collaborative community-building practices. Indeed, a key argument in this book is that sustainable community development is the means of recognising the needs of those who are disenfranchised and to support communities to participate in collective action to achieve human rights and social justice goals.

As a Christchurch resident and social work educator, one who lived and worked in this disaster context during and following the earthquakes, I found this book to provide an insightful and, at times, sobering analysis of these significant events in Christchurch's history. By focusing on the efforts of frontline human service practitioners and managers working in the immediate and longer-term aftermath of earthquakes, van Heugten's book offers thought-provoking understandings and guidance for practitioners inspired to bring social justice and participative community-building approaches to disaster recovery work. This book is a valuable and accessible resource and one which I thoroughly recommend.

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Reference

McGreavy, B. (2016). Resilience as discourse. *Environmental Communication*, 10(1), pp. 104–121.