

BOOK REVIEW

Disaster concepts and issues: a guide for social work education and practice

Gillespie, D. F., & Danso, K. (Eds.).

Alexandria, Virginia: Council on Social Work Education Press,
ISBN-13: 978-0872931374, ISBN-10: 0872931374, \$28 AUD

This edited book by Gillespie and Danso addresses a relative gap in the social work literature around the profession's role in responding to disasters. Through highlighting the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions that make any particular hazard (natural or human induced) an actual disaster, they adeptly bring a collection of authors together to show the value social work in informing effective disaster risk reduction. In this sense, the book signals and elevates the role of social work and heralds an important call for a greater emphasis of a disaster informed social work curriculum as the occurrence and intensity of disasters worldwide appears to be increasing.

The book itself is divided into three main sections: concepts, perspectives and methods; implications for practice; and disaster curriculum in social work. A particular strength in the first section is its shift from what has been a traditional hazard focus within the disaster field to one of vulnerability. By questioning the 'naturalness' of disaster, the book again frames disasters beyond a hazard focus to one of social interaction/relations, political influence, economic participation and diversity thereby consolidating the importance of a social work lens. Further, the book as a whole provides a focus on age, disability, health and poverty to illustrate that a disaster's impact is experienced unevenly across a society where pre-existing inequities, inequalities and forms of exclusion can be exacerbated. In this sense, the book effectively incorporates a disaster focus alongside other social work teaching of anti-oppressive practice, human rights and structural critique. One of the most helpful chapters focused on critical understandings of social justice, resilience, trauma across multiple dimensions that help pinpoint the social and political contexts that inform the associated meanings and interpretations to any given disaster and the power structures that often form the dominant narratives around these. The book in multiple places does well to note that gender and cultural and linguistic diversity is an important consideration though it would have been helpful to have made a stronger emphasis on how disasters are gendered and the implications of working with diverse groups (such as working with interpreters, translators, cross cultural workers, disaster risk communication, etc.). However, it is not possible to cover the gamut of considerations related to disaster risk reduction and this

book helpfully provides further reading in the annotated bibliography that one can access for more detailed information in these (and other) areas.

Section Two of the book looks at more pragmatic applications and case studies to illustrate where social work can play an important role. Through discussing the concept of coordination and social workers as coordinators, the chapter provides a basis to illustrate how the profession can work towards the social justice outcomes and the political empowerment mentioned in previous chapters. Mathbor's chapter on invisible assets and use of Putnam's (2000) social capital theory provides a helpful reminder that communities have many capacities and that many of these may not be readily apparent to responders who are from outside the impacted area and local community. Cronin and Ryan focus on practice perspective for mental health using the American Red Cross as a case study to demonstrate how social work is historically and currently well placed to be part of an integrated disaster response through community development models of practice. One of the challenges not articulated as well is that the systems that can cause vulnerability are themselves often incredibly resilient – in this sense responding to disaster is not just about adjusting, advocacy or adapting to a particular situation, it is also about considering a more transformative engagement with existing power structures. The chapters on social justice and vulnerability begin to address this issue and represent a key area where theory and case studies can provide further understanding on conceptual and applied levels to achieve a more nuanced and social work informed disaster risk reduction praxis.

Section three focuses on the social work curriculum and provides perspectives on ethics, multiculturalism, cultural competence and the contemporary and changing contexts of disasters. In response, this book provides a solid basis for social work students to consider the complexities of disasters and the multiple ways in which they might conceptualise a particular event and respond as professionals. What is particularly useful is that the frame of vulnerability is extended to consider capacities and resilience so that the vulnerability concept moves beyond a label and a dominant deficit based approach. Through the focus on both distal and proximate factors that influence vulnerability, numerous chapters in the book provide a person in environment context that encourages for a structural and policy based analysis to understand the ways in which vulnerability is constructed and experienced. The welcome focus on resilience and capacities shifts the perspective of people affected by a disaster from passive victims to individuals, families and communities as agents capable of responding to adverse circumstance.

In terms of potential limitations to the book, there is mention about the 'phases' and 'stages' of disaster which at times is problematic. Whilst these phased understandings are used widely within the social work and wider literature, the notion that there is a cycle of mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery makes the experience of disaster look too linear when in fact within each of these 'phases' are elements of the others. Further, though the book clearly illustrates the promise of quantitative methods, it does not give enough credit to the possibilities and applications of qualitative approaches (ethnography, participatory mapping, photovoice, etc.) that also play a critical role in developing nuanced understandings of disaster risk reduction practice and theory across time, place, context and diverse realities. And finally, the use of the term 'recovery' is used somewhat uncritically without

recognising that sometimes it does represent a 'bouncing back' or a return to a previous state but it may also involve radically different renewal, vision and re-envisioning. These critiques, however, are relatively minor to the merits of the book – it provides a solid basis for social workers to consider the profession within the disaster space and suggests helpful ways forward.

Overall, the importance of having a disaster informed curriculum is made clear, and the editors and authors have developed an important resource for the social work profession. Through acknowledging that social workers are well placed to respond not only in the areas of crisis intervention, stress and trauma, grief and bereavement support but also within structural and systems level engagements (pre and post disaster), the book situates the importance of disaster social work in wider settings. I would recommend the text for preparing students (and social work professionals) to consider a particular community's proximity to disasters and the ways in which proactive, collaborative and empowering disaster risk reduction initiatives can be further realised.

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Reference

Putnam, R. (2000) Bowling alone: *The collapse and revival of American community*, London: Simon & Schuster.