

## REVIEW

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## RESENSIE

Christopher Hall, Stef Slembrouck and Srinkant Sarangi. 2006. *Language Practices in Social Work: Categorisation and accountability in child welfare*. London: Routledge. pp 198.

Hall *et al.* set out to increase awareness of the ways language is commonly used in the area of social work, as a way of contributing to better practices in social work. However, their work has much wider implications.

There are two major approaches to research in social work. Evidence-based practice has been described as 'rational-technical' (Schon, 1983) because the professional is expected to make a logical link between a particular social or personal problem and the characteristics of the people involved. On the basis of this assessment, action (intervention) is taken. Reflective practice, the other major approach, sees each case as unique and so decisions are necessarily complex. Decisions are based on intuition and tacit knowledge rather than research findings (p. 165). Both approaches can be described as linear. The authors of this book do not fit into either camp. They do not explain everyday practices to explanations which are seen in terms of applying theory to practice. Instead they see the social worker as an interactional strategist, who uses a number of rhetorical and linguistic skills to negotiate encounters in their professional world (p. 166). In acting to make an assessment, display competence, persuade or meet any of the other communicative challenges involved in their professional practice etc, they are typically involved in categorisation (p. 166). The authors break new ground in not ascribing these practices to either evidence-based or experiential theory, but instead exploring the complex sets of language practices involved in particular contexts. They are interested in the 'unfolding process of categorisation during the case conference and the complex set of interdependent interactional moves (p. 166).

They see *reflexivity* as 'everyday activities by which members of a community monitor, react to and report on what is going on and treat it as normal and accountable' (p. 167). They make it plain how this applies in all human sciences by recounting an incident from a mathematics class. Here they show how the classroom situation trades on the tacit knowledge which underlies the known roles of teacher and pupil. At a key point, the teacher's question, 'Who remembers a fraction that equals one half' marks the beginning of an orderly lesson and an end to the chatter.

Reflexivity, the choice (to stop talking) urges children to become 'ordinary' students, unremarkably there and without nomination-relevant features, and even to hear the choice to become implicated in the production of the normal order of the room. (Macbeth, 2001:54 in Hall *et al.*, 2006: 168)

Ultimately what the authors hope to do is 'to illuminate the landscape for the decision-makers, providing frames for thinking about it' (p. 169). Their concern is that social workers categorise people very easily. Although it is possible that a category ascribed after just a few hours of contact could be changed later, it is also equally likely that the initial category could

remain despite disconfirming evidence. Another important aim is to trouble terms like 'concern'.

In their view, too, there is a need to create home-visits which allow agreement and difference to be expressed without undermining the relationship between the role players: children, social workers and families.

Finally, while their study showed the dominance of categorisation leading to intervention, they argue for approaches in which categorisation does not dictate intervention.

They meticulously discuss the ways in which a discourse analytic approach could explore aspects such as why a case was categorised in one way rather than another and how the actual accounts of their work are constructed by social workers.

In Chapter 3, they explore data produced in collegial communication during policy review interviews. More specifically, they draw on data from interviews between a social worker employed by an urban authority and a senior colleague who was part of the review panel. In this instance, the review was occasioned by the placement of younger children in residential children's homes. Hall *et al.* meticulously analyse the extended forms of explanation and justification which are generated and show how the narrative is used to construct the social worker's action. Thus the narrative places the interviewer in the role of 'privileged observer' so she can accompany the process and become acquainted with the role players and therefore understand (and endorse) the child placement decision.

Chapter 4 focuses on a child protection conference – a key site for a range of professionals to collaborate to ensure that interventions are coordinated. Interestingly, they show that the construction of the mother's character is the central concern rather than the nature of abuse the children face. Hall *et al.*'s analysis highlights the complexity of the discussions in which, although there is little sign of disagreement, there no clear evidence of agreement.

Chapter 5 challenges the view that social worker's home visits must necessarily be purposeful. Hall *et al.*'s detailed analysis demonstrates that the complex negotiation involved in establishing a working relationship between social worker and client means that the visits will have multiple purposes. They are therefore more interested in the interactions which establish the category of clienthood (characterised by indirection) and the way in which what is said is affected by earlier visits.

The analysis in Chapter 6 is confined to running case notes so does not include summary reports which assess or evaluate the overall state of affairs in the family or the required interventions. The authors make the interesting point that these are in a sense imperfect and not really authentic because they do not give the whole story. The incompleteness in part (and even the over-detailed aspects) is related to the fact that case notes are for 'future but unknown purposes' (p. 105). It is also an indication of the impingement of legal frameworks. They also problematise the effect that sharing notes (electronic case notes) will undoubtedly have on how they are framed. They suggest that narrative approaches (diary-like notes) are likely to give way to self-conscious, wary note-taking.

Chapter 7 reflects an alternative account of public care, the view of the parents. The analysis corroborates the view that people's conception of themselves is a product of those with whom they interact (as opposed to the view that the self is locked into the individual). In this case,

the parent is powerless to redeem her own parenthood, because the encounters with the professional social worker serve to undermine it. Hall *et al.* suggest that as long as social workers hear parents' explanations as excuses to be ignored, they will be unable to entertain an approach which focuses on 'finding solutions' and 'building strengths' (p. 123).

The context of Chapter 8 is the court room. In this case, the social worker's everyday actions are made visible and are open to detailed scrutiny of a variety of audiences. Here the researchers explore the ways in which the barrister and social worker construct and manage the case so it is seen as a child protection or family support case. In other words how the focus is on the construction of justifications in a legal inquiry, without making links to the actual occurrences in the case (p. 125). As in the other chapters, the central characteristics are categorisation and accountability.

Chapter 9, the last of the body of the research, accountability is addressed as a dimension of press coverage. Hall *et al.* present a careful account of the ways extreme formulations of criticism, blame and accountability and the ways in which a wide variety of interpretations ensue. In the process, routine events can move to the spectacular (p. 163) raising the question of whether social workers are 'prepared to continue in an atmosphere where protective practice is always uppermost (p. 164).

In the final chapter, Hall *et al.* raise important questions. Two that seem particularly valuable are:

- Can forms of practice can be developed which make it possible to suspend formulation or to work with tentative, uncertain and suspended formulations?
- Can forms of practice be developed in which strategic positioning no longer takes over the encounter and dominates its dynamics?

In my view, the value of the book is not confined to social work nor even to others in social science. The authors have also been meticulous in presenting their analysis. This undoubtedly contributes to better understandings of complex interactions in a variety of contexts. Much is to be gained by discussing the interactional strategies which professionals use. As the authors suggest, this could be a means of both challenging and enhancing practice. The meticulous and transparent analysis in this book also makes it a useful guide to those wishing to use this course analysis.

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