Book review

Personnel Preparation in Disability and Community Life: Toward Universal Approaches to Support. By JULIE ANN RACINO (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publisher Ltd, 2000). [Pp. 350]. ISBN 0398070784 (pbk)

Thirty years ago some scholars and advocates in the broad field of disability began to say loudly that professionals (especially medical, public health, rehabilitation counselling, and special education professionals) had no reason to tell people with disabilities how to live their lives. It took some 10 years for their position to be heard in the mainstream of various disciplines dealing with disability. Mostly it was ignored, but in some persons it struck a chord of both logic and fairness. It took another 10 years in the USA for the Americans with Disabilities Act to become law and it took a little longer for other countries to pass similar legislation.

This movement was called independent living, mainstreaming, deinstitutionalization, self-advocacy, empowerment, self-determination, inclusion and simply the disability movement. Today, after another 10 years has passed, the disability movement is recognized as an academic field in disability studies and as an advocacy movement. In academia there is the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) which is international in scope and membership. For advocacy in the USA the movement is represented by groups like Not Dead Yet (NDY), which is concerned about assisted suicide and eugenics, and American Disabled for Attendant Programs (ADAPT), which first fought for integrated transportation (and largely won) and now fights to empty nursing homes of people with disabilities who want to and can live independently in the community. In the UK the Disability Action Network (DAN) fights the broad spectrum of problems which face persons with disabilities. In other countries similar groups exist. Internationally there is the Disabled Peoples International. The disability movement is well established.

In some professions, like physical therapy, occupational therapy, nursing and social work, change has occurred. In other professions such as medicine (especially medical rehabilitation), public health, special education and rehabilitation counselling the change is painfully slow. Medical textbooks and practitioners still talk about patients and cases in a very depersonalizing manner. In public health much work is done with the purpose of eliminating disabilities implying that people with disabilities should not continue to live because they are a burden which can be eliminated. In special education there is talk about exceptionalities which is intended to be a positive term, but comes across as meaning abnormal and thus dependent. In rehabilitation counselling, people with disabilities are referred to as clients and consumers. They are not clients because in no way could they fire the professionals who are providing services. And the term implies that people with disabilities are not producers which in our society means they have no value. The general public (especially the media) view people with disabilities as challenged and as victims. The former term is too cutey and the latter term is too morbid.

The book under review is an attempt to introduce the thinking of the disability movement into the training of people (in both academia and in the field) who will work with persons with disabilities. It largely succeeds with its goal. However, there are minor errors and omissions. Table 1.2 (p. 9) lists the various disciplines which are relevant, but omits political science, economics and history, all of which made important contributions to the development of disability studies and the disability movement. In Chapter 9 (p. 187) the year of the death of Irv Zola is incorrect. Irv died in 1994, not 1992. And there are others, but they are inconsequential. In addition, the author presents such detailed discussions of examples and so much bibliography that the minutia often detracts. Finally, there is a lack of transitional sentences and paragraphs. Change from one topic to the next is abrupt, but headings and subheadings do give assistance.

Racino uses the term ‘community support personnel’ to describe this new breed of professionals who work with people with disabilities. The term is both fortunate and unfortunate. It is unfortunate because it ignores the fact that about half of all the people with disabilities have no need and never will have the need for the assistance of community support personnel. This fact, apparently, is largely unknown by professionals in the field of disability. If the reader doubts the fact, it is true, but it must be defended in an arena other than a book review. By ignoring this fact the whole field contributes to the public (and too many professionals) viewing people with disabilities as tragic, pitiful and dependent. For exam-
ple, nowhere in the extensive discussion of transportation is there a mention of the 1986 Air Carriers Access Act and only once in the discussion of housing is there a mention of the 1988 Amendments to the Fair Housing Act in the USA. It is this type of legislation, rather than the ones she discusses, which has the greatest impact on the half of the disability community which has no use for community support personnel.

On the other hand, use of the term community support personnel is fortunate because by using this comprehensive term it helps bring together many disparate professions which must work together for people with disabilities who do need the assistance of community support personnel. It is a way to unite and enlighten personnel who do work with persons with disabilities.

Part I of the book presents basic information and the environment in which community support personnel training evolved over several decades. It places the theme of the book in a historical context which gives both understanding and insight. It and the remaining sections of the book contain a plethora of bibliographic references which are especially helpful to students and to academics as well people in the field.

Part II presents and discusses personnel training in academic settings and in the field. Specific content (family support, housing, employment) and pedagogical techniques are presented. Concepts and public policy undergirding the field of community support personnel work and training are covered.

Part III begins by examining community services and how this approach differs from traditional human services. All through part III systems change is a prominent theme. In the various chapters Racino discusses participatory action research, leadership training of self-advocates (the jargon for persons with cognitive disabilities), organizational development, consciousness raising, field (applied) research, the dissemination and use of research results as a change technique and the role of the university in all of these activities.

Chapter 9 in part III is of particular interest to this reviewer. It discusses disability studies and does a credible job, but nowhere is the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) mentioned. Its name appears only in the bibliography as co-publisher of what this reviewer knows, but Racino does not name, as the proceedings of one of the annual meetings of SDS. As a former president of SDS and now editor of its Journal (Disability Studies Quarterly) this is disconcerting. It seems incredible that she does not know about SDS and inconceivable that she does, but chose not to even mention it.

Chapter 10 of part III gives some insight into this conundrum. She discusses how the disability field (medical rehabilitation, public health, rehabilitation counseling, special education and others) must now go into the community. She equates disability studies with the fields of disability. In no way are they the same and by equating them she shows her ignorance of the fact that half of the disability community does not need and never will need community support personnel. This lack is a sad drawback to an otherwise valuable book.

Part IV (which consists entirely of chapter 11) is an attempt to integrate the entire book. It does not work. Racino states what she would like to see happen, but does not deal with the problems of making it happen. To give just one problem, whenever issues of concern to people with disabilities are folded into community wide issues, the popular stereotypes that people with disabilities are tragic, pitiful and dependent produce solutions which give evidence of uncaring and ignorance.

Her naivety is further shown by the following statement in chapter 11: ‘The author supports frameworks of diversity of all peoples, and hopes to remove these frameworks from the current contexts that favour people who seek politicized solutions to common human needs.’ (p. 231) If the political process is not to be used to achieve solutions, what is? Certainly not the economic process, the so-called free market. Certainly not a wise class of aristocrats, the best and the brightest. With all of the drawbacks of the political process, it is still the best manner in which to resolve common human needs.

To achieve her end of creating active community support personnel Racino advocates the joining together of parts of academia (especially Schools of Education) with human service providers who would be retrained as community support personnel. In her view this coalition will succeed.

Racino wants to introduce the thinking of the disability movement into the training of community support personnel. Her purpose in writing this book was to provide the knowledge and techniques to achieve this end and she partly accomplishes it. It is a useful book with a noble purpose, but at the end it fails to point to a feasible way to achieve that goal.

Nevertheless, this reviewer recommends Racino’s book to people who want a broad view of the disability movement’s thinking and who agree that the training of human service and medical providers must be reformed. Perhaps its greatest value will be as a reference for those persons engaged in that reform.

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